

**SHADOWS ON THE EDGE:
EUGENIO MONTALE'S AFTERLIFE**

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University of Oxford, Christ Church

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Trinity Term 2017

ABSTRACT

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This thesis forms a monograph on the poetry of Eugenio Montale (Genoa, 1896 – Milan, 1981) which considers his principal collections: *Ossi di seppia* (1925), *Le occasioni* (1939), *La bufera e altro* (1956), *Satura* (1971), *Diario del '71 e del '72* (1973), and *Quaderno di quattro anni* (1977). It focuses on the notion of 'ombra' as the key element through which a greater degree of insight into Montale's eschatological vision can be achieved. Montale's 'shadow' emerges as a paradoxical presence-in-absence, and as a constitutive element of his poetry, in so far as it conceives of the existence of a continuity between life and death. From as early as *Ossi di seppia*, the status of 'ombra' is two-fold. First of all, 'ombra' is the shadow with which the poetic subject identifies, and it represents the only possibility of attaining a desired existential and poetic self-effacement. Secondly, but no less importantly, 'ombra' is the shadow of the absent loved one, who is reduced to incorporeality, and from whom the poetic subject seeks not to be cruelly separated. By considering the relationship between poetry and mourning from the Derridean perspective of 'demi-deuil', I contribute an original viewpoint to the study of Montale's 'care ombre' ('Proda di Versilia', *La bufera e altro*, 33, pp. 253-254), whereby subjects of mourning are no longer considered as negatively dominated by the Other's death. They are, indeed, devoted to preserving the affect relationship with the dead, as opposed to the Freudian notion of 'moving on' after loss. The passage from one individual 'ombra' in *Ossi di seppia* to the plurality of the 'care ombre' in all of the following collections is shown here to delineate the exceptional continuity that marks Montale's *œuvre* from the very beginning of his poetic journey. This thesis chooses to dialogue with existent scholarship by shifting the focus onto the textual aspect, making it the centre of analysis. This allows the shedding of further light onto specific poetic strategies of the Montalean exploration of the boundaries between life and death, and onto his very individual eschatology.

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This thesis focuses on the notion of 'ombra' as the principal element through which a more complete understanding of Eugenio Montale's eschatology can be reached. Montale's 'shadow' emerges as a fundamental way through which the poet interrogates and meditates on the boundaries between life and death in so far as it is the element that allows the creation of a bridge between these two dimensions. Moreover, the 'ombra' emerges as a paradoxical presence-in-absence and is characterised by a tension towards 'essence' – as he writes in *Xenia*: 'non [...] più forma, ma essenza' (*Xenia* I.14, 4, p. 302).

This contradictory presence-in-absence is what makes Montale's shadows essentially *on the edge*: caught in between the tangible, visible world and what lies beyond, the afterlife. Their liminal nature is the result of their being shadowy presences: their simultaneous state of radical dissolution ('non [...] più forma') and their being true essence ('essenza'). Moreover, Montale's incorporeal shadows stand for more authentic forms of being that are eventually perceived by the poetic subject as more alive and truthful than the living. Their principal function, in their travelling between the visible world and the 'aldilà', is to allow the poetic subject to have a glimpse of the afterlife with which he seeks to dialogue.

From as early as *Ossi di seppia*, the status of 'ombra' is two-fold. First of all, 'ombra' is the shadow with which the poetic subject identifies, representing the only possibility to attain a desired existential and poetic self-effacement. Secondly, but no less importantly, 'ombra' is the shadow of the absent loved one, who is reduced to incorporeality, and from whom the poetic subject seeks not to be separated. The way the 'vivi', and specifically the living poetic subject, are no more alive and autonomous than 'shadows', emerges clearly in numerous poems in *Ossi di seppia*, and most powerfully in the 'osso breve' 'Ciò che di me sapeste...': 'Se un'ombra scorgete, non è | un'ombra – ma quella io sono' ('Ciò che di me sapeste...', *Ossi di seppia*, 17-18, p. 36). The boundaries between substance and shadow, 'real' and 'unreal' are blurred. As the concluding chapter highlights, the very boundaries between life and death will be blurred, too.

The passage from one individual 'ombra' in *Ossi di seppia* to the plurality of the 'care ombre' ('Proda di Versilia', *La bufera e altro*, 33, pp. 253-254) in all

following collections is shown here to delineate the exceptional continuity that marks Montale's *œuvre* from the very beginning of his poetic journey. From this standpoint, this thesis considers all of Montale's principal poetic collections: *Ossi di seppia* (1925), *Le occasioni* (1939), *La bufera e altro* (1956), *Satura* (1971), *Diario del '71 e del '72* (1973), and *Quaderno di quattro anni* (1977).

Chapter 1 – The Self as ‘Ombra’: *Ossi di seppia*

Chapter 1 begins this thesis' investigation of Montale's shadows by looking at the poetic subject's self-identification with the status of ‘ombra’ in *Ossi di seppia*, which comes as the result of his desire for complete self-effacement. The poetic subject's progressive dissolution is accomplished also at a textual level by means of what I refer to as a ‘textual strategy of anonymity’. Two well-known poems, ‘Merigiare pallido e assorto...’ and ‘Felicità raggiunta, si cammina...’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 30, 40), are key to understanding the way Montale employs these textual strategies, particularly the use of pronouns and verbs in their infinitive and gerund form, which help attain the poetic subject's dissolution. What emerges is that ‘[c]hi parla è ormai “scorza” senza “sostanza”, “ombra” senza “corpo”, “me” senza “io”’.¹

It is by drawing attention to the poetic subject's fragmented self and desire for self-effacement that this chapter highlights an aspect of Montale's poetry that has so far remained unnoticed. I am referring to the element of sharp and knife-edged objects that inhabit *Ossi di seppia*, and that eventually give form to the immaterial concept of ‘male di vivere’ (‘Ciò che di me sapeste...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 17-18, p. 36) that I regard to be one of the primary causes of the poetic subject's desire for self-effacement and subsequent identification as ‘ombra’.

In the conclusion of this first chapter, I propose that it is precisely the incorporeal dimension of the ‘ombra’ that the poetic subject seeks in order to find a point of contact with the intangible ‘Niente’ (‘Violoncelli’, *Poesie disperse*, 20-23, p. 794). Paradoxically, it is in this status of complete nothingness, embodied by the ‘ombra’ itself, that one can find the ‘essence’ of things, and the locus of true authenticity.

Chapter 2 – Talking to Shadows: Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca

In order to enter into dialogue with this dimension of ‘Niente’, the ‘io-ombra’ needs to establish a relationship with a *tu*. It is in this way that an important shift takes place from the individual shadow of the poetic subject to various shadowy presences that inhabit Montale's poetic universe. Chapter 2 begins the exploration of this dialogic relationship between the ‘io-ombra’ and the absent-present *tu*, by focusing on the three female ‘ombre’, specifically: Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca. All of these three female figures represent, for the poetic subject, a possibility to enter into contact with the ‘beyond’, the place where they ultimately belong.

Furthermore, in this chapter I look at Montale's re-writing and revision of two of the most influential myths in Western culture and lyric poetry in particular, which allows us not only to trace how their cultural transmission and reception have

¹ Andrea Malagamba, *Quell'ombra io sono: io, tu, noi nella poesia di Eugenio Montale* (Rome: Giulio Perrone Editore, 2011), p. 55.

developed and transformed in the twentieth century, but also to clarify the nature of his absent-present female figures. I am referring to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and the myth of Persephone, the soon-to-be ‘dreadful’ queen of the underworld. The thought of the feminist political philosopher Adriana Cavarero provides the theoretical framework through which the analysis is undertaken.

By focusing on the figures of Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca, Montale’s most complex embodiments of what I refer to as the ‘Eurydice-Persephonean archetype’, this chapter sustains that Montale’s female *tu*, as is traditional in lyric discourse, becomes the *pre*-text for the development and articulation of the male poet-creator’s *text* (and self).² In doing so, the female poetic beloved is condemned to dissolve into nothingness and thus continues and preserves that long-standing tradition that, according to Cavarero, is inaugurated by the mythical figure of Orpheus and that wants the loved woman to be a dead woman, something that remains traceable in Montale’s poetry.³ In her transiting towards some *other* place, the female *tu* loses herself and becomes the custodian of this ‘beyond’ in which she is now confined. Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca thus present themselves as key propitiatory figures towards a ‘beyond’ with which the male poet-creator yearns to enter in order to dialogue with it. Here lies their Eurydice-Persephonean nature.

By exploring three of Montale’s most complex and relevant female ‘ombre’, I also re-assess the traditional categories into which Montale’s female figures have been enclosed so far, at times even erroneously. From this perspective, I argue that the tendency towards categorisation, which has widely characterised Montalean scholars’ approach towards his female figures, prevents us from reaching a complete understanding of the female in Montale’s poetry. Through my exploration of the way the ‘ombre’ of Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca embody the Eurydice-Persephone archetype, I conclude that the feminine in Montale departs from the kind of femininity that has been previously emphasised within Montalean criticism. The traditional model of angelic/salvific/transcendent woman and its counterpart of the monstrous/earthly/erotic woman, represented by, for instance, Clizia and Volpe respectively, appears limiting in so far as it does not account for the fundamental feral femininity that plays such a crucial role, and which allows us to reach a better understanding of Montale’s female figures and the nature of the *io-tu* dialogic relationship.

Chapter 3 – The Dialogue with the Dead: Elegy and ‘Demi-deuil’

Given that mourning and memory increasingly emerge as key elements in the ‘io-ombra’’s relationship with his lost female shadowy figures, Chapter 3 looks at these two elements. By focusing on Montale’s so-called ‘ciclo di Arletta’, particularly the poem ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, 1939), I explore the nature of Montale’s

² The terms ‘pretext’ and ‘text’ are employed by Rebecca West in her essay ‘Wives and Lovers in Dante and Eugenio Montale’ now in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart (Vienna-Berlin: Verlag Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 201-211 (201).

³ ‘In quanto simbolo della poesia d’amore, Orfeo inaugura l’ostinata tradizione che vuole nella donna amata una donna morta’. Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: Filosofia della narrazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2011), p. 121.

mourning and his close relationship to the poetic genre or mode of the elegy. Although one finds several conventions belonging to traditional elegy, Montale ultimately disregards the classical consolatory machinery of the elegy that aims to achieve complete forgetfulness and replacement of the lost object of love. Moreover, I investigate how Montale's mourning for Arletta deviates from the traditional binary distinction between 'healthy' mourning and 'unhealthy' melancholia as initially presented by Freud in his 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917). Montale's mourning for Arletta is clearly intermittent but, nevertheless, unending. From this viewpoint, I argue that it is productive to engage with one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, who, however, has not yet been considered much in relation to Montale or the wider Italian literary tradition: Jacques Derrida.⁴ Derrida's concept of 'demi deuil', translatable as 'mid-mourning' or 'semi-mourning', is shown to provide the most helpful conceptual framework through which to look at Montale's poetic depiction of mourning.⁵

Chapter 4 – Shadows and the Afterlife: Montale's Poetic Eschatology

After looking at some key poems centred around the figures of the female beloveds, it has emerged that they tend to engage with the poetic subject's mourning for his lost beloved and problematise the traditional 'work of mourning' and its relation to the elegy. Chapter 4 highlights how other central poems dedicated to other 'care ombre', present a different viewpoint in so far as they portray more explicitly the deceased's point of view and grief. This brings into focus the passage between life to death, the nature of the 'oltrevita', and how death and loss relate to memory from a more conceptual and theoretical perspective. Moreover, this leads us to discover another view about memory: memory is no longer welcomed in its contradictory and oscillatory nature between the remembrance and forgetfulness of 'demi-deuil', but is rather presented as something that chains the 'care ombre' to earthly life and which the dead themselves must abandon in order to complete the required process of dematerialisation.

The chapter focuses on a few particularly significant 'care ombre' which are worth investigating further: the indefinite group of dead from the poems 'I morti' (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 95-96) and 'L'Arca' (*La bufera e altro*, p. 208), and the parental figures of the mother and the father from the poems 'A mia madre' and 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 211, 258-259). Moreover, the short-story 'Sul limite' from Montale's *Farfalla di Dinard* will be helpful in further highlighting how within Montale's poetic universe there is a solid continuity between life and death, between the visible earthly world and what lies beyond it.

⁴ My use of Derrida's 'demi-deuil' finds its roots in the works of two scholars who have approached loss and mourning in the Italian literary tradition from a Derridean perspective: Emanuela Tandello and Jennifer Rushworth. Emanuela Tandello, 'A Note on Elegy and Self-elegy in Leopardi's *Canti*'; Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵ On Derrida's 'demi-deuil' see Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 257-409 (p. 335 for 'mid-mourning'); and "'Dialanguages'", in *Points ... Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber and trans. by Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 132-155 (p. 153 for 'semi-mourning').

Conclusion

After investigating Montale's 'dialogo con i defunti', I conclude that Montale's 'care ombre' allow us to see how, through poetry, life can be prolonged beyond the threshold of death. Moreover, by looking at Montale's 'ombra' it emerges that for Montale the dead can continue to live in the afterlife in proportion to how they are remembered by their dear ones who are still alive. This key characteristic of Montale's eschatological vision leads the poetic subject to articulate an obligation to keep alive the memory of his lost 'care ombre'. Remembrance, indeed, becomes, from the perspective of the living, a responsibility, a way to remain faithful to one's dead after they move to the 'oscura regione' ('Delta', *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 97). However, the viewpoint from the afterlife appears to be significantly different. As becomes clear in 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), remembrance and, more broadly, attachment to the dead's lost earthly life, is accepted only 'fin che giova'; for the dead, memory can run the risk of becoming a 'memoria-peccato' ('Voce giunta con le folaghe', *La bufera e altro*, 42-45, pp. 258-259).

Yet the dead fear to be forgotten by the living. What emerges is that the 'care ombre' should not keep their memory of their past earthly life alive, something that would chain them and prevent them from reaching the desirable process of dematerialisation as seen with the 'farfalla' 'Sul limite', and with the 'nuovo balzo' of 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, 33, pp. 258-259). This purification-like process must be undertaken by all shadows in order to complete their journey from earthly life (which is paradoxically perceived in Montale's eschatological vision as 'morte'), to death (equivalent to 'vita'). It is through the development of this peculiar working of memory that Montale is able to create an eschatological vision where there is presence in absence. The locus of the afterlife is identified as the 'punto dilatato', where there is no boundary between life and death, and where absence is presence ('Voce giunta con le folaghe', *La bufera e altro*, 50, pp. 258-259). This is a discovery that the poetic subject is able to make only through his confrontation with the element of the 'ombra', which therefore is of absolute importance in Montale's poetry. It is precisely by looking at the notion of 'ombra' that Montale's wide poetic corpus acquires a renewed sense of cohesion and unity.

For Lukas

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My parents, Chiara and Federico, have supported me throughout my time in Oxford, and I am profoundly grateful to both of them. I would also like to thank my grandparents, Gabriella and Alfredo, for their love and for having me grow up in a house full of poetry, especially Montale's.

Writing this thesis has been a source of inspiration on exploring what it means to be 'non più forma, ma essenza' and in my own dialogue with my 'care ombre'. I have been accompanied on this intellectual and personal journey by my 'vere pupille', without whom it would be 'vuoto ad ogni gradino'. This thesis is dedicated to him, Lukas, whose generosity and love know no boundary.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- SM I* *Il secondo mestiere. Prose 1920-1979*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1996)
- SM II* *Il secondo mestiere. Arte, musica, società*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1996)
- PR* *Montale. Prose e Racconti*, ed. by Marco Forti (Milan: Mondadori, 1995)

A NOTE ABOUT REFERENCES TO POEMS BY MONTALE

References to poems by Eugenio Montale are to the *Meridiano* edition of Montale's poetry, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1984), unless otherwise indicated. References to Montale's poems are given in the following form: title of the poem, title of the collection, line number(s), page reference to the *Meridiano* edition, e.g. 'Corno inglese', *Ossi di seppia*, 1-2, p. 13.

INTRODUCTION

In the Italian literary canon, the Nobel-Prize winning poet Eugenio Montale (Genoa, 1896 – Milan, 1981) most powerfully interrogates and meditates on the boundaries between life and death. Unsurprisingly, the figure of the shadow is thus the founding principle – consistently to be encountered throughout his *œuvre* – that allows him to create a bridge between these two dimensions. What defines the nature of this fundamental mode of being beyond the tangible consists in a tension towards ‘essence’ – as he writes in *Xenia*: ‘non [...] più forma, ma essenza’ (*Xenia* I.14, 4, p. 302). The paradoxical presence-in-absence, constitutive of Montalean discourse, is the mechanism that allows a continuity between life and death, loss and recovery, immanence and transcendence, absence and presence. This contradictory presence-in-absence is what makes Montale’s shadows essentially *on the edge*: caught in-between the tangible, visible world and what lies beyond, the afterlife. Their liminal nature is the result of their being shadowy presences: their simultaneous state of radical dissolution (‘non [...] più forma’) and their being true essence (‘essenza’). Montale’s incorporeal shadows stand for more authentic forms of being that are eventually perceived by the poetic subject as more alive and truthful than the living. Their principal function, in their travelling between the visible world and the ‘aldilà’, is to allow the poetic subject to have a glimpse of the afterlife with which he strongly seeks to dialogue. This dialogue, however, is the product of a progression. To begin with, the element of the ‘ombra’ represents a state of being with which the poetic subject of *Ossi di seppia* strives to identify, through a tension towards the absolute and the essential that is often articulated as self-effacement. The figure of the shadow is

thus, at this early stage, a figure of the poetic subject himself. Necessarily, therefore, this thesis begins its exploration of Montale's eschatology from this individual dimension of the 'ombra'. This allows me then to move on to the transition from the individual shadow to the plurality of Montale's 'care ombre' ('Proda di Versilia', *La bufera e altro*, 33, pp. 253-254) and to declare it as the fundamental discursive line that crosses – and holds together – Montale's poetry as a whole in its reaching for an eschatological view of human life.

So far, scholars have tended to focus on either the poetic subject's earlier desire for self-effacement in *Ossi di seppia* or on some of Montale's 'care ombre', the latter often regarded in their individuality and not necessarily in their collective status as shadows.⁶ Moreover, critics have often approached these two key elements of Montale's poetry separately and without seeing the 'ombra' as a crucial element through which Montale's extensive and diverse poetic corpus acquires a renewed sense of unity and cohesion. This thesis aims at redressing this somewhat fragmentary approach in the existing scholarship. The text lies at the core of my analysis, taking its cue from Rebecca West's seminal *Eugenio Montale: Poet on the Edge*, where she focuses on the way liminality and marginality – from geographic edge spaces to psychological margins – are key elements in Montale's poetry.⁷ West's article, 'Montale's "Care Ombre": Identity

⁶ The literature on the poetic subject's desire for dissolution is considerably wide. Among recent studies on this topic, I have found it particularly productive to engage with the following ones: Andrea Malagamba, *Quell'ombra io sono: io, tu, noi nella poesia di Eugenio Montale* (Rome: Giulio Perrone Editore, 2011); Christine Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa. Dal disincanto linguistico degli 'Ossi' attraverso le incarnazioni poetiche della 'Bufera' alla lirica decostruttiva dei 'Diari'* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2006); and Luigi Blasucci, *Gli oggetti di Montale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002).

⁷ Rebecca West, *Eugenio Montale: Poet on the Edge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

and its Dissolution', is another key work that informs this thesis.⁸ Here West looks at both the *io*'s struggle with his own identity and his subsequent identification as 'ombra', together with the many shadowy presences. West's main contribution lies in highlighting the extent to which the motif of the 'care ombre' is reminiscent of Virgil's and Dante's own treatment of shadowy presences in their respective poems. This, of course, has been widely and exhaustively discussed by scholars, particularly by Glauco Cambon, and this subject will therefore not concern this thesis.⁹ West's article paved the way for this current study, which, however, distinguishes itself by exploring the different nature and function that the various 'ombre' play in Montale's poetry, as a way to shed further light on his eschatology: from the 'io-ombra', to the shadows of the absent female beloveds, to the 'care ombre' of the figure of the mother and the father. Although with some significant differences, that this thesis will highlight, all shadows lead the poetic subject towards his exploration of the 'oltre' and to the development of a peculiar eschatology where everything related to earthly existence must dissolve into nothingness.

Other studies of Montale's poetry have been crucial to my exploration of his 'care ombre'. Francesco Giusti's recent book focusing on the genre of the 'canzoniere in morte' in lyric poetry, together with his other works specifically on the figure of Mosca, have been key to my understanding of the dialogic nature of modern lyric poetry and of Montale's dialogue with his lost female beloved in

⁸ Rebecca West, 'Montale's *Care Ombre*: Identity and its Dissolution', *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies*, 23 (1989), 212-228.

⁹ See, especially, the fourth chapter of Glauco Cambon's *Eugenio Montale's Poetry: A Dream in Reason's Presence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 90-153. See also Cambon's 'Eugenio Montale's Dantesque Style', in *Dante's Craft* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), pp. 161-192.

particular.¹⁰ Giusti's reflections on the 'canzoniere in morte' are important in so far as they shed light upon the poetic subject's need to maintain a contact with the lost object of love, which in Montale's poetry takes the form of his beloved 'ombre'. Individual poems become an archive of memory, and, as Giusti states, the poetic subject becomes 'coinvolto in una ardua negoziazione tra la vita e la morte, tra pezzi di realtà discordanti e la loro trasfigurazione simbolica, affinché possa darsi delle ragioni per un evento irragionevole in se stesso [...]'.¹¹ Moreover, in order to detach oneself from 'quel legame doloroso, il soggetto prova a vedere in ogni pezzo di memoria richiamato alla mente e alla scrittura la prova della necessità di quella fine', and hence delegates to poetry a restorative function.¹² However, in Montale, the necessity to recover what has been dissolved into the dimension of the 'ombra' rises to the surface every time the lost beloved is remembered, without any attempt to achieve forgetfulness, but rather to exorcise it. Regarding Montale's female 'ombre' in particular, Gilberto Lonardi's seminal reading of Arletta/Annetta, the 'Silvia montaliana', as he significantly refers to her in his *Il fiore dell'addio*, has strongly influenced my own interpretation of Arletta/Annetta.¹³ Lonardi highlights the way Arletta echoes the mythical figures of Eurydice and Persephone. These two figures have given rise to

¹⁰ For an excursus on the 'canzonieri in morte' from Dante to contemporary poets such as Milo De Angelis and Patrizia Valduga, among others, see the recently published book by Giusti on the subject: Francesco Giusti, *Canzonieri in morte. Per un'etica poetica del lutto* (L'Aquila: Textus Edizioni, 2015). On the figure of Mosca, see Francesco Giusti, 'Parlando la Lingua della Mosca: Gli *Xenia* e la Morte tra Dimensione Domestica e Trauma Epistemologico', *MLN*, 124:1 (2009), 236-253.

¹¹ Giusti argues this with reference to Goliarda Sapienza's *Ancestrale*, but this is something that can also be applied more broadly to the context of modern elegiac poetry. Giusti, *Canzonieri in morte*, pp. 124-125.

¹² Giusti, *Canzonieri in morte*, p. 125.

¹³ Gilberto Lonardi, 'Mito e "Melos" per Arletta: "Punta del Mesco"', in *Il fiore dell'addio. Leonora, Manrico e altri fantasmi del melodramma nella poesia di Montale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003), pp. 139-159.

what can be called the Eurydice-Persephone archetype, which represents the influential and long-standing model of the virginal young woman with whom the male subject initiates a dialogue *in absentia*: Eurydice, the ‘moritura puella’,¹⁴ and the young Persephone, the soon-to-be dreadful queen of the underworld.¹⁵ Drawing on the study by Lonardi, I will reveal how some of Montale’s female figures can be seen to belong to the archetype of the ‘fanciulla morta’, which in turn is the modern paradigm of the Eurydice-Persephone archetype. This is the same archetype that can be found in Giacomo Leopardi’s Silvia, and even before that in Petrarch’s Laura. Indeed, both, as we will see, are fundamental models for Montale’s elaboration of his own chthonic female ‘ombre’. From this standpoint, I will suggest that Montale does not challenge the archetype of the young woman who undergoes a premature death; rather, he preserves this tradition that is so profoundly embedded in lyric discourse. The figures of Eurydice and Persephone converge into a synchronic mythologeme that functions as the pre-textual essence of the female figure’s textual existence. Moreover, as is proper to the poetic code, the evocation of the dead through dialogue *in absentia* with the female beloved allows a form of communication to be preserved and recovered not only with the ‘ombra’ of the departed female beloved, but also with the beyond: the afterlife. Herein lies the nature of this archetype.

¹⁴ Virgil, *Georgics*, trans. by Peter Fallon, ed. by Elaine Fantham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), IV, 458.

¹⁵ I use the term ‘archetype’ from an anthropological standpoint and using Jungian ideas, perceiving it as a collectively-inherited disposition in our unconscious and ‘to which each century adds an infinitesimally small amount of variation and differentiation’, although the nature of the symbol/motif remains mainly unchanged. C. G. Jung, H. G. Baynes, and C. F. Baynes, *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1928), p. 162.

From a theoretical point of view, there is another scholar whose work has guided me in the understanding of the archetype that some of Montale's female 'ombre' embody: the feminist political philosopher Adriana Cavarero. Cavarero's philosophy provides the theoretical framework through which my analysis of Montale's female beloved 'ombre' in Chapter 2 is undertaken. Cavarero's thought is helpful in order to highlight the way Montale's absent female figures echo two of the most influential myths in Western culture and lyric poetry in particular: the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and the myth of Persephone. I share Cavarero's noteworthy interpretation of the myth of Orpheus as she presents it in her *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* and *Nonostante Platone*. Cavarero's contribution is particularly significant with regards to the origins and essence of that prolific and long-lasting lyric model of the absent female beloved, whose death is lamented by the male poetic subject.¹⁶ The male poet-creator's song depends on its being bereaved, just like Orpheus: his poetry comes from an irremediable loss – that of his beloved. In other words, the female beloved must inhabit the world of the dead, just like Eurydice, in order for Orpheus to create his enchanting poetry that has the magic power of drawing the trees of the forest to him. Orpheus inaugurates what Cavarero sees as a persistent tradition that wants the loved woman to be a dead woman, something that remains traceable in Montale's poetry.¹⁷ Hence, Orpheus' story, just like Montale's, finds its legitimisation in the absence of the female other. It is from this loss that Orpheus' elegiac song springs, and it is through this loss that the poet-lover Orpheus enters into the myth. Moreover, Cavarero's reading of the myth highlights another crucial

¹⁶ Adriana Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone. Figure femminili nella filosofia antica* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1990); Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*.

¹⁷ Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 121.

element of many of Montale's female 'ombre' on which this thesis will focus: the female beloved is silenced; Orpheus then sings not only of her, but also for her. As I will argue in Chapter 2, this is a fundamental characteristic of Montale's 'canzoniere in morte' to one of his most complex female 'ombre': Mosca. Engaging with Cavarero when looking at the figure of the 'fanciulla morta' in Italian modern lyric poetry has proved to be a productive approach in other influential studies, including Tanello's seminal book on Amelia Rosselli.¹⁸ Following Tanello's influential reading of the re-elaboration of the archetype of the dead young girl in Rosselli's poetry, I propose to read the female beloved's 'ombra', developed by Montale, with whom Rosselli herself dialogues, also through the same theoretical lense offered by Cavarero.¹⁹

Approaching Montale's 'ombre' as a way to shed further light on his eschatological vision inevitably involves an engagement with death, mourning, and memory, which all acquire defining roles in Montale's poetry. As Philippe Ariès has eloquently discussed, death, once so discursively omnipresent in the life of Western communities, has been increasingly marginalised from twentieth-century Europe.²⁰ In particular, Ariès' noteworthy *Western Attitudes Toward Death* informs this thesis in contextualising Montale's poetry in its historical and cultural context. As Ariès explains, death has not only been gradually effaced as a

¹⁸ Emanuela Tanello, *Amelia Rosselli: La fanciulla e l'infinito* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007).

¹⁹ See in particular the chapters 'Esterina', and 'Fanciulle morte: Arletta, Silvia, Euridice', in Tanello, *Amelia Rosselli*, pp. 73-84, 85-95.

²⁰ For a comprehensive overview on the changing attitudes towards death from as early as the Middle Ages to the present day, see Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: from the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. by Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974).

subject-matter, but has also become shameful and forbidden to the point of becoming unspeakable.²¹ In short, the modern attitude towards death involves an absolute interdiction of it in order to preserve ‘happiness’.

The interdiction on death suddenly follows upon the heels of a very long period – several centuries – in which death was a public spectacle from which no one would have thought of hiding and which was even sought after at times. The cause of the interdict is at once apparent: the need for happiness - the moral duty and the social obligation to contribute to the collective happiness by avoiding any cause for sadness or boredom, by appearing to be always happy, even if in the depths of despair. By showing the least sign of sadness, one sins against happiness, threatens it, and society then risks losing its *raison d’être*.²²

The important consequences of this interdiction on death, according to Ariès, consists of making mourning an even more difficult and painful experience.

The choking back of sorrow, the forbidding of its public manifestation, the obligation to suffer alone and secretly, has aggravated the trauma stemming from the loss of a dear one. In a family in which sentiment is given an important place and in which premature death is becoming increasingly rare [...] the death of a near relative is always deeply felt, as it was in the Romantic era. A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty. But one no longer has the right to say so aloud.²³

Mourning is no longer perceived as a necessary period encouraged by society, but rather a ‘*morbid state* which must be treated, shortened, erased’.²⁴ As a result, the modern subject lacks the emotional ability to record and process his or her losses. From this standpoint, as Tandelio explains, poetry acquires two fundamental functions:

²¹ ‘A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty. But one no longer has the right to say so aloud.’ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, p. 92.

²² Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, pp. 93-94.

²³ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, p. 92.

²⁴ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, p. 100.

It answers death by displaying private grief publicly and in doing so it reaffirms the centrality of human emotions related to loss and bereavement, taking on the responsibility of passing on traumatic knowledge by framing it and allowing it to be processed.²⁵

This thesis is written from the perspective that it is poetry that allows us to reconnect with death and fully experience it, not only individually, but also collectively.

It is surrounding this relationship, between poetry and loss, that the most topical debates in literary criticism revolve around today. Two major works on mourning and loss – Giovanni Nencioni’s seminal essay ‘Antropologia poetica?’ and Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning* – have laid the foundations for an ‘anthropological’ theory of the lyric that informs this thesis.²⁶ Nencioni’s essay is particularly relevant in that it highlights the dialogic nature of modern lyric poetry, where the ‘dialogo con i defunti’ emerges as a constitutive element. This viewpoint is particularly important when looking at Montale’s ‘care ombre’ without whom the poetic subject would lose his main medium through which to look at the world. Nencioni stresses how lyric poetry essentially reactivates key anthropological structures, such as the funeral elegy:

l’evocazione dei morti, prima di divenire un genere poetico, fu un rito arcaico, un atto di effettiva, riconosciuta comunicazione con l’aldilà, che i poeti antichi, Omero come Eschilo, hanno finto nel racconto o nell’azione scenica senza però alterarne il valore; il quale si è in gran

²⁵ This view is proposed by Emanuela Tandello in ‘A Note on Elegy and Self-elegy in Leopardi’s *Canti*’, *Appunti Leopardiani*, 4:2 (2012).

²⁶ Giovanni Nencioni, ‘Antropologia poetica?’, *Strumenti critici* 19 (1972), 243-258; now in *Tra grammatica e retorica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), pp. 161-175; Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1994). In his *Poetry of Mourning*, Ramazani offers a helpful analysis of how mournful poetry is inflected by changing historical contexts, and in particular how it interacts with and relates to societal practices governing mourning.

parte mutato col ritrarsi dell'antichissimo rito nel codice poetico, ma non tanto da non separare, con un residuo di carica antropologica, il primo nostro colloquio dal secondo, dandogli un suggello di verità che significa conservazione o recupero, a diverso titolo della comunicazione.²⁷

Furthermore, the anthropological structures to which Nencioni refers to belong to our system of communication and have entered into poetic code only gradually:

le forme del codice poetico, le piccole come le grandi – il poema epico e il dramma come il colloquio *in absentia* e la pronomiazione ad esso relativa – sono tutte riconducibili a remote forme di comunicazione sociale; e se ciò non è una scoperta, perché molti sono ormai gli studi sul rapporto originario tra le forme poetiche e il rituale magico o religioso, dovrebbe tuttavia essere tenuto più presente di quanto di solito non si faccia.²⁸

What follows is that in order to fully understand poetry's phenomenology, one must see how it constantly embeds itself into the forms offered by life itself, or rather how it springs up from them:

insediandosi la poesia di continuo nelle forme offerte dalla vita, anzi sorgendo da esse, conv[iene], per rendersi conto della sua fenomenologia, [...] ricondurla alle strutture linguistiche e antropologiche da cui è sorta e vedere come, resesi esse più o meno disponibili dal contenuto e dalla funzione primitivi, ne abbiano assunti di parzialmente o totalmente diversi, costituendo nuovi tipi e livelli di comunicazione, non più pragmatici, ma pur sempre antropologici [...].²⁹

More importantly, as Nencioni highlights, the role of poetry is not only to display structures of communication as those that are offered by our shared communication system, but to propose one that has been rejected by current society:

²⁷ Nencioni, 'Antropologia poetica?', p. 173.

²⁸ Nencioni, 'Antropologia poetica?', p. 174.

²⁹ Nencioni, 'Antropologia poetica?', p. 174.

Il codice poetico dispone di strutture proprie, che possono coincidere esteriormente con quelle del codice comune, ma hanno una funzione diversa; e la diversità della funzione può essere dovuta alla conservazione di un contenuto arcaico ormai rifiutato dalla norma comune, e alla assunzione di contenuti da forme poetiche.³⁰

In other words, poetry acquires the crucial role of allowing us to reconnect and dialogue with the dead in a way that is no longer possible in everyday life. From a similar viewpoint, Ramazani further investigates this idea in relation to modern elegy, focusing on the ways through which modern elegies challenge normative ways of mourning imposed by society.³¹ According to Ramazani, they do so by actively engaging with the disruptiveness of both death and mourning. Jonathan Culler's groundbreaking *Theory of the Lyric* develops further this view, particularly with regard to the idea of lyric as a 'ritual' and an 'event', which is contrasted with mimesis and representation.³² In terms of methodology, it is precisely this anthropological approach to lyric poetry that informs this thesis, particularly Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, which focus on the nature of Montale's poetic mourning.

Montale's narrative of mourning for his shadows 'on the edge' is worthy of attention given that it deviates from traditional discourses of mourning and the elegy's conventional consolatory machinery.³³ At the same time, Montale's mourning is not strictly melancholic, a tendency that Ramazani identifies in the

³⁰ Nencioni, 'Antropologia poetica?', p. 172.

³¹ See in particular the introductory chapter of Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning*, pp. 1-31.

³² Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³³ I borrow the term 'elegy's consolatory machinery' from Ramazani as he employs it in his *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 3.

majority of modern elegies in so far as they often reject any end to mourning and any replacement of the lost object of love, something that traditional elegies generally tend to accomplish. In other words, Montale's elegiac poetry departs from the classical binary view on the so-called 'work of mourning' as initially presented by Sigmund Freud in his well-known essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), which served as a basis for almost all subsequent theoretical and therapeutic approaches to grief.³⁴ Rather, as this thesis will demonstrate, Montale's mourning is never fully accomplished. From this viewpoint, I contend that it is productive to engage with one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth-century, who, however, has not yet been much considered in relation to Montale or the wider Italian literary tradition: Jacques Derrida.³⁵ Derrida's concept of 'demi deuil', translatable as 'mid-mourning' or 'semi-mourning', will be shown to provide the most faithful lens through which to look at Montale's poetic depiction of mourning.³⁶ In so doing, I will map out how Montale's

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), in *The Standard Edition to the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), XIV (1957), pp. 243-258. As Ramazani points out, 'psychoanalysts as varied as Karl Abraham, Melanie Klein, John Bowlby, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva have reinterpreted and reinvented its ideas [Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia'], and literary critics and theorists have extended its terms into discussions of everything from the literature of the Holocaust and AIDS to such genres as tragedy, elegy, and the novel.' Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 28. For overviews of classical psychoanalytic accounts of mourning, see Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London: Cresset Press, 1965), pp. 136-152; Lorraine D. Siggins, 'Mourning: A Critical Survey of the Literature', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 47 (1966), 14-25; Beverly Raphael, *The Anatomy of Bereavement* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983); and Catherine M. Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1989), pp. 22-41.

³⁵ My use of Derrida's 'demi-deuil' finds its roots in the works of two scholars who have approached loss and mourning in the Italian literary tradition from a Deriddean perspective: Emanuela Tandello and Jennifer Rushworth. Emanuela Tandello, 'A Note on Elegy and Self-elegy in Leopardi's *Canti*'; Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³⁶ On Derrida's 'demi-deuil' see Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press,

mourning deviates from the traditional representation and ideology of both ‘healthy’ mourning and ‘unhealthy’ melancholia. In fact, Montale’s poetic subject resists what in Freudian terms is seen as successful mourning and asserts the impossible replacement of the lost object of love.

By considering the relationship between poetry and mourning from a Derridean perspective of ‘demi-deuil’, I offer an original viewpoint to the study of Montale’s so-called ‘fanciulla morta’, whereby subjects of mourning are no longer considered as negatively dominated by the Other’s death, but indeed are devoted to preserving the affect relationship with the dead, against the Freudian notion of ‘getting over’ and ‘moving on’ after loss. Engaging with French theory when looking at Montale is productive in so far as Derrida’s writings on mourning and loss offer a highly helpful set of concepts (such as that of ‘demi-deuil’) and a very precise terminology that perfectly captures crucial characteristics of Montale’s mourning for his ‘care ombre’, as I understand it, for which there is not an adequate vocabulary available. It is, in other words, a filter that reflects my own vision of Montale’s mourning for his ‘care ombre’ and that allows me to frame it and to present a new understanding of it with an accurate and fresh terminology.

This thesis will be structured as follows. Chapter 1 begins the exploration of Montale’s shadows by looking at the poetic subject’s self-identification with the ‘ombra’ and his desire for self-effacement as it emerges in *Ossi di seppia*.

1987), pp. 257-409 (p. 335 for ‘mid-mourning’); and “‘Dialanguages’”, in *Points ... Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber and trans. by Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 132-155 (p. 153 for ‘semi-mourning’).

Here, I will highlight how this increasing state of dissolution is achieved also at textual level by means of what I would choose to call a ‘textual strategy of anonymity’. It is in the incorporeal form of the ‘ombra’ that Montale looks for a point of contact with the intangible ‘Nulla’. In this dimension of complete nothingness seems to exist a more truthful and meaningful state of things. However, in order to enter into dialogue with this dimension, the ‘io-ombra’ needs to develop a dialogue with a *tu*: a shift gradually develops from the individual shadow of the poetic subject to various shadowy presences. From Chapter 2 onwards the focus is therefore on the poetic subject’s dialogue with the ‘tu-ombra’ as a way through which to explore the ‘beyond’, the afterlife. More specifically, Chapter 2 focuses on the so-called ‘fanciulla morta’, and the figures of Esterina, Arletta/Annetta, and Mosca in particular. All of them represent, for the poetic subject, a possibility of entering into dialogue with the ‘beyond’, where they all transit and ultimately dissolve into nothingness, the element to which they essentially belong. As mourning and memory increasingly emerge as key players in the poetic subject’s relationship with his lost female ‘ombre’, Chapter 3 looks at these two elements in depth. This analysis is undertaken from the Derridean perspective of ‘demi-deuil’, and the focus is specifically on the figure of Arletta. The poems centred around the ‘fanciulla morta’ tend to bring into focus the poetic subject’s mourning for his lost object of love and to challenge the traditional ‘work of mourning’ and its relations to the poetic genre of the elegy. Chapter 4, however, will highlight how other poems that centre around other ‘care ombre’ follow a different trajectory, tending to present more explicitly the dead’s perspective and grieving. This brings into focus the passage between life and death as well as the nature of the afterlife in a more in-depth way. Moreover, the

poems dedicated to these other shadows, particularly the ones of the poetic subject's mother and father, lead us to explore how death and loss relates to memory from a more theoretical point of view, rather than the poetic subject's personal, mournful perspective. It will be at this stage that a complete vision of Montale's eschatology will fully emerge.

CHAPTER 1

The Self as ‘Ombra’: *Ossi di seppia*

1.1 Introduction

‘Ma è possibile, | lo sai, amare un’ombra, ombre noi stessi’ (*Xenia* I.13, 12-13, p. 301). In the concluding lines of this *xenion*, Montale defines both Mosca’s shadow, now belonging to the realm of the dead, and the status of the living as somehow caught in between. The co-existence of these two dimensions represents, throughout Montale’s extensive and diverse poetic corpus, an element of continuity that has scarcely been examined in any depth. Montale’s exploration of the element of the ‘ombra’ – as an unknown mode of being beyond the tangible – and more broadly, his interest in what lies beyond the visible world, the ‘oltre’, holds together a view of both experience and poetry in a significant way. Indeed, the image of the lyrical ‘I’ as ‘ombra’ certainly does not occur in *Xenia* for the first time, but goes back to his first poetic collection, *Ossi di seppia*. Here ‘ombra’ is something that exposes the poetic subject to a desired dimension of dissolution, and this is not far away from the dimension of death. Furthermore, this unsubstantial status embodies the more authentic form of being for the poetic subject as its ‘vera sostanza’ (‘Ciò che di me sapeste...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 14, p. 36). Already in *Ossi di seppia*, in other words, the status of ‘ombra’ is two-fold. First of all, ‘ombra’ is the shadow with which the poetic subject identifies, representing the only possibility of attaining the desired self-effacement. Secondly, but no less importantly, ‘ombra’ is the shadow of the absent loved one – who is now reduced to incorporeality – from whom the poetic subject seeks not to be separated. These ‘ombre’ are characterised by a paradoxical dimension of presence-in-absence, in

so far as they are uniquely tangible beings who seem to be more alive than the living. This chapter explores the first dimension, that of the poetic subject's self-identification with the 'ombra', and his desire for self-effacement. This will enable us to understand how Montale subsequently arrives at the elaboration of his 'care ombre' in the following collections, and to better grasp their complex nature and function within his poetry.

In his essay entitled 'Montale e *La bufera*', Gianfranco Contini captures Montale's strong and never-ending attachment to 'irreality', to which the element of the 'ombra' belongs, arguing that:

La differenza costitutiva fra Montale e i suoi coetanei sta in ciò: che questi sono in pace con la realtà [...] mentre Montale non ha certezza del reale. [...] Ma si può anticipare che, come delle *Occasioni*, così della *Bufera* sono già negli *Ossi* veri e propri elementi avanti la lettera. In breve: in un mondo talmente cancellato, improbabile e senza avvenire, *i vivi non sono più autonomi di ombre*; al confronto i morti, depositari del ritornante passato, acquistano la pienezza di vita di cui quel mondo è capace.³⁷

The way the 'vivi', and specifically the living poetic subject, are no more alive and autonomous than 'shadows', emerges clearly in numerous poems in *Ossi di seppia*, and most powerfully in the 'osso breve', 'Ciò che di me sapeste...': 'Se un'ombra scorgete, non è | un'ombra – ma quella io sono' ('Ciò che di me sapeste...', *Ossi di seppia*, 17-18, p. 36). The boundaries between substance and shadow, 'real' and 'unreal' are blurred. As the concluding chapter of this thesis will show, the very boundaries between life and death will be blurred, too. In an interview in 1965, Montale questions – not for the first time – the existence of the

³⁷ Gianfranco Contini, 'Montale e *La bufera*', an article first published in *Letteratura* in 1956 and now available in the collection of Contini's essays on Montale entitled *Una lunga fedeltà. Scritti su Eugenio Montale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), pp. 79-94 (85) (emphasis added).

material world, and indeed his own existence: ‘Non sono nemmeno sicuro che il mondo esista, che la materia esista, che io esista’.³⁸ From this perspective, it is clear how the human condition does not appear to this poet to be radically different from that of a shadow. Similarly, Enrico Testa argues that ‘la condizione umana non appare tanto diversa da quella delle ombre [...] e la centralità dell’uomo nel mondo, la sua presenza in esso, lo statuto “reale” di ciò che ci circonda vengono messi radicalmente in crisi.’³⁹ It is within this framework that, as this chapter will reveal, earthly identity needs to be shown to be gradually dissolving, as it were, into nothingness – into the status of ‘ombra’. In this dimension, a greater sense of fulfillment, and a more authentic reconstitution of the self, can paradoxically be found in *Ossi di seppia*.

³⁸ Ferdinando Camon, ‘Intervista con Montale’, in Antonio Barbuto and Donatella Fiaccerini Marchi, eds, *Eugenio Montale* (Rome: Dell’Ateneo, 1972), pp. 8-15 (13). This statement also highlights another aspect of Montale’s poetry, namely its ‘distrust of the existence of the real world, and his fear that words may be able to express nothing of it’ and how this leads Montale to use the ‘language of hypothesis, qualifying many assertions with grammatical pointers of doubt.’ On this aspect of Montale’s poetry as ‘not one of assertion but rather one of doubt and investigation’, see Clodagh J. Brook, *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale’s Poetry: Metaphor, Negation, and Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 97.

³⁹ Enrico Testa, *Montale* (Milan: Einaudi, 2000), p. 93.

1.2 The Poetic Subject's Dissolution and the *Topos* of the Knife-edged Object

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.⁴⁰

The poetic subject in *Ossi di seppia* is experiencing an overwhelming and paralysing state of crisis, echoing the sense of disharmony declared by the poet in his well-known 'Confessioni di scrittori (Interviste con se stessi)'. In the *Ossi*, this disharmony configures itself on multiple levels. Firstly, the disharmony is an integral part of the 'male di vivere' that the poetic subject experiences and struggles to give voice to. Furthermore, this is the disharmony between the *io* and the external reality, something with which it cannot be in 'accordo': 'Dalla mia la tua musica sconcorda' ('Giunge a volte, repente,...', *Ossi di seppia*, 3, p. 57). Lastly, disharmony characterises the *io* himself as well as his heart – a 'scordato strumento' – which is 'squassato da trasalimenti', over which the poetic subject has no control or ownership ('Corno inglese', *Ossi di seppia*, 17, p. 13; 'Mia vita, a te non chiedo lineamenti...', *Ossi di seppia*, 6, p. 33). The poetic subject of Montale's first collection is thus not only in disharmony with the surrounding nature but also inherently in conflict with his own self: he is a divided soul – an 'animo [...] informe' ('Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato...', *Ossi di seppia*, 2, p. 29). All this brings the poetic subject to an increasingly overwhelming desire for self-effacement and identification as an incorporeal 'ombra'.

The disharmonic interior state of 'male di vivere' is paradoxically saturated with physicality whilst also seeking his own dissolution. The extent to

⁴⁰ Eugenio Montale, 'Confessioni di scrittori (Interviste con se stessi)', in *SM II*, pp. 1591-1596 (1592).

which the poetic subject's crisis pervasively subjugates him emerges by looking at his desire for self-effacement, and his gradual dissolution into a shadow. This is an *io* striving to be pared down to the bone – ‘svanire a poco a poco’ and ‘sparir carne’ (‘Riviere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 28, 32, pp. 103-105) – in the same way the cuttlefish do as they passively toss and turn on the seashore. This is eloquently expressed in the previously quoted poem ‘Ciò che di me sapeste...’: ‘Se un’ombra scorgete, non è | un’ombra – ma quella io sono’ (‘Ciò che di me sapeste...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 17-18, p. 36). Similarly, the seventh poem of the section *Mediterraneo* opens by highlighting precisely this desire for essentiality: ‘Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale’ (‘Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 1, p. 59).

It is by drawing attention to the poetic subject's fragmented self and desire for self-effacement that this chapter aims to highlight an aspect of Montale's poetry that has so far remained unnoticed. I am referring to the element of sharp and knife-edged objects that inhabit *Ossi di seppia*, and that eventually give form to the immaterial concept of ‘male di vivere’ (‘Ciò che di me sapeste...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 17-18, p. 36) that I regard to be one of the primary causes of the poetic subject's desire for self-effacement and subsequent identification as ‘ombra’.⁴¹

⁴¹ Critics have devoted considerable attention to the element of absence and the dissolution of the poetic subject as well as to the so-called ‘poetica dell’oggetto’ in Montale's poetry. However, these two cardinal elements of Montale's first poetic collection have never been approached together. Consequently, attention has never been given to the paradoxical co-existence of, on the one hand, the presence of an ‘io-ombra’, and, on the other hand, the presence of a highly concrete landscape depicted in all its physicality, particularly the constellation of knife-edged objects that inhabit Montale's *Ossi*. Regarding Montale's ‘poetica dell’oggetto’ see Blasucci, *Gli oggetti di Montale*; and Donato Valli, ‘Montale, Saba e la poetica dell’oggetto’, in *Omaggio a Montale*, ed. by Silvio Ramat (Milan: Mondadori, 1966), pp. 39-63. As Blasucci highlights, that disharmony, that ‘male di vivere’, is ‘verificata [...] direttamente, fisicamente, nelle cose che circondano il poeta.’ The critic continues: ‘[d]i qui la ricchezza degli oggetti che popolano la sua poesia, convocati spesso a dichiarare la loro refrattarietà, la loro

Talking about corporeality in relation to Montale goes against the grain of a whole critical tradition. Montalean scholars are accustomed to what could be labelled as a ‘metaphysical reading’ of his poetry that generally excludes any reference to the body. This line of criticism has been encouraged by both Montale himself and by the specific cultural setting in early criticism of his poetry. Therefore, reference to the kind of physicality that emerges from Montale’s verse has been either reduced to the classical concept of ‘corrosione’ or to marginal footnotes and isolated sentences. Far from aiming to reject the metaphysical status of Montale’s poetry, I nonetheless claim that there is a paradoxical co-existence of absence and presence: an intangibility of the ‘io-ombra’ as opposed to the tangibility and corporeality *around* the ‘io-ombra’. What happens in *Ossi di seppia* is the story of the dissolution of the lyrical subject – a dissolution that, as it will soon emerge, does not materialise, as in d’Annunzio, into an occasion for panic unity.

It was Alfredo Gargiulo, in his introduction to the Ribet edition, the second edition of *Ossi di seppia*, who first mentioned the term ‘corrosione’ as the ‘essenziale motivo’ of this poetic collection: ‘[I]a corrosione critica dell’esistenza, che in queste pagine di poesia costituisce l’essenziale motivo, ha certo, in tutto risalto, un tale aspetto aspro, “pietoso”’.⁴² Gargiulo’s by now renowned statement is not lacking either in consensus or contestation among early critics. Nevertheless, that very sense of sharpness inherent in the word ‘corrosione’ as

irriducibilità [...]. Questa refrattarietà conferisce agli oggetti qualcosa di irto e di solido: ciò che, in ordine alla tecnica evocativa, si traduce per lo più in spessore ed asprezza lessicale.’ Blasucci, *Gli oggetti di Montale*, p. 57.

⁴² Alfredo Gargiulo, ‘Introduzione’, in Eugenio Montale, *Ossi di seppia* (Turin: Ribet, 1928); now available in ‘*Ossi di seppia*’, in *Letteratura italiana del Novecento*, 2nd edn (Florence: Le Monnier, 1958), pp. 453-457 (453).

used by Gargiulo led a few early critics to further reflect on this element, particularly in relation to the *Ossi*. In the introduction to the edition of *Tutte le poesie* by Giorgio Zampa, reference is made to the ‘qualità sottile e tagliente’ and the ‘incisività’ of Montale’s style.⁴³ Echoing Zampa, Silvio Ramat similarly highlights Montale’s ‘espressioni rapide e taglienti’, as well as ‘certe espressioni incisive’.⁴⁴ My claim is that there is an image-theme of sharp objects that keeps returning in the *Ossi* – be it natural phenomena or specific objects – which is not merely the cutting and sharp essence of the style that these critics refer to, but of the Ligurian landscape as evoked in the *Ossi* itself, as it can be found in the sea’s ‘[l]ame d’acqua’, as well as in the ‘forte scotere di lame’ and in the image of the ‘mare che scaglia a scaglia’, to name a few (‘Riviere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 41, pp. 103-105; ‘Corno inglese’, *Ossi di seppia*, 2, 10, p. 13). These sharp and knife-edged objects, as I will illustrate, are closely linked to the *io*’s identification with the ‘ombra’ and search for complete dissolution.

In the Italian lyrical tradition, there are instances of an *io* that feels its body to belong to himself: a subject that assigns to each distinctive part the functions with which either to recall a sense of unity of the self or to destroy an already existing self. In Montale, however, as we have seen, the poetic subject is depicted as being in fundamental and inherent disunity – disharmony, to use Montale’s own words – within himself and the external world, and who identifies as an incorporeal ‘io-ombra’. This is mostly visible when looking at the poetic subject’s relationship to his own body through those corporeal synecdoches,

⁴³ Giorgio Zampa, ‘Introduzione’, in Eugenio Montale, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1984), pp. xi-liv (xl, xlix).

⁴⁴ Silvio Ramat, ‘*Ossi di seppia*’, in *Montale* (Florence: Vallecchi Editore, 1965), pp. 11-80 (18-19).

where ‘la parte rimanda al tutto solo al fine di mostrarne la desiderata ma impossibile identificazione’.⁴⁵ In ‘Corno inglese’ a simultaneous gradual humanisation of the natural landscape – particularly of the wind – develops alongside the progressive disunity and dissolution of the poetic subject.

Il vento che stasera suona attento
– ricorda un *forte scotere di lame* –
gli strumenti dei fitti alberi e spazza
l’orizzonte di rame
dove strisce di luce si protendono
come aquiloni al cielo che rimbomba
(Nuvole in viaggio, chiari
reami di lassù! D’alti Eldoradi
malchiuse porte!)
e il mare che scaglia a scaglia
livido, muta colore,
lancia a terra una tromba
di schiume intorte;
il vento che nasce e muore
nell’ora che lenta s’annerà
suonasse te pure stasera
scordato strumento,
cuore.

(‘Corno inglese’, *Ossi di seppia*, p. 13. Emphasis added.)

The heart is used here to express the poetic subject’s constitutive disunity: the heart is *other* to the *io* – its rhythm is completely independent from its owner’s will – it is but a ‘scordato strumento’ (‘Corno inglese’, *Ossi di seppia*, 17, p. 13). Moreover, it is interesting to note that, throughout the *Ossi*, the heart is never

⁴⁵ Malagamba, *Quell’ombra io sono*, p. 25.

accompanied by a first-person possessive pronoun or adjective. The only exception to this is to be found in ‘Antico, sono ubriacato dalla voce...’ (‘Antico, sono ubriacato dalla voce...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 12-15, p. 54). The otherness of the body does not suggest the absence of an identity. Rather, it is a way of expressing the inherent disharmony and sense of non-belonging and estrangement – ‘non-appartenenza’ – that characterises the poetic subject, as well as highlighting the gradual process of dissolution that the *io* is undertaking in ‘Corno inglese’.

If the lyrical ‘I’ is presented as gradually dissolving, the landscape is, on the other hand, depicted in all its materiality and physicality. The wind with its clashing, as though of metal sheets, gradually acquires very concrete features. These are further emphasised by highlighting the wind’s sonorous dimension; the sound produced by the musical instrument, the English horn, is compared here with the sounds of nature, particularly the song of the wind playing in the trees and then the sea beating against the sand. The ‘forte scotere di lame’, along with the ‘strumenti dei fitti alberi’, the ‘cielo che rimbomba’, and the sea that ‘lancia a terra una tromba | di schiume intorte’, become a metaphor that allows a bridge to be created between the external reality and the emotional state of the poetic subject, that is, between the external landscape and the poetic subject’s interior landscape (‘Corno inglese’, *Ossi di seppia*, 2, 3, 6, 12-13, p. 13). The heart is both literally and metaphorically in disharmony – out of tune – with both the external reality and with its own self. Montale, therefore, creates an existential landscape in all its (meta)physical disharmony to evoke a particular state of being: that of the ‘male di vivere’. As such, the materiality of the poetic landscape becomes a way through which the inexpressible becomes expressible; a way through which the poetic subject’s ‘male di vivere’ is expressed without requiring the ‘io-ombra’

to reject himself as ‘ombra’ in favour of a more ‘solid’ self that would be able to voice this interior state of being.⁴⁶

It has almost become commonplace to talk about the *topos* of inexpressibility, both in reference to the literature of this period and to Montale’s work in particular. Montale was profoundly aware of the limitations of language, and this emerges both in his poetry and in his interviews, self-interviews and articles.⁴⁷ Critics have often addressed the question of how Montale brings the inexpressible into language. Following Clodagh Brook, I suggest that in order to express the inexpressible – such as the concept of ‘male di vivere’ – Montale constructs a series of metaphors and symbols, in all their materiality and physicality, to make intelligible what would otherwise be difficult, if not at times impossible, to grasp in purely abstract terms. This is especially given the presence of an *io* that searches for complete dissolution equally in terms of poetic authority (as is evident in ‘Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato...’, *Ossi di seppia*, p. 29). These metaphors and symbols are mainly to be found in the objects that inhabit his poetic landscape, as well as natural elements like the wind and the sea.

One particular trait of these objects is, however, exceptionally significant: the recurrence of an image-theme of knife-edged objects that keeps returning in the *Ossi*. A few of the most eloquent examples are to be found in ‘Corno inglese’, where one encounters the already mentioned sharp sea-waves and their vigorous

⁴⁶ My reading partly originates from Clodagh Brook’s exploration of Montale’s ‘expression of the inexpressible’ in her *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale’s Poetry* and aims to develop it in new directions by considering the *topos* of the knife-edged object that I identify in Montale’s *Ossi di seppia*.

⁴⁷ See the already cited Montale, ‘Confessioni di scrittori (Interviste con se stessi)’.

advancement evoked, as we have seen, in the image of ‘il mare che scaglia a scaglia’ (‘Corno inglese’, *Ossi di seppia*, 10, p. 13). The protagonist of this poem is, however, not the sea, but the wind; a wind that is also, similarly to the sea, portrayed through the *topos* of the knife-edged object, and that is said to resemble the sound of a ‘forte scotere di lame’ (an image that resurfaces in ‘Arsenio’ as the ‘fremere di lamiera | percossa’ (‘Arsenio’, *Ossi di seppia*, 26-27, pp. 83-84)).

It is helpful to linger here, for a moment, on the element of the wind in ‘Corno inglese’, in order to continue our journey through Montale’s Ligurian poetic lands. However, a short detour towards another wind must be made first: Shelley’s unforgettable West Wind. In his renowned ‘Ode’, Shelley invokes the West Wind to bring him inspiration and summon its energetic and regenerating nature:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!
[...]
If I were a dead leaf thou mightest beat;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
The impulse of *thy strength*, only less free
Than thou, O *uncontrollable!*

[...] Be thou, Spirit *fierce*,
My spirit! Be thou me, *impetuous* one!

[...]
Be through my lips to unawakened earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?⁴⁸

Even in invoking this positive force of the wind, Shelley does not hide its inherent double valence: the wind is both a ‘preserver’ and a ‘destroyer’. To Shelley, the wind can awaken mankind, but it is, at the same time, an ‘uncontrollable’, ‘impetuous’ energy and a ‘fierce’ spirit which is well beyond man’s power. Something similar occurs in Montale’s *Ossi di seppia* with the wind’s ‘forte scotere di lame’ (‘Corno inglese’, *Ossi di seppia*, 2, p. 13).

The wind, along with the sea, represents one of the most central elements of the *Ossi*’s poetic landscape. Critics generally agree that the wind stands for regeneration, renewal and poetic inspiration.⁴⁹ However, this energetic force associated with the wind also latently acquires sharp and destructive features, similar to the way Shelley’s wind does. Compared to water and the earth, the wind is surely the most incorporeal element of the three: it is shown to have the power to impact reality on a material level just as the sea can beat the Ligurian shores. Its presence is felt by what it moves with a blowing that is simultaneously vital and destructive. Against such an overwhelming presence, the poetic subject appears to dissolve even further. What therefore emerges in ‘Corno inglese’ is

⁴⁸ Percy B. Shelley, ‘Ode to the West Wind’, in *Selected Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1956) (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ To use Angiola Ferraris’ words, the wind and the sea are ‘forze primordiali’. Similarly, in ‘In limine’, Ott highlights the wind as a primary source of ‘vitalità e ispirazione’. As the verb ‘godi’ in the first line suggests, the wind inaugurates a ‘processo di vitalizzazione’ by its act of ‘penetrare nel giardino’. Angiola Ferraris, *Se il vento. Lettura degli ‘Ossi di seppia’ di Eugenio Montale* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 1995), p. 21. Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, pp. 121, 150, 197.

that, on the one hand, there is an *io* who does not identify as a unified self and, on the other, there is the image-theme of the ‘lama’.⁵⁰

Moreover, in both ‘Corno inglese’ and ‘Arsenio’ there is a dormant sense of theatricality: the ‘forte scotere di lame’ and the ‘lamiera percossa’ remind us of the device used in theatre productions to emphasise a dramatic climax by clashing metal sheets backstage, a supposition that, in the case of ‘Corno inglese’, is further supported by the title of the poem itself (‘Corno inglese’, *Ossi di seppia*, 2, p. 13; ‘Arsenio’, *Ossi di seppia*, 26-27, pp. 83-84). Nonetheless, Montale chooses to employ the word ‘lame’, which inevitably evokes a sense of sharpness, calling to mind a sword-like object. This is consistent with other instances of knife-edged objects, among which are the sea’s ‘scaglie’ and ‘lame d’acqua’ (‘Merigiare pallido e assorto...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 10, p. 30; ‘Riviere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 41, pp. 103-105). However, the sense of sharpness inherent in the knife-edged object is at its most powerful in ‘Corno inglese’. Here, Montale simultaneously engages two of the reader’s senses: the sonorous effect of the ‘scotere di lame’ and the almost palpable ‘mare che scaglia a scaglia’ awaken the reader’s senses of hearing and touch. The images depicted here evoke an overwhelming sense of sharpness,

⁵⁰ Just as in Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’, there are many instances in the *Ossi* where the wind is represented not just as a regenerating, but also as a destructive element. Examples of this include ‘Falsetto’ where the wind ‘lacera o addensa, violento’ (‘Falsetto’, *Ossi di seppia*, 7, pp. 14-15). Among the many winds that blow throughout *Ossi di seppia*, the ‘tramontana’ emerges as a ‘volontà di ferro [che] spazza l’aria’ (‘Ed ora sono spariti i circoli d’ansia...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 5, p. 72). In this last poem the words ‘subbuglio’, ‘squassa’ and ‘schianta’ further highlight the hostile nature of the primordial force of the wind, something out of the *io*’s control (‘Ed ora sono spariti i circoli d’ansia...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 9, 11, p. 72). Similarly, Arsenio is shown as unable to contain the ‘turbini [che] sollevano la polvere’ (‘Arsenio’, *Ossi di seppia*, 1, pp. 83-84). There are also eloquent moments throughout the suite *Mediterraneo* where the wind is depicted as violent, instances of this are to be found in the ‘erratiche forze di venti’ in ‘Giunge a volte, repente,...’ and in the poem ‘A vortice s’abbatte...’: ‘A vortice s’abbatte | sul mio capo reclinato | un suono d’agri lazzi’ (‘Giunge a volte, repente,...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 19, p. 57; ‘A vortice s’abbatte...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 1-3, p. 53).

further emphasising the disharmony that is part of the ‘male di vivere’ that the ‘io-ombra’ seeks to give voice to without saying ‘io’, but rather by using this *topos* of the knife-edged object to concretise it.

Similarly to the wind, other elements of the Ligurian landscape of the *Ossi* further develop the *topos* of the knife-edged object. One of the most significant examples is to be found in the image of the bottle shards embedded on the wall edge of ‘Merigiare pallido e assorto...’ (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 30). Here, the knife-edged ‘cocci aguzzi di bottiglia’ (line 17) express the hostile nature of the reality surrounding the *io*. Moreover, the representation of such a sharp reality allows the poet to convey a more abstract conception of life. As Brook explains, Montale often uses the device of the copula, included in ‘Merigiare pallido e assorto...’, as a ‘device that can provide a concrete and tangible grounding for an abstract or nebulous matter, and may thus be suitable for giving form to the ineffable’.⁵¹ It is in this way that the knife-edged wall can provide:

a tangible translation of an abstraction, bringing the worn concept (‘la vita e il suo travaglio’) alive, and grounding it in an experience that a reader cannot only visualize, but with which s/he can also identify.⁵²

The sharp element in the image of the wall topped with bottle shards has, therefore, a concretising function: it is a way through which Montale gives face to the more general and abstract idea, an almost inexpressible idea of life and its torment (‘travaglio’), which would otherwise have been difficult to render without impacting his poetics or making his language too abstract or philosophical. This is a particularly important aspect to highlight, especially in relation to the presence of an ‘io-ombra’. Furthermore, as often happens in Montale, the materiality of the

⁵¹ Brook, *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale’s Poetry*, p. 57.

⁵² Brook, *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale’s Poetry*, p. 58.

words, their phonic quality, further emphasises the overall effect of his verse. In fact, in the closing line, the sense of sharpness is made even more grating through the onomatopoeia of the words ‘cocci aguzzi’.

It is worthwhile to mention here Peter Brooks’ reference, in his book *Body Work*, to the poetic tool of onomatopoeia in relation to the poet’s role in restoring life to the corporeal substratum of language:

the role of the poet [is] to revive the latent metaphoric substratum of language, to make it speak afresh of bodily sensation and natural phenomena – as, for instance, in the relatively trivial but much debated instance of onomatopoeia.⁵³

The sharpness inherent in the concluding onomatopoeia in ‘Merigiare pallido e assorto...’ is a perfect instance of the ‘asprezza’ to which Luigi Blasucci makes reference.⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that there are a few similar instances that echo Montale’s ‘cocci aguzzi di bottiglia’ which, however, lack the kind of corporeality that the Montalean image possesses. An example of this is the ‘cocci innumeri di vetro | sulla cinta vetusta, alla difesa’ from Guido Gozzano’s ‘La signorina Felicita’, as well as ‘come veduto attraverso un coccio di bottiglia’ in Corrado Govoni’s ‘I sobborghi’ from *Inaugurazione della primavera*, a collection of poetry that was particularly dear to Montale.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, as Blasucci argues, ‘tutto montaliano è però lo spessore lessicale, la risentita nettezza materica del verso: “che ha in cima cocci aguzzi di bottiglia”’.⁵⁶ However, it is not simply the ‘nettezza materica’ at the level of lexicon, but also in the object itself. In short,

⁵³ Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 229.

⁵⁴ Blasucci, *Gli oggetti di Montale*, p. 58.

⁵⁵ Corrado Govoni, *Inaugurazione della primavera* (Ferrara: Taddei, 1920); Guido Gozzano, *La signorina Felicita, ovvero, La Felicità* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1983).

⁵⁶ Blasucci, *Gli oggetti di Montale*, p. 58.

through the materiality and physicality of the external landscape, the *io* can acquire the incorporeal form of the ‘ombra’ but still remain able to give voice to the inexpressible, the ‘male di vivere’. This is most powerfully and eloquently accomplished through the use of the *topos* of a sharp and knife-edged object, and the use of related verbs, making the *interior* landscape of the poetic subject an intelligible, palpable feature, present at the level of the observable physical landscape.

Now that we have explored the function of the *topos* of the knife-edged object, we can focus in more detail on its relation to the *io*’s desire for self-effacement, which is intimately linked with the presence of the ‘io-ombra’ in *Ossi di seppia*. Although these objects and the *io* never come into direct contact, the distinctively recurrent use of words such as ‘traversare’, ‘trapassare’, ‘tagliare’, ‘recidere’ (‘So l’ora in cui la faccia più impassibile...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 2, p. 38; ‘Crisalide’, *Ossi di seppia*, 30, 81 pp. 87-89), to name just a few, demonstrates the correlation between the objects’ knife-like sharpness and the poetic subject’s interior feeling of being divided and separated: an ‘anima “divisa”’, an ‘animo [...] informe’ (‘Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 2, p. 29).⁵⁷ This can also be seen as closely related to what Romano Luperini calls ‘irrisarcibile lacerazione’.⁵⁸ This laceration inevitably leads the poetic subject to undertake a process of gradual dissolution, an experience followed by a profound sense of pain: an ‘impietrato soffrire’ (‘Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 21, p. 56). The wind ‘lacera o addensa, violento’ (‘Falsetto’, *Ossi di*

⁵⁷ Romano Luperini, *Storia di Montale* (Rome: Laterza, 1986), p. 25.

⁵⁸ Romano Luperini, *Montale o l’identità negata* (Naples: Liguori, 1984), p. 61.

seppia, 7, pp. 14-15). Although the wind in itself is not an object that cuts, Montale's use of it here significantly resembles that of a knife-edged object.

1.3 The 'io-ombra''s Desire for Self-Effacement and Montale's Textual Strategies of Anonymity

In order to fully understand the nature of the 'io-ombra' in *Ossi di seppia* it is helpful to contextualise the poetic subject's desire for essentiality in its historical moment. The twentieth century is in fact often referred to as the century of the dissolution of the subject – of its crisis and fragmentation – to the point that its death has often been proclaimed among philosophers and cultural theorists.⁵⁹ Consequently, the literary production of this century cannot but register the crisis of the unity of the self and hence the attempt to recover the subject from its total disappearance by looking at its body. As a result, the crisis of the self is followed by the emergence of the body as a central constitutive element:

alla messa in crisi del Soggetto, inteso come luogo di un'identità e di un'interità dell'io in grado di farsi interprete di parametri certi su cui commisurare la realtà [...] corrispond[e] un progressivo aumento delle quotazioni del corpo, che si scopre, lui sì, luogo di rapporti concreti con il reale, e sede di una fisicità che si contrappone e fa attrito contro lo sfaldamento.⁶⁰

This 'sfaldamento' mentioned by Niva Lorenzini corresponds in *Ossi di seppia* to the gradual dissolution of the poetic subject, which, however, presents some unresolved contradictions. On the one hand, one finds an 'io-ombra' that, in the same way as the cuttlefish, is acted upon and passively dissolved, as the verb

⁵⁹ The literature on the disappearance and death of the subject is immense. A representative case is to be found towards the end of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* where he elaborates on the 'death of Man': '[i]n our day [...] it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed as the end of man'. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 385. For a short overview of the main thinkers who questioned the validity of the human subject see James Heartfield, *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained* (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press, 2002).

⁶⁰ Niva Lorenzini, *Corpo e Poesia nel Novecento Italiano* (Milan: Mondadori, 2009), p. 13.

‘sballottare’ implicitly suggests. In their being subjected to the sea’s repetitive movements, the cuttlefish toss about passively until their corpses are gradually corroded and eventually made fleshless (‘Riviere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 26-28, pp. 103-105). On the other hand, however, one finds an *io* that strives towards being ‘scabro ed essenziale’, something that implies a certain level of intentionality and hence an *io* that actively works towards the effacement of his own self (‘Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 1, p. 59). While the latter, in my view, is accomplished at a textual level by using several strategies to attain anonymity, the former is actualised by the external reality, which becomes the indirect agent of this dissolution.

The increasing dissolution of the poetic subject is accomplished at a textual level by means of what I would choose to call a ‘textual strategy of anonymity’. Examples of this include a strategic use of pronouns and verbs in their infinitive and gerund form as exhibited, for instance, in the poems ‘Merigiare pallido e assorto...’ and ‘Felicità raggiunta, si cammina...’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 30, 40). As Andrea Malagamba notes, the impossibility of using the word ‘io’ as a ‘formula in grado di fissare l’identità’ translates into ‘una strategia testuale interamente fondata su modi impersonali [attraverso i quali] l’*io* è scorporato in un elenco di funzioni vitali retto da verbi di modo indefinito’.⁶¹ This is the case for ‘Merigiare pallido e assorto...’, where the use of verbs in their infinitive and gerund form – ‘ascoltare’, ‘spiar’, ‘osservare’, ‘andando’, ‘sentire’ (‘Merigiare pallido e assorto...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 3, 6, 9, 13, 14, p. 30) – allows the poetic subject to avoid the word ‘io’ and consequently to attain the long-desired self-effacement. Similarly, in ‘Felicità raggiunta, si cammina...’, the

⁶¹ Malagamba, *Quell’ombra io sono*, pp. 42-43.

poetic subject hides himself through the strategic use of the pronoun 'si': '[noi] *si cammina*' ('Felicità raggiunta, *si cammina...*', *Ossi di seppia*, 2, p. 40. Emphasis added).⁶²

This textual strategy of anonymity could be said to echo the futurist poetics of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 'Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista'.⁶³ Here, Marinetti advocates the use of the verb in its infinitive form 'perchè *si adatti elasticamente al sostantivo e non lo si sottoponga all'io dello scrittore che osserva e immagina.*'⁶⁴ The *io* for the futurists is consequently perceived to be:

[una] parassitaria meditazione, un'interruzione che ostacola il rapporto diretto con la realtà fenomenica, la fusione tra l'oggetto e l'immagine da esso evocata: insomma la coincidenza tra la parola e la cosa.⁶⁵

However, contrary to the futurists, Montale 'piega l'esperimento formale [...] all'immobilità degli stati contemplativi'; he portrays an *io* that, in a moment of solitary contemplation, reflects on life in order to extract an abstract formula from

⁶² My reading of 'Felicità raggiunta, *si cammina...*' is indebted to Malagamba, who maintains that 'l'adozione di formule impersonali lavora per nascondere l'*io* che vive in prima persona dietro quanto afferma. L'*io* racconta se stesso, ma cancella così bene le proprie tracce che alla fine del componimento il lettore ha dimenticato non solo che la riflessione sulla felicità prende avvio da un'esperienza di matrice personale, ma anche che l'amorevole ammonimento che suggella la prima strofa ed espone il senso del testo ("non ti tocchi *chi* più ti ama", v. 5) riguardi soprattutto colui che parla'. Malagamba, *Quell'ombra io sono*, pp. 60-61.

⁶³ Malagamba, *Quell'ombra io sono*, pp. 43-45; Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, pp. 72-73.

⁶⁴ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista' (1912), in *Opere. Teoria e invenzione futurista*, ed. by Luciano De Maria, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1968), pp. 40-54 (41).

⁶⁵ Antonio Saccone, 'Marinetti e la "distruzione dell'io"', in Palombo Saccone, ed, *Tempo e memoria. Studi in ricordo di Giancarlo Mazzacurati* (Naples: Fridericiana Editrice Universitaria, 2000), pp. 317-345 (321).

what he observes.⁶⁶ Montale employs the verbs in their infinitive form in a way that echoes the futurists' precepts not to violently erase, but only to weaken the lyrical 'I'.⁶⁷ The futurists' objective was to 'distruggere nella letteratura l'io'.⁶⁸ Montale might have assimilated the futurist lesson, but he subsequently developed it in a personal way, and in fact what one finds is a 'maschera spersonalizzante dell'infinito' beneath which, however, there is, at least at this stage of *Ossi di seppia*, a trace of a poetic subject: an 'io-ombra' that still implies the presence of a subject and not the absolute negation of it.⁶⁹ It is important to note that although the *Ossi* poems are close in time to the futurist movement, Montale is less receptive of futurism than other poets such as Ungaretti.⁷⁰ In 'Meriggiare pallido e assorto...', for instance, Montale inaugurates a new conception of poetry which distances itself from both the 'oggettivismo radicale quanto da un enfatico soggettivismo': where 'pallido e assorto' could also not refer to the lyrical 'I' but to 'Meriggiare', and the use of the infinitive 'suggerisce [...] che questo incontro con la natura sia un processo senza conclusione [...]; sembrerebbe non tanto legato a un singolo soggetto, quanto piuttosto a un certo luogo, a una certa ora del giorno.'⁷¹

Although there are unquestionably instances where the *io* appears as a unified subject, generally the relation that Montale establishes between his

⁶⁶ Malagamba, *Quell'ombra io sono*, pp. 43-44.

⁶⁷ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, pp. 82-83.

⁶⁸ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 83.

⁶⁹ 'La prospettiva soggettiva si è ritirata dietro la maschera spersonalizzante dell'infinito, ma è tuttavia presente'. Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 83.

⁷⁰ For an analysis of Ungaretti's debt to futurism see Vivienne Suvini-Hand, *Mirage and Camouflage: Hiding behind Hermeticism in Ungaretti's 'L'Allegria'* (Leicester: Troubador, 2000).

⁷¹ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, pp. 73, 77.

‘designazioni, retoriche o letterali che siano’ undermines ‘dall’interno la sua supposta unità’.⁷² All this is a significant departure from the Italian lyrical tradition. For instance, neither Leopardi nor Pascoli ever deprive their poetic subject of the first-person pronoun, even in the most dramatic moments of the potential annihilation of the *io*. In Leopardi’s ‘L’infinito’ an example of this is ‘il naufragar *m’è* dolce in questo mare’ (‘L’infinito’, *Canti*, 5, p. 49).⁷³ Similarly, in Pascoli’s ‘La vertigine’ the *io* is still clearly present in the poem:

se *mi* si svella, se *mi* si sprofondi
l’essere, tutto l’essere, in quel mare
d’astri, in quel cupo vortice di mondi!

Veder d’attimo in attimo più chiare
le costellazioni, il firmamento
crescere sotto il *mio* precipitare!

Precipitare languido, sgomento,
nullo, senza più peso e senza senso:
sprofondar d’un millennio ogni momento!⁷⁴
(‘La vertigine’, *Nuovi Poemetti*, 43-51, pp. 390-392)

In ‘Meriggiare pallido e assorto...’ (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 30), Montale distances himself from the classical vision of panic unity between the *io* and the surrounding natural landscape. In any analysis of ‘Meriggiare pallido e assorto...’ it is difficult to avoid reference to d’Annunzio’s ‘Meriggio’, since Montale’s poem is in direct contrast to the d’Annunzian conception of the ‘meriggio’. By comparing Montale’s and d’Annunzio’s poems, one finds that Montale

⁷² Malagamba, *Quell’ombra io sono*, p. 45.

⁷³ Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, in *Poesie e Prose*, ed. by Mario Andrea Rigoni, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1987) (emphasis added).

⁷⁴ Giovanni Pascoli, *Poesie* (Milan: Mondadori, 1939) (emphasis added).

inaugurates a new perception of nature. This becomes clear if one takes into account the *topos* of the ‘meriggio’, which from Mallarmé to Nietzsche and d’Annunzio traditionally symbolises ‘la maturità, la massima perfezione delle cose [e] sprigiona energia sensuale e stimola l’immaginazione.’⁷⁵

Both d’Annunzio and Montale focus on the frightening aspect of the ‘meriggio’, although the conclusions they draw from their reflections are very different. In fact in d’Annunzio ‘il silenzio mortale prepara una rinascita. La contemplazione del paesaggio porta a una perdita di sé, per cui l’io si fonde con il paesaggio circostante – un’immagine tipicamente panica.’⁷⁶ This powerfully emerges in the following lines:

A mezzo il giorno
sul Mare etrusco
pallido verdicante
come il dissepolto
bronzo degli ipogei, grava
la bonaccia. Non bava
di vento intorno
alita. Non trema canna
su la solitaria
spiaggia aspra di rusco,
di ginepri arsi. Non suona
voce, se ascolto.
[...]
e il fiume è la mia vena,
il monte è la mia fronte,
la selva è la mia pube,
la nube è il mio sudore
[...]

⁷⁵ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 73.

⁷⁶ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 75.

Non ho più nome né sorte
tra gli uomini; ma il nome
è Meriggio. In tutto io vivo
tacito come la Morte

E la mia vita è divina.

(‘Meriggio’, *Alcyone*, 6-12, 85-88, 105-109, pp. 147-151)⁷⁷

While in Montale the ‘io-ombra’ is evidently in a state of disharmony with the surrounding nature, in d’Annunzio it emerges that the *io* gradually becomes part of nature and even acquires a state of immortality; an occasion for panic unity that elevates the poetic subject’s existence above the rest of the ‘comuni mortali’.⁷⁸ For Montale we do not have a communion, but rather an irreconcilable fracture from nature.

Montale’s ‘Merigiare pallido e assorto...’ presents a very different vision of the topical hour of the ‘meriggio’. This is accomplished first of all by presenting a much more impersonal lyrical voice and therefore negating ‘qualsiasi pretesa orfico-profetica [che] accentu[i] la precarietà dell’esistenza e della conoscenza umana.’⁷⁹ Montale distances himself both from the well-developed and ‘solid’ d’Annunzian poetic subject, which can shape reality at will, and from the futurist precept of complete annihilation of the lyrical ‘I’.⁸⁰ The hour of the ‘meriggio’ ‘non concede illuminazioni poetiche o, come volevano gli antichi, teofanie, ma conduce al disinganno’.⁸¹ The resulting disappointment, however,

⁷⁷ Gabriele d’Annunzio, *Alcyone*, ed. by Pietro Gibellini (Turin: Einaudi, 1995).

⁷⁸ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, pp. 76-77.

⁷⁹ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 81.

⁸⁰ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 85.

⁸¹ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, pp. 80-81. Of significance is also Leopardi’s notes about the *topos* of the ‘meriggio’: ‘[a]nticamente correivano parecchie false

does allow some insight into the character of life. ‘Sul piano gnoseologico’, as Ott explains:

il percipiente deve infine riconoscere l’impossibilità di oggettivare la realtà esterna. L’assoluta imparzialità non esiste: il mondo naturale e la sua espressione sono sempre frutto di una relazione soggettiva.⁸²

This significantly differs from the outcome of the *io*’s fusion with nature in d’Annunzio’s ‘Meriggio’, where the *io* becomes a medium with which to measure the world, the primary element that defines reality. This comparison reveals that in Montale the poetic subject finds himself dislocated from the surrounding reality, which does not allow for a panic unity, but rather only the realisation that life and all its ‘travaglio’ is like walking on the side of a wall topped by bottle shards.

One can only conclude that ‘[c]hi parla è ormai “scorza” senza “sostanza”, “ombra” senza “corpo”, “me” senza “io”’.⁸³ However, this should not mislead us into thinking that what we find in *Ossi di seppia* is the negation of the poetic subject’s identity, or the representation of his fragmentation and constitutive disunity as a result of a gradual dissolution, thus presupposing a state in which the poetic subject precedently *was* a well-defined and constituted subject. Rather, the poetic subject’s unity and the formation of a lyrical ‘I’ have been compromised from the very start. One of the ways in which this has been achieved is through Montale’s textual strategy of anonymity. As a result, any possibility of future unity seems improbable. What one finds, instead, is an ‘io-ombra’ that seeks his

immaginazioni appartenenti all’ora del mezzogiorno, e fra l’altre, che gli Dei [...] si lasciassero vedere o sentire particolarmente su quell’ora [...]’. Giacomo Leopardi, *Annotazioni alla dieci Canzoni stampate in Bologna nel 1824*, in Leopardi, *Canti*, pp. 163-201 (192).

⁸² Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 84.

⁸³ Malagamba, *Quell’ombra io sono*, p. 55.

own effacement while wandering around the liminal space of the Ligurian coast as portrayed in the *Ossi*. The poetic subject belongs to the ‘razza | di chi rimane a terra’ (‘Falsetto’, *Ossi di seppia*, 50-51, pp. 14-15), maintaining – as we shall see in the next chapter – an unbridgeable distance separating him from the ‘jeune fille en fleur’ of ‘Falsetto’ who bravely plunges herself into the roaring abyss, as well as other female interlocutors. The poetic subject ‘rimane a terra’ and is unable to dive into the sea: he can only observe the fearless Esterina doing so – he is a ‘uomo che tarda | all’atto’ (‘Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 8-9, p. 59).⁸⁴

The programmatic poem ‘Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato...’ articulates Montale’s idea of poetry as intimately related to the awareness of the presence of an ‘io-ombra’ as a deformed soul that can only assert his identity through negation:

Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato
l’animo nostro informe, e a lettere di fuoco
lo dichiari e risplenda come un croco
perduto in mezzo a un polveroso prato.

[...]

Non domandarci la formula che mondi possa aprirti,
sì qualche storta sillaba e secca come un ramo.
Codesto solo oggi possiamo dirti,
ciò che *non* siamo, ciò che *non* vogliamo.

⁸⁴ In one of her succinct but eloquent footnotes, Tiziana Arvigo reminds us that the expression of the ‘razza che rimane a terra’ echoes a Proustian moment of *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*: ‘Telles que si [...] elles eussent jugé que la foule environnante était composée d’être d’une autre race’ (emphasis added). Marcel Proust, *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by P. Clarac and A. Ferré, Paris, Gallimard, 1954, pp. 429-955: 791. See also Tiziana Arvigo, *Guida alla lettura di Montale. Ossi di seppia* (Rome: Carrocci, 2001), pp. 42-45 (43).

(‘Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 1-12, p. 29)

Here one finds not so much, as generally argued, the idea that it is impossible to express any kind of truth in poetry, as one could assume from the line: ‘Non domandarci la formula che mondi possa aprirti’. Rather, one finds a poetic subject that is put on the side, given that he is no longer able to express ‘la parola che squadri da ogni lato | l’animo [...] informe’ (lines 1-2).⁸⁵ As a result, ‘la parola non dice l’io’ perchè non c’è alcun *io* da dire’.⁸⁶ Montale seems to suggest that the word ‘io’ is only a ‘storta sillaba’ which is ‘secca come un ramo’: nothing more than a mere grammatical entity emptied by any potential power to express any meaning (‘Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 10, p. 29).⁸⁷ What is at stake here is how to express the disunity of this ‘io-ombra’ – an ‘anima “divisa”’, of this ‘animo [...] informe’ – without saying ‘io’ (‘Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 2, p. 29).⁸⁸ This is achieved through the aforementioned textual strategies of anonymity as well as the already mentioned *topos* of the knife-edged object.

⁸⁵ This view is shared by Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti in his ‘Montale o il superamento del soggetto’: ‘[c’è la] messa da parte del soggetto, in quanto non più in grado di esprimere da sé la parola che squadri l’animo diventato informe, cioè confuso, oscuro, [...] e di conseguenza, ridotto a uno stato magmatico e caotico di illeggibilità e, di inesprimibilità attraverso la poesia’. Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti, ‘Montale o il superamento del soggetto’, in *La poesia di Eugenio Montale. Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, Milan 12-14 September – Genoa 15 September 1982 (Milan-Genoa: Librex, 1983), pp. 171-187 (171).

⁸⁶ Malagamba, *Quell’ombra io sono*, p. 36.

⁸⁷ Malagamba, *Quell’ombra io sono*, p. 40.

⁸⁸ Luperini, *Storia di Montale* (Rome: Laterza, 1986), p. 25.

1.4 *Mediterraneo*: The Sea and its ‘ampie gole’

As we have seen in the preceding sections, the disharmony of the ‘io-ombra’ – the ‘male di vivere’ – is verified directly, physically, on the objects that surround the poetic subject. Among these, the knife-edged objects represent the most relevant instances, particularly the sea that comes to acquire significant sharp features. The sea represents a pivotal element in Montale’s first poetic collection to the point that, as Sergio Solmi eloquently states, once the reader closes the volume after reading its last poem, its powerful voice keeps whispering in his or her ears:

Se chiudiamo il volume ne udiamo, dietro le parole che lente si scancellano dalla memoria, il battito contro le scogliere e l’infinita musica. Quest’aperto soffio salino dà l’aroma a tutto il libro, ne evoca lo sfondo e gli dà una sorta d’ideale unità culminante in *Mediterraneo*.⁸⁹

However, two points should be raised here. Firstly, the beating on the shores and the sea’s ‘infinita musica’ should not be misread as a pleasant music evoking some sort of peaceful bliss, but rather as a disharmonic music of the sea’s ‘strepeanti acque’ and their delirium (‘A vortice s’abbatte...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 16, p. 53).⁹⁰ Secondly, one notes that Montale explicitly situates the origin of the *io*’s gradual dissolution in the traumatic event of the end of the golden age of childhood, something that causes a painful divorce between the *io* and nature, of which the sea becomes its indisputable protagonist.

⁸⁹ Sergio Solmi, *Scrittori negli anni* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1963), p. 20.

⁹⁰ If one dares to make such a comparison, this ‘infinita musica’ is similar to what Maurizio Pollini achieves playing the attack of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s piano piece *Klavierstücke IX*, with its traumatic endless repetition of a single chord which echoes so powerfully Montale’s sea and its ‘strepeanti acque’, rather than, one might say, his forte Frédéric Chopin’s *Etude Op. 25 no. 12* (‘A vortice s’abbatte...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 16, p. 53).

It is for this reason that *Ossi di seppia* has often been seen as a ‘romanzo’, with a recognisable narrative of the end of childhood.⁹¹ From this standpoint, in his groundbreaking *Storia di Montale*, Luperini asserts:

Gli *Ossi di seppia* si pongono dunque come un romanzo dell’identità, o meglio, di un’identità da farsi [...] [sul piano] psicologico, come elegia di un’anima ‘divisa’ o di un ‘animo informe’ che tenta la strada di una faticosa ricostruzione della personalità dopo la ‘fine dell’infanzia’.⁹²

The ‘fine dell’infanzia’ is at the centre of one section of the *Ossi* in particular, namely *Mediterraneo*, where the Mediterranean sea is the focus of all its nine poems. Here the sea’s severe beating on the shores stands as a reminder of the disharmonic status of the lyrical ‘I’ that now finds himself exiled from his ‘mare-padre’. However, as is often the case with Montale, the *io* has an ambivalent response to this traumatic event of the ‘fine dell’infanzia’, and finds himself caught in contradictory yearnings. On the one hand, there is the desire to recover a harmonious unity with the sea, and, on the other, the attempt to rationally detach oneself from it. The simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the sea also stands for the latent desire to re-appropriate himself with a unified self after the end of childhood, as well as continuing his journey towards being ‘scabro ed essenziale’ and towards being an ‘ombra’ (‘Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 1, p. 59). Thus, this ‘divorzio’, this separation, brings the protagonist of the *Ossi* to the realisation of the difficulty to harmonise:

adesione panica alla natura e necessità della scelta e della decisione adulta, dell’accordo col ritmo cosmico, dell’attesa del prodigio che

⁹¹ Regarding readings of the *Ossi* as a ‘romanzo’ see Luperini, *Montale o l’identità*, p. 69; Vittorio Sereni, ‘Dovuto a Montale’, in *La tentazione della prosa*, ed. by Giulia Raboni (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), pp. 144-149 (146); Testa, *Montale*, pp. 26-27.

⁹² Luperini, *Storia di Montale*, p. 25.

salvi dall'inerzia e dalla insensatezza, del fallimento che incombe sull'esistenza del giovane.⁹³

Moreover, the inherent corrosive nature of the sea and its waves should not be underestimated. Just as the cuttlefish gradually become fleshless, the sea implicitly assumes, although never in direct contact with the *io*, the same role as regards the poetic subject, with his desire to 'svanire a poco a poco' and 'sparir carne' ('Riviere', *Ossi di seppia*, 28, 32, pp. 103-105). The sea is thus an agent of dissolution, that very dissolution that the 'io-ombra' strives for, but multiple tensions and contradictory yearnings mark this complex relationship between the *io* and his 'mare-padre'.

In a little known essay published on *L'Ambrosiano* in 1932, Carlo Emilio Gadda offers an interesting and pertinent observation on this:

Non vano, non vago, non gratuito, non 'voluto', questo 'paese' (o questo ribollente mare) è la culla storica della poesia di Montale: ma la realtà scenografica si trasforma in una 'necessità' lirica: si sente subito quanto il paesaggio divenga necessario simbolo d'altra emozione, connaturato mezzo d'altra e secreta immaginativa. [...] La Liguria terrestre ed equorea divien simbolo nell'attuazione della conoscenza e nella consumazione del dolore. [...] Ed ecco, nel mondo de' simboli, il Mediterraneo ribolle incomposto e pur attua una legge: che è la legge composita ed armoniosa della infinità, della totalità. [...] Valido e nuovo, veritiero ed acre è il simbolo nella poesia di Montale.⁹⁴

The sea is therefore not merely a static decorative element that is contemplated in a state of peaceful bliss by the poetic subject. On the contrary, with its beating on the Ligurian shores and its sonorous quality, the sea emerges as a fundamental element through which the lyrical 'I' can narrate his story, the story of the 'fine

⁹³ Luperini, *Storia di Montale*, pp. 5-6.

⁹⁴ Carlo Emilio Gadda, 'Poesia di Montale', in *Opere, Saggi, Giornali, Favole e altri scritti*, vol. 1 (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), pp. 765-771 (766).

dell'infanzia'. All this immediately emerges from the image of the 'ribollio dell'acque', the beating of the 'schiume sulle rocce' and the 'strepeanti acque' in the opening poem of *Mediterraneo*:

Quando più sordo o meno *il ribollio dell'acque*
che *s'ingorgano*
accanto a lunghe secche mi raggiunge:
o è un bombo talvolta ed un ripiovere
di *schiume sulle rocce*.
Come rialzo il viso, ecco cessare
i ragli sul mio capo; e via scoccare
verso le *strepeanti acque*,
frecciate biancazzurre, due ghiandaie.
(‘A vortice s’abbatte...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 9-17, p. 53. Emphasis added.)

Thus, as Gadda points out, the Ligurian landscape becomes a symbol for the experience of pain: that ‘consumazione del dolore’, or, in other words, of the pain of living – the ‘male di vivere’, whose origins are to be found at the end of childhood and the *io*'s subsequent exile from the sea. In *Mediterraneo* this separation between the *io* and the sea is depicted in the most vivid colours, as for instance in ‘Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...’, where one finds a ‘rottura non solo improvvisa e lacerante ma definitiva’.⁹⁵

e tutti vidi
gli eventi del minuto
come pronti a disgiungersi in un crollo.
(‘Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 13-15, p. 59)

If the *Ossi* resembles a ‘romanzo’, then the suite *Mediterraneo* has a particularly strong narrative quality, and it plays a central part in exposing the

⁹⁵ Luperini, *Montale o l'identità negata*, p. 34.

sense of disharmony between the *io* and the surrounding reality, and his attempt to reconstitute a sense of unity of the self after the end of childhood:

I tre movimenti corrispondono poi all'accordo panico col mare, vissuto nell'infanzia e talora ancora possibile al presente, all'angosciosa consapevolezza attuale del divorzio dal mare-padre e all'augurio di recuperarne in avvenire una qualche positiva lezione, seppure nell'ambito di una pessimistica chiaroveggenza circa il 'limite' stesso della condizione umana ('limite' che appunto il distacco dal mare rende evidente).⁹⁶

In *Mediterraneo*, to which 'Merigiare pallido e assorto...' is intimately related by the similar way the sea is represented, the sea that is addressed as 'antico' and 'padre', becomes a symbol of life: 'simbolo della vita, e le macerie ricacciate a riva non sono che gli inutili rottami dell'esistenza' ('Antico, sono ubriacato dalla voce...', *Ossi di seppia*, 1, p. 54; 'Giunge a volte, repente,...', *Ossi di seppia*, 28, p. 57).⁹⁷ One notes that the title of Montale's first collection of poetry was originally supposed to have been *Rottami*, a detail that supports Luperini's claim regarding the presence of a 'tematica del detrito', implicit in the short story 'Una spiaggia in Liguria' and explicit in the title of *Ossi di seppia*, as well as in many of its poems, as for instance the second in the suite *Mediterraneo*:

e svuotarmi così d'ogni lordura
come tu fai che sbatti sulle sponde
tra sugheri alghe asterie
le inutili macerie del tuo abisso.
('Antico, sono ubriacato dalla voce...', *Ossi di seppia*, 18-21, p. 54)

Here one finds both the dissolution of the *io* towards an 'ombra', as expressed through the image of his gradual emptying ('svuotarmi così d'ogni lordura', line

⁹⁶ Luperini, *Storia di Montale*, p. 38

⁹⁷ Luperini, *Storia di Montale*, p. 5.

18), and through the ‘rottami’, described here as ‘inutili macerie’, which are bounced about by the sea’s beating on the shores (‘che sbatti sulle sponde’, line 19). This is even more evident in ‘Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte...’, where the ‘informe rottame’ is now exiled from the sea which has expelled it from its watery womb:

Così, padre, dal tuo disfrenamento
si afferma, chi ti guardi, una legge severa.
Ed è vano sfuggirla: mi condanna
s’io lo tento anche un ciottolo
róso sul mio cammino,
impietrato soffrire senza nome,
o l’informe rottame
che gittò fuor del corso la fiamara
del vivere in un fitto di ramure e di strame.
(‘Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 16-24, p. 56)

The aforementioned simultaneous ‘attrazione e repulsione verso il mostro’ that the sea embodies, further complicates the relationship between the sea and the *io*.⁹⁸ Consequently, as Elio Gioanola states,

Il soggetto vorrebbe, nel confronto solitario con l’‘antico’ [...] partecipare nel potere paterno del mare, accordarsi in qualche modo con quel ‘cuore disumano’, secondo quanto ha sentito da quella voce di cui si è ‘ubriacato’ [...]. Ma l’affinità originaria non è affatto promessa di partecipazione e tanto meno di identificazione, profilandosi subito nei termini di una legge.⁹⁹

In other words, the origin of the ‘io-ombra’’s feeling of ‘disarmonia’ is, in part, to be found in the relation between father and son. There is a meta-poetic element in this relation between the poetic subject and the sea; the poems in *Mediterraneo*

⁹⁸ Contini, *Una lunga fedeltà*, p. 24.

⁹⁹ Elio Gioanola, ‘Il Mare negli *Ossi di seppia*’, in *Il secolo di Montale*, Genova 1896-1996 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), pp. 325-342 (330-331).

narrate the failure of the *io*'s attempt to take possession of the sea's powerful language: 'io che sognava rapirti | le salmastre parole' ('Potessi almeno costringere...', *Ossi di seppia*, 6-7, p. 60).¹⁰⁰

Potessi almeno costringere
in questo mio ritmo stento
qualche poco del tuo vaneggiamento;
dato mi fosse accordare
alle tue voci il mio balbo parlare: –
io che sognava rapirti
le salmastre parole
in cui natura ed arte si confondono,
per gridar meglio la mia malinconia
di fanciullo invecchiato che non doveva pensare.
Ed invece non ho che le lettere fruste
dei dizionari [...].
Non ho che queste parole
[...]
non ho che queste frasi stancate
[...].
Ed il tuo rombo cresce, e si dilata
azzurra l'ombra nuova.
(‘Potessi almeno costringere...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 1-12, 15, 18, 21-22, p. 60)

Compared to the powerful voice of the ‘mare-padre’, whose ‘salmastre parole’ could allow the poet to give a voice to his melancholy – ‘gridar meglio la mia malinconia | di fanciullo invecchiato’ – the *io*'s voice is merely a ‘balbo parlare’ (‘Potessi almeno costringere...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 7, 9-10, 5, p. 60).¹⁰¹ What is at stake is the ‘io-ombra’ and his ‘anima divisa’, an ‘anima che non sa più dare un

¹⁰⁰ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 107.

¹⁰¹ Note that ‘balbo’ is a Dantism: ‘Mi venne in sogno una femmina balba’ (*Purgatorio* XIX, 7).

grido' ('Casa sul mare', *Ossi di seppia*, 3, pp. 93-94). The *io* only has 'le lettere fruste | dei dizionari', 'queste parole', 'queste frasi stancate', something that echoes the 'storta sillaba' mentioned in 'Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato...' ('Potessi almeno costringere...', *Ossi di seppia*, 11-12, 15, 18, p. 60; 'Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato...', *Ossi di seppia*, 10, p. 29). This cannot but bring the *io*, the 'fanciullo invecchiato', to feel a certain level of resentment: 'la rancura | che ogni figliuolo, mare, ha per il padre' ('Potessi almeno costringere...', *Ossi di seppia*, 10, p. 60; 'Giunge a volte, repente,...', *Ossi di seppia*, 27-28, p. 57). The *io* is unable to 'accordare' his 'balbo parlare' to the powerful voice of the sea ('Potessi almeno costringere...', *Ossi di seppia*, 5, p. 60). It is interesting to note that, given its implicit link to the sense of (dis)harmony, the key word 'accordare' in line 4 keeps returning throughout the *Ossi*. In 'Corno inglese', for instance, as we have already seen, the heart is a 'scordato strumento'.

Regarding the early section of 'Accordi', it should be mentioned that in almost all seven of the poems there are still efforts at attaining a d'Annunzian panic unity: the attempt at an 'accordo con il tutto' was still possible and the lyrical 'I' could still be in 'accordo' – in tune – with the surrounding reality.¹⁰² However, this 'accordo' is missing in the poems that constitute *Mediterraneo*. As Ott explains, in 'Riviere' there is still the 'desiderio di una panica dissoluzione dell'io nella natura', while in *Mediterraneo* 'questi oscilla tra la volontà di congiungersi all'elemento acqueo e il distacco razionale': 'In lei titubo al mare che mi offende' ('Giunge a volte, repente,...', *Ossi di seppia*, 22, p. 57).¹⁰³

¹⁰² Luperini, *Storia di Montale*, p. 11.

¹⁰³ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 108.

Nonetheless, even in ‘Riviere’ one could still find the ‘delirio del mare’ expressed in all its concrete, corrosive and adverse presence, where ‘ogni cosa’, the *io* included, ‘in se stessa pareva consumarsi’ (‘Riviere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 4, 24-25, pp. 103-105). Moreover, the sea’s ‘[l]ame d’acqua’ inevitably evoke a sense of hostility, the same hostility as the sea in *Mediterraneo* (‘Riviere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 41, pp. 103-105). There is an impossibility to elude the ‘legge rischiosa’, which later is even said to be a ‘legge severa’ of the fatherly sea: ‘Così, padre, dal tuo disfrenamento | si afferma, chi ti guardi, una legge severa’ (‘Antico, sono ubriacato dalla voce...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 16, p. 54; ‘Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte’, *Ossi di seppia*, 16-17, p. 56).

In ‘Antico sono ubriacato dalla voce...’ one finds the *io*’s attempt to feel in harmony with the sea, which is, however, in the past tense, thus positioning the harmonious unity with the sea in an unrepeatable past:

[...]. Tu m’hai detto primo
 che il piccino fermento
 del mio cuore non era che un momento
 del tuo; [...].
 (‘Antico, sono ubriacato dalla voce...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 12-15, p. 54)

The *io* separates himself from the sea only under the mask of a ‘noi’ as in the fifth poem in *Mediterraneo*:

Giunge a volte, repente,
 un’ora che il *tuo* cuore disumano
 ci spaura e dal *nostro* si divide.
 Dalla *mia* la tua musica sconcerta,
 allora, ed è nemico ogni tuo moto.
 (‘Giunge a volte, repente,...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 1-5, p. 57. Emphasis added.)

Here one notes that the possessive pronoun ('nostro' in line 3) is followed by a first-person possessive pronoun ('mia' in line 4), something that allows the *io* to assert his presence without saying 'io'. This is done by a separation between what is human and what is not: 'il tuo cuore disumano' (line 2). The adoption of the plural pronoun 'noi' is another way in which the dissolution of the lyrical 'I' into an incorporeal 'ombra' takes place.¹⁰⁴ This reading is partly in contrast with the general interpretation of the instances where Montale employs plural pronouns or directs its hopes to other(s), be it in the form 'tu', 'voi' or even 'noi'. For instance, as Valentini claims: '[è] abbastanza frequente in Montale questo augurare agli altri quello che egli sa di non potere avere mai'.¹⁰⁵ The most evident example of this is in 'In limine':

Cerca una maglia rotta nella rete
 che ci stringe, tu balza fuori, fuggi!
 Va, per te l'ho pregato, – ora la sete
 mi sarà lieve, meno acre la ruggine...
 ('In limine', *Ossi di seppia*, 15-18, p. 7)

The *io* is aware that there is no hope for him to go beyond the sheer wall and prays that at least the *tu* will be able to find a way out. However, it is clear that with regards to 'Giunge a volte repente,...' as well as 'Felicità raggiunta per te si cammina', as already shown, this is not the case. On the contrary, the plural pronoun becomes a mask with which to actualise the dissolution of the poetic subject on a textual level.

¹⁰⁴ As Malamba argues, '[i]l collettivo – vale a dire un'altra forma di frantumazione – è anteposto all'intero, l'umano all'individuale'. Malagamba, *Quell'ombra io sono*, pp. 63-64.

¹⁰⁵ Examples include: 'In limine', 'Ciò che di me sapeste...', 'Crisalide', 'Casa sul mare', and 'Falsetto' (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 7, 36, 97-89, 93-94, 14-15). Alvaro Valentini, *Lettura di Montale: Ossi di seppia* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1971), p. 48.

When the lyrical 'I' is separated from the sea there is the realisation that it is limited and different.¹⁰⁶ This emerges clearly in 'Giunge a volte, repente,...':

Mia vita è questo secco pendio,
mezzo non fine, strada aperta a sbocchi
di rigagnoli, lento franamento.
È dessa, ancora, questa pianta
che nasce dalla devastazione
e in faccia ha i colpi del mare ed è sospesa
fra erratiche forze di venti.
(‘Giunge a volte, repente,...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 13-19, p. 57)

In this poem it is apparent that the sea gradually comes to acquire unfriendly features as is evident in the image of the plant beaten by the sea's waves: 'colpi del mare' (line 18), where the word 'colpi' clearly evokes a sense of harsh beating. This energy expressed in physical terms is even stronger in 'L'agave sullo scoglio' where the sea is portrayed as a devouring mouth:

L'agave che s'abbarbica al crepaccio
dello scoglio
e sfugge al mare da le braccia d'alghe
che *spalanca ampie gole* e abbranca rocce;
(‘L'agave sullo scoglio’, *Ossi di seppia*, 16-19, p. 71. Emphasis added.)

Just as the *io* identifies with the agave in 'L'agave sullo scoglio', the 'pianta' in 'Giunge a volte, repente,...', with its face wounded by 'colpi di mare', stands for the *io* ('Giunge a volte, repente,...', *Ossi di seppia*, 16-18, p. 57). As Malagamba highlights, 'l'aggrapparsi, tutto umano, dell'agave riflette la volontà di non

¹⁰⁶ Luperini, *Storia di Montale*, p. 39

perdere l'individualità minacciata da un mare dai connotati mostruosi.¹⁰⁷ It is interesting to note that although the word 'io' is indirectly present, the metaphor of the 'agave sullo scoglio' does not evoke a unified self through which a vision of reality is filtered. On the contrary, by identifying with the plant and, thus, being part of the world, the poetic subject 'viene gettato di colpo tra le cose malferme della terra', which means, paradoxically, 'nella minaccia di dispersione alla quale tenta di sfuggire, assottigliando fino a cancellarlo il filtro che lo separa da ciò che osserva'.¹⁰⁸

Contrary to 'Riviere', where the *io* partly attempts to achieve a panic unity with nature, in *Mediterraneo* it seems that the *io* 'voglia emanciparsi, almeno in parte, dalla forza elementare del mare (infatti il desiderio di essere ciottolo nel mare è evocato come sogno del passato)'.¹⁰⁹ The image of the 'ciottolo' appears throughout the *Ossi*, including *Mediterraneo*, as in 'Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...' and 'Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte...':

Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale
 siccome i ciottoli che tu volvi,
 mangiati dalla salsedine;
scheggia fuori del tempo, testimone
 di una volontà fredda che non passa.
 ('Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...', *Ossi di seppia*, 1-5, p. 59. Emphasis added.)¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Malagamba, *Quell'ombra io sono*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁸ Malagamba, *Quell'ombra io sono*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁹ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 113.

¹¹⁰ To note the word 'scheggia' which echoes a sense of sharpness similar to the sea's 'lame' and 'scaglie'.

The image of the ‘ciottolo’ corroded by the sea is connected to the *io*’s progressive dissolution into the incorporeal being of the ‘ombra’. As Gioanola asserts, the image of the ‘ciottolo’ corroded by the ‘salsedine’:

estremizza la condizione di un soggetto appartenente alla ‘razza di chi rimane a terra’ e non può concedersi gli abbandoni tra le braccia del ‘divino amico’ mare, come Esterina, ‘della razza’, dice Contini, ‘idiota degli eletti’.¹¹¹

Montale’s depiction of the ‘ciottolo’ – the ‘ciottolo | róso’ – brings to light how Montale’s representation of the relationship between the *io* and the hostile surrounding nature greatly differs, for instance, from Ungaretti’s (‘Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 19-20, p. 56). In Ungaretti’s ‘I fiumi’, written in 1916, the image of the stone stands for a harmonious relationship between the *io* and nature.¹¹² In Montale, on the other hand, the ‘ciottoli’ are said to be ‘mangiati dalla salsedine’ (line 3), where the verb ‘mangiare’ echoes the ‘inghiottire’ of the ‘mare [...] che spalanca ampie gole’ (‘L’agave sullo scoglio’, *Ossi di seppia*, 18-19, p. 71). In short, water has a ‘funzione levigante’ in Ungaretti, while it is ‘corrosiva’ in Montale, hence a ‘vita consumata’, a ‘vita che si sgretola’ (‘Marezzo’, *Ossi di seppia*, 56, pp. 90-92; ‘Non rifugiarti nell’ombra...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 31).¹¹³ The above comparison between Ungaretti and Montale clearly highlights the hostile and physical features of the sea in the *Ossi*. It is in this way that the sea gradually becomes a ‘segno di una

¹¹¹ Elio Gioanola, ‘Montale: il mare, il padre, la caccia’, in *Psicanalisi e Interpretazione letteraria* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2005), pp. 227-244 (234).

¹¹² ‘L’io lirico si identifica con un sasso levigato dalle acque (“mi leviga | come un suo sasso”, vv.14-15), e si sente in armonia con la natura (“docile fibra | dell’universo”, vv. 30-31)’. Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 112. Giuseppe Ungaretti, ‘I fiumi’, in *L’Allegria*, ed. by Cristiana Maggi Romano (Milan: Mondadori, 1982), p. 141.

¹¹³ Ott, *Montale e la parola riflessa*, p. 113.

disarmonia col reale, di un'irrisarcibile lacerazione'.¹¹⁴ This 'lacerazione' is the separation between 'mare' and 'terra'. What therefore emerges is that this separation – 'lacerazione' – inevitably leads the *io* to further dissolve, something that is followed by a profound sense of pain: an 'impietrato soffrire' ('Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte...', *Ossi di seppia*, 21, p. 56). One notes that the word 'lacerare' literally means 'ridurre in brandelli, strappare malamente senza usare strumenti taglienti' or, if referred to 'tessuti organici', it means 'produrre una rottura traumatica (v. lacerazione): una scheggia gli ha lacerato la guancia'.¹¹⁵ Figuratively, it stands for '[c]olpire con violenza, dando la sensazione di una rottura traumatica, e, in senso più astratto, tormentare dolorosamente e acutamente, straziare'.¹¹⁶ In other words, the effect of something that lacerates is the same as the effect a cutting object would inflict, but it actually does not come from a sharp object. This sustains the idea of the sharpness of nature in *Ossi di seppia* – and the *topos* of the knife-edged object in particular – as related to the formation of an 'io-ombra'. The wind, as it emerged in the previous section, 'lacera o addensa, violento' (*Ossi di seppia*, 'Falsetto', 7, pp. 14-15). The wind in itself is not a cutting object, but it is evoked by Montale in such a way as to have the same effect as a knife-edged object, which is of course accompanied by its figurative meaning 'tormentare dolorosamente', something that echoes the 'vita e il suo travaglio' which is the 'impietrato soffrire' of the 'male di vivere' ('Meriggiare pallido e assorto...', *Ossi di seppia*, 15, p. 30; 'Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte...', *Ossi di seppia*, 21, p. 56).

¹¹⁴ Luperini, *Montale o l'identità negata*, p. 43.

¹¹⁵ 'Lacerare', *Il Vocabolario Treccani*, ed. by Aldo Duro et al., 3rd edn (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2009), <www.treccani.it/vocabolario/lacerare> [accessed 5 September 2014].

¹¹⁶ 'Lacerare', *Il Vocabolario Treccani*.

In his 'Intenzioni', Montale writes that '[o]ccorre vivere la propria contraddizione senza scappatoie, ma senza neppure trovarci troppo gusto. Senza farne merce da salotto.'¹¹⁷ The contradiction in *Mediterraneo* is one of irreconcilable yearning towards the sea, and by extension towards absence and presence, certainly not expressed to provide 'merce da salotto'. 'Negli *Ossi di seppia*', as Montale continues, 'tutto era attratto e assorbito dal mare fermentante', including this contradiction and, by extension, the difficulty in harmonising the conflicting yearning for panic unity and rational detachment from the sea.¹¹⁸ In short, the sea stands for the dislocation (or rather the 'irrisarcibile lacerazione') between the protagonist of the *Ossi*, and nature, of which the sea becomes its primary agent.¹¹⁹ The separation reaches its most dramatic moments when Montale depicts the sea as a "'mostro" marino' in all its material hostile presence, something against which the 'io-ombra' can only react as a powerless and impotent being.¹²⁰ What emerges is, then, that the poetic subject's dissolving in an 'ombra' does not lead him to a panic dissolution in nature, but rather as a painful separation from it, especially with regards to the monstrous and corrosive sea of 'ampie gole' ('L'agave sullo scoglio', *Ossi di seppia*, 19, p. 71).

¹¹⁷ Montale, 'Intenzioni (Intervista Immaginaria)', in *SM II*, pp. 1475-1484 (1479).

¹¹⁸ Montale, 'Intenzioni', p. 1482.

¹¹⁹ Luperini, *Montale o l'identità negata*, p. 43.

¹²⁰ Gioanola, 'Il Mare negli *Ossi di seppia*', p. 325.

1.5 Conclusion

To conclude, from the outset of his first poetic collection, Montale explores the mode of being of the 'ombra', which lies at the absolute centre of his poetry, particularly in the way the dead will be envisaged as shadows in the following poetic collections. However, before engaging with his 'dialogo con i defunti', Montale explores the nature of the 'ombra' as the form of being with which the poetic subject himself identifies. This passage from one individual 'ombra' to the plurality of the 'care ombre' is a particularly important one to highlight, especially for the way it delineates the exceptional continuity that marks Montale's poetry from the very beginning of his poetic journey to his last poetic works. It is in *Ossi di seppia* and through the poetic subject's desire of self-effacement and complete dissolution into a shadow that Montale starts his exploration of the nature of the 'ombra' as, paradoxically, a more authentic and truthful mode of being, as opposed to the meaninglessness of the tangible world. It is in the radical and incorporeal form of the 'ombra' that Montale searches for a point of contact with the intangible 'Nulla', where a more veracious state of things can also be found. In order to enter into dialogue with this space of 'Nothingness', the 'io-ombra' will need to develop a dialogue with a *tu*, who will transit in this 'oltre' in order to allow the poetic subject to enter into contact with it, at the cost, however, of also dissolving into an 'ombra'. The *tu*'s shadow brings rather different aspects into focus, which I will explore in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

Talking to Shadows: Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca

2.1 Introduction

We have now seen how the poetic subject, through perceiving himself as a shadow, enables the lyrical 'I' to come closer to the dimension of 'nothingness' that it so adamantly pursues, and to what lies beyond the tangible world. Eventually, this exploration is undertaken in the collections following *Ossi di seppia* through the dialogic relationship between *io* and *tu*. Grasping the realm of radical absence is then facilitated and almost fully delegated to the 'care ombre' – Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca in particular – who eventually guide the poetic subject into the unknown 'oltre' and modes of existence beyond the visible and immanent world. It is from this standpoint that Montale's focus gradually shifts from the individual 'ombra' of the poetic subject to the collective group of 'care ombre', therefore placing at the absolute core of his poetry the 'dialogo con i defunti', on which the last two chapters will focus. This desired dimension of 'Nulla' can only be reached through a dialogue with a *tu*. It is this *tu*, the absent female interlocutor, who is sent, towards complete dissolution, into the 'aldilà' and who, in doing so, enables the *io* to come into contact with the 'oltre'.

In his autobiographical and auto-exegetic article, 'Due sciacalli al guinzaglio' (1950), Montale refers to himself as a poet who has been, just as any lyric poet, 'assediato dall'assenza-presenza di una donna lontana'.¹²¹ Although the

¹²¹ Eugenio Montale, 'Due sciacalli al guinzaglio', in *Sulla poesia*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1976), pp. 84-87 (84).

reference here is to Clizia, her status as an absent-present figure is common to many, if not all, of the female figures in Montale's poetry. Montale's poetic female figures have often been understood as belonging to three specific categories: the superior and transcendent angelic woman, the monstrous woman, and the companion-like woman. The first two typologies are set against each other, whereas the latter seems to synthesise the two former antithetical categories.¹²² Categories might be helpful to apprehend, at least initially, a series of entities. However, they soon risk becoming limiting in so far as they are bound to inevitable failure when it comes to capturing the more individual meanings of the object in and of itself. As a result, readings of Montale's female beloveds all share a very similar bias that excludes other interesting perspectives. Moreover, critics have almost exclusively focused on the figure of Clizia, and only recently on the 'other women'. From this standpoint, I see Mosca, in particular, not only as belonging to Montale's less central 'other women' (especially if compared to the

¹²² Giusi Baldissone's classification of Montale's female figures is symptomatic and representative of this tendency towards categorisation. In her *Le muse di Montale* she argues that '[l]e donne montaliane sono sostanzialmente raggruppabili in tre tipologie: la donna superiore (angiole stilnoviste), la donna mostruosa (o barbata), la donna complice e sorella.' Giusi Baldissone, *Le muse di Montale: galleria di occasioni femminili nella poesia montaliana* (Novara: Interlinea, 1996), p. 8. Others have divided Montale's female figures into two main, broader categories: the primary female beloveds (for example, Clizia, Volpe, Arletta) as opposed to the less central and therefore secondary female figures (for example, Dora Markus, Gerti, and Liuba). It is worth noting that Arletta, too, until very recently was recognised as a minor female figure. The core of the discussion often focuses on whether the respective female beloved should be considered a secondary or rather a primary figure within Montale's poetry, and which poems should be attributed to each individual female figure. A minority of critics, whose voices could be represented by Pierluigi Pellini's, and with whom the overall critical position of this chapter is closest, proposes not to refer to Mosca and Clizia or any others as individual figures, but rather to 'una "donna delle *Occasioni* e di parte della *Buferà*" e una "donna di gran parte dell'ultimo Montale"'. Perspectives of this kind implicitly tend to give priority to the thematic constellations that emerge from the text, rather than extratextual biographical information, which too-often tend to shadow more important aspects of the poems themselves. Pierluigi Pellini, 'L'ultimo Montale: donne miracoli treni telefoni sciopero generale', in *Le toppe della poesia. Saggi su Montale, Sereni, Fortini, Orelli* (Manziana, Rome: Vecchiarelli Editore, 2004), pp. 13-49 (27).

critical attention that Clizia has received in the last few decades and still receives), but also being the ‘*donna di gran parte dell’ultimo Montale*’.¹²³ However, in order to fully comprehend the nature and complexity of Montale’s female figures, it is necessary to overcome this tendency towards categorisation. Enclosing Montale’s female poetic figures in separate little boxes does not allow us to reach a full understanding of the female in his poetry. However, this becomes possible in the moment one considers Montale’s lesser studied re-writing and revision of two of the most influential myths in Western culture and lyric poetry in particular: the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and the myth of Persephone. I aim to address an aspect of the feminine in Montale that has passed unnoticed, until now, by focusing on Montale’s most complex embodiments of what I will refer to as the Eurydice-Persephone archetype: the fearless diver of ‘Falsetto’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 14-15), the more crepuscular *tu* of ‘Incontro’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 98-99), and the ‘piccolo insetto’ of *Xenia* (*Xenia* I.1, 1, p. 289) – no longer fitting the archetype of the virginal young girl, but the much rarer figure of the wife. By looking at these three central female figures, I will argue that the feminine in Montale violently departs from the kind of femininity that has been previously emphasised within Montalean criticism.

In so doing, it will emerge that Montale’s female beloveds represent, essentially, the ‘pre-text’ for the male poet-creator’s text. The female poetic beloved, as is traditional in lyric poetry, becomes the ‘pretext’ for the development and articulation of the poet’s ‘text’ (and self).¹²⁴ It is through the

¹²³ Pellini, ‘L’ultimo Montale: donne miracoli treni telefoni sciopero generale’, p. 27.

¹²⁴ The terms ‘pretext’ and ‘text’ are employed by West in the opening of her essay ‘Wives and Lovers in Dante and Eugenio Montale’ presented at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry’s conference on Dante in 2009. ‘In the work of male poets,

monologue (or dialogue *in absentia*) that the poet establishes with the *other* woman, that a process of elaboration of his own self becomes possible. For instance, as the third section of this chapter will highlight, in losing Mosca the *io* loses one of his most privileged interlocutors, who also represents the main medium between himself and the world. Furthermore, Montale, in the experience of mourning (which is at the core of the two series of *Xenia* as included in his fourth poetic collection, with his (almost anti-lyric) ‘poesia d’amore’ in this ‘canzoniere in morte’), develops a personal and lyrical conception of absence that reveals a profound connection between poetry and absence.¹²⁵ In Montale, each female inspiration, each imagined interlocutor – whether distant or a lost love, or the heartless ‘belle dame sans merci’ – represents the pretext for a new stylistic adventure: a ‘pre-text’ for a renewal of the poetic word. The male poetic subject can thus construct his own self through his relation with the female *other*. It is worth considering now where Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca stand within Montale’s female poetic universe and within Montalean criticism.

West echoes Pellini in her condensed, but nonetheless relevant essay ‘Wives and Lovers in Dante and Eugenio Montale’.¹²⁶ This chapter partially finds its roots in West’s paper and aims to further explore her attempt to blur traditional

the love for a woman is often a *pretext* for the elaboration of their *texts*; that love can be seen both as a deeply felt personal inspiration and as the point of origin for stylistic adventures, which involve the less personal techniques of poetic art.’ Rebecca West, ‘Wives and Lovers in Dante and Eugenio Montale’, in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart (Vienna-Berlin: Verlag Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 201-211 (201).

¹²⁵ As Giusti suggests, this is also a tendency traceable in modern lyric as a whole: ‘La lirica moderna in particolare approfondirà questo rapporto e farà del discorso “in assenza” e “sull’assenza” dell’oggetto una base solida del proprio discorso e una parte sostanziosa (per non dire totale) della propria produzione.’ Giusti, ‘Parlando la Lingua della Mosca’, p. 238.

¹²⁶ West, ‘Wives and Lovers in Dante and Eugenio Montale’, pp. 201-211.

antithetical categories into which Montalean scholars have tried to pin down Montale's muses. The main point of West's essay is the view that the 'other women' are much less separable from the primary female figures than such binaries as major/minor, transcendent/erotic, or soul/body may lead us to believe – regardless of how often Montale himself contributed to the development of this binary conception of his female figures. Back in 1977, Annalisa Cima intuitively asked Montale if 'i volti vari delle sue donne non sono forse il suo stesso volto strappate le maschere'.¹²⁷ To this Montale replied:

Queste donne sono così diverse tra loro, le ho colte nella loro particolarità, un giudizio generale sarebbe impossibile. Alcune sono comparse, apparizioni. Clizia e la Volpe sono messe in contrasto, una salvifica, come si direbbe adesso, l'altra terrena [...] dantesche, dantesche.¹²⁸

With these words Montale clearly dismissed any attempt to find a common denominator that was valid for the various female characters, something that will nevertheless be shown to be partly present without, however, disregarding their individual particularities. Similarly, on another occasion Montale presented a decidedly binary view when referring to Beatrice as opposed to donna-petra in his essay 'Dante ieri e oggi' (1965). Here he asserted that 'non si può immaginare un processo di salvezza senza la controparte dell'errore e del peccato', thus stressing not only the antithetical nature of the female figures in Dante's poetry – which, at least at first sight, greatly resembles the antithesis between Clizia and Volpe – but also advocating the necessity of such opposition.¹²⁹ Hence, the antithetical binaries of celestial/terrestrial, angelic/erotic, soul/body into which much of

¹²⁷ Annalisa Cima, 'Le reazioni di Montale', in Annalisa Cima and Cesare Segre, eds, *Eugenio Montale* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1977), pp. 192-201 (194).

¹²⁸ Cima, 'Le reazioni di Montale', p. 194.

¹²⁹ Montale, 'Dante ieri e oggi', in *Sulla poesia*, pp. 15-34 (21).

Montalean criticism finds itself embedded and emphasised by Montale himself. Studies such as West's, however, highlight how much the reading of the female beloved figures as representing strictly separable dichotomies is a limiting perspective. Clizia, just as Beatrice, is a hybrid figure endowed with (masculine) authority: she is much more than the typical courtly lady.¹³⁰ Despite the title of her essay, West mainly focuses on Clizia and Volpe, with only rapid, but nevertheless meaningful, reference to Mosca towards the end of her paper. In her being neither completely a Clizia-like salvific figure, nor her antithetical erotic counterpart for which Volpe stands for, Mosca represents a much more complicated, and also a much less explored, field of enquiry. In her being a hybrid between the two and transcending easy categorisation, Mosca requires a re-evaluation of the traditional categories into which Montale's female poetic figures have been enclosed so far.

Montalean critics are by now accustomed to being misled by Montale's self-commentaries. Despite his almost consistent efforts to develop the myth of a modern Beatrice through the character of Clizia, Montale also often resisted critics' attempts to pin him down about the identity of his muses to the point of suggesting in 'Domande senza risposta' the possibility of the presence(-absence) of one single muse – identifiable, in my view, with either poetry itself or a collective female 'Other':

¹³⁰ Teodolinda Barolini advocates a view of Beatrice as an 'anomalous hybrid' in so far as 'she possesses an absolutely unprecedented and masculine authority', something that transcends the traditional figure of courtly lady and reunites quite different traditions. West argues that this is also the case for Montale's Clizia, despite Montale's own attempts to construct the myth of a modern Beatrice. See Teodolinda Barolini, 'Notes toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature, with a Discussion of Dante's *Beatrix Loquax*', in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 360-378 (368).

Mi chiedono se ho scritto
un canzoniere d'amore
e se il mio onlie begetter
è uno solo o è molteplice.

[...]

Se avessi posseduto
un liuto come d'obbligo
per un trobar meno chiuso
non sarebbe difficile
dare un nome a colei che ha posseduto
la mia testa poetica o altro ancora

[...]

Non ho avuto purtroppo che la parola,
qualche cosa che approssima ma non tocca.

(*Quaderno di quattro anni*, 'Domande senza risposta', 1-22, p. 577)

This encourages the view of the female poetic beloved as a pretext for the articulation of the male poet-creator's text (and self). Their absence is suffered and mourned, but above all it appears to be necessary. This, I will suggest, finds its roots in two mythological figures.

The figures of Eurydice and Persephone and the way they have been re-interpreted throughout the centuries is key to shedding further light on this unexplored chthonic and darker femininity of Montale's poetic world. Eurydice and Persephone stand for the influential and long-standing model of the virginal young girl, prematurely dead, with whom the male subject initiates a dialogue *in absentia*. This chapter addresses how Montale's model of absent-present female figures is ascribable to the archetype of the Eurydice-Persephone dead young girl, whose transformation into queen of the underworld is witnessed in the figure of Mosca, who powerfully embodies such a metamorphosis. Petrarch's Laura and Leopardi's Silvia are only two of the most well-known embodiments of this

archetype; two key models for Montale's elaboration of his own chthonic female figures. The evocation of the female beloved through dialogue *in absentia* allows a communication to be preserved and recovered not only with the dead, but also with the 'beyond': the afterlife. Echoes of both these myths have been highlighted in Montale before, but have mainly been circumscribed to his first poetic collection and limited to the figure of Arletta, and thus they have never been put forward towards a larger, coherent vision of his female figures and the feminine more broadly.¹³¹ Here resides the core aim of this chapter: to highlight the much darker and chthonic femininity, compared to what previous studies have presented, that violently erupts from Montale's poetic underworld. Moreover, my reading of Mosca will allow a re-evaluation of what I see as a key figure in Montale's poetry. Criticism has tended to erroneously position her in the latter of the above-mentioned categories and to perceive her as not being a central female figure among Montale's female muses, and thus not worthy of further investigation. On the contrary, I see Mosca as the most significant figure that allows entry into Montale's underworld, where many other Eurydice-Persephone figures dwell.

Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca are chthonic creatures all belonging to the 'razza idiota delle elette'. I am deliberately using a feminine declination of Contini's famous definition of Esterina as belonging to the 'razza idiota degli eletti' as opposed to the 'razza | di chi rimane a terra' ('Falsetto', *Ossi di seppia*, 50-51, pp. 14-15) to which the poetic subject – the 'testardo contemplatore' –

¹³¹ The most significant reading of Arletta as embodying the Eurydice-Persephone archetype is to be found in Lonardi, 'Mito e "Melos"'.

belongs.¹³² I should point out that I employ Contini's expression as it productively catches an important aspect that this chapter focuses on, yet in doing so I detach from its original context in Contini's essay. In fact, Contini here aims to highlight that 'felicità umana bruta' belonging to an elitarian group of people (the 'eletti', also on a social level), whose idiocy should be read not as a lack of intelligence, but as an innocence and moral idealism that the poetic subject cannot share with them.¹³³ Esterina is that 'jeune fille en fleur' who dives into the roaring abyss accompanied by the many other Eurydice-Persephone figures that inhabit Montale's (under)world: Filli, Adelheit, Crisalide, to name just a few, of whom Arletta becomes the most powerful embodiment, a model which will eventually, and unexpectedly, culminate in the figure of Mosca, no longer a 'jeune fille', but wife – the regal wife of the Montalean underworld. 'Elette', then, these female figures have the task of descending into the 'Niente' ('Violoncelli', *Poesie disperse*, 20-23, p. 794) – the 'oltre' – and in this transition they do not only lose themselves in the 'aldilà' (a word that will haunt the poems dedicated to Mosca), but they will also become its custodians. Hence, their nature is intrinsically Persephonean. In its feminine declination, 'elette', Contini's original expression helps us to reinforce and delineate an element in its feminine nature that has received very little attention in Montale's poetry. When set against the celestial and angelic figure of Clizia, Mosca, for instance, could only appear as a *domestic*

¹³² Contini, *Una lunga fedeltà*, p. 23.

¹³³ I interpret Contini's 'razza idiota degli eletti' with an echo of Dostoyevski's *Idiot*, whose protagonist Prince Myshkin's 'idiocy' stands for his innocence and moral idealism, which cannot be accommodated within the emptiness of a society obsessed with wealth and power. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. by Alan Myers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

angel, still subdued to the image of a salvific woman.¹³⁴ Mosca is much more than this, and, as I will argue in the last section of this chapter, such a definition comes close to being erroneous. Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca are representative of a peculiar kind of female figure who is ‘eletta’, where ‘elect’ stands for a superior essence. However, they do not ascend towards some kind of higher celestial place, but stand in balance between life and death, ready to descend rapidly and violently towards lower and darker places: the Montalean underworld. In their being superior, ‘elette’, however, they also have to be non-thinking beings: each of them “‘ignaro” soggetto di non-sapere, figura persefonia dalla quale l’io deve separarsi, la cifra del non, che se accolta, condurrebbe solo al Nulla.’¹³⁵ A modern paradigm of the Eurydice-Persephone archetype thus emerges from looking at Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca together, three female figures belonging to the ‘razza idiota delle elette’, in the sense of the propitiatory ‘elected’ figures. They are able to access that ‘beyond’ which the poetic subject seeks to enter into dialogue with and where, however, in their transit to this region, they dissolve into nothingness and become its custodians. Their function is, nonetheless, limited to give access to the ‘beyond’ to the male poetic subject, who belongs to the ‘razza | di chi rimane a terra’ (‘Falsetto’, *Ossi di seppia*, 50-51, pp. 14-15) and who possesses the ‘sapienza maschile del vero filosofo’ and can therefore engage with it. Here, however, their feminine existence has no significance, hence ‘idiote’ in the sense of being essentially “‘ignar[i]” soggett[i] di non-sapere’ who are not granted to this superior ‘philosophical’ knowledge, reserved for the male poetic subject.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ It is Giusti who coins the expression *domestic angel* for Mosca. Giusti, ‘Parlando la Lingua della Mosca’, p. 240.

¹³⁵ Tandello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 86.

¹³⁶ Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, p. 35.

Looking at Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca together is not commonplace within Montalean criticism. Often highlighted is the similarity between the young girl who hurls herself into the sea of 'Falsetto' (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 14-15), with the woman to whom the 'evanescenti labbri' of 'Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...' (*Ossi di seppia*, 'Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...', 5, p. 47) belong to. Never, however, has a more profound connection between the two young virginal 'fanciulle in fiore'/'fanciulle morte' introduced in *Ossi di seppia* with Montale's 'vere pupille' (*Xenia* II.5, 11, p. 309) been suggested. If something has been pointed out, it is the breach that *Satura* marks with Montale's earlier poetic collections and how Mosca is a much more earthly creation if compared with the angelic Clizia. Mosca's nature belongs neither to the earthly nor to the angelic spheres, but rather to the lower spaces of the underworld.

To recapitulate, the aforementioned tendency towards categorisation is not beneficial in so far as it has led to the missing of a fundamental element of some of Montale's female figures, something that my reading of Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca will allow to emerge. In doing so, the tendency to put Montale's female beloveds in separate little boxes such as the binary opposition of celestial/terrestrial, transcendent/immanent within which Montalean female figures have been enclosed will be overcome. A much darker, gloomier, and infernal femininity emerges from Montale's poetry, something that has passed almost unnoticed in Montalean criticism. Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca are essentially chthonic creatures whose femininity has nothing to do with the celestial, delicate idea of femininity that has been predominantly emphasised in Montale's poetry. Here might reside Montale's departure from the traditional archetype of the 'dead girl' as preserved in the figure of Laura and Silvia.

Although Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca emerge as voiceless and condemned to disappear into shadow, their essence is fundamentally demoniacal, infernal.

2.1.i Montale's Feral Muses

As already mentioned, two myths intertwine with each other in Montale's poetry, and help us to delineate the darker lineaments of Montale's feral muses, namely that of the myth of Persephone and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Myth is a fluid entity, and a study of the myriad transformations that both the myth of Orpheus and that of Persephone underwent over the centuries would require many volumes. Thus the following summary does not aim to be an exhaustive account of these two myths, but a short overview of a few elements essential for the understanding of how these two myths enter Montale's poetry, or rather how Montale's poetry revisits and problematises them.

2.1.i.i Montale and the Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

As Pierre Brunel states in his *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, the myth of Orpheus is not just a very obscure myth, but also riddled with contradictions.¹³⁷ The core of the myth becomes clear only if the first known

¹³⁷ This is because, as Brunel argues, 'the events in the story of which it offers an account were not present from the beginning, and the plot only became established at a late stage, from a collection of different traditions in which it is hard to sort out the authentic elements from those introduced by contamination'. Pierre Brunel, ed, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 932.

text in which Orpheus features is not omitted. I am referring to Orpheus' presence among the Argonauts as first narrated in Pindar's *Fourth Pythian Ode*, which dates from the sixth century BC. Here Orpheus is the son of the god of poetry, Apollo (and not Oeagrus, as another tradition suggests). Orpheus is shown to be a vital member of the group for three main reasons: first, Orpheus is indispensable in the building of the ship Argo, as Orpheus, 'who had the magic power of drawing the trees of the forest to him by his songs, must also have had the power of getting them to sacrifice themselves in order to become building material for boats'; second, during their voyage the sailors encounter fearsome tests, but Orpheus, thanks to his lyre, is able to protect them; third, when the expedition was planned, King Pelias 'ordered a quest that was not confined to seeking the Golden Fleece. He invoked a dream, during which his ancestor Phrixus appeared to him, demanding that his soul should be brought back from Colchis where it had remained.'¹³⁸ This expedition is clearly completed. Thus Orpheus was involved in a mission which repeated the Odyssean *nekuia* (i.e. the visit to the underworld). Here, however, the hero is not Orpheus, but Jason. In short, Orpheus is from the very beginning endowed with supernatural powers over animals, plants, minerals, and even over souls. All this is the result of Orpheus representing the perfection of music. The Argonaut episode produced a considerable legacy in literature, and is essential for the later developments that the myth underwent. Orpheus' descent into the underworld in search of Eurydice re-enacts the evocation of the dead man.

Interestingly, Eurydice's name 'does not [...] appear until relatively late, in a highly literary development of the myth, which has Orpheus married, Orpheus

¹³⁸ Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, pp. 932-933.

as a “widower”, “inconsolable” Orpheus stepping in to take the place of the originally single Orpheus.’¹³⁹ Although not all versions of the myth see Orpheus as unsuccessful in his quest to bring Eurydice back to life, the most widespread and persistent tradition sees Orpheus as failing miserably in his mission. In book IV of Virgil’s *Georgics*, and later in books X and XI of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus is granted the permission from the gods of the underworld to climb up again with Eurydice on one condition only: to not turn back to look at his beloved, who has to walk behind him, before having both left the infernal regions. Orpheus, however, forgets this single condition set by the gods, or rather, he is unable to resist such a temptation (a problematic and questionable reading this last one) and consequently loses Eurydice forever. Her death is now final and his loss therefore permanent. It is in this way that Orpheus enters into the myth, and contrary to Eurydice, who soon meets death, the mystery and fascination with Orpheus remains alive through the millennia. In Eurydice’s second death, Virgil’s Eurydice speaks herself and protests, while Ovid’s Eurydice, with her arms outstretched towards Orpheus, reads this fatal act as the ultimate proof of their love. Orpheus’ turning backwards, his backward glance, has been interpreted in many ways. I am inclined to reject the reading that sees Orpheus as victim of his excessive love and the act of looking backwards as an act of that love. The original and more ancient meaning that this act must have had is less relevant in the context of this study, given that it has more to do with the fact that neither

¹³⁹ As Brunel continues, ‘Orpheus’ wife is first referred to as Agriope (in *Leontion* by Hermesianax of Colphon, third century BC); the name Eurydice appears for the first time in the *Lament for Bion*, supposedly by Moschus: “Your song will not go unrewarded; as Core once granted Orpheus the return of Eurydice in recompense for the sweet sounds of his lyre, so she will send you, Bion, back to your mountains”. Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, p. 934.

Orpheus nor Eurydice had the right to turn back towards the gods of the underworld, or to break the silence in the nether kingdom.

What happens after Eurydice has died for the second time? Orpheus will also suffer a tragic death, of which there are several versions: ‘that he killed himself so as not to outlive Eurydice [...], that he was struck by a thunderbolt from Zeus for revealing the mysteries to men [...], or that he was killed in a popular uprising [...].’ The most predominant tradition, however, is the one of Orpheus killed by the Maenads of Thrace on Mount Pangaion, ‘either as a punishment wished on him by the gods (Plato, *Symposium*, VII.179), or with Dionysus himself being forced to disown his devotees (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*).’¹⁴⁰ Well-known is the image of Orpheus’ decapitated head that keeps singing, or the lyre that still produces pleasant music as narrated in Ovid’s poem when Phoebus-Apollo comes to the rescue of his son’s remains. Music(/poetry) survives death. Or rather, in its passage through death, Orpheus’ music is even more powerful. This is the mythical figure of Orpheus whose chant has the power to move oaks, to curb wild beasts, to stop the natural flow of rivers, to enchant the uncompromising gods of the abode of the dead, and to obtain the privilege to descend into the underworld to bring back to life his lost wife Eurydice: the power of poetry and the force of love can overcome the laws that govern the world.

Orpheus occupies a particularly influential position in the Western literary canon, including a very popular phase in the twentieth century. My reading of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice draws on Cavarero’s groundbreaking interpretation of this myth, as she presents it in her *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* and *Nonostante Platone*. Following Cavarero, I reject the principal,

¹⁴⁰ Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, p. 937.

traditional understanding of this myth and Orpheus' fatal turning back as an act of excessive love that tends to position him as the victim. On the contrary, I share Cavarero's view that '[t]raendo da Euridice ormai morta la sua ispirazione, Orfeo canta appunto di lei ma non *a* lei. Forse per questo, maliziosamente, si volta'.¹⁴¹ Cavarero develops her view of Orpheus' not-so-innocent act of turning back, highlighting that in the moment of his turning backwards he abruptly pushes Eurydice back to the underworld in order to enter, himself and his poetry, into the myth:

Se si fosse voltato *dopo*, infatti – fuori dalla bocca degl'Inferi dove il vedere Euridice, ormai salva, era concesso – avrebbe dovuto raccontare proprio a lei quella storia di lei che gli aveva aperte anche le porte dell'Inferno. Se si fosse voltato *dopo*, insieme a un improbabile *happy end*, avremmo potuto godere di un amore ricondotto alla scena d'amore alla portata di tutti, un amore dei giorni di festa. Invece, come sappiamo, si è voltato *prima*: ricacciandola indietro per entrare nel mito.¹⁴²

This reading of the myth of Orpheus is crucial to an understanding of the Eurydice-Persephone archetype, and to the origins and essence of that prolific and long-lasting lyric model of the absent female beloved, whose death is lamented by the male poetic subject. The Orpheus-like poet's poetry arises precisely from the irremediable loss of his beloved. The female beloved must belong in the world of the dead, just like Eurydice, in order for Orpheus to give life to his poetry. It is from this standpoint that Cavarero argues that Orpheus is the mythical figure who initiates the long-lasting tradition that wants the loved woman to be a dead woman, a tradition also present in Montale's poetry: '[i]n quanto simbolo della poesia d'amore, Orfeo inaugura l'ostinata tradizione che vuole nella donna amata

¹⁴¹ Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 131.

¹⁴² Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p.131.

una donna morta'.¹⁴³ It is from the loss of his beloved that the mourning Orpheus' song springs, and it is through this irrevocable loss that the poet-lover Orpheus enters into the myth. Furthermore, Cavarero's interpretation of the myth sheds light also onto another key aspect of this archetype. The female beloved, just as Eurydice, is without voice, completely silenced. Hence, Orpheus sings not only of her, but for her, and this is also what, as I will show in the last part of this chapter, takes place in Montale's 'canzoniere in morte' to Mosca.

Baldissonne opens her book with the frequently cited statement that '[o]gni figura femminile nella poesia montaliana è la figura di un'assente, della quale urge evocare la presenza'.¹⁴⁴ To this view I would add that each female figure is not only consistently absent – even when this absence stands for a departure and not a death, the female *tu* shares something with Eurydice's fate – but also fundamentally a Persephone-like figure. As we shall soon see, Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca generate a modern paradigm of the Eurydice-Persephone archetype. Uniting the figure of Eurydice with Persephone finds its legitimisation in the fact that if Orpheus as an Argonaut echoes the adventures of Odysseus, Eurydice's death echoes the death of Persephone when she was abducted by the god of the underworld. Moreover, both these two chthonian maidens find themselves confined in the underworld by the hand of another person, a man in both cases. Eurydice is pushed back into the land of the dead by Orpheus' turning backwards, while the future bride of Hades and queen of the underworld is kidnapped by Hades. Moreover, the connection between the myth of Persephone and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is suggested by Ovid himself in his *Metamorphoses*,

¹⁴³ Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 121.

¹⁴⁴ Baldissonne, *Le muse di Montale*, p. 8.

when Orpheus reminds, or rather dares to remind, the dreadful queen of the underworld of her own story (X, 25-31):

Posse pati volui, nec me tamptasse negabo:
vincit Amor! Supera deus his bene notus in ora est;
an sit et hic, dubito; sed et hic tamen auguror esse,
famaque si veteris non est mentita rapinae,
vos quoque iunxit Amor. Per ego haec loca plena timoris,
per Chaos hoc ingens vastique silentia regni,
Eurydice, oro, properata retexite fata!¹⁴⁵

This *post mortem* narrative, just as Montale's *Xenia*, seems to find its legitimisation in the absence of the female other. A scenario thus emerges where someone is absent (either dead or departed) and someone else is distressed by this loss. It is from this loss that the orphaned Orpheus' chant springs from, and it is through this loss that the poet-lover Orpheus enters into the myth. Modern revisitations of the Orphic myth – from Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Gesang der Frauen an den Dichter' [Song of Women to the Poet] to H. D.'s 'Eurydice' and Amelia Rosselli's *Serie ospedaliera* – indirectly highlight, if not denounce, the malice involved in that act of turning backwards, together with its more profound implications.¹⁴⁶ Suggesting that Montale's female figures are essentially Eurydice-Persephone figures is not synonymous with proposing a *reductio ad unum* of Montale's female muses, but rather to delineate a constitutive element that these highly individualised absences-presences share. This allows us to trace the origin of Montale's inspiration in textual terms rather than biographical ones,

¹⁴⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Books IX-XV*, trans. by Frank Justus Miller and G. P. Goold, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁴⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Neue Gedichte* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1923); Hilda Doolittle, *Collected Poems 1912-1944* (New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1982); and Amelia Rosselli, *Le poesie*, ed. by Emanuela Tandello, 2nd edn (Milan: Garzanti, 2004).

a tendency, as already mentioned, that has marked the majority of Montale's criticism so far.

2.1.i.ii Montale and the Myth of Persephone

Traces of another mythological archetype are to be found in Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca: namely, Persephone. In Greek mythology, Persephone, also called Kore ('the maiden'), born out of the union of Zeus and the grain goddess Demeter, is the bride of Hades, and together they are the rulers of the underworld. Like her mother's, Persephone's union with her spouse comes through rape. After all, as Karl Kerényi reminds us in *The Science of Mythology*, co-authored with Carl Jung, her maidenhood presupposes the possibility of succumbing to a man.¹⁴⁷ In Roman mythology, the dreadful queen of the underworld is known under the name of Proserpina, and her mother is called Ceres. Demeter and Persephone, the 'two goddesses', as they were called at the sacred place of Eleusis, should be seen, Kerényi argues, as a *double figure*: 'Persephone is, above all, her *mother's* Kore: without her, Demeter would not be a *Meter*.'¹⁴⁸ There are several variants of the myth of Persephone, of her abduction by Hades and her periodic return to join her mother on earth. Although there must have been older versions in the oral tradition, the oldest record of the myth of Persephone is to be found in the three lines in Hesiod's *Theogony* (c.a. eighth century BC). The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is the second-earliest recorded version (c.a. seventh century BC). Here

¹⁴⁷ Carl Gustav Jung and Karl Kerényi, *The Science of Mythology: Essays on the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, trans. by Richard F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1951), p. 126.

¹⁴⁸ Jung and Kerényi, *The Science of Mythology*, p. 129.

the unknown poet intends to sing of Demeter, of her and her daughter. Later, Persephone's story will be treated in both Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book V) and later in his *Fasti* (Book IV).

According to the myth as narrated in the *Hymn*, the young Persephone, while picking up flowers with the Oceanids alongside Artemis and Athena in a field, with the complicity of her father Zeus, was abducted by her uncle Hades, Lord of the underworld, who was in love with her. After finding out that her daughter had disappeared, Demeter began her relentless search for her. Eventually, thanks to the all-seeing sun, Helios, Demeter learns what has happened and where her daughter is now residing. Zeus finally forces Hades to return Persephone. Demeter shall then be reunited with her daughter, but as she consumed a pomegranate seed offered to her by Hades, she will have to spend a third of every year with Hades (or according to later tradition, contrary to the Homeric one, half a year).¹⁴⁹ This reunion is bittersweet, as Demeter never succeeds in having her daughter back for good. This cyclical return of Persephone is used as an origin story to explain the seasons (when mother and daughter are reunited, the earth flourishes, but in absence of Persephone, the earth becomes a barren realm) and is also the reason why Persephone stands for both death and rebirth. From this perspective, Persephone embodies two contradicting forms: in her being a daughter with a mother she stands for life and is connected with youthful vitality, whereas in her being a young girl with a husband and as goddess of the underworld, she is connected with death. Although this might seem to suggest that Persephone is an Artemisian figure, one should remember that while

¹⁴⁹ See Book V of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Books I-VIII*, trans. by Frank Justus Miller and G. P. Goold, 3rd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

Artemis carries death in herself in the form of murder, Persephone appears completely passive. According to the *Homeric Hymn*, the future queen of the underworld was picking flowers when she was raped by Hades. Poets, among whom was D. H. Lawrence, rarely missed the significance of this scene, for whom the flowers were ‘hell-hounds on her heels’.¹⁵⁰ Or in ‘Fidelity’ the author of *Women in love*, writes:

[...] a little torrent of life
leaps up to the summit of the stem, gleans, turns over round the bend
of the parabola of curved flight,
sinks, and is gone, like a comet curving into the invisible.¹⁵¹

Before D.H. Lawrence, John Milton wrote: ‘Proserpine gathering flowers | Herself a fairer flower.’¹⁵² Hence Persephone’s double function as both a chthonic maiden and vegetation goddess.

Relevant to this study, particularly with regard to the figure of Esterina, is the image of the cheerful young girl picking up flowers as evoked in the myth of Persephone. This is echoed, in the second book of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in the figure of the ‘jeunes filles en fleur’. As Tiziana Arvigo suggests, Esterina recalls that ‘falcata sicura, lo sguardo luminoso, la speciale impertinenza o noncuranza degli atteggiamenti’, features that one can trace in the little brigade that strolls over the Balbec’s dock, with their ‘nature hardie, frivole et dure’, and their ‘beaux corps aux belles jambes, aux belles hanches, aux visages

¹⁵⁰ D. H. Lawrence, ‘Purple Anemones’ (line 19), in *Selected Poems*, ed. by James Fenton (London: Penguin, 2008).

¹⁵¹ D. H. Lawrence, ‘Fidelity’ (lines 4-7), in *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. by David Ellis (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002).

¹⁵² John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (IV, 269-270), ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2003).

sains et reposés, avec un air d'agilité et de ruse', leading one to think that they belong to an inhuman world of classical beauty – they are 'comme des statues exposées au soleil sur un rivage de la Grèce'.¹⁵³ Although he would gradually be included in the little brigade, the 'jeunes filles en fleur' represent a state of being to which the narrating voice will never have access, just as the poetic subject of 'Falsetto' (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 14-15) never has access to that ability of being in 'accordo' with the world of nature that Esterina has. One should not forget that in her being queen of the underworld, Persephone evokes a quite different image. No longer the cheerful young girl who was picking flowers and soon to be abducted against her will, now Persephone rules the underworld, together with her spouse. Her physiognomy too reflects this dramatic change and is often represented in a similar way to Medusa, with Gorgon-like features and with snakes and other animals growing out of her hair.

In antiquity, representations of Persephone are to be found in all the various phases of the myth: first, as a young and light-hearted woman representing the serene state of adolescence; second, as an object of worship desperately trying to free herself from the strong arms of her seducer in the dramatic moment of her abduction by Hades; and third, as a dreadful and regal chthonic deity as the queen of the underworld. Less frequent, however, is the representation of Persephone's cyclical return to the earth. In Montale's poetry, it is possible to find a similar sequence starting from the young girl 'adolescente' of *Accordi* (*Poesie disperse*, pp. 793-800), to the virginal adolescent Esterina, to the

¹⁵³ Arvigo, *Guida alla lettura di Montale. Ossi di seppia*, p. 44. Marcel Proust, 'À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs', pp. 790, 791.

much more obscure Arletta, eventually arriving at the more mature figure of the wife, Mosca.

Persephone is ‘a creature standing unsudbued on a pinnacle of life and there meeting her fate – a fate that means death in fulfilment and dominion in death.’¹⁵⁴ It is worth noting here that Montale’s female figures are similarly often represented in a precarious balance between life and death (for example in *Xenia* II.4, 8, p. 308). They are desired precisely ‘[n]el solco dell’emergenza’ (‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’, *La bufera e altro*, 1, pp. 217-218) in the moment right before their transitioning into the ‘Niente’ with which the male poet seeks to dialogue. They become the necessary channel through which to reach some kind of philosophical empyrean region, where, paradoxically, their ‘femminile esistenza [...] non ha alcun luogo di significazione’.¹⁵⁵ These female figures appear to be dangerously light, airy figures, whose beings slip away as water (Esterina is an ‘equorea creatura’, ‘spiccata’, ‘leggiadra’ (‘Falsetto’, *Ossi di seppia*, 33, 47, 23, pp. 14-15)), as opposed to the much more solid, stable, ‘sapienza maschile del vero filosofo’.¹⁵⁶ However, this is not everything and, as Emanuela Tandello highlights while referring to Esterina, there is something more in this act of ‘transitare’ – it is here that their Persephonean nature emerges:

il ruolo della fanciulla non solo è propiziatore: nel transitare, essa si perde nell’Oltre, e insieme ne diventa la custode. Ecco dunque che la sua natura è intrinsecamente persefonea. C’è infatti qualcosa di ferale in questo balzo sull’abisso [...] gesto di movimento che si infrange nell’immobilità del Nulla. [...] Su Esterina convergono allora importanti modelli letterari (e non solo letterari) di adolescenza femminile quale *diversità* necessaria, realtà aliena, misteriosa, inconnoscibile e soprattutto non condivisibile, alla quale viene affidato

¹⁵⁴ Jung and Kerényi, *The Science of Mythology*, p. 129.

¹⁵⁵ Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, p. 38.

¹⁵⁶ Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, p. 35.

il ruolo di custodire lo spazio dell’Oltre con il quale il poeta agogna di dialogare. E questo può venire solo a un prezzo: in quello spazio essa dovrà *dimorare*, novella Persefone, novella Euridice.¹⁵⁷

Often unaware of their fate (for example, Esterina, the unaware young girl of ‘Falsetto’, caught in that feral leap into the sea);¹⁵⁸ often enveloped, if not dissolving, into the fog (‘Sommersa ti vedremo | nella fumea che il vento | lacera o addensa, violento’ (‘Falsetto’, *Ossi di seppia*, 5-7, pp. 14-15);¹⁵⁹ often found in or emerging from obscure places (‘stasera quasi al buio [...] | sei ricomparsa’, (*Xenia* I.1, 3,5, p. 289)); often captured in the act of descending (as the mysterious G.B.H. left the scene set in London ‘sui gradini automatici che ti slittano in giù...’ (‘Di un natale metropolitano’, *La bufera e altro*, 12, p. 232) or ‘Scenderai | sulle scale automatiche dei templi di Mercurio tra cadaveri in maschera’ (‘Gli uomini che si voltano’, *Satura*, 14-15, p. 386)). These feral muses visit the poet without previous notice, or rather their presence is evoked by their male poet-creator through those objects or places that have the power to conjure their presence. At times, the reader even finds the poetic subject himself descending into the underworld: ‘tremi di vita e ti protendi | a un vuoto risonante di lamenti | soffocati’ (‘Arsenio’, *Ossi di seppia*, 49-51, pp. 83-84). In ‘Arsenio’ the verb ‘discendere’ returns three times: ‘tu discendi | in questo giorno’ (lines 6-7), ‘Discendi all’orizzonte che sovrasta | una tromba di piombo’ (lines 13-14), ‘Discendi in mezzo al buio’ (line 34). Similarly in ‘Incontro’ one reads: ‘ch’io | scenda senza viltà’ (‘Incontro’, *Ossi di seppia*, 53-54, p. 98-99). In the mythical dimension of ‘Ho sceso milioni di scale dandoti il braccio’ (*Xenia* II.5, p. 309),

¹⁵⁷ Tandello, *Amelia Rosselli*, pp. 78-79.

¹⁵⁸ Contini, *Una lunga fedeltà*, p. 23.

¹⁵⁹ Similarly the poetic subject addresses Arletta: ‘sommersa!: tu dispari’ (‘Incontro’, *Ossi di seppia*, 46, pp. 98-99).

the *io*-Orpheus and the Mosca-Eurydice are united in the same Orphic action of the *katabasis*. Although their presence is evoked by the poetic subject, their absence remains final, and thus makes the poet's mourning permanent. Here lies the malice that Cavarero highlights: in casting his female creations as Eurydice-Persephone figures, the male poet-creator casts himself as the orphaned Orpheus figure who can enchant us with his song. Reading Montale's female figures as sharing Eurydice-Persephone traits implicitly allows us to overcome that tendency towards categorisation, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, into which Montale's female characters have been too often enclosed, something that prevents a full understanding of these complex poetic figures. On the contrary, the focus can now be on their inner essence, without nevertheless disregarding their individual specificities, and what implications all this has for the *io-tu* relation and poetry more generally. Let us now turn to the first chthonic figure belonging to the 'razza idiota delle elette', Esterina and her feral leap into the sea, her 'divino amico' ('Falsetto', *Ossi di seppia*, 49, pp. 14-15).

2.2 Esterina

‘Falsetto’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 14-15. See Appendix 2), a poem included in the section *Movimenti* of *Ossi di seppia* and, in the final edition of *Tutte le poesie* (1977), positioned between ‘Corno inglese’ (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 13) and ‘Minstrels’ (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 16), belongs to this triad of texts whose titles allude to the musical vocabulary that ties together these compositions. I have already mentioned ‘Falsetto’ when exploring the presence of the image-theme of sharp and knife-edged objects in Montale’s earlier poetic landscape. However, this poem – a much richer and more complex text than the majority of critics have acknowledged so far, especially with regard to the figure of Esterina – is also a key text for the focus of this second chapter.¹⁶⁰ My analysis of the absence of Montale’s female figures cannot exclude Esterina, and should begin by looking at her as the first ‘character’ to enter Montale’s poetic world – that ‘equorea creatura | che la salsedine non intacca’ (lines 33-34), who is observed from a certain distance, a distance presented as almost necessary by the poetic subject. As is well-known, ‘Falsetto’ was inspired by Esterina Rossi, written on 11 February 1924, and thus already in an advanced stage of the composition of *Ossi di seppia*.¹⁶¹ Esterina Rossi was a young woman staying with Montale’s friends

¹⁶⁰ Still, today, Esterina is considered as a minor female figure in Montale’s poetry: ‘una musa minore all’interno degli *Ossi di seppia* e dell’intera produzione montaliana’. With these words Massimiliano Tortora begins one of the most recent articles on ‘Falsetto’, confirming that the traditional reception of Esterina among Montalean critics has not changed. Although quantitatively speaking Esterina is surely a minor character (only ‘Falsetto’ acknowledges her presence as its protagonist and no other poems have been attributed to her), this should, however, not lead us to draw misleading conclusions on the relevance of Esterina within Montale’s *œuvre*. Massimiliano Tortora, ‘Un punto di svolta in *Ossi di seppia*: lettura di *Falsetto*’, *L’Ellisse. Studi storici di letteratura italiana*, 5 (2010), 165-188 (p. 165).

¹⁶¹ ‘Falsetto’ carries the epigraph ‘a Esterina’ in the first three editions of *Ossi di seppia* (the 1925 Gobetti edition (Turin), the 1928 Ribet edition (Turin), and the 1931 Carabba edition (Lanciano)). Esterina Rossi was a young vacationer Montale spent time

Bianca and Francesco Messina, with whom the poet spent time during the summer of 1923. The sculptor Messina recalls in his *Poveri giorni* the genesis of ‘Falsetto’ by narrating those gatherings at Quarto dei Mille, occasions for the poet to observe the graceful swimmer diving into the sea, something that would have later given birth to the female protagonist of ‘Falsetto’.¹⁶²

Esterina’s literary lineage is particularly rich; important literary as well as philosophical models converge on her. Edoardo Sanguineti, for instance, sees in her an echo of the similarly audacious ice skater of Guido Gozzano’s ‘Invernale’,

with while she was hosted at the house of his friends Bianca and Francesco Messina during the summer of 1923. It is from the correspondences between Montale and Bianca Messina that most of the information regarding Esterina comes. ‘Oggi è giunta un’auto da Crocefieschi, con molti villeggianti. Ho sbirciato inutilmente per vedere se scorgevo l’intrepida campionessa, la Scugnizza’, writes Montale in a letter to his interlocutor dated 14 August 1923, alluding to the sportive allure that the young girl was known for. He writes again a few weeks later on 7 September that: ‘ecco la casta donzella Ester della tribù de’ Rossi trascorrere con suo passo di gazzella’. Even the following summer Montale makes sure to send his greetings to Esterina through Bianca, as two letters dated 6 and 10 August 1924 report: ‘Mi saluti Mess, Esterina, Gino del Rio’, and ‘Queste mattine mi sono considerevolmente abbrustolito, e lo “Scricciolo” è stato fedele. È un barchetto che sarebbe adattissimo per Esterina, la nostra pavoncella. (Alla quale lei vorrà qualche volta ricordarmi)’. See Eugenio Montale, *Lettere e poesie a Bianca e Francesco Messina*, ed. by Laura Barile (Milan: Scheiwiller, 1983), pp. 45-46, 54, 61, 63.

¹⁶² ‘In questo tempo Montale ci divenne compagno assiduo. Con lui passavamo interi pomeriggi, facendo lunghe passeggiate verso le colline. Egli cantarellava sempre, anche nella conversazione scherzosa. Aveva voce di basso che il maestro Sivori trasformò in baritonale. Era meravigliosamente intonato e interprete di eccezionale intelligenza, ma nessuno di noi riuscì mai a sentirlo in un canto spiegato. Solo una volta, durante una delle nostre gite a Monte Fasce, lo sorprendemmo nella emissione di un do di petto. [...] Faceva anche i bagni con noi, in uno stabilimento di Quarto dei Mille. In questo periodo scrisse *Falsetto*. Esterina, bravissima e giovanissima nuotatrice, si era aggregata a noi con slancio di simpatia e di dedizione. Anche lei ci divenne compagna inseparabile, soprattutto in mare, che era il nostro elemento, il più familiare e divertente. Eravamo indiatolati. Quando il mare batteva il libeccio eravamo i soli a giocare tra gli scogli, come delfini. Non Montale, meno sportivo e per ottime ragioni. *Falsetto*, lo ricordo benissimo, nacque sugli scogli di Quarto. Bravissima anche nei tuffi, Esterina si lanciava in acqua dal ‘tremulo asse’ a volo d’angelo. Montale, accoccolato al sole, la guardava assorto e silenzioso. Dopo qualche giorno ci consegnò un foglio con la prima stesura di *Falsetto*. Su piccoli fogli simili Bianca e io possediamo, quasi per intero, *Ossi di seppia* nella sua prima versione.’ As quoted in Franco Contorbia, ed., *Eugenio Montale: immagini di una vita* (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), p. 81.

who is also presented in direct opposition to the poetic subject.¹⁶³ Gozzano's poem is, however, not the only text of which traces can be found in Montale's 'Falsetto': it is now unanimously agreed among critics that the following works are also closely connected to Montale's poem, namely: the virginal swimmers of Portovenere – the 'sorelle di Artemide divina' – in Carlo Linati's *Portovenere*, the 'vergine adolescente' in Vincenzo Cardarelli's 'Adolescente', not to mention those echoes of Ugo Foscolo's *Odi*, Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Canto novo* and *Laudi*, and even minor reminiscences of Giacomo Zanella and Poliziano, particularly his *Stanze*.¹⁶⁴ Arvigo's aforementioned suggestion of a reminiscence of Proust's 'fanciulle in fiore' as presented in the second book of the *Recherche* is also convincing and persuasive.¹⁶⁵ Without aiming to reject such a literary genealogy of Montale's Esterina, I see her not only as the result of a complex intertwinement of literary virginal descendants of which Gozzano's ice skater is only one of many, but also as the starting point of a new genealogy in Montale's female figures. It is in Esterina that one can find the constitutive traits which will return in at least two other female figures: Arletta and Mosca. Other minor characters that this section will only briefly consider and who clearly share with Esterina their innermost essence are: the mysterious Filli, protagonist of 'L'imponderabile' (*Diario del '71 e del '72*, p. 463), and Adelheit, 'una Fenice

¹⁶³ Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Da Gozzano a Montale' (1954), in *Tra liberty e crepuscolarismo* (Milan: Mursia, 1992), pp. 17-39 (33-34). See also Guido Gozzano, *Poesie*, ed. by Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti (Milan: Rizzoli, 1977).

¹⁶⁴ Carlo Linati, *Portovenere* (Como: Vittorio Omarini Editore, 1910); Vincenzo Cardarelli, *Poesie* (Milan: Mondadori, 1960); Ugo Foscolo, *Sepolcri, Odi, Sonetti*, ed. by Donatella Martinelli (Milan: Mondadori, 1987); Gabriele d'Annunzio, *Canto novo*, in *Versi d'amore e di gloria*, ed. by Annamaria Andreoli and Niva Lorenzini, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1950); Gabriele d'Annunzio, *Laudi* (Milan: Mondadori, 1944); Giacomo Zanella, *Poesie di Giacomo Zanella*, ed. by Enrico Bettazzi (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1928); and Angelo Poliziano, *Stanze, Orfeo, Rime*, ed. by Davide Puccini (Milan: Garzanti, 1992).

¹⁶⁵ Arvigo, *Guida alla lettura di Montale. Ossi di seppia*, p. 44.

che mai seppe aedo | idoleggiare [...] alunna di un artefice che mai | poté sbalzarti nelle sue medaglie' ('Diamantina', *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 6-7, 25-26, pp. 510-511), also present in the well-known 'Il trionfo della spazzatura' (*Diario del '71 e del '72*, p. 459). If one wants to find a descendant of Esterina within Montale's poetry, this can be done in the young 'adolescente' of the series *Accordi* (*Poesie disperse*, pp. 793-800), of whose seven poems only 'Corno inglese' (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 13) was included in *Ossi di seppia*. The young girl of *Accordi*, like Esterina and later Arletta, is the embodiment of that peculiar period, that 'sorridente presente' (line 37) that adolescence is: the season where a harmony, an 'accordo', with nature is still possible. At the same time, this is also the 'giovinezza' of 'Falsetto' (line 28), a period that in Montale acquires very strong negative connotations as it represents an obstacle to diving into the world of adulthood. That season of life that will later appear in *Diario del '71 e del '72* in one of the many dialogues *in absentia* with Arletta, referred to as the 'stagione più ridicola | della vita' ('Annetta', *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 33-34, pp. 501-502). It is for this reason that this '[s]tagione perturbante' needs to be, as Tandello suggests, 'allontanata, resa altro-da-sé, restituita al "Niente", all'assenza di esistenza a cui appartiene'.¹⁶⁶

[...] E saprai
 i paradisi ambigui dove manca
 ogni esistenza: seguici nel Centro
 delle parvenze: (ti riuole il Niente!).
 ('Violoncelli', *Poesie disperse*, 20-23, p. 794)

¹⁶⁶ Tandello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 75.

As the title already suggests, the whole poem is ‘sung’ in falsetto; only in this way can the poetic subject assume a point of view so distant from his own.¹⁶⁷ It is a falsetto voice that the male singer assumes to imitate the feminine timbre that helps develop that ironic tonality through which Esterina is portrayed. At the beginning one might not fully recognise that it is voiced in falsetto and thus take as genuine the poetic subject’s awe at Esterina’s vitalistic leap into the sea. However, it cannot pass unnoticed for long as it is eventually made explicit by the voice of the concluding two lines that re-asserts the impossibility and the rejection of such a panic unity with nature, something already clearly expressed in the preceding poems ‘I limoni’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 11-12) and ‘Corno inglese’ (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 13). There is almost a sense of derision in the apparent admiration of Esterina’s characteristic light-heartedness, something that Amelia Rosselli captures in her destabilising critical re-writing and transgressive ‘capovolgimento’ of the Montalean Esterina in her poem.¹⁶⁸

I would be inclined to assert that such a creative posthumous force as visible in Rosselli’s creation of her own Esterina as well as in Montale’s poetry itself, as in the case of figures such as Filli and Adelheit, cannot have its origin in a merely ‘simple’ character as has often been presented by critics. Esterina’s true

¹⁶⁷ In the musical context, the term ‘falsetto’ refers to that vocal ‘falsification’ of one’s natural vocal register in order to sing notes beyond the vocal range of the modal voice register. The falsetto is often used for the purposes of humour and melodramatic pathos. Although both women and men are physically able to phonate in the falsetto register, originally only men were believed to be able to produce falsetto. This fits the scenario created in Montale’s ‘Falsetto’, where it is the male poetic subject phonating the falsetto register in order to reach the female figure of Esterina’s higher vocal register. Clearly the term ‘falsetto’ is used metaphorically in Montale’s poem standing for ‘perspective’ rather than ‘vocal register’.

¹⁶⁸ ‘Nella *Libellula* l’intero *ethos* del testo montaliano subisce un capovolgimento’. It is with these words that Tanello starts her analysis of the poetic operation with which Rosselli destabilises the Montalean text that inspired it, hence the key word ‘capovolgimento’ that returns throughout the chapter on Rosselli’s Esterina. Tanello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 79.

complex nature has so far been recognised by few. I am referring to the few pages that Guido Almansi and Bruce Merry dedicate to the analysis of ‘Falsetto’ in *Eugenio Montale. The Private Language of Poetry*; the analysis that Arvigo offers in her *Guida alla lettura di Montale. Ossi di seppia*; and Tandello’s reading of Rosselli’s *La libellula*, that takes into account the Montalean text that inspired it. Almansi, Merry, and Tandello introduce the view of Esterina as a descendant of Eurydice and Persephone, and they thus represent the starting point from which to develop the current analysis of the figure of Esterina as a modern paradigm of the Eurydice-Persephone archetype. However, all these three texts, for different reasons, do not offer an extended analysis of ‘Falsetto’, something that this chapter aims to attain.

From the very beginning, what one notes in ‘Falsetto’, is the poetic subject’s shifts between apparent identification with the girl as opposed to his determined attempts to distance himself from her.¹⁶⁹ The poetic subject seems to identify with Esterina, as when asserting ‘Hai ben ragione tu! Non turbare | di ubbie il sorridente presente’ (lines 36-37), but this is clearly voiced in falsetto. In fact, at the end of the poem the *io* promptly distances himself from the young girl by highlighting their belonging to two different ‘razze’: the poetic subject belongs to the ‘razza | di chi rimane a terra’ (lines 50-51), while Esterina, to use the already (mis)quoted statement by Contini, belongs to the ‘razza idiota degli eletti’.¹⁷⁰ Here the distance that separates the poetic subject and Esterina is made

¹⁶⁹ For a detailed overview of all the moments in which the poetic subject identifies and distances himself from Esterina throughout ‘Falsetto’, see Riccardo Stracuzzi, ‘Considerazioni sulla “giovinezza” in Montale: il caso di Esterina’, *Griselda*, 5 (2005). <<http://www.griseldaonline.it/temi/ai-giovani/giovinezza-in-montale-esterina-stracuzzi.html>> [accessed 5 September 2015].

¹⁷⁰ Contini, *Una lunga fedeltà*, p. 23.

explicit: the poetic subject ‘rimane a terra’ and is unable to dive into the sea, he can only watch her doing that – he is a ‘uomo che tarda | all’atto’ (‘Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 8-9, p. 59).¹⁷¹ In ‘Falsetto’ one therefore finds the first signal in *Ossi di seppia* of a preference for the ‘terra’, which is nevertheless presented as an inadequacy and privation. In short, there is both a strong feeling of envy as well as revulsion towards Esterina. On a textual level, something that further emphasises the gap that separates the *io* from Esterina and clarifies how incompatible their realities are, is Montale’s obsessive and hammering use of personal pronouns ‘tu’, ‘ti’, ‘te’, and the possessive adjective ‘tuo’: ‘ti minacciano’ (line 1), ‘ti chiude’ (line 3), ‘ti vedremo’ (line 5), ‘t’avvilluppano’ (line 14), ‘per te rintocca’ (line 15), ‘ti renda’ (line 17), ‘sia | per te’ (lines 19-20), ‘t’impaura’ (line 22), ‘ti distendi’ (line 23), ‘te insidia giovinezza’ (line 28), ‘ti temprà’ (line 30), ‘ti rinnovi e ti ritrovi: | ti pensiamo’ (lines 31-32), ‘Hai ben ragione tu’ (line 36), ‘la tua gaiezza’ (line 38), ‘T’alzi e t’avanzi’ (line 42), ‘il tuo profilo’ (line 44), ‘t’abbatti’ (line 48), ‘del ’tuo divino’ (line 49), ‘t’afferra’ (line 49), ‘ti guardiamo’ (line 50). All this functions to mark a discernible crevice, an insurmountable gap, between the *io* and Esterina, and helps the poetic subject to distance himself even further from the young girl.¹⁷²

As Ettore Bonora suggests, ‘la scelta della terra, e dunque del pensiero e della moralità, è atto di umiltà, d’accettazione di un destino di limitatezza e

¹⁷¹ In one of her succinct but eloquent footnotes, Arvigo reminds us that the expression of the ‘razza che rimane a terra’ echoes a Proustian moment of ‘À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur’: ‘Telles que si [...] elles eussent jugé que la foule environnante était composée d’être d’un autre race’ (emphasis added). Marcel Proust, ‘À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs’, p. 791. See also Arvigo, *Guida alla lettura di Montale. Ossi di seppia*, pp. 42-45 (43).

¹⁷² This is in line with Massimiliano Tortora’s interpretation of Montale’s use of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in ‘Falsetto’. Tortora, ‘Un punto di svolta in *Ossi di seppia*: lettura di *Falsetto*’, p. 187.

caducità, e insieme di resistenza stoica'.¹⁷³ Bonora's words are helpful to explore further what separates Esterina from the poetic subject. Being bound to the earth stands for a belonging to the 'regno del pensiero', something from which, as Cavarero argues in *Nonostante Platone. Figure femminili nella filosofia antica*, women have been excluded in Western culture: '[I]e donne nell'ordine simbolico della filosofia [...] sono o assenti, o compaiono come esseri umani ingenui e ignoranti'.¹⁷⁴ Esterina, with her naïve light-heartedness and her 'crollar di spalle | [che] dirocca i fertilizî | del [...] domani oscuro' (lines 39-41), seems to fit this picture perhaps too well. Furthermore, Tandello already pointed out in her study the striking similarity between Kierkegaard's Cordelia, in *Diary of a Seducer*, and Esterina, both opposed to a young man who, similarly to Montale's poetic subject, refuses to take this leap and stays back on land. What is surprising is not only the presence of a feral 'balzo/tuffo' in both texts, but the presence of such a profound separation between the female figure and the male subject, which are but 'due realtà assolutamente inconciliabili': a roaring abyss of a 'mare che scaglia a scaglia' ('Corno inglese', *Ossi di seppia*, 10, p. 13) divides Johann from Cordelia, and the Montalean subject from Esterina.¹⁷⁵

Cordelia's environment must have no foreground, but only the horizon's infinite boldness. She must not be on the ground, she must glide; she must not walk, she must fly, not back and forth, but eternally forward. [...] Wherever she turns, a young girl has the infinite about her, and the transition is a leap, but, *nota bene*, a feminine, not a masculine, leap. [...] A yawning abyss separates them, terrible to gaze down into. No man would dare this leap. [...] But who would be so foolish as to imagine a young girl taking a running start? One can indeed imagine her running, but this running is at the same time a game, an enjoyment, an unfolding of grace [...]. Her leap is floating. And when she has reached the other side, she stands there,

¹⁷³ Ettore Bonora, *Lettura degli 'Ossi di seppia'* (Turin: Lauri, 1964), p. 92.

¹⁷⁴ Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁵ Tandello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 77.

not exhausted from the effort, but more beautiful than ever, more soulful, she wafts a kiss over to us who stand on this side. Young, newborn, like a flower which has shot up from the root of the mountain, she sways over the abyss, so hazardously that everything nearly turns black before our eyes.¹⁷⁶

Kierkegaard's passage is just one of many other instances of that antithetical opposition that Cavarero highlights between the female figure of attractive and pleasant appearance, with the same grace and 'leggiadria' of Esterina, as opposed to the earth-bound 'sapienza maschile del vero filosofo'.¹⁷⁷ In Kierkegaard as well as in Montale there is a separation between the female figure and the speaker who stays back on land. In both authors the female protagonist is a young girl who distinguishes herself for her graceful agility with which she hazardously leaps over the yawning abyss. It is then clear that the archetype of the 'young girl' whose 'gaiezza impegna già il futuro' (line 38) is not limited to the philosophical tradition that Cavarero takes into account, but also foundational in the lyric tradition as well.

Esterina will later find her embodiment in the mysterious figure of Filli in 'L'imponderabile' where Esterina's 'leggerezza' will return, but here Montale tells us that 'La leggerezza | non è virtù, è destino' (lines 6-7): that 'crollar di spalle' (line 39) of Esterina stands as a reminder of her destiny to belong to the nether kingdom. Just as it was for her ancestor Esterina, Filli is also in direct contrast to the poetic subject, whose 'incertezza è più dura del granito | e ha una sua massiccia gravitazione' ('L'imponderabile', *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 1-2, p. 463). Again, what one finds is that the female figure's reality is a 'realtà aliena,

¹⁷⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary of a Seducer*, trans. by Gerd Gillhoff (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 102-103.

¹⁷⁷ Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, p. 35.

misteriosa, iniconoscibile e soprattutto non condivisibile' by the poetic subject.¹⁷⁸

It is interesting to remember here that it is precisely Persephone's youth that puts her in danger by giving rise to Hades' implacable desire for her. From this standpoint, traditional readings of Esterina and her youth become no longer persuasive, as is shown by Massimiliano Tortora's recent study:

In realtà, a ben vedere, la minaccia è asserita in maniera ironica, perché naturalmente 'i vent'anni' non possono mettere a repentaglio la giovinezza di Esterina; la quale, tuttavia, e il verso comunica anche questo, inesorabilmente secondo la concezione terrena del poeta non può non essere consumata dal tempo. E questa compenetrazione di minaccia e smentita della stessa è rappresentata anche dalla 'grigiorosea nube', che, proprio in virtù di un rosa che stempera il grigio, non si manifesta particolarmente ostile.¹⁷⁹

As Nicole Loraux argues in her *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, in the language of tragedy one can find a 'thematic relationship between hanging and throwing oneself to one's death'.¹⁸⁰ Although Loraux's analysis is within the field of tragedy, her reading is the more relevant for our study. In the *Suppliant Women* of Euripides, for instance, as Evadne prepares to hurl herself into the fire from the top of an airy rock that dominates the funeral pyre of her husband, Capaneus, she cries: 'Here I am on this rock, like a bird, above the pyre of Capaneus, I rise lightly, upward on a deadly wing [*aiōrēma*]' (1045-1047). *Aiōrēma*, as Loraux explains, signifies:

both the swaying of the hanged woman and the soaring flight of Evadne [...]. [...] The woman who has hanged herself has certainly thrown herself into the void, but her body has left the ground – it is supported, now, by the roof. To throw oneself down, on the other hand, is to fall into the depths [...]. The same word, *aeirō*, which

¹⁷⁸ Tandello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 79.

¹⁷⁹ Tortora, 'Un punto di svolta in *Ossi di seppia*: lettura di *Falsetto*', p. 167.

¹⁸⁰ Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. by Anthony Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 18.

means elevation and suspension, applies to these two flights in opposite directions, upward and downward, as though height had its own depth: as though the place below – could be reached only by first rising up. [...] Falling from the heights of a rock or held in the noose, it makes no difference.¹⁸¹

Hence the explanation of Esterina's ascension/*katabasis*: she hurls herself down into the sea lightly, 'spiccata' (line 23), where her throwing herself downwards stands for her fall into the darkest depths. Loraux's commentary significantly highlights the profound link between the vitalistic, apparently joyful leap and one's death. This could be seen to throw greater light on the young girl of 'Falsetto'.

Moreover, it should be remembered here that Esterina's presence evokes that of a bird, the mythological phoenix, and we should pause briefly over this.

Sommersa ti vedremo
nella fumea che il vento
lacera o addensa, violento.
Poi dal fiotto di cenere uscirai
adusta più che mai.
(lines 5-9)

As Loraux continues her analysis:

the bird is in tragedy an operator that stands for escape, and because it presents a concrete image of light, it provides several suggestions on what is said about women in connection with hanging. These wives (who were properly represented in everyday life as sedentary) show in their propensity for flight a kind of natural rapport with the beyond: there they are, throwing themselves into the air and hanging between earth and sky.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, pp. 18, 19.

¹⁸² Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, p. 19.

It is in these last words that one finds an interesting key with which to read Esterina's lightness, as well as her deeper connection in echoing a bird's features, and her final leap into the sea's arms. Esterina, just like Montale's other female figures, has a natural and privileged bond with the beyond, that beyond with which the male poetic subject strives to enter into dialogue with. Hers is a merciful flight into death, a winged flight, the flight of a bird. Once again, considering Cordelia with her feral leap together with many other young girls of pleasant appearance, these female figures are dangerously light, nonthinking beings, all strongly opposed to the earth-bound knowledge of the male philosopher who belongs to the 'razza | di chi rimane a terra' ('Falsetto', *Ossi di seppia*, 50-51, pp. 14-15). Hence they are the 'elette' as well as 'idiote'. There in the void Esterina loses herself, 'novella Euridice', 'novella Persefone': her 'leggerezza | non è virtù, è destino' (lines 6-7). There she is, throwing herself into the air – 'spiccata' and 'leggiadra' (lines 47, 23) – hanging between earth and sky.

'Equoree, e aeree, queste moderne Artemidi sono osservate e desiderate nel momento in cui transitano da un elemento a un altro, leggere, ardite, e *ignare*.'¹⁸³ Similarly, Esterina's scopophilic portrayal captures her the moment she takes the plunge away from the poetic subject: 'T'alzi e t'avanzi sul ponticello | esiguo, sopra il gorgo che stride' (lines 42-43). Before diving into the sea, she hesitates: '*Esiti* a sommo del tremulo asse' (line 46, emphasis added). '[M]olti lettori preferirono la forma errata giudicandola più...esistenziale'.¹⁸⁴ Montale, here, ironically refers to the typographical error in the second edition of *Ossi di seppia*, where instead of 'Esiti' it was printed 'Esisti'. Rather than because of a

¹⁸³ Tandello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 76.

¹⁸⁴ Eugenio Montale, 'Variazioni', in *Corriere della Sera* (26 July 1970). Now printed in Montale, *Sulla poesia*, pp. 154-157 (155).

preference for a more existential tonality of ‘Falsetto’, Esterina does *exist* in that very moment while standing on the springboard, which, as will soon be shown, is something that will return to Mosca through the similar image-theme of standing in front of a crevice (‘sul ciglio del crepaccio’) in a precarious balance between life and death (*Xenia* II.4, 8, p. 308). Montale’s female figures are desired precisely ‘[n]el solco dell’emergenza’ (‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’, *La bufera e altro*, 1, pp. 217-218), in the moment right before their transitioning into the ‘Niente’ with which the poetic subject desired to dialogue. Esterina thus becomes the necessary channel through which to reach some kind of philosophical empyrean region, where, paradoxically, her ‘femminile esistenza [...] non ha alcun luogo di significazione’.¹⁸⁵ However, as already highlighted, there is something more in this act of ‘transitare’ – it is here that her Persephonean essence emerges.

Apart from the various underworld symbols that are present throughout ‘Falsetto’, it is the reference to the alternation of Esterina’s seasons that is the most obvious echo of the myth of Persephone.

Salgono i venti autunni,
 t’avviluppano andate primavere;
 ecco per te rintocca
 un presagio nell’elisie sfere.
 (lines 13-16)

In the image of the ‘andate primavere’ that envelop Esterina, lies one of the keys to understanding the nature of ‘Falsetto’. Throughout the poem we find many other similar menacing moments that evoke a sense of imprisonment, hence the echo to both the figure of Persephone and of Eurydice. The most evident of all is

¹⁸⁵ Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, p. 38.

to be found in the opening of the poem itself, when Esterina is introduced to the reader as menaced by her youth (already mentioned is the link with Persephone's youth) and trapped in a grey cloud that 'a poco a poco in sé [...] chiude' Esterina (line 3). Similarly, the seawater is an energising source of renewal and purification for Esterina: 'L'acqua è la forza che ti temprà, | nell'acqua ti ritrovi e ti rinnovi' (lines 30-31) and 'torna al lito più pura' (line 35). However, the seawater also traps her: 't'abbatti fra le braccia | del tuo divino amico che t'afferra' (lines 48-49, emphasis added). The verb 'afferrare' could be said to relate innocently to the violence of Esterina's 'abbattimento' into the sea. However, I am inclined to interpret this as violence from the side of the sea, that sea which acquires human features by bringing into focus its grasping 'braccia' (line 48). This is the same menacing sea as portrayed in the section *Mediterraneo* that lures the poetic subject to abandon the land, which stands for rationality, and appears as violently abducting the *io*: '[il mare che] spalanca ampie gole e abbranca rocce' ('L'agave sullo scoglio', *Ossi di seppia*, 19, p. 71). The violence of the sea is at the core of the whole *Ossi di seppia*, but here in relation to Esterina it acquires a peculiar physiognomy. This is the violence of that sea that is portrayed as beating the plant which is wetted by its water, a plant that remains lacerated by this violent contact: 'questa pianta | che nasce dalla devastazione | e in faccia ha i colpi del mare' ('Giunge a volte, repente,...', *Ossi di seppia*, 16-18, p. 57). Those arms do not only catch Esterina: they trap her. Could then not these be the arms of the god of the underworld? Esterina is trapped, abducted by the sea. It is also important to note that the sea is said to be a 'divino amico' (line 48, emphasis added). Although emphasis is often given to the word 'amico', I see the word 'divino' as equally important. The sea is the embodiment of that threatening

pagan divinity that acts in all its violence. It is a god who violently abducts the young woman and takes her to his Kingdom. In a different manner to the poems included in the *Mediterraneo*, Montale does not refer here to the sea's 'strepeanti acque' ('A vortice s'abbatte...', *Ossi di seppia*, 16, p. 53), or to its 'furia incomposta' ('Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte...', *Ossi di seppia*, 28, p. 56), or to its 'rombo' ('Potessi almeno costringere...', *Ossi di seppia*, 21, p. 60). The poet closes 'Falsetto' by emphasising the divine nature of the sea, which, just as in *Mediterraneo*, acquires very strong human features. If in *Mediterraneo* one can hear the 'ammonimento' of the sea's 'respiro' ('Antico, sono ubriacato dalla voce...', *Ossi di seppia*, 13, 14, p. 54), or its 'voce' coming out of its 'bocche' ('Antico, sono ubriacato dalla voce...', *Ossi di seppia*, 2, p. 54), now one sees a violent abduction by the sea which catches the young Esterina, 'novella Persefone', 'novella Euridice'. Reflected in Montale's sea, I perceive, as in the traditional iconography of Persephone's abduction, Hades/Pluto's hands encircling Persephone/Proserpina's waist and his fingers sinking into the yielding flesh of the young girl as powerfully portrayed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini's famous marble, *The Rape of Proserpina* (1621-1622). Finally, it should be highlighted that Esterina is *descending* towards the sea, which as Montale tells us in the first poem opening *Mediterraneo*, is 'là in fondo' ('A vortice s'abbatte...', *Ossi di seppia*, 6, p. 53). She is not going towards higher places in a kind of angelic ascension, but descending; a movement associated with the infernal descent towards the underworld. There is nothing angelic in Esterina's leap into the 'abisso' ('Antico, sono ubriacato dalla voce...', *Ossi di seppia*, 21, p. 54), rather this is a feral jump. Overall, there is a 'presagio' that 'rintocca' of a 'domani oscuro' (lines 15-16, 41) for the young Esterina-Persephone-Eurydice.

It will be later on in *Ossi di seppia*, in the figure of Crisalide, whose inspiration finds its origin in Paola Nicoli, that one can find one of the clearest examples of Montale's Persephone-like creatures – her rebirth is but a sterile secret:

[...] M'apparite
allora, come me, nel limbo squallido
delle monche esistenze; e anche la vostra
rinascita è uno sterile segreto.
(‘Crisalide’, *Ossi di seppia*, 36-39, pp. 87-89)

Similar to the idea of rebirth and renewal as intrinsic to the cycle of seasons, as already briefly mentioned, Esterina also echoes the phoenix that obtains new life by arising from the ashes (lines 5-9). This is the same cycle of death and rebirth that is present in the myth of Persephone. It will be in ‘Diamantina’ in *Diario del '71 e del '72* that the phoenix will return in one of Esterina's descendants, Adelheit: ‘una Fenice che mai seppe aedo | idoleggiare [...] alunna di un artefice che mai | poté sbalzarti nelle sue medaglie’ (‘Diamantina’, *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 6-7, 25-26, pp. 510-511). In ‘Storia dell’araba fenice’ Montale writes: ‘Che cos’è una poesia lirica? Per mio conto non saprei definire quest’araba fenice, questo mostro, quest’oggetto determinatissimo, concreto, eppure impalpabile perché fatto di parole [...]’.¹⁸⁶ Almansi and Merry are therefore right in stating that ‘Falsetto’ is after all a ‘demoniacal poem’.¹⁸⁷

Speaking of the demoniacal essence of ‘Falsetto’ as well as of Esterina herself (something that greatly contrasts with the traditional reading of the young

¹⁸⁶ Eugenio Montale, ‘Storia dell’araba fenice’, in *SM I*, pp. 1198-1203 (1198).

¹⁸⁷ Guido Almansi and Bruce Merry, *Eugenio Montale. The Private Language of Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977), p. 27.

girl as a tanned and graceful swimmer or as a water nymph), it is worth remembering Almansi's and Merry's unorthodox interpretation of 'Falsetto', together with their helpful 'dissection' of the poem (see Appendix 3). Almansi and Merry list all the positive elements (in a column under a plus sign) as opposed to all the gloomy, negative, pessimistic elements (in a column under a minus sign).¹⁸⁸ The result of this re-organisation of the text reveals a surprising abundance of the negative and pessimistic elements and thus asserts the negative essence of the poem. All this gloominess that clearly emerges from Almansi's and Merry's critical operation not only questions previous interpretations of Esterina as merely belonging to the 'razza idiota degli eletti', but is also perfectly in tune with the view of the young intrepid swimmer as a modern embodiment of the Eurydice-Persephone archetype.¹⁸⁹

If the poem apparently opens by neutrally addressing Esterina and pointing out her young age, immediately those 'vent'anni' (line 1) are said to represent a menace to her. These first lines openly echo Leopardi's 'A Silvia', who also belongs to the same archetype of the 'fanciulla morta' that Montale revisits through the figure of Esterina.¹⁹⁰ As already mentioned, it is precisely her youth that puts the future queen of the underworld in danger by giving rise to Hades' implacable desire for her. The '*grigio-rosea nube*' (line 2, emphasis added) clearly stands for a gloomy cloud that slowly entraps the young girl as

¹⁸⁸ See Appendix 3. Almansi and Merry, *Eugenio Montale*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁸⁹ Contini, *Una lunga fedeltà*, p. 23.

¹⁹⁰ 'Silvia, rimembri ancora | quel tempo della tua vita mortale, | quando beltà splendea | negli occhi tuoi ridenti e fuggitivi, | e tu, lieta e pensosa, il limitare | di gioventù salivi?' (lines 1-6). Giacomo Leopardi, 'A Silvia', in *Tutte le opere. Le poesie e le prose*, ed. by Francesco Flora (Milan: Mondadori, 1940).

though the rosy element of the cloud would be shadowed by the darker grey. Although Almansi and Merry include the next line as containing a positive connotation, it is clear that ‘Ciò intendi e non paventi’ (line 4) is sung in falsetto, a first sign of Esterina’s belonging to the ‘razza idiota delle elette’. The positive essence of this line is therefore limited. The next few lines powerfully capture the young Persephone-Eurydice that Esterina echoes. The hostility and negative nature of the wind that ‘lacera o addensa, violento’ (line 7) has already been analysed extensively in the previous chapter. This violence inherent in the wind and Esterina being enclosed in this cloud, both echo Persephone’s and Eurydice’s moments of terror during their abduction. Already highlighted was the link between the cycle of seasons (‘venti autunni’, line 13) and Persephone’s myth.

The same brutality reverberates in the sharp noises evoked by the image of the ‘incrinata brocca | percossa’ (lines 18-19). Esterina reminds the ‘lucertola | ferma sul masso brullo’ (lines 26-27), where the lizard surely belongs to that constellation of feral symbols present in ‘Falsetto’. A lizard is after all a reptile, like the snake, which evokes menace. According to the Orphic tradition, Zeus took the form of a serpent to mate with his daughter Persephone, and from this union Dionysus was born (Ovid mentions this myth briefly). The reptile is also present in the Orphic myth: Eurydice was bitten by a serpent hiding in the grass. This led to her first death; her second was on account of Orpheus, who looked back towards his beloved, making Eurydice’s death final. Moreover, a ‘domani oscuro’ (line 41) is awaiting Esterina, and there could not be a more evocative sign to express her destiny as custodian of the Montalean underworld. Esterina moves towards the ‘ponticello | esiguo’ (lines 42-43) right on top of a gloomy sea, the ‘gorgo che stride’ (line 43). Here she *hesitates-exists*. Here, in her moment of

transiting towards some *other* places she is desired. Here, Esterina ‘come spiccata’ (line 47), fiercely makes her feral leap, her ‘abbattimento’, and the *divine* sea, whose gradual humanisation now reaches its climax, promptly, and fatally, in the act of catching her: ‘[I]’afferra’ (line 49).

Infernal sounds reverberate throughout the poem where Montale’s musical and phonic choices further enhance the gloomy nature already highlighted. One can almost hear the wind blowing sounds, that autumnal wind that ‘lacera o addensa, violento’ (line 7), those tolls from the ‘elisie sfere’ (lines 15-16), those rhythmic beats on the jug (lines 18-19), as well as that creak of the sea, the ‘gorgo che stride’ (line 43), which is the same ‘mare florido | e vorace’ of ‘Fine dell’infanzia’ (‘Fine dell’infanzia’, *Ossi di seppia*, 81-82, pp. 67-70). All this gives a particularly deep and dark tonality to the poem, a feature that is further emphasised by some peculiar rhymes and other phonic aspects of the poem. As Tortora highlights, a dominant sound throughout ‘Falsetto’ is the voiceless alveolar stop /t/ followed by a vowel which returns more than 60 times in total (in two cases the alveolar stop is a double stop), to which four other cases of more vibrant alveolar stops between lines 43 and 46 need to be added, and which reproduce the sonorous trembling of the bridge from which Esterina throws herself.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ Below is a list of all the cases in ‘Falsetto’ as presented by Tortora: ‘EsTERina’, ‘venT’Anni’, ‘Ti’ (line 1), ‘TI’ (line 3), ‘inTEndi’, ‘pavenTI’ (line 4), ‘Ti’ (line 5), ‘venTO’ (line 6), ‘violento’ (line 7), ‘fioTTO’ (line 8), ‘adusTA’ (line 9), ‘proTEso’, ‘avvenTUra’, ‘lonTAna’ (line 10), ‘inTEnTO’ (line 11), ‘venTI auTUnni’ (line 13), ‘T’Avviluppano’ ‘andaTE’ (line 14), ‘rinTOcca’ (line 15), ‘TI’ (line 17), ‘incrinaTA’ (line 18), ‘TE’ (line 20), ‘T’Impaura’ (line 22), ‘TI distEndi’ (line 23), ‘lucenTE’ (line 24), ‘lucertoLa’ (line 26), ‘TE’ (line 28), ‘TI TEmpra’ (line 30), ‘TI’, ‘TI’ (line 31), ‘TI’, ‘cioTTOlo’ (line 32), ‘creaTUra’ (line 33), ‘inTAcCa’ (line 34), ‘TOrna’, ‘liTO’ (line 35), ‘TU!’’, ‘TURbare’ (line 36), ‘sorridente presentE’ (line 37), ‘TUa’, ‘fuTUro’ (line 38), ‘forTIlizi’ (line 40), ‘TUo’ (line 41), ‘T’Alzi’, ‘T’Avanzi’, ‘ponTicello’ (line 42), ‘TUo’ (line 44), ‘EsiTI’ (line 46), ‘spiccaTA’, ‘venTO’ (line 47),

[...] sopra il gorgo che sTRide
 il tuo profilo s'incide
 conTRO uno sfondo di perla.
 Esiti asommo del TRemulo asse
 (lines 43-46, emphasis added)

This recurrent use of the phoneme /t/ enhances the phonic hardness and rhythmic quality of the poem, something in line with the already predominant dark and gloomy nature of the poem. It is a 'gorgo che stride' (line 43): the effect of the sounds of 'Falsetto' is 'stridente', without producing any kind of harmonious melody. A grating contrast cracks the reader's ears into a piercing and strident, discordant and dissonant repetition of the sound /TR/. Is this not the same 'stridere' of 'Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...' ('Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...', *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 47)? This grave and deep tonality is further emphasised by the recurrent use of the dark sound of the close vowel /u/. If the first part of the poem up to line 29 is characterised by a more musical and harmonic tonality this is in great contrast with the second part of 'Falsetto'. From line 30, there are only three lines where the deep phoneme /u/ is missing (i.e. lines 34, 40, 48). While some rhymes can be found in the first part of the poem, which enhances its harmonic musicality, only a few are in the concluding part: 'creatura'; 'pura' (lines 33, 35), 'futuro'; 'oscuro' (lines 38, 41), 'stride'; 'incide' (lines 43, 44), 'afferra'; 'terra' (lines 49-51). This is in line with a reading of 'Falsetto' as a demoniacal, infernal, poem and not a harmonious portrayal of an angelic, virginal young girl, accompanied by certain kinds of melodious sounds and rhymes. We are here entering the dark, threatening nether kingdom of the god Hades and as

'T'Abbatti' (line 48), 'TUo', 'T'Afferra' (line 49), 'TI' (line 50), 'TErra' (line 51). Tortora, 'Un punto di svolta in *Ossi di seppia*: lettura di *Falsetto*', pp. 170-171.

appropriate to this region, the sounds one can hear can only be discordant. This is a strident, infernal, piercing music. This is, after all, the sound of falsetto.

To conclude, it is significant that Montale's first character to enter his poetic world is a female figure whose profound essence is bound to a gloomy, dark and violent kind of femininity, something very different from the portrayal of the young girl that has been ploddingly, as well as erroneously, perpetuated in the last decades within Montalean criticism. Esterina is the first 'jeune fille en fleur' belonging to that 'razza idiota delle elette', and reading her through the mythical lenses of Eurydice and Persephone has proved productive in so far as it has highlighted the unexpected abundance of the negative and demoniacal elements, thus asserting the negative essence of this poem. It is now time to turn to an even more powerful expression of this darker femininity, as embodied in the figure of Arletta.

2.3 Arletta

‘Spenta in tenera età’ (‘Per un fiore reciso’, *Quaderno di quattro anni*, 1, p. 556), Annetta or Arletta, who is also evoked under the name of Aretusa and Capinera, belongs, together with Esterina, to that long and prolific tradition of ‘fanciulle morte’ as Montale himself openly highlights in ‘L’estate’: ‘torni anche tu al mio piede, fanciulla morta | Aretusa’ (‘L’estate’, *Le occasioni*, 7-8, p. 175). Arletta is the greatest mythical-mourning figure of Montale’s poetic (under)world who, as the ultimate embodiment of loss, is the custodian of the ‘negative’ sign. She is the ‘figura per eccellenza del *non*’, as Gilberto Lonardi states in what is one of the most significant contributions on Montale’s most complex female creation and which serves as a foundation for the current study.¹⁹² Arletta finds her inspiration in Anna degli Uberti (1904-1959), a young girl Montale spent time with during his summers in Monterosso between 1919 and 1923, the latter being the year in which Annetta stopped visiting Monterosso and a few (ill-fated) visits to Rome followed (see ‘Una visita’ and ‘Postilla a “Una visita”’ – both now included in *Altri versi*, pp. 725, 726). It is well known that Montale insistently declared this poetic figure to be dead.¹⁹³ My concern is and remains focused on Arletta who, in

¹⁹² Gilberto Lonardi, ‘Mito e “Melos”’, pp. 139-159.

¹⁹³ The insistence with which Montale declares this ‘jeune fille en fleur’ dead even though she was still alive and well is well known, and therefore crafts Arletta to the archetype of the young girl whose life has been taken too early, something that is highlighted in ‘L’estate’ as well as in ‘Eastbourne’ (*Le occasioni*, pp. 175, 176-177). In a letter to Silvio Guarnieri, Montale writes: ‘Nella *Casa dei doganieri* e in *Incontro* c’è la donna che chiamerò 4. Morì giovane e non ci fu nulla tra noi’. Now in Eugenio Montale, *SM II*, p. 1510. Still referring to ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167), Montale told Giulio Nascimbeni: ‘L’ho scritta [‘La casa dei doganieri’] per una giovane villeggiante morta molto giovane. Per quel poco che visse, forse lei non s’accorse nemmeno che io esisteva’. Giulio Nascimbeni, *Montale* (Milan: Longanesi, 1969), p. 116. Similarly, to Luciano Rebay Montale refers to Arletta as ‘una donna “crepuscolare”, una donna segnata dalla morte. [...] [E]ra una persona morta molto giovane, di una malattia inguaribile’. Luciano Rebay, ‘Sull’“autobiografismo” di Montale’, in *Innovazioni tematiche, espressive e linguistiche della letteratura italiana del Novecento*.

her being ‘cifra del *non*’,¹⁹⁴ is entrusted the task of travelling across and acquiring knowledge of the netherworld, that ‘beyond’ with which these female figures seem to have a natural relationship. Here lies her connection with Esterina, who can be seen as her feral sister – a pre-Arletta figure. Given her natural bond with this ‘oltre’, she needs to be, just as Esterina, distanced from the poetic subject. She would otherwise lead them both to that ‘Niente’/‘Nulla’ of which she is a custodian. This is why, I suspect, Arletta is subjected to a premature death: in her transiting to that space of nothingness to which she ultimately belongs, she transforms into a Persephone-like figure, into a ‘fanciulla morta’.¹⁹⁵ Just like Esterina, Arletta can be considered to be a ‘figura femminile che propizia il regno metafisico dei padri dove il puro pensiero è senza più (vivente) radice’.¹⁹⁶ Their being the embodiment of the ‘negative’ sign stands once again as an eloquent signal of the ‘estraneità femminile a quel sapere del quale proprio le donne escluse, si vorrebbero docili propiziatrici.’¹⁹⁷ Hence, Arletta too belongs to the ‘razza idiota delle elette’.

Although much neglected by critics until very recently, a ‘ciclo’ of Arletta is no longer a hypothesis.¹⁹⁸ Starting from her very first appearance in ‘Lettera

Atti dell’VIII Congresso dell’AISSLI, ed. by Vittore Branca et al (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1976), pp. 73-83 (76).

¹⁹⁴ Tandello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 86.

¹⁹⁵ Although referring to Ortensia and Esterina, the same could be said about Esterina and Arletta, who similarly ‘transitano in un luogo altro riconoscibilmente infero. Questa discesa le trasforma, di fatto, in creature persefonee, in fanciulle morte.’ Tandello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 85.

¹⁹⁶ Esterina and Arletta both belong to those ‘figure femminili [propiziatrici di] quella via del pensiero astratto nella quale la filosofia celebra i suoi fasti patriarcali’. Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, p. 40.

¹⁹⁷ Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁹⁸ The poems included in the ‘ciclo di Arletta’ are the following. In *Ossi di seppia*: ‘Vento e bandiere’ (p. 25), ‘Fuscello teso dal muro...’ (p. 26), ‘Il canneto rispunta i suoi cimelli...’ (p. 41), ‘I morti’ (pp. 95-96), ‘Delta’ (p. 97), ‘Incontro’ (p. 98). In *Le*

levantina' (1923) (*Poesie disperse*, pp. 802-806), although the attribution of this poem is still much debated among critics, and passing through almost all Montale's poetic collections, her last visitation is to be found in 'Ah!', now included in *Altri versi* (*Altri versi*, p. 727).¹⁹⁹ Arletta, the 'Silvia montaliana', or rather the 'sommersa Silvia marina' as Lonardi names her,²⁰⁰ presupposes in fact the other greatest 'fanciulla morta' – Leopardi's Silvia. Arletta, just like Silvia, is carefully crafted 'su una trama persefonea, Core nella quale l'io poetico contempla la propria esistenza di morte, e su di sé canta "funereo canto"'.²⁰¹ For the focus of this study, Silvia stands as the most relevant literary ancestor of Montale's Arletta. It should not be forgotten, however, that Silvia herself presupposes another young girl doomed to death, who was cast into being a bride of Hades. I am referring to Petrarch's Laura, seen as Petrarch's revisitation of the myth of Orpheus – the first rewriting of the Eurydice-Persephone archetype. Traces of this can be found in the way both Leopardi and later Montale re-worked the traditional archetype of the 'moritura puella' (*Georgics*, IV, 458), which is so

occasioni: 'Pareva facile giuoco...' (p. 111), 'La casa dei doganieri' (p. 167), 'Bassa marea' (p. 168), 'Stanze' (p. 169), 'Punta del Mesco' (p. 172), 'L'estate' (p. 175), 'Eastbourne' (pp. 176-177). Critics still debate the right place for 'Eastbourne'. In *La bufera e altro*: 'Due nel crepuscolo' (pp. 221-222), and 'Ezekiel saw the Wheel...' (p. 255). The latter is according to Maria Antonietta Grignani. In *Diario del '71 e del '72*: 'Il lago di Annecy' (p. 448), 'Ancora ad Annecy' (p. 496), and 'Annetta' (pp. 501-502). In *Quaderno di quattro anni*: 'Per un fiore reciso' (p. 556), 'La capinera non fu uccisa...' (p. 569), 'Se al più si oppone il meno il risultato...' (p. 575), and 'Quella del faro' (p. 610). In *Altri versi*: 'Il big bang dovette produrre...' (p. 661), 'Quando la capinera...' (p. 723), 'Cara agli Dei' (p. 724), 'Una visita' (p. 725), 'Postilla a una visita' (p. 726), and 'Ah!' (p. 727).

¹⁹⁹ Laura Barile sees Bianca Messina rather than Annetta in this poem. However, I agree with Arvigo in seeing traces of Arletta in this poem. Arvigo, *Guida alla lettura di Montale. Ossi di seppia*, p. 72.

²⁰⁰ Lonardi, 'Mito e "Melos"', p. 139.

²⁰¹ Tandello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 86. See Franco D'Intino's essay for a reading of Leopardi's Silvia as intertwined in the mythical laces. Franco D'Intino, 'I misteri di Silvia. Motivo persefoneo e mistica eleusina in Leopardi', *Filologia e critica*, 19 (1994), 211-271.

profoundly embedded into lyric discourse. Other significant influences are to be found in P. B. Shelley, John Keats, as well as Robert Browning, in whose poetry ‘l’amore è il significante dell’Aldilà’.²⁰² This section focuses on Arletta and her being bound to a repetitive and incessant *anabasis/katabasis*: a cyclical return/union movement which is inevitably followed by a departure/separation. As will be shown, in this ‘su’/‘giù’ lie the mythical traces that mark the figure of Arletta. Moreover, I will explore how Arletta, too, embodies the archetype of the ‘ignorant’ young girl who, nonetheless, is a propitiatory figure who leads towards the beyond with which the male poet-creator seeks to dialogue.

Right from *Ossi di seppia* it is possible to trace a mythical narrative emerging through Arletta’s movements of ‘su’/‘giù’. In ‘Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...’ one finds an image of a smiling face appearing in the well, but as soon as the *io* comes closer to those ‘evanescenti labbri’ that arise from death, the image rapidly descends and disappears (*Ossi di seppia*, ‘Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...’, 5, p. 47). Even if just for a moment, Eurydice returns and climbs up from the underworld to rejoin her beloved Orpheus. The theme of separation and illusion of a forthcoming reunion, followed by a further separation, are all elements that profoundly belong to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, an Orpheus-like poetic subject who here presents narcissistic features too. From line 8 begins that ‘rapido moto verso il giù che dà il senso ultimo a tutto’.²⁰³ Now, once again, as the poem concludes, an unbridgeable distance separates the poetic subject from the female ghostly figure: ‘una distanza ci divide’ (line 10). Let us

²⁰² Regarding Robert Browning’s influence on Montale’s poetry see Arvigo, *Guida alla lettura di Montale. Ossi di seppia*, pp. 71-72 and Laura Barile, *Adorate mie larve: Montale e la poesia anglosassone* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990).

²⁰³ Lonardi, ‘Mito e “Melos”’, p. 144.

not forget that the poetic subject and Esterina were also portrayed as separated by an irreversible distance. Is this not the same irremediable distance that Orpheus and Eurydice could not bridge after her second, final, death? The *io*-Orpheus has irreversibly lost his *tu*-Eurydice. Ultimately, Arletta's 'su'/'giù' and 'emergere'/'sommere' are nothing but her *anabasis/katabasis* from and to the Montalean poetic underworld. Here lies her Eurydice-Persephone essence: a fleeting contact followed by a renewed separation. This clearly echoes the cyclical and repetitive return-departure of Persephone, as well as Eurydice's fugitive and momentary union, inevitably bound to an imminent and final separation in her descending once again towards the underworld after Orpheus' act of turning backwards.

Similarly to 'Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...' (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 47), in 'Incontro' (significantly originally entitled 'Arletta' in its first publication in 'rivista') the 'su'/'giù' presents itself under the 'cifra arlettiano-funebre del *sommere/sommersa*'²⁰⁴: 'Poi più nulla. Oh sommersa!: tu dispari | qual sei venuta, e nulla so di te' ('Incontro', *Ossi di seppia*, 46-47, pp. 98-99). After the fleeting contact with the *tu* there is nothing left, only the 'nulla' (line 46). In the first version of the poem, there was 'Oh Arletta!' instead of 'Oh sommersa!' (line 47). This new version links this being 'sommersa' at the ending of the poem 'I morti', where the 'sommersi' are clearly identifiable with the dead: '[...] ed i mozzi | loro voli ci sfiorano pur ora | da noi divisi appena e nel crivello | del mare *si sommano*' ('I morti', *Ossi di seppia*, 34-37, pp. 95-96. Emphasis added). The 'sommersa' that disappears in 'Incontro' towards an unstoppable and relentless descent towards death – the 'oscura regione' ('Delta', *Ossi di seppia*, 8,

²⁰⁴ Lonardi, 'Mito e "Melos"', p. 147.

p. 97) – is Eurydice-Arletta. A further myth, the myth of Apollo and Daphne, intertwines with ‘Incontro’, a myth that, just like the one of Orpheus and Eurydice, is linked to the elements of absence and loss:²⁰⁵

Forse riavrò un aspetto: nella luce
radente un moto mi conduce accanto
a una misera fronda che in un vaso
s’alleva s’una porta di osteria.
A lei tendo la mano, e farsi mia
un’altra vita sento, inombro d’una
forma che mi fu tolta; e quasi anelli
alle dita non foglie mi si attorcono
ma capelli.

(‘Incontro’, *Ossi di seppia*, 37-45, pp. 98-99)

In the mythical operation that takes place in ‘Incontro’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 98-99), where Arletta is at the absolute centre, one notices how the female *tu* comes to acquire strong Daphnean features too. Just like Daphne, Arletta is also condemned to become a symbol of poetry – ‘sommersa’ in the space of poetry. Thus, just as in ‘Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...’ (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 47), there are two myths that intertwine with each other in this poem: the myth of the woman’s metamorphosis into a plant – with the *io*-Apollo attempting to grasp her – and the myth of the young girl abducted by Hades who is transformed into Persephone-Eurydice, with the poet-Orpheus who descends towards the darkness, invoking the female *tu* to protect him. Moreover, the landscape of ‘Incontro’ contributes to the mythologisation of Arletta as it is evoked in all its demoniacal essence, particularly in the first two stanzas. That roaming fog (‘viaggia una nebbia’, line 8) similar to the one already encountered in ‘Delta’ (‘Delta’, *Ossi di seppia*, 13, 20,

²⁰⁵ Lonardi, ‘Mito e “Melos”’, p. 150.

p. 97) will return with Mosca, who, just like Arletta, is often portrayed as enveloped by darkness and condemned to disappear as shadow. This fog, which is present in ‘Falsetto’ (‘Falsetto’, *Ossi di seppia*, 6, pp. 14-15), is also the fog into which Laura vanishes in ‘Canzone delle visioni’ (*Canzone* 323), enveloped ‘d’una nebbia oscura’ in the so-called ‘stanza di Euridice’ (‘Standomi un giorno solo a la finestra’, *Canzoniere*, 68).²⁰⁶ Eurydice herself in Virgil’s *Georgics* was enveloped by darkness and condemned to disappear into shadow: ‘ex oculis subito, ceu fumus in auras | [...] fugit diversa [...]’ (*Georgics*, IV.499-500).

Within Arletta’s *anabasis*, which are always inevitably followed by her *katabasis*, I would add the movement of Arletta at the window: she too ‘esita’/‘esiste’ on the ‘crepaccio’-like space as portrayed in the customs guards’ house which overlooks the abyss of cliff drops. ‘A lei [la vita che dà barlumi] ti sporgi da questa | finestra che non s’illumina’ (‘Pareva facile giuoco...’, *Le occasioni*, 11-12, p. 111). Arletta is here presented in the act of ‘sporgersi’ from the window that opens towards the balcony, where that ‘ti sporgi’ (line 11), as Montale explains to Silvio Guarnieri, stands for a ‘ti sporgi nella mia memoria e fantasia’.²⁰⁷ Although this leaning from the window signifies a leaning into the poetic subject’s memory, Montale himself insists on the realistic foundation of the object, telling Guarnieri that ‘questa finestra’ (line 12) ‘è “anche” una finestra reale’.²⁰⁸ This is not the only case in which Arletta is found in the act of leaning out towards something, a state of suspension that strengthens the link with both

²⁰⁶ Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Gianfranco Contini (Turin: Einaudi, 1993). See also Marco Santagata, ‘Il lutto dell’umanista’, in *Amate e amanti*, pp. 195-221.

²⁰⁷ As stated by Tiziana de Rogatis in a note to ‘Pareva facile giuoco...’, in Eugenio Montale, *Le occasioni*, ed. by Tiziana de Rogatis (Milan: Mondadori, 2011), p. 7.

²⁰⁸ As stated by de Rogatis in Montale, *Le occasioni*, p. 8.

Esterina and Mosca. For instance, she is found leaning out from a ‘davanzale’ in ‘Punta del Mesco’: ‘ritornano i tuoi rari | gesti e il viso che aggiorna al davanzale’ (‘Punta del Mesco’, *Le occasioni*, 21-22, p. 172). Arletta often returns to the poetic subject’s memory, as Persephone returns, cyclically (seasonally), from the underworld. It is in the image of the ‘voragine/precipizio’ as presented in ‘Vento e bandiere’ (‘Vento e bandiere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 25) that one finds the *topos* of the ‘crepaccio’. This image-theme was already highlighted in Esterina’s ‘esitare’/‘esistere’ on the springboard, just before hurling herself into the abyss and the death-dealing alternative that the sea stands for (an aspect that is also present with Arletta). Similarly: ‘com’è tornata, te lontana, a queste | pietre che sporge il monte alla voragine’ (‘Vento e bandiere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 7-8, p. 25). For many, this chasm is the same as the ‘rialzo a strapiombo sulla scogliera’ of ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (‘La casa dei doganieri’, *Le occasioni*, 2, p. 167). The customs guards’ house has the same function as the ‘crepaccio’ in Mosca: it is the limit, the ‘varco’ (‘La casa dei doganieri’, *Le occasioni*, 19, p. 167), which delimits the border between presence and absence, between the visible world and the one beyond, the ‘aldilà’. This is ‘la rupe dei doganieri’ as later evoked in ‘Annetta’ (‘Annetta’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 6, pp. 501-502), which is ‘come una rupe del ricordo’ (‘Ancora ad Annecy’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 10, p. 496). Arletta is suspended between the sky and the abyss, between the *io*’s memory – that trembling ‘ricordo nel ricolmo secchio’ – and his inevitable and inescapable forgetfulness that ‘ridona all’atro fondo’ the female *tu* (‘Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 3, 9, p. 47). Through memory, Arletta’s presence is evoked, although she remains irrevocably absent, as in ‘Il lago di Annecy’: ‘Ora risorgi viva e non ci sei’ (‘Il lago di Annecy’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 9, p. 448).

Her presence is evoked through memory, but through memory she is also forgotten, lost forever.

Another way in which Arletta is displaced, removed, confined to the lower sub-stratum of the text, is to be found in Montale's textual strategy of removing Arletta's forename, of which 'Incontro' is a clear example (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 98-99). However, to this Montale opposes an equally consistent and obsessive textual strategy of disseminating Arletta's 'vocal body' (i.e. /AR/).²⁰⁹ There is something feral, demoniac, in this strident vocal body. In 'Incontro', for instance, Arletta's 'head', /AR/, is disseminated throughout the poem: 'dispARire' (line 46), 'RARi' (line 48), 'spARsa' (line 49), 'ARia' (line 52). Moreover, it should be noted how this vocal body – /AR/ – is profoundly discordant and piercing ('Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...', *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 47). These are the same sounds highlighted earlier in 'Falsetto' (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 14-15). The dissemination of Arletta's *stridente* and dissonant vocal body/decapitated head²¹⁰ is neither limited to 'Incontro' nor to *Ossi di seppia*. In 'Vecchi versi', for instance, one finds: 'una | vita che dispARì sottoterra' ('Vecchi versi', *Le occasioni*, 51-52, pp. 115-116). The 'disparire' of 'Incontro' is clearly connected here, just as it was in 'sommersa', with a feral descent ('sottoterra', line 52). Similarly, in 'La casa dei doganieri': 'Oh l'orizzonte in fuga, dove s'accende | RARA la luce della petroliera! | Il vARco è qui?' ('La casa dei doganieri', *Le occasioni*, 17-19, p. 167). 'Punta del Mesco' is also not immune to this dissemination: 'affondARono RAPide' (line 7), 'sfioRAva' (line 8), 'tRÀpano [...] bRAncolo' (lines 18-20),

²⁰⁹ I borrow the expression 'vocal body' ('corpo vocale') as used by Lonardi with reference to Arletta in his 'Mito e "Melos"', p. 147.

²¹⁰ Lonardi suggests reading a 'decapitation' of Arletta here as latently present in this dissemination of Arletta's 'head'. Lonardi, 'Mito e "Melos"', p. 148.

‘RARi (line 21) and ‘spARi’ (line 24) (*Le occasioni*, ‘Punta del Mesco’, p. 172). Arletta emerges and disappears in a constant ‘su’/‘giù’ while swinging on the hammock in her ‘voli senz’ali’ (‘Vento e bandiere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 11-12, p. 25). Arletta’s voice is choked, imprisoned: ‘voce prigioniera’ (‘Eastbourne’, *Le occasioni*, 20, pp. 176-177). Her presence is equally choked: ‘presenza soffocata’ (‘Delta’, *Ossi di seppia*, 4, p. 97). As we shall soon see with Mosca, what the reader hears is not the *tu*’s voice which is imprisoned/abducted, but the poet’s ‘ticchettio della telescrivente’ (*Xenia* I.8, 5, p. 296).

What emerges is that Arletta belongs, just as Esterina, to the ‘razza idiota delle elette’. With the anguished cry, ‘Tu non ricordi’, Montale opens ‘La casa dei doganieri’, a poem trapped in the issue of memory, where Arletta’s inability to remember comes together with a not-knowing (as opposed to a memory and knowledge that the male poetic subject is supposed to possess). Three times throughout the poem the *io* reminds us that the female *tu* does not recall: ‘Tu non ricordi’, ‘Tu non ricordi’, ‘Tu non ricordi’ (‘La casa dei doganieri’, *Le occasioni*, 1, 10, 21, p. 167). This insistent and repetitive assertion contributes to making the separation between the poetic subject and the female *tu* even more profound. Moreover, the repetition further consolidates the fundamental otherness of the female *tu*. Her inability to remember confirms her as an “‘ignaro” soggetto di non-sapere”, just as her feral sister earlier in ‘Falsetto’ proved to be.²¹¹ The poem is thus not centred round an unrequited love, as it could seem at first sight. It is noteworthy that the poem will end not only with the *tu* no longer remembering the *io*, but also with the *io* who has forgotten the *tu*. This is not only an oblivion/non-

²¹¹ Tanello, *Amelia Rosselli*, p. 86.

knowledge of the past, but also of the present, as the desperate ending states: ‘Io non so chi va e chi resta’ (‘La casa dei doganieri’, *Le occasioni*, 22, p. 167).

We have already ascertained the profound connection between the figure of the woman and the bird as proposed by Loraux through the figure of Esterina. Arletta herself (just as Mosca, who had had ‘ali [...] | solo nella fantasia’ (*Xenia* I.2, 2-3, p. 290)), is without wings (‘riversa sull’amaca | tra gli alberi, ne’ tuoi voli senz’ali’ (‘Vento e bandiere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 11-12, p. 25)) and later she assumes the appearance of a blackcap and thus preserves the *topos* of the woman-bird (‘La capinera non fu uccisa...’, *Quaderno di quattro anni*, p. 569). Even when embodying the ‘capinera’ Arletta is portrayed as unable to remember: ‘Suppongo che di me | abbia perduto anche il ricordo’ (lines 4-5). The image of Annetta swinging on the hammock as a bird without wings recalls Esterina throwing herself into the sea; both are hanging between earth and sky: between life and death. It is Loraux who has shown the profound link between the leap and one’s death. This encourages us to read the poetic subject’s killing of the ‘passero solitario’ (‘Annetta’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 26, pp. 501-502), who was standing still on the ‘asta’ (line 29) (something that recalls Esterina’s springboard), as the killing of Annetta in his poetic world: ‘il solo mio delitto | che non so perdonarmi’ (‘Annetta’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 30-31, pp. 501-502).²¹² Could this be the Orpheus’ not-so-innocent turning backwards that will make Eurydice’s death final? Perhaps that ‘Perdona Annetta’ with which the poem opens (‘Annetta’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 1, pp. 501-502) can be read as a metapoetic, apologetic

²¹² Lonardi too suggests a similar reading: ‘Dunque è lui, è l’io poetante che, in una verità fantasmatica più profonda della elementarmente biografica, ha sparato ad Arletta. L’infanzia allora è quella di lui, Eugenio, l’Arsenio di terra, non meno che di lei, ondina-piccola dea-fanciulla-fanciullezza già presto internamente ferita – *dilaniata* – da un destino di morte, di cui la Natura battuta e ferita è l’oggettivo correlato e l’annuncio’. Lonardi, ‘Mito e “Melos”’, p. 156.

moment by the poetic subject about the mandatory act of making the lost object of love irrevocably absent in order to mourn her death and thus give life to his *œuvre*. This continues and preserves that tradition that Cavareto refers to and which is not limited to the philosophical tradition: that ‘ostinata tradizione che vuole nella donna amata una donna morta’.²¹³ The bird-woman, however, was not killed by a hunter (‘La capinera non fu uccisa | da un cacciatore ch’io sappia’, lines 1-2); she must have died by some other unknown cause, but is surely not killed – Montale is careful to later clarify – ‘Morì forse nel mezzo del mattino’ (‘La capinera non fu uccisa...’, *Quaderno di quattro anni*, 3, p. 569). ‘[L]e capinere hanno breve suono e sorte. | Non se ne vedono molte intorno. È aperta la caccia.’ (‘Se al più si oppone il meno il risultato...’, *Quaderno di quattro anni*, 10-11, p. 575). In any case, that the ‘capinera’-Arletta had to be killed, or rather sacrificed, was already known: ‘Quando la capinera fu assunta in cielo | (qualcuno sostiene che il fatto | era scritto nel giorno della sua nascita)’ (‘Quando la capinera...’, *Altri versi*, 1-3, p. 723). It was written on the day she entered Montale’s poetic world: in her being part of the ‘razza idiota delle elette’, in her being a ‘fanciulla morta’, in her being ‘cifra del non’. Arletta, Esterina, Mosca: ‘elette’ and thus necessarily dead.

It is now possible to start bringing together some conclusions: Arletta positions herself as Esterina’s feral sister and together they develop the Eurydice-Persephone archetype of the dead girl – the propitiatory figure to access that beyond which, in their transit, they have become custodians. The lost object of love remains silent, distant, condemned to disappear into a shadow, as is traditional in the lyric discourse. They have to be non-existent ‘un genio | di pura

²¹³ Cavareto, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 121.

inesistenza' ('Annetta', *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 6, pp. 501-502). In his dialogue *in absentia*, the poetic subject yearns to speak with the absent/dead (and possibly death itself). After all, poetry can be seen to be the only medium through which one can dialogue with the dead and with death, with that which is beyond. Irrevocably absent, the poet attempts to clutch at his *tu* through the thread of memory: 'Ne tengo un capo, ma tu resti sola | né qui respiri nell'oscurità' ('La casa dei doganieri', *Le occasioni*, 15-16, p. 167). It will still be through memory that Mosca's presence will be similarly evoked in Montale's 'canzoniere in morte'.

2.4 Mosca

‘Caro piccolo insetto | che chiamavano mosca non so perché’ (*Xenia* I.1, 1-2, p. 289). With these words Montale opens the first poem of the two series of *Xenia*: a ‘canzoniere in morte’ written in memory of Drusilla Tanzi, and directly addressed to her. Montale’s life-companion, and eventual wife, was also affectionately known as Mosca for her tiny frame and near-blindness. After the indirect reference to the mythical phoenix with Esterina in ‘Falsetto’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 14-15) and Arletta’s ‘voli senz’ali’ (‘Vento e bandiere’, *Ossi di seppia*, 12, p. 25), and her disguise under the appearance of the blackcap, one more flying creature is added to Montale’s already rich bestiary. The one that will prove to be most pertinent is the ‘hellish fly’:

Moscerino, moschina erano nomi
non sempre pertinenti al tuo carattere
dolcemente tenace. Soccorrendoci
l’arte di Stanislaus poi
decidemmo per hellish fly
(‘Gli ultimi spari’, *Satura*, 1-5, p. 347)

It is noteworthy how, in a different way from both Esterina and Arletta, Mosca’s ‘nomignoli’ (‘moschina’, ‘mouche’, ‘moscerino’, ‘insetto’, ‘grillo’, ‘musclin’, among others) all belong to an ‘idioletto diminutivo [...] [che] porta completamente fuori dai prodigi cliziani’.²¹⁴ *Xenia*, first published in 1966 after ten years of poetic silence that followed the publication of *La bufera e altro*, sees, for the first time, the exclusive presence of Mosca, who now becomes the ‘pre-text’ for some of the most powerful and poignant of Montale’s poems. *Xenia* was

²¹⁴ Maria Antonietta Grignani, *Prologhi ed epiloghi. Sulla poesia di Eugenio Montale. Con una prosa inedita* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1987), p. 31.

initially published in an edition ‘fuori commercio’, with a print run of only fifty copies, with the publisher Tipografia Bellabarba in San Severino Marche. It is with the words ‘a mia moglie’ that Montale acknowledges Mosca as the dedicatee of these fourteen poems on the first page of the *plaquette*. Montale’s choice of such a small print run for the first edition of *Xenia* is eloquent in signalling a desire to highlight the privateness of these poems, as opposed to the more openly stated civic and public status of his poetry that the older Montale could have easily reached at this stage of his career.²¹⁵ In 1968 Montale published a second series under the title of *Altri Xenia*, comprising, again, fourteen poems, which eventually were joined under the titles of *Xenia I* and *Xenia II* in *Satura*, published by the poet with Mondadori in 1971.

The subject of *Xenia* is the banalities of everyday life: ‘le coincidenze, le prenotazioni, le trappole, gli scorni’ (*Xenia II.5*, 5-6, p. 309) – issues that do not have anything transcendental about them. As Montale himself stated, ‘ho voluto suonare il pianoforte in un’altra maniera, più discreta, più silenziosa’: this is a book written ‘in pigiama’ within the domestic walls of his later years with Mosca, and not ‘in frac’ as his early poetry might have been.²¹⁶ Mosca is now somewhere else – a ‘beyond’ that is also constantly questioned by the poetic subject – and her ‘ombra’ fills Montale’s later poetry with an intensity and insistence almost equal to Clizia’s; her visitations seem to be out of the poet’s control or desire. Mosca, most importantly, opens up the spaces for modes of being beyond the tangible and immanent world, beyond visible and representable realities, but also beyond any

²¹⁵ Ilena Antici, ‘L’absence de la figure féminine dans la poésie de Eugenio Montale et de Paul Eluard’ (unpublished MA thesis, Université Paris X Nanterre, Paris, 2007), pp. 24-25.

²¹⁶ Cima, ‘Le reazioni di Montale’, p. 193.

kind of simplistic religious-transcendent ‘oltre’.²¹⁷ The question at the core of this chapter, and this section on Mosca is no exception, is over what kind of urge drives the subject to look back to its dead beloved. To answer this question, let us look in more depth at some specific cases where Mosca clearly echoes the Eurydice-Persephone archetype. These can be grouped into, firstly, images in which the female beloved is represented as enveloped by a fog, a fundamental element that belongs to the ‘aldilà’; secondly, episodes in which Mosca is shown to belong to the underworld; thirdly, instances representing the act of descending towards lower places that indirectly recalls the descent to the underworld.

‘Un ciclo di poesie dedicate a una defunta non era davvero una novità nella poesia italiana; neanche in quella di Montale.’²¹⁸ With these words Franco Fortini opens his lecture on *Satura* for Almansì’s students at the University of Kent in 1971, soon after Montale’s fourth poetic collection had been published. It is novel, however, in so far as wives are much less present in the courtly love tradition.²¹⁹ Mosca in fact enters Montale’s poetry only in the poet’s last years and under particular circumstances: ‘[n]el solco dell’emergenza’ (‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’, *La bufera e altro*, 1, pp. 217-218). This is the only poem that features the presence of Mosca before the publication of *Xenia*. Something in this poem anticipates what one will later find in *Xenia*, of which its narrative language is

²¹⁷ West attaches a positive value to Montale’s explorations of this ‘oltre’ beyond ‘touch, sight, or simple identification’ to which all Montale’s shadows direct the poetic subject. See West, ‘Montale’s *Care Ombre*: Identity and its Dissolution’, p. 215.

²¹⁸ Franco Fortini, ‘*Satura* nel 1971’, in *Nuovi saggi italiani* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987), pp. 103-124 (103).

²¹⁹ There are no references to Gemma throughout Dante’s works, and the few wives in his work are mainly secondary characters with the only exception of the adulterous-wife figure of Francesca. The exclusion of the figure of the wife within modern Italian love poetry persists with only a few exceptions, such as Umberto Saba, Edoardo Sanguineti, and several others who wrote wonderful pages with their wives as their primary subject.

only one element. From the opening of the poem, the atmosphere is dramatically tense and the poetic subject is clearly in a state of profound alarm and distress: ‘buio, per noi, e terrore’ (line 5). Here in the precarious balance between life and death, as if standing in front of a ‘crepaccio’ (*Xenia* II.4, 8, p. 308) – a topical image, as has already been mentioned, that often accompanies Montale’s female figures – the poetic subject turns backwards and in doing so realises that something has changed: Mosca is ill and she now resembles a chalk mannequin:

ed io mi volsi e lo specchio
 di me più non era lo stesso
 perché la gola ed il petto
 t’avevano chiuso di colpo
 in un manichino di gesso.

(‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’, *La bufera e altro*, 9-13, pp. 217-218)

In ‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’ Mosca is presented as a ‘manichino di gesso’ (‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’, *La bufera e altro*, 13, pp. 217-218) – an image that too easily reminds us of the bedridden Frida Kahlo’s self-portrait of a plastered bust: ‘imprigionata tra le bende e i gessi’, just as Mosca is depicted by Montale (*Xenia* I.14, 14, p. 302).²²⁰ Similarly to Orpheus, who in the moment of

²²⁰ See Frida Kahlo, ‘The Broken Column’ (1944), Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño, Mexico City, Mexico. Kahlo suffered of what modern medicine now calls fibromyalgia: a syndrome characterised by persistent widespread pain and the presence of tender points in well-defined anatomic areas (something that clearly emerges in her art works). This partly echoes Mosca, who was affected by Pott disease – a form of spondylitis. In a letter to Contini dated 29 May 1945 (the first written after the war), Montale writes to his friend: ‘Lunga emergenza, guai d’ogni genere, salto dei ponti, bombardamenti d’ogni calibro, fuga di Gadda, fame, inopia (direbbe Macri) di H₂O, freddo, la Mosca ammalata in ottobre e tuttora ingessata a letto; due mesi li abbiamo passati in una clinica dove lei era censée di esalar l’ultimo respiro; invece una notte (suppergiù quella del trapasso) s’è alzata, ha ridacchiato, ha mangiato fichi secchi, bevuto *port wine* e il giorno dopo la catastrofe era conclusa [...]. Se tu sentissi che ci fosse qualcosa da fare per me in Svizzera (cosa assai improbabile) non dimenticarti di Eusebio. Anche la Mosca avrebbe assai bisogno di venirci per ragioni di cura. Ha il morbo di Pott, cosa guaribile ma lunga e grave. L’inverno che ha passato e m’ha fatto passare è stato veramente indescrivibile.’ See the *carteggio* between Montale and Contini now available

turning backwards witnesses his Eurydice quickly falling back towards the underworld, here Mosca-Eurydice has ‘di colpo’ (‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’, *La bufera e altro*, 12, pp. 217-218) been subjected to a tragic metamorphosis. In the act of ‘voltarsi’, the poetic subject suddenly and unexpectedly finds Mosca dramatically changed. Her throat and chest – where the former stands for her ability to speak and, in broader terms, to communicate, and the latter as recipient of the metonymic heart that stands for life itself – are all of a sudden encased into what resembles a lifeless chalk mannequin. Both the act of turning backwards and the overall atmosphere of ‘terrore’ as presented in ‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’ have a rich history in Montale’s poetry, among which: ‘Forse un mattino andando in un’aria di vetro,...’, ‘Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...’, and ‘Incontro’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 42, 47, 98-99).

In *Xenia* the reader is told that the *io*-Montale-Orpheus and the female *tu*-Mosca-Eurydice have practised a whistle as a ‘segno di riconoscimento’ (*Xenia* I.4, 2, p. 292) to find each other again in the ‘aldilà’. There is something inherently feral in this apparently mere playful joke between the two partners:

Avevamo studiato per l’aldilà
un fischio, un segno di riconoscimento.
Mi provo a modularlo nella speranza
che tutti siamo già morti senza saperlo.
(*Xenia* I.4, p. 292)

Montale will come back to this whistle that he and Mosca had agreed and practised together in their assurance of being, one day, in the ‘aldilà’, and making sure to find each other again. It happens in ‘Pasqua senza week-end’ where the

in *Eusebio e Trabucco. Carteggio di Eugenio Montale e Gianfranco Contini*, ed. by Dante Isella (Milan: Adelphi, 1997), pp. 95-100 (95, 96).

word ‘fischio’ (*Xenia* I.4, 2, p. 292), which intrinsically has a playful quality, is referred to as ‘segnale convenuto’ (‘Pasqua senza week-end’, *Satura*, 2, p. 385): a much more serious way of expressing this little ‘segno di riconoscimento’ (*Xenia* I.4, 2, p. 292).

Se zufolo il segnale convenuto
sulle parole ‘sabato domenica
e lunedì’ dove potrò trovarti
nel vuoto universale?
(‘Pasqua senza week-end’, *Satura*, 1-4, p. 385)

Similarly, Montale presents the reader with another rhetorical question in ‘Non più notizie’: ‘Ma ora come riconoscersi | nell’Etere?’ (‘Non più notizie’, *Altri versi*, 7-8, p. 708). To think ‘con teste umane quando si entra | nel disumano’ (‘Nel disumano’, *Quaderno di quattro anni*, 17-18, p. 599) does not bode well, and the ‘fischio’ (*Xenia* I.4, 1, p. 292), this ‘segno di riconoscimento’ (*Xenia* I.4, 2, p. 292), surely belongs, just as those ‘quattro ossa’ (*Quaderno di quattro anni*, ‘Nel disumano’, 10, p. 599) and the ‘paio di gingilli’ (*Quaderno di quattro anni*, ‘Nel disumano’, 11, p. 599), to the tangible world. Montale later came to the same conclusion, as emerges from his exchange with Nascimbeni about the anecdote of the whistle: ‘Non era un’invenzione poetica. L’avevamo studiato davvero. Ma c’era un grosso errore, l’ho capito dopo. Se si è morti, si è senza corpo. Il fischio esige un corpo. È una faccenda che non sta in piedi.’²²¹ What is most interesting in this reflection on the whistle is the vivid evocation in the reader’s mind of the poetic subject and the female protagonist of *Xenia* in the underworld, trying to find each other through the modulation of a whistle. Here lies the feral and Orphic

²²¹ Giulio Nascimbeni, *Montale, biografia di un poeta* (Milan: Longanesi, 1986), p. 147.

quality of this whistle. Could this not be something the mythical couple of Orpheus and Eurydice could have done as well? The *io*-Montale-Orpheus imagines himself descending into lower places, the underworld, with the urge to find the *tu*-Mosca-Eurydice. However, the modern Orpheus that is evoked by Montale does not appear so confident that this will be possible; even the existence of an underworld is questioned and will continue to be questioned:

Non è piacevole
saperti sottoterra anche se il luogo
può somigliare a un'Isola dei Morti
con un sospetto di Rinascimento.
[...] Mi fa orrore
che quello ch'è lì dentro, quattro ossa
e un paio di gingilli, fu creduto il tutto
di te e magari lo era, atroce a dirsi.
Forse partendo in fretta hai creduto
che chi si muove prima trova il posto migliore.
Ma quale posto e dove? Si continua
a pensare con teste umane quando si entra
nel disumano.
(‘Nel disumano’, *Quaderno di quattro anni*, 1-4, 10-18, p. 599)

As his name suggests, Orpheus is an *orphan*: his poetry stems from an irremediable loss – that of his beloved. This is also the case for the modern Orpheus that emerges from Montale’s ‘canzoniere in morte’ to Mosca. It is the (sub)genre of the ‘canzoniere in morte’, a poetry collection written by the poet for his/her dead beloved, a genre at the core of the Western poetic tradition, that can assist us in better understanding what happens in *Xenia*. Here, the subject, caught in a state of mourning and trying to re-elaborate his loss, attempts to order his/her scattered memory fragments by arranging them into a highly organised and

structured work, the ‘canzoniere in morte’.²²² One of the most celebrated mythical couple of tragic lovers of all time, Orpheus and Eurydice lead the reader along a path that starts with Dante and Petrarch, passes through Leopardi, and eventually reaches the voice of Montale.²²³ Approaching *Xenia* as a ‘canzoniere in morte’ requires one brief clarification in terms of methodology. Although in its final publication, *Xenia* does not stand as an autonomous book but rather represents the first two sections of a book, and regardless of the fact that there are other poems scattered throughout *Satura* outside the two series of *Xenia*, it is possible to consider it as a ‘canzoniere’ for three reasons. Firstly, it maintains a certain autonomy from the rest of *Satura*, secondly, it was previously published as an autonomous work, and lastly, it possesses a strong structure, and its internal elements give it a unifying form.²²⁴

After ‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’ Mosca returns in *Xenia*, but here she visits the poet in the form of a shadow, and without her characteristic ‘grossi | occhiali di tartaruga’ that at night Montale used to take off her and place near her analgesics: ‘che a notte ti tolgo e avvicino | alle fiale della morfina’ (‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’, *La bufera e altro*, 16-19, pp. 217-218). Now Mosca appears without her glasses: ‘sei ricomparsa accanto a me, | ma non avevi occhiali’ (*Xenia* I.1, 5-6, p. 289). Without this key ‘segno di riconoscimento’ (*Xenia* I.4, 2, p. 292) they cannot see each other: ‘non potevi vedermi | né potevo io senza quel luccichio | riconoscere te nella foschia’ (*Xenia* I.1, 7-9, p. 289). Here the dead

²²² See Francesco Giusti, ‘Le parole di Orfeo: Dante, Petrarca, Leopardi, e gli archetipi di un genere’, *Italian Studies*, 64:1 (2009), 56-76; Francesco Giusti, ‘Poesia e performance del lutto’, *Mantichora*, 1 (2011), 350-363.

²²³ See Giusti, *Canzonieri in morte*.

²²⁴ Giusti, ‘Parlando la Lingua della Mosca: Gli *Xenia* e la Morte tra Dimensione Domestica e Trauma Epistemologico’, p. 240.

Mosca emerges from some other unspecified place enveloped by a mist that recalls the bride of Hades. Montale himself reminds the reader that ‘c’è nebbia e fumo nell’aldilà’ (‘Tergi gli occhiali appannati...’, *Altri versi*, 2, p. 709). Mosca-Eurydice is here summoned up to earthly life, but the poet soon becomes aware that the death of his beloved is final. Mosca, just like the other feral female figures, belongs to the underworld, that ‘oscura regione ove scend[ono]’ (‘Delta’, *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 97).

That Mosca belongs to this ‘oscura regione’ (‘Delta’, *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 97) is suggested throughout *Xenia*, as well as in other poems outside the two series included in *Satura*. One interesting case is to be found in the *xenion* II.6 where Montale reports an ironic exchange between Mosca and a ‘vinattiere’:

Il vinattiere ti versava un poco
d’Inferno. E tu atterrita: ‘Devo berlo? Non basta
esserci stati dentro a lento fuoco?’
(*Xenia* II.6, p. 310)

‘Inferno’ is the name of a wine from Valtellina, a valley in the north of Italy at the border with Switzerland. On one level the *calembour* recalls Montale’s conception of the ‘morte-in-vita’, something that is in tune with Mosca’s health issues as presented in ‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 217-218). On another level, however, the reader cannot but read those lines a second time, resulting in a much more literal interpretation: Mosca and the underworld are not strangers to each other. Mosca is a chthonian maiden very familiar with the underworld. A second instance where Mosca emerges as a feral maiden is to be found in ‘Luci e colori’, which does not belong to *Xenia*, but nevertheless belongs to what I would call a third series of *Xenia*, traceable in the remaining

two sections of *Satura*, as well as part of the final triptych dedicated to Mosca formed by ‘Nel silenzio’, ‘Luci e colori’ and ‘Il grillo di Strasburgo notturno col suo trapano...’ (*Satura*, pp. 414, 415, 416).²²⁵

Se mai ti mostri hai sempre la liseuse rossa,
gli occhi un po’ gonfi di chi ha veduto.
Sembrano inesplicabili queste tue visite mute.
(‘Luci e colori’, *Satura*, 1-3, p. 415)

Here the eyes are said to be ‘un po’ gonfi’ (line 2), where the swollen eyes are those of someone who has seen the ‘aldilà’.²²⁶ In ‘Luci e colori’ it is also possible to find again the ‘foschia’ (line 5). Once more, Mosca is presented to the reader as belonging to that ‘oscura regione’ (‘Delta’, *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 97), as do Esterina, Arletta, as well as other well-known Eurydice-Persephone figures such as Petrarch’s Laura.

Just as one finds a modern transposition of these feral muses descending into the underworld through the ‘scale automatiche’ (‘Gli uomini che si voltano’, *Satura*, 15, p. 386),²²⁷ so the fog and mist that belong to that ‘oscura regione’ (‘Delta’, *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 97) of the ‘aldilà’ is evoked by the ‘fumo’ in the train station (‘Nel fumo’, *Satura*, p. 329), which is perhaps the same ‘fumo’ of ‘Tergi gli occhiali appannati’ (‘Tergi gli occhiali appannati...’, *Altri versi*, 2, p.

²²⁵ It is possible to identify a third series of *Xenia* spread throughout the second part of *Satura*, to which the poems dedicated to Mosca belong, namely: ‘La morte di Dio’ (p. 327), ‘Nel fumo’ (p. 329), ‘Lettera’ (p. 341), ‘Piove’ (pp. 345-346), ‘Gli ultimi spari’ (p. 347), ‘Le revenant’ (p. 348), ‘Cielo e terra’ (p. 362), ‘A pianterreno’ (p. 365), ‘Pasqua senza week-end’ (p. 385), ‘Il repertorio’ (p. 403), ‘Nel silenzio’ (p. 414), ‘Luci e colori’ (p. 415), and ‘Il grillo di Strasburgo notturno col suo trapano...’ (p. 416).

²²⁶ See Eugenio Montale’s ‘note d’autore’ in *Poesies IV. Satura (1962-1970)*, trans. by Patrice Dyer Angelini (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 306.

²²⁷ The mysterious G.B.H. leaves the scene set in London ‘sui gradini automatici che ti slittano in giù...’ (*La bufera e altro*, ‘Di un natale metropolitano’, 12, p. 232), and similarly: ‘Scenderai | sulle scale automatiche dei templi di Mercurio tra cadaveri in maschera’ (*Satura*, ‘Gli uomini che si voltano’, 14-15, p. 386).

709). Here, two observations are necessary: first, the railway is a theme directly linked to Mosca throughout *Satura*;²²⁸ second, and most importantly, the train in itself stands for a means of transportation, or rather transition, from one place to another: perhaps to an ‘aldilà’. A transition in which Mosca, just as Esterina and Arletta, is caught and desired in that very moment of travelling from a place to another. Here, at the train station, the poetic subject is awaiting Mosca ‘nel freddo, nella nebbia [...] fumando Giuba poi soppresse dal ministro | dei tabacchi, il balordo!’ (‘Nel fumo’, *Satura*, 2-4, p. 329). Eventually, Mosca arrives: ‘Poi apparivi, ultima. È un ricordo | tra tanti altri. Nel sogno mi perseguita’ (‘Nel fumo’, *Satura*, 10-11, p. 329). The view of the train as a way of reaching the underworld is further developed by Montale himself in one of his prose works. It is with a ‘tranvai’ that in the short story ‘Sul limite’ in *Farfalla di Dinard* the protagonist reaches the ‘aldilà’ after dying in a car accident.²²⁹ As we shall see in the concluding chapter, here Montale offers the reader a well-defined topography of the afterworld, where memory plays a central role.

Similar to the image of her enveloped by an obscure fog, Mosca is also evoked in the act of descending to lower places, something that indirectly echoes the descent into the underworld:

[...] e m’interruppi quando
 tu scivolasti vertiginosamente
 dentro la scala a chiocciola della Périgourdine
 e di laggiù ridesti a crepapelle.
 (*Satura*, ‘La morte di Dio’, 3-6, p. 327. Emphasis added.)

²²⁸ See Pellini, ‘L’ultimo Montale: donne miracoli treni telefoni sciopero generale’.

²²⁹ Eugenio Montale, ‘Sul limite’, in *Farfalla di Dinard*, in *PR*, pp. 187-192 (187-188, 191).

With her characteristic laugh, Mosca slides down. This ‘laggiù’ (line 6), beneath the ‘scala a chiocciola’ (line 5), can be associated with another lower place: the underworld. Mosca is either portrayed as descending to some obscure place, or, alternatively, she is represented on the threshold between life and death, in that space of transition between one place and another, in the ‘solco dell’emergenza’ or ‘sul ciglio del crepaccio’, where the crevice stands for the doorstep that separates life from death (*Xenia* II.4, 8). Both scenarios bear the mythical *katabasis* of Eurydice and Persephone. As a final note on ‘La morte di Dio’, it is in the image of dying laughter, and the word ‘crepabelle’ in particular (‘La morte di Dio’, *Satura*, 6), that it is possible to find a further feral element of this poem. The idiomatic expression of ‘ridere a crepabelle’ is synonymous with ‘morire dal ridere’ or ‘scoppiare dal ridere’, and has an interesting etymological nature: it is composed of ‘crepare’ and ‘pelle’. Eating or, as in this case, laughing ‘a crepabelle’ means being unable to bear that act anymore. Here, the memory of Mosca’s laugh, paradoxically a sign of her tireless vitality, is presented, masked by an idiomatic expression, as something that brings her close to death: to die laughing.²³⁰

One of the most celebrated poems that is rarely missing in any anthology is the *xenion* ‘Ho sceso, dandoti il braccio, almeno un milione di scale...’ (*Xenia* II.5, p. 309), where again one can find Mosca in the act of descending into lower places, but this time she is not alone, she is accompanied by her beloved. Contrary

²³⁰ Mosca’s irreverent laughter recalls the similarly joyful and disruptive laughter of Hélène Cixous’ Medusa as portrayed in her ‘The Laugh of Medusa’. Esterina is also portrayed as laughing, just before she hurls herself into the sea. Arletta too is represented as laughing in ‘Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...’: ‘Trema un ricordo nel ricolmo secchio, | nel puro cerchio un’immagine ride’ (‘Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 3-4, p. 47). Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of Medusa’ trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1:4 (1976), 875-893.

to the way in which the ‘lungo viaggio’ (*Xenia* II.5, 3, p. 309) is more commonly pictured as a progressive movement upwards towards higher places, here the poetic subject and Mosca are trapped in following the path of their lives by descending millions of stairs. The poem opens with the image of the poetic subject giving his arm to Mosca, suggesting a source of support: ‘dandoti il braccio’ (line 1). Soon, however, it emerges that the real guide is not the person whose ‘viaggio [...] | dura tuttora’ (lines 3-4), but Mosca herself: ‘e ora che non ci sei è il vuoto ad ogni gradino’ (line 2). Or similarly, as the poem closes:

Ho sceso milioni di scale dandoti il braccio
 non già perché con quattr’occhi forse si vede di più.
 Con te le ho scese perché sapevo che di noi due
 le sole vere pupille, sebbene tanto offuscate,
 erano le tue.
 (*Xenia* II.5, 8-12, p. 309)

Regardless of her strong myopia, her ‘grossi | occhiali di tartaruga’ (*La bufera e altro*, ‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’, 16-17, pp. 217-218), and regardless of how much her eyes are ‘offuscat[i]’ (line 11), it is Mosca who has the power of vision, the ‘vere pupille’ (line 11). There is a tendency to read all this in mere contrast with the almost divine ‘chiaroveggenza’ of Clizia as opposed to Mosca’s more earthly faculty of vision.²³¹ I would furthermore argue that the much more earthly figure of Mosca as compared to the angelic figure of Clizia has a power of vision not just of worldly reality, but of the underworld as well. Caught in all her oxymoronic essence, which is also a constitutive element and marks the stylistic specificity of *Xenia* as well as some parts of *Satura* as a whole, Mosca appears as

²³¹ See Riccardo Castellana’s comments to the poem in his edition of Montale’s *Satura* (Milan: Mondadori, 2009), pp. 60-61 (60).

the embodiment of contradiction, in addition to being able to deconstruct the tangles of reality: ‘Ti piaceva la vita fatta a pezzi, | quella che rompe dal suo insopportabile | ordito’ (*Xenia* II.12, 9-11). Similarly:

[...] negando che la testuggine
sia più veloce del fulmine.
Tu sola sapevi che il moto
non è diverso dalla stasi,
che il vuoto è il pieno e il sereno
è la più diffusa delle nubi.
(*Xenia* I.14, 7-12, p. 302)²³²

Mosca is no longer alive but somehow more alive than the living, and surely more alive than the poetic subject who is not even sure of being ‘al mondo’ – “non sono mai stato certo di essere al mondo” (*Xenia* II.7, 1, p. 311), one reads in a reported dialogue between the couple, whose echo will be heard in *Diario del '71 e del '72*, ‘non sono certo di essere vivo’ (‘I nascondigli’, *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 1, p. 436). Thus he is someone who lives ‘al cinque per cento’ (‘Per finire’, *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 8, p. 520), and is presented to the reader as embodying contradiction: ‘anche sul ciglio del crepaccio | dolcezza e orrore in una sola musica’ (*Xenia* II.4, 8-9, p. 308). She is that ‘piccolo insetto | che chiamavano mosca’ (*Xenia* I.1, 1-2, p. 289), for others simply an ‘insetto miope | smarrito’ (*Xenia* I.5, 4-5, p. 294) with her ‘occhiali appannati’ (‘Tergi gli occhiali appannati’, *Altri versi*, 1, p. 709), who, nonetheless, is endowed with a ‘radar di pipistrello’ (*Xenia* I.5, 11, p. 294), that ‘senso infallibile’ (*Xenia* I.5, 10, p. 294), and could therefore reveal and deconstruct all the knots of the world and society:

²³² On the figure of the oxymoron in *Xenia* see Giusti, ‘Parlando la Lingua della Mosca: Gli *Xenia* e la Morte tra Dimensione Domestica e Trauma Epistemologico’.

Per gli altri no, eri un insetto miope
 smarrito nel blabla
 dell'alta società. Erano ingenui
 quei furbi e non sapevano
 di essere loro il tuo zimbello:
 di essere visti anche al buio e smascherati
 da un tuo senso infallibile, dal tuo
 radar di pipistrello.
 (*Xenia* I.5, 4-11, p. 294)

As Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo suggests, this is not a celebration of a paradoxical *coincidentia oppositorum*, but rather of a fundamentally anti-dialectic attitude towards the world where opposites simply coexist.²³³ This is perfectly in tune with the definition of oxymoron as a figure of speech that is able to reunite two opposing terms in one single expression in a state of coexistence. Mosca is precisely this: she embodies a paradoxical contradiction and therefore brings a 'corto circuito' to the traditionally resolved picture of Montale's female figures as easily classifiable into specific categories, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The volcanic Mosca-Medusa laughs, and with her joyful and disruptive laughter she brings a 'corto circuito'. All this elevates the ordinary Mosca to a superior being, and it is no surprise that without her it is 'vuoto ad ogni gradino' (*Xenia* II.5, 2, p. 309). It is she, the regal Persephone, who can guide by holding the poet who entrusts his arm to her in this feral descending of 'almeno un milione di scale' (*Xenia* II.5, 1, p. 309). In the mythical dimension within which the *io*-Orpheus and the Mosca-Eurydice find themselves, the women and the poet are

²³³ '[N]on si tratta affatto di celebrazione della paradossale *coincidentia oppositorum* della realtà in nome di una superiore, magari dialettica saggezza, ma di un atteggiamento, al contrario, totalmente anti-dialettico (gli opposti, semplicemente, convivono, o meglio sono la formulazione imperfetta di un nostro buio intellettuale), e di una proclamazione letterale di *ignoranza*'. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *La tradizione del Novecento* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), pp. 318-358 (340).

united in the same Orphic action of the ‘scendere’. The female beloved, be it Esterina, Arletta or Mosca, emerges as an indispensable companion for the poet in order to be able to undertake his own ‘altro cammino’ (‘Incontro’, *Ossi di seppia*, 50, pp. 98-99), his descent into the underworld. It is as if, in the poem beginning Montale’s first poetic collection, it were the poet praying for the female *tu*: ‘Cerca una maglia rotta nella rete | che ci stringe, tu balza fuori, fuggi! | Va, per te l’ho pregato’ (‘Godi se il vento ch’entra nel pomario...’, *Ossi di seppia*, 15-17, p. 7), just as in ‘Incontro’ where one reads:

[...] Prega per me
 allora ch’io discenda altro cammino
 [...]
 [...] ch’io ti senta accanto; ch’io
 scenda senza viltà.
 (‘Incontro’, *Ossi di seppia*, 49-50, 53-54, pp. 97-98)

In this *xenion*, too, Montale turns the situation so that the poet openly recognises his need of the female *tu* in order to undertake his descent into the underworld.²³⁴

It is now possible to dismiss the critical significance of statements such as the following:

Mosca – grazie al suo ‘radar di pipistrello’ – sa infatti vedere oltre la superficie delle cose e si conferma come erede della chiaroveggenza di Clizia (ma al tempo stesso il valore di quel dono è diminuito perché ha corso solo nella quotidianità).²³⁵

²³⁴ My reading of the *xenion* ‘Ho sceso, dandoti il braccio, milioni di scale...’ (*Xenia* II.5, p. 309) in relation to ‘Godi se il vento ch’entra nel pomario...’ (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 7) and ‘Incontro’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 98-99) is indebted to Marwa Ali Fawzy Ali’s analysis in ‘Montale e una donna. Lettura metafisica della figura della donna nella poesia di Eugenio Montale’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Università degli Studi di Padova, Padova, 2013), p. 52.

²³⁵ Castellana in Montale, *Satura*, pp. 60-61 (61).

Mosca is neither a successor of Clizia nor an undersized Clizia possessing her vision but having it limited to the sphere of everyday life. Standpoints such as Riccardo Castellana's led younger critics like Giusti to suggest the definition of *domestic angel* as opposed to the *visiting angel* figure of Clizia.²³⁶ Still, however, enclosing the character of Mosca within the antithetical category of *domestic angel* as opposed to the *visiting angel* for which Clizia stands, although not incorrect, remains limiting: her role and function, as it has emerged, have much more profound implications in Montale's poetry. To reiterate once again, enclosing Montale's female poetic figures in separate little boxes does not allow us to reach a full understanding of the feminine in his poetry.²³⁷ To this I would add that, in her transcendence of the traditional antithetical binary of transcendent/immanent woman which so profoundly characterises the lyric tradition of courtly love, Mosca represents, for critics, a chance to supersede this tendency towards categorisation implicitly informed by some level of teleological urgency, which in this case echoes a Hegelian-like dialectical process. It is through the figure of Mosca that Montale opens up spaces for less linear, non-binary representations of female identity that transcend the traditional antithetical angelic/terrestrial dichotomy that goes back to Dante's Beatrice *versus* donna-petra and partly finds its modern reactivation in Clizia *versus* Volpe. With Mosca, Montale embraces such contradiction. Mosca shares some of the salvific features of Clizia, but she is much more bound to the earthly reality than a celestial plane, if compared with the former Montalean muse: Mosca has 'ali [...] | solo nella fantasia' (*Xenia* I.2, 2-3, p. 290).

²³⁶ Giusti, 'Parlando la Lingua della Mosca: Gli *Xenia* e la Morte tra Dimensione Domestica e Trauma Epistemologico', p. 240.

²³⁷ West, 'Wives and Lovers in Dante and Eugenio Montale', p. 210.

‘Il desiderio di riaverti, fosse | pure in un solo gesto o un’abitudine’ (*Xenia* I.3, 9-10, p. 291). By the time we turn to the third *xenion*, any possibility of a direct exchange or conversation with the deceased beloved is evidently no longer possible. The poetic subject becomes aware that Mosca can come back to life only in the moment of recollection, in the moment where her gestures, and the places that are still instilled by her presence, are remembered. It is in this way that the past becomes the one and only possible dimension to live in and it is in the past that the poetic subject’s object of love can be found. The *io* searches for the past in the present of that absence or in the absence of that present. It is in this way that poetry eventually becomes the only possible medium to invoke the *tu*’s presence, something that necessarily ends in re-affirming her absence. It is precisely due to the impossibility of being in contact once again with the object of love that the poetic subject is eventually marked, profoundly marked, by the absence of his female beloved.

[...] Forse che
te n’eri andata
così presto senza parlare?
Ma è ridicolo
pensare che tu avessi ancora labbra.
(*Xenia* I.2, 7-10, p. 290)

The poet here expresses his surprise by Mosca’s too-hasty visitation, without even uttering a word: ‘te n’eri andata | così presto senza parlare?’ (lines 8-9). Where she has gone is clear by now: she went back to where she belongs, the ‘aldilà’. The *io* has now recognised, with sorrow, that it is no surprise that the dead beloved did not speak a word; she does not have substance any longer, she does not have lips to voice herself, she is now pure essence. To this the poetic subject

returns in the concluding *xenion* of the first series: Mosca is now ‘non [...] più forma, ma essenza’ (*Xenia* I.14, 4, p. 302).

La primavera sbuca col suo passo di talpa.
Non ti sentirò più parlare di antibiotici
velenosi, del chiodo del tuo femore,
dei beni di fortuna che t’ha un occhiuto omissis
spennacchiati.

La primavera avanza con le sue nebbie grasse.
Non ti sentirò più lottare col rigurgito
del tempo, dei fantasmi, dei problemi logistici
dell’Estate.
(*Xenia* I.12, p. 300)

Mosca is now voiceless. The poetic subject will no longer hear Mosca lamenting the antibiotics she has to take or the pain of her femur, nor the everyday logistical problems of how to plan the summer holidays. These, however, will be the banal things that the *io* misses so strongly now that spring slowly peeps out. It is in the evocation of them that her presence emerges through a sort of ‘reliquario privato’ that served as an ‘inventario dei [loro] ricordi, l’unico filo che [li] lega dopo tant’acqua [...] passata sotto i ponti’, something that we read in the *farfalla* ‘Reliquie’, but which perfectly fits the two protagonists of *Xenia* as well.²³⁸ It is precisely at this point (when the poetic subject becomes aware that Mosca’s death is final) that his loss too becomes permanent and the *io*-Orpheus can finally mourn and lament to us, the readers, through his verse. Here lies the Orphic quality of Montale’s ‘canzoniere in morte’.

²³⁸ Eugenio Montale, ‘Reliquie’, in *Farfalla di Dinard*, pp. 144-147 (145).

Mosca does not have ‘labbra’ (*Xenia* I.2, 10, p. 290) any longer, inevitably, then, as the poetic subject highlights, her voice has ‘mutato l’accento’ (*Xenia* I.8, 3, p. 296):

La tua parola così stenta e imprudente
resta la sola di cui mi appago.
Ma è mutato l’accento, altro il colore.
Mi abituerò a sentirti o a decifrarti
nel ticchettio della telescrivente,
nel volubile fumo dei miei sigari
di Brisago.
(*Xenia* I.8, p. 296)

The poetic subject will get used to hearing his dead beloved’s voice, that ‘parola così stenta e imprudente’ (*Xenia* I.8, 1, p. 296), in the ‘ticchettio della telescrivente’ (*Xenia* I.8, 5, p. 296). Montale will then not only write and speak *of* her, but *for* her: his writing is the way to give voice to her, to hear her voice one more time. This is the reason why Mosca’s voice, as critics have highlighted, enters Montale’s poetic voice. However, this is also the reason why the reader will never be able to hear Mosca-Eurydice, but only Montale-Orpheus retelling her story, voicing her: there is no possibility to hear Mosca’s voice. Mosca cannot speak herself. It is noteworthy that Mosca is evoked here by the persistent repetition of the pronoun ‘tu’, and the sound of this pronoun itself functions as the sound of the ‘ticchettio della telescrivente’ (*Xenia* I.8, 5, p. 296).²³⁹ As Giusti suggests, this echoes what happens in Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, where the name of Laura keeps returning phonetically throughout the lines in a sort of ‘introiezione linguistica e di nominazione dissimulata che rende onnipresente la donna proprio

²³⁹ Giusti, *Canzonieri in morte*, p. 105. Also see Stefano Agosti, ‘Forme trans-comunicative in *Xenia*’, in *Il testo poetico. Teoria e pratiche d’analisi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1972), pp. 193-207.

quando è sottratta alla presenza fisica individuata'.²⁴⁰ 'Che farò senza Euridice?'.²⁴¹ This is the exclamation by Gluck's Orpheus in the well-known *aria*. Or, before that, 'Quid faceret?', as Virgil's Orpheus asked himself in the *Georgics* (IV.504). This seems to be the same question that haunts the poetic subject throughout the two series of *Xenia* as well. The moment of loss seems to coincide with the eventual possibility of being able to abandon oneself, voluntarily, to the sublime chant of Orpheus.²⁴²

What one finds is a 'presenza fantasmatica incarnata nel linguaggio'.²⁴³ I would like to bring Giusti's reading one step further into a direction left unexplored by him. I am inclined not only to believe that in losing Mosca the poetic subject is finally able to acquire a new poetic voice, but that in taking possession of Mosca's own voice, the poetic subject makes her silent forever. She does not speak, as Giusti's reading implies. It is the male poetic subject's voice speaking *for* her. Her voice echoes throughout those pages only through the pen of her male poet-creator. She is powerless, voiceless, without form. However, I share Giusti's claim that poetry 'diventa un'invocazione alla presenza che, proprio in quanto parola invocante, istituisce e rinnova l'assenza.'²⁴⁴ Moreover, just as in Gluck's already mentioned *aria*, we hear Orpheus lamenting repetition, his

²⁴⁰ Giusti, *Canzonieri in morte*, p. 106. See especially his footnote number 137.

²⁴¹ *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), by Christoph Willibald von Gluck; see Christoph Willibald von Gluck, *Orfeo ed Euridice: opera in tre atti*, libretto by Ranieri de' Calzabigi (Milan: Ricordi, 1952).

²⁴² The American poet Louise Glück alludes to the problematic acquisition of a new poetic voice, a higher poetic voice, in her poetic collection (significantly) entitled *Vita Nova*: "'J'ai perdu mon Eurydice..." | I have lost my Eurydice, | I have lost my lover, | and suddenly I am speaking French | and it seems to me I have never been in better voice | it seems these songs | are songs of a high order'. Louise Glück, *Vita Nova* (New York, NY: The Ecco Press, 1999).

²⁴³ Giusti, *Canzonieri in morte*, p. 105.

²⁴⁴ Giusti, *Canzonieri in morte*, p. 40.

invocation of his beloved's name: 'Euridice! Euridice!'.²⁴⁵ Montale's hammering, obsessive repetition of the pronoun 'tu' throughout *Xenia*, as well as the moment in which he highlights the absence of a reply from Mosca, are there as a powerful denouncement of her disappearance. In lacking a reply ('Forse che | te n'eri andata così presto senza | parlare?' (*Xenia* I.2, 7-9, p. 290)), in the absence of a whistle (*Xenia* I.4, p. 292), in the absence of her voice ('è ridicolo | pensare che tu avessi ancora labbra', (*Xenia* I.1, 10-11, p. 290)), of the 'scoppio' of her irreverent laughter (*Xenia* I.11, 2, p. 299), in the absence of her 'parola', of her 'parola così stenta e imprudente' (*Xenia* I.8, 1, p. 296), we have the ultimate attestation to her absence.

Inevitably, there is a reference here to the last poem that now closes the 'third series' of *Xenia*, the penultimate poem of the entire collection: 'Il grillo di Strasburgo notturno col suo trapano...'. Montale asks his wife 'ti riapparvero allora?', meaning at the point of death and referring to some past events they shared together ('Il grillo di Strasburgo notturno col suo trapano...', *Satura*, 10, p. 416). At the heart of the poem is Mosca in her moment of transiting to the 'other' life, Mosca's last thoughts and words before leaving the poet alone in this world.

²⁴⁵ As Giusti suggests, '[i]n questo nome gridato o sussurrato non c'è ancora l'immagine di Euridice, ancora non viene recuperata nell'atto cosciente di memoria, c'è piuttosto un desiderio immediato di riattivazione della presenza fisica della donna che è anche, e necessariamente vista l'impossibilità del suo ritorno, la denuncia estrema della sua scomparsa'. This is also in the case of Montale, before arriving at the point with no return when: '[i]l passato diventa l'unica dimensione dell'avvenire, si cerca il passato nel presente dell'assenza o nell'assenza del presente. Manca un[a] posizione mediana stabile in cui arte e vita possano *co-esistere* pacificamente. Sembra, però, che nello spazio della morte, come continuo *ritrarsi* dell'oggetto d'amore, come *sottrazione* al rinnovarsi del contatto, paradossalmente si dia per il soggetto una possibilità (per quanto dolorosa e instabile) di coesistenza di arte e vita nelle forze di identificazione e separazione che la morte consente e impone. [...] La poesia, quindi, diventa un'invocazione alla presenza che, proprio in quanto parola invocante, istituisce e rinnova l'assenza. Tuttavia, se non può più giungere all'oggetto, tale invocazione modifica profondamente il soggetto'. Giusti, *Canzonieri in morte*, pp. 20, 40.

‘[P]rendi il sonnifero’ (line 12) are her last words, and probably just some ‘nugae | anche minori’ (lines 10-11), things of very little importance that must have crossed her mind. In an interview of 1968 and only published in 1990, Montale reveals the origins of the poem:

Il suo [della poesia] punto di partenza è questo: mi sono chiesto spesso che cosa dirò in punto di morte. Goethe disse: Luce, luce. Io che cosa dirò? Che cosa pensa la gente quando muore? Forse pensa a cose insignificanti, bazzecole, bagatelle, argomenti di nessun interesse che, dimenticati nella memoria, in quel momento vengono in mente. Che cosa ha pensato, morendo, mia moglie? Forse si è ricordata di un mese che passammo a Strasburgo. Io facevo un servizio giornalistico sul Consiglio d’Europa. Era il 1949 [in realtà il 1950, *NdR*]. Stavamo all’hôtel Maison Rouge. La sera telefonavo il pezzo al giornale, e poi tornavo in albergo e trovavo mia moglie che stava parlando con il barman, il quale le dava qualche piccola lezione di lingua basca. Andavamo poi a pranzo e c’era con noi Ruggero Orlando, ma c’era anche un signore [...] il quale parlava sempre dei suoi dispiaceri coniugali. Pare che avesse sposato una turca, che fosse stato più volte tradito, e parlandone arrossiva. Quel signore si aggregava sempre a noi, e quando arrivava il conto si distraeva in modo da non pagare. Ecco, forse alla mia povera moglie sono tornate in mente cose di questo genere. In realtà lei disse una cosa che nella poesia si legge all’ultimo verso. Una cosa molto gentile, molto cara. Si vede che lei sapeva di andarsene, e pensava che questo fatto mi avrebbe sconvolto. Ora credo che la poesia possa essere letta senza ulteriori spiegazioni.²⁴⁶

As it clearly emerges from Montale’s words, what one hears in ‘Il grillo di Strasburgo notturno col suo trapano...’ is Montale’s ‘ticchettio della telescrivente’ (*Xenia* I.8, 5, p. 296). It is not his ‘povera moglie’ at the core of the poem, but actually a question that always intrigued the poet himself, a question that now Mosca’s death makes it possible to explore and find an answer to. This is what leads the poet-Orpheus to look back to Mosca-Eurydice. The question is only on the surface of what Mosca thought in the last moments of her life, the real question is ‘che cosa dirò in punto di morte. Goethe disse: Luce, luce. *Io* che cosa

²⁴⁶ Eugenio Montale, ‘A vent’anni sapevo soltanto ciò che non volevo’, in *SM II*, pp. 1679-1685 (1679-80).

dirò?’ (emphasis added). Even before being about Mosca specifically, the question for Montale is ‘[c]he cosa pensa la gente quando muore?’. What the reader hears in the poem is not Mosca’s voice, Mosca’s last voiced words, but the poet’s hammering writing on the telex: ‘Il grillo di Strasburgo’ (line 1), the Maison Rouge (line 3), the barman (line 3), ‘Ruggero zoppicante’ (line 4), and ‘Striggio d’incerta patria’ (line 5), are all the poet’s words. Mosca is voiceless, Mosca is absent, Mosca is essence, Mosca does not have ‘labbra’ any longer (*Xenia* I.2, 10, p. 290). The female poetic beloved, as it is often the case in lyric poetry, hence becomes a pretext for the development and articulation of the male poet-creator’s text (and self). It is through the monologue, or dialogue *in absentia*, that the poet-creator establishes with the female *other* that a process of elaboration of his own self becomes possible.

It is in the ‘mille cianfrusaglie’ (*Xenia* II.14, 9, p. 318) that her presence emerges. Those ‘carabattole’ (‘I nascondigli’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 9, p. 436) might change their location, might often risk ending in the bin, but are still there, ready to recall Mosca back to life: ‘Mutano alloggio, entrano | nei buchi più nascosti, ad ogni ora | hanno rischiato il secchio della spazzatura’ (‘I nascondigli’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 9-11, p. 436). They are more present than the ‘pipa’ (line 3), the ‘cagnuccio | di legno’ (lines 3-4), more than the ‘tappo di bottiglia | che colpì la sua fronte in un lontano | cotillon di capodanno a Sils Maria’ (lines 6-8), more than the ‘Gubelin automatico’ bought in Lucerna (line 16), and maybe only equal to those ‘tre o quattro occhiali’ (line 5) that from time to time are still found around the house. The most memorable of these objects is the famous ‘infilascarpe’ (*Xenia* II.3, 1, p. 307), nothing more, to the eyes of strangers, than a ‘pezzaccio di latta’ (*Xenia* II.3, 9, p. 307). The beloved object, just as the other

‘carabattole’ presented to us in ‘I nascondigli’ (‘I nascondigli’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 9, p. 436) risked ending up in the bin during one of the many visits to the Danieli, the well-known Venetian hotel on the canal: ‘L’abbiamo rimpianto a lungo l’infilascarpe, | il cornetto di latta arrugginito ch’era | sempre con noi.’ (*Xenia* II.3, 1-3, p. 307). The ‘infilascarpe’ (*Xenia* II.3, 1, p. 307) appears as the custodian of some of the most private memories about the life that the couple shared together. Although it remains a mere quotidian and simple object it assumes a powerful, evocative capacity to the point of stirring in its ex-owner a regret for having lost it. It is through the evocation of these objects as the ‘infilascarpe’ (*Xenia* II.3, 1, p. 307) that the poetic subject attempts to bring Mosca back to life, to make her climb up and leave the underworld behind her. Each attempt, however, is bound to fail: Mosca is without ‘labbra’ (*Xenia* I.2, 10, p. 290), she is now ‘non [...] più forma, ma essenza’ (*Xenia* I.14, 4, p. 302), she now belongs to Montale’s ‘care ombre’, and, more specifically, an Eurydice-Persephone shadow like her chthonian companions Esterina and Arletta.

To conclude, each *xenion* has at its centre the figure of Mosca; each *xenion* is the recollection of an episode, a moment through which the presence of Mosca is evoked. This happens through the recollection of moments belonging to her past, or through those objects that are still instilled with her presence, to the point that the reader eventually gains a clear sense of who Mosca used to be. However, the story the reader is told is not so much that of Mosca-Eurydice, but rather that of the male poet-creator-Orpheus. Although there is no sense of a heavy lament through these poems, what still reverberates in the reader’s ears after closing this ‘canzoniere in morte’ is a sense of profound mourning, and the *io*’s sorrow in the impossibility of recreating a dialogue with the dead beloved. In

the space of the two (or three) series of *Xenia*, the past becomes the only dimension in which the poetic subject can exist. There is no present for that irremediable absence of the female beloved, but only the absence of a present. The poetic subject is inevitably transformed by the loss of his *tu*. The death of Mosca allows Montale to be Orpheus, and he mourns her death. It is the performance of this mourning through the presentation of his memory-fragments of a life shared with the dead beloved, as well as the present life that suffers from her absence, that is at the centre of each poem of this ‘canzoniere in morte’, and not Mosca herself. Once again, Eurydice is powerless and her fate and the telling of her story are in the hands of someone else. Here lies the fundamental Eurydice-Persephonean nature of Mosca in *Xenia*, and *Satura* overall. Faraway, coming from underground, from even deeper than the ‘scala a chiocciola’ (‘La morte di Dio’, *Satura*, 5, p. 327), we hear Mosca’s irreverent laughter, which is not merely a joyful laughter, but a much darker one, ‘di chi ha veduto’ (‘Luci e colori’, *Satura*, 2, p. 415), a laughter of the regal wife of the Montalean underworld.

2.5 Conclusion

To conclude, the Eurydice-Persephone archetype of the absent, voiceless female beloved appears as the only medium to access that ‘beyond’, that ‘Niente’, with which the poetic subject seeks to be put into dialogue, and where she is condemned to disappear. From this standpoint the female figure is the pre-text for the poet(ic subject)’s text. The ‘text’, this *post mortem* narrative, finds its legitimisation in the absence of the female beloved. Moreover, the story the reader is told is not so much that of Mosca-Eurydice, but rather that of the male poet-creator-Orpheus. What we actually hear is the ‘ticchettio della telescrivente’ (*Xenia* I.8, 5), and not her voice. Here lies the fundamental Eurydice-Persephonean nature of Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca. The long-lasting Orphic tradition to which Cavarero refers to and that wants the loved woman to be a dead woman is then the only way for the male poet to engage with the ‘beyond’. Montale finds himself within this poetic tradition and, although he makes Mosca the most earthly female figure of his poetry, rendering it difficult to pin her down to pre-conceived categories, he is not able to overcome this lyric model that goes back to Petrarch, passes through Leopardi and continues in the twentieth-century. Montale’s female beloved’s absence is lamented by the poetic subject, but also appears – by following both myth and lyric tradition – fundamentally necessary.

Moreover, by highlighting the chthonic essence of Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca, it has emerged that the feminine in Montale violently departs from the kind of femininity that has been previously emphasised within Montalean criticism. From this standpoint, the traditional model of angelic/transcendent/salvific woman and its counterpart of the monstrous/earthly/erotic woman, as embodied, for instance, in Clizia and Volpe

respectively, appears limiting in so far as it does not account for the fundamental feral femininity that plays such a crucial role and that allows us to reach a more complete understanding of Montale's female figures. Esterina, Arletta, and Mosca do not belong to any of the traditional categories into which Montale's female figures have been enclosed so far. Furthermore, they have allowed us to step into the darker abyss of Montale's poetic (under)world, where the much more gloomy essence of the feminine as embodied by some of Montale's chthonic female figures resides, something no longer left unexplored. In doing so, these female 'ombre' have also enabled us to blur the traditional antithetical categories into which Montale's female figures have been enclosed, at times even erroneously. It is now worth looking in more detail at Montale's mourning for his lost object of love, and how the continuity between life and death becomes possible in Montale's poetic world.

CHAPTER 3

The Dialogue with the Dead: Elegy and ‘Demi-deuil’

3.1 Introduction

Having considered Montale’s ‘dialogo con l’assente’ as framed within the tradition of the absent-present female poetic beloved, whose absence is only at times the result of her being dead, I will now focus on a particular form of the dialogue *in absentia*: the dialogue with the dead. Montale’s ‘dialogo con i defunti’ occupies a central position in his poetry, and reaches its most intense elaborations in poems dedicated to the figures of the ‘fanciulla morta’ Arletta – on whom this chapter focuses – and the poetic subject’s mother and father, who will occupy the next chapter. The poetic genre, or mode, of the elegy and Derrida’s concept of ‘demi-deuil’ are, I will contend, the most productive lenses through which to look at Montale’s ‘dialogo con i morti’ and the contradictory nature of the poetic subject’s never-accomplished mourning. Moreover, memory will emerge as a key element in Montale’s poetic depiction of mourning, as well as in his eschatological vision of the ‘oltrevita’ and the process of de-materialisation that the ‘care ombre’ must undertake.²⁴⁷ In short, by focusing on the radical absence of the dead and how the poetic subject relates to grief and bereavement, this penultimate chapter will look at how, within Montale’s poetic world, the prospect

²⁴⁷ Like Éanna Ó Ceallacháin, I employ the term ‘oltrevita’ to refer in the broadest sense possible to Montale’s ‘beyond’, including the afterlife as well as other spiritual planes of existence beyond the visible and material world. The term often recurs in Montale’s poetry, including the poem ‘Vivere’ (*Quaderno di quattro anni*, pp. 578-579) and ‘Sono pronto ripeto, ma pronto a che?...’ (*Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, p. 462). Éanna Ó Ceallacháin, “‘Un lungo inhippo’: the “other” world in Montale’s later works’, in George Talbot and Doug Thompson, eds, *Montale: Words in Time* (Leicester: Troubador, 1998), pp. 139-156 (155).

of a continuity between life and death, between absence and presence, between the world of the ‘vivi’ and that of the ‘morti’, is made possible.

As Ramazani writes, in the opening to his *Poetry of Mourning*, some poets have long been regarded as elegists, while others have not.²⁴⁸ Within the Italian literary tradition, the names of Petrarch and Leopardi are unquestionably associated with the first category, whereas Montale, for whom both authors arguably represent the most profound literary influences, surprisingly belongs to the second group. This chapter implicitly aims at readdressing this view. In her essay on Leopardi, Tanello reminds us that saying ‘Leopardi’ and ‘elegy’ in the same sentence is stating the obvious:

When dealing with a poet for whom death, transience and loss, and the meditation on the consequent consolatory role of poetry, stand indeed at the absolute centre of poetic inspiration, the question of the accuracy, or the appropriateness of the term ‘elegy’ to define the poetry of the *Canti* may appear to be mildly superfluous.²⁴⁹

It is well known that Leopardi’s poetry represents a significant literary legacy for Montale, for whom death, loss, and their relation to poetry is also at the absolute centre of his work. However, criticism has referred to the elegy only sporadically in relation to Montale, and his close and complex relationship with this genre is still relatively unexplored. That only two poems by Montale bear the title of ‘Elegia’ does not account for the fact that a substantial number of them perform ‘lamentations’, and this represents a further affinity with Leopardi’s *Canti*.²⁵⁰ As this chapter will demonstrate, Montale’s elegiac poetry neither performs

²⁴⁸ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. x.

²⁴⁹ Tanello, ‘A Note on Elegy and Self-elegy in the *Canti*’, p. 8.

²⁵⁰ ‘Elegia’ (*Poesie disperse*, pp. 784-785) and ‘Elegia di Pico Farnese’ (*Le occasioni*, pp. 181-183).

compensatory mourning nor is it fully melancholic. Rather, it continues that ancient and complex interplay between the two modes of mourning and engages in an equally close and complex relationship with the genre of the elegy. It is worth noting that traditional views on elegy have depicted mourning as compensatory and the elegy as enacting the finite work of ‘healthy’ mourning. Well-known is Peter Sacks’ reading of the elegy as a compensatory form in which loving memories of the deceased are recalled until sorrow subsides. This view has been recently challenged by Ramazani who has argued that although canonical elegies had depicted mourning as compensatory, modern elegies, in contrast, reject this normative ‘work of mourning’ and enact an anti-compensatory ethics of mourning, which, following Freud, he sees as ‘unresolved, violent, and ambivalent’.²⁵¹ Drawing on the work of Derrida, Ramazani, and Nencioni, I will analyse this complexity within Montale’s poetry.

3.1.i Elegy

In broad terms, the elegy articulates a discourse of mourning and therefore is a poem of lamentation, often for the dead.²⁵² Among the oldest and most complex of poetic genres, the elegy has evolved through the centuries up until the twentieth century. Moreover, it is possible to identify a pronounced centrality of the genre

²⁵¹ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, pp. 3-4. Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy. Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 1-18.

²⁵² For a succinct explanation of the term ‘elegy’ see the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The literature on the poetic genre of the elegy is exceptionally vast. Among the most recent authoritative studies, see *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. by Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

for the development of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century lyric. As Ramazani points out, ‘God may have died, but the dead have turned to gods for many modern poets. Always a favourite muse, death has outstripped most rivals by the time that Stevens declares it “the mother of beauty”’.²⁵³ Ramazani’s words make us pause for a moment on the term ‘modern elegy’, which bears an apparent oxymoron: both modern poetry and the elegy have more than once been regarded as opposing.²⁵⁴ The traditional standpoint that advocates for modern poetry’s neglecting of inherited forms, including the elegy, is the result of the widespread misconception that all twentieth-century poets discarded both mourning and genre. On the contrary, it is possible to trace an opposite tendency that sees twentieth-century poets prolonging the ancient literary dialogue with the dead by renegotiating the possibilities as well as the limits of the poetic genre of the elegy. I share Ramazani’s view that modern poetry and the elegy should rather be seen, although not without tension, as in an inextricable state of co-existence; hence, the appropriateness of the term ‘modern elegy’.

In order to fully understand the ‘psycho-poetic’ nature of modern elegy, it is necessary to look at how the genre relates not simply to poetic, but also to archaic social codes and practices of mourning. With the term ‘psycho-poetic’, I therefore aim to highlight those aspects of the elegy that refers to both poetic mourning practices as well as to how mourning functions in psychological terms,

²⁵³ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 1.

²⁵⁴ ‘The apparently oxymoronic term “modern elegy” suggests both the negation of received codes (“modern”) and their perpetuation (“elegy”) - a synthesis of modernity and inheritance’ that is especially fruitful for poets like Montale. Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, pp. 1-2.

arguing that the two elements are intimately related to each other in the elegy.²⁵⁵

The classical elegy originates from the funerary oration where the mourners, who were originally mainly women, performed the rite for the dead. This discourse of mourning gradually became a well-developed lyric mode whose ultimate aim was to reach consolation and redress. It is a discourse of mourning through which private grief is made public, something that allows the individual mourner to go beyond his or her individual mourning, and therefore also beyond his or her own individuality. The state of transcendence in which the elegy's social function lies is something that remains traceable throughout the elegy's long life, from the Roman love elegy to the Romantic ode and to the modern elegy.

What emerges is a fundamental anthropological function that distinguishes the elegy. The address to a vanished *tu* is one of the most diffused models within lyric discourse, but how did this come to be the case? The particular form of dialogue *in absentia* is today confined to only rare situations in our socially accepted code of conduct. As already introduced at the beginning of the thesis, this is the result of the increasing marginalisation of death from everyday life in twentieth-century Europe, something that contrasts greatly with the role that death once had. This interdiction of death, as Ariès explains, makes mourning an even more challenging experience to undergo.²⁵⁶ From this viewpoint, poetry acquires the fundamental role of reconnecting us with death and experiencing it in all its disruptiveness.

Regardless of how profoundly the numerous violent deaths taking place in the twentieth century as a result of acts of indiscriminate violence gave the

²⁵⁵ I borrow the term 'psycho-poetic' from Ramazani as he employs it in his *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 10.

²⁵⁶ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, p. 92.

impression of an over-exposure to death, death has, without doubt, ‘lost its prominent place which custom had granted it over the millennia’, and mourning, ‘no longer a necessary period imposed by society, [...] has become a *morbid state* which must be treated, shortened, erased’.²⁵⁷ As a result, the contemporary subject lacks the (emotional) abilities to record and process his or her losses. From this standpoint, poetry acquires two fundamental functions: by displaying private grief publicly, it reaffirms the centrality of human emotions relating to loss, and in doing so it acquires the responsibility of passing on traumatic knowledge by framing it and allowing it to be recorded.²⁵⁸

As Nencioni explains in his influential essay ‘Antropologia poetica?’, before developing into a poetic genre, the address to a lost person, which he argues to be at the core of lyric poetry, was a common archaic rite that only entered the world of poetry at a later stage.²⁵⁹ It is from this standpoint that Nencioni sees lyric poetry as reactivating important anthropological structures. Poetry arises from life itself and cannot be seen as merely fiction. Enrico Testa further expands this view, while commenting on Nencioni’s essay:

Nel tempo in cui i morti sono costretti ad abolire la loro esistenza e ‘sono respinti fuori della circolazione simbolica del gruppo’ e in cui viene quotidianamente perpetrata ‘l’uccisione della comunicazione fra il morente e il sopravvissuto’, il discorso della poesia riattiva strutture antropologiche (destinandole a funzioni diverse da quelle primarie ed offrendone una versione ormai priva dell’originaria finalità pragmatica), che significano pur sempre – anche se sul piano simulativo proprio della scrittura letteraria – un recupero della comunicazione: nel ‘cono d’ombra che la letteratura porta con sé’ si scorge così una sorta di ‘reliquia secolarizzata’, una mimesi, catafratta

²⁵⁷ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, p. 100.

²⁵⁸ This view is also supported by Tanello in ‘A Note on Elegy and Self-elegy in Leopardi’s *Canti*’.

²⁵⁹ Giovanni Nencioni, ‘Antropologia poetica?’, *Strumenti critici* 19 (1972), 243-258; now in *Tra grammatica e retorica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), pp. 161-175 (174).

e distorta, dei riti della relazione morti-vivi, della loro funzione in uno spazio di rapporto costante.²⁶⁰

Moreover, poetry, according to Nencioni, not only presents us with the anthropological structures that life offers us, but also with the ones rejected by a normative society that attempts to regulate the experience of mourning by the ‘norma comune’.²⁶¹ As a result, poetry is what allows us to reconnect and dialogue with our dead, something that modern everyday life does not always make possible.

From a very similar standpoint, another pioneer in the study of English elegy, Peter Sacks, argues that, ‘many elegiac conventions [...] should be recognized as being not only aesthetically interesting forms but also the literary versions of specific social and psychological practices’.²⁶² It is therefore not just through a structural relation between loss and figuration that elegy relates to the experience of loss and the search, whether achievable or not, of consolation, but through what Tanello calls a ‘performative’ relation.²⁶³ Furthermore, in his recent, groundbreaking *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler identifies a similar need in both criticism and pedagogy to look at lyric poetry as an event and to focus on the ritualistic elements inherent to it.²⁶⁴ To Culler, lyric is a ritual event, and not a work of ‘fiction’. Similarly to Nencioni, Culler argues that lyric poetry addresses our world rather than projecting a fictional one: poetry attempts to ‘be an event

²⁶⁰ Enrico Testa, *Per interposta persona: lingua e poesia nel secondo Novecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1999), p. 46.

²⁶¹ Nencioni, ‘Antropologia poetica?’, p. 172.

²⁶² Sacks, *The English Elegy. Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, p. 2.

²⁶³ Tanello, ‘A Note on Elegy and Self-elegy in Leopardi’s *Canti*’, p. 10.

²⁶⁴ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 125.

rather than a description of an event'.²⁶⁵ Through repeated readings, readers contribute to this sense of lyric as an event that makes realist statements rather than fictional representations of an utterance or the projection of a fictional world. It is here that the lyric poem's 'functioning in the world' resides.²⁶⁶ 'Lyric enunciation [is not] the fictional imitation of an ordinary speech act but [...] a linguistic event of another type'²⁶⁷, one closer to the ritualistic event or re-performance event. Performance is what the Greeks called *epideixis*, a 'discourse conceived as an act, aiming to persuade, to move, to innovate', and here, according to Culler, lies 'the distinctiveness of lyric'. In short, although it may contain fictional elements, '[p]oetry is not fiction', and this view has significant consequences when looking at elegy and discourses of mourning in lyric poetry.²⁶⁸

By placing the dialogue with the dead at its centre, poetry fulfilled an important social function that gradually resulted in the formation of an occasional, non-fictional performative space. Socio-historical factors such as the industrialisation of warfare, the tragic increase of mass death, the gradual weakening of the funeral rituals, the confinement of the dying in hospitals, and the tabooing of death, all contributed to make poetry one of the preferred cultural spaces for mourning the dead. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century it is possible to perceive a simultaneous

²⁶⁵ As stated in his final lecture of the School of Criticism and Theory's public lecture series at Cornell University, Linda B. Glaser, 'Poetics should take priority, Culler asserts in SCT lecture', *Cornell Chronicle*, 30 July 2012 <<http://news.cornell.edu/stories/2012/07/poetics-should-take-priority-culler-says>> [accessed 20 September 2016].

²⁶⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 131.

²⁶⁷ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 109.

²⁶⁸ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 108.

decline in the mourning rituals of Western cultures and, in broad terms, the disappearance of death from everyday life, together with a reinvigorated poetic of mourning.²⁶⁹ Freud commented on these changes of attitude towards death before the outbreak of the Great War by arguing that ‘we showed an unmistakable tendency to put death on one side, to eliminate it from life. We tried to hush it up’.²⁷⁰ The traditional psychological necessities of mourning from which its archaic codes had developed gradually became incompatible with the increased pace of modern life in Western society. From this standpoint, poets were seen as transgressing the social order by dwelling on the ‘regressive anarchy of grief’, rather than following the social code of conduct that would ‘pathologize and expel the bereaved.’²⁷¹ In this way, as Ramazani argues by referring to Adorno’s statement regarding modern art in general, the work of elegists could be said to be a ‘social antithesis of society’, resisting the normative discipline of grief through concepts of progress and other related ideas.²⁷² The First World War brought back, at first, the ‘death-consciousness’, but to this temporary increased awareness of death, in a kind of boomerang effect, an even stronger tendency towards the ‘dying of death’ returned. This resulted in the increasing resemblance of a proper denial of death. Throughout the twentieth century the escalation of the privatisation of grief was the result of changes in the mortuary practices across

²⁶⁹ Ramazani refers to an apparent contradiction ‘between the death-denial in ‘practical life’ and the death-obsession in literature’; ‘[d]eath was reviving in literature and the arts at the same time that death was dying in other social practices’. Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, pp. 12, 11.

²⁷⁰ Similarly, Joseph Jacobs writes in his ‘The Dying of Death’: ‘[p]erhaps the most distinctive note of the modern spirit is the practical disappearance of the thought of death as an influence directly bearing upon practical life [...]. The fear of death is being replaced by the joy of life. [...] Death is disappearing from our thoughts.’ Joseph Jacobs, ‘The Dying of Death’, *The Fortnightly Review* 66 (1899), 264-269 (p. 264).

²⁷¹ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 13.

²⁷² Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 14.

Western culture (for example, the spreading of cremation as a reflection of the more secular and private-orientated attitude towards the dead). The rhetoric of funeral directing characterised by concealing the dead by way of putting on make-up and formal outfits, among other things, is contrasted with the language of modern elegy that undresses the dead from this camouflage and resists the objectification of grief as something to be isolated and cured. On the contrary, elegists expose grief in great detail and in all its complex and ambivalent nature.

To society's attempts at disciplining death and bereavement, the poet, by contrast, opens up to the disruptive forces of both death and mourning. This inevitably distances modern elegy from more traditional elegies such as those by Shelley and Keats, where elegiac conventions tended to conceal the specificity of the individual mourning poetic subject as well as the mourned. Now, in response to the social codification of mourning that prescribed impersonalisation as well as a control of its social practices, poets oppose a much more private representation of mourning that focuses on articulating 'their intimate and contradictory feelings towards the dead, who became in turn ever more distinctive because of their complex portrayal'.²⁷³ These words could be easily applied to all the absent-dead figures hunting Montale's poetry: from Arletta to Mosca, from the figure of the mother to that of the father.

From this perspective, the recent and increasingly widespread hypothesis of an anthropological understanding of lyric poetry as fulfilling a strong social function is persuasive, and also encourages us to adopt a critical approach that can reflect this specific standpoint. Ramazani offers a helpful methodology in the context of modern elegy and modern narratives of mourning: integrating genre

²⁷³ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 18.

theory with psychoanalysis. This appears as appropriate in so far as genre theory assists in understanding the elegy as a literary construct, but given that the elegy is a mimesis of mourning and its social practices, Ramazani argues that it is in psychoanalysis that one finds a helpful framework to look at the poems that belong to a discourse of mourning.²⁷⁴ I share Ramazani's view of the usefulness of combining genre theory with an analysis of narratives of mourning in non-fictional contexts, but I would like to extend his proposed approach to include views on mourning that do not strictly belong to psychoanalysis, but appear to be more akin to the kind of mourning that some authors, including Montale, presents us, namely Derrida's notion of 'demi-deuil'. From this standpoint I will look at Montale's 'dialogo con i morti', integrating genre theories about elegy and Derrida's deconstructive philosophical thought on mourning, which engages with psychoanalytic views on mourning (for example his criticism of Freud's binary view on mourning), but is not limited to them.

3.1.ii Mourning and Melancholia

Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' is inevitably the starting point for any discussion about mourning as it influenced almost all subsequent approaches to grief, theoretical and therapeutic. In his essay Freud presents a strict binary

²⁷⁴ 'For interpreting the modern elegy, the combination of generic and psychoanalytic paradigms holds a number of advantages. Ideally, these paradigms should not only complement but also correct each other, genre criticism restraining the psychoanalytic tendency to reduce all elegiac artifice to emotion, pathology, or biography, and psychoanalysis restraining the generic tendency to reduce all elegiac feeling to trope, code, or convention. Put more positively, genre criticism honors the aesthetic specificity of the elegy, while psychoanalysis recognizes its bearing on life'. Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 23.

distinction between ‘healthy’ and ‘successful’ mourning as opposed to ‘unhealthy’ static melancholia. Freud refers to ‘normal’ mourning ‘when the work of mourning is completed [and] the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’.²⁷⁵ This has been at times applied literally in the clinical field of psychoanalysis: it has been adopted as the one and only healthy and successful typology of mourning where the individual in a mechanical step-by-step therapeutic process recovers and is freed from grief, and loss gives place to redress. To be fair to Freud, however, his view was subsequently developed and later writings tended to emphasise how the gap of loss is actually never fully filled and the mourners are bound to remain inconsolable, but these remain marginal arguments that do not overturn his earlier and still influential binary view on mourning and melancholia that marks his legacy on this topic.²⁷⁶ Elegy criticism, and more broadly writing about death and mourning, still remain today within the rigid boundaries of Freud’s binary view on mourning, as opposed to melancholia as presented in his essay. This means that there are critics that privilege mourning (Sacks, for example), others that privilege melancholia (Ramazani), and others that in trying to resist the ‘fictive’ nature of such binaries, attempt to reconcile this opposition on some in-between ground and end up claiming the impossibility of ever being *beyond* mourning (Derrida).

²⁷⁵ Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, pp. 245, 249.

²⁷⁶ See especially Freud’s response to Binswanger’s mourning: ‘Although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually, this is how it should be, it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish’. Sigmund Freud, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. by Tania and James Stern (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1960), p. 386). For discussion of this letter and Freud’s indications elsewhere that mourning is endless, see Siggins, ‘Mourning’, 17, and George Pollock, ‘Mourning and Adaptation’, *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 42 (1961), 341-361 (p. 353).

Sacks' previously mentioned observations on elegy have influenced a whole generation of critics and his study still offers a valid support to any account of elegy. However, his attention excludes a considerable amount of elegies that do not fully fulfill the consolatory and compensatory effects he refers to. For that we have to turn to Ramazani who argues that a collapse of the traditional compensatory nature of the elegy takes place in the majority of modern poetry. Ramazani's definition of the elegy transcends traditional views of the genre – such as Sacks' – and is more inclusive: it embraces poems such as self-elegies, war poems, the blues, epochal elegies, and mock-elegies. Essential for the pages that are to follow, is the distinction between the traditional 'compensatory elegy' and the 'melancholic elegy', which perform 'healthy' mourning and 'unhealthy' melancholia respectively. In short, melancholic elegy is the productive failure of the normative consolatory machinery of conventional elegy. The modern elegist tends 'not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss'.²⁷⁷ Therefore, the discourse of mourning that belongs to modern elegists – which partly includes Montale – does not tend to present the normative and teleological trajectory of 'healthy' consolatory mourning, but rather of melancholic mourning. Ramazani's own definition of 'melancholic' mourning is not to be regarded in a rigid dialectical opposition to Freud's 'normal mourning', as Freud's original definition of 'melancholia'. According to Freud, in the process of melancholic mourning the 'mourners review memories of the deceased in a process of relinquishment. [This] illuminates the severe self-criticism in melancholia, attributing it to an inner division between two parts of the ego (or, in the later topography, 'ego' and

²⁷⁷ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. xi.

‘superego’) – one part narcissistically identified with the lost object and the other part attacking this encrypted object.²⁷⁸ As Freud himself points out, however, melancholia and mourning share a few significant features, such as ‘ambivalence’ and ‘self-reproaches’, and ‘profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity’.²⁷⁹ From this standpoint Ramazani’s use of the term ‘melancholic mourning’ is not placed in dialectical opposition to ‘normal mourning’, but is rather conceived ‘as a term for the kind of ambivalent and protracted grief often encountered in the modern elegy.’²⁸⁰ In short, melancholic mourning almost fully discards the orthodox consolatory machinery of the elegy, leaving grief and bereavement in a state of suspension where they are not redeemed but remembered, re-visited, and re-lived, often without any resolution, but rather as open wounds. Although close, this is not a faithful framework through which to look at Montalean mourning. This is because Ramazani’s melancholic mourning, regardless of the importance it places on how it is not in absolute binary opposition to Freud’s mourning, ultimately remains chained to this binary opposition, especially when compared to Derrida’s concept of ‘demi-deuil’. Derrida’s ‘demi-deuil’ escapes this dialectical opposition and is the most helpful view on mourning with which to look at Montale’s narratives of mourning, which oscillates between forgetfulness and remembrance in a way that eludes both mourning and melancholia.

²⁷⁸ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 29.

²⁷⁹ Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 244.

²⁸⁰ Eminent psychoanalysts following Freud support similar modifications of Freud’s views on mourning as dialectally opposed to melancholia. Karl Abraham, for instance, reveals how mourning contains strong emotions of ambivalence and introjection, both elements that for Freud belonged to melancholia alone. Karl Abraham, ‘A Short Study of the Development of the Libido, Viewed in the Light of Mental Disorders’ (1924), in *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham*, trans. by Douglas Bryan and Alix Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1968), p. 420, 435-342.

3.1.iii Derrida's 'demi-deuil'

Derrida consistently criticised Freud's conceptualisation of mourning as presented in 'Mourning and Melancholia', particularly for being fundamentally unethical, in so far as it involves forgetting and replacing the lost person. Instead of embracing the concept of 'melancholia', Derrida proposes his own model of mourning: 'demi-deuil' (literally 'mid-mourning' or 'semi-mourning'). Derrida's 'demi-deuil' challenges Freud's binary model in its perpetuating of the mourner's relationship to the lost love object by way of an intermittent oscillation between remembrance and forgetfulness. This contradictory fluctuation between remembrance and forgetfulness is at the core of Montale's mourning: the poetic subject's scattered memories of the lost love object are bound to unexpectedly and suddenly resurface to then inevitably vanish again. 'Demi-deuil' is a helpful concept to understand the oscillation between mourning and bereavement, on the one hand, and forgetfulness and replacement of the lost object, on the other. In the rest of this chapter I aim to show how it is not appropriate to understand Montalean mourning within a Freudian narrative of the forgetting and replacement of the lost object of love. Rather, Montalean mourning seeks to remain faithful to it by sustaining a melancholic attachment to his lost beloved, just as Derrida's 'demi-deuil' involves.

Derrida argues that the traditional definitions of what is labelled as 'successful' and 'normal' mourning are too inflexible. Freud's 'work of mourning' involves what for Derrida is ethically unacceptable: complete forgetfulness. Instead, Derrida urges the following of a more ethical trajectory of an endless melancholic attachment to the lost love object: '[a] certain melancholy must still protest against normal mourning. This melancholy must never resign

itself to idealizing introjection. [...] Forgetting begins there. Melancholy is therefore *necessary*.²⁸¹ Contrary to ‘le deuil normal’ [normal mourning], this melancholy to which Derrida refers is ‘interminable. Inconsolable. Irreconcilable. Right up until death’.²⁸² Derrida’s ‘demi-deuil’ allows the experiencing of a state of in-betweenness in all its instability and vulnerability; an experience between the two antithetical states of mourning and melancholia. It is in this way that resolution is never fully reached, but rather one finds a frustration of the teleological nature of psychoanalytic accounts that share Freud’s antithetical view of mourning, which rejects incomplete mourning as unsuccessful and melancholic.²⁸³

Most importantly, Derrida ponders on what it means to be ethical and faithful towards the dead:

Is fidelity mourning? It is also the contrary: the faithful one is someone who is in mourning. Mourning is an interiorization of the dead other, but it is also the contrary. Hence the impossibility of completing one’s mourning and even the will not to mourn are also forms of fidelity. If to mourn and not to mourn are two forms of fidelity and two forms of infidelity, the only thing remaining – and this is where I speak of semi-mourning – is an experience between the two. I cannot complete my mourning for everything I lose, because I want to keep it, because by mourning, I keep it inside me.²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Derrida, ‘Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem’, trans. by Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski, in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 135–63 (160).

²⁸² Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. and trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 143.

²⁸³ Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, p. 97.

²⁸⁴ Derrida, “‘Dialanguages’”, in *Points ... Interviews, 1974–1994*, pp. 151–2.

Similarly to Derrida, Roland Barthes in his *Journal de deuil*, opposes the normative-teleological Freudian ‘work of mourning’, raising the possibility of transforming grief without suppressing it:

Not to suppress mourning (suffering) (the stupid notion that time will do away with such a thing) but to change it, transform it, to shift it from a static stage (stasis, obstruction, recurrences of the same thing) to a fluid state.²⁸⁵

This fluid state to which Barthes refers echoes the essence of Derridean ‘demi-deuil’ where one finds a similar fluid form of ‘work’ in so far as it is the ‘impossible mourning that nonetheless remains at work, endlessly hollowing out the depths of our memories’.²⁸⁶

Julian Barnes in his *Levels of Life* eloquently contemplates the ‘final tormenting, unanswerable question: what is “success” in mourning? Does it lie in remembering or in forgetting? A staying still or a moving on? Or some combination of both?’.²⁸⁷ These are also the questions that move throughout Montale’s *poetry of mourning*. Derrida’s ‘demi-deuil’ appears to be the most similar theoretical elaboration of mourning to Montale’s, and helps to understand how a ‘half-mourning’ that intermittently fluctuates between remembrance and forgetfulness can be the only possible and faithful answer.

²⁸⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, ed. by Nathalie Léger and trans. by Richard Howard (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011), p. 142.

²⁸⁶ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, pp. 94-5.

²⁸⁷ Julian Barnes, *Levels of Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), p. 116.

3.1.iv Mimetic Mourning

A widely spread preoccupation is shared among poets and theorists of both elegy and mourning: how the specificity of the individual mourned is threatened by the generic language of elegy and mourning. The uniqueness of both the lost love object and the individual experience of mourning are inevitably fused together with myth, poetic tradition and the related inherited narratives of mourning. I have already delineated how the figure of the ‘sommersa’ Arletta embodies the Eurydice-Persephone archetype in the preceding chapter. From this standpoint, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as the myth of Persephone, represent an inherited language of mourning that the Montalean poetic subject adopts in order to chant his own irreducibly personal experience of mourning. This paradoxical relationship between personal and generic is something that also concerned Derrida, according to whom this is one of the most surprising aspects of mourning, given the radically personal experience it stands for: ‘the discourse of mourning is more threatened than others, though it should be less, by the generality of the genre’.²⁸⁸

The Montalean poetic subject presents this problematic issue of reconciling the uniqueness and originality of his individual loss with the available generic language at his disposal. Arletta, for instance, is ‘una statua viva | da [lui] scolpita’ (‘Annetta’, *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 17-18, pp. 501-502). It was she who ‘balz[ò] | su un plinto traballante di dizionari’ (line 18), and who was then ‘modella[ta] con non [si] s[a] quale aggeggio’ by the poetic subject (‘Annetta’, *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 18, 21, pp. 501-502). Similarly to Derrida, Barthes is also concerned with the difficulty of reconciling the two poles of originality and

²⁸⁸ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 95.

universality. Yet, as Jennifer Rushworth argues in her *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, Barthes' desire to 'respect originality' and to offer a faithful homage to the uniqueness of one's loss can only be conceived, paradoxically, as he himself admits, in Proustian terms, therefore making use of an inherited and generic language.²⁸⁹ The expression 'respect originality' is borrowed from Proust's narrator in the *Recherche*, where he agonises over the difficulties in respecting the uniqueness of his mourning and the personal loss of his grandmother: 'I was anxious not to suffer only, but to respect the originality of my suffering'.²⁹⁰ For Proust as well, this desire is frustrated by the common use of language: 'we try to reduce the scale of our suffering by bringing it into our everyday conversation between ordering a suit and choosing the menu for dinner.'²⁹¹ Something similar can be found in Montale, whose language of mourning is placed within a complex intertextual relation between the mythical Eurydice-Persephone archetype and poetic tradition (Leopardi and Petrarch *in primis*), whose narratives of mourning are a constant presence in both the funereal 'ciclo arlettiano'.

Both Derrida and Barthes reject literature precisely on this basis: it is irremediably inadequate to the specificity of their losses and it ends up merely aestheticising them. On this Derrida writes:

Me who, among other remorse and with respect to my mother, feel really guilty for publishing her end, in exhibiting her last breaths and, still worse, for purposes that some might judge to be literary, at risk of

²⁸⁹ Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, p. 115.

²⁹⁰ Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. by John Sturrock, in *In Search of Lost Time*, ed. by Christopher Prendergast (London: Allen Lane, 2002) p. 161.

²⁹¹ Proust, *The Fugitive*, trans. by Carol Clark and Peter Collier, in *In Search of Lost Time*, p. 430.

adding a dubious exercise to the 'writer and his mother' series, subseries, 'the mother's death'.²⁹²

Similarly to Barthes' inevitable recourse to Proust, Derrida makes recurrent use of Augustine's narrative of the death of his mother in his *Confessions*, something that once again presents a paradox that undermines the resistance in making one's unique loss of his mother 'a Figure'.²⁹³ Montale's inevitable use of generalised language and the aestheticisation of the event of the beloved's death is evident in 'Annetta' (*Diario del '71 e del '72*, pp. 501-502) through reference to the myth of Apollo and Daphne. Arletta, as already mentioned, is here presented as a 'statua viva' to be modeled by the poetic subject with some unknown 'aggeggio' ('Annetta', *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 21, pp. 501-502). Thus, instead of being silent about the uniqueness of one's individual loss in front of the impossibility to resist generalised language, Montale turns myth and the poetic genre of the elegy into channels to express his personal experience of grief within a shared language of mourning.²⁹⁴

The concept of 'shared singularity' that has been used to refer to Derrida's own writing about his losses sheds further light on this process. On this, Christina Howells states that in 'each of his various texts on mourning Derrida employs an intense and even uncanny form of intertextuality, where direct citation is

²⁹² Derrida, 'Circumfession', in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 3-315 (36-37).

²⁹³ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 75.

²⁹⁴ Similarly, with regard to Dante and Petrarch, Rushworth argues that the book of Lamentations is 'a vehicle for intense personal experience, couched in a shared language of mourning'. Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning and Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, p. 122.

interwoven within his own, intimate, elegiac writing'.²⁹⁵ In this paradoxical and destabilising 'shared singularity', 'private' and 'public' are intertwined in unsettling and challenging ways. While writing on the death of his friend Roland Barthes, Derrida acknowledges the impossibility of creating a completely unique language of mourning as well as the only apparent good alternative is remaining silent:

Two infidelities, an impossible choice: on the one hand, not to say anything that comes back to oneself, to one's own voice, to remain silent, or at the very least to let oneself be accompanied or preceded in counterpoint by the friend's voice. [...] [B]ut this excess of fidelity would end up saying and exchanging nothing. It returns to death. It points to death, sending death back to death. On the other hand, by avoiding all quotation, all identification, all rapprochement even, so that what is addressed to or spoken of Roland Barthes truly comes from the other, from the living friend, one risks making him disappear again, as if one could add more death to death and thus indecently pluralize it. We are left then with having to do and not do both at once, with having to correct one infidelity by the other.²⁹⁶

To the question 'Che cos'è la poesia?' Derrida answers that poetry is 'an imparted secret, at once public and private, *absolutely* one and the other, absolved from within and from without, neither one nor the other'.²⁹⁷ The two poles are irreconcilable and always an intermittent mixture: '[o]ne never writes either in one's own language or in a foreign language', where the former is a personal and unique language, and where the latter is the shared, public and inherited one.²⁹⁸ In

²⁹⁵ Christina Howells, *Mortal Subjects: Passions of the Soul in Late Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 192.

²⁹⁶ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 45.

²⁹⁷ Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', in *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*, pp. 288-299 (289).

²⁹⁸ Derrida, 'Living On/Border Lines', trans. by James Hulbert, in *Parages*, ed. by John P. Leavey and trans. by Tom Conley, James Hulbert, John P. Leavey, and Avital Ronell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 103-191 (127), quotation from the 'Journal de bord/Border Lines' section. See also Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, pp. 124-125.

the same way, Montale's 'dialogo con i defunti' displays a destabilising and challenging oscillation between personal and universal that should not be seen as solely unethical, but rather as an ethical form of survival not only with regards to the limits of language, and poetry in particular, but to death and loss. After all, to Montale the 'parola' can only be 'qualche cosa che approssima ma non tocca' ('Domande senza risposta', *Quaderno di quattro anni*, 20, 21, p. 577).

This perspective allows us to add one further consideration to Montale's writing on the absence of his various female interlocutors. Montale himself has often oscillated between looking at his female *tu* as a generalised poetic *other* and an individual figure: a 'shared individuality' should be recognised in Arletta, as well as Esterina, Mosca, Laura, Clizia, among others. For this reason, then, perhaps Montale initially published a very limited number of copies of *Xenia* in an out-of-commerce edition with a print run of only fifty copies. The oscillation, as we shall see in the next section, between the names of Annetta and Arletta, could be read from this standpoint: Annetta stands for the uniqueness and irreplaceable deceased, and Arletta belongs to the shared mimetic language of mourning between myth and poetic tradition. I will now proceed with individual close readings of Montale's poetry of mourning in order to address how his mourning eludes a static position of either traditional finite mourning or pathological melancholia, but rather echoes Derrida's 'demi-deuil' in all its contradictory and anti-normative nature, and in its endless oscillation between remembrance and forgetfulness. It is in this instability and fluidity that a more productive way of looking at Montale's narrative of mourning can be found.

3.2 Arletta

The poems that belong to the cycle of Arletta provide an insight into the nature of mourning in Montale's poetry and how this relates to poetic form, specifically to the genre or mode of the elegy, an aspect that this chapter considers. The unstable and fragile nature of the relationship sustained with the lost object of love, as between Montale's poetic subject and Arletta, echoes the nature of the connection that the mourner attempts to maintain with the deceased in Derrida's 'demi-deuil'. 'La casa dei doganieri' (*Le occasioni*, p. 167), one of Montale's most celebrated poems, is a key text from which to start examining this.

3.2.i 'La casa dei doganieri'

Tu non ricordi la casa dei doganieri
sul rialzo a strapiombo sulla scogliera:
desolata t'attende dalla sera
in cui v'entrò lo sciame dei tuoi pensieri
e vi sostò irrequieto.

Libeccio sferza da anni le vecchie mura
e il suono del tuo riso non è più lieto:
la bussola va impazzita all'avventura
e il calcolo dei dadi più non torna.
Tu non ricordi; altro tempo frastorna
la tua memoria; un filo s'addipana.

Ne tengo ancora un capo; ma s'allontana
la casa e in cima al tetto la banderuola
affumicata gira senza pietà.
Ne tengo un capo; ma tu resti sola

né qui respiri nell'oscurità.

Oh l'orizzonte in fuga, dove s'accende
rara la luce della petroliera!

Il varco è qui? (Ripullula il frangente
ancora sulla balza che scoscende...).

Tu non ricordi la casa di questa
mia sera. Ed io non so chi va e chi resta.

(‘La casa dei doganieri’, *Le occasioni*, p. 167)

In including this poem in a study of Montale’s ‘dialogo con i morti’, a short explanation is first needed. Critics are still divided on whether to consider the female poetic beloved at the centre of this poem as alive or dead.²⁹⁹ Regardless of Montale’s declarations to identify the female figure with that ‘[fanciulla] morta molto giovane’ (now known as Annetta-Arletta), de Rogatis, for instance, argues that lines 7 and 10 suggest that on a literal level the female beloved is not dead. It is important to not disregard, however, what has been mentioned in the previous chapter: Montale constructs the figure of Arletta between myth and poetic tradition – a model that links the Eurydice-Persephone archetype with other ‘fanciulle morte’, and Leopardi’s *Silvia in primis*. There is, unsurprisingly, a strong and undisguised intertextual relation that Montale establishes in ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) with Leopardi’s ‘A Silvia’. Leopardi’s celebrated poem is one of the most well known elegies dedicated to the young girl who could not see ‘il fior degli anni [suoi]’.³⁰⁰ This encourages the identification of Montale’s female beloved, whose ‘riso non è piu lieto’ (‘La casa dei doganieri’,

²⁹⁹ Tiziana de Rogatis’ notes and comments on ‘La casa dei doganieri’ in Montale, *Le occasioni*, pp. 180-184 (180).

³⁰⁰ ‘Tu pria che l’erbe inaridisse il verno, | da chiuso morbo combattuta e vinta, | perivi, o tenerella. E non vedevi | il fior degli anni tuoi’ (lines 40-43). Leopardi, ‘A Silvia’.

Le occasioni, 1, p. 167), as dead and this poem as an elegy lamenting her irrevocable absence. Moreover, as I will soon discuss, in this text Montale engages and re-works the genre of the elegy, which further supports the hypothesis that the female beloved is not simply absent, but deceased. Although, to some extent, every departure or lost love can be assimilated on a metaphorical level to death, it would be difficult to reconcile the view that Montale's elegy performs a work of mourning for a living person. The analysis that follows therefore begins with the assumption that in 'La casa dei doganieri' (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) Arletta already belongs to Montale's 'care ombre'.

I would now like to start by focusing on two typical conventions of the elegy: first, the classical movement from grief to consolation, and second, the traditional use of repetitions and refrains. While the latter of these two norms is observed in 'La casa dei doganieri' (*Le occasioni*, p. 167), something I will focus on in the last part of this analysis, the former, as already anticipated, is not. It is worth beginning this close reading of 'La casa dei doganieri' (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) by simply looking at what role consolation plays in the first two opening lines of the poem: 'Tu non ricordi la casa dei doganieri | sul rialzo a strapiombo sulla scogliera' (lines 1-2). The 'casa dei doganieri', already highlighted in the title of the poem, introduces, through its original function of 'dogana', the central element of the poem: the 'confine' – the border between remembrance and forgetfulness, between presence and absence. The position of the house itself: the 'rupe' (as it will be referred to in a later poem ('Ancora ad Annecy', *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 9, p. 496) further underlines this liminal position and role of the customs men's house.

Montale's poetic subject, from as early as *Ossi di seppia* to the later *Diario del '71 e del '72*, keeps expressing one main ardent wish towards his *tu*, whether still alive or already belonging to his 'care ombre': that he or, more often, she, will be able to find the 'varco'. In finding this salvific channel one also finds the possibility of *infinitarsi* and thus being able to '[passare] al di là del tempo' and '[salpare] per l'eterno' ('Casa sul mare', *Ossi di seppia*, 22, 21, 37, pp. 93-94).³⁰¹ This, as I will argue in the next chapter, is also the fear that hunts Montale's father in 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259): the inescapability of forgetfulness. In other poems, including 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), one generally finds the dead fearing that the living will forget them, something that in Montale's eschatological vision is not desirable because, in so far as the dead is alive in the living's memories, he or she is still partly present, but when forgetfulness (which appears to be inevitable) takes place, the dead will fully dissolve into nothingness. In 'La casa dei doganieri' (*Le occasioni*, p. 167), however, the repeated *incipit* 'Tu non ricordi' (lines 1, 10, 21) points out that it is not only the *io*, but the female beloved herself who does not remember. In the second stanza the image of the string that connects the two is associated with a 'filo-ricordo', that while earlier was held by both and so kept alive their connection, now 's'addipana' (line 11): it rolls up on itself. Forgetfulness thus undermines the connection that the poetic subject is clearly seeking to keep alive.

³⁰¹ Montale's invented verb 'infinitarsi' is a Dantism. Dante employs the similar verb 'eternarsi': 'm'insegnavate come l'uom s'eterna' (*Inferno*, XV, 85). As Pietro Cataldi and Floriana d'Amey argue, there are also other similar cases, among which is Dante's use of 'indiarsi' and 'infuturarsi'. Montale, *Ossi di seppia*, ed. by Pietro Cataldi and Floriana d'Amely (Milan: Mondadori: 2003), p. 233.

In Montale the inescapability of forgetfulness³⁰² is closely related to the inexorable and pitiless passing of time, something that undermines remembrance and, in this poem, is embodied in the image of the ‘banderuola affumicata [che] gira senza pietà’ (lines 13-14) on the house of the customs men’s rooftop. The deteriorating passing of time that makes everything dissolve into nothingness is clearly not desired in ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167): the poetic subject does not wish to forget Arletta, but rather mourns how forgetfulness undermines that fragile string that connects them together. Moments of remembrance seem to coincide with moments of presence of the lost beloved, as through memory her presence can be evoked. Forgetfulness, however, undermines these rare moments of presence and is therefore bound to lead to the mourned person’s absence, which is as a second death. In this oscillation between presence and absence, Arletta is like a living dead: she is treated neither as one would speak of someone who is alive nor as someone who is fully dead, but rather as both at once. The fact that the dead and living do not appear very different to each other is one of the elements that breaks the barrier between life and death in Montale’s poetic world, and that consequently allows a bridge to be created between absence and presence, something that will emerge more clearly in the analysis of ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259) in the next chapter.

By repeating that Arletta does not remember, the poetic subject seems to position himself in contrast to this state of forgetfulness. Thus, what one reads is ‘Ne tengo ancora un capo’ (line 12): the *io* still holds his side of this memory

³⁰² This is something on which Montale reflects in other poems included in *Le occasioni*, such as ‘Eastbourne’, where the well-known image of the ‘ruota [che] non s’arresta’ becomes its embodiment (‘Eastbourne’, *Le occasioni*, 38, p. 176-177).

string, he still remembers. But then, as is typical of the contradictory oscillation between remembrance and forgetfulness of ‘demi-deuil’, the poetic subject tells us that the ‘casa’ is fading away (line 13), which on a literal level is the result of the evening that is advancing and therefore the house becomes less visible because of the darkness: ‘s’allontana | la casa’ (lines 12-13) and similarly later on ‘Oh l’orizzonte in fuga’ (line 17). Clearly, however, this also refers to the progressive fading away of the memory of the ‘casa dei doganieri’, the location of this *incontro* between the *io* and Arletta.

This oscillation and intermittent movement between remembrance and forgetfulness is also captured by two images found in the concluding lines: the one of the wave, ‘ripullula il frangente ancora sulla balza che scoscende’ (line 20), and the one of the intermittent light of the ‘petroliera’ (line 18). Moreover, this light is ‘rara’ (line 18), but still sometimes lights up. Rare and unpredictable also are Arletta’s ‘apparizioni’, the resurfacing of the memory of Arletta, as we shall soon discover in a later poem entitled ‘Annetta’: ‘Le tue apparizioni furono per molti anni rare e imprevedute’ (‘Annetta’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 5, pp. 501-502). Similarly, in an earlier poem belonging to Montale’s fourth poetic collection, the *io* wonders why ‘può scattar fuori una memoria | così insabbiata’, the memory of Arletta (‘Il lago di Annecy’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 6-7, p. 448).

Lastly, Arletta’s aforementioned movements of *su/giù* are then not only, as I have argued in the previous chapter, her *anabasis/katabasis* from Montale’s underworld, but also a disappearance and resurfacing in the poetic subject’s memory: an unpredictable movement of presence and absence from the *io*’s memory. Her being remembered brings her up from the well, but when the poetic subject comes closer to those ‘evanescenti labbri’ that arise from death, the

remembrance of the 'sommersa' Arletta descends and disappears once again ('Cigola la carrucola del pozzo,...', 5, p. 47). Similarly, in 'Incontro' one reads: 'Poi più nulla. Oh sommersa!: tu dispari | qual sei venuta e nulla so di te' (*Ossi di seppia*, 'Incontro', 46-47, pp. 98-99). This 'nulla so di te' (line 47) can be read as a signal that complete forgetfulness took place. The 'cifra arlettiano-funebre del *sommergere/sommersa*' is thus embedded in a narrative of mourning where the lines of her being suddenly buried must be read within Montale's discourses of mourning, in which the fear of the inescapability of forgetfulness represents a threat to the mourner-mourned relationship that must be sustained after the loss of the love object. Montale does not encourage or look forward to achieving the normative finitude of a Freudian-like model of classical mourning as traditional elegy generally accomplishes, and where total forgetfulness and replacement of the deceased take place, but he does not present a static position in a melancholic state of endless and constant melancholia towards the lost object of love either. Montalean 'fluid' mourning swings back and forth between these two poles, just as Derrida's 'demi-deuil' does. As we shall soon discover, this is even more visible when looking at the 'ciclo di Arletta' considered in its fullness, where it is possible to notice a movement of continual subversion and contradiction regarding the end of the poetic subject's mourning for Arletta. Sometimes forgetfulness seems to have taken over, but then Arletta's 'apparizioni [...] rare e impreviste' ('Annetta', *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 5, pp. 501-502), her memories resurface, her smiling face from the well re-emerges to then dissolve again as soon as the poetic subject gets closer to it. Montale's narrative of mourning is, then, clearly intermittent but, nevertheless, unending, just as Derrida's 'demi-deuil'.

Interestingly, Rushworth's reading of the relationship between Proust's narrator and Albertine in the *Recherche* sheds light on the relation between Montale's poetic subject and Arletta.³⁰³ Rushworth points out the intermittent and paradoxical coexistence of absence-distance and presence-closeness between Proust's protagonist and Albertine – with whom Arletta not only shares a few letters of her vocal body (i.e. *Albertine*; *Arletta*):

[Proust's protagonist] re-experiences the terrible absence of Albertine when the 'couvercle' [lid] or 'portes de la prison' [gates of the prison] are momentarily opened, through the action of involuntary memory. Albertine is both inside the protagonist, but distant from him, invisible, and resistant to his appropriating memory. Proust's protagonist's unconscious melancholic fidelity means that Albertine remains both living and, as she was in life, inaccessible and unknowable.³⁰⁴

Similarly, no resolution is achieved by the poetic subject on this issue and, surely, no consolation is reached. This emerges clearly in the concluding two lines: 'Tu non ricordi la casa di questa | mia sera. Ed io non so chi va e chi resta' (lines 21-22). The poetic subject reasserts once more the beloved's inability to remember this meaningful place in which for him their encounter could still be evoked, and he is therefore left without even knowing who goes and who stays. An important aspect of the inescapability of forgetfulness in Montale's poetics of mourning is that the mourned is shown to be the one who has forgotten: it is Arletta that does not remember. This should be seen within the contradictory nature of the relationship between the mourner and mourned as thought to be in the unstable and fluid state of Derridean 'demi-deuil', where the one guilty of infidelity is

³⁰³ See in particular Chapter 3, 'Proust's *Recherche*, Derridean "demi-deuil", and Mimetic Mourning'. Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, pp. 91-126.

³⁰⁴ Rushworth, *Discourse of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, pp. 99-100.

Arletta, and not the poetic subject. This is a fascinating as well as a painful twist that marks Montale's narrative of mourning in 'La casa dei doganieri' (*Le occasioni*, p. 167).

Arletta's death, together with the loss and bereavement that this death brings to the poetic subject, is not entirely an 'occasion of poetry' offered by the 'luce della petroliera' (line 18) that brings a greater knowledge to the poetic subject's 'animo diviso'. The gnomic concluding statement – 'Ed io non so chi va e chi resta' (line 21) – contains several layers of meaning. First, it stands for the question of who makes it through the 'via di fuga' ('La casa sul mare', *Le occasioni*, 28, pp. 93-94) that the 'varco' represents and who does not; this brings forth a second concept: the question of who is really dead and who is fully alive, who is freed from the constraints of this world, and who is still bound to 'le coincidenze, le prenotazioni, le trappole, gli scorni' (*Xenia* II.5, 5-6, p. 309). This implicitly reinstates Montale's concept of the 'vita-in-morte' and the 'morti-vivi' as opposed to the ones who are dead and paradoxically more alive than the living ones. The statement also stands for the already mentioned possibility of being forgotten – the only possibility to survive death – and hence not even living in the 'vivi's memories and thus starting the process of de-materialisation.³⁰⁵ Finally, and most importantly, it also stands for the impossibility of knowing whose absence can still be evoked in the mourner's life and whose cannot, as forgetfulness is presented as something uncontrollable: 'l'orizzonte in fuga' (line 17) and the house of the customs men that drifts apart ('s'allontana', line 12) are outside the poetic subject's control. The poetic subject 'resta' (line 22): once more

³⁰⁵ As mentioned in Chapter 2, the 'processo di smaterializzazione' is the one that the dead undertake in 'Zona II', one of the zones in Montale's underworld as he presents it to us in the short story 'Sul limite'. Montale, 'Sul limite'.

he predictably stays 'a terra' ('Falsetto', *Ossi di seppia*, 51, pp. 14-15) in a dimension of existential constraint where the unstoppable pass of time marks his life with all its pitilessness and violence: 'Ripullula il frangente ancora sulla balza che scoscende...' (lines 19-20). Just as in Derrida's 'demi-deuil', by making the poetic subject visit those 'vecchie mura' (line 6), beaten for years by the violent libeccio's blows, the modern elegist Montale presents a work of mourning that does not free the subject from grief and bereavement, but rather sustains it. This is a work of mourning that does not heal but rather keeps intermittently reopening the wounds of loss in an attempt not to forget, and thus not to unethically replace the lost love object.

The way Montale's mourning relates to poetic form and the way he negotiates elegy's traditional elements can be seen in his employment of a key convention of the genre: the use of repetitions and refrains. In *The English Elegy*, Sacks argues that '[r]epetition creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death. Time itself is thereby structured to appear as a familiar, filled-in medium rather than as an open-ended source of possible catastrophe'.³⁰⁶ Repetition, moreover, as Sacks continues, is:

one of the psychological responses to trauma. The psyche repeats the shocking event, much as the elegy recounts and reiterates the fact of death [...]. By such repetitions, the mind seeks retroactively to create the kind of protective barrier that, had it been present at the actual event, might have prevented or softened the disruptive shock that initially caused the trauma.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Sacks, *The English Elegy. Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, p. 23.

³⁰⁷ Sacks, *The English Elegy. Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, p. 23.

At the same time, however, repetition is also a way of controlling grief: ‘the repetition of words and refrains and the creation of a certain rhythm of lament have the effect of controlling the expression of grief while also keeping that expression in motion. It is as if the grief might be gradually conjured forth and exorcised. This returns us to the idea of ceremony, and to the idea that repetition may itself be used to create the ‘sense of ceremony’. This last note by Sacks is relevant in so far as it highlights the already-mentioned relationship between elegy’s conventions and the original role that the use of repetition and refrain had in archaic funerary rites.³⁰⁸

What emerges from Sacks’ observations on the conventional use of refrains and repetitions is that Montale does not work within the traditional consolatory machinery of the elegy, but, still, employs some of its main conventions, such as the use of repetitions and refrains, and this can be read as an indication of his attempt to still achieve some degree of consolation. However, as I will now discuss, the repetitions in ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) seem to painfully re-enact and re-open the wound created by Arletta’s death, rather than exorcise grief. This view does not exclude the other and should be seen in a contradictory state of co-existence with Montale’s attempt to respond to grief in a normative and consolatory way, in tune with the contradictory nature of ‘demi-deuil’ itself.

There are two refrains in ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167): ‘Tu non ricordi’ (a) and ‘Ne tengo ancora un capo’ (b). These should be seen

³⁰⁸ ‘Certainly, by confessing its repetitive nature at large, the elegy takes comfort from its self-insertion into a longstanding convention of grief. And by repeating the form of the vegetation rites, for example, an individual elegy may borrow the ritual *context* of consolation’. Sacks, *The English Elegy. Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, p. 23.

together in a supposed dialogue where *b* stands as a stoic answer to *a* forming the following scheme: *a-a-b-b-a*. To the last *a* it is no longer possible to answer with *b* but only a hopeless deduction can follow at this point: ‘Ed io non so chi va e chi resta’ (line 22). Inevitably one must make reference here to Leopardi’s ‘A Silvia’ refrain on which Montale constructs his poem:

Silvia, rimembri ancora
 quel tempo della tua vita mortale,
 quando beltà splendea
 negli occhi tuoi ridenti e fuggitivi,
 e tu, lieta e pensosa, il limitare
 di gioventù salivi?³⁰⁹

However, while Leopardi formulates, in the form of a question, whether Silvia can remember this time of their encounter, Montale presents it as a definite statement: ‘Tu non ricordi la casa dei doganieri | sul rialzo a strapiombo sulla scogliera’ (lines 1-2).

Equally significant to Montale’s relationship with the elegy in this poem is his use of repetition of the phonemes /r/ and /t/ and /k/. This should be seen in line with Montale’s already-mentioned consistent and obsessive textual strategy of disseminating Arletta’s vocal body, following the textual strategy of removing Arletta’s forename (of which the most evident instance is ‘Incontro’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 98-99)). In the sub-stratum of the text the strident and feral sound /r/ (that belongs but is not limited to Arletta’s ‘decapitated head’ /AR/)³¹⁰ and the equally discordant and sharp sound of the phonemes /t/ and /k/, evoke from the

³⁰⁹ Leopardi, ‘A Silvia’ (lines 1-6).

³¹⁰ As already mentioned in Chapter 2, it is Lonardi who suggests reading a ‘decapitation’ of Arletta as latently present in this dissemination of Arletta’s ‘head’. Lonardi, ‘Mito e “Melos”’, p. 148.

lower parts of the poem the bereavement narrated on the ‘upper’ parts of the text. Below is the poem with the phonemes highlighted in italics where the phoneme /r/ returns for a total of 35 times, while the phoneme /t/ is repeated 33 times, and the phoneme /k/ is counted 21 times.

Tu non *ricordi* la *casa* dei *doganieri*
sul *rialzo* a *strapiombo* sulla *scogliera*:
desolata *t’attende* dalla *sera*
in cui v’*entrò* lo sciame dei *tuo*i *pensieri*
e vi *sostò* *irrequieto*.

Libeccio *sferza* da anni le *vecchie* *mura*
e il suono del *tuo* *riso* non è più *lieto*:
la *bussola* va *impazzita* all’*avventura*
e il *calcolo* dei *dadi* più non *torna*.
Tu non *ricordi*; *altro* *tempo* *frastorna*
la *tua* *memoria*; un *filo* s’*addipana*.

Ne *tengo* ancora un *capo*; ma s’*allontana*
la *casa* e in cima al *tetto* la *banderuola*
affumicata *gira* senza *pietà*.
Ne *tengo* un *capo*; ma *tu* *resti* sola
né qui *respiri* nell’*oscurità*.

Oh l’*orizzonte* in *fuga*, dove s’*accende*
rara la *luce* della *petroliera*!
Il *varco* è qui? (*Ripullula* il *frangente*
ancora sulla *balza* *che* *scoscende*...).
Tu non *ricordi* la *casa* di *questa*
mia *sera*. Ed io non so *chi* va e *chi* *resta*.

Moreover, one notices that pronouns such as ‘tu’ (lines 1, 10, 15, 21), ‘ti’ (line 3), ‘tuo’ (line 7), ‘tua’ (line 11), ‘tuoi’ (line 4), and words that contains the pronouns

'tu' and 'te', are another way through which Montale constructs an important refrain to address the beloved female figure. Examples of this are 't'attende' (line 3), 'avventura' (8), 'tempo' (line 10), 'tengo' (lines 12, 15), 'orizzonte' (line 17), 'frangente' (line 19), 'tetto' (line 13), 'orizzonte' (line 17). As in the archaic rituals at the origins of the poetic genre of the elegy, this obsessive repetition-compulsion in the mourner's address aims to evoke the presence of the absent-mourned person. However, just as in Petrarch's already mentioned use of Laura's name in his *Canzoniere*, repetition does not bring back the lost love object, but rather succeeds in reaffirming her absence.

It is helpful to look at a similar case in Proust that sheds further light on Montale's use of repetition. As Rushworth explains, Proust's narrator also similarly repeats Albertine's name obsessively in the *Recherche* for an incredible total of 2,360 times. However, in both Petrarch and Proust, the use of repetition does not bring a presence, but confirms an irreversible absence, something that they share with Montale.

[Repetition] does [not] really substitute for their presence, but instead emphasizes their distance and absence. It is thus, a repetition of loss, or a refusal of loss that perpetuates and sustains the loss experienced. Through repetition, the name becomes an empty signifier, which is reduced to the sonorous fragments of which it is composed.³¹¹

Therefore to the initial attempt to conceal Arletta's presence by concealing her name – as if obeying the demands of the normative healthy-forgetful trajectory of mourning – there follows an unstoppable repetition-compulsion of disseminating her name-presence-vocal body throughout the cycle of Arletta. However, this attempt that exhibits all the instability and contradictory nature of Derridean

³¹¹ Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, p. 113.

‘demi-deuil’ does not evoke the desired presence of the loved one, but stands as a painful re-enactment of her death. Ultimately, the gap that separates the poetic subject and the irrevocably absent Arletta cannot be filled.

Still on a phonic level, another less easily identifiable sound resonates throughout the poem. It is an almost shamanic ritualistic sound that emerges from the lower sub-stratum of the poem. This is the sound of ‘lo sciame [...] | irrequieto’ (line 4), the sound of the libeccio (well-known for its violent and erratic blows, whose violence is highlighted in the verb ‘sferzare’, line 6), the sound no more ‘lieto’ of the beloved’s laughter of line 7 (again, just as for Mosca, this recalls a Medusa-like feral laughter), the *frastornare* of time (line 10), and the sound of the ‘frangente [che ripullula] | ancora sulla balza che scoscende’ (lines 19-20). All these violent images depict a collision: be it of the waves against the cliff or the frantic swarm. These sounds transcend language – as any lamentation or moan does – and easy classification in one individual phoneme. It is a discordant sound perfectly in tune with the sense of bereavement that moves through the poem and, most importantly, this is the sound of the irresolvable collision between Arletta’s presence, as evoked through poetry, and her irrevocable absence that will always ultimately prevail.

Another significant element emerges from the sub-stratum of this key poem. Prayer, and liturgical language more broadly, is a discourse that also makes extensive use of patterns, repetitions and refrains. Elegy could even be regarded as representing the pattern of prayers, be it religious or not. ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) essentially enacts a prayer. One can hear it when distancing oneself from the poem as Arletta’s shadow does: ‘Tu [...] resta’. The first word that opens the poem, ‘tu’ (line 1), and the word that marks its end,

'resta' (line 22), together give life to a request by the poetic subject to the dead beloved. Although she does not remember and although he does not know who stays and who goes, the creative force of the text performs a prayer asking whether she could stay, without vanishing as a result of the inexorable passing of time that will make even her shadow in his memory disappear irreversibly. Notice that the use of the imperative mood 'tu resta' as opposed to the use of the indicative 'tu resti' encourages this reading, as expected, as having no certainty from the poetic subject. Hence it is a request similar to a prayer, rather than an assertive statement by the poetic subject. This request, once again, aligns itself to a contradictory and unstable trajectory of 'demi-deuil' where the mourner rejects complete forgetfulness and, in the threat of its inescapability, seeks remembrance and attempts to sustain the relationship with the lost love object.

Before turning to another key text of Montale's elegiac 'canzoniere' to Arletta, it is important to notice one last element about 'La casa dei doganieri' (*Le occasioni*, p. 167). In this poem one finds oneself on a liminal border between absence and presence on an irreconcilable collision between a fleeting moment of contact and a renewed separation. This emerges also geographically at the level of the landscape, which is able to evoke the presence of the absent Arletta. This movement between absence and presence is something inherent in Montale's elegy: the poetic subject addresses an absent person not to renew her absence, but to find a point of contact through the evocation of the mourned person. Ultimately, however, the momentary presence of the mourned person vanishes and the mourner is again at the starting point where what is present is only the absence of the beloved. As previously mentioned, the title of the poem already introduces us to the issue at the core of the poem, namely: the coastguard's house.

The 'dogana' is also the 'varco' (line 19) seen as the limit-border between memory and forgetfulness, presence and absence, constraints and freedom. The 'casa dei doganieri | sul rialzo a strapiombo sulla scogliera' (lines 1-2) itself stands for a liminal place not only because it is positioned on a cliff at Monterosso, but also because its original function was to serve, in the past, as customs control of the maritime commercial traffic, where the role of the border is once again evoked. Similarly, the 'scogliera' (line 2), the 'sera' (3), the 'mura' (6), the 'frangente' (line 19) are all words and places on the edge between being and not-being as on a 'rialzo a strapiombo' (line 2) between one line and the other. Significantly, they are all at the end of a line and all stand for what the poem itself is trying to perform, which is to make Arletta remain present in all her irreversible and irrevocable absence a bit longer: 'Tu resta'.

3.2.ii 'Il lago di Annecy'

Non so perché il mio ricordo ti lega
al lago di Annecy
che visiterai qualche anno prima della tua morte.
Ma allora non ti ricordai, ero giovane
e mi credevo padrone della mia sorte.
Perché può scattar fuori una memoria
così insabbiata non lo so; tu stessa
m'hai certo seppellito e non l'hai saputo.
Ora risorgi viva e non ci sei. Potevo
chiedere allora del tuo pensionato,
vedere uscirne le fanciulle in fila,
trovare un tuo pensiero di quando eri
viva e non l'ho pensato. Ora ch'è inutile

mi basta la fotografia del lago.
(‘Il lago di Annecy’, *Diario del '71 e del '72*, p. 448)

After a long time, the memory of the poetic subject’s visit to the Lake of Annecy unexpectedly resurfaces and evokes the presence of Arletta: ‘Non so perché il mio ricordo ti lega | al lago di Annecy’ (lines 1-2). This sudden resurfacing of memory is perfectly in tune with the oscillatory nature of ‘demi-deuil’ and it is what surprises the *io* most, as he ponders over this contradictory nature of memory and how a ‘memoria | così insabbiata’ has the power to suddenly ‘scattar fuori’ (lines 6-7). Memory appears even more contradictory in this case, given that, contrary to the coastguard’s house that stands for a place where the *io* and *tu* had actually met in the past and therefore those ‘vecchie mura’ (‘La casa dei doganieri’, *Le occasioni*, 6, p. 167) are still able to evoke the female beloved’s presence, the Lake of Annecy does not. The poetic subject only visited the place a few years before her death. What troubles him is that during the visit, as opposed to now, he did not even think of her: ‘Ma allora non ti ricordai, ero giovane | e mi credevo padrone della mia sorte’ (lines 4-5). This makes the poetic subject even more surprised by the powerful link that somehow has been created between the lake and Arletta, to the point that now, even just a picture of this place is sufficient to conjure up her figure as though she were alive: ‘Ora ch’è inutile | mi basta la fotografia del lago’ (lines 13-14). The *io* appears certain that the female beloved did not think much of him either: ‘tu stessa | m’hai certo seppellito e non l’hai saputo’ (lines 8-9). Regardless of the distance that marked the relationship between the poetic subject and the female figure in the past when both were alive, now the gap that divides them cannot be overcome. Despite the remembrance that

Arletta is brought back to life, her absence remains final: ‘risorg[e] viva e non c[’è]’ (line 9).³¹²

Through remembrance Arletta’s presence is evoked in the form of a resurrection, but her absence remains irreversible. Concluding images of resurrection are among elegy’s primary conventions.³¹³ Elegy does not ‘merely [aim] to recognize the dead but also to bring them back to life. [...] Even when elegy’s rhetorical arts of resuscitation fail to console, as they often do, poetry is no less worthy, or less ethical for the endeavor.’³¹⁴ The image of Arletta’s resurrection is inseparable from the focus that is given to her absence – ‘e non ci sei’ (line 9) – as these words undermine the nature and value of her resurrection. In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva, whose position, broadly speaking, favours the state of melancholia, argues that writing constitutes, if not an antidepressant, at least a possibility to survive and to resurrect in the face of death.³¹⁵ Montale seems to partly reject the consolatory powers of poetry, and Arletta’s conventionally elegiac resurrection could be called, echoing the in-between state of Derridean ‘demi-deuil’, a ‘demi’-resurrection, oscillating between presence and absence. Consequently Arletta’s half-resurrection can only bring a partial consolation.

³¹² In ‘Il lago di Annecy’ (*Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, p. 448) Montale not only revisits a place from a distant past, the Lake of Annecy, but also his own poetry. He returns to another earlier poem: ‘L’orto’ from *La bufera e altro* (pp. 251-252), which also opens highlighting the state of not-knowing that the poetic subject presents in ‘Il lago di Annecy’: ‘Io non so, messaggera | che scendi, prediletta’ (‘Il lago di Annecy’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 1-2, p. 448). This intertextual relationship is interesting in so far as the female figure at the centre of the earlier poem is not Arletta, but rather Clizia, an element that supports the view that what Montale here revisits is not only the mourned Arletta, as the poem seen in its individuality might suggest, but also his poetry.

³¹³ Sacks, *The English Elegy. Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, p. 2.

³¹⁴ Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 7.

³¹⁵ According to Kristeva, ‘such a fiction, if it isn’t an antidepressant, is at least a survival, a resurrection.’ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 51.

The epilogue of the poem (between lines 9 and 14) supports this view. The poetic subject returns once more to what is presented as almost a betrayal: he did not even think of asking about her when she was alive, and now that it is pointless, as she is deceased, even just a postcard of the lake can bring back the memory of her. This oscillation between forgetfulness and remembrance is not, properly, the swinging between these two states as in Derrida's 'demi-deuil'. In Montale the *tu* is still alive in the moment of forgetfulness, but the poetic subject experiences it in the same unpredictable and destabilising way as 'demi-deuil' would involve. To notice the pairing of the adverbs 'allora' (line 4) and 'ora' (line 9) not only gives a symmetric structure to the poem, but also ratifies a double distance between the poetic subject and Arletta.³¹⁶ In short, it highlights the impossibility of a contact on both temporal levels: the past ('allora') where she was alive, but absent from the poetic subject's memories, and the present ('ora') where she is dead, but present in the *io*'s memory. The missed act of remembrance in the past when Arletta was still alive is presented with bitterness and almost a sense of infidelity towards the now deceased beloved. Once again, the element of fidelity towards the lost object of love as present in Derrida's discourses of mourning is also a key aspect of Montale's mourning, where the poetic subject constantly reflects on the level of fidelity, or lack of it, towards the lost beloved.

³¹⁶ Francesco De Rosa refers to 'una duplice distanza dell'io' from Arletta in his 'Riapparizioni di Clizia', in *La virtù del nome*, in *Quinto quaderno di filologia, lingua e letteratura italiana*, (Verona: Università di Verona, 1996), pp. 103-145 (140).

3.2.iii 'Ancora ad Annecy'

Quando introdussi un franco
nella fessura di una slot machine
raccolsi nelle mani un diluvio d'argento
perché la mangiasoldi s'era guastata.
Mi sentii incolpevole e il tesoro
fu tosto dilapidato da Cirillo e da me.
Allora non pensai al nobiliare ostello
che t'ha ospitata prima che la casa dei doganieri fosse sorta, quasi
come una rupe nel ricordo. Era una
storia più tua che mia e non l'ho mai saputa.
Bastò una manciatella di monete
a creare l'orribile afasia?
O si era forse un po' brilli? Non ho voluto mai chiederlo
a Cirillo.
('Ancora ad Annecy' , *Diario del '71 e del '72*, p. 496)

'Ancora ad Annecy' (*Diario del '71 e del '72*, p. 496) should be seen as complementary to 'Il lago di Annecy' (*Diario del '71 e del '72*, p. 448). Here, the poetic subject returns to revisit a place dear to him, the Lake of Annecy. The recurrence of the Lake of Annecy is an interesting operation given that repetition, as already mentioned, is one of the main traditional elements of elegy.³¹⁷ Revisiting Annecy becomes a way to protract Arletta's presence and make her stay longer through the act of remembering her, just as in the previous text, 'Il lago di Annecy' (*Diario del '71 e del '72*, p. 448). Moreover, the poem continues the same narrative of the earlier poem: the poetic subject's travel with his friend

³¹⁷ Similarly, Vittorio Sereni will later present a similar case with two poems from *Strumenti Umani*: 'Strada di Zenna' and its successor 'Ancora sulla strada di Zenna'. Vittorio Sereni, *Gli strumenti Umani*, in *Poesie*, ed. by Dante Isella, 4th edn (Milan: Mondadori, 2000). For an analysis of these texts see Francesca Southerden, *Landscapes of Desire in the Poetry of Vittorio Sereni* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 165-175.

Giansiro Ferrata, affectionately called, in the poem, by the name Cirillo (line 15). The *io* recalls now the moment in which the ‘slot machine’ (line 2), that ‘mangiasoldi [...] guastata’ (line 4), gave them ‘un diluvio d’argento’ (line 3). ‘Mi sentii incolpevole’ (line 5), states the poetic subject regarding this win, which was a result of the machine’s being faulty. Here, Montale represents again, just as in ‘Il lago di Annecy’ (*Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, p. 448), the oscillation between remorse and forgetfulness, on the one hand, and faithful remembrance, on the other. However, Montale inserts an intertextual reference to ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) where the one guilty of not remembering was not the *io* but the female *tu*: ‘prima che la casa | dei doganieri fosse sorta, quasi | come una rupe nel ricordo’ (lines 8-10). Just as Arletta is perceived as having betrayed the poetic subject in ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) by not remembering him, now the *io* confesses to having forgotten her during his visit, and wondering how such an ‘orribile afasia’ could be created:

Bastò una manciatella di monete
 a creare l’orribile afasia?
 O si era forse un po’ brilli? Non ho vouto mai chiederlo
 a Cirillo.
 (lines 12-15)

The betrayal thus consists in not remembering Arletta for just ‘una manciatella di monete’ (line 12) of the slot machine’s ‘diluvio d’argento’ (line 3). An echo of Judas’ betraying voice can be heard here: “‘Quanto mi volete dare perché io ve lo consegni?’”. E qui fissarono trenta monete d’argento’ (*Mt 26, 15*).³¹⁸

³¹⁸ Massimo Gezzi’s notes on ‘Ancora ad Annecy’ (*Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, p. 496) in Montale, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, ed. by Massimo Gezzi (Milan: Mondadori, 2010), pp. 317-319 (319).

The poetic subject's accusation of Arletta's inability to remember could be assimilated to elegy's classical convention of exposing moments of rage and resentment towards the mourned lost love object.³¹⁹ At the same time, however, this feeble anger for Arletta's betrayal is tinged with a strong sense of guilt that still marks the poetic subject and undermines, once again, the traditional elegiac narrative of mourning as well as elegy's conventions.

3.2.iv 'Annetta'

Perdona Annetta se dove tu sei
(non certo tra di noi, i sedicenti
vivi) poco ti giunge il mio ricordo.
Le tue apparizioni furono per molti anni
rare e imprevedute, non certo da te volute.
Anche i luoghi (la rupe dei doganieri,
la foce del Bisagno dove ti trasformasti in Dafne)
non avevano senso senza di te.
Di certo resta il gioco delle sciarade incatenate
o incastrate che fossero di cui eri maestra.
Erano veri spettacoli in miniatura.
Vi recitai la parte di Leonardo
(Bistolfi ahimè, non l'altro), mi truccai da leone
per ottenere il 'primo' e quanto al nardo
mi aspersi di profumi. Ma non bastò la barba
che mi aggiunsi proissa e alquanto sudicia.
Occorreva di più, una statua viva
da me scolpita. E fosti tu a balzare
su un plinto traballante di dizionari
miracolosa palpitante ed io

³¹⁹ Sacks, *The English Elegy. Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, p. 2.

a modellarti con non so quale aggeggio.

Fu il mio solo successo di teatrante
domestico. Ma so che tutti gli occhi
posavano su te. Tuo era il prodigio.

[...] Ora sto

a chiedermi che posto tu hai avuto
in quella mia stagione. Certo un senso
allora inesprimibile, più tardi
non l'oblio ma una punta che feriva
quasi a sangue. Ma allora eri già morta
e non ho mai saputo dove e come.
Oggi penso che tu sei stata un genio
di pura inesistenza, un'agnizione
reale perché assurda. Lo stupore
quando s'incarna è lampo che ti abbaglia
e si spegne. Durare potrebbe essere
l'effetto di una droga nel creato,
in un medium di cui non si ebbe mai
alcuna prova.

(‘Annetta’, *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 2-24, 34-48, pp. 501-502)

‘Annetta’ (*Diario del '71 e del '72*, pp. 501-502), which brings to an end the triptych dedicated to the ‘sommersa’ in the *Diario* is a particularly significant poem within the ‘canzoniere arlettiano’. What immediately strikes the reader is that the name of the deceased finally resurfaces from the substratum of the texts from which it was hidden up to now. From being consistently concealed, not only from ‘Incontro’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 98-99) (which was initially entitled ‘Arletta’³²⁰), but also poems that were not included in the final edition of the *Ossi*

³²⁰ See Rosanna Bettarini and Gianfranco Contini’s notes on ‘Incontro’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 98-99) in ‘Varianti e autocommenti’, in Montale, *L’opera in versi*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini and Gianfranco Contini (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), p. 890.

(for example, ‘Dolci anni che di lunghe rifrazioni...’, *Poesie disperse*, p. 812), whose title in two manuscripts was ‘Destino di Arletta’, she is now eventually called by name.³²¹

Her presence is evoked through memory, but through memory she can also be forgotten, potentially lost forever in the work of forgetful mourning. The poetic subject’s apologetic *incipit* should be read from this standpoint: ‘Perdona Annetta se dove tu sei [...] | poco ti giunge il mio ricordo’ (lines 1, 3). Just as in the preceding ‘Il lago di Annecy’ and ‘Ancora ad Annecy’ (*Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, pp. 448, 496), the poetic subject ruminates on his unethical forgetfulness of the deceased, and thus rejects the normal Freudian-like work of mourning. For many years Annetta-Arletta’s ‘apparizioni’ (line 4) were both ‘rare e impreviste’ (line 5). Matching Derridean ‘demi-deuil’³²¹’s classical oscillation between forgetful mourning and melancholia, the *io* highlights that moments of remembrance were present but only in small number, and, of course, they were unexpected. This recalls Mosca’s ‘visite mute’ and ‘inesplicabili’ in the already mentioned ‘Luci e colori’ (*Satura*, 3, p. 415). Moreover, Arletta is ‘pura inesistenza’ (line 42) and that original ‘senso | [...] inesprimibile’ (line 36-37) that she stood for, turned from an initial ‘oblio’ (line 38) into one sharp-edged absence: ‘più tardi | non l’oblio ma una punta che feriva | quasi a sangue’ (lines 37-39). The ‘punta che feriva’ (line 38) is ‘la punta amara del rimpianto, con un ricordo ancora

³²¹ As Zampa confirms in his ‘Note ai testi’: ‘Prima redazione manoscritta, senza data e con titolo *Destino di Arletta*, conservata da Luciano Rebay. [...] Trascrizione in pulito, con titolo *Destino di Arletta* e data “1926”, a tergo di una lettera ad Angelo Barile datata “Monterosso 9.IX.26”.’ Both letters and the facsimile are reprinted in *Letteratura*, 30 (1996), 79-81, 230-231, now in Silvio Ramat, ed, *Omaggio a Montale* (Milan: Mondadori, 1966), table 10. Zampa, ‘Note ai testi’, in Montale, *Tutte le poesie*, p. 1152.

leopardiano, da *Aspasia* (30-31)’: ‘lo stral, che poscia fitto | ululando portai’.³²² It is interesting to highlight the significance of the ‘quasi’ (line 39) which supports the affinity of Montale’s mourning the non-finite state of ‘demi-deuil’: it is a ‘punta’ that *almost* hurts with blood, but not completely. Melancholia has been often associated with an open wound, and it is therefore particularly relevant to notice how the wound produced by Arletta’s absence is ‘*quasi a sangue*’ (line 39, emphasis added) – not fully as an open wound that is bleeding, but still as a wound: a ‘demi’-wound.³²³

The movement between remembrance and forgetfulness is intermittent just as the ‘lampi’ (‘I pressepapers’, *Quaderno di quattro anni*, 8, p. 581), ‘fari’ (‘Se al più si oppone il meno il risultato...’, *Quaderno di quattro anni*, 7-8, p. 575) and ‘barlumi’ (‘Pareva facile giuoco...’, *Le occasioni*, 9, p. 111) that keep returning throughout Montale’s poetry: the ‘lampo che ti abbaglia | e si spenge’ (‘Annetta’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 44-45, pp. 501-502), the ‘petroliera’ (‘Oh l’orizzonte in fuga, dove s’accende | rara la luce della petroliera!’ in ‘La casa dei doganieri’, *Le occasioni*, 17-18, p. 167) or the ‘faro’ of ‘Quella del faro’ (*Quaderno di quattro anni*, p. 610) and of ‘Se al più si oppone il meno il risultato...’:

Anche il faro, lo vedi, è intermittente,
 forse è troppo costoso tenerlo sempre acceso.
 Perché ti meravigli se ti dico che tutte
 le capinere hanno breve suono e sorte
 (‘Se al più si oppone il meno il risultato...’, *Quaderno di quattro anni*,
 7-10, p. 575)

³²² Angelo Marchese’s notes and comments in Montale, *Poesie*, ed. by Angelo Marchese (Milan: Mondadori Scuola, 1991), p. 255.

³²³ On melancholia as an open wound, see, among others, Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, where he states: ‘melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies [...] from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished’. Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 253.

Not to mention the poem opening *Le occasioni*: ‘La vita che dà barlumi | è quella che sola tu scorgi’ (‘Pareva facile giuoco...’, *Le occasioni*, 9-10, p. 111). In short, unlike both the traditional forgetful mourning that belongs to the consolatory machinery of traditional elegy and static melancholic mourning, Montalean mourning is intermittent, but also endless and therefore an unresolvable mediation between the two antithetical poles of traditional discourses on both the mode of elegy and the work of mourning.

An analysis of the poetic subject’s mourning for Arletta cannot but benefit from taking into account a short story included in *Farfalla di Dinard* – ‘Sulla spiaggia’ – where the narrator-protagonist refers to the lost ‘Annalena o Annagilda o Annalia’ or maybe ‘Anactoria’, all names clearly resonating with both Annetta and Arletta.³²⁴ Here Montale provides us with a complementary reflection on the role of memory in relation to mourning when referring to the female figure’s sudden re-surfacing in his beloved’s memory – exactly what the poetic subject presents us in the Arletta’s cycle:

Ma qui non c’è da discutere: Anactoria o Annabella era stata del tutto soppressa dal mio pensiero per quattro cinque sei anni, ed ora è tornata perché ha ‘voluto’ tornare, è lei che mi fa grazia di sé, non sono io che mi degno di ridestarla andando dilettevolmente alla ricerca del tempo perduto. È lei l’amorevole, la degna intrusa che rivangando nel suo passato s’è imbattuta nella mia ombra ed ha voluto ristabilire nel senso migliore della parola una ‘corrispondenza’.³²⁵

As the story continues, the narrator-protagonist refers to the ‘scherzi della memoria’ which echo, among others, the ones portrayed in ‘Il lago di Annecy’ (*Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, p. 448) and that make the poetic subject wonder upon

³²⁴ Eugenio Montale, ‘Sulla spiaggia’, in *PR*, pp. 193-198 (193).

³²⁵ Montale, ‘Sulla spiaggia’, p. 195.

how 'può scattar fuori una memoria | così insabbiata non lo so' ('Il lago di Annecy', *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 6-7, p. 448):

A dire il vero sono avvilitissimo. Penso agli scherzi della memoria, al pozzo di San Patrizio del ricordo. Io mi credevo in credito verso di me e verso gli altri supponevo che infinite cose tramontate vivessero ancora in me, trovassero nel mio petto la loro ultima giustificazione: mi credevo ricco ed ero invece indecente. Qualcuno che avevo dimenticato m'ha colto di sorpresa; sono io che esisto ancora nella mente di Anactoria o di Annabella, io che sopravvivo in lei, no lei in me. Già; e come può un ricordo sparire fino a questo segno? Ero consapevole di custodire nello scrigno della memoria una follia di fantasmi possibili, virtuali che non evocavo per non ridestare ombre non sempre grate, ma che tuttavia affioravano talvolta alla superficie della coscienza e ne formavano in qualche modo la ricchezza. Reminiscenze così fatte, spore inesplose, castagnette a scoppio ritardato possono senza fatica spiegarsi, giustificarsi. Ma che dire del fatto che pullula 'ex abrupto' dalla nostra inerte materia grigia, che pensare del fenomeno di una scomparsa totale che a un tratto si rivela presenza?³²⁶

A 'scomparsa totale' – death – can unexpectedly reveal itself as a 'presenza' through memory. This leads the narrator-protagonist of 'Sulla spiaggia' to question the common understanding of the nature of memory that he had: '[i]o credevo insomma a dimenticanze relative e quasi volontarie, a un processo, come chiamarlo?, tayloristico della mente che mette in pensione quanto non può giovarle, pur conservando il bandolo e il filo di se stessa.'³²⁷ However, his memory for Anactoria or Annabella does not work within this 'work of mourning' traditionally perceived as beneficial for the mourner subject, where forgetfulness gradually takes over, but rather plays some 'scherzi'.

³²⁶ Montale, 'Sulla spiaggia', pp. 194-195.

³²⁷ Montale, 'Sulla spiaggia', p 195.

3.3 Conclusion

Looking at the most significant poems of Arletta's 'canzoniere in morte' has highlighted that there are two levels at which Montalean mourning functions. The first is at the level of the individual poem as seen in my reading of 'La casa dei doganieri' (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) and other poems belonging to the 'ciclo arlettiano'. Here an oscillation between presence and absence, forgetful mourning and melancholia makes impossible the consolation and redress of traditional elegiac mourning, instead following the anti-teleological trajectory of Derridean 'demi-deuil'. There is, nonetheless, a second level, as poems rarely exist in complete isolation, but rather in a complex web of intertextuality. For this reason, I argue that Montalean mourning for Arletta should be looked for within the cycle dedicated to the figure of the 'sommersa' as a whole. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the 'ciclo arlettiano' starts from the *Ossi* and passes through all of Montale's following poetic collections until 'Ah!' in *Altri versi* (p. 727). What is the trajectory from the *Ossi* to *Altri versi* and how does Montalean mourning for Arletta move throughout this 'canzoniere in morte'? Does it follow the same narrative as seen in individual poems above? I believe that the same intermittent movement traceable within the single poems, as discussed above, can also be traced within the 'canzoniere' as a whole. Here lies the complexity of Montale's narratives of mourning and of his 'canzoniere di Arletta'.

Therefore, the poetic subject resists what in Freudian terms is seen as the only possible successful mourning, but rather asserts the impossible replacement of his beloved 'cara ombra', his lost love object. His mourning is clearly

intermittent but, nevertheless, unending.³²⁸ An unpredictable fluctuation between forgetfulness and remembrance is the result of a Proustian-like ‘*mémoire involontaire*’ [involuntary memory] which can only destabilise any possible end to the work of mourning. What Roger Laporte argues with regards to Proust’s narrator in relation to Albertine, could helpfully be applied to Montale’s poetic subject with regards to Arletta:

For a few hours, a few days, the narrator will be inconsolable, then forgetting will carry out its work, the work of mourning – as we would now say – will be accomplished, indifference will reign once more, unless a new involuntary memory intervenes.³²⁹

Montalean mourning is an endless mourning that keeps resurfacing intermittently in a constant, unpredictable oscillation between forgetfulness and melancholic remembrance, between presence and absence. Unlike what Derrida names the ‘*deuil normal*’ [normal mourning], Montalean mourning for his ‘*care ombre*’, just as Derridean ‘*demi-deuil*’, is ‘*interminable. Inconsolable. Irreconcilable. Right up until death*’:³³⁰ it is, one could say, una ‘*punta che feri[sce] | quasi a sangue*’ (‘*Annetta*’, *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 38-39, pp. 501-502).

³²⁸ Rushworth notes that a similar intermittent shift is to be found in Proust’s narrator when mourning his lost Albertine. Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch and Proust*, p. 93.

³²⁹ Roger Laporte, *Marcel Proust: le narrateur et l'écrivain* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994), p. 37. Translation from French by Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch and Proust*, p. 95.

³³⁰ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 143.

CHAPTER 4

Shadows and the Afterlife: Montale's Poetic Eschatology

4.1 Introduction

As already observable in the cycle of poems dedicated to the shadow of Arletta, in Montale's poetry mourning and loss are closely related to the theme of memory. The poems centred around the figure of the 'fanciulla morta', as we have seen, tend to engage with the poetic subject's mourning for his lost beloved and problematise the traditional 'work of mourning' and its relation to the elegy. Other poems, dedicated to other 'care ombre', tend to present more explicitly the deceased's point of view and suffering, something that brings into focus the passage between life to death, the nature of the 'oltrevita', and how death and loss relate to memory from a more theoretical standpoint. All this leads to a divergent perspective on memory, which is no longer welcomed in its contradictory and oscillatory nature between the remembrance and forgetfulness of 'demi-deuil', but presented as something that chains the 'care ombre' to earthly life and which the dead themselves must abandon in order to complete the required process of dematerialisation. What emerges is that the notion of 'demi-deuil' is no longer helpful in so far as the dead's mourning for their lost earthly life and their loved ones differs significantly from the poetic subject's mourning for his lost beloved.

The 'care ombre' at the centre of these poems are either an indefinite group of dead, as in the poems 'I morti' (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 95-96) and 'L'Arca' (*La bufera e altro*, p. 208), or the parental figures of the mother and the father as in the poems 'A mia madre' and 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*,

pp. 211, 258-259). Both ‘A mia madre’ and ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’, on which this last section will focus on, provide the reader with a vision and a reflection on what the ‘oltrevita’ consists of, and are therefore helpful in gaining a better understanding of the nature of Montale’s eschatology, where memory lies at the absolute centre. In other words, mourning for the poetic subject’s family members leads to a different kind of discourse, which tends not to focus on the poetic subject’s bereavement, but rather on understanding what lies beyond the visible world and how the separation brought by death between the ‘care ombre’ and the living ones is affected by memory. Most importantly, both poems explore the fluid borderline between life and death, between the living and the dead, between absence and presence. As Rossella Riccobono clearly demonstrates, Montale’s poetry presents the possibility of a continuity between life and death.³³¹ Before Riccobono, Contini famously pointed out the poetic issue of the absolute ‘abolizione della barriera tra vita e morte’ concerning Montale’s third poetic collection, but which can be extended with reference to Montale’s *œuvre* overall, including *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, where one reads: ‘Non si è mai saputo se la vita | sia ciò che si vive o ciò che si muore’ (‘Opinioni’, *Diario del ’71 e del ’72*, 1-2, p. 505).³³²

³³¹ Rossella Riccobono, ‘Further Reflections on the Theme of Death in the Poetry of Eugenio Montale: “A mia madre”, “Voce giunta con le folaghe” and “I morti”’, in *Montale: Words in Time*, pp. 125-138.

³³² Gianfranco Contini, *Altri esercizi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), p. 154.

4.2 Montale's Ark and its 'perduti': 'I morti' and 'L'Arca'

Before focusing on 'A mia madre' and 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 211, 258-259), it is worth looking at two poems – 'I morti' (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 95-96) and 'L'Arca' (*La bufera e altro*, p. 208) – that introduce some key elements concerning Montale's eschatological vision, specifically the nature of the passage from presence to absence. 'I morti' (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 95-96), a poem written in 1926 and therefore only included in the second edition of the *Ossi*, is a text characterised by strong ambiguity: the dead and the living do not appear to be very different from each other. The Montalean motif of the 'morte-in-vita' (or the 'non-vita'), finds in this poem a complementary condition in the dead's tormenting existence of 'non-morte'. It is this ambiguity over the conditions of life and death that determines an 'intreccio inestricabile delle voci dei morti e del vivo che condivide con loro una condizione di morte'.³³³ The dead are imprisoned in a condition of 'larve rimorse dai ricordi umani' (line 31) as they did not yet meet 'il fantasma che [...] salva' ('Godi se il vento ch'entra nel pomario...', *Ossi di seppia*, 12, p. 7) and are therefore forced to live in a freezing and static, limbo-like existential dimension.³³⁴ As a consequence, the poetic subject's expectation that the dead could provide guidance and salvation for the living ones is frustrated. Moreover, being dead does not grant the possibility of finding the 'maglia rotta' ('Godi se il vento ch'entra nel pomario...', *Ossi di seppia*, 15, p. 7), but rather provides a mere condition of imprisonment in the 'rete' ('Godi se il vento ch'entra nel pomario...', *Ossi di seppia*, 15, p. 7), the one created by the 'fili che congiungono | un ramo all'altro' where 'si dibatte il cuore'

³³³ Arvigo, *Guida alla lettura di Montale. Ossi di seppia*, p. 213

³³⁴ This 'fantasma', however, will come to assist, as we will later see, the figure of the father in 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*Diario del '71 e del '72*, pp. 258-259).

(lines 22-23). These ‘fili’ are reminiscent of the ‘filo’ of ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, 11, p. 167) and should be read in the same way: it is the memory-string whose fundamental function is to connect the dead and the living. Contrary to ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167), however, where the prospect of the ‘filo [che] s’addipana’ (‘La casa dei doganieri’, *Le occasioni*, 11, p. 167) was feared, here, memory chains living and dead, and the ‘filo’ thus acquires a negative connotation rather than being a beneficial bearer of the connection that the poetic subject tried to maintain with the ‘sommersa’ Arletta.

The focus of these poems is thus on how the dead’s memory represents an obstacle and should therefore be abandoned, rather than on the nature of the living ones’ memory as in the poems dedicated to the ‘fanciulla morta’. While the poetic subject’s mourning resembles Derrida’s ‘demi-deuil’, the dead are presented as fundamentally melancholic subjects, where melancholy is negatively understood within the traditional framework of a Freudian-like ‘work of mourning’. Forgetfulness must overcome remembrance and allow the dead subject to ‘move on’ (also on a literal level) thus forever severing the ties with the earthly world and going beyond to the ‘oltrevita’. This is clearly far removed from the living subject’s mourning for his dead. Contrary to ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) where Arletta’s inability to remember was negatively presented, here the dead are presented as caught in the threads of memory, and this is why they have to endure their torment and their painful condition of ‘larve’. Memory, therefore, clearly plays a different role for the dead, compared to the poetic subject’s own. The latter, in experiencing a Derridean ‘demi-deuil’ and its oscillation between remembrance and forgetfulness, can preserve a connection with the lost object of love – the dead cannot. For them, memory and its ‘fili’ bind

them to the earthly world that must be abandoned in order to pass beyond to the ‘oltrevita’, beyond the visible world where – as we will see – a Nirvana-like state of nothingness is awaiting them.

Moreover, the dead are said to be ‘immobili e vaganti’ (line 26): immobile and yet moving, they are trapped in a ‘fissità gelida’ (line 27) and are unable to find any peace and stability (hence ‘vaganti’).³³⁵ All this leads the poetic subject to conclude that after all, even for the dead, just as it is for the living, there is no rest: ‘Così | forse anche ai morti è tolto ogni riposo | nelle zolle’ (lines 27-29). Death might even be a worse condition than the imprisonment that life looks like to the poetic subject: ‘una forza [...] | spietata più del vivere’ (lines 30-31) takes them to the ‘ferrigna costa’ (line 4) of this terrestrial hell. ‘I morti’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 95-96), then, focuses on the painful condition in which the dead are trapped within an ‘orizzonte | flagellato’ (lines 17-18) where the Ligurian landscape becomes an allegoric space of an infernal land.

In short, the reason for the dead’s torment lies in their being still imprisoned by earthly memory. Memory is thus presented as an essentially destructive force that negates the dead ‘materia’ and ‘voce’ (line 34): a ‘rimorso’ (‘larve rimorse dai ricordi umani’, line 32). To conclude, ‘I morti’ (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 95-96) introduces a central element that will continue to lie at the absolute centre of Montale’s poetry of mourning: the liminal space that characterises the passage between life and death, and the role that earthly memory plays in preventing the dead from passing beyond.

³³⁵ This sense of imprisonment and cold immobility echoes the ‘ghiacciata moltitudine di morti’ of ‘Arsenio’ (*Ossi di seppia*, 54, pp. 83-84).

The nature of this process is further clarified in ‘L’Arca’ (*La bufera e altro*, p. 208), a later poem belonging to *La bufera* that develops Montale’s eschatological vision and whose ‘perduti’ (line 21) seem to coincide with the dead of ‘I morti’ (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 167). However, while in the earlier poem the chorus of the dead could be heard, here it is only the poetic subject speaking. As is the case for many other poems of the *Bufera*, the annihilating and menacing storm of the war occupies the background of ‘L’Arca’ (*La bufera e altro*, p. 208): the poetic subject finds himself in a ‘terra folgorata dove | bollono calce e sangue nell’impronta | del piede umano’ (lines 13-15). The storm is also, however, an allegorical one, the ‘bufera’ that will gather his dead ‘sotto quel tetto’ of a Noah-like ark. Just as in the biblical story of Noah’s ark, his household will be there (his ‘morti’ and ‘vecchie | serve’, lines 5, 6-7), and his animals (his ‘cani fidati’, line 6). As part of its biblical symbolism, the ark also functions as a space that contains the dead’s memories, something that the ‘tempesta di primavera’ mentioned at the opening of the poem further suggests (line 1). This reading of the ark is further supported by the centrality that memory has in the poem. Echoing a Schopenhauerian veil of Maya,³³⁶ the ‘vello d’oro’ (line 4) is, as Montale himself

³³⁶ ‘[T]he ancient wisdom of the Indians declares that “it is Mâyâ, the veil of deception, which covers the eyes of mortals, and causes them to see a world of which one cannot say either that it is or that it is not, for it is like a dream, like the sunshine on the sand which the traveller from a distance takes to be water, or like the piece of rope on the ground which he regards as a snake”’. As these words from *The World as Will and Representation* highlight, according to Schopenhauer the phenomenal world is essentially illusory. From this standpoint Schopenhauer ‘understood the Hindu idea of *mâyâ* as illusion and the idea of the veil of *mâyâ* to refer to our ordinary perception and behavior in the world of illusion.’ David E. Cartwright, *Historical Dictionary of Schopenhauer’s Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), p. 109. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by Eric F. Payne, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Dover, 1969), p. 8.

clarified, nothing but ‘il qualsiasi sudario che quando si alza scopre i ricordi: appunto il velo che protegge, nascondendolo, il passato’.³³⁷

Similarly to the ark and its role of safeguarding the poetic subject’s ‘perduti’, the kitchen stands as the private and domestic place that not only reunites the household, but also preserves their memories. The protective function of this domestic place is made explicit by the verb ‘proteggere’ in line 18:

[...] Fuma il ramaiolo
in cucina, un suo tondo di riflessi
accentra i volti ossuti, i musì aguzzi
e li protegge
(lines 15-18)

The dead’s ‘volti’ and the dogs’ ‘musì’ reappear all together in the ‘ramaiolo’’s circle whose curved surfaces lengthen and distorts their features. The kitchen has the same protective function in other poems and prose texts. In ‘La casa delle due palme’, for instance, one reads:

Si disse: pochi giorni di villeggiatura con i miei morti: passeranno in fretta. Ma subito pensò con preoccupazione al sapore dei cibi che gli sarebbero stati serviti. Non era un cattivo sapore, ma era *quello*, era il sapore di famiglia che si tramanda di generazione in generazione e che nessuna cuoca potrà distruggere mai. Una continuità che distrutta altrove resiste negli unti dei soffritti, nel fortore degli aglio, delle cipolle e del basilico, nei ripieni pestati nel mortaio di marmo. Per essa anche i suoi morti, condannati a un cibo più leggero, dovevano tornare talvolta in terra.³³⁸

Moreover, still within the *Buferà*, one can think of the ‘gong che ancora | ti rivuole fra noi, sorella mia’ in ‘Madrigali fiorentini’ (*La bufera e altro*, 15-16, p.

³³⁷ Lorenzo Greco, ed, *Montale commenta Montale* (Parma: Pratiche, 1990), p. 56. Similarly in a letter dated 29 November 1965 to Silvio Guarnieri, Montale writes that ‘il vello d’oro è il qualsiasi sudario che quando si alza scopre i ricordi’. Eugenio Montale, ‘Finisterre, Dopo, Intermezzo’, in *SM II*, pp. 1516-1520 (1518).

³³⁸ Eugenio Montale, ‘La casa delle due palme’, in *PR*, pp. 37-42 (41-42).

215), where, alluding to the domestic signal with which lunch is announced, the poetic subject remembers his sister Marianna.

The dead are, significantly, referred to as ‘perduti’ (‘L’Arca’, *La bufera e altro*, 21, p. 208), where their being lost seems to suggest that the separation brought by death between them and the living is irreparable. Nonetheless, when the ‘tempesta | primaverile’ (lines 19-20) shakes the poetic subject’s ark, this leads to a ‘latrato | di fedeltà’ (lines 20-21), which comes from the dog, but also from the poetic subject and indicates his will to resist the inevitable separation that divides him from his dead. In other words, both the poetic subject and the dead seem determined to ensure that a continuity between the world of the living and that of the dead remains possible. The resistance expressed by the end of the poem coexists with the poetic subject’s awareness that the ark’s inhabitants are ultimately ‘perduti’. Nevertheless, the ‘arca’, the protective ‘ombrello del salice’ (line 2), the ‘orto’ (line 4), the ‘tetto’ (line 11), the kitchen’s ‘ramaiolo’ (line 15), the ‘magnolia’ (line 18), all clearly share the same function: to keep the dead and their memories reunited and protected. Remembrance is thus confirmed to be of fundamental importance for the poetic subject and, contrary to the earlier ‘I morti’ (*Ossi di seppia*, p. 167), attention is not on what this attachment to the ‘perduti’ and resistance against the separation brought by death means for them. For this, we must now turn to ‘A mia madre’ (*La bufera e altro*, p. 211) and ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259).

4.3 The Dead's Mourning and Earthly Memory: A Reading of 'A mia madre' and 'Voce giunta con le folaghe'

Among the 'perduti' carefully protected in Montale's ark, is the poetic subject's mother. The poem 'A mia madre' (*La bufera e altro*, p. 211), written in 1942, is the poetic response to the death of Montale's own mother that took place on 25 October 1942. 'A mia madre' is a key text for two reasons: not only does it help the reader to gain a more complete understanding of the nature of mourning in Montale's poetry, it also reveals the poet's very individual and singular eschatological vision.

The figure of the mother is, together with the 'fanciulla morta', one of the richest *topoi* in lyric poetry, and literature more broadly. However, in a more pronounced way compared to the case of the 'fanciulla morta', the recurrence of the figure of the mother is only partial: the richness of different re-elaborations of this *topos* in the Italian lyric tradition is striking from both a thematic and a stylistic point of view. As far as Montale is concerned, it is interesting to see that although the focus throughout the poem is on the uniqueness and individuality of the mother, the poem also presents a de-personalised and theoretical reflection on the complexities regarding the passage from life to death, from presence to absence, and the role that memory plays in this process.

The issue at the core of the poem concerns the significance of the duality of the 'body-soul' after death, something on which the poetic subject and his mother have different perspectives. According to the secular poetic subject's point of view, if the mother abandons her 'spoglia' (line 6) as a result of her judging it a mere 'ombra' (line 6), she risks dissolving into an inconsistent indeterminacy and nothing will be able to protect her and safeguard her unique being: 'chi ti

proteggerà?’ (line 8) is the question that the poetic subject addresses to her with the implicit request to not dissolve into a shadow. As Isella explains, ‘ombra’ in the ‘sistema semantico montaliano [...] ha sempre valenza negativa’ and is always antithetical to the ‘vita vera [e la] ricerca di autenticità’.³³⁹ This fear that haunts the poetic subject arises from his awareness of his mother’s Christian faith, and her consequent disregard of the value of the body compared to the immaterial and superior quality of the soul. The mother thus sees the corporeal body only as an impediment and obstacle for the soul: what belongs to the earthly and visible world is a mere appearance and the body is but a prison preventing access to the higher plane of existence following earthly life. From this standpoint the mother perceives the corporeal ‘spoglia’ to be as inconsistent as a shadow. If the mother abandons her physical being, who will ever be able to protect her being from dissolving into nothingness – a being that, from the perspective of the son, is a synthesis of body and soul? This dilemma is what leads the poetic subject to present his counter-arguments to his mother’s beliefs: a defence of the importance of the individuality of both soul and body:

La strada sgombra
non è una via, solo due mani, un volto,
quelle mani, *quel* volto, il gesto d’una
vita che non è un’altra ma se stessa,
solo questo ti pone nell’eliso
folto d’anime e voci in cui tu vivi
(lines 8-13)

³³⁹ Eugenio Montale, *Finisterre*, ed. by Dante Isella (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), p. 52.

It is this unique ‘gesto’ that belongs to the mother that can fix her in the poetic subject’s memory and assures the continuity of her presence in the world of the living.

The loss of the mother brings a ‘domanda’ (line 14) that is first formulated in the opening stanza (‘chi ti proteggerà?’), line 8) and which problematises the issue of what the boundaries and limits are within which one can attempt to oppose the annihilating force of time and death. The poem also concludes highlighting this ‘domanda’ (line 14) which remains open and unanswered until the end of the poem: ‘e la domanda che tu lasci è anch’essa | un gesto tuo, all’ombra delle croci’ (lines 14-15). Generally, this question is interpreted as voicing the doubt aroused by the different standpoints of son and mother on the afterlife – a doubt with which he is left after his mother’s death, questioning the possible continuation between life and death made possible by the work of memory. A different reading of this ‘domanda’, which appears even more captivating, is provided by Lonardi, who interprets it as a request from the mother to her son, asking him to grant her the ‘libertà della de-corporeizzazione e spiritualizzazione cristiana cui lei interamente si affida, mentre lui, “troppo umano”, si aggrappa al ricordo delle *sue* mani, del *suo* volto’.³⁴⁰

In the short story ‘L’angoscia’, Montale reflects further on the issues presented in this poem regarding the Christian beliefs of an afterlife:

Teoricamente sono contrario alla sopravvivenza e credo che sarebbe sommamente dignitoso se l’uomo o la bestia accettassero di *sombrer*

³⁴⁰ Gilberto Lonardi, *Winston Churchill e il bulldog: la ‘Ballata’ e altri saggi montaliani* (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), p. 13.

nell'eterno Nulla. Ma in pratica – per eredità – sono cristiano e non so sottrarmi alla idea che qualcosa di noi può o addirittura deve durare.³⁴¹

The statement poses some questions regarding Montale's position on his religious belief. Despite declaring himself a Christian, I agree with Cambon and Riccobono on the affinity he seems to share with Buddhism and a Nirvana-like annihilation, given Montale's conception of dissolution into the 'eterno Nulla' and the process of de-materialisation that I will shortly discuss through the short story 'Sul limite' and 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259).³⁴² However, this dissolution into nothingness is in contradiction with the idea that something can or even must last after death. If read from outside of a Christian standpoint, then this 'qualcosa di noi' can be associated with memory together with an attachment to the deceased's corporeal entity. Just as the poetic subject of 'A mia madre' (*La bufera e altro*, p. 211), the narrator-protagonist of 'L'angoscia' does not want to renounce memory. After all, from the very beginning to the end, as Riccobono highlights, the poetic subject remains one of the 'razza | di chi rimane a terra' ('Falsetto', *Ossi di seppia*, 50-51, pp. 14-15), meaning one that remains

³⁴¹ In 'L'angoscia' the figure of the beloved dog Galiffa also returns: 'Il cane Galiffa di cui posso esibirvi la fotografia egregia collega, è morto più di quarant'anni fa. In questa foto, che è l'unica di lui esistente, figura accanto a un amico mio, morto anche lui. Io sono dunque la sola persona che ancora conservi il ricordo di quel festoso bastardo di pelo rossiccio. Mi amava e quando fu troppo tardi l'ho amato anch'io'. Remembrance is once again highlighted for its power to preserve the lost one, a view that is further argued in 'L'angoscia' with reference to animals again: 'i cani (più che i gatti) restano nel ricordo, chiedono di sopravvivere in noi'. To be remembered and present in the living's memory is then clearly a way to survive. Eugenio Montale, 'L'angoscia', in *PR*, pp. 207-210 (208-209).

³⁴² Cambon, *Eugenio Montale's Poetry*, pp. 3-5, 34. Riccobono, 'Further Reflections on the Theme of Death in the Poetry of Eugenio Montale', p. 135.

bound to earthly memory and the phenomenal and visible world that the mother dismisses.³⁴³

While in poems such as ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (*Le occasioni*, p. 167) the grief for the lost Arletta is expressed in powerful mourning, the poem addressing the loss of his mother does not present the same degree of pain and bereavement, but rather moves the discourse towards more theoretical reflections that detach from the specificity of his loss. This remains problematic and in contradiction with the emphasis that the poetic subject puts on the individuality of his mother, on *her* hands, *her* face, and *her* gestures. The generalisation of this theoretical discourse is exactly what the poetic subject tried to resist: a loss of his mother’s unique specificity.³⁴⁴

The figure of the mother returns in ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), to which it is now time to turn. ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), written in 1947 and later inserted in the *La bufera e altro*’s section *Silvae* is generally regarded as one of the pinnacles of Montale’s poetic output. However, the poem is, as Giuseppe Savoca suggests, ‘[una poesia] più ammirata che compresa’.³⁴⁵ The first element that gives rise to this misunderstanding is the identity of the ‘ombra viva’ (line 47) that comes in support of ‘l’altra [ombra] ancora | riluttante’ (lines 47-48): the figure of the dead

³⁴³ Riccobono, ‘Further Reflections on the Theme of Death in the Poetry of Eugenio Montale’, p. 135.

³⁴⁴ This is, after all, the same preoccupation that Barthes expressed regarding the death of his mother in *Mourning Diary*. It is perhaps from the collision and unresolved relation between the personal experience of grief and the literary representation of it, between the individuality of the loss and the generalised and universal language with which one can express it, that mourning can enter poetic language and where a continuity between life and death becomes possible.

³⁴⁵ Giuseppe Savoca, ‘L’“ombra viva” e il “punto dilatato” nella *Bufera* di Montale’, in *L’infinito e il punto. Letture di poesia tra Ungaretti e Cattafi* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2011), pp. 91-115 (92).

father. The identity of the ‘ombra viva’ is still today at the centre of disputes among critics who have tended to identify it either with the figure of the father dialoguing with the poet,³⁴⁶ or with a female ‘ombra’ identifiable with Clizia.³⁴⁷ I argue, however, that the ‘ombra viva’ is identifiable with the figure of the dead mother, a view that only a few critics have supported. Savoca was the first to introduce this new and ground-breaking interpretation of the identity of the ‘ombra viva’, which, however, continued to remain merely a marginal reading against the more established view of the shadow being Clizia.³⁴⁸ Yet, as the critic himself points out, the affinities with the ‘visiting Angel’ are undeniable. Above all, one cannot ignore her physiognomy, which resembles the distinctive traits of Iride-Clizia in *Finisterre*:

³⁴⁶ This view of the shadow as identifiable with the poetic subject in dialogue with his dead father has been held by Contini in *Una lunga fedeltà*, p 91. However, as Savoca explains, if ‘l’“ombra viva” non fosse di una persona morta ma dello stesso poeta giovane (a parte la grammatica: il “giunta” del v. 41 si riferisce all’ombra di una donna perché, come annota A Valle – in *Tre saggi...*, cit., p. 39 –, “un uomo anche trasformato in ‘ombra’ non cambia genere”), si avrebbe, tra l’altro, la scena assurda, surrealistica, di uno sdoppiamento del poeta che, nell’ombra, assumerebbe tratti femminili (i capelli), non udrebbe le sue stesse parole, si rivelerebbe come colei in cui “bruciava | amor di Chi la mosse e non di sé”, ecc.’ Savoca, ‘L’“ombra viva” e il “punto dilatato” nella *Buferà di Montale*’, p. 95.

³⁴⁷ The reading of the ‘ombra viva’ as identifiable with the figure of Clizia still represents the view of the majority of critics, including Rebecca West in her already-mentioned article ‘Montale’s “Care Ombre”: Identity and its Dissolution’ and Giovanni Macchia as evident in his article entitled ‘Montale e la donna salvatrice’ and published in the *Corriere della sera* on 24 January 1982. See Savoca, ‘L’“ombra viva” e il “punto dilatato” nella *Buferà di Montale*’, p. 95 for more details regarding this particular reading of the ‘ombra’ as being Clizia. Another interpretation regarding the identity of the ‘ombra viva’ is the one that sees ‘nell’ombra un’allegoria della poesia [...] o una figurazione della coscienza e dell’anima’. Among these critics one finds Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti and Stefano Jacomuzzi, for whom, as they states in their *La poesia italiana contemporanea*, in the figure of the ‘ombra’ ‘la personificazione della poesia, il principio metafisico, si confondono in un’unica figura con la persona amata’. Although the allegorical and metaphysical interpretations are legitimate, they remain secondary to the actual figure of the ‘ombra’, when compared to its possible functions: her human and female essence that, as Savoca argues, must be ‘rispettata e decifrata’ Savoca, ‘L’“ombra viva” e il “punto dilatato” nella *Buferà di Montale*’, p. 95; Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti and Stefano Jacomuzzi, *La poesia italiana contemporanea* (Florence: D’Anna, 1996), p. 278.

³⁴⁸ Savoca, ‘L’“ombra viva” e il “punto dilatato” nella *Buferà di Montale*’.

[...] uno scarto
altero della fronte che le schiara
gli occhi ardenti ed i duri sopraccigli
da un suo biocco infantile
(lines 14-17)³⁴⁹

Furthermore, another central female figure of *La bufera* – Volpe – is also easily identifiable with the ‘ombra viva’ of ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259). Volpe has, just as the ‘ombra viva’, ‘ali’ (see the ‘ala d’ebano’ in ‘Nubi color Magenta’ (*La bufera e altro*, 10, p. 269) and ‘sulle scapole gracili le ali’ in ‘Se t’hanno assomigliato’ (*La bufera e altro*, 20, p. 267)). Volpe also has a ‘mano d’infante’ ad a ‘fronte incandescente’ (‘Se t’hanno assomigliato...’, 14, 22, p. 267) and the ‘ombra viva’ has ‘occhi ardenti’ (line 16) and ‘un suo biocco infantile’ (line 17). As Savoca and before him, Avalle, argue, there is a substantial interchangeability on the features that Montale reserves for his female figures, and here lies the origins of all the disputes among critics concerning the identity of the ‘ombra viva’.³⁵⁰ Moreover, with regard to the interchangeability of Montale’s female figures, Savoca advances the view that there is a ‘fantasma materno’ in which they all find their root.³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ On Clizia’s similar characteristic features see, among others, ‘La bufera’ (*La bufera e altro*, 20-21, p. 197): ‘e con la mano, sgombra | la fronte dalla nube dei capelli’ and ‘La frangia dei capelli...’ (*La bufera e altro*, 1-3, p. 203): ‘La frangia dei capelli che ti vela | la fronte puerile, tu distrarla | con la mano non devi’.

³⁵⁰ D’Arco Silvio Avalle, *Tre saggi su Montale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), p. 48. See also pp. 37-41 on the ‘campo onomasiologico’ of ‘volo’ and ‘ali’.

³⁵¹ ‘E non va dimenticato che prima di tutte le donne amate ce ne sta una di cui esse sono destinate ad essere in vario modo ripetizione. Per essere esplicito, penso che nel caso delle figure femminili montaliane sia da mettere in conto l’esistenza di un fantasma materno, pacamente presente a livello manifesto, ma profondamento attivo nel rapporto uomo donna, o anche io tu, su cui si sostiene la poesia di Montale.’ Savoca, ‘L’“ombra viva” e il “punto dilatato” nella *Bufera* di Montale’, p. 96.

In other words, the fact that the ‘ombra viva’ is the dead mother³⁵² does not deny the possibility of finding some traces of Iride-Clizia or Volpe. The religious pathos that characterises the ‘ombra viva’ is something that the ‘donna angelo’ also possesses, as does Volpe. However, *in primis*, the ‘fede’, as it has emerged by looking at ‘A mia madre’ (*La bufera e altro*, p. 211), is what supports the figure of the dead mother. Moreover, although Clizia is portrayed as absent, Montale never represents her as dead. Notice how the ‘ombra’ in ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259) is even pierced by any material that comes into contact with: ‘i primi raggi | del giorno la trafiggono, farfalle vivaci l’attraversano, la sfiora | la sensitiva e non si rattappisce’ (lines 19-22).³⁵³ Furthermore, the epithet of ‘viva’ to the shadow within the Montalean eschatological vision of ‘vita-morte’ does not contradict the view of the ‘ombra viva’ as being dead. After all, the mother in ‘A mia madre’ (*La bufera e altro*, p. 211) was also said to be alive ‘nell’eliso | folto d’anime e voci in cui tu vivi’ (‘A mia madre’, *La bufera e altro*, 12-13, p. 211). Similarly, in the short story ‘Sul limite’, when the protagonist asks his guide, Nicola, if their common friend is really dead, he is answered with the following: ‘[v]iva [...] o meglio, anche per lei il guanto s’è rovesciato; come per me, come per te. Di’ pur morta, se credi’.³⁵⁴

Most importantly, what supports, more than anything else, the view of the ‘ombra viva’ being the mother is the way she relates to the father:

³⁵² Soon after Savoca, the other critic who has identified the shadow as the figure of the dead mother is Giusi Baldissone in *Il male di scrivere. L’inconscio e Montale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), pp. 50-51.

³⁵³ For further textual references on the reasons why the ‘ombra viva’ is not identifiable as Clizia see Savoca, ‘L’“ombra viva” e il “punto dilatato” nella *Bufera di Montale*’, pp. 97-99.

³⁵⁴ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 190.

Nelle parole della voce si coglie infatti un'oblatività particolarissima nei confronti del padre, messo in primo piano rispetto agli altri, di cui pure la donna ben si ricorda, anche se 'tramutata': 'Ho pensato per te, ho ricordato | per tutti' (dov'è da sentire anche una risposta alla preghiera su cui si apre *Proda di Versilia*: 'I miei morti che prego perché preghino | per me, per i miei vivi'.³⁵⁵

Moreover, the shadow insists on the 'legame, ormai passato, ma sempre vivo nella memoria, che in vita l'accomunava al morto, prima che lei morendo assumesse le ali per volare, libera come le folaghe, nel cielo dell'oltretempo.'³⁵⁶ This emerges clearly when she states: 'il mare che ti univa ai miei | lidi da prima che io avessi l'ali, | non si dissolve' (lines 38-39), where this connection with her 'lidi' stands in a literal way for the shared life that they lived before passing away. The same could not be said about either Clizia or Volpe in relation to the father.

Lastly, the 'ombra viva' presents itself as detached from earthly memories, although she still shows some degree of attachment to her past earthly life: 'Io le rammento quelle | mie parole e pur son giunta con le folaghe | a distaccarti dalle tue.' (lines 41-42). In other words, the mother has arrived to free the beloved partner from his attachment to his earthly 'folaghe' and to help him make that transition into de-materialisation that the reader already knows she believes to be necessary from the earlier presentation of her 'fede' in 'A mia madre' (*La bufera e altro*, p. 211). The father, however, is still afraid that 'la larva di memoria in cui si scalda | ai suoi figli si spenga al nuovo balzo' (lines 32-33) and even in the last lines of the poem, he is said to be 'riluttante' (line 48). The father's viewpoint insists and consolidates the standpoint regarding memory already introduced by the poems dedicated to Arletta: if the living do not forget or replace the lost object

³⁵⁵ Savoca, 'L'"ombra viva" e il "punto dilatato" nella *Bufera* di Montale', p. 99.

³⁵⁶ Savoca, 'L'"ombra viva" e il "punto dilatato" nella *Bufera* di Montale', p. 99.

of love, the dead can continue to be alive in their memories. However, while in the ‘ciclo di Arletta’ the reader is given the poetic subject’s perspective, here, significantly, it is the dead’s point of view that is presented. The ‘ombra fidata’ (line 23) firmly confronts the father over the necessity to progress and make this ‘nuovo balzo’ (line 33),³⁵⁷ and, most importantly, over the fact that remembrance is not necessarily beneficial:

[...] Memoria
non è peccato fin che giova. Dopo
è letargo di talpe, abiezione
che funghisce su sé...
(lines 42-45)

In short, ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259) presents two ‘ombre’: the one of the father who is strongly reluctant to recognise his condition of death and the one of the mother who has already been through the ‘nuovo balzo’ (line 33) and is in harmony with her new de-materialised existence. It is now helpful to look at the short story ‘Sul limite’, where Montale’s process of disembodiment is presented within the three-dimensional earthly existence that can be said to also be in the background of ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), and where, additionally the mother and the father can be clearly positioned.

³⁵⁷ Similarly, in ‘Visita a Fadin’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 225-226) Montale writes about Fadin’s death and an ‘ordine diverso’ which resembles the one that is accessed by the ‘nuovo balzo’ mentioned in ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259): ‘E ora dire che non ci sei più è dire solo che sei entrato in un ordine diverso’.

4.4 Further Reflections on the Liminal Borders between Life and Death: ‘Sul limite’

‘Sul limite’, written just a few months before ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), complements the view of the ‘oltrevita’ as already discussed in the previous section on Montale’s ‘dialogo con i defunti’. The short story from *Farfalla di Dinard* narrates the aftermath of a ‘brutto incidente’ between two cars: a ‘cozzo violentissimo’ after which the protagonist was ‘sballottato come un bussolotto dentro la nera cabina della macchina’.³⁵⁸ Immediately after the car accident, the drivers start to fight without noticing the protagonist-narrator, who at this point, without being aware of it, starts his adventurous ‘viaggio’ in the liminal space of the ‘oltrevita’:

A questo punto il diverbio fra gli autisti toccò il diapason dei moccoli ed io ebbi il tempo di spolverarmi alla meglio la giacca, di toccarmi per sentire s’ero vivo e di saltare su un tranvai che passava a poca distanza.³⁵⁹

The ‘tranvai’, similarly to how the train functions in relation to Mosca in ‘Nel fumo’ (*Satura*, p. 329), has the function of allowing the transition from one place to another: from the reality of the visible world to what lies beyond it. While the vehicle goes in unexpected directions, after reaching the suburbs of the city, it eventually stops and the driver tells the narrator that ‘Qui finisce la corsa’.³⁶⁰ The

³⁵⁸ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 187.

³⁵⁹ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 187.

³⁶⁰ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 188. A similar use of modern transportation as a means to evoke the ‘viaggio’/passage from life to death is evoked by Giorgio Caproni in ‘Stanze della funicolare’ from his poetic collection *Il passaggio d’Enea* (1956) where the ‘funicolare’ has a similar function to the one of the ‘tranvai’ in Montale’s ‘farfalla’. Similarly, the ‘ascensore’ plays a similar role in the poem ‘L’ascensore’: ‘Quando mi sarò deciso | di andarci, in paradiso | ci andrò con l’ascensore’ (lines 5-7). Lastly, also ‘Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso’ in *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee* (1960-1964) re-elaborates this metaphor of the ‘travel of life’ as

‘corsa’ is clearly not just the bus ride, but life itself, which ends here. It is at this point that a ‘calessino tirato da un asinello sardo e guidato da un giovane in pigiama che portava in testa un cappelluccio da alpino, ma senza piuma’ arrives together with a ‘cagnuolo rossiccio, d’incertissima razza, che abbaiò lungamente verso di me’.³⁶¹ The young man, Nicola, will be discovered to be an old acquaintance; the dog is the protagonist’s beloved Galiffa, il ‘canino che prediligev[a] da bambino’; and lastly, the donkey is Pinocchietto, the ‘asinello di Vittoria Apuana, al quale portav[a] sempre lo zucchero’.³⁶² This is clearly, for the narrator, an ‘inatteso incontro’ for which he feels unprepared. He is still not aware that he is dead and not in the earthly world any longer: he is now in Limite, the liminal space divided into three zones where the passage from life to death and the process of de-materialisation takes place. Nicola is employed in Limite’s ‘ufficio smistamento’ and has therefore come to pick up his old friend. An echo of the ‘arca’ is traceable in ‘Sul limite’ when Nicola apologises that there is too much work to do in Limite, and he could therefore not come to pick up his friend with all the animals belonging to his ‘arca privata’: Fufi, Gastoncino, Passepoil, Bubù, Buck, Valentina, and Mimì. However, Nicola reassures him that it will be possible to see them all again soon. It emerges that in Montale’s eschatological vision of the afterlife, it is possible to be reunited with one’s lost loved ones, those belonging to one’s ‘arca’.

As the short story progresses, Nicola also mentions a woman, Giovanna, who is now residing in Limite too. The afore-mentioned exchange between the

progressively entering in a space beyond – an ‘aldilà’. Giorgio Caproni, *L’opera in versi*, ed. by Luca Zuliani (Milan: Mondadori, 1998).

³⁶¹ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 188.

³⁶² Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 189

two regarding Giovanna is one of the key passages of the short story that is worth looking at:

‘Morta?’ arrischiavi a occhi bassi traballando sul sedile angusto. [...] ‘E...sta bene?’

‘Viva’ ammonì seccamente; ‘o meglio, anche per lei il guanto s’è rovesciato; come per me, come per te. Di’ pur morta, se credi.’³⁶³

The view of death being ‘life’ and life being ‘death’ as well as a ‘dream’ is further elaborated by Nicola when he notices how the protagonist, just as the father in ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), is still ‘attaccat[o] alle storie di prima’:

È come accadeva a me quan’ero tra i vivi, che dico?, tra i morti dell’Antelimito da cui tu giungi ora; sognavo e al risveglio ricordavo ancora il sogno, poi anche quella memoria si perdeva. Lo stesso ora succede a te; c’è ancora una frangia terrestre da addormentare nella tua mente, ma è questione di poco. Più tardi, quando Giovanna ti farà vedere la ‘registrazione’ di quella che hai chiamato la tua vita, stenterai a riconoscerla.³⁶⁴

After repeating how the previous existence in the earthly world is not what should be called life and that once that dream-like experience comes to an end, there is a kind of ‘risveglio’, Nicola introduces the core element of ‘Sul limite’ and Montale’s reflection on the ‘oltrevita’: the role that memory plays in the transition from presence to absence, from life to death. As Nicola highlights, just as the ‘ombra viva’ of ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259) explains to the father, at the beginning there is the tendency to remain attached to what belonged to the earthly life: una ‘frangia terrestre’ that needs to fall asleep and to dissolve, something that happens quickly once entered in Limite, which by

³⁶³ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 190.

³⁶⁴ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 190.

now clearly stands for the ‘limite’ – the liminal border – between life and death. A video recording of what one used to call life is then needed to remember what belonged to that part of one’s existence: the ‘registrazione’ that Giovanna will show to the protagonist will even end up appearing unfamiliar at a more advanced stage of the dissolution of one’s earthly memory. As Nicola continues to explain to the new inhabitant of Limite, once this earthly memory is abandoned, one acquires a new memory that will make the passage to real life possible. Once this stage is reached, one can pass from Zone I to Zone II: ‘dove comincia il processo di smaterializzazione’.³⁶⁵ This narration regarding the various stages of the process of de-materialisation and the passage from life to death (or from death to life, to follow Nicola’s viewpoint) is helpful as it provides a more detailed framework within which Montale’s poetic ‘dialogo con i defunti’ and the poems analysed so far can be better understood. The father in ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259) clearly finds himself in a similar position as the protagonist of ‘Sul limite’. However, while the father is reluctant to abandon his attachment to the visible and earthly world fearing his consequent dissolution, the protagonist of this key ‘farfalla’ highlights the pain in having to re-encounter all the ones he thought lost forever, without knowing he would one day be reunited with in the ‘oltrevita’. In other words, the resurfacing of memories belonging to a past the protagonist desired to remain buried, is perceived as painful:

‘Non si potrebbe rimandare questa faccenda? questo incontro dico? Forse mi capisci, per me era una partita chiusa. Ho faticato tanti anni per deviare il mio pensiero da questi...amici, ho creduto d’impazzire per questo sforzo e il destino mi aveva persino risparmiato la notizia del vagone impiombato. E ora tu...No, no, è troppo, è troppo...Io

³⁶⁵ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 191.

volevo che ci fosse qualcosa di *finito* nella mia vita, intendi?, qualcosa che fosse eterno a forza d'essere finito. Non posso ricominciare, Nicola [...].³⁶⁶

These words highlight in a powerful way the continuity and cycle of life and death. Moreover, the way memory is envisaged as resurfacing in 'Sul limite', against the protagonist's desired state of finite forgetfulness, is what similarly takes place in 'Ezekiel saw the Wheel...':

Ma la mano non si distolse,
[...]
frugava tenace la traccia
in me seppellita da un cumulo,
da un monte di sabbia che avevo
in cuore ammassato per giungere
a soffocar la tua voce,
a spingerla in giù, dentro il breve
cerchio che tutto trasforma,
raspava, portava all'aperto
con l'orma delle pianelle
sul fango indurito, la scheggia,
la fibra della tua croce
[...].
(‘Ezekiel saw the Wheel’, *La bufera e altro*, 7, 12-22, pp. 255)

Memory and its movement between forgetfulness and remembrance (whether voluntary or not) is at times a 'punta che feri[sce] | quasi a sangue' ('Annetta', *Diario del '71 e del '72*, 38-39, pp. 501-502), as in the case of the poetic subject's 'demi-deuil' for Arletta, and at others simply a 'letargo' that must be avoided in order to make the 'nuovo balzo' ('Voce giunta con le folaghe', *La bufera e altro*, 44, 33, pp. 258-259), and, lastly, at others times, a too painful experience. More

³⁶⁶ Montale, 'Sul limite', p. 191.

broadly, within the Montalean eschatological vision, there are two memories. One that might resemble a Derridean ‘demi-deuil’: the intermittent memory of the living ones mourning their lost loved ones. For the ‘care ombre’: an earthly memory that chains them to the earthly world, which prevents them passing beyond through the process of de-materialisation and acquiring the new memory mentioned in ‘Sul limite’.

It is at this stage, when the protagonist better understands both where he is and the nature of Limite, that he asks to be brought to see his mother, the only one he would like to see. However, he is soon warned that she belongs to the last Zone of Limite: Zona III – where ‘la memoria è molto ridotta’, given that the process of de-materialisation is there completed.³⁶⁷ Just as the mother is to be found in ‘Sul limite’ in accordance with the way she was portrayed in the poems ‘A mia madre’ and ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), the figure of the father is also present and, just as he was presented as reluctant to abandon his earthly attachment, here too he seems not fully after the ‘nuovo balzo’ yet (‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’, *La bufera e altro*, 33, pp. 258-259). Nicola tells his friend: ‘Tuo padre aveva promesso di farsi vivo di là, ma per ora...’.³⁶⁸ The liminal space of Limite is therefore a ‘zone of perfecting and purging from the earthly memory’.³⁶⁹ However, as Riccobono continues, ‘even Zones I and II seem to be

³⁶⁷ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 192.

³⁶⁸ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 191.

³⁶⁹ Riccobono, ‘Further Reflections on the Theme of Death in the Poetry of Eugenio Montale’, p. 131.

further zones through which one must pass before being admitted to the final Zone III'.³⁷⁰

Let us return briefly to 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), 'A mia madre' (*La bufera e altro*, p. 211) and the earlier 'I morti' (*Ossi di seppia*, pp. 95-96), where it is evident that the mother belongs to the 'entelechie superiori'³⁷¹ of Zone III of Limite, something perfectly in tune with what we have learned about her in 'A mia madre' (*La bufera e altro*, p. 211). She is in the final phase of the de-materialisation and hence in the 'eliso | folto d'anime e voce' ('A mia madre', *La bufera e altro*, 13-14, p. 211). For this reason she is more complete and alive than ever before and experiences a sense of plenitude that the father is lacking as he is still bound to his earthly memory. The father's indecisiveness and lack of firmness in his 'nuovo balzo' is something, as we have seen, that is also highlighted in 'Sul limite'. However, the way 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259) concludes, highlights the way the father might have, although reluctantly, made a decision to abandon his earthly past life. This emerges clearly when the poetic subject's final gesture to his father – of offering him his hands – is rejected:

Il vento del giorno
confonde l'ombra viva e l'altra ancora
riluttante in un mezzo che respinge
le mie mani, e il respiro mi si rompe
nel punto dilatato, nella fossa
che circonda lo scatto del ricordo.
(lines 46-51)

³⁷⁰ Riccobono, 'Further Reflections on the Theme of Death in the Poetry of Eugenio Montale', p. 131.

³⁷¹ Montale, 'Sul limite', p. 190.

Although still undecided on whether to remain attached to the earthly world and memory or to abandon it, the father interrupts the communion with his son as it is not a source of enrichment for him any longer, but rather, as the ‘ombra viva’ of the mother highlights, it is ‘peccato’, ‘letargo di talpe’, and ‘abiezione’ (‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’, *La bufera e altro*, 43, 44, pp. 258-259). Now what the mother tells the father regarding memory – ‘Memoria | non è peccato fin che giova. Dopo | è letargo di talpe, abiezione | che funghisce su sé...’ (‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’, *La bufera e altro*, 42-44, pp. 258-259) – acquires a clearer meaning from the eschatological vision offered by ‘Sul limite’. As Nicola explains, within the three-dimensional space of Limite there is a sense of an approximate amount of time that each person should spend in the respective zone before progressing to the ultimate state of de-materialisation belonging to Zone III. As Nicola highlights, the protagonist could stay ‘qualche decennio’ in Zone I with them, for instance.³⁷² After a certain amount of time, however, memory must be abandoned and de-materialisation must be completed in order to reach Zone III, where the sense of plenitude awaiting in this ‘eterno Nulla’ is stronger than expected. The locus of the afterlife is identified as the ‘punto dilatato’, a space beyond time and space, where complete nothingness reveals itself in the moment memory is released: in the ‘scatto del ricordo’ (‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’, *La bufera e altro*, 50, 51, pp. 258-259). This is the ‘vuoto inabitato’, which resembles a ‘transcendental womb from which we came and to which we shall return’, after all, it even ‘remembers’ us, as Cambon highlights (‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’, *La bufera e altro*, 54, pp. 258-259).³⁷³ This ‘original generative “Void”’ is the

³⁷² Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 192.

³⁷³ Cambon, *Eugenio Montale’s Poetry*, p. 128.

nihilist viewpoint with which ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ turns to an end and which can be seen as representative of Montale’s vision of the afterlife overall.³⁷⁴ Mosca knew this from the start: ‘Tu sola sapevi che [...] | [...] il vuoto è il pieno’ (*Xenia* I.14, 9-11, p. 302).

To conclude, what emerges from a reading of ‘Sul limite’ as a complementary text to interpret ‘A mia madre’ and ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 211, 258-259), is that in Montale’s poetic afterlife the ‘values of life and death are inverted as death is the real life. Life was but a brief interval, a brief death between lives’.³⁷⁵ It is from this standpoint that the conclusion of the short story should be read, when Nicola exhorts the protagonist to be brave: “‘Vieni, fatti coraggio [...]. Era troppo comodo dimenticare. Riprendi a vivere come noi...giunti prima di te.’”³⁷⁶ Not only life and death, but also forgetfulness and remembrance acquire opposite meanings in Montale’s ‘oltrevita’. Nicola and the other inhabitants of Limite appear so real and alive that any difference and boundaries between life and death, past and present, real and unreal are to be excluded. This is after all the same in Montale’s poetry, where ‘i morti [...] acquistano la pienezza di vita di cui quel mondo è capace.’³⁷⁷ Mosca knew that absence is presence, that death is life, that there is no ‘barriera tra vita e morte’.³⁷⁸ Hence, that ‘enorme | presenza dei morti’ (‘Ballata scritta in una clinica’, *La bufera e altro*, 43-44, pp. 217-218) that Montale’s poetic subject experiences.

³⁷⁴ Cambon, *Eugenio Montale’s Poetry*, p. 116.

³⁷⁵ Riccobono, ‘Further Reflections on the Theme of Death in the Poetry of Eugenio Montale’, p. 131.

³⁷⁶ Montale, ‘Sul limite’, p. 192.

³⁷⁷ Contini, ‘Montale e *La bufera*’, in *Una lunga fedeltà*, pp. 79-94 (85).

³⁷⁸ Gianfranco Contini, *Altri esercizi*, p. 154.

4.5 Conclusion

After looking at Montale's 'dialogo con i defunti', it emerges clearly that within Montale's poetic world there is a solid continuity between absence and presence, between life and death, between the visible earthly world and the one belonging to his 'care ombre'. Furthermore, in tune with Montale's conception of 'morte-in-vita', we have seen how the absolute abolition of any barrier between absence and presence and between life and death creates a viewpoint where the dead are more alive than the living and where the living are said to be dead. Nonetheless, even though there would appear to be no barrier between life and death, the poetic subject still powerfully highlights the painful experience of mourning his beloved lost ones. In doing so, he attempts to maintain the 'filo' of memory that can keep him united with the deceased. Memory has therefore emerged as the key element in Montale's relationship with his 'care ombre'. For the poetic subject, memory is fundamentally intermittent and constantly oscillating between forgetfulness and remembrance, echoing Derrida's *demi-deuil*'. Hence, the lost object of love is never replaced by the poetic subject and consequently the traditional consolatory machinery of the elegy is rejected.

Montale's poetry has also offered us the possibility of seeing the perspective of the dead's mourning for their lost earthly life and separation from their loved ones, something that enriches our understanding of the nature of mourning in Montale's poetry as well as his eschatological vision. For the dead, who sometimes appear to be more melancholic than the *io* himself (as in the case of the figure of the father), earthly memory must be abandoned in order to acquire a new memory which can coexist with the necessary process of de-materialisation that Montale's 'oltrevita' involves. There is no indication as to what this new

memory consists of. Surely, however, as is evident from ‘Sul limite’ when Nicola refers to the protagonist’s mother, it is rather different, as he cautiously, implicitly suggests that she might not even recognise him. This new memory is antithetically opposed to the earthly memory that is concerned with what belonged to the past life, but still, significantly, it is referred to as a ‘memory’. The ‘ombra viva’ herself, once arrived to take care of the dead father and exhort him to abandon his earthly memory, seems to remember those common ‘lidi’ which still partly tempt her:

– Ho pensato per te, ho ricordato
per tutti. Ora ritorni al cielo libero
che ti tramuta. Ancora questa rupe
ti tenta? Sì, la battima è la stessa
di sempre, il mare che ti univa ai miei
lidi da prima che io avessi l’ali,
non si dissolve. Io le rammento quelle
mie prode e pur son giunta con le folaghe
a distaccarti dalle tue.
(lines 34-42)

Ultimately then, although remembrance is rejected, forgetfulness is equally never fully reached, not only for the living poetic subject, but also for the dead within their process of dissolution and complete de-materialisation, as envisaged in Montale’s eschatological vision. A state of Derridean ‘demi-deuil’ seems to characterise the dead as well and their process of de-materialisation does not preclude the possibility to remember, although this remembrance entails forgetfulness and belongs to a different kind of memory than the one belonging to the earthly world.

CONCLUSION

Montale's notion of 'ombra' has emerged as a paradoxical presence-in-absence, and as a constitutive element of his poetry, in so far as it conceives of the existence of a continuity between life and death. From as early as *Ossi di seppia*, the status of 'ombra' is two-fold. First of all, 'ombra' is the shadow with which the poetic subject identifies, representing the only possibility of attaining a desired existential and poetic self-effacement. Secondly, but no less importantly, 'ombra' is the shadow of the absent loved one, who is reduced to incorporeality, and from whom the poetic subject seeks not to be separated. The passage from one individual 'ombra' in *Ossi di seppia* to the plurality of the 'care ombre' in all following collections is shown here to delineate the exceptional continuity that marks Montale's *œuvre* from the very beginning of his poetic journey.

This thesis' investigation of Montale's 'ombra' has also highlighted that the dead can continue to live in the afterlife in proportion to how they are remembered by their dear ones who are still alive. This key characteristic of Montale's eschatological vision leads the poetic subject to articulate an obligation to keep alive the memory of his lost 'care ombre'. Remembrance, indeed, becomes, from the perspective of the living, a responsibility, a way to remain faithful to one's dead after they move to the 'oscura regione' ('Delta', *Ossi di seppia*, 8, p. 97). However, the viewpoint from the afterlife appears to be significantly different. As we have seen in 'Voce giunta con le folaghe' (*La bufera e altro*, pp. 258-259), remembrance and, more broadly, attachment to the dead's lost earthly life, is accepted only 'fin che giova' because the dead's memory can run the risk of becoming a 'memoria-peccato':

[...] Memoria
non è peccato fin che giova. Dopo
è letargo di talpe, abiezione
che funghisce su sé...
(‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’, *La bufera e altro*, 42-45, pp. 258-259)

Yet the dead, among whom the figure of the father becomes the most representative, fear to be forgotten by the living. What emerges is that the ‘care ombre’ should not keep alive their memory of their past earthly life, something that would chain them and prevent them from reaching the desirable process of de-materialisation as seen with the ‘farfalla’ ‘Sul limite’, and with the ‘nuovo balzo’ of ‘Voce giunta con le folaghe’ (*La bufera e altro*, 33, pp. 258-259). This purification-like process must be undertaken by all shadows in order to complete their journey from earthly life (which is paradoxically perceived in Montale’s eschatological vision as ‘morte’), to death (equivalent to ‘vita’). The figure of the mother, contrary to the father, is the only one who seems to be able to complete this process of de-materialisation. This is because she fully abandons her earthly memory and unchains herself from the ‘memoria-peccato’.

It is interesting to notice, nonetheless, that from the perspective of the living poetic subject, memory cannot necessarily be treated in the same manner. The *io* feels a moral obligation to remember the dead, and he does not seem to acquire the knowledge that ‘memoria’ can also be ‘peccato’, as the dead come to learn once they travel to the afterlife. From the poetic subject’s perspective, attachment to the lost loved one is fully positive: he wishes, for instance, that the ‘filo-memoria’ for his lost, beloved Arletta would not dissolve. This is a vision faraway from the one presented by the ‘ombra viva’ in ‘Voce giunta con le

folaghe': of memory as 'letargo' and 'peccato', constraining rather than positively maintaining a point of contact with one's beloveds.

My investigation of Montale's notion of 'ombra' and his eschatology has therefore shed further light on the theme of memory, which is at the absolute core of Montale's poetry and has been the subject of rich discussions among scholars. However, by looking at existing scholarship one notices that critics often struggle to come to terms with what is perceived to be an almost unacceptable contradiction of memory in Montale.³⁷⁹ This contradiction resides in the fact that memory appears in Montale's poetic corpus at times as inevitably and inexorably fading, but, at others, as never-ending and persistent, if not even growing. Moreover, as I have already highlighted, memory appears sometimes desirable, and sometimes as something that must be abandoned. The theoretical framework I adopted for my analysis of Montale's 'dialogo con i morti' has allowed me to approach this contradiction from an original perspective of Derridean 'demi-deuil', that does not require a resolution of the contradictory nature of Montale's memory, but rather explains its non-linear and non-normative intermittent essence. The point is not to investigate whether, in the end, Montale presents memory as truly failing or as eventually growing, and which of these two states is more desirable, but rather to trace this contradictory nature, particularly its intermittent but nevertheless never-ending fluctuations between remembrance and forgetfulness, as present in Montale's elegiac poetry to his 'care ombre'. This is an important advancement in Montalean scholarship that will hopefully lead to future studies that will further investigate the productive possibilities that a

³⁷⁹ A representative case of this tendency among existing scholarship is to be found in Gregory M. Pell, *Memorial Space, Poetic Time: The Triumph of Memory in Eugenio Montale* (Leicester: Troubador, 2005).

Derridean theoretical framework can open up. More specifically, it would be interesting to explore whether the figure of what Derrida calls ‘mort vivant’ (translatable as ‘living dead’) can shed further light on the relationship between the poetic subject and any of his ‘care ombre’. This would allow us to gain a new understanding of a hypothetical process of introjection of the figure of the other by Montale’s poetic subject. Derrida challenges binary thinking equally, in this circumstance, by arguing that the deceased should not be treated ‘as one speaks of one of the living *or* of one of the dead’, but as both at once, as a ‘living dead’.³⁸⁰ I believe that the figures of Arletta and Mosca, for instance, could be read through this lense.

It is through the creation of this peculiar workings of memory that Montale is able to portray an eschatological vision where there is presence in absence. The locus of the afterlife is identified as the ‘punto dilatato’, where there is no boundary between life and death, and where absence is presence. This is a discovery that the poetic subject is able to make only through his confrontation with the element of the ‘ombra’, which therefore is of absolute importance in Montale’s poetry. It is precisely by looking at the notion of ‘ombra’ that Montale’s wide poetic corpus acquires a renewed sense of cohesion and unity.

³⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, pp. 94-95. The term ‘mort vivant’ can be found in *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Christie V. Mc Donald and trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 58; and Jacques Derrida, ‘Foreword’: *Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok*, trans. by Barbara Johnson, in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. by Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. xi-xlvi (p. xxi).

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: List of Knife-edged Objects in *Ossi di seppia*

Given that this is the first study that critically assesses the significance of sharpness in Montale's *Ossi di seppia* beyond issues of style and that suggests the presence of a *topos* of the knife-edged object, I have listed all the instances that support such a line of argument (for example, *lama*, *lima*, *lamella*, *lamiera*, *scaglia*, *lastra*, *spina*, *scheggia*, *freccia*, *coltello*, *sciabola*, *razzo*, and similar knife-edged objects as well as derived verbs).

The aim is to complement Giuseppe Savoca's examples as offered in his *Concordanza di tutte le poesie di Eugenio Montale* regarding this semantic field which, as I hope is clear by now, is so significant to Montale's first poetic collection.

	Quotation	Reference
Nouns	forte scotere di <i>lame</i>	'Corno inglese', 2, p. 13
	e il mare che <i>scaglia a scaglia</i>	'Corno inglese', 10, p. 13
	<i>lacerata</i>	'Falsetto', 7, pp. 14-15
	<i>screzi di sete</i>	'Caffè a Rapallo', 7, pp. 17-18
	trombe di <i>lama</i>	'Caffè a Rapallo', 16, pp. 17-18
	<i>sciabole</i>	'Caffè a Rapallo', 23, pp. 17-18
	derelitte <i>lastre</i>	'Ma dove cercare la tomba...', 10, p. 24
	<i>scaglie</i> di mare	'Merigiare pallido e assorto...', 10, p. 30
	muraglia che ha in cima <i>cocci aguzzi</i> di bottiglia	'Merigiare pallido e assorto...', 16-17, p. 30
	<i>colpo di fucile</i>	'Mia vita a te non chiedo lineamenti...', 8, p. 33
	su fil di <i>lama</i>	'Felicità raggiunta, si cammina...', 2, p. 40
	<i>razzo</i>	'Valmorbia, scorrevano il tuo fondo...', 7, p. 43
	<i>spacco</i>	'Arremba su la strinata proda...', 9, p. 48
	in faccia ha i <i>colpi</i> del mare	'Giunge a volte, repente,...', 18, p. 57
	<i>scheggia</i>	'Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...', 4, p. 59
<i>coltello</i> che recide	'Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...', 18, p. 59	

	garbugli di <i>spini</i>	‘Fine dell’infanzia’, 40, pp. 67-70
	<i>lamelle</i> d’argento	‘Egloga’, 8, pp. 75-76
	<i>freccia</i>	‘Flussi’, 16, p. 77
	<i>lima</i>	‘Clivo’, 19, p. 79
	fremere di <i>lamiera</i> percossa	‘Arsenio’, 26-27, pp. 83-84
	<i>taglio netto</i>	‘Crisalide’, 81, pp. 87-89
	<i>scheggia</i>	‘Marezzo’, 12, pp. 90-92
	<i>Lame</i> d’acqua	‘Riviere’, 41, pp. 103-105
Verbs		
	il vento <i>lacera</i> o addensa, violento	‘Falsetto’, 6-7, pp. 14-15
	derelitte lastre c’hanno talora <i>inciso</i>	‘Ma dove cercare la tomba...’, 10-11, p. 24
	<i>traversata</i> da una cruda smorfia	‘So l’ora in cui la faccia più impassibile...’, 2, p. 38
	<i>grafito</i>	‘Sul muro grafito...’, 1, p. 50
	coltello che <i>recide</i>	‘Avrei voluto sentirmi scabro ed essenziale...’, 18, p. 59
	<i>trapassa</i>	‘L’agave sullo scoglio’, 6, p. 71
	<i>Lameggia</i> nella chiara	‘S’è rifatta la calma...’, 9, p. 73
	<i>lima</i> che <i>sega</i>	‘Clivo’, 19, p. 79
	questo sbattimento che vi <i>trapassa</i>	‘Crisalide’, 29-30, pp. 87-89
	<i>taglio netto</i> che <i>recide</i>	‘Crisalide’, 81, pp. 87-89

Appendix 2: 'Falsetto', *Ossi di seppia*, pp. 14-15

Esterina, i vent'anni ti minacciano,
grigiorosea nube
che a poco a poco in sé ti chiude.
Ciò intendi e non paventi.
Sommersa ti vedremo
nella fumea che il vento
lacerata o addensa, violento.
Poi dal fiotto di cenere uscirai
adusta più che mai,
proteso a un'avventura più lontana
l'intento viso che assembla
l'arciera Diana.
Salgono i venti autunni,
t'avviluppano andate primavere;
ecco per te rintocca
un presagio nell'elisie sfere.
Un suono non ti renda
qual d'incrinata brocca
percossa!; io prego sia
per te concerto ineffabile
di sonagliere.

La dubbia dimane non t'impaura.
Leggiadra ti distendi
sullo scoglio lucente di sale
e al sole bruci le membra.
Ricordi la lucertola
ferma sul masso brullo;
te insidia giovinezza,
quella il lacciòlo d'erba del fanciullo.
L'acqua è la forza che ti temprà,
nell'acqua ti ritrovi e ti rinnovi:
noi ti pensiamo come un'alga, un ciottolo,

come un'equorea creatura
che la salsedine non intacca
ma torna al lito più pura.

Hai ben ragione tu! Non turbare
di ubbie il sorridente presente.
La tua gaiezza impegna già il futuro
ed un crollar di spalle
dirocca i fertilizî
del tuo domani oscuro.
T'alzi e t'avanzi sul ponticello
esiguo, sopra il gorgo che stride:
il tuo profilo s'incide
contro uno sfondo di perla.
Esiti a sommo del tremulo asse,
poi ridi, e come spiccata da un vento
t'abbatti fra le braccia
del tuo divino amico che t'afferra.

Ti guardiamo noi, della razza
di chi rimane a terra.

Appendix 3: Almansi and Merry's 'Dissection' of 'Falsetto',³⁸¹

+

Esterina, i vent'anni

-rosea nube

Ciò intendi e non paventi.

uscirai

adusta più che mai,
proteso a un'avventura più lontana
l'intento viso che assembla
l'arciera Diana.

t'avviluppano andate primavere;
ecco per te rintocca
un presagio nell'elisie sfere.

io prego sia
per te concerto ineffabile

non t'impaura.
Leggiadra ti distendi
sullo scoglio lucente di sale
e al sole bruci le membra.

L'acqua è la forza che ti temprà,
nell'acqua ti ritrovi e ti rinnovi:
noi ti pensiamo come un'alga, un ciottolo,
come un'equorea creatura
che la salsedine non intacca
ma torna al lito più pura.
Hai ben ragione tu! Non turbare
di ubbie il sorridente presente.

—

ti minacciano
grigio

che a poco a poco in sé ti chiude.

Sommersa ti vedremo
nella fumea che il vento
lacerà o addensa, violento.
Poi dal fiotto di cenere

Salgono i venti autunni,

Un suono non ti renda
qual d'incrinata brocca
percossa!;

di sonagliere.
La dubbia dimane

Ricordi la lucertola
ferma sul masso brullo;
te insidia giovinezza,
quella il lacciòlo d'erba del
fanciullo.

³⁸¹ Almansi and Merry, *Eugenio Montale*, pp. 23-24.

La tua gaiezza impegna già il futuro
ed un crollar di spalle
dirocca

T'alzi e t'avanzi sul ponticello

il tuo profilo s'incide
contro uno sfondo di perla.

poi ridi,

Ti guardiamo noi della razza
di chi rimane a terra.

i fortilizî
del tuo domani oscuro.

esiguo, sopra il gorgo che stride:

Esiti a sommo del tremulo asse,

e come spiccata da un vento
t'abbatti fra le braccia
del tuo divino amico che t'afferra.

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This is not intended as a comprehensive bibliography of all publications by or on Montale, but rather as a selection of those most relevant to the present study. For a more complete bibliography of Montale's works and of critical studies on Montale, see Francesca Castellano, and Sofia D'Andrea, eds, *Bibliografia degli scritti critici su Eugenio Montale (1925-2008)* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2012).

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