

No Retreat, No Surrender

April 5

My neighbour, Mrs Z, knocked on my door early this morning, just as I was getting down to work. After apologizing for having disturbed me, she begged to exchange a loaf of bread for a half cup of coffee. Her husband had returned home suddenly, she said. The exhausted fellow was already asleep. She wanted to surprise him when he woke up with a freshly made cup of coffee, to show him how resourceful she is. Mr Z is among those holding the position on 20th October Street and his unit controls the bakery on Avenue of Independence, which explains why the bread was still warm. I measured out the coffee and made her sit down and drink a cup from the pot. She looked worn out, poor girl, but still managed to smile very prettily. She was barefoot, wearing a blue smock dress and her hair, which she normally wears up and plaited, was hanging over her shoulders. I couldn't help jumping to the conclusion that the returning warrior had fulfilled his marital duty before falling asleep.

While we were sipping coffee on my little balcony, discussing the situation, the new battery of K38s in the Parodi district opened up behind us. Each time they fire, the apartment shakes to its foundations – twice, first when the shells are discharged and once again on impact. Our artillerymen were trying to get the range of the enemy's mobile rocket-launchers which had been relocated during the night. Why is it that the distant whistling sound of rockets in flight is so much more disturbing than the not-so-distant explosion they make as they strike the sides of apartment blocks ? As soon as the bombardment commenced, Mrs Z hurried away, fearful lest their

daughter wake up. Her husband can sleep through a 9 millimetre artillery barrage but wakes up the moment his baby does.

April 6

Hooray!

Today I completed the final proofs. What a job it has been, editing my oeuvre systematically. So many poems, so many errors. Every page contained some printer's improvement or imbecility of my own. I can't say I haven't enjoyed this work but I have wondered on occasion how a poet's observations about the most banal acts of life can acquire such importance for other people. Only the day before yesterday in the Aurore a young soldier whom I had not noticed before recited to Nita, the pretty waitress there, a poem I had written some fifty-three years ago. The girl for whom I wrote that poem has been in her grave for forty of them. My dear Lise would have been about Nita's age when I wrote it. Things had looked bad then, I told the young man.

But not, I forbore from telling him, nearly so bad as they look now.

The fact is, soldiers, the ones who have education, often pack some scrap of literature in their kitbag when they leave for the front. The choice is not always made on literary grounds, I grant. The book most carried by members of the British Army during the Great War, after the Bible, was Gilbert White's humble collection of botanical observations about a garden in a village in Hampshire. Leopardi, Catullus, Yesenin – even Gilbert White – I can understand. But my small lyrics ? What a responsibility!

April 7

In the café there was talk of a new ceasefire but nobody I spoke to took it seriously. (*'Look what happened last time ?'*) International opinion is dithering, equivocal and pious. It seems we are expendable, a justifiable sacrifice for peace in the region. If this were true, if peace could be bought at the cost of our annihilation, it would be a sacrifice I, for one, would be prepared to make, but peace could never be a consequence of the erasure of a culture as ancient as ours. Our crops, the shape of our fields, our institutions, our beautiful language – if the woof of this ancient rug were to be unpicked, would peace follow ? I doubt it. The peace that follows death is not peace but simply death.

April 8

The noise from the guns was very great today. Either the fighting is getting closer or it has only just begun to score my consciousness. While I had work to do, it did not bother me. Now that my proofs are out of the way and I am twiddling my thumbs the explosions and automatic gunfire are very tiresome. Tomorrow I shall return to my translations of Montale – for my own peace of mind.

On my way out of my apartment this morning I bumped into my neighbour, Mr Z, who was carrying his automatic carbine. We descended the stairs together. He was not sanguine about the situation and advised me to make arrangements to leave.

'Where do you propose I go ? Abroad ?' I asked him.

He shrugged. He knows there is nowhere to go. I am not an insect, capable of stepping out of my skin. Anyway, if the situation is as bad as he said it is, why, I asked him, does he not send Mrs Z and

his baby daughter away from the zone ? He looked puzzled. I don't think the idea had occurred to him before.

'If *she* left, *I* would have to leave,' he said. 'And I can't very well leave. We're in this together, she and I. We are man and wife. She knows that.'

'Quite so,' I said. 'I can't leave for the same reason. I have lived here all my life. I was born in this house. We are in this together, the city and I.'

'I'm glad you understand. I am the soldier. You are the poet,' he said. 'After they kill me, they will kill you.'

We embraced and parted, he for the 20th October Street battery, I for the Café Aurore and my aperitif.

April 9

I had the impression that there were more people than usual on the street today, although the guns were not noticeably less active. Not all the shops were boarded up. The haberdashery on the corner of Old Market Street, for example - the one run by the man who dresses up as a woman - was open for business. Are there people still making peplums, ruching and shirring ?

I attached myself to a group of my fellow citizens who had gathered outside an electrical goods store on Avenue of the Heroes. Inside the store ABC News pictures of the rocket damage being inflicted on our city were being shown simultaneously on a dozen television screens. The small crowd watched in silence, individuals murmuring to their neighbour each time a familiar landmark was recognized: '*Look, there is Palace Gate!...Ah - the P.U.M. Building !*' The TV pictures of our plight did something to us but I would be hard pressed to say what it was. Awed by the instant universal transmission of our

everyday experiences, we were reverential, as if in the presence of a miraculous event. Although there were a dozen TV screens to choose from, I noticed that we all seemed to be watching the same one.

I was intrigued by the hold the TV footage of the conflict had on us. It was as if the pictures on the screens possessed a greater degree of credibility than we, standing out on the pavement of Avenue of the Heroes, possessed ourselves. They seemed to be telling us something that we did not know. It is easy to forget that television is not a narrative form impartially reporting the facts; it is a fact itself, as indisputable as any other.

The crowd cheered when pictures of the Chief appeared, jeered when the News service even-handedly showed an officer in Government uniform drawing his index finger across his throat. It is reassuring to see how hated were are.

April 10

My re-reading of Montale this morning made me sit up and gasp, chuckle, sigh, weep. What a lovely fellow he was ! Quiet. Weighty. Sombre – and yet very funny. Like Fellini in that respect. And old, of course. Eugenio was old even when I first met him, and he was only forty-two then, in 1938, shortly before the publication of *Le Occasioni*. His poem *Le Barche sulla Marne* reminded me of the occasion in Florence – in '54 – when he took Lise and me out onto the Arno in a narrow rowing boat. I handled the oars while he and Lise sat in the bows scoffing wild strawberries out of a twist of brown paper we had bought on Ponte Vecchio close to the spot where Dante Alighieri first clapped eyes on Beatrice Portinari. Such a jolly time we had! Eugenio recounted for our amusement his extraordinary

meeting with the young Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, engineered by the British Council – in '52, I think – when Thomas had jumped out of a window – or was it into a cupboard ? - at something Eugenio had said.

‘What had you said ?’

‘All I did was ask the boy if he would be happy with a cup of Earl Grey tea!’

He then recited to us his delightful Tuscan translation of Manley Hopkins’s poem *Glory be to God for dappled things / For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow.*

Ah, what days they were!

After making myself sad with memories of much loved, long departed friends, I was pleased to see that it was time for me to put on my hat and coat and sally forth into the sunshine. The young leaves on the ancient lime trees on Avenue of the Heroes – mercifully unpollarded this year – were, like me, reaching towards the warmth of the sun. *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age!* Some clever clogs – Lorca, I shouldn’t be surprised – must already have pointed out how absurd it is that green shoots push forth in spring whatever calibre of shell is shot at them.

Or, perhaps, Wilfred Owen. Was he Welsh too ? My memory is getting terrible. I know that the marvellous boy – poet *and* soldier, covering both his bets – was killed only hours before the Armistice in 1918.

Montale said from the bow of the rowing-boat, quoting from his own poem, *Eastbourne*: ‘*Perhaps tomorrow all this will appear to have been a dream!*’

It is tomorrow now. Eugenio. How right you were. It does appear so.

April 11

It was my habit, until the conflict got out of hand, to walk to the Aurore in the morning for my coffee and again in the early part of the evening for my aperitif. Since I may not leave the building after dark – I am not exempt from the curfew and the streets at night are, frankly, lawless – I now restrict myself to a late morning stroll, consuming my coffee and aperitif on the same occasion. I have always imposed strict habits onto my work schedule. Like most writers I am a naturally lazy person. In order to produce my modest corpus of work I have had to force myself to be a slave to routine and discipline.

I make a point of walking to the café by the same route – diagonally across Victory Square and then down Avenue of the Heroes. I see it as my patriotic duty to undertake this journey, my contribution to the war effort. Am I not the Famous Poet, recipient of numerous international prizes and honours, friend of the Chief ? It is important that my out-of-fashion homburg, my cane and my sombre English overcoat are seen on the streets, to show the world that I am going about my business as I have done over a number of decades. My demeanour says: I am unabashed, I have confidence that our armed forces have the situation under control. I have persuaded myself that it is for the good of the morale of the city and my faith in ultimate victory over our adversary that I take my aperitif at midday.

The café, which I have frequented since I was a student, is on the river-side of the old city. In summer the tables are set out facing the

bridge. There are fruit sorbets and ice-cold white wine; during the winter months, hot soup and red wine and brandy. It has been the haunt of intellectuals since before my father's time – nationalists, communists, monarchists. Except during the Fascist period, it has always been the place you went if you were looking for an argument. These days, fortunately, the clientele does not consist solely of writers and artists and students but of people from all walks of life. These days it is impossible to say who is what since nearly every person is in the drab-green uniform of the militia. The militiaman addressing you might be a railway engineer or an expert on Kodaly – or both. I love the place. The *patron* is an old friend. Nita, the dear girl, serves me first my coffee, then my cognac. It is my second home.

April 12

My walk to and from the Aurore is attended by new and unwelcome images. The shelling of recent months has ripped apart many favourite old buildings. Every day they mutate, becoming more grotesque almost before my eyes. It is most distressing and, surely, a reversal of the traditional order of things. Hitherto the job of the poet was to lament the brevity of his allotted span on earth, mocked by the enduring nature of his own artefacts. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. But today the permanent decays at a faster rate than the transitory. This accelerated entropy of the urban sprawl is something modern and frightening. What would Horace or Marvell have had to say about such a phenomenon ?

Under normal circumstances the old part of the city is delightful, laid out like a piece of eighteenth century prose in which there are long coordinated sentences, winding predictable suburban clauses, bridge passages, cul-de-sacs. Concord, irony, paradox. Everything

is on a human scale, albeit an heroic one. The Golden Mean is everywhere in evidence, the heartbeat in proportion to the inhaled and exhaled breath. Congruous and cogent. Whatever you may think about the overall design, intended to reflect the harmony between God and His universe - a joke in questionable taste, you might suppose, after the recent rocket-attacks - there can be no denying how delightfully it is punctuated.

Every one of these elegant buildings I have known for over seventy years. They are my respected neighbours - upright personalities with whom I have enjoyed a formal acquaintance but whose hearts have been hidden from me. Alas, no more! The secret and private parts of these venerable aristocrats are displayed for all and sundry to behold. Where outer walls have been removed by shell blast I can see a bedroom - the marital bed, a framed photograph on the wall. In the library a bookcase containing volumes in our language - including, conceivably, editions bearing my own name. In the nursery a frieze of rabbits and squirrels. An umbrella is on the hat rack on the hall. The archaeology of only yesterday. In the kitchen a man in an overcoat who is stirring the pot raises his hat to me as I pass. A lavatory, a bath, a bidet...

In war the interior life is meaningless, these exposed structures declare. Today we are all under Doctor Mengele's microscope. In the jaws of defeat there is no place for the intimate human emotion. We are what you see on your television screens between Sports Roundup and the current favourite soap opera: items of curiosity - an interesting colony of arthropods ingeniously photographed in combat with an intrusive neighbour, objects of pity.

April 13

Woken by a huge explosion that smashed every one of the remaining panes in the glass door that opens onto my little balcony. A frightful mess everywhere. The apartment block next to my own had taken a direct hit. God, what a sight! The block is – *was*, I should say – a mature six-storey building, solid, the way they used to make them when my father was newly married. Although, like my own, it had been largely evacuated, I saw ambulance personnel carry out several bodies on stretchers. Three dead, Mrs Z signalled up to me with three fingers. Is this a lot – or to be expected ?

By midmorning it was business as usual. Late coffee and oranges in a sunny chair – until a young man in the uniform of the militia, after hammering on my door, ordered me in a rather peremptory manner to leave the area. I invited him in and sat him down and gave him a cup of coffee and an American cigarette and chided him for his defeatism. He could hardly take his eyes off the books with which the walls of my apartment are lined.

‘Oh, yes. Didn’t you know ? After sandbags, books are the best thing for absorbing the shock of high explosive.’

And who said literature serves no purpose in time of war ?

I dropped the name of the Chief, which had the effect I desired.

‘You know the Chief ?’

‘My dear boy, I was marking his essays on Clausewitz at the University before you were at your mother’s breast!’

Only then, I think, did the penny drop.

The young man informed me he had attended the University himself, before it was transformed into a militia barracks – studying engineering and Russian, of all things. I dug out my signed copy of Mayakovsky’s constructivist poem *GOOD!*, handed to me on the

platform in Leningrad railways station by Lili Brik herself, to whom the book is dedicated and dated November 1927 – three years before the author shot himself with a gun he had found lying around a film studio. The young militiaman carried the little volume off with him as if it had been a newborn baby he had rescued from the flames.

Dosvordanyua!

April 14

What is the role of literature in time of war – or, for that matter, at any time ? *Poetry makes nothing happen* Wystan declared on so many occasions that people have come to believe it to be true. It's crap, of course. Poetry does not decide the fate of the coalition government nor influence which way a dictator will jump, but people who read poetry sometimes do. Don't tell me that those Norse axe-wielders, Greek sword-thrusters, Zulu spear-throwers were not chanting favourite lines from the old epics when they faced their impossible odds. In Wystan's case it was just bad eggs. He felt guilty because he suspected that his magnificent verses *had* made things happen – unfortunately not always things he wanted to happen. By then it was too late. He had changed his mind; he was happy enough with the way things were. The fact remains that in '36 men in Spain had carried his collection *Look, Stranger!* into battle. Had crouched behind the wall, had aimed the Vickers, had squeezed the trigger. Much later, in his carpet slippers, enjoying the smell of his own farts over cups of disgustingly strong tea in that scruffy apartment he had in St Marks Place, Wystan no doubt had cause to feel uneasy. *Tant pis*, my friend! *Who gives us nearer insight to resist / The expanding fear, the savaging stranger ?*

If not Auden, who indeed ?

April 15

It has always been a source of amusement to me that most poems are the length of a good crap. Not only in the space each occupies – about fifteen to twenty centimetres, I would say, on average – but also in the time it takes an average person to consume one and produce the other – about five to eight minutes. (Personally, I like to take a little longer than that.) I was thrilled when I discovered this universal truth. Reading poetry and evacuating my bowels are two activities I like to find time for at least once every twenty-four hours. It is for this reason that the spines of my favourite poets face me every time I lower my trousers and place my posterior onto the toilet seat.

What bliss! The gentle voluntary release of the anal sphincter muscle is a delectable sensation. How wonderful, then, when it is accompanied by the aesthetic frisson provided by the sonnet or lyric picked out at random:

*Groping back to bed after a piss
I part thick curtains, and am startled by
the rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness...*

So much anticipation! Such sublime relief!

April 16

Terrible news. Mrs Z's husband was killed when his battery was knocked out last night. I watched the commotion from my balcony where I had seated myself to look over my translations in the sunlight. First two militia officers arrived in a car. This was an

event in itself. Along with several neighbours I wondered what it meant. The men entered the building and there soon followed a pitiful wail from the apartment below my own – and we knew. We all knew. After several minutes the two militiamen re-emerged – or attempted to. I am ashamed to say I watched Mrs Z, poor child, hanging onto the two men who were attempting to disencumber themselves of this hysterical woman and get back to their car. They obviously wanted to return to their duties, to face an implacable adversary at the front – *anything* but this. They looked bewildered and embarrassed. Mrs Z, her baby under arm, insisted on returning to 20th October Street with them. No, they were saying. That was out of the question. I felt ashamed because from the vantage point of my balcony it was like sitting in a box at La Scala, watching Verdi after a good meal.

The men eventually got hold of some women – that was the way out, of course – into whose hands they could entrust the distraught widow of their comrade, something they should have thought of in the first place. Somehow the baby became the issue. One of the women was holding the little girl in her arms and then Mrs Z was torn in two. She had to come to a decision there and then, either to run after the departing Militiamen to 20th October Street or to retain custody of her child. It was pitiful to watch. As the two soldiers drove off across the Square towards Avenue of the Heroes Mrs Z, sobbing, allowed herself to be led away, following her baby like a mare after her foal. I felt I was witnessing the very first moments of a diaspora. When, if ever, would this fatherless child be permitted to return, and under what circumstances, speaking what language, German or English or French – and her father's tongue imperfectly ?

I wept for Mrs Z. Is her fate and that of her child to be the fate of our people ?

The helicopter descending ever lower over this wretched scene was not – as I feared at the time – a Government aircraft but an ABC News team. Mrs Z's anguish will by now have been flashed into several million homes all over the world, something happening in a corner of a room while children play, wives cook, husbands read the newspaper, waiting for the ballgame.

'The situation looks real bad there, George.'

'Where's that, Hon ?'

'You know. That place with the funny name.'

'Oh there. Yeah, real bad. Don't worry,' George says, glancing at his watch. 'It will soon be over.'

April 17

A telephone message arrived for me this morning, hand-delivered by a militiaman on a motorcycle and initialled in the corner by the Chief. It was from my publishers in Paris. They had received the final batch of proofs of my Collected Edition. Printing was about to proceed. '*Bembo or Baskerville ?*' they wanted to know.

The militiaman confirmed the rumour that the railhead has been lost. Even I know this to be a catastrophe.

At the *Aurore* the atmosphere was tense. Nita was sandbagging the windows and the doors. The place was stripped bare. The *patron* asked me what arrangements I had made to leave.

'What are you talking about ?' I said. 'I have spent fifty years affirming that the place of the poet is integral to the voice of the poet! *There are men whose words / Are as natural sounds / Of their*

places / As the cackle of toucans / In the place of toucans. How can you expect *me*, of all people, to leave ?’

The *patron* shrugged.

‘That’s all very well. What about *me* ? You may be the voice of the place. I *am* the fucking place!’

When the Chief passed through he came across to the table where the *patron* was helping me consume the last of his oldest brandy. We all three embraced warmly.

‘I do hope you decide on Bembo,’ he said with barely a trace of his famous smile. ‘For a collection of such importance, only Bembo monotype will do.’

I am not so vain that I did not catch the irony in his words. The railhead has fallen and the Chief expresses a preference for one printing font over another. If I did not know the man I should feel ashamed for occupying the telephone exchange with my trivial affairs at such a critical moment in our history. But the Chief, I think, was saying – to himself as much as to me: these things matter. In more congenial times they might even be considered important. He was amusing himself, pretending we were free to make a choice between two equally pleasant alternatives. His brain – exercised by the impossibility of our position: *No Retreat! No Surrender!* – was allowing itself a few moments of wry humour at my expense. And why not, for God’s sake. There is precious little about which to be wry or humorous about.

April 18

On Wednesday they shelled the Maternity Hospital again. Yesterday mortar-fire destroyed the big food-processing plant in the Parodi. Today snipers killed fourteen women and two men as they

stood in line outside the bakery on Avenue of Independence. Have we reached the apogee yet – or have we even further to travel down that road ?

It brings me no satisfaction to have been proved right, to have in my mouth the bitter taste of my own prophesy: *I told you so!* I have won few converts, at home or abroad, in my attempts since '45 to persuade my colleagues, friends, anyone who would listen to me, that the Nazis had discovered something in themselves – which is to say, something in *ourselves* – that could not be undiscovered. Like television or America or our ability to rotate our thumbs, it is with us. I have always said so. Recently, as my contemporaries declined in numbers, anyone under the age of sixty has tended to dismiss the excesses of the Third Reich as a pathological aberration, a mad parenthesis in human history which is now closed. Perhaps so. But if Guernica and Oradour-sur-Glane set new bench marks in atrocity, the methodical destruction of our ancient city is approaching these fixed points on the scale.

April 19

It's a strange thing. Although I lie down at night and in the morning I am rested when I get out of bed, I would not say that in between time I have slept as such. I tend to lie very still and fall into a waking reverie and look back on my life, recall events from my childhood and youth, the plots of novels I have read, people I have known, the number-plates of cars I have owned – until it is time for me to get up and put on my clothes. If I were worried about this I would be called an insomniac. I'm not worried about it in the least. I find the state perfectly agreeable. In fact, it is no easier getting out of bed these days than it was when I was a young man, when my

dreams were as farouche as avant-garde movies, full of inconsequential sex and heart-stopping violence. As a person approaches death, I suppose, the less time he has to lie around imitating a condition which he is shortly going to experience, if that is the word, for eternity. If human consciousness is a consequence of our foreknowledge of death, sleep is a daily reminder of the fact – God’s charming way of helping us get used to the idea.

And so my eyes were open, I was wide awake, when the door handle turned almost silently in the semi-darkness and my bedroom door slowly opened; when a figure approached the foot of my bed and stood contemplating my inert body for several minutes. Amid the shadows I discerned the beautiful moonstruck features of a young woman. I wondered whether I was not asleep after all, dreaming some dreadful scene from a poem such as Schiller might have written, the kind Hitler would have approved of, *Der Tod und das Mädchen*. Not my cup of tea at all.

‘Hello Nita, my dear. What’s the matter ?’

‘Oh! You’re awake!’

The rocket-fire had ceased, I noticed then, and our own K38s in the Parodi district too. The night was ominously tranquil. You could have heard a nightingale sing – well, when I was a boy you could have.

‘There’s been a ceasefire,’ I said.

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

‘No! Not good! They have broken through! The *Aurore* has fallen!

‘You mean we have surrendered ?’

‘I don’t know! Without the railhead we are surrounded! The Chief is sending a car for you.’

‘That is most considerate of him. Where am I being taken ?’

‘He didn’t say. He will send the car as soon as he can. He doesn’t know when that will be.’

From the girl’s reluctance to be specific I could tell that I was in a battle zone, a place where only débâcle could be guaranteed.

Nita let herself out as silently as she had let herself in. She is a sweet girl. A soldier, perhaps the young man who recited my poem to her in the *Aurore*, was waiting down in the street for her. I hope he will be able to look after her.

At dawn I got up and dressed and packed a valise with my Montale translations and some odds and ends - a handful of treasured letters and photographs - and then waited for the car to arrive. The streets are empty. The sun is high in the sky.

It is getting late. 11.47 already. The square outside is deserted and silent, sharply sunlit and darkly shadowy – like Main Street in *High Noon*. Is it possible that John Ford was influenced by De Chirico ? It hardly seems likely. If the car does not arrive soon it will be past time for my aperitif. To mortify my thirst I am writing up my journal but my metabolism, like Lorca’s green shoots, wants to go its own way, war or no war.

As soon as I think about Lorca – who, when the fighting broke out, returned to his village in Francoist Spain and was promptly stood up against the nearest wall and shot – I feel ashamed. Flight is a necessary strategic manoeuvre for the Chief and the Militia. For an old man of letters it is surely ignoble. I have been taking my aperitif at the *Aurore* for half a century, at least, and according to the laws of probability there is every chance that I shall continue to do so. Good God, I am eighty-nine! I have shaken the hand of practically every living president, royal personage, Nobel prize-winner! I intend to put

on my homburg and my English overcoat, take my cane and stroll down Avenue of the Heroes to the *Aurore* and demand my cognac. Let them try and refuse me!

If the telephone were in working order I would call the ABC News team and inform them of my intention. They could capture the event on film for the 6 o'clock bulletin.

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