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“BIG BANG O ALTRO”

About the Beginning and the End in Eugenio Montale’s Poetry

ABSTRACT: In Eugenio Montale’s poetry of the “second season” (*Satura, Diari, Quaderno, Altri versi*: 1960-1980 ca.) the topic of the Origin and End of the Universe, the World, and Man is pervasive and almost obsessive. The poet vets scientific hypotheses (Big Bang, Big Crunch, steady and static Universe), religious narratives (Creation, Apocalypse, Judgement, and the “Four Last Things”), ancient myths (Ekpyrosis and/or Ragnarökr-Götterdämmerung) in a highly personal and original way. His style, linguistic register and lexicon are deliberately lower; the tone more colloquial and ordinary, ironic, irreverent, debunking, and light-hearted (unlike the higher seriousness of his first three collections *Ossi-Occasioni-Bufera*). The effects are of intentional de-mythization, parody, trivialization, and mockery. Nonetheless, Montale never falters in his punctiliousness, intellectual honesty and rigor, and rare prescience. His attitude mixes Stoic acceptance, superior detachment and deep involvement, anti-dogmatism, irony, and self-irony. His main instrument is the word, the expression of a lucid intelligence and of a stringent thought, in an intellectual and verbal *tour de force* which sees the poet with his head high in his personal “fight with the Angel.”

KEYWORDS: Eugenio Montale; Beginning and End of the Universe; Cosmology; Final Judgement; Parody; Satire; Irony.

Introduction

Eugenio Montale’s poetry, in particular that dating from the so-called “seconda stagione” (*Satura, Diario del ’71 e del ’72, Quaderno di quattro anni* and *Altri versi*)¹ which

¹ The definition “seconda stagione” refers to Montale’s poetic (“poietic”) phase beginning with *Satura* (1963) and ended by *Altri versi* (1980). Of course, Montale’s more precise and sophisticated critics such as Romano Luperini, Francesco De Rosa, Riccardo Castellana, and Alberto Bertoni establish further subdivisions: “nel secondo grande tempo della poesia montaliana, breve (rispetto al primo) quanto fecondo, sono reperibili delle scansioni che consentono di distinguere con profitto un quarto capitolo (*Satura e Diario del ’71 e del ’72*) ed un quinto (*Quaderno di quattro anni, Altri versi*; ma il *Quaderno di quattro anni* occupa una posizione intermedia, partecipando in qualche modo dell’uno e dell’altro)” (De Rosa 2000, 395; also 414-415, 421. [“in the second great phase of Montale’s poetry, a short one (in comparison to the first) as much fruitful, one may trace articulations which allow to profitably distinguish a fourth chapter (*Satura* and *Diario of ’71 and ’72*) and a fifth one (*Quaderno di quattro anni, Altri versi*; but *Quaderno di quattro anni* ranks an intermediate position, somehow partaking in both,” my translation]. Castellana stresses the “historical” focus of Montale’s poetry: “La ricchezza di riferimenti concreti alla realtà italiana degli Anni Sessanta ... spiega anche, in buona parte, le scelte stilistiche del quarto Montale” (Castellana 2019, 103). [“The abundance of substantial references to Italian reality of the Sixties ... largely accounts for the stylistic solutions of the ‘fourth’ Montale,” my translation].

approximately corresponds to the last twenty years of his poetic and biographic parable (1960-1980 ca.), emblemizes in an original and exemplary way the poet’s approach to, and view about the themes of Beginning and End in mythologies, religions, philosophies and science, the dialectic Chaos/Cosmos, the gradual emerging of an ordered world – this latter characteristic having always been questioned by the skeptical Montale – and the non-representability and ineffability of the state of the ‘pre-Universe’, ‘pre-World’, and ‘pre-Time.’ As a logical consequence of the End, there follows the theme, shared by various religions, beliefs, and philosophies of any age and any part the world, of the final judgement and reward: the Four Last Things (I Novissimi): Death, Judgement, Hell, or Paradise as in Christian theology and doctrine.

From his very poetic debut, Montale never ceased to enquire these ‘big themes’ (Barile 2003, 400; Bertoni 2019, 127 – and also 122, 124, 129, 133; De Rosa 2000, 400, 407, 415-416) through an inescapable and tireless confrontation and ‘debate’ with the Absolute, a kind of personal ‘fight with the Angel’ to recur to a metaphor from the Biblical episode of the night fight between Jakob and the unknown envoy from JHWH (*Gen.* XXXII: 24-34). It is not negligible that Montale spent his *Lehrjahre* (beginning of the XX c.) in Genoa, a city where theological, doctrinal, and philosophical disputations were quite frequent, especially characterized by the presence of theological Modernism, the heretical stance condemned by Pope Pius X in his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907). “Genova era piena di ‘modernisti’” remembers the poet (Montale 1976, 602).²

However, this essay is focused on the poetry of the Sixties and Seventies of the XX c. in connection to the above-mentioned topics. Its themes, language, style, register, lexicon, and tone look ‘lower’, colloquial, ordinary, and the approach and attitude as

Bertoni looks more ironical and, in a sense, apparently distances himself from the critical debate: “A mano a mano che l’opera in versi di Montale continua a mostrare la sua energia propulsiva nel cuore del nuovo secolo, sembra sinceramente ozioso numerarne a forza fasi e sviluppi, discutendo su dove finisce un preteso “quarto” Montale e dove comincino il quinto e poi eventualmente il sesto o il settimo tempo della sua scrittura poetica” (Bertoni 2019, 117). [“As Montale’s poetical work goes on showing its propelling energy in the heart of the new century, it really seems pointless to forcibly count phases and developments, arguing where an alleged ‘fourth’ Montale ends and where a fifth, and then possibly a sixth or a seventh phase of his poetic writing begins”, my translation]. Paradoxically one could think that, fortunately, the Genoese poet wrote ‘only’ seven books – even though Montale himself declared (1975) “ho scritto un solo libro” (Montale 1976, 606) [“I wrote only one book”, my translation] and, in “Per finire” (*Diario del ’72*) he reminded: “Non sono un Leopardi, lascio poco da ardere ... non aumentate la dose...” (Montale 1981, 508; “In Conclusion”: “I’m no Leopardi | I leave little to the fire ... don’t increase | the dose.”, Arrowsmith 2012, 535). In any case (macro-seasons and/or further subdivisions by single sylloges), it is a matter of understanding: if one considers the two macro-seasons of Montale’s poetry (*Ossi-Occasioni-Bufera*, then *Satura-Diari-Quaderno* and *Altri versi*) the term “stagione” still has its meaning; if one focuses on the single poetic collections and their specific chronology and characteristics, the above mentioned critics and their ordinal sub-divisions are obviously more precise and detailed.

² There have been various studies, and a few conferences about Montale’s religiosity and his ‘personal’ Christian and Catholic belief/faith, but the specific themes of Beginning and End in his poetry have never been investigated, rather touched upon *en passant*. See Casella 2015 and its bibliography; De Rosa 2000, 397; Bertoni 2019 *passim*.

regards the ‘big themes’ more familiar, unceasingly ironic, and often light-hearted in comparison to the higher seriousness of his first three sylloges *Ossi-Occasioni-Buferà* (Barile 2003, 399; De Rosa 2000, *passim*; Castellana 2019, 93, 103; Zublena 2019, 182-185; Luperini 1986, 181, 202-204). Nonetheless the poet is stern, unyielding, and prescient; as in Alberto Bertoni’s words, Montale’s are “... testi che ... sono tuttora attuali, per non dire profetici.” (Bertoni 2019, 129).³ He never falters in his punctiliousness and intellectual honesty, but simply speaks in a freer and lighter way – “with hilaritas”, to use a phrase from Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* (Pound 1996, 736).⁴

Montale’s interest and speculative enquiry shift from issues of dogmatic theology – the roots of faith, early heresies in particular Nestorianism (Casella 2015) – to “domande senza risposta”, to borrow one of his famous titles in *Quaderno di quattro anni*: origin and end of the Universe, the World, Man; essence, existence, and function of the divine and its power, will, and interest to intervene in the events of History and of man and, indeed, final Judgement (De Rosa 2000, 397; Bertoni 2019, 133, 136). Such themes are pervasive and almost obsessive, recurring as they do in many poems both directly and occasionally. One could suppose that such an attitude – from a spiritual and psychological point of view – might be ascribed to the old age of the poet (and of any man) close to the end of his life; Laura Barile defines this final stage of Montale’s poetry it as “seconda [parte] memoriale” (Barile 2003, 401),⁵ and Romano Luperini labels *Diari-Quaderno-Altri versi* as “... i tre libri della senilità” (Luperini 1986, 233, 238).⁶

But this is not our topic which, instead, starts from the very Beginning.

Alfa

In the beginning was the Word.
Superfetation of τὸ εἶν,
And at the mensural turn of time
Produced enervate Origen.
(Eliot 2015, 49)

³ “[T]exts which...are still topical, not to say prophetic”, my translation. This indisputable acknowledgment in a sense recalls, and draws on, Montale’s own statement about the poets’ foresight: “Gli avvenimenti esterni sono sempre più o meno preveduti dall’artista...” (Montale 1976, 569). “External events are always more or less foreseen by the artist”, my translation.

⁴ See Ezra Pound, *Canto* 83: “Hilaritas the virtue *hilaritas*” (Pound 1996, 548). As regards the precise identification and definition of the linguistic registers and style employed by Montale in this phase of his poetic parable, see De Rosa 2000, *passim*.

⁵ “Second part focused on memory”, my translation.

⁶ “[T]he three books of [the poet’s] senility”, my translation.

First of all, a brief necessary foreword: Montale, in his cultural tradition, in his spiritual ‘filigree’, and in his ethics (evidently of Christian origin⁷) is not a creationist and does not interpret literally the various mythological tales about Creation: they are fundamentally metaphors of the Beginning – and of the End. On the other hand, he does not incline toward scientific and/or rationalist formulations: he does refer to them within their conceptual-theoretical context and value (or acceptability) but almost constantly calling them into doubt, as in the short poem “Big Bang o altro” (whose title has been borrowed for this essay):

Mi pare strano che l’universo
sia nato da un’esplosione,
mi pare strano che si tratti invece
del formicolio di una stagnazione.

Ancora più incredibile che sia uscito
dalla bacchetta magica
di un dio che abbia caratteri
spaventosamente antropomorfici.
(Montale 1980, 531)⁸

The poet gets rid with ironical skepticism – see the adjectives “strano” ascribed to science and “incredibile” ascribed to faith: two perfectly measured and telling qualifications within the specific context and climax which characterizes them – both of the most respected cosmological theories (Big Bang and/or “steady-state”, and perhaps also “static universe” – see “formicolio di una stagnazione”) and of the theory of Creation by a divine being endowed with “caratteri | spaventosamente antropomorfici”: in the latter case also challenging and implicitly reversing (within their respective grammatical functions of subject and object) the well-known Biblical assumption: “So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him” (*Gen. I: 26-27*).⁹

The poet deals with the same theme (Big Bang) in other epigrammatic poems¹⁰ which could be defined, in the musical metaphor, as ‘variations on the (same) theme’

⁷ Montale’s *sui generis* Christian belief (and *dis*-belief) seems also strongly influenced by some aspects of Judaism and its religious, ethical, and cultural tradition, symbolism and imagery, especially in the biographical phase of his romance with Irma Brandeis and after.

⁸ “Big Bang or Something Else”: “I think it’s odd that the universe | was born from an explosion, | I think it’s odd that the alternative | is pullulating stagnation. || Even less credible is the notion | that it sprang from the magic wand | of a god whose characteristics are | frighteningly anthropomorphic.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 561). On this very poem see also Bertoni’s brief note in *ID.* 2019, 133.

⁹ As regards Montale’s ironical critique of anthropomorphizing of the image of the Biblical God, see also the “dio con barba e capelli” (“a god with beard and hair”) and “un dio (ma con la barba)” (“a god (but with a beard)”) in “Credo” (Montale 1980, 702, my translations): the typical image of traditional iconography of the Creator. See also *ID.* “Lettera da Albenga”, Montale 1982, 349-350 and De Rosa 2000, 416.

¹⁰ Bertoni most precisely stresses the epigrammatic character of these poems: “dominante epigrammatica di lunghezza ridotta ... apoftegmi . . . epigrammi . . . capacità del Montale epigrammatico di parlare

being always characterized by the tone of half-serious *divertissement*. Here are three meaningful texts:

“Il big bang dovette produrre | un rombo spaventoso | e anche inaudito perché non esistevano orecchie.” (“Il big bang dovette produrre,” Montale 1980, 643).¹¹ In this poem reappears also the above-mentioned theme of the ‘pre-World’ and ‘pre-Time’, both also implying that of the ‘pre-Man’ and the connected condition of ‘pre-experience’ (evidently still impossible to be realized). All these are states so far unrealizable (and unrealized), merely and remotely ‘conceivable’ in a dimension still un-accomplishable for a human conscience and self-awareness yet to come.

“Il grande scoppio iniziale | non dette origine a nulla di concreto. | Una spruzzaglia di pianeti e stelle, | qualche fiammifero acceso nell’eterno buio?” (“Il grande scoppio iniziale,” Montale 1980, 658).¹² Here the variation is fundamentally linguistic through the Italian corresponding form, “grande scoppio iniziale”, for the English “Big Bang.” The poet also metaphorically compares the weak twinkling of the very first celestial clusters to that of a match, the latter being one of the objects (and “objective correlatives” *à la Eliot*) dearest to him, as in the memorable finale of his “Piccolo Testamento”, the penultimate poem of *La Bufera*: “... il tenue bagliore strofinato | laggiù non era quello di un fiammifero” (Montale 1980, 267).¹³

davvero a tutti e a nome di tutti...” (Bertoni 2019, 121, 122, 126). [“Epigrammatic dominant of reduced length . . . apophthegms . . . epigrams . . . Montale’s power to really speak to everybody and for everybody . . .”, my translation].

Here I must (gladly and gratefully) also recognize De Rosa’s precision in quoting two more “epigrammatic poems” of Montale’s which had passed unnoticed to me: “Può darsi” (Montale 1980, 641) where the poet recapitulates and concentrates the themes of the strife “una bagarre di spiriti inferociti”; [“a scuffle of incensed/enraged ghosts”, my translation].

See also “una zuffa di galli inferociti,” Montale 1980, 655. [“A fight of furious cocks”, my translation], and of the condition, unknowable and unimaginable by man, “before” Time and “before” Space: “Ma tempo e spazio erano già creati?”; [“but had time and space already been created?”, my translation]; and “Quartetto” (Montale 1980, 700), which again touches upon the themes of the relativity of (chronological) time and of the “Big Bang”: “Non credo al tempo, al big bang . . .” (De Rosa 2000, 416; 419), [“I do not believe in Time, in the Big Bang . . .”, my translation].

¹¹ [“The big bang must have caused | a dreadful boom | and unheard too because there were no ears [to hear it]”, my translation].

¹² [“The great initial bang | did not originate anything concrete. | A spray of planets and stars, | some match lighted in the eternal darkness?”, my translation].

¹³ “... that faint glow catching fire | beneath was not the striking of a match.” (Arrowsmith 2021, 291) / “the thin glimmer striking down there | wasn’t that of a match.” (Galassi 1998, 407). Worth noticing Arrowsmith’s misunderstanding for the Italian adverb of place “laggiù,” meaning a great distance not necessarily connected with a “lower” place/position, translated as “beneath” which on the contrary does imply a lower position – but with reference to what, in Montale’s original, where it means “far away”? On the other hand, this is only one of the several misunderstandings – or rather real, out-and-out, and often gross mistakes due to ignorance of Italian language, of its exact lexicon, to inaccuracy of etymologies, meanings, appropriate use and agreement of gender (male-female-neuter) and relationd pronouns, and to slovenliness and lack of responsibility in the precise fulfilment of the task of the translator – which cram Arrowsmith’s translation. They range from impersonal verbs translated as reflexive verbs [p. 375],

“Se l’universo nacque | da una zuffa di gas | zuffa non zuppa allora | com’è possibile, come...” (“Se l’universo nacque,” Montale 1980, 664).¹⁴ The most remarkable feature in this poem is the untranslatable pun “zuffa di gas” (the post-Big Bang stage as hypothesized by cosmological theories) and “zuppa” (literally “soup”: another typical feature of Montale as a Ligurian *gourmet*) which, however, in its turn evokes the so-called well-know “primordial and/or pre-biotic broth”, that phase lasting ‘only’ a few billions years following the Big Bang, when physical conditions and chemical combinations began to favor the ‘climate’ for the development of the earliest and most elementary forms of organic life.¹⁵ Therefore, this only apparent pun proves that Montale is well cognizant also of the most accredited scientific hypotheses, even though he re-interprets them with sarcastic and light-hearted irony. Worth mentioning here are Ettore Bonora’s recollections of the poet’s observation during one of their conversations, when Montale explains “come verità puntuali delle sue poesie ricevano luce, se messe a confronto di recentissime teorie scientifiche” (Bonora 1983, 78).¹⁶

In “Credo” (ironically telling title) the poet wonders about the potential First Cause: “...l’Amore? Non quello che ha popolato | con un orrendo choc il cielo di stelle e pianeti” (Montale 1980, 702).¹⁷ Here Montale parodically alludes to the very last memorable line of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: “L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle.” (*Par.* XXXIII: 145)¹⁸ by reversing it through the image of “un orrendo choc.” In this brief excerpt religious dogma, Dante’s mystical vision, and scientific hypothesis seem to slightly draw near each other, even though they do not fully converge. The First Cause is defined as “Amore”¹⁹ but its essence remains unknowable and unknown. It is a theological and philosophical stance wholly coherent with Montale’s apophatic vision on the Absolute, the Creator, the First Cause, as it will be demonstrated later when dealing with the relationship between the Divine and language: “Verbum / verbum.”

Such syncretistic combination of scientific formulations and religious-mystical vision (from Dante) leads the way to further conceptual developments. In “Il principe della Festa” Montale seems to allude to the creating Word of *Genesis* “אֱלֹהִים אָמַר”²⁰, or “γεννηθήτω

to the exchange of grammatical roles and functions (subject-object and their attributes/adjectives), to the constant and insufferable use of the contraction of verbal forms preceded by personal or neutral pronouns (as not a few instances also in his translations quoted in this very essay prove), to the utter misunderstanding of the ‘real’ meaning of words used by the Italian poet in very specific biographical, historical, conceptual, semantic, and ‘local’ contexts.

¹⁴ “If the universe was born”: [“If the universe was born | from a gaseous tussle | tussle not muddle then | how is it possible, how . . .”, my translation].

¹⁵ My free translation of the pun “zuffa/zuppa” as “tussle/muddle” tries to keep at least a remote phonic resemblance through the last mute syllables “-sle” and “-dle” of the two English words.

¹⁶ [“. . . how precise verities of his poetry get light, if compared to most recent scientific theories”, my translation].

¹⁷ [“Love? Not that which crowded | through a horrendous choc the sky with stars and planets”, my translation].

¹⁸ “The Love which moves the sun and the other stars.” (transl. H.W. Longfellow).

¹⁹ Initial uppercase in Montale, unlike Alighieri’s lowercase.

φῶς”, or “Fiat Lux” respectively in the three ancient languages of the Biblical texts: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. He speculates: “Forse un eterno buio si stancò, sprizzò fuori | qualche scintilla. O un’eterea luce | si maculò trovando se stessa insopportabile” (Montale 1980, 486).²⁰ One can infer that, at the origin of Creation are, on the one hand the hypotheses of the Big Bang and/or of the ‘stationary universe’ (or ‘static’ as recalled above) in Montale’s interpretations and rewritings inspired by science; on the other hand, in his metaphor drawn from the traditional Western religion stand out *in primis* the symbolic image and imagery of Light and the theological and philosophical concept of Love – “Amor” in Dante, as stressed above – closely connected to that of “Verbum.”

And it is indeed such conception, from the Greek *incipit* of the fourth *Logion*: “ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος” (*Gv. I: i*) – whereas in Latin, a language more practical to the poet because of its etymological proximity and phonetic resemblance between Latin and Italian “verbum / verbo,” it reads like this: “In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum”, the very formula that Montale employs in the vitriolic explicit of the epigrammatic “Si risolve ben poco”:

Si risolve ben poco
con la mitraglia e col nerbo.
L’ipotesi che tutto sia un bisticcio,
uno scambio di sillabe è la più attendibile.
Non per nulla in principio era il Verbo.
(Montale 1980, 608)²¹

The parody, or/also “procedura di sconsecrazione dell’*incipit* biblico, accompagnata da uno slogan pacifista” as aptly recalled by Bertoni (Bertoni 2019, 132;²² and also see briefly Carrai 2019, 208) is developed and conveyed through the quasi-syllogism built upon the lexical and semantic misunderstanding of the words “bisticcio...scambio di sillabe”, to then conclude with the logical – and sarcastic – consequent: “Non per nulla in principio era il Verbo.”²³ One cannot exclude also a veiled allusion to the theological and doctrinal debates about the position and the semantic value (see the phrase “scambio di sillabe” of the Greek article “τὸν” in connection to “θεόν”, as in various theologians and Councils of the earliest centuries of the history of Christianity), as well as a further implicit reference to the Biblical confusion of languages which Montale explicitly exposes and unmasks in other poems. Therefore, on the one hand the poet denounces the original “bisticcio”, on the other hand he himself intentionally causes another one

²⁰ “The Lord of the Revels”: “Maybe eternal darkness got weary and showered out | a couple of sparks. Or an ethereal light, | bored with purity, spotted itself.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 509).

²¹ “Very little is resolved”: “Very little is resolved | with machine-gun and whip. | The assumption that everything’s a pun, | a syllabic confusion, is the most plausible. | Not for nothing in the beginning was the Word.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 643).

²² [“de-consecration practice of the Biblical *incipit*, joined to a pacifist slogan”, my translation].

²³ Also, in this case (as for the pun “zuffa/zuppa” previously stressed in note n. 13) the ironic rhyme at distance between “nerbo” and “Verbo” is untranslatable in English.

through the semantic interference between “Verbum” as “Logos” (uppercase initials and theological-philosophical meaning) and “verbum” as “language” (lowercase initials and literal meaning).

To emphasize the ambiguity and the unreliability of the latter one – i.e., “language” – here is the poem “Per destare dal sonno i suoi scherani”:

Per destare dal sonno i suoi scherani
 il diavolo decise d'intervenire.
 La sua aspettativa era l'armistizio: vincere
 per lui sarebbe stato un grosso impaccio.
 Se in principio era il verbo non occorre
 solo armi ma bisticci
 (di parole, s'intende). Vinca il peggiore
 ma non c'è fretta per ora.
 (Montale 1980, 825)²⁴

A mockingly apocalyptic sketch²⁵ in which the *incipit* from St. John's *Logion*, though re-formulated in hypothetical clause (“Se in principio era il verbo...”) constantly remains the source of “bisticci | (di parole...)”, to identically and ambiguously reaffirm the biting *explicit* of “Si risolve ben poco”, the poem previously examined. At the same time this latter poem foreshadows the theme of the deferral of the End, as will be shown in some texts introduced and commented upon in the following section. “Scamb[i] di sillabe” and “bisticci di parole” (one is tempted to add “and other devilish ideas” – since the devil is the topic and protagonist of this part and is, above all, the deceiver *par excellence* through the use of language) lead to the inevitable allusion to the Biblical episode of the Tower of Babel (*Gen. XI: 1-9*): the very origin of incurable “scamb[i] di sillabe” and “bisticci di parole.”²⁶ Therefore it follows an almost complete assimilation God>Verbum>Language, the constant cause of Babelish linguistic confusion (and, consequently also of semantic and, throughout the course of history, theological and doctrinal misunderstandings) as in “La lingua di Dio”:

Se dio è il linguaggio, l'Uno che ne creò tanti altri
 per poi confonderli
 come faremo a interpellarlo e come
 credere che ha parlato e parlerà
 per sempre indecifrabile e questo è
 meglio che nulla. Certo
 meglio che nulla siamo

²⁴ [“To wake up from sleep his myrmidons...”; “To wake up from sleep his myrmidons | the devil decided to intervene. | His expectation was an armistice: victory | would have been a big bother for him. | If in the beginning was the word, there was no need | of weapons only, rather puns | (on words, is agreed). Let the worse win | but there is no hurry for the moment.”, my translation].

²⁵ With its verbs in the past tense, not future.

²⁶ Paradoxically, in the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, it is God himself the responsible for the confusion of human languages; see *Gen XI: 1-8*.

noi fermi alle balbuzie. E guai se un giorno
 le voci si sciogliessero. Il linguaggio,
 sia il nulla o non lo sia,
 ha le sue astuzie.
 (Montale 1980, 445)²⁷

“Balbuzie” of the creatures VS “bisticci” and “astuzie” of the god-as-language which, in addition, remains “per sempre indecifrabile”: worth noticing the lower case for the divine (“dio”), and the already stressed apophatic (and in this case almost agnostic) theological perspective of the poet as regards the unknowability of the supreme being (cf. Casella 2015; see also Contini 1974, 98; Jacomuzzi 1978, 151-153; Luperini 1986, 208; and De Rosa 2000, 400, 416 as regards Montale’s “teologia negativa” and “lingua di Dio”).

To conclude with, in “Un tempo” the “language-as-god” (and/or vice-versa) is finally deprived of meaning and function: “... [il] linguaggio, questo dio dimidiato | che non porta salvezza perché non sa | nulla di noi e ovviamente | nulla di sé.” (Montale 1980, 518).²⁸ Also in this case the traditional characteristics of the Divine, i.e., its soteriological function in favor of fallen mankind and, even earlier, its omniscience (and knowledge of itself) are totally annihilated. Bertoni aptly remarks, stressing the importance of language: “Ed è evidente che il problema gnoseologico di fondo rimane quello di un Creatore che non può fare a meno delle sue creature per essere pensato e a sua volta creato, anche attraverso il linguaggio...” (Bertoni 2019, 130²⁹).

Omega

“This is the way the world ends [...] Not with a bang but a whimper.” (Eliot 2015, 84) singsong the “hollow men” in the close in diminuendo of the homonym poem. Montale too seems to lean toward a ‘zero degree’ solution: a concluding “whimper” rather than a great final “bang.” The Italian poet however, in his imagery, harks back to the traditional apocalyptic sources (Bertoni 2019, 133-134; De Rosa 2000, 405; 413), *in primis* the *Revelation of St. John the Divine*, together with the Norse mythology of

²⁷ “The Language of God”: “If god is language, the One who created so many | in order to mingle them later, | how can we put our questions to him, how | believe that he’s spoken, that he’ll always | speak undecodably, and that this | is better than nothing? Clearly | it’s better than nothing that we’re stuck | with stammering. And woe to us if someday | the voices were all let loose. Language, | whether it’s nothing or not, | has its wiles” (Arrowsmith 2012, 465, 467).

²⁸ “Once”: “... language, this halved divinity | who doesn’t bring us to salvation, since he knows | nothing of us and obviously | nothing of himself.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 545).

²⁹ [“It is clear that the fundamental gnoseological problem is that of a Creator that cannot do without its creatures to be conceived and, in its turn, also created through language”, my translation]. De Rosa briefly deals with this theme too, but fundamentally from a purely linguistic-semantic – and gnoseological – point of view (De Rosa 2000, 409).

Götterdämmerung and the pre-Socratic and Stoic conception of the final *Ekpyrosis*: a syncretistic blend of different religions, myths, and philosophies.

The first instance is from Norse mythology in “Götterdämmerung”:

Si legge che il crepuscolo degli Dei
stia per incominciare. È un errore.
Gli inizi sono sempre inconoscibili,
[...]
Il crepuscolo è nato quando l'uomo
si è creduto più degno di una talpa o di un grillo.
L'inferno che si ripete è appena l'anteprova
di una 'prima assoluta' da tempo rimandata
perché il regista è occupato, è malato, imbucato
chissà dove e nessuno può sostituirlo.
(Montale 1980, 322)³⁰

The appalling prophecy of the *Völuspá* about the Ragnarökkr is “de-activated” through the idea of suspension and postponement of the End, with the connivence of the one who should realize it, metaphorized by the image of the “regista . . . occupato, . . . malato, imbucato . . .” (incidentally, an appropriate allusion to the *topos* of the *Theatrum Mundi*, another typical theme of the Genoese poet).³¹

Another version of the mythology of the End, the final explosion and fire – a convergence of myth and philosophy: Götterdämmerung and Ekpyrosis – and also of scientific hypotheses (as proved later on) is also neutralized and nullified in the poem “Niente di grave”: “La crosta del mondo si chiude, com'era prevedibile | se prelude a uno scoppio [...] Ma non ci sarà scoppio.” (Montale 1980, 341).³² As in “Götterdämmerung” all is postponed, notwithstanding the vain and not-so-secret hope, suggested in “Un millenarista”, that at last may arrive “[il] piromane che affretta | ciò che tutti volete con più lento | decorso” (Montale 1980, 495).³³ Worth stressing a detail all but irrelevant or incidental: the *reduplicatio* of the noun “scoppio” which, in connection to the hypothesis

³⁰ “Götterdämmerung”: “We read that the twilight of the gods | is about to begin. A mistake. | Beginnings are always unrecognizable; [...] Twilight began when man thought | himself of greater dignity than moles or crickets. | A self-repeating hell is hardly the tryout | of a ‘grande première’ long postponed | because the director’s busy, sick, holed up | who knows where, and no one can sub for him.” (Arrowsmith 2021, 331).

³¹ See also the poems “Chi tiene i fili” (Montale 1980, 468) / “He who pulls the strings...” (Arrowsmith 2012, 491), “Una zuffa di galli inferociti” (Montale 1980, 655), and “Può darsi,” aptly mentioned by De Rosa as recalled in note n. 10.

³² “Nothing Serious”: “Predictably, the world’s crust closes over, as it would | if explosion were imminent [...] But there’ll be no explosion.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 351).

³³ “A Millenarian,” “... the pyromaniac who hastens | what you all desire but in a longer term” (Arrowsmith 2012, 519). See also other short epigrammatic poems on the same theme: “Nell’attesa,” “Il fuoco,” “Il mio ottimismo,” “Testimoni di Geova,” “Elogio del nostro tempo.” (Montale 1980, 345, 433, 497, 537, 545) / “Waiting,” “Fire,” “My Optimism,” “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” “Eulogy of Our Age.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 355, 453, 521, 567, 575).

of the Big Bang cannot but recall its opposite (always from a scientific-astronomic and cosmo-gonic point of view), the so called “Big Crunch”, in other words the final implosion through the contraction and collapse of the whole Universe. With his typically indifferent *nonchalance* the poet throws out his own hypothesis, beyond science and mythology, religion, and philosophy: it is the vision – and pre-vision – of Poetry (as already recalled in the quote from Bertoni stressing the prophetic character of Montale’s poetry).

In connection to the Christian prophecies about the End, it seems that neither the Creator nor his foe (more or less *ab aeterno*) have the specific intention to finish, as clearly expressed in “Non partita di boxe o di ramino”:

Non partita di boxe o di ramino
tra i due opposti Luciferi o eventuali
postumi tirapiedi dei medesimi.
Non può darsi sconfitto o vincitore
senza conflitto e di ciò i gemelli
non hanno alcun sentore. Ognuno crede di essere
l’Unico, quello che non trova ostacoli
sul suo cammino.
(Montale 1980, 501)³⁴

The final confrontation is metaphorically moved to the ring or at the card table: the two “principi” in their Manichean opposition (“opposti Luciferi”: quite meaningful the definition only apparently antithetical) and genetically and ontologically “gemelli” (at least in this poem, not certainly from a theological point of view) are unaware of each other, each being resolutely certain of its own exclusive uniqueness.

A similar de-mythization is accomplished in “Ipotesi”, a short poem which intentionally trivializes and ridicules (at the same time exorcizing it) one of the most obscure and eldritch passages of St. John’s vision (*Rev. XVI: 16*) about the place of the final battle between Good and Evil:

Nella valle di Armageddon
Iddio e il diavolo conversano
pacificamente dei loro affari.
Nessuno dei due ha interesse
a uno scontro decisivo.
L’Apocalissi sarebbe
da prendersi con le molle?
È più che certo ma questo
non può insegnarsi nelle scuole
[...]

³⁴ “No boxing match or card-game”: “No boxing match or card-game | between two opposed Lucifers or possible | posthumous stooges of the same. | Without a struggle neither one | can win or lose, a fact of which the twins | haven’t an inkling. Each thinks | he’s the One, that the right-of-way | is exclusively his.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 527).

Per questo nella valle di Armageddon
non succedono mai risse e tumulti.
(Montale 1980, 578)³⁵

As regards the *Book of Revelation*, another parodistic modality has to do with the sound of the seven trumpets blown by the seven Angels to announce just as many scourges aimed at striking mankind before the final judgement (*Rev.* VIII-IX, XI). In Montale’s poetry this forewarning is reduced (thus being de-mythized and exorcized) by the image in “Le ore della sera” when “...il “fischietto del pipistrello | ... parrà la trombetta del dies irae.” (Montale 1980, 581),³⁶ or in the vain expectation of the moment “Quando il fischio del pipistrello | sarà la tromba del Giudizio” (Montale 1980, 639).³⁷

No more the seven Angels blowing their terrible trumpets, but merely the ultrasonic and nearly inaudible (to the human ear) “fischio - fischietto” of a bat. In this sense Riccardo Castellana’s definition stressing Montale’s “nichilismo non tragico ma debole e minimalista” perfectly catches the point (Castellana 2019, 107).³⁸

In these two examples, beyond the recurring Biblical imagery, one cannot ignore a further and precise Dantescan reminiscence and allusion (once more in a belittling perspective): the reference to Lucifer “Lo ‘mperador del doloroso regno” (*Inf.* XXXIV: 28)³⁹ which has the appearance of a gigantic bat: “... due grand’ali, | quanto si convenia a tanto uccello: ... Non avean penne, ma di vispistrello | era lor modo...” (*Inf.* XXXIV: 46-47, 49-50).⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, Montale’s tiny harmless flying mammalian has nothing to do with the *monstrum* of Dante’s final powerful vision in Hell.⁴¹

The Last Things

After the Beginning and the End, it is the turn of the final Judgement. Montale prefigures it in two different ways: the former disconsolate and disillusioned, the latter reassuring and almost optimistic (quite an uncommon attitude for him).

³⁵ “Hypothesis”: “In the valley of Armageddon | God and the devil peacefully | discuss their business. | Neither one is interested | in a decisive clash. | Is the Apocalypse | a matter for pulling punches? | Absolutely, but this is something | that can’t be learned in the classroom. [...] And that’s why riots and brawls | never happen in the vale of Armageddon.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 609, 611).

³⁶ “The Evening Hours” “[...] then will whistle of the bat | seem like the trump of the Dies Irae.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 613).

³⁷ [“when the whistle of the bat | ... is the trumpet of the Judgement” (my translation)].

³⁸ [“non-tragic, rather weak and minimalist nihilism” (my translation)].

³⁹ “The Emperor of the kingdom dolorous” (transl. H.W. Longfellow).

⁴⁰ “... two mighty wings, | Such as befitting were so great a bird; ... No feathers had they, but as of a bat | Their fashion was...” (transl. H.W. Longfellow).

⁴¹ See also Montale’s amusing and tragicomic short story “Il pipistrello” in *Farfalla di Dinard*. Mondadori: Milano, 1960 (1^a ed. scrittori italiani e stranieri, 1975): 145-150.

In “Ai tuoi piedi” he seems to address a nameless supernatural entity in the typical gesture of someone begging forgiveness:

Mi sono inginocchiato ai tuoi piedi
o forse è un’illusione perché non si vede
nulla di te
ed ho chiesto perdono per i miei peccati
attendendo il verdetto con scarsa fiducia
e debole speranza . . .
(Montale 1980, 579)⁴²

As usual, also in this case it is evident the skeptical ‘de-escalation’ of the significance, not so much theological but actual, of two of the three theological virtues: Faith and Hope: they are respectively defined as “scarsa fiducia | e debole speranza”: “scarsa” the former, “debole” the latter (see again Castellana’s “nichilismo... debole e minimalista” recalled above). Nonetheless, a glimmer of hope seems to resurface (though implicitly) in connection not so much to the Last Judgement by the Supreme Judge, rather to another kind of verdict, much more benevolent and reassuring, delivered by a human being, “la Mosca”, the poet’s companion, in the “Xenion” n. 11 (first series):

Ricordare il tuo pianto (il mio era doppio)
non vale a spenger lo scoppio delle tue risate.
Erano come l’anticipo di un tuo privato
Giudizio Universale, mai accaduto purtroppo.
(Montale 1980, 291).⁴³

The woman’s “peals of laughter” convey a more heart-warming atmosphere, at least in the poet’s recollections, even though with the regret that unfortunately her benevolent judgement never occurred. Also, in this passage it is hidden an implicit reversal of another text, in this case of *Psalms* CXVIII, 9: “It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man”; on the contrary the poet is more trustful in the hilarious benevolence of his companion than in the silence (apophatic, as already remarked, as well as Kafkaesque) of the Supreme Judge.

To conclude with, a brief note on what comes after the Judgement: Hell, or Paradise. Also, in this case the solution of the anguishing dilemma is entrusted to the poet’s companion, “la Mosca.” It consists in two *flashbacks* from the sylloge *Xenia* (second series, poems 6 and 8). Hell comes first: “Il vinattiere ti versava un poco | d’Inferno. E tu, atterrita: ‘Devo berlo? Non basta | esserci stati dentro a lento fuoco?’.” (Montale 1980,

⁴² “At Your Feet”: “I kneeled at your feet | or maybe it was an illusion | since you can’t be seen at all | and I asked forgiveness for my sins | while awaiting the verdict with little faith | and feeble hope . . .” (Arrowsmith 2012, 611).

⁴³ “The memory of your tears . . .”: “The memory of your tears (I cried twice as hard) | can’t obliterate your wild peals of laughter. | They were a kind of foretaste | of a private Last Judgement of your own, | which, alas, never came to pass” (Arrowsmith 2012, 309).

302).⁴⁴ It is then the turn of Paradise: “E il Paradiso? Esiste un paradiso?’. | ‘Credo di sì, signora, ma i vini dolci | non li vuol più nessuno’.” (Montale 1980, 304).⁴⁵

Hell and Paradise are considered from the point of view of the *sommelier*: both “Inferno” and “Paradiso” are in fact wines from the Valtellina, in the northern part of Lombardy (quite paradoxical the contrast between the names of the two vine varieties from the very same area, not only in Montale’s and Mosca’s biographical episodes charged with symbolical echoes). As regards the former, the poet intentionally equivocates between the wine and the ‘hellish’ condition already experienced *in vitam* by “la Mosca”; as regards the latter, one clearly understands that it is scarcely appreciated, notwithstanding its promising name and its sweet taste.

One could theoretically discuss at length about more or less tentative “conclusioni provvisorie” (another telling title of Montale’s) about the ‘big themes’ dealt with by the poet. Perhaps it is more coherent with his poetry and his thought to rely once more on his own verses, in one of the briefest and most spontaneous and frank epigrams, “p.p.c.” (*pour prendre congé*) which, though implicitly, hints at the theme of Beginning and End too: “La mia valedizione su voi scenda | Chiliasti, amici! Amo la terra, amo | Chi me l’ha data | Chi se la riprende.” (Montale 1980, 458),⁴⁶ and, once more, proves the “intatta... capacità del Montale epigrammatico di parlare davvero a tutti e a nome di tutti (com’è proprio solo dei grandi poeti)” (Bertoni 2019, 126).⁴⁷

A note about occurrences

A brief note about the occurrence of some of the most meaningful words pertaining the main topics of this essay, Beginning and End: Big Bang, Big Crunch, Creation, Apocalypse, final Judgement, Paradise, Hell – from scientific, philosophical, religious, and mythical points of view.⁴⁸

Not a few of these words, such as “Apocalissi”, “Armageddon”, “bagarre”, “choc”, “dies irae”, “Götterdämmerung”, “trombetta”, “zuffa” and “zuppa” appear only once, in the very poems examined in this essay (one could define them as ‘hapax-es’ within Montale’s poetry).

“Big Bang”, “bisticcio”, “esplosione”, “Giudizio” and “Giudizio universale”, “Inferno” [upper case; “inferno” with lower case occurs nine times], “scontro”, “stagnazione” and

⁴⁴ “The wine peddler poured you...”: “The wine peddler poured you a thimble | of Inferno. And you, shrinking back: ‘Must I drink it?’ | Isn’t it enough to simmer in the stuff?” (Arrowsmith 2012, 317).

⁴⁵ “And Paradise? Is there a paradise too?”: “And Paradise? Is there a paradise too? | ‘I think so, Signora, but nobody likes | those sweet dessert wines anymore.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 317).

⁴⁶ “p.p.c.”: “Let my valediction come upon you, | Chiliasts, friends! I love the earth, I love || the One who gave it to me || the One who takes it back.” (Arrowsmith 2012, 479).

⁴⁷ [“Montale’s untouched power to really speak to everybody and for everybody (as typical of great poets)”, my translation].

⁴⁸ Source: Savoca 1987, vols. I and II.

“V/verbo” appear twice or three times (“verbo” four times: twice with upper case, twice with lower case), and also these words almost exclusively in the poems of the “seconda stagione”, all dealing with the above mentioned themes, and all examined in the essay.

Finally, there are some more generic and general terms (which, obviously, does not mean inexact ones, but with a ‘wider’ significance) such as “astuzia”, “balbuzie”, “crepuscolo”, “Paradiso”, “scoppio”, “tromba” whose frequency ranges from six to ten occurrences, appearing as they do also in the three early collections *Ossi, Occasioni* and *Bufera* – but in this case in semantical contexts different from those of this essay.

Therefore, one could infer that, on one hand, the more ‘focused’ and ‘specific/detailed’ (semantically specialized) the words are, in relationship to such themes, the less frequent and more specific they are; on the other hand, terms semantically more generic (in the sense specified above) are in a sense equally distributed among the various poems.

Notwithstanding Montale’s typical ‘understatement’ about the ‘power of the words’ (of his ‘poietic’ words): “Non ho avuto purtroppo che la parola, | qualche cosa che approssima ma non tocca;” (Montale 1980, 563),⁴⁹ we can say that the lexicon he chose for these poems does touch the core both of their exact meaning, and of the concepts they intend to convey.

⁴⁹ “Unanswered questions”: “Unfortunately, all I had was words, | things that approximate but don’t touch;” (Arrowsmith 593).

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