

Vladimir Mayakovsky, “An Extraordinary Adventure”

An Extraordinary Adventure Which Befell Vladimir Mayakovsky In A Summer Cottage

As a holiday offering, I sent one of my favorite poems virtually without commentary. Mayakovsky’s narrative poem displays the exact reverse of Wordsworth’s sense of a poetic order: “We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;/ But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.” “An Extraordinary Adventure” begins in despondency and even madness, and ends in gladness.

Just a note on context. Vladimir Mayakovsky was one of the greatest of twentieth century poets. A Russian who wrote during the modernist period, his first important book was published in 1915. He died (well, he did end up in despondency and madness, committing suicide) in 1930.

After the Russian Revolution he worked for the Russian State Telegraph Agency (ROSTA, which is referred to in the poem) designing posters – both the art and the text. That’s where the poem starts, with Mayakovsky in a summer cottage in Pushkino¹, 20 miles outside of Moscow, in July, working on posters every day. He’s angry that he is stuck with poster assignments which have to be completed in what he thinks is a dump where nothing goes on except that the sun comes up in the morning and goes down in the evening, seemingly descending into a “pit” on the western side of the village. He’s so angry at his situation, “flying into such a rage one day,” that he curses the sun as a “shiftless lump.” And then – well, read the story for yourself.

I’d suggest, after you’ve read it, that you read it aloud. Its energy, a vast comic energy, is best encountered that way. Mayakovsky was, like Dylan Thomas, a great public reader of his own verse, and this poem is dramatic. And it has a fabulous ending, which I wrote to my readers could properly serve as my wish to them for the New Year. . . . well, as I said, read it for yourself.

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Vladimir Mayakovsky

A hundred and forty suns in one sunset blazed,
and summer rolled into July;
it was so hot,
the heat swam in a haze—

¹ You can see an aerial view of Pushkino and Akula Mount by typing “Akulovskaya-Mount” into Google.

and this was in the country.
Pushkino, a hillock, had for hump
Akula, a large hill,
and at the hill's foot
a village stood—
crooked with the crust of roofs.
Beyond the village
gaped a hole
and into that hole, most likely,
the sun sank down each time,
faithfully and slowly.
And next morning,
to flood the world
anew,
the sun would rise all scarlet.
Day after day
this very thing
began
to rouse in me
great anger.
And flying into such a rage one day
that all things paled with fear,
I yelled at the sun point-blank:
“Get down!
Stop crawling into that hellhole!”
At the sun I yelled:
“You shiftless lump!
You're caressed by the clouds,
while here—winter and summer—
I must sit and draw these posters!”
I yelled at the sun again:
“Wait now!
Listen, goldbrow,
instead of going down,
why not come down to tea
with me!”
What have I done!
I'm finished!
Toward me, of his own good will,
himself,
spreading his beaming steps,

the sun strode across the field.
I tried to hide my fear,
and beat it backwards.
His eyes were in the garden now.
Then he passed through the garden.
His sun's mass pressing
through the windows,
doors,
and crannies;
in he rolled;
drawing a breath,
he spoke deep bass:
"For the first time since creation,
I drive the fires back.
You called me?
Give me tea, poet,
spread out, spread out the jam!"
Tears gathered in my eyes—
the heat was maddening,
but pointing to the samovar
I said to him:
"Well, sit down then,
luminary!"
The devil had prompted my insolence
to shout at him,
confused—
I sat on the edge of a bench;
I was afraid of worse!
But, from the sun, a strange radiance
streamed,
and forgetting
all formalities,
I sat chatting
with the luminary more freely.
Of this
and that I talked,
and of how I was swallowed up by Rosta,
but the sun, he says:
All right,
don't worry,
look at things more simply!

And do you think
I find it easy
to shine?
Just try it, if you will!—
You move along,
since move you must;
you move—and shine your eyes out!”
We gossiped thus till dark—
Till former night, I mean.
For what darkness was there here?
We warmed up
to each other
and very soon,
openly displaying friendship,
I slapped him on the back.
The sun responded!
“You and I,
my comrade, are quite a pair!
Let’s go, my poet,
let’s dawn
and sing
in a gray tattered world.
I shall pour forth my sun,
and you—your own,
in verse.”
A wall of shadows,
a jail of nights
fell under the double-barreled suns.
A commotion of verse and light—
shine all your worth!
Drowsy and dull,
one tired,
wanting to stretch out
for the night.
Suddenly—I
shone in all my might,
and morning ran its round.
Always to shine,
to shine everywhere,
to the very deeps of the last days,
to shine—

and to hell with everything else!
That is my motto—
and the sun's!

[trans. from the Russian by Max Hayward and George Reavey]