"So you know Italian?"

I suddenly experience an obscure and unwelcome pang of solidarity with Christina Aguilera.

"Not very well."

I look down at my shoes. Perhaps they will help.

"Or at all."

But, I want to add, I do know Eugenio Montale. Or, at least, I’ve read him in translation. This matters because I’m at the handsomely furnished apartment of Professor Riccardo Viale, the Director of the Italian Cultural Institute of New York, where a distinguished crowd of diplomats, writers, and journalists have assembled for a dinner to honor Montale. The occasion is a two-day celebration of the last century’s greatest Italian poet and a Nobel Laureate, the unification of Italy.

The above lines of dialogue are repeated a number of times over the course of the evening, but nobody seems to mind my genial ignorance. I may be stoutly and unheroically monoglot, but I don’t share the cultural introversion of my compatriot Kingsley Amis. I’m here to learn, which is fortunate because the room is full of enthusiasts and newcomers alike. Burrowing into a blond hil of steaming polenta, I chat with a business reporter for Corriere della Sera, the newspaper to which Montale contributed reviews of books and opera productions. Meanwhile, over a glass of wine, the playwright John Guare explains to me how he has only recently come to Montale but is determined to explore his work in more depth.

Fortunately for us, these events are also about translation and, more particularly, about how one of the principle gifts that Italy has bestowed upon the world came to be unwrapped. We have all just attended a busy recital at the nearby Metropolitan Club, where the actor Fausto Lombardi read from a selection of Montale’s lyrics, while Farrar, Straus and Giroux publisher Jonathan Galassi and poet Charles Wright delivered their translations, and poet Rosanna Warren introduced us to those of William Arrowsmith. To emphasize his appeal to American poets and readers, three different versions of Montale’s most famous poem, “The Eel,” were read, but out of a collegial spirit of shared excitement rather than any sense of rivalry.
Montale belongs with W. H. Auden, Constantine P. Cavafy, and Anna Akhmatova in a fellowship of poets who never have to await rediscovery or critical rehabilitation. Unlike many of their contemporaries, they didn’t willfully capsize their reputations by embracing extremist politics or writing vast, unintelligible tracts of self-justificatory nonsense. Montale quietly championed an uncompromised aesthetic: without making any claims for the amorality of art, he was a wary craftsman for whom inspiration conferred responsibilities, instead of granting license. In an article about the Pieces sur Tart by Paul Valery, he argued that Italian criticism “must be revived through a careful, courageous empiricism; not by the superficial who are quick to generalize, but by those who, working on ‘particulars’ and possessing the true tools of their craft, spend many years exhausting a single problem.”

Much the same could be said of Montale’s own practice as a poet and critic, which manages to be genuinely cosmopolitan while drawing upon the regionally specific landscape and culture of his native Ligurian coast. Before the reading, Professor Viale had stressed the fine discriminations by which Montale’s distinctive view was shaped. We learned that he linked morality to decency in everyday life; that he opposed the positivism of the nineteenth century by affirming the role of chance in his writing; that he was sufficiently affected by the tragedy of the Holocaust to declare that “if it were possible to be Jewish without knowing it, such is my case.”

This would be further explored at the conference the next day. There, I would find myself scratching my head as the discussions among the scholarly congregation would frequently revert to Italian. But I would also discover more about Montale’s appeal to American poets and translators, such as Robert Lowell, and about the balance he sought between innovation and tradition. Talking to Galassi, who edited and translated the Collected Poems in 1998, I learned that Montale “wasn’t a radical, a Marinetti, but he was trying to make it new. He called his work a novelette—it was disjunctive but not fragmented.”

But that would be tomorrow. Now, I find myself thanking Professor Viale for his generous hospitality and stepping out of his apartment into a bracing winter evening. Passing Central Park, I wonder about the surfeit of particularity that is so typical of New York. With its proliferation of cultures, languages, and communities, is it surprising that the most characteristic Italian poet of the last hundred years, the man who did so much to refresh his nation’s literature, finds himself a home in this city? Perhaps not, but it seems inconceivable that a poetic sensibility so patiently devoted to specifics would be formed here. It would take a poet of looser, more digressive forms, like Frank O’Hara or James Schuyler, to contain the brilliant debris of New York. As I sit on the subway, gently flushed by a few glasses of wine and the sunny ambiance of the recently evoked Mediterranean, I wonder if I should ask my fellow passengers what they think. This being New York, there are probably a few who could answer me in Italian.

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