I've also been reading his *Collected Prose* which I think most people interested in poetry would find extremely worth reading. In many respects I suppose my own ideas about writing poetry are quite different from Larkin's, but I can't help feeling that there is a great deal of truth in his ways of going about it. One must always be open to other, and new, ideas. That's it, I think.

*This interview with Elizabeth Perkins took place at James Cook University on 8 July 1986. Rosemary Dobson was in Townsville to attend the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature.

DIMITRIS TSALOUMAS

INTERVIEW

EP: Dimitris, perhaps your most formidable recent project is the anthology of Australian poetry that you edited and translated into Greek?

DT: Yes, you might think of that as an ambitious project, but it didn't start that way. What I was planning at the time was just a selection of poems I liked that I would translate and send to Greece to be published in some literary magazine there. I didn't really expect anything more than that. But as we put it in Greek, "appetite comes with eating", and they grew in number. Then I decided to put them into a small book and publish it in Greece. I mentioned it to Tom Shapcott, whom I consulted at the time because I was translating some of his work, and he suggested a bi-lingual edition. At first I thought this was too ambitious. No Greek publisher would support a large project of this nature. Then it was suggested that we might approach the Australia Council for help. Anyway, it started me thinking, and I went on and translated about one hundred and fifty-three poems, and the book reached its present dimensions.

EP: Did you select poems that you thought Greek readers might be especially interested in?

DT: Of course I had Greek readers in mind, and I had to avoid giving them stuff written in a style with which they were sufficiently familiar! For example, some surrealist writing, because surrealism is quite a tradition in Greece, as it is all around the Mediterranean.

EP: So you avoided surrealism in making your selections?

DT: Well, I avoided it, although in fact I tried to translate some surrealist poems, but the result wasn't satisfactory because it reminded me of things already done in Greece, and done well, and I didn't want that. I wanted things that might sound new and fresh to Greek readers, and that made the task fairly difficult. But I think what is presented in the anthology is something that offers a new reading experience to the Greek public.

EP: Do you feel you have captured what we might call the real "ethnic" Australian poetry?

DT: Some poems are more "ethnic" in this sense than others. But my main concern was to select good poetry irrespective of subjects, theme, atmosphere or other special characteristics. In fact, the reaction to the book was more than favourable: I've had nothing but good words about the content and the modest part I played as translator. I'm quite happy, as a practising poet, about the renderings of all the poems.

EP: Now what about the poetry that you yourself are writing in English?

DT: I began to write in English out of curiosity, I wanted to explore this other medium which I'd had at my disposal for so many years without really doing anything about it, apart from its use in the practical matter of earning my living. So I began out of curiosity to see what I could do with this language. I wrote a poem in English some years ago, in 1979 I think. I found it a bit strange at first, and I stopped for a few months, and then began another poem. I was quite pleased with the result, but I was busy then compiling the anthology, which took two years, so I didn't have much time for anything else and I didn't want to become involved in any other kind of literary activity. Once that was over, I made up my mind to write some more and by then I'd got into the habit, what with all this translating, of thinking and writing in English.

EP: Do you find that you're dealing with different moods and emotions when you are writing in English?

DT: It's interesting that you should raise this point because there are in fact a few things in this situation that puzzle me. Moods and emotions remain fundamentally the same, but they are coloured and modified, to some extent, by certain qualities that are peculiar to the language employed. Even your subject, your choice of theme, is something determined by these qualities. I

could not, for example, write now in the style of my old Greek epigrams. My English poems tend to be rather more lyrical and less — I shouldn't say "less substantial" but "less substantiated". Also, they tend to be longer, if not (I hope!) wordier. Generally in English, I don't seem to be as obsessively guided by my convictions about economy and so on. Perhaps they are not needed — but I'm beginning now to curb this tendency to be more expansive in English.

EP: The poem you read last night, "The Inhibition", was originally in English?

DT: Yes. It's about precedents. Sometimes you want to develop a theme that's been taken up in the past and turned into a masterpiece by greater minds, but you feel inhibited, you don't want to touch it. Yet if you don't do it, you regret it for the rest of your life. So in the poem, the crow grows into the brain and becomes an obsession, and your thoughts become feathers:

> For he'd be back
> to roost, to grumble in fitful sleep,
> start up and peck about and spy
> and hone his beak against the flint
> of fossil-thought, then grow to black
> mad moon through winter orchards
> and rise rooster—big and crowd the brain
> till feathers spill out the narrow skull
> and crested dawn comes scraping on the pane.

The crow, of course, has been the subject of fables by Aesop, La Fontaine, and others.

EP: You probably know that the phrase "the cry of the crow" epitomizes a typical Australian desolation and harshness and a sense of bleak tragedy?

DT: No, I didn't. But I'm fascinated by the quality of the crow's voice. There is something human about it: they sound like old men! In fact, the stimulus I wanted for that poem, "The Inhibition", came when I went for a swim at a beach north of Brisbane, and as I got out of the car a crow flew over a patch of ti-tree, making that old man's cry. I had been wanting to write something about crows for a long time before that.

EP: I'd like to ask a question that interests me a good deal: about the use of "I" in your poetry. When you say "I" in your poetry do you ever mean yourself?

DT: No — well, sometimes. I mean, it's very hard to say really. But normally it's an assumed "I" or a dramatic "I". My characters

will speak with an "I" but they are not me. On the other hand, I can't say that I'm not part of that "I". To distinguish it wholly from myself is impossible. No matter what we call it, the dramatic "I" or the fictional "I", the personal element is part of it. But I don't think that I have lived through all those absurd situations that I've put into my poems. Personally, I have not lived through all of them, but I have imagined myself in those circumstances, so in a sense the "I" is part of me. You must enter into your characters to lend them some convincingness — you must live through them like that. That's why I don't quite believe that a complete detachment is possible. I think it is impossible to extricate the personal "I" from the dramatic or fictional "I". From the moment you start to use personal experience as the material of whatever you are writing, you can't very well claim that you are not part of that or that you are looking at it objectively. My "I", at any rate, is a mixture.

EP: Some poets do see the "I" in the poem, even if it is related to actual experiences they have had, as a purely fictional "I". But your idea of the "I" as a mixture of self and dramatic persona is perhaps the more usual experience?

DT: For example, very obviously, when I say in "The Inhibition" that I addressed or would have addressed the crow, I am aware of the absurdity of the situation. Nevertheless that "I" expresses thoughts and concerns that are indeed deeply personal. It really baffles me every time I have to use "I". I can spend hours trying to find a way out. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes I just use "I" towards the end of the poem. I'm as careful in using it as I possibly can be. I really hate it!

EP: What do you mean when you say "you" in a poem?

DT: The "you" addresses some other character. This happens especially in the Epigrams: the classical epigram is traditionally addressed to some person so the "you" figures prominently there. Now, I'm quite free with the use of "you". It could be any person at all, it typifies a certain kind of person. The "you" emerges and becomes someone who is well defined by the end of the poem.

EP: Are you ever addressing yourself when you use "you" in a poem?

DT: Yes, sometimes I'm addressing myself. That's another way of avoiding using the "I". The poet adressing himself, why not? After all, no matter how many characters we create, they are based on ourselves. We can only give new versions of ourselves.

EP: There is something in your work that suggests you have not been greatly influenced by other poets, but perhaps that is because I do not know the Greek poets that may have influenced you?

DT: I hope that what you say is so, because if I have striven for anything at all, it has been to avoid influences in my writing. If there are any echoes of others in my work they just happen to be there, but I have not borrowed or consciously set out to reproduce somebody else's effects. I can give you an example of a coincidence that distressed me very much at the time. It is in "The Sick Barber and Other Characters" which was published in 1979, and the poem concerned is from the poem "A Rhapsody of Old Men", which was written about '77 or '78. There is an image there of a girl tossing her hair like rain. Later, in about 1982, I came across this image in one of Vincent Buckley's poems while I was making a selection for the anthology. He too had used the image of a woman tossing her hair like rain! But I expect you were meaning something more than coincidences like that. Well, no, I can say that I haven't felt any influences from other poets. In fact, I gave up writing for a period of thirteen or fourteen years because I had detected the influences of others, and could hear other people's voices in what I had been doing. When I became conscious of that I was so annoyed with myself that I stopped writing! But that was a long time ago.

EP: It's noticeable that when you read in public a different kind of concentration seems to be given by the audience. The audience seems deeply attentive — and it's not simply because your speaking voice is quietly modulated.

DT: Well, I don't know, but if that sometimes happens it could be that, as some critics have said, these poems have something of the essence of life in them. There is no intellectual play in them for its own sake. Ideas enter them through moments that are warm and vibrant with the spirit of life. It is perhaps in this way that images, situations, tone and so on, acquire their power to convince, and that is what holds the attention.

EP: Do you read a great deal of poetry yourself?

DT: Not much. I take it in small doses, and I can't read a poetry book at one sitting. But there are poems I'm fond of and I take them down and re-read them many times. I read more prose than poetry. I would say, though, that I cherish poetry more than other forms of literature because of its economy. A good little

poem will give you an impression that will outlast any impression you get from a novel, however extensive it is. A poem sticks in your mind: it summarizes and epitomizes sometimes a whole world and even big books fail to do that.

EP: Do you think it's possible to make a profession of poetry?

DT: No, not as novel writing can be a profession. A novelist *must* sit down at the typewriter and bang away, and at times some of it must be to some extent mechanical. Prose writing demands a special, methodical approach, because you've got to keep the novel going. That's not an approach that's possible for poetry. You've got to let the thing you're thinking of writing about take hold of you and possess you and obsess you. And then you start thinking of ways of approaching the subject. Personally I never sit down and pick up a pencil to jot down the first thing that crosses my mind, or more pertinently, to write down even a line, however relevant, that's only a line in shape. Not before I've formed a couple of lines in my mind that are likely to satisfy me, do I pick up a pencil and make a start. The moment you start to write a poem everything is in chaos, and this fixing of two or three lines puts some order in to the chaos, even though those lines may not be used, or may turn up at the end of the poem. It's only when I've fixed those few lines that I know a poem is possible. Some people can sit down and write a complete poem about any subject, but hundreds of such poems get published and you wouldn't dare tell the writers that they aren't poems. It's comparatively easy to produce a poem of this sort, even one that's technically perfect.

EP: But they have no urgency to justify their existence?

DT: No, of course not. They have no real and substantial emotional basis, no sense of urgency. Everything seems to be happening on the surface. They are usually clever little pieces, inventive, well argued, full of little surprises and verbal brilliance. It's very easy for the unwary to mistake this for poetry. I normally live through every detail in the poems I make with extraordinary intensity.

EP: There is a sense in your work that the poems are written very patiently.

DT: I think you are quite right. But let me give you an example, instead of an answer in the abstract. I've recently completed a poem which has a title borrowed from Schubert, "To Be Sung on the Waters". For a long time I couldn't find a way of

finishing it. Several endings occurred to me, all of them acceptable, some even striking, but none of them true enough to satisfy my instinct. So I just waited for the "natural" ending to suggest itself, until one day, as I was standing at a bus stop on a bridge over the Elwood canal, the body of a dead rat came floating down in the water with some yellow leaves, and I knew that would be the ending I was seeking for my poem. And then there's the question of concentration and focusing. I concentrate hard and focus sharply. I try to bring all the important elements of the experience I'm dealing with to a conclusion that is in perfect harmony and tightly linked with every other part of the poem. A good deal of the poetry I read is sheer rhetoric.

EP: That may answer the question about the unusual attentiveness in the audience when your poetry is read. It could be concentration on the part of the audience in response to the concentration in your poetry.

DT: I concentrate and compress: it's concentration on the very essence of my theme and I want every little particular in the poem to bear directly on that theme and contribute to its development. On the other hand, I try to do this as simply as possible in terms of clarity. I don't mean clarity of meaning, which is often impossible to get. I often deal with very complex modern experiences, and it isn't possible perhaps to do them justice in *logical* terms, in say fourteen or sixteen lines. But I aim at clarity of image, visual clarity — so that on one plane the reader knows there is a beginning, a middle and an end. On the plane of "myth" at least. The other things, I hope, may suggest themselves to the reader, however vaguely. And they do suggest themselves, if the poem is successful. The whole derives from the centre, from within — clarity of detail, clarity of image, clarity of diction — but not necessarily clarity of meaning! That's a different thing.

EP: Perhaps clarity of meaning doesn't worry the audience if they trust the rest and know that meaning could be revealed in so far as the meaning of any poem can be known.

DT: Yes, this is true. But meaning or no meaning, the poem must be made interesting and memorable by other means, especially in the case of longer poems. I have difficulty with many such poems because very few seem good enough to carry their length, or to justify their existence, for that matter. I find most of them static, monotonous, ponderous, however interesting their subjects may be in themselves. The authors lack consistency in their control of the ingredients. I feel poems, however long or

short, must focus on a *thing* and must be about this thing all the time, no matter how much variety is introduced. Each line must bear on the central thing, illuminate and enrich it. A poem is very complex, because so many things are happening at the same time. So I don't know . . . that's why I don't write very much. It's hard work.

Interview recorded with Elizabeth Perkins in Townsville, 9 July 1986.