

Eszter Mohácsy

The early poetry of Eugenio Montale
An analysis of *Cuttlefish Bones*

Thesis booklet

I. The purpose and short summary of research

Eugenio Montale is one of the most important figures in twentieth-century Italian literature, mainly for his work as a poet and prose writer. His works, melancholic and ironic at the same time, are perhaps forever etched in the memory of the public of the Italian literature. He followed traditional forms in his language, using them and drawing on them to enrich his poetry with new and innovative solutions. Montale was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975, and Italian literature still considers his most important works to be among the pillars of twentieth-century poetry.

In my dissertation I have tried to present this poetic career in as much depth as possible. During my research, I found that I could give a much more detailed and comprehensive picture of the thought of Montale's poetry by concentrating on a single volume, and I chose the first collection of poems, *Cuttlefish Bones* (*Ossi di seppia*), published in 1925, as the work that forms the basis of Montale's poetry. It is perhaps the most iconic of Montale's poetic oeuvre, a poetic imagery and language that are definitively intertwined not only with Montale's work but with the message, questions and doubts of all twentieth-century Italian literature.

One of the most significant motifs of my thesis - in my opinion - is that it is written in Hungarian. The reason behind is that in the initial phase of my research, it became clear to me that only a small number of Hungarian-language sources on Montale had been published, rather in summary form. Detailed analyses, whether of the *Cuttlefish Bones* or of other Montale works, are scarce in Hungarian literature, and even if there are studies that examine the poet's work in relative depth, they tend to date from the twentieth century and do not deal much with the significance of the *Cuttlefish Bones*. In two respects, my dissertation differs significantly from the sources available in the Hungarian scientific literature to date. The first difference is the subject of my dissertation. The focus of my research is the *Cuttlefish Bones*, in itself, independent of the later works and the oeuvre as a whole (without denying the fact that this volume obviously constitutes the core of the oeuvre). I went through the cycles, examining more than a few poems in depth, in an attempt to analyse and interpret the motifs that define the early poetry, highlighting the path to the concept of Montale's wonder, which has been conspicuously absent from the Hungarian scientific literature so far.

Another important difference is the translation of the poems in the volume. During my work, it soon became clear that the only way for the essay to give a true picture of the beginning of the

poet's career was to translate all the poems in the volume into hungarian. For this reason, I have based my dissertation mainly on my own translations (the Appendix contains the complete *Cuttlefish Bones* volume translated by me), only occasionally drawing on existing hungarian translations. As the *Cuttlefish Bones* in its entirety has not yet been translated into hungarian, it was essential for the thoroughness of my thesis to translate all the poems into hungarian. My aim in my translations was to reflect the content and to be faithful to the text, without taking formal aspects into account.

II. Studies and results performed

In my dissertation, Montale's poetic perception emerges as the chapters progress, building on and characterising in detail the most characteristic motifs of the volume. After a chapter devoted to biographical stages of the volume and a section outlining the stylistic trends that influenced Montale, I have tried to create the atmosphere of the *Cuttlefish Bones* by presenting the stages in the genesis of the volume, from its almost infantile attempts to take off until its final publication a year before the poet's death. Of all the artistic movements, Impressionism, including musical Impressionism and the work of Claude Debussy, was perhaps the most important in my thesis, and this is reflected in the poems of *Cuttlefish Bones* in surprising ways. Equally important in the volume is the objective correlative, partly associated with T. S. Eliot, which, although Montale's use of it is unique, points in the direction of the depersonalization of twentieth-century lyricism, but which serves to present personal insights in the *Cuttlefish Bones* in a more graphic way. While the poet's personal experiences have left an obvious mark on the poems of the first volume, I felt it important to devote a chapter to the position of the speaker in the *Cuttlefish Bones*, that is, to outline the many facets of the lyric self's manifestation, despite the fact that the Italian literature I have examined on the *Cuttlefish Bones* simply does not address the question of "who is the speaker".

Perhaps the most important part of the dissertation is the detailed presentation of the key moments of the volume, the dissection of the concept of wonder, the impact of the images of nature on the speaker and the deeper understanding of the meanings associated with poetic images. I would like to highlight the chapter on the strategy of "the link that comes loose", which details how the speaker sees life as an endless chain, the monotony of which he must

break in order to see something good outside the chain, something that is not part of the chain but exists independently and freely. It is this freedom and exceptionalism that makes a phenomenon (the smell of lemons, for example) equal to a miracle, since its charm lies not in its spectacularity but in its independence from monotony. And to experience wonder, it is necessary to break the perfect unity of the chain, to find the "loose" or defective link. For Montale, a miracle is everything and everyone who is able to stop the inevitable monotony of life, the aimless cycle, and to forget the pain and uncertainty of human existence. A garden or an orchard, which harbours its own little dream world, can be a miracle, as can the angelic figure of a woman watching from a distance, which for brief moments makes the poet forget the torments of life, and can be the nature itself, which exists and flourishes independently of everything, surviving the ages and human fates. In essence, the whole world of thought that defines *Cuttlefish Bones* rests on this basic thesis.

The hungarian language of the thesis and the existence of the translations also justified the presentation of the history of the hungarian reception of the work from the beginning to the present day, highlighting the most noteworthy moments of the hungarian literature's approach to Montale. The hungarian reception of Montale is characterised by the same two-sided interpretations, based mainly on pairs of opposites, as any other scientific literature on Montale. In the same way, I thought it justified to examine the hungarian literary translator's approach from the perspective of the most prominent Montale translators, in comparison with my own translations. The hungarian reception history, on the whole, can be said to have analysed Montale's work and his poetic worldview as a whole, rather than a single volume in detail. Since the basis of the oeuvre was laid by the *Cuttlefish Bones*, it is natural that this is what the hungarian literature has reflected on most. However, Montale's first book of poems was not evaluated in itself, but only in the light of the whole oeuvre. The Hungarian characterisations followed a similar leading principle, mentioning the given period as a background, and embedding the cornerstones of Montale's thought in this. Loneliness, being an outsider and disillusionment are recurring moments, and these received the most attention, while the ironic, beauty-seeking, wonder-seeking side tended to be relegated to the background. The image of a poet who rejects the role of the vates altogether, whose talent is not disputed by any analyst, but whose significance is not always seen in the same traits. The most profound interpretations are those of Tibor Kardos, Ferenc Szénási and the two outstanding translators, László Kálnoky and László Lator, who have examined the layers of the message, going beyond first impressions, which are merely a veil of melancholy caused by disillusionment, and trying to shed light on the 'centre of truth' of Montale's poetry. All this was done with examples that

were accessible to a hungarian audience and could be compared to our own literature. As the dissertation draws heavily on the volume of *Cuttlefish Bones* that I translated, I thought it important to present a deeper exploration of the motivations behind my translations through examples, as I have done in previous chapters. My thesis did not aim to present the hungarian translation theory discourse, but in the last chapter I tried to connect the published hungarian versions of Montale's poems with the hungarian twentieth-century translation mainstream, in order to examine the poems not only from the perspective of Montale's literature but also from the perspective of the hungarian translation tradition.

The aim of my dissertation was to present the poetic world of one of the greatest figures of twentieth-century Italian poetry through the *Cuttlefish Bones* and to create a summary work that could enrich the hungarian scientific literature about Montale and also provide some new insights into aspects of the poet's work that have been less known to the hungarian public.

III. Publications of the candidate on the subject

MOHÁCSY Eszter, *Zene a költészetben – Eugenio Montale művészete* (La musica si infiltra nella poesia – l'arte di Eugenio Montale), In: *Verbum Analecta Neolatina*, XVIII (2017) / 1-2, Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 113-133.

MOHÁCSY Eszter, *Recenzió: Eugenio Montale: Ossi di seppia, a cura di Pietro Cataldi e Floriana d'Amely*, Milano, Mondadori, 2016, in: *Verbum Analecta Neolatina*, XX (2019) / 1-2, Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 173-175.