

For things do not seem the same  
to those who love  
and those who hate.

– Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*

## **Impromptus: No. 6**

Tourists, as Jean-Paul Sartre might have said, are other people. William Wordsworth certainly thought so, and wrote a poem about it: *On Seeing some Tourists of the Lakes Pass by Reading; a Practice Very Common*.

What waste in the labour of chariot and steed!  
For this ye came hither? Is this your delight?  
There are twenty-four letters, and those ye can read;  
But Nature's ten thousand are blanks in your sight.  
Then throw by your books, and the study begin;  
or sleep, and be blameless, and wake at your inn.

How dare tourists come to Wordsworth's beloved lakes and pass them by, oblivious to their beauty and the 'book of Nature'? Are they blind? Have they no feelings? Wordsworth, at least, is convinced of their turpitude.

I know what he means. Except what drives me mad are not people reading books, it's the ones with the digital cameras. I sit on the harbour wall overlooking a little bay in the Irish Sea, feeling rather poetic myself. At one with the Universe, watching gulls crying against the wind, the hush of waves against the shore – that sort of thing – when some tourists of my own suddenly mar the scene. Eye glued to camera. Click. Click. Stand there – click. No, here – click. Are they senseless? Are they blind? Can't they take the feel for the place home with them? Click, click, click. Philistines.

The clicking stops. The man and woman stop, try different angles with the camera. A rainbow arches across the bay, thick, bold, brighter than gold. And then another; two rainbows, one above the other, illuminating sea and sky, the islands in the distance and the hills behind us. It just won't fit into the little electric eye, so they give up. Just stand there, very still, and look. And look, and look. Rain sweeps in from the horizon, onto the esplanade. The couple button up their coats, and run for cover.

Tourists are other people, until they stop acting like tourists. What would Wordsworth have made of it?

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky

His tourists, and 'mine', may not have put it like that. They may have just said: Cool!

Wordsworth was cross (let's call things by their name) because the

tourists refused to see what he saw: 'Nature's beauty' was 'blank in their sight'. That's what bothered me, too. My tourists were messing around with my world, trying to shove it into a camera, oblivious to the real beauty of the place. It was only when they started seeing it the way I did that I stopped being cross at them. It's alright, they're seeing the beauty I see (or so I supposed).

Did their hearts leap up? Probably – whose wouldn't? Who am I, or who indeed is Wordsworth, to assume they are aesthetically obtuse simply because their take on things is different? They did stand rapt in wonder. Maybe they couldn't find the words; maybe they didn't want to. Maybe they just let out a silent sigh. Tourists only see what they want to see. Well, yes ...

What Wordsworth, and I, and all of us do, is put up a fight for the way we see things, the way we relate to things. No, look, you have to see it like this. Well, the way I see it ...

It's curious just how annoyed we can get. Wordsworth's attack on his poor unsuspecting tourists is very caustic: There was absolutely no point in their coming to the lakes, it was a waste of time and effort for all concerned. If they're too stupid to understand Nature's book they may as well stay cooped up in their inn and sleep the time away. His words were lofty, certainly. But the sentiments?

Wordsworth is not just attacking; he's defending. We all have a vested interest in maintaining the 'rightness' of how we see, feel, experience things. That is how things are. When other people come along and suggest that things might be otherwise, it tends to rock our boat. And

we tell them to stop. With poetry, with rude remarks – or restrictive immigration laws.

When things mean something to other people that they don't mean for us, it's the others who are tourists in our world. They barge in, with their lack of appreciation, their inability to understand. Other people are always tourists in our own meanings, in our version of the story. And, like all tourists, there's no getting away from them.

Hell is other people, as Sartre did say, because other people behave like tourists.

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I have slept with her so long,  
With my solitude  
She never leaves me,  
My faithful shadow  
She follows everywhere I go  
To the ends of the earth  
...  
We have made a truce  
And now walk gently hand in hand  
I do not know what this pact will mean  
Do I accept the peace  
Or must I go on fighting?

...

No, she never leaves me,

My solitude

Georges Moustaki, *Ma Solitude*

We try to get out of hell, out of being alone with what things mean to us, by trying to get to heaven: We try to make people see things how we see them. We try to make them understand.

But, can it work? Don't you have to die to get to heaven?

## **Impromptus: No. 7**

What sound does a raindrop make? Well, you might say, it depends. Are we talking about a soft summer rain? Cold, mean winter rain? Hot rain in the tropics, or the sweet rain of spring? Quite. Frédéric Chopin thought along those lines too. He was not at all happy when people started referring to his Prelude No. 15 as the Raindrop Prelude. For, after all, what sound do raindrops make?

I had heard Chopin's Prelude No. 15 many times before I learnt that it had a name. I can't say exactly what I felt when I listened to it. Certainly something silvery, ripply, delicate, heart-rending. I first heard its name in English: Raindrop. Ah, yes, of course. It does sound like raindrops: Liquid pearls falling through space. Then I learnt what it was called in German: Regentropfen. Mmh. Yes, of course. Green, dripping, fresh. I had a little more trouble with the French: Goutte d'eau. Silvery-grey, plump, scintillating. But, yes, why not. I don't know which name came

first, which was the 'original'. And I don't care. In fact, there was no original, because Chopin didn't give it a name. It just was.

The names sounded fine to me, even seemed to make what I heard clearer. Oh yes, that's what I'm feeling ...

The names rang true, for me. And, of course, for the people who coined them in the first place. But raindrop – or, more probably, goutte d'eau, did not ring true for Chopin. Raindrops, drops of water, was all that other people heard in his music. For him, it was much more, so much more, that it could not be squeezed into words, let alone one word. The amplitude of his thought and feeling was narrowed by the act of naming. Sticking a label on the delicate nuances of expression was like trying to bottle up an ocean breeze. You can't do it.

Funny, what words can do. After I'd read that Chopin rejected the naming operation, I realised that they weren't raindrops after all: Yes, you can hear a lot more in it than that ... Am I just fickle, easily swayed by what other people say? Maybe. And maybe words – or the lack of them – make us look at things, hear things, feel things, in a certain way. They say that Chopin composed the Prelude No. 15 in a night of storm and wind. What if 'they' had called it the Thunder Prelude? One of Chopin's interpreters, Alfred Cortot, called it Death is waiting in the shadows. (*Mais la Mort est là, dans l'ombre*). A very different sensation, is it not? There is also some doubt as to whether it was in fact Prelude No. 15 that Chopin composed that night; it might have been No. 6, or No. 8. Are they all raindrops – or none of them?

Giving Chopin's Prelude the name Raindrop gives us something to call

it. It calls up raindroppy feelings. That's fine. We know what they're like (more or less), have no trouble imagining them, relating to them. We know where we're at.

But Chopin meant more. And was irritated that people didn't get it. It's good to feel that we know where we're at, that we understand what's being told us. When we give things a name, we say Yes, that's what it is. We know what it is. We have a handle on it. Not having a handle can be disconcerting. It throws us. If it's not raindrops, what is it then?

A friend, eighty-six years old, told me, with tears in her voice, how she had gone to a self-service restaurant with her husband, also eighty-six. He bagged a table, while she went to get the food. Coming back with the tray, she couldn't find him. Until she realised the old man in the checked shirt was the man she'd been loving and seeing every day for the past sixty years. The old man...

Seeing what we know in a different light can be a real shock. An old man, not-raindrops – how do you get a grip on it?

Yes, I am just like you

Like any one of you

You, like grains of sand

Like blood that is always shed

And fingers forever crushed

Believe me, just any one of you

I longed to do you good  
You, so much a part of me  
But my words scatter lost in the wind  
Fall dumb in depths of silence  
Fade fast in the dim-lit night.  
Deaf to the sound of my soul  
Cold to the touch of my hand  
Blithe-limbed you pass me by  
And heed not my long low cry

After Louis Aragon, *J'entends, j'entends*

Frédéric Chopin, like Louis Aragon, wanted us to hear what he was saying, and not simply tread the usual, well-known paths.

Words help us get a grip. But the grip can sometimes get too tight.