

ROSEMARY DOBSON:

AN INTERVIEW

- EP: When you first became aware of poetry, as a child, perhaps, what did it mean to you then?
- RD: I began writing when I was seven. I know this quite well, because I wrote out the poem and dated it and it has survived.
- EP: Could I ask, what was it that prompted you as a seven year old to write a poem? Today many children wouldn't dream of writing a poem.
- RD: I don't know exactly. I very well remember the feeling of satisfaction, as though you knew that you could do something that you really wanted to do, and it is not surprising that I continued to write. I know that my mother, who in no way forced ambitions on my sister and me, nevertheless would have been very pleased and that she encouraged me. I had been reading poetry and having it read to me.
- EP: How have your perceptions of poetry and your interest in it changed over the years since that seven year old start?
- RD: I think I've continued to feel that this is the most important thing that I want to do. It's my preoccupation. But how has it changed? It's just a matter of diversifying. So many other things enter into one's life and are material for poetry, and one uses them.
- EP: Did you ever feel you put other other possibilities aside, so that you could continue to write poetry?
- RD: Well, I've always felt that I would go on with other things but that if I wanted to write a poem then I dropped everything else. A dilemma came because I had some talent for painting and I was passionately addicted to looking at paintings, but it wasn't really a matter of choice because I knew that the poetry was the first thing I wanted.
- EP: In one of your poems you quote Mandelstam's comment that the poet talks to the future if he or she wants to achieve the sense of continuous surprise that is found in true poetry. Could you explain that a little further please?
- RD: I think that Mandelstam was really emphasising the importance of not addressing your contemporaries or being in any way influenced by contemporary opinion. Of course his circumstances were such that he had to look beyond the present. "The sense of continuous surprise" — I think that it's just the feeling that you forget about everything that is known and you put

your thoughts away from the present altogether. I'm a bit muddled about the continuous surprise, but it was a very strong idea as he expressed it. He talked about making signals to Mars in one's poetry.

EP: Yes. Looking, in some way, beyond whatever is around. It is true though, isn't it, that one of the best ways of describing the effect of art is that it gives a sense of surprise?

RD: Yes, that's right. And Mandelstam's idea is also a very good corrective in a much more trivial way; at certain stages of one's life, of course, one is so influenced by the things that other people say and think about your work and what you are doing. I know I was guilty of this for a long time, of feeling too much the strictures of other people and so on. If you think as Mandelstam does, you don't worry, you just go on and that is a very good corrective.

EP: I am interested in the use of sound in your poetry: do sounds and ideas interact very strongly in your work?

RD: I am interested in your question simply because in fact I never think about sounds! Isn't it strange? My poetry begins with ideas or possibly it begins with a line or a couple of lines. But sound I think becomes more important to me when I'm looking at the poem as a whole and correcting it and finding things that need to be altered. I don't really think much about sound and it always interests me because other poets put such stress on it. For instance, you know Roland Robinson feels that poetry should be heard rather than read, and then, of course, there are Performance Poets.

EP: Yes. One reason I asked that question was that in some of your poems you introduce lines from other writing which contribute because of the *sound* of the way the idea is expressed. At other times you might use the names of well-known brands of things and daily phrases that were around at the time. You start from there and it is almost as though the phrases, that is, their sound, was the origin of the idea. Do you know what I mean?

RD: Yes I do, but actually I don't feel a major concern about sound, and what happens in cases like those you mention is a kind of accident. One must have some regard for it of course: if the poem is successful then sound must enter into it. But I just don't feel conscious of that so much.

EP: The next question is a bit obvious, perhaps, but what do you hope that readers get from your poetry?

RD: I think what I get from other people's poetry is what I would hope for people to get from mine: a kind of extension of life. An extension of ideas perhaps, or some sort of heightened sensitiv-

ity to things. That's a bit vague.

EP: That same sense of surprise, perhaps?

RD: Yes, that's right, and a sense of otherness.

EP: Something that takes you out of yourself?

RD: Yes.

EP: What do you think then that poetry gives to human life that we can't get from any other source or activity?

RD: I don't know that one can claim much more from poetry than from painting, say, except that poetry is poised on a more delicate balance in a way, because it doesn't require anything but words, which are important enough, but it's a sparer kind of activity.

EP: I suppose it focuses your attention in a very special way that can't be done by anything else. Everything will focus our attention in some way, but poetry is a focusing which is different from the way our attention is held when we read prose for example.

RD: Yes, I think I agree, although I find it hard to define.

EP: Have you ever felt that some poets write chiefly from a sense of pain in any of its forms, and others more from the sense of pleasure?

RD: I haven't thought of this though I suppose one could easily see that it is true and give examples of both. I wouldn't think that if I wrote a poem from a sense of pain it would be a very successful poem in some way. I change my mind quite a lot about this — in fact I'm always changing my mind but I think that the too subjective poem is a dangerous one for me.

EP: In what way do you mean dangerous, dangerous artistically?

RD: Yes, not likely to come off, so to speak. Perhaps dwelling too much on oneself might endanger the poem for me.

EP: You are often described as a celebratory poet — that suggests that your attention is focused more on other things and your response to them, rather than on yourself.

RD: I think probably somewhere along the line I made a decision that this was better.

EP: There is a question that interests me very much. Because the I of a poem often seems to be so close to the poet's self we tend to identify the poet herself with the I in most poems in which it occurs. But at the moment, some poets, and other writers too, are disclaiming that the I represents any part of themselves at all. Gwen Harwood, for example, said recently that the I in her poems never represents herself except in poems addressed to particular people. Perhaps she doesn't expect us to believe that

- is entirely so. Would you say something similar about your own use of I in your poems?
- RD: I should think that wherever I use I, I mean myself — yes. Yes, certainly.
- EP: That is interesting and helpful! Do you remember these three poems, “The Missal”, “The Tiger” and “The Alphabet”? They are especially well liked by younger students — I’ve read them in High Schools for example.
- RD: On the whole they’re very clear and simple and I suppose the message in them is really the importance of the word. In “The Alphabet” I’m involved with my interest in anything to do with printing. And actually I mean the *shapes* of letters, not anything more abstract than that. I have such a strong sense of the visual pleasure that one gets from looking at letters for their own sake. I think in both poems what I was trying to connect in some way was the letter, the word and the poet.
- EP: You must have enjoyed learning the alphabet as a child?
- RD: I’m sure I did. And also I’ve been so fortunate in being connected with printing in some way all my life.
- EP: I remember you showed me the book that you printed yourself at school.
- RD: Yes, we had such wonderful opportunities. And then I studied design for a while, which was very helpful and related to that interest. Then I worked in Angus & Robertson’s editorial department, which may sound a bit remote from my chief concern, but in fact it was dealing with words even if not so much for their visual character. Of course my husband’s career was always in publishing and then he established his own press, which is in our own house, and that’s been a great pleasure.
- EP: You have done a great deal of translation. What do you think there is in a poem that can be translated successfully from one language to another?
- RD: It’s a subject that’s endlessly argued: what is best to jettison, because you can’t keep everything. But when we started on the project to make some, well, so-called translations from the Russian, I think our primary aim was to try to create a living poem in English as near as possible to the original. And that did mean jettisoning a number of things, like accuracy of form. So I think if you can bring the poem alive in the new language and make it as close as possible to the original, that is the best you can aim for. We weren’t making claims to be translators, and of course it would have been wrong if that had been our intention. Although we had the assistance continually of an expert in the

language, it's not the same as knowing the language. So it was really a dangerous thing to do I think.

EP: Sometimes I think that it is the poetry of the idea that is carried from an original to a translation.

RD: When we began on Mandlestam there were no versions of Mandlestam available, but since then many people have elected to translate him. The first book we did was the best way to publish, which was with the literal translation followed by the two versions, and so you could say well, nothing is authoritative but here are some approximations. That's what we hoped for in the second book, but unfortunately Queensland University Press wanted to do it differently so we had to fall in with their proposal.

EP: I liked that first book because, apart from the poems themselves, those variant translations or approximations showed something about the process of reading poetry in translation.

RD: What we needed was the Russian text, but we couldn't have it.

EP: It would have provided a visual element which means so much to you? Apart from the obvious advantage to readers of Russian?

RD: Yes, that was part of it, I think.

EP: Do you think Australian poetry has undergone many changes since you first became interested in reading and writing? For example, has it always been sufficiently alert to poetry written elsewhere?

RD: If I can speak from my own experience — there was little Australian poetry available when I was at school. Certainly I read a great many volumes by English poets, and English anthologies. When I was beginning to publish the question was being debated as to whether one should or should not be interpreting one's own country. Some argued that we should not be influenced by overseas ideas at all. There was the whole Jindyworobak and Angry Penguins controversy. That debate was outgrown, of course. I suffered a bit from it, I must say — because, you know, it did seem a far cry to be writing poems about Renaissance paintings! And so I felt I had to defend my choice of subject.

EP: It seems it was a necessary and quite explicable period for Australian poetry to go through, but it must have made writing very difficult for many poets.

RD: And now I suppose the whole situation is so fluid and interchangeable, and there is so much rapidity in communication, that you could be reading what's been written everywhere almost as soon as it's published in any country. There's more

translation and so on. I think that interchange is very good, and that this is a fortunate period for that reason.

EP: As a poet and reviewer, what relationship do you think reviewing has with poetry or poetry has with criticism in general?

RD: My ideas about this have changed a lot. I used to be terribly sensitive to reviews. Adverse ones, which lots of people say they find stimulating, didn't have a challenging effect on me. I used to get terribly cast down. And good ones — as soon as I had the initial pleasure of reading them, I began to think and doubt them! So I have been unnecessarily influenced by reviews. But I must have got older and wiser because I now attach much less importance to them unless I know that the person who has written the review is someone whom I can absolutely trust. And I think one thing that is really missing in the Australian literary scene at the moment is that sort of single-minded intelligence that, for example, Douglas Stewart had and was able to exercise during his time at the *Bulletin*. It wasn't that one necessarily agreed with him, but you could measure yourself against that one mind and that one opinion all the time. Now we have lots of different critical voices. And perhaps you just have to choose your own critic. I always decline to review poetry.

EP: Have you ever felt that the language we use is, as some feminist criticism says, essentially masculine or male controlled?

RD: Only in the rather lesser sense that if you're going to accept the idea of an essentially feminist/masculinist language, then it becomes difficult in writing poetry to explain all the time that you're thinking of both sexes. I think you could just as easily use the feminine pronouns, but as the masculine has always been the case why not continue with it?

EP: The psychologist might argue that for a woman continually to say his, him, he and so on when talking about women and men has a long-term cumulative effect. I must admit that the first time I met it was when I was a little girl at school and we sang "Australia's Sons let us Rejoice". It did give me a shock because I was at an all girls' school! And then of course I began to accept it as one of those strange things about language. But I think that over the years it does have a cumulative effect of making women ignore something about themselves. You know how nuns in convents say "we" rather than "I" as a sort of denial of egotism! If it works that way for them then surely constantly saying "he" for ourselves must have the same effect.

RD: Yes, I think it would be better if there was some compromise as obviously it isn't a case of switching over completely to the feminine. Only I don't know what the compromise could be.

- EP: Some feminist criticism queries the use of the Muse for women poets because the Muse is supposed to be feminine. If the poet thinks of the Muse in any sense at all is it as a realistic help? Do women poets think in terms of another woman helping them? For a man the help offered by a Muse, however he conceives her, is help coming from a woman, someone of the other sex — or someone who may represent the female part of his own identity — his *anima*, perhaps. If you do think of the Muse as any kind of help do you think of it as having a gender?
- RD: Yes. I think it has a feminine gender, because I'm going back to Greek myths where one would think of the Muse or the nine Muses as all being sisters.
- EP: Does it seem that a woman poet might have a special affinity with poetry, then, more than a male poet has? She'd be more at home with it because really it is the voice or art form of her sex or should be.
- RD: That would surely apply to all the arts over which the Muses preside!
- EP: Perhaps it does! As a woman poet do you think that you have special problems that your male poet friends don't encounter?
- RD: Purely practical do you mean? I've never found it so. When I began publishing I was accepted almost immediately. I was about twenty when I had the first poem in the *Bulletin*. I never came across any prejudice. Once H. M. Green, the critic, wrote a book called *Fourteen Minutes* — I think it was based on a series of radio talks — and he had a chapter at the back called "Some Women Poets", that sort of thing. But I was never conscious of any harmful prejudice. I felt I had it easy as a young poet, and that was why, when things came up like Sisters (The Women's Publishing Co-Operative) I was very pleased to be called upon and to be able to do something, simply because I felt that my own experience had been pretty good.
- EP: Your sense of design. I've seen that referred to a great deal.
- RD: Well, I do feel strongly about this and it does influence the way I write poetry. It relates to my training in art. I think it a fact that a training in one form of art assists you in another, and certainly I think of all the technical matters of poetry in terms of art in general — things like balance, darks and lights are general artistic terms rather than exclusively poetic ones. The shape of a poem is very important to me. Not necessarily a regular shape but just the shape the poem takes. I'm not talking about the four line stanza or anything like that, but, yes, all the aspects of design are important in my poems. And in a way I think of them

- a good deal more readily than I think of the sound of words, which we were talking about earlier.
- EP: Your poem called "The Missal" ends with the line "In the beginning was the Word". Would you perhaps want to say rather that in the beginning there was the design?
- RD: No I don't think so. I'm thinking of design only in terms of technical matters. But I think "In the beginning was the Word" is nearer to what I believe.
- EP: What place do you think hostile emotions and attitudes have in poetry? What kind of poem do you think comes out of contempt? Everybody quotes Yeats's remark that out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry but out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric, and I suppose my question is related to that.
- RD: Well, I don't think that anything I ever wrote that was hostile or contemptuous would be a good poem: I would never feel I was at ease in writing that kind of poem. Although I find that when I've been to America, and I've been twice now, each time, partly because of the friends I have there and partly because of various political events taking place, I have written some more or less political poems. I feel very aware of collective guilt, and the last two lines in a recent poem of mine named this century as "the century of the Slaughtered Innocents". I do believe that this is the century of the *victims* and the loss of innocence. I wanted to put the pity and the horror into the poem.
- EP: And it's not your elected mode?
- RD: No, no it isn't.
- EP: I've written here in the margin of one of your books an idea that I must have wanted to remember for a tutorial or lecture. It's "passionate sincerity is the keynote of this poetry." Does that mean anything to you in relationship to your work? Would you be happy to define your poetry in those terms?
- RD: Oh yes, I'd be very happy if someone defined my poetry in those words. It comes back to that question about the I in my poetry, and what I write being from my own strong feelings and convictions.
- EP: Some poets seem actually to deny that. They feel that the I is an artificial construct. That is aesthetically an interesting idea. But obviously not all poets feel the same. You, for example, do not agree with that idea at all in relation to your own writing?
- RD: Well, no. But I'm just wondering if I looked at my poems if I could bear myself out in that! But that is really how I feel about the I in my poems.

EP: You were speaking last night about the cultural heritage available to Australian writers? Do you feel generally that our writers reflect late twentieth century Australian culture adequately in their work?

RD: I think so. I don't feel that I have to defend my use of either the present or our past heritage in my work, and I do say particularly in those "Museum" poems that what you have to do is accept the past heritage and use it in your own time and change it if need be. And yet I find I can hold two opposing views on this at once. For example, Philip Larkin's ideas interest me very much and I've been thinking about it a lot since he died. He used the phrase "dipping into the myth kitty", rather disparagingly. That is what he himself does not do! He's perfectly consistent. He's written a poem in *The Whitsun Weddings* called "Water", which made me think "Oh, if only I had written that poem!" It is entirely without reliance on anything outside himself — there's nothing that comes into it that he hasn't put into it himself. And I admire it so much. But it is the opposite to what I've been holding, so it's not so much changing one's ideas as seeing that there are advantages and good reasons for both attitudes. Larkin's "Water" is such a good poem that you feel it totally bears out his ideas.

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

Philip Larkin "Water".

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.