

Nobel Prize in Literature 1975



Eugenio Montale

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1975 was awarded to Eugenio Montale "for his distinctive poetry which, with great artistic sensitivity, has interpreted human values under the sign of an outlook on life with no illusions".

With his very first collection of poems, *Ossi di seppia* (*Bones of the Cuttlefish*, 1925), the then 29-year-old **Eugenio Montale** was ready to uphold his place in Italian poetry. As his work gradually became known outside his own country, he staked the same claim abroad, being recognized more and more, indisputably, as one of the most important poets of the contemporary west. The fact that this took time is natural enough in itself, but in Montale's case may have a special explanation. His consistent personal reticence is probably one of the reasons that it took so long before the literary public became aware of him. But, undoubtedly, a more decisive reason is that, in general, he has given such sparse occasion to judge him. With each collection of poems, he has widened and strengthened his position, but the succession of new volumes is short and the distance between them all the longer. Apart from what was printed before publication in book form, and from what was added in later editions, Montale has, in all, published four books of poems since the first

appeared fifty years ago: *Le Occasioni* (*The Occasions*, 1939), *La Bufera e altro* (*The Storm and Other Things*, 1948), *Satura* (1962), and, most recently, *Diario del '71 e del '72*. The fact that this modest production has continued to capture the interest of young people both in the poet's own country and in the world at large is sufficient proof of its sterling qualities and lasting effect.

This is all the more remarkable in that Montale's poetry does not meet its readers with open arms. Born in Genua, he has remained faithful to his north-Italian home region; it forms a living background to most of what he has written. It is not the inviting sunbathers' paradise of the Riviera that extends before us, but a shore of a harsher kind, seemingly drawn from the stern lines of the Ligurian coast with the stormy onset of the sea against steep rock bastions.

The fact that the inaccessibility of the rocky shores has been given a shape and a counterpart in Montale's work implies a literary program. He came to have an affinity with the so-called hermetic school in his country's poetry, thereby rejecting the melting tones and the rhetorical fanfares that most people had an ear for, both inside and outside Italy. His inaccessibility is not only a matter of literary form but also a spiritual attitude, an inner necessity, an outlook on life. What the writer rejects is not certain styles but his own situation - to that extent, the whole situation of modern men. Ostensibly, at least, he seeks seclusion, not contact. Ostensibly, at least, this isolation against his surroundings is an expression of deep pessimism, not to say negativism. Indeed, Montale's poetry has been so described. But in order to grasp what the negative attitude means, we need only recall what it was that Montale repudiated. He has never wanted to live with his time. In the first world war he took part as an officer against the Austrians; unlike many of his fellow writers at the front he wrote no war poems, saw nothing edifying, nothing splendid in the ghastly business. Demobilized, he came home to an Italy in disintegration; when his first poems appeared, Mussolini was already in power. Montale would not let himself be carried away by the inciting signals, refused to join the party, was deprived of employment and means of livelihood, saw his own literary efforts jeopardized or thwarted, and had to earn his living



at translation. In his isolation, he persistently and indomitably pursued his work, a "hermetic", if ever there was one. Bearing this in mind, we tell ourselves that if we lose the capacity to repudiate, all is lost. There is a negativism based not on misanthropy, but on an indelible feeling for the value of life and the dignity of mankind. That is what gives Eugenio Montale's poetry its innate strength.

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