

BRIEF REVIEWS

Montale in English. Edited by Harry Thomas. New York: Handsel Books, 2005. 247 pp. \$17

Eugenio Montale once wrote that what interested him most in art was its “second life,” by which he meant the moment of “common consumption and misunderstanding” when a poem, painting, or piece of music unmoors itself from its formal aesthetic reception and heads “back into the streets” to become a part of life. On these terms we might think of translation as a particular and peculiar mode of the second life of art, a sort of halfway house between the ballroom and the bar.

It is our good fortune that the second life of Montale’s poetry in English has been nearly as long and as happy as its first life in Italian. In 1928, just three years after Montale’s *Ossi di Seppia* appeared in Italy, T.S. Eliot published translations by Mario Praz in the *Criterion*. (Montale returned the favor by translating three of Eliot’s poems for an Italian journal.) In the following decades, his poetry would find important friends in Irma Brandeis, James Merrill, and Bernard Wall, but it was Robert Lowell’s inclusion of ten poems in his *Imitations* (1962) that secured Montale’s place in the Anglophone imagination as *the* Italian poet of the twentieth century, the greatest since Leopardi, if not Petrarch.

In the forty-odd years since *Imitations*, the efforts of a dedicated and distinguished coterie of *Montalisti*—William Arrowsmith, Jonathan Galassi, G. Singh, and Charles Wright at their head—have brought nearly the whole of Montale’s *oeuvre* into English. *Montale in English*, a new anthology of Montale translations brilliantly conceived and executed by Harry Thomas, serves as both a catalogue of these efforts and an object lesson in the art and craft of translation.

Montale in English includes poems from the whole of Montale’s career. The poems of the so-called “High Season,” which spans *Ossi di Seppia* (1925), *Le occasioni* (1939), and *La bufera e altro* (1956), comprise a whole literature unto themselves. Mythic in scope and metaphysical in concern, these poems never leave behind the low walls, salt air, and harsh sun of the Ligurian coastline. They are addressed throughout to a persistent and enigmatic other, often named Clizia (after Clitie, the forlorn of Apollo), whom critics have identified with Brandeis in life and Beatrice in art; other times, as here, she is simply called “you”:

You know: I have to give you up again
and I can’t. Each action, every shout
jars me like a perfect shot,
even the salt breeze that floods the wharves,
and breeds the lightless spring
of Sottoripa.

Land of ironwork and mast-
forests in the evening dust.
A long drone enters from outside,
torments like a fingernail on glass.
I'm after the lost sign, the single
pledge you graced me with.

And hell is certain.
(trans. Jonathan Galassi)

Thomas has also wisely included a number of examples from among the *retrobottega*, the series of “back of the shop” poems that began, after a 15-year poetic silence, with *Satura* in 1971 and that continued to the poet’s death ten years later. These are the poems—invariably described by critics as dry, ironic, and disillusioned—that Montale liked to compare to a famous Italian magician’s act, at the end of which the audience was invited backstage to see how the tricks were accomplished.

Thomas claims as his principle to “let the reader see much of what there is to see” and this extends to his selection of translators as well as poems. *Montale in English* brings together fifty-six poet-translators ranging from Edith Farnsworth and Samuel Beckett to Jeremy Reed and Jorie Graham, proving that if politics makes strange bedfellows, poetry makes them stranger still. And with a diversity of translators comes a diversity of styles. Thomas writes, “I have wanted to represent the range of kinds of poetic translation,” and so he has given us everything from lineated trots to Lowell’s imitations to Edwin Morgan’s inspired Scots rendition of “Upupa”:

Peeweet, ye’re a blithe-like birdie!
Whit makar has been fair to ye?
You whigmaleerie o a kaim gangs nid-nod
Heich on the hen-hoose-tap and whiles like the cock
Himsel ye swap about in the wind; ‘peeweet,
Peeweet’: a sang and sign o spring—an O
But ye mak time dee to hear ye
And the girn and brattle o Feberarie,
And aa the airts gie a stretch
At the node o yer hand, ma bird,
Ma spunkie, ma ferlie—and aa this is naethin to yersel!

Variety like this would be enough to secure the value of *Montale in English* for devotees of Montale and those interested in the varieties of English translation. But the most outstanding feature of the book is Thomas’s decision to print from two to five versions of the same poem in succession. This arrangement places *Montale in English* in a narrow yet ancient genre whose roots reach back to Origen’s *Hexapla*, a third-century Bible with two Hebrew

and four Greek translations laid out in adjacent columns. (Another modern example of the genre is *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, edited by Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz, which contains in addition to the nineteen poems announced by the title a remarkable twentieth version by the enigmatic sinologist Peter A. Boodberg.)

Thomas's purpose here, like Origen's, is essentially pedagogical. An old chestnut of translation theory says that every translation implies a reading, and every reading a misreading. But even if one agrees with Joseph Brodsky that "Poetry is what is gained in translation" we too rarely get to see so dramatically just *how* translation and (mis)interpretation interrelate.

Towards this end, Thomas has dedicated the last section of his introduction to what amounts to a short course in the practice of translation: a brilliant and subtle comparison of four variations on the early poem "Verso Vienna." The signal virtue of this exposition, as of the book in general, is to show, and not merely to tell, how the total effect of a translation is built on apparently minor decisions, and contrariwise how the minor decisions—whether we should read *verso* in the title as "towards," "near," "on the way to," "*en route*," or even "while driving to"—depend for their resolution on *global* interpretations.

It is clear that Thomas designed *Montale in English* to be both an introduction to Montale's work and a kind of casebook for students of translation. That it succeeds so completely in the latter goal cannot but come at the partial expense of the former. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the first time we read a major poet like Montale we are often in search of a kind of unity, be it of subject, form, or style. Readers who want to know what makes Montale Montale are advised to complement Thomas's anthology with any one of the several dual-language, single-translator editions that are available (Galassi's is a good place to start).

But the major strength and interest of *Montale in English* lies precisely in its diversity. We begin the book reading for Montale and very soon want to see how Jeremy Reed, Cid Corman, or Anthony Burgess are going to make their individual marks. We should not worry if our attention to those marks momentarily obscures the originals, forcing them to yield the foreground. No translator can avoid the Hellgate stamped "Traduttori traditori," but Montale has already anticipated, appropriated, and finally absolved their necessary treasons:

The notary has crossed out
all the pages of my originals.
All except one: me myself,
Crossed out already at the origin
And not by him.

Robert P. Baird