

Horse and Train



This painting by Canadian artist Alex Colville, entitled *Horse and Train* has haunted my consciousness in the many decades since I first encountered it. It was inspired by a poem by a Roy Campbell, who deplored the authoritarian elements of Fascism and Communism and the horrific Apartheid policies of his own native South African Government:

I scorn the goose-step of their massed attack
And fight with my guitar slung on my back
Against a regiment I oppose a brain
And a dark horse against an armoured train.

For me, it exemplifies the rebel spirit; the often vainglorious desire to set oneself against the grain of contemporary thought and opinion.

When I look back upon my childhood, my natural wish was to conform, to be like everybody else in my peer-group. To stand out from the crowd, to not fit in, left one vulnerable to physical, psychological and emotional attack. My memories of primary school involved sitting, half-hidden, under the eaves of the main school-building with a book in my hands whilst my peers ran demented around, yelling and screaming as children are wont to do. It was never my way, though I often wished it was. I wished for a different world, a world in which I was fully accepted and I had the freedom to be who I wished to be. There was so much social messaging as to what properly constituted a boy; I never quite hit the mark.

Thus I found myself at odds with my peers, at odds with the socio-cultural environment in which I was hosted; at odds with my own person. I was hurt, confused and angry at not being equipped with the prerequisites for full participation in society. As a young man, I fought back against that society, found like-minded individuals, found causes which were hungry for eager recruits. I found ready receptacles for my righteous rage; in writing

speeches, articles and research papers denouncing the perfidious nature of society and those who sought to maintain the status quo. I comfort myself now with the knowledge that so many of those causes I fought for proved to be just and, though derided by the forces of conservatism at the time, are now accepted in the mainstream of opinion and general consensus.

However, I was never at peace; either with society at the time or, more importantly perhaps, with my own person. The violence in my nature unsettled me greatly, it contradicted my own moral values and beliefs in pacifism, a belief in finding ways to resolve conflict, without recourse to the blood-soaked pursuit of military arms. I debated this, at the time, with my fellow peers who were engaged in the causes with me. The general opinion was that the inherent violence of the State justified the violent reactions of those who opposed the State; it was a matter of self-defence.

It was a strong argument, from which I could not demur. I had seen the ugly policies of the State, I had witnessed first-hand the terrible hurt and suffering that the State had perpetrated on its subjects, often wilfully and arbitrarily, turning deaf ears or responding with derision to those voices who sought to illustrate that suffering. In the face of such a malicious and malevolent State, how else was one supposed to respond?

I sold out. I compromised. I colluded with the forces of oppression. In the end, I could not live with the violence of my activities.

Am I at peace now? If I am, then it is a quare one. Rather like the horse in the painting, I am still opposed to the forces which cause great hurt and suffering to people, but unlike the horse, I am no longer engaged actively in seeking to change opinion, to defy the actions of the State, which at times may still act perniciously against its own subjects. Of the causes that I fought for, I remain proud; I feel that history will vindicate the stance of myself and my peers in the fight. However, I accept that my actions also caused distress and hurt to people; in pursuit of the causes there were consequences for people who found themselves engaged against me. It is for others to judge whether my actions were justifiable or not.

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