The Selected Prose of John Gray

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Father Gray was a dedicated hillwalker from the early days of his priesthood in Edinburgh. He would take off when he could find a day or two from this usual schedule and regularly, during the summers, spend two or three weeks walking in the Cotswolds and the West Country, usually with a companion. Here Gray posits that walking is essentially a spiritual exercise, "an ambit in imaginary space, where sensation is fruitful and its fruit imperishable"—a fruit garnered also in his extended poem, The Long Road (1926), the poetic analogue of this essay.
Winter Walking

OOD will be found in the man whose recreation is walking. The moralist means certainly subathletic walking, a true exercise of this form of progress, a test which hopes to be marked high. Results of it can only be compared in their productivity of good. While you experience the pleasant muscular soreness for which you have waited only after the twelfth mile, your mother may be satisfied for the day when she has reached the eighth. A walk in the sense indicated seems to connote for a lady twelve, for a man twenty, flat miles in Great Britain.

Restorative exercise, nay, prophylactic, for fatigue must needs be dispersed and ease insured, cannot, when there is hardly an acceptable substitute to propose, suffer seasonal restriction, accept hyematol. Why should they? On the contrary.

External dispositions fit you rather for winter walking. You are becomingly shod by the very circumstance; and even legal clothing may seem too much in summer. Winter allays; and the walker is not without persecutors. “No heat, no dust, no flies” you will hear your hobnails sing upon the frost-resilient road. And the eyes find more than variety in the winter scene; they learn to choose dead-bracken-clothed steeps and pronounce their food “incomparable” when the blue of the mist deepens to the desired concord.

The Things Required by the walker are two; if the plurality of boots be admitted. These are loose, heavy, best reached-me-down; they are hard and uncouth until copiously anointed with neatsfoot
oil. If for the tread be desired pure leather, as the phrase is, let them
be fitted with a clump sole; yet who but the exquisite so desire?
Whence the question of nailing. If this be done in the village, let
hobnails be well driven over all the sole, waist, and heel; but it is
better to entrust the job to, say, Mr. Harden of Keswick; his hobnails
stay where he drives them; and, if he add a few two-pronged nails
round the sole in all parts, the boot will take a good bit of rough
ground. To be worthy of so much trouble they must be really
footbags—against water and mud, with flap-fronts laceholed all the
way, and fitted with a big leather tug.

They are pulled on over two pairs of socks, so that any friction
arising may be expended between wool and worsted without harm
to feet.

That is the outfit for the body. If Bartholomew's² half-inch be in
a pocket and the walker has a good conscience, nothing is wanting;
the rest follows age, sex, and idiosyncracy. A stick is not forbidden;
and the usual name for this object suggests its addition to the
road-gear. Tobacco, sugar-sweets, chocolate, a Shetland waistcoat in
a pocket, stationery, water-proof, compass, portable meal, vacu-
num,³ camera, all claim to be fruits of experience; and some excite
misgiving in other walkers' minds; though of the contingent use of
each it is possible to discourse, particularly if the day's march include
hills or moor.

But the walker's inheritance is length without breadth: the white
road. It is true that he cannot see what is to be seen from other
ground; yet most roads have ancient sense and venerable tradition
for sponsors; and that man asks more than is human who would see
seven wonders in his paltry seven leagues. There is one wonder: the
creation; and it is contemplated by leg-stretching. Get on, if curtly
expressed, is the marching order; be able, at the day's sweet end, to
multiply the hours by your index, which probably will be 3 ½, and
check by a glance at the map for the number of miles. Should
examination of conscience reveal gossip, dalliance by the way with the pretty (that disease of scenery) insanitary hovels, blue cows, cursed ruins, unwonted birds, the index sinks, perhaps by $\sqrt{2}$; or, if you botanize, even considerably. Though the eye cannot be filled, the attempt to fill it is as well maintained walking as lounging. Real trouble calls for a halt; and for remedies, even to the abandonment of the journey; standing about is only affectation, which may lead to hypocritical exclamations: che bello! Most experience a tickle of fatigue at the third mile, perhaps because circulation adjustment is taking place; and genuine fatigue, if it occur later on, may be a sign that the body needed exercise for its health. There should be no fatigue; he who strolls out after his evening meal among strange gables, say at Bicester, Dunstable, when gloom flatters the lines and proportions of dwellings, sometimes feels as though he were an orphan, and that, strangely, it is delightful to be so; that is enough.

Why men walk will not be decided today; walking has not been defined. A walk is no more an extension of going to the Post Office than eternity is a multiple of time; a hint at the intricacy of the definition (when found) appears in the hypothesis of the walking companion. You could walk to the gallows with lots of men with whom you could not walk upon Exmoor. The companions must not be too much interested in one another; they must have a common object, not a mutual. No one walks in Lovers' Loan; that subterranean cloister in Mr. Asquith's earldom is no place for walking. La salle des pas perdus, how well named!

Some think that the essence of walking is spiritual; that it is a certain struggling of the soul at length successful; or, less speculative, that it is a recovery of balance or of harmony. This is praise. But one consequence of walking may be named enrichment; for it places certain powers of the mind so advantageously that genuine needs are supplied, and lavishly. If this be not so, in what realm of illusion is walking effected? Evidently we must keep to the road, as it heaves and swings under the sky, both physically and metaphorically. Is there
here a clue? Is walking an escape from illusion? The walker does not savour analogies, for they injure his impressions, too delicate to support their weight. What, however, of the analogy of satisfied thirst? The craving; its allayment and extinction as water is tasted and swallowed; there is at least enjoyment, perhaps rapture; the drinker attributes properties to the draught, and with conviction, which at another time he could not discern; flavour, texture, temperature uplift and strain the senses; but the mirage of thirst is shattered. Is walking a return? The fox circulates in the cover and chooses an exit. The tramp is obstinate. Cain departs. The child swings from the cedar bough. The raider rides to his mischief. The stocks are unlocked. The visitor turns into the drive and pulls up as light is switched on in the porch and the friend is seen emerging from the shelter of his hospitality. The walker does many things, and something more; walking is life. It is leaving that which is yet present and returning by a safe journey to that which was never distant; an ambit in imaginary space, where sensation is fruitful and its fruit imperishable.

It is also an approach, raised above degradation and attainment; a property made visible in the skyline, for this reason utterly attractive, remaining forever at an ideal distance, passing through insensible modifications to another geographical name. That finite treasure should be such as is thus approached! That variety should never bewilder and ever offer a choice! Objects beyond value suffer nothing from not being preferred. The anatomy of a tree may be more acceptable than its cloud of leaves and no wrong done; a bare ash in fruit only of withered "keys," as its seedpods are sometimes called, and perching starlings is not negative; the brown of the winter field is more than the absence of corn in August or its preparation; the sinuosity of its lines answering to the roll of the land is an end in itself, and not more approachable because the instrument of production is known. Cause and effect are here no more than steps for the
mind to run up and down upon; there is communication between the external and that within which has power to admit or exclude.

For, in another view, isolation is desired, sought, found; isolation in its etymology; the island stout and strong, nothing hugoesque, its possessions intense, so with strict reference to the widening dimension of the ocean in which it is, an ocean spherical and truly external, as no organic thing could ever be imagined, either in extent or exteriority. Those wise in aesthetic hasten to note that rus and urbs are exclusive; and infer that when attention is withdrawn from social and civic objects, tarn and cloud, crag and bush arrest desires and emotions in search of a term. Beware of the plausible; rebut the explanation that substitution of the inanimate object is unconscious. The desire is not brought in any form from usual life; but is born upon the road itself; and that of the experience itself, in its variety and its harmonies. The thing, if it is at all, is greater than aesthetic.

A partial explanation might be sought with the notion of harmony as a lode. The rhythms of creation are by far more various than immediate observation can detect; many movements are continuous or otherwise regular, wind, water, stars, creatures, day and night, seasons. Forms, colours, tones of the visible world synthesize. The human entity also has its regular movements, from which for the present purpose must by no means be omitted those which walking necessitates. It might be suggested that stride and breathing, pulse and swing, secondary muscular movements fall into accord with cosmic rhythms, and produce that knowledge of well-being and well-doing which needs above all a harmony. There are rhythms unknown, without and within, which yet may contribute to exaltation. Wonders enough are within natural reach. Gladness may come from harmonies and combinations not at once definable, as water, beverage, rivulet, snowflake, has gases for its chemical constituents; and be further enhanced by the association which brings it forth,
beings so unlike as creation, vast, external, and an isolated consciousness.