

THE CRUISING AUK AND THE WORLD BELOW

Lawrence W. Jones

GORGE JOHNSTON is surely an anomaly among the present generation of Canadian poets. His work defies classification, refuses to fit any of the dominant patterns such as that of metaphysical exploration (as exemplified by Margaret Avison) or that of verbal and intellectual subtlety (as exemplified by Stanley Cooperman), yet in its own curious way it is every bit as effective. It is also, for the most part, a more truly "Canadian" poetry than that of his contemporaries in the images it evokes and the way of life it describes (a fact which must please Mr. Johnston's militantly pro-Canadian colleagues at Carleton University).

Although much of *The Cruising Auk* (1959) and *Home Free* (1966) is about the city of Ottawa and its people, George Johnston consistently finds elements in our country's capital (as does Raymond Souster in Ontario's capital) which are symptomatic of some confusing, often sickening tendencies in urban life. It is this which places his work outside the pale of the merely "regional". Evidence of this is perhaps the very popularity of *The Cruising Auk*, which, for a collection of poetry, has sold rather widely across Canada and is presently going into its seventh printing.

However, for those of us who know George Johnston it is perhaps difficult to square away his incisive poetic comments, his function as a cultural seismograph, with the man himself. For he is both a scholar of some repute (his translation of the Old Norse *Saga of Gísli* was published by the University of Toronto Press in 1963) and a Quaker whose views on pacifism are both well-known and well-

exemplified by his life. The scholarship would seem inimical to the folksy charm exuded by his lyrics (although not to the starched black humour which underlies them); the pacifism, although it appears in many of his poems ("Under the Tree" in *Home Free* is the best example, "War on the Periphery" and "The Hero's Kitchen" in *The Cruising Auk* being others), would seem out of keeping with his unrelenting attack upon certain types of people. But Johnston manages to avoid either unsophistication or blatant indictment by a technique most often used in fiction — that of the microcosm.

The world he portrays, taken *in toto*, is a self-enclosed one. The people who populate it and the actions which take place in it are *reflections* of the real world, as though the poet were making his observations from the surface of a pool, which means that things are often grossly distorted, grotesque, absurd. Like the goldfish in "Life from a Goldfish Bowl", the poet himself "notes the goings-on with goggle face/ Of all the world around about in air", and draws for us a serio-comic picture of its insanities. I would like to look briefly at this microcosmic world Johnston details, at the almost Swiftian satire which arises from his portrayal (which has its undercurrent of serious commentary) and finally at the peculiar style the poet employs in order to frame his lyrical pictures.

The first striking thing I notice about Johnston's world is the presence in it of a great number of weird people. Their names are chosen with Dickensian care: Mr. Goom, Mr. Boom, Mrs. McGonigle, Mr. Murple, Miss Decharmes, Mr. Byer, Dr. Gay, Joad — the list seems endless. And most of them seem to be less individuals than personifications of traits which belong to identifiable groups in our society: middle-class businessmen, spinsters in their second childhood, giggling young things, bachelors who seem to be eternally out "on the town". In "Escape", for example, we hear of a belated affair between the conscience-stricken Mr. Smith and the vulture-like widow Mrs. McGonigle:

Fleeing from Mrs. McGonigle, Mr. Smith
Took refuge in a public telephone booth
Whence he rang, as he always did, forthwith,
The gospel tabernacle, home of Truth.

Mrs. McGonigle meanwhile searched the streets
Asking herself as she did so why she did.
His life with her she knew was a nest of sweets
From which he beat it, now and again, and hid.

The poet, tongue-in-cheek, sums up the situation neatly:

Truly a man is never lonely here
And least of all at the moment of wild escape
In the telephone booth, a moment of bliss and fear
Between this world and the next, between fire and rape.

The last line of this poem is evidence of a technique George Johnston constantly uses in evoking his microcosmic world — the inflation or elevation of the inconsequential and seemingly ordinary. The denizens of his world become mock heroes and heroines. In “Fun” we clearly see a parallel with the story of Snow White; Elaine “sleeps in her maiden bed” while across the street the seven boarders dream about her. In “Music on the Water” a modern-day Cleopatra

comes in her little boat
When the air is warm on the smoky river, afloat,
Making her presence felt in her flickering oars:
A journeying wound between the fragile shores.
Nights of splendour she’s been to splendid men,
Swallowed them whole and spit them up again,
After which they’ve forgotten her perhaps —
As though she might have remembered them, poor chaps.

Rather than an Egyptian lullaby, the song she sings is a “Pentecostal hymn.”

According to which Earth’s glories are rather dim
Whereas the rewards of the just are very bright;
Low kind of song, but it serves her turn all right.

Some of the poems’ titles even reflect this mock-heroic dimension. In “Queens and Duchesses” the subject is the promiscuous life of one Miss Belaney who “doesn’t remember who kissed her last/ But he did it good, all right” but around whose head shines a “haze of gold”. If Miss Belaney’s pleasures make her a queenly sinner, Mr. Boom is “A Saint” because

his sufferings
Put him in the know of things,
Teach him what is what and what
In spiritual things is not.
And when he looks upon us all
His heart contracts into a ball
Which is the perfect form of grief;
Its perfectness provides relief.

In these cases and so many others we are confronted with recognizable character-types whose attitudes toward life are satirized, never directly condemned.

The activities in which these delightful people engage, although utterly human, even mundane, are also blown out of proportion. In "Art and Life" the poet describes the artistic ablutions of Sadie McGonigle who has

spent the afternoon with suds and water
And creams and mud; her lines and points are put
And every inch is tender to the view —
Elegant work of art and artist too.

but who has dressed up only to be undressed:

Sweet love, that takes a master piece like this
And rumples it and tumbles it about,
Why can he not be happy with a kiss?
He turns the shimmering object inside out
And all for life, that's enemy to art.
Now where's your treasure, little scented heart?

Again, in "Mail-Order Catalogue" the comprehensiveness and unfailing regularity of the contents cause the poet to remark that

In spring and fall, when serious young men
Comfort themselves that all that lives must die,
Tax and the teeming catalogue again
Come round, and give mortality the lie.

The same kind of satire can be seen in "Mrs. McGonigle on Decorum," "Home Again" and "Dust," and it brings to mind the sardonic humor with which James Thurber always viewed domestic life.

SIGNIFICANTLY, much of the activity so satirized throughout Johnston's poetry is city-related. For, as I mentioned earlier, the city is really the cosmic entity which the poetry reflects. Occasionally this is obvious, as in "The Alderman's Day in the City" and "Love of the City". In the former the fairy-tale pattern of the poem almost, but not quite, covers up the fact that this lazy city official is lining his pockets at the city's expense:

Up at his desk the alderman
Wags with his tar-warm feet;

THE CRUISING AUK

He puts his boots in the city
Whose own back yard is sweet.

In the latter the poet makes a more general comment about the artificiality and the suffocating nature of urban life. In this city that has “moved us in”,

The yellow sky comes down and fills the room;
Dirt on the floor is kind, the walls are kind,
Everyone’s kind to us wherever we go.

And the poet asks the rhetorical question:

. . . truly when death comes where will he find
A better room than here, better arrangements,
More courtesy, more eager friendliness
Than in this excellent street-scattered city,
This home, this network, this great roof of pity?

Clearly, there is a serious side to all of this Thurber-like lighthearted satire. There is always a meaningful comment made by effective satire or parody, and it seems to me that George Johnston is very concerned about the passivity of people in the urban *milieu*, about the non-committal nature of people’s lives in the city. There is a general feeling of helplessness conveyed in Johnston’s descriptions of his McGonigles and Murples, a feeling which comes across openly only infrequently, as it does in “Flight,” where the poet watches a crow taking off from one barren tree in search of another:

Caw! he cries, as though he knew
Something worth his while to do
In an empty tree elsewhere;
Flap! he takes his blackness there.

Me too! I would like to fly
Somewhere else beneath the sky,
Happy though my choice may be
Empty tree for empty tree.

Much the same feeling is articulated in the final stanza of “In It”, where the poet declares:

The world is a pond and I’m in it,
In it up to my neck;
Important people are in it too,
It’s deeper than this, if we only knew;

Under we go, any minute —
A swirl, some bubbles, a fleck. . . .

The submission to the “destructive element” which is implied here may come in the form of routine drudgery which holds us captive in the city’s grasp. This is the problem with “The Queen of Lop” who

works all day at a big machine that lops and lops and lops;
At five o’clock she does her face and the big machine it stops;
Home again on a public bus she goes to her little flat,
Cooks a chop and forgets the lop and the wash-up and all that.

Even in her dreams, as the poet tells us later in the poem, when she tries to find some vicarious excitement in “a boat on the ocean dark and queer” she finds that “the big machine is aboard the boat” — there is no escape. Not only is there this routine of the work-a-day world, but there is the smug complacency of the settled routine of marriage, as we see in “Domestic”:

A man should build himself a house and put himself inside
And fill it full of furniture, and get himself a bride
To fill it full of cooking smells and pickle smells and wit
And all in pleasure breed it full and make a nest of it.

The repetition of “full” here only serves to emphasize the emptiness of the way of life being described. Likewise, the mock-heroic nature of Johnston’s people serves to point up the unheroic, unchallenging nature of their lives, which is perhaps the whole point of the satire.

In any case, if this reading of much of *The Cruising Auk* is correct, we might ask whether the poet suggests any alternative to the frothy existence he portrays. While it is not the poet’s function to offer solutions to society’s problems (indeed, poets are notoriously bad at that), I think George Johnston suggests at least one possibility: that we need to consciously seek our *own* freedom from slavish routine, perhaps by the use of our imagination. In “This Way Down” the poet admits that “my roof is wide to Heaven” and asks the vital question: “Why am I not then airborne?” This is where the cruising auk of the title poem comes in. The bird is simply a symbol of the imagination which has freed itself; his virtue is that he *is* airborne, and this is why we must “rejoice in him, cruising there”. We must strive to extricate ourselves from the life which the bird sees as he looks down upon us:

Our unheroic mornings, afternoons
Disconsolate in the echo-laden air —

To change this life, the poet seems to be saying (as does Raymond Souster in “Good Fortune” in *The Colour of the Times*) we must take charge of our own lives rather than waiting passively for something to happen. This much is clear, I think, in the final poem in *The Cruising Auk*, “O Earth, Turn!” which I quote here in its entirety:

The little blessed Earth that turns
Does so on its own concerns
As though it weren't my home at all;
It turns me winter, summer, fall
Without a thought of me.

I love the slightly flattened sphere,
Its restless, wrinkled crust's my here,
Its slightly wobbling spin's my now
But not my why and not my how:
My why and how are me.

WAYS IN WHICH we may exercise our whys and hows are suggested in some of the more serious lyrics in *Home Free* (a book which has unaccountably not lived up to the promise or popularity of its predecessor). In the stylistically-superb “Under the Tree,” for example, we are exhorted to recognize our complicity with the judge and the rest of society when a man is condemned to hang. “We hardly know each other,” says the poet, “But here we meet, under the hanging tree.” In subsequent sections of the poem various individuals and groups are described — the judge himself, religious people, the condemned man's relatives and friends — and we can see how each of them avoids having to *think* about capital punishment. The religious folk justify the hanging by soliciting the will of God, by placing their emphasis upon the “mean and casual” murder itself and not upon what led up to it; the man's aunt and his erstwhile cronies drown any serious considerations in small talk, in “notions soaked in beer.” Finally, the poet says, we must consider the paradox that although the Earth is the “pit whence we were dug” it is also by necessity “the garden in which we grope/ For love.”

In the book's title poem, "Home Free", Edward is given a chance to break the bonds of a deadening life, but refuses to take the chance:

Edward sweats for a fortnight, the salt is in his shoes.
 Who knows about angels until he hears the news?
 Who knows about gardens until he smells the pit?
 Edward is holding a pass, and he's afraid of it.

What Edward cannot understand is that the world is a garden only if you make it so in spite of the ugliness; in "Love in High Places" he prays that

in Canada there must be
 Somewhere
 Surely a pleasant, sheltered garden,
 Green and fair,
 Maybe even way down in the city
 In its own air,
 Where there would not be births or dreadful pain,
 And fun
 Would have no exquisite hook inside it;

Edward does not feel himself part of what the poet calls elsewhere (in "The Creature's Claim") the "creatureliness of Earth", and so in the final poem in *Home Free* we find him "asleep where brown stalks fuss and wave/ And a squirrel has planted oaks beside his grave."

Although the poetry of *Home Free* is not generally as effective as that of *The Cruising Auk* — Johnston seems much more at home when dealing with his little microcosmic world of Murples — all of the poetry is consistent in style. Unlike other Canadian poets, Johnston eschews experimentation with rhyme and phraseology. But the very presence of rhyme and regular metre gives emphasis to the routine he often describes. Occasionally he resorts to couplets, as in "A Little Light" in *The Cruising Auk*; but most common is the rhyme scheme a-b-a-b and its variations, which is apt for what Johnston has to convey. Where the poet is most inventive (and here his vast knowledge of the history of the language is useful) is in the matter of diction. He is fond of creating words to match sounds — as seen in the "kechunk" of anchored boats in "Poor Edward" or the "kaplink" of falling hairpins in "Dust," and of simply creating words to fill his lyrical needs: "gogglesful" in "Elaine in a Bikini" and "emplaned" in "Dust". Often, slang is used to give a clearer idea of the level of life being described:

“neither I suppose I ain’t” (“A Saint”), “no dice” (“Domestic”) and “shot down” (“On the Porch”) are examples.

I began by saying that George Johnston is an anomaly among Canadian poets. But as I have tried to point out, his is a unique kind of poetry with its own values, with its own valid statement to make. Taken together, the poems of *The Cruising Auk* remind us of the urban dilemma we are faced with and with which we must cope. The symbolic people and events in George Johnston’s little world shed light on their counterparts in our real world. And we are forced to ask ourselves, as we watch the auk cruising overhead: “Why am *I* not then airborne?”

Men Who Helped Make Canada

MACNAB OF DUNDURN

by *Marion MacRae*

illustrated/\$12.50

Sir Allan MacNab was an influential member of the government of Upper Canada and joint premier from 1854 to 1856. He will also go down in history as the man who built Dundurn Castle in Hamilton, Ontario. Around the character of this man and his famous house Marion MacRae, author of *The Ancestral Roof*, has constructed a fascinating architectural detective story. Photographs, line drawings, floor plans, maps.

THE PAPER TYRANT

John Ross Robertson of *The Toronto Telegram*

by *Ron Poulton*

illustrated/\$6.50

A well-known columnist’s objective yet sympathetic delineation of the complex founder of the powerful Toronto newspaper which began as *The Evening Telegraph*. A man of many and varied interests, John Ross Robertson donated a large part of his personal fortune to the internationally-known Hospital for Sick Children. He was also interested in freemasonry and Canadiana; and he was known as the Father of Amateur Hockey in Canada.

NOT A ONE-WAY STREET

The Autobiography of James S. Duncan

illustrated/\$9.25

In a book that reads like the Who’s Who of the business world, the man who helped steer the world-wide Massey-Harris Company through two wars and three Depressions tells the absorbing story of his life. Jim Duncan was the friend, business associate and confidant of important men from Canada and the U.S.A. to England, Russia and Australia; yet today he remains as forth-right and bluntly honest as when he began his career in 1910.

from **CLARKE, IRWIN & COMPANY LIMITED**

791 St. Clair Avenue West, Toronto 10, Ontario
