

Going after ‘*La Bufera*’: Geoffrey Hill translates Eugenio Montale.

When we open Hill’s latest collection, *Without Title*¹, we are greeted by the dedication “in omaggio a Eugenio Montale”. The homage is fully carried out by a remarkable translation of Montale’s ‘*La Bufera*’ – literally entitled ‘The Storm’ – which Hill includes towards the end of the volume. With this gesture the English poet seals a relationship that has been developing, more or less latently, for almost a decade. To be precise, though, Hill does not refer to ‘The Storm’ as translation. Instead, he uses the more generic sentence “after Eugenio Montale, ‘*La Bufera*”² to guide the reader. This does not surprise as he has never claimed the title of translator for any of his previous attempts.³ This being the case, what does surprise is its closeness to the original [see appendix]. This closeness encourages us to explore the poem carefully and use it as a guide to Montale’s presence in Hill’s work.

Montale made his first explicit appearance as far back as *The Triumph of Love* in 1999, where section CXXXIV is almost entirely dedicated to him. Here we are presented with unquestionable praise of the Italian poet, “I admire you and have trained my ear / to your muted discords” [vv. 30/31]. Montale and his work are briefly but poignantly introduced. Hill describes his poetics as “muted discords”, “rage” and “anarchy coming to irregular order” [vv. 31, 33], and seems to hint at Montale’s politics in the lines “private, marginal, uncommitted writing – this is to be in code” [vv. 2/3] or “decorum aloof from conformity; not a mask / of power’s harsh suavities” [vv.5-7].⁴ It is reasonable to suppose that this presentation highlights those aspects in the Italian’s work that have particularly engaged the English poet.

Going back to ‘*La Bufera*’ with this portrait in mind, we find that the poem encapsulates those elements. We are immediately made aware in Hill’s version of those “muted discords” to which he declares he has “trained his ear”. We are greeted with harsh sounds, with “t”s, “k”s, “r”s, “d”s and “g”s that grate on our senses but constitute at the same time the precise acoustic embodiment of the storm. They are in themselves a good example of Montale’s “anarchy coming to irregular order”. That Hill’s ear would need much training for these “muted discords” is hard to believe if we consider the body and muscularity of his own poetry – as we find in earlier verse such as “Genesis”

¹ Geoffrey Hill, *Without Title* (London: Penguin, 2006)

² Hill, ‘The Storm’, *Without Title*, p. 80

³ The closest he has come to actually using the term was probably in the notes to *Tenebrae*, where he claims writing “a free translation” or combining “a few phrases of free translation with phrases of my own invention” – Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 204.

⁴ Geoffrey Hill, *The Triumph of Love* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 72-73, CXXXIV.

or “Mercian Hymns” – or the increasing fragmentary and broken rhythms developed in his later work. Already the two poets seem to share a similar feeling for the texture of language.

Montale’s ‘La Bufera’ was initially published in Switzerland (Lugano) in 1943 and was the opening poem of a small pamphlet with the ominous title of *Finisterre*. Considering the date of publication, the title of the pamphlet gains poignancy, “*finis terrae*”: the end of the world. Thanks to this title we are made aware that the poems collected had been written during the war. We also realise how the opening ‘Bufera’ is not just a compelling representation of a raging storm but may be a metaphor of the violence, anxiety and displacement experienced by the poet and the whole of Europe. Thus, the Italian poem acquires a political dimension that is expressed not through rhetoric or immediate, didactic images but embodied by atmosphere, representations of states of mind and carefully suggestive images. After the war Montale was heavily criticised for his – to use Hill’s words – “private, marginal, uncommitted writing”. However, albeit truly critical of openly campaigning and militant poetry and often private, his verse was not ‘uncommitted’.⁵ His involvement, though, was never ‘shouted’ or seeking proselytes but meditative and, as Hill poignantly writes, “in code”. ‘La Bufera’ with its apocalyptic war setting is a perfect example.

One recognises similarities in the political stance of the two poets. Hill’s political urgency has also shied away from militancy and propaganda giving rise to the criticism of being sentimentally removed from the world, from “real life”. When we consider early poems such as ‘Funeral Music’ or ‘Apology for Christian Architecture in England’ we see how, here too, the vehement political message is coded: embodied through carefully suggestive and ambiguous images, representations of states of mind or atmosphere. Even later when the involvement with “worldly politics” becomes more direct – in *Canaan* or *Speech!Speech!* – this element of private coding remains.

In the case of ‘La Bufera’ the general question of politics leads to the more specific one of “WWII politics” – racial laws and, later, deportation. Although never militant, Montale opposed the Fascist regime. Moreover, a number of his friends and acquaintances were Jewish. Among these we find important names in Montale’s poetical universe, such as Irma Brandeis. The Jewish identity of some of the most famous women in Montale’s poetry is a detail that did not escape Hill. On the contrary, he purposely draws attention on this

⁵ Jared M. Becker, “‘What we are not’: Montale’s Anti-Fascism Revisited”, *Italica*, 60:4 (Winter, 1983), pp. 331-339.

particular aspect in section LIII of *The Orchards* where we read, “the plump Italian; he / loved young Jewish women – Irma Brandeis, / Dora Markus” [vv. 11-13].⁶

Irma Brandeis is a key figure in Montale’s verse. It is mostly on her that the muse Clizia – inspiring interlocutor of much of his poetry – is modelled. An American of Jewish descent, Dantean scholar and translator, she was one of the great loves of the poet’s life. Forced to return to America at the end of the 1930s due to the political situation of the time, Montale would never see her again and her presence / absence, though subsumed in Clizia, became one of the haunting drives of his poetry.⁷

These bibliographical details enter ‘la Bufera’ and contribute to shaping it and deepen its political urgency. Here the key, central image of the poem is the “strana sorella” [v. 15]. Although she is not named in this particular poem, the dating and its position in Montale’s *Canzoniere* allows us to identify this female interlocutor with Clizia. The poem ends on the enigmatic but poignant image of her “stepp[ing] into the dark” [Hill, v. 21]. This ominous action, can be taken to symbolise the loss of the “sister”, her stepping beyond reach. But if the “strange sister” is none other than Clizia, the symbolic loss turns into a real, concrete one – a friend and lover being forced to leave. In the same way the reasons for that departure acquire a more painful reality, they take shape and identify with the dramatic historical events of those years. Through that symbolic act, the shadow of the possibility of racial discrimination and death enters the poem, bringing it close to Hill’s own poetic universe. Intensified as it is by suggestions of violence and obliteration, the sense of loss and anxiety in ‘La Bufera’ echoes what we have witnessed time and again in Hill’s poetry – from ‘September Song’ onwards.

On various levels we have seen how the two poets are strongly connected, sharing sensibilities and preoccupations. Just as ‘The Storm’ was able to guide us in the discovery of these similarities, I believe, it might also suggest a way in which the Italian poet has entered deeper into the fabric of the latter’s work. As already mentioned, the central figure in ‘La Bufera’ is the female figure who steps into the dark and is lost to the poet. Such a presence is one of the defining characteristics of Montale’s poetry. Most of his verse can be seen as an exchange between the “I” of the poem and a female “you”. Throughout his career these interlocutors have changed names and characteristics but their function

⁶ Hill, *Orchards*, op. cit., p.53.

⁷ For discussion of Montale’s muses: Luciano Rebay, ‘Un Cestello di Montale: Le Gambe di Dora Markus e una lettera di Roberto Balzen’, *Italica*, 61:2 (Summer, 1984), pp. 160-169; Enrico Testa, *Montale* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), pp. 31-33; Charles Tomlinson, ‘A poet and his Muses’, *Arion: a Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 9:2 (Fall, 2001), pp. 173-179.

remains constant: a muse, a catalyst for the poet's consciousness and a link to what is beyond his experience (evident is their Dantean and Petrarchan origin). They are his constant companions but never within his reach. In their remoteness and superiority they are not necessarily positive benign figures.

In the "strana sorella" of 'La Bufera' we can easily recognise the suggestive muse Montale entrusts himself to. In Hill's version we find the exact equivalent in "strange sister" [v. 14]. What is intriguing about the "sister", is not that she should find her place in a close translation of 'La Bufera' but that references to "my sister" – an unusual one in Hill's universe – should appear more than once in *The Orchards of Syon*, as for example "yet still I mourn / you, my sister, as for a dead twin" [XXVI:17-18] (echoed in sections VII and L). This volume is the one in which Eugenio Montale appears directly and most markedly after the *Triumph of Love*. If we bear this in mind, the possibility arises that Montale's "sister" might have entered Hill's poetry well before she was directly mentioned in "The Storm". I believe it reasonable to maintain that in *The Orchards* we encounter a Montalian style female character who becomes one of the main interlocutors and principal "you" of the poem.

Quite early in *The Orchards* we unexpectedly come across a particular qualification: the ever-present "you" of the poem becomes a "my love" – "If that was ever you, / wrestle, wrestle with me, my love" [X:3/4]. From this moment on the "you" and the "love" are often identified. Although usually anonymous, towards the centre of the book this you/loved one acquires a name and a pseudo identity: Ingeborg. Clues left in the poems themselves identify her as Ingeborg Bachman an Austrian contemporary poet who died prematurely in Rome when her apartment caught fire in 1973. By name Ingeborg only appears three times in *The Orchards*, in sections XXXVIII, LIII and LVIII, but she acquires particular relevance as she seems to be the only recurrent "you" who is given a particular identity. Sections LIII and LVIII are to be found within a larger sequence (LIII-LVII) which stands out from the rest of the book as it revolves almost exclusively around love and a 'Lady figure'. Since, as we have seen, it is here that Ingeborg is specifically invoked we can assume her to be the 'Lady' in question.

In this sequence Hill's female "you" acquires Montalian connotations. We encounter an "Earthly-ethereal [...] muse" [LIV:13/15] whom the poet needs for support, who can do what he can't but is not always benign or infallible. In the final section of the sequence the muse figure and Ingeborg merge as she is accused of leaving him stranded, "Dead Ingeborg [...] You leave me with a ghosted speech to finish / saying we never met" [LVI: 9-

16)]. By the time we leave this point in the book we can't help feeling that Ingeborg, the muse and the loved interlocutor, who appears before and after the sequence, are the same individual. In the absence of any other woman with the privileged status reserved to Ingeborg, it is plausible to see her behind the female "you" throughout the poem. Assuming as she does the muse-like characters of Montale's interlocutors, this would suggest that his spirit has entered deep into Hill's own work.

From *The Triumph of Love* to *Without Title*, Hill's translation of Montale's "La Bufera" has enabled us to explore the extent of the connection between the two poets. Extending well beyond *Without Title* and "The Storm", this has proved to range from admiration for his sense of language and politics (which are parallel to his own) to a deeper shaping influence over one of his latest volumes. In so doing, 'the Storm' and 'la Bufera' definitely highlight how significant a figure Eugenio Montale has been in Hill's poetical universe, thus strengthening its European dimension.

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APPENDIX.

These are the transcriptions of 'The Storm' and 'La Bufera' respectively.

The Storm

(after Eugenio Montale, 'La Bufera')

- 1) The storm that batters the magnolia's impermeable leaves, the long-drawn drum roll of Martian thunder with its hail

(crystal acoustics trembling in your night's lair

- 5) disturb you while the gold transfused from the mahoganies, the pages' rims of the de luxe books, still burns, a sugar grain under your eyelid's shell)

lighting that makes stark-white the trees,

- 10) the walls, suspending them – interminable instant – marbled manna and cataclysm – deep in you sculptured, borne now as condemnation: this binds you closer to me, strange sister, than any love.
- 15) So, the harsh buskins, bashings of castanets and tambourines around the spoilers' ditch, fandango's foot-rap and over all some gesture still to be defined ...

As when

you turned away and casting with a hand

- 20) that cloudy mass of hair from off your forehead

Gave me a sign and stepped into the dark.

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

- 1) La bufera che sgronda sulle foglie dure della magnolia i lunghi tuoni Marzolini e la grandine,

(i suoni di cristallo nel tuo nido

- 5) 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)
- 10) 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
- 15) 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 ...

- 20) ti rivolgesti a me e con la mano, sgombra la fronte dalla nube dei capelli,

mi salutati – per entrar nel buio.