WAR AND PACIFISM

Michael Wilding

Back in England back in time, a memory theatre of growing up there, all the struggles and resistances after the new world sense of freedom, back to accent, class, place.

How far back do you want to go? How much childhood do you want to read? Running across the road in front of a convoy of tanks. A childhood of wartime: though not of war. It wasn't an episode I ever remembered myself, though I was told about it a few times. A few times: it didn't have the status of myth, nothing had the status of myth. My father's favourite book of the *Bible* was *Ecclesiastes*. It was not a good basis for parental support in the material world of capitalism red in tooth and claw. All is vanity. Myth a lie. Success unattainable, or if attained evanescent, corrupted. My father's favourite hymn was 'The day that thou madest, Lord, is ended. The darkness falls at thy behest.' We waited for the darkness. It always came.

'It was my gesture of opposing war,' I used to say, later, in my CND days. The war was remote. It hadn't impinged on us in its violence. I would hurtle down the garden path and scurry into the house when flights of aircraft came low overhead, off to bomb Coventry, or to intercept the bombers. Later I would hurtle out of the house to try and read the registration numbers on the wings or fuselage. But that was after the war. We used to get booklets that had lists of all the serial numbers of Midland Red buses, one after the other. When we saw a bus we would underline the serial number in the book. We tried collecting aircraft serial numbers too, but it wasn't often they flew low enough to read the registrations. I tried to compile my own master list, the registration of every aircraft that had ever flown. I had the letters, all I needed were the makes and marks of the aircraft themselves. Did it count if you saw the registration in a film or television? We didn't have television or often go to films. Sometimes I would see a serial number on the fuselage of an aircraft being taken by articulated lorry along the main road. Did a fragment count, a substantial fragment?

I would fly myself to bed at night, taking off from the dining room table in a twin-engined Dinky, vroom vroom, climb up the stairs, bank round the landing, land in the bathroom, refuelling stop while I cleaned my teeth, then take off again from the ceramic shelf beneath the mirror, off to bed.

For a while the prisoners of war had hoed in the fields at the back of the house, thin, stooped men in ill-matched clothes, hoeing away amidst the stones and crops.

My father had been too young for the first world war and too old for the second. And he was working in a protected industry, old enough for that, leaving school at twelve. And there was a strong anti-militarist spirit in the family. My grandfather had refused to work Saturdays during the first world war because, at that point, he was a Seventh Day Adventist, which took some sticking out, my father said, not working on Saturday in the war. So there was a generally anti-war line. When it came to joining the school cadet force, one of the rites of puberty, I said I wasn't going to.

'Why not?' my father said.

'I'm a pacifist.'

There was a book in the house, *Vain Glory*, about the slaughter of the first world war, and I would read it to fuel my stand. It was a stand my parents were not very sympathetic to. This on top of trying to evade school games all the time. I was a bit torn. I would have liked to have gone into the airforce cadets and spotted aircraft. But you had to go though the army cadets first. Doing drill in the playground Friday afternoon, blancoing belts, brassoing buckles. There wasn't much pressure. 'I'm against militarism,' I explained to the commanding officer.

'Well, I'm not sure joining the corps is militarism.'

'I think it is,' I said.

I was drafted to the gardening squad, weeding the flowerbeds outside the headmaster's Georgian house. It was a predominantly lower-class crew. Not high-minded idealists there, I was sad to find out. Not the sensitive poets writing critiques of the system, but C-stream boys from working class families, not the aristocracy of labour but the resistant, sceptical, cynical non-collaborators, skivers, dodgers, idlers, those who refused to do a decent day's work, those who did not take on the school spirit, a work gang of the marginalized, the malingerers, the delinquent, not officer-material. Had I really thought it would have put me with the idealists given belated recognition and carved in marble and lain in shrines?

Then I was plucked out of the gardening squad and seconded to the school secretary. There were a couple of other boys from the year ahead in the same position. They worked the duplicating machine.

'The machine gun of the revolution,' said Gordon.

They ran off documents the secretary gave them, put on stencils, loaded the ink tubes, wiped down the machine. They made inventories of the book store. Locked away in it, Gordon would take in hand my political education, his glasses dropping down his button nose and pushed back up again with his forefinger as he giggled at some administrative absurdity in the school.

I wasn't trying to be an outsider. I wanted to be loved, respected, accepted. I did the tasks efficiently. I proof-read the school prize-giving program. First step into applied literary ability, first participation in the machinery of literary production. I found that the school's motto, *sperno mutare*, 'I spurn to change', had been printed *spermo mutare*, so I corrected it and felt proud of detecting error in an official document and of satisfactorily fixing it up for authority.

'Damn,' said Gordon, unpacking the bundles of prize-giving programs. 'They noticed.'

'They couldn't have,' said John.

'Noticed what?' I asked.

'We changed the motto last year but they've gone and changed it back again. We thought we'd introduced a bit of obscenity for at least a decade. Spermo mutare is so much more suggestive, don't you think?'

I blushed.

'Oh, we didn't know you were so sensitive.'

I blushed easily. But I said nothing. I felt stupid. I tried to persuade myself I'd done the right thing, correcting error, minutely scrutinizing for mistakes. But I felt stupid. I was not a natural anarchist though I was beginning to recognize the appeals of subversion. I felt negative, reactive, undoing the achievements of the creative imagination. And I felt guilty, not admitting that I was the one who had made the change. But I couldn't admit it, I would look so stupid and puritanical and conformist. I could imagine Gordon's reaction: 'You should apply for late admission into the army corps. You're missing your vocation here.'

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