The Selected Prose of John Gray

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Here Gray attacks the notion that man’s artefacts ruin a landscape.

In a vigorously unsentimental essay, Gray argues that these may well constitute reasonable additions to the natural scene. As an exercise in persuasion, it may well serve as a model as to how to examine conventional assumptions—such as those about the relation of man and nature—without resorting to full frontal attack. Gray proceeds obliquely, by means of a series of subtle aesthetic discriminations, finally leaving the reader in the air, with a picture of a steam engine delicately making its way across a railway viaduct. Always the poet, even in prose, he grounds the argument in the irrefutable and irreducible concreteness of felt experience.
Man’s Visible Works

It is not easy to find the word descriptive of that hold which the external can exercise in favourable conditions through the senses upon man’s spirit. There might be a successful plea that this influence is more real than is supposed, necessary to men if human dignity is to be upheld; such is not here advanced; but rather one or two practical questions, modestly constructed, are submitted with deference, as: Is not the vague, unnamed, very real relation between man and his inanimate correspondent subject to all the varieties and discriminations allowed to “taste”? Again, in discourse of this matter the word beauty must sooner or later be used; very well, but man is beautiful, though this is only a memory. Regrettez vous le temps où le ciel sur la terre marchait et respirait dans un peuple de dieux? The little we can say at present is: man might harmonize with the created beauty external to himself; but the fact is that his presence is seldom tolerable and very rarely acceptable. Shrinking, he has lost a function; he is reduced to a spectator, and can no longer be wedded to bosquet and glade except in spirit, Walt Whitman’s endeavours and other’s nonobstant. It is by chance that man and his are not eyesorrow, distraction, hindrance, scandal, discord among the elements where he might have wonted place.

That the scandalgiver is man sometimes seems to justify impatience and abandonment of the enterprise; but to close our eyes is to relinquish our only true external inheritance, and that is the last
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sacrifice. Remains for the beholder to accommodate his desires to facts, accept inevitable dilution and look with discretion.

Right as the untouched earth must have been—no one questions the undefilable sky, nor has dreamed that he could improve the open sea—and instant as the three are to reduce the unwelcome line, to eradicate the living species undesired, to begin forthwith to obliterate scars and tumours of industry and war, that it has been touched by hands clean and unclean is so present a fact as to be no longer a subject for discourse. We detect the presence of our kind without delay; the notions of the human self and habitable space at once coalesce into a new notion of a man in his environment. But our attitude is contentious; we would clear the scene so that this presence shall be inopportune, the individual an intruder.

Away, then, with man himself (hand him over to the great landscape painters and forget him when not visiting a Louvre), his attire, his vehicles, his crowds, his picnics; suffer him perhaps in his grouping on market days. Show some tenderness, however, to his cultivation, grazing animals, quarries, roads, for examples; but upon the whole view him with provisional hostility.

With all right on our side we wish to behold, to give attention, to enjoy a complicated state of spirit. The causes of that which delights the vision sub dio are many, and include a variety of movements, continuous, rhythmic, erratic, changes of light, swifter or slower. Entitled or not, one so engaged considers himself privileged, and resents as so many blind spots in a glory of reality works, intruding works, of man. To illustrate the exacerbation of the intrusion. Look across a small manufacturing town from a hill, and make selection from the series of sensations and reflections, inevitable, commonplace, to those who have learned to register them; perhaps somewhat in this way: The skyline, however well known, is seen as for the first time; in truth it has never been twice alike since the world was made; and each of its innumerable moments speaks
permanence, delivering to the sentient mind delicacy milleniums have at length achieved. Convergences are new in the grades approaching it; the colouring, what with the season, vegetation, density of the air, reflection of the sky, is thus or otherwise. Look at the scene, for it is yours alone and only now. The town at your hillfoot, busy beyond the needs of business far, more dogged than the insurance office desires, odious as in the thoughts of its commercial rivals. Its advertisements are legible; its chimneys smoke; it rumbles, hums, hoots to its employes, rings the Angelus,\textsuperscript{4} strikes the hour. Its gyrations and pendulum actions are all deceit. Against its background of "unbuilt land" it exhibits the final symptom of human things: rigor mortis. Like the door to a tomb, hinting at the life of the living and the resurrection of the dead, one thing says Spem,\textsuperscript{5} the road which jumps the river and speeds with all perspective among the hills.

Movement, our nature's sweet defect. "There is that goal to which thy vows ascend; there the repose for which the whole world sighs" is an apostrophe both rational and instinctive, expressing well human abhorrence of the stationary. We approve of man's absence from the scene, we approve of his possible advent; equally, and for the same reasons, of his past (and future) passage. "The voice I hear this passing day was heard in ancient days."\textsuperscript{6} This is the emotion of roads, of wheeltracks upon the moor; "drowsy tinklings."\textsuperscript{7} The idea is contemporaneous with the human heart. If I must see him, or be reminded of him, let him at least move. A diarist has published a memorable saying. The scene was a tent, through the opening of which the occupants rested their eyes upon the dark Arabian night; and one said: "How peopled the desert is; I suppose there is in all this region scarcely a place where I have not lighted my fire."

Permanent traces of man may be reasonable addition to subtler lines and surer colour: his dykes, his planting, houses, quarries, mills. He was here; and in need; or with inspired rage he felled trees and tore down the mountains to re-erect them according to his fancy. It
is petulant, in the world where our pleasures of vision are to be found and in rich abundance, that the refrain should ever be: the natural scene is always right and always new. Cultivation is geometric and attempts no disguise; but the elements of perspective will constantly arrive at some agreement; the roll of horizontal lines, the happy accident, hard juxtapositions, amazing patches, tinted air and shadows of clouds whisper glory where there is least promise of it. In view of a shallow cultivated valley accept frankly the piecework quilt or even the chessboard as the terminus a quo; the tilled or be by it inclosed; in more ways than one man's plot and the wild may become friends. The geology of a country will often support a vast load—of responsibility—with atlantic ease, and save many an ill act from downright degradation. Though long lines are essential to great scenery (and consequently in England the aesthetic fingerposts all point to the chalk), scale in landscape is not important; and, barring risk of the pretty, a charming scene may be of small extent. The irregularly spotty is the prevalent enemy.

Buildings—the subject is intricate—we judge summarily for our purpose. The irrational (as all obelisks) must be excluded by an effort of the mind, or endured. Guideposts may adorn the scene; one near Campden, for example; and, in the west, crosshands evidently of Roman lineage. Some structures lord it over what we must call nature, and witness the human mind: temples, monasteries, palaces, bridges. The builder was on his feet and alert; building in the name of mankind. But private buildings move along with the easy stride of those who, thinking little, follow a well-known track; so long as they do so we shall not complain. Farm buildings have often the high serenity of mediately natural things, such as good manners and ceremonial dress. Their effect can be analysed; the disposition of parts understood and described. Simple, direct, excellently adapted, the plan has come of experience and tradition, and angularities have been reduced by time; but the whole place, answering to living needs, has acquired an aspect of life and necessary being not easily
accounted for. The primitive, nobler remains, though haggard, untidy, of humbler use, often put to shame the modern dwelling beside them, and brand it with vulgarity. Farms need no great value, nor acknowledged historical or aesthetic interest, to take a worthy place in a general scene of cultivation, higher ground and unified horizon. Buildings which are truly part of a scene will be found to be related by multiple ties to the area with which they do not disagree; almost indigenous; their site probably immemorial. Note that a “gentleman’s property” is an evolved farm, and owes its interest to that alone.

Remain buildings too big for any landscape to assimilate, which may or may not arrive at harmony with the natural scene: gaol, school, sanatorium, water-supply, power-plant, factory, observatory, barrack. These structures know their position, that they are foreign, irreconcilable, intolerable, and boastful. This is right, so far; il faut être de son temps. Abandon reason for the short time of the encounter, and apostrophize the sewage-disposal or distillery. We know you are useful, benevolent, necessary; farewell. For we must imitate the false prophet who, when the mountain refused to move, is said himself to have gone away. Illustration: the Reader of course knows what to expect at the next visit to the Perte du Rhône (parmi les merveilles de la France)? All but those whom the cypher 250,000 h.p. can uplift and dessicated geologists move off in silence up the gorge, for consolation in a sight of the Grand Credo. Better than going on to the fortress, stop at Longeray, and the Café Merme; omelette; wine. Admire the little vineyard; feed your benefactresses the hens; tease the future proprietor, who will come to look at you. You are far beyond the power of horses; the summit of terrestrial beauty is somewhere within a couple of days march. Try the Reculet or the Crêt de la Neige for a silhouette of Switzerland.

And yet the big structures just now deplored might be well enough. The kind of pilgrim we are does not say beforehand what he wants; unless “I must see something not unworthy of my
experience of visible things." The mighty steps of Jura; the agitated silhouette to the east; the box plant such as suburban gardens will never dream; surprises which the next moment are age-old and inevitable. The addition to experience might be a work of man: as take the valley of the Welland, looking northward, and from the Northamptonshire side; so exquisitely shallow, the cultivation beyond the stream, slow between its squasy banks, so fair through perspective bringing its horizontal lines together and swallowing the vertical—a refinement of the English scene which seems unsurpassable. From nearby Rockingham a low, delicate object appears indecipherable, which soon suggests a railway viaduct (as it proves to be), with a persistent difficulty of interpreting its colour, rich rose with fantastic mottling of darkest blue. Short of Gretton, the usual railway is cruelly exemplified. Then charming Gretton, with its outlook from the church platform towards Rutland, its kind inhabitants. The meditative traveller measures his own height against the whipping-post (with its thoughtful provision for sinners of different height); and there again is the thousand-legged viaduct—yes, in its beauty; and a white cloud of (physical) progress moving with dainty energy along its splendid curve.