

Santa Cecilia



I remember being cold and wet; or rather I remember peering down roads looking for a façade resembling the one described in our guide-book, and all of those streets down which I peered being mute, empty and smothered in a blanket of the exact shade of grey that I associate with Novembers in London and not afternoons in Rome, afternoons which I always assume to be vivid and flagrant in their nudity, tense in tight congregations of yellows and reds that reveal themselves unchastely from the depths of their playful shadows.

For a Londoner 'grey' is not an adjective that can be applied to something, it is not a descriptive term of appearance but an essential quality that touches on every aspect of that in which it has been discovered; grey as a colour is in London what gives sustenance to all other impressions, it is the primordial root of a civilization whose only true reference before itself, and anterior to itself is the atmosphere produced between the liquid slate of the Thames and the unrelenting ceiling of clouds. For a Londoner grey is a condition of existence in all its breadth, and that is why I cannot trust my memory when I say I remember being cold or wet, because before I can recall those impressions I remember the streets being grey, and the strength of that image would have opened up a rupture in those streets in Trastevere through which they would have been soaked in damp, and chilled by the wind pouring in from a London ever-ready to inhabit all the colourlessness in the world.

But it was Rome, my bright city that wears its age so lightly -how could it have been as I remember, it must have been some confused clouds on their way to Ostia that placed themselves there to distract me in my recollections; but nevertheless, there was a lack of Roman colour and volume in the streets that day as we were looking for a church with a famous sculpture. The sculpture is by the brother of Carlo Maderno, and depicts a martyred saint (the patron saint of musicians), a beheaded lady whose martyrdom is indicated by a crevice around the back of her neck. This is gently made the centre of ones attention as the body is laid out in a horizontal figura-serpentinata, whose most concrete point of inflection is precisely at the back of the neck, precisely at the moment where the potentially somnolent curve of her body which faces the viewer turns and rotates in

a movement that is clearly not one of life, leaving the features of the martyr turned away from us. It is a statue of violence, but it is elegant and perfectly poised, it is harmonious but not idealised and inhuman, it effects pathos but is in no way dramatic.

I remember being momentarily impressed, and perhaps having briefly pondered the simultaneous opening of her curving torso, outpointing arms, and the closing of her thoughts, her face looking away to somewhere not of this world; but I had completely forgotten about her until yesterday, I had forgotten her name and her church. She was Santa Cecilia, she was a wealthy noblewoman of the divine city, her church now was her house during her life, she was ordered beheaded by the prefect Turcius Almachius in 230 for being a Christian. The order was carried out unsuccessfully, and with a mutilated neck she lay dying for three days in that very house. In the midst of inconsolable grief, but in an elevated serenity on the shores of her infinity she began to sing. In Cecilia the conjunction of extreme violence and her corporeality, of excruciating physicality and its contemplating consciousness - when given enough time to know for itself the trajectory it was tracing- produced music, produced song, lyric, rhyme; at the moment of closure she didn't make statements or talk but she *sang*.

Like the immediateness of the odour of saintliness, she released the vapour of aesthetics, she exhaled the all-forgiving and all-forgetting balm of that which unravels fear and regret, that which passes through the fortresses of inclement minds because it is not of the same plane of existence, is not aware of even the possibility of barriers. From little lips came the massive affirmation of the Lyrical as the incandescence of life, of the Musical as the turning point around which rotate all oppositions. I had forgotten the bare facts of this until I read the poem below by WH Auden, and then not only did I remember her, but that statue grew warm and began to hum quietly in echoes, and I reclaimed my memory of her as a measure of affirmation; that crevice at the back of her neck became the infinitely broad line where emptiness and disillusion become exultant; the repose of her body became loud passions extinguished in quiet melodies, and her hands in my mind turned from pointing out at the contemporary observer and his space, to forever signalling towards her words in song, drifting quietly and resolutely through the centuries.

Through the poem Auden imbues the statue with a light profundity that reflects its form perfectly; his poem draws lines which extend exactly from its creamy silhouettes, and spreads their presence through other dimensions and spaces in a movement which pulls Cecilia's story up into it and recomposes the poem, story and sculpture (for those who know all three) into an impression that reverberates around every mode of appreciation. But then of course the poem is glorious and fecund and better read rather than described. I am going back to Rome in a week, and I will not visit the church of Santa Cecilia of the singing lines in the London wet, I will instead re-read this English poem and remember my thoughts and the streets where we got lost, in the cold, on an unwitting pilgrimage to a relic, in a day, that held no significance until it found its form between the lines of 'Song for St.Cecilia's Day'.

Song for St. Cecilia's Day

WH Auden

I

In a garden shady this holy lady
With reverent cadence and subtle psalm,
Like a black swan as death came on
Poured forth her song in perfect calm:
And by ocean's margin this innocent virgin
Constructed an organ to enlarge her prayer,
And notes tremendous from her great engine
Thundered out on the Roman air.

Blonde Aphrodite rose up excited,
Moved to delight by the melody,
White as an orchid she rode quite naked
In an oyster shell on top of the sea;
At sounds so entrancing the angels dancing
Came out of their trance into time again,
And around the wicked in hell's abysses
The huge flame flickered and eased their pain.

*Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions
To all musicians, appear and inspire:
Translated daughter, come down and startle
Composing mortals with immortal fire.*

II

I cannot grow;
I have no shadow
To run away from,
I only play

I cannot err;
There is no creature
Whom I belong to,
Whom I could wrong.

I am defeat
When it knows it
Can now do nothing
By suffering.

All you lived through,
Dancing because you
No longer need it
For any deed.

I shall never be different. Love me.

III

O ear whose creatures cannot wish to fall,
O calm of spaces unafraid of weight,
Where Sorrow is herself, forgetting all
The gaucheness of her adolescent state,
Where Hope within the altogether strange
From every outworn image is released,
And Dread born whole and normal like a beast
Into a world of truths that never change:
Restore our fallen day; O re-arrange.

*O dear white children casual as birds,
Playing among the ruined languages,
So small beside their large confusing words,
So gay against the greater silences
Of dreadful things you did: O hang the head,
Impetuous child with the tremendous brain,
O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain,
Lost innocence who wished your lover dead,
Weep for the lives your wishes never led.*

O cry created as the bow of sin
Is drawn across our trembling violin.
O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain.
O law drummed out by hearts against the still
Long winter of our intellectual will.
That what has been may never be again.
O flute that throbs with the thanksgiving breath
Of convalescents on the shores of death.
O bless the freedom that you never chose.
O trumpets that unguarded children blow
About the fortress of their inner foe.
O wear your tribulation like a rose.