

Diversifications

Also by Augustus Young:

The Nicotine Cat and Other People

(Duras Press / New Island Books, 2009)

The Secret Gloss. A Film Play on the Life and Work

of Søren Kierkegaard (Elliott & Thompson, 2008)

Take Five 07. Translations (Shoestring Press, 2007)

Storytime (Elliott & Thompson, 2005)

Light Years (London Magazine Editions / The Menard Press, 2002)

Days & Nights in Hendon (The Menard Press, 2002)

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(Cranagh Press, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 2000)

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Dánta Grádha. Love Poems from the Irish (AD 1350–1750)

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On Loaning Hill (New Writers' Press, 1972)

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AUGUSTUS YOUNG

Diversifications
Mayakovsky, Brecht and Me

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INTRODUCTION

‘All mankind is one author . . . When one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language . . . some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice . . . for that library where every book lies open to one another.’

John Donne, Meditation XVII, 1624

No poet is an island. Making poetry is a matter of promontories. Imitating fellow practitioners is the sterile one. The fertile promontory is engagement with poets who seem to offer a jetty. I was drawn in the nineteen seventies to Mayakovsky’s ‘A Cloud in Pants’ (1915) and to Brecht’s poems about the politics of work and intimacy.

Translation is one poet’s attempt to understand another. I poured over Mayakovsky’s dramatisation of himself in the face of an unresponsive world. The layout of the verse was a contour map of despair, and the words a stage on which he strutted his failed negotiations with life and love. Thanks to literal translations in French and English, I got to know the substance of what could be a four-act play, but the poetry in its shadows eluded me.

In the mid-nineteen-nineties I resumed my quest to make the poem come alive in English. This time I threw caution to the wind and entered Mayakovsky’s world like a method school actor. I was tracing its meaning and significance with bare hands, feeling for its shape and sharpnesses. I completed my version in a few weeks. It called for liberties. I used late twentieth century management-speak to update the bureaucratic terminology. Though I rhymed like the original, the schema is more haphazard. The topography is not the same. I found the weight of words in English demanded a different presentation.

The full range of Brecht’s poetry only became apparent in the late nineteen seventies. I made versions of them, and diversified into a one-sided collaboration. A Brecht poem triggered a response. Sometimes this was in the style of Brecht

rather than involving an adaptation of a particular poem. For example, I had the nerve to think that the poem Brecht wrote on the suicide of Walter Benjamin did not do justice to their friendship, and worked out one of my own by drawing from Mayakovsky. My more conventional Brecht translations have been published in *Take Five 07* (Shoestring Press, 2007).

Promontory hopping has become an integral part of my own poems. At sixty I moved to France where I had to learn to live with a new language. My mainland expanded to include French poets, particularly Baudelaire and Verlaine. Poets of mortality. Which was something I had to face. So I wrote 'The Long Habit of Living'.

A CLOUD IN PANTS: A TETRPTYCH

After Vladimir Mayakovsky's
Oblako v Shtanakh (1915)

Prologue

Your stuffy notions
sit on a spongy brain pan
like a puffed up timeserver
on a standing committee
that never stands
except on ceremony.

The ego lands!
And it is me.

Big shots,
I promise to embolise
your expense-account complacency
with a clot from the infarctions
of a broken heart,
and to sate
brash youthful
disregard when gangrene
sets in.

I won't wait
for grey hairs
and worldly cares
to soften my views.

I'll melt down
the chairman's iron bottom
with a poker, sizzling
spit.

A direct hit,
disordering his points
with out-of-order
interventions.

I'll solder
his seat to the throne
of supreme deference—
a metal chamber pot
steaming with terms of reference,
previous minutes and what not.

I'll walk around the plush
boardroom shouting 'enough'
with the shrill *ennui*
of an impossible young man
of twenty two.

I won't wait
for grey hairs
and worldly cares
to soften my views
(‘How would you behave
if you were in my shoes?’).

Sophisticates
play their love on a violin.
For yobbos a drum will do.
They like to bang.

But who,
except me, can turn him-
self inside out into
a pair of lips
spitting out pips?

You, upper echelons
of bemedalled bureaucrats,
learn this lesson—
the lisping Party hack

in his Party hat
should know
that the doily
on a headrest
soils easily.

Best
not to lie back
unless you want to trace
a negative Veronica
on the cambric—a blank
surface rather than a face.

Learn too not to blab your lips
like a cook finger-tipping
through a gourmet
manual—

globs of saliva
will smudge the print.
(Isn't it
awful
what can go wrong between
the recipe and the dinner,
the Black Cap and the guillotine?)

Let me pull
a grimace like the winner
of the Raw Meat Steak
competition.

Or if you'd rather
I'll go all soggy
like a sunset
distempering night's shroud.
No longer a man with a mission,
something wet

and tender
—a cloud in pants.

Forget this—
(the scene of the crime
is a beauty spot,
more often than not).
The idyllic does not exist.

I sing instead
men as crumpled hospital beds
and women as clichés.
The world of faeces.

Part 1: Down With You Love (1)

Put it down to swamp-fever.

It happened.

In Odessa. It happened.

'I'll see you at four', Maria promised.

Eight.

Nine.

Ten.

The evening light
turns its back on the window
and desponges me
into the porous damp
of a December night

(giving the giddy
chandeliers
something
to giggle
at).

You wouldn't recognise
the tortured mass
that is me,
 this
hunched hulk
of shivering
sinews.

What could this
hairy mammal desire—
to be cast in bronze,
or to have its heart cased in railings?

No. Only
to sink
his clanging
bell
into
 womanly
 softness.

Too gross
for delicate emotion,
I obscure the window
with tumescent bulk,
my midnight shadow
scratching the glass.

Larger than life, if life be large.

Love me, love me not.
I pull the short straw.
Big love, small love?
I take it on the chin.
Small is the most
I can hope for—
a tremulous little love,
a shrinking violet
wringing her gloves
at the slightest thing.
Terrified of traffic,
a hoof or a horn
puts her in a spin.

Though the ping
of a tram in the night
delights this
tiny little thing
who'll be crushed
by my clumsiness.

The city is awash
with the splash from tyres
screaming through the streets.
I see in craters,
pooling the rain,
my own mashed features.
And drink.
And wait.

Midnight.

Mad axe man
on the loose.
Cut him down, chop him up.

At the stroke of twelve
a head rolls from the block.

On the windowpane
clusters of raindrops
swivel themselves
into the grin
of a Notre Dame
gargoyle and shriek.

Curse you!
Are you happy?
Screams are about
to force open my clenched jaws.

I hear
a spring
softly released.
Something like a
sick man creeping
out of bed. It is a nerve,
tottering at first,
soon scampering
around till it twitches
into a spasm,
running on the spot,
an agitated dance
splintering the boards.

The floor caves in.

Nerves!
every shape and size,
more than enough of them,
worm into action, knit
and knot like loony noodles
until their knees
snap,
 give way
 to a mesh.

Night seeps into the room.
Eyes smart with the fumes.
There is no escaping
the slime of the moment.
The door rattles like death
in the teeth of the hotel.

And you swan in
mauling your suede

gloves. 'Take it, or leave it.
You might as well know,
I'm getting married.'

'Have it your own way.'
(Take it or leave it.)
Can't you see I'm calm?
(I can take it.)
I am the pulse
of a dead man.

How you loved to talk,
quoting Jack London.
'Love and passion,
blood and money.'
You settled for gold
in the last resort.

My Mona Lisa
stolen before my eyes
from my personal Louvre.

I should have guessed
a Gioconda
has got to be stolen.

I'll gamble on mistresses
of Old Masters again,
with fevered brow.
Sure, tramps
often find refuge
in a ruin.

I will stake all
on a foregone conclusion.