

Translator's Preface

Eugenio Montale's *La bufera e altro* (*The Storm and Other Things**) was published in 1956, the product of seventeen crucial years in the life and development of its author. In Montale's own judgment and that of informed critics of Italian poetry, it marks the summit of his career, the book in which he found his authentic voice, already audible but still forming, still questing for fulfillment, in the beautifully crafted but often hermetically difficult verse of *Ossi di seppia* (*Cuttlefish Bones*, 1925) and *Le occasioni* (*The Occasions*, 1939). *Tout court*, at least in my opinion, *La bufera* is the peak achievement of Italian poetry in the twentieth century, the greatest poetry written in Italy since Leopardi.

Proof of such extravagant claims must lie in the reader's intense encounter with the original text, which will invariably reward his efforts. Translation, like politics, is an art of the possible; if the translator has done his work the best he can expect is that his reader, believing that the text has been translated, not merely transcribed or transliterated, will feel something of the contagion of the original and try to confirm it by making contact with the facing Italian text. This is therefore a translator's preface, not a critical introduction. For one thing, the act of translation presupposes a prior act of criticism; Montale's poetry tests the translator's critical sense even more than it taxes that of the attentive reader. If I have failed, the translation will show why, just as it will also show what I have understood of the demands imposed by the poems. For another, we are fortunate in having in the case of Montale (whose very difficulty and power have elicited a heightened critical response from his better critics), three or four recent studies of remarkable quality.** At the risk of redundancy (since translation assumes the critical act) I have added by way of afterword, not foreword, what must seem an alarmingly thick battery of notes and commentary. But I could see no other way of completing my task. Montale is dauntingly, often damnably, difficult, constantly and knowingly risking, even while denying, the charge of obscurity. He is, first of all, tradition-saturated, and familiarity with his most commonly echoed texts—Plato, the Bible, Dante and the *dolce stilnovisti*,

* See Notes, p. 164 for the meaning of the title.

** See Notes, p. 163.

Petrarch—can no longer be expected of most readers of contemporary poetry. But he is also thematically difficult and tonally extremely complex. Guido Almansi and Bruce Merry put the challenge posed by *La bufera* with judicious succinctness: “[It] . . . is one of the hardest and most unmanageable books in modern literature. Time and time again even the most devoted reader, well familiar with the intractable texts, is defeated by the arbitrariness of the image, the constant shift from dream to reality, the jump from one place or time to another, the privacy of the dialogue which goes far beyond the acceptable shorthand of intimacy. *Bufera* is a book of overwhelming beauty which is still kind and harsh toward the unfortunate reader.”*

For all their compendiousness, my notes cannot be expected to cope with this degree of complexity and difficulty. They are designed to provide a modest sense of Montale’s allusive habits by way of indicating how and why he engages the tradition (an engagement, incidentally, which is very unlike that of Eliot, to whom he has frequently been compared). In the case of a number of poems, I have simply cited the comments of critics whose response could not, I thought, be significantly bettered. In other cases, disappointed by what I found or finding little or nothing, I have offered my own critical commentary. Readers who dislike being crowded not only by the interpretation necessarily imbedded in any serious translation but by a defense of that interpretation as well are advised simply to ignore them.

The dense imaginative difficulty of these poems is so great that it took me several years to grasp what, while translating and revising, I was slowly groping toward. Even now I find it difficult to articulate clearly the nature of the task. But I would tentatively define it as the requirement to register “iridescence.” Too impressionistic perhaps and too vague as a practical criterion, but for me it is the only word that does justice to the range of Montale’s poetic vision. I stress “vision.” The poet *sees*, not a vision perhaps, but visionary “signs,” the residue or phenomenal shimmering of the lost or absent presence of the beloved; he sees these signs with an erotic intensity that is manifestly religious. The beloved who most dominates the book is the (Ovidian) Clizia, who is also called Iride—Iris, the iridescence of the rainbow, the flower, the iris of the eye (see note to “Rainbow”). More than half the poems in the book, and certainly the best, are saturated, drenched, with her presence. She is elusive, uncontainable, constantly receding from the poet’s grasp, yet always present to his imagination, the sign of a covenant, a rainbow linking earth to heaven; she is simultaneously redeemer and Muse. Her gift is the poet’s imaginative voice; and it is this voice, this poetry, that in “Little Testament” he calls an *iride*, the only legacy he can leave her in return. The poetry aims, it seems to me, at evoking, even compelling her to return from her real and metaphysical absence, much as a Greek chorus

* *Eugenio Montale / The Private Language of Poetry* (Edinburgh 1977).

attempts, by the power of its performance, to compel an epiphany of the god it invokes. The poetry, in short, is a *mimesis*; its purpose is sympathetic magic, the accomplishment of an impossible miracle—poetry that can keep pace with, even contain, life itself. Thematically, this is attempted by charting the beloved's unexpected manifestations and incarnations, or her miraculously inclusive, because constantly changing, nature: from the iridescence of the eel to the jewellike flash and virtue of the lady's eyes (see "The Eel"). For the translator the problem is constant attention to the dynamics of these transformations, the effort to see that their religious aura is respected while at the same time remaining loyal to the poet's delicate, often ironic, commitment to immanence and the body's truth. The poet straddles two worlds—body and soul, matter and spirit, immanence and transcendence—and the line that divides them is not only very fine but constantly shifting according to the weather of the feelings, the historical situation, and the woman.

Technically as well the aim is iridescence, and the translator must follow suit. Montale's images are constantly in the process of mutation; it is largely their transformational rapidity, urgency, and complexity that make his poetry difficult. An image of a metaphysical sort, for instance, is set out; this is immediately transformed into visual terms, which then become chromatic, only to be transformed again into another associated, but larger, cluster; image after image, each modulating into the other so as to give a quite Ovidian sense of a world in endless process of metamorphosis. We get, not the intensive elaboration of a conceit, but rather imaginative expansion, no less elaborate and far less predictable. The result is a poem that seems to be *alive*, a tissue of shifting tints, the poem-as-prism or spectrum. What the translator (and reader) must do is to locate the hidden transitional pivot beneath the seemingly unpredictable thematic swerve, prosodic jump, or even pointedly abrupt silence or aposiopesis. When we find that pivot we are in touch with what Montale elsewhere, in a metaphysical connection, calls "the brief circle where everything is changed," the "ditch of memory" or that void of suffering that precedes all transformation, all individual becoming. Here the foundations of things are as it were "liquified"; distinctions of body and soul, day and night, reality and dream, living and dead are dissolved. What holds for metaphysics holds also for the imagination; it is in this same circle or ditch that metaphor and image have their origin, become themselves.

The reader will not need to be told that these are love-poems, both personal and cosmological, without doubt the most remarkable sustained sequence of love-poems in Italian since Petrarch. But they are not love-poems in the modern sense, nor are they ultimately Petrarchan, but an odd and original mingling of both—a mixture that requires unwavering attention to the delicate tonal fusion of the literary and aulic with the conversational or colloquial norm. The reader, for instance, will get no intimate modern sense of the beloved from these poems. We know

that Clizia is ash-blond, that her features are stern and even fierce, that she has a wayward curl and bangs, and that she wears jewels—all metaphysical as well as realistic details, and little more. She is a fundamentally transcendental creature, a migratory or transmigratory angel, whose God-intoxicated “flights” enable her to find a passage (*varco*) over walls, mountains, oceans, and metaphysical frontiers—qualities that are expressed in the allegorical or hyperbolic erotic mode of Dante or the *dolce stilnovisti*. But not always. She is also a real woman, and she can therefore be addressed, like her more carnal *semblable*, the Vixen, in directly conversational ways. There is, that is, a constant and thematically crucial tension between the two modes of speech employed; this permits the poet to express the tension involved in straddling the antinomies of his world and his nature, as evoked by alterations in his feelings and situations vis-à-vis the woman he loves. For Montale in particular, the tension is ironically directed, on the one hand, at his own yearning to follow his transcendental lady in her trajectory toward God and, on the other, his own chunky materiality and bodily torpor. The body tends to speak colloquially, and this very colloquial inadequacy compels the poet, in something like self-revulsion or inadequacy, to more transcendental utterance. The beloved, I am saying, is made real to us, not by an account of her moods and physical appearance, but by her effect upon the poet. The emphasis falls, in a quite Platonic way, on the *process* of love. The lover is, if not more divine, at least more interesting, more revealing, than the beloved. The poet and the poetry become Love *en acte*. Hence the iridescence that characterizes the beloved appears as the shifting play of feeling and response in the poet, his efforts to rise, his tendency to fall. At times he seems almost to volatilize with aspiration, to be lifted out of time and become, like Clizia, pure disembodied spirit; at others to sink back into the profane morass of the temporal. Montale has repeatedly said that one of his aims was to make his reader *feel* time; and the seesawing between the temporal and “the instant of forever” is one of his ways of creating this sense of temporal iridescence, of suggesting what it feels like, not to stand firmly in the middle of contraries, midway between the intermittences, but to be tugged, with the rhythm of actual life, always and often tragically, toward one pole or the other.

The aspiration is one that Montale himself insisted upon. “For me,” he wrote, “the miracle was as manifest as necessity. Immanence and transcendence aren’t separable, and to make a state of mind out of the perennial mediation of the two terms, as modern historicism proposes, doesn’t resolve the problem, or resolves it with the optimism of a wave. We need to live our contradictions without evasions, but also without enjoying it too much . . .” To insist upon straddling one’s contradictions, without self-heroics or equilibrist pleasure, is of course simply another way of insisting upon iridescence in both life and poetry. So *La bufera* again and again offers us poems that chart, in appositely rhythmized and structured form, every nuance of a life lived between those contra-

dictions that love, more than any other passion, imposes. At times it almost seems as though Montale were purposely "working" these contradictions as a degree of transcendence, a means of prying himself into the upper limits of his nature, thereby revealing the goddess to whom he is indentured and in whose presence he feels, however briefly, something like achieved divinity. But finally he consents, however reluctantly, to the shifting modalities of the interim, to being torn; with characteristic honesty and clarity he refuses the optimistic Hegelian faith that antinomies can be resolved and unified at a higher level. If there is an *Aufhebung* in these poems, it comes with the brilliance and brevity of lightning; then the old comfortable-uncomfortable darkness of the body and the world reappears. That darkness is historical as well as metaphysical, and it is important to remember that these love-poems exist in the agonizingly real world of the Second World War and its aftermath, and that this setting is crucial to the poet's purpose. Not only because the beloved is a redemptive reality in a world which to Montale looked like a modern replica of Dante's Hell, but because the desperate political and historical situation affects the psyche's ability to adapt, to become, to maintain existential balance. A transcendental love is enough to unsettle any man; but in a world terribly out of balance and tilting, as Montale believed, toward imminent apocalypse and the collapse of civilization, the contradictions are even harder to live.

The danger of course is loss of personal balance, of being driven inward upon oneself, into gloomy solitude or numbed solipsism. Or, conversely, the danger of being propelled (like Clizia) toward an Otherness so overwhelming that one loses all sense of individual self and individual others in an undifferentiated Absolute. "The man who communicates," Montale observed, "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 small space in front of us, a light that carries us toward a nonindividual, and therefore nonhuman, condition." Solitude and solipsism were for Montale, as for Eliot, the greatest personal threat. Hence the poet's constant preoccupation with walls, barriers, frontiers, horizons, prisons, any confining enclosure that makes escape into a larger self or a new community impossible. Hence too his intractable refusal to surrender to any ideology or sodality, whether Communist or Catholic, that effectively denied the individual in an inhuman or closed collective. And hence his concern with the transcendental "I," the "I" who communicates, and his lifelong conviction that openness toward the Other, toward *individual* otherness, was the essential thing in becoming, and remaining, human. He had what, for want of a better phrase, I would term the human, and humanizing, imagination, the capacity for otherness and the sympathetic openness toward those feelings that are not our own but from which we cannot divide ourselves except by becoming less human, even inhuman.