

Teen With Camera, Europe, 1978

Forty years ago, my family spent the summer vacation touring Europe. I felt ambivalent about the experience. While I wanted very much to tour Europe, it meant I had to leave my girlfriend behind. We pledged our undying love for one another. We exchanged a flurry of letters. Predictably, when I returned at the end of the summer, we broke up. I brought a Yashica 35mm camera with me. While the camera survived, its case sank to the bottom of the Grand Canal in Venice.

This was the summer I discovered both poignant loss and street photography. I didn't call it street photography; I called it taking pictures of people in public spaces. On a Sunday afternoon, we went to Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park. My father explained that it was a symbolic affirmation of the basic freedoms enjoyed by people in British society, or words to that effect. In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was four years away, so we had no equivalent affirmation. I loved Speakers' Corner. I loved the unruliness of it. It verged on chaos. It was at Speakers' Corner that I first intuited how talk of freedom necessarily engages us in compromise. Freedom is not an absolute value. If every member of a society is free, then some of those members will end up saying and doing things I don't like. I have a duty to safeguard their freedom by putting up with them, perhaps even embracing them.

As a kid with a camera, I entertained a fantasy that I was an intrepid journalist, a seeker after truth. I felt free to do whatever it takes to get the shot. There was little nuance in my thinking about photography. In fact, I'm not sure it occurred to me that photography might engage me in ethical concerns. I saw a man (or whatever) dressed like a girl (like I said, there was little nuance in my thinking back then), soft-spoken and holding a sign while a crowd pressed in. The only ethic guiding me was the ethic that told me to get the shot at all costs. When you're shooting with a 35mm lens, you have to get close to fill the frame. Although an introvert by nature, I pushed into the crowd. The speaker stared directly at me. I released the shutter. But there were things I didn't do. I didn't listen. I didn't wonder about the power dynamic at play in our relation to one another. I didn't ask myself if my

camera was a colonizing tool.

I can be forgiven my failures. After all, I was a teenager and lacked the experience and education to frame questions the way I frame them now. Some questions—those relating to privilege and colonization in everyday relations—had scarcely entered the general consciousness much less the consciousness of a fifteen-year-old. In a way, then, this photograph I made in 1978 in Speakers' Corner is more reflective of innocence than of ignorance.



It is arguable that in the summer of 1978 the whole world felt an innocent pause, a shining moment in time when people of the West could pretend there was nothing pressing at the doorstep. Saigon had fallen which meant American and Vietnamese kids weren't getting killed anymore. A peanut farmer was President

of the US of A. Canada's leader was a playboy/media darling who seemed to swing the world by its tail. Never mind that Pol Pot was committing genocide in Cambodia and a US-backed lunatic was disappearing people in Argentina. These were far-away places and didn't really matter, certainly not to a teenager vacationing in Europe.

Soon enough, the pause ended and the West had to rejoin the world. Pope Paul VI died as our family entered Italy and people were anxious to know what direction the Roman Catholic Church would take. A few months later, a revolution would depose the Shah of Iran, and students who supported the Ayatollah Khomeini would hold members of the US Embassy hostage. A newly elected Margaret Thatcher would introduce policies of austerity and union-bashing that would hobble the British working classes. A year after that, Oscar Romero would be assassinated throwing El Salvador into years of civil war, a situation that Ronald Reagan's policies would perpetuate. HIV/AIDS became a crisis, especially within gay male populations, another situation Ronald Reagan's policies would perpetuate.

Yet, for an instant on a Sunday in July, I was unencumbered by the past, and unafraid for the future. I framed my subject and released the shutter.

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After a week in London, we rented a caravan and meandered through the English countryside for two weeks. I have no idea why we chose to travel by caravan. I suppose we thought it would be economical—save on meals and accommodation. Past experience (e.g. a cross-Canada camping trip in 1972) should have taught us that such expectations were unrealistic; my mom would resent cooking for us while on vacation so we'd eat at restaurants, and miserable weather would force us into hotels. It was a false economy, but we did it anyways.

In retrospect, renting a caravan in the UK seems particularly ill-advised. For one thing, the rental office was located in the heart of London which meant that Dad's first experience of driving on the "wrong" side of the road involved steering an oversized vehicle with sloppy suspension down streets best suited for Mini Coopers. For another thing, camping in the UK was

unpredictable. In an inversion of the usual stereotypes, camping in Ontario is a more civilized way to travel than in the UK. In Ontario, with its network of provincial parks, there is a well-maintained infrastructure for family camping. In the UK, camping (at least as Ontarians understand the word) is no more part of their culture than, say, hockey. We spent most nights parked in farmer's fields with no guarantee of basic services like water and electricity.

I seem to recall that we made a big circle of it, up to York, then west through the Lake District, into North Wales, then south to Bath, east to Salisbury, and back to London and its caravan-hostile streets. In Wales, we had to stop at Tintern Abbey on the Wye River. I get the impression that everyone who passes that way feels obliged to stop at Tintern Abbey; the roadside signs compel it.



On stepping from the caravan, the first question that entered my head was: What happened to the roof? As a Canadian boy, I had no experience of medieval anything. My experience of sacred architecture

was pretty much confined to churches built in the postwar suburban boom. Toronto had a few older churches built according to the dictates of a slap-dash neo-gothicism, but they were never allowed to fall into disrepair. In Toronto, sacred ruins would have been knocked down to make way for a shopping mall. Today, the façade would be preserved and incorporated into a condominium project.

“What’s so special about Tintern Abbey?” I wondered.

My dad answered that a famous poet had written a poem about it.

“What poet?” Teenagers can be almost as annoyingly persistent as three-year-olds when they start asking questions.

“Wordsworth. He’s one of the biggies.”

So, to be clear, a medieval monastery has been allowed to lie in ruins for centuries, and is visited by scads of people notwithstanding its ruination, all because some guy named Wordsworth—one of the biggies—wrote a poem about it? That’s ridiculous! So concluded I while under the spell of a pragmatic Presbyterianism which I inherited from my mother. I later discovered that the situation is even more ridiculous (as viewed through the lens of a pragmatic Presbyterianism) when I actually read the poem as a requirement for an undergraduate course in English Romanticism. The poem isn’t even about the abbey. You don’t have to read the the poem to figure that out. Just look at the title: *Lines*. The title is supplemented with the following words: “Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798.”

Let’s leave aside for the time being the debate over whether it’s possible for a poem to be *about* something e.g. love, death, a medieval abbey. I harbour a post-structuralist streak (related perhaps to my pragmatic Presbyterianism?) that inclines me to suppose that the primary function of a poem is to be a poem. Any attempt to identify what a poem is about is really an attempt to identify the pretext on which the poem goes about the business of being a poem. I have made an analogous suggestion in relation to photographs, either earlier in this blog, or perhaps only in my mind. I can’t remember which.

Assuming, for the time being, that I am a straightforward reader of poetry who doesn’t care about theoretical concerns, I would say that Mr. Wordsworth’s poem is about natural splendour and the way it affects the moral imagination. That’s one way of putting it. I suppose there are many other ways of putting it, too.

The poet stands in a place he visited once before, and he is delighted to find that, far from being absent in the intervening years, he has been present to this place, and it to him, through memory. Something about the landscape has sunk deep into his soul and he carries it with him wherever he goes. Although five years have past, he returns to the site and realizes how it has fed him. He is further pleased to realize that his second visit will sustain him into an indeterminate future.

*“The picture of my mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years.”*

I might well write a poem which opens: “Forty years have past.” That was when I first learned of Wordsworth’s poem. Five years after that, as an undergraduate, I explored it as fully as I knew how. Now, I revisit it and find to my delight that, in fact, its words have sunk deep into my soul and I have carried it with me wherever I go. I spend time with it now and realize that its words will continue to sustain me into an indeterminate future. A syllogism emerges. Wordsworth doesn’t make it explicit, but it’s ripe for the picking: as natural beauty feeds the poet, so the poet’s artifice feeds the reader.

While the poet expresses regret for lost youth, we are not to concern ourselves, for age has enlarged his capacity to engage the world with greater depth of spirit, with the result that he is

*“well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.”*

Perhaps Tintern Abbey has a place in the poem after

all. Perhaps its mention in the introductory lines is not accidental, but, rather, necessary to a full reading. The poet we encounter in these lines conveys the impression of a deeply spiritual man, a great soul. But his is not the spirituality of an institutional church; it is the soulfulness that finds its seat in scenes of natural wonder. It strikes me that the only fitting temple for such a soul would be one without a roof, exposed to stars and birds and rain.

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After driving around the English countryside for two weeks, we boarded a hovercraft to Ostend where we joined a three week whirlwind bus tour of Europe. It was the travel equivalent of a *Best of the 70's* album. For a teenager, the classic bus tour was a potentially deadly way to travel. However, this particular tour was a demographic anomaly, with travelers from all over the globe most of whom were young families or young singles. There were people from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore, Montreal, the Bronx, a family from Utah, and a young couple (and his sister) from Iran. The mix of people made for lively conversation and proved as interesting as the sights along the way.

A girl from Singapore insisted I was Mark Lester, the Artful Dodger in *Oliver!* and I was annoyed when my parents told her otherwise. At one stop, my dad sent me to fetch a habitually tardy woman from Australia and later apologized because the woman latched on to me for the rest of the trip. I didn't mind. The woman showed me the scars on her hands and told me how, as a young woman in England during the war, she had been boiling water for her tea when a bomb exploded by her house. The explosion splashed boiling water all over her. I thought it was a quintessentially English injury, but, as a polite Canadian boy, I held that thought to myself and simply listened, which of course only encouraged her.

The Iranians, Hommie and Peri (not sure about the spelling) were young school teachers. They had brought Hommie's younger sister, Shari, along for the trip. Every day, Shari wore a fresh pair of multi-coloured bobby sox and looked as if she had stepped from the set of *Grease* (which had just been released in theatres a month earlier). From them, I formed a definite impression of what life was like

in Iran: its young people enthusiastically embraced Western culture. Say what you will about the Shah, he encouraged an openness with the West. Even then, Iran was in a state of unrest and, one evening, Shari began to cry, wondering what would happen to her country. The big American from Utah, wearing his cowboy hat and string tie, put an arm around her shoulder and said: "Don't you worry. Everything'll be all right." I sometimes wonder what happened to Shari. If she's still alive, I somehow doubt she wears bobby sox.

I don't remember the precise route of our bus tour, but I remember certain cities along the way: Brussels, Cologne, Innsbruck, Lucerne, Venice, Naples, Rome, Florence, Paris. We drove around the Atomium in Brussels, touched bullet holes in the exterior walls of Cologne's Cathedral, gawked at the Rococo finishings of a church in Innsbruck, had a snowball fight on Mount Titlis with a woman from Australia who'd never seen snow, went for a gondola ride in Venice, gazed at the cobalt waters of a grotto in Capri, and then we arrived in Rome.



I enjoy reading contemporary authors whose experience intersects with my own. One such author is David Bezmozgis. For example, one of his stories in the collection, *Natasha and Other Stories*, is set in an apartment building on Finch Avenue West in the hollow between Bathurst and Dufferin. I was born in the hospital up the hill towards Bathurst. My mother taught at the elementary school around the corner on Wilmington. He tracks familiar ground which adds a dimension to my reading. His first novel, *The Free World*, tells the story of a Jewish Russian family trying to emigrate to North America and finding itself in limbo in Rome during the summer of 1978.

Part of the backdrop for the narrative is the fact that Pope Paul VI died and the city was crowded with the faithful, first as they mourned their leader and later as they waited for the College of Cardinals to select a successor. As I read the novel, I began to sit up and pay attention rather than simply skim the pages as I sometimes do. I was there! I remember the crowds. I remember what it felt like. Bezmogis' (non-fictional) family immigrated to Toronto from Latvia, and, for all I know, may have come via Rome. However, given that he is ten years younger than me and would have been five at the time, I highly doubt that his account in *The Free World* is novelized personal testimony. He may have been there. He may even have had a feel for what was going on. But I expect he relied on other sources for his account. Still, I was there!

While in Rome, we did as the Romans do, and lined up to file past the body as it lay in state. Although not Roman Catholic, it seemed necessary. After all, how often do you get to see a dead Pope? If I had closed my eyes and focused solely on the mood of the crowd, I would have sworn that I was standing in line for Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean. We had inquired and learned that while photography was generally prohibited in St. Peter's Basilica, the ordinary rules didn't apply when the seat was vacant. Accordingly, I pushed as close as I could and got a photograph of the defunct Pope Paul VI lying on his bier on a hot summer's day and turning a greenish hue. A Swiss Guard gave me a proper shove. I grew indignant. After all, it was my right. The signs said it was my right. In retrospect, I think I was rude. Had it been anyone else's funeral, I wouldn't have had the gall to photograph the corpse. Why should this be any different? In my defence, I was a tourist. And like most tourists, I had temporarily lost my mind.

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When I review the photographs I took when I was younger, I observe a trend: I reserved photography for vacations and special occasions. Part of the reason for this is that film was expensive and, especially as a teenager, I didn't have the cash to develop five or ten rolls a week. Five or ten rolls on a vacation was about all I could manage. But I think another reason for this is that, when I was younger, I held to a narrower view of what photography is for. I visited a place and while I was there I took a photo of it. That way, when I

returned home, I could prove to my friends that I had been there. Photography was a way for me to validate my experience.

Discovering familiar settings and events in novels functions the same way. The characters in David Bezmogis' novel, *The Free World*, pass the summer of '78 in Rome. I remember the summer of '78 in Rome and so I take special note of his words. In a strange irony, passages in a work of fiction validate my experience in the real world. They lend a verisimilitude to my admittedly tenuous hold on things. Photographing oneself in a reflection or, nowadays, with the help of a selfie stick performs the same function. It allows me to say: I was there! I am not invisible.



Now, thanks to the advent of digital photography, the old financial constraints no longer apply. There's no need to restrict myself to vacations and special occasions. Because I can shoot and shoot without limitation, my early motivation (the need to validate

experience) fades from the foreground. Perhaps this is also a result of maturity, although those who know me best would find that suggestion laughable. In any event, I now find myself free to shoot for other reasons.

When shooting on vacations and special occasions, one tends to privilege certain subjects: tourist attractions, brides, crime scenes. Only these certain subjects warrant the cost of film. A result of this habit is that casual photographers like me engage in a tautological process where our photography validates our experience while the record of our experience validates our photographic practice. This produces a self-contained little ecosystem which, unfortunately, is devoid of meaning. More to the point, within its own terms, I suspect meaning is impossible.

The closed loop of habitual photographic practice blinds us to other approaches. I hesitate to use the word—because, in its modern usage, it bears an overblown connotation—but perhaps the best way to break out of the closed loop is to engage in a photographic iconoclasm. Turn away from famous sculptures and buildings. Turn away from brides in all their consumer-driven finery. Turn away from the terror and delight that draws us to scenes cordoned off by police tape. Instead, seek out the ordinary. Celebrate the mundane. Reveal beauty in the quotidian. I have discovered a new reason to shoot: to engage in a kind of restorative justice (largely symbolic, I confess) where privileged subjects are forced to make space in the visual field for subjects that formerly went unseen.

Revisiting photographs I shot forty years ago is a healthy exercise. It reveals to me that my seeing has changed, and it clarifies what I should seek out in the world. At the same time, I don't think my words here should be taken as prescriptive. After all, this is not a manifesto. I prefer to regard this as a record of one man working things out for himself. Go do your work on your own terms.

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