

London Review of Books

Remember the Yak

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Planisphere by John Ashbery

Carcanet, 143 pp, £12.95, December 2009, ISBN 978 1 84777 089 9

It's been two years since the last one, so it must be time for a new book of poems by John Ashbery. Like the old James Bond films, Ashbery's late instalments arrive punctually, and you buy your ticket knowing what to expect: a suave cartoon with ridiculous gadgets, clever one-liners and last-minute escapes. 'So Long, Santa', the penultimate poem in Ashbery's previous collection, *A Worldly Country* (2007), worried that 'it will come round again/and we won't be ready.' *Planisphere* begins with the lines: 'Is it possible that spring could be/once more approaching?' Forever bowled over by the same old thing, finding difference in repetition, Ashbery is the Duracell bunny of American poetry.

The bunny is getting rather long in the tooth – Ashbery turned 83 in July – and he has been writing the same book for more than 15 years. Each new model struts gorgeously down the runway, a bit aloof, a bit silly, and the critics can't tell them apart. The *New York Times's* reviewer found 2005's *Where Shall I Wander* 'both deeply familiar and more than a little strange'; the *Philadelphia Inquirer* considered *A Worldly Country* to be 'strange' but also 'much of the time very familiar'. *Publishers' Weekly's* review of *Planisphere* notes that 'as in his last several books, there's nothing entirely new,' but 'the poems are almost always satisfying and strange.' As Ashbery himself put it in *Flow Chart*: 'We all go often to a place we are familiar with,/though it seems strange and uncompromising.'

Ashbery's singular achievement is to have made his strangeness so familiar. Critics sometimes appeal to the concept of defamiliarisation to describe his technique – Shklovsky's making the familiar strange – but in fact he has spent his career doing the opposite. His bizarreries have been so influential, and have had such great critical success, that something like the following, from 'This Incredible Tapestry', can now seem almost ordinary:

Sure, he towelled, if it is this

fair way that answers up to you, you may dismiss the vowels
because one does not remember the yak that does not immediately
remember one. One does not scan the roads for politeness
or contribute to the desert economy. And lo
what he said became true for everyone
on earth and there was no parallel imagining.

This sort of genial nonsense has been Ashbery's default mode since *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992). But he didn't get to be the most celebrated American poet of the last 50 years by writing about not remembering forgetful yaks. Reviewing *Notes from the Air* (2007), a selection from the later poems, Langdon Hammer suggested that 'Ashbery's writing, whatever else it is about, is usually about other writing.' This is a common claim, and it sounds smart, but one could just as easily say that Ashbery's writing is usually about perceptual states, or language itself, or consciousness. It is about all these things because it is about the experience of having subjective experience: Ashbery's poetry is about aboutness. (This is an obscure way of putting it, but Ashbery's ways are obscure.)

Because he recognises that poetry is a vehicle for thinking about mental action, his poems live in the history of poetry the way a turtle lives in its shell. Though he has always had a goofy side, Ashbery also used to be our great explorer of the interior, diving into the cognitive wreck and returning with weird phenomenological salvage:

The conception is interesting: to see, as though reflected
In streaming windowpanes, the look of others through
Their own eyes. A digest of their correct impressions of
Their self-analytical attitudes overlaid by your
Ghostly transparent face.

These lines from 'Wet Casements' stage the philosophical problem of other minds, of trying to justify the belief that others have an inner experience like our own. The passage seems to imply that to see 'the look of others through/Their own eyes', one would have to *be* those others, looking in a mirror. But Ashbery knows that we can't get around the other-minds problem simply by imagining ourselves in someone else's place, for then we would also have to imagine their experience of the same problem. The difficulty is reproduced by the contradiction expressed by the 'conception': to see another's look through his own eyes 'as though' he were looking at his reflection. But how can anyone see his 'own look' unless he is actually looking at a reflective surface? The second sentence is even thornier: 'a digest' of the others' 'impressions' of their 'attitudes' is somehow 'overlaid' by 'your' own face – even

though you're seeing through the others' 'own eyes'.

Ashbery used to produce reams of this kind of thing, poems that were engagingly difficult, even if they usually resisted precise interpretation. One way in which they allowed themselves to be analysed was by their interventions in tradition. 'Wet Casements', with its reflected face overlaying the impressions of others, recalls Donne's 'A Valediction of My Name, in the Window':

'Tis much that glass should be
As all-confessing, and through-shine as I;
'Tis more, that it shows thee to thee,
And clear reflects thee to thine eye.
But all such rules love's magic can undo,
Here you see me, and I am you.

The transparent lover has scratched his name into his mistress's window to remind her to be faithful to him, so that when she sees her reflection she also sees his name – sees, metonymically, the poet himself in her reflection: 'I am you.' Ashbery seems to wonder on the implications of this metaphorical unity: if the poet is his mistress, then when she is looking at her reflection, he is looking too, through her eyes (a variant has 'it shows thee to me'). But Donne's poem ends by fretting over his lady's potential infidelities, and Ashbery generalises the scepticism, extending it even to our understanding of our language and ourselves. 'What you see will be used against you,' he writes – a kind of Miranda warning – in the new book's 'Partial Clearing'.

Ashbery's post-romantic anxiety takes the form of a search for something that 'gives more than it takes', as he wrote in 'As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat'. This search is conducted in a surface style of elaborate obscurity that owes as much to the avant-garde as his often stately diction does to Eliot. As Oren Izenberg writes in *Being Numerous*, 'in his endless productivity and insistent changefulness,' Ashbery 'seems to belong to every category we can imagine or desire. Our Jack of Diamonds, he is claimed at one moment for the tradition of Stein and at the next for the tradition of Stevens.'^[*] For most of his career, he was our prize monotreme, eluding our neat categories, and if he occasionally laid an egg, you knew he would soon be waddling along to his next reinvention. A poem in 1995's *Can You Hear, Bird* looks back to a time when 'each day' was 'a sloughing-off,/both suicidal and imbued with a certain ritual grace'.

We can be grateful for the bounty of his late work without wishing it were as extreme as the earlier *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* or *As We Know* or *A Wave*. Some of the more recent

books – *Can You Hear, Bird; Your Name Here; A Worldly Country* – are spicier than others, but for the most part Ashbery now contents himself with making ‘ebullient but chaotic soup’, as he once described a poem by John Wheelwright. *Planisphere* (like ‘As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat’) takes its title from Marvell. In ‘The Definition of Love’, Marvell imagines a globe being pancaked into two dimensions: ‘the world should all/Be cramp’d into a planisphere.’ It’s a good metaphor for what has happened to Ashbery’s writing over the last 20 years, and the new book is a slightly less ebullient and more chaotic soup than usual. If it’s about half as good as *A Worldly Country*, well, it’s twice as long.

At some point Ashbery must have convinced himself that several trees must bleed for every poem he writes, even if some of them appear to have been composed by a bottle of Benylin:

or what’s a heaven for?
which is yeastily

how jazzed we were
echoes of conspiracy

ran through it
the awful momentum

and doors will have to open
which doesn’t mean it won’t happen

meantime he does the prayers

These scribbles have something in common with Language poetry and the current redundancy known as Flarf, movements which themselves owe a great deal to Ashbery’s second book, *The Tennis Court Oath*. It’s harmless fun (don’t tell the Language poets), but once you’ve read a few hundred specimens you start to think: surely the point wasn’t to give over the entire typewriter factory to the monkeys.

Most of these poems, though, are instruments of a daft sweetness. For a guy born when the bee’s knees were the cat’s pyjamas, Ashbery has a command of the demotic that rivals Lady Gaga’s. It’s not that he notices the latest slang – though I wouldn’t be surprised if ‘epic fail’ turned up in one of his poems – so much as the bits of cliché that fall out of our mouths when we’re not paying attention: ‘Speaking of which’, ‘Do you have enough/to refer the thing on this thing?’, ‘Keep us on your docket,’ ‘Tag her remains.’ There are poems called ‘Boundary Issues’, ‘Default Mode’, ‘For Fuck’s Sake’, ‘The Foreseeable Future’, ‘No Extras’, ‘Product Placement’, ‘Sticker Shock’, ‘Stress Related’ and ‘Uptick’. (The poems in *Planisphere* are

arranged alphabetically by title, like those in *Can You Hear, Bird*.) A poem ends: 'You know something?/I don't care.' Another has fun with how much depends on the deletion of an article: 'There were a few, or rather, few/ things to do to get ready.' Ashbery is a radio tower broadcasting 'the vague jargon of our time, when we have a vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing'. But what Eliot disparaged, Ashbery revels in. This magpie vocabulary rarely comes across as affected, except in the work of the multitude of his imitators: 'You say your cunning comportment/is artless? Well then so am I/for containing you, champ.' He delights in literalising idioms, undermining our programmed expectations:

Please don't apologise for pissing me off, you were
probably right, and I was halfway out the door
anyway, the living room door, leading to the hall
and all it contains.

Some of the best poems here are uncharacteristically straightforward, telling little stories or developing a single idea in the vein of 'Myrtle' from *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), which begins, 'How funny your name would be/if you could follow it back to where/the first person thought of saying it,' and develops the conceit, finally imagining a river named for a woman who comes

at long last to impersonate that river,
on a stage, her voice clanking
like its bed, her clothing of sand
and pasted paper, a piece of real technology,
while all along she is thinking, I can
do what I want to do. But I want to stay here.

It's a treat when Ashbery writes like this, as if he's saying: 'See, I can too write a "Poem".' My favourite such performance in *Planisphere* is 'The Tower of London', whose inane speaker rambles on about the 1939 film starring Basil Rathbone as Richard III:

Richard's bride was unlike the Queen
in the play *Richard III*. She was played by
Barbara O'Neil, who played Scarlett O'Hara's
mother in *Gone with the Wind*, though she wasn't old
enough to be. That's the way I remember it.

Wait, she was

actually Edward's wife. Richard took
unto him the Lady Anne, who was
played by Nan Grey, though she actually
married Wyatt (John Sutton) after they escaped from
the Tower, or the Castle. In the end Richard
killed just about everybody, except Mord,
who got thrown off a cliff by somebody,
a fitting end to a miserable career.

Other poets stand in line for places at poetry's funeral; Ashbery's attitude is: screw it, I'll bury the old boy myself. Who could resist the charms of a poet who writes, 'Say this for warmer climes, though:/Bears are let out at night to patrol the streets,' or 'Call me potatoes/and soap. Call me soap and potatoes'? Who would want to? And just when you're thinking Ashbery has read so much James Tate that his yaks have forgotten how to recognise real emotion, the tone turns on a dime into one of subdued retrospect:

In the morning hope flushes the city anew.
I guess it was just that I always thought of snow
at the wrong times and defeatism came
 charging through the barricades.
It always knew where to find me.

Funny, few can now remember how water
came in pails once, and sails were free
for anyone who needed them for a boat.

Ashbery is thinking of snow, and of wrong times, throughout *Planisphere*. 'I'm barely twenty-six, have been on Oprah/and such,' the narrator says in 'Attabled with the Spinning Years', and then, as if startled to notice the late hour:

Surely that isn't snow? The leaves are still on the trees,
but they look wild suddenly.
I get up. *I guess I must be going.*

It's almost wistful, the way that offhand colloquialism signals an understandable preoccupation with mortality. Similar phrases are scattered throughout the book: 'Yet one says, so long'; 'I'll be on my way'; 'I have to go'; 'Well I can't stay'; 'We'd better be getting along/before it gets dark.'

‘We must, we must be moving on,’ Ashbery wrote in 1975 at the end of ‘Ode to Bill’, a succinct manifesto of his stylistic restlessness. Thirty-five years later, the trope is addressed to a different bill:

Yet it’s hard not to imagine the loss.
I think, though I can’t be sure,
that all this is being added to my bill.
Woe betide us! We shall never pay,
though, not in a million years.
Everything is promise.

‘Still,’ we read elsewhere, ‘he knew no refund would result/from concerns conveyed to the courtroom/like that. Or any other way.’ The ‘bills floating along beside’ ‘day’s indisputable margin’ bob up in poem after poem, for ‘Living is a meatloaf sandwich./I had a good time up there,’ and the waitress’s shift is about to end.

When asked at a White House dinner what he’d done to be invited, Miles Davis supposedly said: ‘Well, I’ve changed music five or six times.’ I don’t know exactly how many times John Ashbery has changed poetry, but it’s enough to earn him the right to spin his wheels a little in his old age. They’re charming wheels.

[*] *Being Numerous* by Oren Izenberg will appear from Princeton early next year.

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