The Selected Prose of John Gray

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Published by ELT Press

Hull, McCormack, Jerusha.
The Selected Prose of John Gray.
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The origin of the story probably lies in the incidents surrounding the visit of a young Catholic Zulu (called Mtembu) who came with a missionary priest and nun to stay with André Raffalovich in London. Gray’s sister recalls that her brother was “very interested” in Mtembu. Raffalovich later wrote that “Mtembu . . . wore a sailor suit; he shuddered when offered a pear; he had been that day to the British Museum, and with his pocket statuette of St. Joseph and his gestures he conveyed to us the conviction that he had seen the Elgin marbles” (Zaina, p. 95).

Gray’s work at the Foreign Office would have made him familiar with the situation in British territory abroad, although it is through the agency of the New Methodist Missionary Society that Dr. Bishop makes his way to London (perhaps reminiscences from Gray’s early exposure, through his family’s chapel-going, to the protégés of Methodist missionaries?). Gray also had a cousin in Ceylon (whom he mentions in a letter to Pierre Louïs, 16 July 1892, as passing through London) and, later, brothers in South Africa and Canada.
The Advantages of Civilization

ASTER 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 boatbuilders, chevalier of the profound order of the iron cross of Patagonia, member of the Abutabu municipality, wonderful, mighty was Zaccheus Bishop;¹ five-foot-eleven before he was civilized, big in the bone and not too graceful, full of jokes, fond of cabs, ready of wit, not unhandsome with his black eyes and bushy hair and magnificent teeth, the celebrated Fijian doctor.²

The New Methodist Missionary Society was proud of its son. He was a chief by birth of a chiefly line; his pedigree was written all over him. The natural man in him had thoroughly graduated in Fijian virtue, before the Reverend Mr. Solomon brought the oily piece of live mahogany to a knowledge of the truth; before the N.M.M.S. came to bed of the spiritual prodigy. He had led a tribe on the weather side of his native island, under a name he had himself chosen in a time of political trouble, which signified Up-four-trees. In one day the Society gained nine hundred converts (with a corresponding impoverishment of its resources; but this was momentary, and in the manner of a speculation). The report named the total at more than double that number; but then the report was sentimental, and counted women.³ The chief was baptized (christened) Zaccheus. Mr. Solomon was a missionary of wit, and translated the chief's savage
name and title boldly into Christian: Zaccheus Bishop. The reverend missionary then drew his pupil’s attention to the beauties of the British alphabet. Zaccheus was sullen at first; he said his warriors wanted to dance; but the ready Reverend Mr. Solomon translated that maxim into Fijian: The first step is the hardest, and promised to teach him nap. Needless to follow him through all the steps of his progress; in the end Dr. Bishop was such a great man, that if his sanctity had equalled his learning in degree, the Society would scarcely have been big enough to hold him.

Dr. Bishop was back for the fifth time in “the old country” (he meant England); this time informally. Here a technical distinction is involved, the explanation of which would entail a correspondence with the Society. But as far as one can tell from outside observation, the present situation was something like this. The Society treasured its trophy, and worshipped his every act and word; but it liked him best when he was content to remain on some rock in his native ocean, teaching the inhabitant and “using his influence.” On the other hand, the Doctor thought highly of the gifts and accomplishments he was able to place at the service of the Society. And as he knew a great deal, he passed the most of his time at the Grand Hotel. The Society discharged the bills. Certainly the committee queried and disparaged, and the Council sometimes came near action; but the situation remained. The Doctor was quite willing to discourse at Exeter Hall every day and all day; he was ready to edit all the Society’s periodicals, audit its accounts, whip up the supporters, anything. The Society found it best to thank Heaven, in vague terms, for Dr. Zaccheus Bishop.

The Doctor continued his residence in Northumberland Avenue. Thank them, he was very comfortable; he begged them not to be anxious. And from day to day the wits of the Society were turned more and more towards the problem of filling up his time. (They called it “entertaining him.”) He had preached in all their churches, lectured to every audience of two thousand they could get together,
inspected the Orphanage and the Working Boys’ Club. He was busy with National Purity, was writing his Life, paid frequent visits to the Colonial Office, and still had lots of leisure.

As a desperate step, the Doctor was sent one morning, in charge of a strong bodyguard from the Clapton College, to visit the British Museum.

“Delighted, Reverend Sir!” Dr. Bishop shouted, when he learned the object of Mr. Smith’s visit. “Haven’t been there for years. Have a cigar.” The Reverend Mr. Smith didn’t smoke. The two lights of divinity came down to the vestibule of the hotel, well contrasted: Mr. Smith, the principal of the Clapton College, ascetic and brushed to the bone; Dr. Bishop, shining, brushed he too, most certainly, but on the back of him was something to brush; his cravat and linen glistened with purity against his fine skin. All the spices of the Southern seas floated about him as he walked. His breast was gay with a buttonhole of three orchids. One detail about him was taken especial note of by each of the chorus of woolly-chinned youths waiting below stairs. They were the bodyguard. Mr. Smith almost used the word, in a moment of expansion he had, as the Doctor smiled upon them.

“Ah! yes, indeed, Reverend Sir,” he said, “... so many of our young men... yes, indeed, the service of the cause is a blessed thing. Fond of flowers?” he added suddenly, to one of the party, “... orchids... very pretty, aren’t they? If you could see them in Fiji! They grow wild; yes, indeed, they do.”

“Do they, indeed, Doctor?” the chorus intoned; and Mr. Smith added, solus: “Is that really the case?”

So the party arrived at the Museum, all but one out of breath. There was a brief pause on the steps to look at the two mumbo-jumbos under the portico.

“Idols? Quite right, idols.” And the Doctor gave a great laugh, which made the theological students feel uncomfortable.
“This way, gentlemen,” said the Doctor; “you must give up your umbrellas.”

He handed in his cane separately, and pocketed the metal ticket briskly. Mr. Smith felt the leadership of the party was rapidly slipping from him; especially when the Doctor led the way into the gallery of the emperors. Without the spirits and entrain of the Doctor the party might have turned Claptonward at this moment. Mr. Smith pushed his spectacles into his eyes. He was shy of antique art, and he had his students with him. These were troubled.

“Never heard of the Faustinas?” said the Doctor to the student he had chosen as an object for his solicitude, in deprecating surprise. “That is a mistake; a divine cannot know too much. Marcus Aurelius; do you not know the thoughts of the Emperor? Then I had better tell you.” They passed slowly from bust to bust, the Doctor talking incessantly to the lad he had taken in hand of Caracalla, of Hadrian, Antinous, Caligula, till the starveling thought he had a real vocation, and filled his lungs with a physical joy to find so much air side by side with so much intellectual interest. Mr. Smith simply sulked; and that in a way almost coquettish. He was quite willing to be consoled if the Doctor would only address his remarks to him.

They came to the Apollo Citharaedus, and stood about in a semicircle. The students dared not yield to the temptation to look in one another’s face.

“A noble piece of statuary, Reverend Sir,” said the Doctor. (Reverend Sir beamed with sudden interest.) “A late Greek thing. . . . as you see.” Mr. Smith had gathered a very decided impression from the statue, but it was not of an archaelogical character; so he looked scrutinisingly at the inscription to see if it was late or early.

“The physique of the figure is wonderful,” he answered with fierce timidity, a neck-or-nothing admission.

“Yes, indeed,” said the Doctor warmly, “yes, indeed, a fine
physique... and yet not too fat. I dare say, Reverend Sir, you do not
know where the hands are of this very statue."

"No, sir, I do not," Mr. Smith confessed, as though his ignorance
on this detail was curious.

"Ah! they are in the Königliches Museum zu Dresden."11 (Sensa-
tion of the students.) "Such hands! they are better fed than mine,
than yours too," he added, seizing the first hand he saw, in a way
that startled its owner, "the thumbs especially; they are so full here"
(his audience was open-eyed at his exaltation), "like a quail, or more
like the leg of a fat partridge. Just look at those muscles across his
shoulder, the collar bone is almost hidden." He laid his hand on the
shoulder of his starveling friend, fixing him where he stood with
fear. "And the same thing with his ribs. They must be covered with
two inches of solid flesh. And see, Reverend Sir, the mass of his breast.
If that were shoulder of mutton, how would you carve it?"

"! . . ! . . ! . ." The Doctor laughed loudly, and jerked his watch
out of his pocket like a pea from a pod.

"I am afraid I must leave you, gentlemen; I am lunching with the
Minister of Hawaii. I recommend you to go and have a good look at
the Elgin Marbles."12

The Reverend Mr. Smith managed to loosen his tongue in his
mouth, and say: "I hope you will enjoy your lunch, Doctor."