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The Object as Platform for 20th Century Poetry via Williams, Eliot, and Montale

by Laura Klinkon

The idea that the "object" or "thing" is of utmost importance in modern poetry is said to have been introduced by T.S. Eliot in 1919 when in an essay about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, he enunciated the concept of the "objective correlative." Yet, Eliot's concept was a bit more involved than William Carlos Williams' 1930's foreshortened version: "There are no ideas but in things." Later, both Eliot's and Williams' concepts were adopted in the 1940's by the Italian poet Eugenio Montale (Nobel Prize, 1975), who quixotically enhanced it.

In my last article for *L'Idea Magazine*, I tried to explain with the help of Denise Levertov, Williams' theory that "There are no ideas but in things," which, though formulated later than Eliot's, seems to me the most direct starting point for this discussion. Williams and Levertov were right in an almost obvious sense: an object can have many ramifications, depending on its context. Take the word "table" for example. Depending on where it is positioned, we can see it as a coffee table, a work table, a dining table, a kitchen table, a conference table, a knights' round table, etc. So, yes, a thing may "carry" many ideas. Even in William's poem that begins with "So much depends," the wheel barrow, were it not for the barnyard context, might be of various kinds for transporting various things.

Eliot's "objective correlative" had begun to account for the context: he said that the "things" should appear in a sequence or series which together create the "feeling" or overall impression which the poet wishes to convey and elicit. But Eliot also added something else: the objects did not have to be concrete things, they could also be described or implied situations or events in sequence, suggesting that the poem could be something like a story or a part thereof. But, clearly, that is not all that Eliot's concept adds to the "object" as a platform for poetry: he said that the "things" need to "correlate" for optimal effect.

What Eliot did not specify is how they should correlate to obtain the desired effect. If we think about it, things, situations, and/or events may relate in any number of ways; as examples they could relate: chronologically at short or longer time intervals, by resemblance through simile or metaphor, by opposition in a paradoxical sense, functionally in a mechanical or logical sense, by duplication through repeated wording or syntax, sensorially that is, by using visual, aural, tactile, or olfactory images, and allegorically or symbolically by means of things that have ulterior meanings that can be culturally, intuitively or experientially recognized. They can also relate "musically" using patterns of rhythm, rhyme, emphasis, and/or extent.

Montale, not so much a theorist as a commentator (for many years working as an arts critic for the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*), mainly communicated his thoughts on poetry sporadically in articles, interviews, or through his own poetry. One of the things he directly asserted is that he was inescapably a realist and, claiming to have sparse imagination, he and his poetry were very much grounded in the concrete object. As an admirer of Eliot's "objective correlative," he also demonstrated an attachment to the situation or "occasion" which consistently provides a unifying element in his poems. What is also highlighted in Montale's poetry, and prevalent also in Eliot's, is the object as a symbol or allegorical figure; in Montale's case, the object is often an animal.

Another idea espoused by all of our poets, contrary to the expectations of many regarding poetry, was that the poem itself is a crafted "thing" or "object." It is necessary, as explained by the Objectivists of the 1930's, that the poet should remain detached when making artistic choices—his or her own feelings and experience serving as "material" to be crafted. (We are reminded, here, of the Greek word *poiein* meaning "to make.")

Yet, this idea manifests itself variously in our poets. Eliot, for example, rarely appears as himself in his poetry, his poetic voice seeming to arise either from a fictional persona or as an omniscient being. Obviously masked, as in "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or even in "Journey of the Magi," most of his poetry, often interlaced with literary, philosophical, or religious allusions, produces an abstract or metaphysical scenario. Using the concrete "thing" as symbol, the speaker's voice may be overheard "whispering" among metaphysical shrubbery.

Williams seems more cavalier in this regard, possibly due to the staunchly American, Whitmanian side of his poetic persona—that sometimes overtly pursues broad freedom of expression and proud acclamation of America as 'my country right or wrong.' (He had openly stated that he was scornful of Eliot's adoption of European cultural traditions and British citizenship.) Nevertheless, Williams' poetry does adhere to the "object" as the most prominent image-making element in his poetry, his own "detachment" becoming almost inevitable due to his close observation of objects that are described and projected onto a poetical "canvas," often without comment.

Montale, however, seems to invert the objectivity principle. He himself is always understood as the speaker of his ruminations about past remembered events, masking instead, the identity of his past companion(s) and/or person he is addressing—assigning specific aliases to the persons involved. As mentioned earlier, he often uses animal names as symbolic or allegorical elements; he also uses them out of discretion towards the women he addresses, and, during the Fascist years, to protect his Jewish friends. As a rule, Montale almost overwhelmingly uses a concrete, colloquial, but broad-ranging language, sensorially, metaphorically, and symbolically, to elicit his reader's reactions.

In light of the objectivity, variously practiced by these poets, we may ask ourselves what feelings they elicit in their readers, which we necessarily trace back to the feelings that the poets themselves experienced or witnessed in their own lives.

Williams' father had been born in England, but raised in Santo Domingo from age five. A businessman, he married a French-Puerto Rican woman with an interest in art, before moving with her to America. Williams himself, born in Rutherford, N.J. in 1883, reflects his parents' influence in his poetry and convictions. Adamantly rejecting his father's staunch loyalty to his British heritage, Williams strongly advocated for use of the "American idiom" in poetry. His mother, with some experience as an art student in Paris, influenced the strong visual aspect of his poetry. Also, as a long-time physician working at the Passaic General Hospital (N.J.), Williams' poetry reflects a close interest and empathy with human beings irrespective of class. Meanwhile, his poetic ambitions and career were encouraged by his sometime friend and editor Ezra Pound. While practicing medicine for years, Williams spent his evenings writing and experimenting with poetry, gaining significant recognition only in 1949 at age 66, based on his long poem *Paterson*, set in Paterson, N.J. Named consultant to the Library of Congress in 1952, he was not allowed to serve due to false accusations of Communist affiliation. He was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (1963) only posthumously.

Eliot, born in 1888, was educated at Harvard and, while studying on a scholarship at Oxford, became a denizen of London literary circles where he met Ezra Pound. Though related to a well-to-do line of preachers and businessmen, he, like both Williams and Montale, held employment apart from poetry. But to Eliot his jobs at Lloyds Bank and Faber and Faber publishing were a welcome relief particularly during the troubled times of his first marriage. He profited from his classical education, allowing him to allude extensively in his poetry to the Western canon, from his long-standing editorial relationship with Pound, from his early successful publications (*Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917 and *The Wasteland* in 1922) and obviously from his 1948 Nobel Prize. These advantages could easily have caused Williams to resent him. But Williams also saw Eliot's insistence on tradition as a step backward for twentieth century poetry. In Williams' view, even if all the poverty, lack of refinement, and industrial detritus of the modern world were looked upon as signs of cultures in decay, poetry and the arts through realistic and empathetic observation could provide a path for renewal. Eliot's avowed path to renewal was rather related to self-examination and a Hindu-like renunciation of worldly desires.

Montale, both for his style and life experience, could be seen as poised between Williams and Eliot. Born in 1896 the youngest of seven children in a Genoese industrial family, he was not required to carry on the family business or even to obtain a university degree. Privately, however, he studied opera and philosophy, and as a constant patron of his city's library, acquired an education perhaps comparable to Eliot's. Employed at various times as an arts critic, as a private library administrator, as translator and editor, as well as a senator in the Italian government, like Williams, he continued to write poetry assiduously in his free time—unlike Eliot who tended to limit his time spent on poetry so, as he said, to maintain its quality.

Montale's poetic persona, evolving through long application and experimentation was, nevertheless, ineluctable.

Though a great admirer of Eliot and the latter's "objective correlative," the object in Montale's poetry appears both in the sensorial mode of Williams and the symbolic of Eliot. The human empathy we find in Williams, in Montale takes a more amorous turn—for all the poems addressed to women, replete with his musings and memories of them, he has been seen as a modern-day Petrarch. He also expresses through symbolism and innuendo, the social awareness we see in Williams. As a whole, in spite of his admiration for Eliot, it seems that Montale has more affinity with Williams, yet Montale's opus might also be seen as stylistically encompassing both of his counterparts. Montale 's poetry was steadily published from his *Ossi di Seppia* (1925) to his tenth volume *Satura* (1971).

With use of the "object" and objective detachment, the poet, in line with the twentieth century ethos, camouflages his personal feelings so as to transmit an artistic version of those feelings or impressions. He does this through the sensorial object as grounded in a context, or through symbolic, allusive, or allegorical representation. The way objects relate to each other within the poem serves to conjure up the reader's feelings. The object does, in fact, seem to carry the burden for conveying feelings or impressions. Yet, if we look more closely at their work, we see that our poets have additional means to effect the same goal.

Williams' poem that begins with "So much depends" really states outright in its introductory phrase that he wants the reader to feel how important his combination of objects is in conveying what the present writer understands as "freshness." Williams, by his words, strongly suggests how the reader should respond. In another poem, "The Proletarian Woman," Williams reveals in the title, and then again particularly in the last several lines of the poem, the empathy he intends to convey:

> "She pulls out the paper insole/to find the nail/.../That has been hurting her."

The "paper insole" and "nail" contributes to our reaction, but what ultimately compels us is the verbal phrase "has been hurting her." We could see this merely as a detached description of the woman's situation in the poem, but it is so direct that an average reader could not reasonably avoid feeling empathy.

A situational sequence occurs in Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," recounted by Eliot in the persona of one of the magi. It seems to me there are two main situations in this poem. The first includes such details as: "...the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,/Lying down in the melting snow." The second includes the concrete images: "...we came down to a temperate valley,/.../With a running stream and a water-mill.../And three trees on the low sky." Together these phrases speak to a contrasting pleasantness and unpleasantness, conveyed by the camels' uncomfortable situation, and then by the contrasting restorative stream, mill, and trees. The feelings ultimately aroused by these situations are, however, heavily reinforced by direct accounts of the speaker/magi's feelings: "There were times we regretted/" and "A hard time we

had of it." and "...voices...in our ears, saying/…this was all folly." The conclusive part that follows is not based on a concrete description but, as is not unusual for Eliot, philosophical questions with such phrases as "...were we led all that way for/ Birth or Death?..." Ultimately, Eliot is not nearly as inclined as Williams to depend on objects for his effects; he rather heavily intersperses direct expression of feelings, impressions, and philosophical musings, which often convey doubt.

Montale uses objects and events to indirectly address in his poem, "Falsetto," a twenty-year-old woman on a beach: "...you stretch/on the rock ledge shining with salt/and burn your body in the sun." In this case, the objects are verbal actions or events, but also nouns—on the one hand: stretch, shining, burn—on the other, rock ledge, body, bare rock, and lizard. Yet immediately, with a mixture of concrete and abstract terms, he becomes metaphorically symbolic: "Youth lies in wait for you, like a boy's/ grass noose waiting for the lizard."

In poems from his later 1971 collection, *Satura*, Montale's poetry tends to be both more prosaic and satirical or ironic, and even humorous. In one poem "Lights and Colors," he addresses his deceased wife, who becomes an object of rakish comparison to an "...apricot-colored worm/struggling across the bedside rug.../...[that he has to scoop up] on a piece of paper and toss..."! These concrete images end with the satirical comment, "You couldn't have weighed much more yourself." Montale, who was, in spite of all his activity, a solitary person, expressed pessimism about modern life, inevitably affected both by two world wars and the concomitant European existential *mal de vivre*. He avowed, nevertheless, that poetry offered him, to some extent, a *raison d'être*.

This overview of twentieth century poetry, based on both object and objectivity as practiced by three major poets, is intended to offer additional or more up-to-date ways to read modern poetry (see my "One Way to Read a Poem" in *L'Idea Magazine*), but also to suggest that this perspective is still perhaps only one among others. It is hoped that the "object," as centrally posited by these poets, will offer a focus that can be useful when a poem seems difficult or out of reach.

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