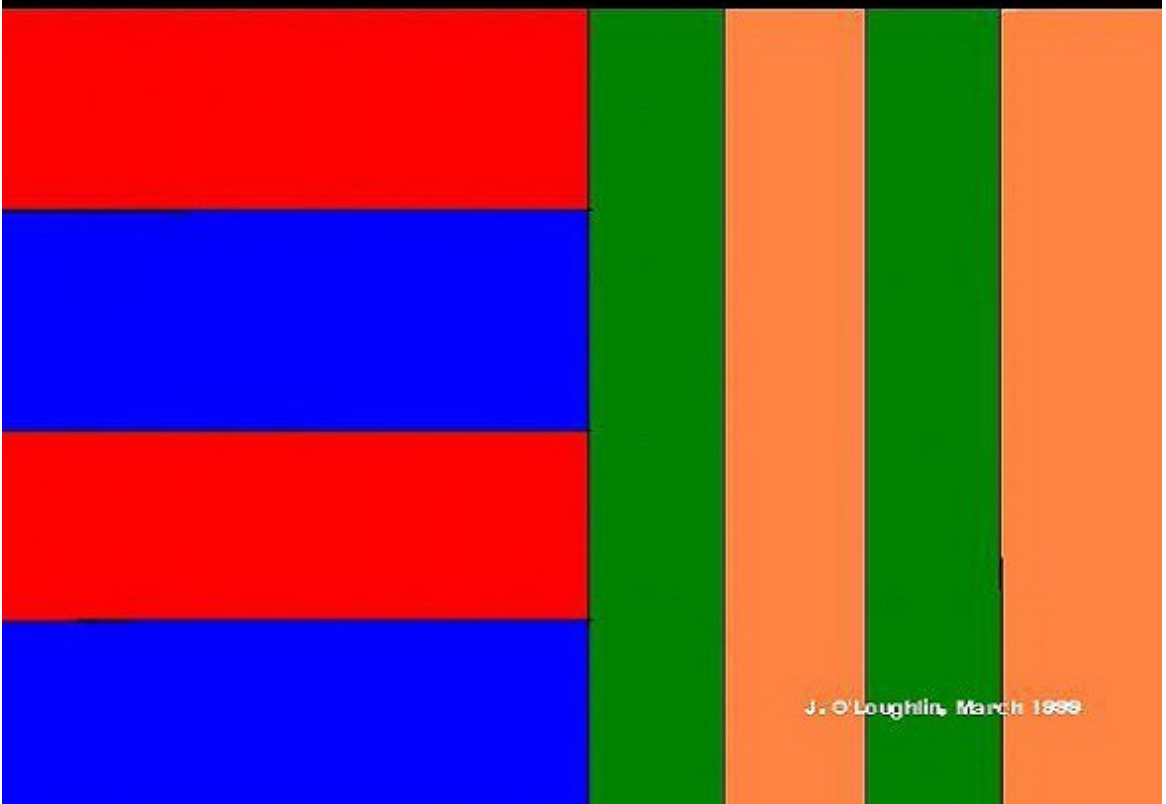


FIXED LIMITS



J. O'Loughlin, March 1999

John O'Loughlin

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CDM Prose

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FRIDAY 17th SEPTEMBER, 1976

It has just gone 7.00pm and I am sitting in my armchair, casually contemplating the thin strands of tobacco smoke which rise, halo-like, from my half-consumed cigarette. My throat is sore because of the smoke and my lungs feel as though they were on fire, but I can't pretend that these little physical inconveniences particularly bother me. After all, one has to suffer something. In fact, I have only recently started smoking again, so there is plenty of time for me to get used to the idea. When I'm on the verge of bronchitis I will probably give it up and make a fresh resolution, like the one I made at the beginning of the year, in order to safeguard my health anew. I have rarely smoked more than ten cigarettes a day anyway, which is probably just as well, considering how depressed it makes me feel afterwards. Besides, smoking only appeals to me occasionally, as a supplement to food or drink. I could never be a chain-smoker.

God, these cigarettes are ghastly! They burn down far too quickly. No sooner have you begun inhaling them than the wretched things disappear in a cloud of smoke and fire of creeping ash! You wonder why you bothered in the first place. Actually now I come to think of it, they are virtually the cheapest brand available, so I guess that was the guiding factor in my buying them. But I couldn't really afford to buy any dearer brand at present because, being a poverty-stricken writer with a limited income, I simply don't have the money to spare on luxuries.

These cigarettes are marked MIDDLE TAR, though it wouldn't really bother me if they were something worse. I guess I'm secretly indulging in a form of self-punishment as well. At the beginning of the year I made what I now perceive to have been a foolish New Year's resolution. I said to myself: "You've been smoking like a chimney for well over six months (a slight exaggeration on both counts, but never mind), your health isn't very good anyway, and you're bored with cigarettes and dying for a change. Make this year somehow different!" So I stopped buying cigarettes and started buying confectionery instead. For a while I felt like a saint or, at any rate, like someone saved. Then to consolidate my change of heart with a change of health, I began doing press-ups, no more than twenty at a time, because my arms weren't strong enough to support me initially, but just

enough to make it worthwhile, to mark a beginning.

Well, that resolution lasted about three months and almost killed me. In retrospect it surprises me that I could have persevered so persistently, taken it all so seriously, considering that I didn't really feel much better afterwards. But, strangely, it never once occurred to me to think objectively about what I was doing; I just acted. When I staggered out of bed in the morning the first thing I did was attend to the press-ups. I acted like a robot. And before I climbed back into bed last thing at night it would be the same thing: more damn press-ups. It must have been like somebody saying his prayers and paying his worldly dues at the same time. Yes, but at least I might have profited a little from these exertions; for it seemed to me that every attempt I made at becoming stronger only succeeded, eventually, in making me weaker, in removing my ability to extend the number of press-ups. By the time I got to the twentieth one I was a physical wreck. My nerves twitched as though they had just received an electric shock, my tongue shot out backwards and forwards like a jack-in-the-box, my breathing became hoarse, and my arms felt like putty. They became noticeably weaker for all the exercise I gave them!

Well, so much for all that! These days I am back to smoking again. Indeed, I might even be fatuous or outrageous enough to regard it as a form of slow suicide, a sort of long-term investment policy with death. It doesn't feel very much like pleasure, anyway. There is nothing particularly sensational about it – not, that is, unless you are prepared to regard a pair of constricted lungs as something of a sensation. But I would be deluded, all the same, to assume that my life could be done away with so easily. It might take another thirty to forty years, during which time I would probably continue to drift in and out of tobacco-nists with the residue of an insane resolution in my head: to do away with myself at any cost! No, I don't really feel I possess that amount of patience or resolve, least of all at the moment. It certainly takes a lot to kill a man. If we could all be disposed of that easily, there wouldn't be many of us left here now. In relation to life we are as stubborn as mules – absolutely fanatic! It would definitely take more than a few thousand cheap cigarettes to finish me off, money or no money. So there is evidently little consolation to be had there!

This ashtray amuses me. Indeed, I don't think it was actually intended as an ashtray at all, since it is too pretty. In actual fact, it is an Italian souvenir

marked *A PAVO*, evidently its place of origin. I don't even remember where I got it, but somebody must have made me a present of it some years ago, because it's not the kind of thing I would buy myself. I absolutely detest its formality!

To begin with, it is a piece of oblong plastic measuring some 6" x 4". The edges are curved slightly upwards, no more than half-an-inch (as might be expected from an ashtray or tiny fruit bowl), and the interior, if such it can be called, contains the reproduction of a colourful painting which depicts five medieval knights who are seemingly paying court to someone in front of and slightly above their gazes, though to whom, exactly, I haven't a clue because he/she doesn't form part of the picture – at least not as it stands here. Perhaps the title of the original painting would enlighten me on this score? But I don't possess an encyclopaedia of Italian art and really don't wish to put myself to the trouble of finding out. I mean, there isn't actually all that much to get excited about when you think of it, is there? These five gentlemen are evidently the cynosure of the work. However, if by some miracle they knew that someone was using them for an ashtray they probably wouldn't look so proud of themselves. They would more than likely take offence and unsheathe their swords specifically with a view to reigning blows and imprecations upon the offender. Indeed, they might even get hostile with the manufacturer for putting them on a souvenir which could be used for such base purposes.

But all this speculation is obviously of small account. I don't even know whether or not they were originally painted from real life, though they look plausible enough anyway. What particularly amuses me, however, is that the fellow at the rear of the group – a man, incidentally, who looks somehow wiser and more experienced in courtly protocol than his companions – is staring rather higher than the others, much as though he were at a private audition, while the third one from the front, a rather effeminate-looking character in headgear, is wearing a sort of peeved expression on his face which stares directly at the painter, or where one imagines the painter should be, instead of straight ahead of himself like all the others. You get the impression that he considers himself a cut above the rest and that the tedium of having his portrait painted is gradually becoming too much of a strain, in consequence of which he would like the painter to damn-well hurry up and finish the job as quickly as possible. Well, that may or may not be the actual case, but it is essentially to him,

and in part to a more manly-looking fellow to his left, that I owe the privilege of a few irreverent diversions.

In mentioning all this, I took the precaution of wiping away the accumulated ash of an evening's bum smoking from them. But now that I have lit myself another cigarette and am consequently obliged to deposit fresh ash somewhere, I am gratifying my sadistic impulses by carefully depositing some of it on the effeminate one's face, rather like those fiendish little delinquents who take a perverse pleasure in effacing the more salient contents of billboards, public notices, and anything else suitably vulnerable to derogatory amendment. What surprises me, however, is that I actually experience a sense of *fulfilment* from crowning his little naked and vaguely arrogant chin with a bustling outgrowth of beard-like ash. It is almost as though I had actually *achieved* something by so altering his demeanour. Why, with this funny little beard, he could almost pass for Ezra Pound, even with those doleful eyes! At least you would never take him for a woman now – not, that is, unless you noticed his bright red tunic.

As for the sharp-nosed fellow nearest to the painter, who appears to be kneeling on the ground and resting his hand on the arm of the chair or couch upon which the foremost of his four companions is seated, it's not so much his face that concerns me as the overly centrifugal nature of his striped dress which, reaching to the ground, suggests a strongly autocratic disposition. With two swift dabs I'm able to obliterate it and lend him a more knightly appearance which, however ragged the ensuing armour, seems to do his sheathed sword slightly more justice.

Aggravated by the childishness of it all, I stub-out the remains of my cigarette on the front one's neck and disgustedly push the 'ashtray' to one side. It has ceased to amuse me. In fact, it might be better employed, in future, as a soap dish, so that I can obliterate its courtly contents in a cleaner and less hazardous fashion. From now on I'm going to do something more *constructive* with my time!

At the moment, it is raining heavily. I can hear rainwater spurting down the drain outside my french windows. There are also regular dull thuds against the panes, though I can't see anything because the curtains are drawn. Nevertheless it reassures me to hear such sounds. I am reminded that there are other things than people in the world. On these wet days I like to think

that people are too diverted by the weather to have much interest in anything else, least of all in individuals like me. Its inclemency acts as a kind of shelter against humanity, a refuge for sick and outcast souls.

Things become more subdued, the streets appear to withdraw into themselves as though in a silent conspiracy against nature. They remind me somehow of a dog that doesn't want to be washed.

Now this torrential rain will certainly make the ground easier to dig next week. I was beginning to despair at the prospect of how much additional back-breaking labour I might be in for, by digging over the back garden on the landlord's behalf. Admittedly, I only managed to do about half-an-hour's digging there each day last week, but that was quite enough! At times it seemed as though the fork would break from all the pressure I was obliged to put it under, in view of the stony nature of the ground. After this, I only hope it doesn't rain all week. My room becomes frightfully depressing after a few days of solitary confinement.

For the time being this stillness is agreeable to me; I don't want to ruin it.

If I were to practise blues runs on my acoustic guitar or play some rock albums on my stereo, the neighbours would more than likely take offence and quickly find some means of retaliating or, at the very least, defending themselves. They would regard my activity as a sort of infringement of their rights, the rights to a given quantity of silence, to a couple of hour's tedious repose in a bath of somnolence, to a little mutual vegetation. Quite frankly, I don't wish to bring that kind of vindictive tribunal to bear upon myself this evening; I have already suffered quite enough noise for one day. If I were now to stretch my self-indulgent pleasures beyond a certain low-key level, the neighbours would probably think me barbarous and summarily accuse me of behaving like an adolescent. It would definitely be wiser to share in the half-life of the community for a while. Then they can testify to my self-restraint.

If my eyes didn't hurt so much from reading I would read a little longer this evening. But I have had enough of it and, besides, you can only do so much of a given thing. Beyond a certain point you come to feel that the world is too narrow, that the sanest thing to do would be to take a week's holiday or have a few days' break just to make a change. If variety is really the spice of life, then mine must be pretty tasteless! Sometimes I get the impression that I'm actually suffocating from culture, since the stereo only

leads to the bookcase, the bookcase to the notebook, the notebook to the typewriter, the typewriter to the guitar, and the guitar to the radio ... in a vicious circle of enforced intellectuality. When you feel like that, you might as well destroy everything, since the world has evidently become too narrow. However, so far as today is concerned, I'm most definitely suffering from an overdose of culture. I badly need an antidote. Ideally, the best thing would be to get drunk and chase after women. But I haven't got the money for it and, besides, there aren't that many women around here whom I would consider it worth my while to chase after. In the end, I would only humiliate and disgust myself. Well, the next best thing – other, of course, than to smash furniture or to burn books – would be to turn-in for the night. But as I won't be able to sleep for at least another two hours, and it is now only 10.45pm, I may as well persevere with things a while longer.

I abandon the writing table (scarcely a desk) and shuffle over to the bookcase. There is an 8" Venus statuette on the top shelf which immediately catches my attention. Actually I think it's an Aphrodite statuette because, although the shopkeeper I bought it from said "Venus", the hairstyle is of that slightly „,