

The poetry of giuseppe ungaretti

Profession, Poet



Interwar Culture and Poetry

This essay will focus on the poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti and will contrast the ways he is able to convey a sense of Italian identity, not only for the soldiers on the frontline of World War I, but also for himself given his intercultural upbringing and his[1]“ hybrid background.” Born in the Egyptian city of Alexandria to Italian parents in 1888 and schooled in France, Ungaretti had a longing for a singular Italian identity. I will also discuss his poetry in relation to his experiences and vivid depictions of war throughout the irredentist and interventionist movements during the first world war. The first world war was the catalyst for many in Italy to answer the national call to arms and re-assert the authority of Italy on the continent. Many saw it as the final stage of ‘ Il Risorgimento,’ where Italy would reclaim the unredeemed lands lost to the Austro-Hungarian empire and restore the Motherland to its once former glory, an reunite all Italian speaking people. However, the war brought a profound sense of devastation to North Eastern territories such as the Carso region and is clear in the symbolic imagery and hermetic style used in Ungaretti’s Poetry. The following poems to examine these themes in closer detail include Soldati (1918),’ ‘ Veglia’ (1915) and “ I fiumi” (1916)

Ungaretti had stated via a radio interview[2]“ Io sono un uomo pacifico,” however his misplaced birth in Egypt had ignited within him a patriotism for Italy of such intensity that it drove him, a man whose identity included a devotion to the theme of universal[3]‘ brotherhood,’ to campaign for the interventionist cause. He spent two years as an infantry man in the Italian army during the Alpine offensive after initially being rejected in 1914. His

sense of pro – nationalist sentiment is echoed in many of his works such as ‘ I fiumi’ and ‘ Italia’ where he becomes a pseudo-spokesperson for all Italians, where all patriotic dreams and aspirations are concentrated within each line. His works give an effective insight into the lives of the soldiers on the frontline, for example in ‘ Soldati’ the numbness and futility of war is conveyed to us. ‘ Soldati,’ is a poem composed of four short lines where Ungaretti metaphorically speaks of death and the ‘ Soldati’ as if they are ‘ leaves waiting for the autumn.’

The power of this poem lies in its cryptic brevity; wherein the allusion to the leaves on the trees forebode how the Italian soldiers will eventually fall too during the war. In this poem we see the juxtaposition of beauty and melancholy of Ungaretti’s poetry, where on the frontline of the war[4]“ la precarietà del vivere umano” is omnipresent. Here he uses words[5]‘ not only for their literal meanings or traditional associations’ but also for their[6]‘ symbolic and musical values and suggestive overtones.’ Over 1. 1 million Italians fought on the front lines and the Italian offensive suffered heavy losses in their efforts to retake unredeemed lands or ‘ Terre irredente’ such as Trento, Trieste, and Gorizia. Whether their demise came at the hands of the Austro-Hungarian forces, or simply war illnesses and disease, over 600, 000 Italian men perished in the fighting between the period of 1914 until 1918.

‘ Soldati’ is a clear example of Hermetic poetry that was founded and lead by Ungaretti’s works, in which he uses unorthodox methods of structure and strips away the pretentiousness and[7]“ ornament of poetry in a pure and

evocative form.’ ‘ Soldati’ does not use traditional forms or punctuation and is directly concentrated into a short lyric to emphasise the subjective nature of this poem, alluding to his avant-garde experimentalist style. Ungaretti makes[8]“ deliberate efforts to isolate the word” wherein one can resurrect the power and emphasise “ its primal meaning” and “ fierce impact.” The symbolic nature of the Autumn ‘ foglie’ on the trees also draws parallels to French symbolist poets such as Baudelaire, that preceded and inspired other Hermetic poets such as Salvatore Quasimodo and Eugenio Montale. This truly short example of[9]‘ impressionismo atomico,’ first labelled by Francesco Flora and used by Ungaretti in ‘ I Soldati,’ is in direct contrast to that of ‘ Veglia.’ Here Ungaretti initiates a discourse in his poetry regarding the dehumanisation and loss of identity of soldiers in the trenches of world war one known as ‘ Trincenocrazia.’ Here he is very much telling a story, narrating the horrors of war as he saw first-hand.

Ungaretti wrote ‘ Veglia’ whilst he was deep in the trenches of the barren Carso region in Northern Italy. Ungaretti uses a cinematic form of[10]“ staccato paratactic lines to mimic bursts of thought broken by artillery fire.” The poem opens with a comrade’s slain body lying in the trench he occupies and must hold a ‘ vigil ‘ over the trench, giving a pseudo-religious tone to the poem initially. Ungaretti depicts the grotesque scene he witnessed throughout the night with the murdered soldier’s corpse acting as the central image of the poem. With the soldier’s[11]“ bocca diriginata volta al plenilunio,” (p. 23) it gives a haunting depiction of a mouth incapable of speech, a mutability that draws parallels to the idea of censorship of soldier’s letters during the war by the Italian army. This was carried out so that key

details could not be intercepted by enemy forces or so that negative information could be disseminated to the Italian public, wherein the true horrors of war could not truly be retold. Ungaretti purposefully focuses on the image of his comrade's closed mouth to emphasise that all communication is now blocked by death, with the retelling of the horror falling solely to Ungaretti.

The death of his comrade also robs Ungaretti of a witness to his own survival. Alone, as Ungaretti watches the impossibility of speech represented by the broken body, he is reminded of his own attempts to communicate in[12]' *lettere piene d'amore.*'(p. 23) However, this once more draws parallels to the censored letters of the soldiers, whom were unable to truly express the destruction and desolation, and in order to communicate with loved ones would have to fill letters describing their false reality. The final three lines, spatially set apart in their own stanza, act as the crux of the poem; witnessing this atrocity first hand has made the speaker see life as more valuable. The final lines give rise to a belief that witnessing violence and recording the death of his comrade almost serves to restore the identity of Ungaretti, with his purpose of recording and remembering in the face of such desolation now essential as the lone survivor.

The title, ' *Veglia,*' once more highlights the speaker as the primary witness to this haunting scene and is in direct contrast with ' *Soldati*' which does not contain a narrator and resembles more closely a metaphorical statement or allusion. The reaffirmation of life, suggested by the act of writing, pulls the poem towards the final stanza's reclamation of the poet's own vitality. Even

though their own death seemed inevitable to many soldier poets in World War I, this final effort of written communication was often the only action possible when a fellow soldier was lost. Ungaretti wrote 'Veglia' assuming he would not survive to show it to another. He wrote in order to comprehend the misery that surrounded him, and to attempt communication with a part of himself and the deceased soldier. By recalling the physical situation surrounding his companion's murder, the surviving poet was able to begin assimilating the War's grim reality, giving him a purpose to carry on. Likewise, in poems such as 'Veglia,' 'Chiaroscuro' and 'In Memoria', this reality exists on a spectrum that portrays the[13]" alienating forces of modern life (especially war) that reduces humanity to nonbeing but aligns poetic expression with an assertion of being".

However, this purpose for existence was not shared by all soldiers, with the loss of identity experienced by the soldiers during World War I led many to question what it was that they were fighting for. The National cause and the idea of restoring Italy's former greatness were the primary focus of many men, with each member coming together from the many diversified regions, supplying a new sense of what it meant to be 'Italian.' Many regions of Italy were still divided by different customs and dialects, considering the fact that the country was unified less than 50 years prior to the initial shooting of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 which initiated the war. This theme of identity is found in the Ungaretti's anthemic styled 'I Fiumi,' which is in contrast from 'Soldati' and the autobiographical and documentary styled 'Veglia', which moves from the destruction and dehumanisation of soldiers to that of Ungaretti's own journey towards finding an identity, where he

recollects his own ancestry and history, whilst simultaneously using various famous rivers as symbols for an almost[14]“ sacral journey” to review and re-establish his sense of identity.

Ungaretti uses four rivers to provide the formation for his identity and his life. We see his use of ‘ il Nilo’ to represent his birth and upbringing in Alexandria as the son of two expatriates from the Italian town of Lucca and the innocence of his adolescent years. He then uses ‘ il Seine’ of Paris, to represent his formative years studying in the European cultural centre, where he would also meet other avant-garde artists and creators such as Picasso and Apollinaire before using ‘ Il Serchio’ located in Tuscany to reflect the ancestral generations that preceded him. His use of ‘ l’Isonzo’ links back to his experience as a soldier in the Alps, which had a such a profound impact on his life and his writing. The negative connotations of the loss of identity and dehumanisation experienced in ‘ Veglia’ are not found here. Instead he speaks of a sense of harmony he would take with him in life as a result of his experiences that would now form his confirmed identity, which he perceives as serving the world better than engaging in war, found in the line,[15]“ Mi sono riconosciuto una docile fibra dell’universo.”(p. 32) Through this reminiscence we see the moulding of Ungaretti’s identity come full circle, whilst his “ own heightened awarenesss of identity” is recognised in the lines[16]“ Questi sono i miei fiumi”(p. 32) and “ Questa e la mia nostalgia.”(p. 32) In this poem Ungaretti presents these rivers as if they are a part of an emblematic[17]“ carta d’identita,” like the identity card used by soldiers during the war to signal their birthplace, hometown etc.

In conclusion, the differing styles of Ungaretti's avant-garde hermetic style are clearly and effectively used to convey the themes of identity and the dehumanisation of soldiers during World war I. From the brief symbolist allusion used in 'Soldati' to the garish, haunting imagery conveyed in 'Veglia,' Ungaretti's poetry written during the war certainly exists on a spectrum that diversifies him from other Hermetic poets such as Montale. Ungaretti also succeeds by providing the readers of his poetry an interesting insight into his own initial motives and later change of perspective towards the interventionist cause and participating in the war whilst simultaneously engaging with his own journey to establish and reaffirm his own Italian identity.

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