The Selected Prose of John Gray
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Introduction: John Gray’s Prose

TO MOST READERS, John Gray is known, if at all, as a minor poet of the nineties. Almost every anthology of the decade lists two or three of his poems, usually taken from his first book, Silverpoints. Published in 1893, Silverpoints achieved a certain notoriety for its “decadent” verse, although its reputation may have sprung, at least in part, from Gray’s own notoriety as the reputed model for Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray. A confidante of Wilde’s, Ada Leverson, echoes the contemporary estimate when she recalls John Gray as “the incomparable poet of the age.”¹

The “incomparable” poet has received his due, not only in the anthologies but, most recently, in Ian Fletcher’s edition of The Poems of John Gray.² As a collection the poems turn out to be, after all, comparable: Fletcher’s edition places Gray securely in the company of his colleagues and friends, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson—a minor but nevertheless accomplished poet of a certain place and time. Unlike Johnson and Dowson, however, Gray survived to write poetry of a recognizably modern tone and temper. Thus his career offers a modest but significant register of the revolution in poetic technique between the last decade of the reign of Queen Victoria and the years after the Great War.

What most people do not know is that during this period John Gray also wrote prose, all sorts of prose: essays, reviews, translations, introductions, short stories, and one rather startling novella. In doing so, Gray was typical of his time. “It would not be easy,” Holbrook Jackson wrote, “to point to another decade in which English literature produced so many varieties of fiction.”³ Or so many varieties of
prose: it was the golden age of the artistic manifesto, the critical review and (a creature now almost defunct) the belles-lettres essay. For the short story, it was a crucial period during which the form was first conceded the status of an art. The commercial demands of the "little magazine" had much to do with its new popularity. Looking back at the decade, H. G. Wells commented on how styles of different journals stimulated the production of shorter fiction, ranging from the insistence of The National Observer "upon lyrical brevity and a vivid finish" to the appreciative clientele of The Fortnightly Review and the "generous opportunities" of The Yellow Book. Consequently, "short stories broke out everywhere." In hindsight we may date from the nineties the emergence of the short story as a distinct genre and note in passing the crucial role it played in the evolution of such major writers as James, Hardy, Kipling and Conrad.

In acknowledgement of this role, much of this decade's shorter fiction has already been collected and reprinted. Yet Gray's best work in prose was either not published during his lifetime or dropped immediately after publication into obscurity. With one exception: his novella Park has been reissued twice since his death in 1934. Its qualities suggest why a selection of Gray's prose merits our attention. In an age when every word was written with intention, Gray's best prose is at once clean and sharp, condensed and clever. At times it verges on the epigrammatic; at others, falls into the enigmatic. The puzzles of Park tease one into rich speculation; it is the mandarin style at its pitch. Among a certain circle of readers, Park holds its reputation as having the refinements of "a dry patrician wine."

From this book alone, one might argue that Gray actually wrote better prose than poetry. But the virtues of Park might also suggest why Gray's prose is not yet better known. Gray sought to make his name as a poet, not a prose writer. Notorious as the avatar of a certain vogue, the fashioning of his poetry was also tied into his self-fashioning as the "decadent" poet and disciple of Wilde, "Dorian" Gray. It was, to a large extent, a public poetry, a poetry of performance.
Speaking in the voice of the dramatized self, the mime and the mock, the poetry of Silverpoints gives itself over to the spectacle of its own disintegration. In contrast, the prose of the period tends to offer a kind of subtext to this spectacle. In a story of the same period, “The Person in Question,” Gray seeks to confront his alienated self in an attempt to regain wholeness and sanity. The story is, at least in intention, confessional. Thus in contrast to the poetry, the prose tends on the whole to be more probing, more authentic: to the point where it may in fact be of such an intimate nature that it was not to be published during his own lifetime.

Not all of Gray’s prose was of such a closeted nature. But even in those pieces which are apparently devoid of personal reference—such as the religious stories—their impulse is so urgent, and the nature of the crisis so obscure, that they demand to be extended to the biographical. In short, I do not think it possible to account adequately for Gray’s prose without invoking his history and his own relation to it.

Gray was born in 1866 to a working-class family. Pulled out of school at thirteen to be apprenticed as a metal-turner in the Woolwich Arsenal, Gray educated himself in order to sit the civil service exams, initially for a position in the Post Office, later in the Foreign Office. Thus by dint of his own efforts he crossed the invisible barrier between those who worked with their hands and those who worked with their heads. Still a barrier today, in Gray's world it was almost a Chinese Wall.

Gray climbed the wall virtually on his own. But he was, as he claimed in his own words, “an invention” of an exceptional man, Charles Ricketts, whom he met in 1888-1889. An artist, printer and engraver, connoisseur and collector, Ricketts together with his partner Charles Shannon adopted Gray as their “disciple.” He joined their extraordinary circle (which included Yeats and Wilde) at about the time they had decided to launch a revolutionary new journal, The
Dial. For this, they persuaded Gray to write two pieces. One, a fairy tale about "The Great Worm," pays tribute to the arch, whimsical style of Wilde, soon to become another mentor. The second, a critical piece on the Goncourt brothers, was to draw Gray into the revolutionary aesthetics of France, to which Ricketts had introduced him. In the Goncourt article, Gray launches himself on a career as an importer of French literary fashion into England—a reputation sealed by his extensive translations of the new French poets for Silverpoints. In this role, Gray's contribution was to prove second only to another poet/translator, that of his friend Arthur Symons.

From the very first, then, Gray published only in the most severely limited outlets: the new periodicals that were to become home ground for the artistic experiments of the English artist. For the established writer, these were a boon, but for the younger, they could be a mixed blessing. He might make the name of the new journal, but the journal would not necessarily make his. Aubrey Beardsley lived to bury The Yellow Book, but at its demise it almost buried him. The magazines which published Gray had an even more modest circulation, and are very difficult to find in libraries today: The Dial, The Butterfly, The Pageant. Aware that his exposure was restricted by such outlets, Gray approached John Lane in December 1893 with a proposal for publication of a collection of his short stories, although the Bodley Head published that month a landmark in nineties prose—George Egerton's Keynotes—Lane and his partner Elkin Mathews disagreed about the value of the new "realistic" fiction and were, in fact, about to break up the partnership over just such disagreements. John Lane rejected Gray's proposal. Consequently, it was only in the 1920s, when he began to publish in the new periodical Blackfriars, that Gray's prose achieved a readership beyond that of the coterie.

Gray had been urged to write by Ricketts, although his mentor also told him on one occasion (as Gray recalls) that he could not relate plots. In fact, as one letter to Gray from an editor indicates,
sometimes plots were actually dictated to him. 13 A certain deadness in several stories does suggest that occasionally Gray wrote to order. Like many a young writer, Gray was insecure in his models and imitative in style. But as he gained confidence, he began to write from experience and the stories spring to life. “Old Gough” is the first tale clearly taken from Gray’s adolescence, when he worked at the Woolwich Arsenal. 14 Like Old Gough, Gray’s father was a wheelwright. Here Gray deploys his knowledge of wheelmaking—and the working man—to tell a quiet, exact, almost cold fable about early trade union politics—and human perversity. “Old Gough” exploits the new (and controversial) naturalistic narrative to its full. It may also claim a place as one of those stories which helped to establish the working-class as a fashionable subject for literature during the ensuing decade.

Gray draws again on his knowledge of low-life for his lecture-essay, “The Modern Actor.” 15 In tones that approach that of manifesto, Gray declared that the poet was not only a performer, but an outcast, the equivalent of the medieval juggler or the vaudeville comedian. Yet he predicts the actor of the new age will not be the idolized personality of the legitimate stage but the despised artiste of the music-hall. For us, Gray’s prescience is confirmed after the turn of the century by the theatre of Beckett and Brecht. For his own audience it was equally startling, but mainly as a model of perversity. Based on Wilde’s essays both in intention and method, Gray’s lecture revelled in self-conscious and even self-mocking paradox. Its paradox was, moreover, one Gray consciously enacted in the lecture performance itself: a precious discourse delivered by an impeccably dressed dandy who had still not lost the inflections of his Cockney accent. As it turned out, “The Modern Actor” was to cap Gray’s own career in paradox—and precipitate its end.

John Gray delivered the original “Modern Actor” lecture to the fashionable audience of the Playgoers’ Club in the company of Oscar Wilde. Reviewing that performance, The Star newspaper commented
that Gray was "the original Dorian of the same name." Although Gray threatened suit and The Star handsomely withdrew its allegation, the rumour that Gray was Wilde's "disciple" and, to a certain extent, his creature had taken on a life of its own. Despite public denials, Gray would describe Wilde as "my beloved master my dear friend." Wilde in return valued him as a poet, offering to underwrite the cost of his first book of poetry, Silverpoints. Their relationship, however, did not survive Wilde's own infatuation with Alfred Douglas. During 1892, Gray began to withdraw from Wilde's company, finally breaking with him altogether in early 1893.

The break was not merely painful, but devastating. At its pitch, Gray was dramatically ill and consumed by thoughts of suicide. In the wake of these stormy months Gray wrote some of his best prose. These stories, however, were not published during his lifetime. They were found, neatly typed, among his papers after his death. It is not difficult to see why they were not put out for publication. The longest, entitled "The Person in Question," is explicitly written at the request of a friend, as an examination of the author's peculiar state of mind. He believes he is haunted: a double shadows him everywhere, but a double whose resemblance only he himself perceives and whose independent existence nobody questions. The double's identity with himself he knows to be an illusion. But it is an illusion based on a prescient act of the imagination: the double is an image not of what he is but of what he will become, a kind of ghost of the future. Once he acknowledges this identity, the writer develops a curious dependency; when his double disappears, he is disoriented and anxious. But when he reappears, he commits an act which shatters the illusion of identity, and, by so doing, shatters also the author's own self-image. It is now he, and not this apparition, who has become the person in question.

The Jamesian subtlety of the tale disguises its origins. For one who knows Gray's history, the doubling and duplicity of the doppelgänger tale—now an accredited means of psychological analysis—eerily
mirror Gray’s own relationship with Wilde. His friendship with Wilde entailed disowning his past as John Gray in order to make his public entrance as “Dorian”: exquisite dandy, disciple, and reputed model for Wilde’s novella of that name. It is as “Dorian” Gray that he made his name as a poet. Consequently, when he broke with Wilde and tried to escape his reputation, Gray fell apart, both physically and psychically. In the event, he was rescued by another mentor, a rich Parisian Jew by the name of André Raffalovich, who eventually became a devoted and life-long friend. At first, it is clear, Gray could not respond to Raffalovich’s overtures. Having painfully broken with Wilde, he found he could not trust himself to another such friendship. Gray explores his dilemma, and its resulting emotional anaesthesia, in a stark, original tale, “The Yellow Princess.”

The Princess’s colour is obviously that of her money and her status as a “golden girl.” But, more than that, yellow is “the colour of the hour, the symbol of the time-spirit,” as Holbrook Jackson puts it in The Eighteen Nineties. As one who marks the fashion of the hour, Gray’s princess is a cogent symbol. One of the “new women,” her status and wealth brings her a freedom usually denied the upper-class Victorian lady. Moreover, she exercises her freedom in the most crucial act open to her: by choosing whom to marry. She chooses in the name of “love,” but that designation turns to dust when she inadvertently returns the kiss of another. “Love” is hollow in the face of the promiscuity—one might say impersonality—of the sexual instinct: a discovery Sue Bridehead and Jude Frawley were also to make.

And yet the Princess’s self-destructive dilemma is not only that of the “new woman.” She is such a potent figure exactly because she embodies the intelligence of the dandy, who sees through the social sham of romance and fashionable marriage. Thus her ultimate lack of discrimination is depicted as a failure of taste: what can one expect of a connoisseur of opera who is as satisfied with Mascagni as with Verdi? By the end of the story, the Princess is again free, although her
freedom is now the negative freedom of disillusionment and her yellow colour that of the bitterness of spiritual bile.

Something of that bile infuses another unpublished short story, "Their Mothers." An analysis of the sexual politics of a fashionable marriage, it employs the brittle ironies of a Beardsley drawing, its flatness of tone the perfect foil for the outrages of the situation.

Why it, like "The Yellow Princess," remained unpublished is unknown. Perhaps Gray felt the essential ugliness of the story rendered it unfit for publication (although Henry James covered much the same ground in What Maisie Knew). But Gray's orientation also had changed. In the midst of his disillusion, at first almost imperceptibly, then visibly, there began to grow a new commitment, one which was to make other commitments possible.

Religion found John Gray. How it arrived, how greeted, how it worked its slow, inevitable transformation, is the subject of two of his finest stories, "Niggard Truth" (1896) and "Light" (1897). What these stories emphasize, in contrast to the standard Victorian conversion tale, is the ordinariness of the experience. In the first, Harriet, a capable but otherwise nondescript woman, marries the minister of her "chapel" to whom she devotes her life. Her spiritual gifts make her not only an inspired director of her husband's career, but also a proud (and slightly acquisitive) housewife. Her exemplary domestic management both of the household and husband leads to that kind of success which is clearly the result of divine grace. A strange theme for an erstwhile "decadent" poet, but one that points to the practical (one might even say, Protestant) turn to Gray's spirituality as well as his detailed knowledge of "chapel" (i.e. Evangelical) sects, to which his family most probably belonged.

"Light," the second and more compelling of Gray's conversion tales, centres again on an ordinary, unnamed woman. The wife of a smith, the routine of her life is transfigured by the discovery of a poem of Jacopone da Todi: "O Love, all love above." Although a
“chapel” Protestant, instinctively distrustful of all that she knows to be “Popery,” the poem, and the spiritual impulse behind it, gradually usurp her whole consciousness, until she dies—raving, according to the village. Her husband alone intuits her holiness, although he does not understand it.

For Gray, the spirit flows from the word. He had seen his own life shaped and subverted by Wilde’s novel, just as the fictional Dorian Gray had himself been corrupted by a “fatal book.” Now, in a new dispensation, Gray proposes that there can be, on the contrary, a “sacred book,” one which will redeem. Gray himself found it in a book of poems by Jacopone da Todi which, according to an early biographer, he discovered much as his heroine came upon it in the window of a bookshop. Subsequently, a translation of “O Love, all love above” was to form the nucleus of his Spiritual Poems, published in 1896, a year before this story. In one sense, the eclectic collation, gathered from different poets of different periods in different languages, represents Gray’s own sacred talismans.

Still other texts were to provide Gray with a map to his own experience. Reviewing two novels, La-Bas (1891) and En Route (1895), Gray traces J.-K. Huymans’s murky path from the “inverted Spiritism” of his decadent hero to his orthodox repentance and conversion. In his essay on “The Redemption of Durtal,” Gray is at great pains to point out that this path, however esoteric its beginnings, is singularly devoid of the glamour of “miracles”; that it is, in fact, a particular vulgarity of Durtal that he should seek “a theatrical sign” of divine grace.

Yet in his own life, his spiritual awakening was through a series of shocks and jolts: first, the conversion of Gray’s now close friend, André Raffalovich, to Catholicism and, subsequently, of their mutual acquaintance, Aubrey Beardsley. His conversion was to become for Gray and Raffalovich a sign, both of the death of the old order of the “decadent” nineties and a foretelling of the new dispensation of
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grace. Gray marked its passing in an obituary memoir for the prestigious French journal, La Revue Blanche; he was prescient in naming Beardsley a "genius" and predicting his name would come to define not merely his own style but that of an entire period.25

Some months before the death of Beardsley, Gray had taken leave from his position in the Foreign Office to make a week's retreat with the Jesuits. He emerged confirmed in a new vocation. By the next autumn he was installed as a student in Scots College, Rome, a candidate for the priesthood. Four years later, in 1902, Father Gray took up the curacy of St. Patrick's Church in the Cowgate, Edinburgh, then one of the worst slums in England. Except for letters, writing now came under the category of dissipation. (The letters themselves—hard-headed, keen-eyed and, most of all, the products of an applied intelligence—augur the writer who was to emerge from an authorial silence of virtually twenty years.) Father Gray did try to force himself into the rule of two hours' intellectual work a day by undertaking translations of theological works. And, in an effort to correct Beardsley's "decadent" reputation, he edited a selection of Beardsley's letters to himself and Raffalovich with an introduction which stressed the spiritualizing effects of Beardsley's tuberculosis.26 All of these, as well as the sermons, children's plays, the editing of a missionary journal and an obituary notice of a loved pastor, show Father Gray putting his art at the service of his vocation.

Not until twenty-odd years later did Gray write for himself, when he was offered a chance to publish in a new journal put out by the Oxford Dominicans, Blackfriars. There followed, in the last ten years of his life, a modest tide of essays and poems, culminating in the serial publication of his one novella, Park. The essays were conducted in the spirit of the word: as trial pieces, attempts to articulate his own short excursions out of Edinburgh. Father Gray had become a formidable hill-walker, taking his holiday yearly in the Cotswolds and, for diversion between times, often setting out on a Sunday after tea and walking through the night. Other walks took him around the
Scottish islands (Eriskay and Skye being favourites) and around Iceland, as well as across parts of France and northern Italy. The essays, however, largely confine him to home ground, in more senses than one. They have much in common with his sermons, starting off on an apparent tangent and ranging widely before homing in on a certain scene and a certain sense made of it. "No matter where or how he begins," one parishioner remarked appreciatively, Father Gray "always brings us into the terminus."27

Essentially meditations, the essays move easily from complex, almost overloaded observation to pithy comment. There is a roominess about them; they take their time, they ruminate, they breathe. Their particular rhythm is one of their great merits; the landscape sketches are meticulous and detailed, the allusion rich (and elusive), but all is carried on with an impetus of wit and ripe pleasure, both in the actual excursion and intellectual assay it provokes.

Several are only tangentially located: "God-made and Machine-made" meditates on the value of mechanical invention, from that of the "yomph" of the motor-car to the factory-produced biscuit. No Luddite, Gray rejoices in the freedom of the invented, but, as an artist, regrets only the little individual touches that used to distinguish the hand-made from the mass-produced.28 In "Hymns: A Suppressed Preface," Father Gray laments the "self-complacent trash" that passes as sacred praise. Hymn-writing should, he opines, be considered a skill, and "the result should rather resemble the call of a bird than a pattern of hotel wallpaper."29 In another of his later essays, Gray playfully engages the wording of the ubiquitous sign "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted."30 Once and once only, he goes in for the kind of tour-de-force wordplay we associate with Joyce. "Dialogue" opens with the New English Dictionary's entry on "orange," gallops through several choice definitions and examples before ending with its consumption: "Cut it through the equator, then across the poles; then imagine you are a meritorious negro."31
That figure of the “meritorious negro” was, oddly enough, to compose the centre of his last and finest prose piece, the novella Park. He in fact appears earlier in a nineties story, “The Advantages of Civilization,” in the guise of “Master of Arts, bachelor of sciences, doctor of medicine, doctor of divinity, doctor of laws, doctor of all faculties, academically honourable in all English-speaking lands, correspondent of all learned societies, honorary member of the Helsingfors guild of boat-builders, chevalier of the profound order of the iron cross of Patagonia, member of the Abutabu municipality, wonderful, mighty... Zaccheus Bishop.”32 A Fijian and a son of the New Methodist Missionary Society, on leave in London, he is taken, with a strong bodyguard of seminarians, to visit the British Museum, where he scandalizes the company by admiring the magnificent physique of the Apollo Citharaedus, and, while advancing some arcane information about the whereabouts of the missing hands of the statute, posits a final question as to how the magnificent chest might (were it a shoulder of mutton) be carved for dinner.

Not for the first time, the joke was on the white man. Working in the Foreign Office and having at least three relatives living at different times in British territory abroad, Gray was inevitably exposed to some of the more cutting ironies of British imperialism. His interest in the primitive, evident in the short story “The Loves of the Age of Stone,” would also have persuaded him of its sophistication. Perhaps, too, coming from the margins of established society, he thought of himself as a kind of barbarian, one who has a new kind of freedom because he understands, as society cannot, the artifices by which it constructs “civilization.”

Gray’s sense of the primitive was thus aesthetic rather than political, although, according to one of his sisters, his interest in the black man led him to foretell “in a general way that the black man would rule.”33 Gray explores the implications of this fantasy in his one novella, Park, published in 1932. Ostensibly, Park is placed in a world of black men. But the location is not Africa but some latter-day
England in which the white men have been driven underground to live in a facsimile of the London Gray knew in the nineties. Above ground, England has returned to a rural, pastoral existence; the car has been replaced by the horse, and the landscape dotted with large country estates. But the medieval is not a mere fortress against the modern. In the land of the blacks, there has been a great advance in technological sophistication: they communicate with each other by telescreen, a kind of video telephone. Thus in the upper world, the Morris-medieval cohabits with the post-modern world of H. G. Wells, although the simplest identification (in a novel that is anything but simple) is with the world of the Catholic Church. For the blacks of the upper world are almost universally priests, and their government is hierarchical, autocratic and, with few exceptions, male.

The hero of this tale enters this world while on an excursion: "Mungo Park walked on in the belief, absurd as he knew it to be, that he had died." He was on the Oxford road, going eastward, when the silence took on a quality of the absolute and the road seemed "just faintly different." Then a note, sweet and prolonged, brings him to a stop. He is peppered with birdshot, assailed by a short, powerful black man, a gamekeeper as it turns out, who answers him in Latin. He is taken to a cabin and there initiated into the society of blacks, their costume, food, language, and strange ways of the Wapami, as they call themselves: "I shall never be back in time, he groaned. I shall never be back in time. Every thought has two meanings." Park has left chronological time, and without its reckoning he cannot establish his identity. History itself has taken on a violent discontinuity, signified by the split between upper and lower world, that of the present theocratic order and that of the past, literally a decadent underworld: in terms of topography, a graphic illustration of Gray's own history, and the discontinuity between Father Gray and "Dorian" Gray.

The issue of Park becomes, therefore, that of the identity of Mungo Park himself. It is, as Gray subtitled it, a "fantastic story" based in
part on the actual history of the Scottish Mungo Park, an eighteenth-century African explorer, who set out on his second expedition to discover the source of the river Niger. He never returned. But Mungo Park is also a facsimile of Father Gray: a priest who goes on long excursions and for whom walking is "an ambit in imaginary space." That space defined in Park—the story of Park who inherits an estate named Park—is nothing less than a map of a psychological excursion into the question of his identity. The fictional Park is dogged, from the very first, by the questions of his origin and purpose. Being out of chronological time, he defines himself in common with his companion and alter-ego, Dlar, as one of the "dead." But he insists on being accepted as a priest. Finally, the Wapami set up an official investigation into the matter. At the close of the novel, they issue a report, which is in part a detailed description of Father Gray, but also full of suppositions which Park/Gray does not himself recognize. "Filled with error, I suppose," Park is asked. "Yes, sir; as far as I am competent to judge," is the ambiguous reply. For of whom can Park judge, if not of himself? And why must he accept a report which represents only a counterfeit Park/Gray, a simulacrum of himself?

The narrative ends with Park awakening on the Oxford Road, going eastward, the status of his vision uncertain. During its opening sequences, Park thinks himself in a dream and meditates: "That is a strange thing, he thought; to dream a fact I did not know awake. I am black." This echoes a sentiment Gray expressed to his sister once: that although he was a white man, he was black inside. An ironic reversal of Blake’s "Little Black Boy"? Or a commentary on the religious order in whose journal he first published Park, the Dominicans, known familiarly as the Blackfriars? (Gray had become, in the early years of the century, a Third Order Dominican.) Or, more generally, did this "black" quality, also linked with his conviction that he is "dead," speak of his spiritual commitment to the priesthood, robed in black as a symbol of his death to the world?
These are only some of the puzzles of an enigmatic tale. Where they may be explicated, they tend to lead directly back to Gray's own interior life: his reading, his preoccupations, and a kind of spiritual nausea that has to do with the disorientation of his own life. A survivor of the nineties, Gray encapsulated the world of that decade in the underworld of Park, a kind of fin-de-siècle turned fin-du-globe. The violent discontinuity between these worlds is signified by the overthrow of the white population by the empire of the blacks; and in his own life by "Dorian" Gray's rejection of his invented self to become Father Gray. On a larger scale, that discontinuity represents the catastrophe of the Great War, which left the survivors of the nineties stranded, like Ezra Pound's Monsieur Verog, "out of step with the decade," immured among his reminiscences. Gray tried to escape this fate by writing his way out of it. As we have seen, the views on modern life—such as his attitude to technology—were scarcely reactionary. One might argue, in fact, that Park represents a last, extreme attempt to integrate not only himself, but the disparate worlds he had come to represent: those of Victorian and modern, secular and sacred, working-class and mandarin.

In this attempt, Gray appropriated many models (he had always had a taste for the eclectic). Like Piers Plowman's vision of a Pre-Reformation England, Gray looks back in Park to an era before a great cataclysm. Like William Morris, H. G. Wells, and Richard Jefferies, he contemplates the emergence of a post-modern England. But its many sources do not explain; ultimately Park remains enigmatic, in the words of one who knew his circle, "positively oriental in its false doors and booby-traps." And despite its sly humour, it is also often a desperate tale. For in Park Gray has literally entered the No-Man's Land where his own identity admits its fabrications, a territory he once described elsewhere as that "rich ground which hangs between Life and Death." As Park of Park, he has come into the inheritance of that estate, which he enjoys as priest, officially dead to the world, but alive to the vitality of the spirit. Like Pater's
Mona Lisa, Gray has been "dead many times," but has reincarnated himself by an enduring act of the imagination.

To those who have their finger on the John Gray's pulse, who have read the poems and the prose, Park also represents, as little else can, the compass and content of this imagination. Its distinctive mode of procedure in the early tales is ironic, constructed around the sterile dilemmas of "Old Gouth" or "The Person in Question" or "The Yellow Princess" or "Their Mothers." All of these tales end in a kind of paralysis. Unlike the fables of Wilde, to which they bear some resemblance, their impulse is in fact moral rather than aesthetic: they are emblems of the death of the spirit so brilliantly inscribed by Joyce's various Dubliners. Like Joyce's characters, those of Gray are betrayed into a kind of living death by their own principled behaviour; but the principles are abstract and self-defeating. They defeat the spirit because they are not of the spirit.

Gray's own conversion is mirrored in tales which tell the opposite story: the release from principle into the spirit, which dictates to its subjects their course of action. When Gray returns to writing, the essays themselves show a confidence, a willingness to take risks and an acceptance that intellectual observation must arise from, and be justified by, experience. In Park one can locate a kind of summation. The self-defeating logic of "Dorian" Gray reappears in the mixture of satire and wish-fulfillment, torment and longing, which set its emotional tone. But from the first there is a willed submission to the dream-vision, a patience with its work and with the sheer gravity of its experience; thus the story vibrates with a kind of wisdom and compassion rare for its genre.

That discipline owes much to Gray's education as a priest. Whereas it has been noted that the precision and brevity of his earlier pieces may be the result his civil service training in writing précis, the clarity and amplitude of Park may be traced to Gray's study of Thomas Aquinas. 41 In the procedures of Aquinas, the medieval has served
to direct the intellectual discipline of the modern, as in many respects
it did for the master modernist himself, James Joyce. It would seem
suitable, therefore, that the Thomistic criteria invoked by his hero,
Stephen Daedalus, in defining beauty should be those directing the
selection for this edition of Gray’s prose: integrity, harmony and an
apprehension of the essence of the thing, which Stephen defines as
the “silent stasis of esthetic pleasure.”

At its best, Gray’s prose does more than aspire to these criteria.
For, as I have tried to show, their agenda is often a desperate one, no
less than an attempt to integrate Gray’s own psyche. At times, this
personal agenda makes the prose flawed or baffling: some of the
allusions are too private, significant to only the author and a small
audience. At other times, this very urgency gives focus; we are patient
with the prose because we sense it has something to say to us. Almost
always, it seeks to teach, but where the lessons fail, Gray seeks to
show that bewilderment itself may be of value. Before the cruel
mysteries of unintelligibility and death, Park implies, clarity itself may
be too expensive.

In sum, one would not claim greatness for John Gray. It is a claim
he would not himself aspire to. Yet it remains an honorable thing to
reclaim his work. On its own merits, Gray’s prose is well written and
peculiarly honest: it has earned its passage. In this sense, its very
intimacy is a kind of guarantee that Gray speaks from experience. But
more than this, Gray has a significance for his time as a writer who
made the transition from the mannered decadence of “The Modern
Actor” to the cryptic pre-modernist narrative of Park. As such, his
work helps us reconstruct our own past: in particular, it requires us
to acknowledge that abyss which lies between the late Victorian and
the years after the Great War. As one who survived, not only
personally but as a writer, Gray allows us to speculate on the strategies
by which he sought to bridge that chasm. And in so doing, John
Gray’s work may provide an example of how, on the edge of greater
chasms, we may still presume to tell stories and to feel, in telling
them, that they are permitted to tell us something about our experience—and ourselves.

Notes


4. Ibid., 228–29.


8. The Dial, 1 (1889), 14–18.


14. The Butterfly, 1 (October 1893), 335–44.


20. The Eighteen Nineties, 49.


22. The Pageant, 1 (1896), 20–36; and The Pageant, 2 (1897), 113–34.

23. From the notes of Gray’s first biographer, Helen Trudgian, who presumably got this information from Gray’s sister, Beatrice (later Sister Mary Raphael) Gray. Trudgian papers, Dominican Chaplaincy, Edinburgh.


25. “Aubrey Beardsley,” La Revue Blanche, 16 (1898), 68–70.


29. Ibid., 6 (October 1925), 580.

30. Ibid., 9 (March 1928), 164–69.

31. Ibid. (May 1928), 308.

32. The Butterfly, 2 (November 1894), 51.


34. Mungo Park’s Travels into the Interior of Africa (1799) is one of the main sources for Park. For other sources, see note 38 below.


37. “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts).” Pound’s M. Verog satirized one of Gray’s contemporaries, the nineties poet Victor Plarr.

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