

At least, along with a group of fellow odd men out at Magdalen, I thought I was so. We formed a small club called *Les Hommes Révoltés*, drank very dry sherry, and (as a protest against those shabby duffel-coated last years of the 'forties) wore dark-grey suits and black ties for our meetings. There we argued about being and nothingness and called a certain kind of inconsequential behaviour 'existentialist'. Less enlightened people would have called it capricious or just plain selfish; but we didn't understand that the heroes, or anti-heroes, of the French existentialist novels we read were not supposed to be realistic. We tried to imitate them, mistaking metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling for straightforward prescriptions of behaviour. We duly felt the right anguishes. Most of us, true to the eternal dandyism of Oxford, simply wanted to look different. In our club, we did.

I acquired expensive habits and affected manners. I got a third-class degree and a first-class illusion: that I was a poet. But nothing could have been less poetic than my seeing-through-all boredom with life in general and with making a living in particular. I was too green to know that all cynicism masks a failure to cope – an impotence, in short; and that to despise all effort is the greatest effort of all. But I did absorb a small dose of one permanently useful thing, Oxford's greatest gift to civilized life: Socratic honesty. It showed me, very intermittently, that it is not enough to revolt against one's past. One day I was outrageously bitter among some friends about the Army; back in my own rooms later it suddenly struck me that just because I said with impunity things that would have apoplexed my dead father, I was still no less under his influence. The truth was I was not a cynic by nature; only by revolt. I had got away from what I hated, but I hadn't found where I loved, and so I pretended that there was nowhere to love.

Handsomely equipped to fail, I went out into the world. My father hadn't kept Financial Prudence among his armoury of essential words; he ran a ridiculously large account at Ladbroke's and his mess bills always reached staggering proportions, because he liked to be popular and in place of charm had to dispense alcohol. What remained of his money when the lawyers and the tax men had had their share yielded not nearly enough for me to live on. But every kind of job I looked at – the Foreign Service, the Civil, the Colon

the banks, commerce, advertising – was transpierceable at a glance. I went to several interviews. Since I didn't feel obliged to show the eager enthusiasm our world expects from the young executive, I was successful at none.

In the end, like countless Oxford men before me, I answered an advertisement in *The Times Educational Supplement*. I went to the place, a minor public school in East Anglia; was cursorily scrutinized, then offered the post. I learnt later that there were only two other applicants, both Redbrick, and term was beginning in three weeks.

The mass-produced middle-class boys I had to teach were bad enough; the claustrophobic little town was a nightmare; but the really intolerable thing was the common-room. It became almost a relief to go into class. Boredom, the numbing annual predictability of life, hung over the staff like a cloud. And it was real boredom, not my modish ennui. From it flowed cant, hypocrisy, and the impotent rage of the old who know they have failed and the young who suspect they will fail. The senior masters stood like gallows sermons; with some of them one had a sort of vertigo, a glimpse of the bottomless pit of human futility ... or so I began to feel during my second term.

I could not spend my life crossing such a Sahara; and the more I felt it the more I felt also that the smug, petrified school was a toy model of the entire country and that to quit the one and not the other would be ridiculous. There was also a girl I was tired of.

My resignation, I would see the school year out, was accepted with resignation. The headmaster briskly supposed from my vague references to a personal restlessness that I wanted to go to America or the Dominions.

'I haven't decided yet, headmaster.'

'I think we might have made a good teacher of you, Urfe. And you might have made something of us, you know. But it's too late now.'

'I'm afraid so.'

'I don't know if I approve of all this wandering off abroad. My advise is, don't go. However ... *vous l'avez voulu, Georges Danton. Vous l'avez voulu.*'

The misquotation was typical.

It poured with rain the day I left. But I was filled with excitement,