

A Point of Compass, A Turn of Mind: Alan Johnston and the Wittgenstein House Murdo Macdonald

"The kind of thing I'm talking about in paint is not sensuality, it's sensibility."

Underpinning Alan Johnston's involvement with the Wittgenstein House is his understanding of Scottish intellectual culture. His grasp of the significance of the Enlightenment and after for Scotland would put many contemporary philosophers to shame, but it provides Johnston with an intriguing and relevant set of starting points for a visual exploration of this place. The major contribution to Viennese culture made by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald in the years around 1900 is well known, but for Johnston a more profound link between Scotland and Vienna lies in the ideas of the pioneering anthropologists William Robertson Smith and James Frazer, which Sigmund Freud considered at length in *Totem and Taboo*. (This work of Freud on the fundamentals of human society was published in 1913, just as Wittgenstein was getting his teeth into another question of first principles, the elements of logic.) Later Wittgenstein was to enter the conversation himself to illuminate the limitations of Frazer's scientism in his *Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough"*. As Wittgenstein says, "Frazer's account of the magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as *mistakes*". This aspect of Frazer is a conceptual flaw through which Wittgenstein casts light on the ideology of the dominant "scientific" tradition of twentieth-century thought in all its devastating glory; Frazer denies the truth of that which he loves because it does not conform to his stereotype of knowledge and yet, with the lived-paradox typical of the Scotch intellect, through the comprehensive nature of his work makes it possible for others to come after and restore that truth. Johnston's understanding of this cultural landscape makes his art appropriate to this place made by Wittgenstein.

But however appropriate to this Viennese setting, Johnston's way of thinking leads one north. He seems to journey with Neil Gunn up the strath and out onto the moorland of heather and bog-cotton and the coming of winter. He quotes Wallace Stevens: "For the listener who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself beholds / Nothing that is not there and nothing that is". Thus his work is seen to be made in the northern manner, just as a border ballad may be recognised as Scottish because of a single word which tells you how to sing it; that tells you as Hamish Henderson has pointed out - that it must be sung more borealis. Like such a ballad the clarity of Johnston's work tugs one north. But this "North" - a point of the compass, a turn of mind - takes its essence from its acknowledgement not just of a Classical inheritance from southern Europe, both aesthetically and philosophically (transmuted, not least, in the post-alchemical fires of the Scottish Enlightenment) but draws equally on a global sense which leads both East and West to Japan.

There is in Alan Johnston's work a sense of both the immediate and the universal. In the Wittgenstein House immediacy is in the mark on the canvas which resonates like the ripple of a single stone dropped into a river. The spiritual meets the ecological here and

conversation with the artist it is no surprise to discover that: "The first time I went to America, almost the first thing I did was to go and stand on the ice of Walden pond. "And, further, that this intentional spiritual linkage has been balanced by coincidence; "When I was doing a wall-drawing for Charles Carpenter in New Canaan, he placed me in a bedroom which was full of Shaker furniture. I had just started the wall-drawing and that evening I went to bed and stuck my hand down between the bed and book cupboard and pulled out a book of selected writings of Lafcadio Hearn. The first story was "The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hoichi", and this story relates to the Sutra which illustrates the emptiness of forms. "Hearn comments in a footnote: " Apropos of the magical use of text, as described in this story, it is worth remarking that the subject of the Sutra(Hannya-Shin-Kyō or Pragna-Paramita-Hridaya)is the doctrine of the Emptiness of Forms-that is to say of the unreal character of all phenomena and all noumena...*Form is emptiness; and emptiness is form. Emptiness is not different from form; form is not different from emptiness. What is form-that is emptiness. What is emptiness-that is form..Perception,name,concept,and knowledge, are also emptiness...There is no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. But when the envelopment of consciousness has been annihilated, then he(the seeker) becomes free from all fear, and beyond the reach of change, enjoying final Nirvana.*" For Johnston this passage from Hearn expresses something essential to his act of drawing: " There's a certain aspect of the language that I use, a linear tonal ambivalence. The line at some point of focus disappears into tone and at another point the line is against the void. A constant playing with definition of a formal thing.....and of course that takes me right from Japanese Zen to George Elder Davie writing about tactile geometry."

In a statement resonant with end of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Jorge Luis Borges wrote

"To reach it a ladder has to be set up. There is no stair. What can we be looking for in the attic but the accumulation of disorder ?"

What we are looking for is one thing. What we find is another. We might like Goethe, find ourselves in a southern land where the lemon trees grow. Or we might find hyperborea, beyond but within the northern snows as, perhaps, does Johnston.