

In the Greenhouse

Filling the lemon tree,
a skittering of mole paws.
The sickle glistened, a rosary
of cautious waterbeads.

Blazing among the quinces,
a red dot, cochineal; the pony
whinnied, reared against
the comb—and the dream took over.

Rapt, buoyant, I was
drenched with you, your form
my hidden breathing, your face
fusing with mine, and the dark

idea of God descended
on the living few, sounds of heaven
all around, cherubic drummings,
globes of lightning hovering

over me, over you, over the lemons . . .

Nella serra

S'empì d'uno zampettio
di talpe la limonaia,
brillò in un rosario di caute
gocce la falce fienaia.

S'accese sui pomi cotogni,
un punto, una cocciniglia,
si udì inalberarsi alla striglia
il poney—e poi vinse il sogno.

Rapito e leggero ero intriso
di te, la tua forma era il mio
respiro nascosto, il tuo viso
nel mio si fondeva, e l'oscuro

pensiero di Dio discendeva
sui pochi viventi, tra suoni
celesti e infantili tamburi
e globi sospesi di fulmini

su me, su te, sui limoni . . .

lated, autumnal revival of the summer's apparently spent heat and passion—the Dantesque “signs of an old flame” recognized.

Ontario. That is, Canada or North America, where “Clizia” now lives. Clizia, it should be added, is like Dora Markus in *The Occasions*, Jewish. The point is poetically important, paradoxically qualifying her role here and elsewhere as “Christ-bearer” (since Christianity derived from Judaism) and explaining her persistent relation to the East (“oriental sapphire”; but see also the closing lines of “Hitler Spring”) and the Levant, as well as her North American exile from “the land that’s yours/and which you have not seen.”

bloodied Face on the shroud. St. Veronica’s napkin.

sapphires of heavenly blue. See Dante, *Purg.* i, 13.

lost Nestorian’s. Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, was banished to the Arabian desert for heresy. His heresy was his insistence that God has two persons as opposed to the orthodox view of a single person. “Christ,” Nestorius declares, “has two natures: one is that which clothes in flesh, another that which is clothed.” So for the Nestorian heretic Montale, Christ was a man who “carries God within him,” just as Clizia is a “Christ-bearer” garbed in the vestments of God’s angels.

Another’s heart. A glancing allusion to Dante who, in several passages, refers to God as *Altrui*—the *other*, *another*.

In the Greenhouse (1946)

Formally and thematically this and the poem immediately following, “In the Park,” are paired. Both written in off-rhymed quatrains, each with its crucial one-line extrametrical coda, they mutually inform each other. Through formal correspondence but thematic contrast, the antiphonal structure is designed to reveal a rhythm of changing feeling on the part of the poetic “I” toward the absent-present Clizia. The precipitant of this altered rhythm is again *memory* that, variously inflected by remembered ecstasy or loss, reveals the poet’s typical oxymoron of feeling: sweet/bitter; freedom/constriction; self-completion in the love of another/total loss of selfhood in love, the sense of being possessed and absorbed, even devoured, by the “other.”

The Italian word for “greenhouse” is *serra*. Etymologically (*ser-rare* = to shut, enclose, surround, clench, tighten), it originally meant an enclosed trench, i.e., a forcing-bed or compost trench; only later a glassed enclosure or hothouse of the modern variety. M. here glances, I believe, at the older sense, in order to stress the thematic idea of *earthly* transcendence—earth volatilizing from the manure of its origins in its organic passage toward the divine (which, in turn, becomes *immanent* in the lemons). Poetry, Montale observed, deals necessarily with both the sewer and with God. This poem manifestly deals with both, and the dynamic, even dialectical, relationship between them.

M. typically begins with the divine irradiation of the everyday object. The sickle glistening with its "rosary/of cautious waterbeads" is an ordinary sickle; its divinity is *immanent* aspiration, a fact that it reveals, not a quality with which it is graciously endowed with from "on high." "Filling the lemon tree,/a skittering of mole paws . . .": the creature-world of the underground, inhabiting the manure of the *serra*, ascends, transcending itself, into the world above, rising into the trees, just as the sickle declares its divinity. In the second stanza, the same point is pursued, but from a different perspective, chromatically. A vivid red dot of the cochineal insect suddenly bursts into flame against the yellow-green quinces, much as Clizia's lightnings blaze in the darkness. Imaged transcendence is then transferred to a pony whinnying, rearing, *up* (Italian *inalberarsi*) in *spirited* protest against the material currycomb—"and the dream took over." The lover's aspiration enacts M.'s poetics. Words themselves are caged and imprisoned until the poet releases them, lets them reach out and up on their own, freely. So too the poem aims at releasing the animal from its cage, letting it freely reveal its spiritual affinities. "Rapt, buoyant"—now the poet rises, drenched like the sickle in the first stanza, with *you*—the beloved "other" whose love lifts the lover into another dimension of reality—and the two merge in the immanent divinity of the "one" they jointly become. Spirit-intoxicated matter merges with matter-loving spirit: "your face [heavenly Clizia] fusing with mine" [earthly but aspiring lover], and the miraculous incarnation occurs, signified by the descent of "the dark idea of God" and the heavenly yearning of the earth-born lemons. That "dark idea of God" is borrowed from the neo-Platonic language of the medieval mystics. The result is achieved heaven-on-earth, the "moment of forever": "sounds of heaven/all around, cherubic drummings,/globes of lightning hovering//over me, over you, over the lemons . . ."

In the Park (1946)

Verso to the *recto* of the preceding poem. "In the Greenhouse" presents a moment of metaphysical balance, precarious but nonetheless real. In Wallace Stevens's phrase, "Not moments that we achieve, but moments that happen/As when a man and women meet and love forthwith." For an instant, in an ecstatic dream, "here" and "there" are fused in the lightning (*lampi*) immanent in the terrestrial lemons.

In contrast, "In the Park" stresses constriction, imbalance, and increasing distance—as the tree of memory shrinks and its shadow becomes distorted—between the poet and Clizia, actual and transcendent. Here as elsewhere the shade of the great tree—magnolia, willow, wild pine, eucalyptus, or fig—is the power that shelters what is precious and permanent in human memory. But now the shade is thinned or stunted, either because the season has changed from summer to fall (as in "The Shade of the Magnolia") or because time and distance have distorted