

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Collected Short Prose Vol.1



JOHN O'LOUGHLIN

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Collected Short Prose Vol.1 by

JOHN O'LOUGHLIN

Of Centretruths Digital Media

CDM Prose

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CONTENTS

Preface

A Magnanimous Offer

The Latest Cure

The Weekly Lesson

The Weekly Confession

The Aesthetica

Hanley's Concept

A Literary Trinity

A Visit to Hell

The Reckoning

Occupational Species

The Christian Compromise

An Extraordinary Rumour

The Turning-Point

Caught Unawares

From the Devil to God

An Unexpected Crisis

To the Millennium and Beyond

Perfection Our Goal

Nolan's Investigations

Living in the City

A Canine Crime

An Evening with Paul Kelly
Prospect of a Change
Extracts from a Journal
Dream Compromise

Appendix: Aphorisms

Biographical Footnote

PREFACE

This compilation of short prose – some might be short stories but narrative fiction isn't necessarily the best or most accurate description – represents Volume One of a projected two-volume compilation which goes half-way towards a 'collected short prose' in that its contents derive from four different volumes dating from 1976–1981, and kind of fit together both stylistically and thematically, coming to an aphoristic head, or culmination point, which summarizes many of the subjects tackled and, in large part, also explains my choice of overall title, insofar as these aphorisms can be regarded as constituting the heads side of a metaphorical 'coin' whose tails, as fiction to truth, can only be short prose, even if not necessarily of an overly narrative character, as noted.

Although the first two pieces in this collection aren't strictly prose fiction, being, if anything, closer to one-act plays, I have included them with the prose proper, if only because I see no future for them or myself in theatre, and don't really feel they ought to stand alone or, for that matter, be excluded from other 'early' material with which they were originally written back in 1976, when I tentatively set-out on a fictional journey that was destined to lead and, indeed, culminate in philosophical truth, a tiny taste of which is provided by the aphoristic appendix; although the volume as a whole stops well short of the sort of ideological earnestness that was to characterize my fiction from 1982 onwards, and so it remains, despite the vigorous polemic

characterizing several of its contents, a comparatively
youthful tribute to ideological innocence.

John O'Loughlin, London 2007 (Revised 2022)

A MAGNANIMOUS OFFER

The drawing room of Mr Cyril Richardson's country house in Berkshire where, in groups of twos and threes, a select gathering of guests are enjoying the relaxed atmosphere of informal conversation. Having been engaged in such conversation with Oscar Wilde, an up-and-coming poet, concerning the rumoured progress of indigenous enlightenment in matters of consummate importance to the survival of ignorance, the host, a successful portrait painter, is heard referring his guest's attention to matters closer to-hand.

HOST: (Eyes his guest's three-quarter empty glass of white wine) I trust the wine is to your liking, Oscar?

WILDE: Oh, exquisite! What is it?

HOST: The best.

WILDE: (Politely if belatedly sniffs the bouquet) I thought as much. Vintage calibre! Alas, the number of perfect hosts is becoming steadily fewer these days. Perfection is quite out-of-fashion.

HOST: Indeed? How fortunate for me that I'm never invited anywhere by the imperfect ones. (He glances towards his wife, a beautiful dark-haired woman who has been waiting on the edge of a group of nearby conversationalists for the opportunity of being officially introduced to Oscar Wilde, and indicates, by a polite gesture of his hand, that he would like her to join them.) Tell me, Oscar, do you believe in miracles?

WILDE: Only when they fail to convince me.

HOST: Then you must meet my wife. She convinces no-one but herself.

WILDE: A regular affair!

HOST: (To Wilde) Allow me to introduce you to Pamela. Pamela, the poet Oscar Wilde.

HOSTESS: (Extends her hand) Delighted to meet you, Mr Wilde. My husband has told me all about you.

WILDE: (Kisses her hand) Then I beg your pardon, madam. He has probably told you too much.

HOSTESS: (Excitedly) On the contrary, he rarely talks unless he's excited, and he's rarely excited until he whets my curiosity.

HOST: Then don't allow me to blunt it, my dear. (He turns to Wilde) If you'll excuse me, Oscar, I must attend to our other guests a moment. Just let Pamela know if there's anything you'd like. There's no shortage of wine in the cabinet. (He points to a nearby wine cabinet and immediately sets off towards some other guests.)

HOSTESS: I trust you found your way here without too much inconvenience, Mr Wilde?

WILDE: Indeed I did, madam. For the scent of affluence sheds an irresistible attraction. One finds half of London pursuing the same path.

HOSTESS: (Scans the crowded room) Are you familiar with any of our other guests?

WILDE: Too familiar, I'm afraid. That's the main reason why I'm alone tonight.

HOSTESS: Oh, really? Then I shall keep you company, Mr Wilde. We mustn't allow that brilliant tongue of yours to cease wagging just because you're temporarily or temperamentally out-of-favour with the bulk of our illustrious company.

WILDE: Thank you, madam. If I've previously exhausted myself on a majority of the other persons here this evening, I have yet to exhaust myself on you. Your

company exalts me, as does your wine.

HOSTESS: Then have some more. (To his surprise she fetches an uncorked bottle of Sauterne from the cabinet and pours its contents into his half-empty glass.) My husband was telling me, the other day, how you recently made a valiant attempt to abstain from drink in the presence of Dr Hugo Fleming.

WILDE: (Blushes) Only an attempt, I'm glad to say. Had I been rash enough to succeed, I should have forfeited the ultimate pleasure of being carried home by that kindly old man and nursed back to drink again. It has since become a ruse among certain well-established dipsomaniacs to accredit me the possessor of an unfortunately high metabolism.

HOSTESS: (With a penetrating look) I find that quite credible.

WILDE: How discerning! But one can't believe everything one hears nowadays, particularly where one's health and pleasures are concerned. One must be content with believing only what one has to.

HOSTESS: You seem more of a sage than I initially took you for, Mr Wilde. Tell me, when are you going to get married?

WILDE: (Lights himself a gold-tipped and mildly-opiated cigarette) Why, I wonder, is it only the married women who ask me that question?

HOSTESS: Well?

WILDE: One should only consider the possibility of marriage when one can't afford it. That prevents one from marrying when one can.

HOSTESS: (Smiles wryly) How paradoxical! But perhaps you're too eligible?

WILDE: (Blushes afresh) There you have it! For were I

a desperate man, I shouldn't hesitate to clutch at a vulnerable twig. But, thanks or no thanks to my eligibility, I can never see the wood for the trees.

HOSTESS: How disconcerting!

WILDE: On the contrary, I find it most provocative. The trees are the only things worth looking at.

HOSTESS: Then you like my dress?

WILDE: Such an elegant leaf.

HOSTESS: How flattering! But you may pay the price of plucking it one day.

WILDE: (His gaze riveted on her bosom) That's a branch of aesthetics in which I'm well versed, I can assure you.

HOSTESS: Perhaps. But you aren't yet in debt to my husband.

WILDE: True, but only because he's in debt to me.

HOSTESS: (Slightly alarmed) Oh, in what way?

WILDE: Eh, financially.

HOSTESS: Then I shall ask him to settle your account.

WILDE: (In a subdued tone-of-voice) Personally, I'd rather you didn't. He has become such an amiable companion in the short time I've known him. Besides, I prefer intrigue. It's less wearisome.

HOSTESS: (Smiles in a subtly coquettish way) Then you shall have it!

WILDE: Allow me to congratulate you. What will you have to drink?

HOSTESS: (Taken by surprise) Whatever you suggest.

WILDE: (Turns toward the wine cabinet) A double orange juice?

HOSTESS: (Feigns indignation) Oscar!

WILDE: I mean, a double orange juice and vodka.

HOSTESS: I think vodka more becoming. Perhaps a

little orange juice would suit you, though?

WILDE: Indeed it would, madam, were I not already partial to your magnificent wine and consequently disinclined to mix drinks. Even so, you would be none the less attractive for a change of glass.

HOSTESS: My apologies for having underestimated you.

WILDE: (Hands her a glass of vodka) Apologies are quite out-of-keeping with your demeanour.

HOSTESS: As is flattery with yours.

WILDE: Then we are cold-blooded?

HOSTESS: I prefer to think in terms of warmth.

WILDE: Your wish is my demand.

HOSTESS: Granted!

WILDE: (His eyes reverting to her bosom) A breast in the hand is worth two in the bodice. (Mr Richardson is seen approaching the newly acquainted couple with two glasses of sparkling champagne in his hands.)

HOSTESS: (Almost whispering) I fear we are about to be nipped in the bud.

WILDE: Not when our liaison has already blossomed, Pamela.

HOST: (Smiles candidly and extends one of the glasses to his special guest) For you, Oscar! A truly exuberant bouquet.

WILDE: Cheers Cyril! I never reject a magnanimous offer.

THE LATEST CURE

The small surgery of Dr Martin Stanmore, the supreme exponent of 'Emotional Hypnosis', where a young and semi-delirious victim of unrequited love, a Mr James Hamilton, is endeavouring to explain certain aspects of his crisis to both the doctor and his female assistant, Nurse Pamela Barnes. He is seated in front of Dr Stanmore's paper-strewn desk, while the good doctor himself – a tall, dark-bearded man – is slowly pacing the floor backwards and forwards behind him. Nurse Barnes, who is seated immediately to Mr Hamilton's left, is clasping a large surgical casebook in which she has been taking particulars and recording general impressions with regard to the clinical nature of the patient's psychological condition. The scene opens towards the climax of Hamilton's confessions.

MR HAMILTON: (In a state of nervous excitement) I'll buy five minutes of her time, four minutes, two minutes! Just a glance then, a touch, a word! I'll follow her everywhere, anywhere, what matter! I have only to set eyes on her for a second and my heart beats like a drum, my Adam's apple rises up to choke me, and my concentration goes positively haywire! I can't even eat without thinking about her. I get indigestion every time anyone mentions her god-damned name, that terribly beautiful name which haunts me all through the night. Her gestures, voice, smile, hair, eyes, limbs, buttocks, breasts, clothes, scents, opinions – everything about her completely enslaves me! For two pins I'd get down on my knees and start worshipping her. What else can I do?

She has only to appear in my presence for a few seconds and I'm a nervous wreck.

DR STANMORE: (Aside to Nurse Barnes) He needs immediate attention. Grade A. This case is already serious. His state-of-mind may deteriorate still further unless we apply the emergency antidote at once. We'll have to put him under for several hours.

MR HAMILTON: (Jumps to conclusions) You're not intending to interfere with the workings of my brain, are you? I'd rather not experience anything more painful than what I'm already suffering from, if you don't mind. A sedative is all very well, but if it's only the start of a process that ...

NURSE BARNES: (Her hand on the patient's nearest arm) Now don't be afraid, James! You won't feel a thing. We've treated literally hundreds of young people, both male and female, since this clinic first opened, and the vast majority of them have profited enormously from our service, as can be verified by the many letters of thanks and acknowledgement in the cabinet to your right. We have every confidence that your welfare will be safeguarded with the utmost care, and that you'll be successfully returned to the pre-love condition without experiencing any psychical or physical repercussions whatsoever. Indeed, we even undertake to offer you a six-month's guarantee which ensures you free service, should today's application of hypnotic expertise by one of the world's top emotional hypnotists prove insufficiently therapeutic; though we've had few complaints or rejections, I can assure you. This emotional insanity from which you're currently suffering ... is injurious both to yourself, as victim, and to the community at large, which is to say to those whom you

infect throughout the course of your daily routine – people who inevitably become victimized and, to a certain extent, influenced by your reduced efficiency, intermittent emotional aberrations, intellectual instability, and general melancholia.

MR HAMILTON: (On the defensive) But I didn't mean to fall in love, honest! I couldn't help it. Her continuous presence gradually overwhelmed me, despite the fact that she was attached to somebody else at the time and wouldn't have anything to do with me sexually. By the time I sought to evade her, it was too damn late. I had succumbed to the malady.

DR STANMORE: (Extends a reassuring hand to the patient's right shoulder) Nobody can *help* falling in love, my friend. It's beyond our control, since ordained by nature. If it happens it happens, and you must suffer the consequences, whether positively or, as in your case, negatively. If she refused you, then she is to blame. You have every right to the woman of your choice. If she was otherwise engaged, I rather doubt that she told you all that much about it, not, at any rate, unless you pressed her to, since the object of this engagement would then have constituted a reason for her excluding you which, regardless of human convention, isn't in accordance with nature's will.

MR HAMILTON: As a matter of fact, she claimed to be engaged with church activities every night.

DR STANMORE: (Raises his brows in surprise) Then you're very unfortunate, my young friend. For the Church is usually in opposition to nature. You've suffered, it seems to me, on account of someone's habitual bigotry. But don't worry! The new administration is seeing to the removal of outmoded

institutions and we, for our part, will certainly do what we can to prevent this misfortune from incapacitating you further. It remains to be said, however, that the final solution rests with you personally. So you must be determined!

MR HAMILTON: (Frowns) But even if you do hypnotize me, or put me under, I'll still be in love, won't I? I mean, you can't cold turkey my emotions.

NURSE BARNES: (Slightly irritated, in spite of her show of good humour) We have absolutely no intention of "cold turkeying" you, James. We can only hypnotize you into forgetting her.

DR STANMORE: (Sits at his desk and then leans forward with fingers intertwined, his demeanour stern) Some people call it brainwashing. They believe it to be an outrage against nature, another very conspicuous example of the inhumanity of modern science, a ruse they're constantly exploiting as a means to furthering their own ends which, as we've already seen, are more often against nature than for it! Now some individuals even go so far as to assert that the interruption and subsequent termination of this pestiferous ailment actually robs its victim of a meaningful and emotionally enriching experience. As though such a condition as unrequited love were more of a pleasure than a pain, and therefore shouldn't be tampered with in the name of science! They fail to establish the difference between the requited and the unrequited kinds of love, thereby regarding them as equal when, as anyone saddled with the latter will know, they're virtually as far apart as heaven and hell! Indeed, I should be most surprised to discover a person whose love had been requited duly applying for immediate hypnotic alleviation. As a rule,

such a person is perfectly at one with himself.

MR HAMILTON: (Still feels sceptical) But will I really forget all about my emotional attachment to her? I mean, isn't that a trifle far-fetched?

NURSE BARNES: (Unable to restrain her impatience)

Mr Hamilton, you *are* a difficult man to convince!

Anyone would think you didn't want to be cured, that you'd rather remain in the painful clutches of a disease which has virtually deranged your mind! Why-on-earth did you come along to us in the first place, if you only wanted to persist in playing hard to get? Admittedly, many things appear a trifle far-fetched to begin with, but that's certainly no reason why they should be thought impossible. Whoever would have supposed man capable of travelling to the moon, let alone flying to America, just over a century ago? And man has come an awfully long way since then! Why, in this very surgery, Dr Stanmore has developed, applied, and perfected a theory of emotional hypnosis which has been proven time and time again! Its validity is incontrovertible!

MR HAMILTON: Yes, but what if, in leaving here, I encounter her within the next few days – as I'm almost bound to – and subsequently run the risk of falling in love with her all over again? Surely I won't be immune from that?

DR STANMORE: (Exercises his customary aplomb and paternal encouragement) O yes you will! For we assure you, during the course of your treatment, that she'll have absolutely no further emotional hold over you until such time as, given a change of circumstances, you may specifically request otherwise. If you shortly encounter her again, there'll be absolutely no possibility of unrequited love. You'll be completely free of her.

However, should she subsequently become accessible to your attentions through either a change in her romantic or possibly even ideological circumstances, then you'll be perfectly free to become re-acquainted with her without running any risk of falling in love. You may even decide to return to us in order to be re-hypnotized into falling *in* love with her again; though such a decision will be entirely up to you, and obviously subject to the precondition that a mutually satisfactory arrangement can be reached next time.

NURSE BARNES: Unrequited love is a thing of the past, a kind of virulent psychic disease, or insanity of the soul, from which your parents' generation and all the generations prior to them constantly suffered. They had absolutely no protection against it, and consequently succumbed in their millions. Now if venereal disease was the chief physical manifestation of sexual hardship, then unrequited love was its chief psychical manifestation, against which it was extremely difficult to prevail. Clinics for alleviating the directly physical aspects of the problem were established quite some time before medical experts and politicians got around to taking its psychical aspects more seriously, and this traditional disequilibrium of attention – so often resulting in more cases of rape, juvenile delinquency, neurosis, severe depression, chronic perversion, and sexual hatred, i.e. the so-called 'war of the sexes' – was partly a consequence of the Establishment's inability and/or disinclination to link such social transgressions with sexual repressions, and partly a consequence of the prevailing misconception with regard to the nature of a healthy soul, the principal criterion for assessing the health of which should have been its social wellbeing

and emotional integrity, rather than the psychological shackles with which the anti-natural morality of the state metaphysics chose to enslave it! However, the recent enlightenment schemes and re-education programmes which the new authorities have introduced, including a much wider and more liberal sex-education scheme; the possibility of regular sex in one of the many aesthetically-advanced 'Sex Centres', where one can privately, comfortably, and economically enjoy access to the most advanced films and sex gadgets/dolls; the widespread recognition of manic depression as the punishment inflicted by nature upon those who, whether through force of circumstances or in consequence of arbitrary decisions, have deviated from it to any appreciable extent, and the concomitant acceptance of the organic necessity of some form of regular sex; the systematic elimination of certain superstitions and anachronisms, and the establishment of the league against sexual puritanism, etc., coupled to the remarkable advances in modern technology – about which, incidentally, I need say no more – have entirely revolutionized the situation. And not only by the legalization of various theoretical antidotes to the old way of life but, more importantly, by the legalization of a variety of practical antidotes to it which are far superior to any old women's formulae or imaginable drugs, and certainly much less harmful. We no longer suffer from so many physical diseases, so why should we suffer from mental or emotional ones instead? What would it gain you to remain perpetually melancholic?

DR STANMORE: (Ironically) You're not a writer, by any chance, are you?

MR HAMILTON: (Without really appreciating the

doctor's subtle irony) No, I'm not actually.

DR STANMORE: Well then, what have you got to lose, apart from a humiliating obsession which you're unable to control, a situation which is driving you crazy, a gratuitous attachment? The days of emotional slavery are over! There is absolutely no need for you to follow this young woman, this epitome of physical vanity, around on an imaginary lead, as though you were a craven dog whose very survival depended upon it! Renounce this servility! Have done with her! Embrace your independence!

MR HAMILTON: (Smiles for the first time) Maybe I'll be luckier next time, assuming there'll be a next time?

DR STANMORE: (In a conciliatory and overly reassuring tone-of-voice) Of course there'll be a next time! A handsome and smartly-dressed young chap like you? Don't underestimate yourself! Why waste precious time worrying yourself sick over some young prude who foolishly ignores you, when you can walk out of here, later today, and approach the first attractive girl your eyes light upon? Now don't take me literally, but that's the possibility. Too many young men waste months and even years in consequence of unrequited love when, given the right opportunity, plenty of other pretty females would ordinarily appeal to them.

NURSE BARNES: And that's precisely why we're here, complete with soft lighting.

MR HAMILTON: (Blushes slightly) Then please get to work on me, people. I have to walk out of here a new man!

THE WEEKLY LESSON

I had just removed her brassiere and was in the preliminary stages of fondling her quite copious breasts when, to my profound consternation, the damn telephone rang. "Now who-the-devil can that be?" I asked myself as, reluctantly extricating myself from Sharla's grip, I hurried out into the hall, snatched up the receiver, and straightaway heard a gruff voice asking: "Hello, is my daughter there?"

"She is indeed!" I impulsively replied.

"Ah, could I speak to her a moment?"

"Er, certainly. Just a sec." I turned towards the piano room, the door to which was still slightly ajar. "Sharla!" I called.

"Yes?"

"Your, er, father wants to speak to you."

"Oh, damn him!" she groaned, automatically putting on her vest. "What-on-earth can he want?"

It wasn't a question I could answer there and then, so I patiently held the receiver to my chest until, arriving breathlessly in the hall, she was able to take it from me and say: "Hi dad!"

Fearing that my presence beside her wouldn't help any, I

ambled back into the piano room, where her bag, coat, shoes, miniskirt and underclothes lay strewn across the floor, and her perfume permeated the air with its delightfully sweet scent. Indeed, everything about her was delightfully sweet. Even the room itself, ordinarily so drab and formal, seemed to have taken on a romantic dimension which lent the furniture a mysterious poignancy, as though it had acquired the semblance of life and was now a silent witness to this evening's amorous events. Fortunately for me,