

When Person and Public Are Hard to Square: Transnational Singularity in Martin Johnston's 'In Transit'

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While a large amount of Martin Johnston's poetry, reviews, and interviews were gathered and edited by John Tranter in a 1993 publication, there has only been a handful of critical works engaging with his poetry. During his lifetime (1947–1990), Johnston published three collections of poetry, a novel, and a collection of Greek translations. He appeared in *The New Australian Poetry* (1979) and is often viewed as a key member of the 'generation of 68.' While Johnston's poetry could sometimes be long and highly experimental, its anthologisation has tended towards the least difficult. Brian Kim Stefans suggests that Johnston juggles the desire for a public with an alternative sense of solipsism in much of his work, even going so far as to argue that it is Johnston's 'private singularity or sense of himself as unassimilable detail [that] makes him distinctive among Australian poets' (n.p.). This desire might be viewed more broadly as a desire for cultural belonging or what Petro Alexiou terms 'a deep emotional connection and empathy with common experience and culture' (n.p.). Alexiou suggests that this desire for connection is in tension in Johnston's writing with 'a very complex intellectual and artistic response to it.' This constant analysis of belonging, of try to understand the self's relationship to culture, leads to a sense of unassimilable detail in Johnston's work that is often bound up with a sense of excessive and endless textuality.

Stefans identifies 'In Transit: A Sonnet Square' as a key point in Johnston's poetic trajectory, where 'he is pretty much within both worlds—that of dense linguistic play and that addressing a sort of "public" which he knows but doesn't really know.' Written between November 1979 and March 1980, 'In Transit' is a thinking about one's history and what it is to live both poetically and between Australian and Greek culture. Stefans characterises Johnston as a modernist 'nomad.' Yet Johnston's transnationalism is more focused on shifting between just two cultures, with a resulting feeling of being outside of or ex-centric to both. Having spent much of his childhood on the Greek islands of Kalymnos and Hydra, Johnston continued to immerse himself in Greek poetry and art. He viewed it as a deep folk tradition in which poetry and art were not only vehicles of cultural history but also modes to psychically work through and accept its tragedies. In contrast, Johnston felt that Australia's 'lack of a genuine cultural tradition' had led to heightened attempts by its poets 'to beg, borrow or steal one or to construct one of [their] own *ab nihilo*' ('On Berryman's Elegies' 192).

As Rebecca Walkowitz notes, 'literature makes worlds as well as enters them' (172). Throughout much of his work, Johnston explores how life is modulated through textuality and the dynamic between tradition and copy. In 'In Memoriam,' he notes, 'Ever since we learned about emblems / and correspondences, we have mirrored ourselves in the sea / and the rock' (38). The child of leading Australian writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift, Johnston would be traumatised by the death of his mother in 1969, which was compounded by the death of his father the year after. Perhaps partly in light of George Johnston not completing his autobiographical novel *A Cartload of Clay* before he died, Martin began a grant-funded biography of his parents in 1973. This would be abandoned, with the distress that it brought likely heightened by the suicide of his sister Shane in 1974. Throughout his career, Johnston was drawn to autobiographies and biographies, whether of philosophers like Spinoza, writers

like Nikos Kazantzakis, or of film stars like Marilyn Monroe (whose life, he noted, became in the hands of Norman Mailer, ‘90,000 words of heaving sludge’ [‘Marilyn’ 213]). Martin returned to the biography of his parents in 1979 when he received Australia Council funding. Once again, it proved too difficult. Tranter notes that for the next year or so, Johnston travelled to Europe, moving between London, Oxford, Amsterdam, Athens and Hydra. ‘In Transit’ was written as a distraction from the biography. While the sonnet square begins and ends with a focus on Australia (Canberra, Darlinghurst, and friends), its central section focuses on Greece. As such, it formally tracks Johnston’s own return trip from Australia to Greece and back again. Its title calls attention to his sense of being culturally displaced, belonging neither fully to one country nor another.

‘In Transit’ is conspicuously subtitled a sonnet ‘square’ rather than a sequence or series, drawing attention to both the civil square and board game shape. In his one published novel *Cicada Gambit*, he blurs these together in considering Sydney through the square of the chess board. In an interview with John Tranter, Johnston states: ‘A game of chess is an intensely dynamic, intensely kinetic object within a static set of parameters, a fixed set of rules. The same I think, in a much more complicated way, applies to the way language works in poetry’ (252). Known for his ‘mania for exactness and precision,’ he elaborated elsewhere: ‘You cannot break rules with impunity unless you know what the rules are’ (Interview with Margaret Jones, 250–51). As Johnston saw it, poetry required diligence to craft and intellectual discipline to be ‘tiresomely mastered in all its little details’ (239). Talent or going on late night nerves was simply not enough.

‘In Transit’ tests the constraints of the sonnet form and of Australian identity. It extends Johnston’s attention to the sonnet form that was begun in the earlier sequence ‘Uncertain Sonnets.’ Whereas those five poems keep to recognisable rhyme schemes, ‘In Transit’ maintains only the fourteen lines. In taking fourteen sonnets of fourteen lines (a squaring of fourteen), he experiments with the poem as a system in and of itself. In his interview with Tranter, Johnston notes: ‘I . . . am interested in making things, objects constructed out of words. I tend to think in terms of sculptural or architectonic analogies for poetry’ (252).

‘In Transit’ would also be shaped by changes in his personal life for he had recently begun a relationship with criminologist Rosanne Bonney. ‘In Transit’ is dedicated to her and the first sonnet, ‘Duende in Darlinghurst,’ locates itself in the Sydney suburb where Johnston lived with Bonney. It also reflects on the blueness or darkness of creativity. ‘Duende’ becomes a test or state of true poetry (similar to A.E. Housman’s declaration that true poetry should ‘make . . . the hair stand on end.’ [quoted by Johnston in ‘Songs’ at 129]) Against the suburban specificity of the sonnet’s title, Johnston explores how one’s affects are shaped by national culture:

If out of our quarrels with ourselves we make poetry, what
do we make of our quarrels with Canberra? Suddenly
someone has gone and invented a new emotion
just as we were coming to terms with Weltschmerz.
Let them in and look what happens. (59)

This seems to allude to the debates that were then occurring around Vietnamese refugees. Melissa Bellanta notes that terms like ‘larrikin’ have played a key role in myths about what it means to be Australian, noting that: ‘Few immigrants or visitors to the country arrive having heard the word’ (xii). As figures who undermine structures of authority, larrikins (along with ‘tarts’ and ‘hoons’) are viewed by Johnston as being in danger of being expelled from

Australian discourse at the same time as Australian borders are being ‘boarded up.’ Australia is ‘ajitter’ in its immigration anxieties and a new puritanism. Johnston offers a different, unexpected invader in the form of a cat ‘from another poem’ (59). Although unspecified, Johnston is perhaps recalling Christopher Smart’s cat Jeoffrey in ‘Jubilate Agno,’ a poem that had been written as a pastime in a time of constraint. The cat becomes a figurative distraction from State politics, a diversion of attention to the poem’s own textuality. Alternatively, Johnston may be recalling the feline references in his own ‘Letter to Sylvia Plath,’ a thinly veiled elegy for his mother. In that poem, worlds are ‘whirling’ and the game is ‘musical cats.’ There is unbidden melancholia seeping in as the night enters from the street ‘cat-eyed’ and the dawn unfolds ‘aubades of memory’ (17).¹

Highly influenced by Borges’s *Ficciones*, Johnston explores the infinite possibility of worlds and even the existence of anti-worlds. History, as the sudden appearance of the cat suggests, is not necessarily logical, teleological, or able to be mastered. While others may go and invent a new emotion, Johnston renovates the romantic pessimism and exhaustion of Weltschmerz. He ironises Dantean suffering in the paradoxically named snowdrop that grows but never flowers at the lowest circle of hell. ‘Feng-sheui, lion and lamb’ have the ‘sadness / of a tightrope walker over shadows’ (59). While these are allusions to the desire to control or meekly accept one’s environment, both are reduced to melancholic responses to the chimeric world. This is a world of tricks and illusion, best characterised by the circus or fairground. In the face of overwhelming social forces, he asks: ‘Do we all fall now like shooting-gallery ducks?’ (59)

The second sonnet moves to the island of Hydra in Greece. Entitled ‘Biography,’ it shifts from national identity to a more personal genealogy, the ‘rotting trelliswork of “family”’ (60). This trelliswork is framed as Greek tragedy, Johnston noting that Aeschylus invented tragedy ‘by adding the second actor’ (59) and the drama of relationship. It is also approached through the philosophy of Empedocles, who recorded all his ideas in verse and saw the history of the universe as tied up with the origin and development of life. Empedocles argued that four classical elements (earth, water, air and fire) constituted the cosmic cycle. Love and Strife are powers that mix and separate the four elements or what Empedocles called ‘roots.’ According to Empedocles, humans, animals and plants all exist on the same plane and were initially in fragments or strange combinations so that there might be a double sex or horns without heads, that is, ‘it’s all tentative’ (‘In Transit’ 60). Extending Empedocles’s universal ecology, Johnston mulls over and revises Auden’s elegy ‘Musée des Beaux Arts.’ Changing the opening line from ‘About suffering they were never wrong’ to ‘About love and hate and boredom they were equally / barracudas’ (59). Johnston gives a surrealistic twist to Auden’s understanding of quiet suffering as the base of the human condition. Indeed, Johnston suggests that artists are perhaps more like a predatory fish in seeking out tragedy. He also playfully adds the totem ‘Monkey Aware-of-Vacuity’ (59) to humanity.

The sonnet marks a painful self-consciousness of genealogy and emptiness. There is a sense of the abject as the ‘odd slug-coloured tubers’ of the plant-human sprout ‘naked pink tendrils.’ These tendrils ‘explore holes,’ both grounding themselves but also discovering gaps. While the ‘feigned unanthropomorphic shyness’ suggests a mask, it is undercut by the vulnerability with which they ‘wince at the touch’ (60). Johnston considers human growth more broadly in Hydra, as one of the most primitive places in Greece becoming urbanised. With its late twentieth-century landscape of ‘sold houses in lost domains,’ Hydra could now even ‘support . . . / a “Jungian sandlot therapist”’ (60) if such an analyst existed. Johnston tracks familial genealogy and social geography as part of the one complex psychological nexus. There is more than an echo of Robert Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’ in its interrelated depiction of a declining Hydra and

existential despair. 'Skunk Hour' itself echoed Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Armadillo,' Lowell suggesting that while we might build houses and let them fall, poems are built upon their precursors.

The third sonnet speaks of 'Being more at home / always in the abstract.' Its first line offers a cryptic crossword clue, 'This faux pas may be on the nose' (60). This refers to amyl nitrates (party poppers) being inhaled. Johnston slides this together with silver nitrate, which Edmund Wilson used to paint his tongue as a cure for a STD. The sonnet's title 'Hecate Country' references Wilson's banned memoir of his sexual adventures and 'eveninglands' (60). The sonnet suggests that history must cover underground practices, including the chemical heightening or distortion of experience. Wilson himself explored the design of history, particularly of the Russian Revolution in *To the Finland Station*, which is subtitled, 'A Study in the Writing and Acting of History.' Whereas Wilson wanted to read the Russian Revolution as a fundamental breakthrough in history, he began to realise that history could only be an account of what the revolutionaries thought they were doing in the interests of a better world. Johnston suggests that any version of history involves consensus, or 'whether It was Good for You Too Darling' (60). The tone heightens a sense of light derision. Johnston meditates further on good or bad history with Thomas Mann's updating of the Faustian myth. Mann's character Adrian Leverkühn strikes a daemonic bargain for creative genius and intentionally contracts syphilis which deepens his artistic expression. His personal descent into madness and breakdown is cast as a political allegory of Nazi Germany. As with the first sonnet, Johnston draws out how individual and state histories are interwoven all the while emphasising their textuality.

Both the fourth and fifth sonnet explore the relationship between the arts, history, and the present. In the fourth sonnet, Johnston likens Uccello's 'Battle of San Romano' to a soccer match between Arsenal and Manchester United. Painted in the fifteenth century as a triptych, the painting presents history from the viewpoint of the winners. Johnston focuses on the scattered depiction of battle within the paintings themselves and their own subsequent scattering across three countries. Focussing on the London-based painting, Johnston juxtaposes the painting's centralised figure of the commander-in-chief Niccolò da Tolentino with two minor figures in the backdrop. Adding a metafictional twist, Johnston suggests that the latter are 'two knights' wandering 'out the back of the canvas not giving a stuff who wins' ('In Transit' 60). Johnston suggests that the 'web of men,' like the paintings themselves, have become disconnected from place. He himself is also 'in "London," in nothing' and, as with the end of a televised soccer match, there is nothing more to do but 'turn off the set' ('In Transit' 60).

Johnston contrasts Uccello's masterpiece of Renaissance painting with the work of Greek folk painter Theofilus Hadjimikhail. Against the glorifying depiction and subsequent aesthetic consumption of the battle of San Romano, Johnston promotes modern primitivism and Greek culture's idea of transhistoricity. Johnston argues that, 'The much-belaboured ideal of "organic" or "natural" culture, so torn and trampled and squabbled over in England and America . . . is far more than an ideal in Greece' ('Songs' 127). Artists like Theofilus create a 'collective epic, reverberating with a common ground-note too deep for notions of influence or individuality' ('Songs' 128). He adds: 'For Greek culture, the "high" as much as the "folk" has always been rather like Freud's imaginary Rome, with all its aspects and epochs present simultaneously' ('Songs' 130). This means that old gods are 'dressed up as new saints and seem quite comfortable in their unaccustomed haloes' (130). Moreover, Johnston suggests that 'these tricks time plays in Greece make up a texture of a life' ('Songs' 131). The fifth sonnet retells the

history of Theofilus, who made his pigments out of local stone, painted local figures on local buildings, but was a figure of village mockery. Johnston generates a sense of cyclic history in the sonnet through the echo of words and phrases such as ‘glass,’ ‘ground,’ ‘brightly coloured stones’ and ‘The neighbours stoned him’ (‘In Transit’ 61). Their fragmentation and repetition draws attention to the poem as a kind of crafted mosaic.

Three of the sonnets of ‘In Transit’ focus on games and pastimes. Johnston argued that viewing interpretation in the postmodern era as a mode of game-play imbued it with honesty and freedom:

Our destiny, on Borges’ showing, is a tragic one: we are swept along and away by a Time which we do not understand, through a life we try vainly to interpret. Our consolation can be, if anything at all, then only the interpretation itself: since we must construct falsely, let us admit the fact, says Borges, and ‘play games with infinity’; doing so we are undeceived, and thus to some extent liberated.
(‘On Jorge Luis Borges’ 174)

The three sonnets in ‘In Transit’ test this presumption. Covering the couple of months that Johnston was stranded in Athens during a bank strike as well as time in Hydra, they focus on a sense of serial defeat rather than liberation. Echoing both the motif and ennui of the second section of T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land,’ Johnston views his life as a game of chess where he faces a series of delimiting choices. Whereas he ‘can do one of two things’ while poverty-stricken in Athens (‘pay the hotel bill’ or ‘eat’), he alludes to Borges’s speculative realism and asks: ‘shall I blame Black Holes, / go back in time and shoot my great-great-grandfather?’ (62). If life is a chess game, then he recommends not stripping oneself of ‘all your defences.’ Yet winning may not be a possible move: ‘Spend years learning / what no one wants, then so arrange things / that you can’t even do it’ (62). Here, he is perhaps referring to failed projects that are mentioned in the sonnet on the jigsaw, including a study of science fiction that was to be part of a series of genre fiction (that never eventuated) to be edited by Stephen Knight. Johnston remarks that ‘[m]y book of cryptanalysis dissolves unnoticed’ (63).

In the sonnet on crosswords, he notes reading a line in the local newspaper: ‘Infant bites snake: a female Herakles?’ While this sounds like a cryptic clue, it leads only to illumination about a history far off in Melbourne. Mourning over the fact that contemporary Greece ‘isn’t “my” Greece’ is misplaced for Johnston realises that ‘it never was’ (62). Any relationship to Greece is only a temporary lease, quickly scrapped as ‘demolishers come’ (62). The sonnet on the jigsaw continues this critique of how a Greek Arcadia is being transformed by the late capitalist drive for property development. Johnston contrasts the ensuing fight for ‘land rights’ to the fight for land rights in Australia: ‘They’re throwing the blacks in the harbour / and there aren’t enough blacks to go around’ (63). He also contrasts it with the effects of the Greek-Turkish conflict where the simple request for ‘Turkish coffee’ in Athens is looked upon immediately with suspicion. Boys play at being Ayatollahs, referencing another ongoing conflict: the Iran war. Johnston draws parallels between war and leisure-time activities, demonstrating how they are based around similar rules of conquest. Even tourists demanding ‘Shrimp! Shrimp’ are likened to a ‘crimson knot of panzers’ (63). In such a milieu, there is a pervasive feeling of short-circuiting. It is reinforced by a number of accidents involving Johnston and his friends. Indeed, Johnston generates a fine sense of anti-legendary irony in recalling how he spoke for about three hours on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* only to then drunkenly smash his jaw into a milepost (63).

While some states of mishap are self-induced, Johnston embraces the topsy-turvy world that results. Drinking Sappho Brand ouzo leads to waking with a hangover with the ‘half-twist of sexual origami’ (64). Sonnet six entertains a ‘Café of Situations’ where tables and their people are known through wildly illogical words or names rather than numbers. A coffee may therefore be for ‘Calendar.’ In such a café you can have ‘just that identity-in-place / you’ve been so long in quest of.’ Yet it is also a café where orders are ‘subtly misconstrued’ and delivered to ‘Broke or Loving or Drunk or wherever I happen to be’ (61). Referencing poets that he is translating or visiting friends within such sonnets generates an alternative world to that of aggression and possession.

A number of sonnets are elegies that have geographic specificity; ‘The Plato’s Cave Hotel’ is written to a family friend after Johnston discovered that the hotel in which he was staying was the site of the friend’s death. ‘For the Cretan Maker’ is dedicated to singer Nikos Xylouris. The title of the former sonnet references Plato’s view of representation as a cave of shadows while exploring how places are haunted by the ghosts of the past. With Xylouris in the latter sonnet being ‘Unmet, unknown’ (65), Johnston mourns a missed connection. The memorialisation of Xylouris as with Johnston’s mother is figured through both having a street named after them. The street-naming connects individual and communal place, while sitting oddly with Johnston’s scepticism of how the geography of Greece is being transformed by human development. The idea of transposing his grief into ‘some tawdry poem’ makes him feel bilious and instead any tears are hidden ‘behind the TLS’ (65). It is fitting that the *Times Literary Supplement* is a screen of cultural repression, a means for Johnston to return to the safer world of the intellect.² The epigraph cites Makriyannis, a nineteenth century Greek general who viewed the making of a song for a dead friend in the same way as he might make that friend a coffee, or after his death, a coffin: ‘Making him a song was an act of the same order, with no special cachet attached to the making itself’ (Johnston, ‘Songs of the Robbers’ 128). Yet the making of a song is no easy task for Johnston. The ‘honest poem’ would be ‘mainly white space’ that more accurately characterises the time spent not typing. He is critical of the “‘effortless” lyrical tropes’ that he once slaved over (‘In Transit’ 64).

The final sonnet of the square returns to Australia. Unlike the opening sonnet’s depiction of a ‘we’ as ‘shooting-gallery ducks,’ this poem is titled ‘On Aggression: Group Self-portrait as Greylag Goslings.’ It is dedicated to Laurie Duggan, John Forbes, Gig Ryan, John Tranter, and Johnston himself. The sonnet alludes to an increasing push to claim a place in Australian cultural history. Whereas Tranter uses the term ‘generation of 68’ in ‘Four Notes on the Practice of Revolution’ (1977), he would also edit the *New Australian Poetry* anthology (1979). These, as well as other publications, sought a decisive break from a predominantly British-Australian past tradition. Johnston cites ‘[o]ld favourite pin-up’ Emperor Julian Apostate, who was the last ruler of the Roman empire but also the leader of the first Christian dynasty. Yet Johnston represents the new generational emergence as a ‘waddle’ rather than ‘flight’ (65). In characterising his contemporaries as greylag goslings, he touches on Konrad Lorenz’s 1935 experiment (which had just been translated) where one group of hatchlings saw their actual mother and followed her around. Alternatively the second batch had Lorenz as the first figure they saw and formed an imprint or picture of him as the object they were to follow. Through this, Johnston suggests that history is something that we receive and follow; there is no ‘true’ mother or originality. Johnston applies this to poetic influence. Just as the title of *The New Australian Poetry* anthology could be viewed as derived from *The New American Poetry* anthology, the ‘American Model’ of influence would be reinforced by a conference and collection by the same name. As Johnston remarks in ‘Gradus Ad Parnassam’: ‘And the groovier modern Americans? They seem to be the context / that I’m supposed to work in,

though mostly I haven't read them' (16).³ Through his gosling trope, Johnston cheekily suggests that it might be a bit 'birdbrain' to declare a 'new' epoch in Australian poetry.

Johnston captures the simultaneous sense of displacement and familiarity in coming back to Australia through the phrase 'sling-stretch of the mind' (65). However, the final sonnet marks a sense of intimacy and homecoming with Johnston still importantly identifying himself as part of the gang or 'gaggle.' In Johnston's poem, the group of poets meet in a 'ruined beer garden,' at once proverbially Australian but also a setting already in decline. As he notes in his interview with Tranter, his Australia 'has very little to do with place, and a great deal to do with people' (254). This is reinforced by the end line of 'In Transit' which transforms the anti-Vietnam slogan, 'Make love, not war' into 'Make love, not imprintings' (65). Here, Johnston redirects activism from the civil square (having participated in anti-Vietnam demonstrations). He proposes instead a more personal activism as well as a poesis generated through friendship and love rather than through warlike revolution or imprinting. This love is one that might be errant, underground, and flawed but a preferred mode for political and aesthetic movement.

A reader of Johnston's 'To the Innate Island' manuscript that was submitted to Angus and Robertson in 1979 remarked that it lacked 'the still centre, the core of repose from which poetry springs' (Tranter, 'Introduction' xxii). This manuscript included poetry from across the period in which Johnston was working on 'In Transit.' Certainly, Johnston's poetry both thematically explores and enacts an almost hyper-mobility, shifting restlessly between sophistry, lyricism, and satire. Johnston's poetry is highly ambitious yet it also cycles through falling and loss. Gig Ryan argues that Johnston goes on to perfect the sonnet tradition of Donne, Empson, Nashe, Wyatt, and Dunbar in his late poems 'Grief' and 'The Battle of Trasimene,' not only in terms of the form itself but also in their 'fatalistic momentum.' She suggests that his final poems 'are a long distance from the insoluble floating abstractions and grandeur of the searching 'To the Innate Island' (n.p.). Ryan's views parallel those of Stefan's in viewing Johnston's poetry as a retreat from an extreme of experimentation. 'In Transit,' for Ryan, encompasses 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.' Ryan adds that these are fortunately 'extremely rare.' This essay argues that it is precisely this connection that drives Johnston's work and which is unwrit and countered by a prevailing sense of transnational displacement and unassimilable genealogy. 'In Transit' enacts a longing to square life and text, person and public, yet acknowledges that in order to do so aesthetically and culturally, it must remain forever on the fly.

NOTES

¹ While I have named 'Letter to Sylvia Plath,' cats tend to frequent Johnston's poetry.

² London features in the sonnet square as affectively and climatically cold. The Johnstons spent a year or so there. ³ It is somewhat ironic then that Brian Kim Stefans likens Johnston's retreat from an extreme of experimentation to John Ashbery's development after *The Tennis Court Oath*.

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