

Gradus Ad Parnassum

for David Campbell

Over a tabasco sandwich, with black coffee
and a number of cigarettes ('one of my breakfasts')
I've been rereading a poem about *The Shipwreck
of the Heart*, or some such—the title isn't important,
only, of course, the Image—by the well-known
Russian revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.
This he wrote immediately before indulging
in the uncharacteristic excess of suicide;
the poem, perhaps because of this, is peculiarly flabby
for this normally vigorous author, is, how shall I put it,
sentimental.

Of course he never had a chance to revise it.
So, having nothing better to do at the moment,
and in accordance
with my (borrowed) idea that we're all one writer
and ought, in any case, to do one another justice,
I thought I might have a go at it
on his behalf. I like to think he wouldn't mind,
though he did once call Dante and Petrarch tongue-tied.

One way of approaching it would be what I'd call the Arnoldian
(cf. *The Scholar-Gypsy*)—the extended thalassic metaphor,
the tang of myth, the vague yearning (perhaps tristesse
is more or less the word) after something or other indefinable.
But it would be hard not to be woolly
Seferis could get away with that sort of thing; but he's a Greek,
in this, as in other lines of business, an advantage.
I don't think it'll do.

Or perhaps something after the manner of Rimbaud,
Le Bateau Ivre, say. It's been done, I grant you
—there's a new Rimbaud every week or so—but it does offer
both astringency and lots of freedom. It's tempting;
and I could invoke Hoffmansthal too, and his incredible boat
'with enormous yellow sails', the ideal dreamscape property
if ever there was one.

Except Rimbaud never had to face
that particular situation; it was always poor Verlaine
who copped it—court cases, absinthe, all very sordid—
and his style,
I'm sure of it, would be worse than useless.

A good line (ironic distancing) would be the cheerfully morbid
surrealist—black comedy, kitsch, *fantastically* rich
imagery—the sort of thing David Campbell does so well
in his latest book. I mean, you could have these merchants,

whores, and sailors gaping on this picturesque waterfront
as this bloody great red, pulsating thing comes in
beating past the headlands, with Joe the little cabin boy
sticking his head out of the aorta to be sick.
And then Whoompf! the reef, and Squelch! the blood,
with the sun opportunely setting. I mean, it's powerful ...
but just a little ... heavy-handed? And critics seem to think
that's all passé. Dr Tiptoes
wouldn't take it seriously. You can't win.

Or, again, the nebulously cosmic: a giant uvula
suddenly becoming discernible on the skyline—
shades of Fenrir at Ragnarok—
teeth poking through the clouds, a crunching sound,
end, but *end*, of poem. But I've done very similar things
myself, earlier on. I don't want to end up in self-parody,
I know too many critics. And I've been a little unkind
myself, perhaps, on occasion. It would hardly be politic.

And the groovier modern Americans? They seem to be
the context
I'm supposed to work in, though I mostly haven't read them.
But their thing about the quotidian, and the earth,
and the immanence of the tremendous in just about everything—
what kind of immanence is left for something tremendous?
Like an extravagant outsized Russian
about to do himself in, shat with love and the party?
What has that to do with the grass? Tenochtitlan?
Cotton Mather
or your friend and fellow-poet who happened to drop in?

..... and one is left, it seems to me, with the techniques
and words
of Vladimir Mayakovsky, who wrote this poem,
The Shipwreck of the Heart or whatever, just before
shooting himself, if I remember rightly.
I'm not sure that it's much of a poem
but it'll have to do. I'm thirsty to start with
and the pubs have opened, and besides I think deep down
I'm hoping
that someone will try to pinch *my* poems, and much good
may it do them: each one the precise, the only possible
delineation of a complex of thinking and feeling;
the explanation of each poem
precisely the poem itself.
Sometimes it's hard to repress a snigger. Still, a beer
and buy the papers and some more tabasco
and maybe another bash at Mayakovsky