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EYES ASSURED OF CERTAIN CERTAINTIES

Robert Gray, ***Certain Things.*** William Heinemann Australia, Port Melbourne, 1993. 81 pp. ISBN 0 85561 506 0

After the peak-in-Darien experience of Robert Gray's previous book, *Piano*, *Certain Things* on first reading seems low-key, less daring, less focussed, frankly slightly disappointing. In the work of so tasteful and meticulous a poet, infelicities distract: the occasional too-easy effect (the lighthouse at the end of "Travelling"); some over-burdened adjectives, mostly in the concise rhyming poems ("Dawn's weird chemical sky"); the odd dash of romanticism evidently offered without irony ("And yet your voice will still delay me by the flowering tree, / and I linger with the cold engenderings of a star"). The final poem, which leaves the poet messing about in a boat on the Hawkesbury River, seems almost symptomatic: after such resounding grand finales to past volumes as "Curriculum Vitae" and "Under the Summer Leaves," it has to be an anticlimax.

Re-reading *Certain Things* at leisure, however, and allowing time to savour the different poems properly, this reader has slowly changed his point of view. If *Creekwater Journal* (1974), *Grass Script* (1978), *The Skylight* (1983) and *Piano* (1988) still seem giant steps in a breathtaking ascent — a progress charted, with precise corrections, in the *Selected Poems* of 1990 — in *Certain Things,* perhaps, we see Gray taking just possession of a high plateau. If that is not the exponential kind of "development" some reviewers incite us to require, few other poets can be said to achieve such altitudes at all. In perspective the "infelicities" shrink to insignificance. It's only fair, too, if, after decades of admiring yachts more or less from a distance, Gray finally takes the chance (in a poem) to go sailing himself!

Certain Things demonstrates on every page that the poet's gift for imagery remains undiminished. Reading a new book by Robert Gray is like the experience of looking at the world through your windscreen after having washed it, inside and out, for the first time in five years or so. There doesn't seem to *be* a windscreen: the colours and shapes of day are suddenly there with forgotten clarity; nightlights are unrefracted. Perhaps, as he sometimes hints, Gray has a photographic memory; more likely he proceeds like a painter, sometimes sticking all day at his easel out of doors, but always constantly making sketches, as it were, assembling folios of details to draw upon later in composing finished works. Grass, trees, stars, rain, smoke, sails, girls, light — these motifs fascinate him and cohere.

Of course, as Edmund Burke pointed out long ago, it's a fallacy that poetic images create spontaneous

pictures in the reader's mind; a conscious effort of visualisation is usually required. In reading Gray's poems the impact of the imagery is, indeed, often immediate; but where it is not, the split second's undivided attention, the momentary freezing of the frame, is unfailingly rewarded. Try these images of light: "Dawn's a rubbed place / on pewter plate"; sunlight emerges from among tall eucalypts "with a censer's swing"; the South Head lighthouse "dumps flour" on workmen playing football nearby; a departing liner is "a shallow dish / piled with fruit salad of light." Gray is excellent, too, at auditory imagery, a feature of his poetry less frequently commended. The barking of a dog chasing a jogger along a beach, for example, is "distant timber thrown down."

The finished works in whose contexts these images are set include still lives, confessional letters to lovers, reports on journeys home, and accounts of long, solitary walks in high places, the last often climaxing in elated perceptions or renewed convictions which strike the softened-up reader with the force of revelation. Principally the poet of Sydney and the New South Wales north coast, Gray makes the land-, sea- and skyscapes of those places his bread and butter. In *Certain Things,* however, as in all his other books, there are also remarkable poems of quite different kinds, still unmistakably his work.

"The Life of a Chinese Poet" is a grand short story in which Gray seems to objectify a range of his personal and poetic concerns by returning, very successfully, to the milieu of his memorable early pieces, "On Climbing the Stone Gate Peak" and "To the Master, Dogen Zenji." Admirers of those poems will love the new one.

Different in a different way is "Illusions," which reads like a list of 57 debating topics. On all points Gray takes the uncompromising negative, frequently supplying notes for his chief arguments in brackets. The effect is to define the poet's rather cranky moral universe, much as medieval poets described heaven, by insisting on what *isn't* there. What Gray does believe in (as no-one familiar with his work will be surprised to read) is the perceptive present: "We are a moment, and then a moment, each of which knows a moment." Since perception brings with it the obligation of compassion, "The problem of morality is to keep alive one's feelings, while not being sunk in others' demands." The poem has the attractiveness of a collection of maxims or *Fragmente.* Every reader will take umbrage at Gray's dismissal of this or that proposition, but every reader will also heartily agree with the poet elsewhere. On the following topics, in the area of aesthetics, I'd take the negative, too:

> That having denied the artist's conscious meanings and intentions, we can then appreciate the work of art (all of whose formal decisions were based on those intentions).
>
> That art is for art's sake. (Because of its sensuousness, its care, its appreciations, art can be as Nietzsche says, "the great stimulus to life.")

> That art requires theory. (Bad art needs to justify itself with theory; good art is justified by its immediate sensory appeal.)

"Malthusian Island" — far and away the best travel poem Gray has published — takes us to Sri Lanka. Its six pages of tightly packed detail combine passages of almost useful factuality ("If you stop your taxi on a dirt track in the jungle at / night, people materialise all about, within minutes, / barefooted, and angular as wood") with imagery which evokes both an external world and a Western outsider's sense of strangeness, suffocation and threat. Carved figures on a Hindu temple "seem to writhe up there like maggots." "On all the signs, and in the soot-coloured newspapers, the / Sinhalese alphabet teems like spirochaetes." A woman brings the "sphincter-colouring" of her mouth. Near the end of the poem comes an elephant scene:

> The elephants on the road look so wilted they are each a caricature of someone slumping, in need of a cup of tea.They are led to the filthy river to bathe by young boys who are thin as sticks. You watch an elephant stepping down slowly, one corner at a time, that seems to have painful bandaged legs, and heavily stone-tipped feet; and it stands leaning forward on its trunk, and will only douse itself wearily, a throwaway gesture, with that outhouse stench, after it has been given many a shout, and clout ...

"Malthusian Island" is the outstanding poem of *Certain Things,* and one of Robert Gray's finest achievements to date. I haven't shown it yet, though, to any of my Sri Lankan friends.

What makes *Certain Things* most different from its predecessors are the intimations in several poems that, as the poet nears 50, the ecstatic moment, preserved a little longer by writing, is not always enough. For two decades, Buddhism, understood as "a detachment from wanting something from the world, which as a constant flux, a multiplicity of forces, is beyond our keeping and control," has provided a philosophical undergirding for both Gray's attitude to life and his poetic method. "My life, I imagined, must be a hymn / to the optic nerve" ("In Thin Air"). Now, he finds, "It seems that I've gone far enough / to be offered normal life." The doctrine of transmutation, that "Everything is metamorphosis, and nothing can remain," sometimes fills him with grief not only for the unfortunate, "all of those beings who are like shuffling, lumpy birds within a basket, / where they have spent or will spend their lives," but also, at moments, for himself, who has watched his image in the hearth, "where a fire / was tearing itself into pieces, with its nails and with its fists," and who has felt "a sorrow for the sea." A sense of life speeding up and passing away, and an unwillingness to dwell on "certain things" too long, may lie behind what I've felt are tiny lapses in the verse. Yet surely it is a development of the

most important kind that in this new book, in poems such as "A Testimony" and "Souvenir," for example, we have before our eyes the view of a poet of great sensitivity *working through* the personal and artistic problems of living his philosophy — problems that were less obvious when most of his moments still lay ahead. If hopelessness sometimes seems to pass too easily ("as a shift of light among leaves"), elsewhere "all that's dark" is accepted and even welcomed. In the end, I think, it has taken courage and strict self-discipline for Gray to achieve the conclusion (in both senses) of "Afternoon Walk":

> There is nothing I want back
> I have ever known, or that I lack.

Certain Things is a rare "stimulus to life." If Robert Gray sees with eyes (in Eliot's phrase) "assured of certain certainties," the excitement for the reader is that through his poetry Gray lends us those eyes. In so doing, he gives us the "things" of the world, the things of which he is fundamentally "certain," as few other poets can. In contemporary Australian poetry Gray's bountifulness in this respect is surpassed, perhaps, only by that of Les Murray — the latter, interestingly enough, a poet assured of an "otherworld.

Alexander Leggatt

SHAKESPEARE AND THE EMPIRE: BREAKING, SHIFTING, PROVOKING

Philip Mead and Marion Campbell, eds, ***Shakespeare's Books: Contemporary Cultural Politics and the Persistence of Empire***, Melbourne University Literary and Cultural Studies Series No. 1., Department of English, University of Melbourne, 1993.

This collection of essays originated in a conference held at the University of Melbourne in July 1992. As its subtitle indicates, its concern is with the uses to which Shakespeare has been put, particularly in empire-building and its aftermath. The primary focus is on Australia, but there are also essays on New Zealand, India and the United States. The core idea is that Shakespeare has been made an instrument of empire, but in the collection as a whole there are many variations on that idea, and it breaks and shifts in useful and provocative ways. It appears in its most straightforward form in Leigh Dale's "Red Plague Rampant?: Shakespeare's *Tempest* in Australia," which surveys three critical readings and one production in which the play is used to "mask or authorize colonialist authority" (99), either presenting the imperialist view directly (as in the case of Mungo MacCallum) or endorsing it covertly by aestheticising the play. It is an easy case to make — perhaps too easy — and given the readiness with which the text can be