

Martin Johnston 1947-1990

Shadowmass, Arts Society Publications, 1971.

Ithaka (Modern Greek Poetry In Translation), Island Press, 1973.

The Sea-Cucumber, University of Queensland Press, 1978.

Cicada Gambit, Hale & Iremonger, 1983.

The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap, Hale & Iremonger, 1984.

'12 Poems', Scripsi, Vol. 6 No. 1, 1990.

by Gig Ryan

Martin Johnston was born in Sydney but educated largely in Greece when students memorised passages from Homer, and in his work there are the twin currents of the Greek and English traditions. His influences are diverse, but in English these are Dunbar, Nashe, Wyatt, Herbert, Donne, Shakespeare, Meredith, Eliot and Berryman - though his reference to being 'half-Berryman' ('For the Cretan Maker') is to do with the circumstances they share, both poets having many occasions for elegy. In the Greek, the poets Cavafy, Ritsos, and Seferis in particular are influential, but more deeply and perennially embedded is Homer. Johnston, though, is not *like* any of these writers.

In his first book, *Shadowmass*, the wit and erudition he is known for is apparent, as is the influence of Eliot:

Spinoza cycles upside-down
around his attic torture-track
scrawling moustaches on God's face
extinguishing the zodiac

and pedals madly till the wheel
must grope for spinning's last extreme
and floats out past the asteroids
nobody's halo no-one's dream

though the last line in this poem, 'Spinoza' (re-printed in his second book of poems) is more under the influence of then-contemporary song lyrics. In another early poem, 'Extract from the

Unpublished Notebooks of Judas Iscariot', he dismantles his own pretensions, while at the same time establishing them, in a way that is always both blithe and fatal, and always ambiguous:

Eli eli. I could have said that . . .
had I not stood so on my dignity, & with better reason.
But bright hieratic robes flutter now in the twilight,
the sickles rise & fall, even the screech-owl
twits me for waste.
It was all a terrible misunderstanding - I know - he knows
but my tongue was blue my larynx crushed how could I say it
all these things perhaps occurred in a moment

The voice of the unheroic antagonist is later explored in 'Cyclops songs' in Johnston's last book of poems. Also revealed in *Shadowmass* is his talent for the absurdist winding Shandy-esque prose that his novel *Cicada Gambit* so revels in, here represented in the eight-page unpunctuated 'horse'.

Johnston's *Ithaka* is a collection of his translations of Cavafy, Elytis, Seferis, among others, and also of folk-songs. With some but limited Greek, and knowing Johnston's fastidiousness, I assume an exactness from his translations, and have noted that Professor Marios Byron Raizis's¹ literal translation of Seferis' 'On Stage' closely parallels that of Johnston's. Perhaps because of the politics they imply (Greek folk-songs and the work of the contemporary composers Theodorakis and Markopoulos played an important role in preserving the morale of, and disseminating information to, the Greek resistance during the Junta years, which is when Johnston's book was published), or simply because they are so tragic (there are many overtly political poems in this book), the folk-songs are particularly striking:

My friends of Roumeli, and you, sons of Moria,
by the bread we have eaten together,
by our brotherhood,
pass by my country and by my people.
Don't enter the village by sunlight
don't enter the village by moonlight
don't shoot your guns
don't sing your songs
for fear my mother might hear you, and my poor sister.

But if they come and ask you, the first time say nothing,
and if they doubly ask you, a second and a third time,
don't tell them I've been killed and make them sadhearted.
Just tell them that I've married here, here in these parts.
I have taken the grave for a mother-in-law,
the black earth for a wife,
and these strewn stones for my brothers and cousins.

(‘Pass By My Country’)ⁱⁱ

The impression one receives from these translations is that Johnston prefers accuracy to the embellishment or evasion so common in less humble, though finally, less proud, translators.

The sometimes shivering atmospheric qualities of his early poems are still present in his second book, *The Sea-Cucumber*, but here the work is more constrained, and sharper:

My father gave me dust, bad eyes, the law,
the golden letters of the Name
at tunnel's end, and turned me out
into talmudic dark.
The white-tipped cane he gave me
was to be pointed only, not to guide, and so
reproach became escape, escape pursuit,
a thing I found out later when I died...
Not far from here Spinoza faced the mob.
I could still trace my last Rook line,
out of this room, into the city square:
the glib voluptuaries of the mind
could finish off their job. But I'll not save them time.
All's curved and soft, my thought
is overripe and rotting. If I could stop that fly,
if I could stop that fly: here I'd remain
hearing once more the crystal music of my brain.

(‘Mazurka For Buzzing Fly (Grand master Akiba Rubinstein speaks)’)

Much of this work, written after the deaths of his parents, the writers Charmian Clift and George Johnston, and the deaths of some contemporary poetsⁱⁱⁱ, is necessarily elegiac, while at the same time, notably in ‘In Memoriam’, the ghoulish elegists are satirized:

Whether there is particular grief in the deaths of poets
is a question that much engages us,
that we answer always in the affirmative,
a priori, because it’s very useful to us to do so ...

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.

Again, in the longest poem in the book, the 23-part ‘The Blood Aquarium’, the dilemmas and paradoxes of ‘what vain art can reply’ are ruefully pondered:

Walking home one night, under a streetlamp,
I came upon a man without a nose.

What struck me, at the time, as sad
was that I was reminded of Gogol: so, I thought,
even your compassion stinks of libraries.

(‘The Blood Aquarium, 11’)

Here Johnston makes explicit what is implicit in all art, that is, the layers of, and borrowings from, other artists, other arts, and thus the accompanying self-consciousness that, paradoxically, only art obliterates.

The statues in the Parthenon used to be painted.
Painter and painting move
from jewelled ikons to sketches in wash and pen.
Brushing myself in
I try, still, not to tear the paper;
eating oneself is unseemly
and all these words have teeth like hungry rivers.

(‘The Blood Aquarium, 23’)

But also only art exacerbates. In ‘Gradus ad Parnassum’, the poet amusingly seeks to finish a Mayakovsky poem, and the seemingly casual and surprisingly optimistic tone spurs the poem as much as ideas and opinions stew it:

Over a tabasco sandwich, with black coffee
and a number of cigarettes (‘one of my breakfasts’)
I’ve been rereading a poem about *The Shipwreck
of the Heart*, or some such - the title isn’t important,
only, of course, *The Image* - by the well-known
Russian revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.
This he wrote immediately before indulging
in the uncharacteristic excess of suicide;
the poem, perhaps because of this, is peculiarly flabby
for this normally vigorous author, is, how shall I put it, *sentimental*.
Of course he never had a chance to revise it.
So, having nothing better to do at the moment, and in accordance
with my (borrowed) idea that we’re all one writer
and ought, in any case, to do one another justice,
I thought I might have a go at it
on his behalf. I like to think he wouldn’t mind,
though he did once call Dante and Petrarch tongue-tied.

Other interesting developments in this book are the five ‘Uncertain Sonnets’ and the long eight-part ‘Microclimatology’, the latter, as to be by now expected, full of wit (‘O wild west wind, I

apostrophize you: notice me!’ from ‘3. Winter Solstice’, part IX), but too sketchy in parts and too cryptic in others. The sonnet form, first introduced here in Johnston’s work, though diligent, does not yet have the inevitability it seems to warrant, or which in his final poems he vexingly achieved. The title poem (‘The bloated sea-cucumber, when touched, spews up its entrails / as though that were a defence’), addressed to the painter Ray Crooke, seems to outline the main concerns of the book - ‘These people of yours, Ray, they are that evening/ when we first saw them... And we were all waiting, though not in your style of art’. What Johnston sees here as the ‘limits’ of art are then praised, detested, jeered at, broken, chosen.

Johnston’s fourth book, the novel *Cicada Gambit*, continues the bizarre imaginative humour of his earlier slight prose. While the ghosts of Sterne, Proust, Joyce, Canetti, Beckett, Borges, Lowry, Faulkner, White and Pynchon haunt the novel, this intriguing and resisting work is like nothing else. Johnston’s Homeric love of lists is allowed mad rein in his hilarious and detailed descriptions of a Carnival parade in Sydney:

Others, with a possibly misplaced belief in the unity of the continent’s heritage and culture, were attempting, with the aid of didgeridoos, rhythm sticks and yellow ochre, to recreate what they took to be the atmosphere of the corroboree; this, it should be noted, was one of the manifestations of festivity from which the black population was noticeably absent; a fact which may have been shown to be the product of good judgement rather than racial feeling when several casualties occurred among those who had seen fit to do their caperings upon the topmost sail of the Opera House in a high wind...^{iv}

An elegant and affluent group partying in Kirribilli, looking down towards the blackening harbour from the clear glass wall of the opulent flat where they were sipping aperitifs, were amused to see the apartment block being approached by a merry rabble dressed up as the Works of H. P. Lovecraft: some hopping along awkwardly... others with shapes difficult to define at all, some, it seemed, constructed on the principle of the pantomime horse or the Chinese New Year dragon...^v

Later, his naturally discursive prose style almost takes over the tale:

I suppose that, for the benefit of the vast majority of my readers - this country being neither Russia nor Iceland - I shall have to explain what Zugzwang is... a Zugzwang situation is one in which the inestimable privilege of the move is in fact catastrophe.^{vi}

There are occasions when Johnston, stepping into territory he knows least - colloquial Australian - seems to flounder, and Mrs. Osgood's voice sounds false and unnecessarily self-conscious to me. It is not a 'poetic' novel, in some critics' sense of the term, that is, a solipsistic miasma, but a weird melange of thriller, comedy, satire, history, crammed with various pieces of incidental information, as is all Johnston's work, with Sydney as both chess-board and chess-game, and the site of all the stock (modern) characters: the half-wit, the blind man, the chess-player, the academic. Dr. Skogg's attempts to secretly uphold his own tradition of Bloomsday, that is, by re-creating every scene annually, and his consequent exchange with Vlastos, the chess-player, are the most entertaining chapters in the book:

Returning - his manner, as seemed habitual with him, combining bluntness and circuitousness to an improbable degree - to something like the line of questioning he had been pursuing earlier, he asked me with a certain transparent slyness of intonation, as he finished his new drink:

'Go out much?'

'No.' I was not, I thought, going to be drawn.

He thought for a little.

'What do you do with yourself then?'

While I felt that this was altogether overstepping any reasonable bounds, I answered quietly and, I hope, civilly enough:

'I come here occasionally, but not much. Mostly I just stay at home and study.'

'Study? Oh yes. Chess.'

'Chess, that's right; there is always a great deal of theory concerning which you have to keep up to date.'

'Really?' Pause again, and then, as one making a confidence, 'Yes, I suppose you'd have to. Hardly study much myself though, in my own field, these days; I reckon if I don't know my stuff by now I might as well give up.'

A statement, I felt, outrageous enough to preclude any answer I could think of; fortunately he continued:

'So you don't go out, eh?'

'As I said, no.'

A certain quiet annoyance must, I thought, have filtered through, but no:

'Doing anything tonight?'

I should perhaps note here that he looked to have cheered up quite considerably during this last beer. The emotional flexibility this implied was startling. Minutes ago he had been unquestionably frightened; now he wore the expression and spoke in the language and intonations of the most heedless and guiltless of 'men of the world'.^{vii}

Dr Skogg, feeling he has thus captured his Stephen (Vlastos), predictably and doggedly proposes a night at Kings Cross, so confirming Vlastos's trepidation:

Looking at him, I tried to work out which way his emotional graph was tending. Certainly he had, over the last hour or so, covered if not the whole gamut of the more disagreeable emotions then at least a very fair proportion of them, and it would, I felt, be as well to know just where he stood at any given moment. My impression was that after having hovered for a time encouragingly in the vicinity of the sanguine humour he was rather rapidly dropping towards the unpredictable and possibly dangerous zone of the choleric - one which I suspected to be natural to him in any case. I felt less and less inclined to have, if I could possibly avoid it, anything to do with a project of his which, uncongenial as I suspected it to be in principle in the first place, was, it seemed, furthermore to be undertaken in a frame of mind surely calculated to get both Dr. Skogg and myself into some form - unpredictable, true, but looming with awful certainty - of trouble.^{viii}

This is not a 'conventional' novel then, but 'having once started, I found myself queerly constrained by its *language* to continue'^{ix}, as Vlastos describes his reaction to Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is both catastrophic and meandering, beckoning because puzzling.

In *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, there are three main sequences of poems: the first, the 'Cyclops Songs' borrows the voice of Polyphemus, the Cyclops, from Theocritus' Idyll XI, and expands it. In the fourth section of this sequence, 'The homecoming', the jokes are mainly at the expense of Homer, and in this, and also in the ridiculously out-of-context quote from Eliot's 'Little Gidding', one can also discern shades of Petronius' *Satyricon* in which epic poetry is misquoted, or quoted in such a context as to debunk or disprove it. Johnston, I think, is here informed by a similar desire and paradox, that is, by debunking and 'de-mythologizing', he is also remembering and authorizing, wrenching the distant or canonical past into the present:

Well, what *was* Odysseus good at? (1) making things (2) lying -
neither a skill I've any use for. Don't talk to me

about subtlety. I've travelled too,
smelt caique-decks' tar and goat and onions in milky dawn winds,
snoozed hunched in my fur on offal wharves, and remember
prayer-flagged cairns, moon-priestesses and pig-myths
on steppes beyond the writ of American Express.
And come back betraying nobody - Argo, Argus,
I'm my own device and my own dog: 'Beware the Savage Cyclops.'
Why should *I* lie?

But for instance I miss
the lobster-scamper down seaweed-stinking alleys,
away from fearful demonstrations yelling
Support Your Local Triple Goddess. - To bed -
I'll give you 'sodden toward sundown'.

This is what all art does, but Johnston does it overtly, and certainly better and more distinctly than most. His poetry though is rarely as immediate as this, but is instead abstruse, often obscure, and almost overwhelmed by its erudition. That the same could be said of Eliot or Pound does not seem, to many, to make his work any more welcoming. In the last section of this sequence, the writer's position - so bleakly vaunted in Shakespeare's sonnets - is grimly asserted:

You:
I'm talking about you. But at least,
you bastard, blind as I am, and a hostage
to your stiff-twined cordon of darkness, *I*
am still the one who writes the poems.

('The Recidivist')

The second sequence, 'In Transit: A Sonnet Sequence', fourteen 'free' unrhymed 'sonnets', contains both the best and the worst of Johnston. The worst are those that attempt 'accessibility' and, in the attempt, reduce themselves to an almost mawkish sentimentality: these however are extremely rare. The second section of this sequence, 'Biography', continues to explore some of his earlier concerns from *A Sea-Cucumber*:

About love and hate and boredom they were equally

barracudas, took an arm or leg quick as winking,
their totem Monkey Aware-of-Vacuity.
Empedocles added to the four elements
Love and Strife to set them spinning, Aeschylus
invented tragedy by adding the second actor.
Back past the sold houses in the lost domains
down in the midden-humus
glows the rotting trelliswork of 'family',
odd slug-coloured tubers wince at the touch
with feigned unanthropomorphic shyness,
naked pink tendrils explore holes. It is all
tentative, and these days the Island supports
a "Jungian sandlot therapist".

Later, in 'Of time and typing, 11', the empty vaunt of the Cyclops seems to be complacently dismissed as 'the honest poem that's mainly white space' is here considered. Luckily such faux-naiveté cannot be heeded by any poet.^x The third sequence, and his most important work, is the long twelve-part 'To The Innate Island'^{xi}. Here Johnston is at his most fluid, seething, and intense. The poem is mainly a rumination around the riddle posed by the existence of the still-undeciphered second-millennium B.C. Phaistos Disc from Crete, a fired clay disc inscribed on both sides with repeating images - arrows, a walking human, a child, a beehive, an eagle, a dove, and others - that seem to spiral inwards, but this ambitious sequence is also of course a voyage. Here Johnston's abstruseness is mesmerizing, his density and 'foreignness' enticing and monumental. With an acute awareness of history, richly flashing with allusion and dense description, this poem fits least into any English-language tradition, and is more closely aligned to modern Greek poetry, Seferis in particular. Where formerly, he may at times have appeared arcane or ambulatory, here he is glassy, inventive, dynamic:

Most of the Titans thought a plenum best
but were slow thinkers, earthed: never looked back
to see how, as they crammed the sky
in pursuit of an ideal, pits yawned
where Ossa and Pelion had stood.
Just one flashed across like the bird that ate him,
the rest were all smeared

into that lowlanders' invention, landscape.
Then first things could at last be first
and there were solitudes to die in
to songs repeating from cassettes in fugue...

In marble cafeteria corridors
the *kouroi* strut and preen
twiddling their tinplate keychains
and all around them flicker the quick blue sparks of neurosis.
Ah, close your eyes, play the guitar.
The knobbed mountains are bleak as alfoil, and the dance
only the unsquarable signature
on the document that proves us many.

(‘6 Friezes’)

In these first and last stanzas, Johnston describes a usually depressing contrast between past/myth and present/reality, as well as describing specific friezes (which is all the Notes admit to). More broadly, the problems of epistemology - that what we know can only, ultimately, be ourselves - and the problems of space/time - that all times somehow exist simultaneously (both hypotheses tossed around in modern Physics) - are threaded through the poem:

Amours de voyage: scaled seas flow
in the pour of dawn to the Cretan mountains,
Hercules' Pillars, those Odysseus saw last.
Flecks of colour emerge, scatter of flags out of night.
An exercise in ethnomusicology: Marsyas' flute,
Hope's kastura, the women of Zalongo,
Mirbeau's bell, bells banged
with rumoured Belgian priests, the possibilities
the Flemish masters found in harps; small spotted dogs
cocking an ear at the Iron Maiden.
The dead-bell splintered the whole morning.
We don't look closely at the saints' faces
in the scraps of fresco when the sirens sound.

Cracked modern windows rattle in the dome's bare brick;
the Pantokrator's not at home.

(‘7. From the Folk-song Archives’)

In this and in section 10, ‘Psychopannychy’ (‘The condition of the sleeping soul between death and the resurrection’, the Notes explain), an array of deaths and resurrections and judgements is imagined:

All the sky's here, begged borrowed stolen,
since oxygen's first faint bow, and from every enamel-
azure altar-screen or ikon since say St Luke:
figure-eight shield's weight of the first yawning
feeling, vision when the alarm clock rings.
And under all the skies are all the men.
Now it's no good referring back to Daumier's
thing coming up through the trapdoor, Redon Piranesi Munch,
things you insisted were nightmares,
the Premature Burial, the Pit.

(‘10. Psychopannychy’)

The terror these things evoke, however, is rapidly followed by self-deprecating humour - ‘I don't dream: never had a dream in my life’, and, as in earlier poems in *The Sea-Cucumber*, the terror itself is only made real through art. Art then is not the mewling maundering petrified catharsis (and, therefore, vaccination) dreamt up by Aristotle, nor the futile toy Auden's wishful thinking (‘Poetry makes nothing happen’) later endorsed (and his poetry disproved), but thought and action as compelling as any other. The next section leaves, superficially, the terrors of a possible judgement, and enters a seemingly-peaceful present, but this turns out to be a gentle aberration or, more gravely, a metaphor:

In the inner garden which we never visit
the insects proceed quietly
about their unlearned webwork of small occasions,
the cat a cloud behind the bay-branches,

and the boat moves into the bay...

Or land at last and view the conventional scene:

oil-slicks and oil-logged gulls, fist-sized lumps of tar,
aerosols, beer-cans and blue plastic bags. And mosquitoes,
midges, caddis larvae, fat spiders, culture and nature.

This is the point where the script indicates: *acceptance*:

do you like it? do you row off

with your cracked oars and unstoppable bunghole? do you look back?

The palaces have been swallowed: do you regret them?

The statues looted: will you put up new ones?

You never return to the place you started from.

Since then earth's moved, and sun, and you find

blank untwinkling stars, blood bursting through the head...

The wind blows down from the dunes.

The boat is loaded

with a second-hand phrenological head,

a smuggled ikon of the Last Judgement,

an insufficient supply of hardtack,

a postcard of the Disc of Phaistos, gold on blue.

In the inner garden which we never visit

the boat seems to be coming in, rust-red sail,

the cat a cloud behind the bay-branches.

(‘11. Water-Garden Snapshots’)

The quest for the Disc, and the possible truth the Disc holds, is always elusive. What is found is only one's own reflection, subject and object are, confoundedly, the same (or, as Rimbaud succinctly put it, ‘*JE est un autre*’^{xii}). In the last section, various explanations of the Disc are offered and rejected, and Johnston's far-reaching knowledge is deployed with skill:

It lacks Sir Arthur Evans' red-ochre signature,

crocus-accented, visible like the snakes of Nazca

only from the sky, at Knossos: yes, and the Great Wall of China

is a get-well card to Mars. Here

the Disc dropped through the collapsing floor
into time, where we think we look at it
through glass in the museum - but opaque
and impermanent as a carbon-column, lost
the key, the scales, the music.

Perhaps it's a model of the Great Spiral Nebula,
perhaps it's a trap.

The printed glyphs curl in to the centre:
fish, scaled helmet, mailed courier
spinning down the black hole...

(The bleached snakes squirm in their tunnels,
innocent mouths hanging open, expecting milk.
There's none on the Disc; it flew
in one soundless explosion
straight into a creation myth one invents at leisure.)
All that was left was lists, despite the professor
who read in the tablets love-lyrics in Basque...

and we see only
blind inner skin of our eyelids
and for so short a time we can't draw the irrational inference
to think it to a world, rightly.
The ceremony. Bunting and bands
and three tin-whistles. The elect
passed through the gates: through time and words:
spinning, onto the Disc.

('12. The Whistlers of Phaistos')

Such a watery and sublime dénouement is abrupt and unexpected after the ravaging and pillaging of civilization and most of its contents, yet it's also the most appropriate; what has unravelled throughout the poem - words, characters from, and interpretations of, the Disc (and therefore the boundaries of knowledge) - are wound back onto the Disc which remains placid, claustal, ambivalent. The poem, of course, is its own explication.

Johnston's final poems are a long distance from the insoluble floating abstractions and grandeur of the searching 'To The Innate Island'. The sonnet form he practised in *The Sea-Cucumber* is perfected in 'Grief' and 'The Battle of Trasimene'. The influences of Donne and Empson are the most immediately obvious, particularly in these sonnets, yet, knowing Johnston's predilections, I am inclined to look further back to Nashe, Wyatt, Dunbar, not for the form itself, but for the awful fatalistic momentum these two poems certainly prize. In 'The Battle of Trasimene', Livy's account is rendered as both fact and allegory, and though the first line 'Of course it was their armour dragged them down' is repeated in the last line, its meaning by then has changed, and it's no longer just the legions sinking 'like lumps of bronze', and no longer just the past the refrain refers to:

The fat and hopeless couple in the bar,
the spidery girl in the flyblown dress,
the man who screams and curses at the bus,
the elegant scholar patched up with copper wire,
the man who pays the boy to play the clown
of course it was their armour dragged them down.^{xiii}

In these poems, Johnston returns firmly to the English-speaking tradition, and thus, at least currently, these poems are his most popular. The other poems of note are 'Biennale: The Romanian Pavilion', 'Tabula Rasa', and 'Gorey at the Biennale'. Apart from the longer poem, 'Getting to Know the General'^{xiv}, which is good in parts but uneven, the other six poems do not have the finish he is capable of, and seem fettered or thwarted.

In the Romanian pavilion the terror
is both dead and charming, and a young woman sits
knitting at the door, acting log-ignorant
of being both hackneyed and emblematic,
a garbled half-educated quote.
George Meredith, too, comes to mind: rank on rank,
the army of unalterable law -
but not the stars. But wicker coffins. But -
are the allusions deliberate? Have they nothing better
to do in Romania?

('1. Biennale: The Romanian Pavilion')

There seems to be an introverted claustrophobia in most of these poems, and the protean imagination so typical of Johnston's work seems overall to be sorely lacking here, and sometimes bitterly replaced by a ghostly, yet studied, self-mimicry. Only 'Grief' and 'The Battle of Trasimene', though the most strictly conventional, do justice to his otherwise most diverse and original career:

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.
Your paintings have been swapped for cheap engravings,
all trace of colour has been washed away,
it's 3 a.m. although you know it's day,
the bank's engrossed your past and future savings.
Love is the subject and love's loss the text.
Grief breaks the heart and yet the grief comes next.

Perhaps a certain strength is gained by being narrower in scope, but apart from these two exceptions, I prefer the wit and gleam of his previous two books of poems, *The Sea-Cucumber* and *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, and the swift elegant play of his novel, *Cicada Gambit*.

N.B. This essay was originally published in *Scipsi* magazine, Volume 7. 3, 1992, and in slightly revised form online in *Journal of Poetics Research* (ed. John Tranter), 2016.

Further reading: *Martin Johnston: Selected Poems and Prose*, edited by John Tranter (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993).

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- ⁱ M. Byron Raizis, *Greek Poetry Translations* (Athens:Modern Greek Poetry, Efstathiadis Group, 1981).
- ⁱⁱ A slightly different translation of this folk song was published in Johnston's later essay 'Songs of the Robbers', *The Athenian* (Athens: March 1980).
- ⁱⁱⁱ George Johnston (1912-1970), Charmian Clift (1923-1969); Charles Buckmaster (1951-1972), Michael Dransfield (1948-1973), Francis Webb (1925-1973).
- ^{iv} Martin Johnston, *Cicada Gambit* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1983), 74-75.
- ^v *Ibid.*, 76-77.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, 139-140.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, 224-225.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, 237.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, 212.
- ^x The only truth and honesty for a poet, for poetry, must be what can be conveyed in poetry - that is, there can't exist for consideration virtues (or vices) outside the poem. If a poet sees anything as somehow belonging 'outside', and not able to be written, then he/she/they would be following a deluded and constricting (and dishonest) notion. A poem is as honest (and as dishonest) as anything else can be.
- ^{xi} This title was inspired by a visit to the small island, called 'Nisi' (island) or 'Nisaki' (little island) in Lake Pamvotis, Ioannina, Greece, according to Nadia Wheatley who accompanied him. Johnston thought Nisi embodied the perfect definition of an island.
- ^{xii} Arthur Rimbaud, Lettre de Rimbaud à Georges Izambard - 13 mai 1871, *Œuvres* (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1960).
- ^{xiii} The layout of these last three sonnets conforms to Johnston's usual left margin alignment rather than the centred layout of their first publication in *Scripsi* (6.1, 1990) and consequently copied in my original version of this essay. According to *Scripsi* Associate-Editor Andrew Rutherford, centred layout was how the late poems appeared in manuscript form, and so, following *Scripsi*, were centred in my original. John Tranter in his *Martin Johnston, Selected Poems and Prose* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993) chose the left margin alignment consistent throughout Johnston's oeuvre.
- ^{xiv} My view of Johnston's late poems has since changed: I now consider many to be among his finest, and intend to elaborate in a future essay.