MARTIN JOHNSTON 1947-1990

The loss of Martin Johnston, who died in June of this year, is a painful blow to Australian writing. He was a brilliant and dauntingly erudite poet and reviewer and, on the basis of his one novel, *Cicada Gambit* (1983), a more than interesting novelist.

A writing life that began extremely early, much to the bemusement of his famous parents (he once described George Johnston and Charmian Clift viewing his early prize-winning efforts with a mixture of concern and disdain: "As if I had started winning prizes for pig-killing at country shows"), produced only three books of poetry: *Shadowmass* (1971); *The Sea-Cucumber* (1978); and by far the best, *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap* (1984).

It is not easy poetry and certainly not always successful. Its character derives from Johnston's central response and central obsession — he was one of those writers whose greatest sensitivity is to the aesthetic shape of propositions. In this his nearest soul-mate is Borges — and Johnston's finest piece of criticism is a lengthy article on that writer.

But an erudition driven largely by a fascination with the shape of ideas means Johnston is writing from an extremely unpromising position. The problem is that, in a sense, the writer is speaking a quite different language to his readers. One way out is to act as teacher and take the reader through the history of the particular idea (it is no accident that Borges favoured the essay and turned it into one of the great forms of creative writing), but Johnston almost always resists this in his poetry.

As a result, at his most inspissate, the ideas which matter most to him are invoked quickly by allusion or by using the name of the author. Sometimes they actually pop out of the poem into epigrams. It often seems that the poems have to be opened out from their compacted, allusive, notational presentation — and this must be done by the reader since for the poet to do it would be patronising or bad manners.

This leads me to the analogy of chess notation. Chess was one of

Johnston's obsessions and it's particularly prominent in *Cicada Gambit.* It is analogous to literature — in the epistemological *cul de sac* inhabited by the ghosts of Beckett, Borges and the like — in being "a beautiful but useless game". But the skill in reading a chess game from the page is to open out the dry list of moves to the full human drama of the individual game, and something like this skill is involved in reading much of Johnston's poetry.

Not all the poems are like this. There are many, especially in the last volume, which are very relaxed. It is difficult to know whether these are his most successful poems, or mere bagatelles produced idly while the great work, the major sequences, fermented. There are a series of poems in *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap,* for example, which are delightful monologues from various points in the story of Odysseus. "Some versions of pastoral" begins by having Polyphemous say:

> He ate my cheese; he tried to steal my sheep.
> And I'm too huge and ugly and male to be a poltergeist
> and big rocks are easily to hand, so I squash things.
> What's it to me if my brothers built Tiryns?

One of Johnston's better known poems, "Gradus ad Parnassum", is done in this style, as he turns over in his mind the various ways of revising the last poem Mayakovsky wrote before suicide. It is full of jokes about poetic styles ("One way of approaching it would be what I'd call the Arnoldian / [cf. The Scholar Gypsy] — the extended thalassic metaphor, / the tang of myth, the vague yearning") but they are jokes shared with the audience.

The major work is saved for the large sequences: "The Blood Aquarium", "Microclimatology" and the last poem of *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap,* "To the Innate Island". None of these are easy poems, nor do they guarantee any reward for an awful lot of effort.

It is clear that Johnston saw "To the Innate Island" as a central, perhaps even final, work. It belongs to that limited group of very difficult poems which stay in the mind despite their incomprehensibility. A rereading after five years astonished me by showing me how familiar it was despite the fact that I did not feel confident with large tracts of it. It is a set of twelve poems, very much about places identifiable, thanks to copious notes at the end of the poem, as mainly Greek.

It is a poem about perception and the processes of the mind — often alluding to the Greek shadow puppet theatre, the *kharagiozis.* But it is

also about Greek history — both anecdotally and as the source, in Crete, of European culture. The large image introduced at the conclusion, the Phaistos Disc, an emblem of a creative spiral expansion, is like the poem itself — clearly linguistic but impossible to decipher.

Johnston was also a superb reviewer, marshalling erudition not to smother the books he reviewed but to illuminate them. He wrote beautifully and with a sense of occasion. One of his earliest reviews for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, published in the year he technically reached adulthood, deals with Colin Simpson's travel book about Greece:

> *Greece* is a highly readable, almost cinematic pastiche of impressions and opinions written by a professional observer. It spreads a sort of diffuse penumbra of rather breathless interest around the hanging monasteries of the Meteora, the gory history of Ali Pasha of Ioaninna, the apocalyptic beauty of Santorini...and through all this the reader is whisked, gawping precariously over Mr Simpson's shoulder at the impossible landscapes around Delphi or the weird sgraffito walls of Pirghi, quaffing ouzo in countless little tavernas, fitfully listening in on scores of intriguing characters, to the scribble, scribble, scribble of book after book of notes.

That's not bad for a beginner. It has the kind of precocious accomplishment that one (rather nervously) calls European — except that here, of course, it is Australian.

As I said at the beginning, his best single piece of criticism is devoted to Borges — it was published in the collection *Cunning Exiles* (1974). It is remarkable and enlightening for, while it engages with Borges on his own terms, elucidating puzzles, labyrinths and obscure references, it also argues for the intensely felt tragic quality of an epistemology which means that words create their own worlds, always at a tangent to reality. It raises Borges (and it lifts Johnston with him, politely holding on to the great man's coat tails) from the category of erudite player of games to explorer of a profoundly tragic experience.

Johnston will be sorely missed. He remained as an exotic presence in inner-suburban Sydney standing (to adapt E.M. Forster's description of Cavafy) at a slight angle to the universe of Australian writing, its conflicts as well as its verities. It is this sense of his position, rather than his relationship to the vernacular, which is caught so well in John Tranter's poem, "Cicada Gambit":

Exiled by circumstance and inclination
from the land and language of his childhood
and deprived by fate of half his family,
he settled uneasily in his father's landscape.
  From the blue Aegan

he declined to Darlinghurst, exchanging the dialect
of Callimachus and Cavafy for the meat-pie-eaters'
drab vernacular. For this indignity, a gentleman's
revenge: he wrought the vulgar tongue into
  exquisite poetry.

Martin Duwell, "Exiled by Circumstances and Inclination".*Editions*, no. 8 /9 (September 1990): 9–10

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