The Storm

Les princes n'ont point d'yeux pour voir ces grand's merveilles,
Leurs mains ne servent plus qu'à nous persécuter . . .

AGRIPPA D'AUBIGNÉ: *À Dieu*

The storm splattering the tough magnolia
leaves, with the long rolling March thunder
and hail,

(tinklings of crystal in your nocturnal
nest startle you, out of gold gone
from the mahoganies, on the edging
of bound books, a grain of sugar
still burns in the shell
of your eyelids)

the lightning blanching
walls and trees, freezing them in that
forever of an instant—marble manna
and destruction—which you carry sculpted
inside you for your damnation, and that binds you
to me, strange sister, more than love—
then the hard crack, the castanets, the shaking
of tambourines over the thieving ditch,
the stamp of the fandango, and overhead,
some gesture, groping . . .
As when you turned around and, with your hand, the cloud of
hair
clearing from your forehead,

you waved to me—and stepped into darkness.

La bufera

Les princes n'ont point d'yeux pour voir ces grand's merveilles,
Leurs mains ne servent plus qu'à nous persécuter . . .

AGRIPPA D'AUBIGNÉ, *À Dieu*

La bufera che sgronda sulle foglie
dure della magnolia i lunghi tuoni
marzolini e la grandine,

(i suoni di cristallo nel tuo nido
notturno ti sorprendono, dell'oro
che s'è spento sui mogani, sul taglio
dei libri rilegati, brucia ancora
una grana di zucchero nel guscio
delle tue palpebre)

il lampo che candisce
alberi e muri e li sorprende in quella
eternità d'istante—marmo manna
e distruzione—ch'entro te scolpita
porti per tua condanna e che ti lega
più che l'amore a me, strana sorella,—

e poi lo schianto rude, i sistri, il fremere
dei tamburelli sulla fossa fuia,
lo scalpicciare del fandango, e sopra
qualche gesto che annaspa . . .
Come quando
ti rivolgesti e con la mano, sgombra
la fronte dalla nube dei capelli,

mi salutasti—per entrar nel buio.

My own notes are not systematic nor, despite their length, do they aim at comprehensiveness. Montale's poetry is too allusive, too prosodically and structurally complex, too elliptical, to sanction the effort. The Italian critic Avalle, for instance, has written a seventy-page critique of one of the shorter of these poems, "The Earrings," and it is none too long. My aim here is to supply the factual material necessary to reading, or at least not misreading, the poems and also to explain my more difficult decisions as translator. I have provided glosses on some, not all, of M.'s many allusions to Dante, the Bible, Shakespeare, Plato, etc. When I thought it useful, or where available commentary seemed perfunctory or thin, I have offered my own critical observations.

There is no evading the fact that Montale is both a difficult poet and an allusive traditionalist, as his essay "Style and Tradition" and the range of his critical writings make clear. In a time when traditionalism is regarded as elitism, and when low-keyed verse of gritty directness and "naked feeling" is the preferred norm, a poet's learning is either unperceived or resentfully dismissed as pretentious. Montale, like Eliot, was *saturated* in what was for him a living, if almost certainly dying, tradition; like Eliot, he took the full risk of that tradition, refusing to be other than what he was, refusing to compromise with egalitarian ignorance disguised as democratic accessibility. If the reader finds these notes pedantically excessive, I can only reply that they would be less so if the general level of cultural literacy were not so low. *Crede experto.* I once had the experience of reading some of these translations aloud with a brief commentary on each before an audience of university people and several professional writers. One writer, an aggressively populist (but not popular) novelist indignantly complained that it was arrogance in a poet to demand so much of any possible contemporary audience. What his complaint revealed was not so much the ancient quarrel between novelists and poets, but the corrosive contempt, disguised as compassionate concern for the audience's capacity, expressed by his refusal of the difficulty of actual experience and the complexity of cultural citizenship. Montale is a traditionalist, not because he is an elitist, but because he cannot, either as man or writer, *forget* who and what he is, or the *living* presence of the dead or absent. His poetry is contemporary because his is a poetry of memory, because, in the true Platonic sense, he is a *rememberer.*

THE STORM AND OTHER THINGS

This, the reader should be aware, is a not wholly accurate rendering of the Italian title, *La bufera e altro.* Accuracy is, in fact, impossible. The problem is the word *altro.* It does *not* specifically mean (as it has sometimes been rendered) "other poems" *(altre poesie).* It *can* mean "other things"; one can, for instance, buy *carne, pane, e altro* (meat, bread, and other things). But it can also mean—and, given M.'s relish for overtones

or "something *else*." It would be an intrusion on M.'s evident desire for open generic suggestiveness to define what that "something else" might be. The suggestiveness is intended to alert the reader to something *there,* on the fringes as it were, something not contained within the context of the agonizing personal and cosmic war conveyed by *la bufera.* Something not unlike the buried spark amid the drought and desolation of "The Eel"; or the "signs" of Clizia's persistently redemptive presence illuminating the infernal ditch of actual existence; or the transcendent "flights" of wings; the upward spiraling of music or small creatures caught in the world's web; or the informing otherness of some divine *Altrui* (see notes to "Rainbow"); or even that ineradicable craving for "something else" *(ti allo)* that Socrates in the *Phaedrus* attributes to Eros and the restless human longing to recover its lost or nearly forgotten origins among the gods.

FINISTERRE

This section was originally intended by the poet to form an apocalyptic pendant (tentatively titled *Poems, 1940–42*) to his second book, *The Occasions* (1939). "If someday," he wrote, "*Finisterre* should end up as the nucleus of my third collection, so much the better for me (or worse only for the reader)." Worse, I suppose, because the figure of Clizia, so central to *Finisterre* and *La bufera* generally, is mediated and to some degree explained by the "angel-woman" of the later poems of *The Occasions;* and the reader who lacks knowledge of her presentation in those poems is to that extent handicapped in approaching *La bufera e altro.*

To the first edition of *La bufera* M. appended this note: "This book contains a selection of the poems I have written since *The Occasions [Le occasioni].* The first section is a reprinting of *Finisterre (Poems, 1940–42)* as that book appeared (1943) in the series 'Collana di Lugano,' edited by Pino Bernasconi. A later edition of that book, published in Florence and edited by Giorgio Zampa, contained in addition the two prose pieces 'Visit to Fadin' and 'Where the Tennis Court Used to Be' and three poems to be found in the second and third sections of the present volume."

For the meaning attached by M. to the place called "Finisterre," see notes to "On an Unwritten Letter."

The Storm (1941)

M., writing to Silvio Guarnieri (Nov. 29, 1965): " 'The Storm' (the initial poem) is the war, in particular *that* war after *that* dictatorship (see the epigraph); but it is also cosmic war, the perpetual war of all . . . The 'tinkle of crystal': hail. The place can't be specified, but it's remote from me. 'Marble manna and destruction' are the components of a character: if you explain it, you kill the poem. 'More than love' (l. 14) is NOT

reductive. The 'cracking,' etc.: images of war. 'As when': separation, as for instance in 'New Stanzas' (in *The Occasions*). 'Clearing from your forehead': realistic memory. 'The darkness' is so many things: distance, separation, even the doubt that she's still alive. The 'you' is for Clizia."

Epigraph: "The princes have no eyes to see these great wonders, their hands serve only to persecute us."

The poem is clearly meant to "frame" the book, above all the *Finisterre* section. It introduces the controlling metaphorical terms, indicating the Dantesque, as well as Petrarchan and stilnovistic, echoes that link the present, but also contrast it, with the past, and, in general, establishes the double apocalypse (the real war, the cosmic war) that is one of the major themes of the book as a whole. The theme of this double war, both particular and universal, is carefully interwoven with the erotic theme of the beloved (both a real woman and something more-than-woman) in her tormenting presence-in-absence. The mediating term for both is the explicitly Dantesque word, *bufera*—at once the "storm" or better "tempest" of war, but also the terrible "storm of passion," the infernal wind that in Dante (*Inf.* v, 28 ff.) *whirls* and *batters* those stricken by carnal passion. The careful reader will need the text present to his mind throughout:

> *Io venni in loco* d'ogni luce muto,
> *che* mugghia, *come fa mar per tempesta,*
> *se da contrari venti è combattuto.*
>
> *La* bufera infernal, *che mai non resta,*
> *mena gli spirti con la sua rapina;*
> voltando *e* percotendo *li molesta.*
>
> [I came into a place *mute of all light,*/which *bellows* like the sea in tempest,/when it is combated by warring winds./The *hellish storm,* which never rests,/leads the spirits with its rapine;/*whirling* and *battering,* it vexes them.]

Out of this Dantesque passage and the hellish locale, M.'s governing terms are generated by allusion, expansion, transmutation, or opposition. Evil is everywhere associated with the Dantesque darkness—feverish sleep, lingering night, deepening gloom, the ominous gathering of groaning voices, shattered light. The world is perceived as a Dantesque ditch: fosse, mire, bog, slimy marsh, sewer, morass, even magma—"the great bog teeming with its human/tadpoles opens to the furrowing night." Acoustically, this human hell is cacophony: thunder, sistrums, cracking sounds, shattering crystal, tambourines, shots, the airplane roar of giant wing-casings buzzing. And, whirled by the great *bufera,* is the dance—fandango, jig, sardana, saraband—of dervish circularity, meaninglessness turning on itself. The human beings themselves are: the stillborn; the skeletons; the imploring hands of victims reaching up out of the marsh; the shattered wings of what was once a tremulously flying thing, a fallen bird.

Against this Hell, Montale sets the equally Dantesque *donna* with her stilnovistic and Petrarchan attributes—the "lightning of her lashes," her lambent radiance, her jewels of jade and coral, the iridescence that reveals her as the angel of the covenant, the harbinger of dawn, etc. It is *she* who intermittently but persistently manifests her presence—a *spiritual* presence made more painfully but blessedly real by her *physical* absence—illuminating the poet's darkness, the photographic "flash" of memory and hope that suddenly, with anguishing brevity, startles his dreams and despair, *waking* him. Being both real and ideal, she is temporal but also timeless, like the war (hostile Fascism; the implacable hostility of reality generally whose hopelessness and pain her epiphany mitigates).

from the mahoganies. As Arshi Pipa (op. cit., p. 89) has pointed out, this is an echo of "Bibliothèque Nationale" in Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*; "Perhaps their faded letters and the loosened leaves of their diaries . . . are lying in a compartment of his mahogany desk."

the thieving ditch. Fossa fuia in Italian, a Dantesque word, employed by D'Annunzio in "La Nave," to designate the prison incarcerating the enemies of the Venetian tribune Marcus Graticus. Cf. the "den of thieves" in the Bible, applied by M. to the "gang of thieves"—the Fascists—who govern Italy.

Lungomare (1940)

Lungomare = ocean-front promenade.

M. to Guarnieri: "Clizia isn't in it; it's wholly realistic, the fence and the rest. A little madrigal of secondary importance."

Arshi Pipa (ibid., p. 83) points out the stilnovistic quality of M.'s last two lines here, reminiscent of the image of the lady's "fulminating eye" in Guido Guinizelli's famous sonnet beginning *Voglio del ver della mia donna dire.*

On an Unwritten Letter (1940)

M. to Guarnieri: "Poem of absence, of distance. I see no obscurity in it. Many particulars are real. There's a background of war. . . . The 'you' is far away, maybe not there and that's why the letter is unwritten. Clizia's there but it's not necessary to give her that name. 'Swarming,' etc. All images of a life reduced to rare apparitions; these don't have here the value of a *senhal,* like the two jackals [in the 'Motet' 'La speranza di pure rivederti' in *The Occasions*]."

Arshi Pipa (ibid., pp. 86–88) comments:

> In the beginning love and war are sharply contrasted by the poet, who feels almost ashamed of indulging in memories of love at a time of national and universal distress: "Oh, never to hear/of you again, to escape the lightning of your lashes! There's more on earth than this!" Immediately after, however, he confesses his usual uncer-