

## Ungaretti, Leopardi, and the Shipwreck of the Soul

Mi destavi nel sangue ogni tua età  
M'apparivi tenace, umana, libera  
E sulla terra il vivere piu bello;  
Giuseppe Ungaretti  
(Poesie, 1912)

You awakened in my blood all your ages  
You appeared to me tenacious, human, free<sup>1</sup>  
And on earth the finest form of living

An ode to the country of his heritage, but not of his birth, captures the passionate longing for Italy and her literary tradition sustained by Giuseppe Ungaretti during his youth in Egypt. He was born in Alexandria February 8, 1888. His father, Antonio Ungaretti, emigrated from Lucca to find work on the Suez Canal and died eight years later, leaving Maria Lunardini Ungaretti to earn a livelihood for herself and two sons at the family-owned bakery in the Arab quarter. Educated at the Ecole Suisse Jacot, among the best schools in Alexandria, he read for himself the works of Leopardi, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Nietzsche.<sup>2</sup> In 1912 he left Egypt for Paris, where he and Apollinaire became friends, and he met the Italian futurists. He returned to Italy in 1914 and began to write the poetry that would eventually become Allegria di Naufragi.

At first glance the poetry of Ungaretti seems derived from the French influences. Closer analysis, as Frederic J. Jones points out, discloses Ungaretti's lifelong admiration for Leopardi (p. 51) and, as Joseph Cary notes, his view of "Mallarmé and French symbolisme in general as the unwitting heirs to the pioneer labors of the isolated poet from Recanati" (p. 170). Cary holds that Ungaretti looked upon

Leopardi as a man ahead of his time in the expression of particularly modern experiences (p. 169). Commenting on the role of Leopardi in the poet's life, Jones writes:

Ungaretti always regarded Leopardi's evocations of sharp metaphysical contours as prefiguring his own orphic dreams, and they clearly have a definite connection with the infinite spaces and formless wastes of the Egyptian desert or the shattered landscapes of the Carso. The result is that art and life are subtly intermingled in his work from the very beginning, and his early atmospheres in the desert and his literary interests as a schoolboy and a young man have a two-fold influence upon his tonal qualities. (p. 11)

Two influential editors, Giuseppe De Robertis (La Voce, 1914-16) and Vincenzo Cardarelli (La Ronda, 1919-22) shared his esteem. In addition to encouraging the young avant-garde poets through publication, they advocated the study and understanding of the Italian classical literary tradition. Joseph Cary, commenting on the role of both editors, says:

Not the least of De Robertis' contributions to modern Italian poetry was his interest in the work of Giacomo Leopardi, which not only helped desentimentalize and revolutionize study of the Canti but also had some influence on Ungaretti's reading of that great poet. This, in my opinion, is an event in the history of what the critic Francesco Flora later captiously called "hermeticism." In a broad sense Flora was right when, in his big history of Italian literature, he called the

second Voce an accomplice in the formation of hermeticism, not because it pushed a francophile sub-symbolist poetry (Flora's point) but because it encouraged a scrupulous rereading of Leopardi's opera omnia. . . . La Ronda published a Testamento letterario di Giacomo Leopardi, a conscientious selection from his notebooks, the Zibaldone, which stressed his classicism and formal purity as both theoretician and practitioner of lo bello scrivere. The Leopardis of De Robertis and Cardarelli are of course quite different; <sup>3</sup> both of them were of use to Ungaretti.

Ungaretti discovered in Leopardi's Zibaldone and Canti "poetica della memoria." It is not, as the name suggests, poetry that describes a sequence of events or even a sample of a given day; it is poetry in which the words chosen convey a plethora of meaning, resulting in perpetual motion between the past and the present. Ungaretti's poetic style, skeletal and terse, is built on words chosen to provide levels of meaning. Much as a kaleidoscope turns bits of broken colored glass into medieval rose windows, the fractured meaning of words fill the barren landscape of an Ungaretti poem.

In the following essay I have chosen to follow a fragment of colored glass, a single word. That word is nafragare (to shipwreck) and its companion noun, nafragio. The word, used on three separate occasions in Ungaretti's oeuvre, is used once, and most famously, in this work of Giacomo Leopardi in 1819:

### L'infinito

Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle,  
E questa siepe, che da tanta parte  
Dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.

Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati  
Spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani  
Silenzi, e profondissima quiete  
Io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco  
Il cor non si spaura. E come il vento  
Odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello  
Infinito silenzio a questa voce  
Vo comparando; e mi sovvien l'eterno,  
E le morte stagioni, e la presente  
E viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa  
Immensità si' annega il pensier mio:  
E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.

The Infinite<sup>4</sup>

Always dear to me was this hermetic<sup>5</sup> hill /  
And this hedge that so much of /  
The farthest horizon excludes from view. /  
But sitting and gazing, [into] interminable /  
Spaces there, and superhuman /  
Silences, and most profound quiet /  
I in thought pretend to be; /  
Where scarcely can the heart not fear.<sup>6</sup>

And how the wind /  
I hear storm among these plants, I that /  
Infinite silence to this voice /  
Comparing, and I remember the eternal,  
And the dead seasons, and the present /  
And living, and the sound of it. Thus in  
this /  
Immensity I drown my thought; /  
And shipwreck to me is sweet in this sea.

I

Allegria di naufragi<sup>7</sup>

Versa il 14 febbraio 1917

E subito riprende

il viaggio  
come  
dopo il naufragio  
un superstite  
lupo di mare

Joy of Shipwrecks

Versa, February 14, 1917

And instantly he takes up  
the voyage  
as  
after the shipwreck<sup>8</sup>  
a surviving sea wolf

Allegria di naufragi is the name of the book in which this poem appeared on the first page, although in later editions the title is pared to L'Allegria (Milan 1931, Rome 1936). Jones says that F. Portinari associates Allegria di naufragi with background imagery drawn from Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé, together with the deeper metaphysical attitudes implicit in Leopardi's well known line from "L'Infinito":

E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare  
[And to be shipwrecked in this sea is  
sweet to me.] (p. 66)

He adds that Ungaretti himself acknowledges this Leopardian influence on many occasions, and he describes his own particular "shipwrecks" as moments of exultancy, of liberation, snatched from the whirlpool of time, as seen, for example, in Poesie:

Il primitivo titolo, strano, dicono, era Allegria di naufragi. Strano se tutto non fosse naufragio, se tutto non fosse tavolo, soffocato, consumato dal tempo. Esultanza che l'attimo, avvenendo, dà perchè fuggitivo,

attimo che soltanto amore può strappare al tempo, l'amore più forte che non possa essere la morte. E il punto dal quale scatta quell' esultanza d'un attimo, quell' allegria che, quale fronte, non avrà mai se non il sentimento della presenza della morte da scongiurare.

The first, somewhat strange title, they say, was Allegria di naufragi. It would be strange if everything were indeed not a shipwreck, if everything were not overwhelmed, stifled, consumed by time. An exultancy which the moment, as it happens, provides because it is fleeting, a moment which only love can tear away from time, a love stronger than death. It is the point from which there bursts forth that exultancy of a moment, that rapture which may have only as its source a feeling for the presence of death, of death to be exorcised.

The poetic process which develops from the "shipwrecks" buried deep in the shadows of time, Jones continues, is one of lyrically recreated memory, of recollective orphic insight penetrating into the mysteries surrounding human experience. At one point the poet defines this sense of mystery as man's continual inventiveness as he works out his endless imaginative transfigurations of events and situations. For him the very aim of poetry is to evoke this mystery within the framework of a sense of human measure, to make specific and fruitful in the life of the individual, through its intense emotive delineation. By such expedients he believes one often succeeds in evoking, as Ungaretti writes in Poesie (p. ixxx) "l'invisibile nel visibile" (cf. Jones, pp. 67-68).

The impact of the poem is in the words that end each line. These words conform to the Leopardian

idea of the parola. Cary refers to Leopardi's concern here: it is "words . . . which do not merely offer the single idea of the object signified . . . but certain accessory images as well" (p. 173). Moreover, he says that "Leopardi calls parole words with layers of connotations secreted through time. To these he contrasts what he calls termini, terms, which, as the name implies, are words fixed and limited to their 'single idea' or denotation" (p. 173). For example, riprendere can be interpreted with twelve colorations of meaning; viaggio, three; an ocean voyage implied by references to the sea and shipwreck that follow. Come is the pivot point upon which the heavier lines turn. It indicates a simile, and evokes, through semi-negation of the reality of the remaining lines, a dream-like state. The comparison created by this simile is between an unnamed "he" (included in the verb riprende) and the surviving sea dog of the concluding line. Is he the poet? Is he a metaphor for humanity? The next word to end the line is naufragio--shipwreck--a simple "term" which is a direct reference to "L'infinito": "il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare." By evoking these Leopardian lines, the poet clarifies the identity of the unknown "he." He is the poet, who, though broken by life, has made the decision to bear the pain of living. Without referring to Leopardi's naufragar, the survival of the lone sailor would become an expression of the capriciousness of fate.

Jones notes that central to Ungaretti's poetry is this idea of the "scavo della parola" [the excavation of the word] (p. 89), of which this poem is a very good example. Not only has he "excavated" the possibilities of the Leopardian parola, but by choice and placement of a word that every Italian associates with the themes of another poem, he taps a well of images and sensations in an economy of space.

One of the most disconcerting elements of Ungaretti's style is the blankness of the spaces that envelope the skeletal structure of the poems. The

sparseness of words serves to underline the complexity of meanings inherent in each word. The placement of the word becomes an element of great importance, and the final effect is a visual equivalent to the attitude of the poet. Such a style suggests that everything has been said before. In order to make the reader aware of the words and the statement the poem attempts to make, he verticalizes the structure and cuts out large pieces. The poet accomplishes all this simply by using the technique of a one word line, "come", of the poem.

## II

### Preghiera<sup>10</sup>

Quando mi desterò  
dal barbaglio della promiscuità  
in una limpida e attonita sfera

Quando il mio peso mi sarà leggero

Il naufragio concedimi Signore  
di quel giovane giorno al primo grido

### Prayer

When I awake  
from the glare of promiscuity  
within a clear, astonished sphere

When my weight grows light for me  
Grant me the shipwreck, Lord,  
of that young day at first outcry<sup>11</sup>

"Preghiera" is divided into two parts, each beginning with the adverb quando. The first quando begins a six syllable line that ends in the verb desterò. The second quando introduces a hendecasyllable, a maiore line, in which the accented phrase



ends in peso, recalling the stressed "o" in desterò. Both words are parole. Destare--to wake up--connotes a physical change of being, to rise from sleep, and alludes to sexual, intellectual, and spiritual change, or awakening. Peso--weight--is synonymous with the heaviness of the body, and implies intellectual and spiritual weights of care, responsibility, and thought. Jones points out that in Ungaretti's poetry "the idea of 'luce' [light] is often associated with the process of extinction and the idea of 'ombra' [shadow] or 'notte' with man's purely contingent sensations" (p. 36). Moreover, two kinds of light are described in the text: the blinding dazzle of promiscuity (which is, I believe, not a reference to the poet's sexual morality, but is used in the sense of an indiscriminant mixture or mingling), a description of the confusion felt by the poet, and the light of dawn, "giovane giorno," an illuminating light that organizes the myriad of sensations. Two references are related to water: limpida and naufragio. Limpida--limpid, clear, transparent--symbolizes a moment of clarity and understanding (calm water, which buoys the poet upward). Naufragio--shipwreck, a disaster met in water--stimulates a drowning sensation (opaque, violent storms at sea, where the poet is helpless). The words Ungaretti has chosen pair off into groups of opposites, separated by quando into clutches of three lines each.

At first the strange pairings confound the reader. The key is in the parola, naufragio, which, with its invocation of "L'infinito," elucidates the poem. Ungaretti has carefully constructed a metaphor for the moment of death which, like the shipwreck, will destroy him but also enlighten him. He expresses hope that death will provide the answers to the puzzling questions of life. This is essentially an optimistic poem. Naufragio, as in "L'infinito," is dolce. Atheism prevented Leopardi from belief in an after-life.<sup>12</sup> Ungaretti, however, had some religious faith; it colors his perception of death. "To awaken

from confusion--in a limpid, clear, crystalline--  
sphere," sleep becomes a metaphor for death, awaken-  
ing, the moment of resurrection. The poet anticipates  
liberation from the weight of the body at the moment  
of shipwreck. He invokes God and begs him to grant  
the sweet moment of destruction. The last line is  
somewhat of an enigma. What is the day of the first  
cry? I interpret it as a reference to the day of  
resurrection, the final shipwreck, when all souls  
will become part of the infinite.

### III

Il tempo è muto<sup>13</sup>

Il tempo è muto fra canneti immoti . . .

Lungi d' approdi errava una canoa . . .  
Stremato, inerte il rematore . . . I cieli  
Già decaduti a batari di fumi . . .

Proteso invano all'orlo dei ricordi,  
Cadere forse fu mercé . . .

Non seppe

Ch'è la stessa illusione mondo e mente,  
Che nel mistero delle proprie onde  
Ogni terrena voce fa naufragio.

The Time is Mute

The time is mute along motionless reeds . . .

Far-off from landings wandered a canoe . . .  
Exhausted and inert the oarsman . . . Skies  
Already fallen into gulfs of smoke . . .

Outstretched in vain on the rim of memories,  
To fall perhaps was mercy . . .

He knew not

It is the same illusion world and mind,  
That in the mystery of its own waves  
Every earthly voice shipwrecks.<sup>14</sup>

"Il tempo è muto" is chosen from Ungaretti's later works. His mature style employs the hendecasyllable in the classic tradition of alternating lines of a maiore and of a minore. Punctuation is not omitted, and the first letter of each line is capitalized. Ungaretti's stylistic similarity to the Leopardi of "L'infinito" is here represented at its zenith, yet he retains the highly effective "short stab" line characteristic in much of his work, and the jagged look of the early poetry. The three syllable line, "Non seppe," breaks the heavy rhythm of the eleven syllable lines visually and rhythmically. Its unusual placement, flush against the ends of the preceding lines, leaves a gulf of white, equivalent to the "batari di fumi" (line four) and the "orlo dei ricordi" in which the poet contemplates the annihilation of memory.

The formal structure of "Il tempo è muto" is the medium through which the sentiments expressed in the poem are made to mirror the images of "L'infinito." The first action of the poem is the stopping of time, "Il tempo è muto . . .," the ominous counterpart to the opening lines of "L'infinito." Both poets are secluded in a silent place, their view of the horizon limited by vegetation. Objects, as first those close to the poet are noted: reeds, canoe, oarsman; a pause as he shifts his gaze to the skies; his thoughts take him to the "edge of memories"; and finally to the abyss and nameless terror, "Cadere forse fu mercé // Non seppe." There follows the comparison of voices echoing the Leopardian passage "a questa voce / Vo comparando . . . ." Shipwreck concludes both poems. The shipwreck that concludes "Il tempo," however, is an expression of absolute despair, untouched by the sweetness that saves the poet of "L'infinito." Here, isolated at the end of the line,

at the end of the poem, it becomes the equivalent of the edge of memory and the destruction of memory. Embittered by the death of his son, Ungaretti allows the poem to cascade into an abyss of total disillusionment and despair.

Three attitudes towards the destruction of self form the fabric of these poems. "Allegria di naufragi" is a statement of tenacity. Youthful Ungaretti expresses the eternal certainty of young people that they will survive the disasters that crush their elders. "Preghiera" asserts that the moment of "naufragio" is joy: when the physical man is claimed in disaster, the spirit is set free. Only after the death of his son, in the poet's middle age, does he find himself confronted with the reality of the shipwreck he had eagerly anticipated in his youth. He feels no profound sweetness, only bitter regret. "Il tempo è muto" nullifies the optimism of the early poems and revokes the "dolce naufragar" of "L'infinito."

Through one word Ungaretti addresses the thoughts of a modern poet to the admired nineteenth century poet. Each reference to shipwreck tests and extracts from Leopardi's genius a synesthesia of the complex universality of his poetic masterpiece.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Giuseppe Ungaretti, Ungaretti: Poesie, a cura di Elio Filippo Accrocca (Milano: Nuova Accademia, 1964), p. 162; translation by Fredric J. Jones, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Poet and Critic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Later Ungaretti would state in a letter to Ardengo Soffici: "I knew of Baudelaire and Nietzsche, of Mallarmé and Rimbaud, of Laforgue and so many others when in Italy there was only ignorance of them. Italians without the name of Leopardi have taught me very little." Cf. also Joseph Cary, Three Modern Italian Poets: Saba, Ungaretti, Montale (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 142.

<sup>3</sup>Cary, p. 10. Cf. also pp. 170-71 where he writes that "ermetico is a pejorative adjective referring to an obscure and deliberately 'closed' poetry that was popularized in the early 1930s by the Crocean literary historian Francesco Flora. His volume of essays, entitled La poesia ermetica, focusing mainly on what he felt to be the obscurantism of Giuseppe Ungaretti, was first published in 1936, thereby giving a name which has clung to a kind of poetry about which he and Croce, and many other critics of the time, had serious misgivings."

<sup>4</sup>This is my own rather literal translation, made by comparing the translations of the Leopardi scholars John Heath-Stubbs, Domenico Vittorini, and Nicholas James Perella.

<sup>5</sup>"Ermo," a poetic form of "ermetico," has the three meanings of recondite, magical and airtight.

<sup>6</sup>Several English translations of "L'infinito" fall into a countersense when rendering the expression "ove per poco il cor non si spaura": instead of a fear that grips the poet's heart, they speak of his heart being calmed for a while! This is to miss the very point on which the poem turns. One of the most curious cases of this is in the recent edition of the translations by John Heath-Stubbs, curious because the first edition of his translations had the meaning right. Nicholas James Perella, Night and the Sublime in Giacomo Leopardi (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1970), p. 54.

<sup>7</sup>Giuseppe Ungaretti, "Allegria di naufragi" from L'Allegria, 1914-1919 in Giuseppe Ungaretti, Vita d'un Uomo: Tutte le poesie, a cura di Leone Piccioni (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1979), p. 61.

<sup>8</sup>Allen Mandelbaum, Selected Poems of Giuseppe Ungaretti (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 35. Cary translates "Allegria di naufragi" as follows: "And quickly he resumes / the voyage / as, / after shipwreck, / a surviving / seawolf" (p. 161), and my own translation: "And immediately he resumes / the journey / like / after the shipwreck / a surviving / sea dog."

<sup>9</sup>Giuseppe Ungaretti, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Vita d'un Uomo: Tutte le poesie, a cura di Leone Piccioni (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1979), p. 517.

<sup>10</sup>Giuseppe Ungaretti, "Preghiera," from L'Allegria, 1914-1919, in Tutte le poesie, p. 97.

<sup>11</sup>Translation by Allen Mandelbaum, Selected Poems of Giuseppe Ungaretti, p. 59. My own translation is as follows: "When I wake / from the dazzle of promiscuity / in a limpid and astonished sphere // When my weight grows light // The shipwreck grant me Lord / of that young day at the first cry."

<sup>12</sup>"Rejected by earth and heaven, . . . his mind continued to ask whether the infinite could have any meaning whatsoever," writes Domenico Vittorini, "Giacomo Leopardi's 'L'infinito,'" in High Points in the History of Italian Literature (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1958), p. 129.

<sup>13</sup>Giuseppe Ungaretti, "Il tempo è muto," from Il Dolore, 1937-1946 in Giuseppe Ungaretti, Vita d'un Uomo: Tutte le poesie, a cura di Leone Piccioni

(Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1979), p. 213.

<sup>14</sup>Wilkins translates the poem as follows: "Time is silent // In the unstirring canebrake time is silent. . . // Remote from landfalls a canoe came straying . . . / The paddler exhausted, limp . . . The heavens / Already fallen into misty chasms . . . // Poised vainly on the brink of memories . . . / To fall perhaps was mercy . . . // He knew not // That the world and mind are but the same illusion, / That in the mystery of its own high combers / Every terrestrial voice is doomed to founder," A History of Italian Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 513-514. My own translation: "The time is mute among the motionless reeds . . . // Far off from landings wandered a canoe . . . / Exhausted, inert the oarsman . . . the skies / Already lapsed to chasms of smoke . . . // Stretched in vain at the edge of memories, / To fall perhaps was mercy . . . // He knew not // It is the same illusion world and mind, / That in the mystery of their own waves / Every earthly voice shipwrecks."