*John Donne Journal*
Vol. 37 (2018-2019)

*More Signs of Donne*

*  *  *  *

# Lovers and Fleas: Montale and Brandeis Read John Donne

George Bradley

> . . . we tarried for hours
> picking over the subtleties of that poet of fleas.

The Italian poet Eugenio Montale and the American scholar Irma Brandeis were intimately acquainted in Florence for five years during the 1930s, and the memory of that affair was a touchstone in Montale's verse ever after. One of the things the lovers shared was their love of poetry—Brandeis had initially sought Montale out precisely because she was impressed by his work, and she may always have been more attracted to his poems than she was to him—and an author they particularly admired was John Donne. They read his work together, Brandeis helping her companion to parse the difficulties of early modern English, and for Montale their side-by-side exploration of Donne's piquant lyrics eventually became symbolic of their intimacy. As the decades passed, the memory of their reading poems such as "The Flea" grew to represent for Montale his intense and yet complicated immersion in what was a relatively short and always conflicted love affair. By the time the poet arrived at old age, references in his verse to Donne and to "The Flea" in particular had become stand-ins both for

Brandeis and for moments of bodily transport. In the poems Montale wrote over the last six years of his life, this association is so strong that fleas in themselves become an emblem of sensual experience. When a flea appears, Brandeis necessarily comes to mind, and their act of shared reading is a substitute for the shared act of sex.

Irma Brandeis was twenty-eight years old and Montale thirty-six when she looked him up in the spring of 1933. Taken with his poetry, she went to find him in Florence's Gabinetto G. P. Vieusseux library, of which he was the director at the time, and by mid-summer the two were exchanging love letters. Despite the erotic overtones of Montale's aged recollections, physical intimacy does not seem to have been fundamental to their affair. In fact, the surviving correspondence suggests an *amplesso intimo* may have occurred only once, during the summer of 1934 in a bathroom in Genoa's Bristol Palace hotel. But if their sexual relations were not extensive, still their psychological intimacy was deep, and in that sense the two remained lovers up until Brandeis's departure from Europe following the Fascist anti-semitic manifesto of 1938. Montale ultimately decided to remain in Italy, and with the outbreak of World War II all contact between them ceased, never to be resumed. Thereafter, Brandeis was present for Montale only in his mind, which may have been painful for him as a man but was advantageous to him as an author, because women were most likely to turn up in Montale's poetry after they had become inaccessible due to estrangement, distance, or death. The operations of nostalgia transformed them into the muses of his verse.[1]

Montale wrote many poems about Brandeis, including the famous "Motets" of the 1930s, but the verse about fleas had to wait. It was not until the 1970s that he began to write what are his eight extant

[1] Montale is a muse poet *par excellence*, and the recollection of women loved and lost performs a vital function in his work. The absent women who inhabit his poems are his private interlocutors, the stimuli to his imagination, the solid points of reference amid what might otherwise have been unfocused feelings of melancholia accepted and diminishment bravely borne. Among the many Montalean muses, Brandeis is the best known and arguably the most crucial, but she was certainly not alone. The list is a long one. Besides Brandeis, it includes: Gertrude Frankl Tolazzi, Maria Luisa Spaziani, Maria Rosa Solari, Dora Markus, Dora Zanini, Anna degli Uberti, and others.

compositions that feature allusions to Donne. Of these, five were published in 1980 in his final volume *Altri versi* (*Other Poems*) and three were subsequently discovered in manuscript and published posthumously. Here is one composed in 1974 when the poet was seventy-eight and entitled "*Le pulci*," or in English, "The Fleas." Note the plural.

*Le pulci*
*Non hai mai avuto una pulce*
*che mesclando il suo sangue*
*col tuo*
*abbia composto un frappé*
*che ci assicuri l'immortalità?*
*Così avvenne nell'aureo Seicento.*
*Ma oggi nell'età del tempo pieno*
*si è immortali per meno*
*anche se il tempo si raccorcia e i secoli*
*non sono che piume al vento.*[2]

The Fleas
Did you ever have a flea
that combined its blood
with yours
and mixed up a milkshake
to guarantee us immortality?
That's what happened in the Golden Age
of the sixteen hundreds, but today
in the age of full-time professionals
it takes less to get immortalized,
even if time contracts and the centuries
are nothing but feathers on the wind.[3]

This little lyric comes early in *Other Poems*, and it constitutes an introduction to the book's concerns, although its full measure of implication will not be appreciated until one has read further in the

[2] With the exception of "E vennero da ultimo i diserbanti . . .", the text of all of Montale's poems in the original Italian come from *Eugenio Montale: tutte le poesie* (Milan: Mondadori Libri S.p.A., 1984).
[3] All translations are by G. B.

volume and encountered additional poems dealing with similar material. An inattentive or uninformed reader might initially be unaware of its connection to Donne's work, albeit the mention of the 1600s is a tip-off and the plural title indicates multiple occasions. But the almost vampiric mixture of blood, sex, and immortality will be recognized to those familiar with Donne's stanzas on the same subject, and the fact that this poem immediately precedes one about Donne's wife Anne More removes all doubt. Even so, other questions remain. Who is the "you" to whom the poem addressed? Who are the "us?" And what to make of the milkshake, of all things? It is only when we identify Montale's echo with Donne's original that we realize we are dealing with a pair of lovers, and that rather than a verminous insect, it is poetry—and Montale's in particular—that offers a degree of immortality. Yet as the milkshake and the mention of professional employment suggest, our present popular culture and utilitarian age do not easily accommodate poetic immortality. The enduring fame that a modern poet can confer is uncertain, threatened not only as it always is by the passage of time but also by what Montale saw as his era's intellectual and artistic decline. The memories in which his late work swims are infused with irony and satire, and "The Fleas" provides the book's introduction to these qualities as well.

A notable inclination to irony is something that distinguishes Montale's late poems from the work of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, as he was quite aware. There exists an incisive couplet he chose not to make public but nonetheless left among his papers which underscores the point. Writing of Giovanni Pascoli, one of the most acclaimed Italian poets of the late 19th century, Montale observes: "Alas, he lacked irony regarding himself / (the most important kind there is)." Montale's taste for irony, especially with respect to himself, no doubt resulted in part from his dry, not to say acerbic, personality, but it was also partly a chosen intellectual stance. Irony of this sort informs Donne's *Songs and Satires*, too, and Donne's combination of the erotic with the satiric may have been one thing that attracted Montale. We might speculate that this aspect of Donne's work influenced the development of Montale's own. Most of all, though, what attracted Montale to Donne and caused him to allude to the latter repeatedly was that, in retrospect, Donne reliably evoked Brandeis.

After returning to America, Brandeis became a professor at Bard College and a respected literary critic, and the poet she specialized in was Dante. Thus, when Montale looked back on their love affair, *The Divine Comedy* came to mind as well, and one element of his emphasis on the sensual stimulation found in a shared act of reading is its replication of the Francesca da Rimini / Paolo Malatesta scene that figures in Canto V of *Inferno*. Among literature's most famous adulterers, Francesca and Paolo are tempted to forbidden sex while reading a tale of two other transgressive lovers, Guinevere and Lancelot, and surely Montale intends that he and Brandeis be seen as a third such pairing, a couple similarly swept away in their engagement with provocative language.

For Irma and Eugenio, the exciting text that prompted abandon was not French medieval romance but English Renaissance verse, as we can gather from a few lines that interrupt the flow of a late poem addressed to "Clizia," which was Montale's pet name for Irma.[4] The poem is called "*Poiché la vita fugge* . . . ", or "Since life is fleeting. . . ," and it is mostly a somber meditation concerning the possibilities for a survival after death of the lovers' experience and their emblematic possessions. The poet wonders what future there might be for Clizia's books and bookshelf, for his thoughts about her and himself, for the moments of happiness the lovers had known. And then, just as he imagines their total dissolution in eternity, his misgivings about the hereafter are interrupted by a seemingly extraneous recollection.

> *Poi* (*sovente hai portato*
> *occhiali affumicati e li hai dimessi*
> *del tutto con le pulci di John Donne)*
> *preparati al gran tuffo.*
>
> At that point (you often used to wear

[4] The original Clizia is a nymph transformed into a sunflower in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but Montale stated in an article that his source for the name was its use for the beloved in a sonnet in *The Rhymes* of Dante. The speaker of that sonnet is faithfully lovelorn, and Montale calls this the typical situation of "every lyric poet who lives besieged by the absence / presence of a distant woman."

> dark glasses and you abandoned them
> entirely amid the fleas of John Donne)
> get ready to take the big plunge.

Steam my shades! The parenthetical lines form an irruption into what is an otherwise sedately contemplative poem, and their intrusion is explicable only as a reflexive recall of sexual frisson. In Montale's company, Brandeis is casting aside the distance and disguise of her protective lenses and plunging into the linguistic allure of Donne's hematophagic metaphysics. A woman's act of removing a pair of glasses to engage more directly with amorous language is a simple gesture become a sexy scene, and it is the allusion to "The Flea" that makes it so. The little episode in which recollected eroticism stands in opposition to oblivion is not quite Donne, of course, and not quite Dante, either, but as Montale has told us, latter-day immortality is a reduced thing. Dante's adulterous readers have been updated to the twentieth century.

Montale's affair with Brandeis was not adulterous, strictly speaking, but it was carried on even as he was involved in another relationship that certainly was. At the time he was reading Donne with Brandeis, he was a lodger in the home of the art critic Matteo Marangoni and Drusilla Tanzi, who were husband and wife. Tanzi left her husband to take up with Montale, and after Maragoni's death, Tanzi and Montale would eventually marry. In the 1930s, however, that outcome was far from certain, and until Brandeis's return to the States, she and Tanzi were jealous competitors for Montale's affection. Montale was notably indecisive regarding the two women and the literary spheres they represented. If Brandeis fed his interest in anglophone verse, it was Tanzi who had the advantage of being tied into the Italian literary scene. (Among other connections, she was a friend of Italo Svevo and was Natalia Ginzburg's aunt.) The struggle between the women was not settled easily, and in fact when Brandeis left for America in '38, Montale contemplated leaving with her. Tanzi threatened to commit suicide if he did, however, and so won the battle, thereby moving Brandeis fully into the muse category and allowing Donne's poetry to gain the heightened significance for Montale that was conferred by his retrospective yearning. After Tanzi's death in 1963, she too would take her place among the poet's coterie of muses, but until that time the

woman living at his side had his company while the one living thousands of miles away commanded the attention of his art. Here's another example of that attention, a poem that also appears in Montale's last book, and one that illustrates the sexual suggestiveness that regularly accompanies his many recollections of Clizia / Brandeis's engagement with poetry.

**Previsioni**
Ci rifugiammo nel giardino (pensile se non sbaglio)
per metterci al riparo dalle fanfaluche
erotiche di un pensionante di fresco arrivo
e tu parlavi delle donne dei poeti
fatte per imbottire illeggibili carmi.
Così sarà di me aggiungesti di sottecchi.
Restai di sasso. Poi dissi dimentichi
che la pallottola ignora chi la spara
e ignora il suo bersaglio.
Ma non siamo
disse C. ai baracconi. E poi non credo
che tu abbia armi da fuoco nel tuo bagaglio.

**Predictions**
We took refuge in the garden (a hanging one
if I'm not mistaken) to escape the erotic
stories of a retiree who had just arrived,
and you spoke of the women whom poets
use to flesh out their unreadable odes.
That'll be me, you added with a sly glance.
I was struck dumb. Then I said: you forget
that a bullet doesn't know who shot it
and doesn't know its target.
But we,
said C., aren't at a carnival booth. And besides
I don't think you're packing any pistols.

There is a whiff of Mae West innuendo here, an implication of sexual inadequacy in the retreat from the lubricious raconteur and in Clizia's sly observation that the speaker carries no firearms. It seems possible that physical incompatibility may have been one reason Montale and Brandeis did not continue as a couple. Regardless, one thing this little

poem tells us is that their companionable immersion in verse was both substitute for erotic activity and an evasion of it.

"Predictions" does not say which poet or poets Brandeis is referring to (though the mention in the salient line of "*donne*," i.e. "women," might be a multilingual pun and thus a hidden clue), and the site of the postlapsarian garden is not identified. Other poems, however, inform us that the place where Brandeis took off her glasses in Montale's company for a closer look at "The Flea" was a hotel south of the Arno called the Pensione Annalena. Brandeis certainly stayed there while she was in Florence, and Montale certainly came to visit, as any guest of the hotel is likely to be told today, but beyond that the precise locus of the aged poet's memory is subject to change. In some poems, Montale situates the reading on a terrace, and the authors examined include not only Donne but also Meister Eckhart and St. Bonaventura. In others, such as the one just quoted, the event occurs in a garden to which the lovers have retreated. In still others, the perusal takes place on a window seat. Montale's final volume exhibits a Whitmanesque disregard concerning such inconsistencies. Thus a poem called "Clizia Says," in the lines used as the epigraph to this essay, speaks of "the bay window where we tarried for hours / picking over the subtleties of that poet of fleas," while just a few pages later the scene has shifted and the lovers are

> . . . together on the terrace
> of the Pensione Annalena
> picking over the rhymes of that venerable
> prurient poet John Donne. . . .

There's no way to be sure if we are dealing with one instance multiplied or several instances conflated, but perhaps the uncertainty is deliberate, or in any case inevitable, because Montale revisited the scene in many poems and adjusted details of the so-called "true story" to suit the requirements of the moment.

I'll close by looking at a late and very brief poem that was discovered in a notebook and published five years after the poet's death. The little quatrain looks like a throw-away, but it is more than that, offering up its preoccupations only when one reads it in the context of Irma Brandeis and John Donne.

**"E vennero da ultimo i diserbanti . . ."**
E vennero da ultimo i diserbanti . . .
Ci scrolliamo di dosso quest'orrenda
pulizia. Anche una pulce
potrebbe confortarsi. Siamo all'osso.[5]

**"And now here come the herbicides . . ."**
And now here come the herbicides . . .
We shrug off such horrible
sanitary measures. Even a flea should
be able to take comfort. We're down to the bone.

These lines seem enigmatic, or simply insubstantial, until one notices that it is not unwanted vegetation to which the herbicides represent a threat. Instead, they threaten a flea, an insect usually found on warm bodies rather than amid weeds. And weed or insect, why should a sanitary measure of pest control so horrify the speaker? Why is he so concerned for the comfort of a creature most of us distinctly dislike? But if we connect the flea to Donne and Donne to Clizia, we can see that what is really being threatened in Montale's old age are his memories of Brandeis and the intimate moments they once shared. The elderly poet knows his horizons are shrinking, that death is not far off, and he is appalled to think that with his extinction his vivid recollections of a woman absorbed in a poem by John Donne will die as well. It is not society at large that is "down to the bone" (though in other circumstances Montale would be willing to say that, too); rather it is the poet himself who is reduced, and thus also his persistent attachment to a love affair long gone, his ability to hold on to the nostalgic thoughts that matter to him most. He fears that the image of Clizia he clings to in his mind and the sentimental history which that image represents can neither of them survive much longer.

The image did survive, though, at least in a way, since the picture of Clizia bent over a book is still to be found in the poems. Just as with Donne's poetry (presumably about Anne More), Montale's verse succeeded in providing his lover with a literary afterlife, and it is fair to say that Brandeis remains remembered today in part because of her

[5] *La casa di Olgiate e altre poesie* (Milan: Mondadori Libri S.p.A., 2006).

appearance in the work of a poet of international reputation. Literature lives on only as it is received, of course, and the fascination Donne's verse has continued to exert on readers such as Brandeis and Montale is why it has been with us for four hundred years. We cannot know if Montale's poems concerning Clizia will endure for centuries, but we do know that reading about them can invigorate our appreciation of Donne's work in our own. Investigating Montale's many allusions to Donne may add to our understanding of the latter's flamboyantly anxious ironies. And witnessing a pair of modern-day lovers immersed in "The Flea" can help us to see that poem not as a recherché metaphor but rather as a model of romantic attachment that is consuming even as, or perhaps precisely because, it is ultimately unfulfilled. Montale's late lyrics encourage us to appreciate Donne's erotic poetry for its genuine insight into the nature of love. The mixed-up milkshake of blended souls lives on.

*Independent Scholar*