

# A VISIT TO HELL



JOHN O'LOUGHLIN

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By

**JOHN O'LOUGHLIN**

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# CONTENTS

THE AESTHETICA

HANLEY'S CONCEPT

A LITERARY TRINITY

A VISIT TO HELL

THE RECKONING

OCCUPATIONAL SPECIES

THE CHRISTIAN COMPROMISE

AN EXTRAORDINARY RUMOUR

*Biographical Footnote*

## THE AESTHETICA

It was with mixed feelings that Francis Daly shook hands with several of the members of the club to which Miss June Faye had introduced him. Although he was relieved to have surmounted the initial hurdle of arriving at the club, he was less than certain that his arrival had really been appreciated, since it appeared to coincide with the hasty departure of someone else. Yet even if the angry-looking man who had pushed his way through the crowded room towards the exit at the very moment when the young writer first entered it *was* the real source of embarrassment on the faces of those for whom Francis' arrival necessitated a formal handshake, one could hardly feel proud of oneself for having arrived at such a seemingly inopportune moment! The embarrassment was there for all to see, particularly the newcomer, who did his best not to appear offended.

"Well!" sighed Miss Faye as soon as the formal handshakes had been courteously dispatched and his hand could return to its customary position of solitary confinement within his trouser pocket, "I do hope you'll get to like it here."

This statement struck Francis as slightly out-of-context with what he had just experienced but, gentleman that he was, he lost no time in assuring his benevolent hostess that he would. More, he stretched his politeness to the well-nigh absurd extent of informing her how honoured he felt to have been elected a member of such a prestigious club. Was there a more exclusive establishment in London? It seemed unlikely if the criteria of admittance were anything to judge by – namely a reputation, firstly, in one of the fine arts, preferably literature, and, secondly, the ability to sit a tough entrance examination conducted on the basis of a GCSE A' Level. Yes, an examination had to be sat and, if possible, passed with honours. And Francis Daly had passed it – with honours! He had answered some two-hundred difficult questions on the lives and works of writers such as Baudelaire, de Nerval, Lautréamont, Huysmans, Wilde, Coleridge, Huxley, Hesse, Flaubert, Rimbaud, etc., and answered them so well that his examiners had no option but to acclaim him one of the most accomplished young aesthetes of his generation and to accord him unconditional membership of their club. 'The Aesthetica', so-named after A.T.

Baumgarten's *Treatise on the criticism of the beautiful or the theory of taste*, first published in 1750, welcomed him with open arms – at any rate in theory – following the final result of his examination. Although, as already seen, his actual entry into the club could have come at a more propitious moment!

However, Miss Faye, ever the presiding genius of the place, was not one to allow matters to stagnate and, before the young writer could say anything further by way of assuring her how honoured he felt to be there, she had taken him in tow, as it were, and was showing him around the premises, taking especial care to point out the paintings and/or enlarged photographs of the various aesthetes whom the club had chosen to honour... Not that one could have overlooked them! For there wasn't a wall in the room, nor in any of the other main rooms of the club, which hadn't been taken over by portraits of famous aesthetes of one persuasion or another! But as much for form's sake as anything else, Miss Faye had no intention of being deprived of her duty in acquainting new members with the exhibits on display, as she proceeded to lead the way past the serried ranks of time-honoured men.

"A most revealing photograph of Baudelaire, don't you think?" she opined, suddenly halting in front of one of the leading 'saints' of her 'church'.

"Indeed," Francis concurred, realizing that he couldn't very well demur or express a contrary view while the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* leered down at them from piercing eyes, his gaze almost withering in its ferocious intensity. And his mouth was clamped so tightly shut by the overbearing jaws that one might have supposed him incapable of ever opening it. Not that he ever did, when considered merely as a photograph!

"You won't be surprised that he should have this man as neighbour," Miss Faye remarked, pointing to another of her literary 'saints', this time a well-known photograph of Oscar Wilde in his prime. "He's one of our bona fide aesthetes," she added, staring up admiringly at the well-dressed figure with a large carnation in his lapel, "the majority of our cultural forebears being fringe aesthetes."

"Fringe?" Francis queried, not quite understanding her.

"Yes, writers of quality who were never specifically part of an aesthetic

movement," she informed him. "Like Stendhal and Flaubert, for instance."

The young writer smiled his acknowledgement of her statement. No doubt, it explained why there were also paintings or photographs of men like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Coleridge on display. There was something intrinsically aesthetic about the writings of any genuine *homme de lettres*, and even philosophers of a certain stamp weren't excluded from contributing their share to that ineffable *something*.

"The most important qualification for membership of our club, whether the members be dead or alive, is a predilection for certain authors, artists, or musicians who might broadly be described as kindred spirits," Miss Faye declared, ignoring the sneeze that had erupted from the quivering nostrils of her latest protégé, and indicating, by a broad sweep of her arm, the contents of an adjacent wall. It contained large photographs of Aldous Huxley, Hermann Hesse, Drieu La Rochelle, and Cyril Connolly – all beautifully done. "We read similar books and are led to admire similar authors. Whether we're poets, philosophers, novelists, short-story writers, or critics ... is relatively insignificant. The essential thing is that we should share similar tastes and thus come to recognize one another as kindred spirits." She paused a moment, as though the occasion demanded an affirmative response from the new member that would justify her continuing and, when it finally came in the form of a modest but meaningful grunt, proceeded to remind Francis of what he had learnt about the club from his recent examination papers. "No-one who isn't automatically led to sympathize with our literary predilections could possibly understand why we think as we do," she confided, taking him by the arm and leading him, via a life-sized photo of Huysmans, into the library.

A little old man, who was evidently a kindred spirit, glanced up from the crumpled newspaper on his lap and smiled across at Miss Faye through gold-plated teeth. There was something distinctly Wordsworthian about his polished skull, though his face was uniquely his own.

Allow me to introduce our new member," she said, responding to the elderly gentleman's recognition. "Mr Francis Daly, Dr Henry Faye, my father."

"Delighted to meet you," the latter croaked, thrusting out a withered hand for Francis to shake. "Let me congratulate you for having passed our entrance examination with such distinction. It was an extraordinary result for a person of such youth."

Francis blushed faintly, as he withdrew his hand from the arthritic clutches of his latest acquaintance. Such praise, legitimate or not, made him feel distinctly uncomfortable.

"My father is chiefly responsible for setting the questions," Miss Faye revealed, blushing in turn, "as well as for marking the answers. His are the real brains behind 'The Aesthetica'."

The old man chuckled drily. "Not that my daughter is entirely bereft of them," he remarked, casting her a fondly paternal glance. "Although she can be swayed by sentiment from time to time. It's not for nothing that her favourite Flaubert novel happens to be *L'Éducation Sentimentale*."

"Oh father, don't be such a bore!" Miss Faye protested, dragging Francis by the sleeve in the general direction of a large glass case which broke the monotony of the bookshelves lining the nearest wall. "This is where we house the first editions of various significant works," she informed him in a reverential tone.

'A veritable tabernacle', Francis mused, as he stood before the glass case and perceived a number of worn volumes which time had evidently endowed with additional significance. Amongst them were *The Unquiet Grave* by Palinurus (alias Cyril Connolly) and *The Meaning of Culture* by John Cowper Powys. A few of the twenty or so books on display he had never even heard of, much less read.

"I expect you're familiar with most of the titles," Miss Faye commented, briefly scanning the title pages of those volumes approximately on a level with her eyes.

"Indeed I am!" came the confident response from the novice of first editions, his face momentarily indicative of pride.

"Over there we house the rest of the first editions in our possession," his

hostess declared, pointing to a glass case of identical construction and size to the one in front of which they were still reverentially standing. It was evident that the aesthetic creed required a fair number of testaments.

"Most impressive!" Francis averred by way of a verbal response to the case in question, which appeared to be more copiously stocked, if anything, than the nearer one.

"I'm glad you think so," Miss Faye commented with a graceful smile and, catching hold of his sleeve again, she dragged him past the nearby first editions in the direction of a tall, thin man of moderately handsome appearance, who happened to be thumbing through a book in front of the right-hand rows of bookshelves that lined the wall. "Allow me to introduce you to one of our most brilliant Aldous Huxley scholars," she went on at once.

At their approach, the Huxley scholar looked-up from his literary preoccupations and was duly introduced as Martin Foley.

"So you're the author of *Trysting Violets*," he remarked, extending a trembling hand in Francis' direction.

"I'm afraid so," the latter admitted, smiling wryly. He so hated to be reminded of the fact!

"How interesting!" Foley exclaimed. There then ensued a verbal pause while they completed their handshake and peered into each other's faces. "Curious, but I had no idea what you looked like actually. Not at all what I'd imagined."

"Really?" Francis responded, feeling slightly puzzled. "I trust my face doesn't make too unfavourable an impression on you."

"Unfavourable? Good God, no! It's just that I had imagined someone older and more academic-looking," Foley confessed.

"Oh, I see! Well, it just goes to show that you can't always tell what an author looks like from his books," Francis declared.



"Indeed not," Foley agreed, nodding sagaciously. "Although you might learn a thing or two about his books from his face! Take my word for it. As soon as you discover that a particular author has an ugly face, avoid his books! They're bound to be just as ugly."

Francis felt vaguely amused. "D'you really think so?" he asked.

"Yes, in a majority of cases," Foley replied. "Ugliness begets ugliness, beauty begets beauty." And he proceeded to lecture both Francis and Miss Faye on the criteria of the Beautiful and one's duty to uphold the cause of beauty in a world increasingly beset by the ugliness of industrial and urban pollution. "'A thing of beauty is a joy forever'," he concluded, recalling the poetry of Keats.

Francis wasn't absolutely sure about that, but he allowed Foley the benefit of a couple of politely affirmative grunts, all the same. It wouldn't do to complicate matters on one's first visit to the club. Even if the world at large *was* more in tune with ugliness these days, and would have preferred to hear that a thing of ugliness was a woe forever, the fact nevertheless remained that 'The Aesthetica' was a law unto itself, an oasis of beauty in a desert of ugliness, against which it was unwise to rebel.

Meanwhile Miss Faye must have remembered her duty to 'The Aesthetica's' latest member, for she took hold of his sleeve again and began to drag him along past the rows of books that presented their glossy spines to one's admiring gaze and vaguely suggested an army regiment which one was obliged to review in passing. "Such a pleasant chap," she remarked, as soon as Foley was safely out of earshot and reduced to his former preoccupations again. "But dreadfully sententious!"

They had crossed the threshold of the third and ultimate room of the club, a room twice as large as the library and containing twice as many people as the other two rooms put together. At the far end of it was a platform upon which a red-bearded man of medium height and fiery eyes was standing at a table and speaking to an assembly of people in the seven or eight rows of chairs in front of him. At first Francis couldn't understand a word of what was being said. For the man's accent was so unequivocally Scottish and his vocal inflexions so uniquely his own, that one became distracted from the meaning of his words by their mode of presentation, at once beguiling and

eccentric!

"This is our lecture room," Miss Faye hastened to inform him in a respectfully subdued tone-of-voice. "We hold lectures here every week, each member of the club being expected to deliver one in due course."

"Oh really?" gulped Francis, suddenly experiencing a distinct qualm at the prospect of his subsequently having to deliver one, too.

"All good fun, I can assure you!" Miss Faye opined in response to the slight agitation now discernible on her young protégé's face. "And usually most educative!" At which point she led the way towards the back row of upright padded chairs serving the audience, and invited him to take a seat. Above their heads the deep voice of the Scots lecturer continued to weave exotic patterns of sound in the air, though by now it had just about become possible for Francis to discern the drift of their import.

"... the regeneration of England through sex which D.H. Lawrence wanted to see come to pass is, alas, most unlikely to happen," the lecturer was contending with stern mien. "The sex that Lawrence advocated wasn't, of course, the loveless, soulless, 'free sex' which has become all-too-prevalent in recent decades but, on the contrary, the true, natural, healthy sex of loving couples. There must be a loving relationship, a strong mutual desire which testifies to the victory of the heart over the head, the triumph of love over intellect. Without that strong mutual desire, the warmth of genuine love, there is only the sterile, mechanical sex of the intellectual pervert: the cold, depersonalized sex which is effectively nothing more than a coital masturbation. Wilhelm Reich, that great and much-maligned psychologist, called this sex the vice of 'the fucker', the soulless idiot who has made sex a dirty word to be attacked and shunned by the Malcolm Muggeridges and Mary Whitehouses of this world. But the sex of D.H. Lawrence and Wilhelm Reich is very different, ladies and gentlemen, from that advocated by 'the fucker', and should never be confounded with it ..."

Francis cast a shyly suspicious glance at Miss Faye, who seemed uncritically engrossed in the lecture which this member of the aesthetic cult was severely delivering. To be sure, a lecture on sex wasn't exactly what he had expected to hear when first entering the room, and he was almost embarrassed by it or, more specifically, by the use of certain words which

the lecturer had selected. But there was a ring of truth about it all the same, a ring which sufficed to make him prick up his ears again and continue listening.

"... thus we can differentiate between true sex and false sex, the sex that revitalizes and the sex that devitalizes, the former transmitting a positive current and the latter a negative one. Unfortunately it's the false sex that dominates our age, and it's from this, ladies and gentlemen, that a majority of us are now suffering. Too many relationships arise which should never have come about in the first place, too many men and women are locked together without feeling any genuine love or respect for each other, without that sine qua non of true sex. The spirit of *Tropic of Cancer* prevails over that of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in consequence of which the world becomes an ever more hellish place in which to live. Instead of climaxing simultaneously, couples climax either separately or not at all. And even those who are right for each other, the couples whose simultaneous climax is likely to revitalize rather than devitalize them, even they, ladies and gentlemen, are all too apt, in a majority of cases, to smother the beneficial effects of such a harmonious climax by the debilitating use of condoms and other life-denying contraceptives!"

A number of gasps and sighs suddenly erupted from the throats of various members of the assembled throng. One man shouted "Reactionary rubbish!", and immediately stamped out of the room. Another drew everyone's attention to the fact that AIDS had made the use of certain contraceptives, particularly condoms, virtually *de rigueur*. But the lecturer was apparently unmoved, for he quickly resumed: "I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, the use of sheath-like contraceptives can be equated with coital masturbation. For the 'orgone' feedback – to use a Reichian expression – which results from a simultaneous climax and provides the revitalizing warmth, or energy, is prevented from taking place by the sheath and accordingly *negated*."

Renewed gasps and sighs erupted from the assembly, this time more unrestrainedly than before. However, the lecturer was far from impressed, but continued: "And, unfortunately, the pill isn't quite the wonder drug it was once cracked-up to be, since, by upsetting the natural hormone balance, it can cause severe depression and radically affect menstruation."

"Here, here!" a young dark-haired female shouted from the second row.

"In short, ladies and gentlemen, it should be obvious that Nature is a sovereign power that won't tolerate being dictated to by a meddling humanity. But modern science, that brainchild of the Industrial Revolution, is generally loathe to admit this fact. There are branches of modern science which presuppose an ultimate victory over Nature, being considered a means of tricking it out of its traditional hegemony and sovereignty. But whenever one tampers with Nature, one pays the price for doing so. Who knows, ladies and gentlemen, but that price could well be the ultimate nemesis of our civilization one of these days, the just retribution of the gods? For the more one tampers with Nature, the closer draws that nemesis which is its inevitable consequence!"

Here he paused to let his words sink into the stunned minds in front of him, paused to survey his audience with a stern and almost contemptuous expression. Droplets of sweat glistened on his domed brow and his face was flushed with righteous indignation, like some Old Testament prophet or early Protestant.

"But I have no wish to go into details of the scientific perversions to which our decadent civilization is subject these days," he confessed, briefly consulting his notes, "for they are legion and scarcely to be corrected by mere words. Of course, we can criticize the various attempts man makes to gain an ultimate victory over Nature, since the consequences are generally disastrous. But we cannot prevent him from pursuing his folly merely through recourse to reason. We must seek to understand why he has become a victim of this folly in the first place, a policy which may or may not lead to the formulation of a practical solution to his dilemma. Unfortunately, the only practical solution of which I can conceive as a means to overcoming his current plight isn't one that's likely to win widespread approval or support. For his current plight is essentially a consequence of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent development of heavy industry, inevitably giving rise to the modern metropolis and the extensive urbanization which characterizes our time. In short, a majority of us are so cut-off from Nature in our giant cities that we're obliged to act the unenviable part of madmen, which people deprived of regular contact with Nature's vitalizing influence sooner or later invariably become. Hence the scientific audacities of our time, the preposterous attempts to overcome

Nature which are less a hatred of it than a consequence of being so cut-off from it!"

Again gasps and sighs erupted from the throats, now somewhat hoarse, of various members of the audience, some of whom now accused him of being superstitious and ultra-conservative, whilst others simply yelled four-letter expletives at the platform. Even Francis felt a familiar malaise enter him at this point. For he knew, well enough, how detrimental prolonged confinement in any large city could be to the spiritual life, and how one was invariably transformed into a kind of robotic machine only fit, seemingly, for the mechanical routines which an industrial and technological society required.

Unperturbed by the uproar, however, the bearded Scotsman went on: "And the fact that so many of the human kind are now isolated from the soul-enhancing life of Nature inevitably means that their sex lives, to return to our principal theme, are more likely to be of the false variety than of the true. Yes, the fact is that the regeneration of England through true sex is unlikely to happen, ladies and gentlemen, while the circumstances which gave rise to the false variety continue to prevail. And those circumstances, manifesting in the ubiquitous reality and rapid growth of urbanization, are unable *not* to prevail, cannot possibly be removed without recourse to the most terrible nemesis the world could ever know, the nemesis, in all probability, of a nuclear holocaust. Naturally, few if any of us really want that. For it should be sufficiently evident, from a study of the military constituents of such a holocaust, that few if any of us would actually survive it. So what do we do? What *can* we do? There, ladies and gentlemen, lies the dilemma of our time, the dreadfully complex predicament in which we find ourselves. Either we continue as victims of the sordid isolation from Nature with which we have been obliged to live, and thus go through life as mental cripples who know what *ought* to be done to improve our lot but are powerless to really *do* anything, or else we commit mass suicide with the assistance of the fiendish weapons our technological expertise has prepared for us, and thus cease to exist in any recognizable shape or ...