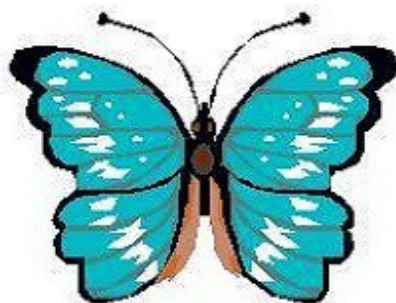


BECOMING AND BEING



John O'Loughlin

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By
JOHN O'LOUGHLIN
Of Centretruths Digital Media

CDM Philosophy

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PREFACE

Divided into two parts, the first of which is autobiographical and the second biographical, this project strives to outline my development as a writer and the influences, both literary and philosophical, which shaped me over the years leading up to 1982.

The first part, containing subjects ranging from sex and politics to health and writers, is slightly Nietzschean in its speculative approach to autobiography, while the second and more voluminous part, which deals with the estimable likes of John Cowper Powys, D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Hermann Hesse, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Arthur Koestler, Lawrence Durrell, Henry Miller, and George Orwell, is intended to provide a biographical summary and fairly blunt appraisal of authors whose works were to inspire me during my formative years as a writer. It is as though they were the beings whom I was eventually destined to *become* or, rather, that I became *being* – and hence a writer – via them.

Finally, there is an appendix comprised of a list of reading material borrowed from Hornsey Central Library (in the north London borough of Haringey) over a twelve-year period from 1977–89, which should intrigue those interested to discover how a self-taught – and even self-made – person can fare with regards to the acquirement of a literary culture that owes little or nothing to school or college.

John O'Loughlin, London 1982 (Revised 2022)

PART ONE

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Sex

I have never had sex with a woman, or, for that matter, with anyone else. At twenty-nine (29) I remain a virgin [the same is still true at sixty-seven (67), my age at the current revision of this text], though I'm not by nature asexual. I have always desired sex with a woman, but haven't had the good fortune to encounter anyone suitable. Poverty and isolation in depressing areas of north London have kept me single – and alone. I don't care, as a rule, for Englishwomen, and I haven't discovered anyone of my own race – I'm an Irishman – who could be described as suitable. I don't particularly desire a black or a coloured woman, although I wouldn't categorically rule out the possibility of sexual relations with such a woman if a suitable opportunity were ever to arise, even though I prefer women of my own race with, for preference, blue eyes – like my mother's.

The only kind of sex I have been accustomed to, over the years of urban exile from Surrey, is the sublimated sexuality to be obtained from 1) fantasies; 2) wet dreams; and 3) pornography and/or erotica. I am a regular fantasist, rarely omitting to fantasize from 10–15 minutes either before I go to sleep at night or after I wake up in the morning. However, during the day I refrain from fantasy altogether. I have other and more important things on my mind!

Occasionally I get a wet dream, but I don't derive much pleasure from it, as a rule. The context in which it takes place may be one that privately disgusts, frightens, or alienates me – as is often the way with dreams, wet or dry. Besides, the emission is rather uncomfortable to live with. I usually apply a paper tissue to the sheet and/or my lower abdomen, and then attempt to get back to sleep again. Wet dreams almost invariably wake me up!

Masturbation is another matter, but not one that I'm greatly thrilled by, and these days I hardly ever indulge in it. I used to derive more pleasure from it when I was eighteen or nineteen. The ejaculation was then much more forceful, the pleasure so much keener, as Gide would say, in consequence. Now I find it something of an anticlimax and am privately disgusted! I

would usually masturbate over a sex magazine once I had found a suitably alluring photograph, and hold a paper tissue at the ready to collect my sperm. I often found the rear view of a woman more alluring than the front, because I derive much pleasure from the sight of a seductive rump. A photograph in which rump, anus, vagina, and thighs were collectively on display was likely to appeal more strongly to me than any alternative perspective.

But I didn't masturbate very frequently, in fact no more than once or twice a month on average, since it both disgusted and humiliated me. After the act I normally felt regret, thinking to myself that I must be mad and am only conditioning myself away from natural sex, which is not going to make it any easier for me to get a woman, should I ever be in a position to afford one. Living on the bread-line is, I suppose, the main reason why I did not get a woman, because poverty and shame combined to preclude one from approaching anyone. Besides, I'm in the paradoxical position of essentially being middle class by birth, and even by upbringing, and therefore not finding working-class women particularly attractive. There is, I know, a deep-seated psychological reason for this, which derives from the fact that my father effectively married beneath himself and suffered the consequences, including separation or, rather, the fact that he ran-out on my English-born mother even before I was born and she ended-up, when the pub business she and her mother were running eventually collapsed for want of sufficient custom, dragging me away from Galway City, the town of my birth and of my father's address, to an upbringing in Aldershot, of all places, which I found both solitary and painful. When I add to this the fact that my mother was the daughter, on her father's side, of a Protestant-turned-nominal-Catholic from Donegal who had earlier left home to join the British army (contrary to his parents' wishes), then there is also an ethnic conflict involved somewhere beneath the surface, which in part explains my aversion to Englishwomen, as well as throws some light on my parents' inharmonious relationship. Unlike my mother, who is pro-British, I am essentially Irish, and not disposed to repeat my father's mistake, which, as I see it, was to marry the wrong woman on both class and ethnic grounds without, initially, being in the least aware of the fact, compliments, in some measure, of her Irish Catholic mother.

No man is ever wholly a writer. He is also a private individual, a private human being. The writer is one part of me, the person another. Thus while

the writer will advocate sublimated sexuality and speak out in defence of masturbation vis-à-vis pornographic stimuli as a more civilized, because artificial, mode of heterosexuality than conventional sex, the private person will often feel disgust with masturbation and harbour certain misgivings about his sex life. The private person desires to find a woman, to lead a fairly normal sex life, while the writer, or philosopher, continues to develop his thoughts along ever more progressive, and hence artificial, channels, scorning conventional criteria. Thus there arises in me a disparity between writer and person which is the source of much internal conflict, as professional thoughts and personal feelings tend ever further apart. To what extent the former influences the latter, to what extent the private person is *conditioned* by the writer, it isn't of course possible for me to say. But there must be some influence, some conditioning, from the one to the other which contributes to keeping me solitary and, by natural standards, perverse.

The private person suffers from a chronic depression due in part to celibacy, in part to solitude, in part to environment (the areas of north London in which he has been obliged to live being uncongenial to him), and so on, and knows that he will only get rid of this depression if he radically changes his lifestyle and perhaps gives-up writing altogether. But, in spite of this, the writer goes from strength to strength by extending the domain of the artificial, or transcendent, in every fresh work, and so continues to derive profit from the private individual's hardships. One cannot fully serve two masters at once, even when they are housed in the same person. Either the writer profits at the private person's expense, or vice versa. For me, the former situation has long been the case and although, with my depression, solitude, etc., I am one of the most unhealthy, unfortunate private people on earth, I'm undoubtedly one of the greatest writers, probably the leading philosophical writer of my generation, though, of course, I have not been recognized as such by the Irish-wary British, nor do I ever expect to be so!

I was discussing my sex life, such as it is, and should remark that while the private person is often disgusted by fantasies, wet dreams, and masturbation, the writer, by contrast, draws a certain satisfaction from them, as if attesting to the fact of his spiritual superiority. To masturbate over a men's magazine or vis-à-vis a sex video is not so much to pervert oneself, the writer reasons, as to indulge in a higher mode of sexuality, in

which sex has been transferred, in large part, from the body to the head, from the senses to the spirit. Instead of feeling quite as disgusted as he might otherwise do, the private person is invaded, as it were, by the writer at such times and consequently induced to modify his feelings in the direction of spiritual pride or even moral righteousness. The others, the mere average mortals, are coarse and sensual sinners who would have a long way to evolve before they could expect to become like oneself – wholly given to sublimated sexuality. The writer believes that, since life is a process of evolution from undiluted sensuality at one extreme to undiluted spirituality at the other, pornographic sex, involving masturbation and/or voyeurism, is a step in the right direction, not simply an inducement to perversion. The private person may have his depression and loneliness but, nonetheless, the writer still intrudes into his thoughts and feelings from time to time, thereby making his acquiescence in pornographic sex less psychologically disturbing than might otherwise be the case. The writer obliges the private person to admit that if he doesn't always feel happy about his use of photographic erotica, it is largely because he is still too naturalistic and sensual, at heart, to be content with nothing else. It becomes a kind of spiritual failing on his part ... that he should prefer the prospect of natural sex to the actuality of artificial, sublimated sex.

I don't wish to dwell on the interaction between writer and private person any longer, nor, if I may be permitted an allusion to Hermann Hesse, on the 'Steppenwolfian' difficulties it can entail, not least in respect of a sort of split-personality, in which the person and persona of Jung's well-know dichotomy are constantly at loggerheads. Suffice it to say that if the writer becomes too domineering, the actual life of the private person may well be endangered, if not destroyed. The writer cannot survive without the private person's consent, yet neither, paradoxically, can the private person survive if he isn't also, or at other times, supplemented by a professional, whether writer or otherwise. That I have survived as both writer *and* private person ... is a fact in large part due to my personal cunning.

Becoming a Writer

I did not want to become a writer until 1972, when I was twenty (20). Prior

to then, I had wanted to become a musician, and had assiduously practised both guitar and piano in the hope of one day either joining a progressive rock band or getting such a band together myself. Why I changed my mind in 1972, I don't exactly remember; though it probably had something to do with the fact that I first fell in love that year and started writing poetry to commemorate the fact. Probably I half wanted to become a professional musician for another two years, though I can distinctly recall telling a friend, in late 1973, that I had absolutely no desire to either join a band or get a band together myself. By then, I must have become dedicated to a literary career.

My first excursion into writing took the form, as I intimated above, of lyric poetry, which isn't altogether surprising really, since most youths who are in any way disposed to literature begin by writing verse. At the time, I was a humble clerk in the West End, but I wrote romantic poetry in my spare time at Merstham, Surrey, where I was then living. When, through force of domestic circumstances, I was obliged to move to the Stroud Green area of north London, where my mother and stepfather shared a flat, I still continued to write poetry, and this was my main literary endeavour up until June 1976, when I began to write my first novel, having left – though not for the first time – my clerical job at the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, in Bedford Square, WC1.

I left my job partly for health reasons and partly because the pay was relatively poor. But I also left it because I had long nurtured a private ambition to do something better with my life, and writing seemed, in view of the relative paucity of alternative jobs for someone like me, by far the best bet. But I didn't succeed in finding a publisher for my first novel when it was completed three months later, and I continued to write in vain thereafter, whilst all the time becoming more depressed. I briefly returned to my old clerical job at the ABRSM the next year, having persuaded the manager to re-employ me. But by then I was suffering too much from a stomach ulcer and a variety of other personal and domestic problems to be capable of staying in the job, which involved booking examination venues throughout Great Britain and Ireland, for very long, and so, once again, I handed in my notice, conscious, as never before, of the degree to which I had changed, in the meantime, and effectively become a writer.

Thus in November 1977, after barely six weeks back as a clerk, I found

myself on the dole again, and that is where I still remain at the time of writing this little autobiographical sketch, nearly five years later. In that time, or rather from June 1976 to July 1982, I have written several works, which have all been typed-up by me in due course. They include novels, essays, dialogues, short prose, and various other projects of a like-literary nature. I have not had one of these works published, though I've continued to send or to take typescripts to publishers on a regular basis. I don't believe that they were rejected because of poor quality but, on the contrary, because of superior quality, which ...