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| Hermeticism |
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| Though it originates in the work of H. D., hermeticism achieves its most lasting impact and enduring legacy in the work of mid-century Italian poets. Within modernism, hermeticism names an alternative sensibility which remains in the shadow of the dominant modernist motifs of rupture and novelty and is drawn, instead, to the paradox of a productive retreat, of strength in weakness. It insists upon the intimate relationship of reading, its community-making power, and the capacity of language to respond to the most brutal challenges of history. One of the symbols of this strain of modernism is the self-enclosed completeness of the pearl and the shell in H. D.’s earlier imagistic poems. Later, in the poems of *Trilogy*, the non-referential intimacy of the shell suggests the more extreme withdrawal of the closed-in ‘egg in egg-shell’ (Gubar 67), emblem of the power of natural objects to withstand apocalypse and the deluge of history. |
| Though it originates in the work of H. D., hermeticism achieves its most lasting impact and enduring legacy in the work of mid-century Italian poets. Within modernism, hermeticism names an alternative sensibility which remains in the shadow of the dominant modernist motifs of rupture and novelty and is drawn, instead, to the paradox of a productive retreat, of strength in weakness. It insists upon the intimate relationship of reading, its community-making power, and the capacity of language to respond to the most brutal challenges of history. One of the symbols of this strain of modernism is the self-enclosed completeness of the pearl and the shell in H. D.’s earlier imagistic poems. Later, in the poems of *Trilogy*, the non-referential intimacy of the shell suggests the more extreme withdrawal of the closed-in ‘egg in egg-shell’ (Gubar 67), emblem of the power of natural objects to withstand apocalypse and the deluge of history.  The form of the shell can be traced back to the mythological figure of Hermes (Mercury for the Romans), who scooped out the shell of a tortoise, converted it into a lyre, and gave it to his brother Apollo. The Egyptian name of Hermes was Thoth, adviser to King Osiris, who is supposed to have invented the general manner of writing and also the hieroglyphs. The body of texts by Hermes, called Hermetica, describes initiations which, unlike the Eleusinian initiation rites, were not based on the display of sacred object or visual images, but on the experience of an interior turn of the soul (Ebeling). Under the guise of Thoth, Hermes repeatedly appears in H. D.’s poetry to announce a writing steeped in the mystery of desire, in the fire of embodied thought, in the union of consciousness and flesh, as well as in ethical purpose.In *Trilogy*, hermetic writing variously refers to an ‘intended script,’ a magical ‘scribbling,’ a poetry ‘indelibly stamped,’ whose decoding is the answer to violence:  remember, O Sword,  you are the younger brother, the latter-born,  your Triumph, however exultant,  must one day be over,  *in the beginning*  *was the Word.*  In her later production, H. D. uses the phrase ‘hermetic definition’ to clarify her life-long poetic practice:  I did not cheat  Nor fake inspiration  What I wrote was right then,  Auguries, hermetic definition . . .  The Italian poets of the 1920s and 1930s, who were later grouped under the label of hermeticism, initially used as a slight, shared with H. D. the dream of a new and intensely private mode of writing that might recreate the world against the course of history. The group included Giuseppe Ungaretti, Salvatore Quasimodo, Dino Campana, Mario Luzi, Eugenio Montale, and others. They practiced a *poésie pure*, an oblique poetry as shorn of narrative and rhetoric and as experimental in syntax and ornaments as the modernist poetry of T. S. Eliot. Like H. D., however, they wanted ‘an escape from entrapment’ (Gubar 68). One of the motifs of Italian hermeticism was a profound sense of alienation or marginality. For Carlo Bo, absence was ‘the sign of our non-belonging to culture or of our exclusive belonging to literature’ (qtd. in Stasi 30). Concrete images work to create a secretive shell that is protective of the poet and attracts the kindred reader, as, for example, in Luzi's early poetry (*La Barca* 1924) and in Quasimodo's inscrutable imagistic lyrics (*Acque e Terre* 1930 and *Oboe Sommerso* 1932).  Some of the poets who practiced hermeticism during the period largely coextensive with fascism later rejected their own work for its inability to oppose the totalitarian regime. Quasimodo, in particular, affirmed the poet's obligation to locate himself in the real world and not to become blind to social and political reality ‘while inwardly watching the setting of the Pleiades’ (Brock xxxii). Despite what Carlo Bo called their ‘sin of omission,’ the hermetic poets clearly remain an Italian version of early twentieth-century modernism and deserve further investigation, especially in their intimate link to an Anglophone other. Dino Campana's atmospheres — ’waning sky,’ the ‘ambiguous spring,’ the ‘solitary streets’, and ‘the heart unsatisfied/and unrepentant’ — closely recall the early poetry of T. S. Eliot. The longing for authenticity, common to all the members of the movement, reflected the much wider European confluence of literature and philosophy in the pursuit of a truth which seemed close to manifestation only in the most ordinary objects of material life, as in Eugenio Montale's ‘Lemons.’ The desire for authenticity also profoundly alters the course of life and the experience of private feelings. In the case of Dino Campana, private love is reconfigured as artistic collaboration. In a lyric to Sibilla Aleramo he writes:  In one moment  the roses withered  their petals fell  because I could not forget the roses  we searched them out together  we found some roses  they were her roses they were my roses  this journey we called love  with our blood and with our tears we made roses  which gloried for one moment with the morning sun  we withered them under the sun among the briars  the roses that were not our roses  my roses her roses.  Like H. D.'s ‘Greek flower’ and ‘Greek ecstasy,’ Campana and Aleramo's roses metaphorically name the poet's sense of belonging to an avant-garde circle committed to the life-long pursuit of a different writing which indeed coincides with ‘the journey we called love.’  Perhaps the first moment of international dissemination of Italian hermeticism is Renato Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1968). Poggioli's understanding of the avant-garde text, difficult to find, difficult to understand, and difficult to defend (Poggioli 91), seems to flow from the textuality of Campana and the others, which sought the meaningful encounter between strangers, and, aimed to breed instant love in the anonymous reader, ultimately repositioned the reader as a familiar infamiliar, an absent other who nevertheless exists vividly on the page. |
| Further reading:  (Brock)  (Ebeling)  (Gubar)  (Marz)  (Marz, Hermetic Definition)  (Poggioli)  (Stasi) |