

## **‘Infinite shall never meet’: Perspective in Martin Johnston’s ‘In the Refectory of the Ognissanti’**

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The lines of perspective invoke infinity at a vanishing point where the artist, in the words of Yves Bonnefoy, ‘imagines the infinite to be concentrated’ (Bonnefoy, *AP* 156)—yet perspectival techniques for capturing the timeless within time, by rendering the moment visible in spatial representation, have themselves only a finite history. They are delimited on one side by centuries of medieval symbologies which seek to render a metaphysical ideal attainable only through the conception of art as a dream-vision, in which the objective world of appearances is transfigured as myth. And they are in turn radically displaced at the commencement of the twentieth century, with the discoveries of non-Euclidean geometry and its conception of curved space in which all lines intersect, destabilising the world of objects. Apollinaire in *The Cubist Painters* dismisses ‘that miserable tricky perspective . . . that infallible device for making things shrink’; while for the Russians, who pushed quickly towards abstraction in both art and in their ‘transrational’ poetry, the distortion or abandonment of perspective was the condition that guaranteed their claim that new form would create new content. Velimir Khlebnikov, the inventor of *zaum*, was a keen student of Lobachevsky’s geometry of negative curvature; while his associate Kruchenykh argued more theosophically that ‘incorrect perspective brings about a fourth dimension’ (Henderson 274). The two best-known forerunners of non-Euclidean geometry make a direct appearance in the chessboard chapter of Martin Johnston’s 1983 novel, *Cicada Gambit*: ‘9. . . QxN+. Things fall apart, or so it may seem. Though infinite shall never meet—but that was before Riemann and Lobachevsky’ (Johnston 316). As Duchamp also realised, a chessboard can be conceived as a model for non-Euclidean ‘unbounded yet finite’ spatiality, with its combinations, permutations and juxtapositions curving toward yet containing infinity; a sonnet, the poetic form Johnston seemed often to favour, might be viewed in a similar manner.

The poet who has most profoundly considered the implications of this history of perspective is Yves Bonnefoy. In his essay ‘Time and the Timeless in Quattrocento Painting,’ Bonnefoy conceives the invention of perspective as a kind of falling away from presence, if not from a Platonic ideal, which ‘deprived these painters of a true encounter with what is’ (Bonnefoy, *Lure and Truth* 54). Yet there is a corollary to this, in that ‘the checkerboard of perspective, with its calculated scaling down of the figure, offers not only precision but also, potentially, harmony. The numerical relationships it establishes can articulate the underlying “Number,” believed to be inherent in the universe’ (Bonnefoy, *Lure and Truth* 54). By removing the numerical from the ideal and grounding it in materiality, perspective provides a means of bringing art into kabbalistic alignment with the world (Johnston, in his essay on Borges, emphasises ‘the kabbalistic doctrine . . . that the universe itself is a book’ [Tranter 180]). This is located in the effect of the vanishing point, with its evocation of the infinite within the finite—also apparent in the Lobachevskyan possibility of the meeting of parallel lines. As John Naughton notes, the aim of Bonnefoy’s poetry is to free being from the autonomy of art by acknowledging lived experience, to seek the ‘atemporal’ within ‘the resistance of time’ (Naughton 93), bringing the transcendental to incarnation. Perspective achieves this by making ‘a cut in the visible, at some very precise moment,’ providing objective rules for collecting and arranging our experience of the world—but this three-dimensional mimetic trace can never attain the fullness of Bergsonian

duration, providing only ‘a petrification of the human gesture which will be to the moment really lived what the concept is to being’ (Bonnefoy, qtd in Naughton 93). As Naughton comments, ‘the problematics of the historical self, of the self reconstructed by the images of memory is related to the general history of perspective. History, as Bonnefoy knows, is *la fatalité de la perspective*. In painting, around the year 1400, the problematics of time and perspective becomes crucial.’ This is precisely the point in history considered in Johnston’s late ekphrastic poem, ‘In the Refectory of the Ognissanti,’ a meditation on perspective and the exchanges between art and life in Domenico Ghirlandaio’s *Last Supper* (1480).

A concern with the poetics of perspective is also central to Bonnefoy’s major prose work, *The Arrière-pays* (1972, trans. 2012), in which he distinguishes between the earlier scientific experiments of Uccello—whom Wylie Sypher compares directly to calculating Cubists such as Braque (Sypher 59)—and Quattrocento painters such as Masaccio and Ghirlandaio, who ‘brought to the experience of the senses the light and unity of the sacred’ (Bonnefoy, *LP* 67). As Bonnefoy comments, ‘now I understood that these painters had conceived of perspective to accomplish this task, asking that it should define the horizon, uncover and retain the possible, and free the conscious mind of prejudices and chimeras.’ Bonnefoy summarises his position in a 2004 ‘Afterword’: perspective, he now writes, demonstrates ‘how number which is but a dream, the perennial dream of the Platonist through history, can also provide a way out of that dream . . . now transformed into the mirror of existence as it really is, not as one would wish it to be—a means of truth’ (Bonnefoy, *LP* 153). And he concludes: ‘Great art . . . consists in not forgetting the here and now in the dream of elsewhere, in not forgetting time, humble time as it is lived through here, among the illusions of that other place, that shade existing out of time’ (Bonnefoy, *LP* 160). This aspiration toward a resolution of antinomies between the dream-ideal of an autonomous art and the realities of lived experience, between this temporal world and what Bonnefoy nebulously refers to as his *Arrière-pays* (literally: hinterland), provides the vanishing point or horizon for Johnston’s poem.

Johnston’s own similarly complex exploration of the boundaries separating the aesthetic from the real is evident in his essay on Borges, whose style he defines as ‘neo-metaphysical’ (Tranter 185) rather than magic realist: Borges is considered a writer of ‘pure ideas,’ the figure of the Valéryan artist who constructs ‘worlds perfect in themselves’ (Tranter 189). According to his interpretation of Borges’s *Dreamtigers*, ‘the tiger is unattainable, the dream, which is art, is the means to attain it’—and yet, for the reasons Bonnefoy has clearly identified, the accomplishment of this ideal carries certain risks: as Johnston notes, ‘if, like Borges, you choose to jettison the lot, you can never be free of the fear that you are being dreamed. Dreamed or written: the freedom and power of dreaming . . . is the freedom and power of art; and so with the limitations’ (Tranter 178). Johnston’s ‘absorption with poetry as a theme’ led to him being described as a ‘new Mannerist’ by the critic Christopher Pollnitz (Tranter 279), and there are grounds for linking his response to Ghirlandaio to that signature poem of postmodern Mannerism, Ashbery’s ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’—however, in spite of apparent similarities, the concerns of these poems are quite distinct. Johnston himself concedes, in an interview with John Tranter, that the distinguishing aspect of his work is that, ‘I always provide an ornamental surface which, if it works as it is meant to, people will enjoy’ (Tranter 266). Yet it is worth at least partially preserving Johnston’s work from the dark rumblings of Bonnefoy regarding ‘Mannerism, where only nonbeing glitters’ (Bonnefoy, *Lure and Truth* 56). According to Wylie Sypher, the commonly accepted definitions of Mannerism (affectation, overcleverness, preciousness) are less important than a concern with exploring ‘shifting planes of reality’ (Sypher 171): the blurring of lines between art and life is a crucial feature of this approach, as ‘Mannerist painters, by inverting perspective, transformed aesthetic to

introspective space'; and the intention is to bring 'the aesthetic world into more complex, variable relations with the world where we live' (Sypher 173).

While no one has yet attempted a biography of Martin Johnston himself, the entanglements of his own life with art are plainly apparent in his family history and its prominent representation in Australian literature, making it inevitable that this would be a central theme within his work. But the stylistic approach of his own writings is very different from the mimetically realist or straightforwardly autobiographical mode pursued by his parents: Johnston is a Modernist poet who accepts the crisis of representation that occurred in the early twentieth century—his method is one of non-Euclidean juxtaposition, cubistically foregrounding the formal materials of his art, and he is perhaps best known for paratactic poems like 'The Blood Aquarium' and 'To the Innate Island' which echo Pound and Eliot in their erudite collation of strikingly ideogrammic imagery. (Charmian Clift described her meeting with T.S. Eliot in London as the highpoint of her engagements with literary life, and unconcealed Eliotisms, later purged, are evident from Johnston's earliest work). The complications are such that Johnston appeared as a literary character many years before he commenced publishing his own work, and the problems of distinguishing reality from fiction identified in his essay on Borges are mirrored in the personae constructed for his parents' semi-fictional publications, including Charmian Clift's highly personalised family-centred newspaper columns. Even the ostensible biographical facts seem unbearably tragic: Clift's suicide weeks before the release of the unflattering portrait of her in *Clean Straw for Nothing*; the subsequent assertion in his father's *Cartload of Clay* (in which Johnston appears as the barely fictionalised Julian) that it is his children's responsibility to draw together the connecting threads of their parents' lives; the later suicide of his sister, for whom he felt no elegy was possible; and his shouldering of the task of writing a biography of his parents, under the obligation of Literature Board funding but understandably abandoned. In the light of these stark facts it is unsurprising that the key feature of Johnston's poetry is not its surface of Mannerist facility, but a persistent engagement with the traditions of elegy, which he describes in an important essay on Berryman as 'a poetic genre as ancient in its origins as it has been distinguished in its practitioners' (Tranter 192).

As John Lucas has identified in his essay 'Martin Johnston and the Matter of Elegy' (*Jacket #11*), this is most directly evident in two of Johnston's significant early works: the obliquely titled poem for his mother, 'Letter to Sylvia Plath, *i.m. C.C.*'; and its companion-piece concerning George Johnston, 'The Sea-Cucumber,' an elegy adopting the tone and manner of 'Five Bells,' staged through ekphrasis of Ray Crooke's Archibald-winning portrait, and so prefiguring the approach of the later Ghirlandaio poem. But Johnston is critical of any conception of elegy as the simple, direct statement of personal expression: 'On Berryman's Elegies' commences by castigating the 'purely reflexive and quite, quite unstoppable' (Tranter 191) tendency to eulogise the deaths of Australian poets in verse. The poet's first responsibility is instead to the demands of artifice required by tradition, in this case: 'even without excerpting from Homer or the fifth-century tragedians one thinks instantly of the tradition leading down from Simonides and Callimachus and perhaps culminating for many of us in Yeats' great poems on Robert Gregory and the dead of 1916, and in Auden's elegy on Yeats himself' (Tranter 192). Johnston's statements in this essay—which is also dismissive of the tendency of Australian poets to imitate 'the most facilely imitable' overseas models: 'how pitiful, how second-hand, how *weedy* all our sub-O'Hara, sub-Ashbery, sub-Creeley and sub-Ginsberg' (Tranter 193)—seem to provide an approach to his ambivalent anti-elegy 'Gradus ad Parnassum,' dedicated to David Campbell (one of the inappropriately eulogised poets, though this poem predates his death). To all appearances this is a startling metapoetic companion to John Forbes's 'Four Heads and How to Do Them,' as the speaker considers a variety of choices of poetic artifice for imitation: Arnoldian, Rimbaudian, Surrealist, Apocalyptic, or 'the groovier modern

Americans.’ But the poem at hand is Mayakovsky’s ‘Shipwreck of the Heart,’ his unfinished final work: ‘This he wrote immediately before indulging / in the uncharacteristic excess of suicide.’ The archness of Johnston’s phrasing here seems more than playful when considered against the tragic facts of his family’s circumstances: here is a poem for which the task of elegy is inevitably insufficient, and the poet’s resources of facile imitation are each in turn dismissed as inadequate. The poem is abandoned with the offhand and evasively reflexive comment, ‘I’m not sure that it’s much of a poem / but it’ll have to do. I’m thirsty to start with / and the pubs have opened . . .’ though the suggestion at the end is that speaker may later ‘have another bash at Mayakovsky’: clearly it is not an easy subject to confront.

The problem most to be obviated is absence of artifice: Mayakovsky’s poem, because of the immediate circumstances in which it was written, ‘is peculiarly flabby / for this normally vigorous author, is, how shall I put it, *sentimental*.’ The reconciliation of art with life requires more than naïve emotionalism: in Berryman’s *Dream Songs* Johnston identifies Eliot’s precepts about the poet’s responsibilities to tradition—the poems succeed because they exemplify ‘a continually fructifying dialogue between craftsmen meeting as equals by virtue of their craft’ (Tranter 201). This is evident in Johnston’s description of Ghirlandaio in the ‘European Notes’ he compiled while completing ‘In the Refectory of the Ognissanti’: ‘it doesn’t do to think of a painter like Ghirlandaio as if he were a primitive, or in any way unaware of the effect he intended to produce, or the means at hand with which to produce it’ (Tranter 110). And this returns us to Bonnefoy’s assertions for the claims of form revealed in perspectival techniques: ‘the geometrising of space can install the metaphysical over there as easily as it can a here which has about it no vestiges of illusion’ (Bonnefoy, *LP* 156), a statement which might be seen to encapsulate the demands of elegy to provide a conciliatory horizon for tragic experience.

‘In the Refectory of the Ognissanti’ positions its speaker precisely at the vanishing point of this horizon, in a curved space where all parallel lines meet and the infinite is concentrated. Like Ashbery’s ‘Self-Portrait,’ the poem explores complex transformative exchanges between the aesthetic and the real, as ‘Birds fly out of trompe l’oeil into yesterday’s loggia,’ and someone’s ‘lunch has been left in front of the Last Supper: / three almost empty mineral-water bottles, / breadcrumbs, plastic cups on the trestle table / that seems set up to echo Ghirlandaio’s.’ However, as Sypher suggests, the purpose of this mannerist play is ‘introspective’ as well as aesthetic. The first clue is in the title: Ognissanti is not only a place but signifies All Saints Day, a time for memorialising the dead, with its origins in the Roman Feast of Lemuria where malevolent or restless spirits were propitiated. This is reinforced by the subject of Ghirlandaio’s painting: the confrontation with Christ’s impending death is balanced by the revelation of mysteries of transubstantiation which the poem itself seems to continually enact. The word ‘echo’ appears twice in the opening sentence—first in a paraphrase of Lorca’s famous elegy, ‘at four in the echoing afternoon’—locating the speaker within a chamber of recurrences which are impossible to deflect from personal experience: ‘like the recurring ‘j’ / you change into ‘i’ when you’re editing German.’ Other passing references reinforce the elegiac theme: Donatello’s Gattamelata (line 13), viewed only through televised representation, is situated over tomb-like reliefs that represent the gates of the underworld; the discovered ‘porcupine quills’ are apparently meant to stand for art (‘You’re a poet, / she said before going, well, here’s a quill’), but might equally suggest the stab of grief at the departure of the unidentified female figure. It should be noted that the final work in Johnston’s ‘Uncollected Late Poems’ is a sonnet titled ‘Grief,’ with its leitmotif: ‘Grief breaks the heart and yet the grief comes next’ (Tranter 96).

All of which suggests that the meal encountered in front of the painted feast, and by extension perhaps the poem itself, is intended as a ritualised propitiation for the hungry dead. The poem’s

deployment of the second person makes it ambiguous whether it is the speaker or some unnamed spirit who passes beyond the horizon of perspective in the poem's central image: 'You walked into the shaft of light / in the painted background where all lines met.' The unsettling appearance of 'something untimely howling in the woods / that bristle down to the river's edge' suggests the restlessness of premature death: that this is 'best left unpainted' recalls Johnston's stated reluctance to indulge in the kind of elegy in which 'our poets, galvanised instantaneously by the news of a convenient death within what they take to be their territory, are able' to indulge (Tranter 192)—it might also refer to the poem on his sister's death that was left unwritten. In its evocation of hallucinatory backgrounds that shimmer beyond the horizon of the fresco, Johnston's poem most directly relates to that *L'arrière-pays* which Bonnefoy identifies as his own central preoccupation: 'the distant hills just beyond the window / a russet and green infolding, dimensionless and precise, / and over Pienza a faded rainbow / embodies the idea of destination, / but there's a wall behind the birds.' Later we are told: 'The ancient codices speak of a white tower / floating in silver clouds on the horizon, / a tapestry of insinuating hills.' But the speaker acknowledges the comparative insufficiencies of his own lived experience, 'the thin flavour of actuality / you carry around like an abridged Vasari.'

His only propitiation is the poem itself, in its attempt to inhabit a vanishing point which, in Bonnefoy's words, can both 'turn time lived through here into an enigma, since it puts value on the timeless,' and 'turn our life on this earth into an exile from which we must extricate ourselves through the terrible labyrinth that our days have now become' (Bonnefoy, *LP* 156). So, in the poem's concluding section, the speaker describes how, in utilising the artifice of form, a horizon of reconciliation might be established: 'Offering up your void, you invent perspective, / the birds fly out of the wall, / perch on the turrets of the unattainable tower / and peck outrageous signatures / on dissolving frescoes you authenticate.' It is a task which is entirely consistent with a Borgesian aesthetic of 'pure ideas,' and Johnston's Borges essay concludes with a quotation from Valery's *Eupalinos* on the subject of 'Poetic Nature': 'all of whose forms and beings are ultimately but acts of the mind, these acts being clearly determined and preserved by their names' (Tranter 189). Here, 'the landscape folds neatly into your head': the speaker is presented as a kind of Monsieur Teste, incorporated within and indistinguishable from the artwork, as 'very carefully, not stepping on the lines, / you tiptoe like Uccello / in a fevered abstraction of vanishing points.' Only as the parallel lines of art and life are brought to intersection—'having your cake and eating it, / from the refectory of the Ognissanti'—is the difficult task of elegy at last fulfilled.

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