

Concert Series • SongFest 2017 • Friday, June 9 • 7:30 p.m. • Thayer Hall

7:00 pre-concert talk by John Harbison

Mottetti di Montale (1980)

John Harbison (b. 1938) • Texts by Eugenio Montale (1896-1981)

from *Le Occasioni*

I | *Sottoripa is the harbor region of Genoa—important to the tone of the whole cycle is the appearance of the ‘lost sign’ “il segno smarrito.”*

Lo sai: debbo riperderti e non posso.
Come un tiro aggiustato mi sommuove
ogni opera, ogni grido e anche lo spiro
salino che straripa
dai moli e fa l’oscura primavera
di Sottoripa.

Paese di ferrame e alberature
a selva nella polvere del vespro.
Un ronzio lungo viene dall’aperto,
strazia com’unglia ai vetri. Cerco il segno
smarrito, il pegno solo ch’ebbi in
grazia da te.
E l’inferno è certo.

You know it: I must lose you again and I cannot.
Like a sensitive trigger your every action moves
me.
Every cry, and even the salt breath that seeps
from the piers and makes the shrouded spring of
Sottoripa.

Region of iron and forest of masts
in the dust of the evening.
An insistent noise comes from outside
scraping like a nail on the window. I search
for the lost sign, the only talisman
I had from you.
And hell is certain

II | *His lover’s convalescence and return to Genoa (whose patron Saint George is pictured on the city flag)*

Molti anni, e uno piú duro sopra il lago
straniero su cui ardono i tramonti.
Poi scendesti dai monti a riportarmi
San Giorgio e il Drago.

Imprimerli potessi sul palvese
che s’agita alla frusta del grecale
in cuore. . .E per te scendere in un gorgo
di fedeltà, immortale.

Many years, and the hardest one
above the foreign lake where the sunsets burned.
Then you came down from the mountains to bring
me back Saint George and the Dragon.

If only I could imprint them on the flag
which flutters at the lash of my heart’s northwind.
And for you descend in a whirlwind of fidelity,
immortal.

III | *Two parallel life-threatening experiences, hers in a TB clinic, his at the Austrian front in World War I.*

Brina sui vetri; uniti
sempre e sempre in disparte
gl'infermi; e sopra i tavoli
i lunghi soliloqui sulle carte.

Fu il tuo esilio. Ripenso
anche al mio, alla mattina
quando udii tra gli scogli crepitare
la bomba ballerina.
E durarono a lungo i notturni giuochi
di Bengala: come in una festa.

È scorsa un'ala ruda, t'ha sfiorato le mani,
ma invano: la tua carta non è questa.

Brine on the windows: together
always, and always separated—
the sick; and at the tables
the long soliloquies over cards.

That was your exile. I think
of mine also, of the morning
when I heard among the rocks
the explosion of the 'ballerina bomb.'
The nocturnal fireworks lasted long;
as if it were a festival.

A brutal wing appeared, and grazed your palm,
without effect. Your card was not up

IV | *Another associative parallel, the moment of her father's death (with her anger at his lack of compassion) and his memory of two Austrian front battle sites.*

Lontano, ero con te quando tuo padre
entrò nell'ombra e ti lasciò il suo addio.
Che seppi fino allora? Il logorio
di *prima* mi salvò per questo:

che t'ignoravo e non dovevo: ai colpi
d'oggi lo so, se di laggiù s'infilte
un'ora e mi riporta Cumerlotti
o Anghébeni— tra scoppi di spolette
e i lamenti e l'accorrer delle squadre.

Long ago I was with you when your father
died, and left you only his goodbye.
What do I retain from it? The enervation
of that time saved me only for this:

I ignored you and should not have: from today's
blows I know it, if from down there one hour
returns, bringing me back Cumerlottior
Angebeni—with the explosions of grenades
and the wailing and rushing about of the squad

V | *A departing train, image of separation to be intensified in no. 16.*

Addii, fischi nel buio, cenni, tosse
e sportelli abbassati. È l'ora. Forse
gli automi hanno ragione. Come appaiono
dai corridoi, murati!

- Presti anche tu alla fioca
litania del tuo rapido quest'orrida
a fedele cadenza di cariooca? -

Goodbyes, whistles in the dark, gestures,
coughs, and lowered windows. It is
time. Perhaps the robots are right. How they
loom from the corridors, walled in!

- Do you, also, lend to the faint
litany of your train this gruesome
and constant cadenza - the cariooca?-

VI | *Essential Montalean SENHAL (sign or talisman), the apparition of the jackals a confirmation of loss.*

La speranza di pure rivederti
m'abbandonava;

e mi chiesi se questo che mi chiude
ogni senso di te, schermo d'immagini,
ha i segni della morte or dal passato
è in esso, ma distorto a fatto labile,
un *tuo* barbaglio:

(a Modena, tra i portici,
un servo gallonato trascinava,
due sciacalli al guinzaglio).

The hope of seeing you again
was fading

and I asked myself if that which closed me
from any sense of you—screen of images—
carried death-signs or some essence
of the past, but distorted and weakened,
an afterglow of *you*:

(At Modena, among the arcades,
a liveried servant was dragging
two jackals on a leash).

VII | *Referring back to earlier troubles (crucchi), but introducing a more hopeful tone (tregua)*

Il saliscendi bianco e nero dei
balestrucci dal palo
del telegrafo al mare
non conforta i tuoi crucchi su lo scalo
né ti riporta dove piú non sei.

Già profuma il sambuco fitto su
lo sterrato; il piovasco si dilegua.
Se il chiarore è una tregua,
la tua cara minaccia la consuma.

The black and white span
of swallows from the telephone pole
to the sea doesn't comfort your griefs, at the
pier, or carry you back to where you are no
longer.

Already the elder tree leaves its perfume dense
over the excavation; the rain-storm fades. If this
clarity is a truce
your sweet threat consumes it.

VIII | *First of a series representing the beloved as a kind of supernatural presence.*

Ecco il segno; s'innerva
sul muro che s'indora:
un frastaglio di palma
bruciato dai barbagli dell'aurora.

Il passo che proviene
dalla serra sí lieve,
non è felpato dalla neve, è ancora
tua vita, sangue tuo nelle mie vene.

Behold the sign: it strikes
upon the wall which glows in gold:
a design of palms
burnt in by the brand of dawn.

The step that approaches
so lightly from the lane—
it is not huddled in snow—it is ever
your life, your blood in my veins.

IX | *Omnipresent in Liguria, the green lizard: less prevalent the old small town custom of a daily cannon shot at noon,*

IX

Il ramarro, se scocca
sotto la grande fersa
dalle stoppie—

la vela, quando fiotta
e s'inabissa al salto
della rocca—

il cannone di mezzodi
più fioco del tuo cuore
e il cronometro se
scatta senza rumore—

e poi? Luce di lampo

invano può mutarvi in alcunché
di ricco e strano. Altro era il tuo stampo.

IX

The green lizard, if it darts
under the heavy cover
of the stubble—

the sail, when it floats
and plunges
at the edge of the rocks—

the cannon of midday
fainter than your heart
and the stopwatch
which strikes without a sound—

and then? Flash of lightning

in vain transforms you into something
rich and strange. Different was your essence.

X | *The smoke may refer to the ubiquitous Ligurian habit of late afternoon yard fires.*

Perché tardi? Nel pino lo scoiattolo
batte la coda a torcia sulla scorza.
La mezzaluna scende col suo picco
nel sole che la smorza. È giorno fatto.

A un soffio il pigro fumo trasalisce,
si difende nel punto che ti chiude.
Nulla finisce, o tutto, se tu fólgo
lasci la nube.

Why are you late? In the pine the squirrel
beats his tail like a torch upon the bark.
The half-moon descends with its horn
into the sun, which extinguishes it. The day is
over.

At a breath, the lazy smoke rises,
and hovers at the point of enveloping you.
Nothing will end, or everything, if you,
thunderbolt, leave your cloud.

XI | *The most specific of the many musical references in the sequence (Montale studied to become a singer and was later a music critic for a Milan paper).*

L'anima che dispensa
furlana e rigodone ad agni nuova
stagione della strada, s'alimenta
della chiusa passione, la ritrova
a ogni angolo più intensa.

The soul which scatters
fourlane and rigadoon at each new
season of the street, nourishes itself
on a hidden passion, finds it
at every corner more intense.

La tua voce è quest'anima, diffusa.
Su fili, su ali, al vento, a caso, col
favore della musa o d'un ordigno,
ritorna lieta o triste. Parlo d'altro,
ad altri che t'ignora e il suo disegno
è là che insiste *do re la sol sol . . .*

Your voice is this pervasive soul.
On wires, on wings, on the wind, by chance,
through favor with the muse or some machine, it
returns joyful or sad. I talk of other things, to
others who don't know you, still its design is
there, insisting *do re la sol sol . . .*

XII | *Highest point in the goddess-like elevation of the woman, soon to be displaced by the return of separation images.*

Ti libero la fronte dai ghiaccioli
che raccogliesti traversando l'alte
nebulose; hai le penne lacerate
dai cicloni, ti desti a soprassalti.

I free your forehead from the icicles
which you gathered while crossing the lofty
nebulae; your feathers are torn
by cyclones and you awake with a start.

Mezzodì: allunga nel riquadro il nespolo
l'ombra nera, s'ostina in cielo un sole
freddoloso; e l'altre ombre che scantonano
nel vicolo non sanno che sei qui.

Midday; the medlar prolongs its black shadow in
the square; a cold sun endures in the sky; and the
other shadows turning around in the lane don't
yet know that you are here.

XIII | *A Venetian carnival—the poet, however, is no reveler, identifying instead with a sinister eel-fisher on the canal.*

La gondola che scivola in un forte
bagliore di catrame e di papaveri,
la subdola canzone che s'alzava
da masse di cordame, l'alte porte
rinchiuse su di te e risa di maschere
che fuggivano a frotte—

The gondola gliding forward
in a dazzle of tar and poppies,
the secret song arising
from the masses of rigging, the tall doors
closing on you and the laughter of
the masked escaping in hordes—

una sera tra mille e la mia notte
è più profonda! S'agita lagiù
uno smorto groviglio che m'avviva
a stratti e mi fa eguale a quell'assorto
pescatore d'anguille dalla riva.

a night in a thousand, and my night
is deeper! Down there writhes
a pale mass, in fits and starts,
and makes me one with that intent fisher
of eels on the bank.

XIV | *At the end of a frightening hallucination the poet recalls the woman (who shared his love of music) pretending to sing the Bell Song from Lakmé*

Infuria sale o grandine? Fa strage
di campanule, svelle la cedrina.
Un rintocco subacqueo s'avvicina,
quale tu lo destavi, e s'allontana.

La pianola degl'inferi da sé
accelera i registri, sale nelle
sfere del gelo. . . - brilla come te
quando fingevi col tuo trillo d'aria
Lakmé nell'Aria delle Campamelle.

Is it salt or hail that rages? It riddles
the campanula, it uproots the citrine.
An underwater tolling approaches, which you
awakened, and fades into the distance.

The pianola of the damned speeds through
its registers, rises on a sphere of ice. . .
it glitters like you
when you pretended with your trill
Lakem's aria—The Bell Song.

XV | *Alpine tunnel rail journey, then an imagined burrowing mole, linked by association.*

Al primo chiaro, quando
subitaneo un rumore
di ferrovia mi parla
di chiusi uomini in corsa
nel traforo del sasso
illuminato a tagli
da cieli ed acque misti;

al primo buio, quando
il bulino che tarla
la scrivania rafforza
il suo fervore e il passo
del guardiano s'accosta:

al chiaro e al buio, soste ancora umane
se tu a intrecciarle col tuo refe insisti.

At first light, when
suddenly a noise
from the railroad speaks to me
of men closed in, carried through
the rock tunnel,
illuminated by slices
of mixed sky and water;

at first dark, when
the mole who tunnels
in the desk intensifies
his passion, and the step
of the watchman approaches:

at dawn, at dusk, pauses still human
if you insist on plaiting them with your thread.

XVI | *Alpine again, a cable car ride separates the lovers.*

Il fiore che ripete
dall'orlo dell'abruccato
non scordarti di me,
non ha tinte più liete né più chiare
dello spazio gettato tra me e te.

Un cigolio si sferra, ci discosta,
l'azzurro pervicace non ricompare.
Nell'afa quasi visibile mi riporta all'opposta
tappa, già buia, la funicolare.
The flower that repeats

at the rim of the ravine
forget me not,
has no colors any brighter or any clearer
than the space thrown between me and you.

A wrenching pulls us apart, separates us,
the persistent azure sky fails to reappear.
Through an almost visible heaviness of air,
carrying me on through the dark to the opposite
side—the funicular

XVII | *Typical Ligurian summer images (the frogs in recent years have become strangely silent) driven away by a surreal fantastical image.*

La rana, prima a ritentar la corda
dallo stagno che affossa
giunchi e nubi, stormire dei carrubi
coserti dove spenge le sue fiaccole
un sole senza caldo, tardo ai fiori
ronzio di coleotteri che suggono
ancora linfe, ultimi suoni, avara
vita della compagna. Con un soffio
l'ora s'estingue: un cielo di lavagna
si prepara a un irrompere di scarni
cavalli, alle scintille degli zoccoli.

The frog, first to recapture his chord
from the pond which submerges
rushes and mists; rustle of the folded
carob-trees where a sun without heat
guts his flames; late among the flowers
the noise of bees still sucking
their nectar. Last sounds, greedy
life of the country. With a breeze
the hour is extinguished: a slate sky
prepares for an outbreak of skinny
horses, for the sparks of their hooves.

XVIII | *Autumn, mud and decay, the poet begs for mercy from the natural world.*

Non recidere, forbice, quel volto,
solo nella memoria che si sfolla,
non far del grande suo viso in ascolto
la mia nebbia di sempre.

Don't cut, scissors, that face,
which alone remains in my fading memory.
Don't make of her wonderful listening gaze
an eternal mist for me.

Un freddo cala. . .Duro il colpo svetta.
E l'acacia ferita da sé scrolla
il guscio di cicala
nella prima belletta di Novembre.

A chill falls. . .Hard is the severing blow.
And the wounded acacia shakes
the hulls of the cicada
into the first mud of November.

XIX | *Images of winter despair, arriving at the clinching "sign," the beloved's distant eyes in the form of a cross*

La canna che dispiuma
mollemente il suo rosso
flabello a primavera:
la redola nel fosso, su la nera
correntia sorvolata di libellule;
e il cane trafelato che rincasa
col suo fardello in bocca,

The reed that softly sheds
its red casing
in spring;
the path in the ditch, on the black
current overflown by dragonflies;
and the breathless dog who comes home,
his burden in his mouth;

oggi chi non mi tocca riconoscere;
ma là dove il riverbero più cuoce
e il nuvolo s'abbassa, oltre le sue
pupille ormai remote, solo due
fasci di luce in croce.

today, here, I recognize nothing;
but there, where the reflection is hottest
and the storm-cloud lowers, beyond
her two eyes now so remote, two lone
bundles of light in the form of a cross.

E il tempo passa.

And time passes.

XX | An attempt to distance the emotion—the word *fazzoletto*, handkerchief, has special resonance for Montale through Verdi’s *Othello*.

... ma così sia. Un suono di cornetta
dialoga con gli sciami del querceto.
Nella valva che il vespero riflette
un vulcano dipinto fuma lieto.

La moneta incassata nella lava
brilla anch’essa sul tavolo e trattiene
pochi fogli. La vita che sembrava
vasta è più breve del tuo fazzoletto.

... but so be it. The sound of a horn
dialogues with the bee-swarms in the oaks.
On the seashell which reflects the evening light
a painted volcano smokes happily.

The coin encased in the lava
also gleams on the table and holds down
a few papers. Life which seemed so vast
is a smaller thing than your handkerchief.

— Eugenio Montale, *Le Occasioni* (1939) — Translation: John Harbison

Kelsey Lauritano, mezzo-soprano
Simone McIntosh, mezzo-soprano
Anne Wright, soprano
Chloë Schaaf, mezzo-soprano

Lydia Brown, piano

Please hold your applause until the end of the program.

PROGRAM NOTES

MOTTETTI DI MONTALE (1980) includes the complete twenty-poem cycle, *Mottetti*, from Eugenio Montale’s book *Le Occasioni*, published in 1939. Essentially a set of autobiographical love lyrics described by the poet as “a novel in verse,” Montale wrote the *Mottetti* between 1934 and 1939. The poems sketch a veiled narrative of love discovered and lost. The heroine of the sequence is Montale’s fictional muse Clizia, roughly modeled on Dante’s Beatrice, and in real life, actually the Canadian-American poet Irma Brandeis, whom he met in 1933 and was close to until she departed in 1938, and to whom the collection *Le Occasioni* is dedicated. Her fleeting presences and prolonged absences are the glowing center of the poems – numerous elusive references, mostly evoking her or occasions with her, flash by in these poems. Having admired Montale’s work for more than a decade, my cycle was composed between 1978 and 1980, and more recently has been arranged for mezzo-soprano and chamber ensemble. The piece in its original version for piano and voice premiered in 1980 and was dedicated, on his 85th birthday, to the poet, who, contrary to his usual practice, gave a rare permission for the setting of his poems, on examination of the already completed score. –John Harbison



EUGENIO MONTALE'S MOTTETTI

Eugenio Montale is one of the most prominent twentieth-century Italian poets. The recipient of the 1975 Nobel Prize for Literature, he was born in Genoa in 1896 and lived there until 1927.

Author of six collections of poetry, Montale is best known for the first three works: *Ossi di seppia* (*Cuttle-Fish Bones*, 1925, 1928), *Le occasioni* (*The occasions*, 1939) and *La Bufera e altro* (*The Storm and Other Things*, 1956). One may say that these collections belong to the three places where Montale lived. *The Occasions* is a collection in which the Florentine tradition, as

expressed especially in the works of Dante and Petrarch, is renewed through a modern appreciation.

These collections mark one of the highest achievements of the modernist poetic trend that goes by the name of Hermeticism. This poetics re-evaluates the role of the word in communication; in Hermeticism the role of poetry is the absolute realm of the word as the prophetic tool, which allows the poet (and by extension humankind) to interpret the world of the visible things. Furthermore, the poetic word, according to Hermeticism, puts this world into contact with the metaphysical dimension by casting such a revealing light on all, that the world itself appears transformed, even transparent, and ready to surrender to a novel understanding. Since this poetry talks about the eternal essence of that which is not seen, except through the ephemeral reality surrounding us, then Hermeticism becomes a poetics of absence.

Montale adheres to this poetics with a specific perspective, which remains constant throughout his poetic reflections: the word may show its prophetic power insofar as it is charged with the assumption that knowledge of the thing itself, including one's own self, is available only in its negative value. To Montale, it is essential to observe the world around us and keep in mind that this immanent and relative perspective is the only one granted to us: in other words, no metaphysical reassurance is taken for granted. Therefore, given Montale's focus on this world, his poetry focuses on objects, whether they are the elements of the landscape of childhood, or the tools of everyday life, or the emblematic little things that remind us of our loved ones. It is this attention to the objects that has invited critics from the start to compare Montale's poetics with that of T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative." Yet, Montale's poetry of objects always aims at suggesting through them, the presence of another reality, the presence of the reality of the Other.

Mottetti is the title of the second section of *The Occasions*. Its very title recalls Montale's passion and appreciation for music, the art that so often lends titles and references to the work of this poet. This strategy appears in some poems of the *Mottetti*. The eleventh of the series ends with a musical suggestion: *è là che insiste do re la sol sol...* In the thirteenth, "*La gondola che scivola in un forte*," as Montale himself points out in a note, the "subdola canzone" may very well be the "canzone di Dappertutto" in the Second Act of *Hoffmann's Tales* by Offenbach.

The title, moreover, suggests other possible paths of textual interpretations: the motet is an ancient musical form, of medieval origin and often, although not exclusively, used for sacred compositions. Its polyphonic nature is based on the combination of at least two melodies. These structural elements seem relevant to Montale's understanding of his poems as motets. Two main motives run throughout the section: the dichotomy between absence and presence (reality of absence of the beloved and ideality of her presence), and the contrast between the desolation of the real world and the hope for its redemption (the alternation between the anguish for the political situation and the search for one's own consolation).

The sequence of *Mottetti* was written in the Florentine years, between 1934 and 1939, with the addition of two more

poems in the 1940 second edition. These chronological data remark Montale's pervasive endeavor in the writing of this particular section. Montale was so taken by the project, that the title *Mottetti* was at first extended to include even the poem "Il balcone," which opens the entire collection *The Occasions*. In this poem Montale's motif of the liminality of existence, of our being always caught between two realms, becomes emblematic of the struggle of the self in the *Mottetti* section. —Ernesto Livorni