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"Empty Silences":
T.S. Eliot and Eugenio Montale

"Silence"

Along the city streets
It is still high tide,
Yet the garrulous waves of life
Shrink and divide
With a thousand incidents
Vexed and debated —
This is the hour for which we waited —

This is the ultimate hour
When life is justified.
The seas of experience
That were so broad and deep,
So immediate and steep,
Are suddenly still.
You may say what you will,
At such peace I am terrified.
There is nothing else beside.¹

Σίγ' ἔχε, μύστα.

Oracoli caldaici, 158

"Forse un mattino"

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

Poi come s'uno schermo, s'accarnperanno di gitto
alberi case colli per l'inganno consueto.
Ma sarà troppo tardi; ed io me n'andro zitto
tra gli uomini che non si voltano, col mio segreto.²

It might seem superfluous to repeat again Mario Praz's formula in his earliest comparison between T.S.Eliot and Eugenio Montale: "Parallels in history, though apt to be misleading, offer a tempting playground for speculation" (244), as so much has been written about this topic since 1933: books, essays, not to mention dissertations ("let some thesis-writer have the satisfaction of discovering . . ." (109), the eighty years old Pound mused though in other circumstances — that is about his 1919 French tour together with T.S.Eliot. But it is the very word "speculation" which, once more, gives the clue and the idea, and again arouses the curiosity about another parallel and comparative reading, even though limited to what might be called a marginal gloss on a topic scarcely or not at all dealt with before. And the "speculation" (*speculum*) gives back more or less different images, and marks the similar traits of the reflected images of these two poems. Furthermore, the privileged perspective ("tempting playground") of the reader-critic offers a further opportunity to attempt a side-by-side reading, under the urge of further explorations, especially after the posthumous and long-delayed publication of Eliot's earliest poetic drafts (*Inventions of the March Hare*, 1996): a collection which offers readers and scholars some fifty "new" poems, and the possibility of further comparisons (or, better, to antedate such comparisons) notwithstanding the scarce and often distorted attention (or, perhaps, because of it) that has been paid to such poems.³

Two texts deserve special discussion: Eliot's previously unpublished (but not unknown) "Silence," dating 1910, and Montale's most famous "ossa breve," titled "Forse un mattino andando in un'aria di vetro," which belongs to his poetic debut, *Ossi di Seppia* (1926). These two poems record a privileged epiphanic moment, an extraordinary experience, a kind of hallucinated and much-looked-for flash of vision and *dénouement* or, better, small miracle and partial revelation, a "moment in and out of time" typical both of the young poet of St. Louis and of his younger Genoese counterpart. It is well known that the two writers were

particularly attracted by spiritual and quasi-mystical experience. Suffice it to recall here a passage from a letter of the twenty-one-year-old soldier Eugenio Montale to his sister Marianna, from the Infantry School of Parma: "Io sono un amico dell'invisibile e non faccio conto di ciò che si fa sentire e non si mostra; e non credo e non posso credere a tutto quello che si tocca e che si vede" (*Quaderno* 72) . Even more meaningful is the famous statement in "Intervista Immaginaria" (1946), a flash-back of his juvenile experiences and "quest":

Mi pareva di vivere sotto una campana di vetro, eppure sentivo di essere vicino a qualcosa di essenziale. Un velo sottile, un filo appena mi separava dal quid definitive. L'espressione assoluta sarebbe stata la rottura di quel velo, di quel filo: una esplosione, la fine dell'inganno del mondo come rappresentazione.⁴

There is a clear reference to Schopenhauer, by way of the title "mondo come rappresentazione." Other philosophical and literary influences during Montale's "Lehrjahre" work in this direction: his omnivorous daily readings at the Berio and University Libraries in Genoa (see *Quaderno*), his interest in the sceptical philosophy of Giuseppe Renzi and Arthur Schopenhauer.⁵

In his turn Eliot — apart from his familiar heritage, the cultural tradition of New England, and that particular shade of scepticism that he himself defined as "the Boston doubt" (Davidson 25) — "said that his mind was naturally inclined to the metaphysical, and any mystical experience which put him in touch with another kind of existence would be treasured and made much of" (Gordon 35). Then, in a kind of self-projection into an animal-like character ("And I must borrow every changing shape / To find expression . . . dance, dance, / Like a dancing bear, / Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape" of the finale of "Portrait of a Lady" — *CPP* 21), that is in the wriggling "Eeldrop" of "Eeldrop and

Appleplex," the poet defined the former of the two characters of the title (i.e. his own spokesman) as "a sceptic with a taste for mysticism" ("Eeldrop" 7). The common denominator represented by the sceptical attitude of both poets is remarkable.

A year after the composition of "Silence," Eliot begun reading and studying Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (published in 1911), a treatise which was destined to remain one of the fundamental guides on the theory, phenomenology and practice of the mystical experience throughout his life.⁶

In other words, for both poets and "sub specie spiriti," in their *beginning* was already inscribed their *end*. However, it is not so much the biographical aspects that will be considered in these notes, but the striking analogies between these two brief, suddenly visionary texts marked by "clear visual images" and built as tightly textured poetical artefacts.

Chronology and Influence

Eliot obviously deserves the chronological priority, "Silence" having been handwritten, as a matter of fact, on the notebook titled by its author "Inventions of the March Hare" — a jotter that the young Eliot bought in a stationery shop of Gloucester, Mass., and that partially followed the destiny of the much more famous "Waste Land manuscript" (*Inventions* XI-XV, 124-126). Montale's "Forse un mattino..." was composed in July 1923, that is more than ten years later, and belongs to a couple of manuscripts (each containing a few other poems) dedicated respectively to Francesco and to Bianca Messina (Arvigo 124). But the similarities in theme and imagery are evident, clear, and quite striking, even though the conclusion seems to point towards two different directions. Nonetheless both writers remained almost totally coherent, in their entire creative parable, to those early formulations, not so much as stylistic and formal

aspects are concerned, but as regards poetical images, ideas, mental representations, and philosophical concepts. In Eliot, as anticipated above, the main influence was that of his initial scepticism coupled with a strong bent towards mysticism: for Eugenio Montale, apart the above mentioned sceptics like G. Rensi and A. Schopenhauer, we should add Šcestov (Montale, *Poesia* 564), the Russian novelists of the nineteenth century, in particular Tolstoj and Dostoievskij (Pasquini 28), and, as regards the brief poem we are discussing, a meaningful passage from the essay "L'Umorismo" by Luigi Pirandello (Pasquini 29; Marchese 182; Arvigo 125).

A Brief Critical Survey

I) T.S. Eliot

It has been anticipated that "Silence" had already been mentioned in Eliot's biographies and in a few strongly characterized critical readings of his poetry, focused on the spiritual experiences of the young American poet. Lyndall Gordon begins the second chapter ("New England Student") of her 1977 biography with a reconstruction of the scenery — or "occasion" (to use a Montale expression) of the poem:

About the same time that Eliot graduated from Harvard College, while walking one day in Boston, he saw the streets suddenly shrink and divide. His everyday preoccupations, his past, all the claims of the future fell away and he was enfolded in a great silence. In June 1910 he wrote a poem he never published called "Silence," his first and perhaps most lucid description of the timeless moment ... At the age of twenty-one Eliot had one of those experiences which, he said, many have had only once or twice in their lives and been unable to put into words. "You may call it communion with the Divine or you may call it temporary crystallization of the mind," he said on another occasion ... In "Silence" Eliot declared that this was the moment for which he had waited. Silence came to a prepared mind..." (15)

Even though the poem is nowadays published, and notwithstanding Christopher Rick's extensive and exhaustive commentary (*Inventions* 124-126), Gordon's precise information remains invaluable. The biographer-critic returns again to the poem in a further reconsideration, concerning the recurrence of imagery (intertextuality) in Eliot's whole body of poetry:

"Silence" was the forerunner of later beatific moments in Eliot's work: in the hyacinth garden "looking into the earth of light, the silence," in the garden of Burnt Norton where the surface of the pool "glittered out of the heart of light," in the pulse in the arm "less strong and stronger / . . . more distant than stars and nearer than the eye." In each case it seems to him that he has received some kind of message that disperses and obliterates ordinary reality, a message he badly needs to interpret. (35)

Peter Ackroyd, Eliot's other major biographer, stresses another aspect of this brief poem:

Sometimes this self-absorption seems to be the condition of poetic vision itself, a "moment out of time" which in the unpublished poem "Silence" (June 1910) stills the waters of experience and creates a terrifying peace . . . ["Silence"] the poem of withdrawal. (38, 40)

Very few critics have focused on this early and still incomplete vision of Eliot's: Eloise Knapp Hay disagrees with Lyndall Gordon's point of view, emphasizing Eliot's preference for Oriental philosophy and religion instead of Christianity:

One of his earliest unpublished poems . . . was a two-stanza poem called "Silence." Dated "June, 1910," the month when he first went to France after studying with Babbitt, returning a year later to start his studies in philosophy, the poem already centers on feelings of recoil from the noisy

swell of life toward a center of ultimate stillness. I do not read this poem the way Lyndall Gordon does, as an inclination toward Christianity ... clearly the Buddhist peace of emptiness and negation was already more real to him than the Christian peace, however terrifying that emptiness seemed to him at that time. (72)

Knapp Hay seems to think of the poet's own recollection about the juvenile attraction he felt for the Oriental thought and spirituality in his earlier academic years at Harvard:

Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjaly's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after — and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys — lay in trying to erase from my mind all the categories and kinds of distinctions common to European philosophy from the time of the Greeks. (Eliot, *Strange Gods* 43-44)

Paul Murray, in his important study on Eliot and mysticism, offers his own reflection about "Silence": "This quasi-mystical experience of the Timeless Moment was the first of a number of similar experiences in Eliot's life, some of which were of course later to be evoked in *Four Quartets*" (2). And John T. Mayer, drawing a partial parallel between the drafts of *The Waste Land* (now in the Facsimile edition), the final version, and "Silence," writes:

Despite Eliot's yearning for vision, which he explored in the city poems and in "So through the evening," he seems not to have experienced the vision of the mystics, only privileged moments that, like the experience portrayed in the unpublished 1910 poem "Silence" and in *The Waste Land* Hyacinth Garden, are intensely ambiguous. (81)

Finally Donald J. Childs, projecting the young poet's experience of that morning of June towards his immediately following interest in mystical experience, assumes that

Eliot's extensive reading in mysticism in the years that followed can be understood as an attempt to understand his experience of 1910. Certainly his notes on Underhill's *Mysticism* (made some time over the next three or four years) reveal an interest in determining the legitimacy of visions. (13)

Childs too connects the phenomenon experienced by the young poet to the analogous moment of revelation / illumination in *The Waste Land*:

... the word "silence" invokes Eliot's poem of the same name written twelve years before ... The speaker notes a silence in the middle of a bustling city. It is a moment for which he has waited — a moment providing through stillness and silence a hint of the ultimate meaning of life. Mixed with the feeling of peace, however, is the feeling of terror — a terror that comes of the awareness that nothing else matters beside this silence. (111)

II) Eugenio Montale

Montale's "Forse un mattino..." has received wider attention and more careful analysis by many of his critics throughout the decades: only very few comments, the most remarkable and incisive, will therefore be quoted here. Marco Forti stresses the close connection (intertextuality) between this "osso breve" and the entire series of twenty-two poems it belongs to (83). Silvio Ramat considers that "un miracolo così forte e fondamentale quale si verifica in 'Forse un mattino' non lo ritroveremo facilmente, forse mai." (50). In the "Festschrift" *Lecture Montaliane* (1977) we encounter two remarkable interpretations, respectively by Italo Calvino and Edoardo Sanguineti. The former touches some of the

key points of this brief lyric: its being a "poesia d'immaginazione e di pensiero astratti" (38); the peculiar atmosphere of "un'aria di vetro" ("concretezza . . . solidità autosufficiente" (38); the theme of the miracle, so recurrent in Montale's early poetry, and the consciousness of the irreality of the World (39), which brings not so much the author, but at least this particular text, close to Oriental thought (another bridge between the Italian and the American poet). But perhaps the most original and since then inescapable contribution offered by Calvino consists in a series of profound remarks on the theme of space, that space that opens before and behind the speaker ("percezione visiva e appropriazione dello spazio"— 40). Very aptly Calvino refers to Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* as an suitable interpretative key for the particular atmosphere of the lyric, and to Jorge Louis Borges' *Zoologia fantastica* as regards the concept (and "mythology") of the "hide behind." He finally stresses the poem's modernity as regards the image of the "schermo" (deriving from the language and technique of cinema) instead of the traditional "theatrum mundi" metaphor (44).

Edoardo Sanguineti in turn compares Montale's poem with a passage of Lev Tolstoj on his adolescence, on the theme of nothingness (50). In *Accertamenti montaliani* Giorgio Orelli offers a phonic, musical, and literary-intertextual analysis of this "osso breve" (11-15).

From a slightly different perspective Ettore Bonora gives his interpretation of the "event" of this brief lyric:

I versi con la loro ampiezza conferiscono al prodigio immaginato dal poeta la naturalezza dei fatti realmente accaduti. Eppure l'evento al quale il poeta pensa è agghiacciante, come puo esserlo il senso del vuoto e del nulla; quando poi il miracolo cessa, si fa più profonda la sofferenza di una solitudine che non può in nessun modo spezzarsi, perché, al riapparire dei segni della vita, chi ha conosciuto l'orrore del vuoto deve tenerlo dentro di sé come un segreto. (159)

The critical readings of the 1980s and 1990s almost invariably refer to Italo Calvino's acute notes, and develop further suggestions. Emilio Pasquini stresses the link between the suspended atmosphere of "Forse un mattino..." and the famous lines in "I Limoni" (27-28):

Vedi, in questi silenzi in cui le cose
s'abbandonano e sembrano vicine a tradire il loro ultimo segreto,
talora ci si aspetta di scoprire uno sbaglio di Natura,
il punto morto del mondo, l'anello che non tiene,
il filo da disbrogliare che finalmente ci metta
nel mezzo di una verità.

(The word "silenzi" recalls again, at a distance, Eliot's title.)

Franco Croce also establishes a connection between the two poems:

L'approfondimento della tematica dei *Limoni* è ancora più evidente in un altro *Oss*o breve, *Forse un mattino..* Qui la scoperta del "vuoto" dietro le "spalle" (in qualche modo analoga al tema del "punto morto del mondo" in *Limoni*) non è più una scoperta consolante, che addirittura porti, come nei *Limoni*, a vagheggiare idillicamente "in ogni ombra umana che si allontana / qualche disturbata Divinità." Si tratta, sì, di un "miracolo" ma vissuto con drammaticità: "con un terrore d'ubriaco." Ma quando la trappola del reale riprende, il privilegio di distinguersi dagli "uomini che non si voltano" suona anche come una condanna..." (19-20)

Angelo Marchese, in his multifaceted book on the Ligurian poet *Amico dell'invisibile*, returns several times to this short lyric, which represents "l'epifania negativa del miracolo ... e il trucco necessario ... del mondo come rappresentazione" (12). He then coins a felicitous formula to define this particular context: "lo scacco di Arsenio," which sums up all the uncertainties, doubts and failures of the most famous character of Montale's early poetry, especially in this

epifania drammatica di un antimiracolo, cioè di un miracolo negativo... Di solito Montale ci descrive l'attesa, l'ansia del "miracolo" nelle immagini famose della "maglia rotta nella rete," dell' "anello che non tiene," implicanti l'anelito all'evasione dalla prigione del cosmo. Qui invece si ha l'esperienza diretta e traumatica del miracolo negativo, che situa l'uomo tra il "nulla-vuoto" e l' "inganno consueto" della sedicente realtà ... (16)

As regards this uncommon "anti-miracle," Marchese wonders whether it is

un presagio del mondo *autre* o della dimensione negativa dell'esistenza assurda? . . . Il miracolo ha svelato l'essenza ontologica negativa del mondo e la fenomenologia illusoria delle cose, sigillando senza scampo l'io nel suo segreto di condanna: l'evento soterico è annullato, anche come ipotesi. (67)

Towards the conclusion of his study, the critic finally focuses his attention on the difference and distance between the experience of the lonely man who has "seen," and the ignorance of the others:

Questa esperienza isola il poeta col suo "segreto" dagli uomini che non si voltano verso l'abisso del nulla, gli stessi che non si preoccupano delle loro ombra stampata su uno scalinato muro ... indifferenti e aproblematici, incapaci di sopportare la verita metafisica (e artistica) ... Un'altra evidente opposizione del testa è quella tra gli "uomini che non si voltano" e il poeta, col suo "segreto": come a dire, fra chi non percepisce l'abisso che è alle sue spalle, la precarietà dell'esistente, e l'intellettuale solitario, l'io lirico che, per un attimo, è colto dalla vertigine del nulla e barcolla come un ubriaco. (181, 216)

Up to this point, it seems that the critical dilemma between the positivity and/or negativity (revelation or closure) of such an uncommon phenomenon remain unsolved. Unless one suggests, as we are doing in

this commentary, the archetype of the "mystes," the initiate, who has undergone a privileged experience of knowledge, and therefore cannot communicate it to his fellow men who remain in their spiritual blindness.

Only Angiola Ferraris has gone along this line of interpretation, discerning in the filigree of "Forse un mattino..." nothing less than the myth of Orpheus:

Penso, innanzitutto, al gesto del poeta, che andando si volta indietro e ripete, così, il movimento dello sguardo di Orfeo, rivolto verso Euridice, il cui nome esprime, secondo Mallarmé, l'idea del mattino (ἠὼς), del suo breve incanto... Ma lo sguardo di chi si volta, come Orfeo, per avvicinare Euridice, la perde irrevocabilmente: è il paradosso della parola poetica che non *tocca* le cose se non per evocate il silenzio che ne avvolge l'essenza, rendendole inafferrabili. Si svela così "l'inganno consueto" del mondo come rappresentazione. La vicinanza del paesaggio che ci è abituale ("alberi case colli") è tale solo in apparenza: in realtà essa rinvia alla meditazione dissimulata del linguaggio, dello "schermo" sul quale le immagini si proiettano staccate da quelle degli oggetti, della loro immediatezza, che rimane avvolta nel silenzio. Ne deriva il "terrore di ubriaco," il disorientamento di chi all'improvviso si vede sospeso nell'irrealtà del vuoto. Rimane la casualità della scoperta ("*Forse un mattino andando...*"), che mette in gioco l'esistenza stessa dell'opera, riconducendola, oltre i confini segnati dal canto, all'incertezza delle origini, all'incontro, affidato anch'esso al caso, con il "fantasma che ti salva": "Se procedi t'imbatti / tu *forse* nel fantasma che ti salva." (36-37, italics in text)

This is the right perspective to interpret the otherwise almost ineffable experience that both poets (Montale in particular) try to convey in their verses. Both their "protagonists" (or "characters" or "alter-egos") have lived something so particular that it cannot be completely defined through the means of human words and language, so that they are compelled to recur to mythical allusions (biblical or classical) to try to speak the ineffable. Numberless are the examples, both in mythology and

in literature, of the "mystai" who have returned from the underworld and cannot express their experience through human language: they must recur either to universal symbols or metaphors (as in the greatest poets like Dante), or to inadequate representations, or to nothing but "silence," the only available response.

As regards Calvino's brief hint at Merleau-Ponty's treatise on phenomenology, it seems at least advisable to reconsider some sections of this study, namely those about the phenomena of perception and of hallucination: apart from the pathological perspective of the French philosopher (which of course can not be literally applied to the two poets and their extraordinary experiences), it is however striking to read statements like these: "Il me semble que le monde se vit lui-même hors de moi, comme les paysages absents continuent de se vivre au-delà de mon champ visuel et comme mon passé s'est vécu autrefois en deçà de mon présent" (385); or still more definitely: "Dans un délire alcoolique, le sujet qui voit..." etc., and "L'alcoolique a surtout des hallucinations visuelles parce que l'activité délirante trouve dans la vue la possibilité d'évoquer..." (385,393) — which echo Montale's *emystich* "con un terrore da ubriaco." And let us consider the following statements:

L'halluciné ne peut pas entendre ou voir au sens fort de ces mots. Il juge, il croit voir au entendre, mais il ne voit pas, il n'entend pas en effet . . .

L'hallucination n'est pas dans le monde mais 'devant' lui parce que le corps de l'halluciné a perdu son insertion dans le système des apparences . . . Si les hallucinations doivent pouvoir être possibles, il faut bien qu'à quelque moment la conscience cesse de savoir ce qu'elle fait, sans quoi elle aurait conscience de constituer une illusion... (387, 391, 396)

Such statements seem to partially interpret both Eliot's vision in "Silence," and Montale's "miracolo" (or "anti-miracolo") in "Forse un mattino..."

A Brief Reading

Eliot's poem consists of two stanzas of 7 + 9 lines, marked by quite laborious rhymes in the first one (ABCBDEE // FGHIILLMM — or BB of the last couplet, if considered as rhyming at distance with lines 2 and 4 of the first stanza). Imperfect rhymes and echoes at distance make the phonic texture still more dense and tighter. The opening embodies a customary variant of the townscapes of Eliot's early poetry, from the previously unpublished sketches in *Inventions of the March Hare* ("Fourth Caprice in Montparnasse," "Interlude in London," "Easter: Sensations of April," "Prufrock among the Women" and "Prufrock's Pervigilium") to the four memorable "Preludes," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," up to the topography of the "unreal city" in *The Waste Land*, both typical of the poet's direct experience, and deriving from the Symbolists (Baudelairean and Laforguean) models as well, together with the metaphor of a seascape (another favorite "topos" of Eliot's poetry, marked by strong autobiographical connections, see for example "Marina" and the multiple representations from different perspectives and focalizations of the third *Quartet*, "The Dry Salvages") to emblematised "life" unfurling in "garrulous waves" (with "garrulous" from the birdsong semantic domain: another area of imagery which was to become so important for Eliot's poetry after the 1930s: see for example "Cape Ann," the last of the five "Landscapes," and again *Four Quartets*: from the very first movement of "Burnt Norton" I ("Quick, said the bird, find them, find them, / Round the corner... Go, said the bird... Go, go, go, said the bird," *CPP* 171, 172) to the finale of "Little Gidding" V ("Quick now, here, now, always," *CPP* 198). To further enrich and complicate this stratified cluster, one can not omit the most outstanding allusion, the Biblical one: the waves that "shrink and divide" as in the episode of Israel's flight from Egypt through the sea "beside Pihariroth, before Baal-zephon," when the Lord ordered Moses:

But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and *divide* it
... And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea
to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and
the waters were *divided*. (Exodus 14: 16, 21, our emphasis)

The movements in Eliot's poem seem however less ordered: "with a thousand incidents / Vexed and debated" (with "debate" recalling, at least lexically and conceptually, the coeval "First Debate between the Body and Soul" and "Bacchus and Ariadne. 2nd Debate between the Body and Soul" also in *Inventions of the March Hare*). Such a tumultuous and frenetic atmosphere seems to calm down in the second half of the composition (not unlike in *Exodus* itself, after Pharaoh's army drowning, and Israel's celebrations of gratitude in honour of its God) when all is "still-ed," finally characterized, as it is, by a strange form of "peace," a peace defined as terrifying ("at such peace I am terrified") and revealing the "nihil" behind. Noteworthy is the fact that the key-word of the title ("silence") does not appear at all within the sixteen lines of the poem, but it evidently informs the whole experience from which the vision derives (silence being also, by the way, the necessary condition to approach such an experience).

At the very centre of the poem, the slightly imperfect anaphora "This is the hour... // This is the ultimate hour" functions as a hinge between the two stanzas, connecting them and marking, as it does, both structurally and semantically the importance of the moment. It is the core of the poem, with its images of "life" and metaphorically tumultuous "seas" ("of experience") suddenly stilled: at this point the poetical voice addresses a second person (external? or an inner self?) with a kind of final couplet, kernelling its ultimate sense: "At such peace I am terrified. / There is nothing else beside." The so-much-longed-for moment of peace proves therefore both terrifying and annihilating. Such is the real critical (and ontological) "overwhelming question" of the poem: does it really

express a moment of visionary experience? The sense of nothingness? The "horror vacui"? Or a positive moment of "vision"? (or the psychological and spiritual pre-requisite for it?). A final cultural and philosophical allusion is suggested by the word "experience" ("seas of experience"), inasmuch as in the following years the young university student at Harvard was to approach the philosophical system of Francis Herbert Bradley, and to write his own dissertation on "Knowledge and the Objects of Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley."⁷

Montale's "Forse un mattino..." pivots on the theme and image of the antithesis between deceptive appearance and true reality: ("human kind / Cannot bear very much reality" — Eliot had the bird sing in "Burnt Norton" I, *CPP* 172). The setting, slightly different from "Silence," seems less urban, even though some elements of a village or a city (indubitably Ligurian) appear in this "vision" ("case" and above all "uomini [che non si voltano]"), and an internal echo of a previous "osso breve," "So l'ora in cui la faccia più impassibile / è traversata da una cruda smorfia: / s'è svelata per poco una pena invisibile. / Ciò non vede la gente nell'affollato corso" (*Opera* 36), anticipates the very theme of "vision vs. blindness," "the few and the many," the "mystes" and the ordinary people. However it seems that the lonely wanderer in that crystal clear morning experiences, like his New England counterpart, the sense of nothingness and of terror ("nulla... terrore").

Stylistically, this brief poem consists in eight lines textured in a flawless rhyme scheme: ABAB 1 / CDCD — typical of Montale's early poetry, and of the twenty-two "ossi brevi" in particular (with a marked preference, in the case of intentional infringement, for hypermetrical rhymes) (see Antonello). Whereas in Eliot's poem the experience is given as already occurred, in Montale it is prefigured "sub condicione" of the hypothetical "[f]orse...", then followed by four future tenses "vedrà... s'accamperanno... sarà... andrò." Which does not exclude the experience itself: in other words a rhetorical strategy to project in a more-or-less

hypothetic future something already occurred. A most rich texture of inter-textual imagery in Montale's early poetry (*Ossi di Seppia*) proves that this is not a "might be/shall be," but a "has already been" poem of experience. First of all the theme of the "miracle," of the extraordinary event breaking the monotonous and already pre-fixed chain/course (and curse) of events;⁸ and in parallel the idea/ideal of the impossible dream of an escape: beyond a wall, through the web of a fishing net. How many walls and nets appear in his early poetry, from the explicit of his very first lyric "In Limine": "Cerca una maglia rotta nella rete / che ci stringe, tu balza fuori, fuggi ! " (*Opera* 5) to many others in *Ossi di Seppia*. But the phenomenon in "Forse un mattino... " is indubitably unique, the most extraordinary and memorable of all.

Images, Visions, and Structure

It has already been stressed that Eliot's main image is the sea and its tumultuous movements, ebb and flow, systole and diastole, as a metaphor of a town(scape) alive with customary daily activity. This activity, all of a sudden, ceases and is suspended into a condition of momentary peace. As for Montale's scenery, it is more centered on the "locus," both natural and humanized: a place like a "theatrum mundi" or, as in Calvino's reading, like a cinema screen. However, the theatrical metaphor still works, especially if one thinks of Eliot's lines in "East Coker": "As, in a theatre, / The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed / With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness, / And we know that the *hills* and the *trees*, the distant panorama / And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away —" (*CPP* 180, emphasis added), where the words "hills" and "trees" recall/repeat precisely Montale's "alberi...colli." Montale's is a very particular kind of *aubade*, not so much lyric or amorous as in the tradition, but visionary and epiphanic —typical, however, of the Ligurian poet's early compositions (and landscapes). The

couple "mattino... aria" represents, in other words, the crystal clear morning air, and its being "di vetro" recalls another typical early image ("etra vetrino" of "Egloga," for example — *Opera* 72); the "miracolo," as pointed out above, is a key concept (and an eagerly longed for event) of his early poetry (and, above all, his life experience), but the real difference is what he has seen, the content of such miracle, the epiphany of nothingness and emptiness. Again one can not but recollect lines from a later Eliot text: "The backward look behind the assurance / Of recorded history, the backward half-look / Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror" ("The Dry Salvages" II, *CPP* 187), where the movement of looking behind one's shoulders seems to rearrange/reshape Montale's images of "rivolgendomi ... alle mie spalle ... dietro / di me, con un terrore ..." and the psychological effects are also very similar. Tiziana Arvigo adds that such an archetypal scene of looking behind oneself recalls also the Biblical episode (Genesis 19: 26) of Lot's wife transformed into a salt statue (128).

Again, both poets modulate the theme of nothingness and of the ensuing sense of overwhelming terror: "At such peace I am *terrified*. / There is nothing else beside" proclaims Eliot; "il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto dietro / di me, con un *terrore* di ubriaco" records Montale. And also the final image of "silence" is shared by them: the speaker of "Silence" concludes his brief "narrative" with an implicit declaration of aphasia, of ineffability: "You may say what you will, / At such peace I am terrified. / There is nothing else beside" — a categorical denial of further speech (almost like the close of "Cape Ann": "The palaver is finished," *CPP* 142), whereas the lonely wanderer of "Forse un mattino..." more openly declares: "Ma sarà troppo tardi, ed io me n'andrò zitto / tra gli uomini che non si voltano, col mio segreto." The secret, the mystery, in both cases (in both poems), cannot be communicated, being unutterable and ineffable: the "mystes" must keep it to himself, he is bound to silence and secrecy.

A further note concerns the spatial arrangement of the events

occurring in the two poems: "Silence" seems mainly organized according to a scheme of "laterality" (apart from the initial "[a]long"), inasmuch as the waves that "shrink and divide" cannot but open at the two sides—right and left—of the speaker/walker (like the Red Sea with Israel: see above), whereas in "Forse un mattino..." the perception is projected *before* and *behind* the protagonist: "andando... rivolgendomi... alle mie spalle... dietro di me... che non si voltano": two different perspectives, according to the very different myths the two poems are built upon. Even though, it must be admitted, in both cases the speaker/wanderer goes on in his direction after the epiphanic moment. And it cannot be otherwise: the "mystes" must continue his journey, alone (and sometimes *ahead* of the other people). And again, as regards the spatiality of these two texts, their perfect architecture should be noted: "Silence" opens with the real "hic et nunc," to immediately shift to the sea metaphor: "high tide ... garrulous waves of life / Shrink and divide"; then addresses to the more or less abstract causes: "thousand incidents / Vexed and debated." At the centre of the poem, connecting the two stanzas, the so called hinge, "the hour for which we waited ... the ultimate hour." Then the imagery returns again to the sea metaphor "seas of experience ... so broad and deep / So immediate and steep, / Are suddenly still" (counter-movement with reference to the first half of the poem). And even the causes of tumult are now appeased: "such peace... nothing else beside." Imagery and thematic scheme are articulated according to a parallel incremental pattern: Introduction (l. 1) + A (sea metaphor: ll. 2-4) + B (tumultuous sea: ll. 5-6) + C ("the hour," *this* particular hour: ll. 7-8) + A1 (sea metaphor again: ll. 10-12) + B1 (calmed sea: l. 13) + Conclusion (ll. 14-16).

"Forse un mattino..." is organized on a fundamentally similar pattern (which, besides being spatial, is also "musical" in the compositional sense of the word), with only one variant. The setting is again the now and here: "mattino... aria di vetro" (l. 1); followed by the

movement: "rivolgendomi" (l. 2); by the extraordinary event: "il miracolo" (l. 2); by its content/essence: "nulla alle mie spalle ... vuoto dietro / di me" (ll. 3-4) and by its effect: "terrore di ubriaco" (l. 4). Then the repetition of the initial setting, with variation and *dénouement*: "schermo ... accamperanno ... alberi case colli" (ll. 5-6); the counter- or anti-miracle: "inganno consueto" (l. 6); the reaction of the wanderer now become "mystes": "io me n'andrò zitto ... col mio segreto" (ll. 7,8) and the counter-movement of line 2 ("rivolgendomi") now projected on the others, "gli uomini che non si voltano" (l. 8). A series of antithetic couples: "aria di vetro" vs. "schermo"; "rivolgendomi" vs. "che non si voltano"; "miracolo" vs. "inganno consueto"; "terrore di ubriaco" vs. "zitto ... col mio segreto." In an isolated position stands the event itself: "il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto dietro / di me": corresponding, in a sense, to Eliot's "the hour for which we waited ... the ultimate hour": again, the climactic moment of the text (its pre-text).

Let us finally consider a noteworthy recurrence of the image of "gli uomini che non si voltano": a poem in *Satura* (Montale's fourth poetical collection, published in 1970, some forty-five years after *Ossi di Seppia*) is titled "Gli uomini che si voltano" (without the negative *non*, in this case), and concludes with a distant reminiscence of that juvenile experience:

... Sono colui
 che ha veduto un istante e tanto basta
 a chi cammina incolonnato come ora
 avviene a noi se siamo ancora in vita
 o era inganno crederlo. Si slitta!

(*Opera 376*)

What an extraordinary flashback! The aged wanderer is still pursuing his quest, he has never forgotten that "moment in and out of time," and still wonders whether it was an "inganno" (or, implicitly, a miracle).

Provisional Conclusions

Eliot seems to have interrupted (or better, momentarily suspended and deferred) his spiritual quest, after "Silence": no particular evidence of such an experience can be found in *Prufrock and other Observations* and in *Poems 1920*. The case is different with *The Waste Land*, but neither in the 1922 masterpiece nor in the following collections ("The Hollow Men," "Ariel Poems," *Ash-Wednesday*) can the reader find traces of similar experiences, though the *journey* has indubitably and undeniably begun with the famous "Let us go then, you and I..." of Prufrock's initial exhortation. It is in fact only in *Four Quartets* that the long journey of spiritual experience through the negative way of descent (typical of the classic initiation and of mysticism) is fully accomplished⁹, Montale, for his part, insists in this direction from the very beginning, and never ceases to question the other dimension (and the Other) — "senza cessare di battere alle porte dell'impossibile," as he himself put it (Marchese 221), until his very last collections (*Quaderno di Quattro Anni*, for example, and *Altri Versi*). To the former, the answer to his lifelong quest was perhaps "satisfactory" (as in "Journey of the Magi") if one considers the ineffable vision of "the fire and the rose" in the conclusion of "Little Gidding" (but how much suffering, "qua homine" and "qua poeta" before reaching that final step: "(Costing not less than everything)": "Little Gidding" V, *CPP* 198). To the latter, it seems that the sceptical doubt, the excruciating "rovello" has never ceased to torture his "spirit unappeased and peregrine" (Eliot's image in "Little Gidding" II, *CPP* 194). Both of them, however, have gone on with their inimitable "decenza quotidiana," either among the "crowds flowing over London Bridge," or "tra gli uomini che non si voltano," or elsewhere and everywhere, each with his own silent ineffable secret.

NOTES

1. "Forse un mattino andando...", *Opera in versi* 40.
2. Eliot, "Silence," *Inventions* 18, © Valerie Eliot, 1996. All quotations of Eliot's other poems are from *The Complete Poems and Plays*, and are indicated with the abbreviation *CPP* followed by page number.
3. *Inventions* has provoked some narrow-minded polemical attacks because of the alleged obscenity of Eliot's light verse. See Massimo Bacigalupo's account in "Thomas Stearns Eliot. Invenzioni" (which includes a translation of "Silence" and other poems of *Inventions*) and *Grotta Byron* 84-85.
4. Montale, *Sulla Poesia* 565. A few paragraphs later in the same "Intenzioni (Intervista immaginaria)," in his recollections of the decade (1929-1939) spent in Florence when he wrote his second book of poetry, *Le occasioni*, the poet returns to the metaphor of the "bell jar" and adds: "Del resto, la campana di vetro persisteva intorno a me, ed ora sapevo ch'essa non si sarebbe mai infranta..." (566).
5. On Giuseppe Rensi's influence on Montale see Scarpati 7-32 ("Scepsi e ascesi all'epoca degli *Ossi*"). On Schopenhauer's influence on Eliot see Habib, *passim*. Also Marchese, *passim*; and Barile 40.
6. Not much has been written about the relationship between T.S.Eliot and Evelyn Underhill, but it is easy to understand the remarkable influence the English theologian and mystic had on the American poet, if one closely compares the theoretical writings of the former and the poetry of the latter.
7. Eliot began studying Bradley's philosophical system between 1911 and 1914 at Harvard, and was to write his dissertation on the philosopher at the end of that period. It is well known that he never defended it, and published it only in 1964. See Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, "Preface" 9-11.
8. The very word "miracolo" as an extraordinary, longed for and soteric event, recurs only three times in *Ossi di Seppia*, but its deep meaning is much more pervasive in

this first poetry book. See Savoca, *Concordanza* ("miracolo").

9. On a initiatory and mystical reading of Eliot's last masterpiece, see Casella, "L'immaginario iniziatico e mistico."

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