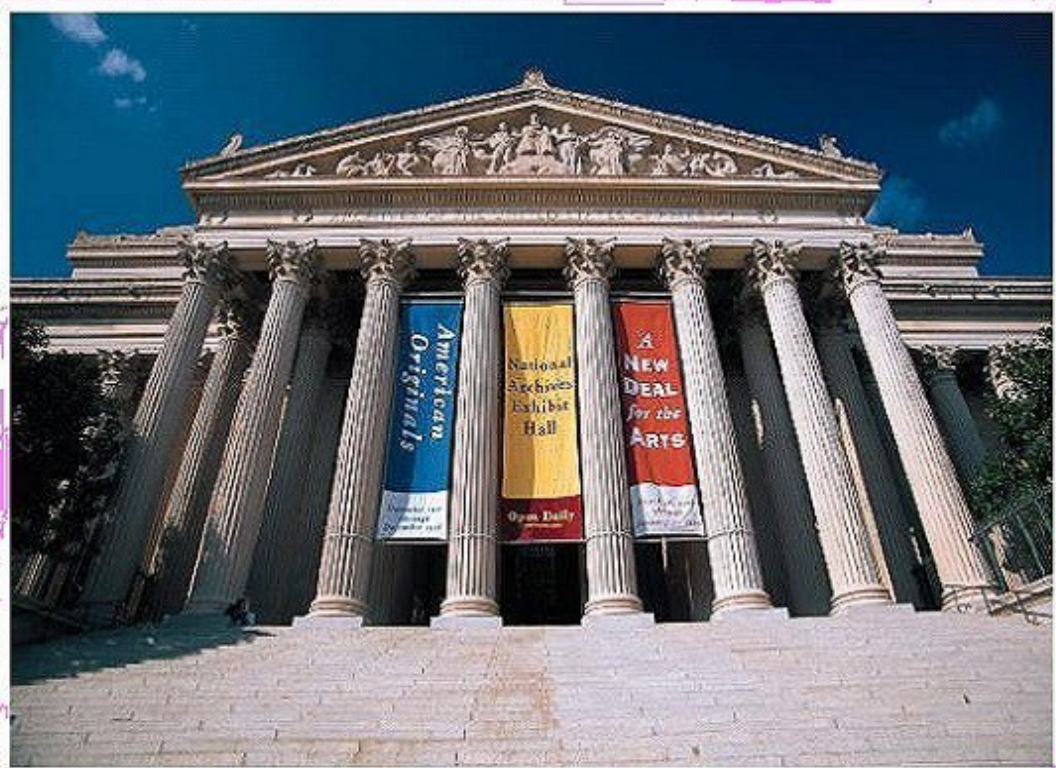


Sublimated Relations

Or
The Voice Museum



JOHN O'LOUGHLIN

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By

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Of Centretruths Digital Media

CDM Prose

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CHAPTER ONE

He gently closed the front door of his parents' house behind him and, pulling his scarf more tightly around his neck, set off at a brisk pace for home. It was a rather cold night and, as he hurried along, great plumes of escaping breath were quickly dispersed into the chill air. He was somewhat relieved that the once-yearly obligation to visit his parents for Christmas had been successfully dispatched and that he was once more a free man – free, that is, to please himself.

Not that their company unduly oppressed him! On the contrary, they did their best to make his stay a merry one, having provided a copious roast lunch and a sufficiency of wine and/or sherry. But, even so, it was a relief that the social pressure to be on one's best behaviour had if not entirely vanished then, at any rate, been temporarily relaxed, and he was accordingly free to be his usual informal self.

One's best behaviour? No, that wasn't entirely true! More accurately, the pressure to tune-in, as it were, to one's parents' standard of Christmas and behave in a manner which suggested that no alternative standard was either possible or indeed desirable. Yes, that was it! He was escaping from the pressure of that, as also, if the truth were known, from the even worse pressure of having been in close proximity to his stepfather's wretched cold and of having had to pretend that it didn't really inconvenience him in any way. But, really, what a gross inconvenience it *had* been! It was quite a stinker the man was suffering from, a most objectionable stinker!

For a moment Timothy Byrne was on the verge of cursing his stepfather for having had the untimely misfortune to catch a rotten cold at Christmas, but, mindful of the festive spirit, he stifled the thought as best he could and replaced it with a charitable commiseration towards Richard Briley for the rotten luck he had had ... to fall victim to such a sordid fate at so inopportune a time. In fact, he forced himself to feel sorry for the man and to offer him, in retrospect, what private sympathy he could. Yet even then it wasn't possible for Timothy to ignore the self-pity which suddenly welled up, like flood waters, inside him at the recollection of his having had to sit

in uncomfortably close proximity to Mr Briley on a number of occasions over Christmas and not only risk being infected with the stinker himself, but, no less distastefully, listen to the incessant snivelling which issued from the old man's snot-laden nose. Really, it was enough to make one weep!

Crossing over one of the busy main roads which prominently divided his part of Haringey from theirs, he hurried his steps along the north London streets still faster, as much, in effect, to escape the memory of his stepfather's threatening germs ... as to get back to his flat as quickly as possible, lest additional threats from unseen quarters lay in sordid wait for him! Poor Mr Briley, it was really most unkind of nature to have inflicted such a bad cold on him during that brief period in the year when, birthdays notwithstanding, one least wished to suffer germs. Most unkind! Yet, unfortunately, that was generally the way with nature, which was unconcerned with human wishes and the sporadic attempts man might make to approximate to a heavenly condition. Mindful, one might almost say, of its own wayward interests. Ignorant of Christmas.

For what was Christmas, after all, but a concerted attempt by man to approximate to Heaven in the face, if needs be, of natural opposition? A time when one remembered the birth of Christ and gave thanks for the spiritual example He was to set. A time when one endeavoured to live more closely in Christ's light and to refrain from sin. But what did nature care about that? Not a frigging jot! It made no specific effort to emulate man and call a truce for a few days. On the contrary, one was just as likely to catch a cold on Christmas day, if germs were in the air, as at any other time. And if the weather had been particularly inclement before Christmas, it wasn't likely to improve just to suit men. It could even get worse!

Fortunately that had not been the case this year, and, as he continued on his brooding way, Timothy felt gratitude for the fact that the weather had remained comparatively dry and mild these past few days, thus discouraging the rapid spread of harmful germs. Yet the fact of Mr Briley's cold was still bad enough, and even if he, Timothy John Byrne, hadn't caught it, nevertheless he had suffered from it in a certain sense, both psychologically and physically, and that was no joke! His Christmas hadn't exactly proved to be the most congenial of experiences, even if it could have been a damned sight worse. Still, his parents had generally been kind

to him, and together, in spite of their temperamental differences, they had endeavoured to maintain an atmosphere of peace and joy whilst in one-another's persevering company.

Yes, a kind of crude approximation to the heavenly Beyond had been achieved, in spite of whatever opposition the temporal world had contrived to place in their way. Even with Mr Briley's constant snivelling and the consequent risk of infection, these past few days had retained a seasonal quality which, on the whole, was fairly pleasant, if a little lacking in excitement. For there could be no question that Timothy had eaten well and, despite his customary abstinence, imbibed a bottle or two of quality sherry, not to mention sat in front of some interesting films on television and spent an hour or so profitably reading philosophy in one of his parents' spare rooms. And, of course, there had been some conversation with his mother – Mr Briley being a rather laconic bloke who preferred not to enter into conversation with him even when he wasn't ill – which had proved more the exception than the rule, and passed the time quite pleasantly.

Yet even as he hurried across another busy road, Timothy reflected that this Christmas could have been a lot better, a much finer approximation to Heaven than theirs had been, and not only on account of his stepfather's cold, by any means! No, on a number of counts. But, alas, his parents had prevented it from being such by their emphasis on traditional, or sensual, approximations to the Beyond, and had thus made it virtually obligatory for him to follow suit. The ideas which were now welling-up in his conscious mind, like molten lava, would hardly appeal to them, well-meaning though they undoubtedly were. No, they couldn't be expected to appreciate what he now considered to be a higher way of celebrating Christmas, a way which, instead of emphasizing downward self-transcendence, put the emphasis firmly on upward self-transcendence and was accordingly closer to Heaven, to what Timothy liked to think of as the spiritual climax to human evolution in the not-too-distant future.

However, being average sensual people, his mother and stepfather could only to celebrate Christmas in a fashion commensurate with their average sensuality, not in a fashion which he now regarded as of a higher and altogether more agreeable order. Yet what was true of them was no less true of the great majority of people, who were likewise indisposed to change their habits and celebrate Christmas in any but a sensual way. And

as he neared his flat, a poignant truth suddenly dawned on him. Like it or not, the majority of people's attempts to approximate to a heavenly condition at Christmas only resulted in their ending-up in a condition closer to Hell, in which their customary sensual habits were intensified to a point of gluttony and drunkenness, if not lechery as well!

Yes, that was the ironic truth of the matter! For the average sensual man Christmas was simply an intensification of his average sensual habits, and thus, in certain respects, an approximation not to Heaven but to its beastly antithesis! Society hadn't yet evolved to a stage where the great majority of people were disposed to approximate, no matter how humbly or tentatively, to the heavenly Beyond through upward self-transcendence. Consequently the only reasonable alternative to average day-to-day consciousness for a relatively short period of time lay, for them, in downward self-transcendence, in the gratification of the senses rather than of the spirit, and thus immersion in the subconscious instead of the superconscious. For which, as Timothy well knew, food and drink were eminently suitable!

And so, by a curious paradox, the Devil was arguably given more acknowledgement, by a majority of people at Christmas, than God, and a kind of sensuous approximation to Hell triumphed over the Christian world during that time. Only in a minority of cases was ...