The Sea, The Sea

Iris Murdoch

Published by Vintage

Extract

All text is copyright © Iris Murdoch 1978

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Prehistory

The sea which lies before me as I write glows rather than sparkles in the bland May sunshine. With the tide turning, it leans quietly against the land, almost unflecked by ripples or by foam. Near to the horizon it is a luxurious purple, spotted with regular lines of emerald green. At the horizon it is indigo. Near to the shore, where my view is framed by rising heaps of humpy yellow rock, there is a band of lighter green, icy and pure, less radiant, opaque however, not transparent. We are in the north, and the bright sunshine cannot penetrate the sea. Where the gentle water taps the rocks there is still a surface skin of colour. The cloudless sky is very pale at the indigo horizon which it lightly pencils in with silver. Its blue gains towards the zenith and vibrates there. But the sky looks cold, even the sun looks cold.

I had written the above, destined to be the opening paragraph of my memoirs, when something happened which was so extraordinary and so horrible that I cannot bring myself to describe it even now after an interval of time and although a possible, though not totally reassuring, explanation has occurred to me. Perhaps I shall feel calmer and more clear-headed after yet another interval.

I spoke of a memoir. Is that what this chronicle will prove to be?

Time will show. At this moment, a page old, it feels more like a diary than a memoir. Well, let it be a diary then. How I regret that I did not keep one earlier, what a record that would have been! But now the main events of my life are over and there is to be nothing but 'recollection in tranquillity'. To repent of a life of egoism? Not exactly, yet something of the sort. Of course I never said this to the ladies and gentlemen of the theatre. They would never have stopped laughing.

The theatre is certainly a place for learning about the brevity of human glory: oh all those wonderful glittering absolutely vanished pantomimes! Now I shall abjure magic and become a hermit: put myself in a situation where I can honestly say that I have nothing else to do but to learn to be good. The end of life is rightly thought of as a period of meditation. Will I be sorry that I did not begin it sooner?

It is necessary to write, that much is clear, and to write in a way quite unlike any way which I have employed before. What I wrote before was written in water and deliberately so. This is for permanence, something which cannot help hoping to endure. Yes, already I personify the object, the little book, the *libellus,* this creature to which I am giving life and which seems at once to have a will of its own. It wants to live, it wants to survive.

I have considered writing a journal, not of happenings for there will be none, but as a record of mingled thoughts and daily observations: 'my philosophy', my *pensées* against a background of simple descriptions of the weather and other natural phenomena. This now seems to me again to be a good idea. The sea. I could fill a volume simply with my word-pictures of it. I would certainly like to write some sustained account of my surroundings, its flora and fauna. This could be of some interest, if I persevered, even though I am no White of Selborne. From my sea-facing window at this moment I can see three different kinds of gulls, swallows, a cormorant, innumerable butterflies drifting about over the flowers which grow miraculously upon my yellow rocks . . .

I must make no attempt at 'fine writing' however, that would be

to spoil my enterprise. Besides, I should merely make a fool of myself.

Oh blessed northern sea, a real sea with clean merciful tides, not like the stinking soupy Mediterranean!

They say there are seals here, but I have seen none yet.

Of course there is no need to separate 'memoir' from 'diary' or 'philosophical journal'. I can tell you, reader, about my past life and about my 'world-view' also, as I ramble along. Why not? It can all come out naturally as I reflect. Thus unanxiously (for am I not now leaving anxiety behind?) I shall discover my 'literary form'. In any case, why decide now? Later, if I please, I can regard these ramblings as rough notes for a more coherent account. Who knows indeed how interesting I shall find my past life when I begin to tell it? Perhaps I shall bring the story gradually up to date and as it were float my present upon my past?

To repent of egoism: is autobiography the best method? Well, being no philosopher I can only reflect about the world through reflecting about my own adventures in it. And I feel that it is time to *think* about myself at last. It may seem odd that one who has been described in the popular press as a 'tyrant', a 'tartar', and (if I recall) a 'power-crazed monster' should feel that he has not hitherto done so! But this is the case. I have in fact very little sense of identity.

It is indeed only lately that I have felt this need to write something that is both personal and reflective. In the days when I wrote in water I imagined that the only book I would ever publish would be a cookery book!

I might now introduce myself – to myself, first and foremost, it occurs to me. What an odd discipline autobiography turns out to be. To others, if these words are printed in the not too distant future, there will be in a superficial sense 'no need of an introduction', as they say at meetings. How long does mortal fame

endure? My kind of fame not very long, but long enough. Yes, yes, I am Charles Arrowby and, as I write this, I am, shall we say, over sixty years of age. I am wifeless, childless, brotherless, sisterless, I am my well-known self, made glittering and brittle by fame. I determined long ago that I would retire from the theatre when I had passed sixty. ('You will *never* retire,' Wilfred told me. 'You will be *unable* to.' He was wrong.) In fact I am tired of the theatre, I have had enough. This is what no one who knew me well, not Sidney nor Peregrine nor Fritzie, not Wilfred nor Clement when they were alive, could either foresee or imagine. And it is not just a matter of sagely departing 'on the crest of the wave'. (How many actors and directors pathetically overstay their welcome.) I am tired of it all. There has been a moral change.

'All right, go,' they said, 'but don't imagine that you can come back.' I don't want to come back, thank you! 'If you stop working and live alone you will go quietly mad.' (This was Sidney's contribution.) On the contrary, I feel completely sane and free and happy for the first time in my life!

It is not that I ever came to 'disapprove' of the theatre, as my mother, for instance, never ceased to do. I just knew that if I stayed in it any longer I would begin to wilt spiritually, would lose something which had travelled with me patiently so far, but might go away if I did not attend to it at last: something not belonging to the preoccupations of my work, but preciously separate from it. I remember James saying something about people who end their lives in caves. Well, this, here, is my cave. And I have reached it bearing the precious thing that has come with me, as if it were a talisman which I can now unwrap. How grand and pompous this sounds! And yet I confess I scarcely know what I mean. Let us break off these rather ponderous reflections for a while.

The above observations have been written on a sequence of different days, wonderful empty solitary days, such as I remember