The Occasions (Le Occasioni) or The Meeting Point Between Hopkins and Montale

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1. Introduction(Shimane)

Many definitions about poetry have been made in the history of English Literature. It would not be an exaggeration to say that every poet has his own, if he does not necessarily express it in writing. But no definition is, to my mind, bolder and more extraordinary than that of G. M. Hopkins:

Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning (*Journals* 289).

He maintains that content or meaning is only the means to support speech to realize itself. Since it is the exact reversal of the ordinary poetic definition emphasizing the importance of content, Hopkins' definition, though included in his *Journals*, has mostly been ignored. It is puzzling to ordinary students of poetry, whereas good poets find it agreeable.

A good poet enjoys composing his poetry using his ears and makes the most of sound as "the relation between sound and meaning in poetry is never arbitrary"; but sound is "a bearer itself of a lexical meaning". Naturally the Italian poet E. Montale is such a great poet, sharing with Hopkins a common fundamental view of poetry, particularly of the nature and significance of poetic sound.

Strangely enough, few studies have been done on this phonetic aspect of poetry either of Hopkins, Montale or other great poets. It is quite strange since poetry cannot be composed without sound; there is no language only with meaning and with no sound, while some words are mostly of sound and of little meaning. There are verses and songs with little content which survived the test of time for centuries. Here exists a mystery of poetic sound.

Now a young Italian scholar, Lara Ferrini of Universita degli studi di Urbini, Italy has tried to crack this inordinately hard nut mainly in Montale's poems in the light of Hopkins' poetics; this essey is one of the very few comparative studies between Montale and Hopkins. Ms Ferrini is an active participant of The Hopkins Summer School held annually in Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, Ireland, a place with an intimate connection to Hopkins in his last years and this is her paper presented at the Summer School in 2001.

2. Essay(Ferrini)

"Anyway I am here because I wrote poems, definitely useless goods, but almost never noxious and that is one of their titles of nobility.   But it is not the only one, poetry being a production and an endemic and incurable disease" (Eugenio Montale).[1]

Of course you know who G. M. Hopkins is but you may not know much about Eugenio Montale. Montale is one of the greatest Italian twentieth century poets. He won the Nobel Prize in 1975. He worked as a literary translator and translated many poets "beyond the Alps" among whom were Hopkins and Yeats. He was greatly influenced by the Anglo-Saxon tradition in general. In his "Introduction" to *The Collected Poems of Montale* the critic Giorgio Zampa, writing about Montale's *Book of Translations*, speaks of a real "elective affinity" between him and the poets he translated. [2]   Furthermore Montale, like Eliot, uses the objective correlative very much. His poetry intends neither to describe nor to portray, but to evoke.

Montale also wrote for the literary reviews *Letteratura* (*Literature*) and *Campo di Marte* (*Field of Mars*) which were the Florentine reviews of the so-called literary movement of the Hermeticism. The latter flourished in the first half of the twentieth century in Italy and included all the poets between Ungaretti and Montale, even if the latter did not like the label of hermatic very much.   He preferred being considered "born in the furrow of a poetic trend which can be approximately defined metaphysical. " [3]   Hermeticism also deals with all the Florentine writers, among whom is Carlo Bo (the rector of my University in Urbino) of the literary reviews *Frontespizio (Frontispiece)* and *Campo di Marte* itself.

The word Hermeticism dates back to Ermete Trismegisto and to an esoteric, philosophical and religious doctrine called Hermeticism, which arose in the Hellenistic age. The poetry of that literary movement has particular features. First of all its language sounds obscure and difficult to understand. Although in his collection of speeches, prefaces, articles, essays, and reviews called *Sulla Poesia (About Poetry)*, Montale himself declares: "I never tried to be obscure on purpose".[4] Another feature of Hermeticism is that its poems are brief, bare and not prolix; in a sense, they are like those of Imagism. Hermetic poetry is like a sort of "pure one" as Montale writes: "Poetry, . . . has investigated itself, the rules of its own purity, it has sometimes gone so far as to draw direct inspiration from its reached self-conscience. " [5]

The poems of the Hermetic movement are also rich in analogies. Their themes are negative and deal with the sense of absence, of isolation, of existential problems and of waiting for something which won't come. All this is well represented in Montale's poem "Spesso il male di vivere ho incontrato" ("Often the evil of life I met"). There he uses special objective correlatives to describe the evil of life such as "il rivo strozzato" ("the strangled stream"), "l'accartocciarsi della foglia" ("the curling up of the leaf") and "il cavallo stramazzato" ("the dropped down horse").   As we see later on, not only the meaning but also the sound is very important for Montale.

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Montale himself, in speaking about his book *The Occasions*, admits that Hopkins has influenced him very much. I quote from his "About Poetry":

Of course, in *The Occasions* the need for an objective expression grows while the romantic effusions decrease. The plot of rhymes and assonances is more compact and it is strange that nobody mentioned the name of Gerard Manley Hopkins. In my way I was looking for my sprung rhythm.[6]

The Occasions is Montale's second book of poetry published in 1939, whose poems date back to the years between 1928-1939. The book is divided into four parts. It begins with a poem called "Il balcone" ("the balcony") which ideally belongs to the second section because of its form. In fact it is what Montale used to call a motet. He meant a popular, short poem with a wealth of ideas in it. The second part of *The Occasions* consists of motets only.

While Montale's first book *Ossi di seppia* (*Bones of Cuttlefish*) is based on the dimension of space, *The Occasions* is based on the dimension of time. Its leitmotiv is memory. The latter can be the only safe way to stop the flowing of life and the blind negativeness of existence. Montale borrowed the word "occasion" from Goethe. Here it is meant to be a sort of miraculous event and not simply an occurrence. In a sense the occasions are like "Epiphanies" to use a Joycean word. They are like unexpected, sudden illuminations. They remind us of past situations and/or of forgotten people like, in this case, the female characters such as Gerti, Liuba and Dora Markus.

The critic Oreste Macri claims that when Montale speaks about Hopkins' influence on *The Occasions*, he certainly means the second section, the one of the "mottetti": "When Montale says ... that he was searching for it [the sprung rhythm] particularly in *The Occasions*; he was of course referring to the gendre of the <motet> ...".[7]

The *Motets* were written between 1934 and 1939. They are the central part of *The Occasions*, all dealing with a dialogue with an absent female character; they are a whole unity. The *Motets* are dedicated to Irma Brandeis, an American-Jewish woman whom Montale met in Florence. At that time of racial persecution in Italy she had to go back to the U.S.A.; she left Italy and therefore Montale. The *Motets* are dedicated to her explicitly only from the 1949 edition. Irma Brandeis is presented as Clizia, as in the tradition of the Provençal poetry. According to the myth Clizia was turned into a sunflower. Here the poet refers to a sonnet by Dante addressed to Giovanni Quirini, where the poet announces his love for a "dispietata e disdegnosa" ("pitiless and scornful") woman. He compares himself to "quella ch'a veder lo sol si gira / e'l non mutato amor mutata serba", namely Clizia. The reader can naturally find the myth in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

So the *Motets* are a kind of "canzoniere" ("a book of songs" like Petrarch's famous one) dedicated to an absent woman. There is a sense of detachment, of parting, but at the same time a desire for contact. Its

leitmotiv is the absence of that woman, but the tone is not elegiac. That is why this section is considered so innovative. It is the way in which this topic of love is treated which is really interesting and outstanding.

Having briefly introduced Montale and his work *The Occasions*, particularly the section of *The Motets*, I now want to consider the questions: "What do Hopkins and Montale have in common? " and "In what ways did Hopkins influence Montale? "

I think what Hopkins and Montale have in common is sound. In his book *About Poetry* Montale claims that "poetry itself was born from the need to add a vocal sound (the word) to the hammering of the first tribal music. Later on only word and music can be written down and be different." [8] Furthermore Macri, speaking of the innovative elements taken from Browning's technique and elaborated again by Montale, asserts that Montale uses the language in a non-conventional way in order to motivate totally the signifier.[9] He also writes that Hopkins influenced Montale from a technical and a musical point of view.[10] On the one hand Macri demonstrates the importance of sound in Montale and the influence of Hopkins on him. On the other hand Kunio Shimane claims the importance of sound in Hopkins as well: "Every word, every technique in Hopkins' poetry is related, in one way or another, to sound effects that he laboured to achieve".[11]

Why is sound so important for both poets? Jurij M. Lotman can answer that question:

The phoneme becomes not only an element which can distinguish the meaning, but a bearer itself of a lexical meaning. Sounds are signifiers themselves. That is why phonological approach becomes conceptual.[12]

As everybody knows, sounds put in a certain order bear a certain meaning. The task of the poet is to find the proper sound to express a certain meaning. Lotman says, "the relation between sound and meaning in poetry is never arbitrary, but due to precise reasons". That is what in poetry is called "iconicity" of the poetic sign.

The Wreck of the Deutschland is divided between two different and contrasting feelings: one of human sorrow and suffering, the other of the infinite goodness of God. A rhythm only like "sprung rhythm" can properly utter this contrast. So to represent that semantic assumption Hopkins used a particular technique made of assonance and dissonance which creates harmony in the whole. We can also call it "disharmony in harmony". I think that is typical of modern art and modern poetry as well, which are both based on contrast, disorder and chaos as modern times are.

A technique based on "sprung rhythm" is a revolutionary one also because it represents a way to renew the tradition by starting within it and by unhinging it on the inside. Not by chance Derek Attridge in his *Poetic Rhythm : An Introduction* includes Hopkins and his "sprung rhythm" in the chapter dedicated to free verse. He justifies his choice: "Much later in the nineteenth century, Gerard Manley Hopkins was also

pushing intense poetic language beyond the limits of metrical verse, developing his own idiosyncratic metrical mode. . . . He called it "sprung rhythm", and claimed that it could be scanned metrically. However, it often works best when read as a type of free verse. " [13]

The so-called "free verse" does not mean anarchy. In fact as G. K. Chesterton holds: "the free verse, like free love is a contradiction in terms". [14]. Why is that? Attridge answers:

> The usual name for verse that does not fall into a metrical pattern is *free verse*, a name which derives in large part from the propaganda of poets staking a claim for the merits of their own new practice, and one which should not be taken to imply that metrical verse is, by contrast, limited or restricted. A more accurate name would be *nonmetrical verse*, which, as a negative definition, has the advantage of implying that this kind of verse does not have a fixed identity of its own, whereas *free verse* misleadingly suggests a single type of poetry. [15]

This explains the modernity of Hopkins. Then Montale defines the new poetry as "syncopated, broken and memory's enemy". [16] Particularly when he refers to *The Occasions*, Montale speaks about a "plot of rhymes and assonances" and the like used by Hopkins. I now want to show how Montale used some of Hopkins' typical devices in some of his poems in *The Occasions*, particularly in his *Motets*. I have attempted an illustration in the original Italian to show how effective these techniques are. Here I concentrate chiefly on sound which is mainly the meeting point between the two poets. First the poem called "Il balcone" ("The balcony") stressing its musicality:

Il balcone

Pàreva facile giuoco

mutare in nulla lo spazio

che m'era aperto, in un tedio

malcerto il certo tuo fuoco.

Ora a quel vuoto ho congiunto

ogni mio tardo motivo

sull'arduo nulla si spunta

l'ansia di attenderti vivo.

La vita che dà barlumi

è quella che sola tu scorgi.

A lei ti sporgi da questa

finestra che non s'illumina.

In this text Montale frequently employs the closed back vowel /u/ as in the words "nulla" and "mutare", the half-closed back / o / and half-open / ɔ / and the diphthong /uo/. In his book *The Poetry of G.M Hopkins: The Fusing Point of Sound and Sense*, Shimane writes: "It can generally be said that the front vowels are light and the back vowels are dark".[17] Thus, this poem must have a gloomy feeling because of the recurrent use of the back vowels, particularly of /u/, which does not occur very frequently in the Italian language. The poem has in fact a dark meaning.

In the same way we can consider the 14th stanza of *The Wreck* where the passengers fight against the storm. It is a very dramatic and gloomy moment. In fact Hopkins uses many back vowels to express sorrow and sad feelings. I have indicated in bold type all the back vowels in the stanza as follows:

She drove in the dark to leeward,[18]

She struck[19] - not a reef or a rock

But the combs of a smother of sand: night drew her

Dead to Kentish Knock;

And she beat the bank down with her bows and the ride

   of her keel:

The breakers rolled on her beam with ruinous shock;

And canvas and compass,[20] the whorl and the wheel

Idle for ever to waft her or wind her with, these she endured.

In this stanza we can also find an outstanding contrast between back and front vowels which mirrors in a sense the fighting between the passengers and the storm.

In an essay entitled "The Origin of our Moral Ideas" Hopkins asserts the importance of dissonance and contrast in art:

In art we strive to realise not only unity, permanence of law, likeness, but also, with it, *difference, variety, contrast.*[21]

I consider the line by Montale, "ogni opera, ogni grido e anche lo spiro" taken from the first motet of the section entitled "Lo sai: debbo riperderti e non posso". As you can see, there are the half-closed and half-open back vowel / ɔ / and the closed front vowel / ɪ / in almost every word of the verse. This creates a strong vowel contrast. At the same time this contrast produces what Shimane calls "dissonance" in his book. Particularly the consonance of the first part of the verse between the two identical words "ogni"s

contrasts with the difference made by the consonant cluster /gr-/ in the word "grido" and that /sp-/ in the word "spiro" which have the same vowels.

Another typical device of Hopkins is used by Montale: the "expanded alliteration" named by Shimane which is an alliteration between "consonants in the relation of *fortis* and *lenis* qualities".[22] I have chosen a line from the 7th motet entitled "Il saliscendi bianco e nero dei". The line is: " **balestrucci dal palo**". The consonant "b" is a *lenis* bilabial plosive while the consonant "p" is a *fortis* bilabial plosive. Also another initial consonant agreement, though not a *fortis-lenis* agreement, is used in: "**Mezzo**di: allunga **nel** riquadro il **nes**polo". "N" and "m" are two nasals which naturally have common phonetic characteristics. That line is taken from the motet "Ti libero la fronte dai ghiaccioli".

we can understand now why Montale, referring to Hopkins, spoke about "the plot of assonances and rhymes". I would like to consider this aspect, namely assonances and rhymes, in the poem "Il balcone". In the first stanza there is a rhyme in lines 1 and 4 between the words "**giuoco**" and "**fuoco**". Then there is another rhyme in the second stanza in lines 1 and 3, but it is internal and imperfect (or half) because of the different consonants in the words "vuoto" and "arduo"; they are a fortis and a lenis consonants. The 2nd and the 3rd lines in the first stanza end with a rhyme in the words "spa**zio**" and "te**dio**". In the first stanza line 4 has also an assonance between "mal**certo**" and "**certo**". In the 2nd stanza lines 2 and 4 end with a rhyme between "mot**ivo**" and "V**ivo**" and lines 1 and 3 with a "half-assonance" between "congiunto" and "spunta". There is also an assonance between "**tardo**" and "**arduo**". In the 3rd stanza lines 1 and 4 end with two assonances between "bar**lumi**" and "ill**umina**" which have also in common a semantic aspect. There is a half internal and external rhyme between "scorgi" and "sporgi" which is in a "chiasmatic" position towards the deitics "quella" ("that") and "questa" ("this").   These are only a few examples taken from Montale to demonstrate how he mastered his words.

I have tried to explain what Montale and Hopkins have in common and how the latter influenced the former, particularly in phonetic techniques; sound is undoubtedly the meeting point between the two. To conclude I would like to let the words of both those great poets and the beautiful sound of the poem "Pied Beauty" and its translation in the Italian language "Bellezza Cangiante" by Montale speak:

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things--
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches'wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced - fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.

La Bellezza Cangiante

Gloria a Dio per le cose che ha spruzzate:

i cieli bicolori, pezzati come vacche,

la striscia roseo-biliottata della

trota in acqua, il tonfar delle caStagne

- crollo di tizzi giovani nel fuoco -

e l'ali del fringuello; per le toppe

dei campi arati e dissodati, e tutti

i traffici e gli arnesi, e tutto ch'è

fuor di squadra, difforme, impari e strambo,

tutto che muta, punto da lentiggini

(chissà come?) di fretta e di lentezza,

di dolce o d'aspro, di lucore o buio.

Quegli le esprime - lode a Lui - ch' è sola

bellezza non mutabile.

Notes:

1   Èugenio Montale, "E ancora possibile la poesia", in Giorgio Zampa (a cura di), *Sulla Poesia*, 1997, Milano,Mondadori, pp. 5-14, p. 7.. "In ogni modo io sono qui perchè ho scritto poesie, un prodotto assolutamente inutile, ma quasi mai nocivo e questo è uno dei suoi titoli di nobiltà. Ma non è il solo, essendo la poesia una produzione o una malattia assolutamente endemica e incurabile. "

2   Giorgio Zampa, "Introduzione", in Giorgio Zampa (a Cura di), *Eugenio Montale: tutte le poesie*, 1984, Milano, Mondadori, pp. XI-LIV, p. LII.

3   Montale, "Dialogo con Montale sulla poesia", in Giorgio Zampa (a cura di), *op. cit.* , m 577-586, p. 581, passim.

4   Montale, "Parliamo dell'ermetismo", in Giorgio Zampa (a cura di), op. cit. , pp. 558-561, p. 558: "Non ho mai cercato di proposito l'oscurità".

5   *Ibid.,* p. 559: "La poesia, per limitarci a questa, ha ricercato se stessa, le leggi della propria purezza, è giunta talora

a trarre diretta ispirazione da questa raggiunta autocoscienza."

6   *Ibid.*, "E. M. Poesie", pp. 87-91, p. 89: "Certo, nelle *Occasioni* cresce il bisogno di un'espressione oggettiva e sono diminuite le effusioni di serrato romantico. Più serrate è l'intreccio delle rime e delle assonanze ed è strano che nessuno abbia fatto il nome di Gerard Manley Hopkins. A modo mio cercavo il mio *sprung rhythm.*"

7   Oreste Macrì, "Lo <<sprung rhythm>> nella poetica di Montale", in *Studi Italiani*, III, 1, gennaio-giugno, 1991, pp. 95-109, p. 104: "Tornando allo <<sprung rhythm>>, Montale dice – come abbiamo letto - di averlo cercato con maggiore intensità a partire dalle Occasioni, di certo riferendosi al genere del <<mottetto>>, che si riflette..."

8   Montale, "È ancora possibile la poesia", in Giorgio Zampa (a cura di), op. cit., pp. 5-14, p. 7, passim: "Per mio conto, se considero la poesia come un oggetto ritengo ch'essa sia nata dalla necessità di aggiungere un suono vocale (parola) al martellamento delle prime musiche tribali. Solo molto piu tardi parola e musica poterono scriversi in qualche modo e differenziarsi."

9   Macrì, "Lo <<sprung rhythm>> nella Poetica di Montale", *op. cit.*, p. 96.

10   *Ibid., passim*, p. 102.

11   Kunio Shimane, *The Poetry of G.M.Hopkins: The Fusing Point of Sound and Sense*, 1983. Tokyo, The Hokuseido Press, p.19.

12   Jurij M. Lotman, *La struttura del testo poetico*, Milano, Mursia, 1972, p. 153.

13   Dereck Attridge, Poetic Rhythm: *An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 169.

14   Gilbert K. Chesterton quoted in Lotman, *La struttura del testo poetico*, Milano, Mursia, 1972, p. 128.

15   Attridge, p. 168.

16   Montale, *Sulla Poesia*, p. 466.

17   Shimane, p.57

18   [luəd](in nautical use).

19   Shimane, p.52: "In Hopkins'day this was a kind of back vowel".

20   *Ibid.*

21   Hopkins, G.M, The Journals and Papers of G.M. Hopkins. ; Italics mine. p.128

22   Shimane, p. 116.