Voice That Came with the Coots

Since, if I look back, the road already traveled is longer
than this goat-track taking me now
where we'll melt like wax,
and the rushes in flower don't console the heart
as do the young shoots, the graveyard's blood,
here you are, Father, free of the darkness
that held you, springing up in that dazzling light,
without shawl or beret, in the rumbling tremor
that, at dawn, announced
miners' barges half hull-down
with their great cargo, black on the heaving waves.

The shade who goes beside me as companion
to your grave, waits, watchful;
resting on a graveyard herm, she haughtily
throws back her head, revealing
beneath a childish curl of wayward hair
burning eyes and scowling brows—
her shade weighs no more than yours, Father,
buried so many years ago; and the first dawn
light cuts through it, butterflies flit
brightly through, the sensitive
mimosa, unfliching, grazes her ghost.

The faithful shade and the mute one rising once more—
she whom the inward fire disembodied,
he whom long years of time beyond time
(dispirited years for me) have now unfleshed—
converse, exchanging words which I, numb
at the grave's edge, cannot hear. She perhaps
will someday find the form in which love
burned for Him who moved her, not for herself;
but the other one's discouraged, afraid
that ghost of memory in which his sons still feel him
warm will disappear in his new upward leap.

—I have thought for you, I have remembered
for all. Now you return to the unbounded heaven
that transmutes all. Does this craggy cliff
still tempt you? Yes, the high-water mark is still where
it always was, the sea that made you one
with these shores of mine before I sprouted wings
doesn't dissolve. I recall my
coasts, and yet my voice has come with the coots
to take you away from yours. Memory's
no sin, so long as it serves some purpose. After that,
it's the laziness of moles, degradation

moldering on itself . . .
In the wind of day
the living shade dissolves into the other ghost
still struggling in a medium that rejects
my hands, and my breath catches
at the widest point, there in the grave ditch
around the sudden start of memory.
So too, a dark remembering sense,
even before it fastens onto images and words,
reveals the uninhabited void
we once occupied, the emptiness biding its time
to fill itself with us, and find us out again . . .

Voce giunta con le folaghe

Poiché la via percorsa, se mi volgo, è più lunga
del sentiero da capre che mi porta
dove ci scioglieremo come cera,
ed i giunchi fioriti non leniscono il cuore
ma le vermene, il sangue dei cimiteri,
eccoti fuor dal buio
che ti teneva, padre, erto ai barbagli,
senza scialle e berretto, al sordo fremito
che annunciava nell'alba
chiatte di minatori dal gran carico
semisommerse, nere sull'onde alte.

L'ombra che mi accompagna
alla tua tomba, vigile,
e posa sopra un'erma ed ha uno scarto
altero della fronte che le schiara
gli occhi ardenti ed i duri sopraccigli
da un suo biocco infantile,
l'ombra non ha più peso della tua
da tanto seppellita, i primi raggi
del giorno la trafiggono, farfalle
vivaci l'attraversano, la sfiora
la sensitiva e non si rattrappisce.

L'ombra fidata e il muto che risorge,
quella che scorporò l'interno fuoco
e colui che lunghi anni d'oltretempo
(anni per me pesante) disincarnano,
si scambiano parole che interito
sul margine io non odo; l'una forse
ritroverà la forma in cui bruciava
amor di Chi la mosse e non di sé,
ma l'altro sbigottisce e teme che
la larva di memoria in cui si scalda
ai suoi figli si spenga al nuovo balzo.

—Ho pensato per te, ho ricordato
per tutti. Ora ritorni al cielo libero
che ti tramuta. Ancora questa rupe
ti tenta? Sì, la bàttima è la stessa
di sempre, il mare che ti univa ai miei
lidi da prima che io avessi l'ali,
non si dissolve. Io le rammento quelle
mie prode e pur son giunta con le folaghe
a distaccarti dalle tue. Memoria
non è peccato fin che giova. Dopo
è letargo di talpe, abiezione

che funghisce su sé . . . —
Il vento del giorno
confonde l'ombra viva e l'altra ancora
riluttante in un mezzo che respinge
le mie mani, e il respiro mi si rompe
nel punto dilatato, nella fossa
che circonda lo scatto del ricordo.
Così si svela prima di legarsi
a immagini, a parole, oscuro senso
reminiscente, il vuoto inabitato
che occupammo e che attende fin ch'è tempo
di colmarsi di noi, di ritrovarci . . .

and the *Phaedrus*. See, for instance, the famous passage in the *Phaedrus* (248b) in which Socrates describes the chariot of the soul with its two horses, one black and one white, when the rational element can no longer control the contrary directions of its steeds: "Confusion ensues, and conflict and grievous sweat. Whereupon with their charioteers powerless, many are lamed, and many have their wings all shattered, and for all their toiling they are balked, every one, of the full vision of Being, and departing therefore, they feed on the food of Seeming."

Tobias's angels. Allusion to the *Book of Tobit* in the *Apocrypha*. Tobias, son of Tobit, is accompanied and guarded by Raphael and the angels on his perilous journey to a faraway land, the consummation of a happy marriage, and a safe return trip home.

burnt-out wadis. The Italian is *greti arsi* (literally, "burnt river beds"). M. is obliquely alluding to the fact that the great Western religions were all born in the south, in the parched landscapes and dry river beds (arroyos) of the Middle East. Out of apparent death comes the impulse to life. Cf. the language of "The Eel": ". . . green soul seeking/life where there's nothing but stinging/drought, desolation;/spark that says/everything begins when everything seems/dead ashes." "Wadis" seemed the appropriate word; indeed, it is employed by M. himself in describing the desolate landscape of the Antilebanon: "You enter a waving sea of mold-colored clay and limestone cliffs: the peasants live in huts of mud, the water oozes in trickles through a few *wadis* . . ." ("Sulla strada di Damasco" in *Fuori di casa*)

Voice That Came with the Coots (1947)

An extremely powerful and complex poem, perhaps the most thematically comprehensive of the book, too difficult to be unpacked in a few notes. For sensitive and detailed reading of the poem (though exegesis of the last stanza strikes me as unconvincing), see Cambon, op. cit., pp. 98–118.

The original title was "Voice That Reached Us with the Coots." The change was presumably dictated by the poet's desire to extend the meaning of "voice"; to indicate, first, the voice of the dead or the absent that returned to him with the coming of the coots; second, the poetic voice, his own *individual* voice, that he recovered in his confrontation with the individual voices of *others,* his dead father and the unobtainable woman he loves. The Italian coot is a partial migrant: most individuals of the species leave their northern European range for the south, Italy included, in winter. Hence the reappearance of the coots can be applied to the returning "voice" of the North American Clizia or to the larval return of M.'s dead father from some "other" world. Except for his white frontal shield and bill, the coot *(fulica atra)* is slate-black, his appearance and migratory habits are suited to his function in the poem as an avine "shade" whose voice in the dead of winter stirs the poet's

memory and revives the voices of his own human "shades." With the returning coot come two voices from "beyond"—from the world of the grave and the transcendental Beyond *(aldilà)* of Clizia. As man and poet, M. recognizes what he shares with the other shades, that he is, like them, a shade; and further, that each shade has a voice only insofar as it has perfected its own individuality and to that degree possesses spiritual substance. An individual shade has a voice because it has something to say—a voice it has earned by *becoming*. The epigraph to the poem, potent but pointedly absent, can only be that purgatorial recognition that occurs when Dante's Virgil says to Statius as the latter tries to embrace him:

Frate,
non far, chè tu se' ombra, ed ombra vedi.

[Do not do so, brother, for you are a shade, and you see a shade.]

But although M. draws profoundly upon Dante, and the poem is unmistakably purgatorial, it is ultimately not a Dantesque vision that controls the poem.

A poetic conversation, in sum, between two shades, mediated by the poet, an acknowledged shade-to-be. On one side, the bodied voice of the dead father, bound to this world, its faces and places, and the hope of enduring in the memory of his sons; on the other, the spiritually disembodied voice of Clizia, burning with love of "Him who moved her" (that is, Dante's Aristotelian Prime Mover, "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars"). In between, interrogated by him and interrogating them, stands the poet, for whom the poem as a whole, by force of the ghostly conversation that is his *vision,* becomes a purgatorial ascent toward *otherness*—the otherness of others, but also the otherness at the heart of things, whether God or the void—that leads him toward his own unknown destination, his own "new upward leap."

the road already traveled. The setting is typically both realistic and metaphysical. A road to a Ligurian cemetery, that narrows into a goat-path as it climbs; but at the same time a Dantesque journey, up the purgatorial hill, along a pathway, the familiar *cammin di nostra vita.* At the top is the cemetery where we "melt like wax," dissolving into shades.

where we'll melt like wax. The image derives from Dante (who takes it from Ovid). "Wax" is for Dante the raw material or "matter" of mortal nature, before it is stamped or imprinted by the seal of Nature or emanations from the Divine Light. Individual differences in "mortal wax" are to be traced to imperfections in Nature herself, compared (*Par.* xiii, 67 ff.) to an artist whose hand trembles. (See also *Purg.* xviii, 37–39, xxxiii, 79–81, and *Par.* i, 37 ff.)

without shawl. See "Where the Tennis Court Used to Be . . ." in which M.'s father wears his habitual shawl against the cold. Here the physical process of dissolution, disembodiment, and detachment from the things of this world that must precede his "new upward leap" has begun.

miners' barges. Realistic allusion to the barges that carry the marble quarried along the Ligurian littoral. But also perhaps a glance back at the Dantesque sloops that in "Coast at Versilia" disembark their returning shades on the shore. The point in any case is that the tremor *announced (annunciava)* the barges and presumably no longer does. Memory is caught in the act of seizing upon what it hungers for; the former tremor is now the vibration of a different reality.

The shade who goes beside me. Realistic details of Clizia's physical appearance: her sternly proud mien; her wayward hair (see "The Bangs"), the intensity of her gaze.

the sensitive/mimosa. That is, the "sensitive plant," *mimosa pudica,* whose leaflets fold in, flinching when touched. Clizia is so thoroughly disembodied that even the mimosa doesn't flinch when it "grazes her ghost."

The faithful shade. Italian *L'ombra fidata*. Clizia is *faithful* because her guidance, like that of Virgil with Dante, can be unfailingly relied upon; but she also carries with her the sense of Christian *fides,* "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen."

the mute one. M.'s father who, because dead, cannot speak to his living son, but communicates only with the disembodied spirit of Clizia. Though mute, he has a voice and converses; it is his son who is numbed and presumably silent at the grave's *edge,* where the dreaded ditch opens.

(dispirited years for me). The Italian is (*anni per me pesante:* "years for me heavy"). Translation is tricky; the years have lain heavy on the poet, but the poet is himself *pesante,* fleshy or corpulent (in marked contrast to the spiritualized Clizia and the by now unfleshed father). "Dispirited" seemed, if pressed, to convey the double meaning.

new upward leap. "Upward" is my effort to suggest the transcendental quantum jump implied by the simple *nuovo balzo* ("new leap") of the text. M.'s father is still stubbornly attached to this world; his hope of immortality is that of living on in the memory of his sons. Only when he is prepared to take the path that leads to fulfillment—M. tacitly insists that there is a fulfillment beyond death—will he be able to take the "leap" that transforms him, toward which, by returning now, he has taken the first insecure, discouraged step. See Clizia's words in the next stanza: "Now you return to the unbounded heaven that transmutes all." Like the poet himself, persistently seeking enclosures and shelters, hesitant to force a passage *(varco)* to the open sea and the unbounded horizon, the paternal ghost trembles *at the edge*. Not, like the poet, trembling at the grave's edge, but at the edge of what lies beyond the grave, the void on the other side of death, the void growing inside us. Cf. the new element into which the poet, like a mullet, hurls himself in the closing line of "The Shade of the Magnolia."

I have thought for you, I have remembered/for all. Clizia, all selfhood surrendered and to that degree disincarnate, is capable of taking compassionate thought for each individual and remembering for all because she has literally dissolved into the Other (the *Altri* or *Altrui* of "Rainbow"). She is Love *en acte,* her individual and perhaps generic destiny fulfilled in

pure otherness; she has sacrificed herself for all. Hence she stresses the activity of memory because it is memory that she had to overcome in herself to become what she is. She too remembers her coasts, even though she has come to remove another person from what he loves toward a larger and more inclusive "landscape" that he can only enter by accepting the necessity of his "new leap." It is important that we understand Clizia's words here as addressed to a *tu* that includes both the poet's father and the poet himself. As M. observed in another context, "My critics assert . . . that my *tu* is an institute . . . in me the many are a one even if they appear/multiplied by the mirrors." No less than his father, the poet is addicted to the paradisal retrogression of memory, to lingering "at the edge," taking shelter under his childhood trees, or, worst of all, to the imprisonment of remembered love. If the father hopes to survive in the loving memory of his children, so the poet, the prisoner of his own memories, has centered his life around a love fixed forever, unchanging, in the past. "Memory," he says, "is no sin, as long as it serves some purpose." Thereafter it becomes a fatal impediment, a carnal torpor, "degradation/moldering on itself." Clizia has indeed taken thought for all, remembered for all. And the "new upward leap" that terrifies the father is even more clearly a challenge to the son.

In the wind of day. The two individual shades dissolve into a single twilit figure that resists the poet's embrace as firmly as Virgil rejects Statius's reaching arms. The poet is left alone to cope with his vision and the fulfillment it has imposed upon him—there at the edge of "the grave ditch *[fossa]*/around the sudden start [or "click" or "snap" as of a camera shutter] of memory."

the uninhabited void. To his French translator M. explained this phrase as follows: "The uninhabited void is that which is formed in us just before we *are* or before we say Yes to life: the void that forms in the pendulum a second before the hour strikes." This vision of the void is manifestly purgatorial, but it is obviously not Dante's and it is not Clizia who is speaking here. It is a third voice, a voice with its own individual vision of the inexpressible *X* that precedes "images and words," the *X* from which we come and into which we vanish. We remember it darkly only when we cease remembering; then, if at all, we *sense* it growing inside us, a fate that depends on us (as God depends upon his believers, like Clizia) to confront and freely define. The ancient Greeks would have called that void Chaos (meaning simply "gaping void"), not so much anarchic disorder as the matrix of the possible, the undifferentiated "ditch" of things.

The Shade of the Magnolia (1947)

When first published, this parenthetical subtitle was appended to the poem: *(Another Unwritten Letter)*. Its recipient is once again the Jewish-American woman and Christian convert called Clizia.

"Il fait bien froid . . ." M.'s father had kept muttering in "Where