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STEAK TARTARE EXTRA

A poem can tell a story but it is not a story. It can make music – indeed it must – but a poem is not music.

also edited five anthologies and written literary journalism and criticism. Last year, he published a memoir, *The Land I Came Through*. Last, a lyrical recollection of the country of his childhood and early writing life; the book won the Nib: CAL Waverley Library Award for Literature. "The payload of poetry is emotion," Gray says. "Poetry enters the reader through the mind; but then, if it's any good, it drops down to the body. A good poem elicits a bodily response. Emotion – or rather, a kind of emotional understanding of things – is what a poem is concerned to produce. Poetry is a form of art, of course, and the purpose of art is the education of the senses."

By how closely a poem looks and how memorably it enacts what it sees, it wakes us up to the world (and our selves within it).

"Here," Gray says and hunts up a sentence from his notebook of epigrams: "The world opens to words." The right words, he means, poetically organised. Rhythm is a large part of what makes a poem a poem (the strict metre of the sonnet, the looser rhythms of free verse). So, too, is tight, bright diction and phrasing: memorable metaphors, in particular, characterise Gray's poetry: "the sea is a glass that's brimming/ under the tap"; from the train window the poet sees "one of those bright crockery days"; rain falls with "its eyes closed"; "Bring my mother in/ from the morning," the poet worries, "she will vanish in that light."

It was Gray's lean lyric verse that first showed me this: poetry is writing from which most of the writing has been taken. What's left, if you leave the right stuff, is richer, syllable for syllable, with the sensual life of the real world with more rhythm, feeling, idea and image than is ever the case in prose. Poetry says more with less, though exactly what it says may take you a lifetime to define.

Gray writes poems in many forms, ancient and modern – haiku, prose poems, long and short free verse, quatrains – and some of them even rhyme. Gray likes rhyme; he plays with it. He's particularly drawn to imperfect rhyme (the way "valley" nearly rhymes with "early", and "hills" with "swirls" in his poem *A Pine Forest*).

Rhyme however, was one of the conventions 20th century poetry turned its back on, searching for a new poetry for a new age, just as painting and music rebelled against their traditions. You can rhyme if you want to, Gray says, but it doesn't make it a poem. Rhyme isn't and never was essential.

"There's too much historical evidence against the idea that poems have to rhyme," he says. Homer didn't rhyme. Milton didn't rhyme. The Roman poets didn't rhyme. Many Chinese poems rhyme but Japanese poems mostly don't. Other devices are more important and always were – including how a poem looks on the page and how its form dances with its content.

"Poetry is another kind of music," Gray says. "It works on you like

music, but it works deeper because it says things – because it speaks and makes literal sense. Music doesn't do that. Poetry uses words, as well as rhythms and melodies and all the rest of it." For Gray, for these reasons, poetry is the highest form of art. And the most useful.

But is it too late for poetry and its uses? Word has got out that poetry's in trouble. Most bookshops don't stock much, it's true; we're not lying about reading it, apparently, the way we used to. Some people seem frightened by what they imagine has become of it since poets stopped rhyming.

But Robert Gray is sure about the future of the poem.

"It's the novelists who should be worried," he says. "If narrative's all you've got, you're in trouble. There are plenty of new ways to tell stories – and some of them work better than books. But poetry does what only poetry can do, and it does it the only way it can be done."

What poetry does exactly, Gray doesn't say. But let me try.

A poem can tell a story but it is not a story. It can make music – indeed it must – but a poem is not music. A poem can philosophise but it is not philosophy. It may be true or it may be invented but a poem is neither fiction nor nonfiction.

Poetry is memorable, shapely utterance. More like speech than song, more like chant than chatter, it is an act of voicing. What it means is how it looks and how it sounds – and how it makes the world seem larger and richer. The voice of the poem belongs to one soul alone but it seems in its integrity to speak of, and for, us all. It seems to speak the world. "Poetry," Octavio Paz once said, "is language making love", and that's got to be a good thing to get into, if you're a species that lives on language, as we do. A poem is a sculpture of meaningful sound. It is an architecture of voice.

"In a poem everything is equal," Gray says. "And this is not true in other kinds of writing. The poet matters only as much as the idea or the moment or the place she's evoking. The comma matters as much as the word, the break as much as the line. Everything's on the same level: the tale and the telling, the style and the substance."

Unlike prose, the content is no more important than the vessel it comes in. You can't get poetry from anything but a poem – the thing you see, the thing you hear, exactly the way the poet sets it down.

Another poet who exercised a deep minimalist influence on Gray, the American William Carlos Williams, once wrote in a poem:

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.*

As long as enough people remember to want what that is, poetry is safe and so are we. And if you wanted to find your way back to the deep old news that poems tell, you might start with Robert Gray.



In the first of his columns, the renowned writer and filmmaker reports on Berlinale, the famous film festival.

I asked my Berlin taxi driver today why everyone speaks English here. "Because it is the language of the victor," he replied. For many reasons, Berlin is now one of the most exciting cities in the world. On the surface it is also the most politically correct city, where my hotel notes, "pets are welcome and we are gay friendly". Culturally and historically the place is jumping out of its skin.

The current film festival or Berlinale (budget \$25 million) is showing 400 films in 10 days. Museums are packed, even in the snow. Restaurants of every ilk are buzzing although the Berlin specialty, the currywurst, which is a bratwurst, covered in tomato sauce and sprinkled with curry powder may be the reason to start World War III. One cafe, called "November 9th" (named after the day the Berlin Wall came down) has former East Berlin food served on Mondays: cabbage soup, bread and cheese, sausages served with noodles and tomato sauce.

Third Reich tours compete with Cold War tours and locations overlap. Check Point Charlie is moments away from former SS headquarters featuring a terrifying exhibition called *The Topography of Terror*. The city, bombed to rubble in 1945 then cut in two, has been aggressively restored since the wall came down in 1989. Meanwhile, the 60-year-old smorgasbord film festival is satiating the outsized Berlin hunger for films of every genre: screenings are packed.

In retro-cabaret, beautiful women box in high heels and play Beethoven, recalling the Weimar Republic. The festival films, with some conventional pandering to Hollywood and the politically correct nod to poor cousin "independent" cinema, hasn't really blown any minds so far. But so what, it brings \$100 million into the city.

Roman Polanski's film *The Ghost Writer* based on the bestseller by Robert Harris, got more attention for its director being imprisoned than for the film itself. However, a developing Berlin conspiracy theory is stimulated by the film's content: did Tony Blair trigger Polanski's arrest as a way of attempting to derail the film, which clearly portrays a Blair-like prime minister as an American toady and disgrace to his country? Berlin conspiracy theorists point to Blair's lucrative Swiss contracts and Zurich establishment connections. The rapier thrusts from Harris's scenario, which he describes as now morphing into "documentary" are harsh indeed.

But there was one powerful documentary, *Fritz Bauer – Death by Installments* by Berliner Ilona Zink, which encapsulates some of the conflicts beneath the surface in Germany. Bauer, a dedicated anti-Nazi, started some of the most important trials in modern German history. Witnesses and friends found his death suspicious.

The film outlines how he was found dead in his bath in 1968, after many victories, including investigating the capture of Adolf Eichmann by Telmo Mosse and where to find him in Argentina, spearheading the post-World War II trials of Nazi Auschwitz criminals, legally reinstating the reputation of anti-Hitler plotters of July 20, 1944, by getting treason charges removed, and relentlessly giving Nazis sleepless nights.

Startlingly, until about 1968, the German infrastructure and civil service was riddled with former Nazis. Bauer was blocked and fought at every turn, only now being appreciated as a hero. Bauer proved that not all Germans had amnesia. The film is a shocking revelation. Somehow Berlin transforms history into a living present.

Every German family is still dealing with Nazi ghosts and involvement but with natural ageing and dying of the Nazi here, there is a surge of information and openness only now being acknowledged. Scores of books, films and memoirs about Hitler fill bookshops with Nazi kitsch.

The banality of evil is alive and well. Some of the detail is now excruciating with, for example, endless investigations of whether Hitler ever had sex with Eva Braun, the subject of a new biography released this week. Per Hitler's secretary one of Hitler's favourite "jokes" was that because "lipstick is made in the sewers of Paris, men who kiss women have constant stomach problems". With this kind of wit, obviously Der Fuhrer was great fun to be around.

On Sunday ufaFabrik, the international centre for culture and ecology, held an event honouring Carl Laemmle. He is the German who founded Universal Studios and modern Hollywood, with a single abstract epiphany. Watching people leave a nickelodeon in Chicago in 1906, he thought: "They go into that shop, pay money, and leave with nothing. That is the business I am getting into." I helped the event by securing copies of his *Hawatha* (1909) and *King of Jazz* (1930). Krautrock star Manuel Gotsching composed a new score for *Hawatha*.

The Berlinale is featuring more Nazi kitsch called *Jud Suss – Film ohne Gewissen*, about the making of the notorious *Veit Harlan* propaganda film. Most younger Berliners like *Inglourious Basterds* which was recently shown at Humboldt (Berlin) University. The university, which expelled the Jewish students and faculty in 1933, was the location of the Nazi burning of the books the same year. One of the students was my own father, Georges Mora, and one of the faculty was Albert Einstein.

As an emotional footnote, the university will welcome my family back with a screening of my film *Svastika* later in the year. Walking through the university grounds, and seeing a monument of empty shelves, I was struck by the fact that I was the first member of my family to return since the Nazis expelled my father.

Heinrich Heine in 1821 wrote prophetically: "Where they burn books, they will ultimately also burn people."

■ Filmmaker and artist Philippe Mora starts his new series *Steak Tartare in Extra today*. Mora, born in Paris and raised in Melbourne, has had a renowned international career.

He is an award-winning writer, director and producer who has made more than 30 films, including *Swastika*, *Brother Can You Spare A Dime*, *Mad Dog Morgan*, *Death of a Soldier* and *Telling*.

He is a voting member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences and is currently preparing two feature films, *The God Project* and *Dali*.

Mora will give readers an inside interpretation of his artistic world in Hollywood – its politics, glamour and humour.

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