The Selected Prose of John Gray

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“Dialogue” was inspired by the publication of J. A. H. Murray’s A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles (now The Oxford English Dictionary), of which the first part (A–Ant) was published in 1884, but the last volume not until the year of this essay, 1928. The essential feature of the Dictionary is its historical method, by which the meaning and form of the words are traced from their earliest appearance on the basis of an immense number of quotations. Gray here exploits the playful possibilities of such a method. The result is a “dialogue” as rich in scholarly word-play as any work of high modernism.

In reprinting this piece, I have respected Gray’s decision to use dashes rather than quotation marks to indicate a change of speaker. These add not only a certain typographical elegance (and originality) to the text, but also a playful fluidity. It is worth noting that a few years later, Joyce also refused “to allow the detestable system of inverted commas and punctuation [quotation] marks” to disfigure an edition of Ulysses then going through the press, preferring, as Gray does here, the “French system” of dashes to introduce quotations (Joyce to Paul Léon, 12 October 1932, National Library of Ireland, Dublin).
AVE a norange.

—Mon premier est un métal précieux;
    Mon second est un habitant des cieux;
    Mon tout est un fruit délicieux.¹

—Yes; there’s truth in that, and scarcely exaggeration. (John, fetch the N. E. D.,² article “orange.”) It’s too great, really; too round, too golden, too juicy, too Brangwyn,³ too coster’s barrow, too abundant.

—Augustine⁴ consecrated it in an able image.

—Looking at it as segments compact in the cortex. We think of it as a bag of juice; a potable lawn-tennis ball. (What’s it say, John?)

—“Orange, orenge, narancia, arancia, naranza, naranja, laranja; mediaeval Greek, nerantzion.”

—Push on.

—“The fruit of a tree (see sense 2) a large, globose, many-celled berry (Hesperidium) with sub-acid juicy pulp, inclosed in a tough rind, externally of bright reddish yellow colour.”

—Thattledoo.

—Globose. That dates Dr. Murray’s⁵ early education.

—You can hear the governess’s voice: “The form of the earth is oblate spheroid; in other words, like an orange. Now if I were to take a knitting needle,”

—pin, she meant, but don’t let her go on. The earth, an orange: a globose fruit (which is what the N. E. D. means):
—(Look up “berry,” John)
—the association is impressed in our minds.
—Should you think . . .
—“Berry. Any small globular or ovate fruit, not having a stone.”
—Thattledoo. Should you think that geodesy and the orange are practically contemporaneous?
—1497. For bering the appill oreynzeis fra the schip.
—It was regular merchandise in the middle ages; but I see the globose berry growing more delectable and less of a medicine as time passes . . .
—“1587. The rinde of the orrendge is hot, but the meate within it is cold.”
. . . until China oranges (not of course the late little loose-jacketed counterfeit) and orange-wenches are on every tongue.
—“Cries of York. Sweet China oranges, St. Michael’s oranges I vend at one or two a penny.”
—China orange, Portugal orange means simply sweet orange.
—I was thinking of Johnson and the orange-peel.
—Do you know what he did with the orange-peel; or why he did it?
—Is it known?
—He believed powdered orange-peel taken in a glass of hot port wine to be a remedy for indigestion.
—Dirty draught; most unsatisfactory.
—Boswell found the great man scraping the oil vessels from the rind; and teased him to know what he would do next; and Johnson teased him by refusing to say.
—Nothing about the port and the powder.
—Years later, Boswell tried another shot. “Sir, I have discovered a manufacture to a great extent of what you only piddle at—scraping and drying the peel of oranges.—Sir, I believe they make a higher
thing out of them than spirit. They make what is called orange butter,
the oil of the orange inspissated, which they mix perhaps with
common pomatum."9

—I prefer to leave the question where the doctor left it: that he
kept his secret.

—Robespierre10 knew what he was about.

—. . . ?

—His passion for oranges helped him to struggle with the bile
which choked him.

—He needed plenty.

—And used them. The Duplays11 kept a pyramid before him,
which no one else was allowed to touch. You could see where he
had sat at table by the piles of orange-peel.

—His innocent gluttony, I should say. China oranges, Apfelsine;12
it's clearly eighteenth century.

—Yes; what Wolsey13 carried was a fair orange.

(John, look up "pomander.")

—To smell when there were too many suitors.

—Or stench, or the pest.

—"Pomaunder, pomamber, pommander, pome ambre, pome d' embre. From pome,
apple (see pome) plus ambre, amber. A mixture of aromatic substances, usually made
into a ball, and carried in a small box or bag in the hand or pocket, or suspended by a
chain from the neck or waist."

—Thattledoo.

—Wolsey's fair orange was emptied and stuffed with spices.

—"1625. Fletcher.14 Oh what a stinking thief is this? Tames street to him is a
meer pomander."

—But Mima's pomanders are of quite another design.

—Studded with cloves.

—She pierces the orange all over with a knitting pin.
—needle. And pegs in the cloves.

—“1558. The Pommander of Prayer, wherein is contained many godly Prayers, whereunto are added certain Meditations, called St. Augustine’s.”

—You ought to say pomander.

—And you ought to say contemplate.

—I know I ought.

—You’ll stay out of difficulties by rhyming with gander, as the sixteenth century did.

—Look, though, at the fruit as it lies there. Il n’est pas bête. How the dish, both in form and colour, becomes it. What is the dish?

—Chinese.

—It’s a visible object, the orange.

—It reaches four of the senses. The sight of it is not exhausted in what lies before us, satisfying as it is; there is its composition on the tree; the golden progress of its ripening. Im dunklen Laub die Gold-Orangen glühn. The shining dark-green leaves do not fall; the lily-scented flowers are perennial. Left to reach its natural shape the tree is globular.

—Versailles.

—If the trunk is sawn it yields golden wood susceptible of a rich polish.

—Scented?

—I wish I could say. The tree abounds in scents; its fruit in flavours. The orange caresses the touch, size, shape and texture.

—The inimitable Mr. Dickens. . . .

—We should talk into the next watch if we touched the epic poem Todgers.18 There the rotting gold is atmosphere for Mercy and Charity Pecksniff.

—Corruptio optimi.19

—I know little literature on the subject.
—There’s the Goethe line.20
—The young Tennyson did well with his matter derived from Theophrastus. The luscious fruitage clustereth mellowly sunset-ripen’d above the tree.21
—And older Tennyson suppressed the poem.
—There exists a quite execrable poem by some Pre-Raphaelite, perhaps Morris.22 The feel of the fruit becomes important when, in the seasonal succession, we choose an orange to say: This shall be mine.

—Jaffa, nombril, California.
—One short fortnight produces the fruit—from Honduras; and the fifty weeks are relatively blank. The Honduras orange is not globose, but a sphere. Its rind is yellow, smooth, thin. The colour inside is darker than lemon. Its scent leans to citron. The taste is dilute, delicious. It indicates in all particulars the marks of the ideal orange. The rough, thick-skinned, orange-coloured, globose varieties are more, as the Chinese say, for show at feasts.

—Wright, who hated oranges, only liked them with a thick skin. While the reader was pulling his feet out of the caramel of some work of reputed history, only to stick them in again, he would exhibit from across the refectory, for me alone, a portrait of the American rector, with his artificial teeth outside his face and all.
—You’ll have one. John has laid the right knives.
—How am I going to eat it?
—Cut it through the equator, then across the poles; then imagine you are a meritorious negro.