Poems

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Abstract
GERICAULT'S SHIPWRECK, SOUTH TO SOUTH, PASSAGES

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GERICAULT'S SHIPWRECK

Before classically he had done the portraits of fine mares
Held in meadows, flowergirls, Napoleon's feathers;
But then news of an uneasy scandal, legally suppressed,
Exposed by journalists, human muck washed in;
Three hundred low citizens lost when not one need have been,
And the captain by Louis restored...got only three years;
Two in the making the canvas for which Paris and London queued
Had the Governor (Schmaltz his name) at last recalled
From Senegal with his cargo of Gambian gum and cotton; cheap cotton.
For this propaganda piece the painter changed his way
And in the end, his red locks shaven, sacrificed even his life;
At what he found he went insane - men ingesting down
Their own waste, their water, one another: meat.
Uncovered his own country's necrophile state: the poverty
Of a beaten kingdom, bad Paris, plague, demented at last.
An awful death, tugged in the stirrup of his mount.
For the Salon of 1819 this monstrous raft all knew about
Had to be admitted. Title: 'Scene of Shipwreck' -
The livid panorama of the expose of the log of the disgrace,
The survivors themselves recognisable therein;
The erotics of hope, that rush of suppressed narrative
The censor may not always stop: the truly, utterly appalling.
First note the absence: no Marianne in this glazed, stripped bustle
Breasting the flood in frank, financial gauze.
Rather these are her colonists: branded convicts, veterans of Waterloo
Under what Henze at least calls a 'black sun' and Barnes
Agrees are fatal conditions: time exonerates injustice
He wishes; but the point is art should not, ever:
Nor does the sea's cruelty excuse bloody fraternal inefficiency:
Like so much else, he sees no negroes there as indictment -
But four are clearly in view, their confessions and their bodies
Of bitumen too raw for even the English to champion;
Rollers should swallow, ragged teeth clench, breakers enfold, disperse.
Starring Jean-Charles as the pyramid's pride,
From a model sharing his dish: strip, reach, stretch, wave rags -
Their mascot - sinking on their bony shoulders as...
Their rescuer sails on - the speck most studied in Western perspective -
And this is his unstopped story dictated in pain:
‘I, Jean-Charles, slave, am manumitted from my chains
By my old Good Emperor... by my new Bad King
I, Jean-Charles, because now I need payment cannot find work:
Expelled like others of my “Afflicted Race”
(The phrase is Wordsworth’s who admired their ‘tropic fire’)... ‘I, Jean-Charles, as I am unemployed, am sent from my motherland
In whose pastures I passed the buffed stud in his martingale
(For M. Géricault no less), wore a hat of feathers too,
Walked the vendeuses in their and my pinpoint embroidery, heard opera;
A groom of such class, loving and loyal... am now banished;
Light and adroit so they hoist me... their Toussaint, their bright boy,
And they have become my (forbidden word) – my camarades.
At the settlement of Saint-Louis in Africa, where I had never set foot,
My task was to be teaching other blacks to comport like me,
Sufficient numbers and alphabet, how to reap and not retain their crop;
Thus at the fringe would I perpetuate what the metropole forbids,
Where may enjoy the capital none but the fruits of its hypocrisy.’
(This moral Wordsworth, Henze and of course Barnes miss... )
‘But young Jean-Louis-André-Theodore, called Géricault,
As he explains to me once and for all as I strain, reach, freeze,
Intends to show them.’ Soon died of exposure ashore...
And here the limit of art must be: for verisimilitude
This painter studied fresh cadavers, stole rotten limbs:
The nude of the dead lad sliding into gilt
Lay this way draped on the slab, groaning back... starved;
Fiery young Delacroix, further to advance this new, committed programme;
And thus he stacked an unimaginable tilted rush
– A salver of those cast-off – discharged into the deep;
The abandoned, drawn from life, breaking frame, unforgettable.
‘O brothers in law’ (the message should be) ‘if you can’t eat cake
Eat shit... suitable deaths of hunks on such perilous hulks
Keep all ranks insecure, o liberty! o ineffable disaster!
Lick the heaving turds from between my cheeks, ah!
My head I laugh off: divide and devour, abolish all famine,
My only friend!’ (quote from His Majesty at the private showing).
Meduse... the rusty jelly sucks at, serpents strike at,
Stone stares... a raft of untying fretwork, flotsam
For the whole Atlantic to gorge, as it has engorged millions,
And not to enclose again without records kept.
SOUTH TO SOUTH

Ai ai ai, the pampas and the Great Karoo,
the rodeo in Montevideo and the grapes in the Cape,
the Great Kuiseb and the roaring River Plate,
you say the Atlantic between should be no obstacle,
by latitude we are sisters, right, after all,
and haven’t we both just emerged from such family dishonour?
Ai ai ai, our ancestry and southern flare,
beneath all the posters and the platitudes,
settlers who fled wars and ought to depend no longer
on the great coat-racks of New York and Madrid,
we’re connected bimonthly by Varig or SAA
from apartheid to Antarctica non-stop.
And look what we exchange for our mutual use: small arms,
bully-beef, interrogators, frozen deep-sea fish.
Ai ai ai, the tangos and the mangoes I can’t miss;
I promise you I’ll visit, on one condition:
you visit first.
PASSAGES

While I was writing the below:

the soul of a racing driver flushed out of
his red helmet on an S-bend
like a speck of excrement;
the procession to the shrine on the cliff-edge
reached the ruins of Spain
tumbled over;
twice I stood, cleaned my nib,
threw the scrap out, returned to the process.

There’s no going back now.

My country finally for the first time
in most of the people’s memory
changed its government
to great applause, tears and thanksgiving,
which I have seen on TV
with other events almost given up on:
exhumed Jews, murdered children,
bodies of partisans tumbled in ditches,
the tribesmen in lakes and fridges
or a speck under the palace floor.

While writing this I did hold back time,
but could not stop or reverse it –
in that sense life is not the news –
and I have been bumped on to change;

and you have been changed too,
reading the above.