

Act Two

Irwin is about five years older and in a wheelchair; he is talking to camera.

Irwin If you want to learn about Stalin study Henry VIII.
If you want to learn about Mrs Thatcher study Henry VIII.
VIII.
If you want to know about Hollywood study Henry VIII.

MUSIC and video sequence.

This is Rievaulx Abbey and this vertiginous trench is its main latrine.

It is a sad fact that whatever the sublimity and splendour of the ruins of our great abbeys to the droves of often apathetic visitors the monastic life only comes alive when contemplating its toilet arrangements. (*He coughs and stops.*)

The Director comes on in outdoor gear, so that it's plain this is being filmed.

Director Are you okay?

Irwin Fine.

Director Sounding a tad schoolmasterly. Touch of the Mr Quelches. Smile-in-the-voice time, you know?

Irwin Yes?

Director Pick it up from 'the monastic life'.

Irwin The monastic life only comes alive when contemplating its toilet arrangements.

Not monks stumbling down the night stairs at three in the morning to sing the first office of the day; not the sound of prayer and praise unceasing sent heavenwards from altar and cell; no, what fires the popular imagination is stuff from the rerodotter plopping twenty feet into the drains.

God is dead. Shit lives.

Wanting toilet paper, or paper of any description, the monks used to wipe their bottoms on scraps of fabric . . . linen, muslin, patches of tapestry even, which presumably they would rinse and rinse again before eventually discarding them. Some of these rags survive, excavated from the drains into which they were dropped five hundred years ago and more, and here now find themselves exhibited in the abbey museum.

The patron saint here, whose bones were buried at Rievaulx, was Aelfred. And it is conceivable that one of these ancient arsewipes was actually used by the saint. Which at that time would have made it a relic, something at which credulous pilgrims would come to gaze.

But what are these modern-day pilgrims gazing at but these same ancient rags, hallowed not by saintly usage, it's true, but by time . . . and time alone? They are old and they have survived. And there is an increment even in excrement, so sanitised by the years and sanctified, too, they have become relics in their own right . . . and more pilgrims come now to see them and these other remains than ever came in the age of faith.

We are differently credulous and our cults are not the same but saner, wiser, more rational . . .
(*He stumbles again.*) I think not.

Sorry.

Director Not like you.

You're sure you're okay?

Irwin Fine.

Director Let's take five.

Irwin wheels himself back to someone who has been watching.

Irwin Familiar?

Man Some of it.

Irwin Meretricious, of course, but that's nothing new.

Man I've forgotten what meretricious means.

Irwin Eye-catching, showy; false.

Man But you were a good teacher.

Irwin The meretricious often are . . . on television particularly.

The wheelchair helps, of course.

Disability brings with it an assumption of sincerity.

Pause.

I hope they're paying you well.

Whose idea was it?

Man I have a counsellor. She thought it would help.

Irwin What happened at Oxford?

Man Cambridge.

It didn't work out.

Irwin I think I heard that.

Man All the effort went into getting there and then I had nothing left. I thought I'd got somewhere, then I found I had to go on.

Pause.

About the money, my counsellor said that if I was paid for it, that would be therapeutic.

Irwin I'm surprised anyone's interested.

It's not much of a story.

Man You're a celebrity. It doesn't have to be.

Irwin And did you write it yourself?

Man Yes. Well, I talked to someone from the paper.

You come out of it very well.

Irwin And Hector?

The Man says nothing.

Man I didn't say anything about you and Dakin.

Irwin Nothing happened between me and Dakin.

Man I think it did.

Irwin No. It's not true.

Man You used to say that wasn't important.

Pause.

You liked him.

Irwin says nothing.

I wondered if you wanted to talk about it.

Irwin Why? Nothing happened.

Man He liked you . . . didn't he?

Tell me, sir. I need to know.

Irwin Why? Why?

Pause.

Are you miked?

Man says nothing.

You're miked, aren't you?

Jesus.
How did you come to this?

Man They won't print it unless you say something.

Irwin Good.

Man It's a chance to tell your side of the story.

Irwin There is no story.

Man You don't want to seem like Hector.

Irwin I wasn't like Hector.

Now fuck off.

I must return to the world of Henry VIII. It suddenly seems almost cosy.

He is wheezing himself away.

Director Ready?

Man Sir.

Would you sign your book?

He has a book written by Irwin open.

Irwin shakes his head but takes the book.

Irwin Whom shall I put it to?

Man Me. David.

Irwin I never called you David. I called you Posner.

I'll put 'To Posner', if that doesn't seem unfriendly. Which it is.

Posner (*appealing*) Sir.

The make-up assistant bushes Posner away. Irwin shakes his head again and goes back into the light.

Irwin Okay.

Director I'll cue you.

Irwin's Voice We are differently credulous and our cults are not the same . . . but saner, wiser, more rational . . . I think not.

Irwin Ours is an easier faith. Where they revered sanctity we reverence celebrity; they venerated strenuous piety; we venerate supine antiquity. In our catechism old is good, older is better, ancient is best with a bonus on archaeology because it's the closest history comes to shopping.

Whatever we tell ourselves, things matter to us more than people. Not the scattering of communities or the tortments of the martyrs or the putting of an end to prayer, no, what shocks us today about the Dissolution is the loss of things. Which, since monasticism originated in a flight from things, is something of an irony. So that you could say that it was at the moment of the Dissolution that the monasteries came closest to the ideals of their foundation and that it was thanks to the villain Henry VIII that the monasteries achieved their purpose and their apotheosis.

A silence.

Director Lovely. Though we're still not sure about apotheosis.

Irwin It is BBC2.

Classroom.

Hector is in sombre and distracted mood.

Posner (*young*) 'Apotheosis: a perfect example of its type. Moment of highest fulfilment.'

Hector is miles away.

Sir. Apotheosis. Moment of highest fulfilment.

Hector Oh yes. Very good, dictionary person.

Now. Can I have your attention. I . . . I have something I have to . . . tell you.

Pause.

Akthar We know, sir.

Hector Oh.

Dakin About sharing lessons with Mr Irwin, sir?

Hector Ah.

Lockwood Why is that, sir?

Hector That?

Oh. It's just a question of timetable, apparently.

No. What I was going to tell you . . .

Lockwood What's the point, sir?

Your lessons are so different from his.

The whole ethos is different, sir.

Timms And we relish the contrast, sir.

Growther Revel in it, sir.

Lockwood Yin and yang, sir.

Akthar The rapier cut and thrust, sir.

Timms It's all about variety, sir.

Hector Hush, boys. Hush. Sometimes . . . sometimes you defeat me.

Dakin Oh no, sir. If we wanted to defeat you we would be like Cordelia and say nothing.

Hector Can't you see I'm not in the mood?

Dakin What mood is that, sir? The subjunctive? The mood of possibility? The mood of might-have-been?

Hector Get on with some work. Read.

Lockwood Read, sir? Oh come on, sir. That's no fun.

Akthar Boring.

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Hector Am I fun? Is that what I am?

Timms Not today, sir. No fun at all.

Hector Is that what you think these lessons are? Fun?

Lockwood But fun is good, sir.

You always say . . .

Posner Not just fun, sir.

Akthar (*pointing at Posner*) Would you like him to sing to you, sir? Would that help?

Hector Shut up! Just shut up. All of you.

SHUT UP, you mindless fools.

What made me piss my life away in this god-forsaken place? There's nothing of me left. Go away. Class dismissed. Go.

He puts his head down on the desk.

There are some giggles and face-pullings before they realise it's serious.

Now they're nonplussed and embarrassed.

Scriptps indicates to Dakin that Hector is crying.

Scriptps is nearest to him and ought to touch him,

but doesn't, nor does Dakin.

Posner is the one who comes and after some

hesitation pats Hector rather awkwardly on the back,

saying, 'Sir.'

Then he starts, still very awkwardly, to rub his back.

Scriptps I was the nearest. I ought to have been the one to reach out and touch him. But I just watched.

Dakin did nothing either. Neither of us did.

He looks at Dakin, who looks away.

Later I wrote it all down.

Hector sits up and blows his nose loudly.

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Hector I don't know what all that was about, I'm sure. Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail. I am an old man in a dry season. Enough.

The boys are still a bit abashed.

Timms These two have got something to cheer you up, sir.

Dakin Oh yes. A film, sir.

Hector Oh, a film. Goody goody. And twenty-three pounds in the kitty!

Dakin (*indicating Scripps*) He's the woman, sir.

Hector Off you go.

Francesca (Scripps) is playing Beethoven's 'Pathétique' Sonata on the piano. James Mason (Dakin), her guardian, limps to the piano.

Dakin Francesca. You belong to me. We must always be together. You know that, don't you? Promise you'll stay with me always. Promise.

She slowly shakes her head.

Very well. If that's the way you want it. If you won't play for me, you shan't play for anybody ever again.

He brings his stick down across her fingers on the keyboard. She shrieks and rushes sobbing from the room.

Hector If I say Greig's Piano Concerto?

Dakin/Scripps No, sir.

Hector If I say *Svengali*?

Dakin/Scripps (*beginning to congratulate themselves*)

No, sir. No.

Hector And if I say 1945, James Mason and Anne Todd in *The Seventh Veil*?

Dakin/Scripps Awww, sir!

The other boys are delighted at their failure.

Hector Pay up, pay up and play the game!

The bell goes. Hector is left, after they've all cleared, sitting at the table.

Headmaster Did he say why he was going?

Mrs Lintott More or less.

Headmaster I am surprised. I have said nothing to anyone.

As I left it he was considering his position.

I hope he will go.

Mrs Lintott He would like to stay. To work out his time. That's what I wanted to ask.

Headmaster Shall I tell you what is wrong with Hector as a teacher?

It isn't that he doesn't produce results. He does. But they are unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use. He may well be doing his job, but there is no method that I know of that enables me to assess the job that he is doing.

There is inspiration, certainly, but how do I quantify that? And he has no notion of boundaries. A few weeks ago I caught him teaching French. French!

English is his subject. And I happened to hear one child singing yesterday morning, and on enquiry I find his pupils know all the words of 'When I'm Cleaning Windows'. George Formby. And Gracie Fields. Dorothy, what has Gracie Fields got to do with anything?

So the upshot is I am glad he handled his pupils' balls because that at least I can categorise.

It is a reason for him going no one can dispute.

And I was so pleased on the night Mrs Armstrong told me she was startled to find she was the object of unaccustomed sexual interference herself. That is a measure of how pleased I was, though I shan't say that to the inspectors.

Mrs Lintott says nothing.

You didn't know. He hadn't told you why he was going?

Mrs Lintott Not that, no.

Headmaster I assumed you knew.

Mrs Lintott No.

Headmaster In which case you must keep it to yourself, both his going and the reason for it.

Mrs Lintott He handled the boys' balls?

Headmaster I don't want to spell it out. You've been married yourself, you know the form. And while on the motorbike. He, as it were, cradled them. To be fair it was I think more appreciative than investigatory but it is inexcusable nevertheless. Think of the gulf of years. And the speed! One knows that road well.

No, no. It's to everyone's benefit that he should go as soon as possible. (*He goes.*)

Mrs Lintott I have not hitherto been allotted an inner voice, my role a patient and not unamused sufferance of the predilections and preoccupations of men. They kick their particular stone along the street and I watch.

I am, it is true, confided in by all parties, my gender some sort of safeguard against the onward transmission of information . . . though that I should be assumed to be

so discreet is in itself condescending. I'm what men would call a safe pair of hands.

Irwin comes in.

Our Headmaster is a twat. An impermissible word nowadays but the only one suited to my purpose. A twat. And to go further down the same proscribed path, a condescending cunt.

Do you think Hector is a good teacher?

Irwin Yes, I suppose . . . but what do I know?

Mrs Lintott You see, I probably don't. When I was teaching in London in the seventies there was a consoling myth that not very bright children could always become artists. Drove of the half-educated left school with the notion that art or some form of self-realisation was a viable option. It's by the same well-meaning token that it's assumed still that every third person in prison is a potential Van Gogh. And love him though I do I feel there's a touch of that to Hector . . . or what's all this learning by heart for, except as some sort of insurance against the boys' ultimate failure?

Not that it matters now, one way or another.

Irwin Why? What's happened?

Mrs Lintott Nothing. (*She is going.*) Isn't this his lesson?

Irwin It is. But we're sharing, hadn't you heard?

Mrs Lintott Sharing? Whose cockeyed idea was that?
Don't tell me.
Twat, twat, twat.

Boys come in, followed by Hector. They sit glumly at their desks.

Irwin Would you like to start?

Hector I don't mind.

Irwin How do you normally start? It is your lesson. General Studies.

Hector The boys decide. Ask them.

Irwin Anybody?

The boys don't respond.

Hector Come along, boys. Don't sulk.

Dakin We don't know who we are, sir. Your class or Mr Irwin's.

Irwin Does it matter?

Timmis Oh yes, sir. It depends if you want us thoughtful. Or smart.

Hector He wants you civil, you rancid little turd. (*Hits him.*)

Timmis Look, sir. You're a witness. Hitting us, sir. He could be sacked.

Irwin Settle down. Settle down.

I thought we might talk about the Holocaust.

Hector Good gracious. Is that on the syllabus?

Irwin It has to be. The syllabus includes the Second War.

Hector I suppose it does.

Irwin Though in any case the scholarship questions aren't limited to a particular curriculum.

Hector But how can you teach the Holocaust?

Irwin Well, that would do as a question. Can you . . . should you . . . teach the Holocaust? Anybody?

Akhtar It has origins.

It has consequences.

It's a subject like any other.

Scrapps Not like any other, surely. Not like any other at all.

Akhtar No, but it's a topic.

Hector They go on school trips nowadays, don't they? Auschwitz. Dachau. What has always concerned me is where do they eat their sandwiches? Drink their coke?

Crowther The visitors' centre. It's like anywhere else.

Hector Do they take pictures of each other there? Are they smiling? Do they hold hands? Nothing is appropriate. Just as questions on an examination paper are inappropriate.

How can the boys scribble down an answer however well put that doesn't demean the suffering involved?

And putting it well demeans it as much as putting it badly.

Irwin It's a question of tone, surely. Tact.

Hector Not tact. Decorum.

Lockwood What if you were to write that this was so far beyond one's experience silence is the only proper response.

Dakin That would be your answer to lots of questions, though, wouldn't it, sir?

Hector Yes. Yes, Dakin, it would.

Dakin 'Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.'

Hector groans and puts his head in his hands.

That's right, isn't it, sir? Witgenstein.

Irwin Yes. That's good.

Hector No, it's not good. It's . . . flip. It's . . . glib. It's *journalism*.

Dakin But it's you that taught us it.

Hector I didn't teach you and Witgenstein didn't screw it out of his very guts in order for you to turn it into a dinky formula. I thought that you of all people were bright enough to see that.

Dakin I do see it, sir. Only I don't agree with it. Not . . . not any more.

Timms Sir.

Hector (*head in his hands*) Yes?

Timms You told us once . . . it was to do with the trenches, sir . . . that one person's death tells you more than a thousand. When people are dying like flies, you said, that is what they are dying like.

Posner Except that these weren't just dying. They were being processed. What is different is the process.

Irwin Good.

Hector No, not good.

Posner is not making a *point*.

He is speaking from the heart.

Dakin So? Supposing we get a question on Hitler and the Second War and we take your line, sir, that this is not a crazed lunatic but a statesman.

Hector A statesman?

Irwin Not a statesman, Dakin, a politician. I wouldn't say statesman.

Dakin Politician, then, and one erratically perhaps, but still discernibly operating within the framework of traditional German foreign policy . . .

Irwin Yes?

Dakin . . . and we go on to say, in accordance with this line, that the death camps have to be seen in the context of this policy.

Pause.

Irwin I think that would be . . . inexpedient.

Hector Inexpedient? Inexpedient?

Irwin I don't think it's true, for a start . . .

Scrapps But what has truth got to do with it? I thought that we'd already decided that for the purposes of this examination truth is, if not an irrelevance, then so relative as just to amount to another point of view.

Hector Why can you not simply condemn the camps outright as an unprecedented horror?

There is slight embarrassment.

Lockwood No point, sir. Everybody will do that.

That's the stock answer, sir . . . the camps an event unlike any other, the evil unprecedented, etc., etc.

Hector No. Can't you see that even to say etcetera is monstrous? Etcetera is what the Nazis would have said, the dead reduced to a mere verbal abbreviation.

What have we learned about language?
Orwell. Orwell.

Lockwood All right, not etcetera. But given that the death camps are generally thought of as unique, wouldn't another approach be to show what precedents there were and put them . . . well . . . in proportion?

Scripps Proportion!

Dakin Not proportion then, but putting them in context.

Posner But to put something in context is a step towards saying it can be understood and that it can be explained. And if it can be explained that it can be explained away.

Rudge 'Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.'

Hector groans.

Irwin That's good, Posner.

Posner It isn't 'good'. I mean it, sir.

Dakin But when we talk about putting them in context it's only the same as the Dissolution of the Monasteries. After all, monasteries had been dissolved before Henry VIII, dozens of them.

Posner Yes, but the difference is, I didn't lose any relatives in the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Irwin Good point.

Scripps You keep saying, 'Good point.' Not good point, sir. True. To you the Holocaust is just another topic on which we may get a question.

Irwin No. But this is history. Distance yourselves.

Our perspective on the past alters. Looking back, immediately in front of us is dead ground. We don't see it and because we don't see it this means that there is no period so remote as the recent past and one of the historian's jobs is to anticipate what our perspective of that period will be . . . even on the Holocaust.

The bell goes.

Irwin I thought that went rather well.

Hector Parrots. I thought I was lining their minds with some sort of literary insulation, proof against the primacy of fact. Instead back come my words like a Speak Your Weight Machine. 'Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.' Ugh.

Irwin I was rather encouraged. They're getting the idea.

Hector Do you know what the worst thing is? I wanted them to show off, to come up with the short answer, the handy quote. I wanted them to compete.

It's time I went.

Irwin Went where?

Dakin and Scripps come in, a touch awkwardly.

Hector Oh, home. Home.

Oh, Dakin, I've got the *Statesman* for you in the staff room.

Dakin I'll get it tomorrow, sir.

I just want to ask Mr Irwin something.

He waits until Hector goes.

We were having a discussion, sir, as to whether you are disingenuous or meretricious.

Irwin I'm flattered.

Dakin Disingenuous is insincere, not candid, having secret motives.

Meretricious is showy and falsely attractive.

We decided, sir, you were meretricious but not disingenuous.

Irwin Thank you.