In Dialogue with Robert Gray

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Robert William Geoffrey Gray, born in Port Macquarie 1945, left school to become a journalist on a rural newspaper. After moving to Sydney, he worked as a mail sorter and bookseller, and wrote for a magazine and an advertising agency. He later reviewed poetry for the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the Sydney Morning Herald. His writing has been supported through numerous fellowships and writer-in-residency programmes. He has published several volumes of poetry, ranging from Introspect, Retrospect (1970) to, most recently, Afterimages (2002).

This exchange took place as part of the “Writers in Focus” series at the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, April 2003.

LM: I’m going to start with a ‘nosey’ question, Robert. I’m going to ask you about your earliest memories of writing poetry and when you first came to it. And whether you had a growing sense of vocation. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

RG: Yeah, um, can you hear me? Um, the only thing I could ever do at school was write. I was good at essays and I used to get top marks in English, but last in maths all the time. It was the standing joke in the school that I got four percent for mathematics, that sort of thing. So I knew I had to do something with writing. And unlike most writers I know exactly the moment when I decided that’s what I wanted to do. It was one Friday afternoon in August, ah, when I was twelve years old—in the classroom—and the teacher was reading to us from the Wind in the Willows and he came to the part where the Mole and the Rat are having breakfast together and it seems that Mole buttered some toast and the butter, the hot butter on the toast dripped through the toast like honey dripping out of a honeycomb, dripping through the toast. And he went on reading, but I stopped there, because I—that was my epiphany, that was a revelation, my moment of truth. I realised that I—that this was exactly what you see. The hot butter drips out of the toast, through the toast like honey out of a honeycomb. I’d seen that, but I’d never noticed it. And then, when it occurred in the book, I suddenly realised that I’d seen this, but never really seen it, never experienced it. And it was the writing, the writer who made me experience it, gave me the intense experience of life. And I realised what imagery can do, you know, that it gives us life, it makes us aware of life. That all the things that pass us by in life, all the ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ of life can be saved, things can be saved out of that torrent and preserved and we can be made to experience them much more intensely. Things can be rescued out of time by, by writing.

So, all I was ever interested in after that was describing. I say still that I’m a descriptive writer... I have that painterly impulse. I want to preserve things that I see. And I think that, what it says in the Bible, not that I want to—I’m not religious—but I was brought up reading the Bible, and it says that, um, you shall have life and have it more abundantly. And I think writing does that, to give us our lives, but give it to us more abundantly, more richly, instead of everything disappearing, thrown out on the dark river of time and carried away... So I think that we actually see through language, that language is one of our senses, and we’re made to see through language. Actually that’s why, come to think of it, children are confused—new born children are confused because they don’t have language. Language enables us to see things, you know it picks things out... I really think of language as a sense that enables us to identify things in the world and experience them.

LM: What about other influences as you were growing, through your teens? So, in the August of your twelfth year, you began to be a poet...? [laughter]

RG: No, I didn’t write poetry then, I just knew that I wanted to. I was told to write novels, but I would always write the descriptive part, you know... It was a dark and stormy night, the wind...
LM: Who else were you reading then, as you were going through your teens?

RG: The first Australian poet I liked was Kenneth Slessor, of course, because he’s such a sensuous writer. He has a huge, unique place in Australian writing because, with him, Australian poetry becomes sensuous. It becomes full of, um, baroque descriptiveness, you know, very ornate and rococo style. I mean his curvilinear and encrusted style is rather excessive at times. But it showed me that you could write about the north coast of New South Wales or the outback or any part of Australia with this rich, European, sensuous, moist style.

LM: …You’ve written…about the Mallee, haven’t you?

RG: Yes, but it’s written out of horror. I like the coast. I get to grapple with it. The landscape you like is the landscape in which your senses first open, the landscape you’re born into… That’s why Wordsworth is right: it’s the landscape of childhood that captures, that influences you for the rest of your life, I think.

LM: And, so what was the first poetry you actually wrote, can you remember that?

RG: Yes, it’s in my book. It was when I was eighteen, my grandfather encouraging me in writing. They wanted me to, you know, settle down and get a good job when I left school, um, and I was taken on by the local newspaper, so he bought me a typewriter. And the first poem I wrote was because of the typewriter, because I realised that with typing I can make an object, a perfect object. Poems are things that can almost be perfect. You can’t write a perfect novel: it’s too difficult to control all the possible nuances and effects. There’s a chance of getting near something perfect with a poem, a lyric poem, I think. But, um, so I wrote a poem because I wanted to make an object on the page in this objective type. That’s the poem in my book called “Back There” (1974) about my childhood on a dairy farm.

LM: And did you have success when you first wrote and sent it out to be published? What happened there?

RG: It got sent back.

LM: And how did you feel?

RG: I felt ridiculous. I was always self-confident because, um, because I knew I had this one gift. I should—that sounds terrible to say ‘I was self-confident’—I should tell you… I was self-confident because I knew that I had… something unusual. Um, I was born with a hole in the heart and I was supposed to die quite young. You know, you don’t live passed twenty-one with this sort of thing. And I was always brought up surrounded by medical attention. They treated me as an interesting freak, and there’s something about a wound in the heart that’s symbolic. It made me, I don’t know, I had the feeling that I was, um, set apart, and that there was something different. And then constantly I didn’t die when they thought I would, you know, fifteen, sixteen, still going. I had this impression that, um, there’s one thing I could do, you know, that I could write and I knew that the doctors were wrong. And - as it turned out they were… I walked out into Macquarie Street, the medical street in Sydney, not knowing who I was or what I was going to do with my life, because I never had any idea of, um, having a career. You know, I was always very self-indulgent, I just did at school what I wanted to study because I always had this sense that, um, people wouldn’t be expecting anything. So, then I had no idea who I was and what I was going to do with myself… But then I realised that I might have to settle in for the long haul. No qualifications, I had dropped out of school, you know, so…

LM: At that time, and as you moved through your career, what sense of the Australian poetry scene did you have? Did you find yourself in a particular corner of it or—what is your sense of the Australian poetry scene?

RG: I think it’s a Darwinian swamp, in which they eat each other, and I think this is because of something that has saved me - not knowing, not being qualified, not having taken school seriously, not having any qualifications, I was saved by the, um, [Australian] Literature Board, you know, I started to win prizes and grants. And, um, I thought I’d probably go through life getting grants, which was another miscalculation on my part. But… when there are dirty large grants, …fifty thousand dollar grants going, it makes people very
LM: It doesn’t sound like a very comfortable place to be.

RG: No, I keep quite away from it if I can.

LM: Do you? So that sense of being a lonely craftsman–

RG: Oh, it must be a lonely craft. It’s not social—many people treat it as a social scene and an avant-garde chic sort of scene, you know—not for me. I’m just interested in the writing.

LM: …you do draw and paint.

RG: I draw for myself—out of a personal obsession. And I paint, but I never show them… I hate the art world too, not only the literary world. I think the art world is totally fashion-ridden… No, I’m interested in it for its own sake. I always draw because I’m obsessed with looking at things, you know, through looking too much. And, um, and I do the drawings to make me look—you know, it’s a way of looking. I do the drawings with my left hand because I don’t do anything else with my left hand, you know…. What you want to do is really see—drawing is to make you see. So, when I draw, I draw with the left hand so that sweat breaks out on my brow…. my left hand is very naive, and it’s a struggle. But the way I’m not naive is that I’ve always been around painters all my life, you know, I’ve been friends with painters. I like them as people because they notice things. And, um, I’ve always, I learned through these associations a lot about painting, theoretically, I know what to look for in a picture. I know how a picture’s made. I know that, um, forms can have a—a significance in themselves which is an innate satisfaction in a form and in the relation of forms, like the way music is satisfying. I know that colours in relationship have—this innate satisfaction about them, a rare quality about them which is satisfying in itself, the same way that music doesn’t need any defence, you know. I know that shapes have this quality of tensile life in them…. Francis Bacon said that ninety-nine percent of people don’t know how to look at a picture because they look at it—if it’s a landscape, they say that’s a nice place for a picnic. If it’s a portrait, they think that’s an interesting looking person or, you know, she’s pretty or, you know, that’s a nubile female, and so on. But what pictures are about to artists is really about shapes being an end in themselves, a satisfaction in themselves. But at the same time, I don’t believe that abstract painting is superior to referential painting. I think the most interesting shapes are the ones that refer to nature, and a line—an abstract line if it’s just drawn without reference to anything—is pretty flaccid, you know, it’s not very interesting, doesn’t have any height, any tension to it. But if that line also describes a branch or a mountain range, you can appreciate it as a line, a free line, you know, as having a life in it. You can also appreciate the ease and freedom of the line more by relating it to a mountain range, you know. Does this make sense? But, er, I believe in an art that refers to nature but treats it rather freely. A line to me has a sort of psychological quality to it, just a line. It’s just full of freedom and ease and freshness. But you notice that freedom and ease because it’s also describing something in a free, easy way. Follow what I mean?

LM: What sort of responses have you had to the drawings in Afterimages (2002)?

RG: Not all of them are my best. They were chosen by the publisher. I’m not keen on all of them. But, um, what sort of response? People, most literary people don’t really like visual art, I think, they’re not too keen. When I go to their houses they have terrible pictures. What sort of responses have I had? Some people like them. But they serve, they’re meant to convey a spirit, you know, they’re not about describing something. I’ve always put in a couple of really realistic drawings done with my right hand - it proves that I can draw. And then I do the other ones which are very naive, because that’s got - the spirit of those drawings is about naive looking, about looking with absolute freshness and innocence, not about looking in a fashionable way because this is the way art has gone at the moment. This is my style or something like that. It’s always about a completely naive way of looking.

LM: In the writing of your poetry you said to me a little while ago that you, you deal with form and that you’re someone who begins with form and then moves towards content. Is that right?

RG: What I said was that I begin with the form or the properties of the poem, you know.

LM: Could you explain a bit more?

RG: What I mean by ‘form’ is not just the shape of the poem. I mean the form or properties, the essential properties—the image, and the rhythm, and the texture of the language, you know, the sounds. So a poem to me is never about a real experience. All those poems that sound as if they’re about something that really happened are not about anything that happened - literally about that. All of my poems begin with just an image and I have no idea where they’re going. They’re not about experience literally. You know that poem I just read
So when I start a poem, I always start just with an image and I have no idea where it’s going or what I want to say or where it leads. I think that, if you knew what the poem was about, it would be journalism. You know, what I want to write is something that I don’t know about, so that the poem transcends itself. I arrive at an experience I haven’t really had, or I write an experience I haven’t really noticed but it’s fresh for me, and I think that’s why the poems, if they do have this quality, have freshness because, because I’m discovering the poem in writing it, do you know what I mean? That’s why I like to write them in free verse because free verse is a form of discovery. The voice is discovering as it goes along. The poems are discovered and I don’t know what I’m going to say in the poem, in the end.

LM: When you say you begin with an image, do you mean it usually an image from the world that comes to you?

RG: Something will strike me, you know. I’ll be travelling in a train and I’ll look out and I’ll see a bare tree and suddenly I’ll think: that bare tree looks just like a fish’s skeleton, you know, with all the flesh eaten off it like a bone. And I’ll think that’s a wintry tree, you know, like the wind has eaten away all the leaves, like someone has eaten the flesh off a fish…. Some image like that— I’m just making that one up. But, er, that will be the start of the poem… So it, so they’re made up. They’re half—they’re partly from life, but partly made up. So what you have to do when writing a poem—those poems aren’t about me. You know…people think they’re literal because they approach the condition of realism. But realism to me is a discipline. To be able to make things seem realistic is like giving the poem a form, you know, it’s a discipline. To make it, that’s the hardest sort of art to me, that realistic art where people feel that it’s true. But really it’s a discipline to approach reality so that it has conviction, the conviction of reality. You know—so the poem is always a discovery. And that gives it a freshness I hope.

LM: I’ve been doing my own sort of cutting through your poetry from the earliest book in seventy-three all the way through, and I think that I can see some changes and developments - different roads that you’ve taken.

RG: I try not to change and develop.

LM: You’ve tried not to change?

RG: Critics always say he’s, he’s developed, you know, he’s gone on that road, and I’m determined not to develop because I like the early—what it was—the fresh start….—when you don’t know how to do something and so you’re really alert. You don’t know what you’re going to do, how to do it, how it’s done…. And that gives it an authenticity, an authentic feeling, I think, not knowing what to do. Whereas if you knew, that’s just academic, you know. Then you do it to a formula, then you don’t look anymore. But by not knowing what you’re doing, you—it’s the beginner’s mind—that’s the fresh mind. And that’s the naive mind. And that’s when the work has that quality that I really value and which I’d like to achieve, but which I don’t know if I have: a freshness…. It bypasses the mind and strikes you in the body. You know, I think really good work has an immediate sensuous quality which you recognise—and it never has to be justified by theories or explanation or any other way—it just has this immediate sensuous appeal…. I missed saying earlier: what you do with a poem is try to create a voice, not miscreate characters, many characters to put that kind of view across. No, the poet creates one character who ranges through many experiences. Novelists break it up into many characters, having many experiences. The poet has one character which is the voice in the poem, you know, the persona, who has many various experience but unifies them all under the same voice. And what you have to do in a poem is create a voice. That’s the real poem. The real—you can have a poem that has nothing else but a moving tone of voice. You have it in William Carlos Williams sometimes and some minimalist poets. There’s just a voice, just a tone of voice. So what I’ve tried to do is create a voice which embodies the sorts of feelings that I value. I got this idea from Rilke. Rilke has that characteristic tenderness of tone which, apart from anything else that he’s talking about, is the poem. Just that tender touch of the voice on the things he’s talking about, do you follow? That’s what’s so moving in his poetry. This human voice which is like a touch, like a caressing touch on everything he talks about.

So what you need to do in the poem, I think, is create a voice. The voice isn’t me. I mean it’s a creation. I think many writers are a great disappointment—but they should not be as interesting as their work. Their work should be more interesting than they are. If the writer’s more interesting than his work then he’s failed as a writer… So what you have to do in writing is transcend yourself. I was worried when I got interested in Rilke—he was very young—but I realised at the same time he had this aching sensibility…. But then I realised that what you get in poetry isn’t the writer’s sensibility; it’s not the sensibility he lives on, that
he lives in, but it’s the sensibility he achieves. He is an ordinary person who achieves a sensibility through work, through writing. And he creates a self, a persona, a voice, a sensibility, and...that’s why we needn’t be disappointed with the poets we read about. The biographers are such ‘prats.’ It doesn’t matter that Wordsworth was egotistical and that Shelley was a shrill, um, hysterical girl, and that...Hardy was a grumpy old man who snapped at the servants, you know. Or that Philip Larkin was all the things that we now know, he was an amateur pornographer and all the rest of it. That doesn’t really matter because what matters is that they transcended that in their work.... So it’s what you can do on the page. It’s because people, you know, people ask why do you write and you say you write because it’s not there. Not because it is, but because it’s not there and you want, you want to create it.

LM: Can I be a bit of a devil’s advocate there for a minute? Have I been doing the wrong thing then in looking for development and change?

RG: You might be. I might be wrong, but I’ve tried hard not to develop... I have the same sort of poems in each book. Haiku, a series of haiku. A few prose poems. Some free verse poems. Some poems in rhyme and meter, you know. It’s called versatility—all the time just to show that I don’t develop.

LM: But you’re trying to convince me that you’ve got poetry as this space where you don’t develop, as you say, that is away from, in some ways, that hectic tumbling world that’s there. But I guess, as a devil’s advocate, I would say that you are pushed on by history and that tumbling world. Does it encroach upon you?

RG: Do I learn anything from history?

LM: Yes: history as making change in you?

RG: I was thinking of my technique. Because what I’m interested in is the technique of poetry. That’s what I mean. You start with form. I’m interested in technique and then suddenly I discover, while I’m just putting images together and creating rhythms, that there’s a content starts to emerge from amongst these things. Something that I didn’t know that I knew starts to appear.

For instance there’s a famous, well-known poem by me about a rubbish dump (“Flames and Dangling Wire” (1977)). And that’s not an experience I ever had. The rubbish dump was from seeing someone’s backyard fire or something, you know. I thought I could write about a great rubbish dump. And I’d driven passed them and by putting all these images together from all over the place, who knows where they came from, the images, my attitude to life, began to emerge and I began to discover what I thought about life.... The images are a way of relaxing the mind, so that the subconscious mind speaks between them, through them, you know.

LM: A lot of poets would take the opposite view, wouldn’t they? That, in fact, language is something that doesn’t allow those things to emerge, but which obfuscates and which, you know, lies and fictionalises, and refuses to reveal. But you’re actually presenting us with--

RG: I have no sympathy with the French theorists at all. I think it’s absolutely faddish nonsense what they talk about.

LM: Why do you think that?

RG: I think language isn’t the fundamental, isn’t the way we fundamentally think or approach the world. The fundamental language of human beings is imagery. We think in images. The language we dream in is images. It’s not words; it’s images. That’s where the emotions lie, in images. They’re embodied and preserved as memories and imagery. And my treatment of an image is transparent. ... I don’t write with words, I write with images. And, by images, I also mean sounds, because the sound is an image, you know. When I say, in a poem there’s an image—which is the horse’s lumpy hooves clump on the planks—and you’re seeing the horse’s lumpy hooves clump on the planks, you hear it, and hearing makes you see. Makes you see it all the more intensely. You actually see through the ear. And in poetry, poetry is that sort of writing that makes you see through the ear as well as through the image, you know. And you see through the texture of the language. The texture of the crisp lines about the secret ministry of frost in Coleridge—which sounds like walking on the creeping frost, crisp frost, you know. Everything goes to enliven the senses in poetry. And so...when I’m writing, it’s not the language that’s important, it’s the imagery. That the language is treated as sound as well as picture, you know what I mean?

So the ideas that we are caught in language, the idea that we are trapped inside language and that we don’t see the world, we only see an interpreted world that language mediates, is absolute rubbish... Because anyone who’s done painting or drawing or anything like that knows that there are many experiences that you have and many emotions that you...
knows that there are many experiences that you have and many emotions that you experience that have no verbal equivalent. It has nothing to do with language. If you sit down and draw a group of trees and the relationship of the trees to each other and the branches and the foreground and so on, you have an experience that can’t be encompassed in words. It’s got nothing to do with language. It’s a sense, a brief sense of placement and of balance and of harmony and relationships, which is very real and very intense in your mind that you couldn’t explain in words, that you couldn’t explain to express. If you look at a drawing by Cézanne there are wonderful emotions in it that have nothing to do with words.

It’s all to do with another way of using the mind and it’s nothing to do with anything that French theory can encompass.

LM: I’m wanting to be convinced because yours is a very useful way of describing language and the world and ourselves. But I’ll have one more attempt: it seems to me that you’re creating a place, or pointing to a place of innocence that you want to hold onto. That word rises up there in what you’re describing. Isn’t that impossible—that we can hold on to that place of innocence or freshness?

RG: No, no, it’s not. You can have direct perception of the world. I know that I perceive the world without words and without preconceptions because I can’t put any words to what I’m trying to express. The only way I can approach it is through describing the imagery and letting the images speak for me. By putting images together there’s a transcendent meaning comes out of those images which is what I’ve been trying to talk about. But it’s done through….a picture in words—a picture in words that’s made of words….can have many more nuances and subtleties than a painted picture even. A picture made with words can put all sorts of imagery together to create a whole. And that says something that words can’t say. I’m really interested in the use of language to say what language can’t say, do you follow what I mean? All that experience of the wordless world outside us which exists, which is full of fugitive reality that we don’t ever grasp in words and that we don’t see because we don’t have words for it. But if we see it as imagery, then we can grasp it, you know.

LM: So, is it ironic, then, that you’re a poet if you’re talking about a place beyond words or before words…and yet you’re a wordsmith aren’t you?

RG: Yes, I’ve always loved that descriptive sort of writing and maybe I should have done painting. But there was so much trouble with painting. I mean you have to stretch your canvass. Brett Whitley once said to me it’s much cleaner what you do, man, you just need a bit of paper and a pencil and you’ve really got it made.

LM: … I’m heading towards a question that I want to ask you—this notion of transcendence—and you used the word epiphany before as well. You seem to be in so many ways a poet of the material world, the land and place and time, of a particular tree or of a particular landscape. But for me one of the most beautiful things about your poetry is the way in which you lead off into that transcendent or epiphanic or mysterious moment. You said at the beginning of tonight’s talk that you’re not a religious person, but for me there’s a great deal of the spirit or spirituality about your poetry. How would you respond to that?

RG: You know people who don’t believe in conventional religion can have a spiritual sense, of course. I was brought up—it was my fault that my mother got involved with a fundamentalist religion because she was very worried about my short prospects in life…. I went along until I was sixteen with this religious cult. I then escaped from it, but I had to find some other spiritual sense about the world, you know. And my feeling about life is that you explain nothing by saying it was created by god because no-one has any idea what that means or who, what god is. And you don’t diminish the world at all if you say it’s matter because nobody knows what that is either. Matter is the mind of Shakespeare, the face of Nefertiti, the spirit of Buddha…. So, whatever matter is, once you’ve given up the idea of god, it’s something extremely mysterious and something that’s not limited in any way. It produces this extraordinary array of experiences which life gives us and it has these vast possibilities in it. And so I don’t think it’s diminishing. If you say that you’re a naturalist and you believe in nature, nature then is something of extreme richness and variety. It’s very plural; it’s got many possibilities in it. The only thing that I really believe in is the virility of nature. I don’t believe, like Spinoza, that there’s just one form of existence. I think that nature is very rich and has all sorts of possibilities in it and evil is only one aspect of nature, you know. And there are all sorts of experiences possible. Does that make sense?

LM: It does. I do think that there is a very strong—I don’t know the right word—‘undertow’ is the right word. Often, in your poetry, there is a melancholic undertow of mortality.

RG: I developed that quite young for reasons you can understand.

LM: I do understand.

RG: I was very conscious of time passing and I still think that time passing is a melancholic thing. It’s so obvious.
experience, you know. Everything is taken away from us by--no sooner experience is had, but it’s taken from us. But, of course, being has possibility in it; it’s renewed by time passing, you know. Everything’s freshened, everything’s made new for us by time passing. So while, on the one hand, we can say everything’s being taken from us, we can also say it’s also been given to us by the passing of time, you know. I think that time is nature. Time is the same as nature, change, you know. Profundity, productiveness of nature is both death and life, and they’re not separable so you can’t have one without the other. I think that’s the case. So, while I’m melancholy in some moods about nature passing, I hope also my poems are affirmative about the sensuous richness of nature. Because time passes, our senses are refreshed.

I guess I’m a bit of a hedonist. I believe in the pleasure of life. And now I believe that life’s pleasures are renewed for us all the time by the change that takes place. And the only thing you can be certain about human beings is that they get sick of one thing and move onto another. So everyone wants to refresh themselves, you know, with change if necessary, all the time. We live in this medium of change, but we also live in a medium of paradox. Everything is paradoxical, so time is both giver and destroyer. Time to me means the same thing as the material world. And this is a very simple philosophy I know, but it’s the only one I can find secure beneath my feet. It’s an empirical philosophy. I look out and I see in naïvety. I look out and this philosophy stands up. So it’s a good, it’s a dialectical philosophy. The dialectics of nature, that things aren’t separable. You can’t have one of the aspects of life without the other aspect of life. This is the Zen attitude to life, and this is why, in the [1984] Zen poem, it says the rooster crows at midnight and now it’s day. In other words, it’s a paradox. You know roosters crow at dawn and announce the day, midnight creates the dawn. The blackness of midnight that makes us appreciate, able to appreciate, the dawn. Midnight defines the dawn. So the opposites define each other and they’re totally interdependent, so there’s no separating them from each other.

LM: A very Blakean notion too, isn’t it?

RG: Yes, but I don’t dine with the Prophet Isaiah. I have some sense of reality.