

# THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A HUMAN SOUL

*PART ONE: BY IOTA*

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When I first awoke to consciousness, I found myself bound by a tie of indescribable closeness to a frame composed of flesh and blood and bone and muscle, but originally sprung, as I have since learned, from dust, and to dust doomed to return, though I myself, in another state of existence, am destined to live forever. This frame and I, coeval in our being, form to this day the body and soul of a mortal man.

How I entered into this body, by what means I am connected with it, whether I proceeded by ordinary generation from my earthly parents, or emanated directly from that ALMIGHTY spirit<sup>1</sup> who formed and who rules the Universe, are subjects which I frankly confess I do not understand; subjects which have puzzled the brains of thousands of my species for thousands of years, and which I am fully convinced are of those 'secret things' that belong with the Lord our GOD,<sup>1</sup> and which it is impossible for us in our present state to comprehend.

Of the first year of my existence I can say but little. I have reason to believe that my intellectual faculties lay during that period in a quiescent state, my perceptive powers being to some extent awakened; and that I caused an infinite deal of trouble to those who had the charge of me, especially my kind and never-wearying mother. My birth-companion, the body, was at this time so weak and helpless, it could do nothing for itself; and I, as I have since heard, was so excessively cross, that I would scarcely permit any thing to be done for it.

Very soon my passions began to develop themselves; and I am happy to say, that the principle of Love was, as near as I can tell, the first which awoke within me. This was manifested by the reluctance which I showed to leave the arms of my mother or nurse, and submit to the caresses of any one else. Following this, if not coeval with it, was Joy, for love naturally and of itself engenders joy. Fear, and Anger, and Sorrow, successively displayed themselves. Sorrow, indeed, might be said to have come into the world with me, for my first sound was a sound of sorrow; but that, I suspect, proceeded from an intuitive feeling of self-

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<sup>1</sup> The Christian God.

preservation; a physical sorrow, if I might use the expression, which did not require the exercise of my faculties. Pride, revenge, ambition, and shame, were at this time wholly unknown to me.

As I advanced in life, I became aware, that there were other beings made up like myself, of soul and body, who loved me and cared for me; and I very soon learned to return their love, attaching myself, however, more to some than to others. I perceived, too, that there were other creatures, which lived and breathed like them, but yet were very different from them. Wherein the difference consisted I could not tell; but from the earliest age I knew intuitively, that the dog which tumbled with me on the floor, and the kitten that purred herself to sleep in my lap, were animals inferior to myself. Since I grew older, I have indulged in speculations, and pondered on the speculations of others, in order to ascertain what was the essential difference between the Man and the Beast — between Reason and Instinct; but am obliged to confess, that the investigations of adolescence amount to very little more than the intuitive perceptions of childhood. I am not without hope that the onward progress of science will throw more light on this subject than has yet been done; but it is a pretty difficult one, and apt to involve us in a labyrinth of speculation, from which extrication is well-nigh impossible. There are many who would admit that a dog, for instance, has reason; which is just the same, as saying that it has a soul; but if we grant this; we must also grant that every individual of that brute creation, even to the animalcule and the zoophyte, has a soul; a thinking, reasoning, immortal part. And are we prepared to do this? Hardly, I think.

But I am wading in waters beyond my depth, and lest I should get drowned in an ocean of conjecture, will hastily retrace my steps to the point from which I started.

Every day of my life brought an increase of strength to my body and an accession of new ideas to myself. At length to the great joy of those by whom I was surrounded, the glorious gift of language was granted to me, and I was enabled by this medium to express those ideas, and receive others innumerable. And then began the joy, the delight, the rapture of existence! Ten thousand rare and beautiful things became by degrees imparted to me; ten thousand new and wonderful sensations awoke at the same time within me. Before this, I had only vegetated, now I lived. The innumerable objects of external nature; the sunshine and the cloud, the waters and the skies, the trees and the flowers, the bird, the beast and the insect, by turns awoke my delighted interest; while the exquisite harmony of sound modulated into every variety of tone, made me thrill with delicious emotions which it is impossible to describe. By a series of admirable pieces of mechanism, called the senses, with the functions of which my reader is probably acquainted, everything passing around me was instantaneously made known to me; and I felt myself gradually expanding like a flower opening its petals to the bright rays of the morning sun.

And ever and anon, as some new object was presented to me, would arise the earnest inquiry: 'Who made it?' nor could I be satisfied until all things were referred to their original source. So many and so searching were my questions on this subject, that as I have heard one, (herself a mother) remark a mother would need to be a good theologian yet so indefinite were my ideas, that when told that GOD made the trees, and the waters, and the sun, and the stars, I would innocently ask: Did HE make the houses and the tables and the chairs! And here let me remark, that children are never atheists.

Atheism is a monstrous and unnatural idea, originating in the pride of human learning, and rising up in direct opposition to an innate principle of our nature. I repeat it, it is *neverfound* in the minds of children.

‘Who made all these things?’ asks the newly awakened spirit; and when told that GOD made them it immediately rests satisfied. It believes, and is happy. Ah! take, if you will, the boastful scepticism of the man, but give me the simple faith of the child.

It has been remarked by one of my species, that a man learns more in the first six years of his existence than in all his life beside. The remark is a just one; but had the period been extended to twelve years, I think it would have had still greater force. For if the knowledge of simple language unfolded to me such treasures, and gave birth to so many new ideas, how shall I describe my sensations when with faculties further advanced and better able to grasp what was laid before them, I attained the power of studying the written language of my kind; that priceless treasure which man alone, of all the animals with which we are acquainted, possesses. What gleams of light broke in upon me! What wonderful things in nature and art became known to me! What a vast expanse of thought opened before me Every thing was new, fresh and delightful, and with every accession to my knowledge, I could feel myself increasing in power, wisdom, energy and activity.

I must confess, however, that at this period I did not fully appreciate the privileges I enjoyed, but would sometimes turn with disgust from the avenues of learning, especially if they were thorny or toilsome, and give myself up with all my energies to some species of amusement, which, though frivolous and transient, contributed in the main to my good, as it strengthened my birth-companion and afforded refreshment and relaxation to myself. I would watch the motions of a kite with an interest as intense as if the fate of empires depended on its flight; I would ‘chase the flying ball’ with a speed which far outstripped the tardy and laborious efforts of my body; nay, I would sometimes superintend with delighted interest, the mysterious feminine operation of dressing dolls, and even (blush, manhood!) permit the awkward, blundering, masculine fingers of my birth-companion to assist in the delicate task!

And here let me pause a moment in my narrative to advert to the wonderful, the incomprehensible connection which subsists between my birth-companion and myself. So closely are we bound together and so completely identified with and other, that it is next to impossible to tell where spirit begins and matter ends. The body cannot so much as lift its hand to its head without the exercise of my will; and I, though by far the most glorious, noble, and potent part, can do nothing, absolutely nothing, without the aid of the body, except indeed to range at will over the regions of thought in complete discommunion with and abstraction from every created being. Should the slightest injury be inflicted on any part of the body, instantaneous intelligence of the event is conveyed to me, and a sympathetic feeling of pain awakened; while, on the other hand, should any sudden or powerful emotions arise within me, the heart will throb wildly and the blood will rush tumultuously to the cheeks, and the limbs will quiver and the tears gush in torrents from the eyes. These effects are produced by means of certain vehicles called nerves, (of which my reader has probably heard) which intersect the body in every direction and centre in the brain ; but *how* that brain and these nerves communicate with me, is something which no mortal has yet found out.

Instead of seeking to penetrate the mystery, let us consider how admirably each part is adapted to its particular use. The hand, by means of which I at present express myself, is a perfect chef-d'œuvre of art; the foot, with its flexible arch, is most wonderfully calculated to support and propel the immense weight that rests upon it; and so with the other parts of the body; and when I look within on myself, I find passions, affections, emotions, and feelings, most beautifully adapted to every order of circumstances in which I may be placed.

Let them talk as they may of the vastness of the universe; of worlds extending beyond worlds in incomputable distance; of suns whose light takes thousands of years to reach our earth<sup>2</sup>; there is nothing, in the whole wide range of creation, which proves more clearly and incontestably the existence, the wisdom and the power of a God, than that compound of mortal and immortal, of spiritual and material, the body and soul of man. And never can I turn from the contemplation of this subject, without feeling myself lifted up toward the ALMIGHTY author of my being, and forced to exclaim with the Psalmist: 'I will praise THEE: for I am fearfully and wonderfully made!'<sup>3</sup>

As I emerged from boyhood and became 'content no more with girls to play,' I experienced many new sensations. I felt within me the workings of ambition; I indulged in bright dreams of the future; and though still ardently thirsting after knowledge, I entered on a path till then almost untrodden and wandered with delight through the pleasant fields of fancy and imagination.

When I had existed for about eighteen years, a new and extraordinary feeling took possession of me. I fell in love! It is impossible to describe my sensations at this time: joy and fear and hope and uncertainty danced round and round within me and kept me in a perpetual whirl of excitement; but joy, wild, fitful, passionate, ecstatic joy, was the predominant feeling. It seemed as if the whole creation existed only for me and one other being toward whom I felt myself drawn by an irresistible impulse, a nameless longing, so powerful, so subtle and so delightful, that I had neither the desire nor the ability to withstand it. If she smiled on me, all nature seemed to smile with sympathetic gladness; if she frowned, the very blackness of darkness was upon me and around me. Never did the sun shine so brightly as when he shone on us two together; never did the wild flowers bloom so sweetly as when the fairy foot of her mortal body trod on them at the same moment with mine; never did the sound of music thrill so exquisitely through me, as when it flowed from her ripe lips, or leaped from her flying fingers. I was entranced; I was spell-bound. I could think of nothing but my love. Every thing else seemed poor, miserable and of no account, in comparison with it. I read great quantities of poetry and even (shall I own it?) tried to

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<sup>2</sup> As scientific knowledge kept advancing from the Scientific Revolution during the early Modern period, the 19th century saw continuous development in various fields of science to understand the heavenly bodies and the origins of the Earth and the Universe. While Western societies, including America, widely accepted the age of the Earth being 6000 years old as the Bible suggested, new discoveries in the 18th and 19th century began to push the age up ("A History of Our Understanding of the Sun – A New Look").

<sup>3</sup> Bible verse, Psalms 139:14. The Book of Psalms are in the third section of the Hebrew Bible. The word is derived from the Greek term *ψαλμοί/psalmoi*, which means "instrument music" or "the words accompanying the music" (Murphy).

compose some; but vain — vain was the attempt to give utterance to the burning thoughts that filled me.

‘I loved, and was beloved again  
In sooth it is a happy doom.’

Before I reached this point of my existence, I had not conceived it possible for human life to afford such joy, such ecstasy, as I then felt; and when I *had* reached it, it did not seem possible that that ecstatic joy could ever have an end. But it had.

Circumstances obliged me to separate from the object of my affections and a considerable time elapsed before I again met her. I passed through new scenes, formed new associations and obtained new and far more-extended views of life than I had had. I became acquainted with many individuals of the softer sex, more beautiful in form, more brilliant in intellect, more fascinating in manner and altogether more in accordance with my ideas of female perfection than she whom I had left. I began to think I had been too precipitate in fixing my choice. I looked about among them, conversed with them, flirted with them, and finally began to waver in my allegiance. At last I became careless, indifferent, cold, toward the idol of my boy-love.

Yet sometimes the recollection of how I *had* loved and especially of how I had *been loved* would come over me, like the soft land-breeze over the mariner, bringing with it many sweet associations and pleasant thoughts of other days. Then I would reason with myself; how very wrong it was to forget my plighted vows; and at length I resolved, not from any ardor of passion but merely from a high sense of honor, to return and renew them at the shrine where they had first been offered.

Animated therefore, by the high heroic feelings of a martyr, I sought the presence of her whom I had once regarded as the quintessence of female loveliness, but to my astonishment and mortification, I met with a repulse as decided and complete as it was unexpected. This stung me to the very quick, for I had learned by this time to think pretty highly of myself, and naturally supposed that every one else would do the same. I retired in high dudgeon; and was ruminating sadly on the incomprehensible fickleness of woman, when I received the astounding intelligence that she, my once adored one, was married!

And who, think you, had she married? Why, an old man, an ugly man; a man with a coarse, hard, sordid soul; a widower, with grown-up sons and daughters. Why did she marry him? Need I answer the question He had great possessions; he had wealth, influence, station.

Thus burst the beautiful bubble: thus ended Love's young dream!



### *EDITOR'S NOTE*

The above article is a fictional autobiography of an imaginary soul tied to its bodily “birth-companion,” from which it is fundamentally distinct. Such formal choice of narrative in the first-person point of view brings focus to the perceptions and feelings of the soul, to his inner world, rather than giving a panoramic view of his external world. The autobiography then functions as a psychological narrative looking into the fundamental nature of the self. The male-engendered soul speaks of his existence from birth to maturity, from bare innocence to mental and emotional development. What remains with him are the contemplations on the essential nature of a human. That is, his existence lies in the mystery of how he entered the body of flesh and bone, and how he was connected to it. Such “secret things” “belong with the Lord our God,” he concludes.

“Of soul and body,” this piece of fiction embodies the philosophy of dualism in Theory of Mind (also famously known as the mind-body problem) branch of philosophy. The philosophy goes back to as far as Plato (c. 300-400 BCE), who thought that the soul and body exist apart from each other, and that the soul can ultimately exist after the body dies. Rene Descartes (17<sup>th</sup> century) formulated the mind-body problem as we know it today. He identified the mind with consciousness and self-awareness, and the brain (part of the body) as the material seat of intelligence. They are different substances and are separate entities (Pecorino). Cartesian dualism was not fully accepted in antebellum America, the time period of this article, but as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, increasing thought was given to the relationship of mind and body and how the progressed understanding of cerebral functions could deal with the metaphysical problems of the Cartesian impasse (Wozniak).

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of rapidly advancing neuroscientific knowledge, formal discussions on the mind-body problem persist. But rather than being a crude consideration of whether the mind and body are separate entities of different substances, formal discourse deliberates on the philosophical and practical implications of the growing knowledge that the brain is the physical basis for the mind capable of metaphysical thought, “consciousness,” and “free will.”

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