USE OF THESES

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'Me is not a stable reality':

Negotiations of Identity in the Poetry of Dorothy Auchterlonie, Rosemary Dobson, Dorothy Hewett and J.S. Harry

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University

December 1994
INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

Not so long ago, one of my children looked at the piles of papers and books on my desk, looked at me sitting (yet again) at the computer, and asked, 'But Mummy, will anybody read your thesis?' Now this thesis is in your hands, and I feel impelled to answer some of the questions I imagine you are asking yourself, and will continue to ask yourself as you read on.

You may ask why I chose this particular thesis topic, and even more importantly why I went about it in the way I have. This is a 'feminist' thesis. I deliberately chose, with a fairly specific ideological motivation, to work on women poets. I was aware from the outset of the project that women poets are neglected in many public forums in this country. Women appear to be under-represented in anthologies, school and undergraduate courses, critical studies, and, in this particular context, postgraduate theses. As one ascends what could be construed as the privilege ladder, from journals to anthologies to courses to theses, the representation of women poets decreases markedly. In a rough survey I conducted of the holdings of my university library in 1990, I found that women penned roughly one quarter to one third of poetry published in journals, but their work accounts for only one sixth of the poetry contained in this century's anthologies.

In the context of postgraduate critical writing—the discourse in which I am myself engaging—there is a marked bias in favour of male poets. Between 1965 and 1988, Australian universities accepted forty-eight postgraduate theses on Australian poets (Union List of Higher
Education Theses in Australian Libraries, 1965-1988). Of these, only nine theses or parts of theses were devoted to the study of Australian women poets. Only five of these were wholly on individual women poets. Predictably enough, four were on Judith Wright, one on Gwen Harwood. By the end of 1988, only three Australian women poets had been the subject of completed Doctoral or Masters theses. They were Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood and Rosemary Dobson.

The remaining thirty-nine dissertations produced between 1965 and 1988 covered nineteen male poets. It is interesting to note that whilst only half of the theses on women poets concerned sole poets—the other half were on a collection of poets—most theses on male poets were devoted to individuals. Do researchers regard Australian male poets as more deserving of scholarship? Do they think that women poets are less deserving of individual attention than their male counterparts? Perhaps scholars choose to study more than one woman poet at a time because of the collectivity at the base of most feminist theory? For myself, there is definitely something of the desire to work on several poets in order to ‘even things up’.

When I turned to another, more recent set of data, I was disheartened to find that the percentages had not changed much in the last twenty-five years. The October 1993 ‘ASAL directory of postgraduate research in Australian Literature’, published in Notes and Furphies, showed that there was only one current thesis being written on Australian women poets (my own), while there were fourteen theses under way on Australian male poets (pp. 25-29). There were several other theses with generic titles such as ‘Australian Poetry’ which made it difficult to assess the sex of the subjects, but I would be surprised if these works deviated much from the pattern I had
observed. All theses on male poets focused on individuals. Interestingly, there was a roughly even sex division among postgraduates currently working on Australian poetry. That even division holds true for theses being written on male poets. This means that as many women as men choose to write on male poets.

There is, however, some cause for hope in the most up-to-date statistics ('ASAL directory of post-graduate research in Australian Literature', *Notes and Furphies*, October 1994, pp. 13-18), which show several new theses being undertaken on women's poetry, and a more balanced division between the nine women and thirteen men poets currently the subject of research.

What are the implications of such obvious bias? Privilege or discrimination in one facet of the canon can lead to privilege or discrimination in another. Those who research often go on to teach, to anthologise, to edit magazines, and to produce books of criticism. This is not, of course, to assert that the choice of a doctoral topic is a prescription for the critical interests or stance which scholars may follow later in their careers. Still, it seems reasonable to assume that the preoccupation with male poets at postgraduate level must have a major effect on these other sectors of the literature industry. It is easy to see why women have, in recent years, chosen to produce magazines and anthologies devoted exclusively to women poets. Anthologies such as *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* (1986) have been astonishingly successful. Susan Lever’s ‘Oxford Anthology of Australian Women’s Verse’ (forthcoming, 1995) continues to collect and comment on this poetry, and seeks to give a more historically accurate overview of women’s poetry in this country. *Poetry and Gender* (1989), a collection of essays edited by David Brooks and Brenda
Walker, devotes itself exclusively to women's poetry, and like the Penguin anthology is concerned with breaking a ban which has silenced and excluded women's voices.

I have written this dissertation, in part, because I want to pay attention to the very voices my contemporaries choose to ignore and exclude. In doing so, I do not try only to redress an imbalance, to 'even things up', for mere rhetoric asserting that men have excluded women writers from the canon is not enough to sustain a thesis, even were it enough to sustain my interest. I have chosen to read these poets and struggle with their writing for five years because I think they have something to say, and have been listened to less than they deserve. I want to delve into what it is in their voices which seems to harden the ears of the literary/critical profession against them, reading their poetry for what seem to me to be its most striking features. It is in those very features that I look for the seeds of the challenge this poetry presents to an Australian critical canon which has largely excluded women; a challenge which, silencing the voice of the poetry, results in turn in a silencing of the critical voice. These are women without whom a canon cannot properly exist.

One of the hardest parts of writing this dissertation has been the scarcity of an established body of writing in which to position my own work. The convention in an introduction to a thesis is to survey the critical terrain, to summarise what other critics and thesis writers have written on the subject, and to describe a position or positions from which one's own will be different. Even well known writers, such as Hewett and Dobson, have had very little critical attention, and in one sense I, and those few other critics who have written about these poets, are making the landscape as we go. The silence, or at least
relative quiet of other critics, makes writing on Australian women’s poetry difficult.

My interest in the voices of Australian women poets, then, did not stem from an established body of criticism with which I wanted to take issue. Rather, it emerged from several other sources. Before beginning my doctoral studies, I wrote an Honours thesis entitled ‘Distance in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson’. In the course of my study of Dickinson, and in writing the thesis, a whole new world opened up to me. When I first proposed the thesis to my supervisor, and mentioned how fascinated I was by the frequency with which the word ‘distance’ appeared in Dickinson’s work, and by the complexity with which she employed both the word, and a whole range of related images and metaphors, he uttered some fateful words: ‘Such a preoccupation with distance’, he opined, ‘seems to offer fruitful possibilities in a feminist context’. I have been very fortunate to have been guided by many fine teachers of literature, from my school days to the present. In my reading and writing progress there have been several points of wonderful illumination, when suddenly a whole unknown, challenging, terrifying world seemed to stretch in front of me and I could barely wait to put my first toe upon the road, or the river, or the slippery ice floe.

The idea that in thinking about ‘distance’ I could also be thinking specifically about Dickinson as a woman writer was one such moment. That thesis was, for many reasons, necessarily limited, and by the end of my Honours study I felt that I was only just ready to launch into the world of women’s poetry, to think about distance, desire, difference, poetics, identities. Beyond that, there were several important reasons for my choice of Australian women’s poetry.
Although disparate, they all bear on the way this thesis has developed. First, I was ashamed that through my entire undergraduate program I had studied virtually no Australian literature. I had, in my first year of university, read the required Australian texts and had then gone on to choose exclusively English literature courses. Honours saw me dabbling in some Australian novels and revelling in modern English and American poetry. By the time I was about to embark on doctoral studies, cultural cringe had loosened its hold on me. The teenager who had planned to emigrate permanently to England, Mecca of civilisation, had become the woman who yearned to travel but could not imagine forsaking Australia for another country. My reading of Emily Dickinson, and of feminist criticism of her work brought me up against ideas such as the country of the spirit, the mapping of one’s consciousness, the imaginative value of the domestic, the immediate and the familiar. The exotic became less attractive, and I was determined to try to read myself into this country of the spirit.

Initially, I saw the rough first title of my doctoral dissertation—'Contemporary Australian Women’s Poetry'—as a series of displacements. I thought the ‘Women’s’, the ‘Australian’, and indeed, the ‘Contemporary’ would be key terms in my dissertation. In a way, the process of the thesis has meant that those terms no longer carry metaphorical upper case letters. They are not ‘outside’ or ‘displaced’; they have become the centre of my literary and poetic map, and I no longer feel the need to amplify any sense of strangeness in them. To use Luce Irigaray’s words ‘I am astonished—and, unfortunately!, not astonished, but I like to go on being astonished’ (1991, p. 34) at how foreign the idea of working on Australian women’s poetry is to many in the general community. The most frequent question I am asked
about my topic—Australian women poets—is ‘Are there any?’ One person recently marvelled at how industrious a researcher I must have been, to uncover enough material on the topic to fill a doctorate. Even the reasonably well-read reply, ‘Oh, you mean Judith Wright’. I remind myself that it is as well to remember this strangeness, this difference, and not to allow domestication to become assimilation.

There were more practical reasons for choosing Australian poetry as my subject, and these bear directly on my relationship both with my thesis and with the poets I have read. When I began my work, in early 1989, my three children were aged one, three and five years respectively. At the time, I was so immersed in their care, in their physicality, and in their need for my continuing physical presence, that I simply could not imagine being able to travel overseas for research purposes. I felt that if, for example, I had continued to work on Emily Dickinson, I would have needed to spend a good deal of time in Massachusetts, absorbing the physical country of her writing. Australian poets seemed a more practical option and fitted in well with my need to study in this country. (Incidentally, one of the reasons that I chose to write on Emily Dickinson for my Honours thesis, quite apart from my fascination with her, which had begun with a term-long undergraduate course on her work, was that I wrote the thesis when my daughter was between three and six months old. She breastfed very frequently indeed, and I found that I could read and contemplate one Dickinson poem per breastfeed. Novels, at the time, seemed impossible...)

Why do I feel it is important for you to know this? Doctoral thesis writers do not generally give autobiographical details in their introductions. Is this thesis really about Dorothy Auchterlonie,
Rosemary Dobson, Dorothy Hewett and J.S. Harry, or is it merely about Marie-Louise Ayres, who is just beginning her critical career? Is this thesis to be only a personal appreciation of these bodies of work?

I want to justify myself, my very presence here in this Introduction, and in the body of this thesis, to you, dear Reader. That word—body—is at the very centre of this problem. In reading the poetry, and other writings, of Auchterlonie, Dobson, Hewett and Harry, I have been continually aware of the presence of their bodies in the texts, of their writing of the body, the female body, as an inescapable part of their texts. And when I try to trace their writing of the female identity and the poetic identity, I find the body at the nexus of each conception. Again, 'conception', like 'body', makes its way into my text. I, an Australian woman writing, share in that 'body', those 'conceptions'. More than that, the condition of my own body, and my own 'place' has found its way ineluctably into this thesis. My own 'story' has influenced, to a degree I find as impossible to elucidate as to deny, the ways in which I have approached both my reading and my writing. My own body, my story, my 'conception' of the poetry and the task, seem to lie in the slippery space between those two activities.

In my previous house, my workplace was the room in which my daughter had been born, only a year or so earlier. My desk, my writing place, was only a step from the place where she came into the world. The carpet was 'marked' there, with the stains of my own blood: the beginning of this work was inevitably marked with the sense of her coming into the world. In a different house, I now share a long room with my children's playthings. When I write about Dorothy Hewett dressing up, acting, masquerading, I have the dress up box in full view. I have reminders from my own childhood here—the doll's pram and
dolls which were considered appropriate toys for a little girl, destined to be a mother. I have reminders of my children’s infancy. In the corner is the rocking chair in which the rhythms of breastfeeding went on, year after year, in which I rocked with the rhythms of labour contractions. Alongside my desk, where I read, and write, and struggle with the abyss between those two activities, is my children’s work table, littered with stories and pictures and books and poems. I am reminded that when I embarked on this project, none of my children could read. As I have come into the world of reading this poetry, of having new worlds opened up for me, they have moved into the world of texts, of reading, of writing. One of them, reading poetry voraciously, writes poetry continually. Reading Tolkien becomes the basis for many Tolkienesque poems, translations from one text to another. Reading Eliot produces fractured phrases and dark images. He reads a children’s anthology, and announces that there is one especially good poem in it, by someone called W. B. Yeats (sic). He asks if I would be offended if he wrote a Ph.D on Australian men’s poetry.

Of course, my own history, my own world of having texts and bodies existing within the same space, is not isolated, is not a history or an unmarked text of its own. Existing in a certain time, in a certain place and within a certain culture, it is possible for me to combine the world of the body and the world of reading and writing. There have been no institutionalised bars to my being a woman and a scholar at the same time, although there have been many subtle difficulties marginalising me. And the world of my body is also marked by history. In this particular time and place, I was able to give birth to my children at home, by choice, supported in my strength. At this time in history, I was able to breastfeed my children as and when I wished, for as long as
I wished. My bodily relationship with my children was touched ineluctably by a history which had come around to reconstructing childbirth and breastfeeding as healthy, ‘natural’ signs of the sexually healthy woman.

But more specifically, my reading during these last few years has been marked, or historicised, not only by what scholarship still calls the ‘Primary Texts’, but also by the ‘Secondary Texts’. The distinction between these two is blurring, and in recent years there has been something of a reversal of their positions. There are many theses or books written now on topics which would once have been thought of as ‘secondary’ but which are now ‘primary’. Thus, many theses and papers have titles beginning ‘A Lacanian approach to...’, ‘A Post-colonial reading of...’, and of course, ‘A Feminist work on...’. Primary texts have become displaced sites for theoretical operations to be performed within. In many ways I feel a sympathy for this reversal. There is, after all, a shadow of the masculine as primary or source, and the feminine as secondary or derivative in these terms, and I value those critics who feel that their ‘primary’ texts are no longer to be reified or valorised as the unchanging phallus around which scholars discover their own lack. I am disturbed, however, at the ease with which these categories (primary and secondary texts) have become reversed, rather than unsettled, at the ways in which theoretical writings have become themselves the unified truth which is danced around. I perceive a lack of questioning among some scholars about ‘why’ they choose a particular theoretical line to follow, about the historicity of their own choices. At times I succumb to this lack of questioning myself.
In my own theoretical practice, I unashamedly privilege my primary texts. They give me pleasure and exhilaration in a way that much theoretical writing does not. I am wary of 'theory' as a sort of abstract, rather than as a tool or as another text to take on the journey. I cannot help seeing that among my postgraduate colleagues, it is often men who choose to work on overtly 'theoretical' issues (which are, correspondingly, highly valued), whilst my women colleagues, like myself, feel disheartened, shut out, stupid, or incapable of understanding abstract theory when it is not connected intimately, or even at all, to a text.

It is in that word—'connection'—that my own theoretical practice resides. In reading 'theoretical' writings, or 'secondary' texts, I look for connections, for conversations, for the pulsing of continuity and disjunction. At my desk, marked as it is by my body and my experiences as woman and mother, I listen to the polyphony of these voices, listen for the places of harmony, and am energised by the places of discord, of difference, of the strange. These voices weave around me. The best of these theoreticians leave lines as memorable, and as slippery, as poetry. I do not try to pin them down, to control them. I listen to their voices, and jump between their silences...

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Both in everyday life and in theoretical and intellectual formulations, men have come to define male-ness as that which is basically human, and to define women as not-men.
(Chodorow, 1986, p. 15)

Reading woman becomes a form of autobiography or self-constitution that is finally indistinguishable from writing (woman).
(Jacobus, 1986, p. 4)
We are not looking for a new language, a radical outside, but for 'the other within', the alterity that has always lain silent, unmarked and invisible within the mother tongue.

(Gallop, 1987, p. 320)

The daughter therefore speaks two languages at once.

(Homans, 1986, p. 13)

Women's biosexual experiences...all involve some challenge to the boundaries of her body ego ('me' / 'not-me' in relation to her blood or milk, to a man who penetrates her, to a child once part of her body).

(Chodorow, 1974, p. 59)

There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink...infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another.

(Cixous, 1980, p. 251-253)

I sing my continence though my leakage.

(Campbell, 1990, p. 29)

'Volume without contours'

(Irigaray, 1991, p. 53)

I think 'feminine literature' is an organic, translated writing...translated from blackness, from darkness.

(Duras, 1980, p. 174)

...an 'other meaning' which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, and at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off...

(Irigaray, 1980, p. 103)

...what takes place between a woman's body and her words is not representation but a fluctuating process of intersemiotic translation... In translation, of course, the transfer of meaning is never totally efficient. Signification escapes, meaning leaches away, and extraneous meaning seeps in.

(Banting, 1992, p. 230)

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In reading these fine theorists who had opened up new vistas in reading for me, these sometimes exotic visitors who left behind them a coloured shadow or the whiff of some almost identifiable perfume, I had constantly to ask myself whether any of these writers gave me the voice or the language with which I wanted to approach
my four poets, Auchterlonie, Dobson, Hewett and Harry. Would they help me to understand the connections between these women and their words? Would they illuminate the repressed bitterness of Dorothy Auchterlonie:

What shall she do now
To leave for a sign
That perfection blessed once
Her solitary vine?

(“The Hollow Years”, 1983, p. 16)

or account for Rosemary Dobson’s willingness to melt into the texts of her poems:

What should any poet do
When the painter he has made
Steps into his picture’s frame?
Taking all my words with me,
Reader, I shall do the same.

(‘The Converts’, 1955, p. 14)

or make sense of Dorothy Hewett’s troubled conflation of woman and silence:

Mother to daughter the curse drops like a stone.
My mother sits silent with nothing to remember.


or indeed help me to understand the mysteries of Harry’s imaginative connections?

He says he has seen
a golden fish in another pond yesterday
It is that golden fish he is after

(‘Backward Over Dark Water’, 1979, p. 44)
And would any of these theoretical voices account for why I chose these four poets, out of many possibilities? There were, of course, practical reasons for this choice. I had started with a long list, shortened it by pretty much irrational means, and ruled out Harwood, Diesendorf and Zwicky several years into the project, on a day when I had a blinding flash of realisation that I could not handle any more than four poets.

But were there, really, other less practical reasons? At times I like to think that in my reading of these poets, they have revealed moods or themes or poetics which, if they do not fully share, at least let them sit together in this one thesis. This is partly true. But this image of revelation troubles me. It suggests that my approach to the poets, my relationship with their work, is like lifting corresponding pieces of tissue paper off several beautiful woodcuts or old photographs in art magazines. It has the advantage that it presupposes that I could, if I wished, lift a different corner off each picture, reveal a different reason for their appearing together. I envisage only a partial lifting—there could be many possible approaches, relationships. The problem with this vision is that it presumes a steady, unchanging, unified and stable image beneath that tissue paper. Indeed, my image undercuts itself, for photographs and woodcuts are not unified or stable—they are presented in negative. In seeing that unchanging if veiled image outside of me, and in lifting only parts of the paper, I fetishise that image, that poet. My relationship becomes, in effect, voyeuristic, or even pornographic. Indeed, it reifies a masculine gaze, concerns itself with a masculine sexualising of the gaze, rather than the texturally (textually) based eroticism which most women seem to share.
So what alternative can I propose? If my relationship in this thesis, in these years reading the poetry, is not pornographic, then what is it? Cixous has written of the 'good mother's milk', the 'white ink' with which women write (1980, p. 251), and it is in this, I think, that I must search for my image of how I relate to the identities, poetic and sexual, of my four subjects. Cixous, however, seems to see that white ink as a one way process—maternal body to child body. And yet, ever since I first read this image (while I was lactating), I have been troubled by the limitation under which it operates. For the process of lactation, like the process of reading, is not a one-way transfer of nourishment from one body/mind to another. Lactation is a complex, interactive process, which continually changes the body of the mother as it changes (by nourishing) the body of the child. The breast is not a disembodied milk store (whether figured as finite or infinite), but responds to the suckling of the child. The child suckles (a rhythmic, pulsing suckle, quite different from the popular concept of 'sucking'), the mother's breast is stimulated to release milk, the child strips the breast of milk, and the breast is further stimulated to make more milk. And more than this, that stimulation of the mother's body is a pulsing one, the pulses, the beats of the sphincter muscles around the nipple are caused by the baby's suckling which stimulates the production of oxytocin. Oxytocin—'the hormone of love'. Responsible for the pulsing of milk release (and simultaneously stimulating the production of more milk), for the pulsing of the womb in the contractions of labour, for the pulsing of orgasm, for the pleasurable feelings of being in love. Responsible for the flush, the heightened breathing, the raised heartbeat, the pleasure of all of these rhythms. Rhythms, pulsings, the erotic. Bodies of mother and child endlessly change in response to each
other, a conversation of the skin, of the viscera, of the smooth muscles of the body.

This, I think, is my image. I remember that the breath is part of this balance—that large amounts of Ventolin prevent these muscle contractions, where premature birth is threatened. In my own first year of reading these poets, my breath became increasingly restricted: pushed or pulled too much by someone else's breath? And the repetitious, pulsing, four hourly nebulisings of Ventolin interfered with my milk release to my daughter, making it difficult to produce enough milk. The balance of our rhythm gone. Anxiety.

Rhythm, pulse, beat between these four poets and me. I hear howls from certain quarters that I am choosing an essential biological relationship, and even then only one of several possible 'biological' stories. That I am merely substituting the penetration, or the fetishistic unveiling with another simple biological image. And yet my relationship with each of these poets has been very much of the body, of the breast. In each of these poets I read the space, the rhythm, the necessity of the woman's body as that space, the only space, from which she can speak. In Dorothy Auchterlonie's body lurks the pleasurable abyss of absence. For Rosemary Dobson, the pulsing between her own inner membranes and the world around her, the 'beat upon her ear', is compelling, and the bulk of her imagery revolves around exchange. Dorothy Hewett enacts her body, her self across pages and stages and yet seems unwilling or unable to follow that rhythm into another, or to allow another to follow the rhythm into her. And J.S. Harry, younger than her compatriots by twenty years, writing her choppy lines, plays hide and seek—now she is here in the text, now she is not.
Who is mother and who is child in these dyads, in this complex, this matrix?

It does not matter—and changes from moment to moment—whether the texts, the poets are mother and I drinking their white milk of writing, or if, in writing my own white milk, I give them, and I hope, my own readers, nourishment. We, poets, critic and readers, are not ‘stable realities’, we are mother and child by turns.

Anxiety. Why did these words of pleasure, of pulse, of erotic love come to me after illness, in anxiety, directly after a dream of sex and death?

The dream was this:

I (a recognisable ‘I’, although not in my own house) am reading an old fashioned cookbook which someone (an older man perhaps) has given to me. The cookbook is full of pictures of dutiful 1950’s housewives and desserts which look like blancmanges, custards, junkets. The desserts are in a range of bright and gaudy colours—there is no fruit to be seen. Suddenly, though, on the turn of a page, the pictures change, and there is a picture of a young, adolescent girl, holding a pink, heart shaped dessert in her hands in front of her. Her face is lit only by candles either on the cake or in front. Her face is dark, morbid, funereal. Turning the pages, more pictures follow quickly, increasingly dark and deathly. They seem to be a kind of dark, soft pornography, still 50’s style, little flesh, much suggestion. The final picture I turn to is of a couple, alive, I think, making love (or making death), with plastic wrap or plastic masks over their faces. The images are disturbing, bordering on the necrophilic. In the dream, I drop the book,
trying to rejoin the dinner party I'm actually meant to be at (in another room in the house?). So quickly that I am gasping with horror, the doorbell rings, I open the door, and there is a mother and child, both with plastic nebuliser masks on their faces. I awake sweating, worry immediately about the safety of my children, and then, inexplicably, these paragraphs of the rhythms of love, of the body, of my pleasurable relationship with these four poets start to write themselves in my head. I get up, sit in a cold room, write for a long time, and then spend hours getting back to sleep.

Anxiety. Unease. Dis-ease. Alienation. Absence. Abyss. These are dark words, dark ideas which also pulse in and out of my relationship with Auchterlonie, with Dobson, with Hewett, and with Harry. There are, between us, gaps and fissures. Even here I have not, of course, told the whole story, or the only story. Even if I had chosen these same four women poets, I could have written many other theses featuring them. I might have written a historico/political thesis, which addressed the particular historical moment that served as crucible from which these four women produced poetry. Or a more specifically psychoanalytic thesis, taking a particular analysand/analysee position. Or a reader response thesis, or a post-colonial thesis, concentrating on the possible difficulties of writing from the position of colonial subject. I could easily have written a thesis on the representation of motherhood in these poets (indeed seriously considered this possibility early on). And, if I had chosen any of these, I would have been able to write another version of my autobiography to support it. After all, I am not only a mother. I am also a lover, daughter, sister, and treasure several passionate relationships with women friends, fewer passionate
friendships with men. I exist as a scholar and a worker, a writer and a member of a community. I may appear to be here, in this Introduction, but like Dorothy Hewett’s poetic identity,

I can’t write autobiography because there is no me
Me is not a stable reality
(‘Creeley in Sydney’, 1979, p. 16)

this ‘I’ also is not a ‘stable reality’. It exists in anxiety, gaps, abyss, in the black milk as well as the white. In the body of this thesis, this ‘I’, along with the many others which constitute ‘me’, does not disappear, even though my ‘story’ may be put away. I will still be here in this thesis, and you will have to look for, be attuned to the pulsings between ‘my’ poets and I, between me, and, dear Reader, you.
CHAPTER ONE

The mainland of grief: Dorothy Auchterlonie

Before her death in 1991, Dorothy Green was many things to many people, and in 1990 Sara Dowse listed some of them by describing Green as ‘Teacher, singer, journalist, lecturer, but significantly, never professor’ (1990, p. 20). Green’s qualities as a public figure gain most attention in the many tributes to her written both before and after her death. Her contribution to Australian public life and letters was remarkable and wide ranging, and has been recognised by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature in its annual Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture, inaugurated in 1992. Yet descriptions such as Dowse’s virtually ignore Green’s life as a poet who published poetry in many literary journals, and collected her works together in three volumes, Kaleidoscope (1940), The Dolphin (1967), and Something to Someone (1983), all under her maiden name of Dorothy Auchterlonie, which, for the sake of simplicity, I shall use throughout this chapter.

In all accounts of Dorothy Auchterlonie’s literary work except those of Elizabeth Perkins (1989 and 1990), Auchterlonie’s poetry is mentioned, but only superficially analysed. Dowse affords a paragraph to her poetry, describing it as ‘on the whole...highly distilled reflections on traditional, often Christian themes [which] usually observe the conventions of metre and rhyme’ (1990, p. 21). Even Perkins, Auchterlonie’s long-time friend and colleague, in her valuable and insightful ‘The Work of Dorothy Auchterlonie’ acknowledges Auchterlonie’s poetry specifically only in her conclusion, where she
praises Auchterlonie’s poem, ‘Equation’ from The Dolphin for its ‘elegant...’ and ‘economic...’ drama, calling it ‘a very fine poem’ (1990, p. 292). In his tribute to Auchterlonie after her death, Humphrey McQueen invokes two of her poems, ‘Questions for Kaspar’ (1967, p. 47) and ‘Overdue, presumed lost’ (1983, p. 31) to illustrate her aversion to war and sees her poetry as displaying ‘the pleasure she took from orchestrating sounds as well as her delight in subverting the wisdom of the ages’ (1991, pp. 34-35).

It is easy to see how the enormous mass of Auchterlonie’s public work might have come to outweigh her poetry, which seems often to be sidelined by descriptions such as ‘fine poetry’ or the like, but difficult to know how Auchterlonie herself felt about this, especially as she once described herself as ‘primarily a poet’ (1970, pp. 35-6). It is also intriguing that Auchterlonie continued to publish her poetry under her maiden name, whilst her public, critical work was published under her married name, forever aligning her with her husband, the eminent critic H.M. Green. In this chapter, I argue that Auchterlonie’s poetry bears critical scrutiny, and that an understanding of its dynamic and aesthetic can enrich and add complexity to our understanding of her work. Her poetry does not simply illustrate or reproduce her position on matters of public importance. Auchterlonie’s voice is not a single, unified one, but is fractured and informed by the ‘absences’ which she names, invokes, and even courts in her poetry, and occasionally in her more public work. There is a disjunction between the work of the public Dorothy Green, and the private Dorothy Auchterlonie, and thus a disjunction between two discourses. Following the example of constantly repeated words in Auchterlonie’s poetry itself, I name these discourses ‘sign’ and ‘absence’. There is
much fruit for the critic in the space between these discourses, as well as in the rarer ‘cracks’ in what Elizabeth Perkins calls her ‘technical formalism’ (1990, p. 292), and I suggest that although Auchterlonie has been seen as antithetical to, or at least unsupportive of, specifically feminist literary endeavours, there is within her poetry and its disjunctions food for thought for the feminist critic.

In her contribution to the bibliographical Contemporary Poets of the English Language, Auchterlonie describes herself as ‘primarily a poet in that a woman is by definition a poet, a maker’ (in Murphy, 1970, pp. 35-6). She adds that her poetic impetus is to ‘reveal’ the ‘loss...and betrayal of the organic world.’ The interesting note on woman as ‘by definition a poet’ will be considered at the end of this chapter, but it may be said that the revelation Auchterlonie sketches here seems akin to the revelations of hypocrisy, injustice, and divorce from a moral ethic which pervade her essays and reviews, the most incisive of which are gathered in her two collections The Music of Love (1984) and Writer Reader Critic, published only weeks before her death in 1991.

Throughout these essays, and in other significant works not collected in these volumes, such as her ‘Afterword: Some thoughts on cultural dieback’ (1982), and the ‘Introduction’ to her massive work Ulysses Bound: Henry Handel Richardson and Her Fiction (1973), Auchterlonie consistently argues that writers have a duty to speak out on public matters, arguing for truth and justice, rather than retreating to a private life and writing only of the internal world. The writers Auchterlonie champions and invokes—White, Adorno, Sir Thomas More, Wright—are praised for their determination to integrate the
public and the private, to make their writing meaningful to the public world, as well as to their intellectual readers.

Much of her poetry, certainly, concentrates on public questions, and in one of her late poems, ‘Night Call’ (1983, p. 25), a poem to which I shall return, Auchterlonie presents a rather charming portrait of herself as one who cannot rest from her task of writing, because of her public duty:

‘It’s late,’ you say, ‘you should have been in bed...’
Indeed I should, and would, in any world
Where reason ruled, or greed were not the law.

Auchterlonie clearly writes herself here as speaking for reason and against greed, for justice and against hypocrisy, in a labour she literally cannot ‘rest’ from.

This public nature of some of her poetry, and the satiric mode she employs in it, has been recognised in reviews of her earlier work. The modest body of criticism of Auchterlonie’s poetry has tended to follow the ‘revelation’ mode, concentrating on the public in her poetry, and seeing her essays and her poetry as being basically of one voice. The poetry has had mixed reviews, and is often damned with faint praise. *Kaleidoscope* is seen as ‘gaily satiris[ing] urban Australia’ (Herring 1941, p. 30), whilst S.E. Lee derides the satiric in her poetry, calling her work ‘competent verse’ and accusing Auchterlonie of allowing herself to ‘move across to invective’ (1968, p. 145). Even less complimentary, Robert Ward dismisses Auchterlonie as writing ‘simple, inoffensive occasional poetry, competent to a degree’, and whilst calling *The Dolphin* a ‘very dull book’, filled with ‘small lyrics’
and ‘unsuccessful satire’, he also refers to her work as ‘introspective and emotional’ (1968, p. 93).

Other critics have been somewhat kinder to Auchterlonie’s poetry. King approves of her as ‘an old-fashioned poet’, and sees her as using the ‘mode per allegoriam’, to try ‘to grasp [the] troubled centre of life’ (1968, p. 173). In perhaps the most balanced of the reviews of The Dolphin, Margaret Irwin sees Auchterlonie’s clarity as leaving her ‘strangely exposed and innocent’, although she goes on to make the point that this ‘innocence’ lies only in ‘approach’, not in ‘experience’ (1968, p. 33). She concludes that while ‘the diction seems rather close to cliché, the over all impression left by this collection is of sincerity, and a belief in spiritual values’ (p. 34). Elizabeth Perkins pays more considered and lengthy attention in her 1989 essay ‘Gender and identity in the poetry of Margaret Diesendorf and Dorothy Auchterlonie’, as well as in her previously mentioned consideration of Auchterlonie’s overall literary achievements. (This essay, incidentally, concentrates on Diesendorf’s poetry at the expense of Auchterlonie’s.) In both works, Perkins acknowledges that Auchterlonie’s ‘technical formalism’ (1989, p. 138) at times belies her unusual views, but nevertheless chides her for her lack of support for feminism, both within and outside her poetry (1990, p. 292). Perkins begins her 1989 essay by alluding to the view that women are good at ‘accumulation of detail’ as in metaphorical pregnancy, but not the ‘thrust’ (read ‘penetration’?) of poetry, and then claims that Auchterlonie’s poems:

do not accumulate detail. Rather they select a few basic and chiselled images, and the lyrical quality is transmitted through a natural vocabulary that avoids deliberately sensuous phrases.
(p. 142)
This ‘natural vocabulary’ sounds very like the ‘Christian humanism’ with which Auchterlonie is generally labelled, and describes her poetry almost as if it were yet more essays, more of the same public person looking always towards the possibility of redemption, using a familiar vocabulary of unity and wholeness. By contrast, Bruce Beaver sees her poetry as a poetry of tension, embodying both ‘the joyous aspect of the creative principle’ and ‘the harsh shore and harsher inland of the human condition’. He sites this tension in Auchterlonie’s love poetry, in which ‘a woman’s mature and all-embracing love is matched and almost annihilated by the death of the loved one’ (1968, p. 19).

I argue that what accumulates in Auchterlonie’s poetry both within individual poems, and among poems, is a ‘vocabulary’ of loss and absence; of what, stealing a phrase from one of Auchterlonie’s own essays on E. L. Grant Watson, I have called the ‘mainland of grief’ (1984, p. 137). Let us consider again the dreamlike ‘Night Call’, which creates a tension between the public duty of the writer—which might be aligned with satire, an ‘innocent’ approach, a ‘technical formalism’—and an underlying and powerful private experience:

Beneath the circumspect exchange of news  
That builds the fragile bridge across our absences,  
The pulse begins to race, the ears to hum  
With a wild music, borne on a wild breath.

Absences are made concrete here, places which may be linked by a sort of private language, a ‘wild’ underlying ‘music’, which in its subversion of ‘news’, of public utterances, can overthrow the hegemony of order and of the finite. The fragile bridges of public language are made transcendent by what is under language, and it is this under-language, the language of ‘absences’, which provides, for
me, the great interest in Auchterlonie’s poetry. She figures herself as ‘Singing defiance’ through this ‘wild music’, and I argue that rather than seeking to ‘reveal’ loss in her poetry, Auchterlonie revels in it, in a manner which she rarely allows herself in her public writing.

The theme of a tension between public and private selves is a recurring one in the study of women’s writing, and an examination of this tension in Dorothy Auchterlonie’s work adds to the consideration and evaluation of her contribution to our literature, despite her feelings on the possibility of isolating women writers. To listen only to the public language of ‘news’ in which feminists will be dismayed at some, at least, of Auchterlonie’s pronouncements, gives little sense of this tension. There is no point in denying her stated views, such as the one expressed in ‘Men and Women Writers’ (1991, p. 167):

...Adam is a generic term, and I am not convinced that intelligent English-speaking women have ever lost any sleep over the use of terms like ‘mankind.’

It is important, however, to listen also to her feeling of alienation from the language she was compelled to use, an alienation which comes through very clearly in a number of her most complex and revealing poems. In listening to this voice, it can be seen that not only was Auchterlonie’s writing informed by loss and grief and absence, as has been much poetry by men, but that at least in part hers is a particular grief in being at odds with a language dominated by the masculine, of being shut out of what she names the language of ‘sign’ (‘The Hollow Years’, 1983, p. 16) and forced into the language she calls the ‘process of evasion’ (‘A Problem of Language’, 1967, p. 36). What is expounded comically in ‘A Problem of Language’—the dilemma of a woman
trying to describe her male lover in his own terms—becomes a sense of bitter exclusion in poems such as ‘The Hollow Years’ in which a woman poet, as an offering of love (to her lover, to the male muse, to the well loved masculine tradition?), gives her work of art, and must then

...watch the begetter
Set it aside
Like a disowned child
On a cold hillside.

Shut out of his language, the woman speaker is anguished, for

What shall she do now
To leave for a sign
That perfection blessed once
Her solitary vine?

In this chapter, I hope to show that Auchterlonie’s voice is not a single, unified, humanistic one, but a fractured one informed by the ‘absences’ which she acknowledges, invokes, and even courts in her poetry, and occasionally in her public work. I hope to locate the disjunction between the two discourses of ‘sign’ and ‘absence’ in the space between the public and the private woman, Dorothy Green and Dorothy Auchterlonie, and to show that in this disjunction, as well as in the rarer ‘cracks’ in a ‘technical formalism’, there is much fruit for the feminist critic.
In the contemporary critical climate, it is often accepted that ‘sign[s]’ are in fact endless deferrals, that they do not have meaning in themselves, but act only within the limits of their particular discourse, their meanings always contingent. Dorothy Auchterlonie’s ‘perfection’, that of a perfect (though now rejected) fruit, would, under such analysis, be read as impossible. In many of her essays, notably in ‘The Place of Literature’ and ‘The Critic’, both collected in her *Writer Reader Critic* (1991), Auchterlonie pours scorn on semioticians and post-structuralists, accusing them not so much of being wrong about their readings, but of claiming novelty for reading habits she sees as having long histories. Later in this section, I shall discuss aspects of Auchterlonie’s essays which elaborate, although not in contemporary, critical language, a view of writing and reading which acknowledges such deferral of signs.

First, however, I will discuss aspects of Auchterlonie’s writing in which signs are signposts to definite places. In the bulk of her public writing, she argues towards single, attainable meanings and ‘tells’ rather than ‘shows’, in opposition to her appreciation of Richardson’s aesthetic, which, she argues, shows, rather than tells (1973, p. 5). In many of her essays, and in her satiric poetry, that destination is clear. She displays a redemptive vision in which all those aspects of our society, especially institutionalised structures which prevent us from becoming what we could be—humble, compassionate, unconcerned with materialism—are held up for inspection.

Thus, Auchterlonie rails against imperialism, militarism, vandalism of the environment, consumerism, and the degradation of
language into a 'desiccated non-language' (1991, p. 4), as well as the underlying lack of compassion which humanity displays to fellow humanity. She employs several tropes which become, in fact, a sort of shorthand for human failings and division: repeated references to the United States nuclear submarine, Corpus Christi is one; despair over the divorce between science and art is another. In such works, it is clear that Auchterlonie perceives both the Fall of humankind, and a possible redemption. Many of her satiric poems see 'things' or 'objects' as replacing human passions, and a recurrent theme is that of pastoral harmony being progressively replaced with all the evils of mechanisation and city life.

Her 1940 poem, Kaleidoscope, satirises the urban world in which Auchterlonie finds herself, and whilst it is perhaps rather crude, her tone is comic, even cheerful, rather than pessimistic. This cheerfulness seems to extend to herself, if we see the persona of the 'pilgrim' reflecting her own passion for King James liturgical language. For indeed, the sub-, or perhaps one should say side-text of Kaleidoscope (the text is illustrated in the margins by Bessie Mitchell) juxtaposes archaic, biblical language, with a contemporary world with which it has little relation. The appropriation of both The Pilgrim's Progress and The Divine Comedy in the poem illustrates Auchterlonie's view that spiritual search has been completely debased by modern life. The '[c]oncatenation', the 'cacophony', the 'stupefying roar' of the contemporary glosses over the spiritual questioning she sees as so important. Indeed, in this Purgatoria, the pilgrim 'riseth/ into York Street' from noise to more noise, and the only hope of a redemptive silence or reprieve, through a 'portal vast and dark', is into a bank, a mock temple or pseudo-heaven in which the 'mosaic...floor'
is 'rubber', the roof is 'gilt-encrusted', and the entire 'concrete' structure is 'faced with pink'. The bank only reinforces the 'dumb subjection' of the pilgrim, in commanding him when he may approach, and when retreat. This pilgrim has no shade of Virgil as guide, but only a mechanised voice, obligated to obey 'a horn/When he shall rise, descend or turn'. Even the gods have become caricatures of themselves: Luna Park is 'The god of all inanity', and in another sort of temple, one can visit 'painted priestesses' in movie houses. The poem is called Kaleidoscope, but the poet sees nothing beautiful or rich in this depiction of city life.

She makes conscious reference to poetry as a spiritual search. The opening lines of the poem, with their disjointed layout, parody modern poetry, leading as they do to the final word of the stanza, 'annihilation':

Concatenation  blinding
  elevation    
  suffocating rattle
  strangulation winding in fish—beer—
  petrol—smoke—beer—prattle
  Green glass tiles—annihilation.

Although Kenneth Slessor's 'William Street' was not published in book form until 1944, four years after the publication of Kaleidoscope, Auchterlonie's poem seems to be a conscious gloss of Slessor's poem, with its pulsing, kaleidoscopic red and green lights, its 'fish' and 'smoke' and 'hiss', and its delight in bustling humanity. Auchterlonie replies to Slessor's 'You find it ugly, I find it lovely', with a definite 'I find it ugly'. The small cartoons of modern icons—Luna Park, the elevator, the radio—show their lack of depth as cultural resources, for
to Auchterlonie they represent only losses, not possibilities. Looking forward again to her comments on the predilection of modern critics for privileging sub-texts over main texts—

As to the sub-text, which everyone now seems to think should occupy the forefront of the reader’s attention, instead of the main text, there is always the possibility that readers may be deceiving themselves about what that is, just as the author may be deceiving them about his intention...

(1991, p. 83)

—the side text of Kaleidoscope, with its icons, brevity, and mock-biblical authority has its superficiality emphasised. Indeed, if there is a message to be taken from this poem, from its ‘cacophony’ of messages on modern music, consumerism, ‘vulgar hordes’ and ‘sundry Aryan dictators’, it must be that of the final lines:

For men, of gods the prototype,  
Would take a star to light a pipe.

In these lines is the ‘prototype’—the commercial imagery continues—of men who would take stars as stars, or at the very least, as harbingers of good news: reliable, if rather mobile signposts.

The Dolphin (1967) contains a number of satiric poems, in which ‘things’ or ‘objects’ are seen as replacing human passions. In ‘Service Numbers’ (pp. 45-6), the telephone takes the place of not only human, but divine contact:

Let not your heart in silence grieve,  
Only ask, and you shall receive ...
The suburban inhabitants of 'Labour-Saving' (p. 24), eliminate wood-heaters, deciduous trees with their inconvenient autumnal habits, and even 'the holy anagram'—the dog—from their lives. More 'operatic' is 'Night at the Opera' (pp. 41-44), in which the grand passions and tremendous griefs of Tristan and Isolde are counterpointed by a 'safe' suburban marriage in which 'high, imperial quest[s]' are sacrificed for 'the bird-in-hand', 'the comfort of a mod. brick bung.' Even the language here is reduced to a 'desiccated', commercialised shorthand: 'brick bung.', 'triple-fronted', and 'clean oil-heating'. As a Canberra resident, I can only surmise that, deriding oil-heaters and electric blankets, Dorothy Auchterlonie was made of sterner stuff than most. Her indictment of such acceptance of security is scathing:

The fortress they have built to keep out fear  
Is a brand-new triple-fronted brick veneer,  
With clean oil-heating (wood-fires make such a mess,  
And slow-combustion heaters not much less;  
And their electric blankets, after a fashion,  
Warm the twin beds faster than Tristan's passion)

In this send-up, however, perception of loss remains as a ghost. The 'Isolde' of the poem tries to ward it off:

But pottery at night keeps doubts at bay,  
And Yoga classes help to fill her day ...

but towards the end of her life she remembers what she has forsaken for her security, prompted by the transgressive love affair of one of her own children:
...She hides her face
In her once-white hands, looks up again and spies
Her ancient longing in her young son's eyes,
And turns her gaze, compelled against her will,
To where Isolde waits upon the hill,
Hears the waves crash and the true Tristan call,
Sees the white sail flying over all,
And through the thundering surf, the anguished foam,
The horns begin to rise, summoning her home.

What these poems and others like them share, apart from their exhortations to return to a more harmonious, less mechanised world, is the sense that the greatest loss in the modern world is perhaps the loss of loss itself. The former dog owner 'Will [soon] cease to feel the absence of the eyes', the telephone user need not 'grieve', and the suburban Isolde can 'keep doubts at bay'. At least Isolde, in old age, finds 'Her ancient longing...summoning her home'. It is quite apparent that for Auchterlonie, it is the 'ancient longing'—desire—which makes 'home' possible at all, that in the spiritual desert of contemporary life, the lack of desire, of consciousness of what is lost, is akin to spiritual 'desiccation'. In a rather heavy-handed satire on the visit of 'LBJ' to Australia, Auchterlonie mourns the loss of mourning, with her ironic observation that 'The last conquest is assimilation' ('The Second Coming', pp. 53).

Auchterlonie's satiric vision matured throughout her career, and in one of her later poems, "Scrantibus Gehennas Parabat" (1983, pp. 20-21), is more sombre, less flamboyant and occasional than her earlier satires, and much more moving. The poem is a disturbing, even savage study of a 'scientific' mind, disengaged from its task. A 'parable' of a 'critical gaze' upon a child which becomes, for the child, a 'hell, or place of burning' as well as the biblical 'valley near Jerusalem where children were sacrificed' (OED). Auchterlonie sees such
disengagement as making scientific or intellectual endeavours meaningless and immoral. Possibly a reflection on Freud and his Dora, the poem details a scientist ‘rescuing’ an abused, abandoned child, deliberately winning her trust and love in order to see what happens when he rejects her. What is perhaps most repulsive about this process, in Auchterlonie’s telling, is the ease with which genuine human feeling can merge with inhuman experimentation. Her scientist can ‘warm...to the task’, and ‘smile...to see’ the child’s growing psychic health, but his ‘power’ is ‘tempted’, and the word he uses to win her affection ‘came easy, learned by rote’. When he begins ‘to undo his daedal web’, he notes ‘with surprise that his own hand shook’, but deliberately sets aside his own human response to the child, stripping her of both literal and metaphorical bread and shelter, in order to ‘clinically chart...her phobic state’. By this stage in the poem, the reader is quite sure that in this easy manipulation of intellect and heart, the child’s ‘evil hour’ was in fact the one when he found her. In such a dark description, we can see Auchterlonie’s continuing and oft spoken anger that the bulk of the world’s scientists are involved with the possible destruction, not the succour, of their fellow humans.

As if to emphasise her disgust at such scientific endeavours, and to acknowledge the sin of making little children suffer, Auchterlonie strips her scientist of language, even that learnt ‘by rote’. As he tries to catalogue his own betrayal with words which ‘clog...his pen’, the means of that cataloguing is removed, for when he ‘picked up his notes to read them through,...the writing was gone, the cards were bare’. By divorcing humanity from intellectual inquiry, this scientist has stripped himself of language, and his endeavour becomes thus meaningless and incommunicable.
Auchterlonie's satiric poetry, then, argues and pushes towards the possibility of a unified experience, of a redeemed society where intellect and heart, passions and experience would make people whole. Her essays by and large display a similar drive to a unified, Christian humanist position. For Auchterlonie, however, this unity must not be a false one in which some drives are privileged over others: it should be a balance rather than an assimilation.

This ideal balance, however, seems to be elusive, and she constantly undercuts her own expressions of its desirability with a sense of its impossibility. Her contentious views on men and women, for example, such as those espoused in her scathing review of Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race*, that 'men and woman are only fully themselves when related to each other', and that 'our precious individuality derives from our membership of one another' (1984, p. 91), seem to strive for this notion of balance. Her irritation with Greer's and other radical feminists' 'relentless pursuit of the psychological cudgel with which to beat the allegedly dominant male and the allegedly submissive female' (p. 84) is an important part of her world view, as is her argument that feminists must value traditional female pursuits. If feminists are to be intellectually honest, she says, and not subservient to an élitist, masculinist dichotomy of art and craft, they must admit that:

> there still remains the possibility that that aspect of the self on which women [artists] set the highest value [has not been] destroyed at all,

that is, that the satisfactions of 'love, marrying and begetting children', (1984, p. 85) are not intrinsically less valuable than those of making
durable works of art. Against this view—of some sort of balance of traditional gender roles—can be set Auchterlonie’s own bitter cry in “The Hollow Years”, just as we can set her opposition, in ‘Men and Women Writers’, to ‘divid[ing] writers along sex lines’ (what she calls a ‘strategy of isolation’ [1991, pp. 170-1]), alongside her tacit acknowledgment that writers always have been divided along sex lines. She acknowledges that ‘Patronising women is as endemic as patronising black people’ (p. 160), sees that women have been ‘given less credit than their due for their innovatory qualities’ (p. 162), and in a tiny note of complaint, suggests that her own work has been undervalued because of her gender. She lets herself off this particular feminist hook, however, by apologetically offering that perhaps her case is not ‘typical’ (p. 159).

Certainly ‘difference’, whether between men and women, writer and reader, or even God and man, is an issue with which Auchterlonie grapples. Indeed, despite her contention that men and women can only become fully human in their relation to each other, she argues that the feminine has been consistently unrecognised or suppressed:

> Western tradition has complicated man’s problem further by adopting a religion which lays undue stress on the masculine. Western man’s passionate urge to prove in one way or another that there is only one sex poisons the relationships between the sexes ...
> (1991, p. 147)

It is clear that Auchterlonie does not argue for ‘one sex’, or even androgyny, but rather for a recognition and balance of feminine and masculine principles. Perhaps Auchterlonie may have meant that these principles need to be balanced inside any individual, in a
symbiotic relationship, rather than in one of colonisation or assimilation. It is, I would argue, the fear of ‘assimilation’—‘the final conquest’—which drives Auchterlonie’s exploration of the landscape of the ‘mainland of grief’. In a sense, her poetry, in trying to awaken or deepen the sense of loss, travels into a second, deeper level of absence and alienation, as a positive subsequent act in response to the problems she sees in her essays and satiric poetry. If her public writing is concerned with healing the breaches, with the possibility of redemption, then what we might call her private writing, the writing of ‘Auchterlonie’, not Green, is about diving into those breaches.

It is this sense of breach, of fruitful division, which leads Auchterlonie to take issue with theorists who argue that writing and reading are essentially the same activity. In ‘The Reader’, and ‘The Critic’ (both 1991), she argues that the new theorists are deluding themselves if they believe ‘active’ reading is a modern theoretical invention, citing Bacon and Fielding as examples of writers who emphasised their fictiveness and encouraged ‘active’ use of their books (pp. 82 and 133), and making the commonsense observation that readers ‘need [the author’s] version, before they can begin making their own as they read’ (p. 80). In ‘The Critic’, however, she concedes the similarity in type of writing or reading (of the critical variety), in saying that:

The critic must come to terms, like all living things, with his ‘parasitism’, his secondariness. In reality, he is doing what the writer is doing, taking certain materials already in existence, and using them to make a statement, which, he hopes, has not been made before.

(p. 123)
This sounds a little like ‘deferral’ of meaning, and indeed Auchterlonie sounds remarkably modern when she says that criticism (and, perhaps beyond that, language):

has refused to admit that it is subjective, and has striven vainly to establish objective canons by which to justify opinion.

(p. 132)

But for Auchterlonie ‘secondariness’ and ‘parasitism’ necessarily infer referral, not an endless deferral of meaning, for she sees all artists, writers and painters, and all interpreters, such as critics, engaged in an activity where they partially create their own experiences of reality, but only in so far as they are secondary or parasitic on a definite, if imperfectly perceived object. For Auchterlonie, the primary object, the host of all parasitisms, is God, without whom there could be no world to interpret:

the greatest of artists did not invent colour, nor the greatest of musicians sound, nor the greatest of genetic engineers DNA. We may succeed in blowing up the world; it is unlikely that we could put another one together.

(p. 55)

Auchterlonie’s aesthetic view, then, is more Platonic than post-modernist, in that beyond her subjectivity is a supreme Object. In her mirror, she sees, imperfectly and at a distance, the face of God. She does, however, acknowledge the fragility of humanity’s understanding of its environment:

All our knowledge must be tentative; we gather evidence and hold our temporary truths in suspension, prepared to abandon them when better evidence turns up...

(p. 114)
and she applies this temporariness or suspension of belief to modernism and post-modernism also, seeing '[b]oth the old theory that it was the business of art to imitate reality or nature, and the newer one that art is creation, transcending reality and revealing a higher reality [as] dualistic' (1991, p. 59). 'Secondariness', then, seems to mean something slightly different to 'dualistic', and Auchterlonie would argue that those critics who say that art can have only contingent meaning create their own dualism, privileging form over subject, and thus constructing yet another temporary truth. 'Critics', she says, '—especially males—in powerful positions in Australia tend to be preoccupied with formal concerns, with the narrative stance of novels, for instance, instead of the subject matter of the novels' (1991, p. 139). Auchterlonie sees such critics as establishing their own rule or authority over texts in much the same way as they have previously accused authors of doing.

In her poetry it is the knowledge of this secondariness, of the difference between perception and the object, which drives her defiance of assimilation. Auchterlonie speaks of 'negative capability' in both author and reader, so that like Keats she sees 'the artist as a chameleon, having no self, but the capacity to enter into every other self'. Accordingly, she writes, 'there can be no real response to literature unless the reader shares to some extent the artist's capacity for 'negative capability', his [and I would add, her] capacity to become' (1991, p. 147). Her 'negative capability' however, is not that of meaningless signs, which conform only to internal rules, but a symbiotic companion to 'conviction'. In Patrick White, for instance, she perceives an aesthetic in which:
The analogy with the actor is clear: he must enter in but not identify. ...Nevertheless,...beneath all this 'negative capability' is the solid rock of a central conviction, a belief that love is redemptive.

(1984, p. 65)

Her considered aesthetic, then, is one which begins with a positive being or conviction, which allows itself to become negative, to enter into others and to suffer with them, and in so doing to love and to redeem. It is no surprise, of course, that this echoes the Christian ethic, which Auchterlonie sees as embodying the deepest human concerns. 'What is mythologised as the Fall', she writes,

is the transition from essential being to essential estrangement, the sense of cleavage between the two states of being, which accompanies the experience of birth. The third part of the Christian triad of experience is salvation or healing, looking beyond both essence and existence to a reconciliation of the cleavage. ...we cannot become fully human unless we look beyond what we are to what we might be...

(1982, p. 274)

In Auchterlonie's aesthetic and philosophy there is always the third state, of redemption, to be sought, but it is clear that 'negative capability', or 'essential estrangement' from the self plays a critical role in her thinking. And if it is in her public, essay voice that Auchterlonie strives for reconciliation, it is in her poetry that we can see her private, and clearly painful exploration of the negative, of the inverse of the sure Object, of essential being, or 'the solid rock of central conviction.'
II

It is ironic that in Auchterlonie’s first published collection, *The Dolphin* (1967), the title poem itself (p. 1) is something of a red herring. Its celebration of the simple and innocent gifts of ‘swiftness’, ‘diligence’ and ‘love’, as opposed to those of the (wise?) king’s greater material and intellectual possessions, does not reflect the collection’s overall exploration of loss and separation. The poem appears to exhibit an almost animistic sense of union and non-alienation: the dolphin does the will of God in being itself, and the poet is seen in much the same way, if he or she accepts the natural poetic task:

The poet on the dolphin’s back  
Sets his course with ease  
Through solitudes of sun and moon,  
On dark prodigious seas.

Auchterlonie seems to argue here that the natural world and its harmonised rhythms of sun, moon and tide, are the province of the poet, and that to depart from such harmony is to ‘blaspheme’ against the ‘generous’ sun. And yet within the poem is the seed of the ‘blasphemy’ or questioning Auchterlonie undertakes in many of the volume’s poems. For in the lines:

The dolphin lives to serve a god  
Whose absence is the night,

is the first of many references to ‘absence’ in this book, and the first to figure God, the supreme object or ‘generous sun’, in its mirror image. The word ‘absence’ echoes throughout Auchterlonie’s poetry. Throughout this volume, which is dominated by religious and love
poems, and many where a distinction between the two is meaningless, Auchterlonie approaches the loved or desired one through absence and lack, through the positive qualities of negative capability.

In her series of 'Tree' poems in the collection, for instance, Auchterlonie valorises such lack. In 'The Tree' (pp. 3-4), 'The Second Tree' (pp. 5-7), and 'The Last Tree' (pp. 8-9), her approach is quite startling, with an unusual cosmological view masked by Auchterlonie's preferred regular rhyme and rhythm patterns. 'The Tree' is an idiosyncratic musing on the Garden of Eden tale, echoing Milton in its assumption of a voice which is outside the action between God, Adam and Eve, but very different from the conventional interpretation of Genesis. For in Auchterlonie's reworking, God creates Adam and Eve to free himself of his own undivided nature, in which his authority, his 'I'-ness, is figured as a prison:

Always the I, never to know the Thou, 
Imprisoned in my own eternity.

Thus unity is a prison for God. 'Thou' is the familiar, relational address used for one who is precious to, but not the same as oneself, and Auchterlonie posits God as making Adam and Eve, not to create them exactly in his own image, but to make himself relational and reflexive. Initially, though, it seems as if the creatures he has made are as unreflexive as his former, undivided self, and so he sets the fruit of desire for them, to tempt them also into dividedness:

Without him they could neither will nor dare; 
Courage and will yet slumbered in the fruit, 
Desire forbore, they still were unaware 
That doubt was set to feed the root.
So, with 'courage' and 'will' still slumbering within the fruit, Adam and Eve cannot be relational creatures: they are angels rather than humans. If Adam and Eve propagate the tree of man, then it is 'doubt' which feeds the root. It is the consciousness of alienation which gives human beings courage and will, and this alienation is a gift from God. This separation is not to be eternal however, for:

'Thus time shall be confounded till you come
Full-circle to this garden where we stand,
From the dark maze of knowledge, with the sum
Of good and evil in your hand.

For Auchterlonie, God's and man's reflexiveness is circular and contains within it the promise of redemption. If the seed of the fruit is death, God's covenant with Adam and Eve is that in return for his own self-multiplicity, and the possibility of being a 'Thou', he will be relational with them, sharing in and taking on their deaths. In this alienation there is always the possibility of the redemptive return, symbolised by the fruit which is returned to seed and thence to fruit. And in the moment of the Fall:

The harsh Word stirred the leaves, the fruit glowed red,
Adam's foot struck against the root;
He saw his naked doubt and raised his head:
Eve stretched her hand and plucked the fruit.

It is appropriate that if life, death and God are all within the fruit, it is Eve who reaches out and plucks—not alone, but with Adam also aware of 'his naked doubt'. They—God, Adam and Eve—all 'fall' together.

What they 'fall' into is a reflexive, relational identity—the consciousness of 'the other'—and it is this consciousness which gives
human beings courage and will. Alienation, or the fall itself, is for AUCHTERLONIE, a gift from God. In the following poem, 'The Second Tree' (pp. 5-6), in which the tree this time is the tree of crucifixion, this divided nature is employed formally, as well as constituting the subject matter of the poem. Where the voice of 'The Tree' is a single, omnipotent one, removed from the action, in 'The Second Tree' the voice shifts position throughout. It begins '[t]hey watch him', moves through a responsive, inclusive 'we' watch, then from Christ watching outside his own agony to an interior Christ unable to stand outside his desolation. Finally, AUCHTERLONIE returns to an external, observant voice. This movement of voices echoes and reinforces Christ's reflexiveness, his ability and willingness to move outside his Godhood, and essential being to experience, in an utterly human way, the terror of essential isolation. For AUCHTERLONIE, Christ's humanity lies precisely in this capacity for absence and lack, and faith and hope are dependent on such absence:

Only to know me from a vast abyss,  
To apprehend me from the end of space,  
To touch me, blindfold, in a moment's bliss,  
And to deny me if they see my face.

AUCHTERLONIE reiterates her imagery of a tree founded on doubt:

With his own hands he stripped his tree of fruit,  
Turning its energy towards its source:  
No waste fecundity, only the harsh root  
Soars from the ground upon its upward course.

Christ thus strips himself of the knowledge of redemption, turning all the power of his being to the 'harsh root' of doubt and estrangement.
And yet it is precisely in this journey into absolute doubt that he may return to absolute certainty. In stripping himself to the source,

He cleaves the thickened crust of time and space,
Back from his endless journey into man;
Resolves his own divisions, face to face
With self once more, where selfhood first began.

In 'The Tree', Auchterlonie has God create others so that he may know himself as divided, but at the same time becoming reflexive so that he will 'for this release...die your every death'. In 'The Second Tree', this promise is fulfilled, with Christ as God and man, resolving his own divisions back to selfhood, but only by the loss of self in the journey.

And, indeed, this journey is one made on behalf of humanity. Auchterlonie, speaking as both 'they' and 'we', argues that Christ's crucifixion is essential to the salvation of humans, because it is in the denial of Christ's divinity, both by humanity, and in his own despair, that redemption lies. 'We' the people require this sacrifice of Christ:

Take back your godhead from us! is their cry,
Lest we should lose it now for evermore:
Leave us our hard-won privilege, to die
As you once died for Adam, long before.
...

From the harsh soil of our rejection you will spring,
From the great rock we press upon your grave,
Fairer than if we now had called you king,
Take now the life only your death can save.

It is thus only in the rejection of Christ, in doubt which is the absence or inverse of certainty, that humankind can, ultimately, be redeemed. Christ knows well that his followers and loved ones will deny him:
All these I have created endlessly,  
To doubt and dread, to dream, exult and dare—

Only to know me from a vast abyss,  
To apprehend me from the end of space,  
To touch me, blindfold, in a moment’s bliss,  
And to deny me if they see my face.

The lessons of Peter the denier, Thomas the doubter, and all those who are not ‘convinced though one rose from the dead’ (Luke: xvi, 31) are well known to this Christ, and those who know him from a ‘vast abyss’ are the happy ones: ‘You believe because you can see me. Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe’ (John: xx, 19-31).

Christ learns also the pain and anguish of being forsaken, becoming fully human in being ‘Emptied of God, his severance absolute’. ‘Doubt and division, these are [God’s] absolutes,’ but as absolutes they have presence, albeit a negative presence. ‘Hell’ is where even God’s absence is not a ‘presence’ and Christ’s descent into hell teaches him of this complete lack:

Far beyond hope, where all doubt is denied  
And no wind stirs to wake the sleeping will, ...

Nothingness is here, without negation,  
Absence without estrangement’s agony,  
Here uncreates itself the whole creation,  
The void returns, the primal entropy.

This ‘primal entropy’ has no ‘harsh energy’ of doubt from which will and belief may spring, no inversion of itself into primal creation but rather complete nothingness, sharply at odds with the bliss of a moment’s belief in the face of doubt. In doubt then, Auchterlonie suggests, humanity is not ‘emptied’ of God, but learns the reflexive
nature of its relationship with the divine. In ‘The Last Tree’ the knowledge of the necessity for betrayal is complete:

He looked at Judas and at John,
And knew that death was in the bread,
That life and love and bread were one,
That John would live by Judas dead.

Love and hate, love and betrayal, belief and doubt, and indeed presence as absence are equal in his hands: when ‘The circle of redemption is complete...good and evil fall from his torn hands’.

Human love is included in this equality and co-existence of opposites, and indeed in many of Auchterlonie’s poems human and divine love are elided. Two poems from The Dolphin illustrate both the reflexiveness of love—between man and woman, and between God and humanity—and the relationship between presence and absence. ‘Release’ (p. 11) and ‘Even-song’ (p. 37) take their diction and imagery from Biblical literature, and yet may be read as secular love poems. In ‘Release’ the imagery of absence and loss prevails:

The house is empty and the far hills glow;
The wine is drunk, and broken all the bread,
The doors are open: it is time to go.

Of course this may be read as the empty ‘house’ of the absence of Christ after the Last Supper, when the doors of the closed room in which the twelve gathered were opened and it was time for Christ to freely make his way to Gethsemane, and thence to Calvary. After the Supper, the teaching, the speaking was complete and there remained only the act—‘to go’. The ‘outgrown garment’ in the poem suggests the purple robe and the winding cloths, the garments of prophesy which, in being
fulfilled, are outgrown. But equally the drunk wine and broken bread can suggest the closed doors of the marriage feast of Cana, and through it we can see the bread and wine as the repast of love in marriage, and the house as a human house now emptied of the presence of the loved one. Auchterlonie was still only in her forties when her husband, H.M. Green died, and it can be assumed that their age difference (she was twenty nine when they married, he sixty three, with an already grown family) meant that even before his death, she must have been aware of impending absence, of the likelihood that she would be the one bereaved. Thus actual absence was preceded by imaginatively felt absence, leading so many of her poems to be imbued with the sense of the ‘mainland of grief’, with bliss or union as occasionally visited tropical isles. But this ‘mainland of grief’, the desert of lack, has its own lessons to teach her, and she sees the presence and the absence of the lover as philosophically symbiotic:

To go—to be able to go:
This is the meaning and the deed,
Cause and effect, to be led and to lead,
To be free and to be freed.

To withdraw, and withdrawing, to unfold,
Not to be held, not to hold—
To cast off, like an outgrown garment,
The once-needs, the once-fears.

And if in these stanzas we can see the death and resurrection of Christ, the final line returns to a personal crucifixion:

You are gone: there are no more tears.
Perhaps the bereaved speaker here has also cast off the ‘once-needs’, the ‘once-fears’ of dependence on a lover, but in asserting the passing of tears, the tears which are as gone as ‘You’, ‘the bread’ and ‘the wine’, she acknowledges that they have been present, that terrible grief has been passed through, in order to reach understanding of the equilibrium, the balance of existence—‘To be free and to be freed’, ‘Not to be held, not to hold’. The colon between ‘You are gone’ and ‘there are no more tears’ reads as the chasm, the point of emptiness or stillness around which love and grief, hope and despair are precariously weighed.

‘Even-song’ performs a similar balancing act, and this time the ‘me’ of the poem may be either God or a lover, seeing both the love of woman for man and God for humanity existing in passion and in peace. If it is God who speaks, we can read an ‘Even-song’ which encompasses the multifarious God of the psalms, both the God who strikes down his people in Israel and the God who leads his people to green pastures. ‘Lightning’, ‘thunder’, and ‘the storm winds’ are signs of a felt and experienced God, an active God who makes his presence known, but ‘still water’, ‘emptiness’ and the ‘absolving silence’ are the absences or abysses, the blindfold moments where we may feel a moment’s bliss. They are the well of silence and the non-material, of that other which is felt but only dimly perceived, an incense, or benediction. The poem may also be read as a deeply felt love poem, an invitation to the lover to not only experience presence with her, but also to partake of the stillness, the silence and the emptiness where the lover may find himself. Silence brings absolution, peace, and the possibility of repair and fruitfulness in the ‘washed fields’, but in the ‘Let me’ Auchterlonie emphasises that this silence or emptiness is a
gift, it cannot be grasped or pinned down, its freedom may only be offered.

In some of Auchterlonie's love poems, woman herself is this emptiness, figured as absence or waiting handmaiden in relation to the lover/father who is the active principle, the 'harsh root'. This is, of course, consistent with her Anglican heritage, in which the primacy of the Father and reliance on Old Testament scriptures reinforces the rule of Israel. Her sense of herself as handmaiden— 'Let me be still water to you'— and of the woman herself as absence or non-being may be distressing to feminist critics. But that feminine 'absence' is increasingly written as an other which is also powerful, with its own language which we can learn to 'read'. Absence becomes not merely a sign in itself, but something signified, which can be written, read and cherished. Absence is even something which becomes part of a woman's bodily experience, and Auchterlonie writes of it very physically indeed. In 'The Knife' (p. 12) and 'In Absentia' (p. 31), the absence of the lover is amplified. These poems are not the reflections in quietude of acceptance of suffering, but angry and passionate, strongly eroticised grief. In 'The Knife', the speaker literally wishes to excise an absence of loss which is part of herself, wanting peace but finding only a continuing 'agony of estrangement'. The images of loss are strongly of the body:

...O if I could

Sever you from the pulse that beats all day
Far in the deep, labyrinthine soul of me,
Cut you from my sinews, and deliberately
Rise and thrust you once for all away.
The absent lover becomes a Minotaur, a monster who cannot be vanquished, for he lives not only in her soul but in her blood and sinew, the ‘fibres’ of her being. That ‘other’ is so close as to be the other side of ‘self’, but this only emphasises the torment:

How shall I still my tongue from calling you?
How shall I stay my hands from holding you—
When they stretch out to find you even in sleep?

The final couplet reads as a resigned, but dark and almost bitter acceptance of the inevitability of this continuing pain of entwined identities:

The wind shall sooner wear away the stone
Than I obliterate you from the bone

—a bitter inversion of the biblical promise of companionship:

‘Can a woman forget her nursing child, 
And not have compassion on the son of her womb? 
Surely they may forget, 
Yet I will not forget you. 
See, I have inscribed you in the palms of my hands’. 
(Is: 49, 15-16)

That absence residing within the body is felt again in ‘In Absentia’, in which the speaker feels her ‘pulse beating [her lover’s] name’, but here the absence is seen even more as a language, or perhaps an inscribed place. ‘Absentia’ becomes a place, just as ‘night’, rather than being merely the absence of day, is something which can ‘leap…out’ and ‘[e]xtinguish the light’. And while the speaker tries to convince herself that the night is ‘deaf and blind’, she cannot cut her own inner night away and is compelled to read its signs, the language
which ‘conspire[s] to prove your absence by my present pain’. The deep longing for her absent lover is read in the places where he has once been:

Here is the empty cup you drank from; here
The pillow holds the pressure of your head,
Your shadow stands behind me in the glass,
And when I stretch my arms along the bed
They trace the enchanted circle of our fear.

‘Present pain’ proves ‘absence’, and the present surrounds—the rim of the cup, the mark of the head, the shadow, and the ‘enchanted circle’—prove her lover’s death. Of course, these signs are not only the external ones, they are also within her, hidden perhaps, and even in code, but always there:

The voices lie: the night is deaf and blind,
And cannot hear my pulse beating your name,
Nor see your sign-manual hidden in my flesh
Burn out your absence with its living flame,
Claiming the kingdom you have left behind.

The images of emptiness in the preceding stanza are all interior and domestic ones, and Auchterlonie continues this sense of interiority here by moving from the closing door into the domestic interior of the house, further into the bed, and finally, into the body itself, which becomes a ‘sign-manual’ of the lover’s absence, ‘burn[ing] out’ his absence, the empty place where he had once been. It is the ‘sign-manual’ which marks the place indelibly and which ‘claims the kingdom’, so that the sign-manual becomes not so much a language by which she can read and interpret her lover’s absence, but a form of colonisation, which marks off territory, establishing perimeters.
But even if a woman could begin to read and write a language of possibility, built on the reflexiveness of the knowledge of absence, who is it that owns the territory of the ‘sign-manual’ of presence and authority? A woman’s own sign-manual, a possible way of reading and speaking the world, would seem inevitably to be colonised, or claimed by either a particular absent lover or indeed a tradition of the masculine, in which all meaning is invested, with the woman remaining as the ‘empty cup’ or the outline of where he has been. This gives her particular problems in speaking, for she is herself ‘signed’ by the manual of patriarchy, and, it is difficult for her, as object of its territorial gaze, to sign herself or her other.

‘A Problem of Language’ (p. 36) makes Auchterlonie’s awareness of this sense of being outside the manual of signs quite clear, whilst at the same time having it embedded in her almost like a parasite. Whilst she parodies Marvell and the genre of male gaze poems in a wonderfully comic manner, the message of the problem of a male dominated language for women is a serious one indeed. It is of course a feature of such poems to ‘gaze’ upon a woman as an object, indeed to mentally carve her up into manageable portions of breast, buttock and so on which may be feasted upon individually without the tiresome necessity of trying to appreciate the sum total of the external body, or the even more tiresome one of seeing into the interior life of the woman. For Auchterlonie, ‘reading’ a man’s body may be a more affectionate avowal of his faults, or his departures from the linguistic inscriptions of tradition. She gives her impressions of a beloved, if less than perfect male specimen:
How praise a man? She cannot vow
His lips are red, his brow is snow,
Nor celebrate a smooth white breast
While gazing on his hairy chest;
And though a well-turned leg might please,
More often he has knobbly knees;
His hair excites no rapt attention—
If there’s enough of it to mention.
She cannot praise his damask skin,
Still less the suit he’s wrapped it in;

but more importantly shows that men are not the objects of habitual
gaze, and are therefore not so evidently inscribed by a linguistic
tradition. The ‘problem’ Auchterlonie sees is not that men are
somehow made absent in being unable to be described or praised. It is
that ‘she’, the woman, cannot ‘praise’, or ‘describe’ or ‘speak’, because
the language she has learned figures her as always the other, the object.
And in the later half of the poem, Auchterlonie shows a sharp
awareness that women, the habitual objects of desire and the ‘gaze’, are
denied the use of such a language to describe the objects of their desire,
and have had to adopt not only a different mode or approach, but a
different language, a language which is based on the unsaid, the
unsigned, the unspecified. When speaking of her lover, a woman
cannot ‘... specify the features/That mark him off from other creatures’.
If a male language of desire is one which marks ‘difference’ and
‘otherness’ as the hallmarks of the desired one, projecting desire away
from the self and onto the object, a female language, a language spoken
by that which is already seen as other, must move itself entirely into
this realm of otherness. Thus:
The only language available to a woman then, is that of 'a process of evasion', a language where the songs of the heart can never match outward words. Indeed, even that 'song' of the heart, that 'magnificat' is so much a song of hymn/him, and places her so securely as the subject of annunciation, that she is unable to 'speak' or 'sing' for herself. Of course, it may be fairly argued that Auchterlonie employs here the rhetorical device of 'saying' in the very act of claiming that she cannot 'say'. Nevertheless, while she oscillates between 'sign' and 'absence', she does propose that what can be said is a 'process', a language which seems to be less concerned with subject and object than it is in the relation between the two. The poem implies that a woman's language would be one in which reflexiveness, relation and connection may be expressed—she is able to describe her 'love' but not her 'lover'—but where the binary opposition of subject and object presents a real 'problem'.

Auchterlonie does not stop at comically elucidating the problem. There are, I would suggest, poems in which the 'gaze' or objectification is seen as immoral and dangerous. The scientific gaze of "Scrutantibus Gehennas Parabat" has already been mentioned, but Auchterlonie also writes of the sort of reification of the object, the thing perceived and distanced from the self, which is apparent in much poetry. Whilst 'A Problem of Language' is parodic, but with a crucial message developed elsewhere, 'A Consent to Mourn the Death
of a Man, by Fire, in Sydney, 1965' (p. 27), is a solemn refutation of Dylan Thomas' 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' (1966, p. 12). Even Auchterlonie's slight rearrangement of her title places her 'Man' before the glorified 'Fire' of Thomas' title. For Auchterlonie, this man—all humanity—must be given primacy, must never become merely an object, or a vehicle for poetic grandstanding. So, whilst Thomas vows 'Never...to mourn/The majesty and burning of the child's death', he dehumanises the child by making her an immobile object for the poetic gaze, as an object 'made' by the poet, just as the poet/speaker/patriarch has 'fathered' 'Bird beast and flower'. He will not, he says,

...murder
The mankind of her going with a grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
With any further
Elegy of innocence and youth.

In the burning of an old tramp in Sydney, Auchterlonie sees the depths to which mankind can sink, and rather than putting her subject on a pedestal, turning him into a monument which feels no pain, Auchterlonie compels us to admit his pain, both to take it into ourselves and to realise that it has come from ourselves. In consenting to mourn his death, she refuses to gloss over its abomination. There can be no excuses, she tells us, no extraordinary circumstances to explain away 'the hidden beast' which cannot bear peace:

Why should folded hands and quiet eyes offend?
Or stillness be an affront?
And she also refuses to place the burnt man outside of ourselves, safely objectified or gazed upon. The abomination has come from within, not merely from individuals:

Who could have sired these children, suckled them,
Who nurtured them to this?

but also from within the whole human community, fathered and mothered by all:

This is the fruit of our whole sickened tree;
Rooted in greed, the crop must come to this;
All branches bear this fruit, all have nourished it.

As such, his pain must be our pain, it must be taken back upon ourselves, so that in mourning 'in anger' and 'in pity', that death by fire should be branded on all our hearts, and in seeing the burnt man, not as 'majestic' or outside ourselves, but irrevocably connected to each one, the 'faces' of 'all men'—seeing ourselves in seeing him—may be made plain.

But as has been seen in 'A Problem of Language', whilst humanity should see itself 'plain', that plainness is not that of a direct language, and the relationship between experience and the language to describe it is often a 'process' of 'evasion'. In an inscribed world, perhaps we may describe best by not describing the object itself, but through the continual process of evasion, deferral and desire. Always other, language is perhaps defined by what it is not. And perhaps this is also the case in perceiving or reading the world around us. The Auchterlonie of the public essays cautions against reifying the sub-text at the expense of the main text, but the voice of her poetry constantly
seeks out the hidden, or what is present by its absence, what evades our gaze. Messages or meaning are to be seen or read almost as photographic negatives, or as paradoxes, and to fail to read such hidden meanings is to be literally lost:

How was it that you could not tell?
Not read the message of the trembling sky?
Not see the shadow fall behind the sun?
...
The day is lost, the blue and gold and I,
And the red dies, though winter's not begun.
("Jour Perdu", p. 20)

In this 'lost' or 'hidden' day, perhaps even in all the days hidden behind the ones we perceive first, there is a death in being unable to 'read' the signs of things hidden, the shadows and the portents of which can act as a sort of map of absence, a 'mainland of grief' which fleshes out our experience and allows us to connect identity positions, to be part of that 'process of evasion' which takes us into realms more complex than the unreflexive gazing of a subject upon an object. Being able to 'read' or 'tell' those signs is not to bring them into the realm of the present, but to feel their absence, to long for them. To be truly 'lost' is to have lost all desire for or connection with what is absent.

This is a complete death, as complete as the descent of Christ into Hell, which consists for Auchterlonie, not in desire and the knowledge of what is lost, but in the absence of desire. In 'Spring Song', Auchterlonie understands the 'paradox' of the seasonal increase in suicide. For in winter, grief can be a sort of numbness, a full negation, where absence is not felt:
The icy heart, left alone,
Feels at ease with the cold,
But the paradox of spring
Brings pain untold.

It is in spring, with the renewal of life, and the consciousness of what is lost also blooming and budding, that desire is reborn: for T.S. Eliot, 'April is the cruellest month' ('The Waste Land'). And there is in the paradox between the exuberance of spring and the bloom of cruelty, a sense that words fail to make their connections between the inner and the outer worlds. For Emily Dickinson, the world has nothing to say to a wounded heart:

I could not bear the Bees should come,  
I wished they'd stay away  
In those dim countries where they go,  
What word had they, for me?  

('I dreaded that first Robin, so,' 1975, p. 165)

For Auchterlonie:

The dead heart has nothing to say  
To the bud and the leaf.

For Auchterlonie, however, suicide in the face of the cruelty of spring is no answer. For Auchterlonie, for whom the biblical Fall allows a reflexive language, for whom hidden messages can provide a sort of map to the homeland of desire, and for whom the 'mainland of grief' is a rich landscape which can reveal even as it conceals, experiencing the negative—falling into it and plumbing its depths—is the most essential task of humanity.
This is not, of course, to suggest that the ‘mainland of grief’ is
the country that Dorothy Auchterlonie would have chosen to inhabit,
nor that she can live in this landscape of the fall without deep pain and
loneliness. Somethings to Someone, published in 1983, is not the work
of a woman who has recovered from loss, but of one for whom loss,
alienation and the sense of being shut out of those islands of paradise
has become her mode of life. Her approach to poetry reflects this
mature and distilled sense of the fine balance between fall and grace.
Many of the poems in this volume are of individual loss, not only of
loved ones, but of the past, of youth, and of moments of fleeting joy.
They can be angry, passionate, calm or reflective, and all share a
simplicity of language and the ‘natural vocabulary’ of her previous
volume. But again there are twists to that vocabulary. ‘First Person
Plural’ (p. 14) displays these qualities of a subtle use of simple diction
and vocabulary to deliver its message of pain:

Do not say ‘we’ when you tell me
What you have been doing
These last, long months
That I have been away.

You whose bread is knowledge
Of the human heart
Should know that ‘we’
Turns the knife in mine.

But the simple and the restrained in Auchterlonie’s work is often of
the variety which Dowse described as ‘the sense of passion striving to
be contained, sometimes a joyful love, sometimes a deep hurt, never
mentioned elsewhere’ (1990, p. 21). It may also be seen as passion
striving to contain its visibility, to maintain its seemliness, to suggest rather than to tell. This passion can be very much that of the inward journey. The friend to whom Auchterlonie speaks here makes his or her ‘bread’ from knowledge of the human heart, but for Auchterlonie knowledge of the human heart is the bread of life. The proximity of ‘knife’ and ‘bread’ suggests that grief has made Auchterlonie cut open or fracture that bread in order to know it more fully, but in so doing she must expose and dissect herself. She must travel again into the metaphorical country of grief, in which she is first person singular, unmatched and unpartnered, trying to find a language with which to speak to those who are still in the known country of first person plural.

I have already argued that, for Auchterlonie, absences become places, landscapes invested with their own meaning, to be read in a language of the negative. Making her own body a part of that landscape is an essential way of learning her grief. For to live with or in grief is to live in another country of absence, whilst having also to inhabit the first country filled with presence and its signs. It necessitates a constant negotiation between identity positions, languages and landscapes. It makes of her a perpetual foreigner. In ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas’ (p. 18):

The first day of Christmas my true love sent to me
No partridge in a pear-tree,
No word at all to hear or see.

With the lover absent, all the signs she was familiar with in the country of presence, those she could previously read, ‘hear’ or ‘see’, are divested of meaning. What is a pear-tree without a partridge, what are the cries of ‘praise’ of ‘all [the rest] of the world’ when for her there is
only silence? What does Christmas, in all its signs of promise, presence and return, mean for one left behind? Its signs are meaningless, signifying only emptiness for her. Her recourse is to wish she could become a sign herself, not a reader of signs:

Would that my heart would turn to stone
Now I must greet the year alone.

An even stronger sense of wishing to become part of the ‘mainland’, rather than a sojourner in it, prevails in ‘North Country Lament’ (pp. 10-11), in which the only possible help for the loss—

And oh my love, come soon, come soon
And walk with me again

—is to become part of that North Country itself. The only message the landscape has for her (‘What water, grass and bird reveal’), is the incontrovertible, irrevocable loss of the lover and her separation from him. The drive in both poems is to find a state where signs and language are obliterated so that loss is not felt. In ‘The Twelve Days’ the heart would turn to stone; in ‘Lament’ she wishes her whole body to return to the earth from which the lover came, the garden before there was separation, or loss, or ‘courage’ or ‘will’. She wishes to renounce language (‘I will not argue’), and movement:

But lie down here, to loss resigned,
And sleep, and never move
Till earth and I are of one mind,
Sweet land that bred my love.

To become this ‘sweet land’, the primal mother which ‘bred’ or ‘bore’ the person whom she loved, is to move into a land without language,
argument, intellect or opposition, losing the self in a state of non-desire, of non-being.

It is significant that in these poems of loss, in which the sign-manuals of life escape or are escaped, Auchterlonie’s poetry itself tends towards the hackneyed, the clichéd and the banal. It is difficult to find much colour or excitement in lines such as ‘The wandering cattle stand’ and it is as if, in the moments when Auchterlonie gives in to loss, her own mind’s wandering is at a standstill. The courage and will, the opposition and resistance of her poetry which ‘slumbers’ beneath their conventional exterior, is also extinguished. For Auchterlonie’s ‘mainland of grief’ to remain a landscape with which she interacts, she must remain aware of herself as being other than that country. She must, in fact, be aware that there once were partridges in pear trees, and that all around her others do sing songs of praise. Auchterlonie is at her sharpest when we sense the friction of dissent and desire. Without that, her poetry of grief can be pathetic, sentimentalised, and even, I would suggest, self-indulgent.

But the majority of Auchterlonie’s poems—those of courage and passion—are challenging for both writer and reader. In ‘Climbing Everest’ (p. 27) Auchterlonie does not write of standing cattle, babbling brooks or a sweet earth, but ‘capricious showers’, ‘casuist winds’ and ‘inquisitorial cold’:
The world’s weather shifts, they say. And so does ours:
The droughts we’ve seen, the ebb and flow
Of tides, floods, capricious showers
Of hail, wrecking the fruit! And now the snow.

To turn to the snow on the dazzling height,
It is no light thing you do. But what of me,
Left with the darkness of snow, held in the night
Of its absence? Not to see, not to see
At night’s end the finger of gold
Touch the bare crests with miraculous light;
Not to see the red response of the earth to the bold
Arrogant lover, her dark heart’s pitiless sun.

Yet we know one another of old, the cold earth and I,
Veiled with the blackness of snow, as we wait for the one
Who brings back the day to the far high
Peaks of our being. Then let the dark time draw on,
Try us with snow, with the inquisitorial cold,
The casuist winds that divide us and numb:
You will find me expectant like earth when you come
With your finger of gold.

Auchterlonie tosses words out like challenges in this poem, reckless although aware of the difficulties of balancing them. If the ‘casuist winds’ ‘divide’ lovers, then readers must also be aware of the ‘divisions’, the difficulties of reading those winds/words. A ‘casuist’ ‘resolves cases of conscience’ but is also possibly a ‘sophist’; the ‘capricious’ showers are random and ‘guided by whim’ but they also owe their etymology to ‘capriccio’—a lively musical composition, in a ‘free style’. While ‘inquisitorial’ means offensively prying, it also suggests the sophistry of a quest for truth which makes up its own truth, of a style of proceedings where ‘the prosecutor is the judge’ (OED). ‘The world’s weather shifts, they say. And so does ours,’ declares Auchterlonie, and the weather of her poetry, the language which she uses, is also one of change, and of challenge, of inversions and uncertain meaning. In this poem, that challenge and uncertainty, the capriciousness of hail which spoils fruit, is strongly eroticised. And
again, desire for the divine and the human lover is elided. This is a poem of division. Fruit is spoiled, winds ‘divide’, there have been droughts and ‘floods’, ‘ebb’ and ‘flow’. There are two ‘snows’—the snow of dazzling light, and ‘the darkness of snow’, the ‘night/Of its absence’. There is the thing itself and its absence, and, between them, desire. Consummation is anticipated only through perception of its current absence:

...Not to see, not to see
At night’s end the finger of gold
Touch the bare crests with miraculous light;
Not to see the red response of the earth to the bold
Arrogant lover, her dark heart’s pitiless sun.

But this feeling of ‘not seeing’ is invested with a peculiar kinetic energy. One cannot help thinking that in this case the ‘not seeing’ may be a more colourful, stronger, more dazzling experience than ‘seeing’. In her final stanza there lies not only a sort of comfort or companionship between the ‘cold and earth and I’ (‘We know one another of old’) but an extremely energetic, prescient sense of anticipation or expectation:

You will find me expectant like earth when you come
With your finger of gold.

There is, also, a daring:

...Then let the dark time draw on,
Try us with snow, with the inquisitorial cold,
The casuist winds that divide us and numb:

Here, ‘earth’ and the speaker, are challengingly pregnant with possibilities, not empty or passive like the earth and the lamenting
lover in ‘North Country Lament’. They brim and seem to ‘sing their
continence through their leakage’. The poem is a powerful inversion,
in which ‘Climbing Everest’ appears to be transposed to ‘climbing’ deep
into a divided, challenging, desiring, and above all ‘alive’, self or
consciouness.

These peculiar inversions become more pronounced and more
persistent throughout Auchterlonie’s later poetry, and manifest
themselves in several ways. In ‘The Swan of Coquet River’ (p. 12) she
plays with, and capriciously tosses up into any order the ‘main’ text and
the ‘sub’ text—in this case, of memory. ‘The Swan of Coquet River’, an
elegy for Janet Chapman, is, like most elegies, an attempt to find some
point of communication with a dear friend, now dead. But it begins
with rejected possibilities, with the negation of the possible ‘languages’
by which she might recall her dead friend:

Music might serve: Vivaldi’s Dixit Dominus,
Or the Harbour’s silvery breathing at first light.
But flowers have lost their eloquence, and what words
Of mine are fit to friend you through the night?

Music ‘might’ serve, but is clearly not up to the task of ‘speaking’ for
Auchterlonie. Indeed, the experience of remembering, of loving, seems
stripped from the organisation of languages, whether those languages
are the contrived ones of Vivaldi or the ‘natural’ ones of the Harbour
and of flowers. Vivaldi, the Harbour, flowers, and even Auchterlonie’s
words no longer speak adequately, have ‘lost their eloquence’—they
might ‘serve’ or be subservient to the experience, but they are not ‘fit’
or equal to the task. The only purpose these languages can serve is to
‘wake the memory’, which exists in silence. The swan does utter a
‘solemn cry’, but only as the precursor, or awakening of its most
powerful manifestation in silence, 'the soundless sweep of wings'. The silence of that language is echoed in other 'speaking' silences:

The woods were silent then, and silent we...
Now closer comes the silence of the sun;

Only the memory of this silence, it seems, rather than the language of words or music, is 'fit to friend' through the night. Companionship and communication lie in such silence. Even the words of this poem are only the awakeners of the memory, for the true memory, the memory upon which Auchterlonie's words can only be 'parasitic' or imperfect, resides and enacts its power in silence. Memory, and the silence the two women shared in this one moment (perhaps the moment would not be so pure had they spoken?), invests the natural world:

Rarest of friends, so rich a memory
Will haunt the stream when both of us are gone.

'When both of [them] are gone'—the power of this memory requires neither woman to be present, or active, or even alive. The memory itself, the unspoken, silent language will 'haunt' the stream. Their absence, their 'negative capability', will enrich.

Like 'Climbing Everest', 'The Swan of Coquet River' is invested with a rich liturgical quality. In both, 'the silence of the sun', the 'gold finger', the waiting in darkness or in silence, and indeed the vocabulary of the poems—the 'praise' and 'keeping', the 'turn to the snow', the 'miraculous light'—are possible because of 'the pure white arc', the divinity in which language and silence, the light of snow and its 'darkness', 'first light' and 'night' can all be encompassed. And in
both poems there is a sure and calm certainty, which survives even when buffeted by ‘capricious winds’, by ‘hail’, by flood, drought, grief and loneliness. In ‘Everest’, there is a sense of endurance, of sure persistence of the identity, even in darkness and negation—‘You will find me expectant like earth when you come/With your finger of gold’— whilst in ‘The Swan’, there is a certainty beyond, or underneath words:

The spirit stirs for flight, its arc foreknown
When first its mortal journey was begun.

The sense of the knowledge of beginnings and ends being ‘foretold’ pervades many of Auchterlonie’s late poems, and many of the poems in *Something to Someone* are indeed meditations upon death. In several of those poems, such as ‘Easter Monday, 1978’ (p. 29), and ‘The Maiden and Death’ (p. 30) death is figured as friend. In the former poem, an elegy for Auchterlonie’s son-in-law, Ralph Jungheim, death is praised:

I praise you most for this last, priceless gift:
Not among strangers did you return for me,
But quietly as I went about our house,
Where my young son slept in the morning light
And my wife knelt in the garden planting trees.

The returns between birth and death are emphasised throughout the poem. On this Australian Easter Monday, spring and autumn are contiguous:

The sun shines gently in these latitudes
Where Easter mornings shimmer on the sea
In the fall of the year...
and death's 'return' comes amid signs of fertility, with the new life of
the 'young son', and the wife kneeling in another kind of prayer or
praise, 'planting trees'. In 'The Maiden and Death' (p. 30), death is even
more domesticated:

Death sits beside my fire quite often now,
I see him crouching, when I turn my head
Towards the darkened corner, out of the blaze,
Timid, apologetic, no word said.
...
I shall grow used to his coming out and in,
Poor dark companion, doing what he can
To give me, like a dog, the truth of love
And faith, begrudged or bargained for by man.

This is a death with almost all wildness erased, as domestic as the
garden in which Auchterlonie's daughter plants trees. It is not a death
to be feared, or loathed, or run away from, although put off for the
present:

His constancy will move me in the end,
Though we have nothing in common but our grief...
How can I see the anguish in his eyes
And not put out my hand for his relief?

But is death tame, or merely clever, waiting until Auchterlonie can no
longer 'begrudge' him her acquiescence, 'bargaining' with her in the
most subtle form of eroticism? Certainly in 'Next Station's Yours...'
(pp. 33-4), Auchterlonie emphasises the naivety of her traveller,
implying that this domestication is but a comfortable myth. She wears
'Good sensible clothes', travels 'second-class', and seems to negotiate
the journey as a series of cautions taken heed of: 'Be careful whom you
talk to'; 'there's always the communication-cord/For emergencies'. She
notes wryly that:
There were one or two tentative moments
With a couple of plausible men, and once she nearly
Had to reach for the communication-cord,
But asked him instead what sort of car he drove, and he told her,
Until the train reached his destination

—but ends up travelling alone, with no one to interpret or take away
the ‘lunatic tattoo on her head’ which inevitably begins to beat. Even
its end, however, the nature of her journey is opaque to her:

And the journey shut like a telescope after
Disclosing the tiny figures of her father and mother
Advancing, beckoning, clutching her brother by the hand,
Growing larger than life, waving to her from the station
She had left that morning. She smiled and thought:
How absurd of them to come to meet me,
And hummed a little tune as the train
Roared through the tunnel before
Slackening
To
A
Stop.

Auchterlonie thus finishes the final poem of her final volume on this
note of the ‘absurd’, figuring herself humming ‘a little tune’ on her
way to death, still unaware that this ‘Stop’ is indeed the ‘final
destination’.

Auchterlonie only hints obliquely at what is not domestic, or
absurd, or little, or sensible about death in this poem. It makes its
presence felt only in a few phrases within one stanza, the stanza of old
age:

After that, she felt a little cold; her back
Was beginning to ache and the seat seemed too high
For her feet. Pins and needles plagued her,
The wheels beat a lunatic tattoo on her head.
The landscape screamed in the dark,
Though the daylight was not quite gone,
And whirling trees mocked her perceptions.
But these moments of possible recognition, in the ‘cold’, the plaguing ‘aches’, the ‘lunatic tattoo’, the screaming landscape mocking her perceptions, are firmly tucked away again at the end of the journey, when

She smiled back with relief, took out a comb,
Straightened her skirt, powdered her nose,
Tidied her papers, put the books
Carefully in her overnight bag.

Even the books, Auchterlonie suggests, are no proof against the ‘Stop’.

Although most of the irony in the poem is directed towards Auchterlonie’s wry self-evocation, there is a movement towards others surrounding her. Neither women nor men are exempt from her castigating eye. Those of her own sex seem to be ineffectual:

The women in the carriage recited their histories,
Offered aspirin or peppermints, came and went
In a long procession of plastic shopping-bags.

In ‘recit[ing]’ their histories, they appear to have no understanding of them, reproducing them parrot fashion, the ‘aspirin’ and ‘peppermints’ like Isolde’s pottery classes, ‘keeping doubt at bay’. Unlike Rosemary Dobson’s ‘long line backwards of women’, the history of these women seems to be ineluctably linked with acquisition and the consumer impulse. The joys of bearing and raising children, which Auchterlonie invokes in her retorts to Germaine Greer and other like-minded feminists, appear likewise to be hollow here:
They were certainly good company and behaved
Most of the way like angels, though just before
They got off became a little obstreperous
And threw the sandwiches she offered them
Back in her face. They said goodbye nicely however
And thanked her for being so kind to them.

Her comments on men are, however, rather more caustic and dark,
even while she amuses us with the image of a man obsessed with his
motor vehicle. Of course, the sharp note here is as much directed
towards herself as against ‘him’. Frightened perhaps by the intensity of
his ‘plausibility’, his capacity for the genuine—frightened almost into
ending her journey prematurely—she keeps him at bay, recreating the
suburban Tristan and Isolde again, safe in their ‘mod. brick. bung’. And
he manages to fill his journey with talk, with descriptions of his car, all
the way to ‘his destination’. He allows no silence for feeling ‘lunatic
tattoos’, or the ‘screams’ of mocking landscapes.

The capacity of men for filling silences with words and
mysteries with explanations is a note woven throughout
Auchterlonie’s poetry. In what is perhaps the most serious of her
poems on death, ‘L’Inconnue de la Seine’ (pp. 7-8), masculine
assumptions and systems of knowledge are directly challenged. In
particular, the conceits in which man and God are conflated, and in
which death and the erotic are intertwined, are held up for inspection:
What did you see, drowned girl, to make you smile,
Before the dark water closed upon your eyes?
Did you sink back upon the river's breast
As on a bed in which a lover lies,

And give yourself to death with so much ease
You scarcely felt his cold lips claim your own?
Were you remembering, as he held you close,
Him who had held you, blood and flesh and bone?

Proud fool! For sure she saw no lover's face
Through the grey veil of water where she found
The secret that she had not known she knew
Unfolding, as the river clasped her round.

No man could teach her lips such slow serene
Detachment, such amused surprise;
No man looked down with lightning on her face,
Compelling her to close her dazzled eyes.

An earlier Australian poem, also in its way a 'meditation on a death-mask', A.D. Hope's 'On an Engraving by Casserius' (1969, p. 12), conflates death, eroticism and a poetic which gazes into and 'penetrates' the mystery:

Who was she? Though they never knew her name,
Dragged from the river, found in some alley at dawn,
This corpse none cared, or dared perhaps, to claim;
The dead child in her belly still unborn,
Might have passed, momentary as a shooting star,
Quenched like the misery of her personal life,
Had not the foremost surgeon of Italy,
Giulio Casserio of Padua,
Bought her for science, questioned her with his knife,
And drawn her for his great Anatomy;

Where still in the abundance of her grace,
She stands among the monuments of time
And with a feminine delicacy displays
His elegant dissection: the sublime
Shaft of her body opens like a flower
Whose petals, folded back expose the womb,
Cord and placenta and the sleeping child,
Like instruments of music in a room
Left when her grieving Orpheus left his tower
Forever, for the desert and the wild.
In Hope’s classical vision, the ‘gaze’ effects no communion of subject and object, and indeed throughout his poem lies a strong sense that the drowned woman is only brought to life, or made real by the gaze of the masculine, and by the phallic penetration or dissection with the knife. But for the masculine probing, her life would have been ‘quenched’, or ‘momentary’. But for his probing, his questioning, his playing upon her body, she would have been merely an unsounded instrument, with no voice or music of her own. And indeed, she is given no voice, but is allowed only to ‘display’, to be the vehicle of Casserio’s ‘elegant dissection’, his probing into the mysteries of death, birth, and pregnancy. Without his lover-like attendance upon her, the poem assumes, she would in fact be nothing. Hope’s is but one example of this genre of meditation on the death mask, but demonstrates the conceit of the gaze, and the masculine pride which conflates it with eroticism. Auchterlonie, by contrast, rejects this conflation and refuses to probe, dissect, objectify or ‘display’ her ‘drowned girl’. Indeed, man’s conceit is directly challenged:

Proud fool! For sure she saw no lover’s face

and:

No man could teach her lips such slow serene
Detachment, such amused surprise.

Rather than following the ‘death as lover’ conceit, and of probing her mysteries like a lover, Auchterlonie turns the imagery back to one in which the drowned girl seems to be giving birth to herself, in an
immaculate conception. Her death mask is like that of a newborn child:

   Her brow is smoother than the river’s glass,
   Her closed eyes hide the morning in her gaze.

Even as AUCHTERLONIE presents a picture which is like an infant being born, ‘unfurling’ its lids, first looking upon the day, there is, in the phrase ‘Surely those lips will part’, a possible double meaning which perhaps refers to the moments before birth, when the child moves towards the light, but before the ‘lips’ unfurl to release it. The imagery of the poem is certainly that of the the amniotic, and perhaps of what KRISTEVA (1984) has called the semiotic:

   Surely those lips will part, the lids unfurl,
   They tremble with such laughter towards the light?
   How can such revelation stay so still,
   Or waken only to the speechless night?

   So pure, so placid was the moment when
   The river took you in its calm embrace,
   You moved untroubled from the light to light,
   Its final candour flowering in your face.

There is a pulsing pressure in this amniotic, in the ‘tremble’ of ‘laughter’ and the conviction that there is a language on the point of being awakened or revealed. And yet, in the face of this ‘placid’ river with its rhythmic artesian overtones, AUCHTERLONIE retreats from the knife which would display her secrets, which would force the lips, or force the revelations into speech:

   Keep both your secrets, hide behind your eyes
   Who you once were, and what you have become;
   Few can bear light and smile: Eyes, do not wake,
   Lips kissed with knowledge, be forever dumb!
Ultimately, Auchterlonie decides that hers is not the way of the ‘proud fool’, or of the one who ‘tells’ ‘all the way to his destination’. Hers is not the masculine desire for forced revelation, for the objectified gaze, for seeing the object as something only brought to life through one’s own operations. Her modus operandi remains that of ‘a process of evasion’, describing ‘her love but not her lover’, of believing that ‘final candour’ cannot be forced to flower. For the poet Auchterlonie, ‘secrets’, the ‘shadows’ and ‘messages’ of the many ‘hidden days’ (‘Jour Perdu’), are the ‘Lips kissed with knowledge’. That knowledge is not always to be spoken or revealed.

IV

To choose silence, or a silence in which ‘knowledge’ and ‘candour’ reveal themselves by their absences, or their inversions, is a different matter indeed from having silence enforced, of becoming the silent body beneath the gaze and the knife of masculine appropriation. ‘A Problem of Language’ may have been humorously conceived and executed, but in “The Hollow Years” (p. 16) and ‘Farewell Message’ (p. 24) from Something to Someone, there is a painful depth of feeling in exclusion, and that pain is specifically a bitterness devalued by the dominant force of the masculine.

Indeed, these poems are cries of grief and rage at being shut out of the land of poesy and of power, of being rendered as sterile and invisible as Hope’s woman ‘past her change of life’, the woman for whom, in the words of “The Hollow Years”, ‘the womb is dry’, and ‘spiral promise sinks/To a lipless cry’. The real bitterness here is that, in artistic terms, woman is seen as ‘dry’ or ‘lipless’, her artistic efforts
derided or simply ignored. "The Hollow Years" may be addressed to a particular man, but, more importantly, its lament is addressed to an entire male culture:

It is a bitter thing to give
As proof of the heart
The fruit of the mind's womb
In a work of art

And watch the begetter
Set it aside
Like a disowned child
On a cold hillside.

What shall she do now
To leave for a sign
That perfection blessed once
Her solitary vine?

Perhaps the begetter/male culture which plants the seeds of art in the mind/womb of a colonised woman, cannot accept a woman’s art as legitimate offspring. Perhaps the begetter hears the whispers of incest and patricide and disowns the child which might threaten his kingdom, setting aside what might threaten his hegemony. In any case, the woman, 'by definition a poet, a maker' (in Murphy, 1970, pp. 35-6) is kept outside the 'sign-manual' of the territory or kingdom of meaningful language, and all 'signs' of the perfection of a woman’s art 'set aside'. Her very definition is erased.

Auchterlonie’s strongest anger and hurt at this exclusion inform 'Farewell Message', in which she sees 'man' as clearly marking off his territory from the rest of the world over which he rules:
Language, asks the poet, is it language
Marks off man from beast?
Hear his golden tongue!
Without him the whole world is dumb, is dumb.

*Child, woman, sheep and tree and rock*
*Measure the word against the deed.*

Reason, asks the scholar, is it reason
Marks off man from beast?
Marvel at his mind!
Without him the world would stand forever still.

*Child, woman, sheep and tree and rock*
*Watch the map of tears and blood.*

His tools, asks the craftsman, is it his tools
That mark off man from beast?
See his turning wheels!
Without him all remain the seasons' slaves.

*Child, woman, sheep and tree and rock*
*Sigh for the doom of rain and sun.*

Cruelty, they murmur in their lifelong dream, is it cruelty
Marks off man from beast.
Behold his countless subtle knives!
Without him, pity would not wear the mask of love.

*Child, woman, sheep and tree and rock*
*Wait always for the next blow.*

In the arhythmic refrains, jolting out of the patterns of rhyme and rhythm she practised so assiduously, Auchterlonie figures the voiceless and powerless 'other' as 'Child, woman, sheep and tree and rock'. They offer a set of silent replies to man's quest to rigidly define his identity, his difference, and his superiority, a sort of folk knowledge shared by the oppressed. The oppressed 'Measure the word against the deed', they 'Watch the map of tears and blood', they 'Sigh for the doom of rain and sun', and for them, the marvels of the masculine, 'his golden tongue', 'his mind', 'his tools', 'his turning wheels', 'his countless subtle knives', are all the marvels of the oppressor.
This Dorothy Auchterlonie, writing at the height of her poetic power, does not sound very much like the public Dorothy Green who protested against isolationist feminist studies, and who couldn’t believe intelligent women could be offended by being included in the generic ‘mankind’. Whilst I acknowledge that many of the images and the themes of her poetry raise the hackles of the feminist, I suggest that through her exploration of the ‘estrangement’ that is one third of the Christian triad, and through her negotiation of the landscape of grief, absence and lack, Dorothy Auchterlonie came to suspect that the language she used, which in her public work she argued was generic and not exclusive, failed to give her an adequate poetic voice.

However, whilst Auchterlonie saw the possibilities of a language of ‘evasion’, she seems to have been so thoroughly colonised or assimilated into the masculinist tradition that her responses are principally those of defiance and bitterness. Those responses do add a great deal to an understanding of Auchterlonie’s complete body of literary and social work, problematising her classification as ‘Christian humanist’. In the end, though, Auchterlonie seems to stand at the edge of masculine tradition, unable to break its shackles, and only glimpsing on her horizon the new country that other women poets see themselves discovering:

*Child, woman, sheep and tree and rock*
*Wait always for the next blow.*
CHAPTER TWO

‘letting fall the folds of unseen linen’ : Rosemary Dobson

In 1979, Rosemary Dobson received the Christopher Brennan Award, presented, as the Award’s conditions demand, to a poet ‘whose sustained work achieves distinction’ (Wilde, Hooton, Andrews, 1985, p. 156). In 1984, she was the recipient of the Patrick White Literary Award ‘to an Australian writer whose work, in the opinion of the administrators of the fund, has not received the critical acclaim or the financial rewards it deserves’ (Wilde, Hooton, Andrews, 1985, p. 550). At the time of the first award, Dobson had published *In a Convex Mirror* (1944), *The Ship of Ice* (1948), *Child with a Cockatoo* (1955), *Cock Crow* (1965), *Three Poems on Water-Springs* (1973), *Greek Coins: A Sequence of Poems* (1977) and *Over the Frontier* (1978). In addition, she had published, with David Campbell, ‘imitations’ of a series of Russian poets in the volumes *Moscow Trefoil* (1975) and *Seven Russian Poets* (1979). After the Brennan and White awards were presented, Rosemary Dobson continued her publication in the form of the fine *The Three Fates* (1984) and, in this decade, *Seeing and Believing* (1990), *Collected Poems* (1991), and *Untold Lives* (1992). She has also, by invitation, edited several anthologies of Australian poetry (1967, 1975, 1979), and published *Selected Poems* in 1973 and 1980.

It is now almost fifty years since the publication of Dobson’s first collection of poetry, making her one of the few Australian poets who have continued to produce very fine work over such a period of time. Indeed, Rosemary Dobson could be seen as a member of the poetic élite of Australia, rubbing shoulders as she does with such other
recipients of these awards as Judith Wright, A.D. Hope, Gwen Harwood, Francis Webb, James McAuley and David Campbell. Despite her own modesty about her position amongst such poets (private conversation, 10/2/93), there can be no doubt that Rosemary Dobson is highly regarded within the Australian poetry community. She has maintained mutually supportive friendships with many Australian poets over long periods of time (10/2/93), and while leading a private life, has not been a reclusive writer working in isolation from her Australian milieu.

And yet, while Dobson’s continued quality of publication is apparent, while she has maintained the contact with the writing world which began with her work as a young woman editor with Angus and Robertson, and while she is often grouped with and classed as writing the same type of poetry as Fitzgerald and McAuley et al., there is surprisingly little scholarly criticism of her work. She does not figure often in school or university syllabi and the 1991 publication of her Collected Poems failed to attract significant review attention. This is a pattern which is familiar to scholars of poetry by Australian women, and is indeed, as has been discussed in my Introduction, a major impetus to a study such as this. In her ‘Statement’ in Poetry and Gender (Brooks and Walker, 1989), Dobson claims that as a young poet, starting out, she never had a sense of ambitions curtailed because of her gender, although she does acknowledge that:

Somewhere along the way, probably rather early, I concluded that historically women were thought to be more emotional and gentler as writers than men. I determined to write with clarity and with an edge of wit...

(p. 32)
That 'clarity' and 'edge of wit' have seen Rosemary Dobson's work portrayed as 'fundamentally in the spirit of classicism' (Mitchell, 1981, p. 12), and yet it appears that her classicism may be problematical. If, as some suggest, Dobson's work is essentially in the same vein as that of McAuley, Hope et al., it is difficult to determine the reasons for her virtual exclusion from scholarly criticism. If, however, Dobson's work does differ from that of her colleagues and contemporaries, perhaps because of her gender, then there may indeed be at least a case for suggesting that her work has been unsettling in some way to the classical tradition. It is possible that unease over Dobson's subtle challenge to classicism silences or discourages mainstream literary critics.

With any writer with such a long publishing history, it is tempting to chart a course from start to finish, and to look for linear movement, what we might term 'progress'. Mitchell (1981) finds much that continues in Dobson's work, such as her 'distinctive attitude' (p. 3), her 'steady perception' and her 'constant reference to humanity' (p. 12), but still argues for linear progress in her work, arguing that her earlier poems are somewhat impersonal and 'largely about things to be comprehended rather than felt', whilst characterising her later work, written as 'wife and mother' as 'mature' (p. 4). There are obvious ideological questions raised by an assessment which, intentionally or coincidentally sees the poetry of a single, childless woman as immature, with the maturity bestowed by the entry into patriarchally sanctioned categories such as 'wife' and 'mother' validating not only Dobson's identity as woman, but also as poet. Dobson's work is given more attention, in a much longer piece, by Veronica Brady (1989), and whilst Brady, writing in a climate of sympathy for and receptivity to
what may be 'different' in women's writing, is careful to avoid such
categories as 'immature' and 'mature', she too maintains a sense of
linear progress in Dobson's work. Brady also sees the experience of
maternity as the 'turning point' (p. 113), the point at which Dobson
abandons the 'weightlessness or wordlessness' which Brady sees as
reflecting her lack of response to her own figuring as 'lack', and turns
to a position of 'letting her body be heard and thus releasing the
sources of the unconscious, hitherto held back, unspoken and
concealed' (p. 113).

And yet, a sustained reading of Dobson's work leaves this
reader with the conviction that 'progress', linear change, and the sense
of 'turning point' are not its most noteworthy features, or rather that
the valorisation and foregrounding of linear development may
obscure other equally important characteristics. The title of one of
Dobson's earlier poems, 'In my end is my beginning' (1948, p. 38), can
be appropriated and extended to argue that in diction, stance and
delivery, there is little to distinguish between the work of 1944 and that
of 1992. This is not, of course, to argue for 'sameness' in Dobson's work,
but rather to say that many phrases, lines, and even whole poems from
her earliest period would not be out of place in a volume published
today. David Malouf, in praising Dobson's 'visionary' qualities, asserts
that:

at any one time, and for any one reader, four or five [of
Rosemary Dobson's poems] will do. To read more may add
to our pleasure...but they will not add to our
understanding of the poet.
(1981, p. 17)
This is an overstatement so severe as to reduce Dobson’s poetic range
to a single dimension. A.D. Hope, in an article retracting an earlier
view of Dobson’s work as ‘parasitic’ and ‘secondhand’, comes closer to
an appreciation of the nature of what continues in her poetry—‘it is an
art that has only developed what was implicit in it from the start’.
Again, however, he seems to overstate stability in her work, or at least
to equate stability in voice and approach with the somewhat anaemic
appellations of ‘order’ and ‘serene’:

the earliest poems show the same exact perception, the
same radiant vision, the same lucid order and are
informed by the same contemplative serene, as the latest
ones.

(1972, p. 11)

Certainly, Dobson’s voice is recognisable across time: her
measured cadence, her love of the austere, and a poetic drive which
she calls ‘…a search for something only fugitively glimpsed’
(‘Statement’, 1989), are not for Dobson qualities acquired gradually.
They are, rather, qualities which are inherent and stable in her poetic,
even while she ranges over subject matter extending from Renaissance
paintings to Greek mythology or her own experiences as woman. The
Dobson who could write in her earliest twenties:

Dreaming by the fire I called myself, watching
For a child to run back through Time to a picnic.
(‘Picnic’, 1944, p. 32)

is not so different from the one who writes in ‘Flute Music’ (1984,
p. 10), of the ‘time to turn and walk forwards’, to ‘Walk also towards
death’. And there is, running throughout Dobson’s poetry, a
continuing sense of fruitful silence, and an attentiveness which allows
deep communication. The sense of a 'wordless and wise' language, such as that which allows a fist punched into a cap to mean:

..."This is a morning!"
The mist like white scoured wool
Is teased and spread about the hills,
The valley's bales are full..."

and an answering punch into a hat to reply:

"The wind will comb and spin
That fleece of mist to thread of cloud
And night will wind it in."

('The Conversation', 1955, p. 39)

underlies many of her most considered lyrics. In this chapter, the pattern I trace in Dobson's work takes its shape from the circle 'drawn thrice' in 'In my end is my beginning', and of the 'white scoured wool' teased and spun, and wound in continuously. That is, I concentrate on circularity and return in her work, on what is continuing and constant, as well as what changes or is different.

There is, of course, no need to see circularity and linearity as mutually exclusive, and indeed the two notions can be contiguous. When writing on the work of the Australian painter, Ray Crooke, Rosemary Dobson praises his single-mindedness, and his dedication to an aesthetic which 'believes that in restating the same themes the artist can penetrate ever deeper into a mystery' (Dobson, 1971, p. 1). This description, with its sense of a continuous, circling reworking of material operating alongside a deepening artistic apprehension, could as fittingly be applied to Dobson herself. Accordingly, rather than reading Dobson's work in a chronological manner, I will also circle through her poetry, in a sense 'beginning' with her 'end'.
There are many possible means by which the critic might attempt to ‘spin’ and ‘unravel’ Dobson’s work. Veronica Brady chooses, as her central image in her appreciation of Dobson’s poetic, the ‘bystander’ from the poem of that name (‘The Bystander’, 1955, p. 5). Ray Crooke, were he to write rather than paint interpretations of Dobson’s poems, might figure her gazing watchfully into one of his dark and primitive interiors. Others would no doubt choose the flute player of ‘Flute Music’ (1984, p. 10), with his sense of perfect balance and fitness in his death as in his music. In this chapter I choose, as my own ‘penetration’ into the ‘mystery’, Dobson’s use of many types of surfaces, principally fabrics, as backdrops in her poetry. ‘Backdrops’ is immediately inadequate as a term to describe the imagistic importance of fabric in Dobson’s work, for my argument concerning Dobson’s poetic consists precisely in Dobson using surface to convey far more than superficies. That is, I do not so much wish to figure Dobson as merely putting things onto sheets, canvases, muslins or indeed fine papers, as involved in a circularity of relation, in which her attentiveness allows her to enter into, or move behind the merely decorative, the flatness of ‘the gaze’, and in turn to internalise their structures. Fabrics and surfaces, in other words, are made interior, rather than being presented as outside the self, or outside the poem.

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, not least the deaths of dear friends. More will be said of these and other griefs in an extended discussion of Dobson’s writing of the body later in the chapter. For now, I wish to show that these two poems, ‘The Eye’ and
'The Other Eye' (retitled 'The Eye (ii)', in the *Collected Poems*), written late in her career, 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, and have been taken into the body, so that the body itself may be written.

Muslin, calico, linen and canvas permeate Dobson's work, but in 'The Eye' (1990, p. 1), such fabrics are no longer outside the body. Rather, they have become part of the body itself:

```
One day the dark fell over my eye.
It was like a blind drawn halfway 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 halfway 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, who has worked for so long with fabrics, 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' (written perhaps on some strange parchment)—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 world also becomes internal, with the eye becoming a world in itself, a planet around which:

Great cumulus gathered at morning gravely  
Circling the world in contemplation,  
At noon dispersed, at evening gathered  
Again in council.

In 'The Other Eye' (1990, p. 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' covered with 'White calico washed pale and thin/Linen with lint all washed away', 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, or even magnify 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.

Just as ‘The Eye’ employs shadowy clouds which, like those of ‘The Conversation’, are spun out and reeled in continuously, here it is ‘sea’, archetype of uncertainty and loss of ego, which plays the role of flux brought into the body, of continuous interchange between what is outside and what is inside the self. And yet respect for the materiality of the body is not lost here. This blindness is not merely imagistic or symbolic. Dobson’s damaged sight is only too real and, as in other
poems, she allows us simultaneously to feel the actual grief of the body—what she calls in ‘Grieving’ (1990, p. 3) ‘a dark disorder’ // A ceaseless banging of shutters/Upstairs there, in the mind’—and to read it as, to some extent, ‘undeciphered omen’.

Although Rosemary Dobson has always sat uneasily in the camps of ‘women’s poetry’ and feminism, and would, I think, be uncertain whether to characterise the relative neglect of her work fundamentally as an effect of patriarchal criticism, I hope to show, through my concentration on the idea of fabric and of the movement of fabric inside and outside the body, that her work may be characterised as significantly ‘different’ from those of her male contemporaries. Dobson is certainly not the first woman poet to concentrate on the womanly images of linens and calicos, sheets and wrappings, and in more than one poem the confluence of such fabrics with metaphysical and ontological inquiry, and with specifically female figures, raises questions on her gender positioning. In ‘The Apparition’, for instance, a recent poem from Untold Lives (1992, p. 22), the poet’s ‘apparition’ is both a woman (in fact Dobson’s mother) and representative of the great questions of what lies before birth and after death. An unquiet 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 the moment remains as an ‘undeciphered omen’—the apparition does not speak. The answers, it seems, may lie in the linen and with them, the
forgiveness, or 'absolution'—perhaps for being alive, whilst forbears
are dead—which Dobson seeks. Further, beyond the confluence of the
linen with the womanly, and the woman's functions of bringing life
into the world and ushering it out, Dobson acknowledges her kinship
with this tradition:

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

The word 'distaff' itself, meaning the matrilineage, tracing one's
heritage through the mother, 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 I will
argue that such notions of weaving and of spinning backwards and
forwards illuminate it, and provide an explanation for why her poetry
does not fit so easily into the 'classical' tradition as is sometimes
supposed.

In order to do this, I will be approaching Dobson's writing from
several standpoints. I shall deal with, in turn, some of the major
groupings in which ideas of fabric are important in her poetry. First, I
will consider several of her many 'painting' poems, and especially her
understanding of the canvases on which they are produced. Second,
and in a similar vein, a smaller body of works, drawn both from her
poetry and from her novel for young adults, Summer Press (1987), will
be examined for their sense of how cartography and printing can make
the world around us, rather than just describe it. Third, I will deal with
what might be called the 'fabric of life' in her poetry, not only the actual
linens which we have already seen in the poems discussed above, but
also verities of community, friendship and love, shared with both men and women. Fourth, in the light of the sense of such things becoming part of the body, I will read Dobson’s writing of the life of the body, especially as it relates to the womanly experiences of fertility, pregnancy and childbirth. I will trace the ways in which the sense of cultural and Biblical inscription of the woman’s body is highlighted in her poetry, and the ways in which Dobson establishes the sense of ‘annunciation’ as a great challenge, rather than a restriction. I will bring the strands of these groupings together in a discussion of Dobson’s ‘translation’ work, and the sense of its accord with the complete body of her poetry, which is very much about moving inside the position of some ‘other’, absorbing its flavour or fabric, and then, as she terms it, returning ‘by another way’ (‘To Meet the Child’, 1965, p. 6).

After these considerations, I will discuss the questions Dobson’s writing raises about notions of ‘exchange’ or movement across identity boundaries. In particular, I ask where Dobson positions herself in this movement. Does she allow herself to become the object of exchange which some feminist theorists would argue her insistence on ‘annunciation’ entails, or does she see herself as the ‘ampersand’ of her poem of that name (‘Ampersand’, 1955, p. 25)—

Between the sea & shore I make
My scribbled, fluent, changing line;
The earth & air would join in one
But that their meeting-place is mine.

—a meeting place which both brings subject positions together, and maintains their distance? Is Dobson less concerned with the polarities of I and not-I, then and now, present and absent, than she is with overcoming such duality by residing in a realm of constant exchange?
And if so, what might this say about the nature of her poetic identity, and how it is constituted?

Finally, I argue that such ways of reading Dobson might effect a modification of Mitchell's definition of her work as 'fundamentally in the classic tradition', and that it is more useful in her case to speak of a 'feminine' or indeed 'feminised' classic, in which we can read her writing of exchange, which we can trace through the womanly images of fabric, as being different to the classic position from, for example, A.D. Hope, James McAuley or David Campbell. It is, I hope, possible to suggest such difference, and to further suggest that some of the neglect of her work may be attributed to this difference, without putting Rosemary Dobson into a closed 'feminist' box with which she would herself be most unhappy. After all, if one is to position Dobson as fundamentally a poet of flux and exchange of identity positions, it is falsely reductive to argue her into a fixed identity position of 'woman poet'.

Earlier, I argued that Dobson's 'Eye' poems are excellent examples of the ways in which interchange, and the movement between inner and outer positions, is expounded and effected in her poetic. And part of the significance of those poems lies in our sense of how essential those eyes have been to her throughout her working life. 'Seeing' itself is not a one-way activity for Dobson—she does not rely merely on the 'gaze', which reveals no community of subject and object, but turns her sights, or 'insights', back upon herself, and frequently imaginatively enters the world of canvas itself, which provides a considerable portion of her poetic subject matter.
Even before her employment as an editor with Angus and Robertson during World War II—a fruitful time during which many important literary friendships were made—Rosemary Dobson was involved with the artistic world. As a young woman, she both studied and taught art (Adelaide, 1988, p. 52) and has continued to practise art to the present. One of the ‘orders’ she ‘force[s] on the mind’ to combat that ‘dark disorder’ of grief and loss is that of:

A search for the true invention
Of form by line in drawing.
(‘Grieving’, 1990, p. 3)

She has even provided small line ‘decorations’ for some of her works, notably The Continuance of Poetry: Twelve Poems for David Campbell (1981). But if a ‘line’ is the simplest, most austere means by which ‘form’ with its boundaries and containments may be ‘found’ or ‘invented’, it is to the rich artistic traditions of the Renaissance that Dobson turns in her many ‘painting’ poems. Although most of these are contained in a sustained preoccupation with the Italian painters in the long series of Child with a Cockatoo (1955), such poems are scattered throughout the several early volumes, and the sense of the painterly is always present in her work. It should be noted that although these poems all deal with European paintings, Dobson’s knowledge of Australian painting is deep and authoritative, as evidenced by her writing of Focus on Ray Crooke (1971), and her careful and conscious choice, for the cover of her Collected Poems (1991), of Ambrose Patterson’s 1902 ‘Self-Portrait’, of which she writes:
Despite the enigmatic use of shadow he is represented as undeniably Australian. In short, the painting draws on European and Australian sources and my poetry, as I hope it will be seen, indicates my indebtedness to these two sources.

('Preface' to Collected Poems)

Her indebtedness to Renaissance painters, however, is a particularly strong one. In my exploration of Dobson’s interpretations of these paintings, I will concentrate on the variety of boundaries which Dobson encounters, and imaginatively overcomes in her readings or sightings of them. The boundary of time, and that between life and representation will be examined, together with the place, in Dobson’s work, of the onlooker, the one who enters or momentarily crosses over these borders. Finally, I will return to a ‘translation’ theme which informs all of her transposition of paintings into poetry, and of the notion of return or circularity in such slippage.

The contiguity of movement and stillness is a constant in Dobson’s writings of paintings, as is the contiguity of then and now. Indeed, her rendering of these paintings into words relies on her sense of the paintings flowing, as it were, towards her. They are not read, or seen, or spoken as static, flat surfaces—separate objects upon which a separate subject can gaze. An underlying sense of flow, even of water, pervades her readings, and is perhaps best exemplified in her poems ‘Still Life’ (1948, p. 19) and ‘Paintings’ (1955, p. 4). In the former, that most ‘still’ of lives—the arrangement of ‘Tall glass, round loaf and tumbled cloth/ And leaning flask of smoky brown’—which will be repeated often in Dobson’s poems of life’s simple verities, is not still at all, but filled with movement and relationship. Writing on one of her favourite contemporary painters, Giorgio Morandi, Dobson reiterates
her approval for sustained contemplation of similar subjects—Morandi spent forty years of his life painting, etching, and drawing arrangements of pots upon a table—but notes that the real point of such devotion is not to involve oneself in the static, but in subtle movement. His, she writes, was 'a prolonged meditation upon the diversity and connectedness of things' (1977, p. 72). In her own poem on the still life, it is also this sense of 'connectedness, not only between the objects themselves, but between painting and viewer, which she seeks to 'meditate' upon. From the painting, Dobson feels

...Time and Silence flowing down,
Welling against the canvas, held
By stroke and feather-touch of paint
As one might build a weir to hold
Some spreading pool in sweet restraint.

The canvas—'weir', 'sweet restraint'—is not a fixed, immovable and implacable boundary between painting and viewer. 'Time' and 'Silence' 'flow' and 'well', presumably from some inherent behindness of the canvas, some other place beyond the surface, the wellspring from which the 'spreading pool' has its source. And although Dobson uses a traditional, rhyming structure for her poem, the words 'Time' and 'Silence' also flow down over the formal stanza breaks, effecting the transfer from simple perception of the objects in the still life to an interpretative, communal interaction with them.

As weir, the 'stroke' and 'feather-touch', the intimate touches of love and sensuality, the 'paint' is arranged so as to allow the seepage of its own flow through its barriers. Further, it invites the 'touch' of the viewer, a reciprocity of 'flow', so that the viewer reaches into that behindness of the canvas, to participate in its feast. Three hundred
years later, the viewer cannot enter wholeheartedly into the temporal world of the painting—she does not know ‘Whose was the hand that held the brush.../And who the guest who came to break/The loaf’, but she is invited into the feast nevertheless:

I, who now pour the wine and tilt
The glass, would wish that well you fare,
Good sir, who set out food and drink
That all who see might take and share.

Perhaps not ‘all who see’ would partake in this feast so imaginatively, and indeed the idea of receptivity, of an informed patience, is one which becomes increasingly apparent in Dobson’s work. Dobson’s ‘seeing’ is, however, one that is available to all, and one which overcomes the flatness of representation, and the separation of subject and object.

‘Paintings’ continues this sense of flow, and indeed its consideration of a painting of the sea moves and changes the idea of quiet, welling water into the ebb and flow of waves breaking and retreating. It also brings another sense beside sight into the equation, for Dobson figures the painting of the sea as ‘the intricate, devised/Hearing of sight’. This compression or elision of sound and sight is not natural: ‘devised’, it is as much the product of artifice as is the entire ‘Climate of stillness’ which the canvas represents. It is art which enables the contradictions of the viewing experience to be held together, so that:

...though I hear
No sound that falls on mortal ear
Yet in the intricate, devised
Hearing of sight these waves that break
In thunder on a barren shore
Will foam and crash for evermore.
Through her experience of art, the viewer can ‘hear’ the ‘break’, ‘thunder’, ‘foam’ and ‘crash’ of the waves as much as she sees the ‘barren shore’. Indeed, the confluence of the ‘intricate’ and the ‘devised’, and her own receptivity, her own sense of her fluid boundaries, allows her to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ the painter, the ‘grave Florentine’. In a way, art allows the viewer to become ‘immortal’, as opposed to the ‘mortal ear’ of the first stanza. The ‘grave Florentine’ is not static within his painting. Indeed he ‘turns’, presumably from peering into his own canvas, towards the receptive viewer, ‘look[ing]’ at her as she has looked at him. Moreover, he speaks to her, in a further ‘Hearing of sight’, and poses the great artistic question “‘What is Time/Since Art has conquered it?’” Art is posed as a dialogue—‘I speak...You hear’—which transcends time, collapsing its boundaries, just as paint can collapse sight and sound into themselves.

But there is a further exchange or crossing of boundaries involved in this artistic transaction. Dobson has her ‘grave Florentine’ echoing the ebb and flow of his own waves by saying of his speech ‘My words beat still upon your ear’. The words ‘beat’ like the continuing ‘foam and crash’ of the sea, but beating, as they do, against the ‘ear’, they are also like the pulse of the blood or the heart, and thus are taken into the body, past the boundary of the self. There is, thus, a bodily pulsing in this exchange between painter and viewer, a relationship which suggests, not a continuous one-way ‘flow’, but a dynamic between presence and absence, speech and silence, self and other.

If Dobson proposes this pulsing and meeting between painter and viewer, she also explores the possibilities of such an exchange, or at least explores the points of contact between the polarities ‘now’ and ‘then’. In ‘Still Life’ and ‘Paintings’, the relationship between the past
and the present is intimately bound up in the relationship between painter and viewer, and Dobson argues that art allows the boundaries between these two positions to be breached. In other poems, notably ‘In a Convex Mirror’ (1944, p. 5) and ‘In a Café’ (1944, p. 13), it is the space between time entities which occupies her attention. It is the same space which rests on the ear-drum, the point of crossover or exchange, the point at which both and neither subject position exists. Dobson has Botticelli ‘In a Café’ catching his Venus ‘between the gesture and the motion’, in that space hanging between movement and stillness, whilst in ‘In a Convex Mirror’, she wonders whether her subjects can make ‘eloquent’ ‘the silence between tick and tock’ (my emphasis). Art, for Dobson, is neither ‘words’ nor ‘silence’, but the instant at which ‘words to wiser silence pass’, in which Botticelli

...limns her in an instant, always there
Between the doorway and the emphatic till
With waves and angels, balanced on a shell.

‘Limns’ comes from the Latin ‘luminare’—to illuminate—and there is a sense in which Dobson argues that what the artist does is not to fix an object or a scene, or indeed a person forever in one moment, but to ‘illuminate’ a moment in a parade which passes inevitably into darkness. The great artists, for Dobson, are those who work in this unnamed and unfixed territory between subject and object, and who therefore subvert dualities. Thus the two-way action between Botticelli and his Venus—‘her glance compels’; he also ‘glances’ slantwise ‘across a half-turned shoulder’—and the sense of his model’s engagement with life, clasping her cup ‘with both hands’ and casting her compelling, oblique glance ‘[o]ver the rim’ means that Venus will
always be more than simply an object, cast with shells and angels, and will retain some of her own subjectivity. The ‘butt-ends’, the ‘dregs of tea’, and especially the ‘emphatic till’, asserting their own subjectivities, are both brought into and bring themselves into the painting through the imagination of the attentive viewer, who seeks to reach beyond the canvas, and beyond the ‘pastness’ of the painting, into a space in which the Renaissance time of Botticelli and Dobson’s contemporary time of cigarettes, cups of tea, and mechanical tills, can exist together. These two times, and indeed the two paintings—the Venus who balances on a shell with angels, and Dobson’s Venus and Botticelli exchanging ‘glances’ in a tea shop—are not set up as antithetical, with an impenetrable barrier between them, but as contiguous, existing in some time and place which is neither one nor the other, but at the same time, both.

Similarly, in the poem ‘In a Convex Mirror’, Dobson’s interest is not so much in ‘words’ and ‘silence’ or even, as Brady has suggested (1989), with ‘selves’ and ‘images’, as in what lies between them. Neither ‘selves’ and ‘images’ nor presence and absence are opposed neatly on either side of a directly reflecting mirror. It is crucial here that the ‘mirror’ is ‘convex’. It is not a flat mirror in which ‘images’ are the direct inverse of ‘selves’. The convexity of the mirror changes ‘images’; indeed, it is the very convexity of the mirror which turns the figures to each other, so that they ‘stand/ As pictured angels touching wings’. And it is in that process of change, of movement in another dimension, that the prophetic becomes possible. The angels touching within the circle are now capable of ‘Bespeaking birth, foretelling kings’. The convex mirror recalls the body of a pregnant woman, which allows separate subjects (mother and child, or metaphorically
humans and angels, tick and tock) to exist in an essentially symbiotic relationship, with the umbilicus of mythical and metaphoric connection between them.

But this ‘convex’ vision, of the merging of subjects, is not one which can exist indefinitely. It is not only undesirable and deadening for images to be contained forever in ‘clear-cold glass’, but also impossible. Dobson can figure and imagine many unions—the touching of angels, the eloquence of ‘The silence between tick and tock’, the congruence of images and selves, a wise silence, an implicit dissolution of the distance between lovers or any other subjects—but cannot retain those unions for any longer than Botticelli’s ‘limn[ed]’ ‘instant’. There is the moment of prophecy, of foretelling, the moment when language can transparently represent deep truths, but it is only a moment, and further a moment ‘fugitively glimpsed’. For time can only be weired between one moment and the next:

But ruined Rostov falls in flame,
Cities crumble and are gone,
Time’s still waters deeply flow
Through Here and Now as Babylon.

This time is not the ebb and flow of the waves which beat, nor the sweet, welling flow of the still life. Time retains its capacity to be both ‘still’ and to ‘deeply flow’, but it is not within the power of the individual to decide when time will ‘swirl...’, ‘rive’ and ‘Engulf... with unnumbered floods’. There is a sense here that human pride, in thinking itself able to permanently circumvent dualities, ‘disregar[ding] the clock’ and forcing the collapse of boundaries, brings upon itself the fate of ‘Babylon’, in which the punishment of the city for its wickedness was the division of its single, transparent language
into the ‘babel’ of all peoples unable to understand each other. ‘Time’
flows as much through the cities of ‘Here and Now’ as through
Babylon, and no ‘hidden spaces of the heart’, no love between lovers or
any others wishing to be ‘angels touching wings’, can escape the forces
of separation.

For the early Dobson, it is art alone which provides the
‘ampersand’, or the membrane of the inner ear which can allow the
pulsing, but not permanent crossing over between subject positions.
And the artist has a peculiar receptivity to this dissolution of ego
boundaries. In its most extreme form, the artist becomes part of his
painting. In ‘Painter of Umbria’ (1955, p. 11), for example, we find a
forerunner to Dobson’s ‘Eye’ poems, in which the external world and
the internal world of the artist interchange with each other. For
Dobson, the fabrics of canvas and muslin, which had preoccupied her
for much of her writing life, finally seemed to have entered the body.
For Dobson’s Francesco Calvi, the ‘Painter of Umbria’, the subjects of
his religious paintings seem to inhabit his own physical world, until
eventually he himself moves into his canvas world, or, in this case,
into the frescoed wall. Dobson portrays Calvi’s receptivity as inbuilt:
always a ‘silent lad’, he spends his childhood ‘scrap[ing] angels in the
dust’. Godlike, he fashions not men but angels from dust, bringing
together the physical and the metaphysical. In Florence, where he
paints, the metaphysical makes its presence felt constantly. ‘Francesco
Calvi paints from dawn to darkness’, occupied all day with the
physicality of applying ‘Stroke on stroke of paint’. The process of
painting is physical and practical, but its materiality does not diminish
its capacity for the divine, and the revelational:
At night he dreams of angels. All day long
Their bright wings brush against him, till it seems
The world is Florence, Florence is the chapel,
And all the people in his world angelic.

Calvi's world shrinks to the world of his canvas, and the angels he
paints take on a life of their own, 'brush[ing]' against him as they move
from behind the 'weir' of the canvas, and inhabit his physical world.
The dreams of night and the work of days become indistinguishable, as
the boundaries between art and life, dream and reality, outside and
inside are dissolved. The dissolution continues until Calvi's painting
stands in a perfect state of readiness, at the point of ampersand at
which the scene can reverse. For, when the painting is perfectly ready,
Calvi enters it:

...One place is empty,
Waiting among that lovely brood of creatures,
Fit space to put a man in. Our Francesco
Grown old and tired beside his magnum opus
Measures his height against the unpainted plaster,
Straightens his back, puts down at last his brushes
And joins his angels grouped about the Virgin.

No longer does Calvi reside in a physical world in which the
metaphysical is constantly impinging. Now, Dobson writes the physical
Calvi painting himself into his masterpiece, passing over the
membrane for the last time.

Dobson's language suggests the rightness of Calvi's physical
transmutation: the place left empty is a '[f]it space to put a man in'.
Francesco Calvi himself becomes '[o]ur Francesco', so that Calvi does
not stand separate from his viewers, but becomes part of them as he
becomes part of his painting. Dobson evokes a sense of familial
affection in her depiction of him as 'old and tired', as 'ours', as the
beloved toiler who at last '[s]traightens his back' and 'puts down...his brushes'. And in stepping into the painting, crossing from a physical world full of metaphysical portent, into a world of angels, he becomes, the poem suggests, an angel himself. Of course, Calvi can only become an angel by his own death. His self-portrait becomes his death mask, and the living Calvi can only be resurrected through the imagination of a sympathetic viewer. Indeed, in this poem, and in several others, the joke is on the reader who assumes Francesco Calvi to have ever been a 'living' painter. Rosemary Dobson's Calvi never had an existence outside her own imagination (personal conversation, 10/2/93), as several readers, such as A.D. Hope, who have criticised her work as 'second-hand', have found to their cost (Hope, 1972, p. 10).

In Dobson's translations of Renaissance paintings into words, she is not merely rendering or retelling paintings in a 'parasitic' manner. Rather, she works through and establishes her own translational poetic through her consideration of paintings. The relation between painter, painting and viewer is very important to Dobson, and she translates this relation into her own world of writing, so that she is very conscious of that beating 'upon the ear' which poetry is—not only the beating between times, and objects, or even between the world and the imperfect language she uses to describe it, but also between writer and reader and poem. Her poems become the 'ampersand' between writer and reader, the canvas which may be transgressed momentarily.

In 'The Converts' (1955, p. 14), Dobson continues her theme of a great painter fashioning a world so beautiful that it takes on a real life of its own behind the canvas, and then explicitly aligns his endeavour with her own. The painter's work is in part prosaic. The halo of the
saint is, we are told, 'Hammered' and then 'Clapped' upon its subject's head. Using workmanlike words, with no nonsense or mystery about them, Dobson shows us the craft of painting, refusing to let its toil be diminished. But that hammered halo, whilst made from 'metal thin and fine', is also 'out of summer sun'. The halo is both prosaic and divine, plucked from the world of celestial bodies, but 'Hammered' and 'Clapped' as any blacksmith would fashion the roughest of metal objects. The painter has created his saint, has given him his halo, his 'staff' and his 'scrip', has 'Placed him on an eminence/Shadowed by a laurel-tree' as the conventions of religious painting have demanded. But in creating his saint, something else has happened. Perhaps it is the influence of the 'summer sun' from which the halo is fashioned, but the painting comes to life. The 'whispering leaves', the 'coloured birds', the 'Fox and squirrel, wolf and hare' all gather to 'praise' and 'follow' the painted saint, who has become more than the skill of his maker. Once again, Dobson suggests a world behind the canvas, that other world which paint can call into being, and from which 'painted landscape' living things may creep.

This other world is not entirely within the control of the painter, or rather, it is not entirely from his skill that the other world exists. Indeed, Dobson's 'painter' in 'The Converts' seems not to have had full control over his painting. Workmanlike, he has not set out to create this living world, but rather seems to have called up some other world beyond his consciousness, a world of which he is the conduit, not the maker. And in this, Dobson explicitly aligns her craft as poet with the painter's craft in applying paint, and hammering 'summer sun' to make something greater than himself:
What should any painter do
When the world that he has made
Comes alive to praise the saint
Holy, bright and beautiful
He has fashioned with his paint?

What should any poet do
When the painter he has made
Steps into his picture’s frame?
Taking all my words with me,
Reader, I shall do the same.

It is tempting to continue the poem, as indeed I think we are invited to do:

What should any reader do
When the poet she has read
Disappears, her trace erased,
Following the birds and beasts
Into the poem, herself effaced.

Whether as readers of Dobson’s poetry, or viewers of Renaissance paintings, we are also meant to be ‘converts’ to cross from one belief into another, or perhaps to cross from no belief, from the prosaic world of paint, frame and crafted words, into the world within the frame, behind the paint, lurking behind the words. That world must be stepped into, or, in the vocabulary of ‘Paintings’, the reader or viewer must not harden the membrane of the ear against the pulsing between self and other. If Dobson, poet, disappears into her paintings, ‘Taking all her words with [her]’, then what we are left with are traces, shadows of words, the inverse. The ‘real’ world of physicality is the illusion, not the world of fluid interchange between identities.

Or perhaps the visible traces are mirrored reflections. We know from ‘The Convex Mirror’ that these are not exact inversions of common vocabulary, but slight distortions. There is no direct,
transparent transference from one to the other. Certainly, in ‘The Mirror’ (1955, p. 15), sub-titled ‘Jan Vermeer Speaks’, Dobson effects several kinds of inexact transferences. The poem proposes Jan Vermeer’s painting technique as painting from mirror images and yet in her ‘Notes on the Poems’ (Collected Poems, 1991, p. 217), she writes that ‘It has been said that Vermeer painted from the reflections of interiors and still-lives seen in mirrors, but I cannot vouch for the authenticity of this statement’. ‘It has been said’ does not imply absolute fact. Indeed, for Dobson as maker, authenticity of this sort is less important than the deeper truth of her own propositions, the force of her own imagination. Dobson’s poem itself acts as a second mirror, in which a deeper authenticity, that of imagination and not of fact, may be found. She writes her own mirrored impression of Vermeer, just as she has him painting a mirrored impression of his Dutch interior. The mirror acts as a concentrator of both time and space, and as a distorter of both. ‘The mirror gathers in the world,/Time and the world.’ The mirror enables time to be held momentarily—‘Time that is always gone stays still/ A moment in this quiet room’—and the world to be contracted into a room, a world entire, where a pitcher becomes a ‘Round moon that draws all restless tides’ and ‘All summers’ may be held in ‘a stroke of gold’.

But there is a still further slippage. Vermeer paints from a mirrored image, and even then his pitcher cannot absolutely be a ‘Round moon’, for there are limitations to what may be painted, even from a mirror. Darkness, for example, is problematical:
Twilight, and one last fall of sun
That slants across the window-sill,
And, mirrored darkly in the glass
(Can paint attempt that unlit void?)
All night, oblivion, is stayed
Within the curtain's folded shade.

Darkness, night or oblivion may be 'mirrored darkly', but the further mirror of paint may be inadequate to 'attempt' it. So, we may infer, may the further mirror of words, which also 'mirror darkly' the world they seek to reflect. The quiet room, twilight, an earthen pitcher—all seem to slip further from representation, almost to disappear into the frame. But painting or writing these erasing traces, these moments 'only fugitively glimpsed' is both the power and the limitation of art:

Oh you who praise
This tangled, broken web of paint,
I paint reflections in a glass:
Who look on Truth with mortal sight
Are blinded in its blaze of light.

This, of course, is also the lesson of Emily Dickinson (1975, p. 506):

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

Rosemary Dobson, then, celebrates slippage from perfect translation into art. If, in some of the poems already discussed, there is a sense of transparent communication between past and present, and painter and viewer, in the 'darkness' of the Vermeer painting, Dobson is more
interested in exploring inexact transferences. In adopting, for the purposes of her own art, a rendering of Vermeer which relies on his purported use of the \textit{camera obscura} technique (the use of a mirror or perspective box which gives the illusion of naturalism but in fact provides perspectives unavailable to the naked eye), Dobson effects her own \textit{camera obscura}, so that the painter \textit{as} a viewer is also removed from the scene. In turn, the fictionality or mythical elements of the subject matter of both Vermeer's painting and Dobson's poem are subtly highlighted. This sort of subtlety is the fugitive Dobson 'hunts' for.

Dobson's writing of the great Renaissance paintings moves back and forth ('spinning' and 'unravelling') between two fields of view or of action, which might in their turn be roughly equated with the 'one good eye' which effects a present-day, transparent conversation with both her subject matter and her readers, and the 'other' eye with its slide 'into the shadowy sea' of myth, mystery and wonder. It is a tribute to her sense, and her 'edge of wit', that in many of her finest, most complex poems she manages to hold these two views together without ultimately privileging one or the other.

In 'Painter of Antwerp' (1948, p. 21), for instance, written on the subject of Pieter Brueghel's 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', the fantastic and the profane jostle each other as robustly in Dobson's writing as they do in the painting itself. Dobson's Brueghel, newly returned from the 'wonders' of Italy and its painting schools, adopts a prosaic attitude to the sights and sounds of his travel. They give him, she tells us, 'Strangeness enough to empty many tankards'. 'Strangeness'—the shock of the new, the elegant, the different—does not 'fill', it 'empties', it does not colonise, but makes or enables a space.
'Strangeness', in a way, resonates in the empty tankards it enables, bouncing back 'by another way', not to overtake the familiar or the ordinary, but to emphasise it, slantwise. Brueghel's familiar landscape is not effaced by the image of Icarus falling into the sea. Rather, the mythical image of Icarus, pride slipping from his shoulders with his wings, acts something like the camera obscura of Jan Vermeer's paintings, an artistic means by which difference is acknowledged and courted.

Similarly, in 'The Bystander' (1965, p. 5), which also refers to the fall of Icarus, unnoticed by Brueghel's 'plodding' peasants, Dobson allows hers and our own attention to be drawn away from the central figures of history, and away from a sense of art as exact representation. Dobson's bystander—

I am the one who looks the other way,  
In any painting you may see me stand  
Rapt at the sky, a bird, an angel's wing,  
While others kneel, present the myrrh, receive  
The benediction from the radiant hand.

—does not, as Brady argues, only 'take...possession of her/his own space, her/his own perceptions' (1989, p. 109), but points the viewer or reader in the direction of that other upon which the bystander gazes. In her notes to the Collected Poems, Dobson writes that putting the bystander into her painting and poem was 'wilful paradox' on her part, as there 'could not have been a bystander in the Garden of Eden' (1991, p. 216). Eden, of course, as a place of unity and undivided nature (until the Fall), could never have had a 'bystander' to create tension and a different outlook. In the Garden of Eden there could be no imperfection, no inexactness, and thus no circulation or possible
translation. Dobson’s bystanders, and her artists who create the sense of a bystander or a slightly detached observer who modifies the sense of an exact world in paint, are all concerned with imperfection which allows painters and poets to travel, as she says, ‘another way’. The bystander is, in effect, the camera obscura, the mirror which does not exactly reflect the world. ‘Wilful paradox’ is the task of the poet.

It is this very sense of inexactness of translation from painting to poem to painting, the ‘wilfulness’ of the paradox between art and life, which enables a sense of agency on the part of the viewer and of the writer. This subject is not always treated with high-minded seriousness, but even where Dobson’s dry humour tackles the issue of interchange between art and life, she carries through her sense of the necessity of leaving the door ajar for that ‘other way’. In ‘The Midnight Reader’ (1955, p. 30), for example, the speaker feels jostled and shoved by the too-real characters of the books she reads:

I carry such companions with me now,
Move always in a crowd who come and go
Just as I come and go and, witty, sad,
Impatient, tranquil, make my mind their own.
Press on my mind, nudge me and jostle so
I’ve not two thoughts together I can keep.
You, sir, whom Fielding fathered years ago
Stand off a little.

Tom Jones, Pamela, Lovelace, Madame Bovary, Angel Clare—all press upon her, jostling, demanding her attention. She protests, ‘Give me air./ This room, my mind, too cabined is to hold/So large a levee’, but cannot resist their presence:
All of you ask,
Demand, solicit, wring my sympathy,
Beseach advice, then go your ways the same.
Heed not the warning, take the fatal path,
Post the wrong letter, leave the door ajar,
Go several ways to ruin and despair.

The reader may certainly interact with the fictions she reads,
may even embrace them, feel they are herself—they 'come and go'/Just
as I come and go'—but her absolute identification with them is the
fiction. As reader, she cannot in fact alter the fates of the fictional
characters she is so in sympathy with, cannot be an actor on the same
stage and plane with them. Their intertwining with her own identity is
more subtle and problematical than a direct identification. For she, as
reader, holds a certain power over her 'companions'. When tired of
their company, she can dismiss them:

Come then, I'll light my candle to your graves,
Uneasy souls. I'll get your peace and mine,
For when I fall to darkness and to dream,
It is your cockcrow and you'll vanish each
Beneath the headstone on your title-page.

But does she dismiss them entirely? Does she relegate them to a world
entirely closed off from herself, closing them into a static category of
'object' whilst she, the active reader, retains the power of 'subject'?
Certainly, she appears to consign characters to a gravestone which is
intimately bound up with their fictional lives. If you are a fictional
character, she implies, your death sentence has been pronounced from
the first page of the book, 'the title page'. From the moment you
become part of an object, rather than an ongoing process, your death is
foretold. But she does leave a way out of this impasse. The vanishing
or death of her companions is only a partial one, for what she 'falls' to
when she puts them aside is 'darkness and ... dream'. They move, temporarily, into that world of imagination which can bring the 'other', whether it is paintings, fictional characters, or the past, into relation with the present, which reconciles, momentarily, the fields of vision of the two eyes.

In 'Azay-le Rideau' (1955, p. 29), for example, the stitched world of a medieval tapestry comes alive through the imagination of the viewer. And just as the figures in the tapestry dream:

In the stitched meadows of a thousand flowers
Pensive as listeners to a silent music
They dream, enchanted, in the close-leaved shade.

so it is Dobson's own 'dreaming', her own 'enchantment' which allows her to experience simultaneously the stillness and entrapment of the figures she sees:

Prisoned and held upon a web of canvas
Or shut forever in a Book of Hours
Between the enamelled and the gilded page.

and to hear the 'lutes', the 'notes', the 'waterfalls of music', and the 'murmuring laughter' of the scene. What she hears, imagines, or recreates, is in effect the point of transfer between the two paradigms of 'prisoned' stillness and 'dancing' life. It is the 'Voices of summer dying on the wind'. Her relationship with art consists largely in her awareness of the process of erasure, by which the 'voices' die on the wind, and by which she 'falls to darkness and to dream', taking her fictional companions with her into a world of 'vanishing'.
II

That relationship with art is not a one way affair. Dobson's poetic is as much about recovery as it is about vanishing, and more than either it is concerned with the movement back and forth between their comings and goings. Paintings and poetry do not record only a vanishing world, but also a world coming into being, a world which can be called forth through art. This is particularly apparent in her works, both poetic and prosaic, which deal with the world of printing, of transferring from life onto the printed page, or conversely of transferring back from the printed page to a life forgotten and vanished. Dobson's husband, Alec Bolton, spent his working life in the world of publishing and printing. In retirement, he set up the Brindabella Press, a publisher of fine small handpress editions of poetry and prose. Printing itself has been a passion for both Dobson and Bolton throughout their lives, and just as fabrics seems to have moved into the house of Dobson's body, so the printing press has moved into the physical space of her household. In this section, I will discuss the significance of printing and the world of print in a number of Dobson's works, ranging from the early 'Country Press' (1948, p. 26) to her novel for young adults, Summer Press (1987). First, however, I turn to two poems, 'Traveller's Tale' (1948, p. 22), and 'The Cartographer' (1948, p. 11) from the sequence 'The Devil and the Angel' (pp. 3-15), which are concerned with a very specific form of printing, that of the map.

'Traveller's Tale' plunges the reader directly into a curious world of reversal:
It was confusing, sir—
All those damned cherubs hanging in the air
Tangling their wings against the mizzen-mast;

Here, surely, as a traveller recounts his tales over the drinks bought for him as the price of his story telling, is 'Strangeness enough to empty many tankards'. In this telling, old maps, with their filled spaces, their cherubs, mermaids, Indians and the waves 'all fixed and ribbed with light', have become the world of the traveller. In this world, sailing the seas has become a journey fraught with the perils of the printing, with drawings of whales becoming real whales which 'took us twenty days to sail around', and the 'scrolls, sir, mixed up with the clouds' making 'the voyage very troublesome' and 'crowded'. The traveller tosses in proofs of the veracity of this strange world: 'The naked Indians in the foreground here/Are just as I remember'; 'De Bry's the fellow, sir, that done the prints/And got it very accurate', 'very lifelike, too', and

...this here jack-knife proves I've been around—
It's slit near thirty heathen at the throat,
You'll know, to feel the edge, sir.

The 'edge' is the crux of the matter. Teetering precariously on the fragile edge between fiction and fact, the knife's edge is both symbol and artefact. It acts, so the traveller tells, like the maps themselves, in which the symbol becomes the real world, for touching the edge of the blade will enable the listener to enter entirely into the veracity and physicality of the verbalised and printed world. It is worth noting that whilst much of the telling relies on acceptance of the verbal descriptions of this astonishing world, it is the touching of the knife edge with a part of the body which will overcome disbelief and 'doubt'. 
The story, whether fiction or fact, will be felt in a bodily way, and, we might infer, such bodily interaction with the symbolic is incapable of anything other than absolute authenticity. The reader is invited to be a little less credulous than the bar-side listener. We see the possibility of a wonder manufactured ‘to empty many tankards’, and the juxtaposition of the strange with the mundane. The beer, the forgetting of details, and the unadorned travelling directions the tale-teller gives at the end of the poem, keep the reader rooted in a more pragmatic reality:

...Well, thank you, sir.  
Yes, the first turning, thirty paces down,  
That’s the best way. You’ll not mistake it, sir.  
One for the road? Your health, then. Down the hatch.

The reader sees also that the map-maker ‘De Bry’, who ‘got it very accurate’ has not actually witnessed this strange world, but has reconstructed it according to the directions of travellers. The speaker has given details—‘a cherub, Will, to blow the wind’, which the artist has added into the mapped world. It is the traveller himself who has described ‘mermaids’ and how they should be drawn. The fiction of the map has been created from the fictions of the traveller, which continue to teeter on that knife’s edge of symbol and reality, remembrance and contrivance, veracity and the tale well told to earn another tankard. Dobson further blurs the mythical and the fictional in the wry detail of smoke ‘Blot[ting] out a toppling Spaniard but his leg’, recalling Brueghel’s Icarus, visible only as a pair of legs about to enter the sea. This world of making, also, is ‘confusing’.

But if there is ‘confusion’ in the making of a world, there is also exhilaration, and desire and intensity. The traveller describes a world
writ over with paper symbols. In *The Cartographer* (1948, p. 11), it is
the maker of maps himself who is the subject of the poem. The series
from which it comes, ‘The Devil and the Angel’, follows the Devil and
Angel, co-travellers more alike than they are different, as they
adventure together in their appointed task of greeting humans at the
moment of their deaths, and offering them the choice of heaven or
hell. The sequence is full of small courtesies between the two, and a
shared understanding. Indeed, the similarities between the two are
repeatedly underscored. In *An Interlude* (p. 7), for example, both
Devil and Angel come, unknown to each other, to a pool of
contemplation:

Each playing Hamlet to his own reflection.
We read each other’s thoughts with recognition,
And neither of us spoke, but in an instant
Plunged backwards by the ways we both had come.
And yet I think the occasion had much meaning.
A chance we missed—a gesture and some humour.
Forgive my introspection in this matter;
I had a restlessness to tell the story.

In various parts of the sequence, the Devil and Angel ‘both keep
silence’ (p. 8), ‘toss a coin together’ (p. 10) and ‘st[ea]l away’ (albeit in
different directions) from the scarecrow who asks only the simplicities
of his present life (p. 6). They act with a grave courtesy toward each
other, ‘bow[ing] each other entry through the doorway’ (p. 3) and
‘observ[ing] ...small refinements’ (p. 10). Indeed, such is their
camaraderie, that the Angel politely ignores the Devil’s challenges:

‘I’faith!’ quoth he. (Odd phrase for him I thought it,
But let it pass.)

(‘The Cartographer’, p. 11)
To some extent, Brady misses an important point of both the painting poems and ‘The Devil and Angel’ sequence, in which she sees Dobson as ‘refusing battle and retreating to the merely aesthetic’:

If they do not quite surrender their hold on the actualities of bodily experience, these poems nevertheless encode and distance them, disguising the debates of passion, of love before death, of light before darkness, as figures in paintings or, more evasively still, as devil and angel. Convention tends to crowd feeling, irony to prevail over the longing for a new beginning on which it rests.

(1989, pp. 108-9)

Brady’s reading of the Devil and Angel, echoing her readings of other Dobson poems, strongly emphasises binary oppositions within the work. Certainly if the Devil and Angel were clearly differentiated into opposite poles in some sort of ‘battle’ between the sorts of binary tropes which Brady invokes, such as ‘love before death’, and ‘light before darkness’, her argument would bear more weight. As I have shown, however, the Devil and the Angel are portrayed not so much as very different as they are alike. The coin the pair toss might be taken for a figure of their relationship: more telling, however, is that pool of reflection into which they both peer, which is rather like the mirror from which Vermeer paints his still lives. The ‘pool’ of reflection acts in the same way that Dobson’s canvases have acted in her poems on paintings—as the medium of exchange, the place where subject and object may exist in a non-hierarchised space. The ‘pool’ recalls the ‘weir’ of ‘sweet restraint’ from ‘Still Life’, but is figured closer to the mirror in its sense of a meeting place where a number of different things may happen. Transparent understanding is possible here—‘We read each other’s thoughts with recognition’—but this does not
necessarily mean that an absolute communion, a merging of subject and object will occur: 'And neither of us spoke'. Indeed, continuing the mirror metaphor, there is a sense in which the devil and angel might be read as the same person, or same subject approaching a mirror from opposite sides. Their hasty retreat, made 'in an instant', sees them both 'Plung[ing] backwards' in mirror images of each other. It is as if the loss of subjection, of difference, might lead to loss of individual meaning. And yet, Dobson continues, the insistence on separate subjection, and the retreat which means that 'recognition' of thoughts does not lead to spoken communication, also has its losses, the 'chance...missed', the 'humour' foregone. Perhaps what is most important in this poem in terms of Dobson's poetic is the final two lines:

    Forgive my introspection in this matter;
    I had a restlessness to tell the story.

These two terms—'introspection' and 'restlessness'—are crucial ones to an understanding of Dobson's writing. 'Introspection' and 'restlessness', the hallmarks of the 'story teller' and the poet, are also those of the 'Cartographer' (p. 11). 'Introspection' is implicit in the cartographer's physical removal from the world he maps, but is significantly ameliorated by the contact he has with the physical travellers, the 'rough sailors' with 'hairy' hands. As map maker, or story teller, the cartographer acts as a repository for the stories of others, and then as their translator:
“So, this,” they told him,  
“From Hy-Brasil, and this from Martinique.”  
The old man, listening gravely while they spun  
Their tales of strife and wonder, traced there a coastline  
Or else upon his map wrote—“Here are Tygers,  
Having it from a Spaniard, right ear gone  
And wooden leg where one was clawed away.”

There is a great intensity in this transposition from the tales of travellers, and the artefacts they bring to him ‘knotted up in gaudy handkerchiefs’ are imaged as being as much the tools of the cartographer’s trade as are his instruments. He is surrounded by ‘compasses and mariners’ measures, / Sextants, projectors, curious phials of inks’ and by ‘Shells and a shrunken head…’. From the shells emptied of their contents, the dried human head, and the sailor’s tales (translated already from fact) of ‘strife and wonder’, the cartographer maps a whole world. In order to ‘tell’ that story, or to ‘map’ a coastline, the cartographer has to suffer the same restlessness the Angel describes in ‘An interlude’, the same ‘unease’ which the Angel suffers, at the beginning of this poem, at the ‘downward slanting glance’ of the Devil. ‘Restlessness’ and ‘unease’ are essential prerequisites for this creative project of translating from one mode to another, of mapping a world onto paper. And indeed, this ‘restlessness’ manifests itself in the cartographer’s incessant search for ‘Terra Incognita / The Unknown Land’. It is the ‘margins of the world’, and the ‘uncharted, unknown oceans’ which drive him, and the tales of returning travellers which create his necessary unease. For the cartographer, a world in which all the oceans, mountains, valleys and lands are known, is the world of death. In such a world, ‘unease’ or ‘restlessness’ would no longer exist. The cartographer desires to live always on the margins of not knowing, in the land where ‘terra incognita’ hovers on the edge of the page.
Thus, confronted by the Devil and the Angel he chooses both their Terra Incognitas, or, rather, chooses the ontological state of 'incognita', undifferentiated into good or evil, or any of the other binary oppositions of the world:

"Both, both!" he cried, and gathered up his compass. We spread our hands and sighed at one another.

Once again Devil and Angel share their stance, and it is to be supposed that, operating within an oscillation as they are themselves, they well understand, and indeed expect, the cartographer's reaction of wanting to map the unknown territory which hovers between sign and signifier, between the tales of the travellers, and the marks upon the map. The cartographer, however, does not wish merely to disappear into that territory, but takes his 'compass', much as the poet would take her pen or words with her, takes, that is the agency by which the writer, the painter, or the cartographer can establish her position, only to call it immediately into question.

There can be immense satisfactions in the establishment of a position, and often some regret in moving away from it. In Dobson's poetic, the canvas, or the fine paper upon which the map is drawn, is not, or not always, sufficient unto itself. Dobson's fabric is somewhat like Kristeva's semiotic:

what can be hypothetically posited as preceding the imposition of language, in other words, the already given arrangement of the drives in the form of facilitations or pathways, and secondly the return of these facilitations in the form of rhythms, intonations and lexical, syntactic and rhetorical transformations...that which cannot be pinned down as sign, whether signifier or signified.

(1976, p. 68)
or her chora, that pulsional rhythmical space from which identities can be produced and by which they can be subsumed again (Revolution in Poetic Language, 1984 passim). In Dobson’s writing, however, her fabric is a web or matrix rather than a series of ‘pathways’ or ‘facilitations’, and is a complex of rhythms or pressures from which some things may return, changed, and into which others will inevitably be lost. It is a medium which allows a dislocation, an imperfect reflection, a ‘remaking’ of some knowledge which slips always from absolutism into the world of vanishing and recovery. And knowledge itself is sought not as an end in itself, but because it too provides opportunities for those ‘other ways’ which Dobson so often seeks.

In Summer Press (1987), Dobson’s novel for adolescent readers, the central character is engaged in a number of related searches. Angela Read is an Australian teenager transplanted into an English village, who ‘reads’ the history of a similarly aged girl, ‘Sarah Hide of Knight’s Woolton’, who has been dead for hundreds of years. In the course of a summer which seems to promise isolation and loneliness, Angela uses a number of ‘text’ sources to pursue her quest for the identity of the young girl buried in St. Mary’s churchyard in the village of Hadlow. She learns to decipher graveyard stone-masonry, listens to the oral histories of older ‘locals’ and hunts down relevant documents in church vestries and the County Records Office. Along the way, she learns the intricacies of handset printing from her friend Lily Knight, and sets her whole family on a course in which the beauties of text itself become a passion.

‘Print’ is essential to this process of trying to recover a past life. Angela Read follows a trail of ‘alphabets’—both print and stone—to
discover the life of Sarah. She traces Sarah’s history from the stone lettering on gravestones:

It [the ‘S’ in ‘Sarah’] flew out like a length of ribbon blown by wind over the stone. And yet it had the enduring strength of the stone itself.

(1987, p. 26)

and from the history of paper print:

Angela’s vocabulary was extended to take in serifs, ascenders, descenders, hair-lines, black-letter, and other unfamiliar terms.

(p. 42-3)

Angela’s friend Lily Knight, who introduces her to hand printing, nurses a passion for print:

I’d rather have a blow up of some good alphabets to look at than any old painting.

(p. 25)

which is rather like Dobson’s own:

My Twenty-six, my leaden men,
Let morning see your flags unfurled,
And shall we not together then
Set out to conquer all the world?

(The Alphabet’, 1955, p. 23)

Angela’s search for Sarah’s story is made through print, and eventually returned to print when she writes up her findings and deposits them with County and church records offices:
It was, after all, the last thing that she could do for Sarah, to ensure that she would not be forgotten. Time and decay would continue to erase the letters already so faint and blurred on the churchyard stone. A written record of the search for her identity deposited with the County Records Office, and with the church at Hadlow, would preserve her memory. Already, Angela felt, she seemed to have moved away from Sarah; was walking away into the future, yet turning back to say goodbye’. (p. 118)

In a sense, this is the territory ‘Country Press’ (1948, p. 26) maps out. Certainly there is irony and an amused glance cast over the rooms of a country newspaper in which time stands still in an Australian version of the still time in the many European paintings of which Dobson has written. The sense of time not passed, however, is not overtly heroic here. There is an affectionate and amused disdain for a ‘Voice of Progress’ newspaper, for the ‘promising lad’ (‘Joe, near forty-seven’), and for the sense in which the newspaper sees itself as being in command of the whole world around it—‘There’s no one dies/But what we know about it’—whilst also being cut off, in time and space, from a world which has moved on regardless. In this world ‘pouter-bosomed showgirls still display/The charms that dazzled in the nineteen hundreds’, and ‘Williams’ pain-relieving liniment’ and the ‘Baptist Social’ are mixed together higgledy piggledy.

But Dobson does not write a world which is altogether irrelevant, nor is she mostly concerned to put the Western Star into a cupboard for the outmoded. Clearly both the charm and the restriction of the rooms of the Western Star lie in the way in which the writing, the script, the print of the Western Star has moved off the page to make for itself a little world. For the room has taken on the print of the
paper, with both walls and floor completely covered with print. The floor, for instance, has become like meadow:

Under the dusty print of hobnailed boot,  
Strewn on the floor the papers still assert  
In ornamental gothic, swash italics  
And bands of printer's flowers (traditional)  
mixed in a riot of typographic fancy.

The floor of the printing room reads something like a wild garden; instead of the 'riot of colour' often used to describe a garden, the 'hob-nailed' boot of the walker and the worker treads over a 'riot of typographic fancy'. The 'printer's flowers' are like real flowers, the 'ornamental gothic' and 'swash italics' could be ornamental flowers in some superb, over-run cottage garden. Indeed, several lines down, the 'garden' comes into the room in a physical way, with 'ivy tendrils' thrusting themselves through the window slats to add further to this sense of a world within a world. The walls, also, are the paper, papered as they are with 'Page-proofs of double-spread with running headlines'. The 'double-spread' and the 'running headlines' seem to run together, to turn the walls into an endless, organic form, in which 'spread', 'proofs' and 'headlines' 'run' together with life to add to the printer's garden on the floor. And the Western Star runs the gamut from birth to death, and is figured as the nirvana, or afterlife of all earthly doings:

...Births, deaths and marriages,  
Council reports, wool prices, river-heights,  
The itinerant poem and the classified ads—  
They all come homewards to the Western Star.

The Western Star becomes something of a world within a world, the sort of artistic miniature which Dobson so admires in the paintings of
Brueghel. Indeed, Dobson uses a Brueghelian palette as she paints this scene of Australian peasantry, with its dependence on ‘wool prices’ and ‘river-heights’, and its grudging respect for ‘itinerant’ poems and poets. This country peasantry enjoys its ‘dance, the smoke-oh, and the children’s picnic/Down by the river-flats beneath the willows’, and, as Dobson’s ‘plodding peasants’ relished the ‘strangeness enough to empty many tankards’, so Joe ‘sets’ all these mundane, unceasing and earthy activities ‘between the morning and the mid-day schooner.’

The world resonates in empty tankards or schooners, and can be recovered—spoken back into being from within a room constructed from newsprint and memory.

III

In later years, that need to recover, that ‘restlessness to tell the story’, has become a significant force behind Dobson’s writing. Her Untold Lives (1992) ‘tells’ a number of lives which otherwise would fall into obscurity, in the same way that Sarah, the recovered second heroine of Summer Press, would have been lost but for the ‘alphabets’ of stone and print which remain as the traces of her history.

It is worth listening to Dobson herself on the ‘project’ of this collection, and her impetus in creating it:

The poems in this series are each intended to encapsulate a life, or to present a life at one of its dramatic moments. They are “untold” in the sense that they are mostly about unnamed people whom I have known and who are not likely to have been “told” about before...They are also “untold” in the sense that they are without number. The possibilities seem endless.

(1992, ‘Preface’)
This intention, to ‘encapsulate’ a life or to ‘present a life at one of its dramatic moments’, speaks of the tension in Dobson’s poetic. To ‘encapsulate’ a life would be to enclose it, or to make a whole life from one of its components, to make a world from a room full of print. To ‘present a life at one of its dramatic moments’ is to illuminate, or to ‘limn’ in ‘an instant’ some spectacle in a passing parade, before the darkness falls, and the mirror can go no further in reflecting the world to the artist. And the collection displays this tension, with its pull between the knowledge of the ‘one good eye’, and the ‘wonder’ of the opaqued eye. In a way, Dobson’s ‘restlessness’ is to tell the story which lies between these two, the ‘restlessness’ which has been imaged in so many ways, as an ‘empty tankard’, as a ‘mirror’, an ‘ampersand’, as those linens and canvases which both close and open onto the worlds they represent.

In *Untold Lives*, that restlessness is increasingly an ‘unease’ rather than a balance, and the poems have a harder edge, even where memories are the memories of love. Unease erupts into these poems with an unexpected force, but with the same delicacy of touch we have come to expect of Dobson. In the poem ‘Who?’ (p. 17), for example, Dobson’s restlessness is to recall a life which has touched her own in childhood, but which remains tantalisingly out of reach of the sureties of recovery through research. ‘Auntie Molly’ cannot be fixed, or recovered, or brought into remembrance in the ways Dobson has often employed. Neither scholarship, nor a sympathetic silence before an image, nor any kind of alphabet, stone or printed, can restore her to the particulars of a life. Unlike Sarah in *Summer Press*, there are no papers available which might help to ‘read’ her life, and then to retell it. Indeed, Auntie Molly has slipped from such knowledge: ‘No one
now/Can tell me who she was...’. Auntie Molly has no other name or story than the one Dobson can give her through memory. There are particulars:

She and my mother shared a rented house
One summer for a fortnight—we took a train
And from the station trudged a country road.
I know she worked year-long and lived alone
Somewhere with a strange name, like Rooty Hill.

but those particulars slip from a firm knowledge. Which summer? Which country road? Which station? Where was the place with a ‘strange name’ which is only ‘like’ Rooty hill? They are not of the variety of knowledge which can be classified, written or relied upon. There are other memories, bodily ones of ‘cream in a jug’ and ‘ripe passion-fruit’, the ‘scuff[ing]’ of ‘sandalled’ feet on the way home from the country store selling ‘bread and milk’. But still the names are missing—of the place, of the road, of the store, and most of all of ‘Auntie Molly’ herself. Clearly she is not a ‘real’ aunt, but one of that wide band of ‘aunties’ and ‘uncles’ with which many an Australian childhood has been endowed. She has no last name, and Dobson cannot even know what outward relation there was between her mother and this almost lost woman: ‘No one now/Can tell me who she was: or how it was/She and my mother shared a rented house...’ (my italics). What she does remember, however, is a relation she can hardly fathom, whilst feeling the force of its disturbance within her:

Mother and Aunt Molly walked ahead
And suddenly Mother stopped, threw back her head
And laughed and laughed there in the dusty road.
We were amazed to hear our mother laugh.
So, 'Auntie Molly' is the woman 'who made my mother/Laugh joyfully in the middle of the road'. That laughter erupts as a force of enormous strangeness which can resonate for sixty or more years. 'Auntie Molly' and 'Mother' are both clearly women bowed by their cares and by hard work, and the recollections of their 'grave voices' which sound through the night, the wonder of their unexpected laughter, and the 'amazement' at its sound mean that there is at least one who 'remembers' and marks the presence of Aunt Molly. Dobson, like the observer in 'Wonder' (1948, p. 20), bears witness, and the wordlessness of the moment in time ('I, also, wordless was there'), becomes, through words, an affirmation of an existence.

That 'disturbance' or 'amazement' can also be sinister. In the first poem of the volume, 'The Major-General' (p. 9) , disruption is a dark force of threat and violence:

Grounded in Greek he kept the stoic phrase
Ready like a revolver in his drawer,
Ex-army, major-general, could outstare
Weakness, opinion, and, at last, old age.
He beat the mischief from his younger son;
His wife grew tremulous, pity and grief
Aroused her protests, but she did not speak.

Sustained by shoe-trees, trouser-press and cane—
A rough-cut blackthorn with a silver knob—
He kept his bearing, earned a wide respect
And envy for his wife. Each morning strolled
About the well-kept garden, cut two flowers,
One for his tweed lapel, and one for her
Laid on the breakfast-table like a threat.

That violence is figured as concerned with language, signs, and sexuality. Language is a weapon for the Major-General: 'he kept the stoic phrase/Ready like a revolver in his drawer...', and so is the masculine gaze: he 'could outstare/Weakness, opinion, and, at last, old
age’. Despite his wife’s pity and grief over his violence, the force of the Major-General’s language ensures that her ‘aroused protests’ remain silent and unspoken.

His body, also, is used as a weapon, to ‘beat the mischief’ out of his son. Dobson writes the Major-General’s body as overtly phallic. It is upright, rigid, and unyielding. His ‘bearing’ is erect, his phallic rigidity is nurtured, or ‘sustained’ by ‘shoe-trees, trouser-press and cane’. Indeed, that cane itself is a symbol of overt phallic threat: ‘A rough-cut blackthorn with a silver knob’. Dobson, however, does not allow him to become a caricature of the phallic, and indeed the true violence in the poem inheres in the terrible disparity between this ‘bearing’ and his appearance in the garden. If she had given us only the lines ‘Each morning strolled/ About the well-kept garden, cut two flowers,/ One for his tweed lapel, and one for her’, we would perhaps have read them as tender, and the act of bringing in flowers as an act of love. As it is, the ‘well-kept garden’ reminds us of the violence of ‘shoe-trees’, ‘trouser-press and cane’ which sustain the Major-General, and the ‘cut[ting]’ of the flowers evokes the viciousness of the ‘rough-cut blackthorn’.

The final line reinforces the unease with which we read his garden strolls. If we read ‘flowers’ as the place of the feminine, or of female sexuality, in a possible opposition to the Major-General’s ‘stoic’ phrases, his stares, and his cane, then it is possible to read those two cut flowers as an appropriation of female sexuality. The one on his lapel suffices as an emblem of his ownership of female sexuality, while the one laid on the domestic ‘breakfast-table’ is indeed ‘like a threat’. In the public sphere, the rigid stance and ‘bearing’ of the Major-General is valorised and admired, earning not only a ‘wide respect’ for himself
but, ironically, ‘envy’ for the wife who is just as likely to be ‘cut’ and ‘crushed’ as are the flowers.

This theme of a specifically masculine violence is repeated several times in Untold Lives. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that some of these poems are an expiation for the youthful Rosemary Dobson who never considered that ‘one’s ambitions should be curtailed simply because of one’s sex’ (1989, p. 32), and who has realised in later life that ‘If I had been more socially aware then perhaps I would have realised how fortunate I was’ (p. 32). For these tales of a concealed masculine violence are ones which require a certain type of awareness. The suppression is not overt, and, we might suppose, has been divined through the slight distortion of the mirror of time, the ‘pool’ of ‘introspection’ and ‘restlessness’. In ‘The Daughters of the Historian’ (p. 10), for example, perhaps a younger Dobson would have perceived a household of five daughters privileged to receive a good education in times when such an education was a luxury for women, a household of scintillating conversation, a household which allowed three of its daughters to go out ‘into the world’, complete with governess schooling, and ‘a brilliant mind’. A further ‘reading’ of this ‘history’ however, reveals the ‘threat’ of the cut flower implicit in the lives of these five daughters. First, ‘The five were decorous’, governed by strict codes which set out what a woman could and could not indulge in. And then, immediately following this strange first short sentence of the poem, we find that it is not only behaviour which is governed by codes:

The five were decorous. Papa enjoined
That each should offer an original phrase
At dinner-table converse every night.
Papa's 'enjoining', with its legalistic overtones and its veiled threat, as sure as the threat of the Major's second 'cut' flower, forces the 'original' phrases from 'brilliant' minds which will be perpetually bound and restricted by the force of the law of the father. Their conversation must meet his standards, and, of all things, it must be 'original', must match the masculine ideal of unrelated egos, rather than the female pattern of interconnectedness. One hears a hint, here, of Dobson's continuing wound over A.D. Hope's initial condemnation of her 'painting' poems as 'unoriginal', secondary, or derivative ('she makes her poetry so much from the material of other works of art', 1955, p. 574).

The cruellest irony for these five daughters is that their entry into the law of the father is limited and controlled by their father, as is their speech. Each may indeed have 'showed a brilliant mind', but the death of one sister is merely a more palpable signal of the metaphorical deaths of the others. Certainly three went out into the world, but not, we can be sure, as 'historians', or as politicians, or as lawyers, or as brilliant thinkers, but as 'teacher, missionary, and almoner'—in short, as metaphorical nuns confined to a world of prescribed feminine occupations but denied, through their 'brilliant minds' and 'original' phrases, the comforts of marriage. All of them, surely, 'understood' their confinement as clearly as did 'the youngest', who 'understood/That she should care for frail Mama at home.' Even those who 'went out into the world' understood that they had been caught in the web their father set for them, too well educated to be 'frail' and unoriginal enough for marriage, yet prevented by their sex, and by their father's 'enjoining', from entering fully the public world. And what is left for a houseful of spinster sisters after a lifetime in this world between worlds:
None married. Years ahead the three returned
To school-room conversation, and the nights
Around the dinner-table, cleared and lit,
Sewing small objects for the church bazaar.

The return to the dinner-table, reminiscent of that domestic ‘breakfast-
table’ of ‘The Major-General’, completes the circle between masculine
prescribed speech and ‘originality’, and the prescriptions that elderly
spinsters must return home and content themselves, not with their
brilliant minds, but with the meaningless domesticity of ‘Sewing small
objects for the church bazaar’. The institutions of the public world, also,
have closed the circle. The ‘teacher’ will have taught within a system
which allows for the continuing education of boys, whilst brilliant girls
must return to the home and their governesses; the ‘almoner’ will
have nursed in a system which still requires that daughters should
‘understand’ their duty to nurse their mothers; and the missionary will
have had her labour and her ‘brilliant’ mind expended in the works of
the church, as surely as she now employs her domestic needle to
uphold it.

There are more specific oppressions, such as the case of ‘He, the
great novelist of the decade’, shoring up his power over the word, and
his position in the world, through the adoration of a young woman
‘Submissive to his fame, and half his age’ (‘The Young Companion’,
p. 26), ‘Chekhov’s Sister’, reading her brother’s silent disapproval, and
giving up her lover (p. 12), and the ‘Sometime Academic’ (p. 11),
whose students, victims of his ego, and perhaps of his sexual
voraciousness, are ‘drown[ed]’ as surely as ‘kittens in a pail’. All share
the sense of Dobson ‘reading’ these histories against the grain, of
coming to conclusions ‘by another way’. In ‘The Major-General’,
Dobson’s observations of sexual violence fly in the face of the ‘respect’ and ‘envy’ her subject is accorded in the public world. In ‘The Young Companion’, in which Dobson laments the imbalance of power in the relationship between an older, famous male writer, and a younger woman, it is only the poet who ‘thought to ask: “What will become of her?”’, while the ‘clerk’, or the rest of the world ‘looked strangely at me and I sighed.’ This sense of a different vision is strongest in ‘Sometime Academic’:

The gown became him and the mortar-board  
Battling the wind between the lecture-halls,  
But these were laid aside when at his desk  
He questioned the year’s intake on their aims,  
Speaking to each as though their fresh concerns  
Were dearer to him than—sometimes a sigh  
Broke through to hint at troubles of his own.

At graduations eminent and grave  
He stood while graduands filed past and bowed.  
When he pronounced the individual names  
It seemed to some he murmured, “my dear child”  
And pressed his palm upon a shining head.  
In all that company nobody divined  
That he was drowning kittens in a pail.

We should read ‘nobody but I’ for ‘nobody’ in this poem, and see that Dobson is writing of ‘divination’, a sort of second sight, or different awareness which the poet possesses, and must endeavour to express in words. That awareness, she implies, can be debased, so that an eminent academic can ‘speak’ to young students in such a way that they will be seduced by his interest and by the sighs and silences which ‘hint at troubles of his own’, and ‘the great novelist of the decade’ can use language for similar purposes:

“How we shall love,” he said, “at the hotel.  
But first a meal. My sweetest heart...” et cetera.
That 'et cetera' betrays Dobson's contempt for the Major-Generals, the historians, the great novelists and the eminent academics of the masculine world who bend language for a purpose—that of the subjugation and the oppression of women. Dobson is not, however, a one-sided propagandist, re-reading history in a simple 'masculine oppression of women' mode. Some of Dobson's 'telling' in this set of poems rests on the sense of women's acquiescence in this process. The Major-General's wife does not risk her voice even to save her son. Chekhov's sister supposedly 'understood' the meaning of her brother's silence over her marriage, but Dobson qualifies this understanding by the phrase 'so she said', and further ironises this understanding by making Chekhov's sister self-indulgently melodramatic in her "desperately unhappy" state. In 'The Daughters of the Historian', we must ask ourselves about the abrogation of strength and will in 'frail Mama'. And, most telling, 'The Young Companion' is not entirely innocent of using her older lover for her own advancement:

But "Hurry, hurry," spoke her whirling mind,
"Learn from experience, and learn from him."

This sense of women's complicity in their subjugation is a subtle and continuing one, but is couched in such terms that the complicity remains as a puzzle, with 'divination' only a partial process. 'Divination' does not lead to answers, only to the awareness that there are more questions to be asked, more lives to be 'told'. And indeed, in the most memorable of these poems, uncertain divination, and the mysterious nature of womanhood, are linked and 'read' together.

In 'The "Aunts"' (p. 23), contradiction and unease permeate the poem, and as in 'Who?', Dobson's 'restlessness to tell the story'
produces a fine poem with a subtle but powerful unbalancing effect. Again, these aunts are ‘friends of the family’, connected not by blood—but by affection—and the ties of pseudo family so necessary in a country of dislocation and distance. And with their plain, unassuming names, ‘Nell’ and ‘Bess’, they are ‘Legendary’, the stuff of which Australian myths are made. But even in the first stanza, where Dobson retells their ‘Legendary’ lives, the nature of their legend is multiplied:

“Aunts” Nell and Bess, friends of the family,  
Legendary peepers of the north-west plains,  
Kept the vast holding that came down to them  
With four wild station-hands to fence and shear  
And drench and round up, and truck into town.  
A timber homestead by a spreading lake  
With water-birds and willows, and two large  
And laden orange-trees. Such oranges!  
My cousin and I went there to stay—but when?

In ‘Who’, Aunt Molly’s identity and the recognisable but unparticularised place are shadowy and not readily definable. And in ‘The “Aunts”’, the mythic nature of their story is embellished and deepened by seeming to exist outside locatable time—‘but when?’.

Indeed, in this poem, two kinds of time, two kinds of tale, two kinds of myth are entwined and produce the ‘unease’ Dobson seeks.

One is the legend or myth of powerful outback women, doing ‘a man’s job’ with authority and decision. These are the women who keep ‘the vast holding’, who manage their ‘four wild station-hands’, who shoot feral pigs dead with a single shot from the back of a truck.

But Nell and Bess are not women who have turned into men. Bess retains an uncomplicated sort of feminine role:

Bess cooked and cleaned and separated milk,  
Minded the animals and garden-plots.
while Nell, on whom the disjunctions of the poem rest, is far more problematical. Nell’s identity as a woman is written as a site of contestation between very powerful drives:

And Nell—she drove the hands; and drove the trucks
And drove the Land-Rover, and soldered parts
And scrubbed the weather-board veranda floors.

Dobson slips the incongruous ‘And scrubbed the weather-board veranda floors’ almost unobtrusively into the litany of drivings and the hunting of wild pig, and indeed the forceful ‘scrubbed’, which seems to echo the ‘drove’ and ‘soldered’, masks to some extent the domesticity of this task, so at odds with the masculine truck driving and mechanical necessities of her other occupations. But the scrubbing of the veranda returns as the most forceful of disquieting images. For when Nell returns from her pig-shooting, archetype of the bush man/woman, in whom sexual identity boundaries are blurred, a curious and unnerving reversal takes place:

“Nell, here’s your tea.” Her sister shook her head
And knelt to scrub those front veranda boards.
We watched her wring her cloth. And painfully
With roughened hands and brush she scrubbed and scrubbed
Again the well-scoured boards of yesterday.

This is a different kind of legend. With her unending task of scrubbing veranda boards, which, like Dobson’s question ‘But when?’, seems to hang outside time, Nell is removed from the world of action, and becomes the focal point of Dobson’s efforts to remember and to recover.

This continuing, timeless moment, hanging as it does among the bustle and drive of the outside life of the station, is reinforced, but
at the same time problematised by another stillness within the memories and within the poem. This visual stillness, which acts as an alternative locus of meaning within the poem, is that of the physical homestead:

A timber homestead by a spreading lake
With water-birds and willows, and two large
And laden orange-trees. Such oranges!

There is an oriental feel to this visual sketch, in its simplicity and its balance. The ‘spreading lake’ recalls the ‘spreading pools’ of water or paint from previous poems, together with the pool of reflection in ‘The Devil and the Angel’. The willows and two orange trees combine with the water to make an impression of stillness, of balance, of those moments of perfect harmony between image and life which Dobson has so often sought in her painting poems. This image is intense and all-absorbing, with the colour and presence of the oranges becoming almost mesmerising, a mantra upon which memory can meditate: ‘The oranges/Hung in the sky.’

The balance of those sun-like oranges, in all the seductiveness of their singleness of image and their promise of a perfect memory, is something like the timelessness with which Nell’s unending scrubbing is invested, and yet it is the juxtaposition of those two very visual images upon which the poem rests. For no sooner does Dobson hang her oranges, like Gods, in the sky, than the image is disturbed:

...The oranges
Hung in the sky. And Nell appeared
Along the front veranda, pail in hand.
Nell is like an apparition disturbing balance and surety of image. For Nell, water is not the ‘spreading lake’, the pool of reflection, the calm mirrored surface in which her image will become a perfected one, the image of an angel. Her ‘pool’ is a smaller, more personal one, which she will dip into and stir, agitate over and over, until its surface cannot reflect anything but the anguish of her scrubbing:

We watched her wring her cloth. And painfully
With roughened hands and brush she scrubbed and scrubbed
Again the well-scoured boards of yesterday.
What was this painful expiation for?
This wilful self-subduing on her knees?

Dobson’s ‘divination’ here is not to answer such questions, but to remember that the questions remain. Of course, the reader can speculate, and Dobson does speculate in a subtle way, by association and by inference rather than directly. Nell’s ‘self-subduing’ is a domestic one—possibly an atonement for transgressing sexual boundaries in her running of the station, or an attempt to retain her identity as woman while doing a ‘man’s job’? But her posture ‘on her knees’ also recalls prayer, and the kind of thin, self-subduing before God which might be an expiation for all the ‘drives’ in her life, to conquer and to maintain control. Then again, her scrubbing comes directly after the killing of a feral pig, and getting her hands dirty with blood, which suggests a kind of scriptural uncleanness. Her scrubbing might be read as a scrubbing out of some sin, and certainly we might suppose that Nell is scrubbing out the original sin of her womanhood, acknowledging, in a silent, painful, but knowing way, the culpability of her sex.
Dobson, in any case, is less concerned to ‘tell’ the story of Nell’s pain in all its details than to recreate the sense of ‘unease’, of ‘restlessness’ which Nell engenders:

The image still disturbs my memory
Of lake and water-birds and orange-trees.

Two images—one of balance, tranquillity, and a unity of being held in the oranges hanging in the sky, the other of pain, and roughness and a self-inflicted violence of the body and the spirit—juxtapose themselves in Dobson’s memory, and jostle each other, shaking and pushing and creating a troubled space in which she continues to try to ‘divine’ through writing. And almost unnoticeable in this poem, certainly not a major locus, but a point at which I can return to the consideration of images of fabric in Dobson’s work, is the scrubbing cloth, which might be seen as the medium of exchange between the stillness of water and the ruggedness of weatherboard:

We watched her wring her cloth.

The subdued violence in the wringing of the scrubbing cloth echoes many other disturbances in this volume, frequently, but not always, arriving with delicately timed shock in the final lines of the poem. There is the cut flower, laid like a threat on a breakfast table. There are small bazaar items, epitomising the violence done to the unmarried woman. There is a friend, Elena, ‘Disdaining life with delicate raised eyebrows’ (‘Elena’, p. 25). There is her mother, ‘The Widow’ (p. 15), struggling with poverty in the wake of her husband’s death, and whose husband’s family, in lieu of more practical assistance,
Wrote with affectionate concern, and sent
Books “for the nursery”. She must have smiled.

That imagined ironic smile, like her mother’s astonishing laugh, the
cut flower and the wrung cloth, encapsulates the ‘wit’, the ‘one weapon
for my fending’ which Dobson has struggled for. Each time, the
moment of eruption is between two images, between the visions of the
two eyes, that of the particular and that of the shadowy world of a
visionary eye. And each time Dobson pursues not only that force of
eruption, but the discursive space in which it can occur. And if we can
see that in many of these poems, that space is figured as the disjunctive
space between the masculine and the feminine, then it is the body, site
of these conflicting identities and beings, that is a clear and logical
choice of place for siting Dobson’s explorations of the philosophical
‘ampersand’.

I return thus to ‘The Apparition’ (p. 22), placed in the center of
the book, and read it as a fulcrum around which the other poems
wheel and float. If “Aunt” Nell ‘appears’ to displace the translucent
image of oranges hanging in a sky, as an apparition which disturbs
perfectly reflected memories, then this ‘Apparition’ is even more
disturbing, displacing the certainties of identities and meanings.
Apparitions necessarily inhabit a world between inner and outer,
between perception of an object separate from the self and projection of
something from within the self. Dobson highlights in her poem the
problematical nature of the apparent figure by returning to words such
as ‘shift’ and ‘shadow’ which permeate ‘The Eye’ and ‘The Eye (ii)’, 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 an unknown woman, existing both in the solid world, like the wooden chest, and in the internal world of the shadowy, visionary eye. The shadowy woman deals with the wooden chest in a very solid, 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 italics), and the image is modulated into one of ‘shadowy sea’. In ‘The “Aunts”’ Nell uses a scrubbing cloth to disturb the water in her pail, and to disturb the balanced image of still water, willow and fruit trees.
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, domestic images lifted out of the everyday world and given power and depth. Dobson’s ghostly figure herself is similarly given depth and a certain solidity. She is, and is not, an archetypal figure. Firstly, she is 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 also, surely, a recognition of the self in this ‘long line backwards’, with Dobson’s hair, as it is, 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 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.

—is a desperation born in the knowledge of certain failure. '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 follow into its
floating shadow. And yet Dobson longs for those words which might
retrieve the past or her own self from beneath the pool of water, or
from beyond the fabric of linens. Longing for 'absolution', she lives in a
state of guilt, but for what the poem does not tell. Is it the guilt of the
living over the dead? Or some cruelty, some subtle rejection of the
mother years earlier, of all the mothers, aunts and grandmothers to
whom Dobson now attributes her great love of reading and of poetry?
She describes her mother as 'a hungry reader', and notes the
importance of women's oral history, of the gossip which becomes like
stories, and tells whole lives ('Women and Reading Seminar',
19/9/92). Is her guilt for her lack of recognition for this women's
language, for her turning, without 'awareness', away from that
tradition? Or is it, more deeply, a grief for that moment of turning
away from the mother and the daughter she writes of in 'Cock Crow',
where she seeks, for a time, to disconnect herself from the 'long line' of
her kindred women?
Whatever the rupture, the disjunction between mother and daughter, between Dobson and that ‘long line backwards of women’, it remains unspoken and private, the asking of an unanswerable question of a vision without words existing in the nebulous region between subject and object, between the world behind Dobson’s linen covered eye, and the world outside, which she still discerns with particularity. But if the woman of the apparition cannot speak, there is the faint possibility that she may hear. Perhaps it is coincidental that the figure ‘leaves the linen, shuts down the lid and is gone’ when the speaker is asking her desperate questions, ‘Can you forgive me’; ‘What should I have done?’. But perhaps the answers lie within the linen, in that space between positions. The linen is woven from the thread spun from the ‘distaff side’. It is used to wrap the newborn, or to wrap the dead. In Dobson’s case, the linen might have been used for both at the same time, to wrap the body of her stillborn first child, who passed directly from the world of dream, to the world of dream, without ever passing through the realm of words.

Discussing new movements in sculpture and painting in the 1970’s, Dobson quotes Harold Rosenberg:

> the canvas began to appear...as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyse or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. (1977, p. 71)

For Dobson, the ‘canvas’, or the linen, or the calico, or the holland blind, is indeed ‘an arena’, but it is not one which can necessarily be seen as a place of action. Rather, it is a place in which exchanges and communications can succeed or fail. Frequently, what might be seen as a failure is merely ‘another way’, so that the lack of concrete, verbal
'answers' to Dobson's questions—about Nell's 'wilful self-subduing', about forgiveness, about the past—provides for different ways of communicating and understanding. In 1962, Dobson wrote commentaries on a series of Australian paintings, and noted, regarding paintings of gum trees, that these trees defied European ideals of what large shade trees should do. She asserts that:

the great charm of the gum tree lies in its airy
displacement of leaves, in its continual shifts of light
and shadow.

(p. 7)

In 'The Apparition', 'The Eye' and 'The Other Eye', the linens (as, in many other poems, the canvases) might be seen as sites of displacement, of continual 'shifts' into different levels of communication and understanding. Like the gum tree which:

testifies to the fact that this secretive landscape which hides its springs and waterholes can nourish giants, and ...provides sustenance for those who, through centuries of nomadic life, have learnt the ways in which it gives and withholds.

(p. 5)

linens, canvases, sheets—fabrics—are also 'secretive', with hidden artesian depths, and can 'give' or 'withhold' answers to the questions of the relation between life and death, of how it is that we live within time, or of how it is that time can somehow be stopped for a moment through the imperfect reflections of art and of memory.

And those fabrics, like water, can be windows between worlds, existing on the very edge of the difference between inner and outer. Dobson aims to place her poems in that nebulous area also, and many of her poems are letters between worlds, wonderful exchanges between
herself and others. Dobson’s series ‘The Continuance of Poetry: Twelve Poems for David Campbell’ (1984, pp. 35-46) is certainly about ‘continuance’, the passing on of the poetic communication; but her ‘continuance’ is not a patriarchal handing down from father to son (remember, her ‘distaff side’ is the long line ‘backwards’) but an ebb and flow between friends, between poets. Indeed, her ‘A Good-bye’ (p. 35), the first of the twelve poems, situates itself in that fluid moment:

There will be time enough and time enough later
For crossing the threshold to lamplight and conversation.

Her sitting place, the place of ‘reflecting’, is one of silence and of shadow, perched on the edge of the greeting and the farewell, and in these elegies for a dearly loved friend, on the edge of the final good-bye. Time and again in these poems Dobson’s images hover on that threshold between dark and light. Poems become displaced into other images:

Here are poems: stones, shells, water.
This one weighs in the hand. This one is shining.

This one is yellow. And this smooth to the fingers.
Ching chink says this one clear as a wind-bell.
(The Messages’, p. 36)

acquiring colour, voice, texture and luminosity, crossing over the threshold of language into the realm of the body and physical apprehension. Or, poems can become images themselves, which displace bodily, concrete perception. In ‘At the Coast’ (p. 42), the ‘smooth-limbed saplings’ of gum trees, and the ‘smooth-limbed’ ‘daughters of professors’ become virtually indistinguishable, but more than this:
They glow and flicker in and out of shadow
Like poetry behind the print on pages.

Here, the poems are not displaced into being something else—yellow, stones, wind-bells. Rather, the external ‘realities’ of girls and saplings are displaced onto the subjective of poetry, not the bodily presence of poetry printed on paper, but the ‘poetry behind the print on pages’, the poetry on the other side of the fabric. That place of exchange or displacement is celebrated in these letters of friendship and love. Indeed, one of the poems, called ‘Exchanges’ (p. 38) celebrates the lending of books—

You lent me Rothko, I lent you Morandi,
We exchanged whole art galleries,
Museums, sculpture, encyclopedias.

—while another (‘Poems of the River Wang’, p. 43) smiles at the special exchange, between poets, of images and potential poems:

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

The poem, a ‘sudden’ eruption into the smooth flow of contemplative walking, will belong to both of them, flickering between them, belonging to both ‘behind the print’, regardless of who it is who finally commits it to paper.

Fabrics, also, can be like this. In ‘Folding the Sheets’ (1984, p. 23) from the ‘Daily Living’ sequence (1984, pp. 17-26), the linens of sheets join women from around the world in a precise and rhythmic pattern which is only momentarily disturbed by restlessness. Indeed, the fabric
in this poem reads like a mirror, not of disturbing images, but of harmonious reflections:

You and I will fold the sheets
Advancing towards each other...

The fabric, and the space between the sheet folders seems to allow a perfect communication, regardless of cultural differences, regardless of whether the participants in the dance are ‘From Burma, from Lapland,’/‘From India’, or ‘From China’. Their countries are where they are ‘from’, and those cultures are important in their particularities:

From India where the sheets have been washed in the river
And pounded upon stones...

and

From China where women on either side of the river
Have washed their pale cloth in the White Stone Shallows
“Under the shining moon”.

But there is another country for women, where these disparate peoples become ‘we’. That ‘country’, or meeting place is both within the fabric, and in water. But unlike ‘The “Aunts”’, here linen and water are harmonious, not disturbing, and the scrubbing cloth does not ruffle the surfaces of rivers. In China, women are ‘on either side of the river’ as they wash their ‘pale cloth’. Both water and linen lie between them, and both seem to reflect, or to incorporate the perfect image of ‘the shining moon’, with its links both to the tides of sea-water and the tides of the menstrual cycle. The water and linen are lyrical and rhythmic, as is the folding of sheets, and the movements of the folders
are like those of the ebb and flow of the sea, or the lapping of river water on banks:

We meet as though in the formal steps of a dance
To fold the sheets together, put them to air
In wind, in sun over bushes, or by the fire.

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.

There is, in this qualification of ‘until they are needed’, something of the sense of a landscape which hides its power, and allows giant eucalypts to grow from hidden artesian water basins.

There is, moreover, a muted power evident in these rhythms, and in the subtleties of the linkages between linen, river-water, the sea, the moon, and the rhythm of ebb and flow in women’s bodily experience. In only one word does that power become manifest in this poem—in ‘pounded’, whereby Indian women do not passively drift their sheets in river water, but pummel and beat them into cleanliness. Elizabeth Lawson has criticised this poem for its failure to address the harsh realities of the lives of those Chinese, Indian, Burmese and Lapland women, or indeed the realities of the lives of men, women and children in such developing countries. She regards the final stanza:

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

as naive at best, and insensitive at worst—‘why do I remember that most people on our earth wish for a bed before sheets, a bed and food’ (1987, p. 121). Such criticism must be taken on board. There are indeed
many in the world without beds, let alone linen sheets, without adequate food, let alone ‘herbs’, and without safe drinking water, let alone sweetly reflecting pools for dabbling poetic sheets into. And yet, it can also be argued that this meeting of disparate women, and the wish that all people might know the meeting places of water and fabric, implies a Keatsian ‘negative capability’, and that Dobson sees herself slipping under the water, or behind or into the fabric, in order to see the land on the other side of the glass.

Certainly, her vision is an affirming, compassionate one, in which possibilities extend. Judith Wright’s poem ‘Smalltown Dance’ (1990, p. 219-220), written also on the feminine occupation of folding the sheets, demonstrates a very different vision. In both poems the sheet-folding is written as an elaborate dance between women, but where Dobson’s is a poem of possible freedoms and conversations, Wright figures this dance as exemplifying inescapable restrictions on women’s lives. Where Dobson allies her images of sheets with images of water, and evokes a mood of ebb and flow, Wright uses precise mathematical images:

Two women find the square-root of a sheet.
That is an ancient dance;
arms wide; together; again; two forward steps; hands meet
your partner’s once and twice.
That white expanse
reduces to a neat
compression fitting in the smallest space
a sheet can pack in on a cupboard shelf.

Those images—‘square-root’, ‘once and twice’, ‘reduces’, ‘compression’, ‘smallest space’—are echoed in the stiltedness of this dance. The steps are ‘stopped’ repeatedly by semi-colons, in contrast to Dobson’s sparing use of punctuation in ‘Folding the sheets’. And where Dobson strives
for and achieves a sense of these women from disparate lands flowing into and away from each other, Wright’s women seem separated from each other, and also ‘reduce[d]’ into neat compressions. For Dobson, sheets packed into a cupboard, or indeed other linens stored in wooden boxes, are fluid and full of a power which only chooses, for a time, to be secretive and unobtrusive. For Wright, the compression of sheets into cupboards spells a very final putting away of possibilities, suggesting women’s lives similarly cramped into small, domestic spaces, but without the sense of artesian power:

But women know the scale of possibility,
the limit of opportunity,
the fence,
how little chance
there is of getting out. The sheets that tug
sometimes struggle from the peg,
don’t travel far. Might symbolize
something. Knowing where danger lies
you have to keep things orderly.
The household budget will not stretch to more.

And they can demonstrate it in a dance.
First pull those wallowing white dreamers down,
spread arms, then close them. Fold
those beckoning roads to some impossible world,
put them away and close the cupboard door.

Again, ‘scale’ and ‘limit’, ‘orderly’ and ‘demonstrate’ emphasise the sense of finite borders within the poem, of a dour and bitter putting away of ‘wallowing’ and ‘beckoning’ into an ‘impossible’ world. Women ‘know’ these borders and fences partly through their experience of possible infinities before they change from girls to women:
High scented walls there were of flapping white
when I was small, myself.
I walked between them, playing Out of Sight.
Simpler than arms, they wrapped and comforted—
clean corridors of hiding, rooted with blue—
saying, Your sins too are made Monday-new;
and see, ahead,
that glimpse of unobstructed waiting green.
Run, run before you’re seen.

This is the woman when she is still ‘myself’, and that sense of the self is intimately bound up with vanishing games, of being a self powerful if hidden. Here, ‘corridors’ and ‘walls’ are used by the self in the games of hiding—they are not restrictions, but possibilities leading to the further possibility of ‘unobstructed waiting green’. These linens are the places where many selves seem possible, and are figured as feminine, maternal: ‘they wrapped and comforted’.

But these childhood possibilities are in danger from the start. The element of ‘sin’, and that of an external, threatening viewer—‘Run, run before you’re seen’—already invade this paradise of possible infinities. The ‘scale’, ‘limit’ and ‘fence’ wait to pounce when womanhood is attained. And indeed, that scale is a particularly domestic one, in which ‘The household budget will not stretch to more’. For Wright, in this poem at least, the ‘economy’ available to women is a finite one in which restrictions, stiltedness, and the compressing of the self into the smallest possible space, are the realities of a woman’s existence. A child might slip into other worlds through the mirror of linen, but a woman will herself be folded into mathematical certainties, not even possessing the ability to entwine with her fellow women. For Wright, women’s dreams are put away for ever; for Dobson, they can be put away ‘until they are needed’.
Of course, this is not to suggest that Wright sees women's lives always in this way, or to negate, on the other hand, the sense of restrictions in some women's lives which Dobson sees in poems such as 'The Major-General' or 'The Daughters of the Historian'. Both poets explore more complex visions, and indeed, as I have argued in my readings of both 'The “Aunts”' and 'The Apparition', Dobson's strength lies in giving depth to both possibility and restriction—in exploring, for her own territory, the peculiar space which lies between 'the eye' and 'the other eye', and in seeking out the patterns traced within it. Rosemary Dobson's economy is not the 'household budget' with its finite restrictions and its limited stretch, but a pattern of exchange. And this exchange is itself the basis of love, whether that love is erotic, maternal, or that felt for family and friends.

Many of Dobson's poems read as love letters. And nowhere is this letter-like quality, with its underlying theme of exchange and 'negative capability' more apparent than in 'The Anthropologist', written to Dobson's daughter (1992, p. 34):
Her post-box is an outrigger canoe
Her house a long-legged frailty over water
She writes her letters sitting on the floor.

"I wash in moonlight at the river's mouth
Where only the women bathe, sleep on the slats,
Eat rice and fish, a handful of green beans.

"We talk in pidgin all day on the sand
And trace this watery world's geography
Learning the patterns of the coastal trade."

She writes of gifts and courtesies returned
Rituals, feasts, the functions of exchange,
How what is offered is a gift of self—

The singing of an irreplaceable song.
Invested with the richness of her living
Her letters give a newer stretch to thought.

What can I send that's equal in return?
These words (this gift, this poem) go to my daughter
In Murik village by the Lower Sepik.

This 'letter' from mother to daughter is, in itself, only one side of an exchange between the two, but paints a whole world of exchange, of gift and return. This 'anthropologist' does not examine her chosen subject at a distance, or with the eye of the 'gaze', but both envisions and retells it with a communal eye, and a relation between herself and the world around her. Her life is as simple as those around her, sleeping on the same 'slats', eating the same simple diet of 'rice', 'fish' and 'green beans', respecting the local custom by bathing 'in moonlight at the river's mouth/Where only the women bathe'. She seems to sit as lightly on her study as do those people in their own environment. Indeed, she seems to hover over their water with her 'outrigger canoe' postbox, and her home, the 'long-legged frailty over water'.

Given Dobson's writing of water, like fabrics, as a possible site of exchange, where all and nothing exists, she writes her daughter as living in a region of water, not of the solidities of land. Indeed, the
anthropologist does her learning ‘on the sand’, between sea and land, at that point of crossover between worlds. Her whole concern is with listening, with ‘learning’ from the indigenous peoples of the area, as they ‘trace [for her] this watery world’s geography’ and ‘the patterns of the coastal trade’. The ‘coastal trade’, like the sea itself, has ‘patterns’—tides, transports, places where a frail ‘outrigger canoe’ might set down lightly at some sandy meeting place, trade, and then return home. The ‘patterns’, like the ‘pidgin’ in which they speak, are ‘between’—existing in the watery world between villages, or between languages. This is a society which might at least hypothetically be based on such ‘betweenness’, grounded on the patterns of ‘rituals’, ‘feasts’, ‘gifts’ and ‘courtesies returned’, where the ‘functions of exchange’ serve to make a space between peoples, between land and people, and between sea and land, in which such patterning can weave the threads of the distaff into a fabric which, like water, can bring identity positions together for a time. Indeed, identity is an integral part of Dobson’s retelling of her daughter’s retelling of the lives of far-off people:

How what is offered is a gift of self—
The singing of an irreplaceable song.

The self is not to be husbanded, or folded away in a cupboard, or to stand alone in a language of isolation, but is to be ‘offered’, to be ‘given’, even when the ‘gift’, the ‘song’ between peoples, may be ‘irreplaceable’ and precious. Of course, one must be aware of the dangers of idealisation: anthropologists projecting their own desire for harmony onto the peoples they study; poets projecting their own desire for a space in which all is possible, onto the work of their daughters.
Nevertheless, Dobson certainly sees the preciousness of her daughter’s gift in these letters, written ‘sitting on the floor’, and in this poem, aims to ‘return’ the gift, to participate in the ‘exchange’ of ritual and feast.

The exchange between mother and daughter reflects the feminine cast of the whole poem. This world, of water, of ‘moonlight’, of tides, of a special place for women where the river and the sea meet, of a society in which individual ego boundaries are subsumed into the communication of exchange and the patterns of gift and return, is an ideal world in which to write of the exchange of love between mother and daughter. In the line, ‘Her letters give a newer stretch to thought’, there is even an echo of the daughter of long ago who must have given a newer stretch to the womb, to the body, enabling the rich exchange of the symbiotic relationship between the maternal and the child body. These letters, both from daughter to mother, and from mother to daughter, are like the umbilicus which links two subjects in the privileged space of the womb, also a ‘watery world’.

IV

That umbilicus of love and letters is not a guaranteed link, and within that realm of exchange between self and other is a landscape which can be dangerous, treacherous with risk and grief. This relationship, delicately and joyfully balanced in the space ‘between’ land and water, between languages, and between identity positions, is not Dobson's sole or final vision. In many poems already discussed, such as ‘The Apparition’, and ‘The “Aunts”’, the promise of a perfect, balanced vision suffers a miscarriage into the disruptions of illness,
grief, pain and death. Such miscarriages are nowhere more apparent, or more poignant, than in a series of poems, spanning the close of *Child with a Cockatoo* (1955), and the opening of *Cock Crow* (1965), and dealing with Dobson’s experience of maternity, and especially through her experience of grief and death, rather than joy and life, within that feminine landscape.

These poems are not so much a ‘turning point’, a place where one landscape is abandoned for another, as they are an intensification of themes already extant in much of her earlier poetry. Their intensity makes them difficult to ‘speak’ or ‘write’ of at all, and Dobson still finds, forty years on, that she can hardly bear to speak of the grief of that time (personal communication, 10/1/93). These poems are anguished and visceral, with the ‘beating upon the ear’ which marks the point of exchange in an earlier poem, replaced now by the space of the womb, and its failures and griefs.

For Rosemary Dobson, grief has a shape and a body, and in ‘Out of Winter’ (1965, p. 4), the shape of her grief is one which encompasses both her own body and the landscapes of otherness which gather around it and give it substance. In writing her grief, Dobson does not turn away from her earlier visions of paintings or involvement in the space which they inhabit. Her grief over the losses of, and from, her own body (in the death of a firstborn and, other poems suggest, other miscarriages) is not an isolated grief which has no connection to the previous landscape of her mind and intellect. Rather, her grieving is intimately bound up with all she is passionate about, and is symbiotic with it:
I ask 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.

Water contents me and the sky at evening,
The promise of flowers in the air at noonday,
Schooled in the miracles of Fra Angelico
I await the Angel of the Annunciation.

Bare tree, bare mind swept clean of anguish
Accept simplicities, be patient,
Await the bird in the bough, the tremor
Of life in the veins, another springtime.

The 'solace' Dobson asks for in this poem is not a solace which is
divorced from her previous beliefs. In the same way that her grief,
whilst an 'unnatural harvest' of 'pain' and 'grieving', is still a harvest
of 'windfall' and of 'fruit', the solace that she seeks is a harvesting or
fruiting of her earlier poetic, in which she entered into and tried to live
in the space of the canvases which Fra Angelico and others had left
behind them. Rather than applying her poetic to these 'early paintings',
landscapes and anatomies, she now awaits their action within herself,
and writes herself, and her body, as the waiting canvas, which has yet
to have its full story revealed. Just as she writes herself as 'bare tree'
and 'bare mind swept clean of anguish', there is a sense that waiting,
'promise' and 'belief' will return her body and mind to 'the anatomy of
beginnings', a bare linen, from which fruits of joy, not grief, may be
harvested. The sweeping clean is not a removal of grief, but of anguish,
of the disorder which grief brings. She asks for 'The clean, the truthful
lines of winter', 'simplicities', 'patience' while she awaits the
annunciation her 'school[ing]' in the miracles of Fra Anglico (both his
subject and his execution) enables her to expect.
That time and place of waiting, however—the patience which is like the suspended moment before annunciation, or the blank canvas before its stories and figures appear—is also, in itself, the place of loss. It is a landscape of dream, the semiotic, of ‘mystery’ (‘The Birth’, 1955, p. 49) and of ‘wisdom beyond mortal thought’ (‘The Birth (ii)’, 1955, p. 50). But for Dobson, this landscape of grief is not one merely imagined, or brought into intellectual being, or even, like James McAuley’s grief in his ‘Pieta’ (1988, p. 140), also for a lost newborn, a grief which is looked on from a distance, observed and gazed upon without ever being truly lived ‘in the body’. ‘The Birth’ speaks of a woman’s disappointed body, hinting at several miscarriages or possibly the lesser but still painful ‘miscarriages’ of months gone by without the longed for conception:

A wreath of flowers as cold as snow
Breaks out in bloom upon the night:
That tree is rooted in the dark,
It draws from dew its breath of life,
It feeds on frost, it hangs in air
And like a glittering branch of stars
Receives, gives forth, its breathing light.

Eight times it flowered in the dark,
Eight times my hand reached out to break
That icy wreath to bear away
Its pointed flowers beneath my heart.
Sharp are the pains and long the way
Down, down into depths of night
Where one goes for another’s sake.

In this dream of grief, the language of fecundity and of fruition takes on a sharp and angular quality. Here is no ‘springtime’, no ‘bird in the bough’ (‘Out of Winter’), nor the warmth and beauty we might usually associate with the womb and conception. In this dream, ‘flowers’ are cold, ‘glittering’, ‘icy’ and ‘pointed’, and the tree on which they bloom,
whilst ‘rooted in the dark’, also seems to glitter with its iciness,  
‘draw[ing] from dew’ but also, more sinisterly, ‘feed[ing] on frost’. But  
even with its promise of pain, and the counterpointing of the beauty  
and the nightmare quality of this tree and its flowers, the flowers are  
irresistible, and must be plucked despite inevitable grief. Over and  
over she reaches for the promised bloom, willing to ‘bear’ ‘Its pointed  
flowers beneath [her] heart’, to suffer the ‘sharp...pains’ of birth and to  
travel far into this dark landscape for the sake of bringing a child back  
with her. She cannot, however, ‘reach...out to break’ the flower from  
the bough, and the flowers stay on their tree, which, like ‘a glittering  
branch of stars’, is beyond her reach.

In the final stanza, however, the violence of these sharp and  
cold images culminates, and is transposed into another key:

Once more it flowers, once more I go  
In dream at midnight to that tree,  
I stretch my hand and break the branch  
And hold it to my human heart.  
Now, as the petals of a rose  
These flowers unfold and grow to me—  
I speak as of a mystery.

In that moment of violence, in which she ‘break[s] the branch’, she  
shatters the coldness of star, and steps through into the world of warm  
‘mystery’. The word ‘breaks’ is itself repeated in each stanza: the cold  
flowers ‘Break...out in bloom’ in the first; her hand ‘reached out to  
brake/That icy wreath’ in the second; and finally, in the third, she  
seems to ‘break’ through the world of dream or nightmare in which  
she is condemned to repeatedly replay her own grief, into a different  
landscape. In this world, pointed, icy, brittle flowers become ‘the petals  
of a rose’, soft, fragrant, and bespeaking not pain, but joy. The icy
flowers melt from the coldness of their mirror/star selves, into the softness of a fecundity which turns towards her: 'These flowers unfold and grow to me'. But there is still something unfathomable or inarticulable about both her own violence in breaking the branch and the different breaking down of iciness into soft unfolding. Thus, she says:

I speak as of a mystery.

Mysteries are spoken in parables, dreams and symbols, and can only be spoken 'as of', rather than directly.

But that 'mystery' is one 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. If 'The Birth' unfolds itself from grief to joy, however, this too is only a briefly flowering bloom, as its companion poem, 'The Birth (ii)' unravels this promised joy and returns us to the country of grief, as the longed for child dies at, or soon after, birth. Throughout the poem Dobson laments that the lost infant resides precisely in that realm of 'in-between', the never-never world which, although it can allow love and connection and communication, can also be a world in which souls are lost to the living. The poem brims with the sense of brinks, or edges which cannot be traversed, with desires and drives which reverse themselves, unable to link one position to another. Thus, in the first stanza, the child's life is likened to the edge of a wave and to that moment between dark and light which she later savours in a poem to David Campbell ('A Goodbye', 1984, p. 35):
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.

And in the second, it is again the space between light and shadow, and between dream and waking in which the baby is lost:

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,
As dream, as dew, as shadow, frost
That fade beneath our waking hands
Unknown, never to be known, lost.

The wave recedes, the dream fades, the promise of dawn retreats into night and the promised child is lost to an imagined world where light and time do not exist. In the third stanza, the place of loss is a more human one:

Brief life that for a moment lodged
Between our need and our distress,

but throughout the poem, the human body is the prime site of loss. In ‘lodged’ we see a brief life which both dwells within the bodies of the grieving parents, and which is ‘stuck’ in some place which they cannot touch or inhabit themselves. Thus, the ‘hands’ which the grieving Dobson herself ‘stretch[es] forth’, and the ‘mortal heart’ beneath which the womb child grew are the site, or the edge at which desire—‘need’—meets with disappointment.
That edge is not, however, an empty abyss, even though it exists without time, light, or touch. There is only one thing which Dobson writes as having any power at the point of this divide, and that is ‘love’. ‘Love’ may be ‘A tree of unimagined light/To break in blossom at your birth’, but it also has power and existence in a stilled world in which the ‘blossoms’ are suspended at the moment before opening. It is the only force capable of operating in this world between worlds, the only thing capable of drawing the grieving parents and the lost infant together:

I turn, return, stretch forth my hands—
Who gave you life, them you will bless.

Enrich us with your need of life,
Draw from us now the power of love,
Strengthen, restore, since you return
Our love, in needing us to love.

It is the ‘turn’ and ‘return’ which give ‘love’ its ‘power’; it is the ‘need’ for love and life which allows love and life to exist; it is the space between the giving and the restoration of that gift in which love dwells. That paradox cannot be explained adequately in word or thought:

Oh wisdom beyond mortal thought
That who gives most has most to give...

and remains, necessarily, as ‘undeciphered omen’. Here, the ‘undeciphered omen’ is that of empty hands, both in ‘The Birth’ and ‘The Birth (ii)’: 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 pairs 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.

Indeed, in one of her very rare love poems, ‘The Fever’ (1965, p. 14), the bodily disruption of a febrile illness reaches deep into the world of passion and love. In this disruption, her known husband, familiar—‘attentive, dark,/In city suit, late for your train’—becomes a stranger to whom the pathologies of the body speak, a doctor. In this unfamiliar world, in which ‘We have not met before’, and in which the playing children are ‘Not yours and mine’—a world, in short, in which known relationships become disordered—there is still a link of the body and heart which will be felt in the body:

If this were so would not my heart
Leap up to recognise with passion
The claim of love for love, to make
Insistent as the shrill cicada
The cry of need, the want of knowing.
One urgent phrase reiterated.

And the power of that passion, would in this fevered world, be a transgressive one:

And would you from your unknown life
Of surgery and morning calls,
And home, and wife, and children doubtless,
Would you not meet with recognition
That doomed, entangled, piercing cry?

It is within this disorder, this transgression of boundaries, and even within the ‘doomed, entangled, piercing cry’, that ‘recognition’ is to be found.
The experience of maternity, and especially the experience of
the dis-ordering of the body that comes with childbirth, is a rich vein
through which Dobson most fully explores the nexus between the
power of bodily transgression and the ‘doomed, entangled, piercing cry’
of language, which are intimately connected with edges and
extremities. Indeed, in the four poems, ‘Annunciations’ (1965, p. 5), ‘To
Meet the Child’ (1965, p. 6), ‘The Edge’ (1965, p. 7), and ‘To a Child’
(1965, p. 9), the relation between language and the process of
estrangement inherent within childbirth is overt. All share the sense
that language is the necessary grief which intrudes upon the
undifferentiated and symbiotic relationship between mother and the
unborn child she carries within her, a separation which enables agency
and subjectionhood. ‘To Meet the Child’ best exemplifies the vision which
Dobson has of language as transgression, and brings many of Dobson’s
previous metaphors and images together, with an intensity which is
almost breathtaking:

I await the signal for setting forth, the journey
To be taken alone across an unmapped country,
A land now tremulous with pain and mirage,
Now bright beyond the focus of my vision.

I know that when I reach that land’s extremity
There is a stranger to be met with, stranger
To be known and loved, upon whose sleeping features
Silence and Time alone have set their fingers

Saying, “Be wise, be silent till that meeting,
Wait like a seed the warmth of love enfolding
In darkness deeper than earth. Be patient, sleeper
At the world’s centre, for the world awaits you.”

Then shall I look upon that face with knowledge
And eyes look back at mine with recognition,
And together we shall return to our own country
With word of wonders, by another way.
This journey is the journey of childbirth, with its ultimate disordering of the body in which the child which has been carried and nourished by the womb must make its entrance into the world of separate subjection. The process of childbirth, however, is made rich with the metaphors and symbols by which Dobson has previously explored her relation to the world, her poetic. Thus, in this journey, she becomes at once the cartographer, travelling alone to map out an unknown country, and the painter trying to find the way between 'mirage', 'focus' and 'vision'. She is the canvas in which 'Time' and 'Silence' are enacted and embodied; she is even, daringly, 'the world's centre'. This entire world is contained within her, for the journey she embarks on is the journey into the dark reaches of her own body, and the 'extremity' she will reach is the extremity of pain where her womb is indeed 'the world's centre', with the outside world receding into 'mirage'.

There is, inevitably, a 'return' from this 'unmapped country', but it is not a simple return, in which the journey is merely reversed. Rather, there is a moment of epiphany—

Then shall I look upon that face with knowledge  
And eyes look back at mine with recognition

—at the very point of 'land's extremity', a point at which the 'stranger' is strange no longer, but known. That moment, for Dobson, is not one which can endure the return journey 'to our own country' unchanged, and indeed the return journey itself is a journey of change and translation:

And together we shall return to our own country  
With word of wonders, by another way.
The implicit reference here to the Wise Men, returning to their own country 'by another way' to avoid the wrath of Herod (Matthew: 2, 12), suggests a danger in returning merely by the same way, and it might be inferred that in choosing another, perhaps circuitous way, Dobson is again following the trajectory of 'slant' and 'circuit', rather than the straight road of authority and patriarchy. And the change in this return, the translation from one path to another is enacted through language. Language ('word of wonders') is what is brought back from the 'unmapped country'. For both mother and child, language can both suggest the 'wonders' of the 'recognition' they shared at the edge of the journey, and provide the means for slippage, by which separate subjects enact their differentiation. Their 'word' is the 'other way'. The 'wonders' they have seen together, and perhaps, if we return to the references to Matthew, the divinity in which they have both shared, must be translated into language if they are to 'map' the divine country, but their translation will remain a slippery one.

Certainly, in 'The Edge', that country is in itself one in which language does not exist, and is not necessary, but the return from the edge necessitates a language which will never be adequate to express its 'wonders'. Here Dobson is once again 'one who brings/Tidings of light beyond the dark', but she is also the one who recognises that her 'tidings' have an inarticulate shadow, which is the knowledge of that other, silent country in which part of her 'voiceless stays, still marvelling'. 'The Edge' is the 'edge' of return, the point at which 'tidings' translate 'voicelessness'. It continues to reside within the body so that even, or especially 'Webbed by the world again', walking 'The mazy paths that women tread':
I see the world half otherwise
And tremble at its mysteries.

The figure of the maze is employed again in ‘To a Child’ (1965, p. 9), but rather than ‘trembling’, the speaker of this poem amplifies the mysticism of the maternal experience, and figures herself less as Madonna awaiting annunciation than as goddess who ordains what will and will not pass over the edge from silence into speech. Indeed, her voice here is a booming one:

Through the dark maze I went and wound
The fine red single skein of love,
Accosting space I parted night,
Cracked the great O of day and cried
With my five voices, “Child, come.”

and in the first two stanzas of the poem it is language itself which calls the world, or the country, into being. In a sense, by travelling through the ‘dark maze’, making her own map in advance with the ‘fine red single skein’, the speaker pre-empts the journey she will need to take. She is active, questing, the maker. The language of these first two stanzas embodies power, agency, the determination to impose the will of order and language. Rather than travelling into space, which in ‘To Meet the Child’ is the ‘unmapped country’ which one must travel but only when the ‘signal’ is given, this time Dobson’s speaker ‘accosts’ space. She challenges it, breaks it up, makes of it what she wishes to. ‘Night’ is ‘parted’, and the ‘great O of day’ and of the world is ‘cracked’ into being through the agency of the female language, which is the dispersed, the mystical, the amplified language of ‘five voices’, all of which issue that irresistible command, ‘Child, come’. That juncture between the mystical maternal figure and the ‘child’ is ineluctably one
which is bridged by language. The mystic mother calls ‘Child, come’, and the child, comes ‘With joy to life’ only within the plane of language—‘answering “I am I”’. Night, day, and the universe are seen as only conquerable through language. The drive, the power of the verbs of these two stanzas—‘accosting’, ‘cracked’, ‘cried’, ‘jumped’, ‘stretched’—are the only possible counter to a world which is powerful, which resists connection, which mocks attempts at unity:

And answering “I am I” you jumped
With joy to life. I stretched my hand,
Mountains reared up to thrust between,
Great oceans yawned, plains stretched away,
Valleys divided one from one.

Again, the largeness of the environment and its power are what Dobson emphasises here. Further, its power is figured as hostile or malevolent. It is the power of a world which thrusts mountains, oceans, plains and valleys to ‘divide one from one’, a country into which an unprepared traveller, without a map, will be thwarted at every turn. And the large, powerful language which Dobson employs here is intended to signify the only resource possible in this hostile world. This is unusual in Dobson’s work, and there is something elemental and thrilling in its adoption. As a whole, however, ‘To a Child’ is curiously unsatisfying. The disjunction between the expansiveness of the first two stanzas, and the return to a quieter, more familiar voice in the final two is not a fruitful one. And indeed, the seeds of that disjunction are sown within the first stanza, when Dobson figures both the ‘accosting’ voice of language and the ‘fine red single skein of love’. Perhaps we are meant to infer that without the skein of love, even a booming voice would have no power. Dobson
fails in this, however, with the sense of ‘dark maze’ and the ‘mazy
paths that women tread’ becoming subsumed by the more linear
imagery inherent in ‘come’ and ‘I am I’. The images of the final two
stanzas are quieter, darker, and more ambiguous than those of the first.
Some, such as the image of the unborn child, the child not yet ‘come’
into the world or into language as ‘Dark honey of my honeycomb’ are
powerful and effective. Indeed, this image is more sympathetic with
the ‘dark maze’, with its sense of texture, richness, and latent energy,
than is the accosting and cracking of the five voices. The ‘patient’ and
‘long’ labour ‘To fashion out of flesh and bone/The form to keep you
housed and home’ is more what we expect of the Rosemary Dobson
who asks for patience to await her ‘annunciations’. And yet here that
patience somehow seems a little banal and clichéd, especially after the
vigour of those preceding powerful verbs. The final two stanzas:

Before you were then you were mine,
Dark honey of my honeycomb.
I laboured patiently and long
To fashion out of flesh and bone
The form to keep you housed and home.

The pulse still beats upon your head
For me, though bone may shield the vein,
The world divides—and yet we hold,
And end to each, the seeking skein,
The indestructible thread of love.

seem to peter out, the images to become too singular, too thin to bear
the weight that they might have borne. The pulse of the child, for
example, whilst it is the pulse which previously existed inside the body
of the mother, carries nowhere near the weight, the richness of the
pulse upon the ear of ‘Paintings’ (1955, p. 4). The divided world here
does not suggest the richness of unmapped territory, of Dobson’s role
as cartographer in going to and attempting to speak extremity. And that ‘seeking skein,/The indestructible thread of love’ simply does not match or add to the portents of ‘maze’ and of ‘honeycomb’, or indeed of the ‘webb[ing]’ of the world she walks in ‘The Edge’.

Perhaps the failure in this poem lies in precisely the alacrity with which the child answers “I am I” when the great mystic mother calls “Child, come.” The rearing mountains, yawning oceans, stretching plains, and dividing valleys, despite their vigour and their drive, seem to pose no real threat to birth here, no real possibility that the ‘single skein’ will snap, that mother and child will not meet each other. The skein, after all, is named ‘indestructible’. In the bulk of Dobson’s poetry, and especially in these poems of language and the body, it is in risk that the poems find their power. Power can indeed be ‘trembling’, ‘fading’, ‘webbed’, and changed, in its journey across unmapped territories, into ‘another way’.

That power of the ‘other’ way is, in many of these poems, the power of annunciation. Veronica Brady has argued that in concentrating on this trope, Dobson figures herself as ‘lack’. However, when Dobson writes of awaiting ‘the Angel of the Annunciation’, she does not figure herself as mere lack but indeed as ‘pregnant’ already with possibility, embodying promise and prophesy. Further, that promise, which she locates within her own body, is the promise of language:
All my past years were waiting years
For time to fashion out of flesh
And blood and one bright drop of fire
The promised and the prophesied.
The beating wings were stilled, the word
Of advent lay upon my mouth.

Lulled by the drumming of my blood,
The distant thunder of my heart,
You slept upon the moving tide
Of darkness, sealed in mortal flesh.
Once more immortal wings were stilled,
I heard the word that bade you come.

('Annunciations', 1965, p. 5)

While this poem is undoubtedly 'about' true bodily pregnancy, and the moments of conception and of birth, the waiting of the female body for the child to grow inside her, and then the letting go of that child from her body, the bodily images Dobson employs point to her conflation of bodily pregnancy with the pregnancy of language. For she writes the moment or moments of annunciation as implicated with speech, with language: annunciation, advent is 'the word', and it lies 'upon [her] mouth' at the very point of speech. The mouth itself is seen as the point of crossover from silence to speech, or from promise to being, or from prophesy to word. And, in that other moment of change, the moment of birth, it is 'hearing' that effects the change—'I heard the word that bade you come'; 'I hear the word. I let you go'. The motifs of the mouth and the ear here recall 'Paintings' (1955, p. 4), in which Dobson sees Art conquering Time. Her line 'My words beat still upon your ear', emphasises not only speech and hearing, but the beating, pulsing presence of the eardrum effecting this miraculous transfer between the two. It is indeed noticeable that many of Dobson's painting poems rely heavily on a sense of the painting being transferred, not just into the different medium of writing, but as being transferred
through the membranes of the tongue and the ear. Here, in
ˈAnnunciationsˈ, the mouth and the ear are the sites of the divine, of
the only possible point of contact between promise and fulfilment, or
between ˈthat sea/Unbounded, shoreless, infinite,/From whence we
come, to which we goˈ and the world of ˈmortal fleshˈ.

Further, Dobson seems to suggest that she possesses a different
sort of power in her ˈwaitingˈ. Certainly she is dependent upon the
agency of ˈtime to fashion out of flesh/And blood and one bright drop
of fire/The promised and the prophesiedˈ, and this suggests passivity
on her part. And yet she is powerful in stilling the wings of the angel
of the annunciation. For when she writes the crucial moment, the
moment of conception, she does not write that ˈThe beating wings
stilledˈ, but ˈThe beating wings were stilledˈ (my emphasis). There is at
least the possibility here that it is the speaker herself whose agency
ˈstillsˈ the wings, and who brings the moment of annunciation upon
herself, actually does the ˈannouncingˈ. Perhaps we can read her
passivity in the agency of language in the phrase ˈthe word/ Of advent
lay upon my mouthˈ, and infer that it has been laid there by some
other agency. An alternative reading, however, is to argue that
language itself is passive, or waiting until she, the speaker, actually
gives it life. The nexus between stilled wings and the agency of words
becomes more problematical in the second stanza, when

Once more immortal wings were stilled,
I heard the word that bade you come.

and transmutes yet again in the final stanza into

The beating wings are clamorous.
I hear the word. I let you go.
In the second stanza, the possibility that it is the speaker herself who causes angel's wings to be stilled is still strong, but language itself now lies upon her ear rather than upon her mouth, and 'the word that bade you come' is definitely an outside voice, not her own. The word has taken on a life of its own. And in the final lines of the poem, the 'beating wings' actually become 'the word'. They are 'clamorous', demanding, loudly importuning her; they become language, and the sound of their beating becomes not the inarticulate beating of hearts, of blood, or of immortal wings, but of words. And in that clamour of the immortality of angel's wings, and the mortality of the word, she must release both her children from the 'mortal heart' which can shelter them for a moment, and release her words, her poetry, from the silence of her mouth into the sound of others' ears.

The dilemma of the mother and the dilemma of the writer can thus be seen in similar ways. The mother can hold her children 'to her mortal heart', keeping them safe within her, 'sealed in mortal flesh' in which the only sound they know is the inarticulate language of 'blood' and 'heart'. The writer may keep her words similarly safe, keeping her words in a continual state of 'advent'. But to do so forever, beyond the appointed hour, would be to 'seal' both child and words in a mausoleum of the self, to deny them the risks of 'that sea/Unbounded, shoreless, infinite,/From whence we come, to which we go'. And indeed, the attempt would inevitably fail, as the wildness of love, and of grief, and of loss and of the infinite inevitably seeps through enclosures and protections:
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 Mother’, 1955, p. 44)

V

In the preface to *Moscow Trefoil*, David Campbell, Rosemary Dobson and Natalie Staples observe that:

Translations of poetry are bound to fail. What we had to decide was what to sacrifice in order to succeed to some extent.

(1975, p. xiii)

This epigram could as easily be applied to Rosemary Dobson’s entire philosophy of poetry, or of art. In her poetry she is always fully, gracefully aware that she will inevitably lack ‘the words to finish/The woven coat of comfort’, and that always there is something, that ‘one wild bird’s wing’, which will slip through her translations from experience to words. Much of her work is literally concerned with the project of translation, or what she would call ‘imitations’ or ‘versions’. But her interest is not so much in a desire to recreate or translate, but rather with the process itself. In her ‘Poems from Pausanius’ (1978, p. 27), there is always a longing for clarity, and a passion for the flawed means by which one will inevitably fail in the search for it. Thus, in ‘Of
Pausanias’, Dobson marvels at Pausanius’ apparently complete translation of the world in which he travelled:

The stony mountain path, the easy road cutting its simple statement on the plain he kept, by some notation, in his mind and afterwards could map their ways again.

With diligent enquiry could raise up a temple’s splendour on the ruins of time or reconstruct from worn and weathered words a marvellous measure of archaic rhyme.

But it is not so much Pausanius’ ability to keep a transparent ‘notation’ which would act as a perfect ‘map’ which she envies, but his mental tools, his attitude which she wishes to emulate. It is his ‘diligent enquiry’, his ability to ‘reconstruct’, his ‘reverence’ for the unspoken around him which she most admires:

This most I envy, most would emulate, the watchful eye, the trained receptive ear, the mind that waits illumination, waits to see, though blind; though deaf, at last to hear.

It is the attitude of ‘negative capability’ which she most seeks in translating:

...hand to ear in silence listen for oracular voices in the water-springs.

There is certainly a sense of a past clarity in some of her poems, as in ‘At Tainaron’ (p. 30):

There was a water-spring at Tainaron and like a glass that mirrors Come and Gone the water showed what would be and was done.
but this glass is like the omens of Dobson’s visionary eye, which can no
longer be deciphered. Interestingly, it is once again ‘linen’ which is
implicated in a disjunction between ‘clear’ and ‘clouded’ sight:

A woman washed her linen in that spring
and nevermore the water spoke so clear
of what was past and what was yet to come.

Dobson writes, ‘I too remark/that dirty linen fouls up many a spring’.
And yet in Dobson’s regrets there remains the voice of irony which
sees that perhaps such clear springs are only ever mythical:

Going down to Delphi, at Lebadeia
splashed my face where the two springs met,
one for Forgetfulness and one for Remembrance.
Much I remember and much forget.
(‘The Dark and the Clear’, from ‘Greek Coins’,
pp. 42)

‘Remembrance’ and ‘Forgetfulness’ must always be entwined and
confused, the spring which might make them limpid inevitably
‘muddied’ by human experience, and by the ‘linen’ which weaves
them together, but never without faults in the fabric. Indeed, in
Dobson’s following book, The Three Fates, her title poem is concerned
with what might happen if one’s desire to overcome time and
mortality were to be granted:
At the instant of drowning he invoked the three sisters.
It was a mistake, an aberration, to cry out for
Life everlasting.

He came up like a cork and back to the river-bank,
Put on his clothes in reverse order,
Returned to the house.

He suffered the enormous agonies of passion
Writing poems from the end backwards,
Brushing away tears that had not yet fallen.

Loving her wildly as the day regressed towards morning
He watched her swinging in the garden, growing younger,
Bare-foot, straw-hatted.

And when she was gone and the house and the swing and
daylight
There was an instant’s pause before it began all over,
The reel unrolling towards the river.

This is what it would be to see both ‘Come’ and ‘Gone’, to have both
‘Remembrance’ and ‘Forgetfulness’ as one wished them. To live
without the muddying of the water, or the mirror, or the eye, would be
to be tangled forever within a perfectly woven fabric, with no
possibility of escape, of wildness.

In her versions of the poetry of Mandelstam and Akhmatova,
written from ‘literal’ translations provided by Natalie Staples, Dobson
highlights the necessary slippage from one poem to another, or indeed
from one language to another. Similarly, although in a different
context, when Pamela Banting writes of Cixous, and postulates a form
of translation between a woman’s body and her words, she
concentrates on a ‘translation’ which is not ‘representation’, in which
‘translation’ is not subservient:

Traditionally, translation has been thought of as an
operation subservient to representation. If the
productions of the poet are, according to the
representational aesthetic inaugurated by Plato, twice
removed from reality, then those of the translator are considered to be three times removed.
(1992, p. 237)

Banting argues that ‘the source text for a given translation is not itself, as we have come to understand, “original” or “originary” but a complex intertextual tissue’ (1992, p. 234), and the necessary instability of the ‘source text’ means that terms such as ‘source’ and ‘target’, or indeed original and translation, operate in a very fluid way, necessitating seepage between the texts:

In translation, of course, the transfer of meaning is never totally efficient. Signification escapes, meaning leaches away, and extraneous meaning seeps in during the transfer between source language/source text and target language/target text.
(1992, p. 230)

In these particular translated poems, Dobson is not, as in her ‘Birth’ and ‘Eye’ poems, ‘translating’ between her own body and her words, but this concept of an unstable, or non-originary ‘source’ text is nonetheless illuminating when considering her approach to the task of writing versions. In making a comparison between the versions of David Campbell and those of Rosemary Dobson in the preface to Moscow Trefoil, Hope is most astute in his observations:

David Campbell, it seems to me, descends like the eagle of Zeus on the poem he is to render, and, with something of the Olympic lightening flash he carries it off and transmogrifies it; it becomes a poem in his manner...This is common enough with poets. They steal without shame and they re-create with triumph. But here is the curious thing: the poem so taken over re-emerges with a kind of second life...it has caught...the essence of the original poem...
Rosemary Dobson, it seems to me, works in quite another way. She flows round and over and through the poem until it is totally absorbed into her own sensibility and assimilated to her personal habits of language, of rhythm, of feeling; and then, with delicate care and exquisite adjustment of detail the poem so dissolved is encouraged to re-crystallise itself in the medium of another language and another poetic personality

(1975, viii-ix)

Hope has certainly chosen images here to bolster his argument that 'One strikes a more masculine, the other a more feminine note' (xiii), and perhaps he overstates the case. Indeed, Hope's own language reveals much about his views on poetry. He figures Campbell as god-like, divine, and plundering, the hunter who sees his quarry, marks it, 'steal[s] [it] without shame', and forces it to become his own creation, and his description of Campbell's translation method presupposes an 'essence', a 'stable reality' which can be changed, by masculine daring, into a different kind of 'stable reality'. Dobson, by contrast, is figured as the 'gatherer', who collects the source text into her own body, encompasses rather than seizes upon it, nurtures it within and then 'gives birth' to a progeny which is both itself and her own—'the poem so dissolved is encouraged to re-crystallise itself in the medium of another language and another poetic personality'. Dobson's method, one can read into Hope's words, begins from a 'reality' or a 'poetic personality' which is not, in the beginning, 'stable', but which is able to be 'dissolved' and 're-crystallised'. I would argue that the classical position as Hope phrases it—the 'Olympic lightening flash', the 'eagle of Zeus'—perhaps betrays an anxiety about identity positions, and about poetic and other personalities. Campbell's approach (or, rather, Hope's writing of his approach) suggests that language, or poems, are
so slippery that they must by attacked, grasped, dissected to reveal their inner secrets. By implication, perhaps one's own identity position is also unstable, to be shored up by these subjugations of the object. The poet or translator must be the aggressor, the subject seizing upon his object. Dobson, by contrast, accustomed by a lifetime of acceptance of the slipperiness of identity, and of a willingness to work within and by the 'fabric' of exchange, the 'ampersand', does not need to grasp so hard at what she seeks to translate, and is willing to forgo her subjecthood for a time. This is not, of course, to say that she does not have the same commitment to be scrupulous and respectful to Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Pausanius, or indeed Vermeer. The humility of her poetic identity in this endeavour—'who could think us other than fortunate in having the opportunity to attempt what we did? (1983, p. 98)—is not subjection, or abjection, or passivity.

Her translations of these poems are as careful with their choice of words as are Campbell's, but there are subtle differences, most noticeably in their syntax and grammar, which reveal something of the split of which Hope has written. In her own 'Record of an Experiment' (1983), detailing the translation endeavour, Dobson chooses to highlight Mandelstam's 'Crete' poem (No. 385) to show the difference in approach between herself and Campbell. It is worthwhile to quote both poems in their entirety:
Blue-rimmed island, happy Crete
Is famed for potters. See their gift
Baked in this ring of earth, and hear
Deep-down their song as dolphins lift.

Rejoicing from the fire, the clay
At the mere thought fills up with ocean,
And the chill bowl overflows
With the twin blues of sea and vision.

Flying Crete, give back to me,
Blue island, my work and my desire;
Let the breasts of the abundant goddess
Fill and quench my vessel’s fire!

This song was sung in blue flame
Before the time of Odysseus,
When the red wine and the brown loaf
Were divided evenly among us.

Restore your influence then, shine out
Star of heifer-lidded Hera,
Though a flying fish is a chance thing
Among affirming tongues of water.

(David Campbell, p. 34)

Blue island, happy Crete, most blest
Whose potters fuse their gifts by fire
In ringing clay. Do you not hear
Far down their dolphins blowing by?

Now, summoned by the hardening fire
The sea appears upon the clay.
The vessel’s cooling glaze reveals
Division between sea and eye.

Blue island, flying Crete, give back
My needed toil, and let the scorched
Vessel be quenched with coolness from
Divine Cybele’s flowing breasts.

All this befell so long ago,
Was sung before Odysseus’ time,
Before man put his hand on food
And drink and said ‘for me’ and ‘mine’.

Star of the ox-eyed heaven, the sky,
Dispel your radiance over all.
The fish that flies is chance’s gift
As is the swift assenting sea.

(Rosemary Dobson, p. 35)
Dobson’s version of the poem uses verbs which either in their tense (‘blowing’, ‘hardening’, ‘cooling’, ‘flowing’), or in their innate connecting nature (‘fuse’, ‘reveals’, ‘dispel’), enact connections and flows within the poem. Campbell’s, by contrast, employs more ‘stopped’ verbs (‘is famed’, ‘baked’, ‘quench’, ‘restore’, ‘shine out’). His poem is, correspondingly, more subject oriented, and maintains greater distance between positions. The first and the last stanzas illustrate this sort of difference. Campbell’s Cretan pots are already ‘baked’, already fixed into subjecthood; the potters do not ‘sing’, but their ‘song’ can be heard. Dobson’s ‘potters’ are active in their craft—she concentrates on their ‘fus[ion]’, their act of creation, rather than their completed artefacts. Even her ‘potters’ and ‘dolphins’ are linked, their singing is the ‘blowing’ of the dolphins.

A similar poetic is in evidence in the final stanza. David Campbell’s ‘Star’ is a single, stable identity, and his choice of verbs emphasises its singular nature. It will be single beam of light, from which light shines singly, capable of ‘Restor[ing]’ its own subjecthood. Rosemary Dobson’s star is much more connected to the ‘ox-eyed heaven, the sky’, and rather than shining out actively and singly will ‘Dispel [its] radiance’, a phrase which suggests a more subtle washing over of light, a flowing activity. Finally, David Campbell’s writing of the final two lines suggests a disjunction (‘Though a flying fish is a chance thing/Among affirming tongues of water’), whilst Dobson’s suggests conjunction between the ‘fish’ and the ‘swift assenting sea’.

A fuller exploration of the many unpublished translations which Campbell and Dobson worked on in their several years of involvement with this Russian project may reveal more of this difference in approach. It may of course, disprove my argument that
Dobson’s ‘translations’ generate more connections and less need to establish difference between identity positions than do Campbell’s. Indeed, I would not want to argue that Campbell always translates in the ‘masculine’ and god-like fashion Hope postulates—this would necessitate a far more detailed study of Campbell’s work. In the end, the words of Dobson herself on their collaboration,

in presenting...two versions of each poem attempted, we felt we were offering possibilities. To claim the authority that one version only assumed was not our wish.

(1983, p. 96)

—reveal the happy way in which their disparate versions create a unique space in which to consider the nature of translation, and of poetry itself.

Critics have tended to see this emphasis on connectedness, the ‘dissolving’ and ‘re-crystallisation’ of Rosemary Dobson’s poetic as in some way ‘passive’. Evan Jones writes that ‘there is an air of lassitude about her poetry’ (1964, p. 123), Hope that ‘there is too much rich dark cake and not enough plain bread’ (1955, p. 574), and Lawson that ‘the tranquillity [the poems] offer is that of time-out engagement from the world’ with ‘a sense of matter kept outside a circle of attention’ (1987, p. 121). Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Dobson is indeed concerned with what is ‘in between’, with the warp or fabric which mediates between experience and art, or between human subjects, or between being or non-being. It is, I believe, wrong to assume that Dobson allows herself to actually be this in between space in an inert fashion, and more correct to see her as exploring its territory so as to return from her journeys bringing back some new treasure, not directly
back through a glass, but through a ‘convex’ mirror, ‘by another way’.
In ‘Over the Frontier’ (1978, p. 3), Dobson confronts this space in poetry directly:

The object that exists
a glass, say, or a bottle
is one step away from the object that does not exist,
it has crossed over the outermost rim
and between light and darkness
it has assumed shape and purpose.

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.
Listen to the universe—
those are the possibilities of order
buzzing and humming.

The outline of non-existence
can be held by the inner eye,
always moving, it assumes the shape of stillness.
So a plate spinning on a stick
is the essence of plate, a still one,
absolute plate with a fish on it.

Dobson’s poetic is not one which charges over the frontier to colonise and to subdue. But it is also not one which sits wavering upon an ampersand. Rather, it is a poetic which, ‘trembling’, ‘crosse...
what exists and what does not. She does not bring a ‘wise passivity’ to her work, but rather a sense of active investigation, trying to gauge the shape and purpose of things even if it is in their ‘outline of non-existence’. She may not be able to force answers from her apparition, or any of her untold lives, but she seeks and increasingly knows the shapes of the questions to ask of them, to at least begin the work of weaving a cloak of words. Her ‘ampersand’ is not a helpless buffer between worlds, but a connective of purpose and direction, coping in a quite muscular fashion with the conflicting demands of keeping things together and keeping them apart. Her poetic does indeed consist of ‘introspection’ and ‘a restlessness to tell the story’, in a fabric which opens in one way to unclouded sight, and in another to a world of portents and ‘undeciphered omens’ which cannot be dragged across the frontier by a poetic identity intent on maintaining its own subjectivity, but only by one which is willing to try to collapse the boundaries between subject and object, self and other.

For this reason, placing Dobson squarely into a classical tradition misses the subtle challenge she poses to it, concentrating too much on her subject matter—art, time, history—and too little on her relationship with that subject matter. In her ‘On Museums’ sequence (1984, pp. 57-62), she sees the proper function of museums (and, by association, culture and poetry) as to provide metaphorical space for
The songs that wind through silence,
All resonant conversation
From the articulate past;
Must be attentive to voices
Of cricket moth and field-mouse
The thunderous worm in the sub-soil;

And movements never completed—
Pacing feet in the guard-room
Lips kissing the icon
The palm kneading the dough.

('Their Purpose', 1984, p. 60)

For Dobson, that 'palm kneading the dough' is also the hand which weaves the fabric, which writes the poem, which waits attentively for the sounds of the 'thunderous worm'. And if her task in her life is to

Learn still; take, reject,
Choose, use, create,
Put past to present purpose. Make.

('Museums', 1984, p. 59)

then her conception of that task is that it is as pliable and as resistant as dough, or as flesh, or as linen, or as stone, and it is never complete:

A message cut in stone
One letter tells all
I was on earth, here,

Praised learning, skill of hand,
Order, simplicity.
A speaks my mind

Roman capital, sharp-serifed
Italic: the long slant, the firm stand.
A accepting the slow moss

Rain, the weathering wind
The sweep and brush of grass.
A cut in the stone

Meaning Alpha
All beginnings
No end

('The Message', 1984, p. 64)
CHAPTER THREE

‘Me is not a stable reality’ : Dorothy Hewett

in life one must accept the limitations
no-one has ever loved an adventurous woman
(‘Beata Beatrix’, 1979, p. 60)

Since 1945, when the eighteen year old Dorothy Hewett won the ABC Poetry Prize for her poem ‘Testament’ (1968, p. 61), the Australian literary public has had a love/hate relationship with her. It loves voyeuristically watching her ‘adventures’, but castigates her precisely for being ‘adventurous’. Hewett is one of the few Australian writers who is a recipient of a lifetime Literature Board Fellowship, yet criticism of her work is often limited to discussions of her personal life, and her stature as an ‘elder stateswoman’ in Australian culture has not translated into a body of serious scholarly consideration. While Hewett’s plays have received a reasonable amount of critical attention, culminating in Margaret Williams’ survey of Hewett’s more than twenty plays (1992), her poetry has received remarkably little sustained critical attention. Over the last few years Andrew Taylor (1987), Shirley Walker (1992) and Jenny Digby (1993) have written essay length pieces on Hewett’s poetry, but to date this aspect of her work has received only a fraction of the critical attention of other poets such as Robert Adamson and Randolph Stowe. Hewett has, however, given many interviews and appeared in several television programs, including the excellent ABC production ‘Bon-Bons and Roses for Dorothy: The Dorothy Hewett Story’ (1994).
This concentration on personal interviews, on the ‘persona’ as it appears in the visual media, has so far seemed to work against serious consideration of Hewett’s poetic and dramatic achievements. It enables Hewett to give her version of her writing and writing life, but on the other hand, makes it difficult to see, not only the connections, but the disjunctions between the Hewett who sits resplendent in velvet caftans upon velvet sofas, long white hair around her shoulders, and the Hewett who reads Mandelstam as well as Tennyson, or who feels a kinship with Stowe as well as Adamson. It allows Hewett to tell her own story, or rather, the story which suits the flatness of the television or journalistic print media, rather than the much more complicated story which can be traced in a consideration of her writing over the several genres within which she writes.

This is not to say that I will not take into account such interviews, and the sense of Hewett’s ‘adventurous woman’ persona. Nor will I argue that there is a neat binary division between the public Hewett persona and the Hewett of the poetry. It would certainly be reductive, if not impossible to split Hewett into ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the same way in which, for example, I have seen Dorothy Auchterlonie. It would also be falling into the trap of reducing my critical consideration to the sorts of binary sets which Dorothy Hewett herself often sets up, to work too closely within her own structures. I am wary of the temptation presented to the scholar by the many neat splits which Hewett presents—mother/father, I/Alice, love/lust, freedom/coercion. It would be neat and easy, in this chapter, for example, to present the writing of Dorothy Hewett only as exhibiting a fundamental tension between two modes of identity—the post-oedipal, or the Lacanian Symbolic of the father as law, and the
Imaginary which under the law of the Symbolic, becomes a language of absence or silence, rather than of unmediated communication. Were I to do only this, Hewett’s writing could be neatly laid out along the opposing lines of the father:

...you tried to give us
A vision of greenness and water, who were bred out of desert and scrub


and of the mother:

Mother to daughter the curse drops like a stone.
My mother sits silent with nothing to remember.


As Shirley Walker points out, however, the ease with which Hewett’s work can be seen in such terms can itself be problematic:

her personal myths become, at times, almost a parody of psychoanalytic theories of the progression to maturity of the feminine person.

(1992, p. 45)

Walker does not, of course, mean that Hewett consciously parodies such theories, but that she is, rather, an unquestioning victim of them. For this reason, the ease with which her own ‘story’ fits in with psychoanalytic narrative structures should be regarded with some suspicion.

Another apparently simple duality might be seen to be operating in Hewett’s conception of her identity as writer, and her identity as woman. For example, when Hewett ponders the difficulty
of writing in a seemingly vacuous landscape, she posits the alternatives as being either:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{to articulate the inarticulate by a deliberately} \\
\text{understated sparse style wrested out of silence, or to} \\
\text{write oneself larger than life, gothic and romantic,} \\
\text{across the empty page.} \\
\text{(1982, p. 99)}
\end{align*}
\]

It is not difficult here to trace the split between what Margaret Homans (1986) renames the 'literal' language (the 'inarticulate') and the 'figurative' ('larger than life'). But it is precisely here that I see the duality which Hewett adopts breaking down, because 'to articulate the inarticulate' is figured as a violent, transgressive manoeuvre—the language here suggesting a babe from its mother's womb 'untimely ripped'—whilst Hewett's 'larger than life' alternative is to inscribe her own body, literally, across the page. Sub-textually, and perhaps sub-consciously, there is an endless interchange between the two languages, of the kind Kristeva suggests when she writes the supposedly silent Imaginary as an eruptive or disruptive 'semitic' (1984), or when she proposes the necessary 'doubling' of the writing experience:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The act of writing is the differential act par excellence,} \\
\text{reserving for the text the status of other, irreducible to} \\
\text{what is different from it; it is also the correlational act} \\
\text{par excellence, avoiding any bounding of sequences} \\
\text{within a finite ideologeme, and opening them up to an} \\
\text{infinite arrangement.} \\
\text{(1980, p. 58)}
\end{align*}
\]

It is, indeed, this very breakdown of boundaries between subject positions and languages, the possibility of 'infinite arrangement',
which enables the critic to resist the temptation to categorise Hewett too rigidly into the alternatives which she herself proposes.

To reduce Hewett's work to dualities, therefore, is to make absent or to silence many of the possible readings of her writing. But again, the problem for the scholar is that just as Hewett proposes opposing alternatives for writing, she also swings between two postulated writing selves. At times, she poses herself as determined or monolithic: this is especially the case when she writes or speaks of her identity as a writer. In her poetic statement for Poetry and Gender, for example, she writes almost naively: 'I just sit down and write what I feel I have to write, spin it from inside me' (1989, p. 4). Yet this is the same Hewett who writes in 'Creeley in Sydney' (Greenhouse, 1979, p. 16), 'I can't write autobiography because there is no me/Me is not a stable reality'. In much of Hewett's work she does 'spin' a kind of autobiography from a personal storehouse of memory icons. And yet these icons, like the trunks of cast off clothes the young Hewett and her sister 'dressed up' in (1990, p. 4), are also outside the self. They are at once monolithic and mediated by memory and language, as is Hewett's identity itself. It is in precisely this ambiguity that, for Hewett, 'Me is not a stable reality', echoing the pronouncement by Rimbaud (to whom, among others, Greenhouse is dedicated) that 'Je est un autre'. I shall return to this distinction between a 'stable' and an 'unstable' self when I consider Hewett's different representations of herself as writer and as woman at the end of this chapter.

To read Hewett in a representational way—in which I read, for example, her involvement in political activity, or her sexual history as representing a psychic drama—is to a large extent to devalue or override the physicality of her work, the way in which Hewett makes
herself present within it, bringing her body to her writing. It ignores the moments in her work where her experience as a woman and her writing of that experience seem to speak literally, unmediated, to other women—the young women believing they are Sally Banner, the several women I have known who, when I mention the poem ‘Anniversary’ (1979), blanch physically and almost mechanically recite back ‘overweight in my Woolworth’s dress’. A representational writing also, of course, ignores the weight of historical detail which Hewett gives us in her writing of her life in the Communist Party, reducing this to a suppressed desire to be ‘one of the boys’, to cross over into the language and the identity of legend. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I restrict my discussion of ‘negotiations of identity’ to those concerning sexual and poetic identities, and regretfully set aside the equally fascinating questions of Hewett’s negotiations of political identity and, especially, Australian or Western Australian identity.

I do not however, propose to set her poetry aside from the other genres in which she has worked. I will, of course, consider Hewett’s several volumes of poetry, including What About the People! (1963), Windmill Country (1968), Rapunzel in Suburbia (1975), Greenhouse (1979), Alice in Wormland (1987), and her most recent publication, Peninsula (1994). I will also, however, examine a number of her plays, including The Chapel Perilous (1972), Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly (1976), and The Tatty Hollow Story (1976), and her prose, which includes her autobiography Wildcard (1990), and her novels Bobbin Up (1959), and The Toucher (1993). It is crucial to read Hewett’s explorations of these genres together, because all of Hewett’s writing intersects with and echoes itself. Wildcard, for instance, draws
on several fragments of earlier writing, *The Chapel Perilous* contains sections of at least eight previously published poems, and all five of her volumes of poetry wind and rewind around each other. Hewett works over a fairly limited range of tropes and plots, and is a recycler *par excellence*. Perhaps other words for this return to her own work might be 'incestuous' or 'narcissistic', and later in this chapter I would like to suggest that Hewett's returns to her own writing might be postulated as returns to the nurturing body of the 'good mother'.

This, then, suggests the starting point for this chapter. I will first examine the Hewett who writes obsessively of coming into knowledge of womanhood, concentrating on her poetry. I will follow Hewett's own practice of 'sincere dishonesty' ('New Introduction' to *Bobbin Up*, 1985), and read her work from the perspective of what, in Freudian terms, has been known as the oedipal drama and to show how such a drama could provide a possible account for her representation of the feminine, specifically her tendency to elide her own written identity with that of her matrilineage. Of course, the 'drama' of the struggles for subjecthood of daughters, as opposed to sons, is virtually absent from Freudian and Lacanian theory.

Nevertheless, with the help of feminist revisionists, such as Nancy Chodorow, who ask how it is that a daughter comes into identity and language—

feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does. (In psychoanalytic terms, women are less individuated than men; they have more flexible ego boundaries.)

(1974, p. 44)
—I hope to show that Hewett’s writing, especially her poetry, shows her fulfilling the hypothesis that as a woman, and a woman writer, she both suffers and gains from the permeability of her ego. Second, through an examination of some of Hewett’s plays, her dramaturgical techniques and particularly the female characters within those plays, I shall argue that for Hewett, the female self is always a performed or performative self. Third, I will consider what writing autobiographically—however problematic the ‘autos’ might be in her work—might mean to Hewett, and how she considers the issues of the mediation or discovery of the self through such writing. Finally, I consider what distinctions, if any, might be drawn between Hewett’s writing of her female identity and her identity as writer, and how such distinctions might problematise Hewett’s entire negotiations of identity within her work.

I

Like the Western Australian landscape she writes from, or her own Rapunzel, Hewett is both colonised and coloniser. Indeed, when writing of her first landscape, that of the wheatbelt around her home town of Wickepin, she is able to write, sincerely:

Western Australia gave me a country to write about and to begin from, a landscape and a society that will forever be central to my imagination.

But she simultaneously mediates that centrality when she writes, in the same essay, of the woman artist, who:
writes from that other country of spirit and physicality
which still remains, for us, largely uncharted.
(1982, p. 102)

This jostling of the external and internal landscapes provides a useful metaphor for Hewett’s writing of the feminine self. Her exploration of a natural landscape which was hopelessly compromised, a landscape of grafted myths and customs, the land of the ‘weatherboard cathedral’, is frequently aligned in her writing with the ambiguous nature of the feminine. Her early feminine landscape is one which moves from paintings in her first home of ‘some Victorian English girls in frilly muslin pinafores toasting chestnuts’ (1990, p. 7), and her grandmother’s tin trunks ‘crammed with eyelet-embroidered petticoats with yards of homemade lace, pale leather button-up boots, pearl-buttoned kid gloves’ (1990, p.4), to the knowledge of women who were hard and unyielding, astute business women with fortunes of their own, whom Hewett portrays as unable to love. In her first major collection, Windmill Country, and especially in the long, prize-winning ‘Legend of the Green Country’ (pp. 50-58), the saltpan country breeds saltpan women and saltpan women contribute to the desiccation of the landscape. The land’s only ‘fruit’ is ‘the apples, little and hard, bittergreen and bitter as salt’ and Hewett describes her grandmother in similar terms:

My grandmother had a bite like a sour green apple,
Little and pitiless she kept the till,
Counted the profits, and stacked the bills of sale.
(p. 52)

Money, in fact, becomes a substitute for all kinds of love, including sexual love:
She kept her bank notes rolled in the top of her stocking
Caressingly...

(p. 52)

and religious sentiment:

She read *The Monitor* while the dust storms whirled,
And marvelled that God was love; it was all clear profit.
...
She balanced the ledger and murmured, "God is love",
Feeling like God, she foreclosed on another farm.

(p. 52)

Hewett's mother does not fare much better, even though she is presumably the product of her own mother's inability to love:

She hated the farm, hated the line of wattles
Smudging the creek, kept her hands full of scones,
Boiled the copper, washing out sins in creek water,
Kept sex at bay like the black snake coiled in the garden

(p. 54)

However, Hewett does not portray her whole ancestry in such shrivelled terms. Rather, when she writes her own version of her family legend:

...I am Eve, spitting the pips in the eye of the myth-makers...

(p. 51)

she writes it as a doubled one, with two strands—of continuity and of fragmentation, roughly aligned with the masculine and the feminine—mirroring each other. On the occasions when she proclaims 'This is my legend' (I) and 'This is my truth' (IX), it is principally her masculine forebears she admits into her revised myth: the grandfather with his triumph in galloping his horse up to the bar
of the public hotel and her father in his continuing cornet song of trees and his dream of a reforested ‘green’ country. Whilst father and grandfather are given a certain romantic grandeur:

This is my truth, a grandfather boozed with guilt
And gold, who got free kisses from a barmaid for his gift,
And a great horse that swung its rump and tilted the world down.
A man rides through the windmill country like an Abo,
Blowing his cornet in a wait of “Trees”, bewitched
By Gippsland fern and luminous girls mirrored in the Yarra.
(p. 58)

the women strip away such pretensions:

The women were strong and they destroyed the men,
Lying locked and cold in their sexless beds,
Putting greed in their men’s fingers instead of love.
(p. 56)

Grandmother and mother combine to finish the drinking and barge-riding of grandfather; mother effectively castrates her husband by relegating him to the sleep-out. For the men of this legend, the combination of gold, guilt and gelding is a lethal one:

He forgets how to sink a well or plant a tree.
(p. 57)

Hewett sees that her father’s dream of a literal green landscape, and an emotional landscape made green through love and desire, ‘is locked away in grief and salt’. But in this ruined mythologised masculinity, she retains the hope that

Maybe, in death, his lips will whisper it,
And the green vision that gave sap to all his days
Will rise again and give him back his country.
(p. 57)
There is a stark contrast between this hope of a romantic respringing of verdure and sap, with its sense of the continuance of dreaming, and a language Hewett can speak ('I will eat their salt and speak my truth', p. 58), and her portrayal of her matrilineal inheritance:

Mother to daughter the curse drops like a stone.  
My mother sits silent with nothing to remember.  

(p. 57)

'Vision'—'silence'; 'sap'—'stone'; 'rise'—'drops'; a 'country'—'nothing': the 'curse' is both the curse of woman's silence shut out from the dreams and heroism of the men-folk, shrivelled to the salt-bitten parodies of Eve's apples, and the curse of nothing to remember, and thus nothing to pass on. Hewett has no hope that her mother may harbour a green vision. And in her choice of words here—'the curse' and elsewhere, 'the birth blood' (p. 53)—lies the strong sense in so much of Hewett's writing that there is something essentially biological, rather than culturally produced, in this sour and silent womanhood. Hewett repeatedly portrays her mother's madness as being due to early menopause (for example, in the 'Alice' poems of 1987), and whilst one could try to argue that this is merely metaphorical, I fear that this is not the case. It is this barrenness, this pitiless womanhood with its failure to love, which Hewett writes 'sleep[s] so restlessly within my blood' ('The Puritans', 1968, p. 66). In *Wildcard*, this bitterness is mediated into an oscillation between understanding and bewilderment:
The struggle to come to terms with my mother dominated most of my life. Her switches of mood from protective love to destructive hatred bewilder me. I learnt never to trust in her benevolence because it was sure to be followed by persecution.

Often it seems to me I have two mothers. There is the mother who lights the little night-light sweetly singing...and wakes us in the mornings, pulling back the bedroom curtains...and the mother who calls me ‘a great gawk’ and, frothing at the mouth, her face red and swollen, beats me with an iron-edged ruler, then clasps me to her sobbing, crying that she is ‘a wicked mother to treat her little girl like this’.

(1990, p. 25)

In Hewett’s earlier poetry, the good mother of nurture, continuance and dream is absent, and in her place, destroying the men, and haunting Hewett herself, is the witch.

In the volume Rapunzel in Suburbia (1975), Hewett tackles this ‘mother’ directly. Drawing on fairytale and, through the epigraphs from ‘The Lady of Shalott’ which punctuate the book, a wider literary heritage, Hewett deepens her personal quest and places her own experience somewhat uneasily within a larger web. Even in those poems which deal very directly with personal memories, an archetypal witch-mother/daughter relationship is called to mind. ‘Calling on Mother’ uses a vocabulary based on black magic to recount Hewett’s sour and bitter memories:

Mother, gigantic in her swami slips,
rubs and rubs at her Aladdin lamp
but never dips the wick.
Dress preservers sewn into armpits,
rubber corsets breathing holes of fat,
false teeth that never fitted
gnaw in cupboards.
(1975, p. 21)
This is a monstrous mother, larger than life, allied with the magic of Aladdin’s lamp, with a death’s head grin of removable smile. The grossness of the figure renders her fantastical, but the juxtaposition of occult images and the images of everyday paraphernalia—the dress preservers and rubber corsets—connects the physical and psychic mothers. In ‘Death of My Mad Mother’ (p. 20), detailing a terrible struggle for power between the living Hewett and her dying mother, the very use of the phrase ‘my mad mother’ suggests a commonality in mother madness. The viciousness of the struggle and the hatred are highlighted by the painful use of Hewett’s pet name:

So that’s the end of it,  the long-days’ hatreds,
Honey-top in the chair gone  grey with waiting.

But this poem also remembers the death of a presumably sane father and it is essential to see the difference in Hewett’s attitude. Father managed:

To die quietly
   one finger on “Legend of the Nineties”
marking his place,
the long night’s tide pulling him
   through dream to dark.

The father is again imaged as ‘legendary’ with a place in tradition, a marker for those following him. His is a gentle death, one in which he can surrender himself, allow himself to be pulled, secure in his ‘place’. By contrast, the mother, fighting perhaps for her own ‘place’, is not content to ‘surrender’, but rather, pulls ‘Honey-top’ into old age with her with her ‘implacable blame’, forcing her daughter to follow her
own 'story'. 'Calling on Mother' displays the same dragging: the mother who 'rubs & rubs' but 'never dips the wick' becomes the daughter who is 'chafed raw' from masturbation; the mother who surrounds herself with the naphthalene and paraphernalia of the housewife, denying her sexuality, becomes the daughter who learnt to answer to "Mrs"; the gigantic, fat Mother becomes, eventually, the obese Hewett. Throughout Hewett's entire poetic output, her father and the patrilineage he represents remain secure in their place. With only the rarest of exceptions in her poetry, they are individuated and allowed separate egos, and retain their link to dream and legend. Conversely, Hewett increasingly compresses her own, her mother's and her grandmothers' identities into one monstrous figure. This is frequently done in a bodily way—the obesity, the madness associated with menopause and 'the blood', the grandmother's cataract blindness:

her grandmother lay in the sleepout
calling on God
ger pupil turning milky

(1987, 'Alice' 4, p. 4)

which slips imperceptibly into Hewett's own detached retina:

her retina detached
& the landscape shimmered.
...
she lay in The Eye Hospital
a drip in her arm
& double vision
bandaged with pain

(1987, 'Days of Violence: Days of Rages'
19 and 20, pp. 41-42)

Indeed, throughout Alice in Wormland (1987), whatever there may have been of something to remember and thus to pass on from
mother to daughter, has been brutally crushed down into a single, archetypal character, embodying all the negatives of the monstrous mother. Whereas in 'The Puritans', it is Hewett's paternal grandmother who has several defective sons, here Hewett compresses the generations, so that these uncles appear to be Alice's brothers:

Alice had six brothers
one lived in the silo one in the sheepfeeder
one was a blind albino building crooked fences
one peed from the chaffhouse window
in shirt tails scratching himself
only Jack & Bob were normal
living in ruined houses along the road to York.
('Alice' 4, p. 4)

And again, where in her earlier poems and her autobiography it is Hewett's grandmother who sings for her future husband ('the window dresser at The Bon-Marche'), Alice now plays that role:

Alice stood on the blue Axminster
by the iron-framed piano
with the sconces glowing
singing Tosti's Goodbye
for the window dresser at The Bon-Marche
hemming the customers in
with bolts of satin
the carriage builder
in The Williamstown Railway Workshops
who always left his cornet behind
in the train.

('Days of Violence: Days of Rages' 14, p. 29)

In effect, Alice has become an amalgam of Hewett, her mother and her grandmothers, their history compressed into hers. This, I suggest, is the permeable ego boundary at its most perilous, for this compression, or what Chodorow calls 'boundary confusion' (1980, p. 58-59)—the daughter turned into mother—forces a symbolic silencing:
My tongue's a broken clapper in a bell,
with book and candle I roll down to Hell,
and circling back upon my mother's bed,
gift-wrapped receive the Kingdom of the Dead.
('I've Made My Bed, I'll Lie On it', 1975, p. 22)

The witch-mother has produced a witch-daughter, writing from the 'Kingdom of the Dead', and with the book and candle of incantation the only voice left to her.

Throughout this and later works, Hewett self-consciously adopts this witch persona. In ‘Underneath the Arches’ (1975, p. 46), she relishes the role, and begins to write it with the beginnings of a more positive conception:

I wear black now,  
the witch's clothes.  
Portents, omens, stab me in the dark.  
Old age is either pastels, twin-sets, pearls of gentle wisdom, or else a robe of power.

This witch role offers a rich range of archetypal images which Hewett calls on throughout Rapunzel in Suburbia and Greenhouse. Alongside the family mythologies and family witches, Hewett calls on the broader symbolism of Eurocentric myth including the Brothers Grimm, Arthurian Romance and Shakespeare's archetypal tragedies of self-ignorance. In doing so, she places her own struggle for identity within the web of a larger human dilemma, and allows the reader to see that this 'individual' voice is very much dependent upon the mould of her cultural ancestry. Further, the continuing dilemma of the voice in this collection is that of woman struggling against patriarchal oppression. The Lady of Shalott's mirror cracks when she looks out from the tower
of patriarchy to see her own desire, and the various mirrors in this book are cracked, dark or threatening, or indeed, pointedly absent.

The dark nightmare of the witch-mother, and the entrapped sexuality of woman come together in the final poem of the collection, ‘Grave Fairytale’ (pp. 90-91). The spectre of the complicity of woman in her own and her daughter’s subjection is ghoulishly realized in the black Witch of this poem. In its violently sexual rewriting of the Rapunzel myth, the construction of woman is not merely the construction of the outer garments, but a construction at the deepest level of the psyche. The alter-ego witch is so close that:

...sometimes I thought, ‘She is myself’

She is ‘as savage as a cuckoo’ and invades the most private of nests, the mind, displacing its natural occupant, the uncorrupted child. The black witch is omnipresent and the edge of individual identities is blurred. As in previous poems, Hewett witnesses and laments the meshing of her own and her mother’s identities. Without a mirror to show ‘true’ reflections, this Rapunzel cannot be sure if she is only her conscious self, or if the Other, the posturing black Witch, would also be reflected if she had such a mirror.

The poem drips with voluptuously perverse images, as in a nightmare. Hewett highlights sexual possibilities—the tower becomes overtly phallic, the hair becomes the net of female sexual entrapment, the prince’s dangling sword is obvious enough. It is a base sexuality, of guttural and bestial lust, seen and vicariously experienced by the schizophrenic Rapunzel:
Their shadows gambolled, hunch-backed, hairy-arsed,  
and as she ran four-pawed across the light,  
the female dropped coined blood spots on the floor.

Such images of rutting animals in heat, with their essential or  
biological implications, are intensified when, countering the single  
‘dangling sword’ of the prince, Rapunzel takes her double, convex  
scissors, reminiscent of Irigaray’s ‘Speculum’ (1985), and ritually  
desexes herself in the cutting of her hair. In this inversion of ‘The  
Rape of the Lock’, Hewett frees her Rapunzel through the murder of  
the ‘glowing prince’. Even his great swordrots at the foot of the tower.  
But this psychic murder, the rejection of an enslavement in the  
patriarchy, causes not just the death of the prince, but the slow  
diminishment of the black Witch.

Or does it? Witch and Rapunzel, mother and daughter, have  
fought for sexual hegemony. It is, after all, the witch who beats  
Rapunzel back to the wall, and pursues, though without satisfaction,  
her own lust, whilst Rapunzel is in the shadow of the witch-mother’s  
possessive and perverse sexuality. The prince becomes, in such a  
reading, merely an object of exchange in an economy based on mother  
and daughter, a reversal of the dominant paradigm in which the body  
of the mother serves as the point of exchange between father and son.  
Does Rapunzel really destroy the black Witch, the pile of rags which  
‘grows smaller every year’, or is it that Rapunzel becomes the black  
Witch, a bald old crone collabrating in her own colonisation? In this  
enigmatic finale to the volume, Hewett suggests that the saga is not  
over, that the absence of the good mother, and the continuing  
invasive presence of the wicked, continues. And in overlaying the  
intensely personal with the mythological, Hewett creates a space in
which the quest for identity for the woman self may be taken beyond the merely personal or confessional.

*Rapunzel in Suburbia*, and especially 'Grave Fairytale', detail a struggle for identity in which Hewett feels herself torn by the two sides of her ancestry—the legends of the prince/patriarch, and the 'itch' in the blood ('The Puritans', 1968, p. 66) of the mad witch-mother. In *Greenhouse* (1979), that same quest for a place and a voice is made in a different way. Whilst Rapunzel laments that she cannot be sure what was her and what was other, Hewett here begins defiantly:

I can't write autobiography  because there is no me
Me is not a stable reality / the collective
Me in the changing world  no propped up statue
in the square for pigeons to shit on turning green.
('Creeley in Sydney', p. 16)

Hewett sees that there is a great lifelessness in 'true' autobiography and has chosen to write the autobiography of the multiplied 'me'. In *Wildcard* one section of her life—the years in Sydney—is written twice, giving us two different stories, each equally true, each equally fictitious. In 'The Darkling Sisters' (1993), Hewett buys a house, and finds a ghostly sisterhood mirroring her own story. The notion of this doubleness, of a split between a unified, stable, continuing self and a self which is composed from a matrix of histories, dominates all of Hewett's writing. In a recent article on sexual identity in Hewett's poetry (1993), Jenny Digby argues that Hewett is indeed presenting her authentic, unified self in her work, whilst acknowledging that Hewett problematises 'the authorial subject' (pp. 173-4). For Digby, Hewett's perceived insistence on her own subjectivity and her use of autobiographical subject matter place her work squarely within the
bounds of a feminist project which insists on the validity of the personal experience. Whilst Digby’s argument that

it is the very holding of a mirror up to the self, in an examination of identity, that is important in the creation of women’s art
(p. 168)

is undoubtedly correct, Digby assumes a mirror which, unlike Dobson’s ‘convex’ mirror, is a more or less straight reflection of the self into writing. She asserts that ‘a belief in the unity of a woman’s life and her art’ (p. 168) is at the heart of feminist literary theory, and seems to argue that this implies a ‘true’ or authentic self which can be clearly represented in writing. Indeed, when writing that

Hewett uses myth and fairytales as a fabric into which she can weave her own story.
(p. 167)

she assumes an underlying, ‘true’ story which can be embellished, rather than seeing Hewett’s story as shaped by, as much as woven into, the narrative discourses which surround her. Similarly, in simplifying Hewett’s creation of personae:

The underlying reasons for Hewett’s creation of a poetic pseudonym are the successful libel threats she has incurred, and the potential of further obloquy
(p. 174)

Digby fails to deal with the refracted Hewett identity. According to Digby’s analysis of ‘Creeley in Sydney’, Hewett rejects her own supposition that ‘Me is not a stable reality’:
The poem's "there is no me" and "Me is not a stable reality" refer directly to post-structuralist theories of subjectivity—the "death" of the author, and the notion of the processional subject—and appear at first to be affirming these theories. However, as the poem develops, idioms of modern literary discourse punctuate the text of the poem and suggest irony in their italicised appearance. Reference is made to Barthes' perpetually deferred signifier: "Writing exists in its own activity" and the disappearance of the author: "Depersonalise the world in abstract words"... It appears from this poem that Hewett is ambivalent about the development away from authorial intention and subjective presence in writing... If we read the poem's irony it could be said that the poet is reclaiming authorial presence and intention. The poet does exist outside language. She exists corporeally in reference to actualities... Read paradoxically the poem makes a claim for the autobiographical subject, and a reconstituted "I", rather than a denial of the self in her writing.

(PP. 173-4)

While it is apparent that Hewett tussles with and ironises the excesses of modernist theory, and particularly its rejection of closure:

Arriving at conclusions is so sad the reference is enough.
To go swimming is not to get to the other side of the lake but to go swimming.

(p. 18)

there is a very real sense in which Hewett does 'swim' in the troubled waters between the 'I' which says 'I am my life' and the 'I' which announces 'I want my negative capability again'. It is in precisely this tension between the particulars of lives—what Hewett calls 'topography' in this poem—and the sense that particularisation, or individuation can lead to the stasis of a 'propped up statue/in the square for pigeons to shit on turning green' that identity is unstable.
Selves are continuing and fragmented. Dorothy Hewett—or any 'me'—is both written and writing.

Hewett has adopted various ways of dealing with this doubled 'essence', and as will be seen in the next section on her plays, experiments with dramatic devices for exploring this centre/non-centre. In *Greenhouse*, Hewett places herself in relation to others in the literary world—from writers local and contemporary to those from other times and places, and to literary characters who have become familiar. Using literary rather than folkloric referents allows her to explore simultaneously her identity as a woman and as a writer. This exploration leads her through a literary world peopled with women characters created and constrained by their male writers, to a search for new role models in this 'unstable' world.

In grappling with these literary icons of womanhood, Hewett engages directly in the feminist quest to expose the 'construction' of femininity and to see how it reflects on her personal experience. In her poems 'Coming to You' (p. 26) and 'Madame Bovary' (p. 27), Hedda Gabler, Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary pass through as icons—'those fatal heavy ladies courting grief/ cross themselves perversely all the way' ('Coming to You'). They are more than icons, for by meshing the literary landscapes of Hedda, Anna and Emma with the trains, rivers and bridges of the 'Hawkesbury', 'Petersham' and 'the bridge across the harbour', Hewett brings those icons into a recognisable location, linking their own 'fatalism' with hers:
my black hat lost in last night's thunderstorm
I ride through the flat land
like General Gabler's daughter
...
the Hawkesbury shakes its great shield
water invades the mind at Petersham
a plane drops out of the sky on Platform 8 smoke
billows up Karenina steps beneath the train
(those fatal heavy ladies courting grief
cross themselves perversely all the way)

('Coming to you', p. 26)

and:

In the village ghetto hand to mouth
the funereal carriage spokes
flash by the park the bridge across
the harbour smiling in the courtyard
on the balcony smiling the camera clicks
the mirrored cadenced voices
faking it Bovary the sentimental arsenic
lady is she the one you met the one
you knew so well?

('Madame Bovary', p. 27)

These three literary women share essential characteristics—they are all created by men, they are all sexual transgressors and they all die by their own hand, unable to bear the burden of that transgression further. They are all the creatures and the victims of patriarchy. Indeed, they are even named for that patriarchy. We know that they are Hedda, Anna and Emma, but Hewett highlights their patriarchal 'ownership' by calling Anna merely 'Karenina', her name showing her to be merely a female adjunct to the authority figure of Karenin, Emma is Bovary, and Hedda is 'General Gabler's daughter'. These three, then, who have so shaped our literary consciousness of women, are all known by their relation to their fathers, husbands, lovers and the masculine dominated world which they both inhabit and are created by. It is no coincidence that they are all effectively motherless.
These characters are only allowed identity in relation to men, in the same way that so many of the folkloric women (all occupying fathered and unmothered mythic territory) are bounded by their heroes—Rapunzel by her Prince, Beauty by her Beast, Snow White and Cinderella by their own Prince Charmings. The repeated use of Guinevere/Gwendoline in *Greenhouse* explores a character who straddles the mythic and the literary. Early in the collection, she is figured merely as 'Lancelot's Lady' or 'King Arthur's consort', a lady given relation by her hero, and waiting inert for his arrival:

Obediently she weaves
the twitchy web
...
the journey's circular
but still the victim can't anchor at the pier
the boat may spring a leak
or Lancelot forget to stick
his head out of the window...

('Lancelot's Lady', 1979, p. 20)

The personal love poems in this volume are all of the waiting, abandoned lover:

Obscure the lens give me a rose
to hold he loves me
petals craze he loves me not
& shatter

('Le Spectre de la Rose', p. 22)

Despairing in her unfulfilled love affairs, and writing herself as incomplete without the absent lover, Hewett implicates her own story with those of her fatal, heavy ladies 'courting grief'. As a woman and writer bounded by the patriarchal tower, she continues the fate of Hedda Gabler, Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary. She acknowledges this meshing of fates in the conclusion of 'Coming to You':
Hewett’s life as a woman and writer is ‘double-crossed’, inscribed and defined by previous fictions and compositions. The wholeness which she cannot achieve is the patriarchal construction of her femininity—her dresses, the outer garments of that construction fall apart, and she cannot ‘mend’ them.

This literary and mythical lack of a position which is not constructed by men, is given exquisite personal attention in one of Hewett’s finest poems, ‘Anniversary’ (p. 41). In the poem, two mothers—the nurturer and the socially constructed commodity—merge. There can be no doubt of the depth of grief here for a small son, a four year old who has died of leukaemia nearly thirty years before. But this is not a grief allowed full expression, and the poem is full of constraints and reprovals. The pathetic personal note of her son saying ‘don’t cry... don’t be sad’ is outweighed by the public nature of his death and her role, for ‘When he died it was like everybody else/ in the public ward with the screens around him’.

The speaker’s grief and her sense of herself as mother are almost entirely moulded by a series of external voices. There is the voice of the husband who says ‘You’re only crying for yourself’, entirely missing the point that the child has been and will always be part of herself. There is the voice of Truby King, the dogmatic male adviser on all matters maternal, who said ‘a baby needed firm support’. The final, tragic admission of failure in the poem is of a gender failure:
A ‘good’ mother gives her baby firm support, massages her breasts and drinks stout to produce milk—a ‘good mother’ does not, surely, allow her child to die of cancer. As one expects of Hewett, with her lifetime commitment to social criticism, this mother’s gender failure is linked inextricably with social failure. Her man walks to work in the dark, their baby lies in a spine-curvature-inducing canvas cot, their house is:

...bare & cold with a false gable
we had no furniture only a double mattress
on the floor a big table & two deal chairs.

Their baby wears shrunken jackets, she wears a Woolworth’s dress, their child dies, ‘like everybody else/ in the public ward’.

Certainly Truby King and his ilk are the absent arbiters of good, middle-class motherhood, but in the poem the present dispenser of justice is another woman—the speaker’s mother, the dreaded witch of so many previous poems. This mother stands for all that the failing mother lacks. In contrast to the bare, cold, false-gabled house, the mother has a house with bay windows, a polished table, fir trees and yellow roses. It is here that the dying child is being nursed—Hewett’s gender and social failure render her incapable of nursing her own child at home. The child has, in effect, been stolen from her (a continuance of the witch/stepmother theme), taken as a punishment for her sexual misdemeanours. In the Rapunzel story, the natural mother has her child taken away from her because she tries to satisfy
her desire. The husband is only the vehicle of that desire. In
‘Anniversary’, Hewett has also lost her child by following desire, and
the lover is merely its emblem. The underlying psychic drama moves
between the voices of patriarchal construction and the struggle of
mother and daughter for hegemony.

In the face of the overwhelming ‘they’—patriarchy and
mother—which disapproves of and enfeebles this mother, there is the
resource of silence. She may be overweight, in a Woolworth’s dress,
and dry-breasted, but she knows that silence may be powerful and uses
it with love:

not telling anybody in case they kept him alive
with another transfusion—

But silence has its limitations. Hewett has always had a great
compulsion to speak, despite the ‘broken’ clapper, the hand over the
mouth, the restrictions of writing in a literary world filled with failed
women who are punished for their unwomanly crimes. There is
another option, and it is one taken up by many women writers—that
of finding a poetic matriarch figure, the ‘good’ mother so absent from
our folklore and literature. This is the endeavour of Gilbert and Gubar
in Shakespeare’s Sisters (1979), of Adrienne Rich in ‘Vesuvius at
home’ (1980), of Fay Zwicky’s poems ‘Mrs Noah Speaks’ and ‘Emily
Dickinson Judges the Bread Division’ (1982). The metaphorical
matriarch need not be a woman. Gwen Harwood finds spiritual milk
in the philosophy of Wittgenstein, and Hewett finds one model in
Mandelstam, to whom her ‘Mandelstam Letters’ (Greenhouse) are a
homage.
Mandelstam serves as a literary or spiritual mother precisely because under the authority structure by which his speech is governed, he suffers the imprisonment of the spirit which Hewett sees herself as a woman writer suffering. Indeed, if the masculinist authority structures of patriarchy, and the political authority structures of Communist totalitarianism are equated, it can be inferred that in one sense, Hewett writes this poem to tell the truth to herself not only about her own blindness to the atrocities of Stalinism, but also about the great women who have disappeared into the barred camps of patriarchy. One of these women, of course, is herself. In *Wildcard*, Hewett writes of her years in the Communist Party, and especially her years as a Sydney organiser, not only as a time of great political excitement, but as a terrible silencing of her creative talents. Rejecting poetry and her gift with language as bourgeois, she deliberately stripped herself of her identity as a writer, only to find that the silence was difficult to break. Hewett tells us that ‘probably the most crucial thing ever said to [her] as a writer’ was Frank Hardy’s advice, in the mid 1950’s, to give up the writing of socialist ballads (which comprise the 1963 volume *What About The People!*), and ‘For Christ’s sake, Toddy, write a poem about the death of your mother or something’ (1990, p. 247). Her poem ‘Testament’ won the ABC Prize in 1945—it was a full twenty years later that ‘Legend of the Green Country’ won the same prize.

In the Mandelstam poems, when Hewett addresses both the attempt to silence Mandelstam, and her collaboration in her own silencing, she consciously aligns the authority structures of Communist totalitarianism with those governing masculinity and femininity. Throughout her ‘Mandelstam Letters’ (pp. 45-56), she
'feminises' Mandelstam and makes repeated textual connections between writing, power and sexuality. Hewett's dresses which fall apart and cannot be mended, for instance, recall Mandelstam's travelling rug which falls apart:

I lost my whitehandled walking-stick after writing *The Patriarch*, the travelling rug that covered me fell apart after the line,
you will cover me with it as with a military flag when I die
('First Voronezh Letter', 1979, p. 46)

and the 'possessions', the material things Mandelstam still owns, are womanly:

a bucket, a frying pan, a lamp and a flatiron.

For both the dissident and the woman writer, a dissident in the dominant ideology, the need to pass on speech is the primary duty:

O my confiscated poems! People will keep my work
for me sewn into cushions,
stuck inside saucepans and shoes, make copies,
passing from hand to hand, hidden
in a thousand secret places, remembered,
forgotten, human life grows cheaper
my memory is not as good as it used to be
our dialogue is over for the time being
yet it is dangerous to stop talking, we might forget how to do it.

('Third Moscow Letter', p. 50)

The cushions and saucepans suggest once again the domestic and the feminine. In the 'Sydney Postscript' to these 'Letters', Hewett deliberately compares herself as a woman writer with Mandelstam as a suppressed writer. In calling the poem 'Postscript', she confirms the continuance she sees Mandelstam as demanding, and 'stretches' again the connections Mandelstam himself imagined:
Let’s start as though we were stretched/on the headsmen’s block,
you and I/on the other side of seventy years
(epigraph to ‘Sydney Postscript’, p. 56)

She sees herself, like Mandelstam, as having ‘the soles of [her] shoes worn through from composing poetry’, and likens her own difficulties with censorship in the wake of the successful Lloyd Davies actions with the restrictions placed on Mandelstam:

I am sending my poems to the literary mags. bookshops no longer stock them poems are obliterated one of the accusations you circulated your verses against you a little serenity in this country I live only for the present unforgivable it is unforgivably vain to compare ourselves.

And yet it is essential to ‘compare’, even if Hewett lives ‘only for the present’ while Mandelstam sees his words stretching forwards across ‘seventy years’. It is in this mode of comparison, or of continuance, that Hewett calls on Sappho and Gwendoline/Guinevere, and conflates the Gwendoline of mythic and literary Camelot, and Sappho with her fragmented songs, with Gwen Harwood, ‘buried under black frost’.

Hewett’s writing of the continuance between the historical Sappho of 600BC of whom so little is known, the mythologised Guinevere, and Gwen Harwood with her own distinctive ‘topography’, crosses time and space. In ‘For Sappho’ (p. 63), Sappho’s Lesbos becomes Tasmania, the ‘Last landstop on the searoad to Antarctica’ and Sappho herself becomes Harwood, in a recognisable landscape. Hobart, Burnie, Launceston, Oyster Cove, and the Derwent are all present in their particularity, yet all recall the Lesbos seascape, the primacy of water and of voyages. Hewett makes Harwood recognisable as Sappho,
acknowledging both her Tasmanian landscape, her affinity with the folkloric (‘a goosegirl in her denims’, ‘calling the geese’, ‘pulling the mullet in’) and the ‘burning senses’ they share. This is a most intimate relationship of the heart, a positive permeability of the self and the witch-like comradeship Hewett, Harwood and Sappho share is an affirming one:

We drive at midnight, the sky is close to us,  
the black sea roams in love in the libraries  
at the University suitably luminous in Oyster Cove  
calling the geese pulling the mullet in  
reading to each other the wild and secret  
messages we send to be decoded...

‘For the Glory of God & of Gwendoline’ (p. 67) continues this comradeship. The Gwen who had been, Hewett tells us, ‘so long the mute the burning Sappho/ Lancelot’s lay & King Arthur’s consort’ is now a partner in the simultaneous storming outside the tower of patriarchy and inside the castle of power. Gwen, like Sappho, Anna, Emma and Hedda, has been figured as ‘Lancelot’s Lady’ and ‘King Arthur’s consort’, shut out from a community of identity in being made subject and all have, Hewett suggests, lived ‘long outside [men’s] wars and wonderments’. But by writing, she says, by inscribing themselves and their solidarity, they can gain power: ‘they’ll have to let us in without a fight’...‘we’ll bring our manuscripts they can’t refuse’. These are now strong women, who can ride as fast and long, even ‘outstrip’ ‘all the dazzling men’. Indeed the great symbol of male dazzle, the Excalibur/sword/penis, will be useful for these two. They can be used as ‘bodkins lovely Gwen’—tools for the weavings of women. What is perhaps most significant in this poem is that in
challenging the patriarchal prohibitions, Hewett suggests a new community.

...OGwen
we've always had a nice way with the men
& this time we won't operate alone

The lessons learned are seen as communal, not individual, and in a new romantic quest of matriarchs who can pass on their wisdom, Hewett poses the final challenge to herself and her Gwen—'I say let's ride we've nothing left to lose'.

In these poems of womanly comradeship, of finding a good spiritual mother, it appears that Hewett has finally turned away from the black Witch who has dogged her search for subjection, to a white Witch of women's dreams and power in community. But there are still shadows hanging over this possible world of woman's wisdom. If Hewett's 'Postscript' to Mandelstam speaks of the need for free speech, of the need to speak out against madness, why is it that so much madness is still seen as bound up in female sexuality? The female body again seems to be the site of madness and inevitable biological illness, the 'fate': women's eyes are 'ablaze' with 'cataracts'; their breasts are 'cancerous', they hold 'dead' children.

In Hewett's next volume, *Alice in Wormland* (1987) this nexus between woman, biology and madness is reiterated:

```
an old woman in a darned cardigan
with a carving knife mouths
Bitch!  Bitch!  Bitch!

Woe to you  cries Alice
&  Woe  woe to me.
```

('The Alice Poems' 1, p. 3)
Hewett's sleight of hand in calling herself 'Alice' rather than 'I' does not, for me, soften much the effect of re-travelling over very worn ground. This is still a world in which:

the blood of them all swam in her
she was caught in the web of their history
like the tarantula
hanging from the chaffhouse rafter
waiting to reel her in.
('Alice' 5, p. 6)

It is also still the world in which:

her mother had change of life at 35
haemorraging into the frayed towels
on the leatherette sofa
she tacked a sign over Alice's bed
I must not tell lies against my mother
('Alice' 5, p. 6)

When Jane Gallop writes of Luce Irigaray's pronouncement 'If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we are going to reproduce the same history', she goes on to elucidate:

The obligation to reproduce—the daughter's obligation to reproduce the mother, the mother's story—is a more difficult obstacle than even the Father's Law, an obstacle that necessarily intrudes even into the lovely, liberated space of women among themselves
(1982, p. 113).

Hewett herself writes something very similar, when she concludes that:

I am programmed to play that role in [my mother's] life, to inherit the romantic non-cautionary side to her, to live out that part of her personality and to be both loved and hated for it.
(1990, p. 25)
No matter how far she travels from her mother’s middle-class respectability, with all its strictures on politics and sexuality, she sees herself as only really acting out what was in her mother’s blood, unable to escape from that obstacle.

In her poetry then, Hewett’s conception and writing of the feminine is one in which her identity as a woman is tied in a primordial knot. While she sees that her construction as a woman is composed of a web of influences, ranging out from family to fairytale to literature and back to family, the spider at the middle of that web is her mother. In general, Hewett displays a knowledge that she is constructed, changing and being formed according to the laws of a number of discourses, including that of patriarchy, but insists at the same time on a sort of essential monstrousness in the mother, a monstrousness which she attributes, not to the range of histories which must have formed that mother, but to ‘the blood’, the genes, the programming that is inside and of the body.

II

Dorothy Hewett spent nine years tutoring at the University of Western Australia, occupying an English Department office overlooking what she calls the ‘miraculous great space of Perth’s New Fortune Theatre’ (1981, p. xvii). She began her play-writing career during these years, and acknowledges that the presence of this stage has significantly influenced her writing for the theatre. In this section, I hope to trace some of these influences. My main concern, however, is to argue that Hewett’s experience with this stage, and her experimentation with overt theatricality is intimately bound up with
much of her poetry. I want to look at the connections between
Shakespeare’s ‘wooden O’ (Henry V, I. Chorus. 13) and Hewett’s:

I wear black now,
the witch’s clothes.
Portent, omens stab me in the dark.
Old age is either pastels, twin-sets, pearls of
gentle wisdom, or else a robe of power.

A difficult sleight of hand—
to remain vulnerable to experience,
yet closed in the black cloak of flesh.

To stand open in a wooden O
is always risky,
but a cyclorama of small orbs, a moon,
a skyrocket or two, is never vulgar,
and cosmic imagery is right in fashion.
...
But power is something else:
to write a poem
Dame Edith Sitwell
bade the London jackhammers cease,
and Nellie Melba (with insomnia)
stopped the Town Hall clock in Bendigo.

Dissolving in a spotlight
keep your cool
with a pack of tarot cards
And jiggery-pokery behind a screen.
Gentlemen may remove any garment consistent with
decency.
Ladies may remove any garment consistent with charm.
(‘Underneath the Arches’, 1975, pp. 46-47)

In her plays, Hewett adopts and adapts both a replica Shakespearean
stage and the idea of its ‘miraculous space’ to suit her particular brand
of performance and theatricality. I want to see why, for Hewett,
standing open in that ‘O’ is risky, and particularly, why she figures it as
more risky for a woman. My aim is to glimpse Dorothy Hewett in the
act of performing herself with that particular brand of ‘jiggery-pokery
behind a screen’ which is writing.
Much has been written about Dorothy Hewett’s life, and particularly those aspects of her life which, if she had been a man, might have been affectionately labelled ‘larrikinism’, but which in a woman have brought about howls of moral indignation. For the purposes of this section of the chapter, only three main biographical issues need to be kept in mind. The first is that Hewett’s earliest years were spent on the family property at Wickepin, south east of Perth. The flatness of the land, the size of the sky, the isolation, and the seeming emptiness of this area are quite overwhelming. For Hewett, this landscape provided an enormous stage upon which her vivid childhood imagination could act, and it is not difficult to see why, in much of Hewett’s writing, the alternative of writing oneself ‘larger than life, gothic and romantic, across the empty page’ dominates the alternative of an ‘understated sparse style’ (1982, p. 99). As the Western Australian colonising society of which Hewett was a part did its best, or its worst, to act itself across what must have seemed like a horrifying empty stage, so did the young Hewett. Isolated by distance, Dorothy and her sister performed, acted and dressed up constantly in that huge, flat ‘O’ of wheatfields. In her autobiography, Wildcard, Hewett recalls herself and her sister constantly dressing up from her grandmother’s tin trunks, and she repeats the importance of costuming in her recent contribution to Drusilla Modjeska’s anthology, Sisters, where she remembers instilling terror in her mother by dressing up and ‘acting’ as one of the dreaded swaggies of the rural Depression (1993, p. 153). This was a childhood and a landscape which seemed to demand imaginative action, and the ability to perform, to keep the emptiness away. Even in these early days, performance seems to have been crucial to Hewett and her conception of herself.
The second of the life issues important to this chapter is that in her adolescence Hewett and her family moved to Perth, where her grandfather built the grand and gilded movie theatre which is now the Regal live theatre in Subiaco. With the building of the theatre, Hewett’s imaginative world underwent a transposition, as she watched and became drawn into the elegant and sophisticated film world, becoming fascinated by the *femme fatale* figure of 30’s and 40’s film. This figure recurs throughout Hewett’s plays and poetry, and is especially apparent in her plays *The Chapel Perilous* (1981, first published 1972), *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* (1976), and *Tatty Hollow* (1976). The last of these three influential theatres is of course the New Fortune itself. Four of her theatre pieces have been performed on this stage, beginning in 1966, with the most naturalistic and least distinctive of her plays, *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*, running through the crucial change to a distinctive style in *Chapel* in 1971, and thence to the unpublished rock opera ‘Catspaw’ in 1974. ‘The Rising of Pete Marsh’, also unpublished, was staged there in 1988 (Williams, 1992, p. 153).

*The Chapel Perilous* is the first of Hewett’s plays in which she fully exploits the possibilities of the open stage of the Fortune, and she appears to have found the process of writing the play both challenging and nerve-wracking (1981, p. xvii). In *Chapel*, Hewett writes herself, or, as I argue later, a mediated and problematised enactment of herself, large and gothic across the empty stage as well as the empty page. Her use of a large chorus, totemic figures, swift changes of time and place, song, dance, and the juxtaposition of the sublime and the vulgar, make *Chapel* a large play, and this largeness of conception, together with many of the effects she wrote for the open stage, are continued in
many of her other theatre pieces. She does not, in Chapel, or in most of
her writing, rely on a complex set, but rather on an energetic
participative imagination in her audience. Like Shakespeare's
audience, we must 'cram/Within this wooden O the very casques'
(Henry V, I. Chorus. 11-13), 'piece out [her] imperfections with [our]
thoughts' (Henry V, I. Chorus. 23), and 'deck' Hewett's kings, or indeed
her queen, with 'our thoughts' (Henry V, I. Chorus. 28). The quieter
and seemingly naturalistic set of Tatty Hollow is ironically undercut
and given larger status by having Tatty appear throughout the play in
an incongruous telephone box, as a blonde dummy complete with
high heels and pink boa. In Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly, which takes
the audience through the production and destruction of a femme
fatale, even a more conventional stage is made to work as if it had
much larger possibilities. Indeed, in this particular play, the making of
the female figure and the making of the theatre itself are textually
linked, a point to which I shall return. Overt theatricality is the
hallmark of Hewett's staging—not only must we 'Mind...true things by
what their mockeries be' (Henry V. IV Chorus. 53), we must be
constantly aware that they are mockeries, that they are fictions.

Hewett adapts many of the characteristics of Shakespearian
staging through her experience of the 'wooden O'. She is prepared to
make her audience work very hard. She writes large across a large
stage, not by filling it with naturalistic props, but by writing large
characters. Peter Thompson has pointed out that a large, open air
theatre demanded a great deal from Shakespearian actors, who must
'have determined to dominate both the platform and the surrounding
audience' (1983, p. 43). Hewett seems not to have trusted her actors to
bring off this domination and writes largeness and confrontation into
her characters, her action and her staging. She shares with the
Elizabethans, and with the world of vaudeville (to which she also
refers in ‘Underneath the Arches’), a language of the body which is
greatly amplified. Like Shakespeare, she contrasts and ironises serious
action with the action of clowns, or with vulgarity. Poetry floats as
easily in and out of prose in Hewett’s work as it did in Elizabethan
theatre, and music is absolutely integral to many of her plays,
although, as Margaret Williams points out, this aspect of her work has
received little attention (1992, p. xv). She displays, too, an Elizabethan
fascination with costuming, and its role in making the man or the
woman, although for Hewett mistaken identities are not a serious
issue. In her plays, there are no games of superficial disguise, and
interestingly enough no Shakespearian or Jonsonian cross-dressing to
problematising gender. It is the inner nature of identity itself which is at
issue, and more specifically, the nature of female identity.

I have argued that a sense of doubleness between a ‘stable’ and
an ‘unstable’ self lies within Hewett’s poetry and autobiography. In her
plays, she experiments with dramatic devices for exploring this
doubling phenomenon. In The Man from Mukanupin (1985), for
example, there is the doubling of day and night, while in Song of the
Seals, written for children (1985), there are the problematic selkies,
both human and seal. But it is in The Chapel Perilous and The Tatty
Hollow Story that Hewett’s examination of the split between the
unified and the dispersed, fluid identity can be most clearly identified,
and it is in these plays that the performative functions of these two
types are most clearly established. In each of these plays, there is indeed
a central character, being enacted on the stage, but in Chapel, Sally is a
positive, even dominating presence, whilst Tatty Hollow is an absence.
Speaking of the creation of the former in an interview with Pip Porter, Hewett says:

I learnt the techniques of having a central character who is real, surrounded by a world of moving, stylised puppet-like figures, who stand in, not for particular human emotions, but stand in for a whole series of human types,

while of Tatty Hollow she continues:

I see her as certainly the central figure in the play, but as very much a mirage in the minds of all the people, because one can’t create her as a complete character, because she changes according to how people are going to see her, therefore she must be fairly ephemeral. (1977, p.11-12)

In many ways, these two plays are like mirror images of each other. This is apparent even in the names of the central characters. Sally is a ‘Banner’ boldly announcing her presence, her unified speaking self, and her quest to walk ‘naked through the world’ (Act Two, p. 86). But Sally’s Banner, written for this large, open stage, is also the banner of the play which announces its ‘playness’. Chapel owes much to early morality plays as well as Brechtian modernism, and of course Hewett acknowledges her debt to Malory’s ‘Chapel Perilous’. But, as she tells us herself (p. xvi), it was to the New Fortune itself that the play owed much of its dramatic impetus. From her extensive teaching experience of Elizabethan drama, and the proximity of the New Fortune, Hewett saw a theatre which did not allow naturalism, which simply was not built for the ‘sleights of hand’ manageable with a proscenium arch, and where everybody—actors, writer, director,
audience—knows all the time that what they are participating in is a constructed fiction.

But Hewett’s handling of that construction takes a different direction to that of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. ‘There is nothing’, she writes, ‘in any other branch of the writing trade to approach the savage and heady confrontation of playwright and public’ (1981, p. 79). In many of her plays, ‘savage confrontation’ is Hewett’s modus operandi. In Chapel, the audience is meant to be confronted by the rather tawdry sex, the abortion, and the crudity of the language and songs, just as it is meant to be confronted by the authority figures who remain as dominators of the action. The stylisation of such characters increases the audience’s sense of Sally wandering through a life of judges and jailers, where human types replicate each other. Thus the figures of patriarchal authority—the canon, the judge and the father—step out from the same masks from which Sally’s lovers emerge. They are, the audience is pushed to believe, cast from the same mould, so it is no surprise that Sally’s lovers all reject her for what they sought in her, her sexuality. Michael is the most savage of these, lying with her ‘without love’ and then rejecting her for doing so, enticing her to leave her husband and baby, and then refusing to marry her precisely because she left her traditional role for him.

Michael: Relax, Sal. It’s not studded with diamonds. You think you can heal the world with that great compassionate cunt of yours but you’re not one of the great whores of history. You’re a de facto, living in a pokey bed-sit in the suburbs.

Sally: [coming to him] Let’s get married. Maybe then I’ll feel more secure.

Michael: [sitting on edge of bed] Marry you, an amateur moll like you? Marry a crow who deserted her husband and kid!

(Act Two, p. 75)
Judith, the mother, and the headmistress also become interchangeable, all acting as the black Witch, denying female sexuality, making it dirty and unwholesome, gloating when Sally's babies die. Basically, Hewett's women characters in Chapel continue to reinforce patriarchal authority.

But Hewett's Sally, even while she is the 'real' central character surrounded by 'types', is not exempted from scrutiny, from confrontation in the play. The fact that Sally is 'clothed' by the outer garments of social pressure does not mean that Hewett does not put her under the spotlight, questioning her catchcry that she wants to walk through the world naked, and answer the blood direct. The young Sally believes, and until the final bow continues to believe, that to be an artist is to be most truly herself and that, to be most truly herself, she must cast off the trappings, cloaks and hobblies of herself as a social animal, interacting with others, and somehow stand alone. She believes her essential artistic self to be a positive presence apart from the influence of family, lovers and society. Paradoxically, of course, Sally is often a pathetic figure, seeking lover after lover to complete herself, forcing them and herself toward inevitable failures. In her relations with lovers, Sally comes across as a sexual desperado rather than a sexual quester. As in so much of her poetry, Hewett does not let go of the idea that the female sex intrinsically holds the seeds of its own downfall. 'The blood' becomes for Sally, as for so many of the female figures in the poetry, 'the curse'.

In dramatic terms, this essential ambiguity in Sally's character is one of the strongest points in Hewett's writing of her. Sally is at once a trailblazer and a failure, a banner waver and a Tatty Hollow, perhaps one of the great whores in history as well as a defacto in a bed-sit. Sally
tells us herself that she is both Sally Banner and Nobody. Her failure is not even a definite one, 'gothic and romantic':

Poor Sally, she never made it,  
No matter how hard she tried.  
She tried hard not to know it,  
But she was a minor poet  
Until the day she died.  

(Act Two, p. 86)

Questions concerning that failure are often asked in terms of 'Why does Sally bow?'. Within this central question, there are many others which Hewett leaves unanswered: Is Sally a failure? Is she only ever a minor poet? What would a major poet be anyway?

Why—to take such questions further—is there such a deep undercurrent to this play suggesting that Sally is somehow sterile, or destructive, unable to create in the form of a healthy, living child, or a 'major' poem? Is it because she is a woman? Perhaps it is only the authority figures who see Sally as 'minor', who continue to insist that, as a woman, Sally cannot be a major poet. Sally's response to the jibes of the chorus leaves that ambiguity intact. Sally's reply 'I walked naked through the world' (Act Two, p. 86) may be read as a riposte to her accusers, an enigmatic but defiant justification of herself which takes the audience back through Lear to all the Wanderers of our poetic and dramatic tradition. Or, on the other hand, it may be an acquiescence, in which she sees that her aloofness, her ridicule for others and her inability to come to terms with her social self have made her what she is, a minor poet who never made it. Judith's reply that:
Very few of my acquaintances ever looked very good naked. Minds seem to be much the same. Those I know who go about being brutally honest without a rag of concession for the outraged reticence of others are a nuisance

(Act Two, p. 86)

is similarly ambiguous. Does Hewett simply damn Judith’s narrow mindedness, or is there a nagging voice here which says that brutal honesty (or confrontation) and major poetry don’t go hand in hand?

And yet Hewett herself does continue with ‘confrontation’, with ‘brutal honesty’. The sense of confrontation between what we perceive as ‘real’ and what is actually enacted or performed is amplified even more in other plays—in a woman who has a permanent dummy husband draped on her arm (Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly, 1976), and, in a grotesque scene, in another woman character who prepares her baby for the Sunday roast, much as a good little woman would offer a leg of sacrificial lamb (Mrs Porter and the Angel, 1992). It is no accident that Hewett brings much of this confrontation, of this shared knowledge of the fictionality of the theatre and the interchange between puppets and individuals, to bear directly on the nature of female identity, and especially upon her consideration of what actually constitutes a woman—is she an essential, biological identity, or is woman merely an accretion of fictions, costumed in a larger theatricality. Is she, in other words, only performed?

I argue that it is at least partly due to Hewett’s experience of the open stage, and of an overt theatricality which intensifies her focus on these issues of femininity. In the plays which continue this theme, Tatty Hollow and Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly, Hewett deepens her exploration of the constructed or performed woman, even where she no longer requires the actual large stage and set for which Chapel was
written. Its 'miraculous space' is now an imagined, metaphorical space, rather like Sally's 'tremendous world' in her head (Act Two, p. 88). In contrast to Sally Banner, Tatty Hollow signifies both absence, and that peculiar absence which is implied in the sense of the tatty hollow of a well used woman. Tatty herself is definitely the central figure of the play, and there is a Tatty who comes on stage, but for most of the play she is actually the dummy propped up in the phone box. The dummy is her re-presentation—Tatty herself is absent. It is quite evident that in writing _Tatty Hollow_, Hewett consciously turns the fabric of _Chapel_ inside out, writing its shadow. The casts of both plays are extraordinarily similar. Tatty is an inversion of Sally; Thomas, in _Chapel_ becomes Ben in _Tatty_, Michael becomes Johnny Apple, Judith becomes Jo, and so on. In _Tatty Hollow_, rather than concentrating on a positively present central character, Hewett presents the possibility of a woman who is perhaps nothing more than the enactments others make of her. Her various lovers all seem to have different versions of her, and there is a wonderfully comic scene in which they all assert that their version of Tatty's death is the correct one. It is worth noting that their stories of her death are all overtly dramatic or theatrical, including the supposition that Tatty, like Mama Cass, has choked to death on a ham sandwich. Similarly, all Tatty's lovers believe that Tatty's son, Paul Laureate, is their own, and the confusion continues when it becomes apparent that Paul may be yet another lover, or, indeed, both son and lover. Tatty is enacted by the audience which those around her comprise, her body becomes the stage on which her refracted identity is projected by the gaze of her lovers. Indeed, it seems that in Tatty the wooden 'O' has shrunk down to the little 'o', that stage which her female hollowness or emptiness makes possible.
In *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly*, the connection between those two ‘o’s, the ‘O’ of the stage and the ‘o’ of the female body, becomes quite overt. The ‘making’ of Dolly Garden, *femme fatale*, is counterpointed by the making of the theatre in which her success and her failure will be acted out. In the very opening of the play, when the courtship and marriage of Dolly’s grandparents progress inevitably to the destined conception of Dolly, the story of her making is ironised by the constructionist lines of a building worker. Thus the beginning of Ned’s and Mary’s courtship corresponds with the worker’s elaboration of ‘Law’s special wire-cut bricks, lime, mortar, cut-struck, cleaned down with spirits’ (Act One, p. 8), and the moments just before their wedding and the revelation of Mary’s pregnancy are made analogous to the finishing of the shell of the building:

WORKER: Two coats approved Superlac. Two coats approved cold water paint. One coat raw linseed oil. Bag down and lie. Lime white on walls and ceilings.

MARY: A mixture for keeping the hair in curl. ...

... WORKER: Half an inch best British polished plate glass, rivetted to last.

... MARY: Ned. Ned. I’m pregnant, Ned.

WORKER: Fill in, ram, cart away. Weld and bolt connections, hoop iron in straps and braces, double nailed nails punched in nail holes, filled with wax, half-inch battleship lino secured to last.

(Act One, pp. 9-10)

The production of Dolly, the vision with long elegant dresses, and of course long blonde hair, is thus prefigured in these descriptions of making a theatre, a stage which will last, filled in, welded, connections bolted. The theatre and the persona constructed for Dolly become a trap she cannot continue to live with, and in the second act
the decline of Dolly as she ages mirrors the decline of the Crystal Palace as it, too, becomes middle-aged:

DOLLY: They promised me the world, and I ended up with a lousy, empty, out-of-date picture show.
(Act Two, p. 48)

I’ve traced here, in a most rudimentary way, some of the staging effects which Hewett first used in the New Fortune Theatre, and noted the way in which her experience with the theatre seems to have given impetus to her quest to find the holy grail of women’s identity. Beyond this, however, the ‘wooden O’ of a Shakespearian stage has not only had a profound effect on her theatrical writings, but also became crucial to any serious consideration of her poetry, and indeed her poetic. The key to examining this relationship between stage and writer lies in Hewett’s now notorious use of her own biographical details in her writing.

III

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, most writing on Hewett, whether it is concerns her plays, poetry, or prose, concentrates to a quite remarkable degree on her private life. Or perhaps this is not quite so remarkable. Hewett has given many interviews in which she has been extraordinarily forthcoming about her life, and there is no denying that the lives of her characters conform in many details to the lives of the people who have provided an audience to Hewett’s personal magnetism. Indeed, in Western Australia it is still not possible to buy The Chapel Perilous or Tatty Hollow due to the
successful libel actions brought against Hewett by her first husband, Lloyd Davies, regarding these plays and her volume of poems, *Rapunzel in Suburbia* (1975), in which Davies argued that Hewett defamed him and his family.

There is no doubt that many events and characters in Hewett’s writing are drawn very directly from her life. It is not difficult to match up her characters to real people, if one enjoys this kind of literary game. And, of course, there are enormous similarities between Hewett’s *femme fatale* figures and Hewett herself. Physical similarities are stressed—Hewett’s beauty and her long blond hair are essential Sally, Tatty and Dolly characteristics, as are Hewett’s sexually questing nature, and, like Sally in *Chapel*, her desire to find her destiny as a writer. Hewett’s use of a white haired ageing writer, crippled with arthritis, in her recent novel *The Toucher* (1993), is a later variation on this theme. The most trenchant criticisms of Hewett’s writing condemn her work as merely confessional, with strong accusations of narcissism abounding. On the other hand, Jenny Digby’s argument that Hewett is working squarely within the bounds of a feminist project by insisting on the validity of personal experience, and by presenting her authentic self in her writing may be seen as a corrective, or an argument for the confessional in women’s writing.

I argue that either of these positions are based on the false premise that Hewett’s writing represents an unmediated presentation of a unified and self-promoting identity, concentrating too much on the *autos*, and not sufficiently on the processes of that *autos*. There are several arguments which can be made for reading Hewett’s writings as much more than simple or even problematised autobiography. The simplest is that much of Hewett’s life does not find its way onto the
page. Her life as a tutor at the University of Western Australia, for example, does not loom large in her writing, nor do many of the health problems which Hewett has endured. Where such a bodily experience appears to have good imagistic potential, however, Hewett will use it. Her experience of a detached retina, for example, makes its way into her poetry as a series of questions about eyes and sight (although not with the ‘visionary’ qualities which Dobson evokes), and her concentration on women’s body issues is essential to her consideration of female identity. Her long battle with arthritis, however, has, until The Toucher, been remarkable in its absence from her writing. Margaret Williams (1992, p. 123) has pointed out that Hewett’s life in bearing six children, and raising five of them to adulthood, is almost absent from her work, although her experience of abortion and the loss of a child from leukaemia are repeatedly evident. Several of Hewett’s poems echo Chapel, in which Sally’s abortion and the death of her young child are emblematic of her failure as a woman, and her failure to bring her writing potential to fruition. Hewett’s deep relationship with her more conventional sister has only recently made its appearance in her autobiography and in ‘The Darkling Sisters’ (1993), and Hewett seems to attempt to gain little fictional mileage from this relationship. She could thus be thought extremely selective, not only about which life experiences she mythologises, but about which parts of herself will be put onto a stage, dressed in different costumes.

‘Enacting’, or ‘performing’ this persona is thus not, for Hewett, merely a process of mimesis or even analogy. Beyond the simple observation that Hewett finds only parts of her own story worth dramatising, there are two other strong arguments which can be
brought to bear on the thesis that Hewett's writing goes well beyond the personal. The first of these, and one which is intimately bound up with her connection with the New Fortune, is the degree to which her writing is influenced by other writers. In a great deal of Hewett's work, her writing of autobiographical subject matter is mediated by her alignment of her own story with other mythologies, other stories. From very early in her career a fascination with fairy tale is evident, and her reliance on Tennyson is well documented. However, I argue that Hewett's experience with the New Fortune, together of course with her familiarity with both Elizabethan and modern drama and a wide range of literatures before and through her time as a university tutor, opened up a new range of theatricality from which she could act. It is the learning of overt theatricality, both in the drama, and through influential poets such as Eliot and Rimbaud, which allows her to move inside and absorb the flavour of other characters before performing the 'jiggery-pokery behind a screen' which brings forth a new poetic persona. It is after the New Fortune, for example, that Hewett begins to merge her own identity with a series of literary rather than folkloric characters. These range from the 'fatal heavy ladies courting grief' ('Coming to You', 1979) of European novels and plays, to Mandelstam, to Gwen Harwood as a Guinevere figure. In Alice in Wormland (1987), she tosses aside the persona 'I', to work with an 'Alice' with many direct references to Alice in Wonderland and Alice Through the Looking Glass. In all of these appropriations of other characters, their stories and images, Hewett concentrates not only on metaphors of costume (thus raising the idea of enacting roles), but also of the physical, social and psychic landscapes those characters inhabit.
In this she considers the stages on and in which these characters perform and are performed, and deepens her own written 'stage'.

But perhaps the strongest argument for Hewett's use of her own biography as the stage onto which she can project many stories, is the remarkable degree to which she employs and re-employs not only elements of her biography, but her writing of them. Figures and tropes recur throughout Hewett's work. There is her own femme fatale figure, the figure of the mad, menopausal mother, the sad, dreaming father, larger than life grandparents, and the Puckish, cruel and irresistible lover. Stories also recur. The story of Hewett's grandfather riding his horse up to the bar of the local hotel, for example, can be found in her plays, as well as in early and late poems. Hewett's tales of childhood similarly recur. If Hewett only repeated these stories, or perhaps gave different versions of them, perhaps we could accept that her work is either merely confessional or the product of a writer quite sure of her own subjectivity. But this is not all that happens. Hewett does not merely recycle stories, she revisits, reinvestigates, and frequently recasts her actual writing of these stories. In effect, she increasingly uses her own writing of her life, rather than her life itself, as a storehouse upon which to draw. Chapel, for instance, contains at least eight poems or sections of poems which Hewett had previously published and I have already described Tatty as being rather like a shadow, or an inside-out version of Chapel. Throughout Hewett's writing, phrases, images and entire lines are rewoven into new material. It is essential, however, to realise that Hewett's re-use of her writing is not unproblematic. Indeed, her reworking is frequently ironic or sardonic. The love poem 'There is a loveliness that burns', for example, which appeared in Windmill Country (1968), takes on a
different colour when it appears in Chapel while Sally is torn between three lovers. In its context within the play, the poem both ironises Sally's idealisation of her relations with men and opens the possibility that Sally must accept her own divided, dispersed nature if she is to make peace with herself and the world:

SALLY: I see myself in you, yourself in me,
    We love and hate ourselves most tenderly;
    Lover to lover lost in fierce caress,
    Such contradictions mock mortality.

Thomas, Thomas, I've written another poem at last.

THOMAS: Who did you write it for, Sally?

SALLY: For myself.

(p. 68)

This re-use and ironisation of her own writing is not a one-way affair from poetry into plays. Phrases and lines from her plays make their way into her later poetry, sometimes ironised, sometimes not. Her recycling is also not one in which layers of meaning or sense are inevitably added, until the image or trope can bear no more. Although Hewett sometimes comes perilously close to this metaphorical saturation point, her most recent work sees her lightening her touch. The figure of the owl, for instance, which in Alice in Wormland is weighed down by being over inscribed, becomes a much freer, and ultimately more powerful image in the poem 'Owl' in Peninsula:

a giant owl
flapped in our faces
covering the windscreen
with feathers
it sat in the headlights
dazzled
staring us down

(1994, p. 59)
Hewett does not reject her previous writing of the owl/Nim figure of
Alice, and indeed, the ghost of Nim is still very much present here:

Later I saw him
lurching down
the one bleak street
of the town
the feathered legs
hidden in jeans
the fingers lopped off
to a claw
in the local sawmill
beak blue with cold
one eye blazing
under a limp felt hat.

But in this poem the owl is powerfully itself, a dazzling presence
which cannot be captured or outstared by being made to bear too many
allusions and metaphors. In this reworking, as in many of the other
poems in Peninsula which travel over elements of Hewett’s history—
‘Lines to the Dark Tower’ (p. 31), ‘Summer’ (p. 55), ‘remembering...’
(p. 45)—Hewett strips away some of the layers which have
accumulated in her journeys from personal history through myth and
literary legend, leaving behind their shadows, and achieving a more
lucid and less confrontational poetic. In these recyclings of her own
writing, the sense that Hewett is watching her enactment of her
persona on one stage, and then translating it to another, is very strong
indeed.

And the risks of standing thus open in a ‘wooden O’? That risk,
for Hewett I believe, lies in that further connotation of ‘O’, as the ‘O’ of
nothingness. Perhaps, as she suggests in ‘Underneath the Arches’, one
must continue to enact oneself in order not to disappear, not to fade
completely from view in pastels. The robe of power can be worn—‘the
witch’s clothes’—but as Hewett herself acknowledges, it is ‘A difficult
sleight of hand—/to remain vulnerable to experience, yet closed in the black cloak of flesh’. The costumes history and society force us to wear can become suffocating, ‘tight skin[s] of gilded flesh’. For Hewett, containing the forces of riot and order in the one body is achievable only by the powerful robe of writing, the ‘jiggery-pokery behind a screen’, and always, the ‘dissolving’ of oneself, ‘in a spotlight’.

IV

At the beginning of this chapter, I foreshadowed some observations on Hewett’s conception of herself as writer, rather than as woman. There is a good reason for having left this until the very end. There are, certainly, many points in her writing, in which Hewett links the two strongly. ‘The Mandelstam Letters’ is one such place; the ‘decoding of secret messages’ in ‘Last landstop on the searoad to Antarctica’, and the ‘bringing of manuscripts’ into the tower in ‘For the Glory of God & of Gwendoline’ are others. In Wildcard, when Les Flood, Hewett’s de facto of nine years, finally tips over the edge into a dangerous schizophrenia, his burning of almost all her writing—poetry, letters, the first act of a play (1990, p. 260)—is intimately bound up with his delusions of her infidelity, and unfitness as a mother.

And yet, whilst Hewett’s identity as woman and as writer are linked, there is a crucial difference between her conception of the two. For whilst she alternates between construction and essentialism when she writes herself as woman, this is how she writes herself as writer:
[my aspirations] are neither forgivable nor charming; no
interesting hobby, no spare time dilettante scribbling
under her hair after the important business of being a
woman is over for the day.

Daughter, sister, lover, wife, mother,
grandmother, domestic treasure, I will be suborned into
all these roles (except perhaps domestic treasure...for
there I am always clumsy and half-hearted), but I have
my vocation. It is outside sex, and yet my sex is part of it.
It is already fixed, brutal, implacable, complete. There
is nothing I can do about it...

(1990, p.11)

'Fixed, brutal, implacable, complete'—the witch mother, inescapable
identity, something about which nothing can be done. I would suggest
that Hewett sees her identity as writer as an absolute, around which all
other roles, all the women she will play in her life, revolve. At times it
will be muffled, at times she will try to escape its demands, but like her
mother it also is the spider at the centre of the web, waiting to haul her
in. To some extent, this insistence on a difference between the poetic
and the personal identity echoes Rimbaud:

The point is, to arrive at the unknown by the disordering
of all the senses. The sufferings are enormous, but one has
to be strong, to be born a poet, and I have discovered I am
a poet. It is not my fault at all. It is a mistake to say: I
think. One ought to say: I am thought. Pardon the pun. I
is someone else. So much the worse for the wood if it find
itself a violin...

(letter to Georges Izambard,
Charleville, [13]/5, 1871, in 1962, p. 6)

Like Hewett, Rimbaud insists that 'I' is someone else, an unstable
reality, liable to be changed from wood to violin, whilst the 'I' which is
the poet as poet is a constant, unwavering observer of this instability:
I witness the unfolding of my own thought: I watch it, I
listen to it...
(letter to Charles Demeny, 15/5/1871,
Charleville, in 1962, p. 9)

But we remember that in *Wildcard* the mother, like the
daughter, like the writer/woman, is doubled—along with the mad,
ranting witch, is the one who sings Hewett to sleep and into waking,
the one who ushers in sleep, and perhaps unutterable dreams, as well
as utterable nightmares, and who coaxes them away. And so, perhaps,
it is not incompatible to say that Hewett’s constant returns to her own
work, not just to its plots but to its images and metaphors, its very
words, can be theorised as returns to the body of the good mother, the
body which is both the mother and the daughter, returns which are
incestuous and narcissistic at once.

If the terrible, fixed mother/writer is also the place at which
Hewett finds the milk of the mother/writing, perhaps it is creative, not
destructive, that Alice:

...wanted to run
completely free
a long way back
the way she had come

(‘Alice’ 6, p. 7)
CHAPTER FOUR

Parts towards a dandelion: J.S. Harry

To date, J.S. Harry has published three volumes of poetry—the deer under the skin (1971), Hold, for a little while, and turn gently (1979), and A Dandelion for Van Gogh (1985), with a further volume, The Life on Water and the Life Beneath, to be published in 1995. Harry’s work is often highly praised by other poets—indeed, she might be thought of as a ‘poet’s poet’. As with her forerunners, Auchterlonie, Dobson and Hewett, this praise has not often been translated into sustained scholarly appreciation. Critics and reviewers appear to be given to aphorisms when discussing Harry’s work: James Tulip calls her the ‘high priestess of a new cult of the inward ego’ (1972, p. 188), Rose Lucas characterises her work as a ‘continuing attempt to incorporate’ (1989, p. 231), Duwell writes of a ‘drive towards ambiguous parable’ (1987, p. 41) and Elizabeth Lawson writes of her poetry as being both ‘condensed’ and ‘narrow’ (1985, p. 10). Keith Russell is candid when he writes that:

the leaps of her mind leave most of us behind wondering just how; and we must run, we must run...
(1987, p. 114)

Eventually, however, it is important to stop ‘running’ and to turn to face the poetry, considering not only its flights and turns, but the deeply-thought structures which underlie those leaps and incorporations, the sense of sacredness which surrounds it.
To date, her volumes have been constructed around a small number of framework 'language' poems which act as expositions on her capacity as an artist, and more importantly, on the imprecision of language. Whilst these poems share some important points in that they are scaffolding poems, setting up the parameters within which Harry will work, they also show changes in the way Harry perceives certain characteristic problems, with a growing awareness of the sexing of language, an increasing distrust of the phallic wielding of the poetic pen, and the proposal of a more feminised construction of language.

In the deer under the skin, 'parts towards a meaning' (p. 13) is enriched by close observation of the Sydney in which the poem is partly set, but more particularly, by the use of a congruence of mythologies and histories which gives this poem, despite its fragmentation, a satisfying resonance which casts itself forward into many other poems in all three volumes. The title poem of the second volume, Hold, for a little while, and turn gently (p. 1) becomes much more specifically intellectual in tone, and in A Dandelion for Van Gogh, the enigmatic and schematised 'Parts of Speech as Parts of a Country' (pp. 9 and 42) provides a scaffolding for a thorough-going exploration of the schism between the phallocracy and the feminine principles which she sees at work in the world around her.

These poems can all be considered to be 'architectural' works, and within them can be seen the two major drives in Harry's poetry: the fear of a lack of connections (between lovers, people and environment, people and art, words and experience); and an opposing fear of death in or through connection, of the rigid structures which can emanate from the desire to connect. It is the tension between these
twin fears—of what she calls in ‘the what o’clock’ an ‘airy death’ (1971, p. 1), and what is figured in ‘parts towards a meaning’ as death by mummification—which drives all of Harry’s work.

Harry’s attitude to her readers reflects this tension. The use of open space and syntax deliberately subverts closure and invites continuing dialogue between poet and reader. Harry is suspicious of poetry which relies too much on the authority of the first person, and she tends in consequence towards disruptions, syntactical difficulties, and the use of many different and opposing voice positions. She uses these tactics to break through the rigid shapes of a conventional poetic which treats language as unifying, rational and coherent, and poetic language as a heightening of that impulse to unity. Her ‘parts towards a meaning’ illustrates just such a struggle against the temptation of forced unity. Its ‘meaning’ is not to be apprehended in linear, or rational ways. Its form is deliberately evasive, and its ‘meanings’ are presented more as ‘found’ gifts than as deductive.

And yet, of course, this is an illusion, for Harry does indeed labour long and hard over her work, paradoxically using her pen to hold things together in such a way as also to push them apart, to create the imaginative spaces she wishes for her reader. It is indeed significant that while Harry resists reading her own poetry aloud, for fear of the closure which her own voice might produce, she also sets limits on how far the imagination of her readers may work. Addicted to dictionaries, she may consult up to ten to ensure that while amplifying the prose meanings of words, she is also working within known limits of definition and consideration, unwilling to allow her readers to follow ‘wrong’ paths (private conversations, July 1989). In
this relationship between poet and audience there is a constant tension between control and responsibility, limitation and openness.

Talking about language itself has become almost as important as talking about texts, or meaning, in the post modern years. If Harry did only this in her poetry, with the style and clarity which many of her 'language' poems have, she would be a valuable poet, one who could teach us much about what can be shown, and the limits of what can be said, and of what can be lost when all the gaps and cracks of experience are carefully papered over. But Harry does not only set herself this intellectual task. The poem 'tunnel vision' (pp. 51-53), for example, can be read as a study in language, but the 'victim' is foregrounded in this nightmarish world in which sights and sounds are distorted, and the distraction of peripheral vision, the big picture of the world, is cut off:

SUPPORT SYD VIOUS
CUT A SLUT

JESUS SAVES AT THE WALES

WHO ARE YOU IF YOU'RE NOT?

CREAMINESS CONTROLS YOU
OR YOU CONTROL THE CREAMINESS

screaming without words
she runs through the tunnel
straight at them
shock opening like flowers
on the faces of the oncoming motorists
her purple dress is ripped
to the waist so it has
become skirt only
her bare round creamy breasts
assault the pity
& the rapist
behind the many
masks of 'motorist'
her face is contorted in
the scream everything
in her life is concentrated behind it...
Beginning and ending with the public words of graffiti, it is clear that Harry is here much concerned with language in its many human forms. She details the woman’s wordless scream, the private word stories of the watchers, as they try to distance themselves from the victim, public language, both in its official, news-voice form, and in the subversive graffiti—first misogynist, and then as it is later feminised. Encompassing all are the words of the poet, trying to find some better language with which to share with her readers that tunnel vision, a vision of a moment which is utterly concentrated. When the woman is found dead and fragmented by the sea two weeks later:

a female
form
its flesh & rags
in fragments
sea-sucked
purple
is fished
out of the
gap-
wash by the calm
voice-of-the-evening-news
a fortnight later

only the poet can really ‘fish’ her from the eddies of everyday life to give her a memorial through language which all those other languages—the silent scream, the voice of the news, the fitted fictions of the drivers, and the questionable wisdom of the graffiti—fail to give her. In setting the suffering of this barefoot woman within the cradle of language variants, Harry never forgets that language has only limited value in conveying anything, let alone the suffering of another, and yet she sees that, as a poet, it is her duty to ‘suffer’ with her.

In this chapter, I consider J.S. Harry’s work from a series of standpoints. First, I argue that a close reading of Harry’s ‘parts towards a
meaning’ is essential for any real understanding of her concerns throughout her poetry. Second, I examine a further group of poems which might be considered as the philosophical scaffolding which allows Harry to build a structure into which her many other poems can fit. Third, I look at some of those other poems, principally those which consider pastoral themes and individual human experience. Last, I conclude with a small series of poems which, like the title of Harry’s third volume, have Van Gogh as their tangential ‘subject’.

I

A close reading and understanding of ‘parts towards a meaning’ (pp. 13-20), is essential to an understanding of both Harry’s thematic preoccupations and her poetic, and indeed, this long poem in six parts, with fractured syntax and disrupted language, might be seen as Harry’s own *tractatus*, setting the parameters for a significant proportion of her explorations of language, experience and philosophical positions. Within this poem, Harry sets up oppositions between inside and outside, memory and present experience, past and present, language and symbols. The fragmented style of the poem, with its exploration of experiential fragmentation, is initially daunting, but the poem is not chaotic or unstructured, and reveals strong narrative and thematic structures.

Harry begins by rooting the poem in a very particular present:

The gift . . . a day . . . light, sun, shadow in all of it.
The scene is that of Harry's local Sydney environment, in which Victoria Street, terrace houses, a deli, sewerage workers, and even a 'sydney county council substation' make their appearance. In inner Sydney, on this particular day, the sun shines, dust lies, and buses run.

Almost immediately, however, Harry introduces one of what will be a number of inevitable 'others' to this scene. Here, the sewerage workers cut into a Sydney of the past, into 'the history under victoria street'. Their digging is in some ways a violent act, but the 'history' resists this arrogant stripping in silence, and cannot be 'read' as unified or comprehensible. Rather, it divides itself into two colours—'chalk' and 'flesh'. 'Chalk' is white, the non- and all-colour of writing, of signs, messages and teaching. 'Flesh' is separate and discrete. 'Chalk' and 'flesh' act as potent symbols for Harry's continuing dilemma as poet: the separateness of the chalk from the flesh of the living and of lived experience.

From the beginning of this poem, history, or the relationship between past and present is implicated in a dialectic between what can, and what cannot be represented by signs or language. But it is not only recent, local history which Harry considers—ancient Egypt, a recurring trope in Harry's poetry, is given a special status by which this paradox of 'chalk' and 'flesh' can be considered. In this first part of the poem, Harry prefigures her continuing thematic interest by noting that, in Egypt, it would be links with the past 'they' would be digging for, 'pictures' which depicted ancient life, knowledge and wisdom. This early introduction of Egyptian mythology, hieroglyphics, and their alignment with the many inscrutable signs with which Harry is faced even within modern day Sydney, adds depth to her fear that language, especially written language, is tragically limited in its ability to convey
the flavour of lived experience. Her interest in Egyptian language is
based upon the problems of preservation or mummification, and the
imitative nature of glyphs which appear to her to be mummified
words. In the oldest Egyptian tombs, the dead were buried with all the
necessities of life, including bread. Over time, real bread was replaced
first by clay models of the essentials, then with pictorial representations
of those necessities which were seen to be the thing itself. In these
glyphs, Harry sees both the attraction of a language and experience
unified, and the risk that in such unification lies not only stability and
preservation, but desiccation.

The ‘pictures’ of Egypt are abruptly aligned with modern, local
pictures. Here, it is a number code on a council substation, a sign, like
the sewers, of modern life and requirements. Its meaning is ‘equal to
the use’—at least, that is, to ‘the ring of its makers’. It belongs to a
‘birthbook of myth and language’. ‘Meaning’ and ‘use’ are here made
one, by those within the ring: they ‘use’ the codes, and therefore do not
need to discover the meaning. The language, as a system of
recognisable signs which convey all they need to, is sufficient for
themselves. However, to the delicatessen owner—or the ‘I’, the old
man, the poets and peasants, the sewerage workers, and even the
goats—do the number codes have any meaning? To those outside the
ring of association, space and of time, the language becomes obscure
and incomprehensible.

Having set up, then, her initial parameters of lived experience
and problematic signs, Harry introduces what appears to be an
authentic, authoritative ‘I’. Authenticity, however, is immediately
questioned, for is the speaker really focusing on a space while sitting in
a bus, or may we read the mid-line space:
as a deception, a break in meaning? Is the bus actually focused behind her eyes, an imaginative construct, a deception? This raises the possibility that the whole of this authentic Sydney scene is such a construct. Certainly some elements of it are tinged with a sense of the surreal. The terrace house, for example, is ‘inscribed’ (marked by its past?), and yet seems to belong to some space outside of ‘real’ time. Indeed, perception appears to be clouded: the house ‘says it has the rooms to let’, but the confusion of the speaker is apparent with the remark that ‘they are all inside’. Perhaps it is rooms which are inside, or perhaps it is those poets and peasants of the past inside, separated from the speaker. Alternatively, it is possible that the whole scene—rooms, poets and peasants, the terrace house and bus—are all inside the speaker, formed by the language system, distinct as that is from a putative ‘reality’.

The inside/outside problem continues to the end of part 1, which concludes with a dual, oppositional vision between an old man trying to look out from the house, and the speaker trying to peer in. The old man’s vision of the outside world is veiled and in peering through his own impending blindness, he looks for ‘real’ goats, not the goats he remembers and imagines—the goats which ate his trousers, goats which together with the bush (a burning bush perhaps), recall past Christian myths, of sacrifice, temptation and evil. The goats were real, he thinks, and outside his head; now his only goats are mythical or imagined, memories. Simultaneously, the speaker struggles on the other side, and the iron bars through which he or she peers are like the muslin through which the old man gazes, emphasising at one and the
same time the impenetrability of muslin and the flimsiness of iron.

Part 2 of the poem condenses and encapsulates the expansiveness of part 1 and carries forward its characters and concerns. The philosophical debate about ‘meaning’ and ‘use’ is echoed, or transposed to ‘proof’. The word’s intense ambiguity is emphasised by Harry’s ironic use of it as a possible link between internal and external, in this case, between the mind, and the bus ticket, whilst also recalling its meaning in the ‘pure’ world of philosophy: of theoretical ‘proofs’ of purely imaginative constructs, with no necessary links to a physical world. This subject cannot feel the bus ticket, and is afraid that all physicality may dissolve, that the trees and people, like the trouser-eating goats, have always and only existed in his head, and that there is no outer world at all, or perhaps, that there is no possible connection between worlds, so that the ‘inner’ experience endlessly reverberates upon itself.

In parts 1 and 2, then, Harry sets up a philosophical debate about past and present, private and public, use and meaning, inner and outer. In part 3 she moves this debate away from Wittgenstinian ‘proofs’ and into a specifically poetic field, questioning whether a poet, and particularly this poet, can make things fit or hang together. Her rhythm changes here and her images and cadences become pastoral and lyrical. The natural images are lush, voluptuous, and sexually charged. This world is one of summer, of green fertility, of the sexual dance, of honey, vats and circles. The sensuality of the images is considered and richly felt—the tension of the nose/bee on the rim of the vat, the excitement of impending discovery, penetration and reception is felt as delicious and precious, moments hanging in, or between, time. It is a world of the senses—of the nose smelling
honeyed sex; of the eyes, pressing and penetrating; and the feel of hands 'shap[ing] sharpness'. This eroticism is that of almost, or occasionally, being able to pass from one state to another:

Eyes press against the edges of things—sometimes they penetrate—
soft inside a colour—like a flower...

The eroticism of such lines is strong and there is clearly a sense of the meeting of male and female sexualities here—with the speaker using the senses as a sort of phallus against 'the edges of things', or the 'other' which has been traditionally feminised. The edge between the known and the not known, seen earlier in the poem symbolised as muslin shrouds and iron bars, becomes here a more traditional flower of the female. The natural imagery continues, for

the earth is held together by the roots of strong grass called bilin during earthquake.

It is roots again here which penetrate, strong and phallic, and which resist the quaking of mother earth. Roots hold the unknown together: in a way they shape it, or make it, or at least confine it. The poet-voice steps in here to exclaim:

...I have to work to find nails...
the purpose of grass is the purpose of nails is the purpose of words...
I have to work to feel shaped sharpness grip like grass...

So, to hold the earth together, to hold the quaking, nebulous, endlessly disintegrating unknown, the poet must 'work'. The effort, striving and pain of the poetic endeavour are apparent here—poetry is not a passive occupation, but is postulated as an active endeavour,
thrusting, energetic, strong and even painful. Grass holds earth together, nails hold structures, bringing pieces into form, and words also are the structure which holds, or allows experience to take form beyond its own chaotic nature. Shape, sharpness and grip—these are the tools, the only tools, of the poet for feeling a bus ticket, seeing real goats, or digging for those four thousand year old Egyptian pictures.

The final three lines of the section have a great power and directness in opposition to the soft, almost dreamy dancing of the bee on the rim of the vat, and the eyes softly against the edges of soft things. The contrast between the elisions and soft sibilants of

the purpose of grass is the purpose of nails is the purpose of words . . .

and the harsh, almost violent staccato of

I have to work to feel shaped sharpness grip like grass . . .

leads the reader to snap out of the seductive voluptuousness offered in the previous lines. All at once that power becomes threatening.

‘Shaped sharpness’ is quite suddenly transmuted into ‘packaged stiffness’ so that ‘packaged stiffness’ now reflects back on grass, nails, words, and the grip of words. Herein lies the danger of the penetration of one essence to another, for here the phallus doesn’t dance softly but becomes a parody of itself, its sharp shape now mere stiffness, lifeless and incapable of yielding. Worse, it is ‘packaged’, made neat and manageable, commercialised and marketable: it is now like a dry root, a dying bee or blind eyes. This stiffness and dryness have a further purpose:
mummification of heads

Its own aridity translates itself, infects, and invades heads and minds and all their internal possibilities. The nails of shape have now become rigid shapes—the wiremesh baskets of the local Soul Pattinson—so that which previously made a structure is now a prisoner of itself. There is no need to visit that Soul Pattinson store for such packaging, however, for the poet has a ready supply, eager to give away to others who would penetrate the boundaries. The chemist has preservatives for ‘the hair/the face/the feet’—the preservatives which seek to hold back, combat, or stiffly package the seen future of old age. Physical immortality may be the province of the chemist, but it is the poet who finds and offers the stuff of inner preservation:

where

is the formaldehyde for the feelings bottled dead inside the selves?

Formaldehyde is the tool of preservation, of bottling foetuses for example, potentials allowed neither the fertility of fruition nor the natural decay into dust. Harry echoes the word to give it greater strength, with ‘formaldehyde’ verbally slipping into ‘bottled dead inside’. The word itself offers its own possibilities, with the formal, the formed, the packaged stiffness dehydrating, hiding, ‘dying’ the feelings inside the self. Thus the eyes pressing inside the edges of things may consume the flower, and word/nails may act as agents of death to the fertility of the natural world, and of the imaginative feelings.

Harry leads her readers to a new ‘part’ of the poem—separate in that it is given its own page, apart from the foregoing section of part 3,
and not separate in that it is not packaged with its own discrete number. It is significant that this section begins with form in negativity—shadows, which like pansies go ‘black black deep/into the sun’. The pansy here has the trick of somehow transcending the boundary between shadow and sun without losing itself. Similarly, it is not just water here dripping fluidly from the hoses, for:

```
here under the white needles of the hoses everything is dripping
onto
/
down from
/
grass
 b
 l
 a
 d
 e
 s
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The elision, and seamless unity of the dripping is one which indeed can be shared by poets and non-poets alike. If Harry had left things at this then perhaps Rose Lucas’ argument (1989, p. 233) that Harry unequivocally seeks such unions, seeking the knowledge of wrists and ankles—‘the wrists, the ankles know’—which are the points at which one thing evenly joins another, might be defensible. She misses, however, the crucial point, that what these wrists and ankles know is the touch of the blade, which visually slashes the poem. Blades applied to wrists are, of course, suicidal. In attempting to overcome the boundaries between subject positions, whether by the sharply shaped blade, the ‘shaped sharpness’ of words, or by an unintentional self-mummification, pressing past the edges of things may be suicide for the poet.
Still, in this summer park, with its unexpected psychic dramas, there is a different kind of meeting, that of two short, squat, red-toed subjects:

    gross, red-toed pigeons walk to bread
    at the hand of a two-foot boychild in red sandals

The two, comically similar, yet unlike, engage in a walking dance, recalling the dancing greenness of young leaves. They meet by bread, by the sustenance of one and the giving of the other, in a dance just as stately, if less erotic than that of bee and vat.

Leaving the park, Harry adds a coda to part 3 which is inscrutable and seemingly discrete. The punctuation separating the three lines from the rest of the poem:

    ... and somewhere for the third time a swimmer goes down
        not really perturbed
        if the cramp in his gut is like envy ...

suggests separation, but also, paradoxically signals continuance, or contiguity. The drama she observes in the park is one drama—the pigeons and two-foot boychild, the pansies, young leaves and bilin roots live on—whilst elsewhere, a somewhere rationally unknown but intuitively perceived, there is a drama of death, a real death to set against the possibilities of psychic death in poetry. To the observer, or poet, 'the cramp in his gut' may be like envy—of the living, or even of the salt (and formaldehyde) preserved—but to the swimmer himself, the cramp is not 'like' or analogous to anything else. He knows only the one pain, one cramp as he goes down, experiencing unity only by his own death. He does not care what the cramp is like, for the
drowning cramp is a single experience, unable to be viewed from anywhere else.

In part 4 of 'parts toward a meaning', Harry moves her scene and imagery from the local and present Sydney, picking up on the other time and place she introduces in part 1. She has ensured the continuity and contiguity of the two imageries in part 3 by raising the subject of mummification, and the stuff of the trade in the ubiquitous Soul Pattinson chemist. Again the poet speaks as poet, but here the voice moves on from the sure assertive voice of the writer feeling 'shaped sharpness' and 'grip', that voice which also runs the risk of the blade—'packaged stiffness'. Instead, the voice here is tentative, unsure, posed in a series of questions and half-sentences, with lines placed at half-way points, and its final lines shaped parenthetically.

The Sydney summer days are days that have been felt, however problematically, and in the preceding sections they have been given 'rites', whether the rite of the dance, or of the mummification, the rite of the 'proof', the rite of the writing of the birthbook of myth and language. Here, Harry poses a rite, or writing, for 'the days that are not felt', a ceremony which could legitimate, or bring into feeling 'the harvest/ of the intangibles'. 'Intangibles', and 'things not felt', are made rich and valuable by the use of the word 'harvest', linked with the 'bread' which figures in part 3, and which is to make its appearance again in the final lines of the poem. This 'harvest' provides the makings of bread, but it can only be sustenance, only be blessed, by ceremony, rites and, perhaps, by the rite of writing. The 'magic' is essential, for:
Primitives believe nature
yields nothing
in return for merely human labour

'Primitives' is used ironically enough: Harry's Egyptians were hardly primitive, and she argues throughout the poem for a magic, or transformer, which remains forever beyond her reach. The word is not used in its sense of 'old-fashioned, undeveloped, uncultured', but in the philological or mathematical sense: 'radical, not derivative', and that 'from which another is derived' (OED), from which some construction begins. Harry longs to return to that 'primo', or to find some relativity between her own, derived poetics, and the first, magical 'name', the name which is not 'merely human labour', and which will transform the 'merely human labour' of this woman poet. Poetics, like language itself, is directly implicated in this desire for the magical:

Language, a field . . . ?

if you can work it . . .

Erotic imagery is barely hinted at here, but relates back to the 'shaped sharpness' of the previous section. 'Nature' here may be seen as an unyielding woman who will yield and be fertile only if the proper rites and ceremonies are observed. Language, as a field, a feminine possibility of fecundity, is also unyielding to the phallic plough-work: the power to work can come only through the 'name', the first, magical word, which will transform the barren field of an 'un-riited' language. Fertility has been possible, in primitive times, for:

The Nile came at the word of Ra
to irrigate the dry of Egypt
The seminal Nile, called up by the magic word, the word of the God, has irrigated the dry, unyielding earth/field/language of Egypt. Perhaps it may happen again. Perhaps this woman poet, possessing all possibilities of language, may also, in having such phallic/seminal power come through her, be fertile. Once again, there is the sense here that it is by ‘rites’ and ‘ceremonies’ that the intangibles can bear tangible fruit, and it is the rites of magic which unite the male and female principles to produce something new, something from ‘the first word’.

The connection of magic and sexuality is made clear in the last lines of the section:

Perhaps there is a magic

the knees angled

what angle appropriate

and to whom?

The poet wonders if she can be part of the Ra magic, if by angling her knees, yielding, allowing the power of the word to come through her, her own field may become fertile. The angle, however, must be appropriate. Is it to be the angle of supplication in prayer-rites, or the angle of sexual surrender? More problematically, and seen as such by its removal from the ‘angles’ of the angle question, is ‘to whom’? If the name is not known, how may she know it? Before whom or what must she yield, if she does not know the word, or the name of the magic? How may her poetic self-field yield anything if she does not have someone to tell her ‘the name’?

Parenthetically, and in a denser formation than the previous lines, Harry asks a parallel question, one firmly rooted in Egyptian mythology:
(and the serpent coiled in the curve of the rain
will it ever swallow the child to spit forth a one
strong with the old wonder . . .)

The serpent here—of the Nile, sexual power and magic—is coiled, giving the impression of a spiral tailed in the past and possessing the energy and threat of a strike into the present, linking these two times, and thus, perhaps all others. This serpent, however, is coiled ‘in the curve of the rain’ (what feeds the irrigating Nile), rain which is imaged as pregnant, brimming with possibilities. Thus the serpent, as male symbol which fertilises the female language field, also resides in that field, and is only possible or made potent by its female home, carrier and protector. The circular, or even self-coiled construct is repeated in the final image of the child (a two-foot boychild in red sandals?), being swallowed and then spat forth, renewed, and ‘strong with the old wonder’. The reverberations of this Egyptian mythology within Christian myth are implicit, with the serpent and child recalling the tempting/swallowing of Christ in Gethsemane which resulted in His being spat back, strong with the old wonder, the old name of God as primo, that from which other things are constructed. It may not even be too fanciful to pose the poet here as a Virgin Mary figure, who may experience annunciation. The manner of her knowing, however, is still beyond the poet, and the ‘name’ has not been given. That name, or its possibility, is thus both ‘the intangible’, and the rite or ceremony: its name is its own power.

The section remains profoundly open-ended, with layers of possibilities, and acts strongly as a link, albeit a broken one, with section 5, but much more strongly with section 6, which reads, indeed,
almost as the continuation of the parenthetical dialogue at the end of this section.

From the nebulous possibilities of life, and fertility in part 4, Harry plunges into death in the short part 5. Moreover, the death is a specific one, of language, of words written and spoken. Recalling the moralistic myth of the ant and the grasshopper, Harry links 'death on a page' with 'crickets in winter', so that it is possible to read the lines as white winter killing crickets, just as white pages can mean death for words, at least, that is, words or language which has not been garnered from the harvest by ceremony and rite, by the transference of 'the name'. The analogy is not linked by a standard conjunction and its absence gives a hint in itself of the separations inherent in language, but also, and importantly, of the space which the poet leaves for the reader to fill, the silence which may be fleshed out, or even the intangible which can be made real by the rite of reading, the interactive process of reader and poet. The following line is much more ambiguous. When Harry writes:

    the hang of it is loose    the way of a tree on a summer evening

the reader must ask, the 'hang' of what? The word may relate to the death of the first line, suggesting perhaps a body or form made inert and formless in death, or it may perhaps be a pun on loose/noose, or a play on the tree itself, symbol of pastoral life but also used for 'hangings'.

With words 'hanged', made dead on pages, taken over by the winter of time, Harry asks one of the central questions of the poem:
who sane would be like a word
of which only one use is recorded,
that, heard at a distance
by a man with half-use of his ears . . .

In the modern-day Sydney County Council sub-station, for those present workers who are privy to that birthbook of myth and language, the meaning is equal to the use. This word, passing over temporal and spatial distance, has ‘only one use’ recorded: it is stripped of multiplicity, or even, possibly, mummified. It is, indeed, exactly the ‘others’ of each word which give it the non-static integrity of ‘meaning’. Moreover, the ‘use’ here is made merely a whisper, ‘heard’ at a distance, and by a man who is not entirely receptive to those whispers of far off time and places.

In a similar way, Egyptians are now stripped of vital multiplicity:

caught on tombs in the ancient glyphs by scarabs

Those ‘ancient glyphs’ are an aspect of ‘death on a page’, and in this case it is the scarab which in those times symbolised immortality, and which now becomes the symbol of mummification. The scarab recalls the ‘cricket in winter’, just as ‘caught on tombs’ recalls ‘death on a page’. Moreover, a scarab is not just a beetle. It is a dung beetle, which, consuming dung, allows it to filter back into earth, rendering it fertile for coming seasons. On one level, the scarab amply fills its role as symbol of immortality, transmitting the present for the promise of the future. It must be noted, however, that a scarab is also a ‘gem cut in the form of a beetle and engraved with symbols on the flat side as a signet’. 
The scarab beetle, then, as bringer of fertility, has been made into a sign. Its form has, like the glyphs themselves, been cut into stone, made into symbol, transformed into that which signifies something else. The meaning, however, is ‘caught’ as are the Egyptians themselves, and their living immortal symbol has become like ‘death on a page’ the meaning lost over time and space, with only distorted whispers reaching the here and now, and only imagination able to guess at where meaning once was.

The implications for Harry as poet are profound. It may be said that Harry is contemplating ‘death on a page’ in two ways. Firstly, there is the death of one’s own words on a page, the seeping of life which may occur in the very act of committing word to paper, of creating word-signifiers for imaginatively and intuitively apprehended things. There is the danger that over time and space, only uses, and not meanings, may be transmitted. Secondly, in these words we can hear Harry’s own cry: ‘who sane, would be like a poet, of whom only uses are recorded, and those, heard at a distance, by people with half-use of their ears...’. Harry’s use of the scarab and other Egyptian symbols clearly demonstrates her concern that without continuous handing down of meanings in memory, the chain of unity in meaning is somehow lost, and the engravings of glyphs and scarabs onto stone only serve to heighten the poignancy of the loss. But it is not only long stretches of time which constitute such distance. In her preceding explorations of the links between public and private memory, of goats inside and outside the mind, and of the insides of flowers, Harry has prefigured her present question. If using ‘shaped sharpness’ risks becoming mere packaged stiffness, and if Egyptians are self-impaled onto their tombs by their own engravings—if the maker and shaper of
words and meanings inevitably contributes to their becoming mere dry use—who sane, would be a poet? Is the poet necessarily insane?

In the final part of the poem, Harry plunges the reader back from the imagery of graven death of section 5 to all the possibilities of life, promise, and magic of part 4. The child has been swallowed by the serpent/cobra, which may 'spit forth a one strong with the old wonder' in a timeless symbol of transformation to the new through rebirth. The dangers inherent in being spat through the mouth of a cobra are obvious enough. The following lines are consideredly ambiguous, and once again are resonant of other symbols, other mythologies, other immortalities. When the moment of striking comes (inevitable always in the 'when'), the power of immortality becomes the degeneracy of old age, in the pathetic spectacle of the old god, now dribbling like a child. In a move to more recent times, Harry shifts the life giving water of the old Nile Ra had created to tormenting 'lit petrol', the scourge of the 1960's east. This 'harvest' is not the 'wealth' of water or of belief, but rather symbolises the degeneracy of our own times, and our divorce from the 'rites' which bless the earth. This childhood is not the potential of 'one strong with the old wonder', or the innocence of a 'two-foot boychild wearing red sandals', but that of the child abandoned, unable to change his environment.

Relegated to the 'side' of the poem, but ironically given equal status in its very parentheticity, comes 'a quibble'. In part 4, Harry evokes the Nile which had come 'at the word of Ra': here, the water dribble of the old God, spit of his decrepitude, is added to the dry dust of the barren Egypt. The Nile does not come magically at his word: rather his grand-daughter 'kneads' the two together, combines the dust and fluid in the age-old, womanly leavening of bread to which pigeons
walk. This is the workable, meaningful form of the chaff of life—dust, wheat and barley. Isis, goddess of creation and renewal, the wife of Osiris of the barley, is not all powerful but does have the power to revive Osiris partially and temporarily. This Isis is also Isis/Eve, the temptress and tempted of the serpent. She promises to 'take the fire' if Ra 'would tell her' the sacred name. Ra seeks to 'please her' by giving her eye of sun and moon, implying the twisting of an old and desperate man, driven by the fires of desire to give his powers and knowledge away. This has been a powerful, all encompassing God:

Ra god of the mountain god of the morning  
Khepera at dawn Ra at noon Tmu in the evening,

known by different names and in different forms. The creator abdicates, and in the 'writing' of the abdication, meaning or reason are lost. Ra becomes a one-dimensional God, helmsman for the dead, but condemned to his death of constant steerage. He steers over day and night, inscribing or carving his sign into the gem colours of winestain and lapis lazuli, but just as the Egyptians were reductively caught by their own glyphs, so Ra is reduced, over time and distance: now he is only a 'shard or a piece of the hull'.

The 'hull' is the frame of a ship, but also the outer cask of grape and grain; a shard may be the sharp, needled fragment which can act as 'shaped sharpness' but it is also the empty wing case of a beetle—a scarab. Fragmented, these remnants 'will not do' for the poet—shards, pieces of hull, Egyptians pinioned to tombs, wiremesh baskets for packaged stiffness—none will do.

This is a hard lesson, for the poet has grown as old as the distance, four thousand years old in the search for the magic and the
name, only to realise that the name is transmitted in silence. For the secret name is not transcribed, or passed on in a form richly recognisable to those reading it, and in being inscribed as scarab, it can act only as death on a page. Perhaps its power is not only transmitted in silence: perhaps the power of the secret name is silence itself.

The poet's voice, wearied by the four-thousand-year search, becomes the voice of bitter disillusion:

old man I could not make you a goat
the snake I made is a liar
... alive through the mouth of a cobra...

The old man of the terraces and the outdated and outmoded Sun God Ra coalesce here: both have been made obsolete and unreachable by time and age. The goat man will live always with his inner goats, unable to find a connection through to the outside world; and Ra cannot be brought to life in the fragments of history. The poet's own sense of failure in being unable to use words—signs to connect things into a truth or reality—is obvious, as is the frustration of being unable to link private memories and public realities. Harry seems to be denouncing the untruthfulness, the lying of the snake, but breaks her own denunciation syntactically. The lines:

the snake I made is a liar
... alive through the mouth of a cobra,

are almost inversions of themselves. Several possibilities are raised here. The snake Harry has made is a 'spoken' snake, a snake of words, and thus forever untrue to originals. And yet, by placing the two lines almost contiguously, Harry posits herself as cobra—her 'liar' has come
through her own cobra mouth. Moreover, the contiguity of ‘a liar’ and ‘alive’, both syntactically and phonetically, raises twin possibilities that, in trying to make things come alive, one is always a liar, and that ‘aliveness’ can only be achieved through lies. Thus lies, fictions and fabrications are perhaps the only ‘life’ possible. The theme continues:

To be believed
do not come
unless you are shaped as a
question

In other words, straight, truthful answers can only ever be lies. Harry shapes her own form here into that of a question, the circuitous curve of the snake, the rain, the Nile, of all the possibilities of the pregnant, encompassing form. Snakes, of course, can strike and bite whatever lies between their jaws in transient pose, and kill possibilities. Harry the snake/poet addresses herself in the following lines:

a question that strikes
four thousand years back
is not your answer

The ‘striking’ of the question, the pinioning with the fangs brings to a point the essential problem which has taken several guises in this poem. The ‘shaped sharpness’—the ‘shards and hulls’, the ‘blades’ of the grass—denote the problem of the snake uncurling from its soft, mellow, fertile curve and lashing into a phallic striking. While they may seem to offer the possibility of cobbling past and present, inner and outer, or poetry and life together, their use in making such a structure, rigid and straight, risks mummifying experience. Such
poetry may become merely ‘death on a page’. For this poet, the ‘answers’ of a four-thousand-year-old society are lost forever, and no amount of reconstructing can give the shards and husks of a former society more than the illusion of desiccated life. ‘Belief’ does not lie in the visible, tangible and concrete, but ‘under shadow’—the shadow of the pansies which ‘know’ light in their own darkness, the shadow of trees, the possibilities within the gift of the day.

It is fitting that such a magical gift concludes the poem, for under the trees ‘belief’ is being made sustenance. Between the two foot child and the pigeons—so local and recognisable, a silent magic occurs. The chaff of life ‘turns to bread’ when the pigeon, believing the magic, reaches for the hand of the child. Just as the word was made flesh in Christ, and barley grew from the body of Osiris, here belief turns to bread, the very staff of life. It seems that Harry, finding imaginative inspiration but no definite truths in long ago Egypt, has brought that inspiration to fruition in two red-toed innocents in this Sydney, on this day.

This magical, silent union, its ceremony simple and unspoken, has turned intangible to tangible, and the harvest of intangibles has turned, before her, to bread. The wordlessness of the two players in the drama is significant. Through the poem, the preoccupation has been with ‘glyphs’, significations ranging from the history of colours and the inscriptions on electrical substations through to the signatures of the Egyptians. Poetry itself is certainly not exempted from the list. In fact, the whole poetic endeavour—to use words to describe ‘the harvest of the intangibles’—is what is most at issue here. It is no coincidence that section 3, in which the poet’s struggle for word-tools to shape and hold experience together is at the centre of the poem, and that the problems,
the risks of attempting to catch that experience, radiate forwards and
backwards from the central exposé.

Conversely, at the farthest edges of the poem, in the beginning
and in the closing lines, lie ‘gifts’—the gift of a day containing all
possibilities, and the gift of a small boy, the ritual offering of bread to a
pigeon. It is here, in these unsolicited gifts, that the ceremony for the
harvest of the intangibles can be found.

That four-thousand-year search of ‘parts towards a meaning’ is
tethered between the times of ancient Egypt and the present day
endeavours of the poet. The local Sydney beginning and end offer
precious gifts, often unrecognised because not painted, adorned, or
captured in song or spell. In ‘hurry hurry’ (1971, p. 55), however,
possibilities have been lost amid the horrors of the modern age, devoid
of art or spells. The promise of Osiris’ chant—“I live I die I am the
corn Osiris”—seems far away, anchored firmly in the rock text, and
Harry’s final cry is one of longing and desperation:

Oh Osiris where have you gone and what have you
done with the barley

Likewise, in ‘Twenty Years— Fragment—’ (1979, p. 19), the realities of
the building of the Great Gizeh pyramid cannot be adequately
deciphered or comprehended through the extant evidence—the ‘two
million three hundred thousand / blocks of stone’. The available
writings do not answer Harry’s questions about individual blocks of
stone, or about those who lifted them. Who were they? Craftsmen,
harvesters, slaves? There are only hints and oblique suggestions, and
some—the women—are not shown at all: the writings have removed
them from the world of the field, made them silent and invisible forever. And why, Harry the poet asks, did they labour so:

did they share these beliefs—
each man thinking he was a part of
a task to raise Khufu
Khufu-Osiris—
that he in his turn would be greeted and greeted,
becoming, down blue halls of distance,
the One of the Dead?

Belief is once more at the centre of this Egypt poem, and belief is a gift—even Ra, the once mighty 'eye of the sun', cannot 'force' belief, and indeed, in its 'blue/socket', 'casts a doubt dark as blindness'. This doubt becomes the poet's lament, and echoes her longing for Osiris:

...—how many times
not to know (never to know):

J.S. Harry, twentieth-century Sydney poet, will never 'know' rationally how many times the arms were lifted, or if indeed there was any man who saw the construction of the pyramid 'in toto', for the past is inscrutable, has

An opacity as dense as any fat
As any poem or historical fact skimmed off
like fat some four thousand eight hundred odd years
afterwards (spoon: Herodotus)

By using the 'spoons' of Herodotus, of writing, of imagination, however, it is perhaps possible to peer for a moment into, even briefly to taste the clear, fluid broth, or the rich sustaining milk beneath the fat. Harry's poem itself seems to bear witness to the possibility, in her vivid, direct images of sweet water, 'waste stones' and 'live scorpions',
of sweat, red eyes, burning sun, and the heightening of the senses in this desert, where her imaginary worker is

    tasting the water of earth
    praised fiercest in dryness.

Belief in these possibilities is essential to Harry, even in the midst of dry doubt, and while she sees that her own poem and poetry may prove as dense as fat and fact, she still continues with her labour—

    making
    not knowing
    for whom . . .

—continuing to ‘make’ in the hope, the faith, that the imagination of her readers may also offer a ‘spoon’.

II

If ‘parts towards a meaning’ is, in some ways, Harry’s tractatus, she is not content to rely on it as her only framing poem, but continues to write poems, philosophical and analytical in nature, in which she recasts and reconsiders the proper relation between words and meanings. In Hold, for a little while, and turn gently, the title poem (p. 1) performs this function, while in A Dandelion for Van Gogh, the doubled poem ‘Parts of Speech as Parts of a Country’ (pp. 9 and 42), provides the architecture around which the volume is structured. It is against the philosophico-political position of these pieces that many of Harry’s poems ‘about’ words and stories, such as ‘This Explains’ (1985,
p. 28), ‘the retreat’ (1971, p. 39), and ‘into the landscape’ (1971, p. 9) can best be understood.

In ‘Hold, for a little while, and turn gently’, Harry seems to advocate holding experience in words, but only for ‘a little while’, and with a ‘gentle’ turn to allow an oblique view. This is a tentative poetic, with more than a little caution in its employment.

The poem, however, does not deal principally with tentatives, but with the direct stabbing of ideas. It is unimportant, perhaps, whether the ‘he’ of the poem is a poet, linguist, sociologist or psychologist. What is important is that ‘he’ is a ‘he’, and is lecturing on the nature of linguistic style, concerning himself with the very matters with which Harry is most involved. In this one-sided dialogue:

He conceived of a style that would stick us to its idea
like a dagger;

and

he conceived of the idea...
...
... as part of our body,

I use the oxymoron ‘one-sided dialogue’ because the silence of the audience in response to these theories is telling, and conveys an idea without any of the ‘positive’ external behaviours, such as being ‘written spoken or otherwise/manifested’, which ‘he’ insists upon. The playfulness with which Harry uses the terms ‘in literal fact’, and ‘external behaviour’ further reveals Harry’s scepticism as to ‘his’ premises.
It is the repetition of the word ‘conceive’, however, which alerts the reader to Harry’s unstated ironic intentions. Here she presents the spectacle of a ‘he’ conceiving, or at least seeing himself as conceiving. The doubled meaning of the word—to become pregnant with, and to form in the mind—seems lost to the speaker, making all the more potent, or perhaps I should say impotent, the covert sexing of his ‘conception’ of a style:

... that could
rise up off its page
and stop us cold as the steelpoint
sunk in, up to its hilt,
        yet making fire
in the belly.

The conceit of idea as belly/womb, and style as dagger, and the phallic stabbing of idea by style to ‘create’ a clearly ‘manifested idea’—a new entity—is undercut immediately. Harry, having dabbled with such daggering (‘shaped sharpness’), highlights what ‘he’ does not say, bringing into play unmanifested ideas, negativities, silences, and shadows. Where he continues to assert his conception of a thrusting style, Harry repeatedly replies ‘He did not say’, thus bringing the inverse, or internal behaviour, of his supposition into play and engaging him in a dialogue of speech and silence. For what he does not say, is that such a stabbing style leaves no room to manoeuvre or reconsider, to test one’s position, or to move outside one’s own identity. If ‘the stabbed man/ is the symbol of fire’ he cannot be a user of symbols any more.

Harry’s imagery is macabre, and in the second half of the poem, the threat inherent in the dance of blade and belly becomes manifest.
The symbolic stabbing seems to become an actual stabbing, with an accompanying failure of the thesis, for:

... there was,

for him, some slight nuance
between the sound of the idea-knife in his
‘mind’ and the feel of a blade in his body)

Rather than sinking the word-knife to its hilt in the desire to force conception, or relying on the fallacy of a perfect, non-Western union of mind and body, Harry offers the alternative of holding the knife for just a little while, and turning it ever so gently, so as to feel pain, but not death, and to allow some space in which the internal behaviours of ideas may develop.

In contrast to ‘Hold, for a little while, and turn gently’, in which bodies and ideas are juxtaposed, the framework with which Harry structures *A Dandelion for Van Gogh* is one in which images are predominantly architectural and geographical. They are, however, the architecture and geography of the broad brush-stroke, unlike the close observations of the natural world to be discussed in the following section. Indeed, rather than suggesting close contact with observed things, the triangle of geography, language and sex in ‘Parts Of Speech As Parts Of a Country’ (1 and 2) seems, on first inspection, to be a closed, self-referential one. A closer reading, however, reveals an irony, similar to that employed in ‘Hold...’, which undercuts rigid philosophical conventions.

The title of this poem (which, despite the separation of its ‘Parts’ within the book, should be considered as a single piece), suggests a link between language and geography and conjures up images of an explorer setting out to discover, map and colonise the shape of the
language we use as an interior landscape. It suggests also a neatness of imagery and sign—a smooth transference from one symbolism to another—almost a mathematical correlation. What the title does not express so overtly is the third ‘signing’ of the poems, that of the sexual division built into the binary division. Harry does not call the poem ‘Parts of Speech as Parts of a Country as Parts of a Sex’ although we may perhaps read this into the title (in the manner of *The Country Wife*). Similarly, the two poems—seen at first perhaps as a straight ‘split’ between the male and the female, and thus of two opposing claims to ownership of the territory, in the transference of the ‘I’ to the ‘he’ and ‘his axe’ to ‘her axe’—are subject to subversion in the slight and comic variations between the almost identical renderings. For example, what is, in the ‘female’ version (‘1’), ‘like an odour of wet tweeds dogs and the British’ becomes, in the ‘male’ (‘2’), ‘an odour of wet tweeds bogs and the English’, and the feminine ‘wooden scoops’ becomes the masculine ‘woody advice’. These disruptions subvert the otherwise mathematical duplication of the poems, and it is in this space between smooth signal transference that authorial irony can be seen.

It is quite clear, both in these poems and in ‘Hold, for a little while, and turn gently’, that Harry keenly explores the gendering of language. While I do not wish to down-play the nature of this exploration, it is, however, important to heed her understated warning that it is erroneous and non-productive merely to abandon a ‘masculine’ in favour of a ‘feminised’ language, especially if a ‘feminised’ language ends as either impotent and merely private, or as just another claim for power through colonisation. Rather than simply trying to replace the phallic with the gynocratic, Harry tries to show both the dangers of a word-knife sunk to the hilt, and the risks of
passivity, and to propose a reconciliation between these two modes.
Harry’s work is characterised by independence from a declared
position, both in a form which deliberately subverts closure, and a
language which enables continuing dialogue between poet and reader.
If, in ‘between people’ (1971, p. 21), she asks ironically, ‘What else is
there/but relationships’, she continues, throughout her work, to affirm
the existence of relationships whilst acknowledging their tenuous
nature. And she asserts that in committing relationships to language,
poems can relate to experience:

the eye makes a crab
out of a sheet of whitepaper
sidling sideways
down the road of the wind.

The ‘whitepaper’ of poetry, and the ‘sideways sidling’ words of Harry’s
poems enable ‘crabs’ to be made. The tensions between the language
which sidles sideways, trying obliquely to reveal or encompass
experience, and the language which seeks to hold experience together
by a ‘shaped sharpness’ informs two important poems, ‘the retreat’ and
‘This Explains’, both, in their own way, dealing with war.

In ‘the retreat’ (1971, p. 39), a modern war, that most
immovable of shaping forces of our times, is clearly described. This is
no longer a battlefield where the enemy is known, and where
advances, retreats, skirmishes and deaths conform to a known pattern,
ordained by a hierarchy of truth. This is the twentieth century war of
mines and minefields, of barbed wire traps and endless uncertainty.
The only ‘truths’ are underfoot, no longer abiding above—the
treacherous, explosive truths of mines which can turn friends into
much the same texture as ‘ploughed ground’, ‘rain sodden and
weathered’. Memory itself has become treacherous, because the male subject now finds it difficult to remember what he once knew, or at least what he thought he once knew:

It became hard to remember
where once he thought he had seen
explosions before:

In reaction, he ‘mimes’ twentieth century speechlessness and immobility so that he’ll ‘appear to be running—’, to be going somewhere, to have some goal or destination. The ‘someone’ who breathes heavily with his own illusion offers what seems to be a truth:

I learnt that some places are safer
for ever.

This seems to be a haven from the risks of movement and uncertainty:

So he stayed. For a while.
It was quite safe.

The truth underfoot, however, is again treacherous, and passivity is no defence against it. The poem’s ending is harsh and grotesque in its deceit, but it is the middle stanza which contains most horror. The images here are as intentionally macabre as those of the first, echoing the horrors of a twentieth century ‘truth’. The nature of that truth becomes even more horrible as we read of friends,

strung on the wires they had stretched
out of miraculous stores of themselves.
These friends have been strung up on truths/myths of their own conception. In turning their backs on action, and retreating to the womb of their own self-built structures, they have become barbed by their own refusal of 'grip' and 'sharpness'.

Continuing the war theme, but this time writing not of a feminised conception of self, but of rigid, phallocratic renditions of ideas and language, 'This Explains...' (1985, p. 28), exposes the limitations of the single definition, of dictionaries, of style stabbing ideas to make things manifest. Much of the poem can be read as comic,

The difference  
between a chimney & a ferry  
is that one carries an insubstantial 'substance'  
in a vertical direction without moving upward  
& the other carries solids  
in a horizontal direction by its own movement

as Harry parodies econo-speak, public service-speak, and even perhaps foreshadows lit-speak. These definitions look ridiculous, especially in the poetic context, and their unrelievably linear nature limits them so severely as to make them absurd. It also makes them lifeless:

Smoke in a non-blocked chimney with updraughts  
is restricted, to a simple upward movement  
which pleases... aesthetically... by conforming to an idea  
of the movement of smoke  
... idea... slowly hardening... It will no longer  
be necessary for you to observe  
the movement of smoke directly

Here is an idea mummified, which in its static form takes away the necessity for continued observation. More sinister, it can also remove our ability to observe—or to question—at all.
For while the early parts of the poem may be read as humorous, Harry ends the poem on a particularly savage note, which makes clear that, for her, these encrustations of habit, of believing what we are told of language, are dangerous in the extreme. For, when all these pseudo-logical definitions, and the process of breaking language down into seemingly elemental propositions, come to the conclusion that 'This explains why people & smoke never meet', the terms of reference are changed. The definers are able to make new definitions to suit them, to find ways in which smoke and people may meet. It is at this point that the reader must ask, where is it in this century of bureaucracy and proofs, that smoke and people have met?

One of the answers is, of course, in that bastion of quasi-logical racial definition—Hitler's Germany—where smoke and people, chimneys and flesh were brought together. This grating between the bizarrely funny and the shocking is echoed in the similar poem, 'Socio-Realist Fiction/Moves Amongst The Facts/Or The Fiction Versus the Facts' (1985, p. 73), in which artistic writing itself is not exempted from Harry's scrutiny. Harry challenges all writers to scrutinise their facts and their fictions, and to probe the nature of their connection, for, she says,

(Had you said a hitler-fact changed 6 million jewispeople-facts into imagined realities (fictions) it would have made no difference to them)

A dead fact is no less dead than a dead imagined reality

Of course, Harry does not argue here against fictions per se, nor does she privilege 'fact' over fiction. Indeed, as Harry argues in 'honesty-stones' (1971, p. 41), a landscape of 'fact' unrelieved by
imaginative possibilities is a deadening one. On one level, this poem presents a speech or dialogue about a relationship which has not survived the modern demands for openness and complete 'honesty'. Whether the relationship is one between lovers, or simply between friends, it has foundered on rocks, and been dried into desert barrenness.

Harry's title gives the reader an immediate landscape in which to work, grounded on two levels—that of earth or stones, and that of communication. The landscape is further detailed by making it 'between us', so that it becomes analogous to the possibilities of human linkage or relationship. And what is that landscape like? It

had grown so bare
the landscape so denuded—

and all that remains is

just the rocks and the shade they cast—

The landscape has not always been this way: what has 'grown' barren must once have been lush and foliated; what is now is only the remains of what once was. When Harry writes of this emotional country

all we had left was what we knew—

her meaning is circular, for the inverse—what we knew was all we had left—can be read into the line. The unknown is what has been denuded. The passion to know has razed and destroyed that which should not be known, acting as a sort of consuming cancer. This
landscape has not only been made bare, but has also become a setting in which the rage for knowledge has ironically contracted into an impenetrable and non-negotiable rockiness, devoid of the verdure of possibilities. The eyes—'your eyes my eyes'—seem to have merged into the oneness of total honesty, but can also, ironically, be seen as irrevocably separated through the loss of the possibility of desire and dialogue.

Ending her first stanza with eyes, vision, and possible blindness, Harry begins her second with her major preoccupation—speech. The sterility suggested by the stanza

We did not need to speak, to talk.  
Everything was in the rocks.  
It had been said before.

is potent, whether one relates it to lovers who no longer have anything to say, or to a civilisation which is doing away with speech, or the sort of honest, up-front poetry which does not allow for imaginative interchange between poet and reader. There is no need to speak, if all has been said before, and neither is there any desire to speak. Indeed, desire itself has been dispensed with, and the rocks represent a powerful, solid and visible 'closure', not just of possibilities for present speech between this 'you' and this 'me', but of 'you's' and 'me's' across cultures, time, history—and across poetry. The poem depicts a spiritually and morally derelict world, one devoid of imaginative contact and of the possibility even of failure. If this world, this relationship, or this poetic are devoid of the foliage of possibility, then they are barren, and accordingly,

We could not live there.
Closure, lack of desire, 'rockness', means psychic death, and the agent of that psychic and spiritual death is 'honesty'. Honesty here is undesirable, and by implication we can perhaps see 'dis-honesty', dissembling, hiding, or even a measure of deceit, as necessary to a spiritual, relational, and especially to a poetic life. The imaginative or poetic foliage between poet and reader as audience must be maintained. Communication between the two needs to be indirect, slanted and imaginative, not rational, reductive and total. Harry, after all, is quoted on the back cover of *the deer under the skin* as saying that she writes 'with the hope that there should be room in each poem for the imagination of the reader to work in'. Even this flat, spare, undecorated poem with its direct messages must, in the end, signal the possibility for a return to a green world. The poem is set in the past tense; it does contain the possibility of otherness (in the 'shade' cast by the rocks), and it ends, not with 'We died there', but with 'We could not live there', allowing the reader to see this couple—me and you, poet and reader—moving elsewhere, as J.S. Harry rejects the way of 'honesty' and speechlessness, and chooses something else, a poetic and a relation to the world which is based on disjunction, or slanted truth.

The poem 'into the landscape' (1971, p. 9), presents the problem of the degradation of a different landscape in a similar vein, as dichotomy between truth and deception, but here that dichotomy is further problematised, with partial, verbal truths shearing against non-verbal instinct. Harry parodies the Romantic from the beginning of the poem. Far from the notion of landscape as the coalescence of the good and the true in nature and in man, this landscape mocks all such expectations. Here the 'lake' is not a Wordsworthian one, deep, eternally spring-fed and with delicate clouds shimmering over it. In
contrast to the romantic paradigm, this ‘lake’ is shallow and drain fed, a mockery of its nomenclature, and is clouded with waste, the rubbish of the twentieth century. The gaps between expectation and reality continue:

Here where delight is a paddle-and-splash, mothers can see that the notice-board’s warning of danger-in-bathing is wrong.

The ingredients of pastoral harmony—the delighted splashing of innocents, watched over by mothers guided by the ‘absolute’ of motherly instinct and intuition, honed to provide safety and harbour for their offspring—are here and such instinct overrides the warning words of the noticeboard. But,

On the dark wet bodies a mosaic of grits surprises the eye with its violet and brown.

These colours and patterns may be beautiful and of a deep hue, but they also ‘surprise the eye’. They are unknown quantities, and as mosaics, composed of many tiny shapes, do not tell a whole truth but leave enough space for an astute or tutored observer to imagine a whole. These observers, however, have been betrayed by their century, and can use only their limited sight. After all, the sand looks almost normal, and the lake-outlet is ‘merely a dribble’—not a threat, it seems, to anyone. Human beings are not the only creatures for whom instinct is outmoded. The ‘fifty fairy penguins/dead at the lick of the tide’, have ‘accepted’ all and followed their instincts and age-old patterns unto
their deaths. The small, dark, wet bodies of children are still living, but for how long amid such despoliation? The romantic harmony of man and his environment is as shattered as a mosaic: the lake is a lie, mothers splash their children with their own impending death, and the fairies of a former innocence lie dead. Ironically, the noticeboard tells some of the truth, and in ignoring the messages of writing the women fail to enlarge upon their intuition. The contemporary problem—that of technological society outrunning woman's ability to adapt her understanding of threats to her instinctual life—is noted warningly here, but the reader cannot be sure whether the poet sees human beings as having any more choice in 'accepting' death than do the fairy penguins. Dazzled by the mosaics of sullied beauties, 'knowledge' once more turns out to be ignorance or deceit.

III

Harry's landscapes, however, are not always ruined or betraying, undermining belief. Although her architectural poems such as 'parts towards a meaning', 'Hold, for a little while, and turn gently', and 'Parts Of Speech As Parts Of A Country' provide an intellectual framework in which to explore the nature of language in rigorous intellectual terms, it would be erroneus to argue that Harry always works in this way, or that the internal world of the intellect is the only world she observes. Rather, these intellectual poems provide a cradle for other more delicate works, in which she can continue, in a series of close observations of the natural and human world of her own spatial and temporal environment, to search for a balance between experience
which fragments, and experience which is bolted down in
explanations.

The tenuous relationship between words, poet and reader is
nowhere more eloquently described than in ‘the what o’clock’ (1971,
p. 1), in which Harry laments her poet’s fate. She feels herself to be set
apart, different, with ‘the isolating air, cool and strange’ of her identity
as poet turning her into floating lightness, thistledown, dangerously
unconnected to the world:

A puff-ball
on a slim green stem
is more attached
to earth than I.

The puff-ball, the ‘what o’clock’ of children’s games, has stayed with
her into adulthood, and she now attempts to make sense of her
aloofness from those around her. How, she asks, did it happen that she
came to be:

Grown from a thin green shoot
with a root in earth
to this airy death?

That question is not answered definitively, only speculated upon, and
the speculation lies mostly in whether this airiness is, in fact, a death.
In disintegration, torn apart by the buffeting air of wind, the puffball is
given new possibility. Its seeds cannot root, renew or grow again
without finding an airy death. What of the puffball poet, also feeling
that cool strangeness about her head? Words ‘root’, she is sure, but

... My words? Mine?
Her word seeds are inside her head—'a kind of thistle-madness'—and in their 'closeness' lies their difficulty. This 'thistle-madness', with its grass growing and birds singing, may seem preferable to the dubious sanity of the outside world, where people rarely sing. However, while 'close' may indicate a non-fragmentation of her words, it may also denote closed or even suffocating, a mind-world where words reverberate without ever touching each other.

Puffballs, however, do take root:

People in pain
I brush against;
I rip. And they hold me.

even if the poet cannot always see where the receptive soil for the seed may be. In the poem 'In a Goose-Month' (1979, p. 6), Harry's anxiety about words which may fail to take root is ameliorated in a sense of the strength-in-delicacy of gossamer. The gossamers of small spiders are spun between things—'the eyes and the moon'—and can cover immense distances, floating lightly where solid things such as daggers would fail. The web, however, is not an entirely untethered thing, rather it:

starts here—and the eyes
take hold imagining
gossamers stretch—from star to star—

Starting here, and now, the eyes can hold, by imagination, the seemingly unknowable, the black spaces between points of light. This imagining is not rational, literal, or infallible, but is necessarily a 'Distort', a gentle turning of the perceived, a frame
... against which

spinnings
take
their chance—

Some spinnings, like puffball seeds, will no doubt fall and be swallowed up by the dark spaces they are flung across, rather than leading to imagined stars. Yet these spinning spiders are portrayed as able to hold almost anything: ‘Small, not-seen’, yet immensely powerful, they can web positives—‘a house’—and negative shapes—‘a door/way’s hole’. Their power is not in a clenched grasp but in a gentle binding ‘down to ground’, suggesting a net which can bring experiences—positives, negatives, selves and others—down to an earthy grounding where we, the word-spiders, may touch and hold them briefly and softly. If those gossamers are not binding down, they float still in a tentative relationship with us:

Else, floating loose
on a wind your breath
light as touch
which the wind
cannot hold—still,
which the wind’s
touch sends—

The lightness of this relationship between ‘breath’, ‘wind’, and ‘touch’ is exquisitely delicate, and the concentrated use of sibilants (‘else’, ‘worse’), the related ‘ch’ combination (‘which’, ‘touch’), and the ‘w’s (‘wind’, ‘which’), phonetically reinforce this relation between what is momentarily held, and what is ultimately unholdable.

Almost hidden within the poem is just such an example of a gossamer touch, a relationship between binding and breathing. In a poem which uses spiders and their webs as chief symbolic conveyors of
meaning, comes the much more solid 'goose', and indeed the title of
the poem is not 'Gossamers', but 'In a Goose-Month'. The word
'gossamer' comes from the Middle English combination of 'goose' and
'summer', referring to a November holy season known as St Andrew's
Summer (OED). This season, in which goose was eaten to celebrate a
kind of pseudo-summer, was also the season in which gossamer was
most prevalent, a lighter veil even than 'gardens' mists'.

Harry obviously appreciates the ironic twist in having the
honking, indelicate goose giving its name to the precision of a spider's
web, but she is perhaps more interested in the webbing of the words
over time. This is indeed a word-gossamer stretched, floating for miles
and years, binding the goose summer of yesteryear and the gossamer of
today in a distorted relationship. The process of the distortion is now
almost invisible to us, but this, she says, is how webs should be. The
poet-spider should be small and not-seen, and yet active, working in
hiding—

Used to be
the month they ate
the goose, more
gossamers veiled
the gardens’
mists and grass

—handing down spun connections between past and present. Perhaps
we no longer eat goose in November, but we may, in a very tentative
way, touch those past lives and experiences: it is language which allows
us to do so.

It is not, of course, only poets who have the ability to spin
connections between the pragmatism of 'goose' and the magic of
'gossamer'. In 'parts towards a meaning' Harry presents her twofoot
boychild and in ‘Backward Over Dark Water’ (1979, p. 44), another, older child resists a linear, progressive view of experience. Darkness and fluidity figure prominently in Harry’s poetry, and here they are linked with language itself. In the opening stanza of the poem Harry encompasses the paradox of a moment in time which exists only now and here, but which somehow also has an eternal existence in the shadows, scents and colours of the moment. The problem of relating these two disparate experiences is posed, with the poet asking:

Who will pick up
this scent
& give it
to the ducks that’ve
brushed their undersides
on the muddy edge of the lake
cried once just there
& gone for ever . . .

Evidently, the poet wishes to make this gift—to find a way to hold together ‘just there’ and ‘gone for ever’—but finds herself unable to do so. Casting around, she ‘catches’ a small boy in that most boyish of activities—fishing. The initial description of a boy on a bridge, with line, hook and grasshopper, is familiar and unchallenging. It is, however, the boy himself who challenges, for:

... He says he has seen
a golden fish in another pond yesterday
It is that golden fish he is after

To the child, past and present, here and there, can be understood and worked with as both discrete and unified. The child is aware that the golden fish he has seen is both elsewhere and ‘elsewhen’, but he also believes entirely in its presence here, today.
Only adults—in particular, the observing adult—perceive the logical 'problems' of such an understanding. The observer notes that the hook the boy holds is too large for his dreams, that the bright, mortal grasshopper will soon pass into the past with its death ('an insect's darkness'). For the boy, however, the brightness of grasshopper and of fish lives on, not caught by the jags and small hooks of linear, progressive 'logic'. His uncaught fish may last, and gleam golden in the light of his belief, but its lasting may not be adequately told in language—'The words do not pulse—fat & gold—in his hand'. To grasp this experience too tightly in words would shift the experience to shadow and darkness, where it would have its own existence 'behind a curtain like the dusk', but no longer 'fat & gold'. The child does not bow to the hegemony of time only in its forward dimensions for 'time gone backward' is also his in a rich way, not merely as an experience which has 'flipped out of its life'. With a hook too large for catching, he will not reduce his dreams into monstrous caricatures of themselves. Whilst fishing without catching, however,

...the boy

holds a hand
to a line of dream
uncaught fish will follow him always

At the other end of the human time span is Harry's 'mrs finnerson' ('eyes', 1979, p. 30)—a woman who through age, infirmity, time and loneliness, has unlearnt the ways of forward time. She is a being in transition, her head 'moult[ing]' just as birds change feathers, losing the down of youth for the bright plumage of adulthood, and then reversing the process in old age. This dispossessed old Sydney-sider carries her life with her in brown paper parcelling:
eyes on the moult head of the little old
camel skin woman stumbling in off the street
her brown paper parcel shaped like a fish

The fish-shaped parcel is a symbol of a ‘fat & gold’ miraculous sustenance the woman carries within. From that parcel she plucks remnants of a life, apparently fragmented to the observer, but whole and complete to herself. Her fear of the night, and of dispossessio, echoes the fear of Harry’s old man of ‘parts towards a meaning’, afraid that his goats, trees and people will be taken away from him. Just as he falls back on the memory of goats, so this little camel skin woman pulls out the memories of a past life, making them present. Although she may appear to be destitute, one of the legions of paper bag paupers, from the parcel of her memory she conjures a ‘nicestew’, rich, nourishing and comforting, and a son on the north shore, cushioning his mother against robbers and telephone bills.

The woman is let down, however, by words, and books, and specifically by a telephone book, ‘birthbook of myth and language’, which is now useless with its harsh absence of her son. She says, ‘you’d better ring the police’, and in answer to her well rehearsed line come others, delivered by a celluloid ‘actioncarved’ hero who arrives in his incongruous hero’s vehicle—‘the bright blue mini’. The policeman has become a caricature of himself, sealed by a police stamp into a certain reality, the reality of ‘knowing’ the old woman’s life, firing it in the brittleness of his knowledge into ‘baked clay fact’, as illusory and unyielding as his disaster movie face. The knowledge he has of ‘husband family ancient-dead’ is the dried, mummified knowledge
of a linearly progressive time, which renders the past and those belonging to it irrelevant.

The police ask her name, despite already knowing it, following the patterns of a linear conversation which is already inscribed in their own 'birthbook' of identification—name, address, next of kin. Mrs Finnerson, however, is as unconcerned with her own name as she is with a definitive and authoritative unitarian 'I'. Her 'i' is not egocentric, but as full of possibilities as the 'o' of her exclamation—a symbol, like her fish-shaped parcel, of what is held gently within. From within that miraculous store of her parcel, of the 'o' of her life, she makes 'names' grow themselves:

mrs finnerson grows by name deadchildren up like
three-week beans alive they thrust
through bakedclayfact police stamp sealed
beneath her feet

These three-week beans, like Osiris' barley, defy 'bakedclayfact'. Like three-week beans, or barley which germinates by chance, however, the vegetation cannot be permanent and its very thrusting youthfulness means it must exist only temporarily, withering from a lack of ongoing sustenance. Mrs Finnerson's three-week bean children wither for a time in their baked clay soil, as she withers to a frightened old woman—pleading, as we sense she must have so many times before, to stay the night in the police station. Paradoxically, the disaster-movie hero seems to become more compassionate as she becomes more helpless—

we wont let the robbers get you mrs finnerson
it's warm inside the nicebluevan
—giving her a refuge from the baked clay facts of her dispossession and isolation. A crumpled old camelskin woman, perhaps, is less threatening to the seal of the police stamp than one who insists on creating a personal magic from within the parcel of her memory. The poem’s ‘epilogue’:

the spider scuttling across the flaws of the body
finds samara also through the wall behind faked plaster
walls behind the walls behind the
ruins line the head

recalls the small spiders of ‘In a Goose-Month’, with their work of weaving experience together. These spiders web the ‘flaws’ of the body, the lines and cracks of age, gathering all the experiences of life into a memory which is rich and non-linear, and which resists the daggering of styles and ideas pinned together. The spider ‘finds samara also’—the winged seeds of ash trees which allow seedlings, like three-week beans, to travel far from their origin. That ‘samara’, found ‘through the wall behind faked plaster’, suggests that life asserts itself through the tiny gaps in ‘bakedclayfact’. Just as the spider can weave its gossamer over all the gaps in the world, Harry aims to bind spaces and disruptions into her word-fabric, giving it depth and balance, resisting the urge to a uni-dimensional stamp which seals experience forever. It is, she asserts, ‘the walls behind the walls behind the ruins’ which provide the possibilities for a new life, with the ‘behindness’ of experience of far more importance than the walls. Like the woman’s old moult head, the poems are ‘lined’ with possibilities, but it is the magic of fish, of three-week beans, and of gossamers—with all their attendant risks and rewards—which allows the generation of ‘real’, non-celluloid life.
This interest in the ‘behindness’ of experience—experience as shadow or inversion—extends to the behindness of language. The rearranging of linear, syntactical language structure in order to reveal its own hidden foundations, is made explicit in “the baby, with the bathwater, thrown out” (1979, p. 38). Indeed, the rearrangement of the well known adage in the title presents the challenge of this poem, which is ‘to hunt new life/ to stuff this particular cliche’. Just as ‘eyes’ may ‘hunt stars...in the spaces of the sky’ (‘Between the Sand Dunes and the Cattle’ 1979, p. 62), so the poet may verbally hunt for stuffing for this flat, linear phrase, rounding it and giving it promise, the fullness of the pregnant circle. Rose Lucas sees the colon which begins the poem’s first line as giving the impression of an interrupted dialogue (1989, p. 239), but it may also represent the subversion of the syntactical rules which promise balance and form, but which can result in an ‘unstuffed’ flatness.

The terms of the cliche are also altered. The ‘baby’ is here a ‘small foetus’, a tiny ‘sac of blood’, holding all possibilities but unable to develop without the encircling protection of the womb. Similarly, the ‘bath’ is a shower alcove, not the amniotic shape of a rounded bowl of water. Water is now associated with pressure, a force which is unable to break up the singleness of foetus, even in its hopelessness. For the foetus is now single, ‘dropped...by accident’—as are so many—and the coalescence of foetus and womb has been broken forever. The two—mother and child—‘will not meet again’: their separation in positive terms is complete, with one sliding to the main drain, and the other forever sterile, a ‘pale chook on a china egg/ set to brood for a century’. The only hatchings possible after this accident are memories and possibilities, the inversion of the non-life the foetus has dropped to.
For mother and child are still joined, even if only in negativity. Although they will not meet again,

Each pair of eyes
reminds the other
of an eyelessness

that joins them

Inversions and shadows remain, and this shadow of ‘eyelessness’ casts itself forward over the rest of the poem. Eyes, which play such a keen figurative role for Harry, stand here again for senses which may not ever connect absolutely or logically, but which may, nevertheless, allow a nebulous ‘behind’ relationship between things and people. Paradoxically, ‘eyelessness’ becomes a form of super-sense—eyes that are more than, as well as less than, eyes.

As may now be almost expected of Harry, the relationship between words and experience is also explored:

Dropped also by accident words
do not fall with
an unborn’s colour

Nor
do they need to be pushed
in quite the same way
to be allowed to fit

through a grating—

While Harry is at pains to tell us that words are not foetuses—they do not share their colour or shape, nor perhaps their resistance—the use of the qualifiers ‘also’ and ‘quite’ establishes a graphic relationship between ‘words’ and the ‘unborn’. Perhaps words do not need to be pushed in ‘quite’ the same way, but, we may infer, they do need a very
similar pushing to squeeze through, and subvert the ‘grating’ of linear syntax. Words, like the unborn (and the mother?) hold possibilities in ‘eyelessness’, or shadow, and even if they are dropped without deliberation, it is still possible for word users such as Harry to hunt for new life for them, to give them back the possibilities of fruition which a driving pressure may have removed. Words also exist in their inversions, in the silences with which Harry fills her poems. Silence is a force for possibilities: it is as ‘merciful’ as the drain below the shower pipe, and there are some small but infinite possibilities, for which verbal acknowledgment is not only inappropriate, but impossible.

It is appropriate, however, to acknowledge other moments or possibilities, so long as the poet does not ‘push’ words to ‘fit’, stripping the experience of its unique colour. In her short, pastoral poems, such as ‘Already Someway Off’ (1979, p. 3), ‘First frost, crisp, dogless hour’ (1979, p. 5) and ‘This Cool’ (1979, p. 10), Harry presents difficulties for the critic, for these poems require little in the way of rational deduction or intellectual rigour, and the reader may risk a great deal in ‘pushing’ these poems too hard when they seem to resist the pressure of the critical pen.

It is tempting to see these as ‘slight’ poems, without the intellectual and linguistic difficulties of her longer poems. Those difficulties can present the critic with an almost irresistible urge to read the longer poems—and write about them—as puzzles to be completed, with Harry herself made neat and confined in a box of the critic’s making.

Harry is slippery to the critic’s grasp, however, and makes her escape in these ‘little’ poems. Here, single moments in time, such as Quasimodo’s sudden evening (‘Already Someway Off’), a moment’s
hesitation in wondering whether a wallaby is eating moonlight or grass ('First frost, crisp, dogless hour') are presented for us to share. They are not 'caught', but rather momentarily 'limned' against their backdrops. The flickering of small fires, the cooking of meat, the grazing of a rabbit provide the environment which allows the 'clearing' of a space for a moment, and that magic element—belief—to happen within.

Believing in spaces, moments or magic which cannot be pinioned is not easy:

This cool
near-dark
holds nothing...
...
Nothing to smell except
rain...

Yet Harry challenges herself and her readers to find what is gently held in 'This Cool'—the slanted lines of barely visible fishing lines, the unseen barbs which nevertheless, in imagination, 'grab' the hidden lushness of weeds—and to catch the almost-nothing smell of rain.

It is in these 'slanted threads', which are 'near-dark', 'near bottom', 'near/green', and almost nothing, that Harry sees the possibility of an organic language, one which offers hope for a regenerative representation. Such a language, that of the 'o', of gossamers, of shining, golden fish in brown paper parcelling, finds its expression—rather than definition—in the poem, 'their common' (1979, p. 23). The title's ironic reference to the use of the most 'common' of things—stones, water, grass—which have been used figuratively and expanded to deserts, hieroglyphics, sea and fish, bilin and barley grasses, does not undercut, but adds to the sense of
'common' as community, or the common ground which people and
the world may share. The poem's cyclical effect:

the words containing
stones and grass
go into you
and sink
are gone

and:

the words containing
stones and grass
grow out of you
and you are gone

is reinforced by the repeated use of the words 'round' and 'ground' and
by the sense of continuous fluid movement. 'I', transmuted here to
'you', is not static or impervious to the experience and the language
structures around it. Rather, it both mediates and is mediated by the
linguistic experience—it both consumes and is consumed in a never
ending cycle. The natural cycle of grass going into the ground as seed,
and then growing out of the ground again is taken by the poet as her
own—she provides the seed with that nurture and protection which is
of earth, water and wombs—but in so doing also loses her own self, the
identity which is as strong and as delicate here as it is in 'the what
o'clock'. Significantly, Harry does not only refer to pebbles shaped,
rounded and smoothed by water, but also to the green 'blades' of grass,
the cutting edges which, dangerous as they are, may, if used
judiciously, give the possibility of a shooting new life which even
rounded stones do not have. Within her poetic are the round and the
green, the smooth and the blade, the womb and the phallus.
In this chapter, I have argued that J.S. Harry carefully steers her way between an organic language, alive with possibilities, and a language anchored too firmly into 'packaged stiffness'. For Harry, language, like landscapes, can be debased, and it is the work of the artist to try to revive it, to refuse spurious or dangerous 'uses'. In ‘words and mouthings the personal assertion’ (1971, p. 23), she begins on a firm note of language as a commodity. It seems ‘everybody’ is trying to sell it:

```
  everybody is trying to sell it—
  not just
  politicians
  students,
  preachers,
  people circumlocuting at the wayside chapel,
  homebodies
  thesis-writers
  taxidrivers,
  foreigners and secret drinkers—
  even that non-commercial
  odd-ball the poet—
  even the blind-deaf-mute—
  wearing out, on the platform at central,
  spuming at the mouth, writing
  incomprehensible
  syllables with his finger—
```

Harry goes out of her way here to include not only the obvious sellers of messages—politicians and preachers—but also ironically implicates herself—'that non-commercial/odd-ball the poet'. Unnervingly, she even evokes the thesis-writer, intent on churning out marketable words in return for a place in the academy. The ironic reference to the poet is reinforced by the fact that the 'personal assertion' is written and spoken, yet remains as incomprehensible as the unconnected 'syllables'
of the blind-deaf-mute of Central Station. The 'personal assertion' seems to be a universal preoccupation, for all are 'pouring' and 'gurgling'. ‘Gurgles’, however, suggests sewerage—the linguistic refuse of a morally defunct and denuded society—rather than clean water ‘praised fiercest in dryness’. Harry reinforces the sewerage imagery later in the poem when she talks of Van Gogh as being mistaken for a ‘public receptacle’:

    no wonder van gogh—
    when colour was his sound
    and people
    kept trying to mess it up
    falling into his ear
    too often
    in the wrong colour—he was not
    mistaken for a public receptacle
    after he took it off...

Later still in the poem, punning ‘cistern’ for ‘system’ in the final line, she continues the black humour of the poem by giving a splendid image of a multitude of people queuing, following, mumbling and muttering—‘gurgling’—from behind ‘a sign’.

    The queue is clearly figured as lining endlessly for a blocked off, overflowing, stinking ‘public receptacle’, in a dirty river of its own making, rather than for the clear water for which perhaps ears were thirsty in a previous age. Ears now are shut, making us all ‘deaf’—but not mute. The commodity flows from the mouth even from ‘behind’ the unseemly gape of the death yawn:

    even from the tombstone they thrust:
    "i worked, i lived, i died, i"
The "i's" on the tombstone phallically thrust their Individuality—Harry undercuts them, makes them mere lower case 'i's' and deflates their pretensions to immortality and self-importance.

In a synaesthetic move, Harry places 'i's' (which double as 'eyes') close to 'ears', implying that eyes and ears can no longer comprehend true 'speech'. Words, it seems, have become mere mouthings—empty and sterile. The juxtaposition with ears is ironic, for it is Van Gogh, master of an art which seemingly appeals solely to the eye, who has open ears. His senses are not discrete and separated; like Dobson's artist and his 'intricate, devised/Hearing of sight', for Harry's Van Gogh 'colour was his sound'. Van Gogh is, moreover, assailed by the refuse of 'the wrong colours'. In this world of continuous outflow, Van Gogh ultimately chooses a radical freedom, removing the public-receptacle-ear as a red (read) sign. He is, however, the exception, with most people still

endlessly following a sign an ear
endlessly mumbling and muttering
all the long way back
from behind the sign
to where the system is blocked off.

If Harry sees Van Gogh as a receptacle of refuse as well as a receiver of pure colours, she sees herself as a receptacle of sorts also, albeit a private, not a public one. In 'the catcher' (1971, p. 49), she projects a sense of herself as an artist bewildered by the plethora of colours and shapes which rain upon her. Unable to 'dance' or 'sing', she says:

what else could I do but catch them falling?
This line may be read as speaking of the shapes of poems tumbling into the poet’s arms. The poems come in many shapes:

Some fell like bubbles, like thistledown, laughing—
and some fell like people weighed down by themselves—
every day every hour the shapes keep on falling...
squatting, sitting, weeping, floating
being — something — to themselves, new ones
settling, fleshing bone-breaks—
animals land softly thudding,
bats like moth-cries, birds like feelings...
sometimes cars fall; owners with them
metal-shiny slip through air...

Most important, however, is their persistence—‘every day every hour the shapes keep on falling’—and the accompanying sense of the poet who is unable to control the flow. They are ‘something—to themselves’, and the speaker would like to ‘catch them’, save them by transforming shapes into the shapeness of words. With some, it seems, she succeeds, but

Mostly they changed when I touched them

as though the very act of catching involves change, transforming the something they are to themselves to the something they are to the poet and reader. In some aspects of her craft power is not in her own hands. She cannot ‘juggle with the order’, because juggling with words causes the poems to slip through her fingers, leaving her only with the illusion of having caught them. Her hands ‘leap and twitch and cry’ in the act of making, or shaping poems, but they are empty—the catching, or gathering of poem-shapes into full hands is an illusion. Even with this knowledge of an infinitely tenuous relationship, however, the poet still has no choice—‘what else could I do but catch them falling?’
These moments of catching are fleeting, ephemeral and always tenuous for the artist, but in proposing a poetic which remains conscious of the disparate ‘parts’ of experience, and which relies on delicacy of touch, a slanted approach, and a style which is encompassing rather than direct, Harry is able not only to ‘enter the invisible’ but to bring it back, to recover it. By acknowledging alienation, exploring the hidden or inverse world, and spinning a web of gossamer, Harry can show in her poem ‘wind painting’ (1985, p. 62) that in her world

there is one fat gold
dandelion for van gogh
tethered by its own sap
in the black damp shade
by the clump of horseshit.

In J.S. Harry’s poetry, the balance of intellect and feeling, in form and in content, enables her also to tether ‘puffballs’ of thought and emotion into fat, gold dandelions.
CONCLUSION

At the end of this thesis, I remind myself of Rosemary Dobson’s words, that there are ‘All beginnings’ and ‘No end’ (‘The Message’, 1984, p. 64). Like Dobson’s ‘Midnight Reader’ (1955, p. 30):

I carry such companions with me now,
Move always in a crowd who come and go
Just as I come and go and, witty, sad,
Impatient, tranquil, make my mind their own.
Press on my mind, nudge me and jostle so
I’ve not two thoughts together I can keep.

For these four poets—Dorothy Auchterlonie, Rosemary Dobson, Dorothy Hewett and J.S. Harry—have been constant companions for more than five years, and will continue to be so. They do not, perhaps, ‘nudge’ and ‘jostle’ so that my own thoughts are pushed aside, but they do ‘Press on my mind’, adding richly to my understanding of the world, my own identity, and the slipperiness of trying to translate the world—especially the world of the body—into words.

Today, many scholars see the need for a ‘history’ which recognises the nudging, jostling and pressing which has been the influence of women on our culture. It is important that our women poets gain their rightful place in this ‘story’. In a recent newspaper interview, Dr Helen Irving, of the School of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney, argued that if one asked two questions of Australians—‘Who were Catherine Helen Spence and Maybanke Wolstenholme?’, and ‘What about Henry Parkes and Edmund Barton?’—‘the answer to the first question should come as easily to Australians as that to the second’ (‘A Professor’s quest: meet the Mothers of Federation’, Canberra Times, 19 Nov., p. 1). If I have a
'quest' of my own, then it is that at least within the academic and critical communities, the poetry of Rosemary Dobson and Dorothy Hewett should be the subject of scholarly research and considered critical writing as much as is the work of James McAuley and Robert Adamson; that critics and critical journals should acknowledge Dorothy Green as not only a teacher and public speaker, but also as a poet; and that J.S. Harry should not be known only to a select group of poets, largely unheard of in the wider literary and non-literary community.

I recognise, of course, that in the general Australian community, poetry of any sort—whether it is written by men or by women—is little known, and that for many, Australian poetry extends no further than Lawson and Paterson. Those who read poetry much beyond this are mostly academics and other poets. Yet even within this narrow community of readers, Australia's women poets have not received the recognition which they deserve, and our literary 'canon'—however problematic such a concept might be—has been the poorer for it. Over the last decade academic critics have done much to foster interest and to 'recover' the works of neglected women novelists, but the drive to recognise our women poets seems to be some way behind.

Does this matter? Does it matter if the critical community ignores or downplays the poetry of women? I believe it does, because that critical community is heavily involved in the teaching of potential poetry readers, and those readers will, by and large, continue to read and teach what they know. If I teach undergraduates a canon which consists mostly of male Australian poets, then it is likely that when some of those undergraduates go on to become English teachers
(teaching my own children) they will continue to teach a ‘history’ of Australian poetry which is only a partial one.

The issue is a more fundamental one than just whether this canon is lop-sided. Having recognised this imbalance, it is more important to identify what is excluded, and to articulate why. Throughout this thesis, I have concentrated on showing that for these women poets the negotiation of identity is a complex and continuous process, in which there is a deep recognition of the continuity between self and other—whether that continuity resides in experience, writing or human relationships. Identities for these women are fluid and dispersed. They are much less concerned with maintaining distance or separation between themselves and their subjects, than they are with collapsing identity boundaries. Such approaches have met with scorn from the critical profession in the past—as when Max Harris accused Judith Wright of ‘biological hysteria’ (1964, p. 360) This scorn has clearly been based on a notion of identity which reifies rigid ego boundaries and the imposition of the self onto the object.

Without clearly understanding the drives and concerns of Australian women’s poetry, this entire strata of our literature will always be subject to the opinions of those who find women’s poetry less valuable because it is ‘different’, or who value only the poetry of those women whose work does not challenge their own viewpoint. A recent example of this latter tendency can be seen in Les Murray’s assessment of the young poet Jemal Sharah (on the back cover of her Path of Ghosts, 1994), as the ‘most gifted young poet in Australia’. While Sharah is undoubtedly a writer of much promise, Murray’s hyperbolic praise seems to be based principally on the fact that her poetry is very much like the masculine poetry which Murray so
admires—tight, controlled, displaying clear divisions between subject and object, and with none of the instability of identity explored in so much poetry by women. I doubt the value of categorising anybody as ‘the best’, but there are many women currently writing fine poetry in Australia—including three of the four poets examined in my own thesis, and such others as Gwen Harwood, Barbara Giles, Elizabeth Riddell and Antigone Kefala, together with younger compatriots such as Jan Owen, Jean Kent and Dorothy Porter.

But it is not enough just to name these poets, compiling mental or verbal ‘lists’. It is not enough to simply ‘redress the balance’ if the terms within which that balance exists remain unquestioned, or worse, unrecognised. If critical writing has any value at all, it must unsettle categories and stabilities, and ‘speak’ that instability. In particular, it is important that critical writing recognises its own categories, the discourses under which it operates, and to ask whom those discourses serve. Have men’s voices been listened to more than women’s because they are easier to ‘read’ and to ‘write’ under the established paradigms of critical discourse? How does the discourse of criticism ‘write’ value and stature into men’s and women’s voices? How aware are critics of their own assumptions? How adequate (or inadequate) is the form of this particular discourse—the ‘thesis’—in which one is supposed to maintain not only a separation between the writing self and the read object, but also to separate the ‘genre’ of critical writing from the ‘genres’ of poetry, or fiction, or indeed autobiography? Contemporary critical practice, and in particular, deconstruction and post-structural feminist criticism, asks these questions and raises critics’ awareness of the paradigms within which they operate. Reading these criticisms—which recognise instability
itself, and the reflexive nature of the critical process—has done much
to open my own critical practice. Nevertheless, while more theoretical
avenues or approaches have been tried with similar intentions—of re-
reading and re-writing the place of women’s writing in the canon—my
own approach, albeit influenced both by these other criticisms, and by
the very instabilities which I perceive and value in the texts under
consideration, uses less tangible or ‘programmatic’ parameters.

In adopting this approach, I have tried, like the poets I so
admire, to ‘collapse’ my own identity boundaries where they border the
poets’. Like Dobson, I have sought to dissolve myself into what is
other-than-myself, so that I might emerge, speaking ‘wonders’ and ‘by
another way’ (‘To Meet the Child’). I have been, of course, unable to
collapse my own identity boundaries fully to the extent I might have
wished. Nowhere has this been more so than in my reading of Dorothy
Hewett, by whom, I confess, I still feel more ‘jostled’ than ‘pressed’. The
marks of my struggle with her work are no doubt still apparent—and
this is as it should be. I also am a speaking ‘subject’, although unstable,
and like Harry, I have had to work, to feel ‘shaped sharpness grip like
grass’ (‘parts towards a meaning’, 1971, p. 13). I have felt Auchterlonie’s
‘casuist’ winds, both cursing and rejoicing in them. And, like all of
these poets, I have had to search deep for what lies beneath, to use their
poetry as my compass and sextant as I find for myself the ‘Dry River’,
which is only ever a ‘Scrabble of pencil marked...on the map’ (Dobson,
1965, p. 35). All through these years of study, this poetry has been my
white milk and my black, and now, as I share this map of the body,
mind and heart, I continue to feel that:
It was my river. My spirit’s destination.
Abstract of water, a dried depression,
Holed and bouldered and raked with fissures
Where the idea of water channelled
Irresistably over and under
Endlessly forcing down to the sea.

(Dobson, ‘Dry River’, 1965, p. 35)
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