



## The Writer as Outsider

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**A**T ONE A.M. ONE MORNING in December 2020, I attended a remote wake for John O'Brien, founder of Dalkey Archive Press, who in the previous fifteen years had become my publisher and my friend. As several mourners introduced themselves as 'Dalkey authors', I identified a scattered, flickering community that owned me too as member, *insider*.

Yet I cannot resist a piece of auto-fiction depicting myself, however lopsidedly, as a dis-located *outsider*.

I grew up – truth to tell – at the heart of a working-class Macmillan-boom council estate on a proletarian outer edge of London, my father the only middle-class professional to live in the vicinity: he was the GP and we lived in rooms above his surgery. Dislocation number one.

An oddity among the kids on the estate, I was despatched at age four by my Quaker, socialist and republican parents, in an act combining equal parts of hypocrisy and wisdom, to a royalist, high-tory, high-church preparatory school. Dislocation number two.

Moreover, by virtue of my *first* language, until around seven, I was an outsider within my more-fissile-than-fusional nuclear family: my speech emerged so late and so mangled that it was experienced by others as either foreign or gibberish, terms which, in the England of the day, were understood as synonymous. Dislocation number three.



An elder sibling, my only sibling to have survived infancy, understood but was unable to speak my idiolect, and served as willing (though later resentful) interpreter, translating me to others. That I understood perfectly the English speech of those I thoroughly baffled with my own utterances was simultaneously cause of frustration, stimulus to protest and source of roaming contempt, uncertain whether to target my perplexed listeners or my unapprehended self. Dislocation number four.

Since autism was not yet 'a thing', schoolteachers ascribed my linguistic peculiarity first to my parents' lengthy medical posting in revolutionary China before my birth and later to the fact that the estate on which we lived was stocked with relocated cockneys, Jews, gypsies and Irish. My maternal grandmother dismissed such conjectures, citing a distant, multiply-removed cousin who, quote, 'was exactly the same and eventually grew out of it', unquote.

As, in time, did I, assisted by weekly trips to a speech therapist, where I surrendered my first language and learned to babble in an improving simulacrum of my second.

This story of discomfitures and removals might be extended through a model 1960s adolescence, replete with experimentations and promiscuities, substance use, a devotion to the random that broadened hitchhiking from a means of travel to a mode of being, climaxing in a variety of self-foreignising semi-anthropological experiments as I shifted restlessly between homes, jobs, friends, lovers, while shuffling my medium of everyday linguistic communication from English through French, Italian, German and, however briefly and superficially, several others.

So: an outsider and therefore a *writer*? 'Piffle!' flashes the reply (in quintessential English). To be a published writer is to be an *insider* where it most matters: between the covers of a publisher's catalogue and one's own books.