

The Eel

The eel, coldwater
siren, who leaves the Baltic behind her
to reach these shores of ours,
our wetlands and marshes, our rivers,
who struggles upstream hugging the bottom, under the flood of
the downward torrent,
from branch to branch, thinning,
narrowing in, stem by stem,
snaking deeper and deeper into the rock core
of slab ledge, squirming through
stone interstices of slime until
one day, light,
exploding, blazes from the chestnut leaves,
ignites a wriggle in deadwater sumps
and run-off ditches of Apennine
ravines spilling downhill toward the Romagna;
eel, torchlight, lash,
arrow of Love on earth,
whom only these dry gulches of ours or burned-out
Pyrenean gullies can draw back up
to Edens of generation;
the green soul seeking
life where there's nothing but stinging
drought, desolation;
spark that says
everything begins when everything seems
dead ashes, buried stump;
brief rainbow, twin
of that other iris shining between your lashes,
by which your virtue blazes out, unsullied, among the sons
of men floundering in your mud, can you
deny a sister?

L'anguilla

L'anguilla, la sirena
dei mari freddi che lascia il Baltico
per giungere ai nostri mari,
ai nostri estuari, ai fiumi
che risale in profondo, sotto la piena avversa,
di ramo in ramo e poi
di capello in capello, assottigliati,
sempre più addentro, sempre più nel cuore
del macigno, filtrando
tra gorielli di melma finché un giorno
una luce scoccata dai castagni
ne accende il guizzo in pozze d'acquamorta,
nei fossi che declinano
dai balzi d'Appennino alla Romagna;
l'anguilla, torcia, frusta,
freccia d'Amore in terra
che solo i nostri botri o i disseccati
ruscelli pirenaici riconducono
a paradisi di fecondazione;
l'anima verde che cerca
vita là dove solo
morde l'arsura e la desolazione,
la scintilla che dice
tutto comincia quando tutto pare
incarbonirsi, bronco seppellito;
l'iride breve, gemella
di quella che incastonano i tuoi cigli
e fai brillare intatta in mezzo ai figli
dell'uomo, immersi nel tuo fango, puoi tu
non crederla sorella?

Grapples of rostrums, loves, nests of eggs
marbled, divine! Now the jemmy sprout
of the perennial plants, like the grub
sparkles in the gloom, Jupiter is buried.

The Eel (1948)

The poem is rightly regarded as one of the peaks, perhaps *the* peak, of Italian lyric poetry in the twentieth century. Technically, it is literally breathtaking: thirty lines of nonstop, passionately driving verse culminating in an astonishing epiphany. A single musical sentence that in the last line poses a simple rhetorical question, utterly unexpected, whose answer lies in the twenty-nine preceding lines. Form and content fuse. Syntax, diction, prosody, the edgy off-assonances—all express the stubborn, purposive, persistent progress of the eel as it thrusts upstream, squirming through narrowing perforations of slimy stone to reach its goal, those “Edens of generation,” into which it explodes in orgasmic climax—the three half-rhyming hammer-beats of *tórcia*, *frústa*, *fréccia d’Amore* (“torchlight, lash, / arrow of Love on earth”)—into the desert waste of burning desolation, without whose aridity of death it cannot spawn new life. The “spark” that stirs in the “dead ashes” is miraculously transmuted into the divine iridescence of the Montalian *donna*, Clizia or Iris, whose covenant, linking heaven to earth, shimmers over men still immersed in the mud from which her ascent began. And then the *volta* of the final question, at once exhortation, reproach, and challenge, asking whether she recognizes her generic affinity with the world she has triumphantly transcended. We *hear* that affinity in the revealing assonances and rhymes that crowd into the coda, linking *anguilla* (eel) to *scintilla* (spark) to *gemella* (twin) to *sorella* (sister), and binding *cigli* (Clizia’s lambent *eyelashes*) to *figli* (the *sons* of men floundering in the eel’s mud). Sound and meaning converge, declaring the affinity that links heaven to earth, life to death, spirit to matter, transcendence to immanence.

Several interpretive points. First, the reader without Italian should be wary of viewing the eel’s progress as essentially phallic. “Eel” in Italian is feminine (*anguilla*), and M. emphasizes the fact by putting *sirena* (siren) in apposition with it, and, in the poem’s last word, *sorella* (sister). Obviously the eel’s thrusting passage is phallic; but the point is to look beyond, to recognize that both sexes are united in the eel, that the poet’s point is the undifferentiated “life force” incarnate in it. A force represented by sexuality but not equivalent to it. There is no reason for denying Bergson’s influence on the poet, or that the eel is an emblem, at least in part, of Bergson’s *élan vital*. Early on, wrote M. (in the important essay “Intentions”), “I was under the influence of the French philosophy of contingency, especially that of Boutroux, whom I understood better than Bergson. Miracles were for me no less evident than necessity. Immanence and transcendence are not separable.” The eel’s progress might

be called a Bergsonian miracle performed in the teeth of necessity; both transcendence and immanence are in it, and indeed at the heart of the poem. According to Bergson, there are two great cosmic realities or forces: matter and spirit. *Conscience* and *esprit*, like fire and air in the ancient cosmologies, tend always to rise; but they can only do so by struggling against the downward-tending force of matter (water and earth). The ascent of spirit is accomplished by its capacity for adapting to, or inwardly encapsulating, matter. It adapts itself to the "lay of the land," to what the Greeks called "the necessity of the earth," and we might call the gravitational fact of the "given." In M. that material "given" is expressed as an obstruction: a wall, a hedge, a cliffside, an enclosing horizon. The naturally aspiring spirit hungers to find a passage (or *varco*) into the world that lies beyond the wall, even into the ultimate beyond (the *aldilà*), a horizon that keeps receding. Bergson's commonest metaphor for the movement of the spirit is a stream that carves its way through rock, but is inevitably shaped by the rock in turn. It *conforms* in order to *inform*; matter and spirit mutually mold each other. M.'s eel can only make its way upstream by going *under* (that is, adapting to what resists it in order to overcome the resistance), not *against*, the full force of the opposing current. What spirit has overcome is in turn brought to bear upon the matter that opposed it. In Bergson's words: "Spirit borrows from matter the perceptions on which it feeds and returns them to matter in the form of movements which it has stamped with its own freedom." The eel escapes the imprisonment of matter by struggling against it; its freedom bears the imprint of what it has struggled against, just as the poet bears the imprint of the Ligurian landscape that once, before he made his way beyond it, defined him, and, in part, still does. See "Where the Tennis Court Used to Be . . ." ("It's odd to think that each of us . . .")

"The Eel," then, should be viewed as a cosmic love-poem, an account of the phylogeny of the human spirit as well as a dithyramb to the woman who inspired it. That woman is again the Clizia celebrated in this section (though M. later told Silvio Ramat that "she could also be that other woman" [i.e., the Vixen of "Private Madrigals"]). M., however, both as man and poet, obviously identified himself with the eel, observing that "I love the age in which I was born because I prefer to live in the stream rather than vegetate in the marsh [see note to the *uninhabited void* in "Voice That Came with the Coots"] of an age without time." All his life he was an eel-watcher. In one of the loveliest early poems, "The Lemon Trees," he is the child-in-the-poet shunning the formal gardens of traditional poetry for the dirt roads that lead to "half-dried pools where boys scoop up a few skinny eels." In one of the love-lyrics of "Motets," he feels himself "one with the man on the bank/intently angling for eels"—i.e., the erotically religious fisherman of "The Black Trout" and "For Album," always angling for that elusive, jewellike flash of the beloved who is one with life itself, spirit incarnated in a silvery shimmer of flesh, never to be caught or, if caught, not kept. A love-poem then, both indi-

vidual and cosmic; an ontogeny as well as a phylogeny. In the eel's passion are embodied those virtues—obdurate persistence, courage, creature-humility but also creature-pride, that refusal of the ditch that lies beneath the aspiration to achieve fulfillment—the legacy bequeathed by the poet in "Little Testament":

. . . a faith that was fought for
a hope that burned more slowly
than a tough log on the grate. . . .

A final point. It has been objected that M. has confused the eel's behavior with that of the salmon. But the confusion is deliberate. M. was too practiced an observer of the natural world to confuse the very different life cycles of salmon and eel. M.'s emblematic "creature" requires both the slime that spawns the eel and the purposive drive of the spawning salmon, much as Shakespeare's Cleopatra requires the procreative ooze of the Nile and the "immortal longings" dialectically generated by that ooze. As Nietzsche observed, "A man's sexuality reaches to the very heights of his spirit." Moreover, this eel is, unlike the real thing, an ecumenical creature. It comes from the icy Baltic and climbs to the burning heights of the Spanish Pyrenees and the Italian Apennines. Corporality is burnt away; the "green spirit" homes for the heights; matter is transmuted into airy spirit. Again, the eel is both masculine and feminine, etc. An ecumenical spirit, then, that, at its moment of transcendence, the moment it becomes pure "otherness," may be tempted, like Clizia, to forget its origins in the mud. Transcendence spells mortal danger, as M. repeatedly observed, nowhere more trenchantly than in his essay, "The Artist's Solitude":

The man who communicates is the transcendental "I" who is hidden within us and recognizes himself in others. But the transcendental "I" is a lamp that illuminates only a very narrow strip of space before us, a light that carries us toward a condition that is not individual and therefore not human.

The danger, in short, is that of becoming merely a generic construct of the species disincarnated from creature complexity: an abstract of humanity. Hence the appeal to the *donna* to remember her sister—that is, either her own flesh-and-blood individual self or her immanent "sister," the Vixen who is the subject of "Private Madrigals," which now follow.

coldwater/siren, who leaves the Baltic behind her. A possible private allusion to Clizia's northern habitat (see "Rainbow" and "Hitler Spring") hinting, in the eel's progress to Italian shores, at her eventual Love-compelled "return."

Edens of generation. In Italian, literally, "paradises of fecundation."

that other iris. See notes to "Rainbow." The trope is drawn from the conventional amorous hyperbole of the *donna* as celebrated by the poets of the *dolce stilnovisti* (Dante, Cavalcanti, Guinizelli, Cino da Pistoia, etc.) and, finally, Petrarch. The lady's jewels, already so prominent in the

poems of the book's *Finisterre* section, are commonplace in the earlier poets. Beatrice's eyes, for instance, are called "emeralds"; while in Guinizelli's famous "Amore e 'l cor gentil," the love in the lady's heart is likened to "virtue in precious stone." Elsewhere the lady's eyes are compared to jasper, pearls, etc.

the sons/of men floundering in your mud. To the Biblical echo of "sons of men," M. adds a Dantesque allusion to the sinners in Hell, called by Dante (*Inf.* vii, 110) *fangose genti* ("the muddy people"). But there is more than a hint of M.'s own "ditch," that painfully hellish or purgatorial realm where the individual soul suffers "a sea-change" *en route* to fulfillment, to becoming itself. See note on *the uninhabited void* in "Voice That Came with the Coots."

PRIVATE MADRIGALS

These "madrigals" were written between 1948 and 1953, at the same time, that is, as most of the transcendental love-lyrics of the preceding *Silvae* section. All of them, according to M., are devoted to the woman known as the Vixen (who appears often in the *Flashes and Dedications* section, and who is specifically addressed as such in her secular hymn, "Anniversary").

Musically and structurally the entire section forms a progressive counterpoint, not merely a static contrast, to the Clizia poems of *Silvae*. Structural *iridescence*, the "musical intermittences of the heart": the poems, like life itself, are constantly changing, the flux of feeling revealing itself in constant transformations and reprises. The Vixen, for instance: initially earthy, a terrestrial love, she reveals, at the peak of her power, an angelic virtue and capacity for transcendence that is rooted in her very earthiness and animal vitality. *Animal spirits* are her nature, yet she persistently displays signs of Clizia's spiritual power, while Clizia herself, in the closing lines of "The Eel" is asked to recognize her affinity with her "sister," the incandescent eel.

These are clearly private poems, *very* private at times, almost excluding the reader. The greater the passion, the more private the poem. The love they celebrate is physical, but at its height it brings the lovers to the brink of achieved divinity. Hence the poems are often, sometimes impenetrably, coded in intimacies; we can hear the meanings perhaps but not the subtler inflections. For responsibly sensitive interpretations of these poems, the interested reader should consult Almansi and Merry, *op. cit.*, p. 110 ff. and Cambon, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-90.

I Know a Ray of Sunlight . . . (1946)

The close correspondence between this small poem, patterned in two quatrains and centered on the image of the swallow, and "On the