The Selected Prose of John Gray

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Editorial Principles

AS AN EDITOR, I followed the principle that he who edits best, edits least. John Gray has his own quite idiosyncratic style, partly due to the fact that he was self-educated. In the earlier pieces, the grammar is not always secure (although sometimes it is merely awkward). In the later essays, he appears to have written as he would have talked, following the British habit of dropping articles when speaking informally. And one must add that unusual turns of phrase also reflect Gray's own natural perversity. He often consciously wrote against the grain, which entailed not only writing against ingrained assumptions but also against predictable phrasing. Taking all these factors into account, it seemed wiser to leave the occasional awkward construction strictly alone, as it acts as a kind of signature to a prose that is, at its best, lucid and terse. On the other hand, Gray was not always well served by his printers; obvious misprints have silently been corrected.

A greater difficulty arises in Gray's use of phrases (later, of entire conversations) in languages other than English. Occasionally he would italicize these; usually, however, he would not. The only apparent principle he followed was one of personal emphasis: if he wanted to call attention to the foreign quality of the phrase, it would be italicized. Otherwise, Latin tags and French phrases are thrown in willy-nilly, to take their place with the English as part of everyday speech—everyday, that is, to the educated elite to whom it was addressed. Gray's distinctive handling of foreign words says much about what he expected from his readers. And, if his mandarin style is not to everyone's taste, it would nevertheless be a drastic change of Gray's style to italicize all passages not in English. Those who do not feel at home in this macaronic universe should consult the notes to the prose, where full translations are provided. I hope they will add to the enjoyment of a prose that has been said to have the "dryness of a patrician [if not native] wine."

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