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Interview with Jack Gilbert

Robert Firth

Kevin Goodan

Jack Gilbert

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Robert Firth and Kevin Goodan

DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN: AN INTERVIEW WITH JACK GILBERT

March 8, 1997

KG: In the poem “Lovers” you speak about those who call themselves passionate and how hollow their words ring. It reminds me of the current state of poetry in America. Looking at the back blurbs on a lot of books, one reads that so and so is one of the great poets writing in America. It brings to mind the amount of anemic and mediocre poetry being produced in the present age.

Well, first off, you have to accept the fact that in all the arts in all times, mediocre is not a bad word. It means average. You can’t expect to find lots and lots of great painters or lots and lots of great dancers. If you look at the world of almost any period, there’s a small group of people trying to push for something more significant, or special, or new. And the men think they are passionate. They’re not…what did you say, hollow? That’s what they think their passion is. I was telling somebody about one of the times I was living in Athens, and there was a young woman there who had gotten involved with a gypsy. “I’ve got a problem,” she said, “He is so passionate that he crushes my lips, and since we see each other fairly often, there isn’t time for them to heal. And now they’re starting to turn purple. I don’t want to hurt his feelings. I don’t know what to do.” So I talked with her a bit. She came back two or three days later, and she was just all smiles. She said, “I did it just like you said. I said to him, ‘Can I kiss you?’ And he said sure. And I kissed him. He stepped back and his eyes were very large and he said, ‘I didn’t know it could be soft.’” I don’t think these men are not nice people. A lot of them really don’t know that what they call passionate is excitement. So I don’t want to sneer at them, though the poem’s kind of a jokey poem. Anyhow, that’s not an answer. I just want to make the point
that I’m not sneering at men, saying, “Yeah, but I’m really good at it.” I really understand them.

RF: It reminds me of something that I was reading in that interview [Lish, Genesis West, 1962] where you talk about the sanitizing of human nakedness and love-making and how it is kind of frightening and dirty. It’s not what it’s often presented as in popular media.

I guess I would endorse the dirtiness. The danger is that they sanitized it. It’s OKAY to have intercourse, as they say. It’s healthy, and you can lose weight. That’s not what true sexuality is about. There is a strangeness and a darkness. I don’t mean a sickness. But a real darkness. A “disproportionateness” to it.

RF: How about that as a subject for poetry? Do you think that’s, in a sense, a subject that speaks of some mystery that we’re afraid of...

I don’t know about the mystery and being afraid of it, but I think it is one of the major subjects. Not just love and gentleness and caring about the woman and such, but it’s one of the three important accesses of the world, as far as I’m concerned. Along with God and romantic love and sex, there’s almost nothing of that scale. I’m not talking about running to the corners as fast as you can go because there’s a spurt of pleasure at the end. I mean darkness in the sexuality, as a way of arriving someplace. The pleasure is nice, but that’s not what’s important. What’s important is where you can get to. That’s why I don’t want it to be moderate or reasonable or hygienic or endorsed. I want it to be something sort of hidden and kind of scary. I don’t mean weird. That’s boring. If one can be more excited by making love while the New York Times is burning in the corner, you know, I don’t mind if they don’t hurt anybody. Anything that helps them to get there.

KG: Would you say that your idea of sexuality, of intimacy, has a sort of duende to it?

Absolutely! Not the kind of duende that’s spectacular or
theatrical. But the thing itself, which is transcendent. That's why I think it was partially so often present when we still had romantic love—true romantic love—before we all became reasonable or lustful. I mean, they both are destructive. Lustful meaning just the rush. But the insides of the experience are in some ways duende or transformation, or magical. You go someplace else. It's not just riding a roller coaster for thrills. It's so much involved with what romantic love is. It is extremely difficult to have a romantic love without the body and the body's appetites. You could have decent agape, friendship, tenderness... all those things, and call it love. But if you're talking about true romantic love, it's very hard to think of it without that means of passing over, or as they say for orgasm on the West Coast, to get over. Well, it is like that. You get over. You pass beyond. That's why all these reasonable books on sexuality are like, like what... It's like talking about poetry. They codify it. They quantify it. They regularize it. And it's good poetry if you've mastered the ceasura, and the metrics are good.

**KG: Do you see this sort of sanitizing in poetry and sexuality as basically being a culture-wide happening in American society?**

You know what I really think. I think the way they see it and the way people are is normal. What I'm talking about is abnormal. Just like classical ballet is abnormal, or liking hot peppers is abnormal. Democracy is abnormal. There's no place in the world that democracy is in genes or molecular something. The guy who thought of democracy was a fanatic—a visionary. Some crazy came down from the mountain and said “You're as important as the pharaoh,” and everybody laughed because that's clearly unreasonable. And I think all of this is due to the fact that we've misappropriated our apparatus. Otherwise, how could you get to a Bach fugue? It's not natural. It's like people living under a tyrant have to learn to notice the nuances of what their keeper's mood is for that day and when to and when not to ask for something. We have to have that kind of sense of tone. But, gee, evolution never cared whether we listened to Bach. We had to learn grunts and groans in order to say “The
elephant over there." And we turn it into poetry, which is totally unnatural. It's the very quintessence of poetry that it goes against the grain. Poetry is like a man watching two people waltz across the floor, and the man says, "What an inefficient way to travel." That's what poetry is like.

RF: Do you think that poetry then serves a kind of progressive purpose in that regard, that it allows us to evolve to higher organizations?

I'm not sure. You can make cases for the fact that it makes it harder to survive. You get complicated. Like I said to someone the other day, the Bible says he who increases knowledge, increases sorrow. So poetry can be dangerous. But I think it's one of the very last hopes to keep this species valuable. We're losing romantic love. We're losing the kind of sexuality I was talking about, which is a major invention: the erotic, a huge invention. Just like romantic love is an invention, it's not natural. Lust is natural. Obsession is natural. Desire for power over the woman is natural. That's what evolution gave us. It's the old crocodile brain in the back of our heads. Poetry is about the new brain—what I think about as the Athenian brain in the front of the head. And in that place, all that really practically matters is located. In that sense, we're really in danger of the death of feeling. It's like the poem you asked about; you think you're erotic because you're lustful. People think that they're emotional because they get angry a lot or they fight a lot or they're unhappy. And all of those are the old brain. If we want a civilization that matters, there has to be something to keep the Athenian brain alive. Where else do you turn for a moral of your feelings? Most of us don't grow up in a family with grandparents anymore. Poetry and the novel and good movies are almost the only things left where we're going to get it. I don't think we can get it much from traditional values. What poetry does and the novel does and films and some of the theater do is enable you to experience the good, experience God, experience love. And once you have an image of it, a felt image, not a prescribed image or a logically delineated picture of the
thing, then you can become that thing. You can find it in
yourself. But it’s very, very difficult. It’s like asking people,
“Where is your liver? Where is your kidney?” They don’t know,
because they’ve never seen them. They really don’t know. Do
you know where your kidneys are?

KG: Not really.

That seems crazy. We’ve been with them for a long time. The
same thing with all the major emotions. People think we’re
just born naturally kind and warm and all those things. But
you look around and after the twenties start to wane, something
goes out of people. Thank God some people are still kind. But
their kindness is a kind of almost congeniality. It’s not measured.
It’s not monumental capacity. And that’s why the arts are so
tremendously important. Just like if you learn to play a musical
instrument, you can do mathematics better because it wakes
up parts of your brain. It’s not literally one-to-one, but those
aspects of the brain that stimulate neural networks allow you
to appropriate that capacity to do other things: to think, to
perceive the music of poetry or the music of music (which is a
different thing than music of poetry). I think poetry is not an
entertainment. If it is just an entertainment, like it makes you
laugh, it makes you feel good or looks beautiful, it’s so finely
made, it’s intricate, obeys all the rules, it makes you feel
sentiment because it reminds you of what you were like when
you were a child and you were sitting on the barn roof throwing
stones at the geese. There is that shock of recognition which is
very pleasant. But it’s not the major emotions. Nostalgia is
fine, but it’s not enough for adult life. And without the arts,
where are you going to get it from? You can’t get it from
politicians. A lot of people can’t get it from their faith anymore.
What, then, are you going to do if you don’t have the arts?
Engineering will never teach it to you. Science is not meant
for that. You can’t ask science about sex. Scientists will tell you,
“Well, at this point of excitation the woman’s back and torso
will flush and her respiration will do this and that.” Take that
to bed with you, and get anything out of it. They are describing
symptoms, but there’s not understanding.
KG: You speak of romantic love being an invention...

It is! According to the scholars it was unknown in the classical times of Greek and Rome.

KG: When did it become invented?

Twelfth century. By the Troubadours. Arnaut Daniel and those people.

KG: When do you think adult love was invented?

Same time. Except that adult love, as I mean it, is something that gets beyond the impossible love. Most of the Troubadour’s love was for the unattainable woman. The performance of love was that she would give you a quest and you’d go out and come back with a certain kind of a rug or golden fleece, or something. But you couldn’t have any contact with her because it would cause such jealousy. Even if the shadow man was away from the place, you’ve got fifty soldiers without wives in that castle, and if she gives her favor to one, all hell will break loose. So you have this kind of theoretical romance. That was a step toward the thing that we have. But we’ve perfected it. We’ve discovered it’s like mathematics. It never existed until it exists. And then it really exists. Two plus two never equaled four until somebody said that there was such a thing. Then you could create all of mathematics. Or the discovery of the concept of zero, which was fairly late. The Greeks didn’t have a concept of zero. We have to have things that will be irrational, and that’s why we have to have the arts. You can’t have jokes among rational people, because jokes are not rational. Rational jokes are failed jokes. So you have to have the irrationality of the artist to have the ability to have visions. Or like quantum mechanics. You go from here to there and you can’t explain how you got there. That’s what the danger of criticism is for literature. They explain literature but don’t experience literature. Because their training is all in Ph.D. programs, they have learned to look not at the literature but the way of talking about the literature.
KG: Do you feel that this is a problem in creative writing programs as well?

Well, so many of the creative writers came from graduate school, and what I'm talking about is almost impossible to teach. You can't qualify it. You're not going to find many teachers who can do it, because that requires a gifted teacher. There are not a lot of them. Just like there aren't a lot of really gifted poets—aren't a lot of gifted anything. So if you have hundreds of workshops, the chances of having 10% of them with teachers who really understand what they're teaching—you are lucky. And because most poets, the good ones, are basically intuitive, they have to find a kind of program to talk about the poems with, because what they do is just do it. They don't know how, or where that image came from. It came. Or the novelist can't tell you why suddenly the people came alive. But he can make them come alive. He doesn't know how it's done. So we've produced a kind of workshop that's not really about writing poems but repairing poems. Because you can qualify that. You can say, "You have to have the active voice instead of the passive voice. You have to have the line breaks a certain way." Workshops, almost all the ones I've been in, teach about the surface of the poem, the neatness of the poem, the tooling of the poem. But, as I said, you know if you have a poem that is messed up, and you say, "What is good about the poem?" everyone stares at you. They don't notice that a good poem's not necessarily the well-made poem and a messed up poem is not necessarily a bad poem. Look at Emily Dickinson. Every kind of educated person she showed her poems to and wanted advice from all wanted to correct her poetry. Thank God they failed. That's the way people are when confronted by somebody like Shakespeare or Rimbaud, because everybody wants a kind of systematic way of evaluating something. I once worked in Sausalito as a handy man at an antique shop. The owner had some wonderful ancient Chinese bronzes. I asked him, "Well, how do you know if they are good or not because there's been so much fake Chinese art produced; it's been a tradition in China?" And he said, "I've got another friend, an old Chinese
gentleman. I call him up and I ask if I can come for tea. He says, 'Sure.' And I go there. As I come in, I hand him the piece I'm interested in. He puts it down on the table and he goes and gets the tea. He comes back and we talk. And sometimes he'll reach over and touch the thing, look at it, pick it up, and he won't say anything about it until I'm leaving. As I'm leaving, he will say just, 'It's a good one' or 'It's not a good one.' What interests me is how many masterpieces you have to have held in your hand in order to tell the difference. That's what's going wrong with teaching literature, not just poetry—literature in general. They're evaluated rationally. The novel is taught as finding out what the symbols mean, or this man was influenced by that man, and in such and such a year, he started the such and such group, wherever. It's understandable why a person trained from a Ph.D. program is like that. When I was in the Ph.D. program at Berkeley, they were quite honest. They'd say to me, "You're never going to make it because you fall in love with the writers and their work. You can't get a Ph.D. that way. You have to fall in love with the bibliography and the scholarly issues. Nobody will ever ask you if you think Dickens is good. Ever." Well, that's crazy. What's the purpose of it except to teach more scholars? There should be ways of teaching scholars. I love criticism. But you won't learn to love books that way. You learn to love books wrongly. Like I was saying about Oscar Wilde, there are two ways to hate poetry; one is to like it rationally. That's what I'm really scared of. I love workshops. I think anybody who cares about poetry should take workshops, but often you're trained to see details. You don't see the poem. You don't experience the poem, you don't see it as a work of art. You see it as something like cosmetics. Make it look presentable. Trim its hair. Get it a different color shirt. That's not about the poem. Those are some of the means the poet needs to use in order to bring you what's inside the poem.

RF: Do you think, then, it is like a failure or a fear of actually talking about the content of a poem rather than these formulaic aspects, that there is an aversion to talking about subjects that
we don’t have these kinds of answers or predicted systems to describe?

There is a widespread discomfort with feeling now to the point in post-modern circles you’re not even supposed to be sincere. And you sure as hell aren’t supposed to talk about your heart. I go around these people, and the students are starving. It sounds boastful, but people cry at my readings. Now that is not my motive. I don’t want to do that. I want to move them. I want to connect with the experience of emotion—not just my emotions but emotions in general. And they can’t explain it, but sometimes after we talk, they say it is because I take life so seriously. And people I know don’t do that. It’s not a kind of fashion. They roll their eyes or they say, “Oh, that’s adolescent.” You know, I don’t want to hear any more about that kind of love… “That’s adolescent.” That’s crazy!

RF: Do you think there’s some widespread cultural breakdown in our society, or fear that we don’t know where there is to get to? We don’t know where the heart lives? Where the soul lives?

I’m not going to blame anybody. There are a lot of causes. Just like I think a lot of poetry has been destroyed because it was profitable. When money came into poetry, poetry changed enormously. I always wished that poetry would fail, so only the lovers of poetry would be left. Now people in workshops that I deal with very often are not really there to become better writers. They’re there for a career. And a lot of them are in the MFA programs, and they want to have their poems polished so they can submit them—so they can get the mistakes out and make it look more perfect. But if you want to talk about poetry, what the nature of poetry is, people get very restless and look at each other because they haven’t been prepared for that. Nobody’s talked about that. Most have been talked about consciously and academically and reasonably and professionally. But they’re not talking about essence. They’re not talking about the fact that a poem is a vehicle of feeling. And if it’s not that, it’s a minor art. I mean it’s handsome. The traditionalists, they’re beautiful craftsmen. Richard… what is his name?
KG: Wilbur?

Wilbur is really a remarkably good craftsman. And if that's what you want, if you want something to put on your mantelpiece, or you've had dinner and you want to sit down to have a beauty experience, he's wonderful. But if you want somebody who will change your heart, or your life...Well, I am not going to be like Winters, scolding the poets. I'm busy with my life. I don't want to teach anybody to reform, that's their business. But I regret what's happened. Because I love workshops so much and am conscious of how much good they can do, I'm nervous of where they're ending up. They're producing poetry that doesn't have to be written. I mean if people want it as a hobby, that's one thing. We can't afford to have poets who are willing to settle for that, or the theoretical things to be deconstructed. That's really frightening.

RF: Do you think it's too much like therapy almost, because of the MFA programs?

I think it's academicism. When you think about how they talk about poetry, they talk about it in terms of its place in the canon, or as I said before, the influences or the dates, or the biography. But they don't get to the poetry of the poetry—not the information or the analysis of the poetry, but the poetry itself. And they don't notice. It's not because they're bad or criminal. It used to be they were often lazy. They'd just take the money and run. Some still do, of course. And I think, as a matter of fact, it goes back to what I said about money. I think money had just turned everybody in the wrong direction. Journalism is terribly dangerous to artists. Do you realize how much time it takes to be famous? How many dinners you have to go to? How many places you have to teach? How many awards you have to receive? How many prizes you have to judge? How much socializing you have to do? Horse trading?

KG: So, getting back to the idea of true sentiment, in your poetry you talk a lot about Pittsburgh...

Yes.
KG: I'm wondering what your sentiment of place is. Why are you attached to Pittsburgh?

Because of its magnitude. Because I grew up in size. There are three rivers running through the middle of the city. The population is Slavs and Poles and Turks and Jews and such, who just came over to be laborers. You know it destroys almost everybody, the pressure of growing up in Pittsburgh. The weather is tough, and also grand. With the summer rainstorms and the old houses and the setting, it's one of the greatest situations for a city any place in the world. But it was something about the city that was big. I suppose you could just see it as clumsily big and being drunken and all those things, but it wasn't that that got me. I lived almost in the good section when I was a kid and I'd walk all night through the city and there would be these grand houses. Just to conceive that you would build a house like that was a sense of scale. I lived near the park, and I'd go in and listen to the lions at night and the things moving around. I guess one of the dangers is not that you grow up in poverty. Maybe the danger is growing up in ease. Everything is comfortable and safe in most neighborhoods, despite the television. It's nice that people have enough to feed their children, and they work without going down in the coal mines or in steel mills. But that sense of order and decency may be antithetical to great poetry.

RF: I think it's in "Searching for Pittsburgh" where you say something like "only Pittsburgh can be greater than Pittsburgh." Are you talking about that sense of proportion—that to make great art and great poetry you have to have a sense of something being greater than itself?

I didn't have that because there wasn't any poetry. You don't realize what it used to be like. I searched all of Pittsburgh for somebody who had written a book. I couldn't find one in all of my adolescence. It was a primitive place. It was the dark ages. It was not a cultured place. It wasn't that you get to know about the arts, but somehow you get a sense of things having a weight, having duende, not consciously, but the great locomotives, as
it says in the poem, drive through the rain at night and the sound the whistles used to make on trains. Now they have imitation whistles. But those old whistles grow something in you. And growing up with the black and white movies of those times. You sit in the dark looking at that woman looking out at you, and her face is sixteen feet high and luminous. And all the novels you read and popular music—it's always about love. People scorn it, but there is something in the best of Sinatra that is vital—not just sentimental and silly. It's grand!

KG: Would you say that bigness went with you to Greece?

There's no way I can get away from it. It's built into me. I lived in Paris for three years. I left because it didn't have duende. It's a wonderful city. It's beautiful. I'm glad I lived there, but it didn't have duende. I moved to dirty London.

RF: Did you find duende in London?

Yeah. Those dark rainy days.

RF: When we were talking about duende in the class, people were saying an English translation might be along the lines of “soul.” What about the idea of tragedy? Is there something that makes duende so involved with life and death and the intractableness of it?

Death and tragedy is duende. One of the things that derives from it is the bullring and the death unfortunately. The cape and the grace, that's not duende.

KG: A friend of mine in France went to a bullfight to watch a very young matador. There's an article about him in The New Yorker, or somewhere. Anyhow, the matador lives in his mother's house, has a bed in his room, and that's it. At night, he dreams about the bulls, and the bulls talk to him. When he goes into the ring, he doesn't shy away from the bull. He's not into the big pompous, elegant movements. But, of course, that is part of the ritual. When the bullfight began, my friend said the crowd was so quiet you could hear the bull rub against his clothes, and at
the end of the bullfight, when it was time for the bull to die, the bull lifted its nose towards him, and the matador went over and put the bull’s head in his lap and was brushing the hair on the forehead.

That’s quality duende. You know it’s so dangerous because you can do that deliberately. That makes great copy. You can make a fortune doing that. It’s because of the Lorca thing. It’s so hard to keep focus on what it really is. And I’ve read that bullfighters really believe they have to have love for the bull, that they’re there together. I think Lorca even touches on that. There’s a little thing I heard about the bullfight that I liked, which was the first thing a bull does when he comes out into the arena is find his home. You can’t tell why. Each one will do it differently. He will go and stand in that place and will come out of there to deal with the toreador or the matador. He will get hurt and tired, and he will go back to his house. I love the idea of that invisible house.

KG: Would that invisible house be something like Pittsburgh for you?

It’s complicated. You have a capacity for feeling when you’re young that you don’t have later. I remember quiet pleasure in my childhood. It wasn’t pretty or anything, but my memories are of a certain quality of emotional life. I prefer my emotional life now and in the in-between times. It’s not just then or here. It’s then, and then there’s being with Linda Gregg, and then there’s living the period of ten years after Michiko’s death alone, being silent. That was a wonderful time. There are different times, and there are different kinds of having lived. Matter of fact, now what I’m going to do is see if there is another time for me to live. It’s difficult because it’s too easy. Because you have a little money, a little reputation and such. You don’t have to fight anything. I’m very nostalgic. Not because it’s colorful, but over things like trying to sleep in the middle of winter at 2:00 in the morning. I’d been trying to sleep on this park bench behind the statue of Christopher Columbus. I was shaking so hard from the cold that I was making noise. I had to get up,
and I walked down to the old Lavarno, where, during the earlier evening, the whores would be. But it was always so cold. And I would just have to keep moving. About five in the morning, they would start up the great cauldrons in these little tiny kitchens for the fishermen who would go out at dawn, and they'd be filled with some kind of liquid with big chunks of tripe. And they also would make hot chocolate. I would buy a bowl of hot chocolate and I'd be so cold, I would hold it in my hands and my hands would get warm and I would drink it out of the bowl. Tears would be running down my face from pleasure. Now I'm not trying to sell poverty to people. It works for me.

RF: You end one of your poems with a line that says “the two of you.”

Yeah, that's the feeling. If you really have a chance to live your lives—I'm sure part of it's already happened for you—you're different people at different times. I miss the person I was when I was with Michiko. I like the person I am now, but I was even nicer—a nicer mix of her temperament and my temperament. When I'm alone and I'm silent, living in those conditions upon a mountain or something, it's silent, but it's a muscular silence and a muscular being alone. That's why I love that. I love being alone. Almost as much as I love being married. I recommend trying it in some parts of your lives.

RF: What about you spending time in Greece? Do you feel that when you go there you are communicating, relating?

No, I don't relate to Greece. I don't try. I don't make any pretense of learning Greek. I use Greece. I go to Greece for the light that Aristotle saw. I go because, as Linda [Gregg] once said, there's a sense of the gods in the earth in Greece. I don't penetrate the culture. I don't respect the culture in that sense. I just use it—the sounds in the night, the quality of the stars, going up and down the mountain, pulling water from the well.

RF: Do you believe that, as a poet coming out of a European
Judeo-Christian tradition, you are accessing some kind of memory there?

No, not at all. The thing about Greece for me is the fact that when I walk around, I'm walking in the same water that the great dramatists walked in when they were seventeen years old. It's still the same water, the same color. I don't feel any attachment to the past. I feel an attachment to the reality of the present—that things are not metaphorical, that you can almost feel the absoluteness of being.

RF: So, it almost has more to do with the light and the water that affected Aristotle or Euripides—that you're participating in the same elements that they participated in?

Well, that's it, but that's a minor thing for me. The major thing for me is feeling myself pull up the bucket—because they don't have a windlass—they just pull it up like in ancient times. While the dawn is beginning, I can feel the difference between morning and night—I notice in between morning and night. I feel the weight of the water when I look down, and I see the funny quality of the water in the bucket being different than the water outside the bucket. And things, the animals, the smell of the fields. I'm almost able to touch reality, and that's hard nowadays. But I don't go to write poems about it. I write poems because I write poems. I don't go there for a topic or to be colorful or have a romantic life.

RF: What do you think it is about Greece that is closer, maybe, to the real than America?

The absoluteness of it. Everything is itself. The stone is rock. The water is wet. The dead goat hanging from the tree, half an hour ago, was something living. That's what I mean about almost touching reality—not to impress anybody, or get some books out of it. It's hard to keep hold of reality—everything is something else. You don't have to process it. You don't have to be intelligent about it. You don't have to make it better.