

A QUESTION OF BELIEF

A collection of philosophical dialogues by
JOHN O'LOUGHLIN



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PREFACE

I first got the curious and even novel idea of writing a volume of dialogues from reading the eighteenth-century French philosopher Diderot, one of the great masters of the genre, and the result, several weeks later, was that I wrote four fairly lengthy philosophical dialogues which enabled me to continue developing the dualistic theories begun the previous year (1977) in both *Between Truth and Illusion* and *The Illusory Truth*. Their subject-matter ranges from book collecting as an art form and the morality of films to the influence of astrology on writers and, finally, historical perspectives, or whether one is being fair to view historical events through contemporary criteria. Although they tend to be a little one-sided in their didactic intent, these dialogues are at least broad enough to be of some interest to the general reader and represent considerable progress, both stylistically and thematically, beyond those play-like pieces contained in *A Magnanimous Offer* (1976).

John O'Loughlin, London 1978 (Revised 2008)

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A 'WORK OF ART'

MARTIN: (*Turns to his host's bookcase*) I must say, John, you're certainly in possession of a much smaller collection of books than I would have expected! Why, I'd have thought, by the many works you appear to be familiar with, that you were the possessor of at least five-hundred books, not a mere forty!

JOHN: Oh, I must have collected about five-hundred books over the past six or seven years. But, eventually, I threw most of them away.

MARTIN: (*Raises his brows in surprise*) Why on earth did you do that?

JOHN: Simply because I had absolutely no intention of re-reading them. It seems to me that unless one is going to re-read one's books - and not just once but a number of times - there is little or no point in one's keeping them. I have no desire, these days, to be a collector for the mere sake of collecting. If I formerly had a tendency in that direction, I outgrew it over a year ago.

MARTIN: Hmm, so these 'favourite' books, which apparently constitute your chief reading material, presumably represent all of your current literary and philosophical tastes, do they?

JOHN: No, but they certainly represent a sort of quintessential distillation of all the books I have ever read. The ones you see there don't necessarily represent *all* of my tastes. For it occasionally happens that I add a book or two when I have grown tired of re-reading everything, and I also borrow from the local library quite regularly. But they do, at any rate, amount to the bulk of my current tastes. Unlike most book-addicts, I'm not interested in retaining anything that isn't approximately pertinent to my current lifestyle. As I change, so my book collection changes with me. Where I once grew out of toy soldiers, water pistols, Lego bricks, bicycles, and football programmes, I now grow out of particular books. I no longer keep anything that isn't more or less pertinent to my intellectual requirements.

MARTIN: I see! So Joyce's *Ulysses* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are both that - more or less pertinent to your intellectual requirements or, as you also said, your current lifestyle?

JOHN: Yes and no. Though, to be honest with you, I would say 'no' more than 'yes', insofar as I make exceptions for what I consider to be the really great books. To my mind, they are above criticism. They deserve to be revered as examples of outstanding creativity. In fact, I keep them in the spirit that someone else might keep a great painting, some expensive jewellery, or a collection of important letters. I have absolutely no desire to part with that which, by dint of its outstanding creative ingenuity and intellectual magnitude, must always remain indisputably great. But there aren't too many such 'classics' in my

collection, as you can see for yourself.

MARTIN: (*Scans the titles*) Yes, aside from *The Will to Power* by Nietzsche, *Ulysses* and *The Lord of the Rings* are the two most voluminous-looking books on your shelf. But I *am* surprised, all the same, that you should be in possession of only one book by Gide, Hesse, and Sartre! As for Henry Miller, Knut Hamsun, and John Cowper Powys - well, I'd have thought that you would surely be interested in owning more than just one book by each of them?

JOHN: What you see there isn't merely an incomplete selection from these authors but, on the contrary, my final and complete selection. The books representative of each author are the only ones that I can now bear reading. As for the others, yes, I've been through them all, I have even admired them all at one time or another. But I wasn't sufficiently impressed, in the final analysis, to regard them as indispensable. For example, my favourite Hesse, aside from that wonderful volume of essays entitled *My Belief*, is unquestionably *Steppenwolf*. My favourite Sartre is *Nausea*. My favourite Hamsun is *Mysteries*. My favourite Gide *Fruits of the Earth*, and so on.

MARTIN: And you would regard these as their 'best' books?

JOHN: Well, I would certainly regard them as the ones which mean the most to me. In actual fact, I've read about fifteen of Hesse's books, each of which gave me a great deal of pleasurable preoccupation and serious food for thought at the time. But, in the long run, I was more impressed by *Steppenwolf* than by anything else. So when I eventually decided to adopt this principle of rigorous selection, I threw all the rest away. You can imagine the pains and doubts I went through, in the process of ridding myself of so many diverse influences! To begin with, I was in two minds about getting rid of *The Glass Bead Game*, *Narziss and Goldmund*, and *Klingsor's Last Summer*. But I finally convinced myself that, as I wasn't intending to re-read any of them, they would only clutter-up the bookcase.

MARTIN: So out they went?

JOHN: Yes. And the same principle was duly applied to all the other authors as well! They served my purposes for a time, but *only* for a time, since I was heaven-bent on transcending them. Indeed, it was during the course of this 'purge', if I may so call it, that I hit upon the rather unusual idea of my book collection signifying a sort of 'work of art', that's to say, something possessing significance above and beyond the mere presence of a fairly haphazard collection of diverse books. Thus this small assortment before you is, in my eyes, a kind of 'work of art', where everything has its allocated place, its reason for being there, and its link with the other books in the collection. But it is a 'work of art', however, that can be changed or modified from time to time, as

occasionally happens when I either remove or incorporate another book.

MARTIN: I must confess, this sounds rather crazy to me! I don't see how any collection of books, no matter how fastidious its collector may be, can possibly be regarded in such a light. Why, a work of art involves skill, beauty, imagination, individuality!

JOHN: Yes, and so, too, believe it or not, does this collection of books, though admittedly to a lesser degree. However, I don't wish to seem pretentious or to be taken too literally here. I don't, by any means, desire to see my bookcase in a public gallery at an exhibition of modern art or anything of the kind, since that would undoubtedly tax the public's imagination and patience to an unacceptable degree - at least from the standpoint of commercial sponsorship. No, I'm merely trying to impress upon you my intention to turn a collection of books into something meaningful, integrated, even thought-provoking. In fact, it's just as important for one to consider what isn't there as to consider what is.

MARTIN: I must say, that sounds frightfully esoteric!

JOHN: Perhaps it does. But for anybody with any knowledge of literature and philosophy, for anybody with a similar taste and temperament to myself, it is bound to provoke certain relevant speculations and thereby *mean* something.

MARTIN: (*Smiles to himself*) Well, it was a pretty ingenious, not to say original, idea! But how on earth did you come-up with it in the first place?

JOHN: Tentatively. I had been confined to bed for several weeks with glandular fever. I hadn't been feeling terribly strong, and, being disinclined to read for any length of time, I tentatively hit upon the idea of having a clean-out with regard to my books. Now at that time - November of last year to be precise - they totalled some three-hundred-and-fifty, the bulk of which was shared between famous and highly influential authors like Henry Miller, Hermann Hesse, Jean-Paul Sartre, John Cowper Powys, James Joyce, and Albert Camus. Well, not having much else to do, and feeling rather bored with the painful existence I was then leading, I crawled out of bed, slowly unloaded the shelves of my bookcase, dragged all the books to the bedside, crawled back into bed, and with a certain trepidation, as though I were about to embark on a very momentous undertaking, began flicking through one book after another principally with a view to 'weeding out' what I considered to be the second-rate, the irrelevant, the tedious, and the outmoded. After a few days of this 'weeding out' process, a time during which my health seemed to take a marked turn for the better, I had reduced my collection by about three-hundred books. I had decided to dispose of eighteen by Miller, fourteen by Hesse, eleven by Sartre, six by Powys, four by Joyce, and so on, right the way through the entire range of my

collection, which eventually left me with approximately what you see before you today, minus one or two late additions. Admittedly, during the course of this 'purge', this almost pathological compulsion to compensate myself for all the boredom I had suffered at the mercy of my illness, I made a few serious mistakes - namely, by throwing out books which I subsequently, though belatedly, realized I ought to have kept. But they couldn't have amounted to more than about fifteen out of the entire three hundred, so I'm not particularly worried. Besides, if I really felt like it, I could always purchase them again somewhere.

MARTIN: Yes, and at more expense! But which books would they be?

JOHN: Oh, I can't remember them all now ... Joyce's *Poems Pennyeach*, Camus' *Exile and the Kingdom*, Cocteau's *Opium*, Powys' *Visions and Revisions*, Miller's *The Wisdom of the Heart*, and a few more like that, I guess. Anyway, most of those I retained are still with me and, fortunately, they're the ones which have brought me so much agreeable literary preoccupation. It is a curious thing, but a majority of authors only manage to write one really good book in their entire career, a work which seems to tower above everything else they've written, and which one can't help regarding, in spite of oneself, as their best book. Now one isn't necessarily justified in regarding it so highly; for such an attitude may often amount to little more than the by-product of personal prejudice or taste. But there is still room for an element of objectivity in these matters. For instance, I sincerely regard *The Meaning of Culture* as John Cowper Powys' best book. Now I haven't read more than eight or nine of his books altogether, but, even so, those I did read clearly struck me as the ones most worth reading. Perhaps I should qualify that statement by underlining the difference between his fictional and philosophical outputs. The former, from what I've seen of it, doesn't particularly appeal to me. I speak mainly from the standpoint of the latter. And *The Meaning of Culture*, regarded as a theoretical work, seems to me to fairly dwarf his other philosophical creations. I absolutely revere it for its wonderfully-flowing prose, its imaginative, expansive and skilfully-handled vocabulary, its profound insight into culture, especially literature, and its general outspokenness as, to me, the 'bible' of an important new creed. Take away every other Powys tome if you will, but leave me this one!

MARTIN: (*Looking at the shelf upon which the tome in question stands*) It appears to be the only one of his works that you've got anyway. How many times have you read it, by the way?

JOHN: About six times in the past two years.

MARTIN: And would that make it your most re-read book, then?

JOHN: No. Being a comparatively recent acquisition, it probably still has a number of re-readings to go. But since I'm only twenty-five, I

haven't really had the time-span, as yet, in which to re-read certain adult books all that many times. Still, if memory serves me well, I must have read Sartre's *Nausea* at least eight times, Wilde's *De Profundis and Other Writings* seven times, Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals* six times, Hamsun's *Mysteries* five times, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* four times, and Bertrand Russell's *Unpopular Essays* three times. And I dare say that, if I live to be much older, I shall occasionally read them all again! However, the most sensational enthusiasm induced by any book led to my re-reading Montaigne's *Essays* five times in the space of three months and, scarcely less sensationally, Joyce's *Ulysses* three times consecutively! I was so disheartened when I first got to the end of these two books that I just had to go back to the beginning and start all over again. And each time I re-read them, I seemed to enjoy them more and more!

MARTIN: I'm certainly surprised to hear that you read *Ulysses* three times consecutively. Why, I couldn't even get into it once, at least not properly! But being of Joyce's nationality, I suppose you were better able to appreciate it than me.....