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There is, I suppose, a sort of confessional in having your portrait painted. You heightened it, of course, by making us go through the gruelling business of selecting a book or an object to express ourselves. I chose Thomas Mann's 'Tonio Kroger', partly out of desperation, but, as Mann says, once you have an idea you see it expressed everywhere. There are certainly parallels to be drawn with Tonio's visit to the studio of Lisaweta Iwanowna.

The twentieth century is hell to live in, Tonio Kroger might have said. We have moved from a time when there was a personal meaning, often a transcendental meaning, to peoples' lives, and a defined role, into what? Man alone. Every man his own genius. Nothing has meaning. Instead of the individualism of the great Renaissance scholars we have the narcissism of the twentieth century: self actualisation through ever-expanding horizons. As for the transcendental: man is alone facing the void. Run for cover in some pseudo-science, mysticism or freaky religion!

And what do we make of education in such a situation? By education, I mean the introduction of children to the world, not that small bit encapsulated in institutions. Look around. Education is in crisis, certainly in the western world. What have we taught the young I see around me on holiday in Europe? One thing is clear: we have taught the British least.

For many it appears that the meaning of leisure is the opportunity for vandalism and personal destruction. They have been taught competition of the crudest sort: my self, my team, my nation can win by status, aggression, violence, and destruction. Knowledge is what can be measured by examinations which give us no credit for what we know, only take marks off for what we don't know. And then what? If you're young you join the unemployed sooner or later. If you're old you're thrown away on the scrap-heap of redundancy; never mind your skills and your flexibility as a human being. Life becomes a meaningless system, a system which values growth over sufficiency, novelty over value, a system which values people the nearer they can become to machines: be an ice-dancer, a gymnast or a synchronised swimmer! Or flee into drugs and alcohol.

But I am not a nihilist, so what am I to do?

There is an alternative, which is not a dogma, but one which is practised by so few, and understood by fewer. Turn the world on its head, away from systems, and start from people. Not the naive assumption that everyone is naturally good: we have moved on since Rousseau. But the assumption that, given reasonable circumstances, most people wish to be reasonable. Oppose the fragmentation of knowledge, of people, of societies with wholeness. Instead of uniformity in education let us evolve coherent views. Instead of the democracy of the right and left, which says that if I can muster one more vote than you I win all the rights, let us practice participation by people who are prepared to associate freely and co-operate to promote positive personal growth in a social context. Let us come to accept the 'otherness' of other people and seek the good in them.

But all this assumes a personal involvement and a smallness of scale which runs counter to the prevailing orthodoxy. Having spent more than 20 years in an independent school which has tried to practice this belief in promoting the integrity and self-sufficiency of human beings, I am saddened by our lack of impact on the larger world of education. Our freedoms were not those of the 1960s permissives, but we have been so confused with them that we are now branded as living in the past, when in fact we are pointing to possibly the only hope for the future. But attempts to carry this message into the wider world have come to nothing: we remain a minority to be destroyed at will by the cynical, sensational press. It is Yeats' vision:

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity."

And so I come back to Tonio Kroger: that longing to be part of life and yet seeing it for what it is and knowing that there is something better.

"I stand between two worlds. I am at home in neither and I suffer in consequence. You artists call me a bourgeois and the bourgeois try to arrest me ... I don't know which makes me feel worse."

You painted me looking sceptical and pained. You were right.