

The Comedy  
*of*  
**Doctor Foster**



A. Colin Wright

paperbytes

## ***Other titles in this series***

### ***Already published:***

Louis Fréchette. *On the Threshold* (tr. Bernard Kelly)

Cary Fagan. *What I Learned in Florida*

Michael Bryson. *Light and Silver*

### ***Forthcoming:***

Tobias Chapman. *Plymouth*

Myles Chilton. *The Local Brew*

Mary Frances Coady. *The Poor*

Dave Hazzan. *The Rise and Fall of Dennis Mitchell*

Lisa Lebedovich. *Stories from a Photograph*

Catherine Leggett. *The 401*

Robert Lindsey. *Another Opportunity for Personal Development*

Bill MacDonald. *A Summer at La Rochelle*

Steve Owad. *Going Places*

Novid Parsi. *How His Little Girl Died*

Uday Prakash. *Duty Officer: Duddo Tiwari* (tr. R. Hueckstedt)

**The Comedy  
*of*  
Doctor Foster**



A. Colin Wright



**paperbytes**

Copyright © 1999 by A. Colin Wright

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system — without written permission from the Publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages for inclusion in a review.

Design: Perkolator {Kommunikation}. Typeset in Minion.

Cover photo: Bernard Kelly

Published by

*paperbytes*

an imprint of *paperplates books*

19 Kenwood Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6C 2R8

[paper@perkolator.com](mailto:paper@perkolator.com)

[www.perkolator.com](http://www.perkolator.com)

# The Comedy of Doctor Foster

*Doctor Foster went to Gloucester  
In a shower of rain,  
He fell in a puddle up to his middle  
And never went there again.*

THOSE WHO MAINTAINED that Dr. Foster's demise was the result of a pact he'd made with the devil were, quite frankly, mistaken. They were members of the congregation of St. Joseph's Church, Wittenberg, Ontario, and they had cause to remember Dr. Foster with some alarm. But the people of St. Joseph's didn't know everything, or even – with the exception of the rector – very much at all. As they said, “There's no smoke without a fire” – but it wasn't hell-fire that Foster was involved with.

It's as well to set down the facts. Foster was not on his way to Gloucester but merely to Toronto. It wasn't raining at the time but had been one of those days in mid-summer when warm sun alternated with violent thunderstorms, and it had rained shortly before he set out. The "puddle" was one of those insignificant rivers one finds along the 401, and in which Foster's car had landed after going out of control. He died instantly, and thus not only did he never go to Gloucester – Toronto – again, he never even reached it. His name, however, certainly was Foster: John Foster, B.A., M.A., Ph.D.

The rhyme? Well, some malicious person scrawled it on the wall of St. Joseph's the day before the funeral, and it was later suggested as a fitting epigraph for Foster's tombstone. For Foster will never be forgotten by that long-suffering congregation, whose only option over the years had been to show Christian endurance towards the man. The obituary notice in *The Wittenberg Torch* stirred up further animosities. "Written by one of his colleagues," Major Austin told every-

one he met: “praising the originality of his thought or something. Which only goes to show the preposterous ideas that are taught to young people nowadays. I read it until I got to the part about Foster being an expert on Nitchy.” (He meant Nietzsche.) “Nitchy, I ask you!” The remark fell flat, as nobody else, except for the rector, was sure who Nietzsche, or Nitchy, was.

Twenty-four years earlier, when Foster had first come to the nearby university, he’d already had a reputation as a scholar. He also published novels, under a different name, and was a competent amateur artist too. (“Something must have gone wrong since,” the rector’s wife would later say. “Even I could paint better than that.”) In those early years, as a few old-timers remembered, Foster had been one of the pillars of the community and of St. Joseph’s in particular. True, he had his oddities. Then in his fifties, he was divorced and so not quite respectable. He read books which couldn’t be approved of. He showed a singular indifference to the niceties of parish behaviour by

attending church in baggy trousers and a jacket with patches on the elbows, and those who sat near him maintained he ostentatiously left out certain sentences from the Creed. But he attended regularly, and no one paid him much attention.

And then it started: in the summer of 1960 to be exact, twenty-two years before Foster's death. He was looked after by a Mrs. Wignall, who came to clean for him twice a week. No harm there, for she was a good soul and likewise a respectable member of St. Joseph's. But suddenly she fell sick, and Foster used that as an excuse to replace her. By a blond creature, a foreigner, in her twenties or younger, and with a figure ... well, the male members of St. Joseph's would, in their jocular, broad-minded moods, describe it with whistles. What's more, she lived in. Now, no one could prove anything. But they talked and shook their heads. Some even sniggered. Only, they couldn't interrogate the girl directly, or have the pleasure of snubbing her, because she didn't come to church at all – and Foster, when tackled discreetly on the subject,



laughed the whole thing off. But already there were murmurs about such things being a threat to the moral fibre of the community.

Actually, the rector met the girl and reported that she was charming, intelligent, and seemed happy working for Foster – and refused to speculate further on their relationship. Others were dissatisfied, saying the rector wasn't sufficiently on guard against sin. (That was the old one, of course – there have been two more since – but all of them for some reason stood up for Foster, even when it became obvious to everyone else that he was an evil man.) Anyway, later that year the girl was obviously pregnant. Foster seemed cheerfully unrepentant and just answered “yes” when someone asked him about it. No shame at all, and now people started avoiding him even in church, which he didn't seem to mind.

The girl finally went away somewhere, and never returned. Foster carried on as usual, or rather, worse than usual. It was one thing to live in sin with an outsider whom nobody really cared about, but quite

another to seduce the organist's wife. Oh, the affair didn't last long and the stupid woman soon went back in tears to her husband, but the effect on the congregation was shattering. The more so because even after her husband took her back in loving forgiveness she refused to show repentance or to say a bad word about Foster. She seemed almost willing to run to him again and, for all the wrong he'd done her, to offer him the other cheek (or whatever part of the anatomy was involved).

It was now that Foster began to get objectionable. He'd always sworn a little. Now he swore a lot. He pretended there was no such thing as "good" or "bad" language (except when it was ungrammatical): just that certain language was appropriate for some contexts and not for others. When someone objected that swearing was morally reprehensible because it took the name of the Lord God in vain, he countered by asking why it was all right to say "my God!" or "heavens!" and not "Christ!" or "Jesus!"; or why, in Spanish, even an archbishop could use Christ, the Virgin Mary and all the saints thrown in as a simple

expression of surprise, which no one took amiss. When someone else claimed that swearing reduced everything to the unpleasant aspects of life, he asked what was unpleasant about shitting and fucking, adding that he enjoyed both.

“It’s not the meaning people are afraid of,” he’d explain as though the worthy members of St. Joseph’s were mere students, “but the sound of it. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is nothing but magic: belief in the power of the word.”

Foster didn’t swear indiscriminately, rejecting this as debasing the vitality of the language, which had to be used with precision. He did indeed swear with precision. He was vulgar with precision. Called things by their names with precision. Once in church, after a piece of unusual metaphysical nonsense in the rector’s sermon, farted with precision.

He told Constance Nightingale, a neurotic spinster in her forties, to take her pants down and have an affair. Then, worst of all, he

seduced the seventeen-year-old daughter of one of the tediously married sidesmen. He became a problem. The rector couldn't turn him away from St. Joseph's and in any case was convinced the church was for sinners rather than the righteous (a sincere if naive man, the rector). And over the next two years Foster had even greater success.

"St. Joseph's is becoming a congregation of cuckolds," Major Austin commented with his usual bluntness – causing the rector, the only one who knew that Joseph was actually the patron saint of cuckolds, to suppress an inappropriate chuckle.

Before Foster's break with the church the majority of the congregation had come to hate him. They could have forgiven him nice, respectable sins. They could perhaps have forgiven a certain sexual licence, provided it were discreet, as a kind of childish last fling before he entered his golden years (or old age, as he indelicately called it). What they couldn't forgive was his threatening all their cherished ideas.

“Of course I’m a threat,” he would roar. “Why is it that Christians have to be so goddamn dull? Do you think Christ wanted a religion of ass-sitters? I’m more Christian than all of you. Read Kierkegaard!”

“Kierke-who?” asked Major Austin, who was deaf. “Is he swearing again?”

More offensive than anything was the fact that Foster was so obviously enjoying himself. Whereas the others were supposed to be living in God’s grace, it was Foster who was happy; Foster who, they said, couldn’t really believe in religion at all.

Why did he come to church? The answer was supplied by the eighteen-year-old son of the Harrisons. A pleasant couple, but their son had “got” religion and had recently written a letter to the *Torch* saying he was seriously disturbed about the moral standards of the community because a strip-tease was being performed in one of the local hotels. Anyway, he’d just entered theological school in the university and thought he knew everything.

“Obviously,” he said, “Foster must have sold his soul to the devil. And he’s making witches of all his, hm, paramours.”

Now, although the idea was ridiculous, there was a spark – a very tiny one – of truth in it. And it caught on because of a comment Foster made the very next Sunday at coffee hour, after the boy who’d got religion started to talk about stories of pacts with the devil.

“That’s all nonsense,” Foster said to the boy with an odd look in his eye. “Have you ever stopped to consider the idiocy of making a pact with the devil? Why the devil? When God is omnipotent, why not ask Him to grant your requests? More effective, and incomparably better as life insurance.”

“Man’s desires are often evil,” said the boy who’d got religion. “God can only work good.”

“That’s simple-minded theology, young man.” Foster was now the serious professor. “God’s omnipotent, the sole source of power. Man cannot limit Him to his own ideas of good and evil, which are hope-

lessly muddled. God gave man the world to enjoy, and the desire to do so. Won't God then grant man his desires?"

"Not if they're evil."

"Don't you think that God might grant man's true desires, for the love of man – rather than this far-fetched devil creature wanting souls to torture? In my experience, man's desires are evil only when they're petty and short-sighted. But his true desires are no more than the natural demands upon life that God's given him."

"So what are they?"

"To experience and know God's world to the full. To share love with all, both spiritually and sexually ... "

The boy pounced. "Spiritually yes, but sexually no. We're told to renounce the flesh!"

"Are you sure that's what Christ tells us?" Foster asked. "He says only that the flesh profiteth nothing – in the sense that human power is helpless as compared with spiritual power. Oh, I know that church

Christianity has always insisted on the renunciation of human desires as the ultimate virtue. I disagree with the church.”

“But that’s terrible,” twittered Constance Nightingale, who’d just joined them. “How can you possibly disagree with the church?”

Foster didn’t deign to reply.

“Then,” the boy went on, “there’s no such thing as evil?”

Foster reflected. “What’s evil is man’s attachment to pseudo-desires, which seem important only because, unless you have God’s help, they’re easier to achieve. Making money, for its own sake, is a pseudo-desire: the real desire is still for other things, excitement, adventure, security – which in itself is only freedom from fear. If you can have them, your true desires, then money itself is unnecessary. Stealing is similarly evil, because it arises from this pseudo-desire for money. Love of material possessions is evil – didn’t Christ himself say that? – only of course it’s so much easier to flaunt your luxurious houses than to live, which involves risk. Fear can be evil. Love of



power over others, violence and murder: all are evil, but again they're pseudo-desires, to compensate for a lack of love and our wanting just to be recognized by others – which we all desire but find difficult to achieve.”

“But stealing other people’s wives?” the boy insisted.

Foster dismissed the objection. “A wife isn’t a possession to be stolen. If you consider sex as wrong, but made permissible by limiting it to couples with property rights over each other, then obviously sex with anyone other than your spouse is wrong too: a position the church has adopted since the days of St. Paul” – (Foster walked out of church during certain epistles) – “while ignoring the far more insidious sin of coveting one’s neighbour’s possessions, which our whole advertising industry encourages. If, on the other hand, you consider sex as a natural, God-given expression of communion and enjoyment, to be shared as Christian love is to be shared – and who would dream of making that exclusive? – then the only ‘wrong’ is the hurt

caused to others: but this is based on a human vice, jealousy, which in turn is based on fear.”

A few of the more thoughtful of those present were uncomfortable, but the majority were horrified, particularly the boy who'd got religion. Foster concluded by saying that God united flesh and spirit, was as much at home with paganism as with church Christianity, in both of which there was evil as well as good, and that these ideas could be found in any number of writers, too.

“Blasphemy!” Major Austin snorted. “Religious anarchy, sexual anarchy, moral anarchy! Why, if this fellow continues making such a noise about things, he'll scare everyone away and where will our property values be then?”

“Blasphemy,” echoed Constance Nightingale. “Rather wicked, don't you think?”

“Blasphemy,” said the boy who'd got religion. “Can he be excommunicated or something?”

“Blasphemy,” said the rector doubtfully. “I suppose so.”

“He’s obviously in league with the devil,” the boy continued. “Did you notice how he talked about making pacts? I tell you, he’s sold his soul.”

At this period Foster was doing a lot of writing, and painting too. Not many knew about it, because the people of St. Joseph’s didn’t know everything. One might have wondered how he found time to sleep, for his sexual romps continued as usual. And he still taught in the university, where he was adored by his students (even though they found his standards too exacting), loved by some colleagues, who regarded him as a genius, and hated by others, who considered him subversive. His life, it seemed, would burn out from its very intensity, but in fact the opposite was the case: he was in perfect health, tremendously vital, and creating picture after picture, writing page after page.

“Fucking woman after woman,” Major Austin commented.

“Horace!” his wife remonstrated. “You’re not in the army now!”

His ideas, though, did have some influence, so that gradually a group of supporters – mainly younger men and women – grew up around him. The things they perpetrated were beyond belief. Sexual, drunken orgies and obscenities of all kinds. The boy who'd got religion attended a number of Foster's parties to try to exert his influence to stop them, and reported on all the disgusting details. He asked the congregation to pray for their lost brothers and sisters, and for him too, for all the humiliations he had to endure at Foster's house. The congregation's prayers had a positive outcome: the boy was miraculously cured of acne.

And then, insult of insults, this man who'd so impracticably preached on the evils of money suddenly received a great deal of it, from the publication of the first book written under his own name. The novel was outrageous and had an immediate success with the non-discriminating public, which lapped up any kind of perversion. Well, the critics hailed the novel too, and the following year it was

put on the Canadian literature course in a number of universities, but the members of St. Joseph's didn't know about that. Anyway, with the publication came money. Which, to everybody's consternation, Foster spent, frivolously, on his riffraff friends. Nothing, by reliable reports, went into life insurance or pension plans, or into any kind of solid investment. Nothing was given to the Progressive Conservative Party. Foster didn't even consider improving his house or putting in a swimming pool, which might have raised the tone of the neighbourhood. "No, they'd only have orgies in the pool then," Constance Nightingale giggled, to everybody's surprise.

BUT THEN, THANK God, Foster went away altogether.

The rector had at last found the courage to ask him to stop coming to church.

Foster understood immediately. "I won't give you any more trouble, Hugh," he promised.

The rector grinned. “I’ve never had such an exciting time. Between you and I” – Foster interrupted to correct his grammar – “I get pretty fed up with the triviality of some of them, as you said once.”

“*Pissed off* were the words I used.”

“Well, er, pissed off, then.”

“I’m going away for a while anyway. I’ll be back, though – you won’t get rid of me entirely.”

The business over, they passed on to other topics, as two friends. But since both were, in different ways, religious, it’s not surprising that religion was a central topic in their conversation. And somehow they started to discuss the nature of heaven.

“Do you want to know what my dream of heaven is?” Foster asked.

The rector nodded.

“I dream first of a cottage, in a clearing in the woods, by a broad river with a sandy beach. With sunlight, not too hot, and no mosquitoes or thorns or things like that.” He gave a smile: “Because I like

woods and rivers, but not the mosquitoes. Or perhaps there'd be mosquitoes; only, they wouldn't really bite, or the thorns wouldn't really prick: rather, they'd produce brief scratches of almost unendurable pleasure, just so you'd know that everything was real, more real than this world which surrounds us. And the rest of heaven would be an infinity of beautiful places to explore and discover. Forests, mountains, snow, sun, beautiful cities, a land where all could have that simple joy they most desire. Man would have access to God's omnipotence and omniscience: to learn and, in the fullness of eternity, to discover the secrets of the universe. He'd be able to travel at will within it – oh, to see and comprehend it all! – but always to return to his spot in heaven to gaze on its beauty and know, know of the rest of the infinite beauty round about.

“There'd be libraries, institutions of truly higher learning, art galleries, concert halls: for who can conceive of heaven without art and music? Man would perform, and create, as he does on earth. All that's

best of man would be there. And all that's worst, for man must not be ignorant, and he needs to know the bad too. So there'd be museums of horror, vice, pettiness. Of course there'd be no war, no conflict except for earnest dispute, no sickness, no politicians. Not even any social scientists, thank God. Doctors, I suppose, yes – but to study the inner physical workings of man.

“And then, most important of all, we'd be resurrected in our young, healthy bodies instead of our old, ailing ones. Death would be an awakening out of sleep into the reality of life. Or perhaps we wouldn't even notice death: life would be forgotten like a dream it's not worth making the effort to remember. In our wonderfully real bodies our appetites and desires would still exist, for food, sex and all the pleasures of life. Only now it would be with all the vigour and passion of first youth. Love-making would be there in its most voluptuous, most erotic and most spiritual form, for now there'd be no jealousy, no fear of being displaced in another's affections. One



would meet again, know and explore – completely, carnally – all one's old loves as well as those one never had time or opportunity to know on earth. Whenever one wished, one would know where one's loves were, whom they'd be with; one would rejoice that all are joined in a common love of God, who uniteth all things, in whom is the sacred and profane, the humorous and the serious, the joy and the suffering, the beginning and the end." He paused. "But there would be solitude as well, for man has need of solitude to create."

"The God you speak of isn't the Christian God."

"Not that of the Christian church at any rate," Foster said sadly.

AND SO FOSTER went away, and life became more peaceful for the members of St. Joseph's. He would return again after many years, but in the interval, with things in the parish back to a normal observance of religious proprieties, he became a mere conversation piece, to be remembered even with nostalgia. How could a man behave in such

an extraordinary way or hold such disturbing ideas? Was he really in league with the devil?

There was, of course, an explanation. The people of St. Joseph's didn't know everything and would have been surprised to learn that before it had all started Foster had quite seriously considered making such a pact: to that extent the later rumours had some validity. The problem was that he didn't know how to go about it. He was a highly intelligent man and didn't for a moment believe the devil would appear before him, horns, tail and all, or in any of the traditional forms. But he'd studied the devil as a literary figure and recognized him as a valid symbol of man's aspirations for knowledge and experience: in revolt against a God who, in the thoughts of some, would prefer man to remain innocent and ignorant of evil.

It was knowledge and experience that Foster wanted. He was already a scholar of no small reputation; he'd published his novels and painted pictures which hung in a few of his relatives' living-rooms.

But he knew that his achievements were minor. His scholarship was sound but inessential; his novels had been published under another name because they were trivial; and his pictures ... well, what was wrong with them was precisely that they could be put up on his relatives' walls, alongside pictures of forest streams, lakes, mountains or sentimental women and children which had been bought at Zeller's. "He's artistic," one of his aunts would tell her friends, unaware that the word was used of people who produced flower arrangements or suchlike with no comprehension of what art was all about.

This wasn't what he wanted, and he was miserable. Unable to endure the high-minded snobbery of his colleagues or the inanities which were the daily life of the members of St. Joseph's – and being uninterested in the fact that his neighbour's three-year-old was now toilet-trained (which everyone else seemed to regard as the most important piece of news since the day it became known that old Mr. Krapowski was no longer toilet-trained) – he was isolated from others,

lonely. Which wouldn't have been so bad had he not craved some intimate contact beyond the superficial level, while at the same time being tormented by simple sexual desire. The two were linked. A great deal of "experience" meant for him sexual experience, for he was well aware that this was one way of coming close to another human being without the meaningless exchange of information which takes place in other social situations. For sexual experience understood in such a way, masturbation was a poor substitute, and in any case seemed somewhat ridiculous in a fifty-year-old man.

And so he thought of a pact with the devil. Not with smoke and magic circles and incantations, not at first. Foster, although he knew a lot about witchcraft in a literary sense, didn't take it seriously. No, he realized he needed to change his life, to rid himself of his old inhibitions and attitudes, and he saw a pact with the devil as a symbolical representation of that change. But how was he to go about it? Even if the devil were only a symbol, he had to make it into one that was real

for him. So finally he decided to devote himself to the mumbo-jumbo of magic – not because he thought spirits would arise before him but in order to convince himself of what he was doing. For this he had to study many obscure works, whose authors in some cases might be simply charlatans. He joined a group of devil-worshippers, whose practices he found grotesque and ridiculous. But he put up with it, feeling in his soul he was an outsider, although the others welcomed him as a convert and took it for granted he shared their beliefs in the same way as the members of St. Joseph's took it for granted he shared theirs.

The night came for his first practical experiment in summoning the devil. He'd removed the carpet and most of the furniture from his living-room, leaving only a couch and chair, and now he brought in the other things he needed: candles, candlesticks, chalk. It didn't take him long, and he then lay back on the couch and went to sleep.

He didn't know what time it was when he awoke. He lit the candles,

placed the candlesticks in their pre-assigned positions on the floor, and started to draw on it with chalk, beginning various incantations as he did so. “Bloody fool,” he thought, “what good will all this do?” He worked eagerly, though, enjoying it. The procedure was complicated, involving some foul-smelling liquid he had to prepare. He couldn’t remember everything, but was sceptical enough not to think it mattered.

Finally, he came to the words that were meant to summon the evil one. “Venez, venez, seigneur, venez!” he pronounced, wondering why the devil should respond more readily to French than to English, and whether it made any difference if the French were Parisian, Old Norman or Québécois.

Nothing happened. Of course. But to make sure, he repeated the French in different dialects, then checked his chalk figures and found he’d made a mistake. So he got down on his knees to correct it, murmuring further incantations, but sticking in a few swear words

because he was annoyed at himself for being so ridiculous.

“What the devil are you doing there on your knees, you stupid runt?” came a voice from behind him.

Startled, he turned round, put out his hand, and stared at the stranger. “Say, then, who art thou? ...”

“Oh cut out all that crap,” the other interrupted. “You don’t really believe in it, do you?”

Foster hesitated. “No, of course I don’t.”

“Good. Then turn on the light and come and sit down on the couch like a human being.”

Foster did so, looking at the guest, who was a shortish old man of about eighty, with long hair that merged into a beard, and dressed in a white robe. A bit like Karl Marx in a night-gown. “How did you get in?” he asked.

“Through the door, you idiot, how else?” The man was looking around with an expression of distaste. “Pretty sparse place you have

here. Why don't you get some decent furniture? Make it comfortable for your guests. And what's that revolting smell? Oh, that liquid over there. Pour it down the drain, for God's sake."

Foster did as he was told, then returned and sat down on the chair opposite. As he looked at him, the old man's rather irritable appearance softened: he was still stern but kindly too, trustworthy. Strength and knowledge was there, sadness and humour. No longer like Karl Marx now that the irritation was gone. Younger perhaps. Or older. Not really how he'd conceived of the devil at all.

"But then I'm not the devil," the man said. "You should be ashamed of yourself believing in that nonsense."

"Only as a symbol," Foster justified himself.

"Oh, as a symbol I'll grant you he serves a purpose. But he's one-sided. Much as your church God is one-sided too."

"Who are you then?"

"Come, Foster, you know who I am."



Foster was embarrassed. “God?” he ventured.

“The trouble with that word,” the old man said, “is that people misunderstand it. They think of me as the God they’ve created in their image. The half-potent God, able to do only what their limited minds think of as good rather than evil. Let’s call me something else, shall we? To prevent confusion. What would you suggest?”

Foster thought. “Yahweh,” he said.

“That will do splendidly. Sufficiently pre-Christian. Close enough to paganism without entirely suggesting my sole purpose is to strike people with thunderbolts. I like it.”

“Is that your usual appearance?” Foster asked with curiosity.

“I’ve no appearance, you dunderhead,” Yahweh said, getting irritable again. “I merely chose the form I thought you’d most appreciate.” Suddenly he let out a roar of laughter. “And you’ve got to admit it’s better than those Santa Clauses or sickly sweet pictures of Christ they’re fond of putting in children’s books and on church walls.” He

became businesslike. “Now, tell me why in the name of thunder were you trying to call up the devil?”

“To make a pact with him.”

“To renounce God, to get the devil to serve you for twenty-four years, and in exchange to give him your soul for eternity, I suppose? I must tell him that the next time I see him, he’ll die laughing. Between you and me he’s getting a bit sick of all these pacts.”

Foster was puzzled. “But who is the devil then?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I am.”

“You said you weren’t.”

“I’m not.”

“How can you be and not be?”

Yahweh laughed. “I’m omnipotent, that’s all. I am. And that includes I’m not. Don’t worry about it. You’re making human categorizations.”

“And then you’re God too?”

“That’s right.”

“And Christ?”

“Me too.”

“And Buddha, and Mohammed, and ... ”

“Oh, do stop going on and on! It’s all the same anyway, what difference does it make? I am, and am not, all of them.”

Foster was sarcastic. “Is there anyone else that you’re not? Or that you are?”

“Yes,” said the other. “Or rather no. I’m you too, and not either, or hadn’t you noticed? Or at least you when you’re not pretending to be someone else.”

“This isn’t getting us anywhere,” Foster said gloomily.

“Sure it is,” Yahweh exploded, “if you try understanding rather than just thinking! You disappoint me, I expected more from you. But tell me, why did you try to summon up the devil rather than me? When I’m the source of power, wasn’t that rather stupid? What can he do that I can’t?”

“Well, I guess I thought what I wanted was evil. No, that’s to say, I didn’t think it was evil, but that God would. And that therefore God couldn’t grant me my desires.”

“That’s simple-minded theology, Foster. You’re confusing me with your church God again. I’m omnipotent, not half-potent, I tell you,” he suddenly roared. “I can give you anything you want. And what’s more, I’m the only one who can.”

“But will you?”

“Of course,” Yahweh said happily. “Love to. Provided you tell me your real desires.”

“And the conditions?”

“Not important. All this stuff about selling souls: your soul will be mine anyway.” He intoned flatly: “Was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, amen!” Businesslike: “Now, let’s make a list of what you want.”

Foster, at least, had his list prepared. “*Fame*,” he said, “so that people

will love me. *Riches*, so that I may travel, live riotously, and have the means to acquire knowledge and be independent. *Power*, to get people to do what I want. *Creativity*, to do something of what you can do – no, I don't want omnipotence, it won't be fun if it's not difficult. *Joy* and *suffering*, because one can't create without them. And *immortality*.”

“Hold on a minute, can't you? I may be omnipotent but I can't write that fast. Let's sort these out a bit. How about we just put down *love* instead of fame? That's what you really want, isn't it? – and although you forgot to mention it, you want to love others too. We'll throw in a bit of fame along the way, but deep down you know that it's not the important thing. Can we cross out riches? You'll get money now and again, but what you want is *travel*, *independence*, *experience*, *knowledge*, and *riotous living* – by that you mean sex, I suppose.”

“Yes. – You see, I think that sex is the greatest form of human communication ... ”

“Oh be quiet! Of course it is. Don't start explaining the world to

me! Okay. No problem, at least for your lifetime: the generation after you will have to be far more careful than you will, because of a devilish virus getting loose somewhere. Now, *power*: you don't really want to boss people around and feel important, like those tedious prime ministers of yours who'll also be inflicted on society in a few years' time? No, you want love again, to be an influence for the better in the world and, for all you give the impression of thinking only of yourself, the satisfaction of doing something positive for your fellow men. Right? *Creativity, joy, suffering* – that's all excellent. Wise man not to ask for happiness, the sop of those who want to live like robots. *Immortality* you have already. Now what can we add? Knowledge we have, but how about a bit of *wisdom*? And *courage* in being yourself. You'd better keep a few vices too: the people of St. Joseph's will be happier if they have something to hate you for. So keep your *arrogance*, your *lack of courtesy*. We'll add on a solid dose of *vulgarity* too, and *outspokenness*. Let's stir things up a bit. Now, is that the lot?"

Foster was delighted. “More than I expected.”

“Fine. One thing: you’ll keep your loneliness, and an inner emptiness which can only be filled at the time of your final union with me. On earth one can’t have wisdom without it.”

“And when will I die? Do you want me to sign a pact?”

“You and your confounded pacts. Of course not. You have my word. And I am the word. I suppose you want me to give you twenty-four years of life too? It doesn’t make much difference when life’s eternal anyway. Just let me know when you feel like a change.”

“I never imagined you could give me all that,” Foster said. “I mean, the church is so set against a lot of it.”

“The church has a sin of its own,” Yahweh said, not without sadness. “It’s called respectability, which is a form of fear. And you thought I should be a respectable God. Me, Yahweh! Ha! The sole source of power. The creator of all things. The beginning and the end. Alpha and Omega. Me, who designed man to be Lord of the

opposites, as one of your German writers so aptly put it. You recognize the quotation, I hope?”

Foster nodded.

“And no doubt,” Yahweh said, getting up to go, “you’d like a little bit of skirt to spend tomorrow night with? Intelligent, beautiful and sexy, right?”

Foster by now was more courageous. “Yes, and she should be ...”

“Spare me the gruesome details, please. I know your tastes. I gave you them, remember?”

Foster looked at him and laughed. “You old bugger, you!” he said slyly.

Yahweh burst out laughing again. “That’s the spirit! Never be afraid of me. Tomorrow Mrs. Wignall will be sick. Get rid of her. You’ll find a better applicant for the job.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Oh, say the Magnificat a hundred times or something. Live, damn



you, live!”

They shook hands, and Foster found himself lying back on the couch again with the lights out.

WHEN HE AWOKE it was morning. After breakfast the phone rang. He told Mrs. Wignall he was sorry she was sick but that he wouldn't need her again. At the office of *The Wittenberg Torch*, where he went to place an ad for domestic help, an attractive foreign girl next to him asked if she could have the job. He agreed, and they arranged for her to come and settle the details that evening. She was even more attractive without clothes on, and the details were settled in bed.

And so began the time of riotous living the people of St. Joseph's found so outrageous. But there was a deeper side to it, of which they were unaware. There was pleasure, yes, but combined with it went an overwhelming sense of gratitude towards Yahweh. Foster was in awe at the enormity of the gift he'd received, the living manifestation of

which was this marvelous girl, whose sexual inventiveness made his own fantasies seem as limited as those of a boy before puberty. It was the awakening of first love all over again. Unknown to anyone else, it was Margrit who initiated Foster into the orgy, on secret weekends when she'd take him to uninhibited places of hedonism.

The affair ended after she got pregnant. It was she who insisted on leaving. "Are you one to be bound by the ties of fatherhood and family life?" she asked him. He admitted she was right, remembering what Yahweh had said about loneliness – although he would still see her, and his son, from time to time.

So he took his new mistresses at St. Joseph's, and then gradually found a group of friends growing around him, so that the orgies now took place at his own house. Qualitatively, they were different from other groups of swingers popular in those years. Theirs was a very close society, which shared solid intellectual and artistic interests as well. The people of St. Joseph's saw only the immorality, but knew

nothing of the discussions, the music and literary evenings, the amateur theatricals (some of which included sexual acts, performed with taste and love). But there were the drunken Dionysian revels too: life in this group was far from idyllic, for the idyllic is one-sided. Rather, it was often bestial, the participants lusting vulgarly after those who, shortly before, had been the recipients of tenderness, love and respect. Crude fellatio and cunnilingus were then the norm, for is not the wet and slobbering sucking of one's partner's genitals, held with legs apart for all to see, the very epitome of earthy, animal sex, compared with which tender, blushing intercourse is ridiculously genteel and polite? For here both barbarism and civilization reigned together in a harmony of opposites.

Foster individually adored his partners and was adored by them. Some, of course, were jealous or possessive and suffered from his refusal to bind himself exclusively to any one, but in this suffering they experienced an essential part of humanity. He too, if they'd

known, had to struggle with the same self-doubt, for he too was human, and as the group grew he was aware of the competition of other, younger, men. He suffered from his own human imperfection, and gave thanks for it.

The orgy of the senses carried over into his painting and writing. He would regurgitate onto canvas in the morning visions which were still coursing through him from the night before, his tubes ejaculating paint, his hands palpitating, kneading the forms before him; and then, in repletion, he would paint a watercolour of utter tranquility, working patiently on the finest detail, inspired, one would say, by the peace of God which passeth understanding. It was the same with his writing. In his passionate outbursts he had no time for anything but a tape-recorder; then he would patiently transcribe in longhand, and work for days correcting and shaping. What he produced was both violent and eternally still, blasphemous and deeply religious, sensuous and spiritual. The members of St. Joseph's found it outrageous,

the critics were divided over it, but it sold: on the one hand, to those who saw, or read, and immediately understood and loved the genius behind it; on the other, to those who craved cheap sensationalism.

AND SO FOSTER earned money, until the day came when he left Wittenberg. His life, since his dream about Yahweh, had been full of action. He'd had no time to consider whether he was happy or not, which didn't matter, and very little for calm, lonely reflection, which did. He went to a tiny village in Austria, where he lived unostentatiously, with none of the uproar which had surrounded him at home. The members of St. Joseph's would hardly find it credible that he went each morning, except Sundays, to the ornate baroque church and spent up to an hour in mute contemplation.

"Are you repenting for your past sins?" a village girl asked him one morning.

"No!" he said emphatically. "I'm taking time to savour my life. To

rest my soul.”

She laughed. “That’s too complicated for us here.”

The girl became his mistress, and they lived together for over a year. They would walk in the mountains, breathe the air, look down at the villages and up into the heavens. They would make love in the meadows, expose themselves naked to the goats and the cows, who looked on indifferently, chewing and producing their milk. They would laugh, and cry too. About once a month Foster would leave the village for a day or so in the brothels in Munich.

“Why do you go?” the girl asked him. “I’m not enough for you?”

He had to think how to explain it to her. “The animal principle,” he said at last. “With you it’s become a beautiful dream, emotion, purity. The sensual has become spiritual, and very lovely it is too. But that alone is inhuman. Humans are just as full of lust and passion, of animalism. Of sordid, exciting desires. The spiritual must become sensual again. Sex, pure animal sex, has to have its due.”

“Is life no more than sex, then?”

“Much more. It includes all that can be appreciated when the urge for sex is stilled. Yet in another sense life is sex. Sex creates life, in every way. It’s the passion to live. Without it there’s colourless self-denial, only angels and harps. The cows producing their milk.” He paused. “But sex is death too, for all of life is a process of dying. Is not each orgasm a small death?”

She couldn’t understand him, perhaps inevitably: no more than anyone really understood him. He was condemned to be alone. But in the meanwhile life was there before him, even if he often felt it wasn’t quite real. How much less real, though, was the sedentary family life of many of those around him. For the first time his feeling of sorrow for them outweighed his more usual contemptuous indifference.

He expressed his sadness in another book, and then he travelled on to other cities, leaving the girl behind. She was a happy memory, part of the fabric of his life but only one of the cross-threads, essential for

the pattern but not running from end to end. And equally, he was only a cross-thread in her life, which was woven in another direction, with the threads from that stretching away into other fabrics. Life in its entirety was a multidimensional construct of different tapestries, some bright and coherent, some irretrievably tangled, some consisting of nothing but a few twisted threads, some torn off and broken.

In Italy a cross-thread was broken for him, painfully. He was in the south and had circumvented local prejudice sufficiently to attract a dark-haired innocent nineteen-year-old. Unfortunately, the son of a family friend considered himself betrothed to her and, following custom in such matters, burst into Foster's hotel room with a machine gun and sprayed the bed with bullets, killing the girl. Foster, ludicrously, was getting rid of a used condom in the bathroom, or he'd have been killed too.

In a moment he was back in the room, where the boy was weeping over the girl's naked, bloodstained body. He offered no resistance



when Foster took the gun. They stood and looked at each other, blind convention staring in hatred at its insolent challenger. In the boy's look was all the fury of the man who knew he was right, had justice and honour on his side. Society itself, even the law, would support him and give only light punishment. Foster hesitated, shocked by his responsibility for this death, caused by his defiance of convention. Did it matter that the convention was evil? Should one simply submit? He looked at the girl's body oozing red and ugly. Why hadn't Yahweh forewarned him of this? This was bestial too, a thousand times more so than any of his orgies where the senses ran riot. He was horrified and yet fascinated. This too was life, the very horror was part of it.

He couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger as the boy left. He sat in silent respect for the girl until the police came, and there followed the interminable inquiries and formalities. The neat documentation by the living of the incomprehensible fact of death: unable to understand it,

they got rid of it by giving it a certificate, as though granting a passport for travel to a foreign country.

WE WILL NOT follow further Foster's travels, for his life was such that it would be possible to give only a superficial view of it. It could be made into an adventure story, with stirring deeds and times when Foster feared for his life, but the adventures of his soul would be lost. It could be made into a morality tale, for Foster performed good deeds to help others, but he would prefer them to go unrecorded. It could be made into a pornographic story, for sometimes the revelings continued, but in Foster's world pornography had no meaning. A love story, a story of violence: all this it could be, for Foster, thriving on life, thrived on opposites.

At long last he returned to Wittenberg. "He's coming back, have you heard?" the whispers went round St. Joseph's.

Now, in eighteen years the parish had changed, for the children

had grown up. There was a certain antipathy between the old-timers (represented by Major Austin, now churchwarden, and old Miss Nightingale, honorary president of the altar guild) and the under-forties, who felt the world was passing St. Joseph's by. Their spokesman was none other than the man who'd once got religion. In eighteen years he'd married and raised six children, and turned into an extraordinarily liberal personality.

With the arrival of Foster, the old-timers considered it their duty to warn everyone of the danger, while the under-forties tended to laugh and think the older ones had probably misjudged Foster. There was tension before anyone had even seen the man. The rector, always well-meaning, tried to reconcile the two sides, pointing out that Foster had become sufficiently well-known as a painter and writer to bring Wittenberg some fame. "We'll have a great man in the congregation, even if he's as difficult as some people say. But he could have changed. And think of the example St. Joseph's could give the world.

Let's welcome him, show the power of the church working with such a man." The rector was getting carried away by now: "How magnificent if we at St. Joseph's could give back to the church a true, repentant sinner!"

The man who'd once got religion shook his head. But others allowed themselves to be convinced, willing at first to show Christian forgiveness and accept their prodigal son with open arms.

If only Foster had been a repentant, prodigal son! Instead, he ignored them. Turned down their generous invitation to become a sidesman. Didn't come to church, even though the rector went to see him and came away hours later after a very friendly chat. It was all the more galling because various celebrities started to visit Foster to pay their respects. Writers, artists, scholars. Well, the people of St. Joseph's didn't know everything, but they certainly knew the glamorous movie star who visited him. But did Foster let his friends, and this actress in particular, meet members of the congregation, or bring

them to public functions where they could give a few autographs to the children? Of course not. St. Joseph's, justly, felt slighted.

"I suppose he's having an affair with her," old Miss Nightingale said with prim satisfaction.

It became known that this indeed was the case. And when a few of Foster's former devotees started to return and the odd orgy took place once more, general indignation broke out again.

"He's still in the service of the devil," Connie whispered excitedly. "Perhaps he's the devil himself."

The others had forgotten this rumour, and the man who'd once got religion, remembering how he'd started it, looked embarrassed. But Connie Nightingale had become stubborn in her old age and went around repeating the same thing to everyone, with picturesque details – remembered from eighteen years before – of everything that supposedly went on now. She seemed particularly incensed that all the celebrities came to pay homage.

“Can’t understand it,” wheezed her ally, Major Austin. “In my day famous people had more sense.”

“Now don’t get upset about it, Horace,” his wife commanded. “It’s bad for your asthma.”

The orgies, in fact, were nothing in comparison with the old days. Foster had mellowed. Everything was more discreet, less antagonistically obtrusive. Foster was now in his seventies, and looked it: worn out, Connie said, by a life of excess (although she herself was younger and looked worse). In this she was, quite frankly, mistaken, for Foster was in excellent health. But he’d had a good life, and the excesses no longer seemed as necessary as before. For the most part, except for the occasional encounter in bed with some attractive woman, he preferred just to write or paint quietly, with less *élan*. His works no longer had the youthful brilliance but instead a calm maturity, so that they were prized by literary and artistic connoisseurs but no longer appeared on the best-seller lists.

But the old-timers of St. Joseph's didn't know everything, and they tried, particularly Connie Nightingale, to make out that it was worse than before.

"A servant of the devil, right here among us," she said on one occasion, with an expression of diabolical cunning. "We can't put up with that. We must do something."

The younger ones looked at her strangely, thinking that since Foster's return she'd gone a bit dotty.

"What have you in mind?" someone asked. Connie only smiled.

The next day she went to call on Foster. According to what she told everyone afterwards, he invited her in, beat her, undressed her, tied her to a chair and raped her. "And then he just threw me out into the street," she concluded.

The last was probably true, but no one at St. Joseph's believed that even a man like Foster would rape Connie Nightingale, and the under-forties thought the whole thing hilarious. She'd apparently

expected them all to go to Foster's house and tar and feather him, but when nothing happened she visited him again. This time, she reported, he did even worse things. More laughter, even from old-timers. Soon people began to get used to the sight of her toddling off to Foster's house, although he'd learnt not to answer the door if he could help it.

Now, although this was clearly her fault, some of the old-timers found in it a reason to blame Foster. "It's witchcraft!" Major Austin exploded. "Seen something of it in Africa, you know. The woman's infatuated with him." As she got stranger and stranger, others began repeating Major Austin's comment and suggesting that here was the traditional case of the devil turning a decent woman into a witch.

Thus, Foster once again found himself cast in the role of the devil. Well, actually, the under-forties rather enjoyed having a devil in their midst. And to be frank, the old-timers enjoyed it, too, for here was someone they could legitimately hate, a scapegoat who could be



blamed for everything that was wrong. When Connie Nightingale was taken off, screaming, to a hospital from which she never returned, there was gleeful talk of its being demonic possession, with Foster the instrument of her undoing.

“The whole world’s going to the devil,” Major Austin complained. “If I just had him in the army! What’s happening nowadays?”

“The world’s changing,” his wife said. “It’ll never be the same.”

“Thank God too,” said the rector, alienating them both.

What suddenly united St. Joseph’s and turned young and old against Foster was the publication of his last book, in which it was apparent that the characters were drawn from members of the congregation and from the faculty of the university. The book was an extraordinary apocalyptic kind of thing, in which they were all shown, neither as welcomed into heaven nor thrown into hell but as condemned to return to earth. Now, the more sensible commentators pointed out that the characters were created with sympathy, this was

no longer the old Foster, who'd looked down on everyone, but a man of understanding who regarded with genuine pity those forced, for whatever reason, to live out their half-lives in the shadow of St. Joseph's or the university. But the faculty members, considering themselves intellectuals, were incensed. The atheists thundered against Foster's naive religiosity. And as for St. Joseph's – well, the congregation couldn't abide his pity. Even the more moderate members (who, in the prime of their middle-class upward mobility, had been treated more harshly in the book than the old-timers) sided with the conservatives. Except for the rector and the man who'd once got religion, they all began to hate Foster.

“Impossible man!” they said. “We've got to get rid of him!”

“Devilry! Witchcraft!” Major Austin shouted. “Remember Connie Nightingale?”

“How do we get rid of him?” the others asked him.

“I'll tell you! We must ... I think we should ... oh hell, hang him

on a post and bang nails into him!”

“Do you really mean that?” the rector said severely.

For once Major Austin looked sheepish. “No, of course not.”

The next day came the news of Connie Nightingale’s death. Most would have done no more than shrug if it hadn’t been for Foster. He shrugged, too, when he was told the news. Said she’d been dead for most of her life anyway. Said terrible things, showed no respect: it was heartless, when he’d been responsible for it all and turned her into a witch. A vile man. An odious man.

“No, no, no,” said the man who’d once got religion. “He was only being honest, don’t you see?”

They didn’t. But the problem solved itself.

FOSTER WAS SUBLIMELY indifferent to the arguments going on around him when he set out that Friday afternoon for Toronto in a blissful mood. He’d finished a painting and, unlike those times when

he'd been restless at the thought that he mightn't get new inspiration, he felt there was no need to paint or write anymore. He had to take the painting to Toronto, however; he'd promised it to a colleague. It was one of those days in midsummer when warm sun alternated with violent thunderstorms, and there'd been a shower just before he set out. He enjoyed driving, since it brought a feeling of peace and an opportunity to think. As he reached the 401 and turned onto it to head towards Toronto, he realized it was twenty-two years since the dream.

“Another two years to put up with St. Joseph’s,” he thought, “to make twenty-four. But what was it He said? As long as you like, just let me know when you want a change. Do I want a change?”

He didn't notice as the car left the road, hit the bridge abutment and plunged down a hillside into a small river. But there was no feeling of surprise when he found himself walking along its bank. The car was further back, he supposed, but he didn't turn round, because

all that was a mere dream he'd left behind. The river, broader now, stretched on enticingly round a bend; it was exciting, needing exploration. And now the sun was fully out, a sun which warmed him pleasantly and which he was tempted to take down in his hands to find out what it was made of. He was naked and his body younger, firmer, full of life and power. Nothing like his body of ... how long ago was it? He walked on, eagerly, to the bend in the river. Forests on either side. Trees vibrating with life, animals he could sense amongst them. How magnificent to be alive. What was it all about? He didn't know, but he would find out. Round the bend in the river was a group of young girls, all naked, too, splashing and playing in the clear water, laughing as he approached. He waved to them as he walked by, feeling strength in his loins and a powerful desire for them all. Who first? he wondered idly. A gleam came into his eye as he realized that an enticingly rejuvenated Constance Nightingale was amongst them. My God! what a figure she had, and yet in his long sleep she'd seemed

so dreary. Or so he supposed, for he couldn't really remember. He glanced again at the women, passed on, and his desire for them subsided. There was time enough for all of them, and for all the other wonderful things he wanted to do. He recalled something about books he'd written and wondered if they were in the library here. Probably, but why bother with them? There was a universe to explore. But plenty of time.

Without looking back, he strode up the hill – oh, how pleurably the mosquitoes bit and the thorns scratched! – towards his cottage in the woods.

“Hello, you old bugger!” he said as he opened the door, to the figure who awaited him.

## About the Author



A. COLIN WRIGHT has published stories in various Canadian and British literary magazines such as *Acclaim*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Descant*, *Event*, *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, *NeWest Review*, *New Quarterly*, *Quarry*, *Storyteller Magazine*, *Waves* and *Stand Magazine*. Originally from England, he is a graduate of Cambridge University in Modern Languages, which have remained as a major interest. As professor (now emeritus) of

Russian Studies at Queen's University, he has published numerous articles on Russian and comparative literature, as well as a major book on the novelist and playwright Mikhail Bulgakov. He has just returned from his thirteenth visit to Russia.

Of his writing he would say that he “writes pretty much anything except poetry” – including several novels, which are still seeking a publisher. He is now mainly involved, however, with the theatre, having written six plays so far. He was 1993 winner in the special merit category of Theatre BC's National Playwriting

#### A. COLIN WRIGHT

Competition with his stage adaptation of Iu. Tynianov's novella *Lieutenant Kijé*, which was subsequently performed at Theatre 5 in Kingston and is now available online from International Readers' Theatre (Blizzard Press). He was also a winner in the Ottawa Little Theatre One-Act Playwriting Competition with his *George's Funeral*. Locally, he has recently directed *Shadowlands* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* for Kingston's Domino Theatre, and has played the Troll King in *Peer Gynt*, Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* and Father Jack in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

