

Paradise Lost and Found

The Road to Cambodia

Although *Terrors of Pleasure: The House* chronicles Gray's early frustrations in Hollywood, his career is in fact dotted with minor successes in film and television, but none succeeded at propelling him into personal wealth or cinematic stardom. One minor role, however, as the U.S. consul in the 1984 film *The Killing Fields*, directed by Roland Joffe, took on a life of its own beyond the silver screen. It provided Gray with material that would vault him onto the center stage of American theater and into the cultural imagination as none of his previous works onstage or in film had. It also began a symbiotic relationship that he had only imagined possible, working his performance pieces into filmed events that expanded his audiences well beyond what the stage alone could generate. This perfect storm of experience, humor, insight, performance, and good fortune arrived in the form of Gray's landmark piece, *Swimming to Cambodia* (1985).

Swimming to Cambodia, the staged monologue as well as the eventual filmed version directed by Jonathan Demme, is without doubt Gray's most popular and successful enterprise. Gray's monologue is built upon his experiences in Thailand as part of the supporting cast of *The Killing Fields*. The film covers the 1970 genocidal events in

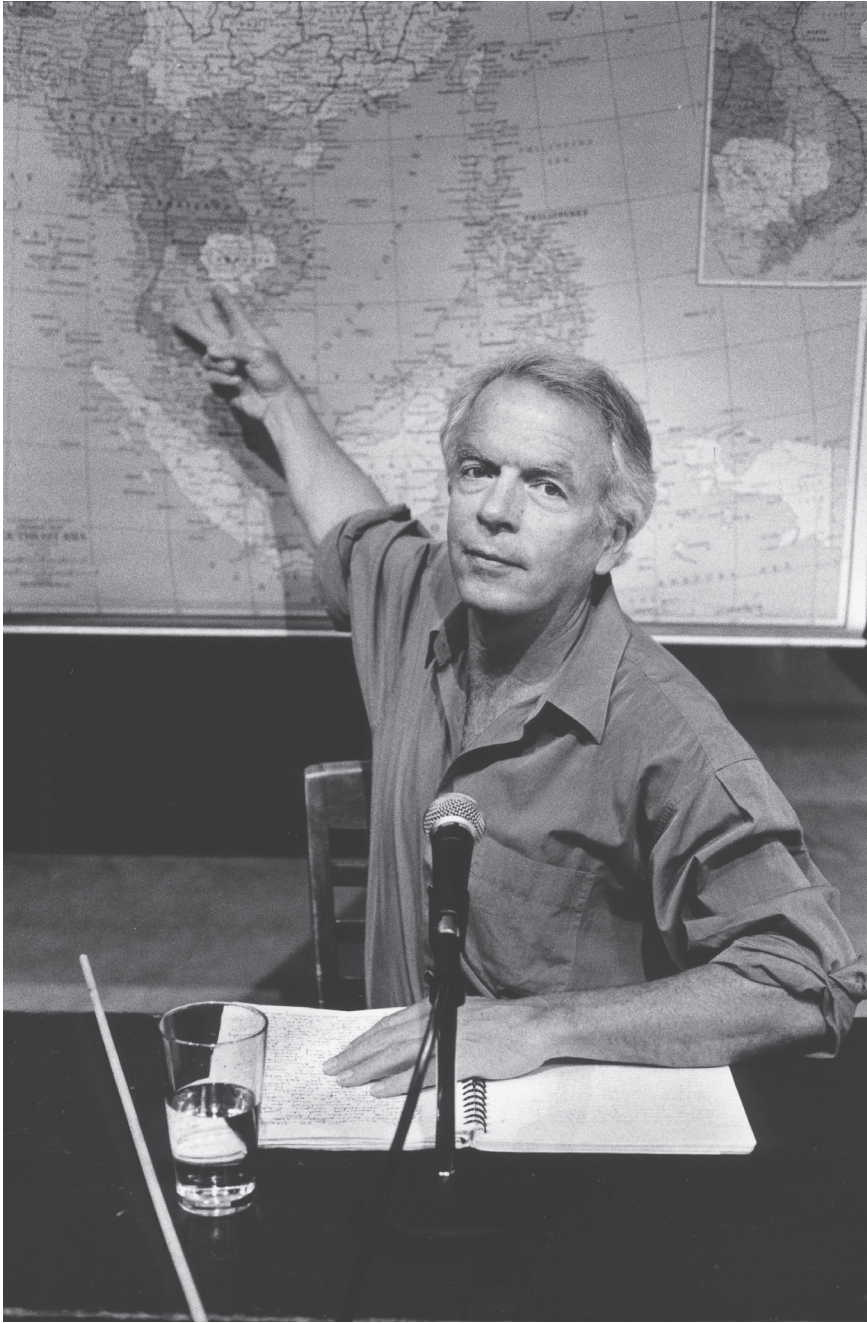
Cambodia involving the Khmer Rouge, indirectly initiated by CIA involvement in that country during the Vietnam War. *Swimming to Cambodia* combines that particular history lesson with Gray's more personal experiences in Thailand during his extended periods of downtime between filming sessions. Gray reports the evolution of *Swimming to Cambodia* in his introduction to the printed version: "It was almost six months after the filming of *The Killing Fields* that I began my first reports, and more than two years passed before I made my last adjustments. Over that time, *Swimming to Cambodia* evolved into a very personal work in which I made the experience my own. Life made a theme of itself and finally transformed itself into a work of fiction."

Created by internalizing his experience and then reflecting it in performances against two years' worth of audience feedback as a monologue, *Swimming to Cambodia* stands out, even today, as Gray's signature work.

Reflecting in 1999 on what at that point (following *Morning, Noon and Night*) he considered a completed career as a monologist searching for self and place, Gray observes rather fondly:

I thought [at the time] that *Swimming to Cambodia* was political because it was a reenactment of the time when there was a secret bombing of Cambodia by the United States. I took a kind of leftist stance—which was the position of the people who were doing the film *The Killing Fields*. I guess that was the first time that I took a stand on an issue. I know that the Performance Group once went to Washington to protest the bombing of Cambodia. I remember we were at a distance and I saw hardcore people who were doing a sitdown. I saw the horses ride over them and that's when I knew that I wasn't going to get any further involved.

In that regard, and true to his Wooster Group experience, in which political activism was seen as a naïve response to more deep-rooted cultural ills, *Swimming to Cambodia* is in fact *not* political in any



Swimming to Cambodia. (Photo copyright Paula Court, courtesy of Paula Court.)

traditional sense. But in another regard, the piece *is* political: it digs beneath superficial machinations to unearth the roots of our culture's pervasive, though often unintended oppression, the first step in a more substantial move toward hoped-for change.

However, what is most memorable about the piece is Gray's desperate search for "the perfect moment" in his Thai paradise. His self-serving pleasure seeking and totally nonresponsible experiences are almost mesmerizing. But what evolves is a subtle indictment of Gray's narcissistic urges as well as the cultural roots that uphold and even endorse such behavior, generally to the detriment of those who are recruited to stand by and serve those indulgences. Like when we watch a movie based on a Jane Austen novel, we are caught up by the luxury and forget the servants whose sweat and toil made it all possible. The pleasure, admiration, and even envy that *Swimming to Cambodia* generates in Gray's audience reveals our own longing for the pleasures that he seeks, and through that audience attraction the general indictment of all of us is virtually complete. Without ever directly saying so, Gray admits guilt at taking advantage of the less-fortunate Asian serving class, but he also draws his audiences into that guilt by exposing our implicit desires to be just like him, indulging our every whim and passion. His charm ensnares us all.

This is not to say that *Swimming to Cambodia* is in any notable sense any different than Gray's earlier works, except in that his cinematic experiences allow him to bring attention to one of the most dominant mechanisms used to draw us all into cultural complicity: the tantalizing allure of the Hollywood film industry. For though *The Killing Fields* "nobly" documents American-inspired atrocities of the recent past, the creation of the film itself unintentionally reveals the root causes of those atrocities even while rather naïvely working to condemn them in a manner not unlike the activism of the 1960s. It's not what we think or want to think about our world that matters so much as how we behave in that world. And when it comes to how we behave toward others, we behave rather badly, even when we think we're helping.

Swimming to Cambodia does move toward a sort of political agenda in a manner more obvious than Gray's earlier autobiographical works had. He had clearly moved beyond simply searching for narcissistic indulgence, if ever he were merely narcissistic in his art. He even reports about *Swimming to Cambodia* that he'd found an objective situation that broke any narcissistic spell he might previously have been under: "People writing reviews have called me a narcissist, and I would certainly admit to that. . . . But with 'Swimming to Cambodia' I found a larger issue outside of my personal neuroses." So even though the piece focused on Gray's pursuit of "the perfect moment," for a perceptive audience, his portrayal of the pursuit itself is entry into his critique. But then, if we look back on the earlier pieces, we see that *Swimming to Cambodia* isn't really so revolutionary, given that in each of the monologues we can find Gray playing with "larger issues" outside of his "personal neuroses."

In his introduction to the published version of *Swimming to Cambodia*, James Leverett confirms this point: "All of the monologues have had an added, often hidden dimension. If you stare at them long enough, you find that what has happened to Gray reflects in a startlingly illuminating way what has happened to the world, or at least a significant section of it, you and I certainly included." To this sense of Gray as everyman, Leverett adds the additional point that we've also witnessed in Gray's work: "But such allegorical relationships are never explicit, or even apparently deliberate." In fact, Gray deliberately undermines any idea that he is either becoming politicized or attempting to awaken his audience to anything like such an awareness. And the same really holds for *Swimming to Cambodia*.

For example, in Part Two, Gray tells us that he watched a tape called *Going Back*, about U.S. veterans returning to Vietnam after the war. But instead of focusing on what that film described as a campaign of senseless loss and destruction, Gray innocently marches forward with a shallow personal response: "Now, I was really taken by the tape, not so much by the Amerasian children in the streets [of

Hanoi], although they were beautiful, or the people who were suffering in the hospitals from the effects of Agent Orange, but I was taken by the fact that Hanoi was filled with bicycles. . . . And I thought, now there's where I'd like to go for my vacation."

Unconcerned with the suffering imposed upon the Vietnamese by U.S. foreign policy, Gray sees the film as more of a travelogue advertising Vietnam's beauty. Instead of the damage inflicted upon this world, he sees what could or should become a vacation spot for Americans. Then, just a step beyond such a callous train of thought, Gray reports that he was "beginning to feel more and more like . . . I really wanted to be a *real* foreign correspondent, not someone *playing* one." His eyes, however, are too ill-trained to see the suffering placed before him. His reports home would likely be anything but eye opening. What we see here is a man playing an empty-headed American tourist who had just pretended to be a foreign correspondent and romantically deciding he really wants to be one. "What a jerk," might be our first response.

But returning to the distinction between Gray the performer and Gray the artist, an audience can see buried in the monologue something of a genuine correspondent's commentary on U.S. complicity in generating so much past and present misery in a part of the world long forgotten by postwar America. And that complicity includes Gray himself. His ironic method of presentation has finally found the perfect material to allow him to exhibit the full ironic potential of his monologic style. Having mastered the art of infinite digression and free association, Gray presents multiple levels of understanding in *Swimming to Cambodia* that demonstrate the results of his Wooster and Performance Group exercises that were present but less obvious in his earlier monologues. He pursues a surface and narcissistic goal of finding a "perfect moment" while a deeper, underlying "moment of understanding" rises to just beneath the surface. It takes the critical instincts of the audience to see beneath the surface and to draw out the revelations that Gray the artist plants beneath the naïve presentation of Gray the performer.

One of many strategies that Gray masters is repetition, introducing an event or a key phrase and then repeating what has become familiar at a slightly later point, making the tale something that the audience feels it owns. It's almost like a popular song refrain that a rock star uses to get his audience cranked up during a concert. We're led to anticipate certain things as the monologue unfolds, and by generating this sense of expectation, Gray effectively draws us into the plots and ploys of the life he retells. If we've followed Gray's career, we're already familiar with certain things that always pop up, like the dynamics of his relationship with his girlfriend. We know of his mother's suicide and other such events that Gray repeats, and to a degree we look forward to hearing about them all over again. Familiarity by repetition is a valuable trick to win an audience over.

But Gray adds even more subtle tricks within the monologue to draw us in. Jumping from Part One to Part Two of *Swimming to Cambodia*, Gray builds on several images and ideas, creating a shorthand of familiar ideas that draws the audience into his way of looking at the world. Consider, for example, Gray's announcement late in the performance that while in L.A. he successfully negotiated a complex highway grid and made all his appointments on time. "I felt a kind of Triumph of the Will," he says. Early in the monologue, Gray sets this point up by talking about how he uses his "Will"—he calls it "the Little King"—to coerce good fortune into getting him the job in *The Killing Fields*. Gray proclaims that if he could master his Will, "this act of will, willing Will, would have more power toward getting me the role in the film," which, of course, he gets. We grow comfortable seeing Gray manipulate the world through "Will" and start to look forward to seeing it pop up at other places. We're now equipped to anticipate Gray's thought processes. But is it really "Will" at work? Or is Gray just using that word to create an illusion of control over what was just a string of good fortune? The more he repeats this ploy, the more his audience can begin to suspect that maybe it's nothing more than an egotistical misconception of how or why something happens. Other examples abound throughout the

monologue, resulting in Gray the artist empowering his audience to look fondly but critically at Gray the performer, in the hope the audience might develop a familiarity that will reach beyond or through the character's conclusions to its own level of understanding.

Of course, it's entirely possible for an audience member to miss Gray's ironic stance and see him as uncritically upholding or actually endorsing a "Will"-fully egotistical pursuit of personal gratification and material gain. Like us all, Gray is not above organizing his life story into self-serving plots. We're all guilty of self-importance and of seeking personal pleasure at other people's expense. And it would be the height of hypocrisy for us to claim that we can escape the gravitational attraction of controlling and feeding off of the world that surrounds us. Gray captures this condition as he moves back and forth between the unironic performer's pursuit of "the perfect moment" and his artist's veiled, ironic commentary on the foolhardiness of that pursuit.

Culture's ills and culture's potential for a growing self-awareness inhere in this single entity, Spalding Gray, even as both illness and cure inhere in each of us. In fact, that Gray's film version of *Swimming to Cambodia* has been so successful—and that his subsequent staged monologues were so well attended—may actually be in part a result of his having won over an audience unself-critically drawn to his tantalizing tales of mass consumption, dissipation, and unconsidered oppression. A good portion of his audience might have been there to hear about the "fun" he had. But this might not be a bad thing, because perhaps the only way to address this reactionary attraction is to draw that uncritical audience into the theater through disarming charm and humor and then to hit them with Gray's unrelenting but padded counterpunches. The strategy sucks in unwitting audiences and not only contributes to the piece's attractive humor but also draws the viewers who need to see these challenges to the consumerist status quo, without smelling of didacticism or sanctimony. He only points fingers at others by first pointing at himself.

So Gray opens *Swimming to Cambodia* by noting, “It was the first day off in a long time.” He begins the monologue by highlighting his determination to enjoy himself in the hotel he calls “the pleasure prison.” He innocently tells us how the Thai waiters actually enjoy manically serving their Western guests, seeming to believe what he says. He admiringly reports how many of his non-Asian film co-workers had bought Thai women to keep them company while they were in Thailand, without ever considering the women’s feelings. Pampered with Western-style accommodations and luxuries daily flown in from the United States, these Westerners have everything they can imagine in order to enjoy their “day off” from work. And Gray offers the rationalization that because of *sanug*—the Thai practice of not doing anything that wasn’t fun—he and everyone else feel comfortable treating the locals as willing objects of their pleasure.

This Westernized rationalization justifies easy oppression of the locals by accepting their seemingly willing submission. It’s entirely possible to proclaim innocence in participating in this master-servant system, given that the servants curiously claim to *desire* their subservient positions. But it also doesn’t take much thought to realize that such willing service exists because the only alternative for the locals would be to reject the advantages gained by serving these Western masters, and that would lead to even greater want and greater suffering. Gray the naïve performer is at this point unaware that there is a need to consider behaving differently, having fallen as he does into accepting the privileges presented to him as a Western birthright.

The extent to which Gray is naïvely part of the oppression unfolds throughout the monologue. After initially commenting on the practice of the film crew taking up Thai wives to pass the time, Gray later observes that he thought it was “a class thing” in that the Sparks—“the British electricians”—were the ones who openly engaged in the practice. But he then notes that “the actors didn’t buy women out front. They were more secretive about it and would sneak around doing it at night.” Being secretive is of course implicitly a

confession that the practice is not entirely “proper.” Otherwise, why sneak around? But then, rather surprisingly, Gray moves from commenting on these two groups to conceding that “you could very easily fall in love with a Thai whore” and later to admitting his own involvement in the practice, though he describes it using the ultimate euphemism: “Joy was my Pat Phong friend” (Pat Phong being Bangkok’s red light district). He also notes that despite her “joyful” performance as his “girlfriend,” Gray’s Pat Phong Joy would often enter “a slightly drained and more reflective melancholy” that left Gray without words to explain.

While seeing the self-gratifying attraction of these mutually profitable experiences, Gray also confesses, after his return from Thailand, “I’ve heard the other side of it and know it exists the way the darker side of everything exists. Just recently, while driving in L.A., I heard a very angry woman talking on KPFK radio about an investigation she made of child prostitution in Thailand.” The point is interesting in that Gray reports a report, not having himself actually sensed “the darker side” while happily participating in it. Gray here gives his audience the opportunity to reflect upon the fact that Western indulgence dehumanizes the non-Western pleasure objects. He even offers a glimpse of the differences between the non-Western victims and their Western counterparts, who have apparently freely made prostitution their profession. The New York and Amsterdam prostitutes with whom he’s trafficked had been “cool, business-as-usual,” presumably having chosen prostitution from among several business options. Gray seems to know deep down that his Pat Phong friend had no such options. And, most likely, neither had his New York and Amsterdam contacts.

If oppressing the other for personal pleasure and gain is detrimental to the oppressed, it also takes its toll on the humanity of the oppressor. Tellingly, among the things Gray imports to America from his experience in Southeast Asia is a renewed sense of dominant male entitlement, to the point that he confesses, “I treated Renée like a Thai whore and I refused to go food shopping and I didn’t

want to cook and I was a wha-wha-wha little two-year-old. Just wha-wha-wha all over the place.” The tantalizing experience of being the central master of one’s domain can be a transformative experience, though not in any noble, humane, or attractive way.

This dehumanization of the other is further relayed as Gray reports yet another experience, again offering an analytic point generated by someone other than himself. In this case it’s a comment he’d heard while working on the film, made by Neevy Pal, “a Cambodian who was related to Prince Sihanouk and a student [in the United States] at Whittier College.” Gray tells us, almost with amusement, that she was “trying to organize all of the Cambodians in the bus because she felt *The Killing Fields* was a neocolonialist film, that the British were looking right through the Cambodians.” Not bothering to reflect upon this observation, Gray the performer fails to internalize the point, choosing neither to agree nor to disagree with it. But it seems to have at least begun to hit home for Gray in a less-than-conscious fashion, for, later on, when trying to conceal his money prior to going out into the surf in search of his perfect moment, he worries that the Thais on the beach would find his stash: “And God knows they needed it more than I did. So, at last, I just took it and left it, fully exposed, on the beach.” And then a little later, he’s also told that everyone in the movie “was making the same salary except Sam Waterston, who was making a little more, and the Cambodians, who were making a lot less.” That conversation reveals that Gray himself is making less than the American/British average, which spins him into a competitive frenzy that concludes with him deciding to get an agent so as to avoid future injustice. He says nothing, however, about the injustice to the Cambodians and Thais. We as audience, however, have been given material to draw our own conclusions.

The urge to control and even dominate our world is generally a Western one. But it’s also more specifically a *masculine* Western urge. And throughout the monologue Gray does everything he can to emulate the masculine ideal, from taking on his own Thai prostitute to treating his American girlfriend like a whore and otherwise

behaving like a “man” even when it appears to be against his character. For example, when he believes his friend Ivan has drowned in the surf of the Indian Ocean, his first instinct is to “find the most responsible man that you can,” little thinking that at least on the surface, *he* is a man, though far from responsible. This first instinct of course reveals that Gray doesn't quite fit the standard Western definition of masculinity, and other events verify this. He marvels at the masculine behavior of the correspondents he meets in the local bars, “Real People” who cavalierly tell stories about risking their lives as they masterfully control their own destinies. And then Gray notes:

And then there was me, who was looking at this incredible bee that looked like a cartoon of a bee because it was so big and fluffy, and its stripes were so wide, and I was saying, “Wow! Look at that bee.”

And everyone said, “It's just a bee, Spalding.”

His less-than-masculine predisposition being what it is, when Gray finally decides to leave Thailand, he decides, “I wanted to say good-bye like a man, and if I couldn't be one, I was going to imitate one.” He does the determined, stoic, manly thing, shaking hands and offering masculine embraces. But his acting out this manly role betrays him in the end:

And when I got to Athol Fugard, he turned to me and said, “So, Spalding. You're leaving Paradise?”

“Athol (oh!) Athol (oh!) uh, Athol (uh!), I—I was thinking that maybe I should (oh!), eh, uh, wait a minute, Athol, you really think I, uh. . . .”

Fugard finally forces Gray to stand behind his decision: “Go back, Spalding! Take what you've learned here and go back.”

Prior to this departure announcement, obsessing on John Malkovich as a “man,” Gray observes: “The film was a ‘buddy’ movie, it

was about *male bonding*. I'd never been with men in a situation like this in my life. . . . We'd all get together for lunch, or cocktails at six, and we'd all just sit around and *bond*, talking about what happened that day." The bonding, of course, involves idle male competition, in this case taking the form of telling jokes, and Gray decides to tell two because "I wanted to be one of the guys." His jokes are scatological and only incidentally sexual, but they do draw laughter from the crowd. Then Malkovich tells his joke (confirming for Gray, jealously, that he's "a good storyteller"), about a mouse trying to have sex with an elephant. A mischievous monkey drops a coconut on the elephant's head, staggering her as the mouse tries to mount her. As the elephant falls to her knees, the mouse cries out, "Yeah! Suffer, bitch!" Gray's childish scatology suffers in comparison to Malkovich's hilariously masculine misogyny.

But Gray's failure to really be one of the guys marks him—against his "Will"—as potentially possessing an empathic consciousness awaiting an awakening. It's his one really redeeming quality, though he certainly doesn't seem to realize it. When he travels to Los Angeles and makes his round of interviews for new roles, sitting in a casting director's office and being evaluated, he observes: "I suddenly and clearly realized what it feels like to be a woman scrutinized by a man. I've hardly ever had that feeling before. Only in Morocco." It's a vulnerability that, quite likely, John Malkovich never experienced. And it suggests a sensitivity that might transform into something other than a desire for masculine, Western dominion.

In fact, once Gray returns to America, something of a pathetic liberal response to all he's experienced ignites Gray into thoughts of action. Having returned from this apparently life-altering experience on the set of *The Killing Fields*, Gray declares: "I would be a changed man. I'd adopt a Cambodian family, I'd have my teeth taken care of, pay my taxes, clean my loft . . . wash the windows, get out all the old sweaters I never wear and take them to the Cambodian refugees in Far Rockaway. . . . At last I would do something for them. At last I'd be of service."

But placing his service to Cambodian refugees into a run-on list that includes personal domestic chores hardly sounds like the determined commitment of a changed man. And this incapacity to commit knocks up against a growing sense of guilt and contributes to Gray's next crisis, a psychological meltdown while vacationing with friends in the Hamptons: "I fled from the table with my hand across my forehead like I had a bad case of Dostoyevskian brain fever, like Konstantin Gavrilovich in *The Seagull*." Crying out, "I'm supposed to be in Thailand! Nothing is ever going to go right in my life again," Gray's consciousness seems to rebel against his self-indulgent, endlessly vacationing behavior. The panic, however, subsides, and Gray eventually turns not to helping others but to finding an agent in Hollywood for his own material advancement.

Ever separated from either the means or even the real will to help the Cambodians or Thais—his conflation of the two nationalities is itself telling—Gray in the above passage hints that he might never be able to help them, at least not in his current condition. The use of a simile "like a bad case of Dostoyevskian brain fever" reminds us how language works to make sense of the world. Gray's familiar center is in the Western world. Despite all his interest in Eastern cultures and religions, his life most comfortably connects with Western art and literature, a reminder that his sense of reality invariably derives from something other than reality itself. For example, when Gray first sees the Indian Ocean, he says, "It was like an oriental Hudson River School painting." When he sees "water buffalo posing like statues in the midst," he says, "they looked like the Thai entry in the Robert Wilson Olympic Arts event." Gray, in short, is trapped, filled with embedded Western images and thoughts, unable ultimately to grasp or comprehend the Eastern world he is experiencing without making it *like* something from his familiar Western world. When he meets two tourists on an isolated Thai beach, they ask him to "tell us of your travels of the world," to which he replies, "It was all like a big Hemingway novel," reinforcing the notion that he will always be a stranger in these foreign lands.

Gray even appears to have missed the irony of his evolved appreciation of journalists as real people. First, traveling on the nonactors' bus (hitching a free ride on the bus after his work had been completed), he longs to be on the "better bus . . . gliding over a smooth macadam highway, filled with every kind of artist." But then at a later brunch, he notices, "I was with these real foreign correspondents. Up until then I'd been hanging out with actors—they're no one. They're conduits." These journalists, however, "can just get on a plane and go with no sense of loss. One minute they're in Beirut, the next they're in a nuclear submarine off the coast of southern France, now they're here, eating and talking about their experiences. They see the whole world as their stage." What Gray is observing and admiring, however, is not so much that the journalists are free of Western prejudices as that everywhere has become an outpost and even playground of Western civilization. These people have passports to all ports of call because they are of the privileged class. They're ultimately not much different than Gray himself, except that Gray doesn't have the guts to go out there on his own. He's only excluded from this world-swallowing lifestyle as a result of his own "unmanly" indecision. Of the two tourists, the one named Jack becomes something of Gray's idol, "the kind of guy who could climb Mount Everest for the weekend just to ski down it and videotape himself doing it." The lives of these bold and beautiful Westerners seem to be a perpetual string of perfect moments. If only Gray had the manly guts.

Gray's own dream of a string of perpetual perfect moments leads to an "epiphany," but it's one that remains in line with conventional American wisdom. He comes to realize that the pursuit of "Cosmic Consciousness belongs to the independently wealthy in this day and age. . . . Go directly to Hollywood and get an agent. . . . Get a house in the Hamptons where you can have your *own* perfect moments in your *own* backyard." Controlled, mastered sublimity. But Gray is slapped out of his Hamptons reverie when, while on the beach in Thailand, he hears shouts of "Boat People! Boatpeopleboatpeopleboatpeople *Boat People!*" He looks out and then, as if in denial

of the real world, asks: "But was it the real thing? I couldn't believe it—just when I was beginning to forget about Vietnam and dream of the Hamptons, these wretched sea gypsies came into view." Reality forces itself into Gray's consciousness at virtually every crucial point where he is about to spin off into fantasy and Westernized escapism. Sadly, the significance of these force-fed returns to reality invariably escapes him.

But then again, if Gray has problems fitting in in the exotic but alien East, he doesn't seem precisely comfortable in his Western world either. Even in America, he seems at times lost. He relates an incident in New York in which he couldn't communicate with his rowdy, disorderly neighbors. Sheepishly backing down from their aggressive verbal taunts, Gray observes: "I don't know the language. I knew the language when I was with my people in Boston in 1962, in white-bread homogeneous Boston, brick-wall Boston." Maybe so, but now he's without a sense of home even in his own America. Lost in a world that his birth would have once empowered him to possess, Gray takes on a certain abject otherness that is surprising for someone with such a background. Gray the performer seems to be growing up, sadder but wiser, and becoming more aware of the all-devouring nature of the world around him.

But the moments when he actually pronounces judgment on the world remain relatively rare, and even those are regularly undermined by his continual return to his narcissistic search for the "perfect moment." Amid the anxiety of his general condition, Gray the performer loves that search, hungers for it. Before leaving Thailand, he does experience his "perfect moment," swimming in the Indian Ocean beyond sight of shore. It begins in true Spalding fashion with Ivan telling him that they'll soon go scuba diving, to which Gray says, "Oh my God, at last. It's like an initiation. I'll become a man." Today, however, they both swim out into "the big stuff," and Gray finds that his courage takes him out even beyond where Ivan is swimming, unafraid of losing his money on the beach or even of being eaten by sharks: "Suddenly, there was no time and there was no fear and there

was no body to bite. There were no longer any outlines. It was just one big ocean. My body had blended with the ocean. And there was just this round, smiling-ear-to-ear, pumpkin-head perceiver on top, bobbing up and down.”

The description—a summary of the monologue’s advertising poster and book cover—converts Gray to a mindless sensory organism who “was all very out of time until it was brought back into time by Ivan’s voice calling, ‘Spalding! Spalding, come back, man! I haven’t tested those waters yet!’” The moment is lost: “I fell back into time and back into my body and I swam in to Ivan.” Ivan claims to have almost drowned out there, leading Gray the imitator to think, “Now I’m going to have to go out and ‘almost drown,’” but then he reconsiders: “No, I won’t fall into this male competitive trap.” Realizing that Ivan’s idea of a perfect moment is “death,” Gray chooses not to follow his friend’s self-destructive, self-indulgent masculine lead. For one of the few times in his life, Gray resists the competitive urges that have caused so much personal anxiety and self-doubt.

This perfect moment is his and no one else’s. Gray’s pursuit of that moment is a pursuit of the indescribable, that thing generally called the sublime. For the moment, he experiences the vastness of creation beyond even the greatest of human imaginations to grasp. The quest is perhaps motivated by a self-indulgent desire, but the experience momentarily places him outside of or beyond not only himself but also all the petty concerns of being “of” or “in” the world at large, beyond concerns of masculinity, power, even the fear of death. Put another way, this brief experience captures the kind of ecstatic moment that American counterculture longed for back in the 1960s, a dream of Woodstock utopia without the fatal memory of Altamont or Charles Manson. Gray’s perfect moment, fleetingly found in Thailand, might fleetingly be found and experienced still, but within that experience is also the point that total abandon is the only way to attain such perfection. The danger, as Gray himself realizes, is annihilation. And it reminds us rather poignantly that the ecstatic dream of paradise is not of this world. Gray will eventually

find more sustainable, though perhaps less spectacular, perfect moments later in his life. At this stage his sublime experiences are rare. And their increasing rarity in human existence, it seems, has been caused by humanity itself.

Recall that upon meeting Roland Joffe, Gray is given a lesson on Southeast Asian culture. It was a culture of generosity, says Joffe, “that knew how to have a good time,” but “because it was such a beautiful, gentle land, they’d lost touch with evil.” In a virtually complete state of innocence, they were vulnerable to the horrors of modernity without any ability to do other than suffer under waves of bewildering oppression. When in 1966 the United States decided to destroy North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia, the action created a political vacuum in Cambodia that was filled by a band of fanatics driven by “a back-to-the-land, racist consciousness beyond anything Hitler had ever dreamed of.” The Khmer Rouge, filled with “strict Maoist doctrine [and] a perverse little bit of Rousseau,” brought with them the seeds of an ideology bent on creating its own paradise, but the result was a living hell.

Several points are crucial here, but foremost among them is that Gray once again relays these telling observations at second hand. They are summaries of the conversations with Joffe: “Leave it to a Brit to tell you your own history.” Gray becomes a curious, absorbed conveyor of the history lesson, marveling at the story but able to remain in a continued state of noncommitment. None of what Gray reports requires him to offer an opinion of the tales’ accuracy or to either endorse or reject the rather leftist position from which the tales are told. In fact, through two diversionary tales, Gray reports both a growing suspicion that the liberal agenda was wrong (or incomplete) as well as a confession that he is just not someone willing to take a stand. The first involves his meeting a basically deranged American serviceman on a train back in the U.S. Northeast corridor, after which he wonders, “Maybe I’m the one who’s brainwashed. Maybe I’ve been hanging out with liberals too long. I mean, after all this time I thought I was a conscientious pacifist but maybe I’ve been

deluding myself. Maybe I'm just a passive-aggressive unconscious coward, and like any good liberal, I should question everything." This Hamlet-like self-doubt is coupled with the general question, "When did I last make a stand, any kind of a stand, about anything?" A second story involving that cowardly run-in with his obnoxious neighbors leads Gray to wonder, "How do we begin to approach the so-called Cold War (or Now-Heating-Up War) between Russia and America if I can't even resolve the Hot War down on North Moore and Greenwich in Lower Manhattan?" Doubting his ability ever to really believe in anything and therefore unable to take a stand on any position, Gray is left incapable of activism of any kind, ironically exhibiting some of the very qualities Joffe assigned to the naïvely innocent Thais and Cambodians. Gray finds himself in an oppressor's position but with an oppressing incapacity to do anything about it.

This condition of resignation fairly accurately identifies the general situation that even privileged participants in our Western world are increasingly experiencing. We may be conscious of a cultural pathology of oppression but are immobilized by an overpowering sense of impotence. Gray's own impotence is enhanced by his growing awareness of oppression everywhere he looks. But that overwhelming impotence seems perhaps on the verge of changing as *Swimming to Cambodia* progresses. The title itself touches on the nearly sublime monumentality of coming to terms with truth and responsibility. Gray reports in the introduction: "I titled this work *Swimming to Cambodia* when I realized that to try to imagine what went on in that country during the gruesome period from 1966 to the present would be a task equal to swimming there from New York."

Important as Gray's travelogue-like experiences in Thailand are to his agenda, filming *The Killing Fields* adds yet another layer to this performance piece. The film dramatizes and critiques U.S. complicity in the atrocities set off by America's "secret" bombing of Cambodia in the early 1970s. But even as the film was being created in the 1980s, its production rather unwittingly duplicated the attitudes that led to those abuses. What occurs in the 1980s is far less catastrophic,

but the fact that we have failed to change our prejudiced attitudes toward less fortunate fellow human beings does little more than lay the groundwork for future catastrophes. *Swimming to Cambodia* uses the filming of *The Killing Fields* to go beyond demonstrating what *The Killing Fields* itself attempts to present. While *The Killing Fields* documents the devastating results of America's misuse of its military and political power, *Swimming to Cambodia* gets to the roots of the problem by showing that the "innocent" and even well-intended acts of Western camera crews, directors, and actors are little better.

This oppressive manipulation of the other is panoramically illustrated by an innocent observation from Gray. Recalling an ascent in a helicopter, he states, "I saw, my God, how much area the film covered!" The massive project overruns vast territory, often without regard for the damage it will leave behind. But the film controls more than that physical territory. It has panoramic economic control and, from that, psychological and ethical control as well. To make this point, Gray the artist begins from the purely narcissistic and subjective perspective and moves to a level that first reveals the film's well-intended efforts to portray the monumental destruction of war generated by the West. And then he shows how the film industry's design turns in upon itself and becomes an oppressive invasion of that same curiously alien, non-Western culture. The initial, apparently noble effort to document the cruelties of oppression has turned into oppression by using the very tools of disregard, control, and domination it has chosen to critique.

Though Gray's narcissistic performance shell doesn't provide direct commentary, Gray the artist clearly has abandoned narcissism in this monologue. The piece makes the point that oppression, intentional or not, is endemic to Western culture. *Swimming to Cambodia* offers a multilayered critique, challenging the oppression of *The Killing Fields* even as *The Killing Fields* documents the oppression of Pol Pot. Vera Dike put it nicely in her review of *Swimming to Cambodia*: "What in *The Killing Fields* had seemed a complete, integrated rendition of reality is now disrupted. Gray's words serve to break the

seamless flow of images, cracking them open like eggshells.” The authority of *The Killing Fields* itself is undermined, very much the same way the Wooster Group critiqued the buried roots of oppression in works by artists like Eugene O’Neill.

Gray’s critique then returns to America and eventually to Hollywood. His experiences back in America parallel in many ways what he witnessed in Thailand, though it’s not as if he hadn’t been forewarned. After all, even as he fantasizes about a film career in Hollywood, he returns to the opulent squalor of several of his Bridgehampton friends, which he “recognized . . . from all the Michelob ads I’d seen on TV.” The community is familiar to him even before he gets there, thanks to the superficial fantasies generated by film and television. Looking at one of the houses in this pristine community, he sees rot beneath the surface: “It was one of those turn-of-the-century houses that used to have a family in it back in the days of families, and now it was filled with beautiful couples all on the verge of breaking up, and lonely singles who had just broken up and didn’t feel ready to re-commit just yet.”

Seeing the ugliness under the surfaces, however, doesn’t keep Gray from going to Los Angeles to pursue his dream of achieving the same level of material wealth. He hoped to succeed by feeding off his new-found celebrity, literally capitalizing on this hollow phenomenon of fame so valorized by contemporary culture.

Thankfully, Gray seems to be headed into the Hollywood wasteland with eyes wide open, even to the point that he recognizes it as a sort of vast, tantalizing but ultimately hollow Holy Land: “Now, who are the holy people in the West? Actors and actresses. . . . And in our utilitarian, materialistic world, where is Mecca for these holy people of the West? It’s Hollywood. And where does their immortality have its being? On film. The image set forever in celluloid. And who is God? The camera. The ever-present, omniscient third eye. And what is the Holy Eucharist? Money!”

Behind or beneath the surface, nothing exists. Much as he came to discover in *The Tooth of Crime* during his Performance Group

days, Gray clearly sees that the images that captivate our culture have no real substance. They take meaning, drain it of true value, and repackage it for market consumption. “Image is everything,” as the Madison Avenue slogan goes. In the case of *The Killing Fields*, for example, Hollywood can vent its liberal outrage at past American transgressions while further humiliating the very people it pretends to defend—the Southeast Asians—by paying them lower wages, treating the men like coolies, and turning the women into prostitutes.

But even though Gray is aware of this industrial-strength deception and its deadening effects on the American imagination, he goes to Los Angeles anyway, hoping to beat the devil at his own game. He negotiates the superhighways that have paved over former fields of agricultural value, feeling that he is on the way to fulfilling his dream of a life where after a hard day at the studio, he would “rest and be with and sleep with, my little Renée. My little sweetie. And soon the beautiful children would come along and there’d be fun with them on weekends out in the high desert, or downwind, surfing off Venice. And we’d make it.” He feels on the verge of living the American Dream, heaven on earth. He’s forgotten all the suffering of others that is necessary in order for the few beneficiaries to live lives of carefree abandon, wealthy beyond imagination. He even forgets that the beneficiaries end in broken Bridgehampton homes, more often than not. The allure, however, remains overpowering for Gray and does for most of us as well, even when fully aware of its many snares and traps.

Here is where Gray almost surrealistically turns the table. Early in the monologue several events set us up for the ending. While on the beaches of Thailand with Renée (who comes for a brief visit) and Ivan (“Devil in my Ear”), Gray gets high, and the experience instantly turns into the terror of uncontrollable vomiting: “And so it went; vomit-cover-mask, vomit-cover-mask, until I looked down to see that I had built an entire corpse in the sand and it was my corpse. It was my own decomposing corpse staring back at me, and I could

see the teeth pushing through the rotting lips and the ribs coming through the decomposing flesh of my side.”

The memory residue of this image continues like the lingering memory of the Bomb in *Sex and Death to the Age 14*. Shortly into Part Two, Gray introduces us to Hang Ngor, a Cambodian survivor of Khmer Rouge atrocities who has been hired to work in the film. Spalding eventually asks him about his past:

“They put! Plastic! Plastic bag. Over my head!”

“And then?”

“And then. They take me. They tie me to a cross. And burn my legs. And burn me right here.”

“. . . What were you thinking about?”

“I know. If I tell the truth. I’m one hundred percent dead. Now I’m only ninety-eight percent dead. The truth. Hundred percent dead.”

Traces of these horrific remembrances surface in Gray’s monologue-closing story of a dream in which he’s babysitting a boy: “There was this huge fireplace, and the boy kept playing a game where he would run into the fireplace and get partially consumed by the flames and then run out—just before he was completely consumed—and reconstitute himself.” Finally the boy is “completely in flames,” and Gray “grabbed the fire-poker to try to pull him out and . . . nothing. It just went right through the flames; there was no substance. And the flames burned down and left this pile of gray ash on the hearth.” Then Gray turns to see “a straw boy, an effigy of the real boy,” and blows the ash into the effigy’s side, bringing it to life. And the effigy’s “face had this great, ear-to-ear, joyous, all-knowing, friendly smile as he shook his head. And I realized that he hadn’t wanted to come back, that he had chosen to be consumed by flames.”

Gray doesn’t explain the dream, once again leaving it to activate his audience into making connections. Reflecting the joyous faces of the Thais and Cambodians, the friendly, smiling but hollow boy

is much like those hotel servants and prostitutes, devoured over and over by their recurring Western victimization. It's a chilling connection. And then, too, we can see Gray as the straw boy, himself lacking substance throughout the performance and perpetually seeming to be filled with some of the *gray* ashes of substance in which the straw boy seems to have lost faith.

The story continues. Gray recalls that in the dream he tries to report the horrible babysitting event, but no one believes him. One friend tells him he should have found "a witness with authority." When he locates the straw boy's mother, who is with Gray's former lover and Wooster Group colleague, Elizabeth LeCompte, he can't tell the story but instead says, "THE REASON I'M UPSET IS THAT I WAS JUST IN A NEW SAM PECKINPAH MOVIE OF CHEKHOV'S *SEAGULL*." And Gray says he's upset because "I CAN'T REMEMBER DOING IT." The overall suggestion here is that without a memory that can organize our experiences into meaningful sequences, life itself has no meaning. Simply living day to day is not enough. Add to that the point that without a witness to confirm one's life, its meaning is reduced to isolated events of no ultimate significance. Life means nothing if it doesn't involve and affect others. Truth that has no witness, as Hang Ngor attests, will simply consume and self-destruct. And a world that refuses to bear full witness to the atrocities that occur on a daily basis becomes a hollow, lifeless place.

Gray ends the monologue, "And I knew all the time I was telling this story that it was a cover for the real story, the Straw Boy Story, which, for some reason, I found impossible to tell." But Gray the artist *has* told the Straw Boy Story through the many diversionary tales that Gray the performer had generated in the making of *Swimming to Cambodia*. He has told the truth but told it slant (to paraphrase Emily Dickinson) and thereby allows his audience to include our own stories in his.

At the end of the shorter version recorded as the movie (the published text is longer), Gray allows the same point to be made slightly

differently and a bit more directly. Drawing on an observation recorded toward the end of Part One of the published version, he announces at the end of the monologue, without comment: “And just as I was dozing off in the Pleasure Prison, I had a flash. An inkling. I suddenly thought I knew what it was that killed Marilyn Monroe.” Gray’s insider’s view as privileged Western male has revealed, it *appears*, exactly how destructively oppressive the indulgences of privileged power can be, even within the ranks of the privileged. The Straw Boy, Hang Ngor, Marilyn Monroe, and Gray himself have all been divested of their three-dimensionality and converted to empty versions of their former real selves. The world of performance has prevailed over the world of real living. To succeed in this world requires certain performances on our part, but that process destroys what makes us who we are.

What was once a glistening but empty *representation* of the real has actually erased the real and become a reasonable and finally acceptable facsimile. It’s a trap that Gray can’t find a way out of. And presumably neither can we, which means fleeting “perfect moments” are the only thing that seems worth pursuing. It’s the American condition, tantalizing but deadly, that Gray has identified.