The Selected Prose of John Gray
McCormack, Jerusha Hull

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“Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted”  

Blackfriars 9 (March 1928), 164–69. 

This is a whimsical meditation on the wording of certain public notices. It should be noted that it is Gray’s first essay purely on language, indicating a shift in artistic direction. Previously, he had told stories. After the nineties, he does not trust the coherence of his writing to narrative, but relies instead on a kind of psychological coherence. The essays progress as a kind of meditation, usually held together by a proposed topic. In this essay and the next, however, the movement is from one phrase or group of words to another, with the words themselves forming the nexus of the essay. Here, plot (or anecdote) derives as explication of words and has become increasingly private in its reference. In this change of direction, Gray is reflecting one of the great shifts of modernism, away from narrative, the structuring of experience through plot, to the structuring of experience through language. 

It should also be of particular note in this essay that Gray no longer credits language (such as the admonitory “Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted”) with having any power to change behaviour—language being no longer either fatal or sacred, but an entity in itself which intervenes in human experience only on notable occasions (as with the man who discovers, inadvertently, he is a “trespasser”).
THOUGH a bright young lady remembered to have read a notice Trespassers will not be Prosecuted, the attentive will mark no fatal difference of futility between this alleged and the well-known warning. Departure Platform; Beware of Pickpockets; and there are others; juxtapositions of words which do not scan, are not irreducible, leave the uninstructed ignorant; and, if we consider them in any carping spirit, are filled with false assumptions, petitiones principii,1 innuendoes and concealed negatives. Warn a man; do. Warn him briskly, leaving him no rejoinder; laconically. A warning connotes danger, proximate or contingent. It is useless to say Wolf to a stranger in the Tube. He would only reply: “Excuse me, sir, my name is Lamb.” But when the voltage is known and protection is nugatory, express your thoughts succinctly. No matter in what land of Europe, you have seen the notice, pictorial, resembling the design of the jolly roger, affixed to posts supporting live wire. There is the human spirit: alike expressed in the will, fulfilled, to have the tramcar hurtle through the province, threading hamlets like pearls upon a worthy chain, as far from the waterfall as it desires; and in the sober stare of death: Do not meddle, brother.

But Trespassers will be Prosecuted; a decayed relic of that noble fruit of the mind, the expedient rules drawn up by the piratical farmers old Norwegians were, to the end that fighting and plunder might continue their honourable course, and life be yet prolonged for the service of God and men. It is too late—but even now some paraphrase

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like Strangers will be Hunted or Pursued would convey to the incipient intruder a distinct image of possible consequences; as would Mastiffs, Bloodhounds or mere Dogs.

Wyatt, a farmer but no pirate, gave, in his moorland dialect, directions for a journey somewhat off the course of the young Exe: Follow the wheel-tracks to the peat-cutting; then you'll see the bog to the left, sloping; keep down till you come to a post with a notice Please Shut the Gate (and there's never been no gate there that I can remember); and so on, trackless and sure. Shift the scene to a forest in a greater land, and the advice would run: Continue until you see a notice Trespassers will be Prosecuted, and then go where you like, for all is of the first class; and break your neck according to opportunity.

Please Shut the Gate is not an uninteresting inscription, whether there is a gate or not; and it adds to the activities of those who pass that way. A pretty variant could be seen in the lane leading from Batheaston to Colerne: Everybody shuts the gate but you. There is vitality in Shut the Gate; if there were a thousand commandments instead of ten it might be one of them.

No doubt Ancient Lights still shine in appropriate places, and the manifestation of their brightness has its use; but no one would be sadder if A and B became confused; if Trespassers etcetera looked from a height of sixty feet upon a scene of demolition; and Ancient Lights would be no less cautionary, minatory, vindictive, malevolent standing in a pool of water on some uncharted foothills, or stuck in the snows of Cairntoul. The foxes and badgers would keep still to the traditional routes.

Oh, but you say. Yes, I know. And, when the small boys are found in proximity to the birds' nests by the huge game-keeper, who is also their cousin, have you heard what it is the big man does? He chuck his knife from a legal distance at the feet of the boys, commanding them to cut the relevant buttons from their clothes "so that the mothers may know that their sons have been where they should not
have been." Observe how the action is accurately deduced from reason and law.

There stands the prohibition in the mist; and with patience we may penetrate the mist in the mind which placed it there. If the stranger (and strangers are not wanted; and the less the stranger they are) commit an imaginary offence, he might commit a real one. You have never shot the wrong stag, nor the right one, nor been within mountain ranges of desiring to do so. But you have committed trespass, if it is possible to commit the hypothetical. A little offence, according to your capacity, against good manners has been provided for you, and you have fallen into the trap. You have never from behind cut the throat of an exhausted park creature while dogs engaged it at the danger-point; nor coveted the filthy right to kill in that way. If not, keep your opinions to yourself; and, when the advice is given, Keep to the Footpath; By Order.

The following incident, if worth narration, requires some historical introduction, however slight. Peterhouse in 1644 expelled Crashaw; but it did and has done better actions than that. Meantime, for tourists it is an attractive place; unfolding, as Cambridge colleges do, that which is more charming as the visitor penetrates; for one example, the bridge at John's, Peterhouse's cul-de-sac, is a garden; and in the garden were deer. Their names are Tonsi, Ponsi, and Fru. We (later called the trespassers) used to visit this garden. On the way we provided our pockets with little apples, probably Bath Beauties, with which to feed the deer, while we talked to the creatures, using an appropriate vocabulary. To us it was idyllic, to the deer of some profit; this use was made of venerable hospitality.

Flash, what a horrible truth to be revealed so unexpectedly; we were trespassing. The two who knew it became hot and cold, as the metaphor has it, à tour de rôle. The dear third has brought from better times and further places a manner almost now her own, reserved for visits to Royal and Academic parks and gardens, of benevolent
interest in what has been provided by those who know best what to provide. So, while the two quakers wished for a door or crater to deliver them, the unconscious trespasser leisurely inspected the elms fourteen feet high with leaves fourteen inches long, the petunias, the yellow calceolarias.

What a man, the trespasser. All our real knowledge of him is in the form of hopes for his health and long happiness. For that time, at least, he was less a man than an interpreter. The instant he made his discovery, some governing or administrative body delegated to him the whole of its powers of conservancy and indignation. He presented at first an aspect of exasperated indecision, mixed with the purpose of complete, summary and continued vindication; at once he executed several steps only to be seen ordinarily at the time of the kermesse, but for the present none of those of the Highland reel.

He pointed to the cardinal points of the compass, following the direction of the sun; and then reversed the gesture. Next with his features to one quarter of the universe and his four principle limbs controlling the remainder, he varied the series of movements in a manner which it would be categorical to describe, but which it was exquisite to behold, as torture was once said to be exquisite. He was evidently screaming upon notes above the audible register. It is rude to compare a European with a dervish; and it would be unfeeling to deny that he was expressing emotion; but which, rather than the rest?

O corybant! He knew the garden to its very substance, as well as all the particulars of its maintenance; how many separate keys the lock obeyed; and so much beside, as the eloquence of his gyrations declared. Those people are in the wrong place; and he summoned justice and retribution, common and ideal, to correct the corrigible.

Just as we supposed that he was at the end of his gesticulation and that he must either repeat himself or desist, it became evident that he remembered, or had not forgotten, the vertical gestures; for he
showed the cloudless sky the ten points of his fingers and thumbs and the bluntness of his clenched hands alternately. He seemed to be, as it were, about to call upon Rhadamanthus; when the party left the inclosure, and Tonsi, Ponsi, and Fru, gazing as though for representation on page eighteen of The Times.

Did you ever take a really deep breath; or wish to meet no countenance but those of paving stones? Peace by comparison seemed to radiate across the way from the outer walls of Pembroke; and, looking up reverently at the barred window from which he descended hazardously into a barrel of water placed to receive him, we thought of the poet who lived and was persecuted before the age of the cinema.

But who is fully regenerate; who is cultivated to the polish which is extreme, truly docile to the conventions? Plausible authors say that our happiest are not always our proudest moments. In our shame we experienced a quiver of joy.

When the party of trespassers returned to their sitting-room at the Bull there was a gentleman looking critically over the books lying on the table. His indifference at the approach of other occupants of the hotel showed with what error he was infected; and part of his gesture of indifference was to indicate which was the chair of his choice. What would the reader have done? Have entered, perhaps, con brio; shutting (or opening) the window with an illustrative bang?

In a story the new character would have been recognised as the Peterhouse choreograph. As an historical fact his beard was rather white than grey, and he looked like a poet laureate. It seemed to minds vividly impressed that here was no more than an instance of those rhythms in sentient life which are not so easily explained. A certain notice was pinned later to the door; but that it was Trespassers will be Prosecuted; By Order no one would believe.