

*This Vanishing Architecture*

by Robert Gibbons

Charlestown, MA: Inner Klang, 2001

*This Vanishing Architecture*, by Robert Gibbons is a meditative, quietly haunting chapbook consisting of twelve vignettes in the form of prose poems. Each poem, a paragraph or so in length, coalesces around the figure of Proust and his great themes of perception, desire, time, memory, disappearance, and art. All of these themes are grazed in the dozen or so pages of Gibbon's little work, and no small part of its wit resides just in its size, its antithetical slightness. In place of the monumental *A la recherche du temps perdu*, we have a delicate web, an echo.

The poet moves through memory and present-day Boston observing features of the architecture and life of the city. Little chains of association are set off, bringing him back, often circuitously, to his preoccupation with Proust's text, which provides the past through which he sifts his present. The first invocation of the French titan is conditional: in the opening poem the poet states he would begin with "the amethyst depths of the waters Proust used to frame his little band of girls led by Albertine at Balbec," but, alas, the world he inhabits is rather different, one in which one of *his* girls is "gulping down sugar-coated cereal from the box, & expounding on topics from world affairs to boys." So the initial tie is hypothetical and tenuous; the poet acknowledges a wide gap between present and past.

But the gap rapidly narrows; the Proustian presence becomes steadily more inevitable, though never predictable. One of the pleasures for the reader is to follow the resourceful variety with which Gibbons weaves the Proustian thread into the poems. It appears now in a title, now in a parenthesis, now in note to self, an injunction to remember "Albertine's

eagle-headed rings, one gold, one ruby.” Once it turns up in an epigraph. The sight of the tower of Boston’s custom house leads to the campanile at St. Mark’s in Venice, which leads to Visconti’s film version of “Death in Venice,” which leads to the observation that Aschenbach is like “Proust’s coalman, who denies he is one, although he’s black all over.” This is a peculiar association, to be sure, but as such allusions accumulate they give the meditative process a gentle center of gravity. At the same time, a narrative persona emerges: idiosyncratic, observant, pensive . . .

And, above all, tactful. All of the aesthetic effects in this work are subtle and balanced. The prose is not dense, the syntax is not especially involved, but Gibbons achieves a good deal of intricacy in a short space. The observations are precise and particular, but then description yields suddenly to dream logic, fantasy, or a decisive metaphor, as when in the tenth poem, a Peregrine falcon living in the tower of Boston’s custom house is said to return home “like a hieroglyph to an obelisk.” For such moments of quiet illumination the author draws on what seems like the full repertoire of poetic devices. This effect of thoroughness within the spare confines of the chapbook is an admirable achievement; the sequence itself becomes an epitome of art, or at least of a particularly powerful conception of that pursuit which reigned in the Modern period.

Tellingly, most of the metaphors in the cycle deal with the ambiguous process whereby the perceived world is arrested, frozen, as art. This applies to the sequence itself, transitory, gossamer, yet hardened into an art object, like the foreign flower girl in the final poem who is compared to a caryatid in turn described as “the long architectonic column of Time.” This is a poignant resolution, but as the title of this exquisite miniature suggests, even this process is not simple or one-way; art preserves some things, but something always vanishes.

*Jeff Staiger*