

Martin Johnston

review of *Selected Poems and Prose*—Martin Johnston—ed John Tranter; UQP paperback, \$22.95.

Martin Johnston died in his early forties in 1990, in Sydney, where he had lived when in Australia. Even when for long periods absent, he was for others a part of that scene—a touchstone of a certain sort of ambition, certain sorts of standards. He had not published frequently in journals and the slim volumes that had appeared under his name were few and have become, by now, hard to obtain. This generous selection is a service to Johnston's work and reputation from the hand of his friend and fellow poet John Tranter.

Tranter is to be thanked too, I presume, for this *Selected's* not labouring under the weight of the standard line-drawing portrait of the author with which UQP regularly consign their books to the categories "musty", "tired", "enfeebled and irrelevant". At nearly 300 pages the book is a handsome buy in other ways as well.

It is a large selection but not a *Collected Poems of Martin Johnston*. And its being very nearly so precludes one appearing in the near future. But it is

the book that might secure Johnston's reputation sufficiently to guarantee continued interest. The book is divided into sections: the Poems (selections from his previous books *The Sea Cucumber*, *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, and many uncollected later poems); European Notes—observations, and notes towards poems, made by Johnston while travelling in 1988; Translations—of major Greek poets and of Greek folk poetry; a selection of Johnston's own essays and reviews; interviews with the author; finally, reviews of Johnston's work.

There is a longish and good introduction and there are introductions to each of the book's divisions. On a first reading these have the effect of hovering a little too protectively around the poems and poet. Johnston's undoubted singularity, the notion or anticipation of it, is doubly reinforced. One becomes apprehensive. Still, Johnston *was* singular: the precociously talented child of bohemian expatriate writers, he was unlike other Australian poets, and anomalous to readers as well, for his erudition and unusual background. What was the audience for Johnston's work? Did it even exist? Or was it an imaginary, a 'virtual' one, with Johnston the curator and attendant of a museum culture, a range of references to which fewer and fewer had access and which linked tenuously to the present? Well, that case can be made. But one of the special strengths of his writing is the sense of difficulty with which the connections *were* made, and the sense of isolation and contingent

individuation that this brought the poet and the poems. Johnston was only more aware of the degree to which one's associations and meanings are one's own and are made rather than given. And at the same time one's emotional life is hardly original. ("Sometimes it's hard to repress a snigger" he says, of the idea of one's work being so very original—or *in part*, for he might be laughing as much at his own insensitivity or bravado of just a line before.) The poem 'Grief' tells more soberly of this selfconsciousness, in a work that is more formal but also, conventionally, more 'heartfelt'. Though perhaps the distance maintained through formality is a kind of dryness *about* the subject matter:

[[Grief breaks the heart and yet the grief comes next.
Some lemon morning in a wash of rain
a brand-new horror comes to call again
and write a footnote to expunge the text.

The gall slips down and hardly hurts at all;
your scholarly rescensions of the past
prove to your satisfaction that at last
time counterloops and paradoxes pall.]]

I would prefer, I *think*, the introductions gathered at the book's front and the work left more separate. The regular warm demotic of the editor's

voice contrasts a little with the cool of Johnston's literary writing: the coach lengthily extols the pleasures of swimming—but when we approach the pool and dip in a toe, the water is another world. Though, editorially, no solution can be perfect: the introductions gathered together, one would complain of their bulk.

Another of the introduction's effects is to detach Johnston a little from his peers. It is an introduction, a life, given by one who knew him—but other poets to whom Johnston was close are not mentioned. I think of Laurie Duggan and John Forbes—with whom he was very much associated in the early 70s and through much of the 80s—or Gig Ryan, to whom he was close in the last decade. Of the four articles on Johnston reprinted here two are by male academics, and one each by poets Tranter and Chris Wallace-Crabbe. The combined effect is a little generalized and clubbily fusty. Ryan's piece should have been present. It was a recent article, well-written and, as I say, close—to say nothing of relieving the monotone of masculine opinion. The context of Johnston's work, as it is given here, seems to be that of a putatively puzzled Australian public, the ambivalence of such as Les Murray (who found Johnston to have "left out the poetry": his letter of rejection to Johnston is quoted), and the work of Tranter and Adamson. Equally, if not more so I think, a slightly younger formation were the context of his work. They appear, with the author, in a poem 'On Aggression', whose title

labels it a “a group self-portrait” as Greylag Goslings—and in which Konrad Lorenz is quoted on the birds:

[[The goslings fight, as do adults, using their wings,
but as these are no more than tiny stumps, their blows
fall short, for they aim as if their wings
were in the right proportion
to the size of their bodies]]

Time will sort out such elisions, and no doubt supply others.

These are small points. Such a collection, once first looked at, comes then to be used more personally: one turns again and again to various of the poems, the translations, the writing—and the introductions, necessary in any case, acquire their true proportion. Similarly, the peculiarities of Johnston’s own kind of literariness (critics complained of his using too big words, as well as of general obscurity) will mark him off less and less from other writers as time gives the rest of the 70s and 80s a degree of opacity and datedness. In fact they partly disappear when the poems are read closely: the complaints are the product of lazy reading.

Only a few of the poems (amongst them ‘Gradus ad Parnassum’, ‘In Memoriam’, ‘Cafe of Situations’, most of the ‘In Transit’ sequence,

which reads as playful emulation of the manner of the other goslings' wit) do the trick for me—which locates me, I guess—though none of them are undistinguished.

The very intangible, retinal sensuousity described in some poems I find sometimes irritatingly pointillist and sensitive, light bouncing and reflecting off surfaces—to me, unclearly. At other times the effects are precise, unusual and totally memorable. There are terrific poems in this book. The cultural references are not so invariably high, but they do seem private, consolatory almost on occasion. Often the poems make large claims for the poet, invoking and suggesting continuity with the great wise dead of the past—who all live on—creators, poets, painters, philosophers. At various times it can seem escapist, an unworldly world view, an empty boast, or at other times ambition and perspective. Here are some old masters, from, admittedly, an earlyish poem:

[[Master Alekhine lost himself in drink,
and crabbed old Steinitz played a game with God
by cordless invisible telephone,
and Schlechter, the frail little Viennese
starved to death quietly in a room like this:
they weren't the same. I drove to the bone
of this our murderous game,
they called me the Spinoza of the chessboard.]]

Finally only Johnston's poems can do the particular tricks that are theirs—"each the precise, the only possible / delineation of a complex of thinking and feeling"—though Johnston himself was amused as he wrote these words. At their best I find them—or the ones I so far like—to be a useful kind of astringent: one meets a mind much more in Johnston's poetry than one meets a voice, for example, which is as much a relief as the strangeness of the mind is a pleasure.

Ken Bolton