The Later Poetry of George Johnston

By W.J. Keith

The recent publication of *Endeared by Dark* (1990), George Johnston's collected poems, draws conspicuous attention to the unfortunate — one is tempted to say scandalous — neglect of his work in the last twenty years or so. This is not, I should state at once, the fault of his fellow poets, many of whom have written, both in prose and verse, appreciatively and perceptively about his work. These include writers as diverse as Margaret Atwood, Earle Birney, George Bowering, Elizabeth Brewster, D.G. Jones, Jay Macpherson, P.K. Page, and David Solway.[1] No, I am thinking of the critics (with the honorable exception of Harvey de Roo[2]) — and especially of the anthologists. A.J.M. Smith, usually quick off the mark in acknowledging new talent, did not include Johnston in his 1960 Oxford Book of Canadian Verse, although *The Cruising Auk* had appeared the year before and a number of his poems had already been published in magazines. (Smith was certainly aware of Johnston's verse by this time, and his parody-pastiche "Stanzas Written on First Looking into Johnston's *Auk*" duly appeared in his own *Collected Poems* in 1962. He later included only a very modest selection from Johnston in *Modern Canadian Verse* in 1967.) Smith was a highly influential anthologist and, given the tendency of the breed to be influenced by each other, his neglect of Johnston in 1960 may well have had additional repercussions. Johnston was not represented in any of the influential New Canadian Library anthologies, where he seems to have disappeared into the crack between Milton Wilson's *Poets of Mid-Century* and Eli Mandel's *Poets of Contemporary Canada*. Other anthologies in which he is absent — indeed, conspicuously absent — are Gary Geddes and Phyllis Bruce's *Fifteen Canadian Poets* (and its subsequent enlargements), Jack David and Robert Lecker's *Canadian Poetry* (1982), Donna Bennett and Russell Brown's *Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (1982-83), and Robert Lecker and Jack David's *New Canadian Anthology* (1988).

This is no place for a detailed inquiry into what seems close to a conspiracy of silence. It is not unreasonable to assume, however,

that the chief reasons for neglect were twofold: first, Johnston is generally regarded as a mainly humorous poet of domesticity, and so relatively unimportant; second, he customarily writes in traditional metrical forms and so can safely be dismissed as old-fashioned. Neither reason is ultimately acceptable or even accurate, though one can see how such impressions might have arisen from a too hasty perusal of *The Cruising Auk*. Such a judgement, whatever its merit, is based on incomplete evidence. No anthologist or critic seems to have taken full cognizance of the dramatic change in Johnston's poetic style from the new poems in *Happy Enough* (1972) onwards. Even the anthologists who have included him emphasize his early poetry. John Newlove in *Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era* (1977) comes off best by selecting two later poems out of seven, but Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman choose only one out of seven in *Literature in Canada* (1987), and Margaret Atwood in *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1982) prints no poem later in date than 1966. Clearly, a reconsideration is needed.

That a radical change came over Johnston's verse in the late 1960s becomes dramatically evident as we read through *Endeared by Dark*. The poem "Bedtime," though appearing in *Home Free* (1966), clearly belongs in style and subject-matter with Johnston's endearing albeit idiosyncratic poetic world introduced in *The Cruising Auk*. Here is the first stanza:

> Edna the dog is dead and so is Min;
> Mr. Smith's diet worked and now he's thin;
> Walter has left the park for his loving wife:
> Better warm than happy defines his life.[3]

This is the tone characteristically associated with Johnston: informal, dead-pan, kindly but often ironic — sometimes wickedly so. One should, however, revise that statement to read "associated with the early Johnston." If we turn over the page, we come to a poem entitled "Outdoors," which begins as follows:

> Everyone gone away
> feasting but Nora, Mark
> and me. Neither do we
> stay put. It is getting dark
>
> and on the horizon
> the haze is grape-coloured;
> an orange quarter moon,
> under-ripe and pallid

> lies in the murk down low;
> the field ends are haunted. . . . (134)

The difference in tone is remarkable. Visually, typographically, this change is parallelled by the dropping of capitalization at the beginning of verse-lines. In terms of convention, it can be recognized in the lack of correlation between the ends of stanzas and those of the sentences they contain. Technically, half-rhymes tend to take the place of full rhymes. Metrically, though a regular arrangement of syllables is still evident, accent becomes decidedly more conspicuous. Only when we consult the running heads or table of contents for *Endeared by Dark* does an explanation reveal itself. "Bedtime" is the last poem in *Home Free* (1966), while "Outdoors" is the opening poem of *Happy Enough* (1972). Something momentous has clearly happened to Johnston's poetry at about this time; the circumstances deserve investigation. Therefore, although I am an admirer of the early Johnston and have no wish to deflect attention from his early achievement, for the purposes of this article I wish to concentrate on the neglected Johnston of the later poems.

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In order to understand the principles underlying this later poetry, however, it will be necessary to take a paradoxical, circuitous course and look at Johnston's other literary activities, since these turn out to have a crucial influence on his poetic practice. Since 1950 Johnston had been teaching English at Carleton College (as it was then), where he specialized in Old English; in the year 1956-57 he spent a sabbatical leave in England where he embarked upon the serious study of Old Norse, which he subsequently taught from the 1960s onwards. This led to a new career as translator, resulting not only in the publication of English versions of *The Saga of Gisli* (1965), *The Faroe Islanders' Saga* (1975), and *The Greenlanders' Saga* (1976), but in the translating of poetry from related modern languages. He also visited Denmark in 1967-68, learnt Danish, and made the first of four visits to the Faroes at that time. In 1981 he published *Rocky Shores*, a collection of 82 poems translated from contemporary Faroese poets, and a further translation of Christian Matras's *Seeing and Remembering* appeared in 1988. He has also translated Olafur Johann Sigurdsson's *Pastor Bodvar's Letter* (1985) from modern Icelandic, and two works by Knut Ødegård from the Nynorsk (the second official language of Norway), one a selection, *Wind Over Romsdal* (1982), one a complete volume, *Bee-Buzz, Salmon Leap* (1988). Poems translated from the

Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish appeared in the special Johnston issue of *Malahat Review* (1987).

His interest in Old English had long alerted him to the alliterative and accentual system of verse that preceded rhyme and syllable counting in the beginnings of the English poetic tradition. But the translating of *The Saga of Gisli* forced Johnston to grapple with the extraordinarily elaborate *dróttkvætt* stanza to which many of the interspersed verse passages in the narrative conformed. Johnston himself provides an admirably succinct account of what is involved:

> This favourite stanza of the scalds was one of the most complex and artificial verse forms in European poetry. Its metric was of stresses and half-stresses combined with a strict syllable count; it held to a pattern of alliteration, internal half- and full-rhyme, and interlocked syntax, and its vocabulary was made up, largely, of a highly developed poetic diction.[4]

As he persevered with his translations, Johnston became increasingly convinced of the need, while avoiding distracting and unnecessary archaisms, to produce a close approximation to the effect in the original language. He therefore worked hard to recreate in his English versions as many of the metrical and alliterative elements as possible, and in the process learnt a great deal about the potentialities of rhythm and accent in modern English verse. As a result, he has published a number of articles over the years, as well as introductions and notes to his translations; these often contain remarks acknowledging the relevance of his experience as translator to his understanding of metrical possibilities and the technical discipline of verse. He has also written a number of more general essays devoted to various aspects of poetry that continually refer back to Old English and Old Norse (or Icelandic) examples.[5]

It may be helpful at this point to present a selection of these comments before proceeding to examine the resultant effects on Johnston's later poetry. In "On Translation — II," published in *Saga Book*, a journal of the Viking Society, in 1961, he wrote: "it is surprising how close to the Icelandic English can come without strain, and indeed contemporary English often seems to be given new life by the effort."[6] A decade later, in "Translating the Sagas into English," while discussing the difficulties of rendering the *dróttkvætt*stanza in English, he nonetheless remarked: "there was

greater pleasure and feeling of poetic achievement in composing them than in other forms that I tried."[7] But Johnston's most elaborate discussion of the subject occurs in the article appropriately titled "What Do the Scalds Tell Us?" He begins with a definition of artifice ("human skill as opposed to what is natural, . . . the making of anything by art, construction, workmanship") and asserts: "wherever artifice has appeared in English verse, . . . it has informed poetry of intense feeling and sweetness of tone" (1). The "artificial poetry of the scalds," he tells us, brought him to a proper appreciation of Milton's insistence on "passion and sensuality" in poetry (1). Later, he documents his increasing formal preoccupations:

> The sense had to realize itself in the form. What I have learned since, gradually — or, rather, learned over again — is that this is the most fruitful approach to the composing of my own poetry. I unlearned the dictum that the poem should find its own form. The poem finds its form more surely within a convention than not . . . . Another thing I relearned, since I had allowed myself to be somewhat talked out of it, is that formal demands are stimulating, rather than inhibiting to the imagination . . . (3)

Later still, before illustrating the impact of scaldic example on his own verse, he remarks: "More specifically I learned that the metres, syllable-counting, internal rhyme, and alliteration of the scalds are useful in modern English, in whose bone-structure Old Germanic characteristics remain" (6).[8]

* * *

The experience of recreating an accentual metric in modern verse is well illustrated by a comparison between the two Johnston extracts I quoted earlier. That Johnston has always been sensitive to the need for metrical and rhythmic variety is evident from "Bedtime." If we follow the procedures of traditional scansion, "Edna the dog is dead and so is Min" is standard iambic pentameter, with the initial trochaic substitution the only divergence from regularity. The fourth line, however, "Better warm than happy defines his life," almost totally dislocates the iambic norm. Only the fourth foot, "defines," is regular, since the first three are trochaic, and the context demands an extreme emphasis on "his" in the final foot. The result is a sense of colloquial immediacy that pleasantly interrupts the expectations that the stanza-form has suggested.

Despite this rhythmic variety, however, we find that the succeeding poem, "Outdoors," inhabits a radically different metrical world. A staccato effect is achieved from the start; the phrases are short, the pauses between them conspicuous. Line-endings are ignored grammatically (there is no end-of-line punctuation until line six), though the combination of rhyme and half-rhyme maintains an awareness of them even when the poem is recited. While the rhythm of "Bedtime" suggests an inevitable and continuous regularity, that of "Outdoors" has the opposite effect: "Neither do we / stay put." The sense implies restless movement, yet the thought-unit itself "stays put" with the sudden stop in mid-line. Further examination (of the "murder-to-dissect" variety) reveals some of the technical details that lie behind the effect: the internal half-rhyme ("-one gone") in the first line and the internal full rhyme in the third ("me . . . we"); the interlacing alliteration between lines two and three ("Nora, Mark . . . me . . . Neither"); the way the last word of line four rhymes characteristically with that of line two, but also the way the first word of the fourth line rhymes with the last word of the first ("away . . . stay"). Similarly, in the second stanza, we may notice how the word "haze" in line two chimes consonantally with "horizon" in the previous line but also assonantally with "grape." In line four, "under-ripe" qualifies "moon" grammatically, but in terms of sense invites reference back to "grape." "Coloured" and "pallid" are both half-rhymes and concept-rhymes ("pallid" suggesting colour). Johnston's control of sound and word is such that, in the third stanza, "murk" succeeds in establishing an echo back to its half-rhyme with "Mark" in the poem's second line. These effects, though occurring irregularly and without taking their place within any formal scheme, are surely related to — and clearly stimulated by — the technical dexterity required more rigidly in the *dróttkvætt* tradition.

It seems evident, then, that Johnston's forays into the literature and life of the Scandinavian peoples were immensely influential in changing the direction of his own verse. But this was not merely a matter of verbal display. At the most obvious level, his Scandinavian experience underlined and confirmed his sense of Canada's position as a northern people. As a poet writing in Ottawa, he had, of course, been well aware of this, as various wintry poems in *The Cruising Auk* and *Home Free* testify: "Ice at Last," "Light Literature" ("In the short sharp winter twilight" [34]), "The Siberian Olive Tree." But such subjects become commoner in the later writings: "Winter Man," "October Snow," "Back to the Ironbound Shore," "Frost" — and connect with poems geographically set in the lands of the saga-writers: "Faroese

Impressions," "With Nora on the Ferry from Suduroy to Torshavn," "The Ringerike Style." The last-named poem, celebrating a style of Scandinavian decorative art that favoured interlaced forms, "interlaced and scrolled" in Johnston's phrase (268), hints at a connection with the elaborate manipulation of interlocked vowels and consonants that characterizes Johnston's later poetry.

But the change is more than one of atmosphere, subject-matter, or even style; it profoundly affects the poet's attitude and his awareness of aspects of experience that need to and can be expressed in verse. *The Cruising Auk* concerns itself with family and community, sometimes movingly, as in "War on the Periphery" where the peace-loving speaker is uncomfortably aware of the presence of "The violent obedient ones / Guarding my family with guns" (23), more often humorously, with a wry detachment, depicting the various pairings and liaisons ironically, as if the participants were actors on a comic, almost farcical stage. In the later verse, Johnston further refines his emphasis on ordinary events in everyday life, but concentrates on the example of his own family and writes not only with personal reference but with immediacy, inner compassion and understanding. P.K. Page has summed up this development perfectly: "he is at his happiest writing about family and friends. (This sounds terrible. It isn't.)"[9] Once again, there are hints of this in his earlier verse — in the loving delicacy of "Cathleen Sweeping," for instance — but the development is fostered, I am convinced, by the experience of more isolated traditional communities with a greater sense of cohesiveness and solidity.

It seems appropriate at this stage in my argument to quote Johnston's translation of one of Christian Matras's poems, entitled "Far Off the Sea":

> Softly falls the night
> and children are in the field below the fences.
> They run for the haybarn door
> where shrunk boards leak
> sweetness into the dusk.
>
> Far off the sea whets his roar
> in the hushed night between the hills.[10]

The tone here is surely compatible with "Outdoors." "Far Off the Sea" is written, like most Faroese poetry, in what Johnston describes in his introduction as "middle-of-the-road modern," in

"the unrhymed, more or less unmeasured forms that we think of having come to English poetry through Ezra Pound" (ii). Johnston's translation, however, includes various notable aural effects (for example, "leak," assonantally connected with "sweetness" — and also, I am tempted to suggest, at least *quarter*-rhymed with "dusk"), effects similar to those he employs in his own later writing. But the subject-matter and the poet's approach to it are alike important. Johnston, growing up in T.S. Eliot's "years of *l'entre deux guerres*," entered a poetic world in revolt against the Georgians, and must have been taught, or at least urged, to mistrust the natural and the simple in poetry — the kind of attitude disseminated in Canada by A.J.M. Smith when he asserted that modern poets "have sought in man's own mental and social world for a subject matter they can no longer find in the beauty of nature — a beauty that seems either deceptive or irrelevant."[11] The realities of the world, so this argument runs, demanded a poetry of the city. For many parts of the world, this was indeed true, but it wasn't true for the Faroes, or for large stretches of rural and isolated Canada. Johnston, I suggest, who had always favoured straightforward human subjects, albeit at a generally detached and comic remove, learnt from the poets of the Faroes and Norway to write directly and unashamedly about simple domestic topics, about life still lived, in the contemporary world, close to the soil and the elements.

Johnston's later work, then, though indisputably an expression of his own personal vision, was nurtured by this out-of-the-mainstream modern verse to which his scholarly interests had relentlessly led him. Above all, he learnt to appreciate — and reproduce — a subtle delicacy of cadence and rhythm independent of Pound or Eliot or William Carlos Williams — let alone Black Mountain. Here, for instance, are the first two quatrains of the opening poem in his translation of Knut Ødegård's *Bee-Buzz, Salmon Leap*:

> Ringer tugs at the bell-pull,
> bells they tumble and swing.
> Small boy wades in the leaf-fall,
> and suddenly comes cool evening.
>
> Small boy goes in the orchard,
> apple-trees green no more.
> Ringer rings daylight darkward
> and homes to his night-dark door.[12]

When I first encountered this poem, I was so impressed by its Johnstonian characteristics that I wrote to ask him if he had deliberately translated the poem into his own style as a kind of mutual compliment. Johnston obligingly copied out the Nynorsk original for me, and it is clear that he has found different but equivalent sound-chimings in English for the verbal effects in the original. For example, the words "tugs" and "tumble" are alliterative substitutions for the half-rhyming "heng" and "svingar" in Ødegård's text; similarly, the half-rhyme of "skrell" and "kveld" is echoed in Johnston's unusual rhyme on an unstressed syllable in "swing" and "evening." Johnston comments politely: "Perhaps the rhyme drew out more of my personal style."[13] What has happened, I think, is that Johnston has not only found a congenial tradition of verse-writing in the work of such poets as Matras and Ødegård but has also felt the need to enrich the unfashionably simple and traditional subject-matter of his later poetry with the complicated artifice which he found in the ancient poems of the northern peoples.

"Back to the Ironbound Shore" (162-63) provides a convenient illustration. It recounts a journey back to a remote sea-girt settlement on a desolate coast. The location is never specified: while the landscape has a Scandinavian dourness, the names (Harris, Percy, etc.) are not Scandinavian. All that we can say is that the poem is definitely northern in flavour. This lack of explanation, initially frustrating, may ultimately be seen as appropriate; as we experience the poem, we participate, if only for a moment, in a private occasion that implies a more general application and significance.

The poem belongs, like Matras's, to "middle-of-the-road modern":

> We smell it
> coming back
>   years on, late in the year
>   and the day
>   sea fog among the branches;
> smell rock and tide,
> the drowning that climbs and falls away.

This is a verse we learn to negotiate with caution. Thus "late in the year" is an especially resonant phrase, strategically placed, challengingly yet effectively creating a curious relationship with the phrases on each side. The singular "year" surprises after "years on,"

and it is easy to stumble syntactically on the next phrase: "late in the year / and [late in] the day." The linguistic shoals can be deceptive — appropriately so. Is "sea fog among the branches" an appositional explanation of the otherwise unglossed "it" in the first line? And the last line of the stanza proves complex: "droning" is ominous, but how can the word be followed by "climbs and falls away"? On reflection, we realize that the motion of tide on rocky foreshore is intended. In working out the meaning, then, we must establish (or re-establish) our bearings, so enacting the primal meaning of this section of the poem. We are presented as "coming back" and must learn to re-read the signs and the local practices.

The verse is irregular, but traditional effects recur: occasional rhyme, quite frequent half-rhyme, assonance, alliteration, a fitful but insistent accentual beat. There are unusual words ("bodes," "lanch") and ordinary words in unusual contexts ("the boat / clambers into the swell," "the foghorn corners the dark," "the quick of the shore," "hollow light"), and a curious range of formal and informal speech ("Percy crippled up, / still out at the nets, though, him and young Paul," but "Occulting light"). The unexpected intricacy of the verse effects partly accentuates, partly disguises the slightness of the narrative action. The cold dark journey ends in the pleasures of reunion ("The door opens into warmth"), but this is immediately followed by the startling — because unanticipated — question: "What body do we take to judgement?" A visible answer is "Percy between his canes," an image combining pathos and grit, but the unspoken message is rendered unequivocally:

> dont stay away so long
> we may not be here next time.

The blend of celebration and mournful realization is masterly. We are not told who Percy is or where he lives, but we know all that we need to know: his endurance, his tough determination to live a hard life to the end. We are transported back not only to "the ironbound shore," whatever and wherever that may be, but to life at its most basic. The art, always evident but difficult to classify or pin down, subtly reinforces the movement and thrust of the poem as a whole. "Back to the Ironbound Shore," I would argue, could not have been written if Johnston had not made his own intellectual return journey to the ironbound shore of the saga-writers and the modern Scandinavian peoples.[14]

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Johnston's poetic practice, then, has been profoundly affected by his

knowledge of ancient northern languages — Old English and German as well as Icelandic. Poetic interest in the rhythms and metres of what used to be called "Anglo-Saxon" is not, of course, particularly unusual. Johnston himself cites, among others, the cases of Auden (one thinks especially of *The Age of Anxiety*) and, in Canada, Earle Birney ("Mappemounde," "Anglosaxon Street").[15] His own experiments in the use of a strictly alliterative accentual metre include "Ecstatic," "Boon," and (with variations) "Eastward." Characteristically, he makes the exercise more complicated by using the unalliterated fourth beat in the line as determinant for the alliteration in the following line — a practice not followed in a sustained way in the ancient texts. The opening lines of "Boon" exemplify his method:

> Heart-weary head   the humid morning
> moves with mounting   menace into day;
> dims the deep woods,   dulls the skyline. (266)

Such poems are an awesome demonstration of skill, yet they have a willed quality about them which is not, I think, to be found in his best work. The technique becomes over-conspicuous, and threatens to detract attention from what is being said. The poetic significance of his studies in these languages lies elsewhere.

In his essay "What Do the Scalds Tell Us?" Johnston quotes and discusses his poem "Age" as an example of his use of "Germanic metres" (7); he is alluding in this phrase to the classification of recurring metrical types advocated by Eduard Sievers in his *Altgermanische Metrik* (1893), a system frequently applied to Old English verse, and also to the *dróttkvætt* court-metre by Johnston and others. Superficially, "Age" appears to be a standard example of modern accentual-syllabic verse with its clear quatrain-divisions and standard use of end-rhymes. But Johnston has grafted on to these conventional elements of traditional English prosody the strongly accentual rhythms we associate with Old English or Old Norse or Old High German — even, in this instance and certain others, reproducing the formalized system of "Sievers types" within his poem.

It is important to realize what is involved here. Johnston has set himself an additional technical task in the belief that it will give his poem an added texture and tension. Readers are not expected to recognize what he is doing — they need not be able to distinguish, say, a Sievers A type from an E, or even be aware that such metrical discipline is being employed — but they will register a radically

different kind of rhythm from the smooth-flowing regular beat of most of the poems in *The Cruising Auk*. Ideally, he will have recovered some of the strength and sinew of the old scaldic metres without giving up the sense of pleasing regularity we derive from the poetic metres of the later English tradition.

I must begin by quoting "Age" in full:

> Peace, all but quite,
> Jeanne talking to her cat
> whose eyes are shut,
> tail tip stopped, all but.
>
> Pretend sleep
> on an uncertain lap
> with the familiar voice
> quoting cat sense.
>
> Age, that in its clutch
> bears the spinal itch,
> makes hind-quarters weak
> and stomach sick,
>
> also rounds the purr
> rounder than ever before,
> and brings pretend peace,
> peaceful almost as peace. (176)

The opening lines establish the simple, domestic subject of the poem which, at least on the surface, is a straightforward account of his wife and her cat. The short lines (varying from three to six syllables per line) demand a radical economy of statement, evident here in the rather curious phrase "all but quite" — a conflation, presumably, of "all but" and "not quite." Initially, it may seem a somewhat awkward, angular construction inadequately integrated into the flow of the poetic statement, a kind of syntactical stutter; but, as we read on, we notice that it draws attention to an important undertone in the poem. "All but" is itself repeated at the end of the first stanza; an equally unconventional phrase from the syntactical viewpoint, "Pretend sleep," opens the second stanza and is balanced by "pretend peace" in the penultimate line of the poem; moreover, the final line contains the important qualifying adverb "almost." The poem is preoccupied, we begin to realize, with a sense of incompleteness. Jeanne may be "talking to her cat," and the cat may recognize "the familiar voice / quoting cat sense," but full communication between the two is not possible. Even Jeanne's lap

is described as "uncertain," since the cat must be vaguely aware that it cannot always remain sitting there. Ultimately — and I inevitably damage the poem by brutally revealing its subtle indirections in prose statements that risk banality — "age" itself is acknowledged as chillingly close to death: "all but quite." Moreover, although the details of aging are presented in the cat's terms — "hind-quarters weak / and stomach sick" — we register a distinct sense of its broader, human application.

Johnston knows that his subject is universal but vulnerably commonplace — doubly so, in fact, since cats as pets can all too easily provoke a cuddly sentimentality, while the truth that time passes and maturity declines into the sere and yellow leaf has become a poetic cliché. Such widespread truths can be revivified only by an unusually skillful presentation. His solution is as neat as it is appropriate. The poem is traditional, "all but quite." The "Germanic metres," whether recognized or not, create an unexpected freshness. The conventional subject has thus been, in contemporary jargon, defamiliarized. The poem is, indeed, full of deft technical strokes that demonstrate an intellectual rigour not commonly evident in treatments of the subject that stress the cute or the falsely "poetic." A phrase like "tail tip stopped" is an instance, with the alliteration of "tail" and "tip" blending into the half-rhyme of "tip" and "stopped," an effect that recalls some of the technical effects of Gerard Manley Hopkins. One notices also the teasing paradox of the final line, "peaceful almost as peace," and the fact that the poem, significantly but unostentatiously, begins and ends with the word "peace." These are forceful illustrations of what Johnston means by the power of artifice; "Age" is not just a rendition of a universal truth but an achieved making. The appreciation of its art is at least as important — is, indeed, inseparable from — an understanding of its statement.

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Perhaps the extent of Johnston's most recent poetic subjects and interests can best be indicated by the divisions of the volume entitled *Ask Again* (1984): "Friends and Occasions"; "Marriages, Births, Deaths"; "Seasons and Metres." (It should be noted, however, that poems fitting into these categories are conspicuous in *Taking a Grip* [1979], and even before.) As his poetic career developed, Johnston found himself drawn more and more towards the "occasional," towards the writing of verse arising out of, or commissioned to celebrate, particular occasions. This kind of poetry has a long history behind it, ultimately going back to the bards and scalds; however, with the decline of public interest in

poetry in recent years, it is now a neglected, even an endangered sub-genre. It is typical of Johnston that he should have rediscovered it and employed it for some of his most characteristic and effective verse.

Many of these poems are, of course, written for and delivered at public occasions — his two Convocation addresses, or the poem recited at a conference at Trent University on the occasion of Gordon Roper's sixty-fifth birthday. But such poems need not be public statements. Many of them commemorate private events — Johnston's response to his friend Bob McRae's book on Leibniz, or even "Bob Takes a Grip," celebrating the successful cleaning out of a cesspool. And many exist halfway between private and public, like "A Marriage Poem for Andrew and Kate" celebrating the wedding of one of the Johnstons' sons and recreating the moment in which they received the letter announcing the marriage-plans. What links all these poems is the fact that they put the poet on his mettle and require him to demonstrate his artifice, his skill as a "maker." In many of them, indeed, he shows how highly ingenious technical dexterity can be — should be? — worn lightly. By this time, one feels, thanks to his thorough apprenticeship, Johnston can achieve whatever effect he wants in polished and appropriate verse.

The art of this poetry displays itself in various ways. In "A Marriage Poem for Andrew and Kate" it is evident in the colloquial ease through which the experience of surprise is conveyed by the subtle imitation of casual reference and conventional response. The speaker is relaying the contents of the letter to his wife:

> News, he says, first off. Kate and I
>   have decided to get married.
> Well, that is news! Good thing that we
>   are seated, so as not to be carried
>
> away, or knocked off balance, or what-
>   ever. One begins to need a chair
> for such news, and a pot
>   of tea, and air. (219)

The colloquial phrasing ("first off"), the most direct possible statement ("Kate and I / have decided to get married"), the simple but emphatic response that dictates the stress-pattern ("Well, that *is* news!"): all these lead in to the essentially comic account of their immediate reaction which conveys a sense of naturalness and spontaneity while being, one feels, at one and the same time determined and discovered by the exigencies of the verse-form.

"Married" duly suggests "carried," but what might otherwise be considered a forced rhyme is turned into a poetic asset by means of the witty line-breaks ("carried / away," "what- / ever"), and the exaggerated impression of elderly fuss, further stimulated by considerations of rhyme that lead to the domestic but endearing terms "chair," "pot / of tea," "air."

Similar effects are to be found in "To Bob McRae on Reading his Book: *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, and Thought*":

> Perception, apperception, thought,
>   in Leibniz: imagine
> bearing down on that lot
>   with a rhyming brain!
>
> Well, I bear down,
>   exulting no little
> over each dawn
>   of intellectual
>
> light that breaks over my earth
>   (a metaphor
> for what it's worth
>   I can make more). (221)

Here, of course, although the tone remains casual and conversational, the subject demands a greater emphasis on intellectual wit. The first line quoted, unpoetically abstract in itself, is taken up by the speaker as a poetic challenge, the problem of converting the philosophical topic into an occasion for verse itself becoming the actual subject-matter of the stanza. The self-imposed requirements of rhyme and half-rhyme enable Johnston to move from philosophical category to colloquial phrasing ("thought . . . that lot") with witty blatancy. At the same time, the alternative procedures of philosopher and poet are seen as essentially related, the next pair of rhymes culminating in "a rhyming brain" to show that poetry is a means of conveying something different from philosophical argument but still legitimately qualifying as "thought." This is demonstrated in the course of the next two stanzas where the poet's "metaphor" is deliberately introduced, "intellectual / light" being a considered gloss on "Perception, apperception." In both these poems, Johnston offers practical instances of his assertion, already quoted, that the sense "had to realize itself in the form" and his continuing insistence on the utility and satisfaction of submitting to the discipline of traditional metres and patterning.

There are aspects of Johnston's later technical experiments, however, that will seem extreme to some readers. Several of these poems, for example, are written as acrostics, a pleasant compliment to the person involved but without any extending poetic resonance. While one critic's dismissal of such poems as "a parlour-trick for the sight" may be a trifle extreme,[16] Johnston's own comment in his poem to George Bowering, "Acrostic is always a lark" (249), perhaps says as much as can be said and puts the matter in proper perspective.

Another effect is embedded in the opening lines of "For Gordon and Helen Roper":

> The Good Lord looked on
> Peterborough, that
> rivery city
> sixty-five years
> ago; right spot
> opined he, or perhaps
> she, for a Canadian
> bookworm . . . (195)

A careful scrutiny of these lines will reveal how the "literal" constituents that make up the names "Gordon" and "Roper" are contained within the sentence (e.g. "The *G*ood L*ord* looked *on*"); "Helen" is similarly concealed later in the poem. This verbal encoding is repeated several times in the course of the poem. It is an effect which, I must admit, I would never have noticed if Johnston himself had not revealed it to me (it also occurs in some of his other poems, including "Remembering Margaret" and "A Marriage Poem for Nora and Jamie"). Certainly, it is undetectable in oral delivery; those who were present on the occasion for which it was written (I was one of them) could not have been expected to recognize it. Indeed, few readers if any are likely to pick up the clues, even if the poem ends, as it did in *Taking a Grip*, with a hint, a reference to this

> love feast
> for Gordon and Helen
> whose love-linked names
> these rhymes have rhymed. (Taking a Grip 36)[17]

Such effects may well be more important to the poet, as a stimulant to poetic dexterity, than to the reader. Nonetheless, even if some of these displays seem, on consideration, gratuitous, "For Gordon and

Helen Roper" remains one of Johnston's most rhythmically satisfying productions. Metrically regular — lines vary from three to seven syllables in length[18] — each line (or pair of lines) will be found to contain either alliteration or assonantal patterning. Repeated words and sounds create an impression of openness and flexibility. What is especially remarkable is its smooth-flowing conversational ease that maintains itself alongside an obvious (though not readily identifiable) technical artifice.

A final example. "Farewell to Teaching," where Johnston employs a system of strictly syllabic verse, begins:

> Knowing what I now know
> would I have consented
> to be born? Next question.
> When it comes time to go
> will I go forlorn or
> contented? Ask again. (223)

Once again we notice the elaborate effects of related sound. In the first line, "know" echoes "Knowing" and establishes a half-rhyme with "now." "Consented" in the second line rhymes internally with "contented" in the sixth, just as "forlorn" in the fifth line harks back to "born" in the third. Then there is the syntactical balancing of the two triplets of lines, the assonance that binds "Next question" together, and the similar vowel-alliteration of "Ask again." To list such technical details risks tedium, but it is important that we realize, even to a limited extent, how our pleasure at the smoothness of the verse is achieved.

Johnston, it seems clear, has resuscitated the qualities of the ancient bards and scalds who took pride in their mastery of verse techniques and performed a function in predominantly oral societies by embodying and displaying the resonant power of words. In going back to the old methods, he has paradoxically injected a potentially revivifying freshness into the making of contemporary verse. At a time when the discipline, the sheer hard work, of verse-making is distressingly underestimated, the importance of his contribution to modern Canadian poetry is incalculable; however belatedly, it should be recognized.[19]

Notes

1. See Margaret Atwood, "Apocalyptic Squawk from a Splendid

Auk," in her *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982) 27-29; Earle Birney, "For George Johnston" (poem), *Malahat Review* 78 (March 1987) 147; George Bowering, "Grace Requires Age" (poem), in his *Delayed Mercy* (Toronto: Coach House, 1986) 100; Elizabeth Brewster, "George Johnston's Poems: Letters to a Friend," *Malahat Review* 78 (March 1987) 136-46; D.G. Jones, "George Johnston," *Canadian Literature* 59 (Winter 1974) 81-87; Jay Macpherson, "GJ at Victoria from *Acta* to *Auk*," *Malahat Review* 78 (March 1987) 52-56; P.K. Page, "Remembering George Johnston Reading" (poem), in her *The Glass Air* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1985) 156, and "Notes on Re-Reading George Johnston," *Malahat Review* 78 (March 1987) 67-72; David Solway, "For George Johnston" (poem), in his *The Road to Arginos* (Lasalle, Québec: New Delta 1976) 39. [back]

2. Harvey de Roo, "*Happy Enough*: The Poetry of George Johnston," *Malahat Review* 78 (March 1987) 106-31. [back]

3. George Johnston, *Endeared by Dark: The Collected Poems* (Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 1990) 133. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Johnston's poetry will be to this edition, with page-references in text. [back]

4. George Johnston, "What Do the Scalds Tell Us?" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 52 (Fall 1982) 1. Subsequent page-references in text. [back]

5. Besides articles cited elsewhere in this essay, these include "Rhythm: a few general observations," *Journal of Canadian Poetry* 3.2 (1981) 5-13, and "Diction in Poetry," *Canadian Literature* 97 (Summer 1983) 39-44. See also Laurence Hutchman, "An Interview with George Johnston," *Zymergy* 5.2 (Autumn 1991) 45-57. [back]

6. George Johnston, "On Translation — II," *Saga Book* 15.4 (1961) 395. [back]

7. George Johnston, "On Translating the Sagas into English," *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies 1972* (Copenhagen: Royal Library, 1973) 15. [back]

8. I should make clear at this point that George Johnston is not the only modern Canadian poet to be concerned with metrical

niceties. Others include writers as diverse as Jay Macpherson, David Solway, Peter Stevens, Christopher Wiseman, etc.; indeed, a much longer list could easily be compiled. In fact, the predominance of "free verse" in twentieth-century poetry in English — both in Canada and elsewhere — has been much exaggerated. However, Johnston represents a special case, since he is the poet most clearly influenced by a professional interest in the early languages that helped to mould the traditional English poetic line. [back]

9. Page, "Notes on Re-Reading George Johnston" 67. [back]

10. George Johnston, compiler and translator, *Rocky Shores: An Anthology of Faroese Poetry* (Paisley, Scotland: Wilfion Books, 1981) 14. Subsequent page-reference in text. Johnston's translation of this poem first appeared in *Tamarack Review* 65 (March 1975). [back]

11. A.J.M. Smith, Introduction to *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943), rpt. in his *On Poetry and Poets* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977) 41. [back]

12. Knut Ødegård, *Bee-Buzz, Salmon Leap*, translated by George Johnston (Moonbeam, ON: Penumbra Press, 1988) 9. [back]

13. Letter, George Johnston to myself, 7 February 1989. [back]

14. Ironbound, Johnston informs me, is an island off the coast of Nova Scotia, where Johnston spent a summer in 1938 and revisited in 1971 (letter, Johnston to myself, 10 July 1991). This explains the circumstances but does not, I think, seriously affect my argument. The return trip occurred three years after Johnston's visit to Denmark and the Faroes. [back]

15. See, for example, "What Do the Scalds Tell Us?" 7. [back]

16. Catherine Ing, *Elizabethan Lyrics* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951) 88. [back]

17. The final verse-paragraph containing these lines was unfortunately omitted from the text of *Endeared by Dark*. That this was an oversight rather than a revision is confirmed in a letter from Johnston to myself, 10 July 1991. [back]

18. In the *Endeared by Dark* text, two lines have been printed

together on p. 197, creating a nine-syllable line. This is an error confirmed by Johnston in his letter to me, 10 July 1991. [back]

19. In the writing of this article I have been deeply indebted to George Johnston for generously and patiently responding to queries, and to my colleague Professor Roberta Frank for advice and counsel on matters relating to Old English and Old Norse. [back]