CHAPTER 7

“Ulysses’ Island”: Nóstos as Exile in Salvatore Quasimodo’s Poetry

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The Thirties saw the publication of the most representative collections of hermetic poetry: during this period, Alfonso Gatto published his first two collections (Isola in 1932 and Morto ai paesi in 1937); Giuseppe Ungaretti refined his fragmented poetics in the two editions of Sentimento del Tempo in 1933 and 1936; and we could also take into consideration the publication of Corrado Pavolini’s Patria d’acque in 1933. But it is Salvatore Quasimodo’s poetic creation that opens and closes this decade of poetry. His first three collections (Acque e terre in 1930, Oboe sommerso in 1932, and Erato e Apòllion in 1936) punctuate the development of Italian hermetic poetry, which would never be the same after Quasimodo’s triptych and his peers’ collections: simply consider La Terra Promessa, by Giuseppe Ungaretti, and Nuove poesie (1936–1942), by Quasimodo himself, for an immediate confirmation of this statement.1

Prevalent in Italy between the two World Wars, Hermeticism reacted to the symbolist decadence of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s poetry (along with Giovanni Pascoli, the most important poet in fin-de-siècle Italy) and to the avant-garde of Futurism. Hermeticism distinguished itself by its careful attention to the poetic word, often relying on short and apparently cryptic poems, hence the definition of Hermeticism that the literary critic Francesco Flora first elaborated in his book La poesia ermetica in 1936. The importance of the precision of the word was the legacy that Symbolism left to Hermeticism, whereas literary critics sometimes interpreted the cryptic poetic expression as a political rebellion to Fascism. However, there were also those literary critics, supported by the critical writings of some of the poets, who emphasized the mystery of

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1 Furthermore, one cannot exclude Umberto Saba from this brief list of hermetic poetry – especially his collection Parole (1934) that includes, not coincidentally, a composition entitled “Ulisse”. A second composition with the same title appears years later in Mediterranée (1946). Both collections can be found in Saba (1988). Quasimodo’s collections are published in Quasimodo (1971). It must be noted that some critics do not agree on Quasimodo’s hermeticism, see, for instance Tedesco (1959), 23 and Bo (1969), 404–5.
the poetic expression, which in extreme cases aimed at a mystical sense of the poetic text.

The topos of nóstos, and in particular Ulysses’ nóstos, is so prevalent in hermetic poetry that its presence cannot only be considered influential on a narrative and thematic level, but it also involves and truly supports the central principles of this poetry. The hermeticist poetics of the word must pay attention to certain Ulyssian myths, like that of the Sirens, which is a key element in the modernist elaboration of Ulysses, especially because of its implications with regards to phonè. Furthermore, nóstos implies a terminus ad quem of circumnavigation: in Homer’s epic poem, Ulysses’ destination is the long-desired island of Ithaca, but we must also consider the fact that he must arrive, visit and finally leave many other islands before reaching his final destination. Therefore, there are two recurring elements in Odysseus’ journey: the island and the shipwreck. In fact, the hero is introduced for the first time after the shipwreck that crashes him into the shore of the island of Ogygia. The episodes that follow alternate between shipwrecks and landings on various islands: a shipwreck and then the landing on Scheria (V, 282–493); the episode on the Cyclops’ island (IX, 105–566); the floating island of Aeolia (X, 1–79); Circes’ island (X, 133–574); the Sirens’ island (XII, 142–200); and the island of Trinacria (XII, 260–402).

The hermetic poets’ interest in the metaphor of the island – a metaphor that breathes the same salty air of the metaphors of the sea journey and of the shipwreck – suggests a strong affinity between that image and the open nature of the fragment, which is the most emblematic poetic form the hermetic poets employed. The fragment appears to be the enlightening and often short expression of a longer and more complex discourse, which remains unsaid, but contained in its entirety in the fragment itself. One thinks of Ungaretti’s first collections, which by no chance oscillates between the two titles Il Porto Sepolto (1916) and Allegria di Naufragi (1919), and the lack of punctuation at the end of each poem, in the style Guillaume Apollinaire adopted in his Calligrammes. The intention behind the lack of punctuation is to return the

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2 Please see Ungaretti’s “Sirene” and “L’Isola,” in Sentimento del tempo, found in Ungaretti (1969), 109, 114. Regarding the island metaphor, please see Valentini (1970); for a discussion on Ungaretti’s composition “L’Isola,” please see Leo Spitzer’s annotations in Ungaretti (1960) of Taccuino del vecchio, with statements from foreign friends of the poet; Friedrich (1983), 190–2 and Lonardi (1980), 83–6. For more on the poetic implications of lexical and semantic decisions in Quasimodo’s poetry, please see Salina-Borello (1971a) and Genot (1969).

3 When Quasimodo published his translations Dall’Odissea (1951), he included the descriptions of Calypso’s island and of the Island of the Sun, and the episode on Nausicaa.