

Marjorie Perloff: "Still Time for Surprises"

For the past decade, John Ashbery has been producing a new book of poems almost every year—a situation that, for just about any other poet, would signify excess. Can the lyric poet, one wonders, continue to produce at this rate? Has Ashbery's vision changed dramatically, his experience taken a new turn? Has there been a noticeable stylistic shift? Have the poet's advancing years (Ashbery is now over seventy) brought the wisdom Yeats claimed as the compensation for what he called "bodily decrepitude"?

It is probably too soon to assess the overall trajectory of Ashbery's poetic career. But as this dazzling new collection makes clear, his ability to produce memorable poems uniquely his own remains undiminished. True, one could argue that there is a generic Ashbery poem. The speaker usually begins with an observation -- "Disturbing news emanates from the wind tunnel" or "Out on the terrace the projector had begun / making a shuttling sound like that of land crabs"—an observation that involves seemingly absurd detail or non-functional simile. An Ashbery poem characteristically collages childhood memories, present conversations, and interweaving narratives—almost always non-sequiturs that nevertheless add up to the sensation of being alive, here and now, in the bizarre, media-filled culture of the late twentieth century. The bemused and beleaguered Ashbery voice is immediately recognizable in such locutions as "I know I shall one day come to the reason / for manners and intercourse with persons. / Therefore I launch my hat on this peg?", or "I am wondering where to stand? could that group of three / or four others be the beginning of the line?" Ashbery's demonstrative pronouns remain largely indeterminate, so that when we read a line like "We doctored it all up" ("A Suit?"), we cannot know what "it" refers to. The preferred verse form continues to be a stanza of irregular length made up of long, loose free-verse lines, most of them enjambed. As for wisdom, the "I" of these poems is just as uncertain, hesitant, self-deprecating, and receptive to new possibilities as was his younger self. He never pronounces, never generalizes, never claims to have the truth or even to experience the privileged moment when the poet sees into the life of things. If anything, these poems end, as does the brilliant "Sonatine Mélancolique" with the memory of

A time when we too were out of step

and the whole sentient world offered to bathe us?

pale bluster, flubbing today again and again.

Despite such marked continuities, the new poems are recognizably different as well. For one thing, they are more relaxed, more humorous, more willing to let it all hang out than were those in, say, *The Double Dream of Spring* or *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Memory has become increasingly obsessive, playfulness and camp more acceptable, and dialogue with a "you" who is a close friend or lover becomes the normal lyric mode as does the telling of tales that invokes a shared past. Bowdlerized citation used for burlesque effect—from pop song, poetry, newspaper headline, opera libretto, French novel, advertising jingle—has become a stock-in-trade: every line points to something we have heard before—but where? In this free-wheeling new landscape, the anxiety of such poems as "These Lacustrine Cities"

and "They Dream Only of America" has given way to a certain measure of serenity. Yes, we read at the conclusion of "A Suit", "I could have told you that some time ago." But since we have no idea what "that" is, the ending is not exactly reassuring either.

Take "Redeemed Area", whose suggestive title encompasses all sorts of possibilities, from actual "redemption" to its antithesis—an area "redeemed" for the sinister uses of others. The poem opens with an absurd bit of dialogue, or is it monologue?

Do you know where you live? Probably.

How can one not know where one lives? Never mind: the narrator goes on to tell a more or less realistic story about one Abner (Li! Abner of the comic strip?) who "is getting too old to drive but won't admit it" and who goes out in search of "cough drops / of a kind they don't make anymore." But the "drugstore has been incorporated into a mall" and "All the houses / are owned by the same guy, who's been renting / them out to college students for years, so they are virtually uninhabited." It all makes good sense: students are known to wreck rental units and urban blight has brought decay to the "old" neighborhood.

But just when we think that the poet is giving us a "normal" account of suburban sprawl, a surreal note is introduced:

A smell of vitriol and socks pervades the area

like an open sewer in a souk. Anyway the cough drops

(a new brand) tasted pretty good—like catnip

or an orange slice that has lain on a girl's behind.

If this sounds like mere clowning around, the drawing of absurd comparisons and making of foolish similes, think again. The smell really may be a mix of sulfuric acid and sweat (from dirty socks), thus reminding the poet—in a moment of comic alliteration, of an "open sewer in a souk"—a souk or Oriental bazaar. Cough drops do taste medicinal and hence perhaps like extract from the catnip plant, and as for that orange slice—how, one wonders, would lying on a girl's behind affect its taste?

Here, as so often in Ashbery's lyric, "nonsense" turns out to be oddly apropos. For, as in Joyce's "Araby," exoticism soon mutates into the merely tawdry. Consider the next stanza:

That's the electrician calling now?

nobody else would call before 7 A.M. Now we'll have some

electricity in the place. I'll start by plugging in

the Christmas tree lights. They were what made the whole thing

go up in sparks the last time. Next, the light

by the dictionary stand, so I can look some words up.

Then probably the toaster. A nice slice

of toast would really hit the spot now. I'm afraid it's all over
between us, though.

This is at once hilarious and poignant. By the time one comes to the last line, one realizes that the speaker has been fooling around so as to ease the pain that parting from a lover is about to bring. The absurd suggestion about the Christmas tree lights suggests that the loss of electricity has marked the end of a holiday season, a season of love and pleasure. The inconsequential shift from the Christmas lights to the dictionary stand and then to the toaster, turns the "redeemed area" of the title into a space of chaos and impending trouble. But the poet refuses to mourn: "Gradually," he declares, "everything will return to normal." Indeed, "I have adjusted the lamp, / morning's at seven".

This last line illustrates the thickness of Ashbery's poetic texture. "Morning's at seven" comes, of course, from Robert Browning's Pippa Passes: "The year's at the spring, / And day's at the morn; / Morning's at seven . . . God's in His Heaven-- / 'All's right with the world!" But Ashbery isn't drawing a simple contrast between Pippa's cheeriness and his own chaotic life. For "Morning's at Seven" is also the title of Paul Osborn's 1939 Depression drama—a Midwestern family tale where things get a bit more complicated. Perhaps, the poet suggests ruefully, a bit of distance will give him the perspective he needs:

the tarnish has fallen from the metallic embroidery, the walls have fallen,

the country's pulse is racing. Parents are weeping.

the schools have closed.

All the fuss has put me in a good mood,

O great sun.

Again, the absurd quickly yields to pathos and back again. Tarnish is what is left when the metal flakes off, not vice-versa. The ominous and generic news—"the walls have fallen . . . parents are weeping / the schools have closed"—is never explained; indeed, these are no more than generic signs of doom. And yet "all the fuss has put me in a good mood": if the world is indeed in such a sorry state, how sorry can the poet feel for himself? And so, in a wry allusion to Apollinaire's "Soleil cou coupé" (in Zone), we have, finally the invocation "O great sun."

Ashbery has many imitators both in the U.S. and the UK but not one who can match these tonal shifts and thick allusions. Indeed, it is the density of reference and vocal range that also makes Ashbery's poems early and late so hard to talk about. David Herd's new full-length study makes a valiant effort to chart the poet's entire career to date, to determine "What are the continuities? What are the differences? . . . How does one volume lead to, or away, from another?" He proposes to do this by examining the relations of the poems to their period and rehearses, with great skill and thorough scholarship, what Ashbery was doing when, whom he spent time with, what he was reading, and what was happening on the political and cultural front. The anomalous Tennis Court Oath (1962), for example, is read in the context of the poet's alienation in his early Paris years—an alienation heightened by Cold War culture in the U.S., as defined by critics like David Riesman, Vance Packard, C. Wright Mills, and Philip Rahv.

But compelling as is the attempt to link Ashbery's poems to *The Lonely Crowd* or *The Hidden Persuaders*, the poems don't quite come alive as a result. Why, after all, is *The Tennis Court Oath* so different from the work of Ashbery's Paris friend Harry Matthews on the one hand, his Harvard /New York friend Frank O'Hara on the other? Why is his response to Philip Rahv so different from Robert Lowell's? Nor does it help to posit generalizations like "How and whether to risk the sublime in a cultural climate in which poetry is failing to communicate are problems which persist throughout Ashbery's poetry of the 1970s." To what poet would this diagnosis not apply? In his first chapter, Herd notes that Ashbery himself has repeatedly expressed the desire to be more fully understood. But understanding can only come from reading the poems themselves, word for word, and line by line, with as much knowledge of genres, conventions, and poetic topoi as possible. Indeed, Herd's comparisons of Ashbery to Pasternak or Pascal are finally no more satisfying than earlier links drawn between Ashbery and Keats, Ashbery and Emerson. No labels seem to stick to this great mercurial poet, who has, in his own words,

. . . wriggled farther into an indeterminate space

that was actually a mood, or many moods, one overlaying another

like gift wrap.

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