

The Shiny Surface of Obscurity

by Cosma Siani

Mottetti, Poems of Love: The
Motets of Eugenio Montale

Translated and Introduced

by Dana Gioia

Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press;

77 pp., \$14.95

“Nobody would write verse if poetry were a question of ‘making oneself understood’; indeed, it is a question of making understood that *quiddity* which words alone fail to convey.” This much-quoted statement by Eugenio Montale, the Nobel Prize-winning Italian poet who died in 1981, may serve as an introduction to these *Motets*, a sequence of 20 short poems, as well as to the most acclaimed style of his poetry as represented in his collections *Cuttlefish Bones* (1925), *The Occasions*, which includes the motets (1939), and *The Storm and Other Things* (1956).

But how does that principle work in Montale’s own creative writing? And what is it that words may “fail to convey”? The tiny book under review, equipped as it is with a short essay of Montale’s himself (“Two Jackals on a Leash,” in Jonathan Galassi’s version) and with an introduction by the translator, Dana Gioia, provides us with everything we need to find a way out of an otherwise vague and even cryptic assertion.

An example will best demonstrate the poet’s assumption. Here is the autobiographical report of a stroll around a town in Northern Italy (in the passage, the poet calls himself Mirco, while Clizia is a fictitious name for the American Dante scholar Irma Brandeis, whom Montale met in Florence in 1932):

One summer afternoon Mirco found himself at Modena walking in the galleries. Anxious as he was, and still absorbed in his “dominating idea,” it astonished him that life could present him with so many distractions, as if painted or reflected on a screen. It was too gay a day for a man who wasn’t

gay. And then an old man in gold-braided livery appeared to Mirco, dragging two reluctant champagne-colored puppies on a leash, two little dogs who at first glance seemed to be neither wolfhounds nor dachshunds nor Pomeranians. Mirco approached the old man and asked him, “What kind of dogs are these?” And the old man, dry and proud, answered, “They’re not dogs, they’re jackals.” . . . Clizia loved droll animals. How amused she would have been to see them! thought Mirco. And from that day on he never read the name Modena without associating the city with his idea of Clizia and the two jackals. A strange, persistent idea. Could the two beasts have been sent by her like an emanation? Were they an emblem, an occult signature, a *senhal*? Or were they only an hallucination, the premonitory signs of her fall, her end?

Similar things often happened; there were no more jackals, but other strange products from the grab-bag of life: poodles, monkeys, owls on a trestle, minstrels. . . . And always, a healing balm entered the heart of the wound.

The setting is ordinary and so are the events—a microcosm of commonplace things and everyday gestures. The only unexpected detail is the two jackals on a leash; but it, too, would have been lost in the flow of perceptions, had the poet not stopped and talked to the old man.

Here the poet is trying to frame in plain words an utterly subjective train of thought: the link, in other respects undetectable, between the person who is his “dominating idea” and some micro-events falling within the scope of his experience. And he is successful in explaining because he meets our logical expectations. But has he managed to involve us at an emotional level, and to make us feel the incident the way he felt it? This is perhaps what the explanatory words fail to achieve, and what the poem inspired by the Modena episode is supposed to produce:

I had almost lost

hope of ever seeing you again;

and I asked myself if this thing
cutting me off
from every trace of you, this
screen
of images,
was the approach of death, or
truly
some dazzling
vision of you
out of the past,
bleached, distorted,
fading:

(under the arches at Modena
I saw an old man in a uniform
dragging two jackals on a leash).

The readers’ puzzlement over the literal meaning of the poem is an indication of their involvement. The lack of a frame of reference becomes an element of attraction, and even an unintentional strategy. We are faced with the challenge of reconstructing the poet’s state of mind. It is a method that puts a great demand on its reading public.

The motet above and the *Motets* in general are probably not the finest examples of Montale’s excellence in this method, of his mastery over the selection and blending of words and images to conjure up an atmosphere or to suggest vanishing nuances. (My favorite specimen is “The Storm,” the eponym piece from the 1956 collection.) However, the task of translating the sequence, now for the first time available in English in its entirety, has surely not been an easy one for Dana Gioia. How has he coped with it? Being a poet in his own right, he has claimed space for himself, and decided to offer versions that “would move naturally as English-language poems.” Accordingly, he has tried “to set an English cadence that would integrate the transposed elements tightly into a new whole,” the outcome being “an imitation” as opposed to mere paraphrase.

As comparison in this bilingual edition shows, the most remarkable liberty he has taken is in rethinking the lineation of the originals; we often have numerous half-lines where Montale has used a longer measure patterned into more compact stanzas. Yet there are instances where Dana Gioia can get close to Montale’s rhythm and

peculiar mood, as in Motet X:

Why are you waiting? The
squirrel in the pine tree
beats its torchlike tail on the
bark.
The half moon sinks with one
tip fading
into the sun. The day is
finished.

The lazy smoke is startled by a
breeze
but gathers itself to cover you.
Nothing will end, or everything,
if you,
the flash of lightning, leave the
cloud.

(A misprint must have escaped proof-reading in the fourth line: following the original meaning, "The day" should be "The night.") And here in Motet XVII is an example of how cleverly he can combine adherence to the original text and claim to personal re-creation:

The frog, first to try its chord
again
from the reed-choked, misty
pond,
the rustle of the interwoven
carob trees where a cold sun
is snuffing out its own
weak rays, the slow
drone of hornets in the flowers
where there's still a little sap—
the last sounds,
the bare life of the country.

One breath
and the hour is extinguished: a
sky
the color of slate prepares for
the explosion
of death-thin horses, of flaming
hooves.

Montale shared his unorthodox structure, illogical sequence, and subjective language with a generation of interwar Italian poets that included Ungaretti and Quasimodo. Montale was keenly aware of the European influences—mainly from French Symbolism—that the Hermetic school of poetry received and spread this side of the Alps. But Montale did more than just lean to modernist taste. As Gioia points out, a whole world of classics—the heritage common to all students who had undergone classical education, or "liceo classico," in Italy—was at work in his background.

... Montale's pessimism does not arise from either existential *nausée* or decadent ennui, but from an acceptance of life without any comforting illusions. His vision focuses on the tragic insight ultimately behind all philosophy—the recognition that man's life is meager compared to the inexhaustible and eternal presence of the world. In this sense perhaps Montale seems closer to Sophocles than to Eliot. . . . If one wanted to find a comparable sensibility in European poetry, one would turn not to any contemporary but to the other great poet of the Italian landscape, Lucretius the Epicurean. . . .

As long as it does not make one overlook the decisive influence of European modernist trends in the shaping of Montale's sensibility and verse, the argument is helpful in pointing out the poet's complexity.

But the book under review also reminds us of another aspect of Montale's writing that is at the moment overshadowed by his reputation as a poet: his neatness and clarity as an essayist—qualities that, unfortunately, are not easily found in Italian letters after Croce. The short essay most appropriately appended to this edition of *Motetti* is a significant sample of the other side of Montale's talents.

Cosma Siani is a teacher and
textbook writer living in Rome.

Dance to the Music of Time

by E. Christian Kopff

Ovid's Poetry of Exile
Translated into verse by
David R. Slavitt

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins
University Press; 240 pp., \$32.50
(hardcover), \$12.95 (paper)

The struggle to keep poetry alive is a game of tag-team wrestling, and the greatest poets play their matches with the poets of ancient Greece and

Rome. We all know it for Latin. Plautus and Vergil are centones of Greek verse, their originality hidden, for some, by passage after passage taken directly from Greek poetry.

English poets have played in the same arena. Shakespeare learned how to make verse sing and stage action jump by rewriting Ovid and Plautus. The classic tradition of English verse begins with John Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas and hits its stride with Dryden's Vergil and Pope's Homer. (Professors should not be allowed to pontificate on "The Rape of the Lock" and "The Epistle to Doctor Arbuthnot" until they have worked through Pope's *Iliad*.) From Milton to T.S. Eliot our greatest poets have known Greek and Latin and other languages to boot and have filled their verse with echoes and quotations. English poetry grew strong out of that sometimes rough-and-ready contact sport.

So it is no wonder that our contemporary poetry is anemic and asthmatic, that it wheezes out limp phrases, mumbling to itself about personal problems or the politics of newspaper editorials. It needs to be sent south to the Mediterranean for its health. Its regimen must be the classics in the original tongues. It has to resign its current motto: "Better mendacities than the classics in paraphrase."

If American poetry does manage to rise above easy despair and gimpy-legged verse, it may look back to David Slavitt as one of its chief benefactors. In 1971 he gave us *The Eclogues of Virgil*, a lively and exciting mosaic of translation placed carefully in the midst of poetic, moral, and political reflections, which is still my favorite book by him.

Now he has tried something bigger, *maius opus*, an attempt to re-feel and rewrite the extant poetry that Ovid wrote while passing the last decade of his life in Tomis, modern Constansa in Rumania. He had written a poem and he had made a mistake (*carmen et error*) and the Emperor Augustus sent Ovid out of Rome, never to return.

Ovid did not stop writing poetry. His career had been founded on his brilliant success in taking the conventions of Latin personal love poetry, born from Catullus' genius and his affair with the wife of a Roman consul, and playing with these conventions so