

LANCING AND AFTER

It's a daunting prospect for anyone to give the first memorial lecture in the name of Evelyn Waugh. All his grateful readers know Waugh as one of the greatest prose stylists of the last 100 years. He was able to write sentences which achieve their effects so perfectly that their construction seems both inevitable and surprising. He was also exhilaratingly funny. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, written in the Seventeenth Century, Robert Burton remarks, in words which will one day apply to the great novelist, 'Melancholy men of all others are the most witty'. And yet it's hard to believe that the choice of lecturer tonight would have done much to lift Evelyn Waugh's spirits. 'I am by nature a bully and a scold', he wrote of himself. We may all imagine Waugh's bullying and scolding upon discovering that a humourless left-wing atheist playwright was being asked to commemorate the supremely amusing conservative Catholic novelist. So let me start by explaining how come this task fell to someone so clearly unsuitable.

I was encouraged to take on this talk by Roger Dancey, who was until recently, Headmaster of King Edward's School Birmingham, and therefore, God help us, in charge of 800 young souls. Those of you who know Roger will recognise all too well his legendary and dangerous charm. This is a man who lay in his cradle sucking his thumb and formulating plans for what he could get other people to do. I had been foolish enough to write an article in praise of the lecture as a form, saying how much I enjoyed listening to lectures, and on occasions even giving them. No sooner had the article appeared than the phone rang. 'Well, if you so enjoy giving lectures...'

Since we were at Lancing together, Roger has become a distinguished educationalist and even occasional counsellor to various massively admired Ministers of Education, who have made such a huge and unarguable success of schools policy in the last 30 years. Alongside Christopher Hampton, the quiet, weirdly confident boy who was also at school with us, he has remained a life-long friend. I can still picture Roger teaching at Whitgift when he was in his early twenties, lying on the floor of his attic room in Croydon, with a well-iced gin and tonic, stretching lazily maybe for another slice of lemon and telling me that teaching was enough in itself and denying that he nursed any ambitions for personal advancement. No doubt Napoleon cut a similar figure at the same age.

This lecture gives me a welcome chance to talk about the past. Some time in the 1980s I was the guest on *Desert Island Discs* and was quizzed about my upbringing by an excitable Sue Lawley. After transmission I received a letter from Donald Bancroft, my one-time English teacher, saying how refreshing and rare it was to hear anyone talk gratefully about their education.

The fashion, he said, was for insisting that school had been hell. Ex-public school boys seemed keen to stress only the cruelty and the snobbery. Donald had been surprised to hear someone who had made their life in literature speak so warmly about the literary foundation laid in the years at Lancing. I had alluded to the high overall standard of teaching and in particular to a couple of teachers – Donald himself and Harry Guest, who taught us modern languages. It's a cliché to say that gifted teachers change pupil's lives. But surely there isn't a more powerful moment in any educated person's progress than when somehow they are urged towards the right book, the right play or the right film at the right time. Harry and Donald urged me towards many.

It's very difficult to explain to anyone under 50 quite how different the world was in the early 1960s. For a start, it was colder. Evelyn Waugh, who arrived at Lancing in 1917, had noted that 'wind, rain and darkness possessed the place'. He also observed that 'the food in Hall would have provoked mutiny in a mid-Victorian poor-house'. By 1960, little had changed. Most striking, a sock was used nightly as a kind of primitive tea-bag and lowered, full of leaves, into a steaming urn. We ate badly and the weather was filthy. Towards the end of 1962, a brutal winter took hold. The snow never left the ground for eight weeks. Your face ached, rigid in the icy wind, as you braced yourself, turning a cloister corner. Wrapped in scarves, gloves and extra pullovers we all rushed back to our houses at break in order to clamber as best we could onto the hissing radiators, or to hold white sliced bread on a toasting fork against the dimpled white elements of the gas fire. An industrial tin of Nescafe stood close.

Because, by a quirk of timing, my age-group had managed to arrive after World War Two, we were continually being reminded how lightly we'd got off. Maybe. Yes, we had indeed missed danger, but we did not altogether miss hardship. Something of a wartime atmosphere lingered for twenty years after 1945, as if the whole country were still dreaming its way through some sort of dormitory coma. Lancing, as well as being cold, was most definitely dirty. Detachable collars were the school's crafty way of ensuring that they didn't have the expense of washing our shirts too often. There was a thick rim of grime on the fold as we threw them, three times a week, into the basket. We seemed a lot closer to the Nineteenth Century than the Twenty-First. Electric waxing machines embedded filth on the parquet, but rarely removed it. Any kind of snivel, wart, growth or adolescent eruption was firmly treated by matrons with their stinking cure-all: the lavish application of a purple antiseptic called 'gentian violet'. The overall impression was of dirty fingernails and dirty laundry. Little wonder that many of those boys were, in that evocative Australian phrase, 'on the nose'.

In his recently published letters, Graham Greene has great fun with the convention that whenever he wants to make a character in one of his books particularly dishonest or unpleasant, he makes him an ex-pupil of Lancing College. It was, of course, a private joke, a piece of mischievous biography intended to amuse his best friend Evelyn Waugh. There was, Greene claimed, a particular sort of aspiring public school which produced a young man full of facile sociability and doubtful morals

. It's all there, isn't it, in that terrible word 'minor', as in 'minor public school'? And there was, to be fair, in our own school – whether major or minor, it could never quite decide – a slight sense of pretence, a feeling that we were in some way aping an unseen original. We had all been cast as walk-ons in a seaside repertory version of *Goodbye Mr Chips*. The bigger, more famous schools all their eccentricities. It was therefore essential that we must have ours, including special names and conventions which made no sense outside the walls. Teachers had to be known as Tiger, Monkey or Dozy. Everything was in code, and the code had to be learnt. That was part of our belonging, but some of the rules seemed to defy explanation. Maybe that was the point. No-one could ever tell me, for instance, why all the boys were for years compelled to swim like Germans, stark naked, without benefit of costume. It was perhaps easier to understand why so many visiting clergy seemed eager to include the swimming pool in their tour of the school's most compelling facilities.

Graham Greene, in a radio broadcast, blamed his dislike of his own public school Berkhamsted on the lack of privacy. He couldn't, he said, live happily in a place where you were forced to share everything, where you couldn't get time or space to yourself. It was the relentless, intrusive communality that he hated. A lover of the erotic, and an enemy of the scatological, Greene could never get past the lockless lavatories. And yet if I'm honest, I wonder if it wasn't this very quality of jostling proximity that attracted me most about Lancing. I came, as it happened, from 35 miles along the coast, past a run of chalk-white cliffs, from the pebbled, anaesthetic town of Bexhill. It was a place which had been described by James Agate as 'bleak and purseproud'. The English Channel looked even greyer there than it did from Worthing. I had one sister, older, who was receiving a good education at the local grammar-school where, in spite of the fact that she was clearly marked out for a physics degree in a first-rate university, she was still required to take classes in domestic science. My father was a sailor, and largely absent. Bexhill at the time boasted the highest average age of any town in the country. I was violently sick in the car on the way to my interview at Lancing, which my parents chose as the only school which would award a scholarship. The plan then was to wait and see whether you succeeded in your real aim of getting into Winchester. It was one of the happiest accidents of my life that the roadside vomiting presaged scarlet fever and that I was therefore too ill to go through the second half of the plan. Lancing it was – and with this huge advantage: it wasn't Bexhill.

John Dancy, my first Lancing Headmaster, remarked in my first school report – in terms which I have clearly never forgotten – that I was an excellent student by anything but the severest standards, but that unfortunately in future I must expect to be judged alongside the best. By the highest criteria, he said, I was disappointing. Perhaps it was fair – or at least fair from his point of view – but as a way of damning a boy before he had even begun, it could hardly be bettered. I was, after all, 13. If it was intended to hurt, it certainly succeeded – and has hurt for the whole of my life. I am not Chekhov. I am not Shakespeare. To my dismay, the possibility of becoming either has simply not been available to me – and to imply this must be due to lack of effort, as John Dancy did, seems like an offensive ruling-class con, a way of putting you down before you've even sprung up, a cheap means of communicating that timeless English message: 'Whatever you do, don't imagine it's going to be of any importance.'

The splash of cold water from that first report alerted me early to the difference between being and trying. It also suggested the tension in an outfit which was at the time poised somewhere between being half-Christian and half-humane. As my years at Lancing went by, it became clear to us all, masters and pupils, that we were living through interesting times. In the prevailing teachings of muscular Christianity, as it was then called, it might have been thought useful to tell a boy who was not gifted, say, at football, that he must try harder, even if the boy and the master knew that trying was never going to make him Pele. (Indeed, let me add as a curiosity that my easy-going friend Christopher Hampton played Roger Dancey at squash throughout the time they were at Lancing. Christopher lost over one hundred times and won once.) But such propagation of pointless effort was now being challenged by a more relaxed, more sympathetic style of teaching, which encouraged a pupil to find out who he was before sending him out on a mission to attempt tasks for which he had no feeling or aptitude, on the grounds that failing was, presumably, good for you. I was made to run when I couldn't run. I was made to swim when I couldn't swim. When I came last in a race by some humiliating margin, the swimming coach shouted at me in the water the familiar thoughtless mantra of teachers down the ages: 'You're not trying.' In fact, I was trying as hard as I could. I just wasn't succeeding. But meanwhile, outside the swimming pool, I was also for the first time working with other teachers who seemed to imply, if not to state, that they thought such ambitions were as stupid as I did.

There will be those here who strongly object to my opposition of the words 'Christian' and 'humane'. Perhaps a less loaded way of putting things would be to say that the difference was sharpening, not least at Lancing, between those who believed in revealed authority and those who believed in none; an ethical struggle, in fact, between religion, with its claims to truth, and agnosticism, with its ambition only for the pursuit of truth. It's unnecessary to point out, surely, that a much sharper, more lethal version of this same conflict looks set to disfigure the coming century more dangerously than it did the last. At the time of Evelyn Waugh's death, a writer in the *Spectator* observed that although *Brideshead Revisited* was an enjoyable exercise in nostalgia, nevertheless it had no subject. It was, finally, about nothing. A second writer

responded indignantly the next week by saying that on the contrary, the book was explicitly, at the author's own insistence, about the intervention of divine grace in the affairs of fallen man. The original writer came back in the following issue: exactly, as he'd said, it was about nothing.

It was not just in matters of religion that a gap was opening up between those who believed that the path had been shown, and those who were convinced that you had to find it for yourself. It was also in questions of politics. My lecture tonight will be shaped round three random incidents at school, each of which has stayed with me, the implications of each one touching me far more deeply than any of the more direct homilies or sermons, delivered from pulpit or prefects' study, intended for my general edification and therefore forgotten at once. The first of these incidents is in many ways the most perplexing. For various reasons, some of them more honourable than others, while at Lancing I became, like many of my friends, a passionate supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Pictures of the Aldermaston March inspired me to send in for an application form. Soon from a brown envelope there clattered out a small number of black and white badges with the familiar symbol, designed from a combination of the semaphore flag signals for the letters N and D. Without thinking, I attached one to my herringbone jacket and set off for class.

It was not long, inevitably, before some figure of authority informed me that although it might be acceptable to wear a religious symbol at Lancing, a political badge was against the rules. Any sensible person would surely have left it at that, removed the badge and thought no more of it, but being already, at any early age, a self-righteous idiot, I dispatched a letter at once to *Peace News*, the journal of nuclear disarmament, to complain that a leading public school – it was 'leading' when it suited my purposes, 'minor' when it didn't – was practising a vile form of censorship by forbidding pupils to display evidence of their deepest convictions. To my amazement, *Peace News* not only published my letter but also responded by offering immediately to send down an investigative reporter to give more comprehensive coverage to this obvious outrage.

Even I could see that this was probably not a good idea. It did not take long for my anonymity to be unmasked. For the first time at Lancing, I was summoned to the headmaster's study where I was met by William Gladstone, John Dancy's genial successor, who bewildered me by treating me not as an errant schoolboy, but as a fellow member of an unnamed club. If I had to give a name to that club, I suppose I would have to call it the establishment. That copy of *Peace News* was on the desk in front of him. He waved a hand at it. 'Yes of course you can write letters like this to the newspapers,' he said. 'But a school is a very fragile thing, you know.' He went on. 'If you like, you can go to the North Field and set fire to it. If the wind's in that right direction, the blaze will catch, and with a bit of luck you'll burn down the whole school. It isn't hard,' he said, 'to burn down a school. But we have this convention, you see. The convention is that we don't burn it down. Now could you please not write to the papers again?'

There are so many unexpected assumptions in that short speech that even after 45 years it is quite a challenge to unpack that. But at the time the most striking revelation for me was that any British institution, least of all my school, should think of itself as vulnerable. How could a single letter to a campaigning rag with a tiny circulation do the slightest harm? In my youth and ignorance, I had imagined that all British hierarchies – the stock exchange, the monarchy, the private education system, the established church – thought of themselves as strong and indestructible. It has never occurred to me they didn't.

By coincidence, I have found myself recently writing the screen-play for a film set partly in a German university in the same period, and I have had to explain to young actors just how earnestly we debated everything in the 60s. Anyone brought up in the last twenty years is used to pliant consensus. So many people in the West now take it for granted that oil-fired consumer capitalism in its exact present form will continue as it is, it seems inconceivable we might gather together to discuss the means by which the present system will be either superseded or overthrown. The result is an enfeebled public discourse in which jokes, irony, side-swipes, personal bitterness and little sallies are all that is offered. Given the turn that history was about to take, the arguments which characterised the 60s – Can the bomb be banned? Is God dead? Will the monarchy survive? Should advertising be illegal? Will labour close down the public schools? Is socialism possible? Is there life on Mars? – may seem with hindsight markedly unrealistic, but they also belong to an era in which everything was philosophically in play.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that the framework for such debates was not practical but moral. By 1964, it had been a long time since the end of the previous Labour government. Therefore many people were asking not whether public schools would be able to survive, but whether it was good for society that they should. There are people in this room today who know far more about the history of this vexed issue than I do. But we can all agree that when Harold Wilson's government did finally arrive it was clear it had little radical fire. A far greater threat to public schools emerged in the 1980s, but it was essentially consumerist. Urgent questions were suddenly asked, but only in the bilious jargon of the day. Were private schools any longer providing the range of services parents demanded? Were they in a position to offer a brand, a difference? Were they efficient shops for learning, and if not how could they become so? In short, how could they position themselves in the educational marketplace? It seemed a long and demeaning journey from the days in which people argued not about what worked, but about what was right. What has followed under more recent Labour governments is something even worse, a basic submission to the market, but wrapped in a specious PR smear of social responsibility. 'Service to the community' has replaced 'service to the empire' as the ingratiating banner under which the public school now marches.

These days, as we know, the higher nonsense of New Labour dictates that the form an education take must be determined by the parents' fabled freedom to choose, rather than imposed by a bunch of teachers who claim to

know what's best. And yet looking back on my own education, my most interesting lessons all came out of this rich confusion about what kind of school Lancing wanted to be. Certainly non-syllabus trips to the theatre were one of our greatest luxuries. The second of my three memorable incidents happened on a visit to the Theatre Royal, Brighton. For months we had been looking forward to it. First Edinburgh and then London, we understood, had been shaken to revolutionary laughter by an Oxbridge sketch-show called *Beyond the Fringe*, which was credited with inventing an entire new genre of entertainment called satire. We had all bought the LP – the cover showed four cheeky fellows doing what I later learned was called gurning. We had spent hours perfecting our imitations of Alan Bennett's vicar. Now the touring version – not the original, naturally – was coming to Brighton.

It was our English teacher Donald Bancroft's inspiration to take his A-level class to see it, and yet it was also Donald who hated it most. He took particular objection to a sketch which we regarded as the most brilliant. It was essentially a skit on the stiff upper lip. In it a young RAF flyer, played on the record by Jonathan Miller, is told that he must go back to war on a doomed venture, in which he is likely to be killed, because, in the words of his commanding officer, 'We need a futile gesture at this point.' 'Goodbye.' says the young man, 'or is it *au revoir*?' 'No,' the commanding officer replies, 'It's good-bye.' Donald came out of the theatre fuming, puffing angrily at his pipe and complaining that the whole evening had been a bitter disappointment. In particular the war sketch had demonstrated the utter ignorance and ingratitude of the young, whose lives had been saved by the selfless sacrifices of their parents. He turned to me darkly. 'I don't think you lot would have done any better...'

Again, for a second time, I was encountering generational attitudes which ran so deep it seemed almost impertinent to challenge them. But this time I was ready with an answer. The sketch, I pointed out, was called *Aftermyth of War*. What was being satirised was not the behaviour of brave men and women, but the ridiculous myths that had grown up after the war about the tenor of that behaviour. A whole film industry had been created peddling a notion of the British phlegmatically sleepwalking their way through what we all knew had, in fact, been six years of violence and death. Kenneth More, John Mills and Richard Todd had all perfected the art of muttering 'Hello, old girl' when, back from battle, they were reunited with their dogs or with their women. Lower orders were confined to saluting and cheerily inquiring 'Permission to win the war, sir?' Leading actors had ascended to a peculiarly domestic stardom on the back of a travesty: the suggestion that there could ever be such a thing as war which is moving without being upsetting. We were telling ourselves lies. It was high time, I said, that someone had come along to point out the huge divide between reality and fiction.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that, at this point, Donald literally had no idea what I was talking about. Here, beside me, walking back to the bus, was a man who could pick his way through an alexandrine or a sonnet with a forensic skill which regularly enlightened a class-full of callow pupils. He was, and remained until his death at the age of 81 in 1995, a far cleverer person

than me. Yet faced with a parody which impinged on his own experience, it was as if his discernment fell away. This punctilious Northerner could not see past his own value-system even to identify correctly the target of the satire. There were times, I realised, when the stupid man can see more clearly than the clever.

It was on that evening that I began to discern the extent of any individual's investment in the story they tell themselves about their own past, and to wonder in what, exactly, I would invest myself one day. It was the first time I understood the degree to which human beings live off a reef of conviction which grows up in them like a continental shelf. As it happened, my own modest prosperity as a playwright would follow on my being among the first writers seriously to re-interpret British attitudes in World War Two. When, fifteen years later, I wrote a television play *Licking Hitler*, the story of a black propaganda wireless station deep in the English countryside, and its companion piece, *Plenty*, the study of a heroic SOE agent's disillusionment with post-war Britain, I became known as the sort of person who might be invited onto *Desert Island Discs* to talk about their schooldays. In both stories I was suggesting that no war, however virtuous in its intentions, could ever be morally simple. But, implicitly, tribute was also being paid to a generation who had been forced to find answers to rather demanding questions than the ones which troubled our own.

I referred earlier to a more relaxed, individualistic style of teaching which began to gain ground at Lancing while I was there. No-one embodied that style more than Harry Guest. In his French and German lessons we were hearing names – Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Sartre, Camus, Brecht – which were not the staples of a traditional High Anglican education. If I could rid the word of its fatuous connotations, I would call Harry an aesthete, a man for whom there was nothing more important in life than art. Part of the spell he cast was by dressing more like a human being than a teacher – no leather patches on Harry's elbows, no panama hats. Even more, he had a special gift for treating his pupils as equals, never assuming that our inner lives were any less rich, vital or developed than his own. It was this assumption – that we were complete people who happened to be younger, and who would therefore be concerned, as Harry was, to keep abreast with any fast-breaking developments from Paris in existentialism – that led him to invite a few of us to dinner one night. Thus it was in Harry's flat above a shop in a modern parade in Shoreham that the third of my illuminating incidents took place.

The full transit of the evening is lost to me – who was there, what we ate – but I have a vivid image of Harry's fiancée Lynn, glamorous in a short black skirt, with black tights. At a certain point, Harry had pulled down a book from a shelf. It was a paperback copy of *The Death of Tragedy* by George Steiner. Even today, since the celebrated literary scholar is still alive, the laws of libel will prevent me from quoting Harry in full, least of all from memory – but sufficient to say, it was clear that Harry did not feel Steiner had written a very good book. Indeed, as the meal went on, the egregious badness of the book seemed to consume him. 'How can anyone take this seriously?' he kept asking. We kept eating. I had noticed as he took it down that Harry's copy was

already ominously disfigured, both with scrawling in the margin and with thick black lines through whole paragraphs of Steiner's prose. But certainly by the time pudding came, and perhaps a certain amount of red wine had gone down, Harry was becoming more and more agitated. 'This book,' Harry said, 'is taken seriously. It's taken seriously. And it's full of school-boy howlers. Referring to Shakespeare's *King Lear* Steiner writes of the blinded Lear standing on what he believes to be the cliffs of Dover, and falling. And yet everyone *knows*' – Harry climaxed with tremendous emphasis – 'every schoolboy *knows* it was not King Lear who was blinded, it was Gloucester. How can *anyone* take seriously a book which confuses King Lear with the Duke of Gloucester?' At this, Harry did two things I have never forgotten. He took the book and threw it violently into the wastepaper basket. At the same moment, he burst into tears.

It was certainly one of the most striking moments of my young life – striking, because so unexpected. It had simply never occurred to me that such passion might be possible. Fair enough, Donald Bancroft had been a man upset about a war. But Harry Guest was a man upset about a book. There was complete and utter silence round the table, the rest of us sitting lost for how to react. Lynn threw an arm round him, and consoled her intended like a baby. 'It's all right,' she kept saying, 'It's all right, it doesn't matter.' Harry's glasses had steamed up. He took them off because he was still crying. He said that it wasn't all right, it *did* matter, these things were important, and if writers couldn't be bothered to get the smallest things right, why should anyone pay them any attention when they moved on to the larger?

I might, if I had been smarter, have taken this evening as a sort of presentiment. I might have realised that I was, like a ship, being slid down the slipway into waters I would come to know very well. Harry was a poet. How could I foresee that I myself would end up writing professionally and that I would therefore spend the rest of my days among people who took books, plays and films incredibly seriously? My play, *Amy's View*, written in 1997, and played by Judi Dench both in London and in New York, somewhat makes mock of such intensity by dramatising a disastrous family row about art between a painter's widow and the media-minded fashionable young man who has married her daughter. Their tumultuous arguments about what is beautiful and what is true are interrupted by their next door neighbour, an insurance agent from Lloyds, who is perplexed that anyone cares. Trying to calm things down, he points out that he has himself, he says, not seen a film since *Dr Zhivago*. He thought it was pretty good. But if he happened to meet someone who didn't think *Dr Zhivago* was a good film, he really couldn't see himself getting into much of a state about it.

The Christian faction at the Lancing of my youth would have said that we were indeed entering a world where feelings, which ought to run high about religion, were instead being allowed to run high about apparently less important things, like politics, sport and art. As Stefan Zweig records in his autobiography, mass sports stadia only began to spring up in the first years of the Twentieth Century on the fringes of cities where churches and synagogues were beginning to empty. A whole set of human values were being required to carry

the load once carried by faith. In his most provocative crack, T S Eliot once remarked that 'If you will not have God... you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin'. It seems to me a deeply unworthy joke from someone of whom you might have expected better, but nevertheless it's also clear that, in my life-time, arguments about values have indeed been displaced. Sometimes it seems we don't quite know how to argue and we don't quite know what to argue about. That's why I've loved the theatre, the place which, for me, gives expression and shape to all our contradictions. Yet, at the end, it was a devout Christian, my housemaster Patrick Halsey, who finished off my schooldays by doing more or less the most unexpected thing you could imagine of any schoolmaster of the period. Patrick decided personally to drive me and a fellow pupil called David Ransom in his Humber Snipe all the way across Germany, to see Dachau.

Again, it will be hard to explain to anyone who did not live through the immediate post-war period quite how radical a venture this was. When I planned to write *Via Dolorosa*, my play about a visit to Israel and the Palestinian territory, one-time inmates of the camps explained to me that their first feeling about having survived was one of shame. Their immediate reaction through the 50s and 60s had been to fall silent, because they felt so rebuked by the fact that they had come through and their comrades had not. They felt undeserving. Being in a camp was not something you boasted about, nor indeed, in Israel, was it anything most of your fellow-citizens were interested in. The new country was building a new and better future for the Jews. Understandably, it didn't want to look back. The result was a curious, almost universal reticence about what had gone on. When Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, surely the definitive literary work about life in the camps, was first published after the war, most of the 2,500 copies printed mouldered in a warehouse. In fact, it was only 25 years later, in the 1970s, with the rise of a new generation in Europe and in the Middle East, that gradually the victims began at last to feel less intimidated, to feel free to talk openly about the unimaginable.

In the 30s Patrick Halsey had driven Lancing schoolboys to Germany to see the rise of Hitler. Now in the 60s he was driving Lancing schoolboys to see the consequences. The best instruction is the most accidental. When I later became a theatre director, charged with helping actors to say the lines in my plays and the plays of others, I would learn very quickly that anything an actor discovered for him – or herself was 50 times more valuable and better rooted than anything I endeavoured to plant by tuition. Thus, Patrick's trip with his young charges was deliberately various. We took in many sights. We went to Berchtesgaden, to walk through Hitler's den in the mountains. We went up the Moselle for the wine festival. We travelled down the long plain of what was then Yugoslavia to visit Dubrovnik. From Istanbul, we sailed on the Bosphorus. Patrick trusted us to sort out for ourselves to which of these experiences we should give the most emphasis. Dachau was, on the day we went, not particularly busy. Probably there were twenty or 30 visitors, including a few who chose to attend every day of the week in memory of family who had died there. The displays were simple but harrowing. Afterwards, we said little. But even then, on that remarkable day, I felt an

intense respect for a schoolmaster who believed that a contemporary education would not be complete unless a boy from Sussex saw at first hand one of the principal sites where European civilisation had turned to barbarism.

'What did God send his son for? Why didn't he come himself?' is a question which Evelyn Waugh confessed to having found unanswerable at Lancing. I found many such. I arrived at the school with an average degree of confidence and conviction, and left with a good deal less. I don't resent this. On the contrary, I mislaid my early religious beliefs, and have never, to this day, been disposed to recover them. If the effect of Lancing was to water the roots of doubt, then I would regard it as a school which was pretty much in tune with the times. I was drawn, certainly, to friendship with other boys if I recognised in them a self-certainty I lacked. But I was also deeply confused by the degree to which I did, or didn't, desire to give my loyalty to an institution. Lancing, a clubbish school, offered pupils the role of insider, or the role of rebel. It wasn't so good at offering much in between. I loved the solidarity of belonging, but at the same time I resented its necessary stupidities, and my inchoate anger prevented me from being seen to enjoy myself too much. The desultory romance of being a loner appealed to me, and the compromises involved in identifying with others sometimes seemed too much. Besides, those others weren't always so keen to befriend me, anyway. One way or another, I was setting off on a profession whose essence is its unrelieved loneliness. Sometimes the decision to write has found me sympathising with the German mercenary von Frundsberg who coined the notorious phrase 'Viel Feinde, viel Ehre' – Many enemies, much honour.

Everyone knows the English educational system is cock-eyed: over-privileged schools you pay for, and under-privileged schools you don't. Nobody setting out equitably to educate a nation's youth would start from here. Thanks to my teachers, I was given an extraordinary broad and sympathetic access to culture. But my thirteen terms at Lancing also persuaded me that culture was deeply mixed up in politics. By the time I moved on to Cambridge, I was raring to be taught by Marxists. Oddly, the education university offered me was not a patch on the one I had received at my school. My chief subject was English literature, and at school my time was spent learning. Enlightenment was sought through the accumulation of knowledge. At university, it was to be acquired through the exercise of judgement. Yet I quickly noticed that many of my teachers' own judgements were spiteful. Literary criticism, then as now, seemed to consist of a litany of complaints about the ways in which literature failed to measure up to the imagined high standards of the critic. The purpose of literary criticism was to draw attention to artistic failings. Nearly every writer you could name was being given the withering John Dancy treatment. Milton, Blake, Pope, Wordsworth were all told by Cambridge critics in no uncertain terms 'Go back, try harder, do more. *You're letting me down.*' Instead of inquiring into literature, as we had at Lancing, to see what we might find there, it felt as if we were now being taught to resent it, to see art only as the inevitable falling short of minds and sensibilities less fine, less discerning than our own. Not only was I repelled by the snobbishness of the activity, I was also overwhelmed by its utter pointlessness. We can all invent criteria of performance to which no-one can realistically aspire. It isn't difficult.

Cambridge taught me one thing only: how easy it is to judge, how hard to create. As Ted Hughes later observed, you could only come out of Cambridge University a creative writer by 'scrambling through the barbed wire and the camp searchlights'. For better or worse, I resolved to scramble.

In sum, then, this is the paradox: Lancing College, as it was in the 60s, was a place which, in its heart, would have liked to retain a previous social order. Patrick Halsey summoned his house prefects downstairs in their slippers and pyjamas to watch the ridiculous Alec Douglas-Home being thrown out of Downing Street on his black and white telly, and asked us whether we didn't feel the slightest trace of sympathy for this noble Etonian of an earlier age. The answer was a raspberry. But Lancing was also alert enough to sense that the country was heading towards social and cultural change. The Beatles were already coming over the horizon. Compared with the intellectual snobbery I would encounter at Cambridge – the competitive desire always to be seen as cleverer, meaner and altogether smarter than the next person – the social snobbery endemic in a system of private education would come to seem if not harmless, at least more available to mockery. The country's social structure would prove robust. By the end of the decade, you might still command wealth, position and power by the fortune of your birth. The alteration was this: you would no longer command respect.

'My education,' wrote Evelyn Waugh, 'was the preparation for one trade only; that of an English prose writer'. My own was good only to make me a playwright. But in my case, the circumstances were very different. For popular culture was waiting around the corner. An immense impulse of energy would come up during the 60s, as always from below, and give voice, in song, on stage, on film and on television to sections of society from which we had not recently heard, and almost never authentically. Within a few years I would be rattling round the county in a Volkswagen van taking a small, subversive theatre group out on the road to the furthestmost and unlikeliest places we could find. I would be introduced to a Britain of which I knew nothing. In an artistic movement of real breadth and some vitality, I was one of the few participants who had been to a public school. In the main, I knew I'd been lucky. But then why spit on your luck?