

# A QUESTION OF BELIEF



John O'Loughlin

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By

**JOHN O'LOUGHLIN**

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# CONTENTS

## PREFACE

*A 'Work of Art'*

*War and Peace*

*A Question of Belief*

*Historical Perspectives*

BIOGRAPHICAL FOOTNOTE

## PREFACE

I first got the curious and even novel idea of writing a volume of dialogues from reading the French philosopher Diderot, one of the great masters of the genre, and the results, several weeks later, were four fairly lengthy philosophical dialogues, which enabled me to continue developing the dualistic theories begun the previous year (1977) in both *Between Truth and Illusion* and *The Illusory Truth*.

Their subject-matter ranges from book collecting as an art form and the morality of films to the influence of astrology on writers and, finally, historical perspectives, or the importance of getting things into historical perspective. Although they tend to be a little one-sided in their didactic intent, these dialogues are at least broad enough to be of some interest to the general reader, and represent considerable progress, both stylistically and thematically, beyond those play-like pieces contained in *A Magnanimous Offer* (1976).

John O'Loughlin, London 1978 (Revised 2022)

## A 'Work of Art'

MARTIN: (*Turns to his host's bookcase*) I must say, John, you're certainly in possession of a much smaller collection of books than I would have expected! Why, I'd have thought, by the many works you appear to be familiar with, that you were the possessor of at least five-hundred books, not a mere forty!

JOHN: Oh, I must have collected about five-hundred books over the past six or seven years. But, eventually, I threw most of them away.

MARTIN: (*Raises his brows in surprise*) Why on earth did you do that?

JOHN: Simply because I had absolutely no intention of rereading them. It seems to me that unless one is going to reread one's books – and not just once but a number of times – there is little or no point in one's keeping them. I have no desire, these days, to be a collector for the mere sake of collecting. If I formerly had a tendency in that direction, I outgrew it over a year ago.

MARTIN: Hmm, so these 'favourite' books, which apparently constitute your chief reading material, presumably represent all of your current literary and philosophical tastes, do they?

JOHN: No, but they certainly represent a sort of quintessential distillation of all the books I have ever read. The ones you see there don't necessarily represent *all* of my tastes. For it occasionally happens that I add a book or two when I have grown tired of rereading everything, and I also borrow from the local library quite regularly. But they do, at any rate, amount to the bulk of my current tastes. Unlike most book-addicts, I'm not interested in retaining anything that isn't approximately pertinent to my current lifestyle. As I change, so my book collection changes with me. Where I once grew out of toy soldiers, water pistols, Lego bricks, bicycles, and football programmes, I now grow out of particular books. I no longer keep anything that isn't more or less pertinent to my intellectual requirements.

MARTIN: I see! So Joyce's *Ulysses* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are both that – more or less pertinent to your intellectual requirements or, as you also said, your current lifestyle?

JOHN: Yes and no. Though, to be honest with you, I would say 'no' more than 'yes', insofar as I make exceptions for what I consider to be the really great books. To my mind, they are above criticism. They deserve to be revered as examples of outstanding creativity. In fact, I keep them in the

spirit that someone else might keep a great painting, some expensive jewellery, or a collection of important letters. I have absolutely no desire to part with that which, by dint of its outstanding creative ingenuity and intellectual magnitude, must always remain indisputably great. But there aren't too many such 'classics' in my collection, as you can see for yourself.

MARTIN: (*Scans the titles*) Yes, aside from *The Will to Power* by Nietzsche, *Ulysses* and *The Lord of the Rings* are the two most voluminous-looking books on your shelf. But I *am* surprised, all the same, that you should be in possession of only one book by Gide, Hesse, and Sartre! As for Henry Miller, Knut Hamsun, and John Cowper Powys – well, I'd have thought that you would surely be interested in owning more than just one book by each of them?

JOHN: What you see there isn't merely an incomplete selection from these authors but, on the contrary, my final and complete selection. The books representative of each author are the only ones that I can now bear reading. As for the others, yes, I've been through them all, I have even admired them all at one time or another. But I wasn't sufficiently impressed, in the final analysis, to regard them as indispensable. For example, my favourite Hesse, aside from that wonderful volume of essays entitled *My Belief*, is unquestionably *Steppenwolf*. My favourite Sartre is *Nausea*. My favourite Hamsun is *Mysteries*. My favourite Gide *Fruits of the Earth*, and so on.

MARTIN: And you would regard these as their 'best' books?

JOHN: Well, I would certainly regard them as the ones which mean the most to me. In actual fact, I've read about fifteen of Hesse's books, each of which gave me a great deal of pleasurable preoccupation and serious food for thought at the time. But, in the long run, I was more impressed by *Steppenwolf* than by anything else. So when I eventually decided to adopt this principle of rigorous selection, I threw all the rest away. You can imagine the pains and doubts I went through, in the process of ridding myself of so many diverse influences! To begin with, I was in two minds about getting rid of *The Glass Bead Game*, *Narziss and Goldmund*, and *Klingsor's Last Summer*. But I finally convinced myself that, as I wasn't intending to reread any of them, they would only clutter-up the bookcase.

MARTIN: So out they went?

JOHN: Yes. And the same principle was duly applied to all the other authors as well! They served my purposes for a time, but *only* for a time, since I was heaven-bent on transcending them. Indeed, it was during the course of this 'purge', if I may so call it, that I hit upon the rather unusual idea of my book collection signifying a sort of 'work of art', that's to say,

something possessing significance above and beyond the mere presence of a fairly haphazard collection of diverse books. Thus this small assortment before you is, in my eyes, a kind of 'work of art', where everything has its allocated place, its reason for being there, and its link with the other books in the collection. But it is a 'work of art', however, that can be changed or modified from time to time, as occasionally happens when I either remove or incorporate another book.

MARTIN: I must confess, this sounds rather crazy to me! I don't see how any collection of books, no matter how fastidious its collector may be, can possibly be regarded in such a light. Why, a work of art involves skill, beauty, imagination, individuality!

JOHN: Yes, and so, too, believe it or not, does this collection of books, though admittedly to a lesser degree. However, I don't wish to seem pretentious or to be taken too literally here. I don't, by any means, desire to see my bookcase in a public gallery at an exhibition of modern art or anything of the kind, since that would undoubtedly tax the public's imagination and patience to an unacceptable degree – at least from the standpoint of commercial sponsorship. No, I'm merely trying to impress upon you my intention to turn a collection of books into something meaningful, integrated, even thought-provoking. In fact, it's just as important for one to consider what isn't there as to consider what is.

MARTIN: I must say, that sounds frightfully esoteric!

JOHN: Perhaps it does. But for anybody with any knowledge of literature and philosophy, for anybody with a similar taste and temperament to myself, it is bound to provoke certain relevant speculations and thereby *mean* something.

MARTIN: (*Smiles to himself*) Well, it was a pretty ingenious, not to say original, idea! But how on earth did you come-up with it in the first place?

JOHN: Tentatively. I had been confined to bed for several weeks with glandular fever. I hadn't been feeling terribly strong, and, being disinclined to read for any length of time, I tentatively hit upon the idea of having a clean-out with regard to my books. Now at that time – November of last year to be precise – they totalled some three-hundred-and-fifty, the bulk of which was shared between famous and highly influential authors like Henry Miller, Hermann Hesse, Jean-Paul Sartre, John Cowper Powys, James Joyce, and Albert Camus. Well, not having much else to do, and feeling rather bored with the painful existence I was then leading, I crawled out of bed, slowly unloaded the shelves of my bookcase, dragged all the books to the bedside, crawled back into bed, and with a certain trepidation,

as though I were about to embark on a very momentous undertaking, began flicking through one book after another principally with a view to 'weeding out' what I considered to be the second-rate, the irrelevant, the tedious, and the outmoded. After a few days of this 'weeding out' process, a time during which my health seemed to take a marked turn for the better, I had reduced my collection by about three-hundred books. I had decided to dispose of eighteen by Miller, fourteen by Hesse, eleven by Sartre, six by Powys, four by Joyce, and so on, right the way through the entire range of my collection, which eventually left me with approximately what you see before you today, minus one or two late additions. Admittedly, during the course of this 'purge', this almost pathological compulsion to compensate myself for all the boredom I had suffered at the mercy of my illness, I made a few serious mistakes – namely, by throwing out books which I subsequently, though belatedly, realized I ought to have kept. But they couldn't have amounted to more than about fifteen out of the entire three hundred, so I'm not particularly worried. Besides, if I really felt like it, I could always purchase them again somewhere.

MARTIN: Yes, and at more expense! But which books would they be?

JOHN: Oh, I can't remember them all now ... Joyce's *Poems Pennyeach*, Camus' *Exile and the Kingdom*, Cocteau's *Opium*, Powys' *Visions and Revisions*, Miller's *The Wisdom of the Heart*, and a few more like that, I guess. Anyway, most of those I retained are still with me and, fortunately, they're the ones which have brought me so much agreeable literary preoccupation. It is a curious thing, but a majority of authors only manage to write one really good book in their entire career, a work which seems to tower above everything else they've written, and which one can't help regarding, in spite of oneself, as their best book. Now one isn't necessarily justified in regarding it so highly; for such an attitude may often amount to little more than the by-product of personal prejudice or taste. But there is still room for an element of objectivity in these matters. For instance, I sincerely regard *The Meaning of Culture* as John Cowper Powys' best book. Now I haven't read more than eight or nine of his books altogether, but, even so, those I did read clearly struck me as the ones most worth reading. Perhaps I should qualify that statement by underlining the difference between his fictional and philosophical outputs. The former, from what I've seen of it, doesn't particularly appeal to me. I speak mainly from the standpoint of the latter. And *The Meaning of Culture*, regarded as a theoretical work, seems to me to fairly dwarf his other philosophical creations. I absolutely revere it for its wonderfully-flowing prose, its



imaginative, expansive and skilfully-handled vocabulary, its profound insight into culture, especially literature, and its general outspokenness as, to me, the 'bible' of an important new creed. Take away every other Powys tome if you will, but leave me this one!

MARTIN: (*Looking at the shelf upon which the tome in question stands*) It appears to be the only one of his works that you've got anyway. How many times have you read it, by the way?

JOHN: About six times in the past two years.

MARTIN: And would that make it your most reread book, then?

JOHN: No. Being a comparatively recent acquisition, it probably still has a number of rereadings to go. But since I'm only twenty-five, I haven't really had the time-span, as yet, in which to reread certain adult books all that many times. Still, if memory serves me well, I must have read Sartre's *Nausea* at least eight times, Wilde's *De Profundis and Other Writings* seven times, Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals* six times, Hamsun's *Mysteries* five times, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* four times, and Bertrand Russell's *Unpopular Essays* three times. And I dare say that, if I live to be much older, I shall occasionally read them all again! However, the most sensational enthusiasm induced by any book led to my rereading Montaigne's *Essays* five times in the space of three months and, scarcely less sensationally, Joyce's *Ulysses* three times consecutively! I was so disheartened when I first got to the end of these two books that I just had to go back to the beginning and start all over again. And each time I reread them, I seemed to enjoy them more and more!

MARTIN: I'm certainly surprised to hear that you read *Ulysses* three times consecutively. Why, I couldn't even get into it once, at least not properly! But being of Joyce's nationality, I suppose you were better able to appreciate it than me.

JOHN: Well, that may or may not be. But I could only really appreciate *Ulysses*. You won't find any of his other writings on my shelves, though, to some extent, it's basically a question of personal taste again. However, as to what I was saying earlier about a majority of authors only doing one thing really well, it seems to me quite indisputable that the books I *have* mentioned, i.e. the ones on the shelves, mark a high-point in their respective authors' careers. As long as they've each written at least one work which I can regard as outstanding, then, so far as I'm concerned, they have justified their reputations as great authors. But it's almost inevitable that, no matter how good a man's writings may generally happen to be, there will always be something which stands apart from the bulk of his

work and demands our acknowledgement of its greatness. And this exceptional book will fairly dwarf all the rest!

MARTIN: (*Briefly scans the shelves*) Yes, that may well apply to Hamsun's *Mysteries*. But as to Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, I'm not so sure. But you evidently have your reasons ...

JOHN: One need only compare that with a majority of his subsequent books, to acquire a fairly accurate scale of relative values. Almost everything of any importance after *Tropic of Cancer*, with the notable exceptions of *Quiet Days in Clichy*, *The Colossus of Maroussi*, and *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, was based on reminiscence or autobiography appertaining to his pre-Paris years – a thing, you'll doubtless agree, which can't help but 'tone down' a writer's enthusiasm and creative inspiration. But in the first published book, one finds, curiously enough, a level of enthusiasm and creative inspiration – not altogether dissimilar, incidentally, from the qualities to be found in Hamsun's *Hunger* – which he was never able to equal, let alone surpass, in his later work. Admittedly, he was getting older all the time, so it was only natural that he should increasingly reminisce. But, so far as the literary side of his work is concerned, his greatest literary achievement was consummated in *Tropic of Cancer*. For me, that epitomizes the genius of Henry Miller!

MARTIN: Hmm, every person is entitled to his views, I suppose. Nevertheless I do sympathize with your choice of *Gulliver's Travels* for Jonathan Swift. Very few people would disagree with you there!

JOHN: But, then, very few people really know that Swift wrote anything else anyway.

MARTIN: That strikes me as a palpable exaggeration!

JOHN: Well, have you read anything else by him?

MARTIN: No, as a matter of fact I haven't. But I don't see how that can have anything to do with it.

JOHN: On the contrary, it has a lot to do with it! If you haven't read anything else by him, then you don't really know what he wrote. After all, what's in a title? Would you know what *Tropic of Cancer* was all about just by knowing of the title?

MARTIN: No, I suppose not. Though, in getting back to the subject of Miller's book again, I'm quite surprised that you can apparently appreciate both that *and* works like *The Meaning of Culture*, *De Profundis ...*, and *Unpopular Essays*. For there would seem to be little or no connection between them.

JOHN: I can assure you, Martin, that there is a very strong connection

between them! For a cultured taste doesn't 'beat about the bush' where intimations of creative greatness are concerned. And such greatness has many diverse and apparently contradictory manifestations! To stick to one manifestation for too long would eventually prove insufferable. But each man is quite different. Wilde has his views on art, Powys has his, and so does Miller. Now when you've read them all – and quite a few others besides – you select what is relevant to you, what will augment, corroborate, and clarify your own views – assuming, of course, that you happen to have any. But if you expect the views and technical approach of one man to be exactly the same as another, then you're going to be somewhat disappointed! Similarities, extensions, affinities there will always be. But if one man were to say it all, if one man were to provide a definitively sacrosanct treatise as to what art should or shouldn't be, who on earth would possibly have anything else to contribute after him? It's not for the writer of today to repeat the aesthetic or moral views of the writer of yesterday, still less for the writer of tomorrow to copy those of today! There is no eternal art, no more than there is any eternal science, politics, or religion. Where a theory applicable to the works of a former generation is no longer applicable today, it must be swept aside to make way for the new. Human attitudes change, even if the basic human archetypes remain the same. And although, contrary to Spengler's prognosis, art is unlikely to become entirely obsolete, it's certainly likely to be modified in the course of time.

MARTIN: Yes, I see your point. And I also see that you are more of a thinker than an artist, more conceptual than perceptual. Which is why, I suppose, you can appreciate such seemingly unrelated books as *Tropic of Cancer* and *De Profundis*....

JOHN: You are indeed right to say 'seemingly'. For, in reality, there exists a great deal in common between them. It seems to me that you are inclined to allow style, epoch, class, and nationality to override the profounder affinities which exist between such books. Nevertheless, what you say about my being more of a thinker than an artist is really quite true. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that I'm not really an artist at all. For my real allegiance is to the philosophers, which is probably the main reason why I now admire the philosophical side of Wilde's work, including such lesser-known writings as *The Rise of Historical Criticism* and *The Critic as Artist*, more than any other. But since I don't generally prefer the Hippogriff or the Basilisk to the Truth, so I'm not opposed to a certain amount of crude realism. When, however, I've had enough of Miller and

Joyce, I am glad of Tolkien or Wilde. And when I've had enough of them, I am glad of Schopenhauer or Russell. There is nothing odd about oscillating between one type of influence and another, from truth to illusion and back again. But there is certainly something odd about being too wholly partial to one or the other. For man is definitely not meant to live by truth or illusion alone!

MARTIN: Then you must be a philosopher-artist, and not just a philosopher.

JOHN: Maybe, though I don't, as yet, see any strong evidence of art – aside, that is, from the technical considerations which I choose to maintain in my writings. I have absolutely no intention of writing a poem, a play, or a novel – not at this stage in my career, anyway. But if I aspire to recording philosophical truths in my working hours, that doesn't mean to say I can't appreciate aesthetic illusions in my spare time. As can be verified by my collection of books, and not only in the sense that I have endeavoured to turn it into a sort of 'work of art'.

MARTIN: (*Scans the bookshelves anew*) Hmm, I can see that your little collection is a mixture of fiction and philosophy, so it would appear to confirm your intentions or predilections fairly conclusively. I very much doubt, however, that there are all that many people who would care to read philosophy all the time, even among the philosophers themselves. The four books here by Camus, for instance, provide one with a perfect example of the philosophical artist, even if the four titles by Nietzsche don't.

JOHN: Yes, Camus was more of an artist than Nietzsche, who, by contrast, you might refer to as an artist-philosopher. Still, it's very easy to be misled by what a man does and thinks, considering that some of the time one thinks exactly the opposite of what one is doing, if you will permit me a double paradox. But whether a man dupes himself into believing the contrary or not, we are all dualists, we all live according to the dictates of opposing influences. So if we aspire to the wine of truth in one context, we must pay for it with the bread of illusion in another. The philosophical artist and the artistic philosopher aren't necessarily more dualistic than either the philosopher or the artist, though they may well appear so at face-value. Give a philosopher too many sober truths to deal with, and he will soon turn to illusion for that nepenthe which the truth is denying him. Give an artist too many beautiful illusions to create and he will soon seek oblivion in truth! There is no getting away from that fact, and that is the main reason why *Steppenwolf* has become one of my favourite novels. For Hesse knew only too well how human nature must forever oscillate

between two poles or, rather, numerous antitheses, and that a man shouldn't allow himself to become unduly annoyed or worried by the fact. However, in the *Steppenwolf*, poor Harry Haller was almost continuously divided against himself and suffered accordingly. Instead of the cultured man and the philistine changing places in a more or less natural fashion, the change-over – to the extent it happened at all – took place against Herr Haller's deepest wishes. For, ideally, he would rather have remained the cultured man. But the philistine, or beast in him, refused to be cheated out of its legitimate influence, and continued to intervene nonetheless. In short, Herr Haller's personality was insufficiently integrated, his dual components rarely worked together as a team; for the one attempted to destroy the other, and the resulting conflict would perhaps have led him to suicide, had he not stumbled upon the courtesan Hermine who, together with Pablo, Maria, and the Magic Theatre, duly brought about his psychological reintegration and self-acceptance as a whole man. All men are dual-natured, but the *Steppenwolf* signifies the crisis of a man whose dualism has, largely through force of circumstances, lost its 'harmony' and consequently become an insufferable discord. It was indeed necessary, in the end, that Haller's personality, which included his specific obsession with himself through the way he had come to view his plight, be left behind when he entered the 'Magic Theatre' of his unconscious, in order that his instinctive inclinations and archetypes, so long bottled-up, might subsequently manifest themselves in their rightful, albeit duly-distorted, perspective.

MARTIN: How complex! Fortunately for me, my knowledge of dualism is mostly confined to the practical rather than the theoretical sphere. I can certainly recall having seen the film of that novel though, and a very excellent production it was, too! There aren't too many films that I would rate above it.

JOHN: I entirely agree with you. For here was a film that, with due respect to Hesse, seemed even better than the book from which it had initially acquired its inspiration. But, in practice, it was too good for the general circuit. So I dare say that only a small percentage of the cinema-going public actually saw it, and that only a tiny number of those who saw it actually understood its psychological symbolism and thereby really appreciated it. However, in returning once again to the theme of dualism, one can obviously contend that Hesse was more than just an artist, he was also a philosopher, and a very interesting one, too! But as a work of art, which in the final analysis it must remain, *Steppenwolf* is certainly outstanding. It is even better than *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

MARTIN: It is certainly more contemporary than ... *Dorian Gray*, not to mention *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which is another of those novels treating of the human dilemma in relation to split-personality, or the dualism within the self, and probably remains the all-time classic in the genre, transcending even Goethe's *Faust*.

JOHN: An enterprising suggestion, but one which, in my opinion, rather exaggerates the literary importance of Stevenson's tale, which lacks the moral and metaphysical sophistication of great philosophical literature. Still, an interesting analogy nevertheless, even if less pertinent than *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which, on account of the importance I attach to *The Steppenwolf*, is now absent from my book collection.

MARTIN: (*His eyes scanning the shelves again*) As I can see.

JOHN: Well, I should think that you are fairly tired of this subject by now. We haven't been in each-other's company all that long and all we have discussed, aside from 'Steppenwolfian' dualism, is my collection of books!

MARTIN: On the contrary, it is a subject that deeply interests me. When I return home, this evening, I shall wade through my own books and duly dispose of those which I consider to be superfluous to my needs or designs. Then I shall be able to create my own 'quintessential distillation' or, to quote you again, 'work of art' for future discussion with somebody else.

This is an approach to collecting which is rather appealing, you know!

JOHN: I only wish it would appeal to more people. For I'm pretty sick and tired of wading through other book-collectors' mounds of mostly third-rate works!

\* \* \* \*

## *War and Peace*

MARK: (*Quotes aloud from a letter by a female correspondent in a newspaper which he has just taken from the pocket of his jacket*) 'This is yet another example of the cloud of violence that has invaded the modern screen and turned cinema into a den of vice. It would be better for everyone if such disgusting films were banned and their respective writers, directors, producers, and actors/actresses either imprisoned or made to pay a heavy fine. Then we might have more peace in the world and less unrest on the streets of our major cities.' – Well, what do you make of that? It certainly sounds as though the correspondent was deeply offended by what

she saw at the cinema the other week, doesn't it?

PHILIP: I suppose she is one of those elderly spinsters who, in lacking a family of her own, imagines that it's her duty to protect the welfare of society instead. Either that, or she's one of those happily married mothers who, in condemning cinema, imagines she is protecting the welfare of her family by inoculating them against the celluloid iniquities of the contemporary world!

MARK: She has signed herself a Miss Edith Connors, so she might well be one of those elderly spinsters. But whoever she is, her moral squeamishness and sense of social responsibility evidently got the better of her that time! *(He resumes quoting aloud from her letter)* 'The film authorities should be condemned for not having banned it, and the censor condemned for not having been fastidious enough in his application to ...