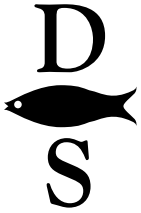
Reading Group and Teachers' Notes

The poetry of Robert Gray



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The main themes of Gray's Poetry

To Gray no point of detail can be too trivial. The strength in his poetry arises from a minutely fastidious attention to the facts of physical existence, and from an equally fastidious concern for precision of language, and for the effects which can be achieved with it. He is from time to time described as an "imagist" poet, but this is only partly accurate. No doubt his poems are full of imagery - similes, mostly - but it is a mistake to assume that these images are present for their own sake.

Gray's main object, especially in his early books, is to achieve a maximum of clarity: the imagery he uses is an explanatory device, rather than a decorative one. Each simile is drawn in order to bring a picture more clearly into focus, a procedure opposite to that of the English "Martian" poets whose indigenous, riddle-like metaphors aim first to obscure their subject and then to stimulate thought.

The thought in Gray's poems is clear and explicit. In an interview, he explained his preference for simile over metaphor, and other forms of figurative language, on the grounds that a simile is the most truthful way of comparing one thing to another: a metaphor, by definition, is not literally true, while the qualifying "like" or "as if" of a simile means at least that the trope is not *un*true.

Claritas is the essence of his poetry, which is still able to open a wide-angled lens to the world of objects and that of culture. As a rule, when Gray makes reference to what might be called intellectual material-things an average reader might not be assumed to be familiar with, he is at pains to make the reference self-explanatory in the poem. Unlike too many twentieth century poets, it is not his aim to demonstrate his mental superiority to the reader. Rather, he wishes to share his experience of the world, an experience which necessarily includes a certain amount of reading, for Gray is a chronic and incorrigible bookworm.

The misunderstanding which has most affected (Gray) is the widespread assumption, particularly among academics, that his work derives in some way from that of Les A. Murray. Admittedly there are grounds on which this misconception can be based: both poets come from an impoverished rural background, in distinctly dissimilar places which appear close together on a map; both have written a few poems on subjects which overlap. Yet one need only compare those overlapping poems .... to see that no two poets could be more unalike.

The link between Murray and Gray is talent. Each in his own way has made a major contribution to our literature, and as both are still working at the height of their powers it is in each case a contribution which can only be large in years to come. But they do not together constitute a "school" any more than they can be seen to have a mentor-pupil relationship: they are distinctive writers who have achieved importance through widely different means

Jamie Grant
Quadrant

Robert Gray on Poetry
in conversation with Don Anderson

DA: How does a poet cope with the marginal status of poetry in Australia?
RG: The marginal status of poetry, pretty much everywhere, is its great strength. That poetry is not so popular, Auden said, should be a cause for pride, rather than regret. It's the one art that doesn't have to degrade itself because of market pressure. Poetry can be just about quality. Of course, it often does impose limitations on itself, those of fashion, if writers are foolish enough to let this happen.

I'm completely free in my work. I don't have to appeal to avant-garde cliques and trimmers, the way painters have to appeal to curators, nor to the lowest common level, in the hope of making money.

DA: Are you a public poet? Do you give readings, go to conferences?
RG: Poetry that's any good is too good for public readings because there most of it passes you by on the air. As for other "public relations" , it's always seemed to me that a writer's self-promotion is in inverse proportion to his talent, so I've tried, very superstitiously, to avoid the practice.

My poetry is really about what is sublime being right here in the ordinary. I've always felt that the deepest mystery, and whatever answer there might be, is nowhere else but here, right on the surface of life. My poetry's about this sense, and at the same time about " the great interests of man: air and light, the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking".

DA: Can you talk about similes, so vital in your work?
RG: The copious use of similes is all to do with the visual precision and clarity that Imagists want. But I've carried it further than the original exponents of the style. The more accurately you want to define a thing, the more you have to bring in aspects of other things. This points to the very interdependence of everything, of all qualities - a Buddhist idea. In fact it's the central one. This is what Buddhism means by "There is no self-nature in anything".

A simile always involves two separate terms - there's no blurring two separate things together, as with symbols or metaphors. It's like keeping an outline around each one, and yet making them dependant on each other.

DA: Finally, how does a poet live?
RG: I've enjoyed working, a couple of days a week, in a bookshop. The books, at least, are interesting. I've done a lot of freelance writing. I've had Literature Board grants, an overseas travelling scholarship, and a number of writer in residencies at universities here and overseas.

An excerpt from "Robert Gray shows how the ordinary can be sublime:
an interview with Don Anderson."
1986

'Flames and Dangling Wire': an analysis

Gray's reading, and his careful observation of the physical world, come together in what is widely regarded as his finest poem, which is called "Flames and Dangling Wire". The subject of this poem - a visit to a rubbish dump - is one which might not have been considered by an Australian poet before the "New Writing", with all its faults, achieved its one important revelation, which is that there is material for poetry wherever one looks, without restriction. This is also one of the revelations of Buddhism, of course.

The concluding stages of the poem go like this:

> - It is a man, wiping his eyes.
> Someone who worked here would have to weep,
>
> and so we speak. The rims beneath his eyes are wet
> as an oyster, and red.
> Knowing all that he does about us,
> how can he avoid a hatred of men?
>
> Going on, I notice an old radio, that spills
> its dangling wire-
> and I realise that somewhere the voices it broadcast
> are still travelling,
>
> skidding away, riddled, around the arc of the universe;
> and with them, the horse-laughs, and the Chopin
> which was the sound of the curtains lifting,
> one time, to a coast of light.

"Flames and Dangling Wire" is an exceptional achievement. Few poets could have taken such an unpromising setting and drawn from it a connected sequence of ideas which takes in the theory of evolution, aspects of theology, nineteenth century painting, and ideas about the future, before returning to the poignantly realised scene, somewhere in an unnamed person's past, which the final stanza sketches with deft economy. Yet in Gray's poem all these disparate elements seem to belong together inevitably: unlike much recent poetry which essays a similar juxtapositioning of unrelated materials, there is no sense of strain or of dislocation here.

Jamie Grant
Quadrant

'Late Ferry': an analysis

The discretion in Robert Gray's use of imagery distinguishes him from the "Martian" approach to composing poetry. The…attempt to refresh the description of commonplace objects as though viewing them through the detached eyes of a planetary visitor…suffers from the self-consciousness of its enterprise. Too often the voice in a "Martian" poem will betray a clever graduate trying to persuade us he sees the world through innocent eyes. The innocent perceiver in Gray's poems predates the Martian experiment and has a naturalness…that the Martian speaker is too educated to allow…We read "Late Ferry", trusting that we are going to be *shown* the harbour and not that we are going to have something *proved* about it.

The second thing to note is the painterly naivety of the speaker's perception of the scene. The ferry goes "up" the harbour, rather than "away". The intellect, with its knowledge of what the ferry is actually doing, does not mediate what the senses say the ferry is appearing to do…We have been persuaded, temporarily to view the world as though we were naifs, with the result that we have had reawakened a childlike sense of the numinous individuality of things and the artless simplicity with which language appears to be able to evoke them….The art in Gray's best poetry lies in persuading us that naivety need be neither a means of evading subject's complexity, nor a mask behind which it is being manipulated toward some intellectual purpose. Rather, it is one means of enhancing perception, one means of achieving candour.

Simile is Gray's most characteristic descriptive instrument…From his using simile so often and so powerfully, we gain the sense in Gray's poems of a world of unlimited correspondences between things….simile is…an instrument for unifying the diversity of phenomena, for establishing, not only the lines of connection between things, but the idea of the entire unity that these connections create.

Though Gray is a descriptive and quietist poet rather than a dramatic or interpretive one, and mostly confines himself to description, description does not confine his understanding. Behind many poems - "Late Ferry", "Flames and Dangling Wire", "The Sea-shell", for example - the scrupulous accumulation of the visual evidence points to a vision of the way all objects and moments integrate with one another in a Creation that is both marvelous and innocent.

Alan Gould
Quadrant

Robert Gray on 'Diptych'

an interview with Barbara Williams

BW: Your poem "Diptych" is very moving. Its subject is your parents who were two completely different exemplars. How did your childhood prepare you for writing?

RG: My parents, like the panels of a diptych, were forever separated while in proximity. In a way I was fortunate they were so different: I was able to see the inadequacies of both their extreme temperaments. Maybe that's the origin of the underlying attitude of my poems, which I've realised is a dialectical one.

My mother was very warm; she had a sort of marsupial warmth about her. But it's fair, even though harsh, to say that she was unintelligent - most significantly in that she chose for a husband a person who could only bring her a great deal of unhappiness. She always acted purely from her emotional nature. I benefited greatly because of my mother's sensibility, but I could see the inadequacies of being simply emotive about everything.

My father was far more intellectual: well read, cuttingly witty, an easy raconteur; a rational person, with a discriminating taste. He had a good deal of charm, but it was not to be relied upon. I have come to accept many of his beliefs about life, in which he opposed my mother: his anti-religious feeling, for instance. But he was a frozen man, deeply neurotic, imposing a highly mannered life upon himself, and us. He was tormentingly fastidious, constantly belittling, and I, as the eldest, was his main target, apart from my mother. We kids all turned against him, to varying degrees, early on; and he wanted this, I realise. He couldn't stand a domestic, cosy atmosphere. He was, at regular periods, a real falling-down drunk, who would end up having to be hospitalised. Yet he was never, in his worst condition, physically violent, and I realised recently that he never swore.

I admire some things about both my parents. All through my poems there is, subtly I hope, a consciousness of the interdependence of opposites; and an acceptance or reconciling of these. I will leave it to the critics, however, to discover the extent and the significance of this.

BW: Was there a literary atmosphere in your home?

RG: There was, I suppose, to the extent that books were never the subject of my father's belittlement, but were referred to in a way that made them seem, really, the highest thing. And my mother, not a reader herself, adopted this valuation, and always encouraged us to read, as kids, by buying us books out of her very meagre purse.

My father had no patience with music - it was really just a noise to him, unless it was something "relaxing" and with a personal association, like a song of Bing Crosby's. But painters he spoke of with respect. A drinking acquaintance of his had been Elioth Gruner, of which he was proud.

My father read novels, from the library, but never any lightweight rubbish, and he remembered the books of his youth with uncharacteristic warmth. He seemed to know quite a lot of

poetry by heart. For many incidents, if in the mood, he would have a quotation. The books of poetry he owned were in Latin, or else they were things like "Marmion" by Sir Walter Scott, which held little interest for me. When it appeared I had some ability in English, he began challenging me to identify quotations. His manner was, as usual, disparaging. I learned that these lines were nearly always from Kipling, Longfellow or Browning, and very soon I could outwit him, just on the "feel" of the quotation. He gave that away. None of those are poets that I can stand.

We lived on a farm that was owned by older, retired people, for part of my pre-teenage years. By this time, the last of several properties my father had owned himself had been, literally, lost in a card game. On that occasion my mother went tearfully, with my youngest brother in arms, to the man who had won, but to no use. My father would have made some allusion to Dickens, no doubt. Anyway, one of my memories of my father is set on this farm, and involves an outdoor lavatory. My father had the unpleasant job of having to empty that, and I can remember him shouldering the can whilst quoting a poem. I was amused at the time, and had some appreciation of the allusion, but was more appreciative a few years later when I had identified what he had been reciting, as he mounted the hill with shovel and burden. It was Charles Woolfe's "Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna": "Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,/As his corse to the rampart we hurried./Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot/O're the grave where our hero we buried." So literature and its uses were part of my childhood, you could say.

BW: You would seem to have come to terms with your father.

RG: It was warfare at the time, but that's no longer a problem. He'd have his occasional good days, and anyway I held my own. There was plenty of room to escape, up there. People might think that "Diptych" is a confessional poem, but I don't see it as that.

BW: I didn't read it that way.

RG: I'm glad, because all of what's recounted there was pretty much common knowledge where I grew up - it was merely our contribution to the common pool of gossip, which was expected of everyone. There was nothing dark and suppressed and in need of airing in my childhood, I can tell you. I don't want to grow anecdotal, but there are many other stories I could have told. There's the one of my mother taking him to court to get him barred from all the local pubs, and the connivances because of that. And there's the story of him buying an ex-racehorse, after he could no longer drive, which used to bring him home, dead drunk on its back, and what happened with that, and so on. But the danger of such material, in poetry, is that it can all get a bit "Banjo" Paterson and raucous, which I've wanted to avoid.

And there are sadder stories, from late in his life, about being hit by a truck, right on the full bottle of whiskey in his coat pocket, about pins in his hip, and a suicide attempt, and the "nerve ward" at Concord Repat. Hospital, where I visited him for years and we got to know each other...

BW: I think yours is a portrait done in love, though I imagine other emotions were there initially: anger, hatred, resentment - naturally.

RG: "Diptych" was written after he died, unlike the other poem about the same subject, "Poem to My Father", which was written when he thought he was going to die, one time. After someone dies, you are no longer their victim - disturbingly, they become yours. You can say anything about them. The realisation that he was now contained in my hand, as it were, tempered any bitterness. Not that you could say the emotion of "Poem to My Father" is a bitter one. They *are* poems that have a certain sense of goodwill, I guess. They just happened like that.

From an interview with Barbara Williams
Southerly
1980

The Skylight: A REVIEW

Considered purely as an Imagist, Gray is without rival in the English-speaking world; even his early mentors, Williams and Snyder, seem flat by comparison. In poem after poem we find acutely observed images that at once focus intently on the natural world and, by their very precision, render it strange: " the night as filled with rain as a plank with splinters," "his torch beam, about the room,/ was a trapped swallow." Here, as almost anywhere in this collection, there is a recognition that is inevitable yet unexpected, a studied brilliance without attendant cleverness.

If the poetic program of Gray's texts is the transformation of the I into the eye, this is also the philosophy that underwrites the volume. Gray's Taoism commits him to the view that the ego is an illusion, and that true happiness is to be found only "in the contemplation of matter," a position he associates with Marx.

Gray believes that "the ego of an individual can be shown to be an illusion". The self may not be an originating wholeness, but neither is it a complete illusion, for, as Gray's poems testify again and again, reality and illusion invariably undo themselves by finding the real in the illusory and the illusory in the real. The pleasure afforded by *The Skylight* is, then, in the tracing of this double movement of the positive and the negative: a pleasure of all strong poetry.

Kevin Hart.
The Australian

Certain Things: A REVIEW

Robert Gray seems, at heart, a poet of things, somebody who appreciates the objects of experience but also appreciates their transitoriness, their tendency to disappoint those who want to possess them. The essence of his vision is to preserve the intensity of the love of things without teetering into a desire to appropriate them. It is a noble Buddhist tightrope and it at best gives Gray a perspective from which arise marvellous poems, but they are …poems of a certain kind. His poems…have that pleasing Oriental sense of having been written in situ and thus, by taking the act of writing out into the natural world, of having reduced the gap between the two.

For all the sheer pleasure that the poems of this new book provide, I can't help but worry that Gray is facing some major problems. He has always had to face criticism that his approach to language, as something transparent, is philosophically at odds with most contemporary views.

But I think a more immediate concern is the fact that his position is essentially a static experience for the poet himself. The world may pass by in its shimmering coruscation of shapes, none of which the poet wants back, but the viewpoint that appreciates this is not likely to change much. This means that Gray, as he ages, is going to be seen more and more to transgress the 200 year old expectation that artists should never repeat themselves and must always break through into some new mode of expression. But perhaps that is an expectation that could do with some transgressing.

Another concern is that, as he occupies an honourable but uncommon place within poetry, he must write poems which explain his stance, which keep that space clear and ensure new readers know what he is on about. As a result there tend to be, within any book by Gray, rather prosy poems of explanation laying out, elegantly enough, the propositions that underpin his work. *Certain Things* has its share of these, and though one is thankful for the way in which sets of statements like 'Illusions' wittily make his position clearer, it is a propositional kind of poem at odds with the marvellous poems of the rest of the book. He has plenty of admirers … perhaps he should trust them to be aware of what he is doing.

Martin Duwell
The Australian

Robert Gray in conversation

My impression is that you have a distinctly painterly eye. Are you also a painter?

RG: I am not a "frustrated painter". I'm doing what I want to do. I value writing above any other means of expression. My poems are about visual experience becoming language. I've consciously decided not to be a painter, even though some of my closest and earliest friends are landscape artists, and I've long felt a sympathetic involvement with their work. I've decided on this because I know I would feel inarticulate, whatever else I were doing, if I weren't a writer, and also because of all that stuff that painters have to have. here's all the making of frames, and stretching of canvases, and accumulation of equipment, and having to rent studio space, and then, worst of all, selling off the one version of the thing you have made, and it going into private hands to some unknown fate. It's all too messy, too much problem, and too disappointing, for me.

But I love paintings. They're my greatest passion outside books. And I have always drawn, and sometimes used colour. I've consciously limited myself to a relatively small scale, to drawings, for the reasons above, and because of time - because I am wary of chasing two hares at once, as Chekov described it.

Still, what a pleasure drawing is, drawing from the subject. Perhaps nothing gives me more pleasure when it works. I don't show these things to anyone other than friends. If you've captured something of what pleased you in a subject, then that is always there in the work, to reward you when you look at it again, and that's sufficient in itself, certainly if you're also writing. Perhaps I might say that I think some of these drawings are as good as my poems, however one sees those.

Would you use them to illustrate your poems?

RG: They're quite separate things, to me, done for their own sake - they don't illustrate anything. I could include them simply among some other poems, as Alec Bolton has suggested doing for me, but people get suspicious of "versatility" don't you think? The drawings might detract from or limit some people's responses to the poetry - I've considered that. And they're rather varied; while they're all linear, they range from realist to expressionist to formalist and decorative styles, although nearly all landscapes. I'm not bothered, really, to do anything with them at present. They contribute a lot to my poems, subterraneously, I think, and that's sufficient. The value of drawing and painting, to a writer, is that they get you out of your head, save you becoming too intellectual - they're entirely sensuous and wordless. They're valuable in that way like physical work or exercise.

Would you expand on the pleasures of writing, which you convey strongly in your poetry, and especially about those times "when there is nothing that has to be written"?

RG: Those are the times when one is writing not for money, nor for some audience, but just for oneself - for itself. But there is a dialectic involved in this, too. For those who want to write well, there is no better means than through having something to say. It is not really possible to without a specific content, which provides the pleasures of a real sense of form and of a tensility in one's work. Nothing creates boredom quicker, I find, than arbitrariness of manner. This modish self-referential approach is so dull. John Ashbury, and all the lesser talents derivative of him, are lost in the fallacy that because poetry isn't simply what is said, therefore what is said makes no contribution, and all that is necessary is empty sonorities, and some wisecracks.

It is what is being said that gives the real emotional charge to poetry, if this is realised through style, and the style is relate to it.

Les Murray has said to me that the "abstract" writers don't have a real audience at all - one that reads for pleasure and interest - but only a political one. It's political because what it's really interested in is trendiness, something apart from the actual work - they're interested in a form of snobbery, which is what a self-conscious avant-gardism is.

But to the pleasures of writing...the great pleasure is, again, dialectical: it's to have the senses and the rational mind working together. The whole person. You write with free emotion and sensuality, and criticise and shape this with cool reason. You move between them rapidly, and one heightens the sense of the other.

Another of the pleasures of writing is to describe, and to relive things. One sometimes lives them most intensely on the white page. Life is often "a buzzing, blooming confusion", to quote William James, when you're in the midst of it, but when you sit down to write, all sorts of things which you barely noticed before start to reappear, out of the end of your pen, and far more vividly. You live them most intensely at those times, when you live them imaginatively, or so it seems.

What do you like to read?

RG: I don't read much fiction. I get more pleasure from poetry than from anything else I read. I read new things, and I like rereading the great poets. Apart from that I'm interested in non-fiction: books on science, certain philosophers, art history, biographies of writers and artists.

I think Hardy is probably the best English novelist...I hate the self-involved, self-regarding Modern Novel, with a passion...the great poets are Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Whitman and Thomas Hardy. Everyone else is minor, compared to these. ....

Students need to understand that a poem isn't something that's exhausted by having its "meaning" extracted...A poem's meaning isn't only found in its paraphrasable content. It's also in the tone of voice, the cadence, the use of the traditional resources, the choice amongst these - all of that contributes to and modifies the prose meaning. Poetry, as I understand it, is language that wants to go beyond, say more than, its words. It can't be fully translated out of the

silence after itself, where it resonates. Poetry is things felt. In this way it has more in common with painting than with prose.

Apart from this suggested meaning, what else do you aim for in your poetry?

RG: Vividness, I suppose, is what I aim for, above all. Simplicity, purity, clarity of outline. I think these things represent the true achievement in any of the arts, from painting to acting.

Are there any critics who have said revealing things about your work?

RG: ...Vincent O'Sullivan a poet and an academic, wrote a review I thought showed real insight. He commented on the relationship of my work to aestheticism, to people like Gautier and Wilde. Gautier said,"I am a man for whom the physical world really exists." You can imagine that I would feel some affinity with him. And Wilde and Pater, too, have meant a great deal to me - that aestheticism taken to the point of being a morality.

Can we speak about technique? What is the principle on which your free verse is written?

RG: Free verse is structured on the lingerings in the voice, according to feeling. It is the pattern of these pauses which creates the rhythms, down the page; it is a rhythm which exists vertically, through the poem, and not just a tight, short, horizontal rhythm. The rhythm in free verse, or in mine, can be felt in the way the rhythm in the placement of brushstrokes, the tree shapes along a hilltop, can be felt in a painting by Corot.

What advice would you give to a young writer?

RG: I might say that the instrument with which art is created is Ockam's Razor...If you have the observant, sensuously-aware temperament necessary to be a poet, then I think such advice is the best complement to it. If you have what nature gives, then maybe you can earn the logic and self-criticism which create a style.

How is your poetry going to develop now?

RG: I've been interested lately in more use of rhyme and more regularity of form, but this is not because I have lost faith in free verse. It is simply to revivify the act of writing, for myself; to make the experience new, to avoid facility.

However, these new, more formal poems are what might be called a "post-free verse" formalism. That is, within the formal set-up they either subtly or blankly break the rules - but always for an expressive purpose. That's what gives the method whatever authenticity it has.