



Morandi, Bonnard, and Silences Within

By William Eaton

Maintenant; Ethel l'a compris . . . Now Ethel understood: it was the emotion of her great-uncle that was making her shiver. That such a tall and strong man was immobilized; it was because there was a secret in this house, a marvelous, dangerous, fragile secret; the least movement and everything will come to a halt. — J.M.G. Le Clézio, *Ritournelle de la faim* (Wm. Eaton translation)

1

The twentieth-century Italian painter Giorgio Morandi is best known for his paintings of old bottles, pitchers, and tin boxes. As a start I would propose that what matters most is these containers' unstinting emptiness.

At first, when one sees Morandi's work in a book or at an exhibition, one may well be struck by the choice of subject, by the simplicity and reverence of the forms, and by the fact that for 40 years or so, until his death in 1964 at the age of 73, Morandi, over and over again, painted, drew, and made engravings of these few objects, along with a few bowls, shells, vases, flowers, and landscapes which are most notable for the absence of human beings. (Their warmth is in the light and color; the occasional, flat side of a building may suggest a past presence of humans, who have since been removed, as if by the state.) In all there are about 1,500 oil paintings, 300 watercolors (a few of them among the most exquisite art works of the twentieth century), 150 engravings, and some number of drawings.

Image at top is of a Morandi drawing. The text of this essay published on the Zeteo website includes many illustrations besides this one. William Eaton is the Editor of Zeteo. A collection of his essays, Surviving the Twenty-first Century, will be published by Serving House Books in July, 2015.

A highly guarded, though hardly asocial person, Morandi did not make a lot of public statements about his work. In the one that is frequently quoted, he speaks, in Italian of course, about how in his work he was trying to reach into the depths, into the essences of things. A recent large survey of his work, at Rome's Complesso del Vittoriano, included, in addition, this translated quotation: "As Galileo recalled in his book of philosophy, the book of nature is written in characters that are not those of our alphabet. These characters are triangles, squares, circles, spheres, pyramids, cones and other geometrical figures."

Perhaps some art historians have made much of such comments because they're about all Morandi put in writing. It is hard, however, to see that his artworks—magical as they are—tell us much about "nature" or the objects we see. They tell us nothing, say, about glass bottles or tin boxes besides that they can be used to make beautiful artworks. Morandi's colors, even if often shades of gray, are elegant and evocative, but he might have read in Galileo's work that color, in Galileo's view, has nothing to do with the essences of things; "tastes, odors, colors, etc., . . . are nothing else than mere names".

2

Like a lot of European painters of his generation, Morandi was greatly influenced by Cézanne's landscapes. It is easy enough to say, and to see, that Morandi's idea of essences had—if not in his head, nonetheless on his canvases—less to do with Galileo and modern science and more to do with Cézanne's use of color and his imposition of geometry on his environment. (Or, if you prefer, it can be Cézanne's perception of the geometry in his environment.)

It is a commonplace that "emotional" people, people for whom feelings and relationships with other people are primary, are particularly attuned to the colors of objects. If asked to describe a light green tin, for example, they will first say that it is light green. More analytical people, people more interested in concepts and abstract relationships, are said to be more focused on geometry. They will see that the tin is cylindrical or "round" before they note (if ever) its light greenness. (And then are those like me—and we may be more numerous than is often realized. We are so enveloped in our projections and intuitions that a light green tin may be a square red wooden box, or such a box one day and a gray bottle the next.) More than a philosophy or approach, Cézanne and Morandi may have shared a great ability: to value simultaneously form and color—to see and reveal the primacy of both.

And when Morandi said that he was trying to reach into the depths, into the essences of things, might he have been trying to suggest, and no more than obliquely, that he was reaching into his own depths, to the essence of what he felt, what he had seen? Or, alternatively, in her aptly titled *Giorgio Morandi: The Art of Silence*, Janet Abramowicz, who in her youth took etching classes from Morandi and worked as his assistant, proposed that

Morandi's goal was to liberate the objects he painted from their everyday reality. He was, she says, uninterested in imitating nature or in describing the object per se. (We may note the thicket in which we find ourselves. Not only are one man's essences another's mere secondary qualities, but one man's, or woman's, perception of what matters *to another person* will vary based on the ever-evolving perspective of this secondary observer and the contexts in which her perceptions find words.)

Abramowicz quotes from the writer Giorgio Bassani, best known for his novel (become film) about fascist anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (The Garden of the Finzi-Continis). "The fear of reality, the terror," Bassani writes, "that's what those sweet flowers of Morandi are all about." And—zeroing in, we might say—Abramowicz quotes from another painter who had a large influence on Morandi: Giorgio de Chirico: "The purpose of perfecting technique is not for getting closer to the representation of the object, but, to the contrary, to detach it as far as possible, to make of it—its own object—a thing unto itself."

The French painter Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) wrote that painting is rarely concerned with painting what is near at hand. Quite the contrary, the artifices of painting have been developed in order to keep the world in the distance. Much more than of something in the here and now, a painting is of something that has already taken place, as it were in another world.

3

As I have said, Morandi was a highly guarded person, and I do not believe anyone has yet tried hard to get past the guards—past the fences of his dusty bottles and tins—to explore the essence, or essences, of his life. The bits I have accumulated over the years include the fact that he never married, instead living with his mother and his three sisters in an apartment in his hometown of Bologna. After visiting Morandi's bedroom-studio, the art historian John Rewald reported on the

dense, gray, velvety dust, like a soft coat of felt, its color and texture seemingly providing the unifying element for these tall bottles and deep bowls, old pitchers and coffeepots, quaint vases and tin boxes. It was not the result of negligence and untidiness but of patience, a witness to complete peace. In the stillness of his humble retreat from all the excitement of an agitated world, these everyday objects led their own, still life.

In 1915 Morandi joined the army, but, Abramowicz writes, "after less than a month and a half, he was hospitalized for severe depression and physical exhaustion," and he was discharged. He performed much better as a single-minded careerist, cultivating close relationships with leading Italian art critics and sculpting for public consumption a false image of himself as a solitary genius, detached both from the dynamic artistic movements of

the first half of the twentieth century and from the political and human disasters that Italy, Europe, and the world were struggling through. Nonetheless, perhaps the longest statement we have from Morandi is a very brief, 1928 autobiography in which he writes, *inter alia*: “Ebbi molta fede nel Fascismo fin dai primi accenni, fede che non mi venne mai meno, neppure nei giorni più grigi e tempestosi.” (The great faith I have had in Fascism from the outset has remained intact even in the darkest and stormiest days.)

A few lines from Stevie Smith’s great poem “I Do Not Speak”:

I do not ask for mercy for understanding for peace
 And in these heavy days I do not ask for release
 I do not ask that suffering shall cease. . . .

 I do not ask for anything I do not speak
 I do not question and I do not seek
 I used to in the day when I was weak.

 Now I am strong and lapped in sorrow . . .

4

Concurrently with the Morandi show in Rome, Paris and its tourists have been enjoying a yet larger exhibition of the patchwork quilts, we might try calling these paintings, that Bonnard painted in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. The art critic John Russell proposes, in the catalogue of an earlier Bonnard retrospective, that, like Morandi, Bonnard cleared his own path, oblivious to [or choosing or pretending to ignore?] the work of his contemporaries. A friend of mine observed that the obliviousness was, in fact, of another order; the show could make one feel that the first half of the twentieth century—with its two world wars, the Holocaust, the uprisings and suppressions of the working classes, the invention of the airplane, the discovery of penicillin—never happened. Like Morandi in his studio-bedroom with his bottles, so Bonnard with his domestic scenes and gardens, his bright yellows and greens, his model and eventual wife Marthe washing and rewashing herself or sleeping naked, legs spread, Bonnard sought, unrelentingly, to curtain himself from most everything else.

Although they comprise but one of the foci of Bonnard’s work, the paintings of Marthe nude—including some wonderful (which is not to say happy) paintings of her submerged in

a bathtub (see Credits section below)—have attracted the particular attention of the public and art critics. Once again there are many ways, perhaps an inexhaustible number of ways, that we could view this work. There is a sense in which Bonnard, deliberately out of step with his times, was ever reworking predecessors' works, and the Marthe at her *toilette* paintings recall Degas's similar series from the previous century. I have also read that Marthe was—or became, under the painter's constant gaze?—a difficult person and would spend long hours in the bathroom (in an attempt to have some privacy? or, a Tate museum website proposes, “she may have had tuberculosis, for which water therapy was a popular treatment, or she may have had an obsessive neurosis”). It has also been proposed that Bonnard decided that if the bathroom was where his model was hanging out, this is where he would paint.

My feeling is of a person, Bonnard, with a fixation. It could be that Marthe reprised for him some resonant, inescapable moment or relationship of his childhood, or it could be that his fixation was on Marthe herself, on watching her sponge the insides of her thighs (and this after he had had sex with her?). There is a painting of Bonnard's which was not in the show, but which is reproduced in the catalogue for the 1984 Centre Pompidou retrospective. *La Sieste* (the nap), is Bonnard's version of *Hermaphrodite endormi*, a much copied Roman sculpture on view in the Louvre. The painting shows Marthe naked and asleep on her stomach on a rumpled bed. Contributing curator Steven A. Nash's catalogue note remarks on Bonnard's way of evoking a masculine presence recently withdrawn from the scene. I am not sure, however, where this withdrawn presence can be seen, if it is not in the absence, in the painting, of the penis that the sculpture itself has, or in the dark cleft of Marthe's buttocks and at the top of her thighs. Perhaps the hermaphrodite in Bonnard's erotic work involves a uniting of painter and painted, Pierre and Marthe. It is hard not to conclude as well that Bonnard's particular fixation has a good deal to do with a woman seen naked, stripped of her privacy, *after* he has had in her some way, be it in sexual intercourse or as an artist rendering her for his artistic purposes.

5

So now in this penultimate section I will come back to Morandi, seeking, we might say, to reach into the depths. After I saw the Morandi shows and the Bonnard show, and I was trying to glean something from the catalogue of the Centre Pompidou show, the word or idea of incest came to my mind. Had there been some something in Bonnard's childhood that had led to his particular relation to and use of Marthe? Had there been something in Morandi's family? Sometimes his rows of seemingly empty containers look like fences or screens, to keep the world out. And Bonnard's work was in part inspired by, and has been compared to, Japanese screens. But Bonnard's work is also caught up with home and garden, domestic scenes, and sometimes Morandi paints or etches families of objects.

In one of my favorite pieces (reproduced at the top of this essay), readers might note the feminine forms of three of the items, behind which stands the rectangular box. And what are we to make of the partially open lid—as if, in a cartoon, the box were speaking or someone inside were peeking out. Morandi was a tall man, and this tall box with its partially open lid appears in many of his works.

In my life I have had two girlfriends about whom I eventually learned that, in childhood, they had been involved in incestuous relationships. One, perhaps starting when she was eleven or twelve, had been, let's say, visited in her bed and screwed, or made love to, by her somewhat older brother (who she greatly admired). The other had, until she was 8 years old, shared a bed with her father, while her mother slept alone in the master bedroom. Apparently father and daughter had not had sexual relations beyond affectionate touching and sleeping together (and such relations between mothers and fathers and their young children seem to have become rather common, though this fact of the other parent sleeping alone nearby may remain rare).

I repeat the title of Abramowicz's book: *Giorgio Morandi: The Art of Silence*. Both of my two girlfriends were painfully shy and taciturn, and the explanation for this seemed obvious. Incest is taboo. People engaged in incestuous relationships are not supposed to speak about them and may live afraid that most anything that leaks out may allow others to find out the truth about them and their depravity or violation. This may cause them to be mocked or scorned; but, worse, if the truth gets out, they may have to confront it, confronting either the roots of their own desires or how they have been used by, caught up in, the egoism of the very people they have most admired and depended on.

A French phrase from the subway, long ago—"les mutilés de la guerre"; veterans, mutilated in the never-ending battle of my interests and yours. And I might propose that all our voices have been silenced or deformed to some extent and in various ways by how we have been used by others, as well as by the glimpses we have had of the depths of our desires. I have also drafted, but left to ripen, other sentences about how the concepts and equations of philosophers and scientists, Galileo included, may be seen, from one perspective, as being like Morandi's bottles and tins (and like my own). Concepts, equations, and essays can act as fences, increasing our security or our sense of it, but at some cost to our capacity to see, understand, accept ourselves for who we are, what we have been and might be.

6

I do not wish to assert something about Morandi's family, about which I know next to nothing. Nor do I wish to ignore the failure and shame of Italy's descent into fascism or many another personal or political event which might lead to a fear of reality (in Bassani's phrase). Unlike Bonnard, Morandi did not leave behind unhappy self-portraits. Was this

because his suffering or capacity for empathy was less, or because his suffering was less existential, all-encompassing—or simply much better hidden? (And thus more resounding.)

I would certainly not ignore the elegance and reverence of Morandi's work. A refusal to be soiled or to have been soiled. A refusal repeated over and over again decade after decade as he painted and repainted his empty containers and slept in a single bed next to where these containers waited, gathering dust.

Many of Bonnard's paintings of Marthe nude involve mirrors. We may see her only as reflected in a mirror, or—for example, in the case of one of the most famous paintings, *Nu à contre-jour* (or *Le Cabinet de toilette au canapé rose* or *L'Eau du Cologne*), we see Marthe both unmirrored and mirrored, and not the same in the two views. Mirrors, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposed, magically change things into performances, performances into things, me into another and another into me. I have also read Russell's assertion that Bonnard was one of the most intelligent people ever to touch a paintbrush. A brilliant student at elite schools, he earned a law degree before turning 21 and seemed ideally prepared to follow in the footsteps of his father, an administrator in the war ministry. We may ask why, instead, he became a largely wordless painter, and we may be impressed by his datebook in which Bonnard writes only one word per day, a word about the weather—*beau*, *nuageux* (cloudy). Accompanying these single words is a small sketch, often of Marthe naked. Elsewhere Bonnard made longer notes, to include about how the act of painting kept the object (or subject) of the painting at a distance and « me protège de tout contact immédiat avec lui » (protects me from all immediate contact with the subject). But, on the other hand, he says, the attention he was paying, as an artist, physically plunged him « au cœur du visible » (into the heart of the visible), suppressing the distance between him and his subject.

Particularly during the heyday and collapse of Mussolini and Italian fascism, Morandi was—certainly more than a political partisan, and perhaps, at that time, more than a painter—a master engraver and a professor of printmaking at the University of Bologna. He has been rightfully called one of the greatest printmakers of the twentieth century. It could be said that we do not see a printmaker's work, but only the reflection, the print, of it. At the show at the Complesso del Vittoriano, and, concurrently, in a smaller exposition at Rome's Istituto Centrale per la Grafica, some of Morandi's prints were exhibited in tandem with the copper or zinc plates from which they had been made. Unpolished zinc is not shiny, but dull, a kind of gunmetal gray, and the work of the etcher can be hard to make out. But copper is resplendent, glorious, and I could not help but feel that the gray reproductions, however elegant, that had been made from these plates were at best shadows of the real work, and of the real emotion, of the artist. It is also the case that in engraving darkness is produced by an increasingly dense cross-hatching; the greatest light appears in those areas where the artist has made no mark at all and his silence is left to speak for him, and loudly, brightly, but without the least detail.

Credits & Links

J.M.G. Le Clézio, *Ritournelle de la faim* (Gallimard, 2008). I do not believe this novel has yet been translated into English. The title could be rendered as Hunger Variations.

“Giorgio Morandi 1890-1964,” curated by Maria Cristina Bandera. Complesso del Vittoriano, Rome. 28 February to 21 June 2015. Previously, in 2008, Bandera, Director of the Fondazione Roberto Longhi in Florence, curated, along with Renato Miracco, the New York Metropolitan Museum’s show “Giorgio Morandi, 1890–1964.”

Bonnard (Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984). In addition to reproductions of the paintings and of daily calendar entries (word + sketch), segments particularly useful for the present essay were: notes on individual paintings, many of them by Steven A. Nash; John Russell’s Introduction; and Nash’s



discussion of some of the older artworks that served as models for Bonnard. My copy of the book is in French, but I presume that Nash’s and Russell’s contributions were written in English. I have avoided putting quotation marks around my translations back into English of the French translations in the Centre Pompidou’s catalogue. Bonnard’s observations about painting being rarely concerned with what is near at hand and about how painting does and does not keep the subject at a distance—these are my glosses of Bonnard’s notes in French, which appear on page 19 of *Bonnard*.

The translated words from Galileo’s *Il Saggiatore* are as quoted in E.A. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (Dover, 2003). Reprint of second, revised edition which was first published in 1932, following up on the publication of the first edition in 1924. The whole passage:

I think that these tastes, odors, colors, etc., on the side of the object in which they seem to exist are nothing else than mere names, but hold their residence solely in the sensitive body; so that if the animal [e.g. the artist or museumgoer] were removed, every such quality would be abolished and annihilated. Nevertheless, as soon as we have imposed names on them, particular and different from those of the other primary and real accidents [number, weight, configuration, and velocity], we induce ourselves to believe that they also exist just as truly and really as the latter.

Janet Abramowicz, [*Giorgio Morandi: The Art of Silence*](#). Yale University Press, 2005. In a [*review of the book for The Brooklyn Rail*](#), Eyal Danieli writes: “[O]ne cannot help but wonder if the Morandi myth was created to hide or obscure personal details or issues that may have proved more explosive and interesting than his Fascist connections.”

Stevie Smith, [*I Do Not Speak*](#).

Giorgio Morandi, “Autobiografia,” *L’Assalto*, Bologna, December 31, 1928.

Giorgio De Chirico, “Il ritorno al mestiere,” *Valori Plastici* I, no. 11-12 (November-December 1919): 15-19; cited in Fossati, *Valori Plastici*, 42. Original Italian: “Il perfezionamento tecnico non ha la scopo di avvicinare la rappresentazione all’oggetto, ma al contrario distaccarla sempre di più, per farne una cosa a sè.”

“Pierre Bonnard, Painting Arcadia,” curated by Guy Cogeval and Isabelle Cahn. Musée d’Orsay, Paris. The show is slated to be at the Mapfre Foundation in Madrid from 10 September 2015 to 6 January 2016, and at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco from 6 February to 15 May 2016. Cahn’s [*Album of the Exhibition*](#) may be ordered online from the Musée d’Orsay. *N.B.*: I have left out of the story of Bonnard’s paintings of Marthe in the bath the fact that Bonnard began this series in the wake, not only of his marriage to Marthe, but also of the suicide of another woman in his life, Renée Monchaty, whose suicide seems to have been inspired by the marriage. One reading of Bonnard’s work is that he did not let unhappiness—his mistresses’ or his own—darken his *joie de vivre* or the happiness of his colors. Another reading, closer to my own, is, for example, that his bodies floating in the bath (and at times headless) are, in a sense, corpses. And, I would say, or say again, that Bonnard’s bright colors may serve, above all, to hide his darknesses, as well as our own. Readers of French might see [*Musée d’Orsay : la face cachée de Bonnard*](#), by Marie-Anne Kleiber, *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 15 mai 2015.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “L’œil et l’esprit” (Eye and Mind), 1960. In 1993, Northwestern University Press published [an English translation of the essay](#) in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, edited by Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith. N.B.: Link may not be to the Northwestern edition and translation.

“Morandi in Calcografia,” curated by Fabio Fiorani and Ginevra Mariani. La collezione di matrici dell’Istituto Centrale per la Grafica, Rome. 9 June to 31 July 2015. [Catalogue published by Campisano Editore](#), 2015.

This would seem to be my season for writing about connections between incest and art, and in France and Italy in particular. See the earlier [Divine Wisdom \(and of course emotions\)](#), about the movie *La Sapienza*.

See also, [The Unsaid](#), *Agni*, 2014, and, perhaps, [The silence at the end of the tunnel](#), *Zeteo is Reading*, 2014.