

Ungaretti: The Man and the Poet

By Giusy C. Oddo

(Assoc. Professor Emerita University of British Columbia)

At the turn of the century the poetic scene in Italy was still dominated by the powerful personalities of Carducci, Pascoli, and D'Annunzio. They exercised a strong literary and spiritual influence up until World War I. While Carducci still gave voice to romantic moods framed in rigid classical forms, Pascoli and D'Annunzio expressed the myths of European Decadentism, where hints of a more modern poetry can be found in certain forms of interiorization, in the allusive tension of the word, in the free flow of the imagination that breaks up the traditional poetic syntax. Nevertheless, the young generation was growing intolerant of so much rhetoric, of the nauseous sentimentalism of Pascoli, of the lofty tones of D'Annunzio's superman morality and esthetics.

The first signs of weariness and exhaustion of the sentiments can be seen in the tones of the so-called "Crepuscolare" poetry, a term perfectly suited to a poetic language that marks the twilight of a whole world. Corazzini and Gozzano, just to mention the major crepuscolari, are, as someone said, "men without any myths" who with the fine irony of their purposely subdued and prosaic language, corrode the temple of august literature upheld by the great masters. After them the artless use of the poetic word will no longer be possible.

As in Mahler for music, so also in D'Annunzio for poetry, the decadent potential of the medium of expression had reached a complete semantic saturation. One could go no further. One could only destroy in order to start anew. Music moves toward the new dodecaphonic tonalities of Schönberg and Stravinsky, painting toward Cubism, and in poetry, as T. S. Eliot says, the poet will have to perform surgery "in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into its meaning." An echo of the Futurist battle launched in Paris by Marinetti from the pages of *Le Figaro*. With his 1912 MANIFESTO TECNICO DELLA LETTERATURA FUTURISTA, he proposed the destruction of the poetic language in favor of a new syntax of "parole in libertà (free words), joined in ever deeper and distant analogical associations.

The new generations of Italian poets were ready and eager to join in this drive for innovation. They formed vanguard movements and founded literary reviews, widening with each year the horizons of their poetry. From 1908 to 1916, the Florentine literary review *La Voce* produced the first examples of what was to be the new poetry, an expression of a new language common to all the arts, more responsive to the fast pace of modern life. In the eyes of the beholder reality was, in fact, losing the solid certainty of the Positivist era. In its constant elusive fluidity, it could only be captured in quick vague impressions. This was also the moment of the musical impressionism of Debussy, of the kaleidoscopic reality of Pirandello. And so also in poetry the Vociani discovered in the "fragment" the possibility of a verbal impressionism. As Ardengo Soffici states, poetry - similar to painting and music - breaks with conventional forms in order to "draw closer to the fluidity of life, to its impressions." The poet must "arrange his words as a painter does his colors."

Ungaretti was maturing his poetic personality in this general search for expression. He came in contact with Futurism in Paris, and published his first verses in the literary review *Lacerba*. But if his poems betrayed echoes of the proposed new techniques, he quickly left behind the polemics on poetry in order to write it. His rejection of traditional forms, his

search for the essence of the word, were in fact motivated in him by an ethical need even before a stylistic one. The poetic expression became in Ungaretti a measure of the mystery, the very essence of reality. Hence the need to free the word from its conventional superstructures so that it might regain its original pristine form and become the voice of a metaphysical anguish. The poet broke the traditional meter and verse in order to free the syllables in music. "Music" - as he himself says - "that brings us to a point where, dissolving in mystery, poetry can . . . reveal itself in all its artlessness." ¹ This is quite far from the ironic conversational tone of the Crepuscolari as well as from the aridity of the Futurists and the impressionism of the Vociani. Only a great poet could, in fact, bring to real life that "lyrical fragment" which other Italian poets had attempted to achieve in vain. In the twilight of traditional values, be it life or art, it is up to those of greater talent and sensitivity to decree the end of a world and the birth of a new one.

While there is no doubt that every poetic creation is a personal expression, even the most original manifestation presupposes a long gestation and cannot prescind from the influences of a common effort. Ungaretti's search for the mystical value of the written word shows that he was aware of the path already taken by Baudelaire and Mallarmé, more than of Italian influences. One should not forget that, in fact, Ungaretti's cultural formation from his very first school years in Alexandria, Egypt, where he was born in 1888, was profoundly French. When, in 1912, he left his native city, it was to go and study in Paris, where he attended courses at the Sorbonne and at the Collège de France, and had Henry Bergson among his great teachers. In Paris he plunged with all the enthusiasm of a young student in the cultural and artistic excitement of that period, and established one of his most significant friendships with Apollinaire, with whom he engaged in an important debate on the new poetics. "To find a word means to penetrate in one's darkest recess, without upsetting nor being able to uncover its secret," the poet would write. In Mallarmé's works he was nourished by the essential, dense and mysterious tone of the French poet; in Baudelaire he followed all the dizzying possibilities, down to the abysmal silence:

*When I find
in this silence of mine
a word
it thrusts into my very being
like an abyss*

(Farewell)

Ungaretti said that for Mallarmé the universe was the sonnet he dreamed of writing. To reduce the universe in words, this was the lesson Ungaretti learned from the French masters of symbolism.

If, as Ezra Pound says, "great poetry is simply language filled with all its possible meanings," there is no doubt that Ungaretti deserves a place of honor in the "great poetry" of our time. His message is the most dense and expressive imaginable. He breaks and isolates the word until it is reduced to a mere tone-color, these same sound echoes becoming then a new semantics. Beyond the rational, literal "meaning," poetry emanates a "sense," that is, a type of knowledge that escapes reason. Such primal poetry annuls the distance between word and object, between word and image, its sense being captured in a spark of intuition. The poetic discourse is achieved through the syntax of images and the symbolic mediations of

sounds, which go beyond the linguistic syntax of the sentence and add innumerable echoes to the phrases.

The ambiguity, rather than being a negative element, reveals the creative capacity of the new poetic language. When in 1936, the critic Flora defined this new type of poetry as "hermetic," Ungaretti will be considered its founder, since he was the first to show how to enhance the expressive value of the word, giving it the most subtle of meanings. Among the great poets of Hermetism one must also include Montale, just slightly younger, followed by Quasimodo. Hermetic poetry has brought the metaphorical character of poetic language to its highest potential through the complicated mechanism of analogies:

*A parapet of breeze
tonight on which to lean
my melancholy*

(Tonight)

The metaphor assumes a fundamental role in defining reality, and becomes the bridge between the plane of reality and that of the unknown:

*Between a flower plucked
and one proffered
the ineffable nothingness*

(Eternal)

The ever less rational poetic discourse slips towards an abyss where reason cannot reach; towards that zone of mystery which, as the critic Stefano Agosti observes, "Form alone, not the concept, manages to rip into:"

*The poet plumbs it and to the light
then rises with his songs
and scatters them*

(The Buried Harbor)

This poem (which gives the title to the first collection of poems of 1916) alludes to the legendary port thought to pre-date the founding of Alexandria, and to have been lying beneath its waters for thousands of years. A symbol of the mythical secrets of vanished civilizations, here it becomes the abyss of the mystery which the poet must reach in order to return from it with its drop of ineffable truth:

*Of this poetry
I'm left with the emptiness
of an endless secret*

(The Buried Harbor)

Ungaretti's experience follows the mystical tradition of Dante and Rimbaud. The ineffable mystery is expressed in the evocative contradiction of that empty and yet "endless secret." In fact, only silence can fall upon revelation. "A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa," says Dante in the same instant in which his "mente fu percossa" by the "fulgore" of the divine vision. So also Rimbaud becomes lost the moment he has his visions of the mystery. The poet "arrive à l'Inconnu, et quand, affolé, il finirait par perdre l'intelligence de ses

visions, il les a vues." The revelation is more mysterious than the mystery itself. To reveal does not mean to reduce the concept to intelligible terms, for the mystery escapes reason and the rational word. This confirms a reversal of the creative process, as Agosti has brilliantly understood. The critic points out that it is not, as it had been traditionally conceived, "a progression from a dark and amorphous nucleus towards the conscious clarity of the form" (see Croce). Rather, in the poetic creation it is the rational content that is urged towards the secret irrationality of the form. The conscious thought is thus enriched with echoes and meanings which might better contain the ineffable. And so, through Ungaretti's technique of "rapid and continuous exchange of properties among the different parts of speech," the poet discovers the hidden sense of reality, gives significance to the world, nay, he creates it. "C'est le monde des mots qui crée le monde des choses," as Lacan says.

* * *

In spite of its abstract and decidedly anti-narrative tone, the poetic works of Ungaretti are markedly autobiographical in character. The brief moments that signify his profoundly human experiences over half a century of existence come together to form the poem of a life. When he collected all his poems for his complete works published by Mondadori, Ungaretti himself pointedly indicated that he wanted them to be "the book" of the "life of a man," which, in fact, became its title. Starting from the poet's direct and personal experience, the poem expands to embrace Everyman's life, poetry being the "discovery of the human condition in its essence," as Ungaretti explains.

The first experience which marked the young poet was that of the war when, already on his way back to Egypt, he was convinced by the interventionist propaganda in Italy to go and fight as an enlistee in the trenches on the Carso front. As a result, his pure poetry had to contend then and there with a reality of mud and blood. But he will also discover how it is precisely the war which "forces the human soul to strip itself naked." That powerful need to give a sense of urgency to his poetry acquired, therefore, and above all, a psychological motivation.

Gone to war as a volunteer, induced by the desperate sense of patriotism which feeds the emigrant, Ungaretti never fell prey, however, to the rhetoric of the period that exalted war as a heroic exploit (Futurists), or as a chance for the exaltation of the individual (D'Annunzio). He saw it rather as mass carnage, in which men die anonymously, and only by bonding as brothers do they give meaning to their death. Confined in the trenches, Ungaretti will meditate on life, he will write poetry. Amid the bombs exploding, there was no time for long sentimental effusions, only for harsh truths. The starting point for his poetic inspiration is "desperation pushed to its limits;" "Ma lampe qui sait mon agonie," as Mallarmé would say.

It is here, however, where he will listen as well to the "elan vital" of nature, and interpret the cosmic silences. The poet tries to read the signs of a lost innocence in the lights and the colors of the sky. His poetry becomes the echo of whispers from space, of mysterious voices at the very origins of the world; his poetry is the expression of a desperate religiosity re-discovered, in a "disquieting identification with the cosmic essence of things," to quote his own words. In later years, Ungaretti would recall the war period: "The object would achieve the proportions of divine certainty." He struggled against the sense of alienation by remaining "pliant to the course of a serene universe," yielding to natural forces

as the "stone polished" by the stream. In the crystal-clear skies he breathed a sense of the infinite, he searched for a moment of harmony in which perhaps man's evil might be purged within a superior order. An ascending tension, an expression of the soul expanding, becomes the typical structure of this first poetry:

*Suddenly
high above the rubble the pure
wonder
of the infinite appears*

(Vanity)

In the anguishing peril of trench life, where "through living is death atoned," the poetic meditation becomes a constant effort to capture in each single instant a measure of the eternal.

Here in the trenches, the exciting theories of Bergson followed with such passion at the Collège de France become direct experience, as the young poet carries out a re-evaluation of time and its constant flow. In the constant implacable stream of life, so as not to drown in that which Bergson defines as "the torrential flow of things," Ungaretti resorts to the mechanism of natural defense which the philosopher discovers in man: that of casting upon the moving and changing reality an ideal "veil" with which to immobilize it. For Ungaretti this will be precisely the poetic miracle that envelopes reality in a semantic and psychological net. Time is transformed into space (Bergson's "spatialized time"), in which some fixed points of reference are established in an immutable concatenation. On the pattern of succeeding events, the poet represents the duration of time as series of superimposed moments. And in the crystal-clear waters of the Isonzo, in which Ungaretti the soldier has immersed himself to cleanse his "clothes soiled by war," he sees reflected all the "rivers" of his life, "the ages" marked by them. The unstoppable flow of existence is fixed in the illusion of the poetic image:

*This is my longing
in each of them
betrayed
Now that night has come
and my life seems to be a corolla
of shadows*

(Rivers)

The "corolla of shadows" that closes this poem becomes the perfect metaphoric representation of the Bergsonian idea of time: the infinite continuum of the circle is broken and fixed in the petals of light and shadow that compose it. From that depth of the unconscious, from that deep "night," the poet draws the inspiration with which to condense in poetic language the luminous spaces of his life's images, in which he finds his own identity and historical conscience.

Hence the importance the theme of memory assumes in Ungaretti's poetry. Memory still within Bergsonian terms, that is, not as the nostalgic regression from present to past, but on the contrary, as progress from the past to the present. The most recessed memories recalled form the substratum of the present perception, become the images that express the current

poetic moment. By a process of concentration, the memory gathers in a single instant the infinite number of small events and condenses in one word the entire span of one's life:

*I recalled
the ages of my life
These are my rivers*

*These are
my rivers*

(Rivers)

The entire poetic phase of Allegria is built on a continuous dualism, and on the tension generated between contrasting elements. Underneath it all there is the temporal tension, while, as we have seen, the creative act fixes the illusory moment between the "before" and the "after:"

*Forsaken in this sinkhole
that has the weariness
of a circus
before or after the show*

(Rivers)

This is also a metaphoric expression of the very real experience of the moments of truce during the course of the war. Contrasting states of mind take poetic form in the game of opposition between calm and storm, day and night, darkness and light, scream and murmur, death and life, while the soul of the young poet ("a soul for slings and terrors," as he defines himself) struggles between mud and innocence in the horrors of war, beneath the limpid skies of the Dolomites. This moment of conflict extends to include the vaster and more decisive encounter between two opposite worlds. In fact, both Africa and Europe lay claim to this first formative experience of the young Ungaretti.

When Ungaretti left his native city of Alexandria in Egypt, he left behind the vastness of the African deserts in order to immerse himself for the first time in the history of his origins and his cultural roots. It was the moment of passage from the innocence of childhood to the mature awareness of himself and of life:

*This is the Nile
which saw me
born and grow
and burn with vague yearnings
upon its sweeping lands*

*This is the Seine
in whose murky waters
I steeped myself
and found myself*

(Rivers)

His childhood nights had been soothed by desert voices: the barking of wild dogs, the

chants of the Bedouins. An experience that left a permanent mark on Ungaretti's soul and poetry. He breathed the "fierce eroticism" of that climate of desert sand and sea, as he himself tells us: "Everything is burning-hot, everything is annulled in a single yellow color where the horizon line between earth and sky disappears." His first knowledge was shaped by the illusion of mirages, created by the blinding desert light that obliterates everything, only to fill the void with new forms. Hence, his poetry made of voids and mirages. In his voyage toward Europe, the mirage will take the shape of Italy, "the promised land." Only by knowing his soul was shaped in the infinite freedom of African spaces, can we understand completely the constant yearning for the infinite that underlies the war poetry of *Allegria*, that need to find once more the vast expansion of the desert in the Alpine skies. In a Bergsonian way, then, his perception of the new world he discovered was conditioned by his memory of Africa. All the poems in *Allegria* issue from the subtle interweaving of two worlds, two landscapes, two experiences, of which one underpins and illuminates the other:

*Heaven's blush
awakens an oasis
in the nomad of love*

(Sunset)

* * *

Following the contemplative state beyond space and time achieved in *Allegria*, Ungaretti's poetic expression discovers a new rapport with human experience in the investigation of the "seasons" of time. In *A Sense of Time*, the collection of poems written between 1919 and 1935, Africa becomes even more distant:

*I saw
my city vanishes
leaving
briefly
in the dusky air
of lights a crescent
there suspended*

(Silence)

For Ungaretti his world had now become identified with France, where he married, and with Italy, where he took up residence in Rome in 1920. That sense of time without limitation, still indestructible, implied by the transient pyramids, by a millenary civilization, was now transformed in a historic time, marked by the signs of different civilizations superimposed over the centuries; this was a new expression of the Bergsonian flow and change which man vainly tries to oppose by raising the fragile dams of his monuments ("He defies decay by raising tombs").

The constant change of the Mediterranean seasons is superimposed on the unbroken landscape of the African perspective. For the first time the poet bears witness to the transition from the blooms of spring to the ice and snows of winter. The natural seasons, a parallel of the human ones, transform time in a closed parabola, that brings the inevitable

wearing away of all things ("il consumarsi senza fine di tutto"). An awareness, then, of the destructive forces of nature, hence of death as the natural consequence of a cycle. Beauty is no longer contemplated for beauty's sake, but is associated with time and its own decline. A shadow passes over the colors of human existence, a sense of apprehension makes the joys of love feel a slight shiver.

A Sense of Time begins precisely from the awareness of the impossibility to attain the absolute. The negation of the present, the impossibility to stop it and to expand it in time, leads the poet to reclaim it by allowing it to rejoin the Bergsonian flow, and reconnecting it to the past. What had been expressed only fleetingly in *Allegría* becomes the fundamental approach in this second phase of his poetic experience. If human temporality unfolds in one instant which leads to the next and yet another, endlessly, then past, present, and future are all three already "written" on the spatial, horizontal plane of history, and each new moment of cognition is connected to the memory of the preceding experience. To know, then, means to remember, that is to recognize, through memory, the essence of reality; which is the mythic aspect of knowledge. Ungaretti himself vividly explains how in the poetic creation past and "perception" are superimposed in the instant in which the intuition of the present moment takes shape: ". . . a few words dropped in silence like lightning in the night, a quick cluster of images was enough to evoke in me the landscape suddenly surging to join the many others in my memory." We could not see ("perceive") and understand if we had not already within us the idea of that reality, that is, the recollection of it. A neo-idealistic and Platonic position which shaped his philosophical outlook, as Ungaretti himself confesses. Memory allows the surfacing of "recollections which await in the deepest part of our subconscious," it materializes into reality the objects recalled "from the depths of space or from the mists of time. " But if it were merely a plunge in the subjective time of memory, a purely personal vision of things would result. Hence the need to return to the primordial, mythical memory. Poetry will speak then at the same time a subjective and a universal language.

This meditation on the theme of memory compels Ungaretti to bring his poetic form back into the traditional mainstream, "the millenary history of the industrious and dramatic people to which we belong." As the critic Carlo Bo puts it, Ungaretti's poetic parabola became a "progress toward the past."

The same love for words, that desire to study and extract all their potential that had made him create the "poetics of signifiers" in which the word vibrated in its naked isolation, now brings the poet to immerse himself in the complexities of D'Annunzio's syntax and to enrich the word in baroque amphibolism, familiarizing himself with its technical difficulties by enthusiastically translating Blake, Góngora, and the sonnets of Shakespeare. The words are no longer "dropped in silence like lightning in the night," but are rather fused in a new rhythmic arrangement. Nonetheless, if blank spaces between words have now disappeared, the poetic intensity is still brought out by the silence between phrases, by the intensification of the syllables, by the sudden analogical associations.

It should be made clear at this point that Ungaretti's reference to the past does not mean at all a slavish return to the mainstream of tradition through imitation of the classics. Petrarch and Leopardi are examined as the original creators of the Italian poetic language. Ungaretti restores the poetic word within its history in order to capture all the echoes of meaning with which it has been enriched by literary tradition. In this process Ungaretti discovers and clarifies the difficulties that the modern poet encounters in trying to express

the voice of his own time. His task is that of overcoming the temporary

meanings of the word, linked to a particular historical period, and of capturing it in its emblematic and perennial meanings, its most universal essence. Thus, Ungaretti goes back in history to find and extract "gli emblemi" which give meaning to our earthly existence: the "eternal emblems, names, pure evocations" of Ofelia D' Alba.

Once again, then, we find the poet in the footsteps of Plato, searching for the archetype, for the primordial innocent ideal moment before it is corrupted by history:

*How sweet the world
Must have been before man*

(Prayer)

The word becomes the sign of the absolute, "L' absolu dans les signes" of Mallarmé. For Ungaretti, language becomes man's final salvation, the only level in which one can fight against the chaos and give back an order to the universe: "Poetry's greatest aspiration is to achieve through words the miracle of a world reborn to its original innocence." Ungaretti's poetry becomes a hymn to Bergsonian freedom and creativity with which the French philosopher had launched a re-examination of time in order to break the shackles imposed on man by historical determinism. In *A Sense of Time* the poetic miracle of the constant transition from memory to innocence, from a sense of time to creative freedom, is achieved.

* * *

From his very first poems, a metaphysical tension is clearly evident in the Ungarettian inspiration, as the poet tries to achieve a communion between his individual soul and the universal one. We have seen how this process is accomplished in *Allegría* in his desire to fuse with nature, which recalls Emerson:

If man would be alone, let him look at the stars.

To which Ungaretti's verses seem to be a counterpoint:

*And terrified
the creatur
stares
and welcome
dewdrops of stars*

(Reawakenings)

Like Emerson, Ungaretti seems to be "standing on the bare ground, (his) head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space. "According to Emerson, this immersion in nature is the first step toward a union with God: "The first step to take is to get in touch with nature. . . so as to feel in harmony with it . . . in the woods we return to reason and faith." So also the young Ungaretti aspired to discover himself "a pliant part of the universe," while he felt rising within him questions about God. His youthful poems already contained the first signs of a religious crisis that will come to a head in the *Hymns of A Sense of Time*. Then, they were only sporadic outcries that fell back into the void:

*But my shout
strike
like lightning
the heaven's
muted bell*

*They plunge back
down in fright*

(Solitude)

It is only after reading Pascal and coming in contact with Christian theologians that this vague pantheism will lead the poet, by now a mature man, to a debate about God in which the mystic impulse is subjected to the rigors of the intellect. The hymn "Pity" is one of the most intense expressions of the passionate temperament of the poet who rebels against all limitations. There is a biblical eloquence in the rhythmic alternating of questions, followed by pauses of silence of a man "tired of [his] voiceless screams." Pauses that seem to emphasize the silence of God as well. And the poet struggles against the void filling it with the baroque richness of the word. Man in his despair "is alone with himself," but his poetry acquires a choral value of all of humanity which suffers and struggles in the absence of God. And if the poet pities humanity, he also knows that materialism and pride have blinded the spirit of mankind and drawn it away from God. This poetic moment of Ungaretti confirms the definition that Yeats gives of poetry: "the social gesture of a man alone."

* * *

The year 1936 marks yet another dramatic change in the life of Ungaretti: he moved to Brazil where he had been offered the Chair in Italian Literature at the University of San Paolo. After *A Sense of Time*, and just as his poetry was moving toward a calm maturity, the brutal intrusion of "history" in the "myth" occurred, causing a lacerating break in his life and in his poetry. His voyage toward *La Terra promessa*, the poem begun in 1932, is interrupted by the experience of Grief, marked by a series of tragic events beginning with the death of his nine-year-old son in Brazil. At this point, his poetic word is no longer able to express itself in "pure evocation;" it is petrified in "a rock of screams:"

*I have lost everything of my childhood
And never again will I be able
To lose myself in a scream.*

(I Have Lost Everything)

Thus opens *Grief*, which includes the poems written between 1937 and 1944. The poet moves from "death meditated" in *A Sense of Time* to death suffered, and isn't even able to rise to the paradoxical "allegria" experienced among the "shipwrecks" of his youthful years.

Nature with a capital N enters Ungaretti's poetry as the new protagonist. In point of fact, the "metaphysical" character of his poetry in *Allegria* had deprived its ambients of any "physicality." Nature had then become an abstract opportunity for a state of pure meditation. Equally allusive was Nature in *A Sense of Time*, where it was rich with literary

echoes but never descriptive. Not so in Grief. Here Nature becomes a living "physical" force, a personified one, the one that "shattered" his "aerial child." No longer is it the reassuring nature of Allegria, with which to feel as one. Instead, Ungaretti discovers the primeval violence at its origins. Predominant now is the daunting Brazilian landscape: virgin immense Nature; theatre of the futile human struggle between Reason and Chaos in which man's fragility is destined to succumb. Once again the Ungarettian word is unleashed in all its baroque fury to depict a universe that has lost its prerogative to harmony, and has been revealed instead as the origin itself of those primitive destructive forces that have brought about the chaos. The baroque becomes the expression of the Brazilian delirium, a sign of chaotic saturation and of "horror vacui" at one and the same time. A treacherous jungle that has opened the abyss of death beneath the "light dancing feet" of his child.

In an interesting paper on the diversity of lands and peoples, the French historian Michelet states: "Toutes les patries sont chacune pour les autres, par leurs diversités, un enseignement, une 'éducation,' un moyen de se dépasser, quelque chose que nous ne sommes pas, mais que nous aurions intérêt à être en plus de ce que nous sommes." In spite of the tragedy suffered, Ungaretti's humanistic nature succeeded in turning his stay in South America into precisely that source of teaching and spiritual enrichment expressed by Michelet. Many years later, Ungaretti himself would explain how his "encounter" with Brazil had been "very important," so much so that he claimed to,

have four motherlands: Egypt, because that's where I learned the secret of desert and light, because it's where the only valid images are those created by the blinding glare of the sun; Italy, because I am from Lucca, of old Tuscan stock; France, because I was shaped in France together with all those who have been the protagonists of today's European poetry and art; finally Brazil, because it's the one country where the clash between nature and reason, as Leopardi says, or between memory and innocence, as I dare to say, seemed most evident to me.

Every country, then, represents an enrichment of the soul and the spirit, every country a poetic experience. Each country, however, reconfirms the ironic paradox of discovering himself ever more "expatriate": "and I always leave a stranger" (Wanderer).

In 1942, for the second time, Ungaretti faced the tragedy of war as he made his lonely return to Italy and to an occupied Rome. His private sorrow for the death of his son, and then of his brother, became now a collective and historic sorrow. Having suffered the loss of loved ones, he was now witnessing the collapse of the symbols of civilization. Quite compelling is the passage from the volcanic impetuousness of the Brazilian landscape to the tame beauty of the polished stones of Rome, stones imbued with history and art which now are thrown nonetheless into confusion by man's barbarity, deaf to the lessons of a millenary tradition of beauty. Now that history presses inexorably, the refuge offered by myth is useless. Pain remains the only stimulus for knowledge and for poetic inspiration. The 'fateful' Tiber, symbol of the past and present of Rome, is added to the "rivers" of Allegria, but "the night" the darkness of life, spreads at this point until it embraces the darkness of human history.

The consideration of evil induces the poet to take up once more the religious conflicts broached in A Sense of Time, but now the dialogue with God results in the rediscovered comfort of faith, whose most intense expression is "You Too Are My River." Ungaretti is

re-proposing a Christian humanism. Human dignity, according to the poet, can be redeemed only through the mystery of God incarnate. In the end, poetry once more helps to free him from his sorrow.

* * *

The themes most cherished by Ungaretti, the very essence of his life and of his poetry found new forms in the unfinished poem *The Promised Land*, an allegory of the life of the poet and of human existence in general; a pilgrimage towards a promised land which will turn into a land of ruins.

Written over a period of twenty years (1932-1950), it bears witness to the poet's reached maturity. The end of "*Vita d'un uomo*," the long journey through desert, sea, war, Brazilian jungle, and, naturally, his writings.

The different facets that the pilgrim assumed through the stages of his journey are here personified in the characters of Aeneas, Palinuro, and Dido. The Virgilian hero is the young, exuberant wanderer in search of the Italic land, the place of enchanting beauty promised by the gods. He is the poet himself in his youth, sailing toward his ancestral mythical land, and all his mirages. A voyage of the mind as well, undertaken through Aeneas' wise coxswain, Palinuro, tenaciously focused on the stars in order to reach a place of harmony and peace, the land of the mythical word. Palinuro gives voice to the poetic experience, to the experience of a mind which lives constantly in a precarious balance between dream and reality, between illusion and action, until, falling prey to sleep, he will find his death and be transformed into a rock. His figure of a wise old man counters the naive youthfulness of Aeneas. It is he who testifies how beauty is linked to human history, to earthly images and, therefore, how beauty is "only illusively eternal." Nevertheless, he does not stop dreaming, and Aeneas surrenders to his spell, the spell of imagination, of the ability to keep the dream alive.

Aeneas is youth, naivete, beauty, and he finds himself between Dido and Palinuro, experiencing the charm of both: that of the spirit and that of the flesh. Dido is in fact the symbol of carnal passion. Her splendor already in decline, she represents the "autumn" of life, contemplating in Aeneas the last thrills of fleeting youth and beauty before the inevitable parting and death. The departure of Aeneas inspires in her the poetry of memory. The theme of memory is thus developed as a vital element which tries to arrest corruption, to freeze immortal beauty. And in the solitude of her abandonment, memory becomes the illusion of safety from shipwreck.

Once more memory becomes the medium. But, warns the poet, if the hero Aeneas should reach the Promised Land "the ghosts of his preceding experience would rise up in his memory to bear witness of how the present one would end, and so on with all the rest, until man, at the end of times, will be allowed to know the real Promised Land." To reach the "promised land" means, in actual fact, to cross the desert which now becomes "the desert of time" which has corrupted everything, leaving just a void. A pilgrimage among the ruins, the ruins of Carthage. The "promised land" takes on more and more the appearance of a "lost paradise" which comes not after the desert, but before it:

*We cross the desert with remnants
Of some former sign in mind,*

Of the Promised Land
No one living knows more.

(Last Cantos
for the Promised Land)

* * *

The poet's shout of "Grief" is continued in *A Cry and Landscapes*, which collects poems from 1939 to 1952, and it appears as an appendix to the preceding collection. Still dominant, in fact, is the Brazilian landscape and it is centered around the shout of pain of the dying Antonietto: "*You cried out: I can't breathe.*"

It is significant how the "shout" becomes the symbol of this final moment of Ungaretti's poetic parabola. The "shout," as the French critic G. Picon has so aptly observed, becomes for Ungaretti the very definition of poetry: "*Elle est cri, cri naissant, cri poussé, echo du cri, dialectique, organisation du cri. Cri: c'est la définition même de la poésie, selon le poète (un unanime cri).*"

Already in *Allegria* his first poems were often bordering between the word and the shout, as the young poet tried to establish his own existence, to give voice to his own desperation. The shout of the poetic word reaches out as the only consolation until, in the end, finding itself powerless in the face of the tragedy of human history, it becomes petrified in the poet's throat:

Life stuck in my throat
Is no more to me
Than a rock of screams

(I Have Lost Everything)

While the poet is crushed by the weight of his experience as a man, his "poetic shout" undergoes throughout his work a gradual reduction of its semantic field to the very threshold of silence. The voyage continues, nevertheless, toward other existential and poetic experiences, toward "ever more metaphysical deserts," toward the final poems - by now brief flashes among long silences - before dying out forever in the "final silence."

In his last years Ungaretti was trying to forget his loneliness in constant travels. The *Old Man's Notebook* (1952-1960) is the diary of anguish for the waning of life, as the awareness of the transiency and vanity of it all deepened. Still, the cruelty of times now gone was countered with the last throbs of an indomitable heart, unwilling to renounce life. Forlorn echoes of distant youthful passions can be seen reflected in the platonic exchange of "elective affinities" with the young poet Bruna Bianco. "Dialogue" is a song; for two voices in which her vibrant freshness acts as a counterpoint to the weary tone of his voice, for whom happiness can now be only contemplated beyond mortal boundaries.

Ungaretti's poetry covers the most tragic period of our century including the experience of the two World Wars. And yet his song has been able to filter the tragedy through the lightness of the heavens, and in it the soul breathes a cosmic breath. His style, absolutely unique and personal, has become the general sign of an epoch.

Upon the death of the poet in 1970, Giacinto Spagnoletti declared that "an epoch that had believed in poetry as a necessity of life" had come to a close. And as Gianna Manzini

has so aptly pointed out, Ungaretti's poetry "adds to life. . . that which is missing, and of which we are unconsciously thirsty."

It could as well add much to the life of today's youth, lost as it is in a hallucinating present, devoid of memory.

“Ungaretti: The Man and the Poet” by Giusy C. Oddo was published as “Afterword” of the book *A Major Selection of the Poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti. A bilingual edition translated by Diego Bastianutti*. Toronto: Exile Editions, 1997, and is reproduced in “Bibliosophia” with kind authorization.

September 1st, 2010