A Preliminary Taxonomy of Montale's Metaphors: *Ossi di seppia*

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The semioticians of poetry consistently attempt to define poetic discourse in terms of the semantic density or multiple aspects of signification with respect to the so-called poetic "hypersign" (Corti 121-48), by which is meant the utterance understood as indirect statement: i.e., one that foregrounds its own capacity to generate multiple readings. This process is often referred to as polysemy or polyvalency. One of the most commonly used vehicles of polysemy is the metaphor, since it explicitly or implicitly inscribes a correspondence between two objects, ideas or situations. The precise nature of this correspondence or equivalence has been the subject of substantial discussion, as have the actual mechanics of metaphor production. The bibliography on the topic is imposing, spanning as it does the speculations of philosophers such as Aristotle and the most recent theories proposed by Eco or the authors of the *Rhétorique générale* (Dubois).¹

I take as my working premise in this paper, the definition of metaphor proposed by Umberto Eco which is as follows: "una entità sta in luogo dell'altra in virtù di una loro rassomiglianza. Ma la rassomiglianza è dovuta al fatto che nel codice esistevano relazioni di sostituzione già fissate" (108). A modern poet who exploits the expressive potential of this venerable device is Eugenio Montale. Evidence of the extent to which he relies on metaphor for the production of poetic text are the more than 400 metaphors which even a casual reading of *Ossi di seppia* yields. Much has been written about the expressiveness and originality of Montale's "parole" or "ideolect"; however, no single work, to my knowledge, aims at defining that originality within the framework of an extremely traditional rhetorical device. In other words, Montale operates within a classical or conventional form in order to construct a highly sophisticated and personalized modernist text. In the present article I propose to examine the morphological and syntactical strategies deployed, as well as the recurring semantic nuclei embedded in metaphoric discourse, with the objective of demonstrating the continuity and the discontinuity of Montale's dialogue with traditional poetic form.²

Taking as my point of departure Christine Brooke-Rose's model of the grammatical categories of metaphor, I can report that the highest-frequency

syntactical form of metaphor (125 cases) in Montale's *Ossi* is the noun + impertinent epithet construction – in which a qualifying adjective is applied to a noun/object falling outside of the epithet's normally circumscribed semantic field. An example would be the phrase "eterno grembo" (5). By convention, the epithet would be most appropriately aligned with abstractions such as "vita," "anima," "felicità," or "amore." In common usage, even when the term modifies concrete nouns such as "padre" or "riposo," the referent implied remains a concept: God or death. Montale prefers to combine "eterno" with "grembo," thereby generating connotations of a repetitive and endless birth-giving proper to nature as a whole, or to mankind collectively, rather than to an individual, whose personal life-cycle is finite and unrepeatable. As a result, the "grembo" becomes metaphoric. Montale shows a marked tendency to reproduce this format – whereby either a concrete object is assigned an abstract epithet or, conversely, an abstract object is assigned a concrete epithet. Syntagmas containing an abstract noun abound in the poet's work. Here are some samples: "domani oscuro" (13), "ore vuote" (14), "volontà fredda" (57), "vita consumata" (89), "memoria grigia" (30), and "vita brulla" (44). Just as frequently, the epithet will precede the noun, as in: "scialba / memoria" (41), "impietrato soffrire" (54), "cupa storia" (56), "scerpate esistenze" (69), "monche esistenze" (86), and "impallidite vite" (96).

In these constructions, the abstraction undergoes a kind of materialization or objectification as it acquires texture by virtue of the fact that the epithet designates tangible properties as the poet's imagination either detects or posits similarity or complementariness between the properties denoted by the adjective and those of the perceived object. Ricoeur makes an apropos generalization by stating: "To metaphorize is to see resemblance." The structure here obliges the reader at least to consider the possibility of an affinity or relationship not previously contemplated (23).³ Through this same format, Montale manages to evoke two additional rhetorical effects: personification and oxymoron. The first is the result of ascribing words which designate human behavioral traits to abstract ideas. Consider the following personifications elicited by a metaphoric epithet: "volontà cieca" (22), "sorridente presente" (13), "musica innocente" (15), "anima inquieta" (65), "memoria stancata" (66), "ore perplesse" (68), and "vita turbata" (70). The tendency to select terms connoting disorientation, perplexity, or malaise is characteristically Montalean and contributes in no small measure to the comprehensive interpretation of Montale's verse as modernistic or solipsistic. On various occasions too, the poet opts in favour of an abstract noun/abstract adjective (or in reverse order) juxtaposition, as in "ora fallita" (72), "prodigio fallito" (86), or "astrale delirio" (89). These are, in fact, the sort of phrases which critics point to when they discuss typically hermetic utterances in Montale's poetry.

Of comparable critical interest is the technique of producing oxymorons with the impertinent epithet – where the impertinence resolves itself as antithesis. In such cases one could argue that the structure does not emphasize similarity as much as it suggests dissonance. Be that as it may, this constitutes a favourite device for a poet who is essentially preoccupied with the process of articulating the maddening contradictions inherent in modern existence: “immoto andare” (81), “rombo silenzioso” (81), “vuoto risonante” (82), “bellezze funerarie” (102), and “cuore disumano” (55). In the final analysis, these oxymorons are an exaggerated form of a misapplied epithet. Whereas the impertinent epithets considered previously inscribe a less than obvious compatibility of physical properties or senses,⁴ the oxymoron structure appears to flaunt the semantic-logical dissonance of the terms of reference, grafting the new dimension suggested by the modifier onto a prior decodification of the noun. Such surprising, or even disturbing juxtapositions suggest the uneasy co-existence of unresolved conflicts or antitheses in the poetic subject and his cosmos – where, for example, there is incessant movement that leads nowhere and where the deafening din of existence is inaudible at a distance.

The second most-frequently deployed structure in *Ossi* is the metaphoric predicate (110 cases). The question of which word in an utterance is metaphoric has been hotly disputed by scholars. Ricoeur (85) makes the following distinction: “The word *focus*, [...] will designate this word [the metaphoric word], and *frame* will designate the rest of the sentence.”⁵ Richards distinguishes between the tenor and the vehicle, thereby arguing that the non-literal signification is performed by the latter. Let's examine the implications in an expression like “l'illusione brucia” (24). The tenor is “illusione,” while the vehicle is the verb “brucia” since, in context, it does not signify a literal burning. However, some semioticians argue that without the presence of the proper term, this verb would not necessarily be a metaphor. Hence, the more current view among rhetoricians that “metaphoricity” is the product of the interconnectedness of words. Concepts such as Riffaterre's “retroactive reading” and Derrida's “différance” are particularly useful in comprehending poetic discourse in general and metaphoric speech in particular. When the reader encounters the word “brucia,” s/he reflects back to the subject, detects in that subject the inappropriateness of a literal or semantically linear interpretation, returns to the verb in order to seek out less apparent senses, and again reconsiders the tenor. In this way, the reader performs a dialectical reading act. The tenor now seems more like a vehicle, because it is no longer a mere abstraction; that is, “illusione.” It is also something that can be consumed or incinerated. As Brooke-Rose points out: “The verb changes one noun into another by implication” (206).

Once again, Montale revels in the process of visualizing abstract terms in empirical verbal form, as in: “il tempo s'arresta” (47), “il tuo delirio sale”

(57), "il tempo precipita e s'infrasca" (75), "tutto scorre" (75), "la tesa ti ringhiotte" (82), and "un [...] delirio si disfrena" (89). As was the case with the epithet, the metaphoric verb may precede the noun/subject, rendering the syntactical linkage even more salient or surprising: "discende alla sua foce / la vita" (44), "trema un ricordo" (45), "sale un'ora d'attesa" (39), "vapora la vita" (32), "volarono anni corti" (67), "volava la bella età" (67). As we can see, Montalean juxtapositions range from the conventional to the unexpected. By isolating specific manifestations of the metaphoric procedure, the reader is better able to ascertain the poet's intention to concretize the intangible and mentalistic components of human experience. As a consequence, his/her sense of the imprisonment of the spirit within a mechanical cosmos is sharply intensified.

Echoing the effects attained by the use of the impertinent epithet is the tendency to animate entities by ascribing to physical phenomena the capacity to perform actions normally reserved for living beings: "le cose / s'abbandonano" (9), "la pioggia stanca la terra" (10), "la pietra / voleva strapparsi" (53). From time to time, the poet will simply transfer a verb from one field of reference to another – for the purpose of rendering a descriptive phrase more precise or pointed: "annuvolano l'aria le zanzare" (52), "una volontà di ferro [...] scava / grandi solchi" (69), "esplode [...] una canea" (72), "corneggia la luna" (73), and "goccia trepido / il cielo" (82). Oxymoron structures can also result from the coupling of subject and metaphoric verb: "il gorgo sterile / verdeggia" (93), "terra dove non annotta" (41), "invisibili / fili a me si asserpano" (101). It is safe to conclude that this sort of antithesis constitutes a Montalean isotope that conveys the modernist sense of the absurdity of existence and the bewilderment of a disoriented poetic subject.

Also stylistically significant is the alternation of transitive and intransitive verb constructions in the metaphoric phrase. Samples of intransitive metaphoric predicates are "il cuore / par sciogliersi" (102), "un'ora / sta per scoccare" (96), "affiori, memoria" (95), "il tempo s'ingorga" (95), "ti s'appressa / l'ora" (91). Transitive verb-metaphors are equally numerous in the Montalean text: "una risacca di memorie [...] sommerge [il cuore]" (85), "spesso il male di vivere ho incontrato" (33), and "l'ultime voci il giorno esala" (96). While it is perhaps risky to suggest any definitive reading of the semantic or expressive patterns emerging from such metaphoric utterances, it is possible to recognize that there is a marked preference for integrating abstract, but vital, experiential terms such as time, youth, memory, and soul, with empirical data. Perhaps in the work of no other modern Italian poet does the mentalistic or universal amalgamate with the quotidian or particular to evoke such a degree of poeticalness. As well, the predicate forms exploited give ample evidence of the poet's subtle command of the multiple denotations and nuances of implication inherent in the activities specified.

A third major category of metaphoric structure (93 cases) is the so-called genitive link. The concrete-abstract binomial almost inevitably resurfaces since, as stated, the poet is perpetually confronted by the two primary dimensions of the phenomena he experiences: the material and the immaterial. We must here differentiate between abstract and concrete tenor. The tenor is abstract in expressions like: "ondata della vita" (5), "viluppo di memorie" (5), "giuoco del futuro" (5), "mezzo di una verità" (9), "ondata di calma" (30), "gocciare / del tempo" (53), and "acqua di giovinezza" (56). In a few syntagmas, both the tenor and the vehicle are abstract nouns; we find, for instance: "tedio dell'inverno" (10), "ora di disagio" (29), "musica dell'anima" (65), and "delirio [...] d'immobilità" (81). This last image is, of course, a familiar Montalean topos; it is the "ossimoro perenne" mined so profitably by several Montale critics. The same structure may also incorporate two concrete terms, as occurs in the following: "strumenti di fitti alberi" (11), "orizzonte di rame" (11), "fiotto di cenere" (12), "il palpitare [...] di mare" (28), "ragnatele di nubi" (29), and "città di vetro" (54). It is a technique that brings the observable traits of a given object – colour, texture, form – into contiguous relationship with a set of traits proper to a different object. The end-product is a sometimes uninspired, but more often stunning, collage of word/referents to which a reader can return repeatedly for always new avenues of nuanced reading.

In terms of the hermeneutics of those metaphoric nuclei, it is possible to distinguish between those that have an essentially descriptive or surface valency and those that have an ontological or epistemological function. The latter encompass Montale's many allusions to time, memory, will, salvation, and existence per se. It should also be remarked that the recurring terms of comparison are those charged with a negative or destructive semantic value: "delirio," "fumea," "gorgo," "abisso," "ansia," "tedio," "macerie," and "disagio." The cumulative effect on the reader is the generation of that sense of controlled disquiet that many Montale critics make the subject of their studies.

A fourth structural vehicle for Montale's metaphoric forms (58 cases) is the relative subordinate clause – effectively a noun-verb correlation prompting a non-literal signification. The vast majority of these units presents a concrete noun/object which, in an accompanying subordinate clause, is ascribed an unanticipated predicate that does not fall within the noun's usual or anticipated semantic parameters. Here are some samples: "il vento che suona gli strumenti dei fitti alberi" (11), "la raffica che ti incollò la veste" (23), "il buio che precipita / e muta il mezzogiorno in una notte" (82). It is predictable that Montale would also utilize this structural device in order to "materialize" concepts as, "torpore che esala" (44), "vita che fugge" (68), "vita che si sgretola" (29), "ora che torpe" (91), "vita che si rompe nei travasi" (95), "male /

che tarla il mondo" (57). In these citations, the polysemy of the phrase is concentrated around the predicate which designates an activity that may be performed by any number of agents. The range of implication or "openness" varies considerably since almost any material object can crumble or disintegrate, whereas only liquids can evaporate, and only entities capable of locomotion can thrash about.⁶ Then, too, there is a verb like "tarlare" which Montale virtually refashions by using it transitively, thereby suggesting the possibility that an abstraction such as "male" can behave like a moth. However, the concrete image of the moth – which "tarlare" evokes – is caused to resonate back to the abstraction denoted by "male"; the agent is the term "mondo." Such is the complexity of Montale's discourse at the level of metaphor.

In thirty-three instances, metaphoric effect is achieved by means of a copula or copula-like verb that unites the tenor and the vehicle. Some of the simplest constructions are these: "sono io / l'agave" (68), "il suo rombo non era che un sussurro" (54), "[il male di vivere] era il rivo strozzato" (33). For additional allusiveness, the vehicle may on occasion precede the tenor: "non è / un'ombra – ma quella io sono" (34), "bruciare, / questo, non altro è il mio significato" (59), "restò così questa scorza / la vera mia sostanza" (34). What is especially intriguing about these forms is the fact that the vehicle does not actually function as vehicle until the completion of the phrase; it initially appears as the tenor – the second term causes the reader to reflect back to the first and re-examine its signification, beyond the literal level. In typical fashion, Montale is not satisfied to offer the reader a single, isolated metaphoric utterance. Instead, he produces series or chains of images: "agli occhi sei barlume che vacilla, / al piede, teso ghiaccio che s'incrina" (38), "mia vita è questo pendio, / mezzo non fine, strada aperta a sbocchi / di rigagnoli, lento franamento" (55). In such instances, the visual, syntactical concatenation resonates with the sequence of metaphors to intensify the overall semantic effect. Periodically, a Montalean chiasmus catches the eye: "la sete / mi sarà lieve, meno acre la ruggine" (5). This particular quote demonstrates brilliantly the intricacy of the Montalean metaphors. Not only do the epithets "lieve" and "acre" come into visual contact, but so do the nouns "sete" and "ruggine" – to evoke a synaesthesia of taste and appearance. Add to the equation the fact that the words "sete" and "ruggine" are in themselves metaphors pointing to a vaguely-defined referent and you have some sense of the density of the Montalean discourse.

I should make clear that all of the phrases cited above (in addition to all those not explicitly cited but which constitute the research on which this paper is based), may be considered metaphors *in praesentia*. In other words, both items being compared or juxtaposed are present in the utterance.⁷ Subsequently, the reader's interpretation occurs within flexible, but finite semantic

parameters. There are, however, at least thirty-two cases of metaphor *in absentia*, in which one of the terms of the comparison is missing. Brooke-Rose (32) prefers to call it Simple Replacement. It is often difficult to determine if the absent term is the proper or metaphoric one. Consider an expression such as, "il cammino finisce a queste prode" (92). Apparently "cammino" and "prode" constitute a composite tenor. If he had chosen a metaphor *in praesentia* to articulate the same thought, the poet would have specified a vehicle that made a statement about the tenor. In this context, however, the tenor itself seems to assume the function of vehicle since it points to an empirical referent and, at the same time, connotes an archetypal journey of existence ending on the shores of Buzzati's "lago di piombo." What causes the reader to decode the utterance metaphorically, rather than literally, is the context in which the expression is situated. Influenced by the text's preponderance of oblique references, the reader responds by permitting him/herself to contemplate perspectives alternative to the literal. Similar constructions are: "il timone / nell'acqua non scava una traccia" (24), "il viaggio finisce qui" (91), "si va sulla carraia di rappresa" (96).

Another set of forms is considerably more difficult to interpret due to the enigmatic nature of the real referent, absent from the metaphoric formula: "l'anello che non tiene" (9), "il taglio netto che recide" (87), "il varco" (91), "lo spacco [...] senza strepito" (46), "la piccola stortura / d'una leva che arresta / l'ordigno universale" (57), "il filo da disbrogliare" (9). In each instance, the proper term dangles precariously between the role of tenor and of vehicle. If "l'anello che non tiene," for example, is the tenor what is the vehicle? The parallelism is between what two things? The ring that will not hold points to a weakness in a restraining system. If the poet seeks out a flaw, as it were, in the chain of being or in the mesh of material reality, it does not exist other than as hypothesis. Therefore, the term "anello" must be the vehicle – a metaphoric term suggesting determinism and closure in general. Similarly, the "filo da disbrogliare" and the "varco" act as vehicles for hard-to-identify tenors. Critics of Montale have long privileged just this sort of metaphor touting it as a manifestation of the "analogismo" which has become synonymous with Hermeticism. From the brief exposition conducted here, it would appear that the elusiveness of Montale's verse resides, to a large extent, in the indecipherability of the metaphors *in absentia*.

To conclude, the greatness of Montale's poetry has been attributed most frequently to the use of abstruse analogies. However, I suggest in the present paper that Montale relies heavily on the familiar structure of metaphor. His innovations and expressiveness do not derive from a redefining of the trope or a discarding of it in favour of some sort of avant-garde, radical anti-technique. Rather, it derives from the subtle and engaging complexity of operations, performed within a conventional structure. Montale's talent lies in the explo-

ration and exploitation of virtually every syntactical strategy available, and in the production of personalized thematic nuclei that interact and resonate off one another in an endless play of intertextuality.

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NOTES

- 1 For an extensive list of reference materials on the subject of metaphor, see Shibles.
- 2 In generic terms, Cohen's view, expressed in the following passage, underscores the essence of my argument: "Allorché il poeta [...] crea una metafora originale, quelli che egli inventa sono i termini, non il rapporto. Egli incarna una forma antica in una sostanza nuova. La sua invenzione poetica sta qui" (69).
- 3 Miall makes the following point: "Metaphor is a figure of speech in which one entity or state is spoken of in terms which are seen as being appropriate to another" (96).
- 4 For the concept of seme see Greimas (40-42).
- 5 On this question, Ricoeur offers a useful observation when he writes: "an entire statement constitutes the metaphor, yet attention focuses on a particular word, the presence of which constitutes the grounds for considering the statement metaphorical" (84).
- 6 Weinrich tells us: "Ogni parola può assumere un significato metaforico, ogni cosa può essere caratterizzata metaforicamente e per la fantasia non ci sono confini" (43).
- 7 Ricoeur informs us that: "In metaphor in absentia [...] the substitutable term is absent from the discourse; in metaphor in praesentia, the two terms are present together as well as the marks of their partial identity" (162).

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