

CROSSING OUT THE EMPEROR

So, he is no more than a common mortal! Now too will he tread on the rights of man, and indulge only his own ambition; now he will think himself superior to all men, and become a tyrant!, *Ludwig van Beethoven, on hearing Napoleon Bonaparte had declared himself to be the Emperor, 1804.*

Napoleon and Beethoven. Each one a name that towers in the firmament, and yet each one a prisoner, Napoleon ultimately the prisoner of St. Helena, Beethoven ultimately the prisoner of deafness. Just think, if Napoleon had stood on the exiled shores of his lonely island and screamed a scream the whole world could hear, Beethoven would still have been none the wiser. *Napoleon and Beethoven.* The two men never met, but it's as if they should have done, each one so overwhelmingly defining their own era in their chosen fields. *Napoleon and Beethoven.* The two men were the same age to within a year and both in their different ways children of the French Revolution, the former owing his career to the revolution, the latter owing to it much of his egalitarian philosophy. Napoleon Bonaparte, the ultimate riser through the ranks, and Ludwig van Beethoven, the composer as romantic genius.

Did Napoleon know that Beethoven's 3rd *Eroica* Symphony was originally dedicated to him? It is said it was the emissary of the revolutionary French Directoire, General Bernadotte, who first suggested to Beethoven the idea of a 'heroic' symphony on the subject of General Bonaparte whilst visiting Vienna in 1798. And it's an idea Beethoven obviously took to his heart.

But what we don't know is whether the Emperor Napoleon cared less when he was crossed off the dedication. And more, Beethoven was so furious upon hearing that Napoleon had crowned himself Emperor that he didn't only cross Napoleon's

name out on the title page, he scratched through the paper to try and expunge any remnant of the man Beethoven considered to have betrayed the French Revolution. *The revolution was about getting rid of Emperors, not about creating new ones!* Did Napoleon even know it had happened? And if so, was he bothered? Frankly, did the Corsican Brigade General, the victor of Toulon, the victor of Montenotte, Dego, Millesima and Arcole, the Commander-in-Chief of the campaign in Egypt, the victor of Marengo and Austerlitz, the First Consul, the Life Consul, the indomitably resolute first man of Europe..., let's face it, did *the EMPEROR!!!* give a damn what an increasingly hard of hearing, idealistic Germanic composer thought of him? When a Viennese violinist complained the cadenza of the Violin Concerto was too difficult, Beethoven replied "what care I for the limits of your damn'd fiddling?". And so maybe Napoleon thought to himself "what care I for the dedication of your damn'd symphony?". Why should the Emperor have given a damn?

Why? Because Napoleon and Beethoven have a lot in common. And Johann Wolfgang von Goethe met both of them, so he should know. "[Beethoven's] talent amazed me" he said, adding with the fake wisdom of the self-seeking that "unfortunately he is an utterly untamed personality, who is not altogether wrong in holding the world detestable but surely does not make it any the more enjoyable either for himself or for others by his attitude". Goethe obviously didn't think Beethoven was the kind of man you took to see an Emperor, which is probably why he didn't. Goethe was very good at meeting all the right people. He was even involved in government. Perhaps governing people is what Goethe and Napoleon talked about.

Well, governing people, and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* apparently, which the Emperor had read, and doubtless thought he could have done much better if he'd set his mind to it. The Emperor was *that kind of a guy*. If you worked for Napoleon, the one thing you never said, and I mean never ever never said, was "that is not possible". For Napoleon, the words simply didn't exist, or rather belonged "only in the dictionary of fools". Goethe said meeting him was like meeting a grand prosecutor relentlessly pursuing the defendant to the end. *Just why does young Werther commit suicide, Herr Goethe? Just what kind of a hero is that? Not much use to the Grand Armée!* Goethe also said "He was Somebody and one could see that he was Somebody", but I don't think that's quite right. Napoleon was Somebody and he *knew he was Somebody*, that's the point. And so did Beethoven. *What care I for the limits of your damn'd fiddling?* It's not my music that's the problem, it's you...

There's an attitude there, one that Napoleon would have approved of. "He was one of the most creative people ever to have lived;... what matters is whether the idea, the discovery, or the deed are alive, and whether they are able to live on...". Did Goethe say that about Napoleon or about Beethoven? About Napoleon actually, but he could have said it about Beethoven. Deaf or not, Beethoven could have gone places with the Grand Armée. *If you can't do something, then get better!* If you don't know how to do something, then learn! *Nothing is impossible, and ignorance is always, always defeatable.* Who d'you think you are? *The bloody Emperor?!* And there's the rub. That's what Beethoven couldn't stand. Napoleon Bonaparte, son of a minor Corsican tax assessor, Napoleon Bonaparte, revolutionary, had declared *himself* to be the Emperor.

"Goethe delights far too much in the court atmosphere, far more than is becoming in a poet". So wrote Beethoven after meeting Goethe at Teplitz in 1812. And quite right too. You see, as far as Beethoven was concerned, you didn't acquire status, you were born with it. "Prince!" he wrote to Lichnowsky, "What you are, you are by circumstance and by birth. What I am, I am through myself. Of princes there have been and will be many thousands. Of Beethovens there is only one". Try changing the names, and imagine saying that to your boss, or to which ever powerful person you feel like saying it to. *Say it and mean it*. Because as far as Beethoven was concerned, it represented the entire point. As far as Beethoven was concerned, we were all emperors and empresses, counts and countesses. Within each and every one of us was to be found the whole potentiality of humankind. As far as Beethoven is concerned, we are all capable of being heroes and heroines! He had to believe this to make his own life work. *He had to believe in the possibility of the deaf composer*. Beethoven spent his lifetime believing in the impossible and proving himself right. He wasn't invincible, but he knew his limitations could be overcome. Napoleon on the other hand knew of no limitations and completely failed to understand that no one is invincible. The human capacity to love and create is infinite, but so is the human capacity to self-destruct, and perhaps amongst this novel's various stories of love and war that is the most salient lesson.

Napoleon first suffered from stomach cramps in 1802. They would come on a few hours after eating, and were usually accompanied by violent physical sickness. At Austerlitz and at Wagram, at Marengo and Friedland and at Jena, at international conferences and when at home in the Elysée, the Emperor was secretly writhing in pain. He learnt to deal with it, finding light snacks of chocolate and ice cream brought

much relief, and he came to carry in the inner pockets of his favourite dark-green uniform little packets of aniseed which he swallowed every time his stomach threatened further eruption. From time to time he would also faint, probably from the result of a blood sugar deficiency known as hypoglycaemia. *Some Emperor!*

And it gets worse. From 1810 onwards, the Emperor had been gradually getting fatter and fatter, to the point of downright obesity in his final years of exile. His dark-green uniform of a Colonel in the Chasseurs being now too tight, too old and too shabby, Napoleon insisted on a new one, but no suitable cloth could be found. Eventually, Hudson Lowe, the British Governor of St. Helena, ordered the old uniform be unpicked at the seams, underlaid, turned inside out and thus transformed. And transformed Napoleon certainly was. His doctor described his "beautiful hands [and] rounded breasts... Any beautiful lady might have been proud of that chest". The Emperor was turning into a woman! One recent pathologist has linked most of the above symptoms and maladies together under the Zollinger-Ellison syndrome, sufferers of which have multiple small tumours of the pancreas and over-secrete the hormone gastrin, which causes repeated ulcers to both the stomach and the duodenum. In one quarter of all patients, the gastrinoma is only one part of the disease, the other being *multiple endocrinological adenomatosis* (MEA1), a sex-linked disease resulting in tumours, often malignant, affecting the parathyroid glands as well as the pancreatic and the pituitary glands. Sufferers of MEA1 develop secondary liver and kidney disorders, as well as over producing insulin with a resultant loss in the blood sugar level. Reduced thyroid activity tends to result in obesity, fatigue, drowsiness, whiteness of skin, loss of skin hair, atrophy of the genitals and adrenal insufficiency at times of stress. In short, MEA1 has a chronic effect on both the body and the brain.

The Emperor Napoleon died a mess. And he was a mess long before his afflictions caught up with him. He was a mess because he could only ever conceive of life as one long literal battle, and inflicted his battles on everyone else. And just how many more Borodinos and Moscows do we need? How many more Sommes and Stalingrads, how many more Hiroshimas and Cambodias and Baghdads and Bazras and Vukovars and Sarajevos and Rwandas and Kosovos do we really have to impotently witness before finally on one bright and shining new day there exist enough people in one place at one time simply and strongly to say "STOP IT"? How long will it be before enough of the innocents are heard? How many more power mad Emperors will order the crossing of the Beresina whatever the cost? How many more battles will there be until then? We've all got the choice to emulate the Napoleon's of this world, or to listen to Beethoven's alternative invention of a new heroic personality that doesn't use its power and authority to dominate and kill. In Beethoven's invention of the new heroic personality of the 3rd Symphony to the triumphant exaltation of the *Ode to Joy* in the 9th is a new story of charisma, power and knowledge that understands its job is to exalt humanity, not to ride roughshod over it or dominate it. A new child is being born every day, and through that new child a new adult, and if you listen well enough to Beethoven, perhaps that new adult could still be you. In the soul of every one of us dwell the dreams of inexhaustible promise. *We are all emperors and empresses.*

Beethoven replaced his 3rd Symphony dedication to Napoleon to one which read "to the memory of a great man", emphasising the promise not the actuality of what Napoleon became. Think of Stalin. Think of Hitler or Mao. It is normally tyrants

that cross out artists and many thousands and millions of others as well. Beethoven could see what was coming and got in there first. He crossed out the Emperor before the Emperor crossed him out. And the rest of us.

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