

CICADA GAMBIT

A novel with lots and lots of ideas in it is a rum go in Australia; not all that common anywhere else, if it comes to that. There are, of course, plenty of writers who sprinkle the surface of their novels with what look like ideas, or at least the husks of ideas, but to get such material right into the cake-mix is quite another matter, quite another test.

To sneak up on the matter from another angle, what is it we want from the contemporary novel (loosely loaded phrase, that one), or from the experimental novel (thistle funnels and bunsen burners, perhaps), or from the Postmodernist novel (that phrase is already overloaded to way past the Plimsoll line)? The answer would seem to be that we want to see the narrative register much of the dismantling, reflexiveness, author-killing, self-abeyance and deferral which swarm around us like Hymettus's bees, but, being every bit as selfish as readers in other centuries, we also want the busy traction of plot and the thick pleasures of mimetic detail laid on for us. Very few of our presumptively avant-garde authors can keep all these acts properly on the go at once.

One who demonstrably can, on the evidence of his first novel, is Martin Johnston. Previously known as an erudite poet and reviewer, he offers in *Cicada Gambit* a novel of quite unusual wit and daring. So complicated and dazzlingly reflexive are the meshings of its structure that I find myself hesitating to write about it for fear of the number of gaffes I am likely to make about a psychological thriller in a fictively real Sydney, wherein neither the characters nor the various putative narrators are able to unravel, even at the end, what has so vividly been going on.

Let me begin very gingerly. The book has twenty-two stylistically disparate chapters, all evoking "these same streets of Sydney, so washed in deadly colour and sound, so deviously reinterpreting one's desires in unexpected corners", but also reverberating to echoes of a Greek past. A bit like *Ulysses*? Precisely, but the book is perfectly (odd adverb, that one) aware of this, orchestrating and varying the relationship all the way from glancing echoes through correlative prose modes and a final chapter whose eighteen sections allude to Joyce's eighteen chapters to comic foregrounding in a character called Dr Skogg, who spends each Bloomsday trying meticulously to re-enact the events of *Ulysses*, his pubgoing Dedalus being in this case young Vlastos, the arguably central character of the book.

But it is also like *Endgame*, that harrowingly witty play by Joyce's sometime secretary, in that Johnston has structured his narrative around a chess game, making it as scacchocentric as is the whole threatened world of Vlastos, a very very good but not quite great chess-player. Vlastos moves to the end of the narrative being threatened by a doppelgänger (who is, after all, a kind of sinister mate) as well as by checkmate, which he comes to fend off for the "draw by repetition draw by repetition draw draw by by repetition". Modally, echoically, explicitly, parodically, the text also declares its relationship to other texts by Eliot, Montale, Petronius, James, Faulkner, Stead, Dostoevsky, Borges, Conan Doyle, Rilke, Pope, Pasolini, Anthony Burgess and A.A. Milne. Further, one of the book's ironically displaced narrators is Sean McIan, a journalist and short story writer, a professional man of words; and his name may surely be glossed as John-son-of-John, combining in synecdoche the attributes of St John the Evangelist and St John the Divine.

It is McIan who writes an apocalyptic yet recurrently comic account of Carnival in Sydney, an account which abounds in rococo catalogues such as

The carp and goldfish flashed and jingled in the specially diverted and restrained rills of running brook-water that ran through the penthouses, while those whose pleasures ran more to the physical cast esoteric and oddly convoluted fly, emblazoned with kabbalistic emblems, for the dwarf trout that had been specially bred for such occasions by disenfranchised bonsai masters smuggled into the country for the purpose on prawning boats.

The bottoms of many of these artificial streams had been designed by eminent artists suitable for such work, such as Asher Bilu and Leonard French; in the case of the latter the business of fly-casting gained a certain additional piquancy from the inability of the fishermen clearly to distinguish between the actual, animate fish and the symbolic, anological ICHTHYS fish with which the master had liberally strewn his ornate mosaics.

As the tonal echoes of "Cyclops" catalogues suggest, this is both comic and, very differently, pointed: like much of the prose in the book, it has trouble distinguishing between "the actual, animate fish" and the symbolic or strenuously cognitive. This, too, within a chapter which is subtitled, "(A Short Story)" and which ends with a vision of the Fisher Library burning down. Cognitive doubt runs to and fro through this book, in forms as witty as they are serious. As the final chapter puts it at

one point, "Despite which, it's surprisingly difficult to decide what, specifically, to fix on."

That's the very nature of the game: it's surprisingly difficult for the reviewer to decide what, specifically, to fix on. If he or she is — as the present reviewer certainly is not — a chess buff, then chessboard tropes and chess lore may come to stand at the centre of the book's organisation. If the reviewer is an addict of cities, then attention may focus on Johnston's marvellous evocations of a city which is both tangible and phantasmagorical, both painterly recreation, like "the effect of the mid-afternoon, seen through light cirrus, on the coiled grey-green subtropical clumps in the Botanic Garden", and merely figures of speech which insinuatingly reassert the dismantled author.

As Kafka and Beckett have revealed, passivity is a great engenderer of wit. All the central characters, narrators and reporters in *Cicada Gambit* are disposed to be passive. As Randall Jarrell has put it, "They are as patient as their name". Yet the book is not devoid of action. Its pages, its questionable adventures are full of a kind of hectic drift. It contains a violent death, real or supposed plots against Vlastos, hauntings, and extravagantly worked-out comedy. Among Australian novels, only *Such is Life* and *The Wort Papers* resemble this in combining extreme cognitive deviousness with hilarious horseplay. And all three operate under the sign of that great precursor of twentieth century literature, *Tristram Shandy*, with its ludicrous growth of seemingly uncontrolled narrative effects.

Johnston's novel is easier reading first up than either Furphy's or Mathers' (nobody should ever have to reach *Such is Life* for the first time, I have sometimes thought). This is partly because his prose is so clear and stylish, in some perfectly oldfashioned sense of the word, "stylish", whatever that slippery, elegant, pleasurable concept may mean when we really sit down to examine it. He is adroit in managing plain prose or purl; the structures which carry action, perception, reflection, jokes located in the flow of character ("He had never really grasped the function of waiters, that, for instance, it was up to him and not them to decide what he was to eat.") and jokes located in pure narration ("Counting the barmaids, as one well might do, nineteen of the people present were women and forty-seven men, if one includes among the latter six youths under eighteen who had driven in from Miranda in a second-hand FJ Holden belonging to the oldest of them..."). For such an absurdist enterprise,

Cicada Gambit feels to be agreeably full of the things of this world, those of modern Sydney in particular.

Most novels have something wrong with them, usually crook endings. And for all the ingenuity of Johnston's eighteen-lobed final chapter, "Hamppe vs Meitner, Vienna 1872", it does not strike me as resolving the book, given my conservative need for even a postmodern book to impose formal closure on its declaration of nonclosure. In this last movement, Vlastos's regressive yet currently chess-playing mind plays back over memories of some of the events we have just read about, instructed by Joyce and Dame Frances Yates. This chapter is also designed to close the circle, leading us at the end to glimpses of that appalling desert (whether internal or post-Armageddon) which filled the very first chapter. But the mental wanderings here at the end feel somewhat loose and un compelling, as though or unless I am missing something. We are tempted to ask whether all those marvellous earlier self-subversions led only to *this*? The book has got there before me, even at this point, declaring, "I'm trying not very effectively to tidy up loose ends". And then again, this chapter also offers itself as a dramatised slice of psychoanalytic therapy: that mention of Vienna was another signal. Paranoia can be creative, too.

Reflexiveness goes on and on. And on. And is one free to ask whether the book knows why it is so nearly devoid of women? Whatever the answer to that one, *Cicada Gambit* is a remarkably beguiling read. Full of echoes though it may be, it is not in the upshot like anything else.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe, "Martin Johnston Fly Casting".
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