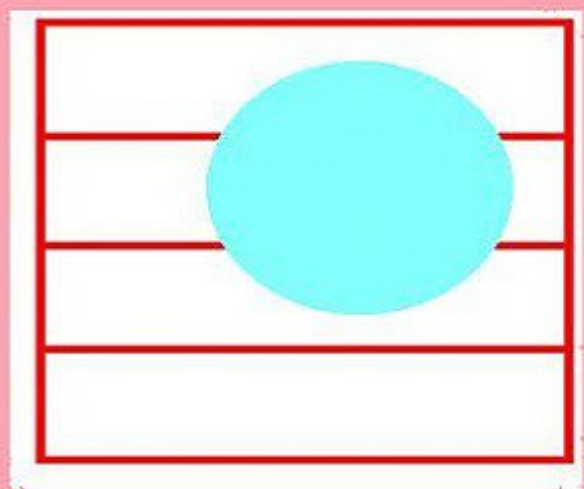


FROM THE DEVIL TO GOD



John O'Loughlin

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Preface

Written on and off during the winter of 1980–81, this collection of short prose starts in a relatively literary fashion, with the account of a clandestine visit of a masseuse to a priest who can no longer cope with his celibacy, and ends in a profoundly futuristic manner with an account of evolutionary progress towards a definitive Beyond, as envisaged by a radical philosopher. In between, comes a fairly balanced alternation between literary and philosophical subjects ... as we follow the voyeuristic pleasures of a man covertly watching his wife getting dressed from the comfort of his early-morning bed; explore the evolutionary revelations of a de Chardinesque gnostic in the face of atheistic unbelief; witness the horror of a Mondrianesque ascetic, whose rural day-trip out of London with some friends proves to be more unsettling than he had bargained for; and go beyond conventional concepts of the Millennium, as of Millennialism, with a revolutionary thinker who believes that only when human brains are artificially supported and sustained will there be any prospect of heavenly salvation of a definitive order.

John O'Loughlin, London 1981 (Revised 2022)

The Turning-Point

Father Kells wrapped the dark-green dressing gown around his naked body, tied its cord tightly about his waist, and, switching off the light, emerged from the bathroom fresh and sweet-smelling into the passageway which led to Room 25 – the single room he had booked into that very evening. With a swift turn of the key he quickly entered the room and, sighing in relief, gently closed its door behind him. Then he went across to the only mirror the room possessed and began to comb his short brown hair into place, taking note of his face to ascertain that everything was more or less as it should be. No, he had little cause to worry about his facial appearance, which now, as previously, was passably handsome. Prolonged celibacy and solitude may have left some ugly marks on it, but, for all that, he was still only thirty and by no means a victim of wrinkles, puffy eyes, double chin, grey hairs, greasy skin, or anything of the like. True, his lips might be a trifle tightly drawn and almost too severe for comfort. But, on the whole, his face still had a certain youthfulness which inspired a degree of confidence, as well as allayed the doubts and fears that had momentarily assailed him.

Having attended to his coiffure, he retired to the room's only armchair and prepared himself for the impending arrival of the person from whom he had earlier booked a professional call. What she would look like for certain, he couldn't of course be sure. But he hoped, anyway, that his approximate specifications would be honoured, and that an agreeably attractive young black woman would knock on the door in due course.

And so he waited, slightly apprehensive lest the experience should turn out to be a disappointment or even an ordeal, but, at the same time, curiously excited by the prospect of what lay in store for him. He couldn't quite slot into any particular mood or feeling about it; for no sooner had a positive thought occurred to him ... than a negative one would take its place, causing him to lose heart slightly and once again question the moral justification of what he was doing. But, really, he had to start somewhere after all, and even if this wasn't quite the best or most honourable of ways, at least it was a way of sorts and, God knows, he needed it! For he was still, to all intents and purposes, technically a virgin, having adhered to the

priestly ideal of strict celibacy ever since he came-of-age, so to speak, and entered the Church as a raw youth of eighteen.

Yes, he was still a virgin, though not, alas, a particularly happy one, since the exigencies of clerical chastity had left their psychological marks on him and resulted, over the years, in his becoming progressively more depressive and sexually frustrated. Apart from a few minor aberrations of a petting order with some young women of his parish, he had consistently denied the Old Adam in himself, denied it in deference to his vocation as a spiritual leader, a man of God. Yet such a denial had not brought him the peace he expected but, on the contrary, had led to his becoming increasingly restless and dissatisfied with his lot – indeed, had led to serious doubts as to whether he *should* have become a priest in the first place. To be sure, he didn't feel he had it in him to remain celibate for ever, as his vocation demanded. No, the going in that respect was indeed tough and becoming steadily tougher! And not simply on account of the sexual abstinence itself, but also, and no less significantly, on account of the seemingly ever-growing number of perversions and temptations by which he was assailed – most of which caused him to shudder with disgust at the mere thought of them! But, of course, there was the depression as well, and that, as he well knew, wasn't becoming any the less painful with the passing of time.

Whether, in fact, it could be wholly ascribed to his celibacy or whether the noisy urban environment in which he lived and worked was responsible for some of it, he didn't know for sure. But he was anxious, all the same, to do what he could to correct it and, if possible, restore himself to a healthier state-of-mind – even if this did mean that a number of radical changes would have to be made in his life, and that he might accordingly find himself obliged to work outside London and adopt friendlier relations towards women than hitherto. After all, he was a man, not a god, and although he might be a priest with certain very idealistic standards to live up to, and consequently be closer to the godly than the majority of men, yet his manhood was still a fact of life which couldn't be entirely denied. He was a man, and therefore he had a body to live with and, in some sense, even to honour.

True, he was not by nature the most sensual of men. But neither was he the most spiritual – at least not in any absolute sense. If he was predominantly spiritual, it was not to such an extent that he could systematically deny

himself sexual gratification without unduly jeopardizing his health and peace of mind. He had certainly discovered that fact! If he was a spiritual leader, he was one who still had to honour the body to some extent and, as regards sex, this he had signally failed to do. Now perhaps, in this small hotel room, he might be able to redress the balance slightly, and thus go some little way towards appeasing the flesh.

No man can properly serve two masters at once, least of all two such exacting and uncompromising ones as God and the Devil. But, then again, no man can wholly serve only one or the other, either. Sooner or later the fact has to be accepted that one's nature demands a compromise of sorts between these two extremes, and that failure to honour such a compromise can lead to the most unpleasant consequences – consequences of which Father Kells was only too aware, as he ambivalently awaited the arrival of the visiting masseuse. As Baudelaire – his favourite French poet – had so truthfully put it: 'There are in every man, always, two simultaneous allegiances, one to God, the other to the Devil', and even a priest was not exempt from this general rule. No, he might strive to honour the spiritual as much as possible, but he was still tied to the sensual and the obligations it imposed. He was still a man.

But what of the injunction to celibacy – was that therefore wrong? Father Kells, tonight divested of his customary frock and posing under the alias Edmund Healy, stared thoughtfully at the dark-blue carpet in front of his feet and ran the forefinger of his right hand across the sharp bridge of his aquiline nose, as he often did when plunged in reflection. In one sense it was, and in another sense it wasn't. To begin with, one was a man, and consequently injunctions that ran contrary to one's basic human nature and its needs were potentially harmful and could only result, in the long-run, in one's nature rebelling against them. Yet though, on the other hand, it might prove impossible to adhere too stringently to it, the injunction to celibacy had the merit of encouraging, if not maintaining, a standard of spiritual leadership compatible with one's priestly vocation. For what right had one to lead the flock and lay claim to spiritual authority if one was as prone to sexual indulgences as the next man? Could one really consider oneself a spiritual exemplar if one was yet guilty of carnal commitments to an average extent? No, of course not! There had to be a standard of celibacy set, even if one was likely, as a human being, to relapse, from time to time, into average or, more likely, above-average sexual habits. Otherwise one

had no business considering oneself a worthy example of spiritual guidance to one's parishioners. The standard was there and, as a priest, one had a duty to adhere to it to the extent one could. Too bad if perversions and temptations occasionally got in the way!

He glanced at the small wall clock above the dresser and noted that it was now five-to-eight. It was over an hour ago that he had telephoned the massage bureau. Soon, he hoped, the masseuse would arrive. Quite how he would respond to her he didn't know, but he hoped, anyway, that she would be able to alleviate the burden of his celibacy a little. For if she didn't, he would be no better off than previously – indeed, he would probably be worse off, and not only financially but also, and more seriously, as regards the progressive worsening of his depression, the feeling that, short of leaving the priesthood, all routes for easing it had been blocked to him.

But could he leave the priesthood now? He didn't think so. At least he had no idea what he would alternatively do. After all, he hadn't received any other training and felt that it was a bit late now to embark on something new – another career, that is. Alternatively, he could opt to take a secular clerical job which wouldn't require too much training. But whether he would be able to step down from the rung of his professional status onto the relatively humble one of a drudge-ridden white-collar worker ... was something about which he couldn't be absolutely sure. More than likely he wouldn't be able to, since his pride would rebel against it. More than likely he would have to continue as a priest, irrespective of the psychological and physiological difficulties with which such a vocation presented him. He couldn't see any real alternative at present.

Just as the clock reached eight, there was a gentle rap on the door, followed by a couple of soft coughs intended to clear the throat. "It must be her," he thought, and quickly got up from his armchair and hurried over to the mirror to take a last critical look at his face. His heart had started to beat more rapidly – indeed, so rapidly that he was afraid she might hear it. His hands began to tremble and his legs to grow weak with the apprehension he was feeling. "Oh God," he groaned, as he crossed the carpet, "I hope I don't make a damned fool of myself!" He reached the door, hesitated a moment to swallow a ball of saliva which had welled-up in his mouth, and, with sweaty hand, unlocked and pulled it slowly open.

"Ah hello!... Mr Healy?"

He nodded bravely and stood back to admit her to his room. He couldn't see properly, for the wave of embarrassment that had suddenly surged over him carried all objectivity before it.

"My name's Veda by the way, and I've come as requested," she sweetly and almost gratuitously informed him, entering the room with an air of confidence.

He quickly closed the door and stood for a moment undecided what to do or say. It was as though he had lost the power of speech, so great was his mental confusion. "Ah yes," he at length managed to respond, casting her a hollow smile while simultaneously making a swift attempt at physical appraisal. "Well ..." and he made an involuntary gesture of helplessness "... what should I do first?"

The young masseuse smiled and put the leather bag she was carrying onto a nearby table. "I take it you've had your bath?" she said, extracting a plastic sheet from its interior and walking towards the bed.

"Yes," he nervously admitted.

"Good! Then if you'd like to remove your dressing gown and stretch out on this sheet for me, I'll set about massaging you," she said.

It was only now that Father Kells was able to acquire a better look at her. Bent over the bed, she was dressed in a short fur coat with a dark-green cotton skirt, black stockings, and contrasting white high-heels. Her calf muscles were both firm and well-defined, and, as she stretched farther across the bed to draw the expanse of plastic sheet smoothly into place, the shapely outline of ...