

**A Paper given at the John James Conference in Cambridge,  
11<sup>th</sup> March 2017**

In his introduction to the 2010 *Salt Companion to John James* Simon Perril, referred to a ‘politics of poise’ existing in James’s poetry and to my mind this relates to the poet’s wry sense of transience and his concern for the particularity of the moment. The artist Peter Cartwright’s contribution to that book was titled ‘art is a balm to the brain / & gives a certain resolution’ and his field of observation was ‘The impact of, and engagement with, the visual arts in John James’ writing’. In particular Cartwright noted how throughout John James’ oeuvre there appeared to be a constant interaction between the poet’s full awareness of what he saw and the ensuing fluidity of these perceptions as they then appeared in his poems.

John James came across the work of Peter Cartwright at the ‘Survey ’67’ exhibition of ‘Abstract Painters’ which he and Andrew Crozier had visited at Camden Arts Centre as it opened and it was there that he also came across the catalogue which included Cartwright’s own comments upon his art:

I am concerned with growth, movement and tension. Certain work is influenced not directly by, but by reaction to, natural forms and structures...I am aiming to establish a reality which will exist independently from myself. My intention is to make a vital tension between forms, to induce speculation, to create a relationship which is a synthesis between the formal and the unpredictable. Any references in my work are oblique and are references to mood.

That last statement was to weave its way into James’s poem ‘Waiting’ which was to appear in *The Small Henderson Room* published by Crozier’s Ferry Press in 1969. The fifth section of the poem opens

In a new blue room I rearrange  
the mantelpiece, opening on it  
the catalogue of the Survey ’67 Exhibition at Peter Cartwright’s  
*Three*. Those anonymous forms wait, shakily  
menacing to change shape, making  
a new & unpredictable arrangement  
of themselves.

It was after seeing Cartwright's work in the Camden gallery that James asked the artist to produce a cover for the Ferry Press volume and Cartwright later wrote about his pleasant surprise at seeing his own catalogue statement appearing in the poem prompting him to say a few words about 'Waiting':

The poem moves through events and situations, producing the sensation of a shifting range of experience. It reveals in John's work an integration of allusions to art, to living encounters and to language and the centrality of a range of phenomena in which the aesthetic experience is a potent and even a fundamentally social element... Two effects strike me as running through his poetry, in the form of an interaction of a consciousness of the visual with an acute flow of perceptions. I am aware in John's poetry of a constant perceptive response to the tactile, to the nature of light, of physical presence and one's own physical transience.

In his contribution to the Salt volume Cartwright had also referred to the particular nature of the Ferry Press book cover:

*The Small Henderson Room* was the last of the covers I made, and was designed with more concern for the curious and oblique relationship the cover would have to the work within. Did I receive a copy of the poems before designing the cover? At this distance I'm not sure but I think not. The cover was designed as an entity but with some intuitive response to the words 'The Small Henderson Room'. The cover-work, a formal abstract image, was a response to the unknown nature of that 'room'. My intention was to create a spatial ambiguity, tension and even a sense of unease.

The illustration may well have been the last of the covers that Cartwright made but it was only by a month or two since he had also produced the cover for the last issue of the magazine *The Resuscitator* that John James and Nick Wayte had begun in Bristol in 1963. The last issue of that magazine appeared in February 1969 and Cartwright commented upon the way he had designed the cover and pointed to the image of 'a stark black formality on a white ground' with the 'embossed whiteness of the title' which 'meant that no text was immediately visible. THE LAST RESUSCITATOR – the title's ambiguity

chimed with the need to physically tilt the book to decipher it'. Of course the same is true of the Ferry Press book and both suggest perhaps something about the act of reading: words are not simply and automatically visible, they need to be tilted to reveal what lies below the immediate surface.

The opening poem in *The Small Henderson Room* presents us with a world in which 'we are aware of ourselves as persons with a / particular history'. The poem had originally appeared the year before the Ferry Press publication in *2R2, (Resuscitator Second Series, August 1968)* and it opens on the move:

& so I open myself again as we wheel  
down over Crickley, chivalrously high on our seats  
you see across the gleaming generous screen  
right to the Severn Valley, tawny with the broad  
spread of distant grain, & beyond  
    is where I'm going, where the mountains  
put up their profiles & in the moister  
air of that higher altitude, the woods and valleys  
will be deeply soft & made greenly  
vivacious again

When the poem appeared in the following year's Ferry Press collection the presentation of those opening lines had changed somewhat, perhaps to emphasise the urgency of a sense of movement, and the second draft of the poem is what was to appear much later in 2002 in the *Salt Collected Poems*. In *The Small Henderson Room* the opening line starts now much further towards the right-hand margin and is heralded by three dots as if to suggest the continuance of a line of thought. Both the second and the fourth lines are closer to the left-hand margin giving the impression that the main body of the poem is indented. These small details are perhaps part of what Cartwright was referring to when he suggested that James's poetry presented an interaction between a conscious awareness of the visual and an acute flow of perceptions:

    ...or as we wheel  
down over Crickleigh, chivalrously high on our seats  
    you see across the gleaming generous screen  
right to the Severn valley, tawny with the broad

spread of distant grain, & beyond

In her contribution to the *Salt Companion* Romana Huk had referred to the ‘shifting frames in John James’ early poetry’ and she went on to suggest that there is a quality of repetitive artifice and voluptuous spontaneity which can be recognised in the nine poems which form ‘The Postcard Sonata’, a sequence which contains “40”, a sonnet written collaboratively with Andrew Crozier. This sonnet was to reappear as ‘FORTY’ in another Ferry Press publication *IN ONE SIDE & OUT THE OTHER* in 1970 where it joined forces with the artist Tom Phillips to become a writing which emerged from what had already been written. *IN ONE SIDE & OUT THE OTHER* presented the reader with a world of palimpsests in which words seem to push themselves off the page through new designs. As Huk put it this was ‘a process of moving through one’s textual landscape by shifting frames without reframing from any one angle, dubbing, echoing and dubbing upon it until its apertures appear and perception goes hurtling off the page.’ As one now looks through this attractively produced collaborative collection it seems as if the near-obscuring of an original text permitted new rivers to appear to the eye and it is almost as if one needs to tilt the book to see what lies beneath. When I look through these ‘new’ poems I am inevitably reminded of Charles Olson’s ‘These Days’, an early poem from January 1950, in which the past emerges to form the newness of the present:

whatever you have to say, leave  
the roots on, let them  
dangle

And the dirt

Just to make clear  
where they come from

The second sonnet in ‘The Postcard Sonata’ was (*for Andrew Crozier*) and it contained a brief critical comment on Peter Cartwright’s work:

admiring Peter Cartwright’s    One   Two Three  
Four & Five            all menacingly fluid but  
precise, a relationship between the formal

& the unpredictable.

This quality that James noted about Cartwright's work was to haunt his own poetry and Simon Perril made clear how James's work shared a willingness with the New York School poets 'to view everyday objects not simply as degraded commodities, but as potential talismans that might be invested with hopes and desires'. Noting the influence of Wordsworth on James's poetry Perril also made the point that 'characteristically, this aesthetic moment of contemplation contains an element of rhapsody that compels the listener to *look up* and take further notice of his environment.' Not dissimilar to the conversation poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge which had involved shared walks, interests and focal moments there is a 'communitarian sense of the lyric voice forged not in isolation but in the friction of relationships, friendships and reciprocal hopes and fears'. It is as if the sense of plurality, the 'we', becomes a pathway travelling along which gives the 'I' a sense of identity.

The untitled opening poem from *The Small Henderson Room* proposed that 'In a mutual presence / catastrophe may be averted' and this was a thought taken up in *A Theory of Poetry* published by Street Editions in 1977 in which we note a reference to 'particular people at a particular time / & in a particular place':

these people are the others  
without whom you would not exist

It is within the particularity of this context that I wish to highlight what will appear obvious, I hope, to sensitive readers of John James's poetry: his early work, often based in a rural setting of north Somerset is in *no* sense a hearkening back to the pastoral nostalgia of the Georgian poets. In *MMM... AH YES*, the first John James collection that Crozier published for Ferry Press in 1967, we discover a poem the title of which offers a nod in the direction of Wordsworth: 'An Open Letter to Jim Workman, Landlord, at the Rose & Crown, Withy Mills, North Somerset'. The poem celebrates the natural ability of a pub landlord to find 'sustenance' in his rootedness in 'the earth your / feet press on'. Now what I mean by emphasising how different John James is from the Georgian 'Nature' poets who focused on geographical rural particularities can be seen if you compare this early piece with a little poem written in 1910 by

W.H. Davies, friend of Edward Thomas and known mostly for being the author of *The Autobiography of a Supertramp* as well as for possessing a wooden leg which Thomas had arranged to have made for him! The poem celebrates a particular pub in the Sevenoaks Weald named The Harvest Home and it is little more than a jolly record of a moment of social interaction. As of course might be expected, the pub no longer exists but then neither does the Rose and Crown at Withy Mills near Paulton in Somerset. And that's where the similarity ends. Whereas Davies's poem is locked into a particular moment of stasis, a diary note that could be added to a social history of the local area, James's poem is 'on the move'. It recreates the character and personality of Jim Workman through the landlord's actions and advice. There is the local humour of characterisation contained in the recollections:

& if I brought you a poem  
what would you do with it?  
what would your hawk's nose,  
your dry sniff, pulled down  
corners of mouth,  
mockery of Old Winsley,  
scrounging his way, the way  
you made him an iced birthday cake  
of wood, set light to his hat

The wry smile of the next two lines ('you might burn / my poem & yet...') is accompanied by an admiration of folk-lore knowledge that suggests an awareness of Edward Thomas's 1915 figure of folk-lore, 'Lob':

the way you know the way  
foxes kill young cuckoos  
in long grass...

You showed me the  
way to bud the  
briars in June,  
splicing with  
raffia. Told me  
dung burns the roots off

beans, to repair  
the rung of a ladder with  
pitchpine

However, what moves the poem well beyond that echo is the Wordsworthian title and the inclusion of words from Ezra Pound's 1919 'L'Envoi' ('that song of Lawes') along with a recognition of the influence of Charles Tomlinson in 'the fields / multiplying through / division by hedges'. The landlord, Jim Workman, finds 'sustenance' in the natural rootedness 'from the earth your / feet press on' and the poem echoes the short review of Anselm Hollo's *here we go* which James had written for *Resuscitator 4* in May 1965:

In this and in other poems in this little book, Mr. Hollo presents the humdrum details of family life in such a way, with such choice and ironic juxtaposition, that escape is not only unrealistic but unnecessary. Such apparently trivial details – queuing for public transport, children asleep in their cots, undressing for bed – matter for Mr. Hollo and for all of us because without them we would not exist. Once they are accepted they become meaningful, a source of happiness and enlightenment. Such acceptance of the common place in literature is not new of course. One thinks of how central it was to the poetry of Wordsworth and to Ulysses; and it survives as an attitude in the poetry of Charles Tomlinson...

One must recognise the significance of this reference to Charles Tomlinson whose poem, 'A Given Grace' had been the opening moment of *Resuscitator I* in Autumn 1963 before going on to reappear in *American Scenes* three years later. When *Resuscitator 2* appeared in April 1964 Tomlinson again took up his place alongside Louis Zukofsky, Cid Corman and Charles Olson, a clear acknowledgement of an English poet who was recognising the power of what was happening in a post Donald Allan's *New American Poetry* world. By January 1968 the second series of *Resuscitator* magazine was started from John James's new home in Cambridge and the contributors were to include J.H. Prynne, Elaine Feinstein, Andrew Crozier, Nick Wayte, Wendy Mulford and John Hall. However, it is worth noting here that the dedication at the front of that new series of the magazine made unquestionably clear a debt that was to remain important for John James's own poetry and reading:

This series of *Resuscitator* is dedicated to Charles Tomlinson with thanks for his generous help over the first series.

For John James 'sustenance', the ground on which your feet press, was later to be movingly located in his poem 'The Conversation' which he contributed to the last issue of *Grosseteste Review* in 1984. The world of Charles Tomlinson moved on towards the world of J. H. Prynne:

to say nothing of you Jeremy when you leaf  
your pages to that summer & and have before you  
all we make of what we are when every day  
gave some new sense of strengthening regard for common things  
& all the land gave up a breath of gentler touch  
but for the undertow of darkness  
in the phones

And the continuing awareness of how the past remains running through the present is caught with anguished simplicity in the second section of *Songs In Midwinter For Franco* (the Swiss artist Franco Beltrametti who had illustrated the cover of that last issue of *Grosseteste*) published by Equipage less than three years ago here in Cambridge:

in tranquillity  
is difficult simplicity

as ever the table set  
not to forget