

Young Martin, backwards and forwards



BEHIND THE LINES

DON ANDERSON

THE way my parents [the authors George Johnston & Charmian Clift] lived has perhaps been disastrous for me in the long term. [In Greece] they wrote very hard, from say seven in the morning till midday, and then they went down to the waterfront and got pissed. I supposed that's the pattern of life I've followed ever since." — Martin Johnston, June 1989.

Twelve months later, Martin was dead, from a combination of alcoholism and a galloping case of the "Parents Terribles", to invoke the Jean Cocteau film released, prophetically for Martin, in 1947, the year before he was born. We mourned this prodigiously gifted poet, essayist, chess-player and conversationalist three years ago. This month, we celebrate him, with

the publication of his *Selected Poems & Prose*, which John Tranter has edited for the University of Queensland Press Australian Authors series.

If ever a young man had occasion to adopt the role of *poète maudit* it was Martin Johnston. It is a mark of his extraordinary intellectual toughness that he not only refused the role, but castigated his fellow-poet Michael Dransfield (1948-73) for too easily adopting it. He wrote of Dransfield:

"He was in no sense an intellectual; he swallowed the Coleridge—Rimbaud—Sylvia Plath et cetera et cetera *poète maudit* romance hook, line, and sinker. . . And he never properly understood poetry as a craft, or indeed any intellectual discipline as something that has to be diligently, often tiresomely mastered in all its little details."

That Martin, who at the age of 26 described himself as "the old Tory of poetry" — a mantle some thought belonged to the Squire of Bunyah — possessed in full the qualities the absence of which he regretted in Dransfield, was borne out by his admiration for Empson, Eco, and, in particular, Borges. He revered the Englishman

and, even more so, the Argentine, because they were "so directly exhilarating intellectually . . . at the core of their work is the interplay, graceful or terrifying, of pure ideas". In the Italian, he celebrated "liberal values — tolerance, moderation, a sense of humour".

But Martin could temper reverence by distinguishing; thus he elevated Borges's "economy" and "brevity" above Eco's "prolixity, garrulousness".

Thus the distinguished critic of Australian poetry, Christopher Pollnitz, was led to salute Martin's "professionalism, rigorous intellectual training".

Martin's Greek childhood, his Greek, English and Australian education, as documented by John Tranter's selection, shows something that had not occurred to me before.

Martin Johnston was truly a "multicultural" Australian, whose omission from Sneja Gunew's *Bibliography of Australian Multicultural Writers* — which curiously includes Elizabeth Jolley and several Greek and Lebanese-Australian writers who have rejected the label "multicultural" — shows just how contentious the "M" word is.

Though I lived opposite Martin in his last years in Darlinghurst where, to misquote Kenneth Slessor's *Five Bells*, "poets groan to God", and

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though I indelibly associate him with Sydney University and Glebe pubs and parties, this selection shows that he belonged also to Milson's Point, home of SBS TV, where he worked as editor and translator. When

Gerard Windsor reviewed the first edition of the *Oxford Guide to Australian Literature*, he deplored the omission of Milson's Point from that scholarly tome.

This oversight has not been rectified in the revised edition (1993), which thus shows, in Boswell's words, "great fortitude of mind" or, in Dr Johnson's correction of his young friend, "stark insensibility". But, then, the index to the revised *Guide* fails to mention either Martin Johnston or Gerard Windsor. Such a scholarly lacuna may perhaps be excused in mere academics; scholar-poets such as Martin Johnston or John Tranter would never have committed it.

Martin's poem *Reading Moby Dick Backwards* may serve as a precedent for reading this book backwards.

Thus, the reviews and essays — so omnivorously read, so assured, so young! — the translations of Greek poetry, both modern and folk, all serve to inform and illuminate the poetry, which rightly has pride of place. One might deploy the words of the once-reviled painter Theophilus, on whom Martin writes, with respect to poetry: "Real loaves fall down.

Painted ones stay where you put them."

Martin was no stranger to Eros, but John Tranter's loving and scholarly edition of his friend's work testifies to the power of a different and, for some (the Church Fathers included) a higher kind of love — *Agape* or, if you prefer Latin to Greek, *Caritas*. Selfless love. This *Selection* represents editing and scholarship as friendship.

It seems only fitting, therefore, to end with some lines from Martin's 1980 poem, *On Aggression*, the title of which refers to a work by the ethnologist Konrad Lorenz.

*And home at last between drafts.
Back in Athens/
air like unwashed dogs, the temples
pitted grey, friends passing/
leaving me phials of curious pills. Old
favourite pin-up/
Emperor Julian Apostate, bless/
these spiralling austerities . . ./
. . . (It's not the heat/
but the humidity. Make love not
imprintings.)*

Martin Johnston: Selected Poems & Prose, edited by John Tranter (UQP, \$22.95)

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