

say, and his imagery has become his own, to be used for the poem's purpose and no other.

Before dawn the fishing boats
float into floating mist that certainly conceals
little prospect of a light descent
from reportable middle regions in solid air,
freeze there, hunch
back under cover, steel
sea, boats, fish, a single liquid
falling, slow horizontal rain, through the dark bedroom.

Martin Johnston's combination of subtle perception and ruthless intellect made him at an early age one of the best critics we have had. His own poetry is now losing its earlier stridency, and is gaining in its place a quiet effectiveness.

John Tranter, "Poems of Subtle Perception and Ruthless Intellect".
National Times, 26 August 1978, p.42 [with two other books]

THE NEW MANNERISM: THE SEA-CUCUMBER

While I was sorting through this swag of Australian verse,* I was also reading some Pre-Raphaelite poetry, and it struck me that the properties of this poetry, particularly Rossetti's with its formal cupids and allegories of the female Soul, might as well be designated Post- as Pre-Raphaelite. I began to notice, too, how many of the concepts art historians use to illuminate sixteenth-century Italian painting were illuminating my understanding of Australian verse. In these days, when there is a steady bubble of discussion about the Epigones and the New Romanticism, mightn't it be equally appropriate to speak of the new Mannerism? Both the existing terms have problems. The trouble with the self-adopted label, "the New Romanticism", is that it raises the ghosts of the English Romantics, when the only one of these to whom *New Poetry* contributors can pay even lip-service is the outsider of that great movement, Blake. Even Blake has to be pared down to the prophetic books, and no Australian poet I have read imitates the *style* of the prophetic books. The

* Nine other books are reviewed along with Martin's. [JT]

trouble with Richard Packer's label, "the Epigones", is that it must be a term of obloquy. As far as it has currency as a term of historical description it refers to a period of Alexandrian, or to sixth-century Latin, poetry. These comparisons mislead by raising expectations of an obsession with form, when what characterises the new shift in direction of Australian verse is an obsession with style.

"Mannerism" as a critical term has the same advantages as "Pre-Raphaelitism": it raises no specifically literary expectations. It does have disadvantages. No Australian poet is as besotted with political power or as eager to glorify the ruler as the Mannerist painters were. My knowledge of the politics of the Arts Council is slight, and I can hardly comment as to whether their system of patronage has resembled the Medicis'. Although Australian poets are increasingly knowledgeable about the visual arts, none, with the exception of Peter Porter, display much interest in this particular period. Yet the comparison between Mannerist art and our contemporary verse is extremely suggestive. In both the unique, personal vision of the artist is put forward as a primary standard for judgement, both make efforts towards internationalism, both are critically self-conscious, both cultivate a wilful detachment from a shared, communal reality. And inasfar as *poesis* ever resembles *pictura*, the visual effects can be very similar [...] The usefulness of Mannerism as a concept for analysing Australian poetry lies in a measure of fuzziness and a high degree of suggestiveness [...]

The title poem of Martin Johnston's *The Sea-Cucumber* is one of the handful of major Australian poems this decade. About the volume as a whole there is a professionalism, a sense of rigorous intellectual training, which makes most other current Australian poetry seem amateur by comparison (not that amateurism need not be an engaging pose). The panache of Johnston's writing is apparent in the following from his "Uncertain Sonnets", which is subtitled "Airport";

Her arms are gravelled at the undertow
of air flung across air as the monster flows
escaping air. A labyrinth, she knows,
is where all genial lies and no dreams go.
The shaggy dreambeast watches the golden leap
(a dream of Icarus caught in a dream) and still,
staring and weeping on a Cretan hill,
sucks at a dried-out marrowbone of sleep.
"Bloody well fly!"

The styles of our defining
 are words in sleep, and when the words are said
 we lie in the conch of night, entwining
 our double-crossing limbs on the double bed.
 Toppling unbalanced in the wind I hear
 your words lost in the labyrinth of my ear.

Immediately noticeable is the brilliance with which the two myths, of the Minotaur and Icarus, have been fused and modernised. Only later was I disconcerted by my uncertainty as to who was seeing whom off. Excuses were to hand for this (the parting is mutually destructive, a dreamed loss of self as well as an actual loss of another, and a loss besides of the verbal signatures of identity), but it seemed to me undeniable that the sonnet was more fascinated with myth and language than it was concerned with enunciating specific emotions at a specific parting. Finally, I was reminded of another, more emotional parting from this same body of myth, of Ariadne's cry, "Paint me a cavernous waste shore", and of Eliot's juxtaposing of modern futilities and myth.

Although not included in the helpful lists of poets Johnston leaves lying around in his poems, Eliot is a poet to whom he sometimes alludes, and about whom he has thought a good deal. Like Eliot, Johnston experiments with the dramatic monologue, and does so grippingly in "Mazurka for Buzzing Fly". Johnston is much possessed by death, by timelessness and by *Poems 1920*, and in the impossibly entitled "Poem Resumed After Its Interruption When in Draft Form by the Death of Igor Stravinsky", he proves that he has learnt as well from the musicality of *The Waste Land's* structure. The difference, again, is that Johnston's words, with their multiply reinforced connotations, play both *concertante* and *ripieno*, they occupy the whole concert platform, and we come away with the impression of a brilliant performance but no impassioned private grouse. For Johnston, the Mannerist, a new influence is a new theme. Yet for all the literary self-analysis in these poems, the Eliotic habit of mind that is most in evidence here has not been analysed. It is that immodest appetite to ingest "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer", that colonial longing to master the parent culture.

Johnston gets beyond poems about poems by writing summaries of the state of poetry, bulletins on its cultural health or illness. The hieratic impersonality of so many of the poems in *The Sea-Cucumber* is partly explained by his repulsion from what he takes to have been the ghoulish

sixties' taste for intensity, blood and suicide. In "In Memoriam", a meditation on how influence works and the guts of the living do modify the dead culminates in a vision of elegists being endlessly elegised "in a recession of identical rooms". The cessation of physical death, the poet concludes, is never conveyed in a poem. Instead what we get is a shadowy, lingering death-in-art:

For the fan of letters opens and shuts and the wind blows
errant zig-gags of light and night through the phrases,
chops, remoulds, effaces. Theologians
have always found dismembered cannibals tough.
The whole thing becomes too tight, which is not at all

what's needed, whatever sensualists may say.
Too like Zen archery, too painful somewhere around
what used to be called the heart. The parataxis
of time and light could have flowed around and through
these dead and living poets and myself.

That would have been a pretty nonsense. Instead the flicker-
flicker of a zoetrope. In this peepshow world
all styles come down to punctuation. O Mayakovsky,
Buckmaster, all of you, they're circumventing Euclid.
They knew that parallel lines in curved space meet

eventually, somewhere: in the black hole between spaces,
the full stop with no sentence on either side,
between the moving magic-lantern slides.
Not that you wouldn't have gone there yourselves willingly:
where the blood pours out the dead come to the feast.

This argument is more than the nervously witty parataxis it at first appears. The glibbest of the throwaway lines ("The whole thing becomes too tight, which is not at all / what's needed, whatever the sensualists may say") deepen and expand into the lines that follow. A more confident voice is heard than in the "Airport" sonnet, a voice confident of its powers to speak outside a pre-warmed literary context. When Johnston permits this more humane, personalised voice to have its seemingly relaxed but carefully structured say, as in "The Sea-Cucumber", he becomes an altogether richer, without becoming a different, poet. Clearly he has been chafing at the claustrophobic limitations of which Mannerist art, composed for art, is capable. The explosion of meaning at the end of "In

Memoriam" is a triumphant realisation of a wider authority. The Mannerist's absorption with poetry as theme is an indisputable limitation of interest, and Johnston shows the way beyond this. The poet's hypochondria about his vocation can extend into a diagnosis of the total cultural hegemony in which the poet and poetry play small, but symptomatic parts. The poem moves outward to comprehend the civilisation of which it is a product.

Of the ten poets reviewed it is worth observing that six write sonnets. This in itself is a cultural symptom. In the late sixties the Australian sonnet looked dead as last week's mutton. Its revival, and the revival of the sonnet sequence, might be attributed to Lowell and Berryman's influence, or to a return to the charms of conventional form, though as I have indicated, I do not believe that formal considerations have changed the direction of recent poetry. Rather the sonnet has been taken up as a traditional background against which the poet can test and display his individuality. Consider what diverse uses have been made of fourteen lines in the four sonnets quoted — the imagistic shifts and starts of Gould's moodsetting, Tranter's extrovert spurts and exclamations with their sad undertow, the laboured insincerity and balance of Hart's confession, the compacted verbal detail of Johnston's ornate composition. The new Mannerism has given a unity of purpose to a sizable number of East Coast poets and that has been worthwhile. It has added to the diversity of Australian poetry and that is of permanent value. But while a poetry remains purely Mannerist it has certain congenital weaknesses that cripple possibilities of further development. The strongest poems by Mannerist poets are those on its fringes, those in which the poet is half-way towards some other principle. Mannerism isn't mysticism: it can't look inwards for eternity. It must broaden its horizons towards the material and mundane, if it is to be more than a decorative swag on the outside of that greater edifice on which it has, capriciously, found itself.

Christopher Pollnitz, "The New Mannerism".

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[with nine other books]