

ANNE LLOYD AND R.G. HAY

INTERVIEW

EP: What is it that makes both of you spend so much time on poetry?

RGH: It's what I feel I can do. I write it because I can write it. People like to do the things they can do.

EP: What kind of rewards do you get from writing poetry?

RGH: It's largely the pleasure of feeling that I'm doing something reasonably well, and that it has difficulties that I find I can overcome. Also, poems are about something, and writing enables you to get things off your chest, in a way. It's a nice kind of hobby — well, I shouldn't say hobby, but it is a hobby. It's an interest that isn't going to fade away. It's not like my cricket, for instance, where I no longer see the ball very well or bend down to field very well. As I grow older it's not fading from me. In fact, I have the feeling that I might be getting a bit better. And I can look forward to its getting better still. And surely people like something that they can do, and that they feel they're getting better at, and perhaps will go on getting better at, and where there's infinite challenge. It doesn't matter how well I think I've written something, there's always something else I want to write.

AL: The question was: Why do you spend so much time writing? I'd have to say straight away that I don't currently spend much time on writing at all. I have in the past, and I'm quite confident that I will come back to that again. I've had a bit of a lull, and a sit-back and a think, but I hope the time's about to happen when I do come back to it and spend as much time on it again. When I *am* writing an awful lot, and when I am spending a lot of time on it, it's not a matter of why do I, it's that I can't help it. That is the all-consuming thing, and no matter how busy I am or what sort of job I have, poetry, for a long time in my life, has been the important thing. I would quite happily write on at three o'clock in the morning, having been up all night, not because I wanted to but because I had to, just because I was driven.

EP: When did you start writing poetry?

AL: I've been writing for about as long as I can remember. I can remember when I was about nine, saying I wanted to be a poet, and my mother saying, "Oh don't be ridiculous, dear — write novels." I know novels don't make money, but mum was quite

confident that poets don't make money and that novelists do. Even in primary school I can remember feeling that I wanted to write a poem, and wandering off by myself and finding a secluded spot — often in the bush — and just sitting down and writing. Well, they were just sick kinds of poems that I wouldn't be terribly pleased about now. I've always wandered off at times and sat down and written.

EP: Do you think your primary schooling was rather different from the average? Poetry must have played a part in your schooling that it doesn't seem to now?

AL: I don't know. I remember some years back giving a paper at a conference in Rockhampton and being attacked severely by Carole Ferrier for my middle-class upbringing! But I think I did have a very fortunate upbringing in poetry, and I was very lucky that I went to what was called an Opportunity School in the last two years of primary school. We did a lot of classroom reading of poems — often performing poems. I can remember one particular piece that went very well. Each kid in the room had two lines to read, and I remember getting particularly wrapped up in that kind of poem. I can remember some boring poetry lessons too, but in High School. In my second year at High School I was also lucky because they decided they would abandon formal English classes for us — take no notice of the syllabus, you know — and they just had a creative writing course. All we did for the whole year was creative writing. We were taught various forms, and the best examples went into a book and got gold stars or some such thing! It was a really challenging time for me. I took poetry very seriously from that time on. And in the last two years of High School I was lucky that I went to a very funny school in Sydney called the Australian International Independent School. It was the sort of school where you could say, "There's a conference on poetry at Macquarie University that I'd really like to go to. I won't be at school for the next two weeks." And you could sit in at the conference and everybody thought that was a perfectly legitimate thing to do.

EP: If poetry disappeared do you think it would be a great loss to society in general — even for people who don't read it?

RGH: I think the particular value poetry has is related to the fact that it is linguistic — it is a use of language. And it seems fairly natural that if people use language all the time in society, some of them are going to become rather interested in language use,

and one of the things they'll get interested in is poetry. And I think the kinds of things poets do — the precision of writing and the playfulness — would feed back into other kinds of writing. I don't really see a total discontinuity between poetry and other kinds of writing.

AL: I have real trouble with the notion of something being for the betterment of society as a whole. But if you asked did I think poetry was important, I'd say that it was the most important thing. As a linguistic exercise it is for me the most important thing. I mean, I don't think I'm primarily an ideas person. But the playing with words, to me, is what I was put on this planet for.

RGH: I like the notion that some other people are going to read my poems and enjoy them. In a way, that's the aim in writing poems. And keeping that kind of use of language alive, and relating it to other uses of language is very important. To come back to an earlier question, I didn't, unlike Anne, always like poetry or always intend to be a poet. At school we learnt a lot of it by heart, which was quite a good thing. I notice many people complain that they didn't have Australian poetry at school, but I can remember our teacher in primary school reading to us "The Man From Snowy River," and our reading books had quite a lot of Australian poetry. In Junior we had *The Second Bond of Poetry*, which was about fifty percent Australian. I always intended to be a writer, but I didn't think of myself as writing poetry. I began in a fairly conventional way when I was eighteen by falling hopelessly and madly in love and used to pour out my heart in a terrible sort of free verse.

EP: Why did being in love prompt all this poetry?

AL: Oh, that happens to everyone who writes — it's part of the thing!

EP: Did you think 'I'm in love, therefore I must write?' *Amo ergo scribo*, as it might be?

AL: It's the miserableness in unrequited love. Everybody does it.

RGH: I have a feeling that it was almost factitious. That I fell hopelessly in love in order to write about it. It's this tradition.

EP: So you were actually falling into an art form and a whole social convention when you started writing and falling in love?

RGH: Well, yes, I think I was.

EP: What do you think in that experience was totally spontaneous and original and yourself? You were making use of a script and a

role that were already set up and ready for you since year dot. But something you must have supplied that came from yourself?

RGH: I suppose so. No one's ever defined the average country boy in Queensland, have they? The "tradition" of the lover-poet is a quite different kind of thing. So I think I got interested fairly quickly in adding to that tradition in terms of what I think of as my own language. It was not the same as the language that you get in the traditional books.

AL: Most students you teach in a Creative Writing course are going through this melancholy phase and say they only write when they are depressed. I now find that a quite ridiculous notion for myself. Perhaps I was an early developer and depressed quite early in life, but I was usually fairly melancholy when I went out in the bush to write in primary school. There's also something about the loneliness of being in the bush which is depressing because you realize how tiny you are. But you ask what was it about my own stuff that was different from any tradition? I hope what was different in my writing and what I see as different in the work of my students who have potential as writers, is in the language — when you suddenly start to twist the words in a way that hasn't been done before. You get enormous satisfaction from having done that. And when students show you something that's all traditional melancholy and sobs, but there's just one line in it that makes it different, that's great, too.

EP: Would you say then that there's a language art facility that is similar to having a facility for music, for example?

AL: Yes, I think you could say that.

RGH: And just as in music there's a gradation between the prodigy and the person who's competent, there's a gradation in writing. My own interest is strictly a constructionist interest. It's the doing it. It's not that I have a message that the world can't survive without. There have to be ideas in poems because poems are linguistic and words convey meaning, but I'm not the prophet kind of poet.

EP: When you say constructionist interest, do you mean an architectural concern — what is sometimes called architectonics? Or did you mean something craftsmanlike?

RGH: Well, they blend. I was thinking of a kind of bush carpenter. People tell him what they want, and he buys the materials, has the design and builds the house, and when it's finished it stands

up, and hopefully someone goes into it and finds it's useful. I suppose that is the social thing. If somebody finds my poems useful then that's good. But I couldn't say that I make them in order to have somebody else use them. I make them in order to make them well.

- EP: Do you ever feel that a poem ends up as a derelict building?
- AL: I do! Actually, coming here, Bob and I thought we'd do a reading that was a kind of interchange of poems we'd written based on the same experiences. I remembered I had a poem about olives which I think was published — Bob's written a very good poem about olives which I think was published in *LiNQ*. I thought my poem was O.K. too, but when I eventually found it somewhere at home in the cobwebs, it was what you've just said, a house that had crumbled — it was just terrible.
- EP: Was the idea wrong or just the way it was handled?
- AL: I think the idea is all right, and I might come back to it.
- EP: Do you sometimes feel that it is the idea in a poem that is really what is poetic?
- AL: Yes. But often the idea develops while you're working.
- RGH: There is what you could call the idea of an idea. People like Anne and me get our ideas from ordinary, everyday incidents, like a chance meeting or a coincidence, which might give you a poem about randomness. In fact this notion of randomness is an important one to me. It is a twentieth century notion to a large extent. Most people before had a very static or a very hierarchical Thomistic sense of order, or else they saw chaos. Whereas in my view of reality chance is a very important factor. I'm not saying that either of us will get a poem from some coincidences that have happened to both of us this week in Townsville, but these are the kind of things from which we could get a poem.
- AL: I used to sit down and say, "Tonight I'm going to write." And I mightn't have an idea in my head, but I was determined to practise, and I'd sit there with a blank page until I'd found an idea I was going to write about. Of course, then the words just take over, and the idea can completely change.
- RGH: I work differently. I make little notes in a notebook, so that when I have some time and feel like writing a poem, I can get out my little notebook which is full of ideas.
- EP: And you never do that, Anne?
- AL: Yes, I do. Then I lose the notebook. And I don't necessarily find it very inspiring if I find the notebook. I'm more likely to write

something if I'm challenged by an event at a particular time, sit down and make a reasonable draft — I'm quite happy to work on it for six hours or more at once — and then keep working on it night after night until I'm reasonably happy with it.

RGH: I've got notes from a trip we made up here some five years ago and some of them still haven't got to the draft stage, but they will soon. Unlike Anne, who tends to work in great bursts, and works at one poem over and over again in one long session, I tend to space my re-writing over a considerable amount of time.

AL: We're different too in that I get on to the typewriter as soon as I have something that looks reasonable, and I play with it on the typewriter. How it looks visually is to me very important. Whereas Bob has finished his poem before he puts it on the typewriter. Actually, I'd like a computer terminal at home because I have one at work, and the physical horribleness of the typewriter after that is a bit of a handicap. I'm sure I'd be more likely to play round with poetry again if I had a terminal at home!

EP: So there is a physical quality to writing — the kind of pencil or biro you're using does affect what you write? When driven to it, you can write with the nastiest biro or the bluntest pencil, but there is something about a well-sharpened pencil or smooth-running biro that encourages ideas? If you're using a word processor, it would encourage the flow of words when writing creatively?

RGH: The size of my handwriting is a good indication. When I begin because I feel I should, my writing is small, whereas when the words begin to flow my handwriting gets bigger. In revising a poem, when I begin to have confidence in it, I notice that my handwriting flows and is much larger. Yes. Writing poetry is very much a physical thing. Incidentally, for me, a draft is something to be chopped into later.

AL: Yes, I chop down too. And the appearance is important. I found the manuscript of the "Bora Ring" poem, which I read here in Townsville, which was the second last version before I typed it up to send away. But instead of just typing it up from this second last version, I made another manuscript copy because I had chopped out six words from the first line — "in the lap of the world" — and when that phrase was taken out it completely stuffed up the way the lines looked on the page, and I couldn't use it as my final draft to copy from.

RGH: This is one reason why I seldom work in closed forms, because I often throw out a line and a half or so, which is awkward because you have to pick up the remaining half line, or do something with it. If you're in a fixed form you've got to replace it with exactly a line and a half. In looser forms there's still a recasting, but you can throw out as much as you want without having to replace it. Alec Hope has an interesting description of how he works, and he builds up the other way. He talks about the fish and the eye. He has the whole poem in lines and stanzas, with blanks where he knows something is going to fit. He's got a great regard for fixed forms because obviously they work for him. He starts and builds up. My first drafts are terribly prolix and anything from ten to sixty per cent has to disappear before the poem's finished.

AL: Mine don't actually get cut all that much in length.

RGH: In one extreme case I had a poem of about twenty-two lines which I worked and worked but it stayed mostly puddingy, with a good start that just petered out. One day I was looking at it and despairing and it suddenly struck me that the first seven lines *were* the poem.

AL: The poem goes its own way in spite of us.

EP: Is the unnecessary part what is consciously put in? The rest gets written by itself or in spite of conscious effort?

AL: I think it's something like that.

RGH: It is very much a discovery. That's why I don't much like the notion of poetry as an expression. Because that suggests that there was something existing before the poem existed, which was then expressed. But all there is is a kind of nebula from which something might condense. What is expressed is expressed by the poem finally when it has found its shape.

EP: Anne, would you like to say something about your Aboriginal Kunapipi poems?

AL: Well, I've always been interested in things Aboriginal and at University I took a course in an Aboriginal language. Then Bob gave me a book by Berndt on Kunapipi — well, religion, I guess is the right term for it. He said I might be able to get something out of it some day.

RGH: I'd bought it not long after it was published early in the fifties, because I thought I might do something with it, but I'm not that kind of poet.

EP: Les Murray used one of Berndt's translations as a basis for his Buladelah-Taree Song Cycle, didn't he?

- AL: Yes . . . Well, I read *Kunapipi* and found it very interesting but I couldn't see what someone might mean by saying "you might be able to do something with it." The book is the song cycles of the Kunapipi religion, both the religious, inside ones and the outside ones too. It must have digested about five years, and when I visited North Queensland so many of the nature references in the song cycle were now familiar things to me. I think my poem has often been badly misconstrued. My big aim in life is to write the celebratory female love poem that just never seems to get written. What's so interesting about the Kunapipi religion is that it's all about fertility and I thought it might get me closer to this aim. Nobody seems to have picked this up, but the first section of my poem actually is quite biblical in conception, in that there is the seven days of creation where you begin with the fishes and go through the birds and so on. The first section is lyrical, the second part is the expedition that the sisters make, and the third section is the actual living out of the religion in daily life. But somebody at the conference here said to me, 'Well, how did you get interested in things Aboriginal?' and I hadn't consciously realized that I was. I explained that often you are just standing somewhere admiring the scenery and grandeur all around you, and it suddenly dawns on you that this has been here so long. I don't have any religion myself, but I often think that the Aboriginal understanding of the world is as close as I could come to religion.
- EP: I was interested to come back to your Kunapipi poem after reading some of the work of Banumbir Wongar, the European who hoped to transgress his Europeanism and translate his writing self, at least, into an Aborigine. One can sympathize with his intention, but from some points of view it does look very usurping, or whatever phrase one now uses. Some of your Kunapipi poem, perhaps, without wanting to do it consciously, came close to paying Aboriginal culture the respect that Wongar wanted to pay.
- AL: My poem is close to Berndt's text in places. I certainly didn't write it in an attempt to be Aboriginal, I wrote it in an attempt to say something about the physical world around me and about fertility and being female.
- EP: A question that interests me very much at the moment is the identity of the "I" when a poet writes "I" in a poem. Could you say something about the identities of the "I's" in your poems, how often they change, and do they represent some part of yourself, or are they always a construct?

RGH: I think any deictic word in a poem has to be a construct. I'm one of the people who thinks a text exists in its own right, and I think the "I" has to be constructed by the reader, and that the poem must give enough hints for the reader to construct a speaker. I've worked a fair bit with "I" because it's something that interests me and I've done some things that are most patently what I suppose might be called dramatic monologues. But I always think that any poem that has an "I" in it has some air of the dramatic monologue. As to the distance between the actual flesh and blood person and the "I" of the poem, I think that the "I" of my poems is reasonably close to myself because it's difficult to create somebody else from the inside. On the other hand, I don't see the "I" poems as communications from Bob Hay to somebody out there.

EP: It's not the "I" that you write in a letter?

RGH: No, I think not. Although I probably come close to that in some of my little comments on literature that I sometimes work into a poem. But I think that the poems that are closest to being expressive of my views, or whatever, are third person poems, or poems that simply don't locate a speaker at all, but are just tiny little essays, as I think of them. Whenever I put an "I" in I do think of the "I" as something I have to construct. It is variable, too. In some of my country poems, the "I" is a person who is allegedly at home in the bush, and sometimes the "I" is a poor, incompetent suburbanite who is trying to adjust to the bush. Having grown up in a small country town I suppose I straddle them both. I think the "I" is always something the reader has to construct, but how close it is to me is for somebody out there, who knows me, and constructs the "I", to decide. But I am conscious of trying to give the reader enough hints to construct a speaker, and not have to go and look at the biography of Bob Hay and say that that speaker has to be Bob Hay. The "I" is a character that has to be constructed. So sometimes has the "you" — I'm also fond of using "you" in a poem, and the "you" is also a construct.

EP: Is it the construct of another person, or is it sometimes yourself talking to yourself?

RGH: No, I don't use "you" that way, although I know it could be so used.

AL: I may be mistaken, but I don't think I do have a lot of "I's" in my poetry. I don't very much enjoy the first person narrative myself, and I frequently use third person when I would see the

third person as being very close in fact to the “I”. I do use a lot of “you” but I can’t think of a case where the second person “you” is close to representing myself. It’s always some other person, and usually based on someone I know very well.

EP: So when you write “you” there is usually someone definite in your mind?

AL: Yes — but obviously only my perception of that person.

EP: In the poem “Armado” that you read yesterday, the “I” appears — does the poem express a real experience of your own?

AL: Yes, I did work in an Italian kitchen washing dishes and the blokes there were amazingly sexist!

EP: The question of the “I” is complex. Some poets deny that the “I” does represent themselves, even when it reproduces dates and events of their own lives. Gwen Harwood said in a recent interview in *Island Magazine* that the only time the “I” in a poem represents herself is when the poem is specifically addressed to somebody.

AL: That’s interesting.

EP: How would you prefer readers to think of it: “In this poem Anne Lloyd writes of her experiences in a sexist workplace” or “The voice in the poem is very tolerant of sexism, or whatever?”

RGH: As far as I’m concerned it is the voice of the poem. I couldn’t write a poem whose voice said something or took attitudes that are entirely repugnant to me, except in some ironic way that I hope readers would recognize as ironic —

AL: The ‘voice of the poem’ idea appeals to me too, but I don’t really mind if anyone decides that it is the voice of the *poet* in most of my stuff.

RGH: If someone is going to interpret my poem, I’d hope they would read the poem, and look for material to construct a speaker in the voice of the poem. It would be a deficiency on my part if they had to come back to my biography to understand the poem.

EP: A paper given here last year by Xavier Pons and printed in *LiNQ* argues that the use of biography and psychoanalysis is a very valid way of saying something about a work. He was partly referring to his own work on Henry Lawson.

RGH: As long as that doesn’t mean you can’t properly understand a writer’s work without referring to the biography.

AL: I’d say the same thing.

RGH: It could mean that reference to biography and psychoanalytic theories is relevant to a study of Henry Lawson, but it might not

be appropriate for all writing. I don't think there is a body of critical approach that is equally valid for all writers. Critics should be eclectic.

EP: Some modes of criticism certainly don't seem appropriate for all writing.

RGH: Critics who examine work written after the wide knowledge of Freudian analysis should be wary. I feel that writers with a little humour and not necessarily malice, are likely to drop a few little misinterpretable signposts to catch Freudian critics, by way of a joke. I'm not sure that Patrick White hasn't done that.

AL: Yes. But the problem about biography comes up even when you're looking at a third person narration. There were some people at the reading yesterday who thought that Bob's poem, "Eleven Ways of Looking at a Blonde", was about me, but it isn't about me.

RGH: I might go so far as to say it was an amalgam of three blonde women I'd known, but really it was an attempt to imitate Wallace Stevens! The verse I like best, in fact, is the one addressed to the bloodless poets of Melbourne. There was a stage in the early sixties when it seemed to me that a cold Antarctic blast affected Melbourne poets. A kind of dose of metaphysics. They were writing what seemed extremely carefully constructed poems. I'd hope my poems were very well written, but not carefully constructed, if the distinction makes sense.

AL: Not really! What makes you say that?

RGH: I mean not contrived. I hope I discover the poem in writing it and don't begin with the notion of a poem that I'm going to have at the end, and the qualities that it should have.

AL: I do, sometimes. For example, I decided on the structure of "Kunapipi" well before I started writing. I even knew how many lines I wanted the thing to come to in the end.

RGH: And did it?

AL: I don't remember checking, but I think it did roughly.

EP: Is what you want to avoid the case where you alter ideas and fiddle around to get to a shape? Do shape and ideas come together most of the time?

RGH: I'm not sure. But part of the aim of our duet in reading poems about the same subject, was to get people to think. We sometimes speak as if the poem was determined by the incident from which in fact the poem *grew*. But the poem is only initiated by

the incident, and perhaps it was useful to see two different poetic temperaments responding to what was clearly the same incident.

EP: It was certainly a practical demonstration that said a great deal more vividly than theory could. Anne's "The Hips Slither" and your "Eleven Ways of Looking at a Blonde" went so well together that they actually constructed a new poem.

AL: We felt that too.

RGH: Anne's poem certainly acted as a corrective to the inflated romanticism of mine.

This interview was recorded at the Annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Townsville, 9 July 1986.

R.G. HAY

ABRASIVE SHALLOWS

An offshore cyclone had closed the beach, but brought no rain, so I walked on the point, watched the waves break on the rocks, noticed how they broke also, with an anguished roar, on the sandy bar. The furious turbulence seemed not to impress the rock: but, since there were cracks, clefts, loose boulders, it seems that in time the rock erodes. Since I was safe onshore, dry, well-fed, and warm, I could enjoy the spectacle, try a little musing in a crypto-romantic mode. Some occurrences are just so bloody poetic everyone, including ten thousand television cameramen, has had a go. Still, I learnt that the sandy bay, just by being four hundred metres of shallows, wears down the waves. No swell so haughty as to carry its identity across that wearying stretch: all break frustrated on the sandy bar, rush in a fury of white water at the distant beach, expire tamely in a line of tickling bubbles at the foot of the dunes.