The Poetry of Place:
Eugenio Montale’s Relationship with Human and Nonhuman Nature in the Mediterranean

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Abstract
The Mediterranean coast and sea characterize Italy’s natural and cultural identity, wielding a determining influence in shaping the lives of its inhabitants. Both suggestive and exuberant, the Mediterranean Sea embraces Italy and has always played an important role in the country’s literature and art. The bizarre fact is that Italy suffers from a water shortage in a country surrounded by water. Moreover, the land is literally disappearing into the sea. If we superimpose a map of the coastline transformations expected to take place over upcoming decades over the current map of Italy—transformations due in part to anthropogenic climate change—we learn that more than 4,500 square kilometers of the Italian peninsula, including some of its most beautiful coastline, may well disappear forever.

In a land increasingly characterized by drought and threatened by the sea, it is interesting to analyze how one of the greatest Italian poets interacted with the sea, with its vastness and power. This paper examines Eugenio Montale’s relationship with human and nonhuman nature in the Mediterranean and proposes an ecocritical analysis of several parts of the poem “Mediterraneo,” included in the 1925 book of poetry Ossi di seppia and of the poem “L’Anguilla” (The Eel) from his 1948 collection La Bufera e altro (The Storm and Other Poems). Montale (1896-1981) lived in Liguria, in northern Italy, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1975. His opus expresses an extremely personal relationship with the Mediterranean environment and describes how it is intertwined with his life and his literary imagination.

Keywords
Mediterranean, poetry, sea, Eugenio Montale, pastoral, soundscape
The Mediterranean coast and sea are elements that shape Italy’s natural and cultural identity, wielding a determining influence on the life and culture of its inhabitants. Both suggestive and exuberant, the Mediterranean embraces Italy, and has always been an important protagonist in the country’s literature and art. Viewed at night from a satellite perspective, the Mediterranean seems like a large lake with brightly illuminated shores: a sparkling belt built of cities and towns, roads and industrial complexes that snake across three continents, leaving little space for natural environments. It is the image, startlingly clear from the dark depths of empty space, of just how much pressure human beings have put on this narrow strip of terrestrial territory. If we superimpose a map of the coastline transformations expected to take place over upcoming decades over this image—transformations due in part to climatic and environmental changes (like a rise in sea levels, the subsiding of land levels, or coastal erosion) and in part to human actions (building construction, the reduction of humid zones, the channeling of waterways, and so forth), we discover that more than 4,500 square kilometers of the peninsula—among its most beautiful—may well disappear forever. One out of every three kilometers of our coast is retreating, and 33 coastal areas risk being submerged by the sea over upcoming decades. Marine biodiversity, just like terrestrial diversity, is changing, and new, alien species are working their way into the Mediterranean. Ecological damage costs between 200 and 800 million euro per year.1

In Italy, the bizarre fact is that we suffer from a water shortage in a country surrounded by water. The lack of sufficient water resources in Italy’s diverse regions for civil, agricultural and industrial requirements is a direct result of scarce precipitation—a factor that has only gotten worse over recent years, and which also concerns regions that had never experienced drought—as well as the result of a water management system that must be considered inadequate.

In a land increasingly characterized by drought and threatened by the sea, it is interesting to observe how one of the greatest Italian poets, Eugenio Montale (1896-1981), related to his Mediterranean surroundings, as well as how this environment entered into and influenced his work. Montale lived on the Ligurian coast in the Cinque Terre region, a land that came to represent the Mediterranean for him. The poet’s presence remains extremely powerful here. His house is located in Monterosso, “la pagoda giallognola” (the yellowish pagoda), as he himself defined and called it. The “Gigante” statue—a great Neptune standing fourteen meters tall that supported the villa of Don Pedro (the emigrant who returned from Buenos Aires to whom the poet wrote a dedication in his work La Farfalla di Dinard

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1 For further information, please consult: <http://www.minambiente.it>.
[Dinard’s Butterfly]), the Cappuccini church and convent, the houses of South American emigrants, the dry walls, the very nature Montale drew upon as inspiration for his poetry, all seem to repeat the name. Today, Monterosso is much different from the town Montale discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century, when he left Genoa aboard a spluttering little worker train to reach the villa by the sea, “la casa delle due palme” (the house of two palms), another way he used to call his house. The “pagoda giallognola,” Montale’s summer residence, can still be seen here, as can the two palm trees the poet held so dear. His house is an island of memories. This is a visual and sonorous landscape, the melting pot in which his poetry took shape.

The Cinque Terre is a unique landscape: on the whole, it represents an unprecedented achievement, a challenge to nature and at the same time, a harmonious design that exists symbiotically with the surrounding environment. Sculptured landscapes, honeycombed lands, stone cathedrals that would stretch over 11,000 kilometers if they were lined up at the height of a man: long centuries of exhausting effort. Upon these terraces, the grapes Petrarch sings of in his poem “Africa” grew and matured.

Montale was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1975. His opus expresses an extremely personal relationship with water and the sea, and the poet described how it is intertwined with his life, and how it influenced his way of writing and the themes that entered his poems. He had a strong, enduring bond with his place of origin, and authorities even created a “literary park” in his honor as a consequence of his unflagging interest in the area.2

2 I Parchi Letterari® (The Parks of Literature) can be physical or mental spaces where the author at some stage lived, the atmosphere of which somehow inspired her/his writing. I Parchi Letterari are not logistical or natural parks insofar as they do not possess clear-cut boundaries, even though they may be situated at a specific geographical location. The Park can comprise one or more places—ruins, houses, the entire center of an old town, old roads within or outside of inhabited nuclei. Activities designed to stimulate curiosity and the imagination will take place to preserve the author’s visual and emotional experiences. I Parchi Letterari combine heritage and potentiality. They use the collective imagination to form an organizational web that strengthens its constituent parts by making wider benefits available to them.

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- In 2000 and 2001, at least 200,000 people visited the tourist and promotional activities undertaken by Literary Parks™.
It is audacious to claim that Montale was deliberately aware of his ecological mindset. But nevertheless I believe that Montale’s environmental awareness develops “naturally” though increasing involvement with the places he chose as “home” and refuge.” As Cheryll Glotfelty writes, one of the aims of ecocriticism is to identify “environmentally enlightened works” that can be traced back to “mainstream genres, identifying fiction and poetry writers whose work manifests ecological awareness” (xxiii). This means reinterpreting the texts, highlighting the universal sense of belonging to a place that develops naturally when one establishes a channel of communication between the human and non-human worlds. This contact allows man to recognize himself in nature, as well as perceive the need to preserve it. No other twentieth-century Italian poet grasped this need as well as Montale. Mediterranean nature is central to all his writings: not simply a “character” or “theme,” but a necessary route to interpreting reality. Although no one spoke about “ecology” and “environmental issues” in relationship to literature in Montale’s era with quite the emphasis we’re accustomed to today, Montale encompasses many of the elements that are central to ecocritical discussion: the sense of continuity between the human and non-human—in particular in his poem “The Eel”; a sense that is amplified in the fusion of abstract and concrete elements that make it possible to overcome the dualisms characterizing Western society—as exemplified in the short poem “Mediterraneo,” in which the sea takes on a symbolic valence and is at the same time overwhelming physicality. The value of nature of and for itself, rather than as a function of or in service to humans, emerges in Montale’s poetry. This new role often makes it possible for nature to be the protagonist in his writings. Notice also the influence of pastoral and romantic literature—especially in the short poem “Mediterraneo”—in the creation of our tradition of environmental literature; the direct contact with nature through personal experience—Montale was a passionate birdwatcher and lived in close contact with Liguria’s natural coastal environment; and the attention to details rarely mentioned

- Includes participation from 55 local bodies (50 municipalities, provinces, and one region), and a multitude of public and private organizations (including FS—the Italian State Railways—universities, foundations, professional associations, mountaineering clubs, and communities, tourist and crafts businesses, etc.).

For Further information about Parco letterario, Eugenio Montale (The Eugenio Montale Literary Park), please visit: <www.parchiletterari.com/montale>.

The Eugenio Montale Literary Park is located in Italy’s Cinque Terre region. The Montale walks—proposed by the Parco Letterario® and dedicated to the poet—represent an encounter, a sort of voyage into Ossi di seppia, “Mediterraneo” and “Meriggi di ombre.” Today, semi-abandoned, the terraces of Cinque Terre have been declared a patrimony of humankind, and constitute the Italian National Cinque Terre Park.
about nature, for example the sound of the sea, which broadens the possibility of communication with and interpretation of the natural world.

From this point of view, I felt it would be valuable to conduct an ecocritical analysis of several parts of the poem “Mediterraneo,” included in the book of poetry *Ossi di seppia* (Cuttlefish Bones—the title alludes to the human being’s condition as an infinitesimal flake, the residue of a brief and incomprehensible life cycle—first published in Turin in 1925 by Piero Gobetti), and of the poem “L’Anguilla” (The Eel) from his book of poetry *La Bufera e altro* (The Storm and Other Poems, 1956), first published in 1948.

When Montale was nine years old, his father built a summer villa in Monterosso, on the Ligurian coast near La Spezia. The Mediterranean coastline was a formative landscape for the poet, and Liguria as the whole exerts a strong presence in his first poems, especially in *Ossi di seppia*, and continues to figure prominently in his later verse and writings. The geographical sources of Montale’s inspiration helped him respond to the depressing historical events he witnessed in the 1920s and 1940s. The privileged “marginality” of his social class (liberal, cultured) sharpened his sensitivity towards the phenomena of nature; personal solitude generated dialogue with the small, insignificant things in Ligurian nature, as well as with the distant, evocative presence of its sole horizon, the sea.

The sea functions as “ferment and foment,” providing the hypnotic allure special to the Mediterranean in certain hours of the day. In a life that appeared defeated right from the beginning, nature gave Montale a deeper dignity, and the poet shares this with his readers through his poetry. Guido Almansi of the University of Kent notes:

> The Ligurian coast of his childhood is not only a background against which he brings to life his creations, but is the main vehicle of his poetry: this landscape of his, arid, rocky, steep, with a vegetation rare and contorted, lined with streams of muddy water, a land known and obsessively studied to a point of self-identification (his own, yet so

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3 Born in Genoa to affluent parents, Eugenio Montale initially studied accounting, but often was unable to attend class due to poor health. His real education came from his older sister Marianna, a philosophy student, and from independent study. An autodidact of impressive breadth and depth, Montale spent long hours in the Genoa library, reading widely in philosophy, the arts, music, language, and literature. In 1967, President Saragat appointed Montale senator for life “in recognition of his distinguished achievements in the literary and artistic fields.” *Cuttlefish Bones, The Occasions*, and *The Storm and Other Poems* are the three collections that earned Eugenio Montale the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975.
universal that the poet is able to rediscover it in other coasts: the seashore at Eastbourne, for example, or the Scottish coasts), his landscape becomes an ideal model of the universe. The presence, therefore, along this coast, of sea wreckage, debris, scraps, viscous or bituminous substances, seaweeds, mud, has an integral significance: Montale derives from it a statement of principle about the human condition. (379)

In other words, to know this landscape, as also the Italian critic Ettore Bonora observes, is for Montale the same as possessing knowledge of life itself (13). Presenting his work in Sweden at the Nobel Prize awards ceremony, the poet himself spoke of the “gaunt, rough, shocking beauty” of his home territory, adding: “Out of instinct I attempted to create verse that adhered to every fiber of that land,” to a terrain impregnated with the highest and most complex experiences of Italian and European poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The poem “Mediterraneo” is a good starting point for analyzing Montale’s relationship with nature and the sea. The poem develops over nine stanzas that proceed with a storybook quality around the theme—charged with an evident mythical aura—of a return to the ideal land of origins, which is created from the Ligurian lands of the poet’s childhood, understood as a point of departure and halfway point on the voyage of life in Ossi di sepia. The atmosphere and some of the themes dealt with can be traced in places back to the tradition of pastoral and Romantic literature, citing Greek divinities, pristine nature, the happiness of a bucolic childhood. In Montale’s words: “the exile returned to his uncorrupted country” (71); The house of my long-gone summers” (67); “I who dreamed of stealing / your briny words / where art and nature fuse, / the better to shout out the sadness / of an aging boy who shouldn’t have been thinking (77). Glauco Cambon has identified several of the literary traditions that may have influenced Montale:

One recognizes here a modern variation on the great theme of Romantic poetry and aesthetics, from Schiller to Blake, from

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6 “La casa delle mie estati lontane” stanza II, verse 5; “io che sognavo di rapirti / le salmastre parole / in cui natura ed arte si confondono, / per gridar meglio la mia malinconia / di fanciullo invecchiato che non doveva pensare.” Stanza VIII, verses 6-10.
Hölderlin to Wordsworth and beyond: in individual and/or collective history, the yearning for the lost home that was Greece or childhood, prehistoric bliss, naiveté, a harmony or integrity anterior to reason. Yet, in the presence of the Mediterranean sea god, the recovery of innocence seems intermittently possible to the Montalian persona that has weathered the ordeal of exile from childhood and incorrupt Nature. (20)

But soon nature and the sea would render the atmosphere both savage and hostile, transforming it, we might say, from “soft” to “hard” pastoral, or “post-pastoral.” In exploring the works of Shakespeare and the European Romantics, American critic Herbert Lindenberger has identified two types of pastoral settings: “the ‘soft’ pastoral of cultivated landscapes and social communion and the ‘hard’ pastoral of wind-swept slopes and total solitude” (337-38). In another analysis, Terry Gifford defines “post-pastoral” literature in the following terms:

Fundamental to post-pastoral [are]: 1) an awe in attention to the natural world; 2) the recognition of a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution; 3) the recognition that the inner is also the workings of the outer, that our inner nature can be understood in relation to external nature; 4) an awareness of both nature as culture and culture as nature; 5) [the recognition that] with consciousness comes conscience. . . . (221)

The pastoral genre developed in part because it was nurtured by the tension between civilization and wilderness, as well as the attempt to resolve it. This dualism can be adapted to Montale’s dialectic relationship with the sea: home, origins, dependable point of reference; but also “abyss” (69), “vastness” (69), “wave in its restless fury” (71). Right from his first verses, the poet writes that “I petrify in your presence, / sea” (67). Montale was undoubtedly quite familiar with pastoral literature, which originated in ancient Greece during the Hellenistic period with the Sicilian poet Theocritus, who may have drawn inspiration from the legends and traditions of the local populace. His work was in turn picked up by Virgil in

7 “abisso” stanza II, verse 21; “vastità” stanza III, verse 21; “flutto in sua furia incomposta” stanza IV, verse 28.
8 “in tua presenza impietro, / mare” stanza II, verses 9-10.
Bucolics and Georgics. Over time, the genre evolved into a more complex form, especially in the 1800s, when Romantic writers had to come to terms with modern industrialization, a situation that Montale shared and experienced as well.

Leo Marx, one of the most important experts in modern pastoral literature, wrote that in this genre there materializes “the desire, in the face of the growing complexity and power of organized society, to disengage from the dominant culture and to seek the basis for a simpler, more harmonious way of life ‘closer’ (as we say) to ‘nature’” (xii-xiii). This definition befits Montale’s choice to remain reclusive and isolated on the Ligurian coast, escaping the evils of his own contemporary society including war and the rise of Fascism. Monterosso is far removed from large Italian cities like Rome and Milan. In Montale’s day, the area was neither densely populated nor particularly industrialized, and the natural non-human presence was much more evident and overpowering. In and around Monterosso, nature is a sanctuary, a refuge, a garden, but also a savage land (wilderness) one can withdraw into. Montale celebrates this (soft and hard) nature, composed of “nonhuman elements—whether they be geological, botanical, or zoological—in spite of the forces of modernity” (Schese 8).

The main character in “Mediterraneo” and the other poems in Ossi di seppia is the sea. The sea’s centrality to his entire poetic opus was underlined by Montale himself: “In Ossi di seppia everything was abstract and absorbed by a stormy sea; later I would see that the sea is everywhere, for me, and that even the classic architecture of the Tuscan hills was in fleeting movement” (Montale, Sulla poesia 567). “In Ossi di seppia the sea is the name of the father” (227), as Elio Gioanola would write in analyzing the verses of “Mediterraneo.” To say sea-father or sea-law is to say the same thing, because the Law is “paternal” in the psychic order as much as it is in social order. The entire “Mediterraneo” poem is crisscrossed by the emergence of language and law: the sea talks and dictates, makes its voice known in various ways, uses “briny words” (77) and emanates a “hard rule” (71). And the law is not for the one from which it emanates, but for the ones it is directed to. Respecting this law, individuals fool themselves into thinking they have established a bond with its legislator. Yet through their very obedience, the law reminds them of its indestructible diversity. In “Mediterraneo,” Montale writes:

Today as then I turn to stone
in your presence, sea,
but no longer feel worthy
of solemn admonition of your breathing.

9 “salmastre parole” stanza VIII, verse 7; “legge severa” stanza IV, verse 17.
It was you who first told me
the petty ferment of my heart was no more
than a moment of yours; that deep in me
was your hazardous law: to be vast
and various yet fixed:
and so empty myself of all uncleanness
like you who toss on the beaches
among cork and seaweed and starfish
the useless rubble of your abyss. (67-69)10

But the sea is also a father welcoming his prodigal son: “and what rises in me, sea, / may be the rancor / that each son feels for his father” (73).11 Defining the sea as a father means not wanting to establish a definitive separation. We originate from our fathers, as from the sea, and share a part of ourselves with him. We are part of him and he is a part of us. We can feel rancor, fear, intimidation, but we must equally recognize the continuity extant between the subjects in question, as well as the positive nature of their relationship, because the father is the son’s source of life. In other cases, the encounter between the sea marks a joyous moment, “the discovery of an elemental exultance that communicates its thrill even to dull matter and rock” (Cambon 22). Montale writes:

Vastness, you redeemed
the suffering of the stones as well:
your exultation justified
the fixedness of finite things.
I slid down among the rubble,
briny guts rose to my heart;
the line of the sea
was a game of rings.
With this joy the lost
lapwing swoops

10 “Come allora oggi la tua presenza impietro, / mare, ma non più degno / mi credo del solenne ammonimento / del tuo respiro. Tu m’hai detto primo / che il piccino fermento / del mio cuore non era che un momento / del tuo; che mi era in fondo / la tua legge rischiosa: esser vasto e diverso / e insieme fisso: / e svuotarsi così d’ogni lordura / come tu fai che sbatti sulle sponde / tra sugheri alghie asterie / le inutili macerie del tuo abisso.” Stanza II, verses 9-21.
11 “E questa che in me cresce / è forse la rancura / che ogni figliolo, mare, ha per il padre.” Stanza V, verses 26-28.
out of the hidden valley to the shore. (69-71)\textsuperscript{12}

In these verses, the poet recalls the happiness he felt when running along the beach as a child. Later in the poem, two darting jays suddenly draw the speaker’s attention towards the sea, with the pine tree-studded knolls and cliffs in the background:

When the boiling
of waters that choke on long shoals
reaches me more or less muffled:
or sometimes it’s thunder
and foam raining back on the rocks . . .
I raise my eyes, the braying overhead
ceases: and bluewhite arrows,
two jays,
shoot by toward the roaring waters. (67)\textsuperscript{13}

We can note the reference to the jays, a kind of bird that Montale knew well. In reference to this, Cambon has commented: “Montale is one of the finest birdwatchers in world poetry, and when birds appear in his verse and prose, they bring life, courage, deliverance. . .” (22). Montale was a close observer of the natural world and knew how to capture its goodness and other qualities, intuiting just how essential a direct relationship with it is for mankind. Therefore, the sea represents an entity to which and with which one can speak, something capable of listening and providing responses. Nature, unlike people, does not judge nor deliberately condemn anyone. The sea patiently awaits our return, even when we believe we dominate it. The judgments and condemnations come from those who do not know how to listen and wait.

Therefore, the sea holds a profound symbolic power, as novelist Carlo Emilio Gada writes:

\begin{verse}

13 “Quando più sordo o meno il ribollio dell’acque / che s’ingorgano/ accanto a lunghe secche mi raggiunge: / o è un bombao talvolta ed un ripiovere / di schiume sulle rocce. / Come rialzo il viso, ecco cessare / i ragli sul mio capo; e via scoccare / verso le strepenti acque, / frecciate biancazzurre, due ghiandale.” Stanza I, verses 9-17.
\end{verse}
Neither vain, nor vague, nor free, nor ‘desired,’ this landscape (or this foaming sea) is the historical cradle of Montale’s poetry, but the spectacular reality turns into a lyric ‘necessity’: you can immediately tell when the landscape becomes the necessary symbol of another emotion, the connate means for other, secretive imaginings. . . . Terrestrial and aquatic Liguria becomes the symbol of actuation of knowledge and the consummation of pain. . . . And thus, in the world of symbols, the Mediterranean boils angrily and even lays down a law: the composing and harmonious law of infinity, of totality. . . . Valid and new, truthful and acrid is the symbol of Montale’s poetry. (766)

The Mediterranean Sea is like a human being equipped with exuberant emotions, a sentiment that Montale identifies and amplifies, and which becomes a mirror for his emotions and the “cradle” of his poetry, a place where Montale felt protected and through which the lyricism of his writings was best expressed. Given that this is a childhood landscape, we can speak of a fusion, with obvious effects on the words and literary creations, between the “rhythms” of the sea and those of the poet. Liguria and its seas are capable of expressing the inexpressible, of interweaving interiority and exteriority, projecting the poet’s id onto the page. In fact, according to a study by Isabelle Melis, “. . . the marine suite, played out on the friction of the high-sounding and prosaic, is the debtor for a “sung” language and the willingness, expressed by the Poet, to place the sonorous impression of a ‘stormy sea’ into the rhythm . . .” (51).

Montale, like all the important poets of the early years of the 20th century, was influenced by the symbolist movement. The landscape is a symbol, a metaphor for existence as can be seen first and foremost in Ossi di seppia, from which we can glean a true system of objects that harks back to existential meanings, and which will reappear in later collections: garden and wall (limits, closure, the opacity of not understanding and being imprisoned), openings (passing beyond, saving oneself), sea (limitlessness, life, not of the individual but in general). Later Montale’s symbolism would become more complex, even detached from the landscape. It would become a more arduous conceptual elaboration, tending towards allegory; objects would allusively characterize a person, giving us a glimpse of an event; on other occasions their choice appears gratuitous, seems to echo the non-sense of life in general. In this use of objects, which substitute for states of mind and are their equal, as well as in his way of treating the poetic text as an “object,” something
autonomous from the subjectivity of the author, Montale is reminiscent of T.S. Eliot and the so-called technique of “objective correlative.”  

But despite this, the sea is also an overpowering, overbearing physical presence. Critic Sergio Solmi writes:

This sea, while certainly not the tranquil decorative mirror of illustrated postcards, is neither a concept nor a metaphysical support. It is a real, live, iridescent sea in all its multiform aspects. . . . If we close the volume we can hear, behind the words that are only slowly erased from memory, a crashing against the rocky coasts and the infinite music. This open salty gust gives the book its harmony, evokes its setting and provides it with a sort of ideal unity culminating in the Mediterranean. (20)

Montale had an innovative approach to his relationship with nature: he understood the symbolism that nature was capable of concealing, and was adept at interpreting it in a modern key. The Mediterranean Sea has both abstract and concrete valences; it is thought and physicality, and both are correlated and interdependent aspects. Western culture is increasingly distanced from the natural world, largely based on the separation proposed by the philosopher Descartes between body and mind, between rationality and affectivity, between nature and culture. A vision of the world that devalues concrete reality, supporting an attitude of detachment from it, creates as a consequence an indifference, a non-caring for things and for the environment. This culture must be substituted with a culture of complexity that recognizes the interrelation and contingency of all phenomena. Therefore there is no contradiction in Montale’s interpretation of the sea. In fact, the poet intuits the necessary reconciliation of the two dimensions of reality. In this sense, Montale is a precursor to ecological and ecocritical thought; an artist intent on rendering such hierarchies null and void. We can sum up this position by affirming that Montale is a “physical and metaphysical poet” (Pancrazi 248) bound first and foremost to his own homeland, Liguria. The greatly beloved landscape of the Cinque Terre, like the

\[\text{With his use of the “objective correlative,” T. S. Eliot meant a series of objects, a situation, or a chain of events that are the formula for a particular emotion, in such a manner that, when the external factors have been given that lead to an experience that can be felt, the emotion is immediately evoked. The great Modernist poet used this technique to demonstrate his conviction that poetry was to be considered the emotional equivalent of thought. See Eliot.}\]
Mediterranean Sea, is employed as the omnipresent scene for the entire length of his poetic journey.

Rebecca West underlines the idea that in *Ossi di seppia*, and in “Mediterraneo” in particular, everything is absorbed by a tumultuous sea:

The focus [of Montale] would seem to have been primarily on sound rather than sense. This is borne out of the poet’s descriptions of the sea, which are concerned overwhelmingly with its sonorities rather than its colors, emphasizing its auditory rather than its visual pull on the young man. As we read through the nine poems of the “Mediterranean” suite we begin to hear the sea more than to see it. . . .

Let’s take a look at a few examples of the sea’s sonorous presence: “sound of harsh play” (67); “more muffled or less the boiling the waters” (67); “voice / that comes out of your mouths / when they open like green bells” (67); “your music” (73); “your voice” (73) “your roaring page” (77).15

The sound is the element that lends the sea its physicality. This choice is original within Montale’s poetic context of reference, and it is interesting from an ecocritical point of view because it broadens and diversifies the possible relationship with the sea, rendering it more direct and complex from a sensorial point of view as well. Literary soundscapes are an area that many ecocritics are currently investigating. Modern society is perceived by many observers to be deaf—it doesn’t hear nature’s voice. This is the result of a widespread inability to listen, as American nature writer John Hay affirms: “Our modern, owned world is going deaf from listening to its own answers” (47). This deafness is metaphoric, as Masami Yuki, an environmental critic and specialist in the study of literary soundscapes, puts it: “Hay uses the word ‘deaf’ metaphorically; it does not refer to the loss of a physiological sense of hearing but to people’s insensitivity and indifference towards their surroundings, the result of which is what we recognize as environmental problems” (136). She goes on to note: “[A] ‘soundscape’ . . . is not a mere registration of sounds but a perceived environment that reflects a certain logic or discourse with which the perceiver can make sense of the word” (137). In this

15 “un suon d’agri lazzi” stanza I, verse 3; “più sordo o meno il ribollito dell’acque” stanza I, verse 9; “voce / che esce dalle tue bocche quando si schiudono / come verdi campane” stanza II, verses 1-2; “la tua musica” stanza V, verse 4; “la tua voce” stanza V, verse 7; “la tua pagina rombante” stanza VII, verse 21.
sense, the sound dimension of a given place can suggest an alternative route to creating a relationship with the natural environment. In Montale’s work, attention paid to this aspect as well as the increase in the musicality of the verse both favor a more intimate, personal, and direct contact with the sea, helping “develop an aural imagination of the environment” (Yuki 136). As I noted earlier, if the sea has a voice of its own, it can establish dialogue, some steps can be made towards creating a relationship—the relationship that has been lost, broken with the father, and which the prodigal son, by listening once again to his father, can reestablish.

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In addition to the ceaseless relationship with the marine element, in the poetry “L’Anguilla” we pick up on a sense of belonging, continuity, brotherhood with the creatures of the marine world. Recognized as one of Montale’s masterpieces, the poem consists of a single, long rhetorical interrogation that contains the answer within itself. The biological stubbornness of the animal, the great vital adventure that leads it from northern seas all the way to European mountains, and from which it returns to the sea, testifies to a spiritual willingness that is confirmed through the concreteness of the terrestrial condition: “[G]reen spirit seeking life / where only drought and desolation sting” (385).16

In “L’Anguilla,” the contraposition between sea and earth that dates back to Esterina, “water creature” (15) for Montale, in the poem “Falsetto,” that is placed in opposition to the “race who are earthbound” (15),17 to which the poet belonged: on the one hand, instinct, an adhesion to nature and immediacy; on the other, reason and conscience. Resistance, tenacity, both attributes of a mountain-dweller’s ethos, are now associated with the biological. Values that have been traditionally associated with the sea become allies of the land, safeguarding both its wildness and ethos. The division of subjectivity (the “divided soul” in Ossi di seppia) has been surpassed. The elements that constitute the Montalian investigation tend toward a reunification, through a more balanced relationship with the world of pulses, animal nature, in which the subconscious and conscious minds, instinct and resistance, nature and ethics, the male and female parts, water and land, sky and fire all meet. With this in mind, Niva Lorenzini writes:

16 “l’anima / verde che cerca / vita là dove solo / morde l’arsura e la desolazione” verses 20-22.
17 “equorea creatura” verse 33; “razza di chi rimane a terra” verses 50-51.
This duality is perfectly incarnated in the figure of the eel, a creature that inhabits the border between land and sea, both subterranean and vital, as well as a popular, very Italian source of food, just as that Apennine ridge that separates Liguria and Romagna is Italian, and to which Montale assigns the function of travel destination for the Baltic eel. The lynchpin of the poem, on a symbolic level it is in fact a dynamic of metamorphosis, of the human in vegetable and mineral (and vice versa), passing through that condition of intermediary animal nature that has precisely its proper objective correlative example in the eel’s destiny of birth, reproduction and death. (183)

Concerning the composition of the poem in free verse, with a prevalence of hendecasyllabic and seven-syllable lines, the reader is struck by its formal structure. The poem is composed in a unique syntactic period of 30 verses that form an interrogative question. The first section, which extends for 14 verses in a broad and complex period, articulated in subordinates “who leaves,” “to reach,” “rising,” “infiltrating,” “until . . . ignites” (385) until only by instinct, swimming upriver to swampy homelands. The poet describes the eel’s (aquatic) path in great detail, its progressive geography drawing closer and becoming more spatially restricted, from the Baltic to “our seas,” to the “estuaries,” to the “rivers,” to their increasingly narrow branches like hair (“from branch to branch”—literally: from hair to hair), to rocky brooks and muddy rivulets that are ultimately reduced to “stagnant pools” (385) in the pits of Romagna, where the eel finds a place appropriate to live.

In this first half of the poem, one can also identify a descriptive willingness suggested by the precision of naturalistic and geographical references (connected with memories and childhood locales, according to Montale’s own declarations) that lay along the eel’s adventurous path, imitating the animal’s torturous, supple movement through their syntactic rhythm. The entire poem has an enveloping, sinuous, and distended rhythm, obtained through long segments, a limited use of strong pauses, and continuous enjambments.

The allegoric value of this common animal, low and terrestrial, hardly literary, is anticipated in the initial verse: “The eel, siren / of cold seas, who leaves / the

18 “che lascia” verse 2; “per giungere” verse 3; “che risale” verse 5; “filtrando” verse 9; “finché . . . accende” verses 10-12.
19 “nostri mari” verse 3; “estuari” verse 4; “fiumi” verse 4; “di capello in capello” verse 7; “pozze d’acquamorta” verse 12.
The term “sirena” (siren) places the animal in a mythological dimension, at once atemporal and anthropomorphic, because it immediately associates an image of woman, of which it will prove to be an emblem. Later on, the eel begins to undergo metamorphosis, turning into a “torch,” a “whiplash,” an “arrow of Love” (385). These images underline that irresistible strength, that instinct for conservation and reproduction, that is capable of overcoming any and all resistance, and which has already been affirmed in the first part (“rising / deep beneath the downstream flood,” “ever more inward, / bent on the heart of rock” (385) and the eel becomes the emblem of love-eros and procreation “Edens of generation” (385). This vital image is an antithesis to others that lead back to the typical Montalian topos that was widely described in “Mediterraneo,” in other words that of a parched, desolate landscape that is presented here in several verses through various expressions: “rock,” “stagnant pools,” “desiccated Pyrenean brooks,” “drought and desolation,” “everything seems charcoal, / buried stump” (385).

The eel proves to be the objective correlative of the woman, compared to a fish for its miraculous regenerative powers, biological instinct, the capacity to (pro)create, almost to shape life out of “mud” (“sons of men, sunk in your mire” (385), in the mud of a world contaminated by violence, just as the eel is capable of surviving “muddy rills” (385). In both the eel and the woman, the poet perceives the dark and unstoppable vocation to perpetuate life; in both he highlights the elementary anxiety to exist that pervades our universe. The eel is like a woman: it

20 “L’anguilla, la sirena / dei mari freddi che lascia il Baltico” verses 1-2.
21 “torcia”, “frusta”, “freccia d’Amore” verses 15-16.
22 “risale in profondo, sotto la piena avversa” verse 5; “sempre più addentro, sempre più nel cuore / del macigno” verses 8-9.
23 “paradisi di fecondazione” verse 19.
24 “macigno” verse 9; “pozze d’acquamorta” verse 12; “i disseccati / ruscelli pireanaici” verses 17-18; “l’arsura e la desolazione” verse 22; “incarbonirsi, bronco seppellito” verse 25.
25 “figli / dell’uomo, immersi nel tuo fango” verses 28-29.
26 “tra i gorielli di melma” verse 10.
27 Montale offers other examples of the continuity and fusion between both human and natural elements. One such example is the well-known poem “Portami il girasole ch’io lo trapianto” (Bring me the sunflower that I can repot it, Ossi di seppia, 1925), in which he writes:

Bring me the sunflower that I can repot it
in my salt-burned land,
where it can display the anxiety of its yellow face
to shimmering blues skies all day
must reproduce after a harsh, frenetic journey, among a thousand obstacles, looking for its own path through the mud until it completes its cycle of fecundity. At this point, the humble eel becomes an allegory for love, driving the children of humankind to reproduce.

As in many other poems, the poet’s privileged interlocutor is a female figure, and here (instead of the woman-angel extant in other compositions) she is the bearer of low, instinctual values, of a biological vitality, sexual, and still the last defense against the ills of the world, even out there where life seems impossible, she is an Arabian phoenix ("spark that says that everything begins / when everything seems charcoal, / buried stump" 385), a terrestrial angel of “Edens of generation,” a light that burns “virginal,” like the eel’s “flash,” “stagnant pools.” And finally “sister” (385), the last word of the poem, which recalls the Franciscan canticle: ultimately

("Portami il girasole ch’io lo trapianti / nel mio terreno bruciato dal salino, / e mostri tutto il giorno agli azzurri specchianti / del cielo l’ansietà del suo volto giallino.” verses 1-4)

The sunflower, that magical plant with petals as yellow as the lemons Montale waxes poetic about in other poems, is rendered semi-anthropomorphic, its “yellow face” on display in the first stanza. But unlike a human, it is an angel, a divinity, a magician turned towards the blue sky in anxiety and yearning for the infinite: it is not a sunflower, but the sunflower. As with the eel, it takes on a timeless, almost mythical dimension. Montale goes on to say:

Bring me the plant that leads
to where blonde transparencies arise
and evaporate life into its essence;
bring me the sunflower gone wild with light.

("Portami tu la pianta che conduce / dove sorgono bionde trasparenze / e vapora la vita quale essenza; / portami il girasole impazzito di luce.” verses 9-12)

The last part of the poem echoes the beginning of the composition as far as invocation is concerned, continuing to pursue the theme of dissolution: “transparencies” and verbs like “evaporate” communicate just how far we have moved from materiality in order to achieve essence. The sunflower has become a symbol of almost mystical intoxication, something that clarifies our view of things, the extreme attempt of a poem that is also philosophy, theory (in the Greek sense of the word: to see) of light, something before which one cannot help but go “wild,” crazy. Montale is not asking his Muse for mere knowledge, he is requesting something more: that which poets like to call “illumination.” We understand the correspondences—in the Emersonian sense—between abstract and concrete through an encounter with naturalness. Nature, therefore, becomes a necessary pathway to gaining a sense of life.

28 “la scintilla che dice / tutto comincia quando tutto pare / incarbonirsi, bronco seppellito” verses 23-25.

29 “paradisi di fecondazione” verse 19; “intatta” verse 28; “guizzo” verse 12; “stagnant pools” verse 12; “sorella” verse 30.
the lyricism is an anthem to solidarity among humble, natural beings; a hymn for life, for its cycle, of which the eel itself is a metaphor:

iris,

twin to the one your lashes frame

and you set shining virginal among

the sons of men, sunk in your mire—

can you fail to see her as a sister? (385)30

The lemma, a predicate of “eel,” leads us back to the first verse, just as the lyric form of the poem itself produces a path moving backward from the animal. Even the poet recognizes himself, identifies himself in the figure of the animal. He feels at one and participatory in the eel’s exhausting, humble yet patient existence, because he too is led by a sort of creative instinct: that of poetry, the creative force par excellence (poiēo = make, create). A force that does not shirk its duties even in the face of the most difficult, uncomfortable realities.

* * *

The tension between the world of nature and the world of human ideas remains high in all of Montale’s work. It indicates a difficult and tenuous boundary between a near spiritual, yet introverted “imprisonment in the cosmos,” and the “terra firma of ideas, tradition, humanism.” Breaches in this marginal zone, the poetic “miracles” Montale so cherished, offer rare glimpses of the interpenetrating of place and ideas, of country and city, of the nonhuman and human.

Works Cited


30 “l’iride breve, gemella / di quella che incastonano i tuoi cigli / e fai brillare intatta in mezzo / ai figli / dell’uomo, immersi nel tuo fango, puoi tu / non crederla sorella?” verses 26-30.


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