

the London Fabian Society from his home in Victoria. He did not start a movement here. The first effective antipodean Fabian Society was founded in South Australia by a crusading young Anglican priest, Charles Marson, who arrived in Adelaide in 1889, already an active member of the London Society.

He put a moral earthquake through staid Adelaide society with denunciations such as this one on the treatment of Aborigines: 'Their tribal organisation broken up, their game all killed, their lands annexed, their sons made slaves of, and all by people who talk about the love of Christ and profess piety.'

It was a matter of hushed comment that, within months of his arrival, he entertained an Aborigine to tea.

Marson broke with British Fabian tradition by actively courting working-class recruits—and promoting a unity of middle-class intellectuals with the labor movement, the Single Tax (Henry George) activists, and other socialist elements. The Society declined soon after his return to England in 1893.

A Fabian Society was formed in Melbourne in 1895—but was dogged by its close association with Harry Champion, a former English radical intellectual, who soon after his arrival here made an ill-judged intervention on the side of the employers in the watershed Maritime Strike of 1890. He was never forgiven by unionists.

MATHEWS DRAWS A PARALLEL between the destructive effect of Champion and Shaw's exclusivist views in Britain, concluding that 'Fabian societies have succeeded to the extent that they have been included by and inclusive of the labor movement, and resisted separation from that movement.'

In the decades from 1890 to 1910, Australia had four Fabian Societies—in each case the instigator a London expatriate.

Distinguished early Australian Fabians included Bernard O'Dowd, Nettie and Vance Palmer, Tom Price (first Labor Premier of an Australian colony: South Australia), Frederick Eggleston, Walter Murdoch and John Latham, though Latham later deter-

minedly shed his Fabian idealism and joined the conservative side of politics.

The first Whitlam Ministry was rich in Fabians—Frank Crean, Jim Cairns, Lance Barnard, Lionel Murphy, Clyde Cameron and Tom Uren. Bill Hayden wrote and lectured for the society. Other political notables identified as Fabians by Mathews include Arthur Calwell, the two John Cains, Bob Hawke, Don Dunstan, John Bannon, Neville Wran and Bob Carr.

Despite their tribulations, Fabian Societies in Australia and Britain have been think-tanks of incalculable value for the Labor Parties. Through Mathews' book we see more clearly than before that, human flaws notwithstanding, the mark of the Fabian is a passion for social justice pursued through a faith in gradualist and civilised processes. ■

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POETRY

ANDREW BULLEN

The codebreaker's pilgrimage

Martin Johnston: Selected Poems & Prose, Edited by John Tranter, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland, 1993. ISBN 0 7022 2521 5 RRP \$22.95

AS LONG AS WE KEEP journeying, we are all Odysseus. This is truer of Martin Johnston than of most, and not solely because Johnston, from childhood on, passed so much of his life in Greece. After his family returned to Australia, he went back there twice during his brief life. His personal journeying came to a sad close in 1990 when he was only forty-two. The untimely deaths of his famous parents, George Johnston and Charmian Clift, and of his two sisters gave his life a tragic undertone; this was a family beset by self-inflicted pain. Greece lived darkly in Johnston's imagination, but it was buoyantly there too. His daunting erudition and sparkling intellect give his various writings a richness

and lightness that revitalise whatever tradition he uses. In a special way he draws sustenance from Greek history and legend from the beginnings right through to modern times.

So here he is, a one-eyed and blinded Greek-island dweller abjuring his connection with Odysseus in opening lines of 'The Homecoming (Cyclops Song 4)':

Well, what was Odysseus good at?

(1) making things (2) lying—
neither a skill I've any use for. Don't talk to me
about subtlety. I've travelled too,
smelt caique-decks' tar and goat and
onions in milky dawn winds,
snoozed hunched in my fur on offal
wharves, and remember

prayer-flagged cairns, moon-priestesses and pig-myths
on steppes beyond the writ of American Express.

Here he is, juxtaposing ancient and modern, his tone ranging as easily and briskly as one supposes his own conversation did, and showing how there's life in the sonnet form yet. The poem concludes with an ironic nod to T.S. Eliot, his earliest master, as all six of the *Cyclops Songs* make an oblique bow to John Berryman's *Dream Songs*. Johnston has enough confidence in his own powers to rouse the spirits of mighty figures. Berryman's *Dream Songs*, whatever else they do, reveal an unforgettable voice and in this alone

move his work to the centre of contemporary concerns, enough perhaps to nudge Robert Lowell aside. Surely Berryman taught Johnston to loosen his own voice and trust more in this than in the heavy pressure he originally put on the innumerable and dense references, a pressure which sometimes makes his earlier work airless. Now there is an ease of voice that makes his last book, *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, a fully mature work.

We do not have enough, but his distinctive voice we do have, and nowadays voice is virtually everything. Johnston's debt to Berryman is also acknowledged in the sadly incomplete essay 'On Berryman's Elegies', which happily Tranter has salvaged for us. Like Berryman, Johnston's playful mastery with voices and with tradition shows him a 'trickster'—Odysseus still, even when taking the Cyclops' part.

Cyclops for his part has the measure of Odysseus, as he tells us in the first song:

I knew
perfectly well what 'Noman is hurting
me' meant.

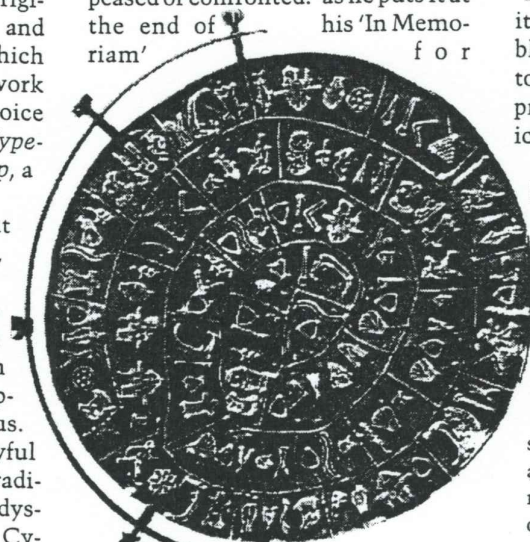
Wearing the mask of Cyclops, Johnston gives us ten words full of pain and hidden revelation. Putting a telling distance between himself and pain was an early habit in his poetry: the title poem of *The Sea-Cucumber* is an elegy for his father, although dedicated to Ray Crooke, and 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' is nevertheless 'i.m. C.C.' for his mother.

It is striking how much of Johnston's work is *in memoriam*. If this distancing is the only approach one can bear, indirection, like tacking, is a way of getting there. Johnston's sustained practice of translating folk songs and the modern poetry of Greece is another indirect way of homing in, as are the chance illuminations given by the art and history he finds as a tourist.

OF THE MANY WAYS OF journeying, Johnston's usual mode is that of a wanderer, with all the advantages that implies for range of reference and voice, and for ease of movement, for quicksilver effects. There may be

times when the voice in these poems has something of the drifter.

There are certainly times when the voice is that of a man driven to search for verse that must be appeased or confronted: as he puts it at the end of his 'In Memoriam'



dead poets: 'where the blood pours out the dead come to the feast'. Odysseus too knew this.

Less anxious but earnest nonetheless, search is the whole point of 'To the Innate Island'. Here, as the title proclaims, Johnston's outward journeying is all inward.

A long work of twelve parts, it is his most considerable and characteristic poem. That a relaxed journey, even a touristy dawdle, can be the unnoticed preliminary for an occasion of great personal significance, has notable exemplars in the climactic canto of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and A.D. Hope's 'A Letter from Rome'. These two are given their moment of disclosure at Lake Nemi, south of Rome and the *locus classicus* for Fraser's *The Golden Bough*.

For his part Johnston, like and unlike, tells us this loose sequence 'rummages around various versions of—as it happens—Greece. It is searching, as hindsight reveals, for the Phaistos Disc, finds it; fails, however, to decipher it'.

Australian poetry, at the very least from Christopher Brennan's 'The Wanderer' onwards, is footsore with the search for meaning. Even if, as Hope's poem terms it, 'The Intervention' happens, its significance is

usually unclear. Indeed often enough Australian poets fear that to name its significance is to jeopardise the experience.

IF SOMETHING 'RELIGIOUS' happens, it is best to remain as silent as possible. One could argue, moreover, that to get it right, one should get there properly, and that requires the asceticism of a pilgrim.

The asceticism of watching with full attention, which is a kind of waiting, is shown, for example, in the eleventh part, 'Water-Garden Snapshots':

Or think of the moment
most poignant in the
process of
parting
suggested by a water-drop's
almost less than momentary
moment's defiance
of gravity, the point
at which its top goes
convex, as it splits
off from what is becoming the next
drop.

He knows when to break line, does Martin Johnston; and how to move to and fro between wry humour and intense statement:

The boat is loaded
with a second-hand phrenological
head,
a smuggled ikon of the Last Judgment,
an insufficient supply of hard-tack,
a postcard of the Disc of Phaistos, gold
on blue.
In the inner garden which we never visit
the boat seems to be coming in, rust-
red sail,
the cat a cloud behind the bay-
branches.

Maybe in the intense moment of each line, a postcard carries as much significance as one could desire, or hope for.

As to decipherment, the Phaistos Disc eludes decipherment from the scholars, Ventris [Michael Ventris, who cracked Linear B] and all, let alone Johnston.

It fits effortlessly into the reticence and unknowingness of Australian poetry:

ABOVE: the
disc, discovered
and still undeciphered
From the *Phaistos Disc*
Collection

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Catholicism, revised edition,
Richard P. McBrien, Collins
Dove, 1994 ISBN 1863713158
(hb) 1863713144 (pb)

RRP \$69.95 hb, \$49.95 pb.

RICHARD MCBRIEN'S THIRD and most recent edition of *Catholicism* bears comparison with the *Catholic Catechism*. It offers a comprehensive account of Catholicism; this is the third edition; it contains over 1,200 pages, and this third edition incorporates his responses to dialogue and to criticism of the first two editions.

In style it has some advantages over the *Catechism*: it respects contemporary English usage instead of returning to archaic and non-inclusive usage. In addition it is freed from the challenge and burden of being a universal treatment of catholic faith, and so reads more easily than the *Catechism*.

The latest edition retains the virtues of the former editions. McBrien is comprehensive, and his theological framework, which owes much to Karl Rahner, enables him to engage with his culture in a positive way. His theology is not dominated by tragedy or by the call to radical discipleship. In addition, his approach represents the middle ground trodden by most theologians, and therefore represents a broadly Catholic theology. In addition, McBrien places influential catholic theologians both of the past and present against the issues on which they have made substantial contributions.

His latest edition contains a splendid introductory chapter on Catholicism, and he shows himself familiar with the latest developments in issues which have recently become sharply topical, for example the place of women in the church.

What some may see as the defect of these virtues is the blandness of McBrien's account. But it is a survey, and is not to be read for original or surprising insights. As a theological map, it rightly highlights the main roads at the expense of scenic tracks. As a readable, modern and comprehensive survey it has no current equal in English. ■

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the Disc dropped through the collapsing floor
into time, where we think we look at
it
through glass in the museum—but
opaque
and impermanent as a carbon-column,
lost
the key, the scales, the music.

Whether this makes it a 'vehicle' that says nothing or suggests everything, as some see the Australian landscape, the poem, may be precisely because it is so rich in indirection, nevertheless presents the Disc powerfully. As the poem goes, if not Johnston's comment on it, cracking the code is not the point.

I have said enough to affirm my enjoyment of and regard for this poem, but Tranter's introduction indicates that there is controversy over its value, with no less a figure than Les Murray finding it 'wonderfully rich, evocative and vivacious, but I fear you've left the poetry out'.

Johnston's work generates discussion of the best sort.

IF NOTHING ELSE, TRANTER'S generous selection of Johnston's work presents us with the material that somehow will have to settle on the Australian cultural landscape. It is already clear that Johnston resists easy classification. He is not quite an expatriate, or if he is, one wonders which country he's expatriated from.

He is not quite a foreigner resident in Australia, and one suspects he would be more than that in Greece also. Is he a Greek poet writing in English? It would be intriguing to watch a Greek critic try to place him. The book stirs up the dust on him.

Certainly, however hard he is to place—like Odysseus again, and however tyrannised or blest he was by distance, John Tranter has paid pre-eminent tribute to his dead friend and fellow-poet in ensuring that what we hear of Martin Johnston is at the very least a telling voice. ■

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