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UNGARETTI'S "LA MORTE MEDITATA"

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## AN INTERTEXTUAL READING OF “CANTO SECONDO” AND “CANTO TERZO” FROM UNGARETTI’S “LA MORTE MEDITATA”

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UNGARETTI’S poetry has been characterized as hermetic often because seemingly arbitrary associations disrupt conventional modes of representation, as we find in “Canto secondo” and “Canto terzo” of “La morte meditata” from *Sentimento del tempo* (1933). However, the enigmatic aspects of these poems become much clearer when read in the context of Valéry’s “Le Cimetière marin.” This is not surprising since intertextuality is a practice and a poetical theme in the works of both Valéry and Ungaretti. Long before Kristeva<sup>1</sup> articulated the concept of intertextuality, this was an object of critical reflection for Valéry:

Qu’il s’agisse de la science ou des arts, on observe, si l’on s’inquiète de la génération des résultats, que toujours *ce qui se fait répète ce qui fut fait*, ou le réfute; le répète en d’autres tons, l’épure, l’amplifie, le simplifie, le charge ou le surcharge; ou bien le rétorque, l’extermine, le renverse, le nie; mais donc le suppose, et l’a invisiblement utilisé. Le contraire naît du contraire. (634)

Ungaretti rendered the process of intertextual rewriting visible by juxtaposing the variant “Canto terzo” to “Canto secondo.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Canto secondo*

Scava le intime vite  
Della nostra infelice maschera

### *Canto terzo*

Incide le rughe segrete  
Della nostra infelice maschera

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<sup>1</sup> Kristeva defines intertextuality as follows: “[...] tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d’un autre texte. A la place de la notion d’intersubjectivité s’installe celle d’*intertextualité*, et le langage poétique se lit, au moins, comme double” (85).

<sup>2</sup> The six canti of “La morte meditata” were originally divided into two parts: “Sentimento della memoria” (the first three canti) and “Sentimento del sogno” (the last three).

(Clausura d'infinito)  
Con blandizia fanatica  
La buia veglia dei padri.

Morte, muta parola,  
Sabbia deposta come un letto  
Dal sangue,  
Ti odo cantare come una cicala  
Nella rosa abbrunata dei riflessi.

La beffa infinita dei padri.

Tu, nella luce fonda,  
O confuso silenzio,  
Insisti come le cicale irose.

Yet, in his analysis of “La morte meditata,” Glauco Cambon wrote about the apparent “superfluity” of “Canto secondo” because, in his opinion, it was overshadowed by the more intense “Canto terzo” (134). Yet “Canto secondo” is as aesthetically valid as “Canto terzo” for it is as a pair that these two poems create a deliberate impact. The mirror effect achieved by placing these variants side by side is an integral part of their message. This arrangement underscores and visualizes the intertextual nature of Ungaretti’s poetics.

Both “Canto secondo” and “Canto terzo” present the reader with several “anomalies” in the sense that there seems to be an incompatibility with regard to the context: Ungaretti writes about death, the “father’s mockery” and cicadas. The links between these various elements are missing from the poem which by itself remains mysterious, unless the reader discovers that, as Riffaterre has written “[...] à cette difficulté correspond une solution, qu’une norme est la contrepartie de cette anomalie” (6). The intertext in question is “Le Cimetière marin” where we find the mocking dead “pères” and the “insecte net.”

Valéry’s “Le Cimetière Marin” may be divided into four sections; the first (lines 1-19) focuses on the tranquil contemplation of the sea. In the second (20-48) the narrator inserts himself into the landscape. The third section (49-109) concentrates on the cemetery and the poet’s dead forebearers, his “pères” and in the fourth, the poem ceases to be an internal monologue. In this part Valéry addresses the reader thereby abandoning “passive” contemplation and reaffirming active life. Thus despite the contemplative themes of “Le Cimetière marin,” (meditation on consciousness as opposed to sensation, timelessness versus time, immobility as opposed to motion, death versus life, the making of a poem) what we may call a “materialistic” perception of existence prevails, that

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is, life is ultimately governed by physical laws. In the eighteenth stanza in particular, the poet's consolation, "immortality," is seen in an ironic light. Like poetry, immortality is "a beautiful lie," a "holy trick" ("un beau mensonge," une "pieuse ruse"). The poet is well aware that the image of immortality is nothing but an "empty skull" ("ce crâne vide"), "an eternal snicker" ("ce rire éternel"), a joke played on him. In the nineteenth stanza we learn that the "rire éternel" belongs to the "Pères profonds," which in itself would be a philosophical cliché were it not followed by the hemistich, "têtes inhabitées," thus forming a rather violent antithesis. The eighteenth and nineteenth stanzas, as do all the cemetery stanzas, focus on the importance of death in life:

Maigre immortalité noire et dorée,  
Consolatrice affreusement laurée,  
Qui de la mort fais un sein maternel,  
Le beau mensonge et la pieuse ruse!  
Qui ne connaît, et qui ne les refuse,  
Ce crâne vide et ce rire éternel!

Pères profonds, têtes inhabitées,  
Qui sous le poids de tant de pelletées,  
Etes la terre et confondez nos pas,  
Le vrai rongeur, le ver irréfutable  
N'est point pour vous qui dormez sous la table,  
Il vit de vie, il ne me quitte pas!

We find the same idea expressed in Ungaretti's "La pietà" (*Sentimento del tempo*, 1928): "É nei vivi la strada dei defunti." The "Pères" are not "profound" in death, they are merely "uninhabited heads." That is, they, and their words are "profound" in life, when appropriated by living poets. Therefore the "ver rongeur" (literally the worm that consumes, destroys, empties) works not on the dead "Pères," but on the living. "Le vrai rongeur, le ver[s] irréfutable" also represents the words of the "Pères" that consume the poet: "Il vit de vie, il ne me quitte pas!" The words of the fathers no longer belong to them; "N'est point pour vous qui dormez sous la table." Now these words ("ver[s]") belong to the living poet. This theme of intertextuality stands out in "Le Cimetière marin" since the "Pères" become an metaphor for intertextual writing.

In the first part of "La morte meditata" ("Canto primo," "Canto secondo" and "Canto terzo") the focus is upon the "sentiment of memory,"

and the inescapable presence of the “padri” and the impossibility of expressing oneself with full autonomy, in total “innocence.” The “padri” of “Canto secondo” and “Canto terzo” are not only the past in general (historic, ancestral), but also the poets who preceded Ungaretti, preventing him from attaining “innocence.”<sup>3</sup> The theme of literary “padri” is explored throughout *Sentimento del tempo*. Everything that the poet writes is tempered or determined by the “padri.” We know that the presence of their “blandizia fanatica” (“fanatic blandishment”) and “buia veglia” (“dark watch”) in “Canto secondo” is a “beffa infinita” (“Canto terzo”) “infinite farce” because the poet never speaks entirely with his own words. If we alter the poetic syntax of the first stanza of “Canto secondo” we obtain, prosaically, the following sentence: “La buia veglia dei padri scava (con blandizia fanatica) le intime vite della nostra infelice maschera (clausura d’infinito).” At first reading this imagery could seem to possess religious overtones. The dark wake of the fathers makes empty (“scava”), meaningless (with fanatical banishment or persuasiveness) the intimate lives of our unhappy mask. The mask is also a “clausura d’infinito”; this is an oxymoronic line, since “clausura” is a closed space (in a religious sense, one from which the monks may not exit) and cannot be infinite. These “fathers” render our “intimate lives” vacuous. This same association between “fathers” and emptiness as in “Le Cimetière marin” (“Pères profonds, têtes inhabitées”) allows us to elucidate what at first sight could appear to be a “contextual incompatibility” between the authoritative “fathers” and the idea of emptiness.<sup>4</sup>

In the second stanza of “Canto secondo,” death is addressed vocatively, “Morte, muta parola.” Then, when the poet suddenly replaces “Morte” with an analogous vocative formula, “Sabbia deposta....,” the mention of “sangue” in the context of death is expected, but the follow-

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<sup>3</sup> The tension between innocence and memory is central to Ungaretti’s work. The theme of the ancestors is present before *Sentimento del tempo* in “Risvegli” (from *Il porto sepolto* 1916), “Conclusion,” (“partout me guette un réveil de regrets d’ancêtres”), “Voyage” (from *La guerre*, 1919) and “Girovago” and “Popolo” (from *Allegria di naufragi* 1919) but in all these cases the ancestors are clearly more mythical than literary, that is, they do not represent the practice of intertextual writing.

<sup>4</sup> While reading Ungaretti’s poems Riffaterre’s definition of “l’intertextualité obligatoire” will help us to clarify other “anomalies”: “Cette trace de l’intertexte prend toujours la forme d’une aberration à un ou plusieurs niveaux de l’acte de communication: elle peut être lexicale, syntaxique, sémantique, mais toujours elle est sentie comme la déformation d’une norme ou une incompatibilité par rapport au contexte” (5).

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ing comparison between death and the cicadas appears to be incongruous. The poet has not given us the elements necessary to fill the gaps. The last line, "rosa abbrunata dei riflessi," suggests a darkened light, that of sunset and approaching darkness, a common association with the image of death. But the cicadas and the sand remain perplexing. The only explanation could be offered by the Valéryan intertext where sand is evoked by the image of the cemetery by the sea, and where death and cicadas are associated:

Ici venu, l'avenir est paresse.  
L'insecte net gratte la sécheresse. (67- 68)

"Canto terzo" is a variant of "Canto secondo." The same themes are treated with greater evocative tension. The "buia veglia dei padri" becomes now, ironically, a "beffa infinita." The antithetical condition of life as determined by death is rendered more absolute in "Canto terzo." "Morte, muta parola" in "Canto secondo" becomes "O confuso silenzio" in "Canto terzo." And the last lines of both texts are tied by paronomasia: "come una cicala/Nella rosa" becomes "come le cicale irose." "La buia veglia dei padri" becomes, as we have seen, "la beffa infinita dei padri" echoing Valéry's "rire *éternel*" and "pieuse ruse" (emphasis mine). The oxymoron "Morte, muta parola/cicala" from "Canto secondo" becomes more absolute in "Canto terzo" where the "confused silence insists" like "angry cicadas": "Tu, nella luce fonda, /O confuso silenzio/Insisti come le cicale irose." "Canto terzo" presents even more "anomalies" than "Canto secondo" obliging the reader to return once more to "Le Cimetière marin" where silence and cicadas suggest the present absence of death and the "Pères" eternal laughter.

It is not so much common motifs that link Valéry and Ungaretti, rather it is the common practice, and the conscious metapoetics of intertextuality which are central to their work. We can say that the relation between "Canto secondo," "Canto terzo" and "Le Cimetière marin" is a case of intertextuality. Based on this conclusion, it would be misleading, however, to assume that the relationship between Valéry and Ungaretti's poetry is exclusively "intertextual." There is also another more complex type of relation, that is, Valéry's "Fragments du Narcisse" (made up of three sections) and Ungaretti's "Lido," "Lago luna alba notte," and

“Leda.” In these three texts (which were originally published as one text, “Lido,” *Commerce*, 1925, and then broken up into three separate poems) we also find images, phrases, and themes from Valéry’s “Fragments du Narcisse.” In this case, Ungaretti’s poems repeat not only Valéryan themes and motifs, but also the triptychal *structure* of the French poem.<sup>5</sup> This second type of relation would be “syntextual,” since Ungaretti’s “Lido,” “Leda,” and “Lago luna alba notte” not only make up a *group of texts* (as opposed to one or two texts), but contain a “*remarkable number of rapports*” with Valéry’s “Fragments.” (Emphasis mine)<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, there is a third category of relations illustrated by Ungaretti’s “transformation” of Valéry’s “La Fausse morte” into “Canto” from *Sentimento del tempo*. This would be, according to Genette, a case of hypertextuality.<sup>7</sup> The present study, which has tried to relate “Le Cimetière marin” and “La morte meditata,” therefore inserts itself in a broader framework of syntextual and hypertextual relations.

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<sup>5</sup> The original *Commerce* (1925) “Lido” actually gave way to four texts, the fourth being “Acqua,” which Ungaretti himself never published. Therefore we may still affirm that Ungaretti broke up the 1925 *Commerce* “Lido” into three texts, as he evidently did not see fit to publish the fourth, which may be considered a rejected draft.

<sup>6</sup> Ricardou differentiates various types of specific intertexts (“intertextes restreints,” one of which he calls *syntexte*. According to his definition, it is an intertext “composé de l’ensemble des textes dont chacun, [...] entretient un nombre remarquable de rapports avec le texte en cause.” (Emphasis mine)

<sup>7</sup> “J’appelle donc hypertexte tout texte dérivé d’un texte antérieur par transformation simple (nous dirons désormais transformation tout court) ou par *transformation* indirecte nous dirons *imitation*” (14).