

CHAPTER I

The Suffering of Stones¹

Recall one of the most resonant voices of twentieth-century European high literary modernism. With its many echoes of Mallarmé and Baudelaire, of Rilke, Eliot, and Valéry, and its enduring concerns with the twentieth-century poetry of both a concrete and an abstract suffering, the voice is from Eugenio Montale's first collection of poetry published in 1925 at the age of 29, *Ossi di seppia* (*Bones of the Cuttlefish*).²

The untitled poem is called after its first words, "*Qualche scendendo...*". One of its English translations reads as follows:

Sometimes descending
the dry slopes already
abandoned to the fragrant
autumn that inflated them,
I no longer felt in the heart the wheel
of the seasons and the dripping
of inexorable time;

¹ This is a corrected and revised version of a text first published only in separate chapters in P. McCormick, *Aspects Yellowing Darkly* (Cracow: The Jagiellonian University Press, 2010), pp. 94-109 and 125-137.

² Eugenio Montale, *Bones of the Cuttlefish*, tr. A. Mazza (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1984), pp. 57-58. Other English translations of Montale's poetry are to be found in *Eugenio Montale: Collected Poems, 1920-1954*, tr. J. Galassi (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2000), *The Coastguard's House: English Versions of the Poetry of Eugenio Montale*, tr. J. Reed (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990), *Poets in Our Time*, tr. A. Hamilton (New York: Urizen Books, 1976), *Eugenio Montale: New Poems*, tr. G. Singh (New York: New Directions, 1972), and in four separate volumes of Montale's four major books of poetry, *Ossi di seppia* (1925), *Le occasioni* (1939), *La bufera e altro* (1956), and *Satura 1962-1970* (1971), each translated by W. Arrowsmith (New York: Norton).

but completely, the presentiment of you
 would fill my soul,
 surprised by the gasping
 of the air, motionless at first,
 upon the stone that hemmed the path.
 Then, I would notice it, the rocks
 wanting to break off, stretching out
 towards an invisible embrace;
 the hard matter could hear
 the nearby whirlpool, and throbbed;
 and the clumps of greedy reeds
 were conversing with the hidden
 waters, nodding in assent.
 You, vastness, redeemed
 even the suffering of the stones:
 in your jubilation the fixity
 of finite things was justified...³

This moving and at times beautiful voice can be annoying. And it can still unsettle many readers even today – it irritates us, it upsets us.

For in a post-modern era we are no longer intellectually comfortable with what seems to be its merely literary seriousness, the confusions of its deceptive transparencies, the figured earnestness of its invocations, the now suspect surmise of something more than material at the heart of the expanding universe, the misplaced righteousness in its attentiveness to a merely fanciful suffering, and the belle-lettristic grandeurs of its hyperbolic apostrophe – “*tu vastità*”!

³ Compare here and throughout the translations by different hands in *Poems: Montale*, ed. H. Thomas (London: Penguin, 2002), with introduction, chronology, and further reading. See also T. Parks, “A Prisoner’s Dream: Eugenio Montale in Translation,” *The New York Review of Books*, 4 February 1999. One of the first scholars to bring Montale’s work to the attention of the English language world was the celebrated journalist and Romanist, Samuel Putnam (1892-1950), whose influential article, “A Miniature Anthology of Italian Poetry” in *This Quarter 2* (1930) H. Thomas cites and whose translation of “Cuttlefish Bones” Thomas reprints.

These posturings are after all fictional – they can be no more than the early Ligurian strains of Montale’s singing words. How could these poetic words ever be reasonably taken as yours, how could they ever be taken reasonably as mine? And, in times like these, after the bloodiest of centuries, why should anyone ever take the time to investigate such matters anyway?

After considering some of the literary backgrounds to Montale’s poetry, in this introductory essay I try to elucidate what could properly count as rationally interpreting this distinctive twentieth-century European high modernist poetry of suffering.⁴ Doing so will involve adumbrating the three major themes of this book, namely ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics.

In particular, I try here to pay particular attention to Montale’s poetry of *varco*, to his European high modernist poetry of passage and breakthrough, of hesitation and ambivalence about the possibilities of personal transcendence. These possibilities will turn out to be situated just where the primacy of the intensest immanence is deliberately qualified by a poetics of impoverishment, emptiness, and the contemplation of self-extinction.

Trying to read not uncritically such a poetry of abstract suffering in sufficient detail, however, will require us first to pursue some of the most salient tensions between mainly epistemological and mainly metaphysical construals of reason in any reasonable interpretation of the lexical and syntactic complexities of lyric poetry generally.⁵

§1. Retrieving the Philosophical

Here is another of Montale’s early lyric poems, “*Forsé un mattino...*”

⁴ Many of the most important of these literary backgrounds can be found in some of Montale’s prose writings. See especially *Eugenio Montale: Selected Essays*, tr. G. Singh (Manchester: Carcanet, 1978) and *Eugenio Montale: The Second Life of Art: Selected Essays*, ed. and tr. J. Galassi (New York: Ecco Press, 1982).

⁵ Montale’s collected poetry appeared in 1980 as *L’opera in versi*.

Perhaps one morning while going along in the air of glass,
 And looking back, I should see, with the terror
 Of a drunken man, the making of a miracle:
 nothingness at my shoulders, the void behind me.

Then as on the screen, suddenly, trees houses hills
 Will assemble themselves for the usual deception.
 But it will be too late; and I shall go on, quiet,
 With my secret among the men who do not turn.⁶

In 1976, when many distinguished friends celebrated Montale's eightieth birthday, the postmodernist Italian novelist, Italo Calvino, presented a memorable and markedly philosophical interpretation of this poem.⁷

Since then, however, much of the interest of Calvino's interpretation has centred on his careful and illuminating description of how, over the years, a poem memorized early in life gave rise to significant distortions that, in turn, came to shape the extraordinary imaginative power of Calvino himself. But Calvino's interpretation is also interesting for both its philosophical details and especially for the difficult problems these details imply for any reasonable elucidation of Montale's poem.

Besides highlighting the influence on his own work then, Calvino's interpretation touches on a number of philosophical aspects the poem suggests. For example, Calvino discusses questions about the subjective character of our experiences of space. And he draws on materials from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) to show how some experiences, such as dreams or drug-induced states or drunkenness, can alter the individual's sense of the objective and empirical elements of spatial perception.

Calvino considers as well several temporal features of visual perception and their pertinence to Montale's use of the movie-

⁶ E. Montale, *Bones of the Cuttlefish*, tr. A. Mazza (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1984).

⁷ Cited by Arrowsmith in E. Montale, *Cuttlefish Bones* (1920-1927), tr. W. Arrowsmith (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 214-221. Hereafter I cite this work as "Montale 1993."

screen image. He touches on the difficult matter of the existence of other minds in speculating on whether changes in the objects of visual perception as represented in the poem entail changes as well in the putative existence of the other persons represented in the poem.

But, however pertinent and fruitful any one of these philosophical themes might prove after closer inspection in connection with the actual working, sounds, and rhythms of this poem, one major theme only anchors Calvino's interpretation. For Calvino, Montale's poem is about "the disappearance of the world."

Uncharacteristically, with respect to much of Montale's other poetry, this poem presents details of no specific landscapes. The scene is urban rather than natural. And the persons are represented in groups rather than as individuals.

The poem in short "is one of the few occasions when the other truth presented by the poet beyond the continuing wall of the world is revealed ... This truth is neither more nor less than the world's unreality..." (216). Accordingly, Calvino takes the crucial expressions of the poem to be "nothingness at my shoulders, the void behind me." And, in his own quite striking language, Calvino goes on to offer a particular interpretation of these lines. We need to consider this interpretation in more detail and ask just how it may be understood as a reasonable interpretation.

"The 'void' and the 'nothingness' are 'at my shoulders,' 'behind me'," Calvino writes. "This is the essential point of the poem. Not an undefined feeling of dissolution, but rather the building of a cognitive model which is not easily refuted, and which can co-exist in us with more or less empirical models" (217).

Construing the poem as the presentation of a "cognitive model" and suggesting that such models are neither exclusive nor uncontroversial – their structures and significance allow argument and refutation – Calvino formulates his specific interpretation in the form of a hypothesis.

“The hypothesis,” Calvino continues, “can be stated in very simple and rigorous terms: given the dual nature of the space surrounding us – a visible field before our eyes, an invisible field behind us – we define the first as a scrim of illusions; the second as a void which is the world’s real substance... The model of dual or bipartite space is never denied by the text; indeed, it is affirmed by the redundancy of the third line – ‘nothingness at my shoulders,’ ‘the void / behind me’” (217). But however simple and rigorous Calvino himself finds his hypothesis, some perhaps may still need more detail.⁸

Calvino goes on to discuss, in biological, evolutionary, and genetic terms, how space is initially discriminated into interior and posterior fields; how the anterior field comes to define the world as opposed to the non-world of the posterior field, and how, despite the mobility of the human head, the visual field is inseparable from the anterior spatial field.

Consequently, Calvino proposes that Montale’s protagonist can be understood as someone who (miraculously) turns round so quickly that he is able “to look at a space still unoccupied by his own visual field... What he sees is nothingness, the void” (218).

What makes this miracle possible? Calvino thinks that the peculiar aspects of the winter air (presumably in Italy) – “the concreteness of this invisible air, which seems precisely glass, and its self-sufficient solidity” – is what makes the miracle possible – “the precise specifying of the medium that expresses the sense of nothingness.”

More specifically, Calvino describes what “triggers” the miracle as “the natural, i.e., atmospheric element – the dry, crystal-line transparency of the winter air, which renders objects with such clarity that it creates an effect of unreality, as though the halo of mist usually hazing the landscape... were identified with the thickness of existence” (215).

⁸ For a standard and more recent empirical account see I. P. Howard, “Spatial Coordination,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, ed. R. L. Gregory, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 855-861, with bibliography.

Once again, however, just as in the formulation of his interpretive hypothesis, the explanation Calvino offers here, while richly suggestive, is difficult to formulate very clearly.

If nonetheless the crystalline transparency of the winter air is what makes the miracle possible, the consequences of the miraculous vision for the protagonist are then taken to be, in Montale's evocative word, the "reassembling" ("*accamparsi*") of the world.

The things of the world moreover are reassembled just as in a movie theatre – the images of things continually scroll by one another on a white screen. In particular, the suddenness of the turn round (the "*rivolgendomi*") that occasions the miracle gives rise to a gnosis, a secret and special knowledge of things as they actually are, whereas the ordering perception of things in a visual field gives rise to apparent knowledge only.

The usual kind of knowledge then is clear, stable, corrigible, testable. But the knowledge of things as they actually are is unclear, dizzying, intuitive, non-testable. And above all, this unusual kind of knowledge is terror-stricken.

Moreover, what one ordinarily "knows", the everyday empirical world, is to be taken as "the usual succession of images on the screen, an optical illusion like that of the movies, in which the speed of the shots persuades you of their continuity" (220). This illusory empirical world is the world of "real" things. The world of actual things however, the world of things as they actually are, this world disappears.

With the disappearance of the actual world, "trees, houses, hills" disappear as well. Whether other persons disappear too is left in suspense – the poet's "I" certainly remains. The disappearance of the world is a disappearance pre-eminently of nature. In short, the protagonist is presented as some day coming to a knowledge of the truth of things and the truth of the world, this unreality.

In the light of these considerations perhaps we can understand why Calvino calls Montale's "*Forse un mattino*" a poem "of abstract imagination and insight..." (214) and, on the evidence

of this richly suggestive philosophical interpretation, we can also understand why Calvino's reading is justly celebrated.

But we may also ask, has Calvino gotten Montale's poem right? In particular, just what is the understanding of reason and rationality implied in Calvino's specific interpretation of what he calls "the essence of the poem" as "the disappearance of the world," the "truth... of the world's unreality" (216)?

More simply, what could ever count as getting the poem right? To deal with this question not inadequately, however, requires our detailing some concerns about epistemological con-structs of reason and rationality. Only then can we return to Montale's perplexing lines in "*Forse un mattino*" of "nothingness at my shoulders, the void behind me" in better founded hopes of disengaging from that poetry some insight into not just poetic matters but ethical ones as well.

§2. Epistemically Rational Interpretation

Although Montale was not to leave Genoa and the sun-bleached summer seascapes of Monterosso for the cityscapes of Firenze till 1927, already ten years earlier he had come to know the very different landscapes of northern Italy. Assigned in the closing months of the First World War to Trentino as an officer in the Italian infantry deployed against the Austrians in the Alpine hills above the Leno River, Montale later celebrated in memory the capture of an Austrian soldier who had carried Rilke's poems in his fieldkit.⁹

He also celebrated the phantasmagoric night combats near the village of Valmorbia, in the "gentle valleys" (*vallemorbida*) below.¹⁰ Included in *Ossi di seppia*, the second of these poems, with its evocations of the elusive yet central notion of "world," can help bring our discussion of epistemically rational interpretation into sharper focus.

⁹ See "*L'eroismo*," in Montale's *Quaderno di quattroanni*.

¹⁰ See the commentary of G. Almansi and Bruce Merry, *Eugenio Montale: The Private Language of Poetry* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1977), pp. 37-38, cited in Montale 1993, p. 221.

Valmorbia, across your glens cloud-blossoms
 scurried, wildflowers in the breezes.
 In us, whirled by blind chance, oblivion
 of the world was born.
 The barrage stopped, in the lonely
 vale no sound but the husky Leno.
 A rocket sprouted on its stem, wailed
 faintly through the air.
 The bright nights, all one dawn,
 led foxes to my cave.
 Valmorbia, a name – and now, in my dim
 memory, land that lightens.¹¹

This poem exhibits a very thickly worked texture of sound and sense. The poem's many features – among others, its heavily stylized description of an unfamiliar landscape, its mythic echoes and strongly accented literary allusions, its extraordinary use of the suggestive power of both the sounds and etymologies of proper nouns, its use of repetition, its Arcadian transformations of a shell-pocked, war-torn, almost lunar landscape – all would require sustained critical attention. Our concerns however are more modest.

Suppose then we try to propose a reasonable interpretation of the poem, and see whether an epistemic understanding of rationality could account for that reasonableness.¹² We may adopt initially something like Calvino's perspective on such a poem, and then go on to entertain as a working hypothesis the idea that "*Valmorbia*," although unlike "*Forse un mattino*" in its situation of material objects and emblems in a specific landscape, strongly resembles that poem in its theme. "*Valmorbia*" too may well be about what Calvino calls "the other truth," the truth of "the world's unreality."

¹¹ Montale 1993, p. 69.

¹² On the notions of rationality and reason particularly in the domain of values see R. Boudon, *La rationalité* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2009), especially "*La rationalité ordinaire des croyances normatives*," pp. 77-99.

Calvino's own hypothesis about "*Forse un mattino*" might then be applied to "*Valmorbia*": "Given the dual nature of the space surrounding us – a visible field before our eyes, an invisible field behind us – we define the first as a scrim of illusions [that is, the hills, the valley, the sound of the river, the airy bronze, the barrage, the rockets, the shell-lit night, the foxes], the second a void which is the world's real substance [that is, the glens, the cloud-blossoms, the flower exploding on its stem, the cave-trench, the all-one-dawn, "the land where night never comes"]."

This reading, however, seems to oppose the real world as the empirical to the actual world as the imaginary. But this impression holds only so long as we fail to pay sufficient attention to the crucial supposition earlier in the poem – "In us... was born / oblivion of the world"– and to the crucial repetition at the very end of the poem – "*Valmorbia*, a name."

For once these expressions are given their due, then we may reasonably construe the oppositions here as holding not between the empirical and the imaginary. Rather, the oppositions are between the real world as the set of illusions arising from the empirical appearances of things on the one hand, and on the other, the actual world as the non-empirical void that the illusory always conceals.

Accordingly, "*Valmorbia*" like "*Forse un mattino*," we might say then, is about the disappearance or oblivion of the so-called real world ("*oblio del mundo*") in the nascent ("*nasciva*") realisation and dawning ("*tutteun'alba*") of the actual world as a void.

When contrasted with Calvino's own masterly interpretation of "*Forse un mattino*," we need to concede, our Calvino-like interpretation of "*Valmorbia*" is evidently strained. Nonetheless, this interpretation is rational; it is not, however, reasonable enough. That is, an interpretation may well satisfy the descriptions of even a sophisticated epistemic rationality without accounting sufficiently for the appropriately metaphysical aspects of reason itself.

In short, reasonably interpreting some instances of the poetry of suffering such as the highly abstract war poems of Montale requires more than just an epistemic understanding of ra-

tionality. To see how this is the case, consider briefly just what an epistemically rational interpretation is.

An epistemically rational interpretation is one where it is reasonable to believe the propositions that comprise the interpretation so long as “those propositions are uncontroversial for you, given what else you believe and given your own deepest epistemic standards.”¹³

The standards themselves are to be understood as “a matter of what you would believe about the truth-preservingness of various arguments were you to reflect to the point of stability, if there is one” (179). And the point of stability is to be taken as “the point at which further reflection would not alter your opinion of the argument.” Such a point is said to be reached “when you yourself, no matter how much more you reflect on the matter, would not regard your opinion as mistaken” (180).

In other words, you may take the interpretation of the Montale poem as epistemically rational if, among the many beliefs it comprises, no one of these beliefs commits you to believing “anything you yourself would not be satisfied with were you to be appropriately reflective” (170). This is the fallibilist mark of an epistemically rational interpretation; we cannot exclude the possibility here of error, of our being mistaken.¹⁴

More generally, you can take an interpretation as epistemically rational if the set of beliefs that comprise the interpretation can be judged from some perspective as satisfying your goals as the interpreter.

¹³ R. Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1989), p. 169.

¹⁴ Standardly, fallibilism is a philosophical view about knowledge deriving from the American philosopher, C. S. Peirce (1839-1914) that represents a middle ground between dogmatism (knowledge requires the attainment of certainty) and skepticism (the attainment of certainty and even the assignment of probabilities are impossible). On this view, “it is not necessary that beliefs be certain, or grounded on certainty. We may justifiably rest content with beliefs in circumstances in which further evidence, forcing us to revise our opinion, may yet come in” (S. Blackburn, “Fallibilism,” in his *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: OUP, 2005], p. 130).

While fallibilist, such an epistemically rational view of interpretation is nonetheless sufficiently detailed enough to be clearly opposed to other views. In particular, when the beliefs about the poem are viewed as uncontroversial for you given your own “deepest standards,” these standards are not taken as “objective” in either of two current senses.

That is, the standards at issue in this epistemic version of rational interpretation are neither those that govern rational belief as a function of their objective probability on the evidence available, nor those that govern rational beliefs that arise from a reliable source only. They are simply the interpreter’s own most fundamental and most foundational standards.

Despite the questions, however, that may arise here about whether such a notion of the rationality of interpretation can be “objective” at all, this epistemic version of rationality seems superior to a traditional so-called “foundationalist” account of rationality. According to a foundationalist account, a body of propositions may be known properly speaking only if based upon certain foundations.

Moreover, this epistemic account of rationality also seems superior to a traditional so-called “coherentist” account. According to a coherentist account, a body of propositions without certain foundations may be known by reason of their interconnected strengths.

For, unlike the present view, neither of these accommodates fallibilism (no guarantee of knowledge or truth). That is, only the epistemic version tries to provide a notion of rationality, not in terms of the successful pursuit of a goal like truth, but in terms of “understandable failure” (177).

We may say that, traditionally, it is foundationally rational for an interpreter to believe those propositions that “are adequately supported by propositions to whose truth you [the interpreter] have some kind of special, infallible access” (169). Fallibilism is excluded.

And we may say that, again traditionally, it is coherently rational for an interpreter to believe those propositions the truth of whose total set is consistent. Otherwise, should even a single proposition of the interpretation be false, then, because the to-

tal set would be inconsistent, believing any other proposition of that set would also be inconsistent. Since this view leaves little that can be believed, fallibilism is again excluded.

Nonetheless, all three views under consideration here – the epistemic, a traditional foundationalist, and a traditional coherentist view – do address the same question. For the interpreter that question comes to just which attitude is rational for the interpreter to adopt with respect to any particular proposition the interpreter considers incorporating into the interpretation – belief, disbelief, or the withholding of belief. Importantly, none of these three views centres on issues about the degrees of belief.

By contrast, were Montale's interpreter to adopt some version of a probabilist approach (in the interpretation of literary works of art, reasonable degrees of probability about critical hypotheses are attainable), then the question to be considered about any proposition that might finally figure in the interpretation would be just what degree of belief in the truth of the proposition would it be rational for the interpreter to accept.

Similarly, were Montale's interpreter to adopt still another approach, say a reliabilist one (a literary critical hypothesis may be known to be true if it follows from a "reliable process of belief formation"), then the issue would be just what would be needed to add to a particular true belief "in order to get knowledge or at least a good candidate for knowledge" (170).

With these considerations in place, and taking account of several subsequent revisions that have been argued and adopted, we can now state more precisely just what is the epistemic rationality of an interpretation.

Let us say then informally that my interpretive belief that Montale's poem, "*Valmorbia*," is about the disappearance of the world is rational to the degree that I have a set of interpretive beliefs, a set of my most profound epistemic standards, and that these standards license me to believe, as a part of my set of interpretive beliefs, that "*Valmorbia*" is about the disappearance of the world.

In other words, we might say a bit formally that it is epistemically rational for an interpreter I at t to believe p =df. There

is a doxastic system D and a set of epistemic standards E such that (i) D is I 's doxastic system at t ; (ii) E is the set of I 's deepest epistemic standards at t ; and (iii) E licences believing p in D .¹⁵

§3. Moral Motivations

With these elucidations in mind of how interpreting a poem can be epistemically rational and before examining these poems more closely we need now to specify just how we are to understand what we may take here as our cardinal ethical theme, namely “moral motivation.”

In everyday common English parlance, native English-language speakers use the word “motivation” to refer either to “an act of motivating something or someone,” or to “the state or condition of being motivated.” More fully, motivation is “the (conscious or unconscious) stimulus, incentive, motives, etc., for action towards a goal, esp. as resulting from psychological or social factors; the factors giving purpose or direction to behaviour.”¹⁶

In particular, many English-language philosophers today, while keeping in mind the basic ambiguity here between motivation as most often an act (providing a motive) and motivation as most often a mental state (itself a motive), focus critical attention on something else.¹⁷

They regularly inquire into what rational grounds there may be for believing persons when such persons adduce the specific reasons, intentions, desires, volitions, sentiments, feelings, emotions, purposes, goals, and so on for acting in the specific

¹⁵ Cf. R. Feldman, “Foley’s Subjective Foundationalism,” *Phenomenology and Philosophical Research* 50 (1989-1990), 156.

¹⁶ See the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed. A. Stevenson, 6th ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2007); hereafter cited as *SOED* 2007.

¹⁷ The classical view of moral motivation in modern moral philosophy is to be found in David Hume’s, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 2.3.3. N. Sinhababu provides a recent re-articulation of Hume’s view in his paper, “The Humean Theory of Motivation Reformulated and Defended,” *The Philosophical Review* 118 (2009), 465-500.

ways they do.¹⁸ Knowing what we already do about our complicated selves, how can belief in others' self-interpretation be rational and reasonable?

More specifically, many philosophers investigate the relations between reasons and causes in satisfactorily explaining actions. Although sometimes reasons and causes for some actions overlap, nonetheless we can usually distinguish between what elements of an action directly result from a cause and what elements merely follow from a reason.

For example, a swimmer waves to you from the ocean with a reason, but shivers from a cause. Experiment on the part of behavioural scientists is sufficient for determining whether some particular action, say the swimmer's shivering, is the result of a cause, whereas a person's intention is sufficient for determining whether some other particular action, a swimmer's wave, follows from a reason.

By contrast with appeal to causes or to reasons, motivation as a mental state or motive "is often invoked precisely when there is a departure from normal reasons."¹⁹

Your swimmer friend later tells you with apparent sincerity that she waved to say hello. But you wonder whether her actual reason was different from her declared reason, however sincere. That is, you wonder about her motive – perhaps, whether she consciously was so aware or not, she really wanted you to join her?

Thus, some explanations of behaviours may appeal to causes, others to reasons, others to motives, and still others to various combinations of causes, reasons, and motives.

When some philosophers focus more sharply on the moral domain, characteristically they most often focus on whether

¹⁸ S. Darwell, "Ethical Intuitionism and the Motivation Problem," in *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations*, ed. P. Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 248-270.

¹⁹ B. Rundle, "Motives and Motivation." See *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* [cited hereafter as "OCP"], ed. T. Honderich, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 633.

there are distinctive kinds of motivation to be found in the moral domain, or whether moral motivations there are only apparently distinctive.²⁰

One way to put such doubts about the existence of distinctive moral motivations is as follows. “If we understand morality as a distinctive domain of normative reasons,” one philosopher writes standardly, “then it begins to seem that the motivations that render moral conduct possible might simply be those general capacities... that enable agents to understand what they have reason to do and to act accordingly.”²¹

We need, however, to distinguish between whether there are distinctive motivations in the moral domain on the one hand, and, on the other, whether there are distinctive patterns in the beliefs, desires, and intentions that often constitute such motivations. And even though much debate about such matters continues, with a distinction like this one we can understand why many philosophers are inclined to hold for something being genuinely distinctive about moral motivation.

For example, the same philosopher writes: “If human agency involves essentially a responsiveness to normative [i.e., rule-like or principle-like] requirements, then the motivations of moral agents will reflect their distinctive responsiveness to the norms at the heart of morality... our access to what is distinctive about moral motivation will be by way of understanding what is distinctive about the values that structure morality as a unified domain of normative considerations. This is in keeping with the general interpenetration of the normative and the psychological [i.e., roughly, between the non-empirical and the empirical] that is characteristic of the whole subject of moral psychology.”²²

²⁰ For example, see M. Slote, “Moral Sentimentalism and Moral Psychology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. D. Copp (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp. 219-239; hereafter cited as *HET* 2006.

²¹ R. Jay Wallace, “Moral Psychology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. F. Jackson and M. Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 95; hereafter cited as *HCP* 2005.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

In our reflections, then, on Montale's poetic representations of moral motivations, we may take our further discussion of moral motivation as mainly discussion of what actually structures or patterns our distinctive responses to the varied ways in which moral values present themselves.

But return now to the poetic representations of some moral situations in the European high modernist lyric poetry of Eugenio Montale.

§4. A Strict Immanence?

Here are several stanzas then from the second half of another Montale poem, his much celebrated high modernist lyric, "*Casa sul mare*" (1925). Among many other things, perhaps this piece may present us with a poetic representation of a moral motivation that we are reflecting on here.

You ask: Is this how everything vanishes,
 in this thin haze of memories?
 Is every destiny fulfilled
 In the torpid hour or the breaker's sigh?
 I would like to tell you: No. For you
 the moment of your passage out of time is near:
 transcendence may perhaps be theirs who want it,
 and you, who knows, could be one of those. Not I.
 There is no salvation, I think, for most,
 but every system is subverted by someone, someone
 breaks through, becomes what he wanted to be.
 Before I yield, let me help you find
 such a passage, a path
 fragile as ridge or foam
 in the furrowed sea.
 And I leave you my hope, too meagre
 for you my failing strength to foster
 in days to come. I offer it
 to you, my pledge to your fate, that you
 break free.
 My journey ends on these shores
 eroded by the to-and-fro of the tides.

Your heedless heart, so near, may even now
be lifting sail for the eternities.²³

Independently of our particular interests here in moral motivation, literary critics have taken this poem as a “dividing point” between the poetry of *Ossi di seppia* (1925) and that of *Le occasioni* (1939).

The poem “looks forward to the menacing interiors of Montale’s late poetry,” one critic writes, “as well as back to the sea-shore of his autobiography. The decisive and peremptory opening (‘Here the journey ends’) is followed by the matching opening of the other three strophes in the poem, all suggesting that a season and a whole experience have come to an end.”²⁴

Thus, “*Casa sul mare*” would seem to have an unusual importance both in *Ossi di seppia* and in Montale’s work as a whole. But what, specifically, is at least the second half of the poem about?

In addressing such a question, several of Montale’s most distinguished interpreters write: “Before the spectacle of the sea man is faced by the same alternative as in ‘*Falsetto*’ [a 1924 poem famous for its dramatic meditation on life and the “momentary apotheosis” of a young woman, Esteria, surfacing after her dive into the glittering sea] ... To the finite itinerary of a human destiny consummated in passing whiffs of memory, the poet contrasts the wildly improbable salvation of the wilful companion...”²⁵

And, looking back to the lines about transcendence just cited, the interpreters conclude: “In this passage the difficult *varco* [passage or breakthrough] ... is being crossed by a privileged human being, even if it is qualified by the heavy weight of a ‘perhaps.’ Yet the passage is an arduous one... Once again – we

²³ Montale 1993, pp. 151, 153.

²⁴ Almansi and Merry 1977, p. 56; cited by Arrowsmith in Montale 1993, p. 258.

²⁵ Almansi and Merry 1977, pp. 57-9; cited by Arrowsmith in Montale 1993, pp. 259-60.

think back to Esteria in *'Falsetto'* – the marine adventure may possibly represent a salvation, but it is fraught with danger, with this fragile escape route in the midst of a rough sea. The companion may take the risky ticket for an unlikely eternity, while the poet accepts the lulling quietness of a finite death...²⁶

Suppose we were now to narrow the scope of this extended interpretation. And suppose, further, for our other than exclusively literary critical purposes, that we were to centre our attention on just what the interpretation takes the passage on transcendence to be about. And finally, having already cited the passages extensively, suppose we were to agree that “the interpretation” at issue here comes to something very close to what the following paraphrase says.

Montale’s poem “*Casa sul mare*,” we might then say, is about one way of responding to a deep question concerning fate and destiny. This way is one of offering, against his strongly considered convictions, to explore what the poet’s *persona* presents as both a weak possibility only, and this as only for a small minority. The offer is to find a passage between life’s basic polarities and thereby create the possibility of a *varco*, both a breakthrough and a passage through the fundamentally polarised situation every human being must suffer.

This basic polarity is the lived tension between the temporal, the finite, and the richly coloured but finally mortal silence of a strict immanence. The figure of this strict immanence is the land and the timeless, the infinite, and the terrible unlikelihood of a transcendent speaking response to a perpetual aspiration figured in the sea. (For the poet-*persona* the quiet land is to be cultivated, but creatively, whereas for his interlocutor the terrible sea may perhaps be dared, but if so, then once only).

Most generally, then, the poem is not just about polarities but about overcoming by breaking through and passing through the suffering these profound polarities continually cause, the suffering of the deep pathos of things.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

But, even were we to adopt such a paraphrase, we would then have to ask further whether such a very general interpretation of this poem is still faithful enough to Montale's very particular poetry as a whole?

"The poet straddles two worlds," one of Montale's English translators, William Arrowsmith, writes in connection with later poems such as "The Eel" in *La Bufera e altro* (1956), "body and soul, matter and spirit, immanence and transcendence."²⁷

And the task for the translator, the reader, and for the interpreter is "to locate the hidden transitional pivot beneath the seemingly unpredictable thematic swerve, prosodic jump, or even pointedly abrupt silence or aposiopesis [i.e., the rhetorical device of "breaking off in speech"]. When we find that pivot we are in touch with what Montale elsewhere, in a metaphysical connection, calls 'the brief cycle where everything is changed,' the 'ditch of memory,' or that void of suffering that precedes all transformation, all individual becoming" (15).

With such an eminent interpretation before us, we might well conclude that the formulations here of the interpretation of "*Casa sul mare*" in the very general terms of immanence or transcendence and especially of an abstract suffering is finally not unfaithful to Montale's central concerns.

But, if not unfaithful, is the interpretation properly rational? More specifically, in what sense if any can we properly say that such an interpretation is not just "epistemically rational but metaphysically reasonable?"

Before we can understand and then pursue such a general question, however, we need to see how such a question can arise from certain elements in the poem that generate the interpretation.

Recall Montale's abiding concern with what he himself called "the transcendental I." "The man who communicates," Montale has written, "is the transcendental I' who is hidden within us and recognizes himself in others" (17).

²⁷ "Translator's Preface," in *Eugenio Montale: The Occasions*, tr. W. Arrowsmith (New York: Norton, 1987), p. 15.

This concern arose out of Montale's preoccupations with degrees of solitude and solipsism. His strategy to counter these ineluctable threats was to emphasize the indispensability of openness to others, pre-eminently through sympathetic and imaginative poetic communication. Montale possessed "the human, and humanizing, imagination, the capacity for otherness and the sympathetic openness towards those feelings that are not our own but from which we cannot divide ourselves except by becoming human, even inhuman" (17).

In "*Casa sul mare*," what calls for interpretation is precisely the communicative situation whose subject is doubly obscure. For not only the subject of the exchanges between the two poetic *personae* is unclear; the identity of the speaking subject is also unclear.

Thus, if after repeated re-readings and judicious study of the available commentary, the poem strongly suggests something like what we have formulated above in terms of *varco*, just what more should a reasonable interpretation be required to include?

When we return to the poem in search of more detail to deal with such a question and after surveying carefully the first half of the poem not cited here, we come to focus sharply on the situation in the poem's second half. The poem represents the speaker as responding to a question about what the speaker has already averred in the preceding two strophes. There the speaker spoke about where "the journey ends" – "Here... in these petty cares dividing / a soul no longer able to protest," "Here... on this shore / robed by slow, assiduous tides." In short, things and their memories inevitably pass away.

The speaker, however, is represented as trying to reply to a specific question. "You ask: Is this how everything vanishes, in this haze of memories?" And the question assumes that what the speaker had previously said comes to a description of everything not only passing away, but passing away finally in the dissipation and dissolution of memory itself. The strong suggestion is that things themselves pass away finally only after the individual and collective memory of their being has already passed away first.

But this complex question is difficult to understand. And the question that immediately follows, presumably representing a reformulation of the same question but this time with still further nuance, complicates the matter very greatly – “Is every destiny fulfilled / in the torpid hour or the breaker’s sigh?”

Whatever the sense may be of the relation between these two questions that we finally might be able to win consensus on, the poem continues by immediately providing representations of the speaker’s protracted reply. The substance of this reply is what the interpretation has already tried to articulate.

What the interpretation has left out, however, is the striking and deliberate because repetitive suggestiveness of who the speaker is and to exactly what the speaker is referring in his insistence on *varco*. Each remains indefinite, indeterminate.

“I would like to tell you,” we first read. Then a distinction: maybe you but “Not I.” Immediately afterwards comes the explicitation, “I think.” Then the specification of the speaker’s standpoint – “Before I yield” – followed by the extraordinary gesture of encouragement in what the speaker understands to be a most probably hopeless venture – “And I leave you my hope... I offer it...”

But whose voice is this, who is this speaker? Is this speaker Montale, or his poet-*persona*, or a character whose views Montale represents but does not endorse? Or is the speaker Montale’s metaphysical ideal, the “communicative man?” The “I” remains indeterminate.

Similarly indeterminate is the nature of the *varco*. For as we have probably already surmised, the word “varco” is strongly ambiguous, referring to a passage or to a breakthrough or to both. While related, these two things of course are not the same.

So is the *varco* to which the speaker repeatedly refers, a “passage” between transcendence and immanence, between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal? Or is the *varco* a “breakthrough?”

And if the *varco* is a breakthrough, then are we to understand the *varco* as a breakthrough from the temporal, finite,

and immanent to the eternal, infinite, and transcendent? Or is the breakthrough from the temporal, finite, and immanent to a “salvation” to be found in some identification with the transcendent?

Still further, is the breakthrough to be taken finally as a liberation from mortality and death to life and immortality? Or, finally for now, is the *varco* in some senses to be taken as both a passage and a breakthrough?

But just as in the case of the previous questions about the identity of the speaker, so too here in the case of questions as to exactly what the speaker is talking about, the poem does not answer in any determinate way.

Now the interpretation of the poem we have tentatively worked out above can be shown to be rational. For, among many other things, the interpretation does capture the subject of Montale’s poem, its theme. But the interpretation cannot articulate the other subject of the poem, that is, the nature of its speaking subject and the determinate subject of the speakers’ reference, without being more than rational.

How then is the interpretation to account for what we may call Montale’s ideal communicative person and his ideal poetic value of *varco* and the objects it constitutes?

Such an interpretation needs to aim then not just at an epistemic rationality but at something more, at what we mentioned tentatively above as “a metaphysical reasonableness.”

We may perhaps say now that interpretation of such work as Montale’s “*Casa sul mare*” turns out to be metaphysically reasonable when it succeeds in incorporating a substantive and creative idea of reason as productive rather than just an instrumental and functional idea of reason as procedural.

Before we try to elaborate such second thoughts, however, we need now to pull together several initial results from our first readings of Montale’s high modernist poetry of suffering.

§5. Poetic Representations and Moral Situations

Perhaps we might not unfairly summarize in a provisional way only several apparent results from our readings here of Montale's poetry.

- (1) Some attentive readings of Eugenio Montale's poetic representations of various moral situations in his early European high modernist poetry of an abstract suffering appear to open up a novel perspective on the nature of moral motivation.
- (2) This perspective sometimes would seem to yield moral intuitions of external objective moral values that appear to underlie much moral motivation. The epistemic reliability of such intuitions, however, are vulnerable to the charge of being arbitrary in the sense of being unwarrantedly subjective.
- (3) A particular interpretive belief about a high modernist poem like Montale's "*Valmorbia*," nonetheless, may be said to be rational and not arbitrary to the degree that it is a coherent part of an interpreter's set of interpretive beliefs. This set of beliefs must also include the interpreter's most profound epistemic standards that basically license the interpreter to hold the belief about the poem that he or she actually does
- (4) Supported with such epistemic reassurance, further discussion of Montale's poetic representations of moral motivation may properly be taken as discussion of what patterns a competent interpreter's intuitive responses to the varied ways in which moral values present themselves in Montale's high modernist poetry of suffering.
- (5) A not inadequate interpretation of such poetry, however, needs to incorporate not just at an epistemic rationality but "a metaphysical reasonableness." That is, critically reflective interpretation of such work as Montale's "*Casa sul mare*" must also incorporate a substantive and creative idea of reason as productive rather than just an instrumental and functional idea of reason as procedural.

After pulling together several of our most important preliminary results, we now take several further steps in our reflections on moral motivation understood as what actually structures or patterns our distinctive responses to the varied ways in which moral values present themselves. Some of those responses we will surmise in the light of Montale's poetry would seem to result in what we may call here ethical emancipations from suffering.

§6. Ethical Emancipations?

In everyday common English parlance, some native English-language speakers use the word "emancipation" to refer mainly to releasing someone from "control or restraint, esp. a legal or political one." Others, however, use this word to refer mainly to causing someone "to be less bound by social conventions, moral restraints, intellectual prejudices, etc."²⁸ This second use is the more pertinent one for our purposes. Note that informed speakers speak and write of emancipating someone in more general senses than they speak and write of "liberating" someone. "Liberating" someone from something usually refers to freeing someone from social conventions, where the expression "social conventions" is mainly taken narrowly as sexual conventions.²⁹ By contrast, "emancipating" someone from something may indeed include the notion of freeing someone from such social conventions as sexual ones, but more often the expression "emancipating" has a broader extension.

Thus, emancipating someone includes a broader understanding of social conventions than mainly sexual ones. Moreover, besides social conventions talk of emancipating someone may often include, as we noted, the additional notions of intellectual prejudices and moral restraints. Still more, emancipation is usually associated mainly with the double sense of freedom, the notion of someone emancipating someone not only from something but also for something.

²⁸ Cf. "motivate," etc. in *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2007.

²⁹ Cf. "liberate," etc. in *Ibid.*

In the ethical domain in particular, this broader notion of emancipation rather than the narrower one of liberation is more appropriate. For often, when persons respond to the self-presentation of some external and objective moral values in certain situations, the actual responses that flow from the patterns of our beliefs, desires, and intentions in those actions we undertake can sometimes prove to be overly constrained as a result of their merely following after certain conventions, rules, obligations, and duties.

Sometimes, however, certain moral situations may require fuller responses that open out more freely onto the domain not just of the moral but also of the ethical, not just of the obligatory but also onto that of the ideal. In such situations one may perhaps speak of someone emancipating someone else from responding on the bases of moral constraints only in behalf of rendering them capable of being able to respond also on the bases of ethical ideals as well.

After our reflection on Montale's poetic representations of moral motivations above, we may now pursue some further reflections on Montale's poetic representations of ethical emancipation. That is, we will start with the provisional idea that some moral motivations may succeed in freeing some persons from, say, undue moral constraints with sometimes the further effect of freeing them for, say, a greater responsiveness to certain ethical ideals.

§7. Metaphysically Reasonable Readings

After having already considered in our first readings of Montale just what makes an interpretation epistemically rational, we may now consider the idea that makes an interpretation metaphysical is its incorporating a more than merely procedural and instrumental idea of reason, a substantive and regulative idea of reason as well.

And in some but certainly not all cases of interpretation, as here with the interpretation of Montale's poetic representations of an abstract suffering in the poems of *Ossi di seppia*,

a more than merely epistemic interpretation, a metaphysical interpretation is required in order to address adequately the fact of a choice being required among competing goals for the interpretation.

What exposes the need to consider something other than the usual goals of explicating or elucidating a poem by the selection of appropriate means is the requirement that the interpretation must render a definite account of something presented as indefinite. That requirement appears when whatever the poem is about on some plausible construal remains essentially indeterminate.

Alternative aims for interpretation, besides the elucidation of the poem and thereby making explicit or discovering the subject, are constructive. Thus, the interpreter may have to construct the poem's subject. For in some cases, such as interpreting the subject of the poetry of suffering, that ambiguous subject of the poem may very well be a void and the nothingness that can have no definite, determinate content prior to its receiving one in an interpretation itself – “nothingness at my shoulders, the void behind me.”

Consider two central ideas. The first is that an interpretation of much of Montale's European high modernist poetry of suffering, and of so much poetry like it, requires the exercise of a substantive and regulative understanding of reason. This understanding is necessary for determining, however provisionally, an alternative goal to the otherwise standard interpretive goals of explication and elucidation that turn on the exercise of procedural and instrumental understandings of rationality.

And the second idea is that determining a plausible alternative goal for interpretation here in the case of the European high modernist poetry of suffering requires filling out the void that the poem seems to be about with the help of Kant's reflections on the discipline of reason.

In terms of these two issues, then, we may choose to construe some rational interpretation not so much in terms of explication and elucidation but in those of conceptualization and construction. More simply, some interpretation is rational

in that, by incorporating a substantive and regulative understanding of reason, the interpretation is a rendering and not just an elucidation.

As we have seen in the details of Montale's work, many of his poems present complex situations whose core remains indeterminate. For despite our capacities to explicate and to elucidate many aspects of those situations, at least two absolutely essential elements usually remain unarticulated. Neither the nature of the speaking subject nor the subject of his central discourse is addressed explicitly enough.

Moreover, it is not a question of simply amending the interpretation to include what has been left out. For much of the poetry presents nothing definite or determinate enough that would accommodate mere explication and elucidation alone. Whatever means those standard goals usually rely on, whether careful paraphrase, or contextual considerations, or linguistic analyses or rhetorical scrutiny or whatever, are irrelevant. What the poetry is often about is essentially incomplete.

And once the indeterminate character of an essential aspect of this poetry is grasped, then the effective choice of means must wait upon reconsideration of just what goals are to be entertained in place of the customary but now provisionally suspended ones of explication and elucidation.

Choosing new goals, however, requires the exercise of a very different set of intellectual capacities than exclusively procedural and instrumental reasoning. For the goals of a reasonable interpretation of poetry like Montale's, where so much seems to turn on comprehending such things as the possibility of a *varco* arising from a void both within and without, requires conceiving of other goals than the customary ones.

The void that in some obscure sense is both the speaking subject and the subject spoken about cannot be simply explicated and elucidated. The void rather must be conceptualized and in some strong sense constructed. Such operations however call for a substantive and regulative understanding and exercise of reason and not just a functional one.

But how are we to construe this very general kind of talk in such a concrete context as Montale's poetry of an abstract suffering? Without making any claims as to actual influence on Montale or on other instances of the European high modernist poetry of suffering, we do well to pursue here Montale's own earlier interests in Kantian ideals and Kantian reason. For we should not overlook the fact that, from his childhood on, Montale had a largely auto-didact's fascination with philosophical issues, a fascination that his elder sister, herself a student of philosophy, ceaselessly encouraged.

In his pre-critical work, the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), Kant distinguished three kinds of sublime (*das Erhabene*).³⁰ The sublime is, Kant writes, "of different kinds. Its feeling is sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy; in some cases with quiet wonder; and in still others with a beauty completely pervading a sublime plan. The first I call the terrifying sublime, the second the noble, and the third the splendid."³¹ Kant adds that whatever its kinds the sublime "must always be great ... [and] simple" (48).

If we remain for the moment with this pre-Critical tripartite division of the sublime, as opposed to the much later double division of the sublime into the mathematical and the dynamical in Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, how can we initially characterize the void we find so often not just in Montale's poetry but in that of Rilke, Eliot, Valéry, and others?

This void is centrally represented as great and simple. Moreover, there is something terrifying about it that corresponds to Kant's reference to a celebrated eighteenth-century description of eternity (Kant cites A. von Haller's *Über die Ewigkeit*, 1736) as stimulating a kind of "mild horror" (50). But there is as well something of the noble about the apprehension of the void that

³⁰ In what follows I draw partly on some of my previous work on Kant in my book, *The Negative Sublime: Ethics, Warfare, and the Dark Borders of Reason* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003).

³¹ Tr. J. T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: UCal Press, 1960; reprinted, 1991), pp. 47-48.

corresponds to another of Kant's examples, namely "a description of complete loneliness" in a short story in the *Bremen Magazine* of the time that Kant says inspires a "noble awe."

The passage Kant cites reads: "...I saw the Angel of Death come over me like a whirlwind. He struck me before I could plead to be spared his terrible stroke. I was petrified, as I perceived that my destiny throughout eternity was cast, and that to all the good I had done nothing could be added, and from all the evil I had committed, not a thing could be taken away" (48, Kant's note).

This image is indeed great, simple, and terrifying – even awesomely noble – think of the German modernist sculptural work of Ernst Barlach's avenging angel, "Die Rache." Of course we could go on to try to nuance this initial determination of the void as an instance of the sublime in both its terrifying and noble aspects, notably by specifying the nature of that experience for the interpretive reader with the help of the extraordinary discussions of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*.

But our concern is not with the void as such. Rather, we are reflecting on just what understandings of reason are at work when reflective interpreters impute to central yet indeterminate places in the literary work of art implicit contents about something so elusive as, in its proper Kantian senses, the sublime.

If, as interpreters, we say that Montale's nothingness elicits the *varco* ideal as the negative sublime in its guise as both the terrifying and the noble, I think we are by that very determination of what the poem presents as indeterminate both positing the contents of our interpretation, its subject, and simultaneously positing ourselves as interpreters, its interpretative subjects.

In these contexts, however, talk of "positing" however is no longer very familiar.³² In a pre-critical work he wrote just one

³² Tr. G. Treash (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), p. 73. Standardly, to posit something is to put something forward "as a useful assumption

year before his first work in aesthetics, *The One Possible Basis for a Demonstration of God's Existence* (1763), Kant explains that positing is identical with being in general or existence.³³ And being or existence can be expressed either relatively or absolutely depending on whether being is expressed in the case of a judgment, "x is p," or in that of an existential proposition, "x is (exists)." In the first case a predicate is said to be posited with respect to a subject – the predicate is posited relatively. In the second case, "the thing itself," Kant writes, "together with all its predicates, is posited absolutely" (74).

At the end of his career, working on the *Opus postumum* shortly after 1801, Kant elaborates the notion of positing once again, but this time in the difficult and unfinished terms of his doctrine of the subject's self-positing (the *Selbstsetzungslehre*). This doctrine has to do with how the subject "makes itself into an object of experience."³⁴

Kant's complete doctrine here, despite misguided attempts to link Kant's reflections with Fichte, in fact reaches back to passages in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (the First Critique), for example, Kant's claim in the "B" version of the transcendental deduction there that "the 'I think' expresses the act of determining my existence" (B 158a).

Later, in the "Paralogism of Pure Reason" in the First Critique, Kant refines the notion of positing with respect to the proposition "I think" (B 420ff). He writes, for example, "the 'I think' precedes the experience which is required to determine the object of perception" (B 423).

One of the commentators on Kant's doctrine of self-positing writes that, for the later Kant, "knowledge of my own existence

or starting-point, but not [as something] necessarily regarded as known to be true" (S. Blackburn in his *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: OUP, 2005], p. 284).

³³ E. Foerster, "Kant's *Selbstsetzungslehre*," in *Kant's Transcendental Deductions* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989), p. 217.

³⁴ Foerster 1989, p. 229.

can only consist in the thoroughgoing determination of the given manifold, and in the positing of a certain set of representations, united under the concept of the empirical self, as outside the concept.”³⁵

“Outside the concept” because when it is a matter of thinking its concept, the object is not thought in connection with its conformity to what Kant calls in the First Critique, “the universal condition of possible empirical knowledge in general,” but with respect to the object’s “belonging to the context of experience as a whole.”

Now if we move from talk of the “I think” to a supposition of the subject’s self-positing in the “I interpret,” then Kant’s mature reflections here come to an extraordinary focus on the substantive and regulative aspects of reason. We can see the point if we keep in mind our central concerns with rational interpretation of the European high modernist poetry of suffering of Montale when we explore briefly Kant’s claim in the First Critique that “the synthetic unity of apperception is ... the highest point to which we must ascribe all employment of the understanding” (B 134).

Before refining these initial ideas, however, we need to get a fuller understanding of just what the object of interpretation is in this still rather vague talk of *varco* as both passage and breakthrough. That is, we need to return to the linguistic and conceptual richness of Montale’s poetry.

§8. A Double Transcendence

Consider then briefly another of the central poems in a major chord of Montale’s *Ossi di seppia*, a collection Montale organized in musically thematic rather than in just chronological ways. And consider as well what could satisfactorily account for the reasonableness of one of its most informed interpretations.

³⁵ Kant, A 600-601 / B 628-629; cited in Foerster 1989, p. 265, note 15.

Don't take shelter in the shade
of that green thicket,
like the windhover swooping, streak
of lightening in summer heat.

Time now to quit the canebrake
stricken as though with sleep
and gaze at the forms of a life
that powders away.

We pass in a shimmer of dust,
mother-of-pearl, a glare
that ensnares the eyes,
undoing us nearly.

Still, you sense it, in these dry waves
lazing in this hour of distress
let's not throw our strayed lives
to a bottomless abyss.

Like those enclosing cliffs
that seem to fray
in a webbing of haze,
so our charred souls

where illusion burns
in a flare of ash
vanish in the bright air
of one certainty: light.³⁶

When situated in the thematic movements of Montale's suite of poems, William Arrowsmith believes this lyric, "*Non rifugiarti nell'ombra*," is about "aspiration towards *varco*," aspiration towards "breakthrough" or "passage" (201). In particular, he interprets the lyric as an exhortation addressed both to someone or something figured as a small falcon and to himself.

³⁶ "*Non rifugiarti nell'ombra*," in E. Montale, *Cuttlefish Bones*, tr. W. Arrowsmith (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 42-43; translation slightly modified.

And the burden of the exhortation is to overcome the inertia, security, and timidity of the shady world below, and to dare, in the clarity of the bright air above, the sunny light, to “gaze [*girard-are*] at the forms of a life / that powders away [*sisgretola*]” (201).

Central to this interpretation is the notion of a double transcendence, a complex movement of positive and negative, upwards and downward. The movement is first upwards towards a Dantesque spiritual light, an ascension beyond the impermanence of life to the eternity of the inward forms of life. The white light of the noonday Mediterranean sun dissolves the shadows of the outward forms of things to leave open the possibility of a vision into the inner form of things.

Arrowsmith interprets the poem as beginning “with a typically Montalean negative, but it is one that contains a strong, not merely wistful, positive imperative. Thus in the first stanza the poem’s ‘tu’ “is adjured not to abandon her natural domain. ...By the last stanza, however, this injunction becomes not merely a passionate yearning for *varco* but a momentary illusion of *varco* almost achieved” (202). Arrowsmith takes this momentary illusion as the “soaring imagination[’s]” glimpse of a positive transcendence, of a “shared life ... lived at peak intensity” (202).

Besides this passage (*varco*) upwards, this ascension towards the possibility of a positive transcendence, the poem also presents the idea of a passage downwards, a descent towards a negative transcendence. The crucial images here are those of the “bottomless abyss.”

And the key connotations arise from the resonant Italian word, “*randage*”(but not, as Arrowsmith points out, from its English translation, “stray”) of lonely and futile errancy. “Transcendence,” Arrowsmith offers, “is negative as well as positive. *Varco* is a ‘passage’ that leads down as well as up” (202). Finally, on the evidence in the fourth stanza strongly suggesting that the speaker in the poem decides on directing his aspiration upwards towards the light of the inner forms of things instead of downwards towards their dark annihilation, Arrowsmith

proposes a very different reading. The basis of this alternative is presumably what Arrowsmith understands from the rest of Montale's work, not just in *Ossi di seppia* but in the poetry as a whole.

That understanding is comprehensive. For before his death in 1992, Arrowsmith succeeded in translating, although not publishing, all of the work Montale himself had arranged and published in book form. What then is the only indirectly supported conclusion of Montale's double transcendence?

"Ultimately of course," Arrowsmith writes, "either form of transcendence is [for Montale] destructive, since, for Montale, we become, and remain, human only by enduring the conflicting claims made upon the psyche by the two warring transcendental extremes" (203). More explicitly, Montale's poetry can be reasonably interpreted as endorsing neither a positive nor a negative transcendence. For each kind of transcendence is mortal. "If the 'death' implicit in downward transcendence is obvious enough, it is equally present in its upward form."

Arrowsmith concludes by citing Montale's prose to support this latter claim that positive transcendence is also mortal, that 'death' is just as present there as in negative transcendence. Montale writes: "The transcendental 'I' is light that illuminated only a very small space in front of us, a light that carries us towards a non-individual, and therefore non-human, condition" (cited on p. 203).

We find here in Arrowsmith's interpretation of "*Non rifugiarti nell'ombra*" a complex, richly evidential, and eminently plausible interpretation of a difficult European high modernist lyric of an abstract perhaps even spiritual suffering. Suppose once again, however, as we did earlier with Calvino's interpretation, we narrow the scope of Arrowsmith's interpretation and for our purposes restrict the interpretation to the following representative set of propositions.

Montale's "beautifully crafted lyric of aspiration towards *varco* ('breakthrough' or 'passage') varies and widens the intrincating [*sic*] themes of the suite [of poems, *Rottami*] ... By the last stanza, however, this injunction [*i.e.*, the negative imperative in the

first stanza] becomes ... a momentary illusion of *varco* almost achieved. For an astonishing instant, the soaring imagination catches a glimpse of the miracle – that transcendence that, for Montale, occurs only when shared life is lived at peak intensity. ...But transcendence is negative as well as positive. ...Ultimately of course either form of transcendence is destructive, since, for Montale, we become, and remain, human only by enduring the conflicting claims made upon the psyche by the two warring transcendental extremes” (201-203).

The question now is under just what construal of rational interpretation in terms of both goals and means can we account for not just the rationality but also the reasonableness of Arrow-smith’s interpretation?

§9. Articulating the Ethical

In 1925, not long after publishing his still influential essay on “Style and Tradition” and after signing Benedetto Croce’s reply to the “Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals,” Montale, we noted earlier, published his *Ossi di seppia*.³⁷ The carefully composed book of poems, with its several lyrical suites juxtaposed with individual lyrics, seemed to refer, in sumptuous fictional representations, to something like the Ligurian seascapes of Montale’s youthful vacations south of Genoa at Monterosso, the landscapes that so affected Paul Valéry as well.

But this impression of a studied representational artistry was not unambiguous. Formally taking its distance from the mellifluous rhythms of D’Annunzio while retrieving Dante’s harsh and strong rhymes, the “*rime aspre*” of the *Inferno* and the earlier “*rime petrose*” of the four Lady Pietra *Canzone*, *Ossi di seppia* began a critical exploration of European high modernism and its perduring legacies that would persist throughout Montale’s long life and work.

³⁷ Cf. E. Montale, *The Second Life of Art: Selected Essays of Eugenio Montale*, ed. and tr. J. Galassi (New York: Ecco Press, 1982), pp. 3-18, 12-19.

Much of that exploration centred on the fractious relations, freshly controversial in our post-modern era today, between poetry and life, interpretation and reason. More centrally, Montale's finest poetry sought to articulate a profound yet obscure sense of a great and abstract suffering, the deep pathos of things and of ourselves.

Although sharing with Croce an antifascist insistence on a separation between politics and art, Montale challenged Croce's partly prescient but sinister views of modernism as a species of cultural nationalism, a preparation for Fascism. Instead, working against the attractions of the regional Ligurian poetry of even his poet friend, Camillo Sbarbaro, and finally leaving the marine seascapes of Liguria for Florence's "*terra firma* of ideas, tradition, humanism," Montale insisted on the cosmopolitan, European character of modernism.³⁸

This larger understanding of modernism, on view in both the poetry and the extensive prose of Montale as well as in the give and take with the avant-garde of his times³⁹ – the structures of Debussy's piano preludes, the characterizations in the novels of Italo Svevo, the etchings of Giorgio Morandi, and the plays of Pirandello – is what we need to recall as we try to develop second thoughts about Montale's moral intuitions and his European high modernist poetry of suffering.

The suggestion here is that our cultural situations today, however diverse whether in Europe, North America, and Japan, call surprisingly for renewed and thoughtful attention to the conceptual resources of a now quite unfashionable understanding of critically reflective interpretation centred on the inescapably demanding interactions between art, life, and reason.

³⁸ From "*Intenzioni (Intervista imaginaria)*" (1946), cited in E. Montale, *Cuttlefish Bones* (1920-1927), tr. W. Arrowsmith (New York: Norton, 1993), p. xvi.

³⁹ Cf. G.-P. Biasin, *Montale, Debussy, and Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

§10. Mimetic Re-Enactments

Much of the excellent historical and sociological work that is continuing to change our understanding of both the modern and post-modern eras shows that Europeans and perhaps others still share today the residual social, cultural, and historical elements of the privileged moments of high modernism in the arts. For even in the post-modern critical and artistic strategies that now clamour for all our attention, European high modernism must be presupposed as a foil, a contrast.

Yet we hesitate to consider literary works of art today in any strongly representative vein; we hesitate to interpret the poetry of Montale's *Ossi di seppia*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and even Valéry's poetic prose representations in his voluminous *Cahiers*, with our own lives and communities in view. We hesitate for fear of succumbing to some strain of a supposedly naive aesthetic and moral realism, of moral truths arising from the nature of things rather than from human beings.

Whatever may be at issue in such work as *Ossi di seppia*, we have learned to say often (but not always) in an instrumental, relativistic, and self-reflexive post-modern vein, whatever the visions of those interactive dissolutions between the physical and the metaphysical, "the stretching out of the rocks," "the suffering of the stones," such work, intelligent people keep telling us, creates its own inviolable space. Poetry, just like any substantial achievement in the arts, can teach no one any lessons after Auschwitz.

Poetry neither offers nor exacts thoughtful reflection. Enough, we keep saying, that such work shine forth intermittently in its occasional perfection, in its "quiet equilibrium," reflecting no more than "bright arid seas," endlessly representing and referring to nothing other than itself.

Yet to construe Montale's poetry, or any work of art in no other than its own self-referential and formalist terms in such a minimalist post-modern spirit, is to violate not only that distance between politics, morals, and literature on which both

Montale and Croce insisted mistakenly. It is also to forego the rich linguistic and conceptual resources of a mimetic reflection on moral discourse, perception, motivation, and emancipation.

Such a mimetic reflection comprises a set of critical practices that, classically after Aristotle, construes poetry and works of art generally as indeed more philosophical than history. For some poetry may make something like universals manifest by enacting exemplary representations of actual situations such as those we face today in the new Europe.

Moreover, some of these representative enactments can, in ways that today we may be losing the interest, attentiveness, and sustained concentration to fathom, properly refer beyond themselves. At times, such representative enactments may be, as perhaps we have glimpsed here and there in this essay, profoundly ethical.

For far from always functioning instrumentally for achieving certain private and fugitive satisfactions, some poetic representations of speech and action as those on view in much of the European high modernist poetry of suffering may set up imaginative, strongly cognitive, and social explorations of alternative ethical goals and their possible consequences in the minds of readers and interpreters.

§11. The Disappearing World

Here is another of the disparate voices of *Ossi di seppia*, “*Forse un mattino...*” (1923). With these reflections as backgrounds, consider briefly its peculiar evocations and the issues that arise from trying to account for the reasonableness of such an interpretation.

Perhaps one morning while going along in the air of glass,
 arid, looking back, I shall see, with the terror
 of a drunken man, the making of a miracle:
 nothingness at my shoulders, the void behind me.

Then as on a screen, suddenly, trees houses hills
 will assemble themselves for the usual deception.
 But it will be too late; and I shall go on, quiet,
 with my secret, among the men who do not turn.⁴⁰

Since several of the nuances here are important for our interpretation, consider a more recent version of the same poem.

Maybe one morning, walking in air
 of dry glass, I'll turn and see the miracle occur –
 nothingness at my shoulders, the void
 behind me – with a drunkard's terror.

Then, as on a screen, the usual illusion:
 hills houses trees will suddenly reassemble,
 but too late, and I'll quietly go my way,
 with my secret, among men who don't look back.⁴¹

This is a sobering voice, subtle with its ironies and allusions, a voice that for all the familiarities of its modernist images of movie screens and wasteland cityscapes insists on a careful hearing.

The poet represents the speaker as musing, in one of the late Jamesian inner monologues Montale admired, about some future enlightenment, a negative epiphany. The speaker imagines the possibility of his miraculously seeing, while taking an ordinary morning walk, not just what is in front of his eyes but what stands invisible both at his shoulders and behind his back.

This impossible circumspection will change the speaker's perception of things and the world in such a way that, henceforth, despite the resumption of his normal everyday perceptions, he will possess unlike other people the secret that the reality of things and the world itself is actually a real fiction. Coming to such a realisation, however, will fill the speaker with

⁴⁰ Tr. A. Mazza 1983, p. 44.

⁴¹ Tr. W. Arrowsmith 1932, p. 67.

terror, a terror as in the drunkard's apprehensive ruminations, of the loss of reason.⁴²

Such a speculative paraphrase of course does an injustice to many of the salient features of this poem – its carefully calculated place in a meticulously articulated book, the deliberateness of its metrics and rime schemes, the calibrations of its assonances and dissonances, its studied interconnections with other poems that explore similar images, metaphors, and themes, and especially the peculiarly remote significance of its major and abstract concerns with perception, knowledge, and reason.

Montale's work, as his celebrated English translator has written, is "instinctively, unconsciously philosophical and, like the Italian mind generally in the first half of the century, suffused, often unawares, with Crocean idealism, saturated in its categories of thought."⁴³ Any reasonably satisfactory attempt at interpretation of such work needs to bring the philosophical aspects of this poem into focus.

This mimetic reflection, incorporating strong claims about poetry's capacities to represent and to refer to more than itself, to imply real and not just fictional authors, to exhibit some determinate, stable, and decidable meanings, to allow evaluative and not merely descriptive criticism, even to manifest genuine pathos – this is the view that continues to suffer neglect and even denigration today in much recent, powerful, and influential post-modern work – work inspired by linguistic formalisms, varieties of post-structuralism, strains of deconstruction, cultural criticism, Lacanian inspired re-appropriations of Freud, and so on – work at the very centre of post-modernism and literature.

But whatever the genuine merits of these other reflective strategies – and they are many although they still require fresh and thorough re-assessment – perhaps we have done mimetic thinking about the literary arts an injustice. Perhaps in a time

⁴² Cf. P. McCormick, *Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), Chapter Seven, "Real Fictions," pp. 256-301.

⁴³ W. Arrowsmith, "Translator's Preface," in Montale 1993, p. xxiii.

of historical, cultural and even social disarray, we have not been attentive enough to the voices in such works as Montale's *Ossi di seppia*, voices that may resonate even today in our still perplexing interactions with the suffering in many persons' lives.

Part of that inattention arises from certain unexamined strains in post-modernist relations with literature. And one of the most important of such tensions is the constrained and unduly restrictive understanding of reason and rationality that often leads to post-modernist attacks on the representational and referential powers of some literary works of art.

§12. Patterns of Abstract Ethical Suffering

Perhaps we may now pull together here some of these further reflections in several further summary reflections on Montale's poetic representations of abstract suffering.

- (6) Much of Montale's high modernist poetry of an abstract personal suffering may not improperly be understood as offering in part poetic representations of patterns of belief, desire, and intentions that continue to structure much moral motivation even today.
- (7) Some of these poetic representations of moral motivation would seem to call attention to certain moral situations where ordinary life is unduly constrained by the immanent demands of everyday moral norms obligations, duties, and constraints.
- (8) Other of these poetic representations would seem to present images of release from such undue restraints.
- (9) Moreover, sometimes some of Montale's high modernist poetic representations of suffering appear to offer reflective persons today fictional characterisations of characters who propose to emancipate others from certain unduly restrictive immanent moral constraints so as to be capable of aspiring towards the realization of some partly transcendent ethical ideals.

- (10) That is, some distinguished instances of the European high modernist poetry of suffering offer reflective persons today a novel perspective on the nature of both moral motivation and ethical emancipation. This perspective may sometimes open out onto both moral intuitions into external objective moral values. It may also open out onto the necessity of achieving freedom for responding not just to moral norms only but to ethical ideals as well.

Envoi

In some of the following essays and those accompanying them in the companion volume, *Of Three Minds*, I would try to explore some of the themes on ethics and aesthetics, ethics and metaphysics, and ethics and interpretation only adumbrated here in this introductory essay.