

Dieter Hoffmann:
Italian Poetry 1885 – 1950

Giosuè Carducci – Giovanni Pascoli – Ada Negri – Eugenio
Montale – Giuseppe Ungaretti – Salvatore Quasimodo –
Mario Luzi – Antonia Pozzi – Cesare Pavese – Elsa Morante



In the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Italian poetry experienced an extraordinary heyday. In ten chapters, the present volume provides exemplary insights into this period. English adaptations of selected poems are followed by literary-historical classifications and interpretations against the background of the life and work of the poets concerned.

Cover picture: Georgios Margaritis (1814 – 1884): Euterpe (the Muse of music and lyric poetry); Wikimedia Commons

Information about the author can be found on [Wikipedia](#) and on his blog [rotherbaron](#).

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Introduction

Motivation and Structure of the Study

Italian poetry experienced an extraordinary heyday at the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century. This is also reflected in the fact that three of the poets active during this period – Giosuè Carducci, Salvatore Quasimodo and Eugenio Montale – were awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and other Italian poets were long considered candidates for the prize.

Against this background, the present study casts a spotlight on Italian poetry of this period in ten chapters. Based on exemplary poems, the work of the poets in question is examined, taking into account biographical, poetological and historical aspects.

Of course, the selection is not arbitrary. The respective literary personalities have had a decisive influence on Italian poetry with their poetic and poetological works. In this way, the study can also provide an insight into trends in literary history.

However, an insight is not an overview. Otherwise, authors such as Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863 – 1938) or Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876 – 1944), whose work also had a significant impact on Italian literature in the first half of the 20th century, should not be missing. Yet both are omitted here due to their proximity to Italian fascism.

Omission of Trailblazers of Fascism: 1. Gabriele D'Annunzio

In 1914, Gabriele D'Annunzio was one of the most important supporters of the so-called "interventionists", who favoured Italy's entry into the First World War because they believed it would benefit their country. Far from confining himself to a background role, he made fervent speeches in favour of participation in the war.

During the war, in which D'Annunzio also took part himself, he wrote the *Canti della guerra latina*, in which he sang in pathetic poems about devotion to the fatherland, the glory of the fallen soldiers and the unifying hand of the king [1].

After the end of the war, D'Annunzio condemned the outcome of the peace negotiations, which he saw as unfair to Italy, with the catchphrase "vittoria mutilata" ("mutilated victory"). He did not stop at expressions of displeasure, though. Instead, D'Annunzio and a few followers occupied the Adriatic city of Fiume, now Rijeka in Croatia, and established an operetta-like rule there, which – with its cult of leadership, mass marches and symbolism based on ancient models – provided a kind of blueprint for the later Mussolini regime.

Omission of Trailblazers of Fascism: 2. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti

Like Gabriele D'Annunzio, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was an intellectual trailblazer for fascism in many respects.

Admittedly, the fact that his Futurist Manifesto, published in 1909, celebrates "the vibrant nocturnal glow of arsenals and shipyards illuminated by mighty electric moons", that it admires "the bridges that span the rivers like gigantic gymnasts" and sings of the insatiable "railway stations that swallow up smoking snakes" [2], can be understood as an exaggerated expression of the belief in technology and progress prevailing at the time. This certainly gave rise to artistic approaches that later proved to be productive even beyond Futurism.

However, Marinetti combines the celebration of technology, the fact that it overpowers and displaces old structures, with an internalisation of its inherent power. This leads him to openly advocate violence and aggression. The corresponding attitude is based on an image of masculinity that associates manliness with uncompromising toughness and rejects everything feminine as an expression of unnecessary empathy and caring – and thus as a weakness that hinders the path to a glorious future:

"We want to glorify war – the only hygiene in the world –, and praise militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of libertarians, the beautiful ideas for which people die, and the contempt for women." [3]

According to Marinetti, this attitude should also be the basis of art:

"There is no beauty except in battle. An artistic work that has no aggressive character cannot be a masterpiece." [4]

However, Marinetti did not want his convictions to have an effect only in the artistic field. As a staunch representative of the interventionists propagating Italy's entry into the war, he was already on Mussolini's side in 1914. Later on, he wanted to translate his views into practical politics by founding a Futurist Party. The programme of this political group was so close to fascism that Mussolini was able to integrate it seamlessly into his own party in 1919.

The Role of D'Annunzio and Marinetti in the Fascist State

The fact that D'Annunzio and Marinetti did not become central protagonists of fascist Italy is primarily due to their oversized egos. Both would have preferred to become Duce themselves and therefore criticised Mussolini out of offended vanity. However, they were opportunistic enough to make themselves at home in the palace of the fascist state once it had been established.

D'Annunzio was happy to be honoured as a national poet in fascist Italy and to be paid accordingly. He lived in a posh villa on Lake Garda, was ennobled by the king and celebrated fascist imperialism as an expression of the strength of the Italian nation.

As for Marinetti, he initially broke theatrically with fascism after having been relegated to the second rank by Mussolini. Shortly afterwards, however, when Mussolini's power had been established, he reconciled with the Duce and subse-

quently played a leading role in the Italian cultural policy of those years.

Marinetti's nationalist ideology, which glorified violence, thus became a second pillar of the official art doctrine of fascist Italy. While Marinetti's Futurist art propagated war as an expression of the dynamic, forward-moving modern man, the backward-looking style of the *Novecento* provided the intellectual legitimisation for this by celebrating Italy as the birthplace of the new world order established in the Renaissance.

Literary Positioning in the Face of Fascism

However, the Mussolini regime of course also had an impact on those poets who were not close to fascism.

Whoever wanted to write literature in Italy during the two decades of fascist rule – the so-called "Ventennio fascista" – had to take a stance towards fascism in some way. This was all the more true if the works were to be published.

The spectrum of reactions in the literary scene – as in Italian society in general – included open support for fascism, sympathisation, tacit tolerance and internal emigration, but also active participation in the Resistenza, i.e. the struggle against Mussolini's state and the later German occupation. This is also reflected in the poems in this volume.

Italian "ermetismo" and Hermetic Poetry in Other Countries

In this context, "ermetismo" is of particular importance. However, anyone concerned with this phenomenon should be aware of two facts:

1. Italian ermetismo is not congruent with hermetic poetry in other countries.
2. The ermetismo is not a uniform movement. It unites a wide range of ways of dealing with fascism that are almost as diverse as those prevailing in Italian literature at the time in general.

The literary Hermeticism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was – as in the work of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, for example – motivated primarily by linguistic scepticism. The aim here was to contrast the worn-out language of everyday life with an unspent linguistic world that would open up a new approach to the world.

In Germany, the hermetic poetry of the post-war period was a reaction to the catastrophe of the Second World War, in particular the Holocaust. Here – as in the poetry of Paul Celan – the linguistic demarcation was motivated by the endeavour to give rise to a poetry beyond fascism through a renewal of language.

Functions of Hermeticism in Fascist Italy

In Italy, Hermeticism appears as an attempt to ensure literary independence from the fascist state. "Independence" is not

synonymous with "oppositional", though. Giuseppe Ungaretti, for example, had a positive attitude towards fascism, although his poetry, which tended towards the enigmatic, was anything but congruent with the official conception of art.

In contrast, Florentine Hermeticism, as represented by Mario Luzi among others, combined hermetic writing with the idea of creating a sort of antidote against the propagandistic language of the regime. Ermetismo therefore had a cathartic function here.

This function was not limited to language. Rather, it also opened up new spheres for free thought, which was thus able to regain spaces that had been buried under the regime's indoctrination machinery. For this, the poems even did not have to be directly critical of the regime. The mere stimulation of reflection and contemplation could act as an antidote to the poisonous paroles of propaganda.

In other cases – such as in the work of Eugenio Montale – the hermetic style of writing marked a conscious withdrawal from everyday life in fascist society. The poetry here therefore also had escapist tendencies.

This was also the case with Salvatore Quasimodo, whose early poetry is characterised by a nostalgic Hermeticism. Unlike Montale, however, he turned away from hermetic writing styles after the war and devoted himself to more committed forms of poetry.

About the English Adaptations of the Poems

Each language has its own logic. In every language, the dense network of associations that connects the individual terms with each other has a different structure.

Seemingly unambiguous translations evoke associations in another language that are only understood by those who are at home in that language. Words that seem neutral can have a pejorative or emphatic connotation in another language.

Finally, the tonal colours of the terms chosen for non-linguistic circumstances also differ in the respective languages. As a result, the immediate emotional effects of the individual terms and their possible combinations with other words also differ between the languages.

The pitfalls resulting from all this for a translation apply particularly to the field of poetry. The problem of the differently structured linguistic cosmos is further complicated here by the additional difficulty that poets play with language. In poetry, the given structures are not simply accepted and reproduced as such, but are remodelled in such a way that the altered linguistic structures enable a new view of reality.

The Logic of Poetic Translation

As far as hermetic poetry is concerned, these tendencies are even more pronounced, because this poetry consciously separates itself from everyday language and perception. In the case of a translation into another language, a literal reproduc-

tion of the original text is therefore even less possible and also less useful than in other cases.

Thus, in a way, every adaptation of a poem in another language results in a new poem – a poem, however, which aims to reproduce the unique nature of the respective poetic expression and the underlying thought and emotional complexes in a different language. Seen in this light, an adaptation of a poem in another language is actually also a kind of translation. But it follows the logic of poetry, for which other laws apply than for everyday language.

Nevertheless, the poetic expression found by a particular person at a particular time in a particular language for a particular mood is something unique that can never be adequately reproduced in another language. The English adaptations of the poems contained in this volume hence cannot and do not want to be more than signposts to the original texts, of whose poetic power they can at best convey a faint idea.

References

- [1] D'Annunzio, Gabriele: [Canti della guerra latina](#) (1914 – 1918). Verona 1933: Mondadori.
- [2] Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso: [Il manifesto del futurismo](#) (1909). In: Marinetti et al.: I manifesti del futurismo, pp. 3 – 10 (here page 7, no. 11). Florence 1914: Lacerba.
- [3] Ibid., p. 6, no. 9.
- [4] Ibid., no. 7.

The Janus-faced Fire of Autumn:
*Giosuè Carducci's Nature Poetry and His Socially
Committed Early Work*

The early work of Giosuè Carducci (1835 – 1907) is characterised by a socially and ecclesiastically critical stance. In his later years, however, he also wrote sensitive nature poetry – as evidenced by his poem *San Martino*.



*Henri Duhem (1860 - 1941): Return of the Shepherd (late 19th century)
Douai/Northern France, Musée de la Chartreuse (Carthusian Museum)*

Saint Martin

Over the undulating hills
the mist scatters its damp sparks.
Foaming, the sea rears up
under the lash of the mistral.

The bitter smell of wine
laughs luringly through the village,
sowing inebriating oblivion
in the anchorless souls.

Whistling, the hunter tosses
the bleeding deer onto the wood fire.
Crackling, the meat sparkles
in the thorn bush of the flames.

Curling the rose pond of clouds,
black flocks of ravens drift along,
ephemeral fleets of thoughts
on the ghostly sea of the evening.

Giosuè Carducci: [San Martino](#) (1883)
from: *Rime nuove* (1887)

The Ecstatic Raid of Autumn

The poem *San Martino* is an example of the nature poetry Carducci wrote in his later years. It was originally entitled *Autunno* (Autumn), which perhaps fits better with the general evocation of an autumnal mood. The new title probably serves above all to point more strongly to late autumn – Saint Martin's name day is 11 November.

Carducci's verses evoke the autumnal raid of transience through various pairs of opposites. The sea of roses in the clouds – the last echo of life – is juxtaposed with the death-drunken thoughts of winter. Similarly, the shroud of fog and the howling sea are contrasted with the gifts of autumn – the wine and the game shot by the hunter.

In both cases, however, the gifts are of a Janus-faced nature, as they point either directly – through the killed animal – or indirectly – through the completed life cycle of the wine – to transience. The flames of bonfire and drunkenness also have their dark sides: Both serve to suppress a fate that can be briefly forgotten, but which nevertheless remains inevitable.

A Bridge between Carducci's Early and Late Works

The reference to the saint mentioned in the title of the poem occurs rather indirectly, notably through the mention of wine. As a component of the Eucharistic celebration, it brings to mind the foundation of a new, deeper community and the associated solidarity. This is also echoed in Martin of Tours'

sharing of his cloak with the beggar, the iconic act that is regarded as the central symbol of this saint.

The allusion to the saint can also be understood as an echo of Carducci's early revolutionary work. In it, he had strongly criticised outdated social structures, for which he blamed above all the anti-enlightenment irrationalism of the official church. This became particularly clear in his poem *A Satana* (To Satan).

A Satanic Provocation

The hymn *A Satana* was first published in 1865. When the newspaper *Il Popolo* (The People) reprinted it four years later, this was a deliberate provocation – because at the same time, the First Vatican Council was opened in Rome.

If, however, the members of the Council had taken a closer look at the hymn – which of course they did not –, they could have realised that the author was by no means a Satanist. With his reference to Satan, Carducci was rather taking up the ideas of the Enlightenment and the thoughts of the early French socialists.

As God's adversary, Satan here initially stood for a free, critical thinking that refused to be constrained by the narrow corset of any kind of religious interpretation of the world. Accordingly, in Carducci's hymn *A Satana*, Satan is celebrated as the "victorious power of reason" ("forza vindice de la ragione") [1] – which is clearly reminiscent of the "Cult of Reason" at the beginning of the French Revolution.

Passionate Church Critic

At the same time, however, the revaluation of Satan in relation to the Christian God also contains a socially critical element. Together with the divine order, it also rejects what the ecclesiastical and secular nobility had proclaimed to be its worldly counterpart: the corporative society. This is contrasted with the original equality of all people.

This idea, which for example was emphasised by Michel Proudhon in *Early Socialism* [2], has, however, also been formulated several times by the ecclesiastical reform movements. With his invocation of Satan, Carducci therefore does not reject the Christian faith as such. What he criticises is rather the official church that has repeatedly nipped in the bud the various approaches to a fundamental reform.

In the hymn *To Satan*, this corresponds to the positive reference to persons who have endeavoured to renew the church in the spirit of early Christianity, such as Jan Hus, Girolamo Savonarola or John Wyclif. With regard to the Vatican Council, the poem is thus to be understood as a call to take the efforts for church reform seriously, instead of using the Council only to secure the power of the official church and especially the papal curia. However, this is precisely what happened in the end – as witnessed above all by the decision on the infallibility of the Pope.

Church Criticism as a Motor of Italian Unity

In Italy, the ideas of the Enlightenment were always closely linked to the *Risorgimento* (Revival) movement. Its central goal was the establishment of a unified Italian nation state. The idea of an original equality of all people was consequently used here as a kind of theoretical superstructure for the struggle against the noble families ruling in the individual territories.

In 1861, the goal of an Italian nation state was almost achieved. Similar to Germany, however, it could not be realised as a movement from below, as a democratic project. Instead, the House of Savoy had taken advantage of the movement to extend its claim to power to the whole of Italy. The desired republic therefore had to be abandoned in favour of a constitutional monarchy.

The only place on the peninsula that had not yet been incorporated into the new Kingdom of Italy was the Papal States. As a fervent advocate of Italian unity, Carducci therefore also spoke out against this circumstance with his hymn *To Satan*.

In fact, the king's troops succeeded in conquering the Papal States only a few months after the beginning of the Vatican Council in 1870. To do so, they took advantage of the weakening of France, which had acted as the protecting power of the Vatican State, due the Franco-Prussian War.

A Free Spirit, but not an Atheist

Carducci's hymn *To Satan* thus coincided with two events of secular significance: the first Vatican Council, which painfully underlined the incorrigibility of the mainstream church, and the completion of Italian unity.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the author achieved lasting popularity in Italy with this long poem. However, in 1869, when the journal *Il Popolo* presented the hymn *A Satana* to the members of the Council, he was no longer a newcomer to the cultural scene of his country.

As early as 1861, Carducci had been appointed professor of Italian literature in Bologna. Moreover, he had never made a secret of his free-thinking views. For example, he openly sympathised with Freemasonry and was a member of various lodges.

In accordance with the basic convictions of Freemasons, who reject the exclusive claim of the Christian God but do believe in the existence of a higher being, Carducci was never a pure atheist. Having achieved fame and reputation and having become an important representative of the cultural life of his country, he later even reconciled with the Christian Church and was readmitted to it in 1895 – which brought him some harsh criticism from his former admirers.

Calm Tones in the Late Work

As a professor in Bologna, Carducci became an important promoter of talented young writers, including the poet Giovanni Pascoli, who later succeeded him in the chair of Italian literature. At the same time, he wrote numerous works of literary criticism.



In his poetic work, Carducci moved away from the pathetic poetry of his early work in his later years and developed a calmer tone oriented towards nature poetry.

This was also the main reason why he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1906, a few months before his death, becoming the first Italian author to receive it. The Nobel Committee saw this as recognition in particular of the "creative energy, clarity of style and lyrical power that characterise his poetic masterpieces" [3].

References

- [1] Carducci, Giosuè: [A Satana](#) (written 1863). In: Poesie di Giosuè Carducci, p. 377 – 385 (here p. 385). Bologna 1906: Zanichelli.
- [2] Cf. Proudhon, Michel: [De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église](#), tome 1, p. 408. Paris 1858: Garnier Frères.
- [3] Quoted after [Giosuè Carducci – Premio Nobel per la Letteratura 1906](#); langolodeilibri.it, 2014.

Picture: *R. Borghi: Giosuè Carducci (around 1870); Wikimedia Commons*

The Poetry of the Childlike Gaze:
*Giovanni Pascoli's Plea for Poetic Simplicity
and Open-mindedness*

The poetry of Giovanni Pascoli (1855 – 1912) is characterised by a melancholic undertone. However, he finds solace in a poetry that is based on a childlike, unbiased view of the world.



Dwight William Tyron (1849 – 1925): Autumn Night (1916)
Wikimedia Commons

November

Translucent air, crystalline light:
you're looking for apricot blossoms,
your dreaming heart indulges
in bittersweet scents of hawthorn.

Strange seed: parched plants
scatter stains of lividity in the azure.
Under the emaciated sky
your step echoes on the tomb of the earth.

Silence all around. Only the rustling
of falling leaves, the futile lament
of the wind in dying gardens.
This is the cold summer of the dead.

Giovanni Pascoli: [Novembre](#)
from: *Myricae* (1891); poem no. 18 from the cycle
In campagna (In the countryside)

November as the Realm of Death

It is certainly no coincidence that Giovanni Pascoli's poem *November* is placed at the end of his cycle *In campagna* (In the Countryside). Like no other month, November represents the absolute end of life in the northern hemisphere, its falling back into itself before it bursts forth again with renewed vigour in the following spring.

While the previous month is still celebrated as the "golden October", when the harvest is brought in and nature treats us to a vibrant display of colours, November is the month of remembrance of death. This is also reflected in Pascoli's poem.

However, Pascoli not only associates November with a heightened awareness of the finite nature of existence and the commemoration of the deceased. Rather, the month of fog literally becomes a cipher for the realm of death in his poem.

This is also indicated by the end of the poem. In November, the signs of life and death are reversed: While it is "summer" for the deceased, i.e. death is in summer bloom, for the living the world is bathed in the wintry colour of death. All life seems to have vanished from the world, spring is only present as a distant, unreal dream.

A Typical Décadence Poem?

This absolutisation of death initially makes the poem appear to be a typical product of the Décadence, which was an important literary movement at the time Pascoli's verses were published. By emphasising the inexorable decay of everything earthly, Pascoli also seems to pick up on the melancholy typical of the time, resulting from the feeling of spiritual homelessness in the face of the enormous social and cultural upheavals.

On closer inspection, though, it becomes clear that Pascoli's preoccupation with death had a more complex background. On the one hand, there were specific biographical reasons for this closeness to death. On the other hand, the commemoration of death also has a specific meaning in his spiritual cosmos, which clearly differs from the weariness of many Décadence poems.

So let us first take a look at Pascoli's biography and then turn to his philosophy of life and his related poetological convictions.

Traumatic Childhood of the Young Giovanni

On 10 August 1867, Ruggero Pascoli, a steward on a noble estate in Northern Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, mounted his horse-drawn carriage and set off for the market in Cesena. In the evening, the horses returned



to the farm as usual. Ruggero Pascoli was also still on the cart. However, he was no longer driving it, but was lying lifeless on the coach box. Someone had shot him on the way home.

This traumatic experience left its mark on Ruggero's then 11-year-old son, Giovanni Pascoli, who later processed the event in the poem *La cavalla storna*, in several respects. First of all, there were the immediate consequences of his father's assassination: the family had to leave the estate and lost their livelihood. This was all the more serious because Giovanni had no fewer than nine siblings, whom his mother could hardly support on her own.

The material hardship and the pain over the loss of her husband were certainly contributing factors to his mother suffering a fatal heart attack shortly afterwards. In addition, two of Giovanni's siblings died of typhoid fever, another brother soon after of meningitis.

What is aggravating is the obvious injustice that came to light during the investigation of the murder. Not only the two murderers, but also those who had hired them were well known in the village: two men who had been after Giovanni's father's job. In fact, after Giovanni's murder, one of them was given his position as steward, and the other also entered the service of the landowner.

Due to the local influence of the murderers, a conviction never came about. When three of Giovanni's brothers wanted to make the circumstances of the murder public, they were also threatened with death. One of them seems to have actually

been murdered – but with poison, which made the murder unverifiable.

Professional Career Despite Revolutionary Youth

The experience of utmost injustice and extreme material hardship caused Giovanni Pascoli to join the anarchist-socialist movement at the beginning of his student days in Bologna. When the anarchist Giovanni Passannante made a (failed) assassination attempt on Umberto I, Italian king from 1878 to 1900, Pascoli recited an *Ode to Passannante*, presumably written by himself. Shortly afterwards the sheet with the poem was destroyed for security reasons.

After taking part in further protests against the arrest of anarchists involved in the riots following the assassination, Pascoli was imprisoned for three months. Subsequently, he concentrated more on his studies and on his professional advancement, especially as he also felt a responsibility to provide materially for his siblings. In particular, his two younger sisters, with whom he also lived temporarily, were dependent on his support.

After graduating, Pascoli worked as a teacher at a grammar school in Livorno before being appointed to the Ministry of Education in Rome in 1894. From 1897, he worked as a university lecturer in Latin and Greek at the universities of Messina and Pisa. Then he moved back to his Alma Mater Bologna, where he took over the professorship of his teacher and intellectual patron Giosuè Carducci.

Despite this outwardly successful professional life, Pascoli remained internally torn. This can be seen not least in his alcohol consumption, which resulted in an ultimately fatal cirrhosis of the liver. He died in 1912, at the age of 57.

Modesty and Simplicity as Poetic Ideals

Pascoli's first collection of poems appeared in 1891 and was successively expanded until the fifth edition in 1900. The poet gave it the title *Myricae*. With this, the connoisseur of ancient literature alluded to a passage in Virgil's pastoral poems (*Eclo-gae/Bucolica*). There it says:

"Non omnis arbusta iuvant humilesque myricae" (Not everyone likes the shrubs and the humble tamarisk; Virgil, *Bucolica IV*, verse 299).

This sentence, to which Pascoli repeatedly refers like a leitmotif in other volumes of poetry, is of programmatic importance for the work of this poet in several respects.

First of all, Pascoli always emphasised the comforting effect that can arise from being in touch with nature. However, this was not meant in the sense of experiencing extraordinary natural spectacles. In Pascoli's view, comfort can rather be found in simple, rural nature [1]. This is exemplified by the simple "shrubs and modest tamarisk trees", many of which thrive even on poor soil.

Above all, however, simple nature and modest plants are also emblematic of Pascoli's poetic ideal: for him, modesty and simplicity are central characteristics of poetry [2].

II Fanciullino: Seeing the World Through the Eyes of a Child

This also corresponds to one of the core concepts of Pascoli's poetic theory: that of the "fanciullino" (little child / little boy). The central idea that he associates with this is that of an undistorted view of the world.

According to Pascoli, only those who retain the ability to look at things as if for the first time will not lose the ability to "marvel" at them. And only those who do not simply take the world as it is, but look at it in a new way again and again, can see the traces of the big picture even in the smallest things and discover the hidden connections between everything that exists.

It is precisely from this special view that the impulse arises to find new, not hackneyed – that is, poetic – designations for things:

"Without him [the fanciullino in us], not only would we fail to see so many things that we usually do not pay attention to, but we would not even be able to think about them (...); for he is the Adam who gives names to everything he sees and hears. He discovers in things the most ingenious similarities and relationships. (...) Moreover, his language is not as imperfect as that of a man who only half articulates a thing, but, on the contrary, as generous as that of a man who expresses two thoughts in one word." [3]

Remembrance of Death as a Prerequisite for Conscious Living

However great the consolation that nature and poetry can convey, they cannot, as Pascoli points out, free man from the "unalterable fate" to which he is chained [4].

From this, however, the poet by no means derives the conclusion that we should close our eyes to this fate. Instead, he emphasises the importance of dealing with the dark sides of human existence. In particular, he considers the theme of mortality to be indispensable in the interest of being fully human and consciously anchored in the reality of life:

"Without thinking about death – and that means without religion, without that which distinguishes us from the animals – life disintegrates into a mere delusion." [5]

By mentioning the thought of death and religion in the same breath, transcendence is directly derived from its absolute negation in death. Apparently, for Pascoli, this very negation spurs the spirit to think beyond its inevitable end and to see its existence in a larger context that transcends its own end.

The Consolation of the Child's Gaze

When considering how death can be thematised in poetry, the "fanciullino" comes into play again, the consciously cultivated childlike view of the world:

"He is the one who, at the death of beloved beings, says those special filial things that move us to tears and save us. He is the one who, in moments of boundless joy, carelessly utters the

heavy word that subdues our joy. He makes happiness and unhappiness bearable by mixing both with bitter and sweet, making them equally fragrant in the memory." [6]

In other words, we are dealing here with a language that addresses the subject of death and makes it bearable at the same time. Ideally, the childlike, unbiased reference to the presence of death in all human activity can help us achieve a kind of mental serenity. Instead of vacillating between moments of ecstatic joy and valleys of deepest sorrow, an inner equilibrium then emerges that accepts the bitter-sweet consistency of the bread of life as such and seeks to experience it in its beauty.

The Blending of Spheres in Poetry

On the other hand, the blending of the spheres of death and life also symbolises the ability of the child's gaze – or of the artist who cultivates it – to connect different spheres of existence. Thus, day and night, dream and reality, animate and inanimate matter, the here-and-now and the hereafter interpenetrate in it.

The one-dimensionality of everyday life is thus disrupted in favour of a multiform view of life: With his childlike gaze, the poet is for Pascoli someone who

"sees or thinks he sees in the dark; the one who dreams or seems to dream in the light, remembering things he has never seen; the one who talks to animals, trees, stones, clouds, stars; who populates the shadow with phantoms and the sky with

gods; the one who is afraid of the light because he sees or thinks he sees in the light." [7]

Not a Pure *Décadence* Poet

At the same time, these words show that it would be too short-sighted to describe Pascoli simply as a *Décadence* poet. He is indeed a child of his time insofar as the inevitable decay of the living characterises his work in a specific way. In addition to experiences rooted in the author's individual biography, the epoch in which he lived may also have played a role here – this life at the hinge of time, witnessing the demise of the old, agrarian world with its own values and ways of life.

However, unlike other *Décadence* poets, Pascoli does not focus on the theme of death and decay as such. Rather, he is always concerned with transcending it to another, spiritual world in which death is not the dominant keynote.

References

[1] Cf. a letter from Pascoli to the painter Antonio De Witt, a friend of his, who created various illustrations for the author's volumes of poetry: "There is a great sorrow and a great mystery in the world; but in the simple family life and in the contemplation of nature, especially in the countryside, we can find a great consolation, even if it is not enough to free us from our unalterable fate". The letter is quoted in the biography written by Maria Pascoli about her brother (cf. Pascoli, Maria: *Lungo la vita di Giovanni*

Pascoli, memorie curate e integrate da Augusto Vicinelli, con 48 tavole fuori testo, p. 616. Milan 1961: Mondadori; translated from Italian).

[2] Cf. Pascoli, Giovanni: *Il fanciullino* (The Little Child / The Little Boy; 1897, expanded 1903/1907), chapter 3: "The signs of his presence and the deeds of his life are simple and modest." What is meant here is "il fanciullino", which in the given context can be seen as synonymous with the artistic or the sense of it (quotes from *Il fanciullino* translated from Italian).

[3] Cf. *Ibid.*

[4] Pascoli, letter to De Witt (see above: 1).

[5] Pascoli, Giovanni: *Canti di Castelvecchio: Prefazione* (Preface). Bologna 1907: Zanichelli.

[6] Pascoli, *Il fanciullino*, chapter 3 (see above: 2).

[7] *Ibid.*

Pictures: 1. *Ruggero Pascoli with his three sons (before 1867; Giovanni Pascoli on the right); 2. Giovanni Pascoli in the garden of his house in Castelvecchio, Tuscany (1890s); both images from Wikimedia Commons (photographers unknown)*



Impossible Life, Impossible Love:

*Ada Negri's Poem **Va l'onda** and Her Socio-Critical Early Work*

Ada Negri's poem about a love that ends in death raises questions about the reasons for the tragic event. Answers can be found in the poet's socially critical early work.



*Gustave Courbet (1819 – 1877): The Wave; Dallas Museum of Art
Wikimedia Commons*

The Weeping Wave

Between the high banks of the river,
blind in untamable sorrow,
the weeping wave rises and falls,
silently surrounded
by the leaden sky.

No smile lights up the silence,
no breath penetrates the pallid night.

On and on the weeping wave surges.
In her sheltering womb she carries
mournfully into the damp night
a sallow, barely blossomed body
that threw itself from life into her arms.

No smile lights up the silence,
no breath penetrates the pallid night.

On and on the weeping wave surges.
But from her lament resounds
the echo of a gloomy secret.
Her sobs are filled
with the silent cry
of a failed love.

No smile lights up the silence,
no breath penetrates the pallid night.

Ada Negri: [Va l'onda ...](#)
from: *Fatalità* (Fate/Doom, 1892)

A Dark Secret

Ada Negri's poem leaves us with a question: What happened? What kind of "dark secret" are we dealing with here? Why did this love lead to its absolute negation – death?

There are many reasons why love can lead to despair, from which those involved see no other way out than to escape into death: infidelity, quarrels, unrequited love ... Since the poem makes no allusions to the causes of the tragedy, there are no limits to the imagination here. It is up to the readers to fill this empty space in the poem with their own speculations.

However, if we read the verses in the context of Ada Negri's early work and of the volume of poetry in which they are included, a clear perspective for interpretation emerges. Then it can be assumed that the poet associated her gloomy image of a love that can only find comfort in the lullaby of a deadly wave with social conflicts and the resulting misery – for example, with money worries, insurmountable class barriers or an unwanted pregnancy.

Negri's Socially Committed Early Work

The very title of Ada Negri's first book of poems, *Fatalità* (Fate/Doom), published in 1892, suggests the hopelessness of a life on the margins of society or at the bottom of its hierarchy. This is indeed the predominant theme of her early poems.

The poem that follows the verses quoted above, for example, is about a street urchin whose fate seems already sealed in

view of the social circumstances in which he has to live. Spending his days on "muddy" roads, dressed "in a tattered jacket and broken shoes", his "mother in the factory, his home deserted, his father in prison", a resigned question arises with regard to his future life:

*"What will you do?
You, who, ragged and illiterate,
are without footing
and without destination on earth?" [1]*

In the poetry collection, Ada Negri also self-confidently refers to her own origins from poor social circumstances. Thus, in the immediate vicinity of the poem about a failed love, we find the programmatic verses about her roots in the life of ordinary people, to whom she, as she emphasises, owes the "flame" of her poetry:

*"A nameless poetess am I,
the uncouth daughter
of a mouldy shack.
The sad and damned people
are my family,
igniting in my heart
an indomitable flame." [2]*

Reference to the Poet's Own Origins from Poor Social Circumstances

Indeed, Ada Negri did not have an easy childhood. Born in Lodi, Lombardy, in 1870, the poet lost her father at an early age. As a result, her mother had to support the family alone.

So Negri spent much of her childhood with her grandmother, who worked as a caretaker for a famous opera singer. The hours of idle sitting in the porter's lodge of the palazzo, which the girl used for an intensive study of passers-by, were later taken up by Negri in her autobiographical novel *Stella Mattutina* (Morning Star; 1921).

Thus, the poet certainly came into contact with members of other social classes. Thanks to her mother's steady income, she was also able to attend a girls' school, which enabled her to obtain a diploma as an elementary school teacher. Accordingly, Negri worked as a teacher at a village school and a girls' secondary school from 1887.

The poems from the volume *Fatalità*, which Negri initially published in newspapers, are thus by no means an unfiltered mirror of life at the lower end of the social scale. Rather, the fact that they could be written and published testifies precisely to the social advancement that Negri could achieve thanks to her mother.

From Regarding Social Misery as Fate to Combating it

Right with her first book of poems, Ada Negri established herself as a recognised poet. Both professionally and privately, the poems paved the way for her to a prosperous life. She obtained a position at a higher teaching institute in Milan and entered into a marriage with a rich factory owner in 1896 (from whom she separated again in 1913).

The success of Negri's socially committed poems was also related to the perspective from which she addressed social misery. Regarding the latter as "fatalità" implied that class differences and social hardship were to a certain extent fated, i.e. inevitable.

Using poetic means to arouse sympathy for people in need thus serves here primarily to motivate wealthy people to act charitably towards the poor. A call for revolution cannot be derived from Negri's early poems.

In her later volumes of poetry, however, Negri did combine the issue of social misery with a demand for social change. Moreover, the socialist circles in which she moved in Milan led to a connection between poetic protest and concrete social commitment.

In the process, the author increasingly linked social misery with her commitment to the emancipation of women. Thus, she played a leading role in the founding of the *Unione femminile nazionale* (National Women's Union) in 1899 as well as five years later in the opening of the *Asilo Mariuccia*, which

was intended to offer girls from difficult social backgrounds educational prospects.

Negri's Path During the Fascist Era

With her collection of novellas *Le solitarie* (The Lonely Ones, 1917), which addresses the emancipation of women from various perspectives, Negri remained true to her socially committed literature even during the First World War. At the same time, however, she also published a collection of patriotic odes (*Orazioni/Prayers*, 1918).

This mixture of social commitment, socialist ideals and patriotic spirit might be one reason why the poet had difficulty distancing herself from the rising Italian fascism. Furthermore, she knew Benito Mussolini from her Milan days as a committed socialist, who had served as editor-in-chief of *Avanti!*, the newspaper of the Socialist Party, from 1912 to 1914.

This made it possible for the poet to be awarded the Mussolini Prize in 1931 for her literary achievements and in 1940 to be admitted as the first woman to the *Accademia d'Italia* (the fascist version of the Italian Academy of Arts and Sciences), which existed from 1926 to 1945.

However, Negri was not an active supporter of the fascist regime. Rather, she retreated into inner exile in the last years of her life and turned to religious themes before dying in Milan in January 1945.

References

- [1] Ada Negri: [Birichino di strada](#) (Street Urchin); from: *Fatalità* (Fate/Doom; 1892).
- [2] Ada Negri: [Senza nome](#) (Nameless); from: *Fatalità* (1892).



Ada Negri in the 1890s
Wikimedia Commons

At Home in Negation:

Eugenio Montale's Sceptical Hermeticism

Eugenio Montale's poetry is characterised by a deep scepticism. However, this is based less on the experience of war and fascism than on a loss of orientation triggered by the radical changes at the turn of the century.



Edvard Munch (1863 - 1944): The Sun (1911)

University of Oslo, Norway, Art collection (Wikimedia Commons)

The Glowing Wall of Noon

Under the glowing wall of noon,
embraced by the daydream of summer,
you sink into the hissing snake bushes
and in the rustling sea of blackbirds and leaves.

In long rows, ants peek out
from cracks in the ground and from flower stalks,
tangling and intertwining
at the edge of their tiny holes.

Stroked by fronds of field bindweed,
you dream of the fish's scaly twitch,
while the trembling chirp of cicadas
soars up into the sky.

Walking in the blinding sun,
you feel with sad amazement
the border of the glowing wall,
where you rise as in a bottle
whose neck is rimmed with a sea of shards.

Eugenio Montale: [Meriggiare pallido e assorto](#)
Written around 1916; from: *Ossi di seppia* (1925)

Midday Slumber in a Southern Garden

The poem *Merigiare pallido e assorto* (literally: Immersed in a Pale Midday Slumber) by Eugenio Montale (1896 – 1981) takes us to a southern garden. The sun beats down on you, making you sleepy. Leaning against a wall, the shimmering midday heat lulls you to sleep.

The haze of heat brings human life to a standstill. Nothing can be heard but the rustling and buzzing, chirping and twitching of snakes, lizards and insects, accompanied here and there by the scurrying of a blackbird in the undergrowth.

Slowly, consciousness fades, sensory perceptions blur with the daydreams that awaken behind the closed eyelids. The field bindweed growing along the wall, its fronds stroking the cheeks of the slumbering one, evokes associations with the scaly shoals of fish, the blue sea of the sky merges with the murmur of the ocean lapping against the nearby shore.

All things are suddenly connected to each other, you are a part of them, escaping from your own ego for a few moments outside of time. This makes the awakening all the more painful. Like after an intense drug high, you feel the hangover of disillusionment throbbing in your temples. The sun, just a moment ago a source of infinite life, has suddenly turned into a crown of thorns that presses painfully on the head of those blinded by its glow.

The Wreath of Broken Glass at the Bottleneck of Life

The four stanzas of Montale's poem congenially reflect this oscillation between daydream and awakening. In the third stanza, the pleasant midday dozing turns into daydreaming, before the last stanza evokes the awakening.

In the process, the meaning of the wall, the poem's central metaphor, also changes. In the first stanza, it appears as the border of a self-sufficient, peaceful garden, as a protective wall around paradise that shields it from the world. In the last stanza, by contrast, it is a boundary for the daydreams in which paradise acquires a momentary reality.

In this way, noon also takes on a metaphorical meaning. While at the beginning of the poem it simply refers to the middle of the day, a break in the routine of everyday life, it can be related to the middle of life at the end of the poem.

From this perspective, the wall no longer only denotes the confines of the refuge offered by dreams. Rather, it now also points to the awareness of an absolute limit to human life. This can be understood both in purely physical terms – i.e. as an awareness of the limit set by death – and in a figurative sense, i.e. as a limit beyond which the human spirit cannot think or – to put it in the language of the poem – at which all its striving disintegrates into shards.

Suffering from Existence Despite a Fulfilled Life

Montale's poem is thus an example of what the poet sees as the core not only of his own poetry, but of poetry in general. Its central "theme", he stated in 1951, is "the human condition itself" [1].

In Montale's work, however, this is linked to a decidedly pessimistic view of human existence. The poet explains this with the experiences he himself had gone through from early childhood:

"Since from birth I felt a total disharmony with the reality surrounding me, only this disharmony could be the source of my inspiration." [2]

This statement, though, is put into perspective when we look at the poet's biography. It is true that Montale suffered from respiratory diseases at an early age. However, he was lucky enough to spend his childhood on the Ligurian coast, where the mild Mediterranean climate had a healing effect on his lungs. His hometown was Genoa, and the family spent the summers in Ligurian seaside resorts.

Moreover, Montale grew up in prosperous circumstances. His father, co-owner of a chemical company, was able to provide his children with a comfortable home and pave their way to a successful professional life.

Montale completed an apprenticeship as an accountant in 1915. Apart from this, he had the freedom to pursue his artistic and intellectual interests in the city's libraries and to par-

ticipate in the philosophy studies of his sister, who was enrolled at the university. In addition, he could compensate for his lung weakness by training as a baritone.

Montale's later life, too, was by no means characterised by "disharmony", contrary to what his pessimistic reviews of his life might suggest. His very first book of poems, *Ossi di seppia* (Octopus Bones), published in 1925, established his status as a recognised poet and in 1929 helped him to be appointed director of one of the most renowned libraries in the country, the *Gabinetto scientifico letterario G. P. Vieusseux* in Florence. In 1975, as the crowning achievement of his poetic life, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Montale's private life was also anything but disharmonious. He had several blissful love affairs, suffered no material hardship and was firmly integrated into the artistic scene of his time.

Feelings of Alienation of a Turn-of-the-Century Child

The "total disharmony with the reality that surrounds me" which Montale describes as the basis of his poetic inspiration must therefore have other than purely biographical reasons.

War and fascism cannot be used as an explanation here either. Mussolini's March on Rome, for example, did not take place until 1922, six years after the verses reproduced above were written.

It is true that the First World War was already in full swing in 1916. Montale himself, however, only took part in the war

from 1917 onwards. Moreover, he was even sent to the front at his own request and returned from the war in 1920 with the rank of lieutenant – which suggests a generally affirmative, active participation in the combat.

Thus, the fundamental scepticism of the verses can probably best be related to the mindset of the *Décadence* – that is, the intellectual current which at the turn of the century reflected the suffering from the profound transformations that were taking place at the time. The resulting loss of traditional structures of order and patterns of meaning seems to be the breeding ground for the "disharmony" experienced by Montale and expressed in his poetry.

Rejection of Absolute Truths

This is also evident in another famous poem from the collection *Ossi di seppia*. In it, the demand for words that claim to press the human soul into definite forms is explicitly rejected. The same applies to all attempts to express human reality and its position in the universe in a formulaic, schematic way.

From Montale's point of view, instead of striving for absolute truths, man must accept that the world in which he lives remains as much a mystery to him as he himself. This leads to the conclusion that we can only live our own lives on the basis of a fundamental negation, in which we accept that we cannot achieve any definitive knowledge and therefore also no purposeful will:

Don't Ask for Round Words

*No, don't ask us for words
that are round and closed in on themselves!
Our soul escapes from all such words,
you can only fathom it in blazing ciphers,
shining like an errant crocus
in the midst of a dust-covered meadow.*

*Alas, the man who, at peace with himself
and others, fades away,
whose shadow even outshines the heat,
pressing against a wall bent by time!*

*No, don't ask us for formulas
that could open the worlds to you!
We only have a few crooked syllables
that crumble in our mouth like summer leaves.*

*Only in negation –
in not being and not wanting –
is where we feel at home. [3]*

Fascism and Poetry as Separate Worlds

Eugenio Montale never made a secret of his opposition to fascism. In 1925, he was one of the signatories of the "Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals", Benedetto Croce's response

to the "Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals" written by Giovanni Gentile.

Montale was also far less willing than other anti-fascist intellectuals to accept compromises with the regime for the sake of his professional advancement. At the end of the 1930s, he refused to join the fascist party even when he was denied payment of his salary for his work as a library director in Florence – whereupon he ultimately lost his job.

On the other hand, Montale saw no reason to thematise fascism in his poetry or to give poetic expression to his anti-fascist stance. For him, fascism belonged to the world of "external events", which in his opinion are of secondary importance for the work of an artist.

In his eyes, what really counts for an artist is the "awareness and the will not to abandon the essential in favour of the ephemeral". An artist, says Montale, must first and foremost have "a certain attitude towards life" and dispose of "a certain formal ability" to "interpret life according to his own patterns" [4].

As Montale stated in 1951, this does not mean that he was indifferent

"to what has happened in the last thirty years; but I cannot say that my poetry would have had a completely different face if events had taken a different course." [5]

Poetry as Refuge and Escape

The existential "disharmony" that Montale deals with in his poetry is also something he does not want to be confused with the unhappiness that war and fascism brought upon people:

"I do not deny that first fascism, later the war and still later the civil war made me unhappy; but there were reasons for my unhappiness that went far beyond these phenomena." [6]

Thus, despite all the external upheavals, Montale held on to his view of an art that was detached from the world. This distinguishes him from Salvatore Quasimodo, for example. It is true that this poet was much more willing to compromise with the fascist regime than Montale. Unlike the latter, however, his experience of war and fascism prompted him to turn away from his initial hermetic style of writing and towards more committed forms of poetry.

Poetry was hence both a refuge and an escape for Montale. It was a refuge for him because it enabled him to make the irrevocable disharmony of his life more bearable by expressing it in the harmonious form of poetry. At the same time, however, it also had escapist traits, as he consistently sealed it off from social reality.

References

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- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Montale, Eugenio: [Non chiederci la parola ...](#) (written in 1923); from: Ossi di seppia (1925).
- [4] Montale, Confessioni (see above).
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Ibid.



Picture: Ugo Mulas: Eugenio Montale at the Teatro alla Scala opera house in Milan (1950s); Wikimedia Commons

Dream Journey on a Dark Abyss:
Giuseppe Ungaretti's "Dark" Hermeticism

Giuseppe Ungaretti's poem *L'isola* (The Island) takes us into a dream world – in contrast to the fascist structures that were established in Italy, partly supported by Ungaretti, at the time the poem was written.



Guy Rose (1867 – 1925): Provincial Olive Grove (around 1910)
Wikimedia Commons

The Island

Stroked by a rustle of feathers,
snatched from the shrill heartbeat
of a flaming river,
he descended from his path
into a forest where the evening
had become entangled until all eternity.

Walking as if in a dream, he saw,
blossoming and extinguishing,
extinguishing and blossoming,
a shimmering larva.

Climbing upwards, he recognised,
in slumber
nestled against an ancient elm tree,
as a nymph the larva.

Wavering between deception and reflection,
between truth and delusion,
he wandered until his eyes
drank the virginal darkness
of an olive grove bathed in evening glow.

A languid spray of sparks
dripped through the labyrinth of branches
onto the shimmering shields of sheep

which, embraced by the evening's warming arm,
were spotted on the pasture.

And the hands of the shepherd
blossomed like a crystal chalice
in which the evening glow was caught,
metamorphosing into a pleasant fever.

Giuseppe Ungaretti: [L'isola](#) (created 1925)
from: *Sentimento del tempo* (Sense of Time; 1933)

A Poem in the Language of Dreams

The poem *L'isola* by Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888 – 1970) speaks to us in the language of dreams and fairy tales. It is reminiscent of the dream images familiar from psychological analysis and of fairy-tale journeys through perilous forests, the crossing of which promises redemption from a dark curse.

From a psychological perspective, the forest in the poem can be interpreted as an image of the collective unconscious. In C. G. Jung's psychology, this refers to the deeper layer of the human unconscious, in which the existential experiences of humanity are encoded in compact images – the so-called "archetypes" [1].

The nymph of the poem can thus be understood as a manifestation of the archetype of the "sister", which corresponds to

the fact that, according to C. G. Jung, the unconscious always appears in the gender opposite to that of the conscious ego. Her iridescent, changing appearance points to the lack of clarity, but also to the fullness of the unconscious, which constantly turns different faces towards us.

From this perspective, the shepherd whom the lyrical I encounters at the end could be seen as the equivalent of the archetype of the "old sage". The enlightenment symbolised by him finds a parallel in the poem in the crossing over from the delusions of the forest into the clarity of the olive grove.

The poem thus describes in compact form a life journey that leads the lyrical I to himself. In C. G. Jung's psychoanalysis, this destination is symbolised by a mythical divine child, in which the transcendent core of the inner self is reflected. In the poem, this fruit of the inner journey is indicated by the shepherd's hands extended as if for a gift.

Ungaretti as a Representative of a Symbolist Hermeticism

The fact that Ungaretti's 1933 poetry collection *Sentimento del tempo* (Sense of Time), which includes the poem written in 1925, is attributed to Symbolism seems plausible against the background of this interpretation. Likewise, the characterisation of his poetry as "hermetic" is understandable in view of the fact that it eludes immediate comprehension.

In addition, Ungaretti also deliberately cultivates Hermeticism in his poetry. Many of his poems are more like aphorisms or

epigrams, some are just short, cipher-like word combinations, others are similar to Japanese haikus.

The following verses are examples of this type of short poem:

Morning

Illuminating, the unilluminable
enlightens me. [2]

Damnation

Enclosed between mortal things
(even the starry sky is finite) –
why do I long for God? [3]

Eternity

Between a picked flower
and a flower gift
the inexpressible void. [4]

Ungaretti and Italian Fascism

Ungaretti's short poems are easier to understand than the poem *The Island*. However, they remain enigmatic insofar as they refer to the unsolvable riddle of existence. Thus, with these poems too, the poet withdraws into a sphere beyond everyday thinking and feeling.

Ungaretti's turning away from everyday life, though, was not only due to a scepticism of language, the pursuit of a "pure", untainted language – in contrast to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé [5], for example. It was also a way for him to avoid coming to terms with his own involvement in war and fascism.

Thus, Ungaretti belonged to the interventionists in the First World War. This faction advocated Italy's entry into the war on the side of the Entente around France, England and Russia, expecting advantages from this for their country.

What's more, Ungaretti's experiences on the front did not lead him to change his mind – unlike other poets who in the trenches quickly realised the error of their cheerful patriotism. Instead, he trivialised killing in the short poem *Soldati* (Soldiers) with the words:

*"It is
like when in autumn
the leaves
fall from the trees." [6]*

Accordingly, Ungaretti did not distance himself from the use of violence to achieve political goals even after the end of the war. Instead, in 1925 he was one of the signatories of the *Manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti* (Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals), written by Giovanni Gentile, which explicitly welcomed the violent seizure of power by Mussolini and his followers.

The manifesto derives fascism directly from the frontline experiences of the First World War. As the "belief of all Italians

who despise the past and long for renewal", fascism would be, as it says in the manifesto,

"precisely the faith that had matured in the trenches and in intense reflection on the sacrifices made on the battlefields for the only worthwhile goal: the life and greatness of the fatherland" [7].

This "vigorous, violent faith, unwilling to respect anything that would stand in the way of the life and greatness of the fatherland", is seen as the natural basis of the "fasci di combattimento" (fighting units) that paved the way for Mussolini's rise to power and which shaped both the name and the nature of fascism [8].

"Dark" Poetry for Concealing the Dark Side of Biography

The "Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals" did not remain unchallenged. Ten days after its publication, Benedetto Croce responded to it with the "Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals" [9]. He, too, chose a highly symbolic day for its publication. While Gentile published his manifesto on 21 April, the public holiday for the founding of Rome, Croce published his manifesto on 1 May, Labour Day. The international labour movement was thus juxtaposed with Gentile's nationalist appeal.

This reaction could have caused Ungaretti to take a step back and reflect. Instead, he worked for the press office of the Italian Foreign Ministry and in 1942 was admitted to the *Acca-*

demia d'Italia (the fascist version of the Italian Academy of Arts and Sciences).

The only thing standing in the way of a stronger involvement in Italian fascism was Ungaretti's academic career, which took him away from his homeland from 1936 to 1942, as a professor in São Paulo, Brazil. Nevertheless, in July 1944, after the end of the Fascist regime, he was dismissed from the Chair of Modern and Contemporary Literature, which he now held at Rome's *La Sapienza* University.

Even this did not lead to insight and remorse on Ungaretti's part, though. Instead, he pointed out his literary merits in a letter to Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi, whereupon he was allowed to return to the university.

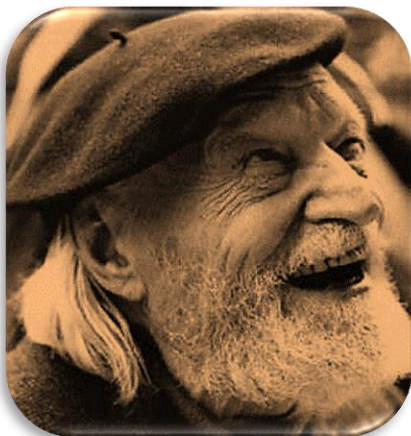
Ungaretti's "dark" poetry thus has a dark side in moral terms as well. It not only leads down or over to the dark side of existence – it was also a way for the poet to conceal his own dark sides, his involvement in war and fascism, from himself and others.

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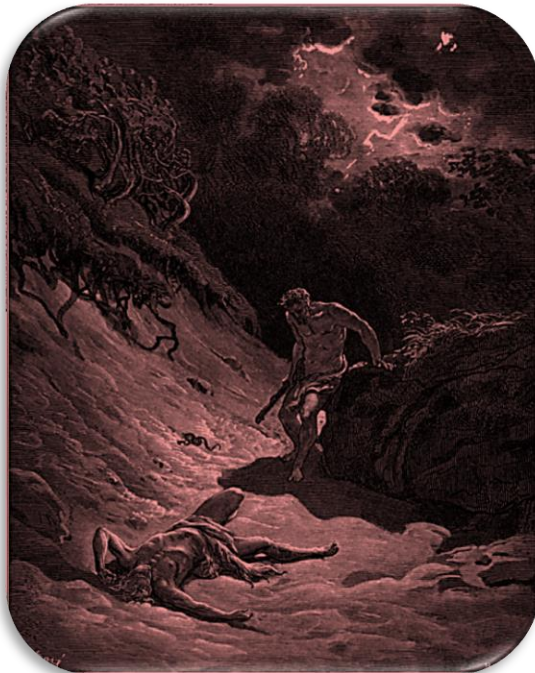


Giuseppe Ungaretti with beret
Wikimedia Commons

From Nostalgia to Utopia:

The Poetic Path of Salvatore Quasimodo

Salvatore Quasimodo's poetry was initially characterised by a nostalgic Hermeticism. However, under the impact of the Second World War, it came closer to more committed forms of poetry.



Gustave Doré (1832 – 1883): Abel's Death (Cain kills Abel, 1866)

Wikimedia Commons

*(With a quote from the Bible – "Come, let's go to the field" –, Quasimodo's poem **Uomo del mio tempo** alludes to the insidiousness with which Cain lures Abel outside to kill him).*

Man of the Modern Age

To this day, man of the modern age,
you are the slingshot man.

In all times you have flown ahead,
carried by your sinister wings
that turn day into night.

In your flaming chariot
I have seen you ride through the ages,
from torture wheel to torture wheel,
from gallows hill to gallows hill,
from mass grave to mass grave.

Without love, without God
you have drawn the fuse of death
through the ages, fuelled
by the throne of your technology,
the master of mindless murder.

Walking in the footsteps of your forefathers,
you answer with murder and slaughter
to the gaze of the animals and the gaze
of your brother, who once unsuspectingly followed
your murderous ruse: "Come, let's go to the field ..."

The cold breath of these words
still clouds your days.
Bloodily their poison flows through your veins

and makes you continue to follow your forefathers,
keeps you walking on the path of murder.

Forget, children, your forefathers!
Turn away from their graves,
from their poisonous breath and their fog of blood!
May the dark wings of the night
forever shroud their ashes!

Salvatore Quasimodo: [Uomo del mio tempo](#) (Man of My Time)
from: *Giorno dopo giorno* (Day after Day, 1947); first published
1946 under the title *Con il piede straniero sopra il cuore* (With
a Stranger's Foot on the Chest)

Stony Path to Poetry

That Salvatore Quasimodo (1901 – 1968) would become an acclaimed poet one day was in no way foreseeable at his birth. No one could have guessed at the time that he would receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959.

Salvatore Quasimodo was born in 1901 in Modica in southeastern Sicily, where his father worked as a stationmaster. He spent his childhood and youth in Roccalumera, the family's hometown on the Strait of Messina.

In 1920 Quasimodo went to Rome to study mathematics and physics, but had to leave the university due to financial constraints. He worked as a clerk in a department store and as a

technical draftsman, while improving his knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek, before being hired by the Ministry of Construction in 1926.

The new job provided him with financial security and allowed him to marry his long-term girlfriend. At the same time, however, his work required frequent changes of location. After first being sent to Reggio Calabria as a surveyor, he was soon after transferred to Florence, then to Genoa, and finally to the civil engineering office of Cagliari.

The unsteady life reinforced in Quasimodo the sense of rootlessness and alienation that had afflicted him anyway since his departure from Sicily. At the same time, though, his travels to the cultural centers of the country helped him gain access to the literary circles of his time.

Thus he was able to publish his first poems in magazines and finally, in 1930, his first book of poems, which was followed shortly afterwards by two more volumes. In 1938 his position in the literary scene was so consolidated that he resigned from the Ministry of Construction and moved to a publishing house, where he acted as editor of a literary magazine and of the poetry anthology *Poesie*. In 1941 he was appointed professor of Italian literature at the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory in Milan.

From the Nostalgic Lyricism of the Early Work to Committed Forms of Poetry

Quasimodo's early poetry is strongly influenced by his longing for his lost Sicilian homeland. The latter is transfigured in a

nostalgic way and thus appears as an antithesis to the constantly self-overhauling life on the construction site of modernity, to which the poet had to adapt for the purpose of earning a living.

The first period of Quasimodo's lyrical work is thus characterised by a clearly identifiable theme and a common basic tone. The fact that the poems are categorised as "ermetismo" (Hermeticism) is therefore not because they fundamentally elude comprehension. The reason for this categorisation lies more in the unusual images and phrases that Quasimodo chooses to express his emotional state.

However, it is precisely this linguistic non-conformism that enables him to express the familiar subject of nostalgic recollection in a new, fresh way. One example of this is the poem *Antico inverno* (Ancient Winter) from his debut book *Acque e terre* (Water and Earth):

*"Alas, your shimmering hands
in the crackling light of the falling fire,
smelling of oak and rose,
of ancient winter and death ...*

*Searching for food,
the blackbirds froze to snow,
just as my taciturn words turned to ice.*

*The angels' wreath of rays
has drowned in the sun's blood,*

*the trees have sunk into the mist,
and our silvery silhouettes
get lost in the light of the morning." [1]*

Compromises with the Fascist Regime

In a way, Quasimodo's early poetry can be seen as a modern expression of the emotional world of Romanticism. After all, Romanticism was also characterised by a backward-looking gaze, a longing for a lost paradise, which was sometimes located in childhood, sometimes in a failed love affair and sometimes in a bygone era.

What the Middle Ages were for Romanticism, Antiquity was for Quasimodo, which is also reflected in his numerous translations of Latin and ancient Greek poems. However, this made it difficult for him to clearly distance himself from Italian fascism, which also took its central symbols from the glorious age of the Roman Empire.

Quasimodo was not an active supporter of fascism, but repeatedly compromised with the fascist authorities, even to the point of adapting to the regime's linguistic norms [2]. Thus, for example, he published an article in the journal *Antieuropa* and was one of the authors of the journal *Primato* [3], which was initiated by the then Minister of Education Giuseppe Bottai to bring together Italian intellectuals under the umbrella of the fascist regime.

Committed Poetry after the Second World War

Quasimodo's decision to join the PCI, the Communist Party of Italy, in 1945 was therefore not due to a consistent anti-fascist stance or even participation in the *Resistenza*, the Italian resistance against fascism and German occupation. The reason for this was above all the experience of the war, from which Quasimodo derived the necessity of a fundamental – socio-political, but also linguistic and cultural – change.

On the level of poetry, this conviction was reflected in the new tone that the author struck in his first volume of poetry published after the end of the war. In the programmatic poem *Alle fronde dei salici* (On the Branches of the Willows), from which the title of the collection of poems published in 1946 is taken (*Con il piede straniero sopra il cuore* – With a Stranger's Foot on the Chest), he implicitly formulates a rejection of his earlier hermetic poetry:

*"How could we have sung
with a stranger's foot on our chest
among all the orphaned dead
on the frozen grass, the dark lament
of the mother for her son,
crucified on a telegraph pole,
the weeping of the divine children?
Gently our hanged harps were dangling
from the branches of the mourning willows
in the speechless lullaby of the wind." [4]*

The immeasurable suffering of the war has thus – as the drastic image of the "hanged harps" shows – also silenced poetry. On the other hand, the poem itself is proof that lyrical speech is still possible after the war. The prerequisite for this, however, is a fundamental change in poetry: it must no longer mourn, backward-looking, a chimerical paradise, but must openly face reality.

In other words, the poet has to stop standing on the sidelines. Instead, he has to get involved and become socially engaged.

Uomo del mio tempo: an Appeal for a Radical Break with the Past

Uomo del mio tempo (Man of my Time) is an expression of a committed poetry understood in this way. As the concluding poem of the collection *Giorno dopo giorno* (Day after Day) – the title of the second edition of *Con il piede straniero sopra il cuore*, published in 1947 – it is a kind of summary of Quasimodo's new poetic position.

With the phrase "Come, let's go to the field!" the poem alludes to the insidiousness of Cain, who, according to the biblical narrative, lured his brother Abel outside with this invitation in order to kill him. It is precisely this murderous deceitfulness that the verses highlight as a recurring theme of human history.

What has changed, therefore, are only the means of murder, which have been perfected more and more. The underlying

destructive attitude of man towards his fellow men and other creatures, however, has remained unchanged.

This results in the appeal for a radical new beginning at the end of the poem. Such a restart, however, is considered possible only if the spiritual-emotional heritage of the ancestors is uncompromisingly put into question instead of being adopted unreflectively. Only the turning away from the reflexive use of violence can enable the change towards a more humane world.

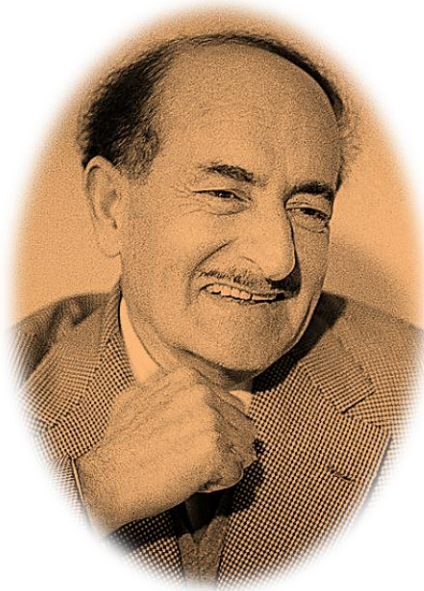
The sad thing about the poem is that little has changed in the more than seven decades since it was written. Even today, there is a deep gap between the ambitions associated with the word "humane" and the reality of being human, which today, just as in the past, includes the annihilation of others and the destruction of our own livelihood. Thus, the call for a radical departure from inherited patterns of thought and behaviour is no less topical today than it was during Salvatore Quasimodo's lifetime.

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Salvatore Quasimodo (1959)

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Poetry as "the Absolutely Real":
Mario Luzi's Surrealist Hermeticism

In his poetry, Mario Luzi wants to make tangible the deeper structures of reality buried beneath the everyday world. For this, he draws on the poetry theory of Novalis, but is also influenced by surrealism and by his religiosity.



Johannes Plenio: Milky Way over the ocean (Pixabay)

Nature

Over the earth and the sparkling sea
spreads, even more sparkling,
another sea,

a sea for the flitting flame
of the sparrows, a sea for the voyage
of the tranquil moon and the sleep
of the translucent bodies,
enraptured from the world,

a sea for those fleeting voices
that tumble out of hidden doors
into the maze of our dreams,

rejoicing like birds drunken with bliss
in hovering flight
to the beatific islands of the beginning,

singing a lullaby
of crimson-soft sanctuaries
for those spurned by sleep
on the hard rock of life
and the thorny bed of love.

Mario Luzi: [Natura](#)
from: *La barca* (The Boat; 1935)

A Poem with Roots in Romanticism

Mario Luzi, born near Florence in 1914, came into contact in his youth with a circle of young intellectuals who had a strong affinity with Italian "ermetismo" (Hermeticism). This also inspired his early poetic work.

Beyond this, Luzi's theory of poetry is influenced by German Romanticism, notably by Novalis. Like the latter, Luzi not only wanted to depict the dynamic process of growth and decay in his poetry, but to make it directly tangible in the creative process. Thus for him

"the greatest imaginable creative power of poetry (...) is to enter fully into the inexhaustible process of creation by following the rhythm of birth and demise and making it its own breath."

[1]

Poetry as an Antidote to Alienation

For Mario Luzi, nature poetry thus does not only involve a poetic description of natural processes or the evocation of a meaning hidden behind them. Rather, he wants to experience "in the poetic moment (...) the forces guiding the universe" and make this tangible in his poetry **[2]**.

Understood in this way, hermetic poetry loses its unworldly character. Instead, Luzi's poetry claims to confront the world, alienated from the reality of life, with "the real, the absolutely real" – the "real that rises from the depths of the world's re-

ality" to the surface and finds its adequate expression in poetry [3].

This is reminiscent of Schelling's philosophy of nature and of Romantic literary theory, which also saw in poetry the expression of the primordial truth of life. Consequently, Luzi explicitly refers to Novalis, whom he quotes with the words:

"Poetry is the real, the truly absolute real." [4]

The Natural Resilience of Poetry

By adhering in this way to the "dignity of truthfulness" – as the title of a volume of poetry by Luzi (Onore del vero, 1952) puts it – poetry has a natural potential for resistance. In Luzi's view, this not only applies to fascism, but generally to all political, technical and socio-cultural developments that alienate people from the reality of existence.

In more recent times, this concerns, on a political level, the populist distortion of facts and, on a cultural level, the increasing tendency to put a virtual surrogate in the place of real life. It is precisely in the fight against this dangerous transgression that Luzi ascribes to literature the function of an important countermeasure:

"Poetry is, so to speak, a last degree of human consciousness and resistance. And here and there these resistances still exist, even if they are only isolated outcries." [5]

Romanticism and Surrealism

While Luzi's poetology refers to Romanticism in terms of content, his poems are more influenced by Surrealism in terms of form. However, this is not a contradiction in terms, as Surrealism can be seen as a radical development of Romanticism in some respects.

This becomes clear, for example, when – in his "Manifesto of Surrealism" – André Breton expresses his belief

"in the future dissolution of the seemingly contradictory states of dream and reality in a kind of absolute reality, if you like: surreality" [6].

Likewise, the Romantics wanted to help the world of dream, fantasy and poetry to regain its importance. They, too, saw the key to a more profound existence in the language of poetry, buried under the formulaic terminology of everyday life.

In terms of content, the Romantics certainly expressed this goal in their literature. On a formal level, however, they remained largely attached to traditional modes of expression.

This is precisely what changed in Surrealism. Thanks to the technique of free association – partly inspired by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis – it was now possible to realise the "surrealism" proclaimed by Breton in formal terms as well.

Surrealist Elements in the Poem *Natura*

In Luzi's poem *Natura*, the rootedness in such a "surreality" is evident in three respects:

- through the explicit reference to the states of dream, sleep and half-sleep and the altered perception of reality resulting from them;
- through the seamless intermingling of the various spheres: Earthly and heavenly sea, dream and reality, this world and the hereafter blur together, creating an in-between world in which everyday and dream perception interpenetrate;
- through a figurative structure in which metaphorical speech no longer merely connects two spheres, but merges them into a new reality (as in the image of the "flitting flame of the sparrows").

In this way, it also remains undecided whether the mysterious, comforting voices mentioned in the poem really exist or whether they only arise from the world of dreams and fantasy. However, in Mario Luzi's spiritual cosmos, rooted in the ideas Novalis, this does not matter, since the dream is no less real here than what we call "reality" in everyday life.

The Importance of Religion for Mario Luzi's Poetry

Another aspect that should be taken into account when studying the work of Mario Luzi is his Catholic faith. When the

poem *Natura* speaks of the "sparkling sea" of the sky, this can therefore certainly be understood in a religious sense.

However, such an interpretation does not necessarily have to be associated with Christian thought patterns. Rather, the poem can be generally related to the experience of transcendence, especially since Luzi himself was open to other religions and in his later life also dealt with Far Eastern philosophy.

Moreover, the Catholic faith in fascist Italy by no means had to go hand in hand with traditionalism or even an affirmative attitude towards those in power. In Luzi's case, at least, it was rather the other way round. This is notably indicated by the fact that he wrote his thesis at the University of Florence on the French writer François Mauriac.

Mauriac derived a consistently anti-fascist stance precisely from Catholic social doctrine, which made him publicly criticise both Spanish Francoism and Mussolini's regime. Furthermore, he left no doubt in his novels that a vibrant love is the opposite of what orthodox Catholicism brings about with its proscriptions and prohibitions – which suffocate all feelings in a partnership.

Thus, on the one hand, the abysses of human existence are quite present in Mario Luzi's poetry. On the other hand, however, his poetry is also permeated by the consolation that can arise from the experience of transcendence – regardless of whether we see it as a religious experience in the narrower sense or simply as a moment that has fallen out of time, a mo-

ment in which, like a sudden flash, a sense of connection with the entire cosmos flows through our veins.

This solace of transcendence is also palpable in the poem *Uccelli* (Birds), which takes up the topos of life's journey in the image of the flight of birds. At first sight, the fact that the birds flying into the sunset receive no answers to their cries in search of meaning seems to contradict this. On closer inspection, however, it is precisely this eloquent silence that testifies to the reality of the incomprehensible that carries and embraces them on their journey.

Birds

*Sometimes the harsh winds
scare our shy flock away
from the shelter of the dry branches.*

*A purple script
in the purple cloak of heaven,
the inexhaustible mine of the cosmos,
that's how we travel on repentantly then
into the heart of the mountains.*

*Painstakingly our ponderous flight
penetrates into the blue beyond the blue,
into the time beyond time,
where our tumbling cries
fade away unanswered.*

*Like the inconceivable, inexpressible
flight of mountain peaks through time,
our flight never comes to an end.*

*But our wings are embraced
by the flame of a celestial spring,
glowing on invisible stems,
a flock of flowers from scattered clouds,
grazed by the wind
in hazily sparkling realms.*

*Through rain and hail and storm
our shimmering flight
leads to a darkly glowing gate. [7]*

Biography of Mario Luzi



Born in 1914 as the son of a railway employee near Florence, Mario Luzi spent most of his life in this city. He graduated from school there and attended university, where he completed his French studies with a thesis on François Mauriac.

In Florence, Luzi also came into contact with the literary circles of his time and became an important representative of Florentine Hermeticism. As a poet familiar with French literature, he was influenced by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 – 1898), who was

likewise known for his hermetic poetry and on whom Luzi later published a separate study (*Studio su Mallarmé*, 1952).

Other factors influencing Luzi's poetry, which result from his involvement with French literature, are the social-ethically based Catholicism of François Mauriac and the poetry of French Surrealism.

In 1955, Luzi became a professor of French literature in Florence, after having worked as a secondary school teacher in various cities following his graduation. He published his first volume of poetry (*La barca / The Boat*) as early as 1935, followed by several more volumes from 1940 onwards. Since the late 1970s, he was considered a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature – which he never received, though.

Luzi, who died in 2005, also wrote plays and made a name for himself as a film critic. Furthermore, he was interested in Far Eastern philosophy and Asian meditation practices.

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Picture: *Mario Luzi in the 1970s* (Wikimedia Commons)

Nocturnal encounter with a mysterious child:

*Antonia Pozzi's poem **Notturmo invernale***

Antonia Pozzi's poem *Notturmo invernale* (Wintry Nocturne) is about a nocturnal encounter with a mysterious child. It reflects Pozzi's attitude to her life and to her poetry.



Gustaf Fjæstad (1868 – 1948): Snow-covered trees in the moonlight (1910); Wikimedia Commons

Wintry Nocturne

The snow almost swallows up,
little child, your murmuring movements,
your silent wandering on the path
in my groping footsteps.

As the black robe of the pines
purifies itself under the snow-white fluff,
so the soul floats in a sea of purity
in the crimson light of heaven.

Silently, the veil of twinkling stars
sinks down onto the night-blue forest
and onto the sleeping world,
wrapped in a silky cloak of dreams.

Like the whisper of a river
amidst the cloak of ice,
the pulse of your soul embraces me
in the all-encompassing silence.

My heart, a wanderer, trembles,
stroked by the echo of the trembling
of another groping step
in the whisper of the wind.

The crown of your pure eyes,
little child, watches over my way

through a shadowless marsh
in this divine hour.

Like two homesick swallows,
lost in the infinity of the sky,
we meet in the virgin desert of winter
before our departure for distant realms.

Tomorrow the heart, alone
with its fate, will still feel
the distant trembling of sisterly wings
on its fearful flight.

Antonia Pozzi: [Notturmo invernale](#) (January 1931)

Mystical Experience of Closeness to God

A walk through a clear winter night, culminating in a mystical encounter with a mysterious child – such a constellation will probably provoke a Christian interpretation in some readers. This is all the more likely when taking into account the poet's origins in a Catholic country.

Indeed, an interpretation of the poem in a religious sense cannot be entirely ruled out. The mysterious child whom the lyrical I encounters in a "divine hour" would then point to a kind of epiphany experience, in the sense of a sudden closeness to God.

However, the interpretation in this case would not necessarily have to be limited to a Christian context, i.e. the divine child would not automatically have to be equated with the Child Jesus. A shimmering white winter landscape glittering in the moonlight is also a fitting image for the perfect emptiness, which is a synonym for the inconceivable, ineffable divine in non-Christian mystical beliefs as well.

The encounter with the divine child would thus be a symbol of immersion in another world untouched by the fleeting hustle and bustle of everyday life, a brief liberation from the "shadowless", i.e. completely dark "marsh" that otherwise dominates human existence.

Searching for Comfort in a World Abandoned by God

Such an interpretation, in which the encounter with the divine becomes a synonym for the general, not necessarily religious experience of the infinite, also fits well with another poem by Antonia Pozzi. Entitled *Grido* (Cry), it revolves around life in a world abandoned by God:

*"To be without God,
without a grave,
without support,
surrounded only by living things
that fade away ...*

*To be without yesterday,
to be without tomorrow*

and to go blind in the void ...

*Alas, this misery
that has no end –
if only someone
could find a way out!" [1]*

Such verses make it unlikely that Pozzi had the harbour of a firm religious belief in mind for her *Notturmo invernale*. What is special about the otherworldly experience depicted in the poem is rather its contrast to everyday experience. This is precisely why the encounter with the mysterious child in the poem is compared to the fleeting encounter of two swallows in the infinity of the sky.

A Poetic "Child's View"

According to Pozzi, poetry has a central function in enabling such experiences. Thus, in a letter written in 1933, she ascribes to poetry the task of "absorbing and soothing the pain that seethes and throbs in our soul" [2].

Poetry is for Pozzi "a catharsis of pain", a means of overcoming the suffering of existence by giving voice to the beauties of life buried under everyday things:

"For those who see their days only in the colour of the sunset and feel a deadly pallor rising in their sky, for those who still absorb with hallucinating eyes the magic of things but can no

longer put it into words (...), it is like a reanimation to find a young soul who frees our unspoken song." [3]

Against this background, parallels arise with Giovanni Pascoli's theory of poetry, in which "il fanciullino" (the little child) is a symbol of the poet's undistorted view of the world. Without this view, says Pascoli,

"not only would we fail to see so many things that we usually ignore, but we would not even be able to think about them (...). He [the "fanciullino"] discovers the most ingenious similarities and relationships in things. (...) Moreover, his language is not as imperfect as that of a man who only half expresses a thing, but, on the contrary, as generous as that of a man who expresses two thoughts in one word." [4]

The mysterious child in Pozzi's *Notturmo invernale* could thus also be understood as an image for the poetic view of the world – a view that allows us to see the world again in its original paradisiacal state by enabling us to experience it in the delightful fullness of its richness of relationships. It would thus be a magical, but not an bewitching view – because it is characterised precisely by the fact that it lifts the veil of the evil spell that weighs on the world of our everyday life, at least for a few moments.

Fulfilled Moments, but not a Fulfilled Life: On Pozzi's Biography

Antonia Pozzi herself, however, did not have the fulfilled life her poetry evoked. Born in Milan in 1912, she attended

grammar school there, where she fell in love with her Latin and Greek teacher. The relationship, though, was thwarted by her parents and thus broke up in 1933.

Pozzi completed her philosophy and literature studies at the University of Milan in 1935 with a thesis on Gustave Flaubert. After her studies, she undertook shorter trips through Italy as well as to Austria, Germany, France and England, always endeavouring to learn the languages of the countries she visited.

Her favourite place to stay, though, was her family's country house in the mountains north of Milan. There she undertook extensive bicycle tours, practised photography, wrote in her diary and exchanged letters with friends. The Lombardy mountains were also the focus of her poetic activity. This was not, however, connected with publications: Her approximately 300 poems were all published only after her death.

In December 1938, Pozzi took her own life, two months before her 27th birthday. In a farewell letter to her parents, she explained her suicide with "mortal despair". The reasons for this were manifold. As her poem *Grido* (Cry) shows, Pozzi felt herself like a kind of spiritual castaway in a world abandoned by God. Her family, from whose traditional Catholicism she had become estranged, was no support for her either. Added to this were the increasing repressions in fascist Italy – notably the racial laws passed in 1938, to which some of Pozzi's friends fell victim.

A particularly empathetic description of Pozzi's personality comes from the novelist and literary scholar Maria Corti, who had met Pozzi at university. She compares the poet to

"those mountain plants (...) that can only grow on the edges of steep slopes and crevices. She was highly sensitive, endowed with a delicate creative urge, but at the same time a woman of strong character and a remarkable philosophical intelligence. She was perhaps the innocent prey of a paranoid paternal censorship of life and poetry. Undoubtedly, her relationship with her family's restricted religious environment was strained. The beloved Lombard countryside, the world of plants and rivers certainly comforted her more than the presence of her fellow men." [5]



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- [3] Ibid.
- [4] Pascoli, Giovanni: [Il fanciullino](#) (The little child/boy; 1897, expanded 1903/1907), chapter 3.
- [5] Corti, Maria, translated after the quote in Ferrari, Nina: ["Nel prato azzurro del cielo"](#). Poesia e natura in Antonia Pozzi; tuobiografo.it, November 13, 2019.

Picture: *Antonia Pozzi in the 1930s* (Wikimedia Commons)

Death as a Protest against Life:
Cesare Pavese's Fatal Flirt with Death

Reflections on death accompanied the Italian writer Cesare Pavese (1908 – 1950) throughout his life. This is also evident in his poetry.



Charles Allan Gilbert (1873 – 1929): All is vanity
Wikimedia Commons

Death Will Have Your Eyes

With your own eyes
death will face you, this deaf death
that never sleeps, that accompanies us
day after day like a ridiculous vice
and our most ancient remorse.

Your eyes will be but a hollow word,
a voiceless cry, a night-soaked silence,
a dark sparkle that even now
smoulders in your eyes as you stroke
your melting face in the mirror.

Ah, beloved hope, on that dark day
it will become certainty: that you weave life
and nothingness in a single thread.
Death looks at everyone in a different way,
with your own eyes it will face you.

And it will be
as if you were casting off a vice,
as if you were watching in the mirror
a dead creature resurrecting,
as if, with closed lips,
a stranger were talking to you.

Silently you will step
into the silent maelstrom.

*Cesare Pavese: [Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi](#) (1950)
from the book of poems of the same name, published 1951.*

Foreseeable Suicide



On 26 August 1950, Cesare Pavese rented a room in Turin's Hotel Roma, where, shortly before his 42nd birthday, he took his own life with an overdose of sleeping pills. Ten poems written in March and April of the same year were found in his estate, including the verses reproduced above.

Without knowledge of Pavese's fate, the poem could probably be generally related to the fact that death already takes root in the heart of every human being at birth. However, if we read the poem – against the background of Pavese's suicide – as a soliloquy, the verses point to the poet's lifelong inclination to take his own life.

Indeed, for Pavese, death was like a mirror image throughout his life, a dark shadow he perceived every time he looked in the mirror. The characterisation of death as a "vizio assurdo", an "absurd vice", also fits well with the author's recurring flirtations with death.

Death at the Poet's Cradle

There were many reasons why Pavese saw the idea of suicide as a natural "protest against life" [1]. Death overshadowed his life right from his birth: Three of his four siblings died at an early age, his father, who worked as a court clerk in Turin, suc-

cumbed to a brain tumour as early as 1914, when Pavese was just five and a half years old.

At such an age, children are not yet able to fully grasp the significance of death. However, they are old enough to consciously experience the tragedy. But as they are not yet able to cope with it adequately, the natural reaction is to repress it. This means that the trauma of the early stroke of fate can cast a shadow over their entire later life.

In addition, Pavese was initially brought up by various wet nurses. This could have been an additional burden for him. As we know from attachment theory [2], the presence of a stable primary caregiver in early childhood is an essential prerequisite for developing a trusting relationship with one's environment and fellow human beings. The distant relationship with his mother could therefore have reinforced Pavese's melancholic nature and his tendency towards despondency.

No Luck in Love

Another reason for Pavese's deep melancholy are the numerous unhappy love affairs that shaped his life like a constantly reopening wound. [3].

In 1925, while still at school, he fell unhappily in love with the dancer Carolina Mignone. Once he even spent so much time waiting for her in the rain that he contracted pleurisy, from which he suffered for three months.

Shortly after the end of the war, Pavese met Bianca Garufi, an employee of the Einaudi publishing house in Rome. The rela-

tionship with her did not prove long-lasting either, even though Pavese dedicated several poems to her and even wrote a novel in collaboration with her (*Fuoco grande* / Great Fire, published posthumously in 1959 as an unfinished work).

In 1950, the year of his death, Pavese finally had two more unhappy affairs. First, he fell in love with the American actress Constance Dowling. She invited him to accompany her, but then began an affair with another actor. The extent to which Pavese felt hurt by this is shown by the fact that he dedicated the collection of poems with the verses reproduced above, unpublished during his lifetime, to Dowling – which directly links his later death with the pain caused by the failed love affair.

A Last Summer of Love

In the summer of 1950, Pavese had a last love affair with 18-year-old Romilda Bollati, the sister of publisher Giulio Bollati. This love adventure of the almost 42-year-old with a woman who could have been his child made Pavese realise that love for him was just a longing for a past, unattainable happiness. In a letter to his beloved, he therefore characterised the relationship as "the last flickering of the candle" [4].

At the same time, he spoke in the letter of the feeling "that those I loved never took me seriously" [5]. In other words, Pavese felt misunderstood by women.

However, it is quite possible that the opposite was the case, too – that the women also felt misunderstood by Pavese be-

cause they instinctively sensed the contradiction between his courtship of them and the unbridgeable distance to him. Pavese's unhappy love affairs could therefore also be a consequence of the fear of committed relationships with other people that he developed in early childhood, the unconscious fear of becoming completely involved with another person whom death could tear from his arms at any moment.

Tellingly, therefore, the only woman with whom Pavese maintained a close relationship throughout his life was his sister, in whom he probably saw a kind of bridge to his childhood. When his mother died in 1930, he even moved into the house of his sister's family, and later on he likewise repeatedly sought closeness to her, who was the only fixed point in his life.

Pavese in Fascist Italy

During his studies at the University of Turin, which Pavese completed in 1930 with a thesis on the American poet Walt Whitman, the author also came into contact with anti-fascist circles. He shared their convictions, but did not stand up for anti-fascism with the same rigour as others.

Thus, despite his dissident stance, Pavese became a member of the fascist party in order to more easily find employment as an English teacher. Accordingly, the fact that he was targeted by the authorities and exiled to Brancaleone in Calabria for several months in 1935 was due to a minor matter: Pavese

had made his flat available as a contact address for correspondence with an imprisoned opposition activist.

His contacts with anti-fascist circles established during his studies also benefited Pavese professionally. They helped him to publish the volume of poetry *Lavorare stanca* (Tiring Labour, 1936), and when Giulio Einaudi founded his now legendary publishing house, he invited his friend to work with him, mainly as a translator.

Pavese's translations from English contributed significantly to the popularity of American literature in post-war Italy. In addition to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Pavese also translated works by Sherwood Anderson, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, James Joyce and Sinclair Lewis into Italian.

Pavese's own narrative style is also influenced by modern American literature and thus contributed to shaping Italian *neorealismo*. At the same time, though, his subjects repeatedly display a mythical-fantastic background [6].

The Dark Fog of Grief

Through his circle of friends, Pavese was closely associated with the anti-fascist resistance group *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Freedom), founded in 1929. Unlike other members of the group, however, he did not go underground or even take part in the partisans' resistance struggle. Instead, he was called up for military service in 1943 when he was on publishing business in Rome. For him, though, the service

essentially consisted of a six-month stay in a military hospital to which he had been admitted due to his asthma.

When he returned to Turin at the beginning of September 1943, the city was occupied by German troops following Mussolini's dismissal by the *Gran Consiglio del Fascismo* (Great Fascist Council). As a result, Pavese sought refuge in the countryside with his sister. There, at the beginning of March 1944, he was informed that a close companion, Leone Ginzburg, an author from the Ukraine and husband of the writer Natalia Ginzburg, had been tortured to death by the fascists. In his diary, Pavese describes his reaction to this as follows:

"My life feels like I'm trapped in a fog. I always think about it [the fate of my comrades], but the events blur before my inner eye. In the end, you get used to this state in which you always put off the real pain until tomorrow, and so you forget and have not suffered at all." [7]

"You are Death and the Earth": Poetic Expression of Grief

It is precisely this feeling that is expressed in a poem written in December 1945. It describes the grief of the survivors like a dark cloud enveloping them. Darkness thus becomes a part of their lives. They can close their eyes to it, or they can open their eyes and face their grief. Either way, their lives will remain overshadowed by darkness:

*"You are death and the earth.
Silence and darkness
are your home.
Nothing is further from you
than the dawn.*

*In your illusory awakening,
nothing but pain awaits you.
Pain throbs in your veins,
pain gleams in your gaze.
You live the life of a stone,
covered by barren earth.*

*A robe of unfamiliar dreams
and silent sobs envelops you,
a pond of pain surrounds you,
trembling, without echo in your soul.
You are death and the earth." [8]*

Feelings of Guilt for Lack of Participation in the *Resistenza*

After the end of the fascist era, Cesare Pavese was not only burdened by grief for his dead friends. He was also haunted by remorse: While he had waited for the end of the war in the countryside, many former companions had lost their lives fighting against the German occupation and for liberation from fascism.

Prima che il gallo canti (Before the Rooster Crows), the title of his collection of stories published in 1948, can even be under-

stood as a kind of public self-accusation. Through the implicit reference to Judas, the title of the autobiographically shaped prose interprets his own behaviour as betrayal.

It is against this background that Pavese's entry into the Communist Party and his collaboration with the communist daily newspaper *L'Unità* are to be understood. For Pavese, this was a kind of active repentance – an attempt to at least participate actively in building the structures for a more humane world, after failing to be at the forefront of the struggle against the destruction of the inhuman structures.

However, he remained a stranger in the Communist Party as well, since for the taste of his new comrades, his thinking was too little aligned with the party's dogmas. Bitterly, Pavese therefore noted in his diary on 15 February 1950:

"Pavese is not a good comrade ... There is talk of intrigues everywhere. (...) So this is what they look like, the speeches of those you care most about." [9]

An Inevitable Suicide?

The shadow of the strokes of fate from early childhood, love as a single chronology of failure, the grief for friends killed in the resistance struggle against fascism, the survivor's feelings of guilt, the feeling of not really belonging anywhere, human baseness – anyone looking for reasons for Cesare Pavese's suicide will find more than enough of them.

But was his suicide really inevitable?

Beside the dead poet was found a copy of his *Dialoghi con Leucò* (Dialogues with Leucò), published in 1947, in which Pavese approaches the eternal questions of humanity by means of ancient myths. Inside the book was a slip of paper on which the poet had noted a quotation from the *Dialoghi*:

"Mortal man (...) participates in immortality only through the memory he carries within him and the memory he leaves behind." [10]

Another sentence was taken from his diary:

"I have worked, I have given poetry to people, I have shared the sorrow of many." [11]

The Poison of Depression

Such sentences do not reflect the despair of a person who sees no other way out for himself than death. If you want yourself and your works to be remembered, you are looking for a bridge to life, for a lasting connection with others, for a permanent place in the world.

This bridge to life was emerging at the very time Pavese took his own life. His career as a writer had just taken off. Under the fascist regime, like other intellectuals who were not loyal to the regime, he had suffered from the limited opportunities to work and publish. He had to eke out a living by teaching English and was only able to get a permanent job thanks to the support of his friend Giulio Einaudi, who employed him as a translator in his newly founded publishing house.

After the collapse of fascist rule and the end of the war, Pavese had published several works and received two important literary prizes – one of them, the Premio Strega, shortly before his death.

Thus, one would like to call out to the poet retrospectively: "If only you had been a little more patient with your life! Only a short time more and you would have been a renowned author, someone who is known and appreciated beyond the borders of his country!"

Unfortunately, however, our words would probably have remained useless even then. For it is precisely a characteristic of pathological depression that it numbs its victims with the poison of its own logic – a logic that envelops the person concerned like a dense fog which no rational argument can penetrate.

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- [3] On the women in Pavese's life, see Internetculturale.it: "Ho dato poesie agli uomini". Cesare Pavese 1908 – 1950: [Pavese e l'amore](#).
- [4] Pavese, Cesare: *Vita attraverso le lettere*, edited by Lorenzo Mondo, p. 254 f. Turin 1973: Einaudi.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] An example of the combination of a laconic, succinct narrative style with a mythological-fantastic subject is Pavese's novel *Paesi tuoi* (Your Lands), published in 1941 (English-language version published in 1961 under the title *The Harvesters*). In it, after a journey to the countryside, the protagonist finds himself in another world, cut off from the rest of civilisation. The rural landscape thus becomes the backdrop for a mythical setting in which eternal human themes such as love, passion and violence are reflected. The novel is also an example of Pavese's influence by the philosophy of Giambattista Vico, who regarded the images of mythology as evidence of mankind's early confrontation with the fundamental aspects of human fate.
- [7] Pavese, *Il mestiere di vivere* (see above: 2), p. 276 (diary entry from 3 March 1944).
- [8] Pavese, Cesare: [Sei la terra e la morte](#) (written on 3 December 1945 as one of nine poems from the cycle *La terra e la morte*); first published in 1947 in the magazine *Le tre Venezie*; in book form in *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi*, 1951).
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[10] Vgl. Malagrinò Mustica, Anita: [Ho cercato me stesso. Riflessioni sull'ultimo Cesare Pavese](#); classicult.it, April 5, 2020.

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Picture: *Cesare Pavese* (*Wikimedia Commons*)

The Utopia of a Post-Paradise Peace:
*Elsa Morante's **Canto per il gatto Alvaro***

In a poem for her cat Alvaro, Elsa Morante creates a vision of a new quality of peace that surpasses the peace of the primordial paradisiacal state through the conscious decision to treat each other peaceably.



*Kazimierz Władysław Wasilkowski (1861 – 1934): Young woman with cat
(Wróżka, um 1920); Wikimedia Commons*

Canto for the Cat Alvaro

In the nest of my arms,
you, lazy, fiery creature,
my shimmering good-for-nothing,
have curled up with relish.

In the midday sun as in the deepest night
you are at home, turning from a dove
to an owl, from the graves
swinging like smoke towards the sky.

When all light is extinguished
you light the candelabra
of your luminous eyes
and watch over my drowsiness.

Fleeting torches then flit
through the fragile peace of the night,
a mosaic of thousands of tigers' eyes,
chasing each other in a childish frenzy.

The wandering lamps then come to rest,
your velvet-eyed twins
that flicker so proudly by day
around the flowers on my windowsills.

And yet I was once like you!
Among the darkly shining foliage,

amidst the faithless people
of paradise, we once lived together.

For me, it was an exile. But for you,
you playful pilgrim, it has remained the homeland,
of which you weave an inkling
around my fleeting walk on earth.

While your heavenly brothers and sisters
enjoy their morning idleness
in heartless wars and hunts,
you stay in the hollow of my arms.

How do I, my savage, deserve this honour?
In my book of fate, only death, captivity and sin
correspond to your eternal,
innocent independence.

Outside your gallant brothers
with the melodious names
chase the thorny crown of the moon
and the inebriating morning wand of the sun.

But you, my prince,
wisely content yourself
with my love.

Elsa Morante: [Canto per il gatto Alvaro](#)
from the novel *Menzogna e sortilegio* (Lies and Sorcery; 1948)

The Ambivalent Nature of the Cat and the Dream of Paradise

The *Canto per il gatto Alvaro* appears at the end of Elsa Morante's first novel *Menzogna e sortilegio* (Lies and Magic), published in 1948. In it, it is meant to thank the cat that accompanied the narrator in her writing.

In the poem, Morante, who was a great cat lover and also dedicated poems to other cats [1], plays with the ambivalent nature of cats, their oscillation between pussycat and predator. The contrasting characters of the cat are, however, split up into different individuals: While the lyrical self's confidant, the tomcat Alvaro, is apparently a pure cuddly kitten, his fellow cats live out their murderous ferocity uninhibitedly.

This artifice makes it possible to create an unbroken vision of a primordial paradisiacal state. Alvaro is thus more than a normal domestic cat. In the poem, he becomes a symbol of peaceful interaction between different creatures.

The poem's deliberately naïve tone indicates that Elsa Morante has also written stories for children. Furthermore, the implicit link to children's ways of feeling serves to support the message of the poem. Thus, the loss of paradise can also be related to the loss of childhood.

Taming the Inner Tiger

The poem, however, is not about a retrospective glorification of childhood. Rather, childhood appears here as the human equivalent of the ambivalent nature of cats.

Children, too, often live out their "wild" impulses unfiltered and can display a not inconsiderable cruelty. However, since they are not yet fully aware of the consequences of their actions, they live in a state of innocence – even by legal standards. The older they get, though, the more they approach the threshold beyond which innocent savagery becomes culpable behaviour.

Seen from this perspective, the utopia outlined by Elsa Morante's poem does not involve returning to the paradisiacal original state. Rather, it is precisely about shaking off the dark sides of this state and saving as much as possible of its bright sides for life beyond paradise.

Or, to put it in "kitty" terms: We must tame the tiger living in all of us at least to such an extent that it no longer poses a danger to us or others.

Biography of Elsa Morante

Elsa Morante, who was born in Rome in 1912 and died there in 1985, is best known for her time-sensitive novels. Together with her fellow writer Alberto Moravia, to whom she was married for twenty years, she was an integral part of the post-war Italian art scene.

Through her friendship with Pier Paolo Pasolini, Morante was also active in the world of film. She wrote screenplays and film reviews, took on smaller roles, worked as an assistant director and participated in the creation of film music. Some of her own novels were also adapted into films.

Her works were particularly suitable for this because, like the most important Italian films of the post-war period, they were based on the style of neorealism. Morante associated her critical realism with the claim to overcome in writing the impression of a disparate and disjointed world that besets modern man in the face of the complexity of reality. Thus she declared in a famous speech in 1965:

"Art is the opposite of disintegration. (...) The reason for art's existence, its justification, the cause of its presence and survival (...), is precisely this: that it is supposed to prevent the disintegration of human consciousness in its daily, tiring and alienating dealings with the world, to give it back again and again, in the unreal, used-up and fragmentary confusion of external relationships, an integral overall picture of the real – in a word: reality." [2]

As the daughter of a Jewish mother, Morante had to go into hiding with her husband – whose father was also of Jewish descent – during the German occupation of Italy. This experience also influenced her most successful novel, *La Storia* (The Story), published in 1974. It is about a woman with Jewish roots trying to survive the war in fascist Rome together with her two sons. In 1986, Luigi Comencini adapted the novel for television, with Claudia Cardinale in the leading role.

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Elsa Morante in her flat in Rome
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