

# **LOPSIDED CONVERSATIONS**



**Collected Dialogues Vol.1**

**JOHN O'LOUGHLIN**

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Collected Dialogues Vol.1 by

**JOHN O'LOUGHLIN**

Of Centretruths Digital Media

CDM Philosophy

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## PREFACE

I began writing dialogues in a play-like vein some time in 1976, two of which are included at the beginning of this collection, and soon progressed, via a study of Diderot and other philosophers of the so-called Enlightenment, to a more philosophical approach to the genre, which is amply documented in this first volume of a projected two volume ‘collected dialogues’.

The nineteen dialogues included here date from 1976–82 and become increasingly philosophical, in the sense of concerned with metaphysical and kindred issues, including eschatology and ontology. Indeed, so much so that I have not hesitated to include, as with Volume One of my ‘collected short prose’, an aphoristic appendix, which properly follows the last seven dialogues, all of which were originally included in a volume entitled *The Importance of Technology to the Transcendental Future* (1981–2).

The title of this enlarged volume, however, would seem to acknowledge the one-sided nature of many of the ‘conversations’ which take place in these dialogues, as though in deference to a teacher/pupil relationship biased towards didactic polemic and religious instruction. This is, in fact, the case as early as with ‘A Dualistic Integrity’ in which the participants, the characters, if you will, are simply described as ‘professor’ and ‘student’, and, the basic template once

established, it was inevitable that I should simply embellish and refine upon it in due course, even when there is a greater concern, within the necessarily restricted parameters of the dialogue medium, with characterization.

The results, though fairly predictable, speak eloquently for themselves, insofar as it was on this basis that I gradually evolved towards the aphoristic purism characteristic of my mature philosophy, and accordingly became less relativistic and much more absolutely committed to the quest for metaphysical perfection. Such perfection may not be evident here, in this first volume of dialogues, but it was eventually to spring from them, as to some extent evidenced by the appendix.

John O'Loughlin, London 2007 (Revised 2022)

## *BETWEEN THE SHELVES*

A very attractive dark-haired customer, a young woman of average height and slightly more than average build, is busily scanning the shelves of a well-stocked provincial bookshop. She takes a fancy to a paperback volume of short stories by Guy de Maupassant and, removing it from the shelf, proceeds to read the blurb.

Apart from an elderly man and two young shop assistants sitting by the till near the plate-glass window, the shop is otherwise deserted. From time to time the customer darts a quick glance at the more handsome of the shop assistants who, cognizant of this, eventually absents himself from his post and approaches her with a faint smile on his lips.

SHOP ASSISTANT: (Very politely) Good afternoon. Would you like any assistance?

CUSTOMER: No thanks, I'm just looking.

SHOP ASSISTANT: Don't you mean looking for a lover? (He smiles, and the customer coldly smiles back.) By the way, you're dripping.

CUSTOMER: (Glances at the floor) Where?

SHOP ASSISTANT: (Draws her behind the shelves at the rear of the shop and puts a hand up her skirt) Here.

CUSTOMER: (Somewhat embarrassed) Oh no, please! What d'you think you're doing?

SHOP ASSISTANT: (Withdraws his hand) My mistake. I just thought you could use a helping hand.

CUSTOMER: (Smooths down her skirt) But aren't you a

trifle forward? I've never been treated like that before, not by a complete stranger. You've certainly got a nerve!

SHOP ASSISTANT: (Somewhat startled by her fierce rebuke) Forgive me. I wasn't intending to rape you. But I noticed you glancing at me – once, twice, three, maybe four times – while you were scanning the shelves, so I thought to myself: 'Either she's up to no good or she fancies me.' Well, preferring to give both you and me the benefit of the doubt, I considered it worth my while to introduce myself. 'Perhaps she's hard up,' I thought, 'or tied to a man who doesn't properly satisfy her. Why not find out anyway, do someone a favour for once.' But I couldn't think of anything to say by way of introducing myself that wouldn't have sounded corny or pathetic to me. So I said the first thing that came into my head and hoped for the best.

CUSTOMER: (Still embarrassed, but cooling slightly) I see. And you hope to make me your girlfriend, is that it? Well, you're certainly original, I must say! Though I wasn't exactly expecting to be picked up in here ...

SHOP ASSISTANT: You mean you only glanced at me because you felt I'd keep my distance?

CUSTOMER: No, not really. I ... oh, how can I explain?

SHOP ASSISTANT: (Takes the volume of Maupassant's short stories from her hand) You evidently had sex on your mind when you picked this up.

CUSTOMER: (Feigns innocence) Did I? Actually I haven't read his work before.

SHOP ASSISTANT: Quite an excellent reason for buying it, then. Allow me to congratulate you for having such good taste. Perhaps you imagined Maupassant



would be a better and livelier read than anybody else?

CUSTOMER: Yes, I suppose I did in a way. But I like French literature in general, so I usually tend to gravitate towards the many French authors to be found in book shops. I studied French literature at college, you see.

SHOP ASSISTANT: Really? How exciting! The French have so much literary talent, don't they? The mind simply brims over with illustrious names.

CUSTOMER: How very true. So you recommend this volume of short stories?

SHOP ASSISTANT: (Flicks through the pages) It would certainly bring you lots of intellectual pleasure. (He looks up from the book and fixes her with a probing eye) Wouldn't you prefer the real thing though, now, tonight, whenever you like?

CUSTOMER: Thank you, but I've already got a boyfriend. I'll be seeing him tonight.

SHOP ASSISTANT: (Loses hope) Too bad! I'm sorry I bothered you. (He returns the book to her trembling hand and begins to walk away.)

CUSTOMER: (Catches hold of his sleeve) Don't think I don't appreciate your interest. If you really want me that much, why not take my name and address now, this very moment, before I leave?

SHOP ASSISTANT: How do I know you're not going to trick me?

CUSTOMER: (Smiles faintly) You'll just have to trust me.

SHOP ASSISTANT: Will I see you again?

CUSTOMER: That's not impossible.

SHOP ASSISTANT: (With a look of relief on his face)

There's a spare room out the back. I can lock the door without drawing any condemnatory attention upon us.

CUSTOMER: (Follows him into the spare room, which is in fact a kind of coffee room, stock room, and office all rolled into one) But won't they miss you in the shop?

SHOP ASSISTANT: Yes, but they'll assume that I'm acquainting you with our latest stock. Anyway, we're not exactly overworked today so, providing we don't stay longer than half-an-hour here, they'll manage perfectly well without me.

CUSTOMER: And what, may I ask, are you really doing?

SHOP ASSISTANT: Introducing a charming young lady to our chamber of sensual delights, of course.

CUSTOMER: (Quite startled) Indeed? So it's regular policy in this shop, is it?

SHOP ASSISTANT: Not really. But we allow each other enough freedom to chat-up the occasional customer who might appeal to one or other of us, if the opportunity were to present itself. The owner of the shop, although too old to be an efficient lover, is an authority on sex education who, providing we assistants remain fairly discreet and don't overdo it, is prepared to turn a blind eye to any socio-sexual activities which my colleague and I may choose to embark on, and all in the hope that we'll thereby come to a fuller appreciation of his own books.

CUSTOMER: (Visibly amused) How very convenient!

SHOP ASSISTANT: It's only natural. After all, being a book salesman in what is, by provincial standards, a fairly small shop on such a quiet day as this can become

rather boring, you know. (He locks the door behind them and then offers her a seat on a convertible settee situated against one of the walls.)

CUSTOMER: (Looks around the room) So this is where the socio-sexual activities take place, is it?

SHOP ASSISTANT: Only with women who are pretty enough, intelligent enough, and compliant enough to permit it.

CUSTOMER: Well, now that you've got me ...

SHOP ASSISTANT: (Draws himself up alongside her on the settee) I'll get to know you on a more intimate basis. What's your name, by the way?

CUSTOMER: Dawn.

SHOP ASSISTANT: Well now, this is certainly the first time I've been granted the opportunity of carnal intimacy with a Dawn in the middle of the afternoon!

CUSTOMER: (Smiles to herself and simultaneously drops the volume of Maupassant into her shoulder-bag without his noticing it) Then don't spoil it, you persuasive man!

## *AN UNUSUAL ENCOUNTER*

A small suburban park in North London. A summer's afternoon. A young man and a young woman are seated at opposite ends of a plain wooden bench, the young man having taken the seat some minutes after the young woman. They are complete strangers to each other.

However, feeling subtly attracted towards the young woman, who is reading a book, the young man decides to say something to her.

YOUNG MAN: (Turns towards her) Is that an interesting book you're reading?

YOUNG WOMAN: (Slightly startled) What...? Oh, yes. Quite interesting.

YOUNG MAN: You wouldn't be interested in some conversation, by any chance?

YOUNG WOMAN: (Blushes slightly) No, not really.

YOUNG MAN: I just thought you might like to talk to someone. To put it bluntly, you appeal to me.

YOUNG WOMAN: (Thinks to herself, "God, he's forward, isn't he? Fancy telling me that! He might as well have asked me to make it with him. I'd better be careful.") Sorry, I'm waiting for someone.

YOUNG MAN: (Coolly impertinent) You're not wearing red panties under that skirt, are you?

YOUNG WOMAN: (Somewhat startled) Pardon?

YOUNG MAN: (Smiles) I bet you're wearing red knickers.

YOUNG WOMAN: (Starts to get up from the bench)

Sorry, but I don't want to answer that!

YOUNG MAN: (Catches her by the arm) Just a minute! I'm not intending to rape you, if that's what you're thinking. I'm essentially very civilized: in fact, too damn civilized! Sit down a moment, let's talk together. Are you really waiting for someone?

YOUNG WOMAN: (Reluctantly sits down again) Why should I lie?

YOUNG MAN: To keep me at a distance, of course.

YOUNG WOMAN: (Laughs nervously) I needn't lie to do that! Besides, even if I were, what business would it be of yours? (She closes her book and is about to get up again when he puts a restraining hand on her arm. She begins to look frightened.)

YOUNG MAN: You're very beautiful. That's the main reason why I must speak to you. A man like me could spend years looking for someone like you, someone who corresponds to his tastes. In a sense, you're very fortunate to be so beautiful. Probably more than 90% of the young women I encounter in this area make either no impression on me at all or only a rather unfavourable one. Very few of them actually appeal to me, the loner of loners. But I won't go into details. Normally I'm quite incapable of getting worked-up about strangers. I have to get to know people first, to find out more about the person in whom I happen to be taking a physical interest, just to be on the safe side. But you pleased me from the moment I set eyes on you, and that's very unusual. Look, I don't really know why I'm telling you all this, spilling the beans to a complete stranger ... but, well, I haven't spoken to anyone like you for ages and,

since you look intelligent, I'm making a fool of myself for your benefit. You see, I need someone who'll listen to me with a sympathetic ear because, whatever you may think, I'm no monster but a human being in need of a little love and understanding every once in awhile, just like a lot of other poor buggers who are daily coerced into maintaining a false, pernicious, and self-defeating persona without necessarily realizing it! Believe me, I'm not homosexual or stupid or poxed or mad or dangerous or commonplace or ... believe me, I'm a damn sight more caring and considerate than most of the men in this world! Maybe you wouldn't understand ...

YOUNG WOMAN: (Shows signs of interest, in spite of her misgivings) Go on.

YOUNG MAN: Well, for a time I thought I was homosexual, not having a woman and not particularly going out of my way to get one. But slowly, gradually, it dawned on me that I wasn't really homosexual at all but simply choosy. I mean (He sighs, as from a realization of the complexity of what he is trying to convey and the odds against his conveying even a fraction of it convincingly), I had to have someone whom I felt it would be possible for me to admire, to talk to, to love, to worship even – yes, don't laugh! I mean it! But poor and solitary as I was, I never encountered anyone who sufficiently inspired such noble intentions in me. In fact, I rarely encountered anyone at all, even casually. So things just drifted: weeks, months, years, a face here and there, the occasional disappointments, blunt refusals, hypocritical excuses, etc. I didn't go to university and I left all my school friends behind in Surrey. I loathe

church institutions, pubs, discos, bingo halls, snooker clubs: you know, all the usual social conveniences that are basically intended to cater for average people. I loathe them all!

YOUNG WOMAN: (Begins to show concern) But haven't you tried computer dating?

YOUNG MAN: (Faintly smiles and nods) Yes, I was desperate enough to give it a go. And d'you know what happened? (He hesitates to choke back rage and resentment) I wasted my money! Most of the bitches the firms informed me about didn't even have the courtesy to reply to my letters, quite apart from the fact that those who did took ages doing so. Some of the firms even had to be reminded about my application virtually every-other-month! And when they eventually got around to replying, it seemed as though they'd taken a lucky dip and, to pass muster, sent me whatever came up, irrespective of my preferences. Anyway, the few women I eventually got around to meeting were plain, to say the least! They'd have humiliated me on the street and exasperated me in the bedroom. So far as the likelihood of my being able to kindle any genuine desire for them was concerned, it would have been tantamount to flogging a dead horse! In fact, they might as well have been cows or sheep, for all the passion I felt towards them! No, I regret to say that computer dating didn't work for me. You never know exactly what you're getting and, besides, I found the whole idea too degrading. I had to take one girl back to the station after barely an hour of her company, because she was so damned incompatible. She hadn't even read *one* of the

several hundred books in my possession at the time. Not *one*! And that was after I'd categorically stipulated a preference for someone literate. But if *that* was bad enough, I thought it even worse that she hadn't even heard of, let alone heard, any of the albums in my record collection. And they call that compatibility? Well, I soon got rid of her, as well as most of the others they inflicted upon me, too! Of course, a majority of people always end-up doing what they imagine everyone else is doing at the time. Climb on the bandwagon, let others think for you, and wait for the lucky number! For if, by any chance, a man with an ounce of self-determination approaches an attractive female in the park, on the street, or in any other public context with the intention of acquiring her, the spirit of technological progress will declare him to be either an anachronistic idiot or a potentially dangerous maniac who should learn to live with the times instead of wilfully following his personal inclinations, obeying the voice of his desire in his own sweet fashion, and taking the law into his own hands irrespective of the consequences! As though men were still capable of self-determination in an age like this, when the sheep-like collectivity counts for everything and the lone individual, especially the self-willed creative individual, next to nothing! Thus speaks the spirit of technological progress.

YOUNG WOMAN: (Raises her brows in apparent concern) I see! But what makes you so sure that *I* may be able to assist you?

YOUNG MAN: Simply the fact that you appeal to me. I mean, I wouldn't mind being seen in your company.



You're very beautiful and, from what I can gather, intelligent as well.

YOUNG WOMAN: (Smiles) Flattery will get you nowhere. Anyway, I'm waiting for my boyfriend, as I think I told you.

YOUNG MAN: (Frowns) So what's he like: strong, tall, handsome?

YOUNG WOMAN: Oh, good-looking, hard-working, intelligent, loyal, generous, considerate, able. A good all-round sort really.

YOUNG MAN: And how long have you known him?

YOUNG WOMAN: (Obliged to scan her memory a moment) Just over a year actually.

YOUNG MAN: And you had other boyfriends before him?

YOUNG WOMAN: Yes, a few. (She becomes puzzled) Why d'you have to ask so many questions?

YOUNG MAN: (Unable to restrain himself from shouting) Because I haven't so much as kissed a woman in nearly ten years!

YOUNG WOMAN: (Becomes indignant) Is that *my* fault? I'm sorry, we all have our problems, you know.

YOUNG MAN: Yes, and some of us more than others! (In desperation) Can't you drop him?

YOUNG WOMAN: Are you out of your mind?

YOUNG MAN: (Frowns and sighs in exasperation) Why should that bastard take all my share of loving? Haven't I as much right to love as him, as you, as anyone? Or is that merely presumptuous of me, a gross delusion, a mode of self-deception engendered by the sight and sound of so much commercial propaganda

pertaining to sex?

YOUNG WOMAN: (On the verge of tears) But it isn't his fault. He's as entitled to choose a woman as anyone else, isn't he? It isn't his fault if he happened to be in the right place at the right time and you, through no particular fault of your own, weren't.

YOUNG MAN: No, it's life's fault! Life is always to blame. That's why some people get everything whilst others get next to nothing. Fate!

YOUNG WOMAN: (Unable to hold back her tears) Oh, don't make such a damn fuss! There are plenty of people worse off than you. Look, if everyone went about spilling their problems over people the way you do, we'd have a civil war on our hands. At least you're still young.

YOUNG MAN: Yes, and that's precisely what riles me! Young and bitter! My God, it sickens me to see so many blatant half-wits, so many ugly, uncouth, depraved men with good-looking women just because they happened to be in the right place at the right time. I might as well have been born crippled, considering what use I make of the advantages I possess!

YOUNG WOMAN: (Dries her eyes) Haven't you ever had sex with a prostitute?

YOUNG MAN: No, I haven't! For one thing, I can't afford to. And, for another, I distrust them. Besides, they're not the kind of women who appeal to me, as a rule. So for anything approaching sexual satisfaction, I'm mostly dependent on the occasional wet dream. Actually, I used to be a bit of a wanker at one time. However, these days masturbation would only arouse

my self-contempt, so I tend to avoid it.

YOUNG WOMAN: Masturbation's puerile.

YOUNG MAN: Fortunately I didn't succumb to it all that often, just once or twice a month in order to clean the works out, as it were, and reassure myself that I hadn't become impotent. After a while I loathed the self-degradation involved with the use of sex magazines, the models of which I rarely found stimulating. So I'd resort to my imagination instead, fantasize myself into a climax and hope that I wouldn't become irredeemably perverted or the victim of a cerebral haemorrhage. Nowadays I don't fantasize as persistently or regularly as I used to; I stop myself going beyond a certain low-key point and limit myself to one or two a day.... Frankly, I believe the fact that I was born in Ireland has something to do with my situation, since I'm the end-product of several generations of Irish breeding and don't feel particularly attracted towards Englishwomen. Now I don't mean to sound unduly endogamous, but the fact remains that, when it comes to the crunch, I prefer women of my own race or nationality to those of any other. I mean, there's nothing particularly unusual about that, is there? (The young woman smiles guardedly but says nothing, so he continues) Look, I'm sorry to keep going on like this, and I didn't mean to upset you just now, but there aren't that many other people around here who would listen to me and, besides, it isn't every day that I get a chance to talk to someone, least of all someone like you. The majority of people would probably think me mad and scuttle away in panic. They'd crucify me if they could. For most people are

frightfully suspicious of what they either can't or won't understand. They only see what they want to, and are more inclined to consider anything that transcends their imaginative or intellectual limitations to be a form of madness, rather than simply something which lies beyond them. They'd strive, with all their limited powers of argumentation, to make me feel in the wrong, to humiliate and ostracize me, and not simply on ethnic grounds. If I suddenly went up to that fellow over there, the one in the open-necked red shirt, and asked him what he knew about manic-depressive psychoses or the psychological effects of long-term celibacy, he'd either take fright or, assuming he's as stupid as he looks, become abusively violent. Indeed, he might even point to the nearest female and say "Why not ask her, mate?"

YOUNG WOMAN: (Smiles through her nose) I wouldn't particularly blame him. After all, one doesn't normally ask strangers those sorts of questions. In fact, one doesn't normally approach strangers at all, at least not in London.

YOUNG MAN: I suppose I *was* being a bit silly then but, well, one sometimes feels the urge to do or say something unusual, if only to prove to