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Stefano Giannini

Memory and the Realization of the Nothingness. On a Letter of Vittorio Sereni to Giuseppe Ungaretti

In the closing of a brief prose to remember Giuseppe Ungaretti, Vittorio Sereni touches on the concept of places and memory in his older friend's works:

... la poesia faceva da tramite non più congetturale al moto di reciprocità tra la condizione temporale, storica dell'individuo e l'intuizione di un superiore e segreto universo; nel lampo della precarietà veniva in luce il concreto delle situazioni. Era Parigi oppure Milano o il ricordo persistente, mai veramente represso, dell'Africa. Questo, in alternativa con quello più occasionale, ma presente, non eludibile del fronte di guerra, era poi lo sfondo dell'*Allegria*; e conta poco che in certi casi indicazioni locali e temporali non concordino con la cosa evocata, tanto preponderante e ubiquo è il ruolo della memoria. (Sereni, 1981: 732)

... poetry acted as the path, no longer hypothetical, to the motion of reciprocity between the individual's temporal and historical condition, and the intuition of a superior and secret universe. In the moment of uncertainty, the concrete of the situations came to light. It was Paris, or Milan, or the persistent memory, never really repressed, of Africa. This was truly the background – as an alternative with the more occasional, yet present and unavoidable one of the battlefield – of *Allegria*. It doesn't really matter that in some instances spatial and temporal references would not match with the evoked subject, such is the preponderance and the ubiquity of the role of memory.¹

Sereni's words present the opportunity to reflect on two issues: the role of memory in artists' works and Ungaretti's relationship with places, in this case his relationship with Africa. I surmise that the more general issue can fruitfully intersect with the more specific second one. What Leone Piccioni, the biographer par excellence of Ungaretti, observes on Ungaretti's *modus operandi* is an indication of the potential overlapping:

non ci sarà, infatti, una sola fase della sua ricerca poetica lungo l'arco di mezzo secolo e più, che si conosce, non una sola indicazione ideologica che non sia riconnettibile, per conseguenza o per contrasto, con la vita, con l'esperienza, con l'emozione del deserto e della vita ad Alessandria. (Piccioni, 1970: 39-40)

there will not be one single period during his more than half-a-century-long poetic quest, known to us, [and] not one single ideological indication that cannot be reconnected, as per consequence or contrast, with the life, the experience, the emotion of his desert and of his life in Alexandria.

¹ My translation. Subsequent translations of prose from French and Italian are mine, unless otherwise indicated. Ungaretti's poetry is translated by A. Mandelbaum, if not otherwise indicated. Sereni's poetry is translated by M. Perryman and P. Robinson.

The words with which Sereni and Piccioni describe Ungaretti's belabored shuttling back and forth between memory and eternity captures the tension in Ungaretti's poetry that animated his consuming desire to remember. The African experience is the memory "never truly repressed," as recognized by Sereni, of Ungaretti's youth that negotiate its existence in many pages of his poetry and prose.

When Ungaretti writes about Alexandria, Egypt, and the desert, his poetic language reveals the complex relationship with his city of birth and his African experience, in which the failure of the author to fulfill the desire to capture his city does not cancel his ability to move toward it. Language opacity in Ungaretti is coupled with his attempts to represent his place of birth, a city—as he writes—that is suffocated by the sun and whose hidden ancient port is submerged by the depths of the sea. Blinding light and the darkness of the deep waters make the understanding of Ungaretti's representation of Alexandria a delicate process. Ungaretti's verses move toward the transcendence of desire, in the form of a repetition (the attempted description of Alexandria) that embodies the desire to capture the traits of his city of birth. The failure to capture his city reveals the threat of the nothingness recognized in Ungaretti's verses.

I believe that Sereni's poetry offers a powerful insight into Ungaretti's poetic discourse, a discourse that Sereni ultimately shares. Sereni (1913-1983) entertained a long epistolary exchange with his older friend, that opens the reading of some of his poems to the possibility of an investigation into the sustained yet asymmetric discourse that took place between the two friends. (Sereni and Ungaretti, 2013)

In the following pages, I will analyze Ungaretti's poetry in order to investigate his relationship with his Egyptian experience and Sereni's presence as a respondent to

Ungaretti's stimuli. The interplay between memory and oblivion in Ungaretti's poetry marks the nature of his unfulfilled desire to recreate a lost Alexandrian atmosphere. It seems as if Ungaretti were aware that all images will eventually disappear, yet by writing them he knowingly seeks to save them. I argue that Sereni re-considers the theme of the light and of the city but he recognizes that the images are drowned in a nihilistic recognition of the unalterable human limitations.

At the end of the summer 1912, the 24-year old Ungaretti left Alexandria, Egypt, and landed in Brindisi, Italy. It was the first time that Ungaretti, soon to become one of the greatest Italian poets of the 20th century, visited Italy, a country he had never seen but that was always present in his heart. From Brindisi, Ungaretti moved north to Florence and by the end of September he had reached Paris, the city where he had chosen to pursue his artistic career and where he subsequently studied at the Sorbonne and attended classes at the Collège de France. During his years in Paris he befriended, among many others, influential artists such as Claude, Jammes, Apollinaire, Picasso, Braque, Delaunay, De Chirico, Modigliani, and Severini. But even before leaving Alexandria, Ungaretti had been meticulously listening to and rapidly absorbing the newest literary voices of Europe. His early project to build an image for himself as a writer deeply embedded in European culture clearly emerges from Ungaretti's early Egyptian writings. (Rebay)

Even if such a project had been under way well before his departure from Alexandria—the city where his family, Italian migrants from the area of Lucca, had settled and where he was born in 1888—until his early twenties Ungaretti lived in a cosmopolitan city where many ethnicities mingled and coexisted: Italian, Greek, Turk, Armenian, Jewish, Lebanese, Syrian, Russian, French, German, Austrian and British communities lived in what

was the second largest city of Egypt (Starr, 2009: 15-24). He wrote to a friend: “mi avvenne di nascere lontano, in una cosmopoli, in un’antica fucina di contrastanti civiltà. ... Sono un italiano di nostalgia” [I happened to be born far away, in a cosmopolis, an ancient crucible of conflicting civilizations. . . I’m an Italian by nostalgia] (Ungaretti, 1988: 224). Those twenty-four years were of great significance to Ungaretti’s life. In parallel with his youthful project to profile himself as an author immersed in the French and Italian literary milieus, readers must consider his public—albeit belated—recognitions of his close attachment to Egypt and its cultural heritage. In a 1952 interview printed in the *Bourse Égyptienne*, Ungaretti acknowledged that his Alexandrian youth had permeated his literary sensibility:

Si ma poésie a quelque qualité, cela tient au fait que j’ai vécu près d’un désert et qu’en Égypte toute mon enfance a été bercée par un chant arabe. (Zingone, 2008: 219)

If my poetry possesses a quality, it is tied to the fact that I lived close to a desert, and that in Egypt an Arabic song has nursed me in my childhood.

In another interview for the same periodical, Ungaretti subsequently reiterated his unique debt to his city of birth and restated the paramount importance of Alexandrian life for his art:

l’Égypte, Alexandrie, l’Alexandrie de mon enfance, sont partout présents dans mon œuvre. (Zingone, 2008: 224)

Egypt, Alexandria, [and] the Alexandria of my childhood are always present in my work.

These declarations of profound influence on his works seem to contrast the infrequency of open references to Alexandria in his poetry. One of the few of such references comes in the 1915 poem “Il paesaggio d’Alessandria d’Egitto” [The Landscape of Alexandria] (Ungaretti, 2009: 407). In this poem, the elements that conjure up the idea of a harsh land are enumerated one by one: the unnerving presence of the sun; the ox as the main energy source for a mill; the lonely and tired *fellah*, or peasant.

However, despite this poetic beginning so rich in cultural and linguistic presences² and the realization that the brief chronological hiatus could not have been the obstacle to the recreation of a visible city—he had left Alexandria only three years before—after “Il paesaggio d’Alessandria d’Egitto,” Ungaretti’s city seems to fade into concealment over the subsequent course of his artistic journey. The apparent absence, or disguised presence, of Alexandria in his poetry is a factor that resonates throughout his art. Questions arise as to whether this disguised presence (or progressing remoteness from Ungaretti’s mind?) stems from early plans to distance himself from his city of birth or if the concealment should be instead considered the indication of a more complex interplay of memory and oblivion in his lyrical reflection. The interplay between these concepts is visible in the process of preparation of several of his poems.

With the early exception of “Il paesaggio d’Alessandria d’Egitto,” Ungaretti removes toponyms from his lyrics: “Ricordo d’Africa” [Memory of Africa] was originally titled “Meriggio d’agosto a Tanta” [August afternoon in Tanta] (a city fewer than 100 miles southeast of Alexandria); “Casa mia” [My Home] was originally “La nostra casa di Moarrembei” [Our House in Moarrembei], an Alexandrian neighborhood.³ The city’s literary aura appears in Ungaretti’s first collection of poetry: *Il porto sepolto* [The Buried

² “Il paesaggio d’Alessandria d’Egitto” ends with a “contrasto,” a verbal exchange of erotic content between the peasant and his lover. The exchange is quite important because it is the incorporation of an Egyptian folk song into Ungaretti’s poetry. Ungaretti wrote: “La strofa del ritornello è la traduzione, autentica, d’un brano d’un solito invito dei miei arabi d’Egitto. (‘Taali li, ia batta. Uanani ali, hì. ecc.’)” [The stanza of the refrain is my translation of an authentic fragment of a song of my Arabs of Egypt. (‘Taali li, ia batta. Uanani ali, hì. etc.’)] (Ungaretti 1988, 3). The transcription of the verses is: “- Taali ya batta | - wa ana ma li e | - Taali fel mahatta | - wa ana ma li e | - Taali fel oda | - wa ana ma li e”: “-Come here beautiful (duck) | - What do I care | - My bed of silk has colors subtle as a poem. | - What do I care. | - I’ll teach you the wiles of the cool sunset. | - What do I care,” cf. F. Gabrieli, “Ungaretti e la cultura araba,” p. 658; A. Marianni, “Contributo allo studio delle fonti della poesia di G. U.,” pp. 1115-1117. Excerpts of this “contrasto” are recalled in his 1923 prose “Roma africana,” cf. (Ungaretti, 2000c: 8).

³ M. Scriboni has pointed out Ungaretti’s elusiveness and reticence in depicting a recognizable Alexandria (Scriboni, 2005: 155-187).

Port]. The history of the old underwater port of Alexandria motivates the title of his first collection of poetry and its opening lyric:

Vi arriva il poeta / e poi torna alla luce con i suoi canti / e li disperde // Di questa poesia / mi resta /
quel nulla / d'inesauribile segreto (Ungaretti, 2009: 61)

The poet goes there / then returns to the light with his songs / and scatters them // Of this poetry /
there remains to me / that nothing / of inexhaustible secrecy

Ungaretti explains as follows:

I have been asked why my first small collection of poems was called *Il porto sepolto* [The Buried Harbor]. When I was 16 or 17, perhaps older, I knew two young French engineers, the Thuile brothers, Jean and Henri Thuile. ... They lived outside Alexandria, in the middle of the desert, at Mex. They spoke to me of a port, a submerged port, that must have preceded Ptolemaic times, proving that Alexandria was a port even before Alexander, that even before his time it was a city. We know nothing about this. My city destroys and annihilates itself from instant to instant. How can we find out about its origins if nothing at all survives—even of what happened a moment ago? We know nothing about it; there is no other sign of it than that port preserved in the depths of the sea—that sea which is the only document handed down to us from every age of Alexandria. The title of my first book derives from that port: *Il porto sepolto*. (Ungaretti, 1975: 203-204)⁴

In Ungaretti, the attempts to clearly depict Alexandria acquire a sense of futility to the point of self-jeering, and the poet's birthplace remains equally disguised. In his poetry, the unmentioned city is constrained by more limitations. The Africa of the brief "Ricordo d'Affrica" is an indistinct space:

Il sole rapisce la città / Non si vede più / Neanche le tombe resistono molto (Ungaretti, 2009: 49)

The sun kidnaps the city / We can't see anymore / Not even the tombs can resist

The city is hidden by an excess of light: readers cannot precisely picture it because Ungaretti is blinded and so are they. The poet had reiterated this strategy in "Silenzio" [Silence], in which the city "ogni giorno s'empie di sole / e tutto è rapito in quel momento" (vv. 2-3) [every day is filled with sun /and all is ensnared in that instant]. Alexandria becomes the city that fades. During a visit to Egypt in the early 1930a, he wrote in his "1914-1915":

Ti vidi, Alessandria, / Friabile sulle tue basi spettrali / Diventarmi un ricordo / In un abbraccio
sospeso di lumi. (Ungaretti, 2009: 201)

⁴ As Carlo Ossola points out, in "Il porto sepolto" the poet arrives at the port and dives into its water, the space devoted to poetry. When the poet returns to the light, by resurfacing from the ritual bath in the waters of Lethe, the river of oblivion, he is born, pure, to poetry again. Ossola discusses the Virgilian origin of the third verse: "and scatters them," "dispersit in auras," calling to mind the role of Sybil, whose prophesies were dispersed at the mercy of the wind (Ungaretti, 1981: 28). The poet of Ungaretti's verses scatters his songs just as the Sybil's prophesies were likewise scattered and taken away by the wind. There might be something more than a message in the bottle: "disperdere" has a negative connotation. It also means to waste, to dissipate; that is: the premonition (again, the Sybil) of a light that will soon cease to exist, that is of a poetry that will vanish.

I saw you, Alexandria, / Crumbly over your ghostly foundations / Become a memory / In a suspended embrace of lights.

In Ungaretti's "Monotonia," blindness is the price to pay for the complexities of life: "Il groviglio dei sentieri / possiede la mia cecità" [The entanglement of paths / possesses my blindness] (vv. 6-7). Ungaretti's African sun never ceases to show its unrivalled force: "Il sole mangia gli occhi" [The sun eats one's eyes], Ungaretti wrote in a letter to his friend Giovanni Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 41). Ungaretti had captured the annihilating force of the sun in the verses of "Calumet":

Je connais un pays / où le soleil engourdit / même le scorpions // seul là s'est endormi / cet agneauloup // seul me serait étranger / au climat / de la mort / cet agneauloup / en exil / partout (Ungaretti, 2009: 403)

I know a country / where the sun numbs / even the scorpions // alone, over there the wolflamb / fell asleep // alone, I would feel foreign / toward the atmosphere / of death / this wolflamb / everywhere / in exile [my translation]

The power that incapacitates the scorpion is echoed in "La risata dello Dginn Rull" [The Laughter of the Dginn Rull], which describes the landscape of Mecs, a stretch of land on the western outskirts of Alexandria where Ungaretti's friends, the brothers Jean-Léon and Henry Thuile, lived:

Il sole già cade a piombo; tutto ora è sospeso e turbato; ogni moto è coperto, ogni rumore soffocato. Non è un'ora d'ombra, né un'ora di luce. È l'ora della monotonia estrema. Questa è l'ora cieca, questa è l'ora di notte del deserto. ... Ah! se non fosse quella frustata che dalla pianta dei piedi vi scioglie il sangue in una canzone, rauca, malinconica, maledetta, direste che questo è il nulla. . . . Non c'è una locusta a quest'ora, non un camaleonte, non un porcospino, non una lucertola, non uno scorpione; non c'è una quaglia, né uno sciacallo, né uno scarabeo, né una vipera cornuta; ma inciampo nello scheletro d'un mehari che farà musica stanotte quando il vento marino gli passerà tra le costole . . . allora lo Ualad-Ali per sorprendermi col suo bastone scaverà la sabbia e mostrerà con un inchino la testa del mehari che s'è mummificata; poi, senza toccarla, facendo cadere la sabbia col piede, la ricoprirà con cura. (Ungaretti, 2000b: 84-85)⁵

The sun is now at its highest point; now everything is suspended and distressed; every movement is covered, every noise suffocated. It's not the time of shadows, nor the time of light. It is the time of extreme monotony. This is the blind hour, this is the time of the night of the desert. ... Ah! If not for

⁵ Jean-Léon and Henry Thuile, were the two brothers whose vast library in their house at Mecs (at the time a stretch of barren land east of Alexandria) nourished Ungaretti's literary interests. Henry played a more important role in this discovery, as stated by Ungaretti: "Henri Thuile (plus tard Thuile bey, secrétaire européen du roi Fouad). C'est lui qui m'a révélé la poésie arabe" (Zingone, 2008: 220).

the whipping that from the soles of your feet melts your blood in a rasping, melancholic, damned song, you'd say that this is the emptiness. . . . There is no locust around at this time, not a chameleon, not a hedgehog, not a lizard, not a scorpion; not a quail, not a jackal, not a beetle, not a horned viper; but I stumble upon the skeleton of a mehari that will produce music tonight, when the sea winds will pass through its ribs . . . then the Ualad-Ali, so to surprise me, with his cane will dig in the sand and show me, with a bowing of his head, the mummified head of the mehari; then, without touching it, moving the sand back with his foot, he will carefully cover it up again.

The web of images is dense as it reaches intra- and intertextual levels. The theme of the excess of light, "l'ora cieca" when the sun is at its highest point, that is the blind hour of the day, fascinated Ungaretti to the point where he decided to prepare an anthology of texts linked to the image of the "demonio meridiano" of Psalm XCI, in which Ungaretti selected texts that share the inquiry on the powers of the sun and the sensual atmosphere it generates. For example, "Il demonio meridiano" includes Ungaretti's translations of Mallarmé's "L'après-midi d'un faune. Églogue": "Inerte, tutto brucia / Nell'ora fulva. . . ." (Ungaretti, 2010: 1155) [Inert, everything burns / In the red air. . . .]⁶ The image of the mehari returns under the guise of the "ossame bianchissimo" ("white, white bone") unearthed by the Bedouin of the "Ultimi cori per la Terra Promessa" [Final Choruses for the Promised Land] and the skeletons of "Di luglio" [In July]: "È l'estate e nei secoli/ Con i suoi occhi calcinanti / Va della terra spogliando lo scheletro."⁷ The bizarre origin of the music

⁶ Ungaretti and Alessandro Parronchi discussed the translation of the text in several letters exchanged between October 25, 1945 and February 21, 1946; cf. Parronchi, 1992: 12-40. The anthology was not completed. "Il demonio meridiano" has been published in Ungaretti's *Vita d'un uomo: Traduzioni poetiche* (1035-1174). Leopardi discusses the "demonio meridiano" in his "Annotazioni alle dieci canzoni stampate a Bologna nel 1824" to "Alla primavera" (Leopardi 523). "Introduzione alla canzone 'Alla primavera'" is the title of a course that Ungaretti devoted to the poet; cf. "Lezioni su Leopardi" (Ungaretti, 2000a: 903-919)

⁷ The all-inclusive list of animals of "La risata dello Dginn Rull" points to a potentially shared sensibility that echoes Henri Thuile's verses in *Lampe de terre*. Whereas in Ungaretti's "Calumet" the sun was able to numb the scorpions, in Thuile's verses the beetle (symbol of the sun for the ancient Egyptians) is incapacitated by the presence of the same force:

Je suis le scarabée du vieux mur qu'on arrache / à la campagne, aux bois, aux sources d'alentour; / ce grand soleil brûlant me trouble et me rend lâche / j'ai peur du bonheur qui ne dure qu'un jour.
(Thuile, 1912: 9)

I am the beetle of the old wall that gets pulled off / in the countryside, in the woods, and its surroundings; / it is this big burning sun that disturbs me and makes me feeble / I am afraid of happiness because it lasts just one day.

triggered by the passing of the wind through the mehari's bones evokes a future example of a nocturnal music of the wind in Sereni's "Non sa più nulla, è alto sulle ali" [He knows nothing anymore, is borne up on wings]: "È il vento, / il vento che fa musiche bizzarre" [It's the wind, / the wind which makes strange music], vv. 8-9, *Diario d'Algeria* (Sereni, 1995: 76), where instead of the ribs of the animal, the musical instruments are the tents that flap against their poles.

The emptiness (the *néant*) grips Ungaretti's thoughts: "you'd say that this is the emptiness" announces in "The Laughter of the Dginn Rull." Ultimately, the inability to see because of the blinding light is conjugated with a fluctuating feeling of inanity and the pangs of a memory that does not want to be revisited. The memory is worn down by the reflections on nothingness that the opposition sound/existence further weakens.⁸

Ungaretti seems wary at the thought of embracing Alexandria again and thus retrieves a feeble and contradictory justification for his inability to depict it:

Com'è disordinata questa città! Tutte queste lingue che s'incrociano; queste insegne, italiane, francesi, arabe, greche, armene, delle botteghe; l'architettura; il gusto! Quale Merlin Cocai s'è divertito a inventarla? Non so quale rancore m'invade, d'amarla, questa mia città natale! (*Vita d'un uomo: Viaggi e lezioni* 33).

How cluttered is this city! All these languages that mix up; these banners—Italian, French, Arab, Greek, Armenian—of the shops; the architectural style; the taste! Which macaronic poet amused himself coming up with it? I cannot explain the resentment that invades me, for loving, this city of my birth!

In this context, *lâche*, which means feeble (but also cowardly) denotes a state of being that, exacerbated by the excess of light, deprives the poet of the courage to identify the objects and leaves him to face an incapacitating emptiness.

⁸ Cf. Ungaretti, "Variazioni su nulla" [Variations of Nought]: "La mano in ombra la clessidra volse, / E, di sabbia, il nonnulla che trascorre / Silente, è l'unica cosa che ormai s'oda / E, essendo udita, in buio non scompaia" [The hand in shadow turned the hourglass, / And, flowing silently, the null-and-nought / Of sand, by now, is all that can be heard, / And, being heard, in darkness does not fade] (Ungaretti, 2009: 292).

Paradoxically, however, it seems that his justification serves him well in recreating his birth city. It is possible that Ungaretti suppressed his ability and desire to see Alexandria, and hence the nothingness exists in the vicissitudes of his desire to leave and to return. To achieve this primordial status, Ungaretti takes a different route and embarks on a journey, as witnessed by “Silenzio”:

Dal bastimento / verniciato di bianco / ho visto / la mia città sparire / lasciando / un poco / un abbraccio di lumi nell'aria torbida / sospesi (Ungaretti, 2009: 71)

From the ship / painted in white / I saw / my city disappear / leaving / a little / an embracing of lights in the dark air / hanging

Ungaretti's memory of Alexandria has become fragile so that the city can be bought in sight with utmost care, almost as if through a delicate archeological excavation. His native city immediately becomes the space where memory and oblivion play out their dialectic properties, upon which he reflected during his first return to Egypt. In 1931, nineteen years after his departure from Alexandria, Ungaretti wrote:

Ho vissuto in Egitto i primi vent'anni, e mi sono diventati, in più di vent'anni lontano, una bolla di sapone, una nuvoletta iridescente con l'interna vaghezza di luoghi e di persone nel trattenuto dissolversi d'un giuoco. Carità finale della memoria! (Ungaretti, 2000b: 27)

I lived in Egypt for the first twenty years of my life, and after more than twenty years away from it, they have become like a bubble blown into the air, an iridescent cloud with its internal haziness of places and people in the slow dissolving of a game. Ultimate charity of memory!

Ungaretti's ever-changing city is the space in which pale vestiges of the past lend themselves to being seen as interchangeable parts of other cities. Alexandria becomes a city whose presence is felt in all other cities; or rather, a city with the uncanny power to become all the other cities, in a perilous dance around the feeling of nothingness that—according to Ungaretti—creates the desire that marks the lives of those born near the desert: “. . . sentiment du néant, qui est au corps de tout désir. . . Sentiment que tout est

illusoire . . . Ce son là des émotions familières à ceux qui ont vécu dans la proximité d'un désert" (Zingone, 2008: 224, ellipses in original).

This city obscured by water ("Il porto sepolto") and sun ("Il paesaggio d'Alessandria," "Ricordo d'Affrica," "Silenzio," "1914-1915," and "Calumet") is a city that Ungaretti ultimately accuses of effacing its own memory; a city that therefore undermines the poet's quest for an identity and for a truth that divests itself of every illusory protection in order, ultimately, to show the nothingness. Almost as if imitating the self-effacing quality of Alexandria, Ungaretti remains a victim torn between the will to efface and to remember his city, knowingly lured by its power of illusion but capable of resisting it.⁹ It seems as if Ungaretti were unable to find his ideal space, and estranged from it, he simultaneously is drawn toward it and distances himself from it, a voluntary victim of the desire that separates him from his memory, the city from his language. He can obtain only limited and temporary identifications in his journeys of reflection.

From his condition of exile, he can exercise his memory to allow him to return whenever he wishes to a place nestled within him.¹⁰ His endless journeys eternalized in the lines of his "Joy of Shipwrecks"¹¹; his inability to find the ideal place; his reluctant brief returns to Alexandria are all more than signs of nostalgia: they are signs of the restless inner search for an identity that was fractured by the realization of the permanent lack of

⁹ For example, in a letter to Papini dated July 12, 1916, Ungaretti informs his friend of four more verses to add after the first stanza of "Silenzio": "Come prima di nascere / come dopo la morte / ho vissuto il mio tempo africano / come sottoterra un seme" [As before birth / And after death / I lived my African years / As a seed underground]. But Ungaretti's acknowledgment of the centrality of his Alexandrian years would eventually be eliminated from the published text (Ungaretti, 1988: 61).

¹⁰ "Tout mon œuvre est imprégnée du parfum de cette Égypte inoubliable inoubliée" [My entire work is saturated by the fragrance of this unforgotten, unforgettable Egypt] (Zingone, 2008: 221).

¹¹ "E subito riprende / il viaggio / come / dopo il naufragio / un superstite / lupo di mare" [And instantly takes up / the voyage / as / after the shipwreck / a surviving / sea wolf] (Ungaretti, 2009: 99).

the ideal space. In a university lecture on the solitude of human beings that he gave during the 1940s, Ungaretti wrote:

l'infinito malinconico dell'uomo è il suo passato, e l'uomo non ha altro: un passato ch'è tutto nella nostra memoria, anche in quell'immensa parte di memoria che s'è oscurata, che è diventata oblio, che tutto lo sforzo umano dovrà tendere a riportare in luce; ma che sarà sempre, ahimè, luce di riflessi! Ricordi! La solitudine dell'uomo è di non possedere altro di proprio, di veramente suo, se non i suoi ricordi, con i quali è però solo, e per i quali si consuma nella notte della sua memoria. (Ungaretti, 2000b: 812-813)

the melancholic infinitude of men is their past, and men have nothing else: a past that is contained in our memory, even in that immense section of memory that has become dark, that became oblivion, that every human effort will be necessary to bring back to light; but that will always remain, alas, light of reflections! Memories! The loneliness of men is to not possess anything truly theirs, really theirs, except the memories, with which, however, they are alone, and for which they consume themselves in the nights of their memory.

Sereni underwent his own exile experience as a prisoner of war as chronicled in his *Diario d'Algeria* (1947). His book, deeply admired by Ungaretti, recounts the forced detachment, an absence he lamented, from the possibility to play a role in a country devastated by war.¹² The expression of the feelings of inability and inanity to heal from the wounds of the preponderant and ubiquitous memory that plagued Ungaretti are often found in Sereni.

The effort to recuperate from a distressful memory that “non si sfama mai,” (La malattia dell'olmo, v. 25) interlaces within Sereni's extended conversations with Ungaretti. In a 1964 letter to Ungaretti that announces the publication of *Gli strumenti umani*, Sereni confesses to his older friend that he is grappling with the completion of “La poesia è una passione?” [Poetry is a Passion?],” a poem in his book (Sereni, 1995: 153-155). Sereni is blocked at the moment when he wants to bring Ungaretti into his verses: “sono fermo al punto in cui entrate in gioco tu e la tua poesia” [now I am stuck when you and your poetry come into play] (Sereni and Ungaretti, 2013: 150). It is unclear what it was of Ungaretti

¹² On April 27 1964, Ungaretti wrote to Sereni: “Ti sono grato della fiducia che hai avuto scrivendomi del Tuo lavoro. Il *Diario d'Algeria* è l'unico libro da ricordare dell'ultima guerra” [I am grateful for the trust you showed to me by telling me of your work. *Algerian Diary* is the only book to remember from the war] (Sereni and Ungaretti, 2013: 154).

that Sereni sought to incorporate in his verses. The desired inclusion could be in reference to the theme of the excess of light as found in the “Larissa accecante” [Dazzling Larissa] of line 64 of “La poesia è una passione?” which refers to a city Sereni encountered during his war itinerary; the line in question potentially exhibits the suture between Ungaretti’s fleeting image of Alexandria and Sereni’s own inability to see yet another city.

Gabriella Palli Baroni’s suggestion to look at the later verses of “La poesia è una passione?” as a clue to Sereni’s wish is both sound and promising (Sereni and Ungaretti, 2013: 153). The seventeen new verses Sereni wrote – Sereni had stated he had always considered “La poesia è una passione?” as the initial installment of a text in flux (Sereni, 1995: 593) – describe a city leveled by the glare of the sun:

La poesia è una passione?

II

È tardi debbo andarmene – nella tromba
delle scale nello spirito
delle scale come se stesse dicendole
quello che non ha detto.
Se n’è andato in silenzio. Se ne va.
-- I suoi occhi morati che si dorano
all’ultimo sole – ripeterà per anni.
I suoi occhi morati. Si dorano. Continuano
a dorarsi nella risalita
nel ribaltamento degli attimi:
guardando i due la città livellata dal riverbero
dell’ultimo sole e poi dal buio e poi
ridisegnata dalle luci
qua e là uniformi
qua e là disseminate a caso
ma è, o vuole lui che sia, una sola fiamma.
Arde la fiamma calma e desolata.

22 marzo 1979

The iterated references to light, shine and sources of heat (“occhi morati che si dorano / all’ultimo sole”; “Si dorano. Continuano / a dorarsi”; “la città livellata dal riverbero”; “luci”; “fiamma”; “Arde la fiamma calma e desolata”) point to a theme powerfully close to Ungaretti: the surfeit of light that blinds and isolates human beings. This plausible

suggestion could be strengthened by the already mentioned older presence of “Larissa accecante” (included in the text published in *Gli strumenti umani*), however, it is another unnamed city, the one “livellata dal riverbero” [levelled by the glare], that seems even closer to Ungaretti’s experience. This line and the theme of light exhibits another plausible suture between Ungaretti’s Egyptian experience, its desert, Alexandria, spaces that are consistently referred to as invisible (“... una città / che ogni giorno s’empie di sole [...] ho visto / la mia città sparire;” “... la città / Non si vede più”; “Ti vidi, Alessandria, / Friabile sulle tue basi spettrali / diventarmi un ricordo”), uncanny and mystifying (“Il sole cade già a piombo [...] Questa è l’ora cieca, questa è l’ora di notte del deserto”; “Il sole mangia gli occhi”); and Sereni’s own inability to see another city. It is the light that triggers blindness and subsequently the realization of the nothingness, the crucial and persistent theme of his reflection dissected in Sereni’s fourth book, *Variable Star*.

In the unpublished second part of “La poesia è una passione?” its completion date – March 1979 – takes on an unexpected particular significance to shed light on Sereni’s intentions when he wrote his 1964 letter to inform Ungaretti of his decision to include “you and your poetry” in it. What did Sereni want to include about Ungaretti’s poetry in “La poesia è una passione?” The opportunity to consider another poem, published in its chronological proximity, is crucial to establish a network of internal cross references that, in turn, can help to think back at Ungaretti’s still ill-defined presence in “La poesia è una passione?”.

In “Poeti in via Brera: due età” Sereni posthumously captures the flaming rage of his friend as he vents on the value he attributed to poetry:

Ci vuole un secolo o quasi / -- fiammeggiava Ungaretti sulla porta / della Galleria Apollinaire -- / ci vuole tutta la fatica tutto il male / tutto il sangue marcio / tutto il sangue limpido / di un secolo per farne uno... (Sereni, 1995: 206, vv. 1-7)

The event evoked in Sereni's verses took place probably in 1962 (the publication of *Allegria: Parole di Ungaretti sulla pittura di Fautrier*, a plaquette to commemorate the opening of an exhibit on the French artist Jean Fautrier at the Galleria Apollinaire in Milan that Ungaretti attended), three years before "La poesia è una passione?" was published in *Gli strumenti umani*. "Poeti in via Brera: due età" was published in 1978. However, the late publication of "Poeti in via Brera" is not the only belated written testimony of the old friendship between the two, nor it is the only occasion Sereni returns, after many years, to revisit a situation, an encounter or an idea. He confesses in a letter to his friend to suffer of the "illness to wait for the right moment to write": "Per dichiarare una poesia compiuta – he writes to Ungaretti – debbo sfondare un diaframma di repulsione e di pigrizia, di paura. Vorrei dirti del gesto convulso e della scrittura convulsa con cui gratto la carta quando ho trovato dentro di me le parole che mi sembrano risolutive: o di quelle specie di puntelli con segno su un foglio [...] le parole, i versi che fanno da traccia alla poesia che un giorno potrò considerare finita." (Sereni and Ungaretti, 2013: 148)

It is possible that the images now found in the second part of "La poesia è una passione?" decanted in Sereni's mind until its 1978 almost contemporaneous appearance in his notebook, in chronological proximity with the publication of "Poeti in via Brera: due età." In it, Ungaretti appears in good company according to the convincing hypothesis of Niccolò Scaffai, as one of the six young poets of the second strophe could be Sereni himself, one of the representatives of a second phase in poetry as Ungaretti embodies the first. (Scaffai, 2014: 200) In this shifting of responsibilities and duties as heralds of poetry,

Sereni made his thoughts on his relationship with Ungaretti explicit: “Ti considero un padre, anzi mio padre” [I think of you as a father, actually my father] he wrote to Ungaretti in the same letter dated April 1, 1964 (Sereni and Ungaretti, 2013:151). He reiterated his feelings in *In morte di Ungaretti*, a brief text that evidences the deep and powerful affection towards his now lost friend, that begins: “Muore per la seconda volta mio padre.” (Sereni, 1998: 97-98)¹³

If the chronological proximity of events can help to delineate a context for Sereni’s letter, a careful look at the verses and dates included in Sereni’s notebooks might bring to the fore another poem and yield yet another promising cue. Between September 1977 and certainly until August 1979 – therefore during Sereni’s work on the second part of “La poesia è una passione? – Sereni was absorbed by the preparation of “Autostrada della Cisa,” one of his most celebrated poems. In it, another city is barely seen, obfuscated by the excess of heat and light: Mantua in the Po Valley. In “Autostrada della Cisa” the theme of excess of light that drives to blindness is recurring as Ungaretti’s mirage claims another victim in Sereni who, during a car ride back north from La Spezia to Parma, once the poet has traversed the Cisa mountain pass, he thinks he can descry Mantua far off in the Po Valley

¹³ The influence of a father shows in manifold aspects. Ungaretti’s more conspicuous presence in Sereni’s other texts has been recorded. For example, in Sereni’s “salta fossi fora siepi scavalca muri” (“Un posto di vacanza,” V, v. 43) as a calque from Ungaretti’s “strugge forre, beve fiumi, / macina scogli, splende” (“Di luglio,” vv. 4-5). In relation to the theme of excessive and consuming heat, it is useful to recall “la sua più mortale calcinazione” (“Verano e solstizio,” v. 9) echoing Ungaretti’s “occhi calcinanti” (“Di luglio,” v. 9), with the linkage, in both poems, of the theme of the consuming heat with the season associated to it (Cf. Mattia Coppo, 2014: 252). Or also the exploration of identical territories as in the case of “Autostrada della Cisa”: “vede laggiù quegli alberi perpetuare / ognuno in sé la sua ninfa” (vv. 16-17), a reference to Mallarmé’s *incipit* of “L’Après-midi d’un faune”: “Ces nymphes, je le veux perpetuer” that had already invited Ungaretti’s translation in his “Il demonio meridiano”: “Le voglio, quelle ninfe, perpetuare” published in his 1948 *Da Góngora a Mallarmé*.

surrounded by a lake as if it were Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec kingdom and today

Mexico City:

e dietro la raggera degli echi e dei miraggi / nella piana assetata il palpito di un lago / fare di Mantova una Tenochtitlán. (Sereni, 1995: 261-262, vv. 18-20)

and behind the radiating mirages and echoes / a lake's tremor in the parched plain / makes of Mantua a Tenochtitlán.

As Alexandria can become a mirage that conjures up stultifying emptiness, Mantua has become a mirage as well, whose memory tricks future generations into the persistence of happiness, as Sereni drily reminds his readers in a note of his about "Autostrada della Cisa":

A suo tempo allietata da un lago, [Tenochtitlán] era la capitale del regno azteco prima della conquista spagnola: città felice nel ricordo, come sempre dopo la catastrofe. (Sereni, 1995: 834)

In the past brightened by a lake, [Tenochtitlán] was the capital of the Aztec empire before the Spanish conquest: a happy city in one's memory, as always happens after the catastrophe.

The indistinct city lays in a desert-like parched land (piana assetata), hidden "behind the radiating mirages and echoes" that had already dulled the denotative traits of Ungaretti's Alexandria. The "palpito di un lago" surrounds Mantua/Tenochtitlán but it is unclear whether the lake delivers respite from the heat, or rather intensifies it. Is the city barely visible in "Autostrada della Cisa" Tenochtitlán, the city that is happy in one's memory? It is a viable hypothesis since Tenochtitlán is a city quite well known by Sereni. In the 1963 first issue of his *Questo e altro* Sereni had included Cristina Campo's translation of W. C. Williams's "The Destruction of Tenochtitlán," a city that, in Campo's translation, did not survive the banal and useless wrath of men: "Tenochtitlán: stritolata dai nomi che gli uomini danno al loro vuoto." (Williams, 1963: 84) Furthermore, Sereni had co-translated with Campo Williams's *Poesie* and several other texts now included in his *Il musicante di*

Saint-Merry.¹⁴ Or it is rather a variation of Ungaretti's Alexandria, the city consumed by the unrivalled force of the sun that consumes all memories to usher in a future of nothingness? The two possibilities are not mutually exclusive, because Alexandria, like Tenochtitlán, is a symbol. The fragile Egyptian city is the symbol of the tenuous nature of memory that, even if nurtured, devours images and feelings to yield, instead, to the frightening reality of a nothingness that is looming over.

In Sereni, in the parched plain of the Po Valley, the sensed presence of Mantua does not overcome the tragic message of the sibyl, whose fate confirms the infinite emptiness around human beings, who move forward from "bedazzlement to blindness":

Di tunnel in tunnel di abbagliamento in cecità / tendo una mano. Mi ritorna vuota. / Allungo un braccio. Stringo una spalla d'aria (vv. 21-23)

From tunnel to tunnel, bedazzlement to blindness / I extend a hand. It returns to me empty. / I reach out an arm, embrace a shoulder of air

The cards dealt to Sereni do not allow the recuperation of a redeeming human contact. The blinding light erases the possibility to see/to hope so that after memory is the nothingness that eventually choked Tenochtitlán:

Ancora non lo sai / [...] / non lo sospetti ancora / che di tutti i colori il più forte / il più indelebile / è il colore del vuoto? (vv. 24-31)

And do you still nor realize / [...] / do you still not suspect / that of all the colors the strongest / the most fast / is the color of nothingness?

The emptiness experienced by the son in "Autostrada della Cisa" responds to Ungaretti's *néant*, as described in an interview ("... sentiment du néant, qui est au corps de tout désir...

¹⁴ W.C. Williams, "La caduta di Tenochtitlán," tr. Cristina Campo, "Questo e altro, 1, 1963:84-91." "And bitter as the thought may be that Tenochtitlan, the barbaric city, its people, its genius wherever found should have been crushed out because of the awkward names men give their emptiness, yet it was no man's fault." In *Broom: An International Magazine of The Arts*, 4.2, January 1923: 112. W. C. Williams, *Poesie. Tradotte e presentate da C. Campo e V. Sereni* (Einaudi: Turin, 1961); and *Il musicante di Saint-Merry* (Einaudi: Turin, 1981), pp. 35-69.

Sentiment que tout est illusoire ... Ce son là des émotions familières à ceux qui ont vécu dans la proximité d'un désert") where the French term seems to broaden the notion of nothingness to acquire a connotation that borders on the explicit possibility of the cessation of life altogether. Quite possibly it was not an explicit Ungarettian textual element whose problematic addition blocked Sereni in the preparation of "La poesia è una passione?" As a matter of fact, Sereni writes that the problem is "tu e la tua poesia," an expression that widens the Ungarettian influence beyond the process of word selection. I argue it was rather the desire to bring in the discussion the concept of memory as a fundamental – albeit intrinsically flawed – element in the construction of poetry. Eventually Sereni's desire extends beyond "La poesia è una passione?" to include the discussion on the value of writing poetry *tout court*. (Testa, 1999: 49-78) Ungaretti's desired presence in "La poesia è una passione?" should be seen as a token or rather an earnest to grow aware of how memory must work its way into verses, with endless changes, to evoke beauty and to try and defeat the threats of forgetfulness and nothingness that Sereni was still hoping to win over in *Gli strumenti umani*. Sereni, the son who must unwillingly complete what the father did not do – a father is, again, mentioned in the opening lines of "Autostrada della Cisa": as the son dies, the father dies again and hopes are ultimately erased – finally accepts the ever present but irreparably weak nature of memory.

But the declining trust in the healing powers of poetry did not begin with Ungaretti. In the exploration of the dense net of literary references around Ungaretti's first book, Ossola had pointed readers to Sereni's poetry: new times brought an undefeatable presence of the dark emptiness that has become the tragic decisive note of the future forewarned in his "Diario d'Algeria." Sereni wrote: "È un'immagine nostra / stravolta, non

giunta / alla luce. E d'oblio / solo un'azzurra vena abbandona / tra due epoche morte dentro noi" [It's an image of ours / distorted, not come / to light, which abandons / a blue vein of oblivion only/ between two eras dead within us] in contrast with the darkness of the abyss in which Ungaretti's diver of "Il porto sepolto" dared to immerse himself, but with the uncanny ability to emerge unscathed to see the light.¹⁵ If, in Ungaretti's case, the poet is able to return to the light of the sea surface, in Sereni's verses this possibility disappears. Under the gloomy sky of the Algerian desert, while contemplating the war that is razing Europe, Sereni also annihilates the prospect of light, whose traditional symbolic value, Ossola argues, vanishes from the pages of modern Italian poetry (Ungaretti, 1981: 27). The city that disappears, that blinds, that puts us into the dark, embodies the sense of the nothingness evoked and fought by Ungaretti. Sereni, as he fears the nothingness, becomes also aware of the imbalance of the forces in the battlefield. In his journey from *Diario d'Algeria* to *Stella variabile*, Sereni courageously recognizes the brutality of the nihilistic future. In "La poesia è una passione?" – a poem originally indicated with the tentative title "Omaggio a un poeta," as if to send a hidden message about his intentions – Sereni did not explicit his thought, but he set out to arrive at the conclusion via the complex path traced in *Stella variabile*, in a chasing of images and reflections that even bring parts of the second part of "La poesia è una passione?" in the opening lines of "Progresso," penultimate poem of *Stella variabile*: "Quei suoi occhi morati dall'ultimo sole. / Di botto in fianco a lei s'è accesa / la città s'imporpora / s'intopazia si smeralda." (Sereni, 1995: 265,

¹⁵ "Sono un uomo della speranza, un servitore della speranza, un soldato della speranza," (Piccioni, 1970: 226).

vv. 1-4) [Those brown eyes of hers gilded in final sun. / Illumined at a stroke beside her / the city is empurpled, / colored topaz, emerald.]

The city “livellata dal riverbero dell’ultimo sole” becomes then a sign of the lyrical conversation that Sereni entertained with his artistic father, whose Alexandria consumed by the sun became, for Sereni, a crucible where different elements interact to prepare the basis for a long reflection on the nature of the relationship between memory, oblivion and nothingness. The blackness brought by the meridian demon is confirmed by the onset of the darkness of the night that leaves the vision of Alexandria only perceived by “un abbraccio di lumi nell’aria torbida / sospesi” (“Silenzio,” vv. 13-14) that mirrors what is left of the “ultimo sole e poi dal buio” of “La poesia è una passione?”: it is again a city reconfigured – like Ungaretti’s – by feeble scattered lights, as if suspended in the turbid air: [a city] ridisegnata dalle luci / qua e là uniformi / qua e là disseminate a caso (vv. 13-15) that ultimately destabilizes any attempt to configure a one-sided understanding of memory, but explores its capabilities to connect the voices of the past with those of the future.

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