



People's Faces, in a World Upside Down: 21 December 2020*

Amy Weldon

'It's coming to pass. My country's coming apart.' These are the first words uttered by Kae Tempest in their poem 'People's Faces' (2019), which stands alongside William Blake's 'London' (1794) and Lord Byron's 'Darkness' (1816) in my British Romanticism undergraduate course one December day as prophecy and apocalypse and hope.

It's coming to pass. Struggling towards the end of this brutal year — two million COVID-19 dead worldwide, Brexit descending on the country Blake loved and chastened, wildfires burning up the West Coast, a defeated American president ranting that an election has been 'stolen' from him, and George Floyd murdered by a policeman on a Minneapolis sidewalk — my students and I wonder what exactly that *is, coming to pass, coming apart*, coming down the pike, slouching toward Bethlehem or Bedlam to be born in these bewildering days.

We hearken to the words of these three English geniuses and try to remember a fourth, George Orwell, who wrote that 'to see what is in front of your nose requires a constant struggle' (see Orwell 1946). We must believe that art will help us see the world clear, and keep our vision kind and active as we move into what is coming next. But it's a struggle, uphill, in the dark. 'My country's coming apart', Tempest muses. 'It's hard.' Especially for my twenty-one-year-old university students, just at the start of things, wondering what future will be left for them.

Blake hearkened to his interior vision, to the light of prophetic conviction that paints itself over the visible world and redirects us to what is and *might be*, and flipped and reversed what is in front of our nose to ask us to look again. 'As a man is', he wrote, 'So he Sees' (Letter to Revd Dr Trusler, 23 August 1799, E702). He looked at London and saw a new Jerusalem struggling to crack its carapace of suffering created by a Lear-like indifference to the way things are. He looked at St. Paul's Cathedral and saw its white stone coated in soot and blood and the cries of Napoleonic War veterans and the curses of the 'youthful harlots' servicing their clients in its shadow ('London', l. 14, E27): synesthetically, all five senses merge and ripple and drop over 'Paul's' as a semi-translucent 'pall' of cloud, of shroud, dimming and darkening (l. 10, E27).

Seen with the spiritual eye, the mighty center of Blake's great city becomes the 'black'ning church of Paul's' (say it and you hear the bitter pun). In Blake's printing method and in his imagination, the visible always becomes and contains its opposite: the raised engraving ridges on the copper plate become the shallow troughs of ink marks on paper, Innocence becomes Experience, Heaven becomes Hell (and that's a good thing). What is always becomes what might be, if we will look with our imagination as well as our outward eye. And it starts with beholding the page, and **looking carefully**. It starts with looking into 'every face I meet' ('London', l. 3, E26) and 'mark[ing]' (Blake loves

*Blake hearkened to his interior vision,
to the light of prophetic conviction that
paints itself over the visible world and
redirects us to what is and might be*

that bitter pun, too) ‘marks of weakness, marks of woe’, plunging through the visible into the imagined and the world that marks and remarks us every day (l. 4, E26).

On a subway platform in the twenty-first century, Kae Tempest joins hands with Blake to look into those faces and *mark* them, too. Together on Zoom, our Romanticism textbooks open on our individual desks, students and I cue up ‘People’s Faces’ and listen. ‘I saw it roaring’, Tempest says, ‘I felt it clawing at my clothes like a grieving friend’: this is the wind of the oncoming train, this is a cry or a curse blasting up the Fleet Street hill, this is the future always bearing down. And suddenly the face looked into is our own. ‘There is too much pretense here’, Tempest continues. ‘Too much depends on the fragile wages and extortionate rents here. We’re working every dread day that is given us, feeling like the person people meet really isn’t us.’

Tears rise to my eyes as I listen. I’m beheld by Tempest’s words as I’m beheld by Blake’s in my *weakness* and my *woe*, in my battles to be generous in a world of austerity tightening around my throat. ‘I stare out at my city on another difficult day’, pleads Tempest, ‘and I scream inwardly, when will this change?’ When will I take off my COVID mask and embrace another person again? When will I feel like I’ve taken enough care, worked *every dread day* to make myself safe enough? When I glance into the faces in their Zoom boxes onscreen — my dear students, twenty-one of them — I can see they’re somber, they’re writing, and at least one of them is wiping her eyes, tear-reddened like mine.

But it’s all right. Because this is what Blake and Kae Tempest and my whole course — ‘Romanticism for a World Upside Down’ — ask us to consider: if art can

crack us open like this, there is still hope for seeing and for acting on what we see. Byron, so outwardly different from Blake, offered a likewise bittersweet pun in ‘Darkness’: ‘a fearful hope was all the world contain’d’ (l. 18). Hope is all that’s left in the world. Hope contains the whole world within itself. ‘And yes, our children are brave but their mission is vague’, Tempest muses. ‘Now I don’t have the answers but there are still things to say.’ And, wiping my eyes, I speak. ‘Thank you for today, y’all’, I offer. ‘I’m grateful for you.’ And Kae Tempest’s words are also mine: ‘My sanity’s saved ‘cause I can see your faces.’

*The date (21 December 2020) refers to when Amy was transcribing the lyrics of ‘People’s Faces’ throughout from the audio recording on YouTube, to which she and her students were listening in the moment described. The poem was released as a spoken word audio piece on Tempest’s album *The Book of Traps and Lessons* (2019).

References and further reading

- Byron, George Gordon, *Byron: The Oxford Authors*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)
- Orwell, George, ‘In Front of Your Nose’, *Tribune*, 22 March 1946 <https://orwell.ru/library/articles/nose/english/e_nose> [accessed 1 September 2021]
- Tempest, Kae, ‘People’s Faces’, online video recording, YouTube, 14 June 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRULtXn6W0s>> [accessed 1 September 2021]

