

Catherine Chandler

Da capo: On a Sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Grow not too high, grow not too far from home,
Green tree (she wrote). For, once upon a time
No one in their right mind would pen a poem
In (heaven help us!) form or (worse yet!) rhyme.
Still, Vincent rarely strayed in her desire
To touch hearts with each memorable line,
Sparked by the music and the metric fire
Of mathematic, luminous design.
But history has not been kind to those
Who would defy the mighty powers that be;
Who won't subscribe to lacerated prose
(Those artful vestiges of poetry);
Who want no part of literary fraud
To gladden a discriminating god.

To gladden a discriminating god,
Even-handedness began to shift —
Old troubadours were given shortest shrift,
Convicted, ranged before the firing squad.
Although the choice of weapons may seem odd,
The pen was lethal, unforgiving, swift,
Implacable with those whose outlawed gift
Might be the singing of a sweet ballade.
No buzz, no brouhaha, no hue and cry,
No underground resistance to the goons;
And so they went too far, they went too high,
Establishing new phases to new moons.
For now the cutting-edge would reign supreme
Upon the order of the new regime.

Upon the order of the new regime
Of self-appointed arbiters, a cure
Was desperately needed to obscure
The light of harmony; and so the team
Contrived and carried out a devious scheme —
A metaphoric conflagration — sure
Steadfast recalcitrants could not endure
A bonfire in the groves of Academe.
But there are ancient roots that will outlast
The brutal tactics of the biblioclast:
New shoots remembered where the stems were charred,
Inspiring the evicted to return
To take a stand against the avant-garde
No one dared banish, blame, belittle, burn.

No one dares banish, blame, belittle, burn
The trusty postman striding up the walk
The same time every day; or overturn
The rhythmic signatures of J.S. Bach;
Or call the crickets' cadence poppycock.
When Larkin, Clare and Hopkins write of spring
In fine, melodious meters, it is schlock?
Is Yeats's sailing poem a paltry thing?
And when you hear a song you used to sing
And dance to with your high school sweetheart, can
You stop your ears against its savaging
Because its words are too pedestrian?
Because it moves in step with every heart?
Because the pundits banned this brand of art?

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Because the pundits panned this brand of art
Just once too often, one fine day I sat
Down at my desk and slowly fell apart.
They'd spoken loud and clear. So much for that.
So I was paid to answer phones and type.
I had no time to sit around and sulk
Because I'd failed to underwrite the hype
Surrounding babel ballyhooed in bulk.
I hid my liking for the likes of Frost;
In secret hummed the music of Millay.
My own bare craft, plain-sailing, trim, un-glossed,
Would sit in dry dock till another day.
Another decade. Then a decade more.
My manifest lay dusty in a drawer.

My manifest lay dusty in a drawer
Beneath a pile of socks without a twin;
And there were papers in a rusty tin
That once held bonbons from the candy store.
These scribblings showed intentions to explore
A looser life — I'd banished Yang and Yin,
Swapped sustenance for shaky gelatin,
And music for a syncopated score.
I'd navel-gazed, dragged beauty down along
With truth, performing literary pranks
That earned me publication, the hooray
Of cognoscenti whom I felt were wrong.
So I rejoined the ever-dwindling ranks
Of sonneteers denounced as démodé.

Should sonneteers, denounced as démodé,
Feel confident that beauty will win out,
Or wait for a complete and utter rout
Resulting from a new auto-da-fé?
How long the current truce may last defies
Conjecture. In a not-too-distant age,
Imagine Vincent's sonnet on a page . . .
As surfers moan and roll their blinkered eyes,
They snicker at "be bare"; they scream *Old fart!*
They diss the silver spire and golden dome.
The stellar couplet's riddle draws a blank
[The key's not in the *Star Wars* Databank].
It's in the fusion, in the heart-to-heart
Grown not too high, grown not too far from home.

[Note: The Millay poem is "Sonnet" from *The Buck in the Snow and Other Poems*]