



{poems}

John Ashbery

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Our Review

The juxtaposition of seemingly random, even bizarre elements is what renders the poetry of John Ashbery so difficult for some readers. He collects ordinary oddities and links them together in a conversational stream of consciousness, thus disguising profundity in the everyday (or finding it there?) and only occasionally relying on the sort of portentous phrases to which so much poetry is indebted. Yet there is shape to this apparent arbitrariness, and in reading Ashbery's newest collection, *Your Name Here*, distinct themes do begin to coalesce and assert themselves.

Many of the poems share, for instance, an unmistakably elegiac tone. In a poem like "Strange Occupations," the word "remember" appears four times in the first eight lines. The book is very much the searching-backward gaze of an older man -- Ashbery is in his 70s -- who clings to memories of people and places but is haunted by missed opportunities and unforeseen consequences. Ashbery sifts through the attic of his life, but he intertwines its contents with the colorful stuff of dreams and fictions, and he directs his remembrances to others; the book is full of constant references to "you," invocations of friends, addresses to the absent.

One of the book's recurring images is that of a spool -- conjuring up the skein of days, the thread of a life unwinding in memories. Writing becomes a transcript of the aging process, a literal book of days; it preserves a sense of self before time's lens, defying the idea of "life as a sandbar...that the tide is frantically trying to erase." But the danger lies in representation replacing action: "My life at my back now, my discourse/like weeds far out on a lake" wrings its hands at the passive nostalgia of later years. In "telling my adventures to anyone who will listen" (from a poem called "Cinema V?rit?"), the poet's life is reduced to art, not transformed by it.

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Looking back at his mistakes, the poet wants to know, "In what way do things get to be wrong?" and he thinks "how heavenly it would have been/if it had all happened later or differently." But an awareness of the gulf between freedom and necessity, expectation and reality, also deepens with age, Ashbery seems to say. One never forgets death, the ultimate end, but getting there can take so many routes, and therein lies the urgency of living: "One can wait on the curb for the rest/of one's life, for all anyone cares, or one can cross/when the light changes to green..." "Escape is never possible" if life is reduced to a labyrinth -- but "there is still time for surprises," for the shock of novelty, adventure, chance. "We know, they say, and keep going," one of the book's final poems declares, supplying the only possible answer for the future to *Your Name Here*'s wistful questioning of the past.

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--iJonathan Cook/i

Your Name Here Details

Date : Published October 3rd 2001 by Farrar Straus Giroux (first published 2000)

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Author : John Ashbery

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Matt Walker says

If you suffer from Ashbery fatigue when reading his recent books just because he writes SO DAMN MUCH, just try this simple trick: every time you start a new poem, pretend it's the only one you've ever read by him. Then you'll realize how good it really is, since you're not just comparing it to all his other poems.

Kassandra says

Reading Ashbery, to me, is like getting on a ride that makes you feel a little sick and disoriented when you stumble off it, yet is so fun you can't wait to get in line to ride it again as soon as you're done. He shakes up the brain quite nicely. These do have a sad/elegiac tone to them. My favorite poem here is "Merrily We Live", which ends:

"Today a stoat came to tea
and that was so nice it almost made me cry --
look, the tears in the mirror are still streaming down my face
as if there were no tomorrow. But there is one, I fear,
a nice big one. Well, so long,
and don't touch any breasts, at least until I get there."

Katharine Holden says

Not drawn into any of the poems.

John Pappas says

Confounding, amusing and arch, these poems wrap their long lines around your brain and don't let go. Dream-like and surreal, Ashbery's poems have at their heart a core of wonderment in the world and a desire for powerful experience and connection, a desire to abate loneliness by engaging in the world or in one's projections of the world. You never know, when you start reading a poem by Ashbery, quite where you'll end up.

Charles says

So, clearly, John Ashberry was/is widely recognized as a poet of distinction and has been the recipient of many awards. The poetry in this collection certainly showed a strong sense of language and some fine imagery. I just didn't like it. To me, the poetry reads like word salads, with sentences and fragments strewn together to avoid meaning. For example: "That watery light, so undervalued except when evaluated, which

never happens much, perhaps even not at all--I intend to conserve it."

I might have still enjoyed this poetry if it had had a sense of music to it, but I personally find the phrasing mostly pedestrian and not very rhythmical. Here's another example: "But how can I be in this bar and also be a recluse? The colony of ants was marching toward me, stretching far into the distance, where they were as small as ants. Their leader held up a twig as big as a poplar. It was obviously supposed to be for me. But he couldn't say it, with a poplar in his mandibles. Well, let's forget that scene and turn to one in Paris."

Perhaps Ashberry was trying to say something about language in general, because after reading a dozen or so his poems back to back, I turned to a regular prose story and found, for a moment, that I couldn't quite understand the flow of the words. I suppose that is an accomplishment, to impose his rhythm, or anti-rhythm on me for even a few seconds. It might have been accomplished at shorter length though; this is a long collection.

Please don't take my opinion here as any form of objective evaluation. This is how I felt about the poetry but many others seem to like his work and he has a much, much more extensive list of accomplishments than I do. Find out for yourself.

Mikael says

my name there yr name where

Dionne says

The very first time I am putting down a book of poetry half read. Cant get into this one. But there were a few I liked from what I did manage to cover, one of which contains these lines:

"I know I'll have a chance to learn more
Later on. Waiting is what's called for, meanwhile.
It's true that life can be anything, but certain things definitely aren't it. This gloved hand,
For instance, that glides
So securely into mine, as though it intends to stay."

Pamela says

Enjoyed it slightly more than the two previous collections of poetry from Ashberry. But not enough to want to read the whole body of his work. A few poems here were good. Perhaps at another time in my life I will have a different reaction.

Book rating: 3.5 stars

Post Note: found it odd two lines repeated in different poems...

*Oh, I love you so much in such a little time.
It seems a shame we have to go on living.*

--The File on Thelma Jordan

--De Senectute

Andrew LaBelle says

Absolutely gorgeous. Contains plenty of unforgettable vocabulary and images, and very approachable despite quite opaque structures and the frequent absence of ostensible meanings. The tone of the poems is often playful. Many of them juggle syntaxes as easily as they pivot between their subject matter. While this collection potentially offers many instances of profound, yet sober happiness, it encapsulates and bursts at the edges with a sad weariness and forlorn touch of estrangement.
