

## POETRY

### *Eugenio Montale*

*Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht*

Sometimes regarded as the greatest Italian poet since Leopardi (1798–1837), Eugenio Montale was born in Genoa in 1896, awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1975, and died in Milan in 1981. He served in the infantry in World War I, and settled in Milan in 1948, where he became the chief literary critic for Italy's foremost newspaper, the *Corriere della Sera*. He was also a music critic and a translator, and, for his courageous opposition to fascism, was made a lifetime member of the Italian Senate in 1967.

Montale's poetry is deeply personal, at times almost hermetic. Often it is addressed to an unknown "you" who, not infrequently, is dead, or to certain women, presented under fictive names (in the manner of classical and Renaissance poets), who played important roles in his real and imaginative lives. They are called Esterina, Gerti, Liuba, Vixen, Dora Markus, Mosca, and Clizia. Liuba, for example, was someone he glimpsed for only a few minutes in a railway station, where she was fleeing from Italy's Fascist, anti-Jewish laws. Dora Markus was someone he never met; she was, he explained, "constructed from a photograph of a pair of legs" sent him by a friend. Nevertheless, as one of his finest translators, William Arrowsmith, declares, "the poem devoted to her is no mere exercise in virtuoso evocation; it is the objectification of the poet's affinity for a personal truth, the existential meaning of a given fragment. 'The poet's task,' Montale observed, 'is the quest for a particular, not general, truth.'" His poems almost always deal with fragmentary experience, the meaning of which is either obscure or, possibly, terrifyingly absent. As a poet, he had a preoccupation with images of limitation. This is manifested, Arrowsmith writes, in the form of "walls, barriers, frontiers, 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."

In 1927 Montale fell in love with a married woman, who left her husband in 1939 and moved in with him. He called her, half-affectionately, half-mockingly, Mosca (or Fly), a name he might have borrowed from Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. She was a plain woman with poor eyesight, but he remained devoted to her, and when her husband died in 1958, they entered into a marriage that lasted until her death five years later.

Another woman who would figure prominently in Montale's work was an American scholar he met in 1932 named Irma Brandeis—later to become the author of a brilliant study of Dante's *Divine Comedy* called *The Ladder of Vision*, an examination of segments of Dante's great epic without recourse to any credence in its theology. In Montale's poems she becomes his Beatrice, a woman of more-than-human gentleness and perfection. (In an interview, Montale said the women in his poems were "Dantesque, Dantesque," by which he meant, suggests the poet/scholar Rosanna Warren, they were spiritualized, not fully individualized beings.) He gave this American, a figure of

majestic spiritual importance to him, the name of Clizia (might this be derived from *ecclesia*?). Arrowsmith calls her “the absent center of the poet’s life. . . . Clizia’s sacrifice of physical love” allows her to become “her lover’s spiritual salvation,” and redeems “all those who, like Montale, were suffering the darkness of the Fascist years and human evil generally. She ‘redeems the time,’” in a phrase borrowed from T. S. Eliot.

Montale was a learned autodidact and a highly allusive poet, a matter that adds to the difficulties and puzzles of his poems. His literary influences, for example, include Plato, the Bible, Dante and the *dolce stilnovisti* of his circle, Petrarch, Shakespeare and the English Metaphysical poets, Browning, Henry James, Hopkins, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Jammes, and Valéry, as well as Eliot.

A word needs to be said about William Arrowsmith, Montale’s chief, and among his best, translators. He was a classicist who has translated Euripides, Aristophanes, and Petronius, as well as Pavese, and, with Roger Shattuck, edited *The Craft and Context of Translation* (1961). In addition, he has written penetrating commentary on Eliot’s early poetry and on Ruskin. He observes: “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.”

The poems that follow are selected from Montale’s *Satura: 1962–1970*, as translated and annotated by William Arrowsmith, and edited by Rosanna Warren.

## From *Xenia I*

1

Dear little insect  
nicknamed Mosca, I don’t know why,  
this evening, when it was nearly dark,  
while I was reading Deutero-Isaiah,  
you reappeared at my side,  
but without your glasses  
you couldn’t see me,  
and in the blur, without their glitter,  
I didn’t know who you were.

2

Minus glasses and antennae,  
poor insect, wingèd  
only in imagination,  
a beaten-up Bible and none  
too reliable either, black night,  
a flash of lightning, thunder, and then  
not even the storm. Could it be  
you left so soon, without  
a word? But it’s crazy, my thinking  
you still had lips.

3

At the St. James in Paris I’ll have to ask for  
a room for one. (They don’t like single guests.) Ditto  
in the fake Byzantium of your Venetian  
hotel; and then, right off, hunting down  
the girls at the switchboard,

always your pals; and then leaving again  
the minute my three minutes are up,  
and the wanting you back,  
if only in one gesture,  
one habit of yours.

4

We'd worked out a whistle for the world  
beyond, a token of recognition.  
Now I'm trying variations, hoping  
we're all dead already and don't know it.

7

Self-pity, infinite pain and anguish  
of the man who worships this world here and now,  
who hopes and despairs of another. . .  
(who dares speak of another world?)  
.....

"Strana pietà..." (*Azucena*, Act II)

8

Your speech so halting and tactless  
is the only speech that consoles me.  
But the tone has changed, the color too.  
I'll get used to hearing you, decoding you  
in the click-clack of the teletype,  
in the spirals of smoke coiling  
from my Brissago cigars.

9

Listening was your only way of seeing.  
The phone bill comes to almost nothing now.

10

"Did she pray?" "Yes to St. Anthony  
who's in charge of finding lost  
umbrellas and suchlike things  
in St. Hermes' cloakroom."  
"And that's it?" "She prayed for her dead too,  
and for me."  
"Quite enough," the priest replied.

12

Spring pokes out at a snail's pace.  
Never again will I hear you talking of antibiotic  
poisoning, or the pin in your femur,  
or the patrimony plucked from you  
by that thousand-eyed  
[deleted],  
long daylights and unbearable hours.  
Never again will I hear you struggling with the backwash  
of time, or ghosts, or the logistical problems  
of summer.

13

Your brother died young; that little girl  
with tousled curls in the oval portrait,  
looking at me, was you.  
He wrote music, unpublished, unheard,

now buried away in some trunk  
or trashed. If what's written is written,  
maybe someone, unawares, is rewriting it now.  
I loved him without ever knowing him.  
Except for you no one remembered him.  
I made no inquiries; it's futile now.  
After you, I was the only one left  
for whom he ever existed.  
But we can love a shade, you know,  
being shades ourselves.

14

They say my poetry is one of nonbelonging.  
But if it was yours, it was someone's:  
it was yours who are no longer form, but essence.  
They say that poetry at its peak  
glorifies the All in flight,  
they say the tortoise  
is no swifter than lightning.  
You alone knew  
that movement and stasis are one,  
that the void is fullness and the clear sky  
cloud at its airiest. So your long journey,  
imprisoned by bandages and casts,  
makes better sense to me.  
Still, knowing we're a single thing,  
whether one or two, gives me no peace.

## *The Death of God*

All religions of the one God  
are only one, cooks and cooking vary.  
I was turning this thought over  
when you interrupted me  
by tumbling head-over-heels  
down the spiral staircase of the Périgourdine  
and at the bottom split your sides laughing.  
A delightful evening, marred only by a moment's  
fright. Even the pope  
in Israel said the same thing  
but repented when informed  
that the supreme Deposed, if he ever existed,  
had expired.

## *I Feel Remorse*

I feel remorse for squashing the mosquito  
on the wall, the ant  
on the sidewalk.  
I feel remorse, but here I am formally garbed  
for the conference, the reception.  
I feel sorry for all, even for the slave  
who proffers me advice on the stock market,  
sorrow for the beggar who gets no alms from me,  
sorrow for the madman who presides  
at the Administrative Council.

## *The Black Angel*

O great soot-black  
angel, shelter me  
under your wings,  
let me scrape past  
the bramble spikes, the oven's shining jets,  
and fall to my knees  
on the dead embers if perchance  
some fringe of your feathers  
remains

o small dark angel,  
neither heavenly nor human,  
angel who shines through,  
changing colors, formless  
and multiform, equal  
and unequal in the swift lightning  
of your incomprehensible fabulation

o black angel reveal yourself  
but may your splendor not consume me,  
leave unmelted the mist that haloes you,  
stamp yourself in my thought,  
since no eye resists your blazings  
coal-black angel sheltering  
under the chestnut peddler's cape

great ebony angel  
angel dusky  
or white  
if, weary of my wandering,  
I clutched your wing and felt it  
crunch  
I could not know you as now I do,  
in sleep, on waking, in the morning  
since between true and false no needle  
can stop biped or camel,  
and the charred residue, the grime  
left on the fingertips  
is less than the dust  
of your last feather, great angel  
of ash and smoke, mini-angel  
chimney sweep.

## *From Two Venetian Sequences*

II

Farfarella, the gabby doorman, obeying orders,  
said he wasn't allowed to disturb the man  
who wrote about bullfights and safaris.  
I implore him to try, I'm a friend of Pound  
(a slight exaggeration) and deserve special  
treatment. Maybe . . . He picks up the phone,  
talks listens pleads and, lo, the great bear  
Hemingway takes the hook.  
He's still in bed, all that emerges  
from his hairy face are eyes and eczema.  
Two or three empty bottles of Merlot,

forerunners of the gallon to come.  
 Down in the restaurant we're all at table.  
 We don't talk about him but about our dear friend  
 dear Adrienne Monnier, the Rue de L'Odéon,  
 about Sylvia Beach, Larbaud, the roaring thirties  
 and the braying fifties. Paris, pigsty London,  
 New York, nauseating, deadly. No hunting in the marshes,  
 no wild ducks, no girls, and not  
 the faintest thought of a book on such topics.  
 We compile a list of mutual friends whose names  
 I don't know. The world's gone to rot,  
 decaying. Almost in tears, he asks me not to send him  
 people of my sort, especially if they're intelligent.  
 Then he gets up, wraps himself in a bathrobe,  
 hugs me, and shows me to the door.  
 He lived on a few more years, and, dying twice,  
 had the time to read his own obituaries.

### *It's Raining*

It's raining. A drizzle  
 without backfiring  
 motorcycles or babies  
 crying.

It's raining  
 from a sky without  
 clouds.  
 It's raining  
 on the nothing we do  
 in these hours of general  
 strike.

It's raining  
 on your grave at San Felice  
 at Ema  
 and the earth isn't shaking  
 because there's no earthquake  
 or war.

It's raining  
 not on the lovely tale  
 of seasons past,  
 but on the tax-collector's  
 briefcase,  
 it's raining on cuttlefish bones  
 and bureaucrats.

It's raining  
 on the Official Bulletin  
 here from the open balcony,  
 it's raining on Parliament,  
 it's raining on Via Solferino,

it's raining without the wind's  
 ruffling the cards.

It's raining  
 in Hermione's absence  
 God willing,  
 it's raining because absence  
 is universal  
 and if the earth isn't quaking  
 it's because Arcetri  
 didn't command it.

It's raining on the new epistemes  
 of the biped primate,  
 on deified man, on the humanized  
 heavens, on the snouts  
 of theologians in overalls

or tuxedos,  
 it's raining on the progress  
 of the lawsuit,  
 it's raining  
 on work-in-regress,  
 on the ailing cypresses  
 in the cemetery, drizzling  
 on public opinion.

It's raining but if you appear  
 it's not water, not atmosphere,  
 it's raining because when you're not  
 here,  
 it's nothing but absence  
 and absence can drown.

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