

SPIRITUAL VOICE IN ROSEMARY DOBSON'S POETRY¹

Rosmané Lawson

‘I looked for ways by which to understand
My origins; for ground whereon to stand
With poetry for a divining branch.’
from ‘A Letter to Lydia’

‘Spiritual Voice in Rosemary Dobson’s Poetry’ is so complex and far-reaching a theme that here I can only invite you to some bare bones, a glass of cold water;² and show a few slides from my recent excursions into those ‘other countries’ of her *Collected Poems*, 1991.³ The bones are important ones in tracing the development of a spiritual ethos which informs the poetry. It is an issue so far not explored in critical commentary, although some of its essential elements are observed in the 1974 essays of A.D. Hope,⁴ and James McAuley,⁵ and in Sr. Veronica Brady’s 1989 essay, ‘Over the Frontier’, in *Poetry and Gender*.⁶

This paper’s interpretation of a spiritual ethos underlying the poetry seems in some ways radical, while yet imaginatively logical, so that it is offered tentatively and with some temerity.

Any critical understanding of Rosemary Dobson’s poems requires reading to and fro across adjacent poems; to and fro in the group of poems, and into the wider series in which each poem is meticulously placed.

Three poems, ‘The Three Fates’, ‘Flute Music’, and ‘Ravines and Fireflies’, work together to introduce the 1984 volume, entitled *The Three Fates*, and also raise the question of what metaphysic informs such poetry. Placed side by side, we see these poems contrasting three approaches to that frontier of death which lies between this world’s experience and eternity. I have prefaced them by the short poem, ‘Pausanias’ from the 1978 collection, *Over the Frontier*:

How to go on? One step and then another -
his precept to the traveller meets my need

who in the midst of life in the dark forest
feel the Eumenides gathering overhead.

For the first poem, 'The Three Fates', we recall that the frontier or horizon of death, in Greek metaphor, has the vast encircling ocean which encompasses the earth and earthly experience, so that here the protagonist facing death is imaged as near drowning. Here we see a chap baulking at that frontier. In trying to avoid death, he appeals to the Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos:

At the instant of drowning he invoked the three sisters.
It was a mistake, an aberration, to cry out for
Life everlasting.

His shocking request being granted, he is trapped forever in this physical realm; from the point of death re-living his earthly experience back to birth, then travelling again towards death; the spool of Clotho's thread unwinding endlessly in that cycle. The witty choice of the word 'reel' in the last line evokes also a remorselessly replayed film, insisting on the pity and the error of the self-incurred fate.

The third poem, 'Ravines and Fire flies', contrasts Hellenic and Christian elements. The setting is near to the wild ravines of Apollo's Parnassus; and Artemis, the female form of Apollo and moon-goddess to his role as sun-god, gives the moon to light this night of death. The persona of the poem is found trapped in a stone effigy on a tombstone, presumably waiting for the Christian Second Coming. The later stanzas read:

And I too lie fretful
Knees straight, feet crossed
Palms pressed together.

Oh, to get off this damned slab
To gather my long gown
And run through the churchyard

To catch the moon's rope-end.

Perhaps this held-in-stone spirit would like to swing across into eternity. All three poems include glimpses of childhood play.

'Flute Music', the middle poem, has none of the distress felt

(despite the entertainment of humour) in its adjacent poems. Here, the spirit goes joyously, freely and calmly, 'one step and then another -', to cross the frontier. Stepping is to the music of the sacred flute; its notes wonderful as from the realm to which the spirit is returning.

Hsi K'ang, preparing himself for death,
Wrote to a friend in a distant province.

It was done. Folding back his sleeves
He took up his flute

And as he walked to the place of execution
He played a new tune.

It was a strange colour, a young moon,
A ball balanced on a fountain.

Wonderful, wonderful, cried the people crowding behind him.
Oh wonderful! Wonderful!

Hsi K'ang put away his flute saying
That is an end of it.

And having arrived at the place of execution
Submitted to the swordsman.

We who walk backwards from birth waving and smiling
Will walk also towards death.

And who can tell when it is time to turn and walk forwards,
To fold the sleeves neatly

Having written a letter to a friend in a distant country,
Intent and tranquil,

To hold the flute sideways to the mouth and stepping lightly
Advance with music

The notes unknown to us
And by none remembered after our death.

The 'new tune' and enchantment of wonder light the whole poem. Quiet understatement ending the legend is blent in a fugue-like poetic movement to the later advancing 'with music'; and the resonance in 'by none remembered' with the final phrase, 'after our death', carries the echoes of that flute music beyond the point of the poem's ending to a meditative silence. Precision in prosody, language, and ideation here all accord with the spiritual ethos of the poetry, developed from the 1948 volume onwards, in two central concepts of 'the continuance of life' and 'the continuance of poetry'.

The 'fate' in 'Flute Music' is that chosen, of the three, to inform the following poems in the 1984 volume. The same free and calm spirit speaks through the in-part-parallel and complementary poems, 'Daily Living' and 'The Continuance of Poetry: Twelve Poems for David Campbell', and contributes to the sheer stature of 'A Letter for Lydia' which centres these two series and culminates the long-established theme of spiritual quest. 'Serenity of spirit also underlies the spiritual discipline felt in the later sequence, the 'darkening sky' poems in the section called *Uncollected Poems*, from 'The Eye' to 'Learning Absences, 1986'.

A.D. Hope's phrases 'radiant-vision' and 'contemplative serene' as the 'distinctive mark of Rosemary Dobson's poetry',⁷ maintain; yet there is included at times the spirit troubled, grieving, or in anguish, even within the confidence found in advancing 'with music', 'Intent and tranquil', towards that frontier with eternity.

In terms of what metaphysic are we to understand this poetry? In tracing a spiritual ethos, recognition of the polysemic nature of the language; awareness that stillness, being stilled, or silence, predicate metaphysical insights or illumination of understanding; and awareness of the physical and the sensuous being linked through metaphor to the metaphysical, are each important. The fourth and dominant feature of the poetry in this pursuit is an extraordinary facility of reconciliation of antitheses to a new harmony involving a new conceptualization.

As artist, Rosemary Dobson is a virtuoso. Being so, she is most often at play within 'the entire *seriousness* of her art',⁸ being endlessly inventive, and constantly disruptive of poetry's discourse.

Disruption of the discourse of poetry is most evident in syntax and prosody, but more significantly in the way the lines of tension in traditional paradox or contradictions are resolved to new conceptualization to shift the parameters of dialectic. A significant example noted by Hope is the traditional antithesis of time and eternity being resolved to 'time presented within the order of eternity'.⁹

Thus for the spirit, being in temporal experience is being still within and part of the order of eternity. That reconciliation marks the contrast between the 1944 volume, *In a Convex Mirror*, and the 1948 volume, *A Ship of Ice*, onwards. It is the key discovery for the spiritual ethos of the poetry from 1948 onwards, and one from which other elements of that ethos are developed.

While the 1944 volume is principally Hellenic in vision, the 1948 volume's placing the temporal within the eternal and the spiritual journey in earthly experience as part of that continuum leads, in the logic of the imagination, to the concepts of 'the continuance of life' and 'the continuance of poetry', and contingent elements. The spiritual continuity from origin in an eternal spiritual source to return of the spirit there, involves images of the circle and horizon or frontier of earthly experience, with the imagined points of birth and death co-incident there.

These and other elements become evident in the 1948 and 1958 volumes, with a seminal expansion of that vision in the identification of the spiritual source and its corollary for the 'continuance of life', given in the 1965 volume, *Cock Crow*, in the poem 'Annunciations'. The poem 'Over the Frontier' from the 1978 collection is complementary to 'Annunciations' in its focus on the source of and continuance of poetry.

While the circle 'eternal-temporal-eternal' is apt, especially in the central concerns of passionate human experience and poetry or art which are the major focusses of the poetry, in poems such as 'Annunciations' and 'Over the Frontier' it seems not a closed circle. In the beyond-time, supernal dimension of the creational source, it is shown as 'unbounded, shoreless, infinite'.

The 1944 volume, *In a Convex Mirror*, is assuredly Hellenic in Platonic and Apollonian reference; 'the soul in exile' is trapped in mortality, in the flesh and in time divided from the spiritual eternal realm. The first poem, 'In a Convex Mirror', is finely placed in opening *Collected Poems*. Its first word, 'See', and first line:

See in the circle how we stand.

are stunningly delphic, as for the following fifty years of publication that is what the poetry is all about. The quest for spiritual insight or illumination of understanding of moments of human experience pervades each successive volume.

The poem, 'In Convex Mirror', wittily considers the Platonic forms

of reflected, and reflected upon, separate images of the real and idealised-abstracted forms of being. The poem's given still point, being stilled before the apprehension of the transcendental, is signatory throughout the poetry, an acuity of perception in the clear logic of the imagination which governs the poetry. In a multiplicity of ways, the poem concedes time's dividing in temporal living from the ideal oneness of eternal being, and evinces something of the spiritual longing for that wholeness:

Time's still waters deeply flow
Through Here and Now as Babylon

And swirling through this little frame
Will rive the two of us apart,
Engulfing with unnumbered floods
The hidden spaces of the heart.

The spirit in exile confronts 'the map of living' in 'Young Girl at a Window':

This way the map of living lies.
and this the journey you must go
Through grass and sheaves and, lastly, snow.

In the poem 'One Section', after tableaux of childhood, girlhood, and womanhood, the persona asks:

Who can deny it was Death in the final doorway?

The poet-persona of 'Foreshore' and 'Disconnected' is frustrated in separation from poetry's inspirational source:

With nothing in my pockets but my hands
Troubling myself that sky with empty cries,
Fast at my moorings - held against the tide?

and in 'But something disconnects my soul', where the disconsolate poet-persona's plea to Artemis:

The moon, whose beckoning rising curve
Compels me to no mute delight

is reduced to 'At least be talkative and bright'. Throughout the poetry, the two strands of life and spiritual life, and of poet-persona's desire for poetry's creativity are thematic.

In 1944, time and death as a finality are linked in the poem 'The Rider':

Time in my ticking clock becomes
A desperate traveller of the night,

...

He needs no sign, but wheels and turns
Obedient to the wheeling sky,
And rides to warn - but whom he warns
I know not and I fear to know.

The 1944 poems also celebrate Apollo, god of poetry, in his various mythological roles. 'Over the Hill' presents Apollo the herdsman in his times of exile from Olympus; the hymn to Apollo as sun-god is 'Cockerel Sun', a poem radiant in light and celebration. Bucolic and farmyard settings for Apollo are also seen in later Apollo poems, 'Chance Met', 'Country Morning', and 'The Conversation'. Apollo as guardian of mariners has 'The Tempest' poem, more complex in its simultaneous allusions to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, to war-time sailors in 'second lieutenant', and to Apollo's taking the ships' crews to guard Parnassus.

Many of these 1944 poems have war references or focusses to the war world they inhabit. They are forerunners to the later volumes' 'anguish of the race', humanity's pain in the 1980 poem, 'The Gods', or in the 1991 *Uncollected Poems* section, 'Gypsy People' and 'Afternoon in Washinton D.C.': '... gypsies, /Massacred innocents. /Our guilt, our century.' and from the latter, 'That here I name, from horror piled on horror, /The Century of the Slaughtered Innocents'.

The sudden shift from the Hellenic vision to 1948's *The Ship of Ice* is theoretically startling. The poet, still in her late twenties, works assuredly in her new systemic conceptualization, like 'The Poet of Antwerp' going her own way. The note of death feared in its finality in 'The Rider', or in 'and, lastly, snow', have gone from the poetry from 1948 onwards. Birth as the spirit's entry into physical, temporal life, and death as the way of the return into the eternal spiritual realm, have no division and finality connotations.

The highly entertaining and urbanely witty poems, 'The Devil and

the Angel' and 'Monumental Mason' dismiss mediaeval Christian images of doctrines of death and judgement with hell and heaven as consequential. Instead, there is the profound sense of wonder imagined to be known in the spirit's return beyond death to the 'other country' of origin, in the poem 'Wonder':

So Cortes returned perhaps to the Old World after -
 So many years and his eyes still brimming with sea.
 Without ovation of guns or trumpets and pennons,
 Wonder is lastly in finding the Pole, with only
 Amazement flowering in a waste of snow.

The final two lines contrast strongly with those of the ending of 'Young Girl at a Window'; and the word 'snow' is losing its power of winter/death traditional connotation preparatory to its quite opposite connotations shaped in the 1958 poem, 'Dew, Frost, and Snow' and in its use thereafter.

Time as presented within the order of eternity has as corollary 'the continuance of life' from the creational source, but in the human and temporal realm of experience also the experience of the 'Hazardous path to Death from Birth'.

A key poem in 1948 is 'In My End is My Beginning', the title perhaps taken from the final life of T.S. Eliot's 'East Coker'. In Eliot, the line points to resurrection in Christ into eternal life. In Rosemary Dobson's metaphysical ethos, as I understand it, there is no Adamic Fall, no need for Hebraic messiahs, nor for Christological salvation. Nor, in 'the continuance of life' from its spiritual source, is there ferryman of the Styx to Hades. The poem concludes:

No fares for ferrying. If you will
 Saint Christopher, be with me still.

The poem demonstrates telling over human and spiritual resources within 'this small orb' for use in the 'Hazardous path to Death from Birth'. They include, 'In this small orb is compassed wonder, /Passion, despair, and state of grace'; blood, flesh, heart, will, head, wit, and 'that the mind has faggots stored/ To kindle on the darkest night'; 'wonder' and 'state of grace' alongside 'Passion, despair'.

This conceptualization of the continuance of life at once by-passes centuries of patriarchal belief systems, including the Hellenic, Jewish, and Christian ideologies; very neatly, quietly, with humour, and

courtesy. The resources of such cultural heritage remain frequently the subjects of or metaphors in the poetry, used always with respect, extensive knowledge, and sensitivity. The poems show a profound reverence for spiritual life as for the individual life. The desire of the spirit for 'the other country' of spiritual and creational origin is evinced throughout the poetry.

In 'In My End is My Beginning', we read:

I am the traveller who, returning,
Finds destination's starting-place.

The wonder of that return, its joy, is imagined in the poem, 'Wonder' and felt in the 1984 poem, 'Flute Music'. The desire of the spirit for that 'other country' is shown especially in the 1965 poem 'The Two Countries', and in 'The Cry', the desire of the poet for its 'marvellous poetry'. In 'A Letter to Lydia' (1984), the Easter visit to Crete described becomes analogy in extended metaphor of that Eden, Paradise, of the spiritual eternal. (Notice in that visit that the Judas effigy cannot be burnt in the villagers' ceremony, the breath of the spirit disallowing it:

Judas, in effigy there upon a pyre
Was not, as custom held, consumed by fire
Such a great wind had risen on that day.)

The phrase 'destination's starting-place' also kaleidoscopes its elements just as the point of birth and of death in this poetry's imagined horizon of mortal experience, become one. This is most clearly understood as we read two poems from *Cock Crow* (1965), 'To Meet the Child' and 'The Edge'. There the mother's going to the edge of death to bring the child through child-birth into life makes the concept plain. 'The Edge' experience is also one affected by mystery of the ineffable:

Three times returned as one who brings
Tidings of light beyond the dark
But voiceless stays still marvelling

and:

The last reflection of its light
Fades from the pupils of my eyes.

The view of 'the continuance of life' through temporal experience within 'the order of eternity' enables the persona in 'The Bystander', in the Eden of its last stanza, to raise the seminal question of the final line:

I heard a voice say "Eat", and would have turned -
I often wonder who it was that spoke.

The 'wondering' may imply that to eat, to know, to experience passionate human life is not of 'Satan' nor with Miltonic exile from such cause.

Throughout the 1948 and 1958 collections the human experience of the spirit in the temporal world is sustained by near-glimpses of the supernal light, and desire of the spirit for its eternal source, 'the other country' reflected in 'The Edge', and 'The Two Countries'. In *Child With Cockatoo* (1958), it is imagined glimpsed in the poem, 'The Raising of the Dead':

My pity for the youth who lies
These seven centuries at least
Returned to Life, who once had caught
A wink, a glimpse of Paradise.

'Chance Met' from *A Ship of Ice*, as in other Apollo-Phoebus poems, takes the tradition of gods of Olympus abroad in the mortal world for its near-glimpsing of Apollo:

... There is nobody there. The sunlight
In golden footprints runs up the ridge of the hill.

The messages, intimations of death in the several areas of 'Daily Living' shown in that poem (1984) are a later, surer evincing of this sense of 'communication' between the two countries of the spirit. The final three poems of 1958 show it in the beautiful and profoundly poignant sequence 'Dew, Frost, and Snow', 'The Birth' and 'The Birth (ii)'.

Love and the pain of love in human experience is shown throughout the long series of 'human responsibility' poetry from the 1958 poem 'The Mother' to the end of the 1965 volume, *Cock Crow*, and is central to later poetry. 'Dew, Frost, and Snow' gives a first imaging of these elements as if from the beyond-time supernal realm given into the

physical realm:

These things that are, and have no birth
 Nor death, returning to the air -
 ... - dew, frost, and snow
 Are manna to our fevered sphere.

Are manna of continuing life.

The following poems are understood in relation to this poem; 'The Birth' reflecting the nine months of gestation is as closely linked to the spiritual realm from which the child will be born as to the physical, mortal body of the woman where 'Those flowers unfold and grow to me -/ I speak as of a mystery'. The later poem, 'The Birth (ii)', poignant in the suffering of love and pain in the new-born infant's death, discovers spiritual blessing even in the pain of those final two stanzas. Its evocation of the overwhelming love felt for the child at birth is given:

Trembling to life in dark profound
 Where time is measured by the beat
 Of human heart, while love awaits,
 A tree of unimagined light
 To break in blossom at your birth.

The centrality of love in the sequence from 'The Mother' onwards, links to the creative source as is shown in both 'The Cry' and 'Annunciations'.

Another element of the metaphysical system underlying the poetry is that, as in some Eastern ideologies and in Blake's and Wordsworth's poetics, of children being closer to the spiritual eternal heaven from which they have come. In 'The Mother', the second stanza opens:

How like a bird from heaven
 Came then her dancing daughter

and its final line:

Wears yet one wild bird's wing.

In the 1965 poem, 'Jack', while adult vision may feel pity and express

longing against being 'coffined up in life', it is the children at the heart of the poem who see the whole point of a Jack-in-the-box as gladness in resurrection:

The children laughed and stretched their hands
And called again for Jack, for Jack.

In 'The Two Countries' the final stanza reads:

How rarely, rarely tread I now
The habitations of delight!
Yet in my sleeping daughter's hand
Treasured in darkness I have found
A diamond, dewdrop, flake of snow -
Something from that enchanted ground.

The desire of the spirit for 'the other country' is central to the poet-persona's desire for its springs of poetry, as in 'Dry River' and in 'The Cry':

All day with diligence I go
That, pausing at a starry time
Or very early, I may catch
The brushing of celestial rhyme

As though some marvellous poetry
Were making in the air above
Where minds of poets meet and merge
Into a single cry of love.

In the 1965 volume, *Cock Crow*, the poem 'Out of Winter' shows seeking for solace leading to:

I await the Angel of the Annunciation

and later:

Await the bird in the bough, the tremor
Of life in the veins, another spring time.

What is sought is both for the needs of the spirit for continuance of life

and in the continuance of poetry.

'Annunciations' complements 'Out of Winter' in solace and reply. It includes annunciation of identification of the creative source as creative logos. Together with 'Over the Frontier' (1978) there is shown the creative spiritual source and explication of becoming, into life and into poetry. The persona in 'Annunciations' is simultaneously the mother and the poet-persona.

The poem encompasses conception, gestation, and birth. The lines, 'For time to fashion out of flesh /And blood and one bright drop of fire' at once shape spirit in generation, and accentuate the significance of emphasis on the word, given in each stanza's ending:

'... the word /Of advent lay upon my mouth';
 'I heard the word that bade you come'
'In the Beginning was the Word'
 'I hear the word. I let you go.'

Identifying the creative source 'In the Beginning was the Word', taken from the opening of St John's gospel without its subsequent text, has an effect of inevitability and rightness in the logic of the imagination for this poetry's ethos.

The other stanzas bring the further development of 'the Word made flesh' as entirely in human terms, and shaping the generational aspect of the continuance of life. The final stanza reads:

Child, children, though I hold you here
 A moment to my mortal heart
 You go from me as rivers go,
 As stars move to their destined place.
 The beating wings are clamorous.
 I hear the word. I let you go.

The 'one bright drop of fire' of the divine or the spiritual in the child, and the images of the third and fourth lines of this stanza affirm the flow of 'the continuance of life' both generationally and in the individual as spiritual entity.

Temporal, physical life within the order of eternity; the desire of the spirit for that 'other country' of the eternal source; the continuance of life and of poetry, and their source in the creative logos; children as still touched by or closer to the heavenly; and the messages or glimpses of the spiritual realm, all contribute to shaping an ethos in the

poetry. The poetry in *The Three Fates* and in the sequence from *Uncollected Poems* reflects the calm certitude of that poetic, and brings to it nuances of meaning from the new subject matter and its imaginative shaping. A spiritual ethos is created by the poetry and to be discovered in it; in this tentative interpretation I hope I've not been far astray. To trace that is only to touch one aspect of "Spiritual Voice" in the country of Rosemary Dobson's poetry, and minor in contrast to all that her poetry may give its readers.

Australian Catholic University, New South Wales Division

REFERENCES

1. This paper is slightly re-ordered from its presentation, and somewhat extended in response to questions asked.
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3. Rosemary Dobson, Collected Poems (Sydney: Angus and Robertson/Collins), 1991.
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7. A.D. Hope, Op.Cit.
8. Ibid.
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