Rosemary Dobson

‘I know that in poetry and painting my own innate preference is for order, discipline, spareness, and reserve, in preference to their opposites.’

(‘Poetry and Painting: A Personal View’ Quadrant Nov 1977 p.72)

‘It is this silence in nature that again and again dominates the mood of Crooke’s paintings. It is the attentiveness and receptiveness that pervades Italian depictions of the Annunciation. It is, above all, a silence that creates its own tensions.’

(Focus on Ray Crooke, UQP 1971, p.23)

‘The painter has arrested in time the objects or action of his painting. James McAuley wrote, in The Grammar of the Real: “Art defeats time by arresting things within its still duration. But the triumph of art is at a price: what it rescues – and gives back to us as an image of beauty or truth or fulfilment – has been taken out of life; though we have it, we have it only in the mode of art, not in actuality.” … Such reflections, and the irony with which they can be explored, have always obsessed me.’

(Southerly, 1, 1980, 4-5)

‘For my part, I had, and have, a very strong belief in translation as a means of cross-pollinating literature, and furthering the exchange of cultures …It may be remarked that in my own poetry I have ‘taken’ from European literature and art. All poets, however, ‘take’ to some degree from other cultures, other languages. The importance of poetry shared and, as with all the other arts, as a means of communication between peoples – these are convictions I hold to very firmly.’

(‘Imitations and Versions of Russian Poetry’ ALS May 1983 p.97)

Lecture notes:

Dobson’s poetry is not as simple as it appears: close reading of “Cock Crow” to show how it plays out various levels of “between” – on the bridge between house and town; between generations; between responsibility and freedom; between being and non-being. Biblical allusion to Peter denying Christ; most readings simplify by identifying speaker with Peter. Note that Luke’s gospel is unique: “The Lord turned and looked at Peter.” (Luke 22:61) Speaker is between Christ and Peter: denied and denying. Note “And I that stood between denied” – at the end of line, “denied” is able to operate as at once passive and active and so generate two levels of meaning.

In “The Mirror” Dobson has the artist say:

I paint reflection in a glass.
Who look on Truth with mortal sight
Are blinded in its blaze of light.

Dobson known for what she calls fugitive annunciations, sideways glances. “The Bystander” as an early articulation of this. You cannot look face on: art does not come fully into presence, there is always that other that is not caught. This is also explored in “Over the Frontier”, where art is shown as something that is always crossing a
border between being and non-being, where a poem that is speaks also of a poem that is not yet. This may help explain why Dobson establishes her reputation with poems based on Renaissance paintings and does not quite take on the nationalist preoccupations of her generation.

First public collection *In a Convex Mirror* published in 1944, the year of Ern Malley, Archibald controversy. Dobson’s position on hoax – she recognised the need for experiment but declared her own preference for spareness, discipline, order.

Painting poems. Very often when poets write of paintings they manage little more than description (the poems become poor cousins). Dobson’s achievement: she controls perspective, manipulating the verbal line so that it corresponds to the visual line of the painting. You look at the poem in a manner that correlates with how you might look at the painting. Dobson studied design under artist Thea Proctor, learning from her how to create a “discipline of line”. In “The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian” eg poem is set up as if it were painting; reader guided through a series of perceptions: the foreground, where there is a coat on the ground, the archer who cuts the foreground, the stream, the hill, the village and, beyond, the sky where ‘angels throng’. Movement of the eye – poem refers to ‘the travelling glance’.

“The Bystander” – Auden’s “Musee des Beaux Arts”, Breughel’s “The Fall of Icarus” (figure walks up centre of painting and away from the mythic moment – Icarus just an ankle poking out of the water; another of Dobson’s fugitive annunciations). Poem is a composite of paintings conveying this theme.

“Child with a Cockatoo” shows how a painting about another missed moment can become an insight into how the unknown constitutes knowledge and identity, in particular national identity. As is often the case with a Dobson poem, it is easy to get at the surface, the story of the little girl given a cockatoo so that she will behave while her portrait is painted, the story of the cockatoo saved at sea, then sold in England, where no one realises that it comes from and is a sign of the great south land. It is a poem that plays on the idea of “a sign unread”.

Things to consider: how the image of the receipt introduces the question of possession. The portrait does and does not belong to its owner; physical possession does not guarantee understanding (and art is only possessed to the degree that it is understood?) Potentially an analogy with nation. Lady Anne, subject of portrait, is represented as possessed – by father, painting and even speaker; yet she is also represented as a figure of elusiveness. She is called “A small, grave child, dark-eyed” and this associates her with the cockatoo and with the unknown land he makes present in the poem/painting. See how her eyes move into the description of cockatoo and land:

The wise, harsh bird – as old and wise as Time

Whose well-dark eyes the wonder kept and closed.
So many years to come and still, he knew,
Brooded that great, dark island continent
Terra Australis.
Following the movement in “Over the Frontier”, keeps Australia between being and non-being, known and unknown, at time when there was preoccupation with national identity.

Just as the speaker of “The Mirror” says not to look straight at Truth, there is a saying that one should not look at Death. Dobson’s poetry comes close, from early poem like “One Section” to later ones like “Being Called For” and “The Almond Tree in the King James Version”.

“One Section” is a kind of ‘ages of woman’ allegory, using one of the most traditional of metaphors for life, the journey. It may represent a tram ride up William Street, but it is also like a panel of paintings depicting scenes from a life. Each scene is composed within a doorway, like a frame, and each frame contains a figure arrested in time – contains, but does not hold. Each figure is also moving beyond its frame, becoming involved with the other figures, so breaking its frame and performing what Dobson describes as “continuance”, art’s capacity to reach across time through consciousness. But if it is about art, it is also about death. Stanza one gives us the child, the potential, where the cat’s back is “arched to a query”; so much is unknown and possible at this stage. Stanza 2 gives us the girl on the edge of romance and sexual maturity. Stanza 3 gives us the women – and the bellying curtain may signal pregnancy and motherhood. And in stanza 4 death becomes a bystander – note that this figure is introduced as a question, so does not assume full presence. Death is present as an empty space. In the final stanza, houses are translated into bodies – the wind ‘blowing outside from inside’ suggests loss of breath, the ‘bulb removed from the socket’ loss of sight, and the ‘Vacancy notice swinging loose from the window’ the deserted body. As with ‘In a Strange House’ and ‘Being Called For’, ‘One Section’ is a parable about becoming familiar with the premonitions, recognitions and acceptances by which the body makes its way to death. This is, at least in Dobson’s work, not a process of abstracting and absolutising the event of death, but a process of familiarisation with the body.

If time, interactive: at what point do you realise “In a Strange House” is not just about a house?

Relational poetic of “Over the Frontier” and sense of death influence her political poetry, eg “Cultural Meeting” and “Folding the Sheets”, and “The Continuance of Poetry”.

“Cultural Meeting”. The title indicates two meetings: a meeting of some committee addressed by a writer in exile who “speaks for those forgotten in camps and prisons” (CP 162); a cross-cultural meeting which occurs when the speaker, entering the writer’s story and dwelling in his language and imagery, recognises the lack in his being, the reason why “He ate as one whose hunger would never be filled.” (CP 163) Dobson’s poetic is also relational. In her sequence, “The Continuance of Poetry”, written to commemorate David Campbell and the work they did together translating Russian poetry, she makes translation itself a metaphor, speaking of poetry as if it were a conversation between cultures. In one of the poems from the sequence, “Translations Under the Trees”, translation becomes a metaphor for culture itself, a metaphor used to imply that arts such as painting and poetry can cross borders and change imaginations, can make another language:
Poems blow away like pollen,
Find distant destinations,
Can seed new songs
In another language. (CP 185)

In another poem, “Poems of the River Wang”, she recalls Wang Wei and P’ei Ti sharing the possibilities of poetry:

Two poets walking together
May pause suddenly and say,
Will this be your poem, or mine?

May offer courteously,
Please take it. No, you first. (CP 186)

Dobson often uses metaphors of continuance, cross-pollination, and conversation to convey her belief in the capacity of art and painting to transform understanding.

How such metaphors might inform her poetics of justice can be glimpsed in the wonderful poem, “Folding The Sheets”, which embodies the give and take, the balance, of mutual understanding. All it does is draw a picture of women folding sheets, but because of Dobson’s characteristic delicacy, this scene becomes an example of what she calls Morandi’s “metaphysics of the common object” and, almost imperceptibly, an allegory of world peace. The women are matching corners of sheets washed in Burma, Lapland, India and China. In China women who wash “on either side of the river” are united through a poem: whatever side of the river they are on, they “Have washed their pale cloth in the White Stone Shallows/ ‘Under the shining moon’.” CP 176 “White Stone Shallows” is the title of the poem by Wang Wei:

In the clear White Stone Shallows
Green reeds almost near enough to touch
The people on both sides of the river
Wash their silk here under the shining moon.ii

The reciprocities involved in the women folding sheets becomes a dance of cooperation:

We stretch and pull from one side and then the other —
Your turn. Now mine.
We fold them and put them away until they are needed.

A wish for all people when they lie down in bed —
Smooth linen, cool cotton, the fragrance and stir of herbs
And the faint but perceptible scent of sweet clear water.iii CP 176

It is, as I suggested, a remarkably indirect vision of world peace: the other meaning of folding sheets is as faint, if as perceptible, as the scent of clear water. There is an uncertainty, or unknowing, informing her writing. It makes for discretion. It also makes for humility. There is no room for imperialist epistemology because her poetry attends what is never made entirely present and so is never entirely subdued to the mind. There is always a sense of something like an active horizon that separates and
joins what is brought into a poem and what stays beyond it. As already indicated, one of the strongest expressions of this is found in “Over the Frontier”, a poem about how poetry and art emerge between being and non-being and carry with them a memory of, which is also a hope for, that place on the other side of existence, that desire that keeps poetry and art always next to nothingness.

And the poem that exists
will never equal the poem that does not exist.
Trembling, it crosses the frontier at dawn
from non-being to being
carrying a small banner,
bearing a message,

bringing news of the poem that does not exist,
that pulses like a star, red and green, no-colour,
blazing white against whiteness. (CP 129)

Some references:


---