Copyright Notice

Copyright in this work is vested in the author or publication in which it appears. The AustLit Gateway holds a perpetual licence to distribute the text to subscribers through the SETIS server at the University of Sydney, by kind permission of the editors of Westerly. This work may be used, with this header included, for noncommercial purposes within a subscribed institution or for personal research purposes for individual subscribers, according to the AustLit Copyright Policy and relevant Licence Agreements. No copies of this work may be distributed electronically or in any other manner outside of the subscribed institution, or by the individual subscriber, in whole or in part, without express written permission from the copyright holder.

AustLit http://www.austlit.edu.au

SETIS http://www.setis.library.usyd.edu.au/oztexts/
"Looking into the Landscape":
The Elegiac Art of Rosemary Dobson

I

Although Rosemary Dobson’s Collected Poems appeared in 1991, it remains true that the majority of criticism still responds to Dobson’s earlier work. This means that the place of visual art in the poems is emphasized without reference to later developments, particularly those in the elegiac mode. The interest in art-as-a-theme, however, and the elegiac are to some degree continuous. Howard Nemerov, the American poet, suggests that the connection between art and poetry is in fact an elegiac one. Paintings are silent, and poems attempt to ‘speak’ this. What is the elegiac significance about this silence? A viewer of a painting knows that

he is seeing the past, the dead, the irrevocable; and he knows something else, that what he sees is not only the past, the dead, the irrevocable, but something that had that intention of being these things from the moment of its conception: something, that is to say, past from the beginning.\(^1\)

Such a broad focus of course loses detail, and the importance of detail is one of the themes of Dobson’s art. Nevertheless, Nemerov’s speculation is relevant as a starting point, for Dobson’s interest in art is essentially an interest in time and in the "original pastness" of art. In "The Raising of the Dead" the transfigured time of art is not transcendence, as one might expect, but rather an arrestment.\(^2\)

> Angels are free to come and go —
> My pity for the youth who lies
> These seven centuries at least
> Returned to Life; who once had caught
> A wink, a glimpse, of Paradise.\(^3\)

---

Dobson delights in confusing the ontological status of the painting within the poem: she draws attention to "the stiffly painted gown", and the "holy gold" about the angels' heads, the same angels who are "free to come and go". What are we to make of such a poem? It adverts not simply to the transfiguring powers of art, but also to its fallen nature. This art, despite its subject matter, is eminently human, sublunary. The represented figure, delightful though it may be, represents human life in which Paradise (for the watcher as much as the subject) is merely glimpsed. It is opposite that Dobson describes her own work as "part of a search for something only fugitively glimpsed; a state of grace which one once knew, or imagined, or from which one was turned away ... a doomed but urgent need to express the inexpressible".  

This search is neither systematic nor devotional, and one needs to attend to the plurality of Dobson's aesthetic. Dobson is not a programmatic writer, as she points out in one interview; and elsewhere she overtly emphasizes the Keatsian virtue of "negative capability". Dobson's anti-programmatic nature can be found by comparing "The Raising of the Dead" with "Paintings", in which visual art simply is transcendent, a presence which 'speaks' through time. Dobson employs synesthesia (a common device of poems on paintings) to suggest not only something of the mystery of how we intuit paintings, but also the interconnectedness of the grammar of understanding: "This grey and silver Hogarth made / To paint the children as they played / Is silver sound of bells and cries". Silent art simply triumphs over time by its metaphorical (and paradoxical) ability to 'speak'. The poet not only hears the children call, those "who are long since dead", but also hears the painter: "... I speak / Five hundred years ago. You hear. / My words beat still upon your ear". Continuity is emphasized, a consolation found in the elegiac subject matter of transience.

In Dobson's later poetry, beginning with Over the Frontier, we can see a widening interest, away from paintings on a canvas to cultural artefacts in general, and a shift in focus, from using images as dramatic icons to using them as part of a search for 'essentials': "And the poem that exists / will never equal the poem that does not exist" ("Over the Frontier"). Similarly, "For the Painter Ben Nicholson" presents a far more abstract 'picture' than her earlier work,7 which is appropriate as Nicholson's work does not lend itself to dramatic interpretation. 'Poems from Pausanias' use fragments of a past to test the sense of continuity and disjunction felt not only in the classical landscape, but also the literary one. "Lost Water-spring" is therefore thematically central to the sequence.

"The road has not been traced.  
The spring has not been found."  
I name the water-spring  
of Piera, gone to ground,  
contained in a footnote.  
....  
In the white dust the cool  
cupping of water shone

---

7. This abstraction, as Gary Catalano points out, is partly to do with the lack of predicates in the poem's two sentences. 
"The Figure in the Doorway", Quadrant 38, 10 (1994), 30.
like love, like poetry,
and like oblivion:
three things that draw me on.

I take that spring for mine.

The spring's textual existence (as a footnote in Pausanias) reflects its apparent material condition; both have "gone to ground". Love, poetry and oblivion are the pivotal nouns here, and ones which form a network across time. They not only 'draw' the poet on (as in a "To-a-Poet-a-Thousand-Years-Hence"), but the figure which describes them is the same for each: water. The search for connection, and the interest in classical imagery is part of a search for essentials; part of a "process of clarification", a search which nevertheless does not slavishly turn to the past for poetic forms.

II

One can see how Dobson's interest in paintings implies an elegiac imagination, and this is best seen with reference to the elegy 'proper'. Whilst elegy has not gained the same popularity (if that is the right word) in Australia as in America, a number of Australian poets have added significantly to our understanding of the genre — in particular Vivian Smith and Gwen Harwood. Dobson is an important addition to these names, and like Vivian Smith, her elegiac art is dependent on the apparently discrepant categories of nature and the art of others. Dobson's elegy, "The Continuance of Poetry: Twelve Poems for David Campbell", begins by positing the connection between not only different modes of artistic endeavour, but also the connections between different times and places. It tests this continuance not just in terms of the poetic afterlife of a friend and fellow poet, but of apprehension across vast distances of time and space, even across cultures. Dobson's use of ancient Chinese poetry (especially that of Wang Wei and Li Po) as an 'intertext' is apt, given her interest in art's relationship with writing. In pre-modern China the connection between painting and writing was closer than in the West. The use of a brush for writing formed an important link between painting and literature, and, as Hans H. Frankel points out, the literati were only interested in calligraphy and painting; the other arts retained their craft status in medieval China. "The Continuance of Poetry" draws upon the evocative brevity of such painting which uses a few lines to suggest mood, rather than 'imitate' nature as such.

"The Continuance of Poetry" opens with "A Goodbye", something which elegy always attempts, but can never wholly accomplish. As Wallace Stevens figures it in his elegy "The Owl and the Sarcophagus", "The ear repeats, / Without a voice, inventions of farewell". The voicelessness in Dobson's case is inherent in the poem's ambiguity, the occasion being not morbid, but social: a description of friends departing. This difference both foreshadows death and deflects it; as if to say

goodbye 'absolutely' is not only painful, but in reality impossible.

The poem's use of 'weak' line endings (as in, with few exceptions, the rest of the sequence) gives a sense of delicacy, an avoidance of stridency, also perhaps apparent in the shying away from strict metres. Although predominately iambic or trochaic, no foot is employed systematically, and indeed the final line can be scanned as amphibrachic. This 'freeing up' allows a sense of the spoken voice, but also mirrors a delicacy often present in the translations of ancient Chinese poetry. Vowel pitch and duration are also expressive, being relatively consistent in the quatrain: each line concentrates upon a particular vowel, such as the 'O' sounds in "On the long white clouds low at the horizon". In the final couplet, the sound changes. "There will be time enough and time enough later" employs an effective 'rising' quality: -ere / -ill, -e / -ime, e- / -ough, etcetera. This underscores the sense of emotional urgency, a plaintiveness, as if the goodbye prefigures something more than just a social goodbye.

The theme of domesticity is central to much of Dobson's work. In "A Goodbye", the domestic scene is, significantly, allied with the natural. Trees, blossom, and clouds, and the reference to the courtyard, give a suggestion of finding something of the courtly, as Wang Wei did, in the domestic. This connects us with past ways of living, allowing a strange sense of continuity between not only the past and present, but also the domestic and the elegiac.

"The Messages" makes the note of continuity plain, by figuring the continuity between poetry and the world. The poem presents a dialectic between presence and absence. The latter is found in the houses of friends; the former in Campbell's poems.

When you set out on your long journey
The houses of your friends became empty,

Rooms resounded with the need of reassurance.
But here on the page are your messages.

Here are poems: stones, shells, water.

Significantly, the presence alluded to is not Campbell's presence, his spirit within his poems as it were, but rather that of the natural world in his poems: "This one weighs in the hand. This one is shining. / This one is yellow", and so on. The poem ends on a note of apparent contiguity, but one which is not necessarily indicative of a simple metaphorical reading: "Poems are set about in the empty rooms of houses. / Windows open on clouds in the blue distance". The windows refer to those of the houses, but the stark positioning of the two statements implies a more mysterious relationship; the poems are windows on the natural world, or the clouds somehow stand for something numinous.

The sense of timelessness within the historical time of Campbell's death is present: death is "a long journey", the friends' houses are empty. Despite the poem's brevity, it seems to say an awful lot, as a few brush strokes can represent a landscape. The sentences (ll. 5-8) slow down the poem, as if emphasising the need to read poetry slowly, to slow down our apprehension. The periods tell us to wait and consider. The sense of mourning is muted but recognisable. The houses are empty ("Rooms resounded" gives a faint onomatopoeic sense of emptiness), and their emptiness
evokes inner emptiness; though the poem also turns to the reassurance of the 'work' of mourning: both the poetic work of David Campbell and Dobson's rendering of that work in her own work.

Onomatopoeia is also present elsewhere (and indeed, its primitive nature points to one sense of the continuance of poetry). For instance, "White Flowers" begins "White water pours down the hillside". The sense of descending in the vowel pitch mimics this descent. Indeed, the whole poem is concerned with the dialectic between nature and art. Two fish are seen under water and then the poet presents all four elements of the poem — water, flowers, rock, and fish — in a kind of state of equivalence:

Flannel-flowers splash in a falling torrent
Push aside boulders, spill over the ledges.

Held still in the eye like a fish carved in sandstone
They become a white cloud visiting the rock-face.

The delicacy and reticence of this poetry also produces its strength. The image of flowers splitting open boulders is not pressed into metaphorical service, but the abundance of metaphorical transfigurations leaves the elements open to a number of metaphorical changes which, as it were, appear 'immanent'in the poem. Indeed, the poem adverts to the 'innate' metaphorical structure of language itself, with the reference to the rock-face. The link between the flowers and Campbell is not made (there is a reference to Campbell's poems on rock carvings), but is suggested in the white cloud, the image of immateriality which haunts the sequence like a ghost. The clouds, significantly, are both real and immaterial (literally), and also, through the poetry of Wang Wei in which the image appears, refer to a past culture. The flowers also evoke an elegiac commonplace, that of the wreath. Dobson significantly makes the wreath natural, and not human-made. The flowers are also subject to metaphorical transformation: they are like water, like fish in carved stone, like cloud on a rock. The logic here is strictly poetic; the rock-fish-water image is knitted together by the flowers in a wreath.

In "Exchanges" continuity is considered through the idea of 'return' and through the inscriptions of culture: "We exchanged whole art galleries / Museums, sculpture, encyclopedias", and through the books which the poets exchanged "All, all were returned long ago. / Now they are gone I hold them". The indirection of the poem figures an aspect of the work of mourning: the fact that the poet can no longer give to the subject any more, and further, that the 'gift' of the elegy cannot be given either. Nevertheless, the continuity is represented not only through objects, but also proper names: Popa, Berryman, Manet. This metonymy, it is implied, is what connects us with the dead — the names and the work of those named are equated in an almost mystical way (and hence the name of Campbell in the title). Thus the sense of loss is undercut by the sense of return — of names to works, of books to owners. The suggestion also is that Campbell's work is part of the continuity implied in the

---

objects of culture. The poem is not simplistic, however, as the paradoxical ending ensures. The relationship between "returned long ago" and "I hold them" is obscure, and holds within it the whole problem of the connection between the living and the dead, the way in which we 'hold' those whom we have lost.

"Translations Under Trees" adverts to known biographical data of Campbell and Dobson: their work together in the 1970s translating Russian poetry. Working outside with wine to drink, poems blow about. The human and the natural world are connected in the imagery: "Poems blowing about, / Some we stalk like Li Po and the moon in the stream". This seemingly casual analogy becomes the central image of the poem.

Pollen brushed from the table
Flies off to make forests
In faraway countries;
May change a landscape.

The poem makes clear the analogy: "Poems blow away like pollen" and "Can seed new songs / In another language". Poems as pollen obviously afford comparison with translation, but the image also suggests that the poems of the dead pollinate the poems for the dead, whose songs are always, even when in English, 'in another language'. In this poem, too, there is a translation from 'life' to 'art', as well as the expected dialectic between life and death.

"Poems of the River Wang", with its objectification of the poetry of friendship, is one of the few places where 'strong' line endings are employed, underscoring the anecdotal and dramatic quality. The two poets offer poems 'courteously' to each other, again employing the 'courteous' / 'courtly' association. Wang Wei's question becomes an implied question of 'Dobson' to Campbell: "Could you join me once more?" This is so not only through apposition, but also as the 'two poets' referred to initially need not, because of the syntax, be Wang Wei and Pei Ti. The ending is both disciplined and moving. "Out walking now I see blond grass, / Wild orchids, black cattle, and the daylight moon". The climax is unexpected and the dramatic quality of the situation suddenly spills out of the original frame — that distancing effect — into the present, and the subjectivity of the poet. The adjectives are expressive, giving both a sense of the unchangeable nature of nature and a sense of the Australian context. The style of these last two lines, the pastoralism, invoke Campbell's work or perhaps his world. The poem, Campbell's poems and the land he worked are ontologically indistinct in the final lines of the poem. They move into and out of history simultaneously, and the wonderful everyday image of the "daylight moon" (wonderful because it is there, everyday) expresses this paradox.

By the penultimate poem, "The Good Host", the various strategies of the poems are familiar: a concern for mute, but strangely enigmatic, objects; a dramatic situation, often transfigured to something timeless with reference to events of the past; a catalogue, and a brief summing up, or further analogy to end. This is satisfying, given the often numinous nature of the poems and the fluidity of the prosody. The images in "The Good Host" of la dolce vita are by now familiar, and resonate in the

14. The moon was Li Po's most characteristic image; see Arthur Cooper, below.
context of the sequence: sunlight, wine, trees, painting, the river. This is slightly undercut by the 'mists of evening'. Dramatically, there is nothing sinister about this: the guests have stayed on, the sun has begun to set. But such an image is the merest suggestion, like a shadow over the page, of mortality. Or perhaps, in fact, the use to which the metaphor is put is unexpected. "Re-reading the poems / We are all late-stayers; / Guests in your country". This country is not simply the country Campbell is known by, but also — as the mist suggests, and as poetry has always suggested — the country of death. Campbell is both Orpheus and Eurydice, as is Dobson; for poetry revives not only the dead, but also one's own dead self, as the continuity of elegy suggests. Dobson visits her friend through poetry, but the poetry is also a visitation. The point she makes about Campbell’s (and Wang Wei's and Li Po's) poems she makes simultaneously in her own. This then is the continuance of poetry; not only through time (as the references to Chinese poets make clear) but also through the handing on of poetry from poet to poet (idealized here as poets-as-friends). But also there is another sense: the contiguity of poetry. Dobson's own Orphic power exists because her poetry is contiguous — alongside — that of Campbell's, and thus poetry is a kind of network, as much as it is a succession of 'great' poets through time.

This may have been an appropriate end for the sequence. However, the final poem furthers the idea of both continuity and contiguity by glancing away from Campbell (for elegy is always a leavetaking as much as a homage and lament). "After Receiving the Book of Poems by Li Po" is the most diffuse (and thus most testing) example of the continuance of poetry. The opening quatrain is the supreme illustration of the brimming tension of Dobson's descriptive passages: there is a sense that the river, oaks, air, and clouds are merely 'themselves', for there are no overt signals to read symbolically. Yet in the context of the sequence they resonate and impinge upon our imagination as perhaps meaning more than themselves. The river may remind us again of the Styx; the fallen needles of the she-oaks that all flesh is grass, the white clouds have previously been associated with the spiritual. But there is no overt textual basis for reading this here. Perhaps, then, even when things are just 'themselves' they echo their other, stranger selves, with their mysterious excess of meaning.

Indeed, this poem is about seeing beyond simple constructions of real and imaginary, realistic and symbolic, for it is all about seeing. As Nemerov reminds us, poetry and painting are continuous in as much as "the poem, like the painting, lies flat on a plane surface, the surface of the page" (96). The land lacks Campbell, it even lacks his 'presence', but by looking 'deeper' into the landscape we "find your poems". This then is the consolation as well as the continuance of poetry. Not that the subject remains in them, but by looking more deeply into the world, we see beyond the world, we see the subject's poetry all around us. So too, in true elegiac form, do we find Dobson's poems. Such a reading is consistent with the poem's 'intertext'. As Li Po's translator, Arthur Cooper, states, "Visiting a Hermit and Not Finding Him' is a very common theme in Chinese poetry... Making present to the imagination the relationship of things in the landscape itself is as much the spiritual meaning as any guess that the reader may make regarding the hermit's whereabouts." 15 The hermit teaches through his absence, and so Dobson's concluding poem, whilst drawing

---

attention to the subject's absence draws upon a tradition in which this alone can be illuminating.

The connections with the Chinese poets is in itself telling, and while Dobson is clear that her understanding of them is through translation, the 'translation' of the work of grieving into the work of elegy is also a theme of her poem. Dobson's choice of Li Po and Wang Wei for her meditation on the 'continuance' of poetry is particularly apposite as they belong to a tradition of continuity, which according to Cooper is "a continuity of tradition unknown in any other of the world's literatures" (20). Dobson presents thematic continuity then, through her use of themes common to her analogues: Wang Wei, for instance, is a poet of friendship, of partings and absences, of the domestic life and of the faint echo of the courtly life heard there. It would be churlish to want to deconstruct Dobson's use of continuity here, to 'lay bare' the discontinuities present in Chinese 'tradition' and the impossibility of translation, since it would ignore the emotional importance of continuity to Dobson in this sequence. The echo of this continuity can be heard in the first poem of the sequence, Dobson's "A Goodbye" is related to a poem of the same title (in translation, of course) by Wang Wei, which reads: 'Our parting in these hills is over / The sun sets and I shut my door / The spring will be green again next year— / Will my good friend come back too?' The relationship between this and Dobson's poems shows that the latter do not make simplistic and absolutist assertions about the continuous and unimpeded translation of 'tradition'; rather they highlight the dialectic between absence and presence, continuity and discontinuity, and so the point made is that even in the face of discontinuity and absence, one can intuit their twins, their opposites, just as we might come to some understanding of poetry by looking deeply into nature. Dobson's "A Goodbye" is continuous with Wang Wei's in as much as both speak of loss, of death, amid the endless reproduction of nature. Poetry, like the natural world, then, needs to reproduce as much as it needs to produce. Thus, if deconstruction can said to be a process by which the problematics of our categories are laid bare, then Dobson's text in fact deconstructs itself.

III

If enlightenment has any currency, then the other side of its coin is death. In the late poems of Dobson this is made clear, and the expressive tension between the free and disciplined in these poems reminds us of Dobson's interest in both the past and the need to evolve new artistic forms. This makes the desires of some critics to secularise or modernise readings of Dobson (such as James Tulip) somewhat problematic, since Dobson implicitly attempts to dissolve such traditionalist — avant garde oppositions, so dear to Australian critics. For instance, "The Three Fates", which Tulip sees as propelling Dobson away from myth and towards modernism, may evoke Thomas Hardy's "The Clock of the Years", with its interest in fate and time reversed. However, Dobson adds the decidedly modern touch of the film analogy, and the perhaps more disturbing notion of endless repetition, rather than Hardy's climax, "It was as if / She had never been". This modern — traditionalist approach,

---

16. See for instance, "To repay my friends for their visit", 117.
17. See, for instance, Rosemary Dobson, "Over My Shoulder", Island 39, (1989), 57-58; Kavanagh & Kuch, 63-64.
then, is too simplistic for Dobson, who has described herself as a 'flexible traditionalist', her interest lies in both the continuity of culture and the need to find new forms.

These tensions can be seen in some of the more recent poems. "The Eye" (i) employs a kind of 'sprung rhythm'; the lines are tetrameter, but there is no definite foot. The lines mix trochaic and iambic feet with great dexterity, and the middle section uses the dactyl and anapestic feet to give a sense of emotional urgency. The triple rhythm is brought up swiftly with the iambic gravity of "morning gravely". This technical felicity is at odds with the poem's subject matter, which is explicitly elegiac: "one day, the dark fell over my eye". Paradoxically, the poet describes this darkness with a metaphorical richness. The injured eye is covered by a "holland blind", a "sheet of shadow", which are in turn like birds and clouds. These shadows are signs of mortality: "dark birds" and "undeciphered omens".

"The Eye" (ii) continues the image not of blindness as such, but light washed away of meaning. The poet's physical surroundings, the calico across "The single window of the room", echo her inner existence. The blurred vision is a prefiguration of something which cannot be directly named, but which speaks implicitly of infinity and of death: "As when a wave that's edged with white / Recedes into a shadowy sea". The poet inhabits a dual world; one in which the earthly and everyday are seen, and one in which the numinous and deathly are glimpsed. Her physical ailment lends itself to spiritual insight, even as it literally half-blinds her. But such a paraphrase merely does violence to Dobson's 'lightness':

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.

The sentence referring to that "other eye" lacks a predicate: what it does or is cannot be directly stated. Also, the reference to her physical surroundings takes on an archaic turn ("these my books") hinting at a kind of monastic existence, a withdrawing from the world to the inner world of the mystics and scholars of the past.

Whilst the delicate status of messages across time and space is considered in "The Continuance of Poetry", in these mortality poems, messages are either dimly apprehended or simply absent. And as the relationship between the domestic and the courtly heightens both the sense of loss and the sense of society, here the domestic furthers the elegiac tone. In "The Eye" (ii) and "Grieving", daily living is linked with daily dying. and this putting out of the lights is most forcefully seen in "Learning Absences, 1986". Where the natural world is the chief form of consolation in "The Continuance of Poetry", here it does not reveal itself. The poet lingers at the window,
Continuance of Poetry", here it does not reveal itself. The poet lingers at the window, as she has been lingering in the other poems (seated before material or immaterial blank canvases of shadowy whiteness), "Not being certain where to find Halley’s Comet / And looking a long time at the darkening sky". There is a greatness about this poetry even as it withdraws into the house and the body, "shutting / The doors and windows". It is a poetry of leave taking. There is a restrained power inherent in the lines’ musicality in the face of death, which now is viewed keenly but indistinctly; the sky darkens, the light in the eye becomes indistinct.

In terms of Dobson’s earlier work this is significant, since the canvases which are silent and made to speak in those poems are rich and culturally significant; they are connected with the historical world and the innumerable networks of images of which they are a part. The blank canvases Dobson makes speak in these late poems are the reverse; their muteness speaks more of the muteness of things in themselves. They speak of interiority; and the blank canvas of the poet’s bad eye gives her a double-vision on life, a vision which can see both “undeciphered omens” and the brilliance of the sun. Turning to an earlier poem we can notice how such indistinction is related to a sense of despair, perhaps, or at least morbidity. In “Reading Mandelstam”, the cultural pleasures of the city are distractions. ‘Following’ the Russian poet we are left with the snow of Siberia (where it is presumed he was killed), not only as an historical image, but also as an image of blankness, a kind of terrestrial blank-page which has the last word on the poet and his readers:

His steps went over the edge and into darkness,  
the line of the type broken, the letters scattered  
like cramp-irons, as he called them, pincers, staples —  
like bird-marks printing the page’s final hard-packed  
snow-drift. The journey ended in snow and silence.

These aspects of Dobson’s imagination suggest that Hope’s characterisation of Dobson’s “passionate serenity” has too often been used to emphasize the serene.22 McAuley, too, noted a passion; he believed there was a balance of decorum and passion.23 This is true, but the later, elegiac poems of Dobson, show just how much the serenity and decorum have to wager, and have to lose. The passion is real, in the sense that suffering is present in the serene and decorous framing of art. The passion suggests also an engagement with the world; the poet is ‘passionate’ about something. Artful though these poems are, one gets the sense that they are passionate about life.

To conclude we might consider "The Almond-tree in the King James Version". This poem seems to give so much away that it leaves little to interpret: the almond-tree flourishing is "An Image of Age in the Book of Ecclesiastes". The whole poem is imbued with the language of the twelfth chapter of that book, down to the voice of the bird and the dimmed windows. The poet calls to herself not to be afraid, and in this act she sees connection with the past in the most fundamental way we have, probably the only 'universal' or 'real' connection we do have: the connection through death. In considering our own death, we share the understanding of mortality which

---

others have also faced: "... it is always as I have been led to believe: Premonitions, recognitions, the need for acceptance". Dobson's use of Ecclesiastes, culturally specific though that book is, is given particular force by this paradoxical sense of connection, amid the discontinuity of death. Rather than choosing a movement from Book to Self, from general to specific, Dobson switches between the two — Book and Self — and thus the poet is portrayed as synecdochic for all others who are going to die. This is the reverse of what we might expect. The life does not 'justify' the book, rather the book justifies the life; the poet's experience stands in for that of others. As with the landscapes, and the canvases — both blank — Dobson habitually 'looks into' two dimensional planes which both obscure and illuminate our fallen sight. The book and the world, in Dobson's book, are different things, but we read them in similar ways, each with reference to the other.

N a k e d

N A K E D  E Y E

A Collection of the Creative Writing of Curtin University Students
Edition 1, 1995
Available from July at Selected Bookstores

CURTIN UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES