

'ROSEMARY DOBSON - THE TEXT AND THE TEXTILE'

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EARLY last Thursday morning, I had the privilege of witnessing the birth of a healthy baby. And even as I was hearing and smelling and seeing this mystery unfold, I could not be unaware that always, there is something about this particular miracle which slips away from understanding and from language. How is it, how can I say, how can we speak that space between the time when the child is in the womb, outside time, outside language, and the time when the babe slips from its mother's body, and can never return to that earlier symbiosis.

When a child is born, it is wrapped in linens, into some soft warm fabric which is the first physical replacement for the warmth of the womb. In one sense, there is no particular mystery in my thinking of Rosemary Dobson, and her poetry, at the time in which I saw this child wrapped and nestled in his mother's arms. I had known for months that the birth of this child and my paper here at this conference were likely to coincide. And yet there is something else, something significant in that confluence of poetry and birth, in the coalescence of text and textile, and it arises not just from the happy coincidence of these two events, but from my reading and writing about the poetry of Rosemary Dobson. My vocabulary in thinking or describing this event to you, is inflected by Dobson's, by her 'mysteries', her 'wordless joys', her landscapes, and travels, and greetings. And, like Dobson herself in her poem 'Out of Winter', which appears to arise from grief after the death of a first baby, I ask, seek, look and listen for:

... the anatomy of beginnings, landscapes
Bared to the bones of rocks and boulders,
The simple truths of early paintings--
Births, deaths, and belief in visions.

('Out of Winter', *Cock Crow* 4)

There are many possible truths by which one might approach Dobson's poetry, and I have myself approached it from a variety of related landscapes elsewhere. In this short paper however, I choose as my own 'anatomy' – my own bare bones – Dobson's use of textiles as backdrops in many of her texts. 'Backdrops' is immediately inadequate as a term to describe the imagistic importance of fabric in Dobson's work, for I do not wish to figure Dobson as merely putting things onto sheets, canvases, muslins or indeed fine papers. Rather, she is involved in a circularity of relation, in which the attentiveness of her poetic allows her to move beyond the flatness of the 'gaze' or of re-presentation, and into or beyond the mysterious warp which lies between different apprehensions of the world. Textile is certainly not the only imaging of between-ness in Dobson's work. Also scattered through her poetry are the ampersand, the translation, painting itself, and the convex mirror or *camera obscura* which she alludes to in several significant poems. In this paper, however, I concentrate on that idea of textile, and read two sets of two poems, the 'Eye' poems from Dobson's *Seeing and Believing* (1990), and the 'Birth' poems, from *Child with a Cockatoo* (1955), together with a more recent poem, 'The Apparition' from *Untold Lives* (1992) which seems to stand between those pairs.

Rosemary Dobson's contribution to the National Library's 'Pamphlet Poets' series, *Seeing and Believing*, begins with two poems concerning the sudden and mourned deterioration of her eyesight, grief for which echoes other losses associated with age. These two poems, 'The Eye' and 'The Other Eye', provide powerful examples of the way in which fabrics, which have been worked with, on and through Dobson's writing life, have become more than merely symbolic or imagistic. They have, in a sense, been taken into the body, and in turn allow the body to be written back outwards. Hence, 'The Eye' (1):

One day the dark fell over my eye.
 It was like a blind drawn half way down
 A holland blind, dense, a sheet of shadow.
 Afterwards it frayed and dipped at the edges
 Filaments thinned and broke away, drifting—
 Seemed to be birds with the motion of swimmers.
 I think of last year as the year of the clouds.
 Great cumulus gathered at morning gravely
 Circling the world in contemplation,
 At noon dispersed, at evening gathered
 Again in council. The filaments moving
 Seemed dark birds against their whiteness
 Or drifting, undeciphered omens.
 With the palm of my hand I cover my eye,
 Cover, uncover. They are always there.

Dobson establishes the sense of simile early in the poem – her blindness is 'like a blind drawn half way down' (my emphasis), and in speaking of her impressions of having birds flying over the retina, she retains the relativity of 'seems' – the filaments 'Seemed to be birds'. But overwhelmingly, the poem conveys the impression that for Dobson, blindness in the form of an internal 'holland blind, dense, a sheet of shadow' did not merely fall 'over the eye', but *into* the eye, into the body from the realm of the external. Indeed, it seems almost impossible for her to determine what is outside and what is inside the body:

With the palm of my hand I cover my eye,
 Cover, uncover. They are always there.

The eye alone cannot tell her if the 'dark birds', the 'undeciphered omens', the filaments and 'frayed', 'dipped' edges of her internal holland 'blind' are inside or outside. She must return to the infant's game of cover and uncover, of peek-a-boo, to discover what of self belongs to self, and what belongs to the other of the external world. And indeed, beyond the fabric images the external and internal worlds interchange, with the eye becoming a world in itself, an earth.

In 'The Other Eye' (2), the distinction between the body of the self and the outside world is even more blurred, so that it is not at all clear what we are to read as an actual 'single window', and what as a damaged eye, also allowing a 'Diffuse . . . brilliance' to pass through the thin white linen of blindness:

White calico washed pale and thin
 Linen with lint all washed away

Diffuse the brilliance passing through
 The single window of the room
 And in this eye that gentle light
 Is blurred and shifts continually
 As when a wave that's edged with white
 Recedes into a shadowy sea.
 If you should come to find me here
 I will look up with one good eye
 From these my books, this pen, this chair,
 Table, thin-curtained window-pane
 To greet you. In the other eye
 That edge of light, that shadowy sea.

In a sense the eye and the window mirror each other, with the 'gentle light' of the window diffused further into 'blur' and 'shift' and 'shadow'. The 'one good eye' can still distinguish particularities of things – 'these my books, this pen, this chair, / Table, thin-curtained window-pane' – whilst for the blinded eye such particularities recede:

As when a wave that's edged with white
 Recedes into a shadowy sea.

In several of Dobson's poems, there is a confluence of fabrics with metaphysical inquiry, and with specifically female figures. In 'The Apparition', for instance, a very recent poem from *Untold Lives*, Dobson's 'apparition' is both a woman (indeed, her mother) and representative of the great questions of what lies before birth and after death. An inquiet soul, the apparition sifts through a chest in an empty room:

She has lifted the heavy lid against the sill
 And with both hands she seems to be dipping, sieving
 And letting fall the folds of unseen linen.

'Is it grave or swaddling clothes you are after?' asks Dobson, but of course the moment remains as an 'undeciphered omen' – the apparition does not speak. The only answers, it seems, may lie in the linen and with them, the forgiveness, or 'absolution' which Dobson seeks. In acknowledging the confluence of linen with the woman's functions of bringing into and ushering out of the world, Dobson also acknowledges her kinship with this tradition:

I truly believe I know her. My distaff side:
 My mother, hers, and the long line backwards of women.

The word 'distaff' itself – meaning the matrilineage – comes from the weaving of linen, for the distaff is the part of the spinning wheel or hand spindle from which wool or flax is spun into thread for weaving. That 'long line backwards of women' is not often so clearly spoken of in Dobson's work, but such notions of weaving, and of spinning backwards and forwards illuminate Dobson's continuous movement between subject positions, and her rejection of the stasis of rigidly defined identities. Her 'Apparition' is disturbing, displacing the certainties of identities and meanings. Apparitions necessarily

inhabit that world between inner and outer, between perception of an object separate from the self and projection of something from within the self. In her poem, Dobson highlights the problematical nature of the apparent figure by returning to words such as 'shift' and 'shadow' which permeate 'The Eye' and 'The Other Eye', thus recalling the tension between the particular vision of the 'one good eye', and the *visionary* nature of the other. Indeed, in the very first stanza, Dobson points to the disjunction between these two apprehensions:

In a room empty of all but the shift of shadow
And a wooden chest, solid, beneath the window--
What is she looking for there, kneeling before it?

The 'empty' room is like a stage on which these two modes of being can exist and intertwine. The 'shift of shadow' of the visionary coexists with the 'wooden chest, solid', the emphasised solidity of which seems to guarantee its authenticity in some external, objective way. And between those two apprehended states is a woman existing in both the solid world, like the wooden chest, and in the internal world of the shadowy, visionary eye. She deals with the chest in a physical way, 'lift[ing] the heavy lid against the sill', and yet her task remains mysterious and other-worldly, as:

... with both hands she seems to be dipping, sieving
And letting fall the folds of unseen linen.

She 'seems' to be 'dipping and sieving'; the 'linen' remains 'unseen', although apprehended.

These 'unseen' linens themselves again hark back to the 'Eye' poems, as linen is conflated with images of water. In the 'Eye' poems the 'holland blind' of partial blindness is figured as 'White calico *washed* pale and thin/ Linen with lint all *washed* away' (my emphasis), and the image is modulated into one of 'shadowy sea'. Here, the very words used to describe the searching through the solid wooden box for non-solid linens, are words usually associated with water. We can imagine this apparition 'dipping', 'sieving' and 'letting' water 'fall' through her hands, as, like Li Po, she searches for the image of herself in a pool of water on a moonlit night.

Those images of dipping into water, or of dipping into a box of linen are peculiarly female images and the apparition is an archetypal figure. But she is also a known woman, loved in an intimacy of memory and particularity:

I know the curve of the head, the hair gathered
In a sweep to the crown, the long fingers,
The arch of the back and the line of sloping shoulders.

There is a grief here for a body bowed and worn with time and hard work, and a sympathetic recognition. That recognition is partly of what she calls 'My distaff side:/ My mother, hers, and the long line backwards of women', but it is surely also a recognition of the self in this 'long line backwards', with Dobson's hair also 'gathered/ In a sweep to the crown', and her own back 'arched', and shoulders 'sloping' with time and age. The figure is both the recognised and the unrecognised, with the back turned to the viewer, and the face, together with its eyes, turned away. The silence of the apparition, and the viewer's inability to see or read her face, means that she will remain as a 'drifting, undeciphered omen', 'always there', but forever 'reced[ing] into a shadowy

sea' in which words as ciphers, as signs or operators which explain or define the world, fail.

Thus the emphasis on 'speaking' and 'telling' in the anguished fourth stanza is a desperation born in the knowledge of certain failure:

Is it grave or swaddling clothes you are after? Tell me.
Can you forgive me, I ask. What should I have done?
Speak to me, turn your face, give me an answer.

'Each time', we are told, Dobson 'hope[s] to be given absolution', and yet that hope is the only possible answer. Her apparition exists in the silent realm of the visionary, the world of portents and disturbances, of unease and restlessness. That realm, like our knowledge of what comes before birth and after death, is unspeakable and words cannot adequately follow into its floating shadow.

In 1962, writing commentaries on a series of Australian paintings in the volume *Australia: Land of Colour through the Eyes of Australian Painters*, Dobson noted and celebrated the 'continual shifts of light and shadow' which characterise the shade of gum trees, and what she called the 'secretive' nature, the giving and withholding of understanding in this Australian landscape (5-7). In 'The Apparition', and in 'The Eye' and 'The Other Eye', the linens (and in many other poems, the canvases) might be seen as sites of displacement, of continual 'shifts' into different levels of communication and understanding.

Rosemary Dobson, then, celebrates displacement, secrets, a sustaining slippage, *not* perfect translation. Her work continually, if subtly, displays a tension between the knowledge of the 'one good eye', and the 'wonder' of the opaqued eye. In a way, what Dobson elsewhere calls her 'restlessness to tell the story' ('An Interlude' from the series 'The Devil and the Angel', *The Ship of Ice* 7) is this unease between the two visions, a precarious and sometimes disrupted balance which she has imaged in many ways throughout her fifty years of publishing: the 'empty tankard'; the 'convex mirror'; the 'ampersand'; those linens and canvases which both close and open onto the worlds they represent.

But if that tension, that creative movement, that ravelling and unravelling of fabric provides for possibility, it is also a landscape which can be dangerous, treacherous with risk and grief. In many poems the promise of a perfect, joyful balance 'between' suffers a miscarriage into the disruptions of illness, grief, pain and death. Dobson does not let us forget that the acquisition of a visionary eye is at the expense of her perfect and treasured sight. If there is the charm of shift and shadow in her apparition, there is also the grief of pains unresolved. And in a set of two almost unbearably painful poems, 'The Birth' and 'The Birth(ii)', the moment of transition or communication between worlds becomes the moment, the site at which a longed for child is lost to death forever. In this case, the 'swaddling' clothes, are also the 'grave' clothes, the winding sheets. It seems significant, that when Dobson came to include 'The Eye' and 'The Other Eye' in her *Collected Poems* (1991), 'The Other Eye' was renamed 'The Eye (ii)' (201), appearing to consciously echo her earlier set of two poems, 'The Birth' and 'The Birth (ii)'.

The landscape of these poems is that of dream, of the semiotic, of 'mystery' ('The Birth', *Child with a Cockatoo* 49) and of 'wisdom beyond mortal thought' ('The Birth (ii)', *Child with a Cockatoo* 50). It is one of possibilities, the creative capacity of 'mystery' which she sees 'unfold[ing]' and 'grow[ing]' – it has shape and promise, and the sense of annunciation which will lead to a new life or new understanding. 'The Birth', unfolds itself from grief and longing towards joy, but this joy is only a briefly flowering bloom,

as its companion poem, 'The Birth (ii)' unravels the promise of joy back to the country of grief, as the longed for child dies at, or soon after birth. Throughout the second poem Dobson laments that the lost infant resides precisely in that realm of 'in-between', which offers so much, which allows love and connection, but which can also be a world in which souls are lost to the living. The poem brims with the sense of brinks, with edges which cannot be traversed, with desires and drives which reverse themselves, unable to link one position to another. Here, the textile, the swaddling clothes or winding sheet is an almost insurmountable barrier. Thus, in the first stanza, the child's life is likened to the fleeting edge of a wave:

Brought forth from darkness as a wave
That breaks upon the edge of day
And knows but for a moment shore,
Landfall, the earth. So there was light
And human hands, before the tide
Returned you to the oblivious night.

Elsewhere in the poem, that edge of the wave is the space between light and shadow, between dream and waking, and finally, poignantly, it is the space in which a 'Brief life' has 'lodged/ Between our need and our distress'.

Here, the 'undeciphered omen' is the pathology of empty hands: in the much later but similarly re-named set of poems, 'The Eye' and 'The Eye (ii)', the pathology of a partially blinded eye takes 'That edge of light' and 'That shadowy sea' in which the life of the lost child has been placed, into the body. It might indeed be said that in both these sets of poems, a disordering or 'unease' within the body, and the grief which comes with that bodily restlessness, is precisely what gives Dobson a deeper reach into the semiotic twilight world.

It is in these disorderings of the body that Dobson most fully explores what she calls the 'doomed, entangled, piercing cry' of language ('The Fever', *Cock Crow* 14), which she writes as intimately connected with edges and extremities. In her poems of maternity, a constant theme is the sense that language is the necessary grief which intrudes upon the undifferentiated and symbiotic relationship between mother and child, a separation which enables agency and subjecthood. Mother and child emerge from birth in several of her poems, 'With word of wonders, by another way' ('To meet the child', *Cock Crow* 6). In her later writings of the body, it is only the healthy eye, the one unclouded by visions, which can 'greet' Dobson's visitors. Both the visionary eye and the apparition, existing in the semiotic world between subject positions, lack the agency of language.

But still both visions, the apparition and the solid world, the linen which is the swaddling cloth and the winding cloth jostle in Dobson's poetry. The edge between language and silence, between grace and despair continues to be the edge, the place, the fugitive moment which Dobson seeks. She is always aware of our need for language, and of its inadequacy, of the flimsiness of the cloth of words. In 'The Mother' (*Child with a Cockatoo* 18), in which a woman is faced with her daughter's grief, that wry knowledge becomes apparent.

She has spun a garment
Of words for her daughter,
A coat she will throw over
To shelter her from evil,
From love, from life's mischances,
And keep her by her side.

But love knows no delaying
 And grief will come too early:
 She lacked the words to finish
 The woven coat of comfort
 And so her grieving daughter
 Wears yet one wild bird's wing.

The real gift of Rosemary Dobson's poetry is that she offers us both the spinnings of word
 linens, and the wildness of one bird's wing.

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