

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Eugenio Montale by Jared Becker

Review by: Emmanuela Tandello

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persistence bore fruit in the foundation, with De Michelis's powerful support, of the *Centro Studi Nazionale* which, in a welter of prejudice, sought to concentrate instead on D'Annunzio the poet:

Come tutti gli uomini anche il D'Annunzio va giudicato, presuntuosa parola, diciamo accostato; ma dell'uomo, come di tutti gli uomini, badando a quanto dell'opera, cioè dell'opera scritta poiché di scrittore si tratta, rimane accettabile anche da noi: senza cui non resterebbe altro che applicare il versetto evangelico, che ammonisce di lasciare i morti seppellire i loro morti. (pp. 164–65)

De Michelis examines the complex printing tradition of some of D'Annunzio's more personal writings: 'Storia di un testo: *Il compagno dagli occhi senza cigli*', 'Gli elzeviri del *Corriere della Sera*', and '*Canto novo*: vient de paraître'. There are discoveries of a less theoretical nature: 'Gabriele giovine e la musica' investigates recently-published personalia and makes the right collations. So 'Il canto di Panfilo', sent to the conductor Giovanni Sgambati in 1897, is here rescued from the latter's papers, while a photocopy of 'Nelle acque di Leucade' is another *inedito* which appeared on De Michelis's desk at a time when he had so many other occupations that the source of it remains a mystery, though its authenticity is undoubted.

De Michelis's silence will be welcomed by the purveyors of the 'giochetti verbali' whose critical efforts simply 'lasciano tal quale i problemi al punto di prima' (p. 15); his silence will not be regretted by gossip journalists. Pietro Chiara's slanted biography of D'Annunzio is taken to pieces for the language of its prejudiced value-judgements, and, for good measure, De Michelis throws in five densely-annotated pages of grave factual errors in Chiara's volume. I shall regret his silence and hope that, like the mysterious photostat of 'Nelle acque di Leucade', De Michelis has a stock of further treasures that he has forgotten until now, in the drawer of his famous *tavolino di lavoro*.

PEMBROKE COLLEGE, OXFORD

J. R. WOODHOUSE

Eugenio Montale. By JARED BECKER. (Twayne's World Authors Series, 778) Boston, Massachusetts: G. K. Hall. 1986. 154 pp.

Jared Becker's book represents the latest attempt to tackle the controversial problem of political meaning in Montale's poetry. The central argument is that 'politics has by now come to seem the primal influence on Montale's poetry'. Throughout Montale's poetical progress, from *Ossi di seppia*, traditionally considered the most innocent of politics of his collections, to *Satura* and the outspokenness of the late satires, 'one can seldom avoid reading a corollary tale of political influence'. This Dr Becker tries to argue through a chronologically-ordered analysis of Montale's work aimed at unveiling the anti-fascist 'themes' of the first three collections, and the political 'occasioni' of the later ones. In the first chapter, 'Biography of a Skeptic', Becker describes Montale's original adhesion to anti-fascist ideology through his 'primal influences', Gobetti, Croce, and d'Annunzio. Such ideology, however, appears to be mainly cultural, inspired by the European modernist outlook encouraged by Gobetti (but not by his ideal of an *engagée* literature), and by Croce's aesthetic theory of art as totally separate from politics. Although the two positions were in reality quite different, what matters, says Becker, is Montale's association with them: he contributed to Gobetti's review, and signed Croce's Manifesto of anti-fascist intellectuals, and this is an unmistakable sign of his commitment against fascist cultural provincialism and protectionism, and against the idea of literature as political propaganda embodied by the life and work of d'Annunzio. And antidannunzianism is the third fundamental element of Montale's primal development.

Like the crepuscular poets before him, the author claims, Montale totally rejects d'Annunzio's image of the public poet, 'manipulative' and self-promoting, and his idea of poetry 'as an instrument of political propaganda', supported by the dominating fascist culture. Unfortunately, to prove his argument, Becker reveals a surprisingly old-fashioned antidannunzian bias. When discussing *Ossi di seppia*, he describes it as an intrinsically antidannunzian experience, linguistically as well as ideologically. Apparently disregarding the universally-acknowledged influence of *Alcyone* on *Ossi*, and Montale's own recognition of d'Annunzio's importance for twentieth-century poetry, Becker claims that Montale's language, low-registered, colloquial, and 'petroso', sharply contrasts with the 'incredibly mellifluous music and grandiose tones' of his predecessor.

As to the anti-fascist themes of *Ossi*, Becker claims that the book is riddled with an undercurrent of political meaning, especially in the portraits of the 'lyrical speaker who is out of synchronization with others'. Such is the persona of not only *Non chiederci* (often taken by other critics as a proper anti-fascist statement, Becker claims) or *Forse un mattino* but even the rather shy person of *Falsetto*, the image of a weak, timorous male (the opposite of the virile, sport-loving man) contemplating in Esterina, a 'mulier fortis' of gozzanian inspiration, the ideal of activism proclaimed by fascist propaganda. *Ossi*'s passivity and negativity symbolize a rejection of mainstream man, and his optimism, 'his confident appropriation of a solid material world'. This, or part of this, is of course nothing new. But exactly how these 'themes' should be more specifically anti-fascist and not, say, modernist is not clear.

In his assessment of the second collection, Becker's search for political 'occasioni' is also strained. Political meaning, he claims, as a result of historical and political circumstances, although cleverly disguised by the cryptic obscurity of the poems, acquires new strength and widens its horizon. He points to the 'worldliness' and 'cosmopolitan viewpoint' of the opening section (that is, English and French settings, and Spanish and English quotations) as contrasted with the nationalism of the fascist State; and he considers the 'Jewishness' of Gerti, Liuba, and Dora Markus as much more than a mere coincidence, showing Montale's disapproval of the racial laws. *A Liuba che parte* was, after all, written in the same year (1938) as that which marked the systematic enforcement of those laws. Becker's analysis of these poems is often naive, and in the best cases, unlikely. He claims that even small details are a subtle attack on the régime. Liuba's cat, for example, is a Roman 'lare' in a Hebrew 'ark', a deliberate irony on Montale's part, 'since the trappings of ancient Rome appealed greatly to the Romans'. This extreme attempt to force political meaning on the poetry (in order, one suspects, to reconcile it with the more open tone of condemnation of *Bufera*) is typified by his casting of Clizia as the 'angel of resistance to Fascism', the opponent of a 'war-machine that has recruited the multitudes', the representative of an 'elite few who exercise intelligence and look with loathing upon the mobilization of an all too weak and malleable populace'.

Becker's assessment of Montale's post-war poetry and prose is, on the whole, the most successful part of his book: helped, of course, by Montale's outspokenness concerning his last phase, and his open, often polemical participation in post-war literary and political debates. The *Botta e risposta* poems in particular, through the condemnation of fascism and post-fascism contained in the allegory of the Augean stables, and the open reference to the Colonels' dictatorship in Greece, confirm, in Becker's mind, Montale's alertness and concern for the political climate of his time, and nullify his frequent protestations of the innocence of his poetry.

It is unfortunate that Becker should end his attempt to prove the existence of a political motive in Montale's work by going as far as suggesting its centrality. The love poet and the existential poet, he claims, are not lost in this assessment: quite the contrary. They gain 'prestige', when it is understood that they 'come from an oeuvre

that does not propose mere manipulation of images, sounds, and conventions as its final end'. I suspect this might be not simply a way of supporting one's argument but a serious flaw in the understanding of that metaphysical and existential Montale that the author carefully refuses to consider.

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

EMMANUELA TANDELLO

Essays in Honour of Robert Brian Tate from his Colleagues and Pupils. Edited by RICHARD A. CARDWELL. (University of Nottingham Monographs in the Humanities, 2) Nottingham: University of Nottingham. 1984. viii + 148 pp. £11.00.

Readings in Spanish and Portuguese Poetry for Geoffrey Connell. Edited by NICHOLAS G. ROUND and D. GARETH WALTERS. Glasgow: University of Glasgow, Department of Hispanic Studies. 1985. vii + 273 pp. £4.50.

The *festschrift* tradition of scholarship is now not only well established but also beginning to develop its own distinguishing characteristics. Since their *raison d'être* is to commemorate the example and achievements of outstanding scholars and teachers, it is scarcely surprising if *festschriften*, either by editorial design or the link shared by their contributors, reflect above all the personality, interests, foibles even, of those to whom they are dedicated. In this respect, *Essays in Honour of Robert Brian Tate* and *Readings in Spanish and Portuguese Poetry for Geoffrey Connell* (referred to here as *Essays RBT* and *Readings GC*) are typical, though the warmth and genuineness with which the individual and collective tribute is paid must surely be notable in both cases.

For a period of ten years between 1957 and 1967 the careers of Brian Tate and Geoffrey Connell developed in the close proximity of the Spanish Department at the University of Nottingham, where Brian was the first holder of the Chair of Spanish, from 1958 until his retirement in 1983. In those early years Geoffrey Connell, affable and down-to-earth, taught various courses in modern Spanish literature, including his beloved specialism, the poetry of the Generation of 1927. Brian Tate, a quiet but immensely formidable presence, taught everything except those areas of medieval and Renaissance studies for which he was already renowned. 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing': so runs the Russian proverb which inspired Sir Isaiah Berlin's famous categorizations. Viewed in these terms, Brian Tate was the most Tolstoyan of foxes and Geoffrey Connell an impassioned Dostoyevskian hedgehog. If the dedications of these volumes of essays are to be believed, passing time has not significantly undone the comparison.

In *Essays RBT*, Richard Cardwell has assembled seventeen contributions covering aspects of the language, literature, history, and ideas of Spain from medieval to modern times, and although three-quarters of them are concerned with literary topics, they constitute an unusually heterodox and broadly-based homage. Notwithstanding the fact that they are all devoted to readings of poetry, the catholicity of the nineteen essays included by Nicholas Round and Gareth Walters in *Readings GC* is similarly marked. Indeed, taken together, these two volumes make up an intriguing 'state of the art' exposition of contemporary Hispanic studies in Britain: not, perhaps, one that is fully comprehensive, but one that is none the less revealing. The reader emerges as from a gallery of miniatures by diverse and often distinguished hands with the overall impression of a range of academic writing of a standard which is high in the sense that, even where a choice of topic may seem idiosyncratic or its treatment slightly lightweight, there is no mistaking the soundness of basic approach and judgement, or the scrupulous application of scholarly tools and techniques, which are its hallmark. Yet even at the stage where