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Les mots : entre pouvoir et puissance

Literary Texts: The Power and the Possible

Numéro dirigé par
Daniel Thomières

Avec la collaboration de
Xavier Giudicelli

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La revue *imaginaires* présente une sélection opérée parmi les communications présentées lors des colloques annuels du Centre interdisciplinaire de recherches sur les langues et la pensée de l’UFR Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Reims.

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That John Ashbery is Nietzsche's "man of intuition, standing in the midst of a culture, [who] reaps directly from his intuitions not just protection from harm but also a constant stream of brightness, a lightening of the spirit, redemption, and release" ("On Truth" 773) is an attractive thesis. But I wish to assert a more narrow point that with respect to Ashbery criticism, Ashbery's Will to Power is triumphant. A poet whose work can be interpreted so variously and yet convincingly over the decades since the 1956 publication of Some Trees (a title I don't know whether to enunciate as an iamb or a spondee) eclipses criticism, creating a critical industry whose members jockey for priority. Is he Harold Bloom's current strong poet, heir, rival, and misreader of Wordsworth, Whitman, and Stevens? Or is he Marjorie Perloff's unclassifiable master: "No labels seem to stick to this great mercurial poet..." (48)? Is he a poet primarily or solely of style or is he Helen Vendler's poet of discernible "subject matter" (224)?
Twenty-first century critics have multiplied the number of possible, even contradicting, Ashberys. For David Herd in 2000, Ashbery is a distinctly American poet. In contrast, Ben Hickman in 2012 asserts, “Ashbery is stylistically original because of an original style of reading of English poetry” (6). Andrew Lee Dubois in 2006 defines Ashbery’s poems as “forms of attention.” Hickman responds that Ashbery develops as “aesthetics of inattention” (8). Dubois also argues that the “incoherencies” of Ashbery’s late poems are indicative of the poet’s “dotage” (114). A year later, Roger Gilbert declares that in “Ashbery’s recent work...the poet’s customary aesthetic stance or persona...is essentially youthful” (219).

Ashbery’s 2009 volume Planisphere might be used as evidence to support any of these critical positions. The volume abounds in Americanisms: “the same old same old” (18), “pull out all the stops” (34), “No Can Do” (42), “I kind of liked it” (43), “easy does it” (68), “what a / bill of goods!” (119), “put up or shut up” (130), including several titles: “No Reason Not To,” “No Rest for the Weary,” and “Not My Favorite Shirt.” The word “America” occurs at least five times in as many poems and thirty-four times in one poem, “Default Mode,” whose title seems to play with the momentous American mortgage crisis. Yet direct allusions to, even quotations of, English poets, occur not infrequently, including lines from Donne, Milton, Shakespeare, Wyatt, Keats, and Byron. (And I should mention in passing, the volume includes some half dozen French words or phrases.) The volume does have the feel of the work of a man in his dotage (Ashbery turned 86 in 2013), with numerous references to ending, death, or the wittily self-conscious title “The Later Me.” Yet the youthful voices of Ashbery in the book—often hilarious, wildly shifting in register, embracing of popular idioms, self-subverting—seem to me indistinguishable from at least some of his voices in his earliest books. His forms of attention—simultaneously to everyday reality, the loftiest reaches of speculation, the subtleties and mysteries of signification, the process of writing and thinking—often appear as inattention to communication as normally defined. Yet thousands of his readers, including myself, believe that his poems—many of them, at least—communicate, though what they communicate we can rarely say with certainty.

Such a volume in such a critical environment makes Ashbery a leading candidate for Barthes’s office of “modern scriptor...born simultaneously with the text” (“Death” 1324), banishing my above use of “voice” with its evocation of author and origin. Arguably, Ashbery writes not consumable works but Barthesian texts: “Text...is bound to jouissance, that is, to a pleasure without separation” (“From Work” 1331), a state like that of orgasmic bliss wherein the utterly free ludic reader supplants any notion of authorial control. I hereby testify that I have experienced what I think Barthes meant by jouissance as I have read certain poems of Ashbery, including some of those in Planisphere, experiences ineffable and none of your business. However, when I function as critic—as reader who wants to talk or write about poetry—I find the notion of jouissance paradoxically not liberating but constraining. I find myself agreeing with Ben Hickman: “Barthes’s ‘passably empty subject’, infinite rather than specific, extends its emptying of psychological depth to erase all trace of context and situatedness from the site of reading and writing. Again [as with Julia Kristeva’s intertextuality], we are left with terms unable to describe the situation of both poet and reader” (7). Perhaps Barthes’s notion of the text as like a score for post-serial music that “asks of the reader a practical collaboration” (“From Work” 1331) acknowledges both reader and composer sufficiently for me to approach the Ashberian text with a readerly freedom in dialogue with made text. But I think that Roger Sell’s notion of the “communicational critic” fully acknowledging both authorial and readerly autonomy more clearly delineates terms for a productive critical approach.

Fully acknowledging that all writers and readers (including critics) live and think in different socio-historical circumstance, the communicational critic is a “mediating critic” promoting dialogues among diverse readers by drawing attention to authorial circumstances, ambiguities and irresolvable issues of complex texts (both literary and nonfictional, as Sell’s examination of Churchill’s My Early Life in his Communicational Criticism demonstrates), and examining various critical responses in
relation to texts. The mediating critic stands midway between the
liberal humanist universalist and the postmodern proponent of
unbridgeable social difference: "A post-postmodern mediating
critic, refusing to accept that difference is all the way down, will
mediate between writers and readers of different formations,
taking as a main concern the conditions for empathetic
understanding and fair-mindedness" (5). Writers of texts that
are "genuine communication" engage in "communication in
which different parties respect each other's human autonomy"
(23), as opposed to "distorted communication" which is not
"dialogical" but "unidirectional," the sender imposing a message
on the passive receiver (21). Ashbery is a writer of genuine
communication, as I hope my critical mediation will suggest.

In focusing on a single poem in Planisphere, "The Salve
Merchant," in the context of the book of which it is a part, I wish
to promote dialogue among readers by linking the language of
the poem to key words and passages of other poems in the volume
and foregrounding the humanely comic Christian evocations of
the poem, not as a final or certain interpretation but as a vehicle
for further dialogue. I acknowledge that I verge on writing the
poem, in the Barthesian sense, but my purpose in so doing is
not primarily to assert my own readerly bliss but to promote
the autonomy of the poem and the autonomy of other readers in
relation to it, to initiate dialogue about this poem and Ashbery's
poetic methods and purposes more generally. I think that the
immense variety of critical writing about Ashbery suggests that
all other Ashbery critics are also promoting dialogue but they
most often do so incidentally as they primarily aim for definitive
readings not available in nearly all poems of Ashbery. The
concluding lines of the Planisphere poem "Uptick" offer a way
to understand Ashbery's poetry as pleasingly evasive, mattering
to us in ways we cannot fully articulate:

Therefore poetry dissolves in
brilliant moisture and reads us
to us.
A faint notion. Too many words,
but precious.

No. Of course I do not intend here to write Ashbery as a Christian. Rather I wish to explore in some detail one poem in the context of the poetic sequence in order to suggest how Ashbery’s ongoing experimental method evokes Christian thought and reference to greatly expand the scope of his vision while at the same time eclipsing Christian thought, making it a vital but diminished visionary scheme, part of his masterful planisphere. To borrow Angus Fletcher’s term, the book as a whole is “an environment-poem,” a poem that is itself an environment, “a poem [that] does not merely suggest or indicate an environment as part of its thematic meaning, but actually gets the reader to enter into the poem as if it were the reader’s environment of living” (122). “The environment-poem seeks symbolic control over the drifting experience of being environed, and it introduces the experience of an outside that is developed for the reader inside the experience of the work” (227). The experience of God and of Christian doctrine is enveloped, revisioned, mastered within the visionary planisphere of Ashbery’s book.

I very gradually came to perceive “The Salve Merchant” as part of a sequence of quirky meditations on Christian belief, a perception initiated by the frequent religious references I have mentioned and reinforced by sense of sequence in many poems in the volume. The concluding line of the preceding poem is “Shall we gather at the river? On second thought, let’s not.” The abrupt shift from the lofty question of the famous traditional hymn to its terse dismissal veers towards religious satire. “The Salve Merchant” begins with a mystic number and a flippantly phrased evocation of spiritual elevation: “The seventh generation has it good, / if surprised sublimity’s your bag (which / hopefully it is).” The next lines explicitly develop the title character (highly unusual for an Ashbery poem) and introduce two other characters, most likely the romantic couple in the ensuing stanza, despite the shift in point of view:

The merchant testifies
to long commerce between you two:
feathers, flowers, subtle array of fruit,
and lesser hand-me-downs of nature.

The merchant seems a sort of witness, testifying that the pair has been together a long time, exchanging over many years a variety of alliterative items and some items unspecified. But testifying is also what Protestants do to affirm their faith. And as the result of the forbidden fruit in Eden, human nature was radically altered, the Edenic sin handed down through all generations, though the seventh one has it good, like the seventh son of the seventh son, perhaps due to distance from the fall and anticipation of the redemption. The half hidden implications of the title are activated: Christ is the seller of salvation, and the etymology of “redemption,” buying back, asserts itself. The taste of satire that ended the previous poem is continued.

The second stanza suggests both an Edenic couple, happily isolated, days passing serenely, and an unredeemed and non-religious couple, happy enough but fleetingly concerned about the possible afterlife:

Most likely you and I were wedged
in a romantic corner, and delivered a sigh,
as black evening arrived on time.

Lovers “sigh” but so do Christians beseeching God for relief—as in George Herbert’s “Sighs and Grones.” And non-believers too may sigh with a worry that comes from considering that the Christians might be right. The next stanza evokes the confused
questioning of the non-believer aware of Christian teaching, revising the easy dismissal achieved by a “second thought” in the previous poem into troubling contemplation of the penalty for delaying and turning to belief belatedly, of having only at the last moment “glorious second thoughts,” that is, thoughts of a heavenly after life as real:

What were going to be the consequences
of waiting all day for the consequences
and then, like a girl with a hoop, changing
the subject to moist, glorious second thoughts?

The playful girl, perhaps an image echoing his 1999 volume *Girls on the Run*, enhances the sense of the spiritual confusion of the couple, the ever rolling hoop allegorical of ongoing questioning.

The girl’s mother is watching over the scene that others ignore, daring a writing of her as Mary witnessing the Crucifixion at the same time the back-and-forth arguments and possible rationalizations of the couple continue, co-existent in time with that monumental scene, as all time is in Christian thought:

The mother stood by. Others pretended not to hear
or not to notice. An aviary of perfectly OK ripostes
waltzed it around and became almost
monumental. Our consensus was rubies.

The consensus of the Western world has been the greatest possible spiritual wealth, the rubies of redemption.

But the concluding stanza turns sharply to comedy, since surely no reader ever said of any line of Ashbery, especially the last line of the preceding stanza, “I knew you were going to say that,” and certainly it is not likely that “somebody yelled at me,” at Ashbery, whether in public or in the privacy of her reading room, at least not because she knew what he was going to say. The poem concludes in a voice close to that of the end of the previous poem, calmly reflecting that the embrace of strict Christian doctrine is not essential, that redemption that comes from acceptance of the quotidian is universally available “anyway”:

If this was what being justified
was like I was ready to play

or stop playing—it comes to the same thing.
Better to win not playing than be cheated
of pictures that were conveyable to you anyway.

Like the girl with the hoop, the speaker, pretty surely now Ashbery, along with his romantic partner, can play the game of spiritual contemplation or they can stop at any moment without the consequence of damnation. The crypt word “pray” for “play” reinforces the idea that the results of spiritual questing or not amount “to the same thing.” The Wallace Stevens of “Sunday Morning” would be pleased, as would Nietzsche as the final sentence suggests a way to metaphysical victory: not playing the religion game. And a misreading of the title as “The Slave Merchant”—substituting the more predictable word in place of “salve”—triggers association with Nietzsche’s “slave morality,” the “imaginary revenge” whose most strongest articulation in the West is Christianity (Genealogy 647).

The two poems following “The Salve Merchant” pick up on the perspective or key words of the poem: “Semi-Detached” suggests a continued distancing from the metaphysical while “The Seventh Chihuahua” mocks the divine number seven included in the first line of “The Slave Merchant.” “Semi-Detached” also concludes with a calm embrace of present experience, asserted in terms of religious belief:

You’ll never be more agitated than you are now,
at this insurpassable moment. I, on the other hand
am cool for the time being. Such is my creed.

“The Seventh Chihuahua” similarly concludes with a sort of creed, insincerely invoking a world beyond this life:

It was all about being on the way.
There were no addresses, only heavenly wings.
Did I say the stars will take care of us? I know
it sounds funny, but that’s the way it is.

We are finally connected to the stars abstractly represented on the planisphere. Their personification is clearly only an indication of an acceptance of our being exclusively on this planet.
A critic once asked, “Is there a wrong way to interpret a poem by John Ashbery?” (Gery 126). My answer is that of course there are many wrong ways. But there are also almost always several strong ways, and I hope that my argument is one, not a final one but a mediation steering readers to attend to the specifics of the Ashberian text and the possibilities of their own reading. My limited jouissance, constrained by the ethical imperative of communicational criticism to acknowledge the agency and autonomy of Ashbery and other readers, concludes with a re-assertion of the triumphant will of Ashbery as I am as unsure of my own writing of his poetry as I am of other critics’ writing and the sense that there is more than one right way to read an Ashbery poem or poetic sequence. Maybe “The Salve Merchant” is also about a long-term romance. Maybe I am supposed to link the poem to the three other poems in the book that use the intrusive word “wedged.” Instead of religious references, I might have focused on the numerous governmental terms of Planisphere—“government” (14, 29), “citizens” (34, 67, 91), “vote” (26, 139), “congress” (43), “states” (57), “constituency” (112), and “mandate” (38, George Bush’s notoriously misused term upon his re-election). If I had, I might have produced a sequence of poems playfully inquiring into the nature of American citizenship and the relations of citizens to the teetering federal government, including the impulse of citizens “to flip our leaders the bird” (14). The book provokes jouissance by many means and testifies to Ashbery’s puissance, his distinctive style of communication.

Works Cited


“After punishment was done with me”: Writing and Revolt in Sharon Olds’ *Blood, Tin, Straw*

EVE COBAIN
Trinity College, Dublin, Irlande

“Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain”: the frenetic response of the “great and powerful” Wizard – now visible behind the curtain – unmasked and absurd even as he continues to issue the dictates upon which the good order of Oz supposedly rests. In *Blood, Tin, Straw* (1999), a collection that derives its title from this Hollywood classic, Sharon Olds pulls back the curtain on civilized society, thereby destabilizing its machinery; she brings to light some of the most horrible elements below the surface of everyday life, and as she writes herself back to childhood, her portrayal of familial experience becomes particularly unsettling. In various interviews the poet has described her own maltreatment at the hands of her parents, “Hellfire” Calvinists, who throughout the collection are seen to inflict violence on the child’s body at the behest of this God, as well as in the name of some yet more abstract sense of social law. “The childhood god I had believed in was punitive, harsh, not a forgiving presence” states the poet. “One’s own personal will, what one wants in one’s own life, was considered wicked” (qtd in. Macdonald 2008). *Blood, Tin, Straw* presents prohibition at its
Christine Chollier is Professor of US literature at the Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne. She wrote her PhD thesis on Cormac McCarthy's novels. She has since focused her problematics on textual interpretation issues and contributes to critical debate on genres, passages, and translation. Her latest contributions include work on Katherine Mansfield, John Dos Passos, Carson McCullers, John Steinbeck, etc.

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