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Review Article

The Problem of Ashbery's Reputation

April Galleons. By John Ashbery. New York: Viking, 1987. Pp. 97. \$15.95.

April Galleons, John Ashbery's first collection since the 1985 *Collected Poems*, works within the style that has contributed to Ashbery's dominance at the center of contemporary poetry. As an introductory statement in an essay that attempts to evaluate Ashbery's work, this sentence seems a weak opener. When describing a poet of Ashbery's apparent stature, such a noncommittal, nonevaluative statement sounds at best blandly congratulatory, as if it addresses a poet who has made his mark and is now just mopping up by inconsequentially repeating the motions that made him. It is accurate, for *April Galleons* does not present a sudden turn in style; it comfortably works within an established mode. Yet it also sounds wrong, for Ashbery has been at the center of fierce discussions about contemporary poetry. These discussions are not resolved by this book. *April Galleons's* repetition of a mode should just intensify our awareness that the problems Ashbery has raised in the past have not been settled; his work still has consequences.

In *April Galleons*, Ashbery continues to develop his repertoire: he employs puzzling shifts in direction, references to his own writing of the poem, enigmatic titles, different voices, borrowed voices, vague antecedents, unclear addressees, clichés, and humour. Like all his poetry, this book is designed for silent, individual reading. And like most of the poetry from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* onward, in most poems the sense of a central subject is somewhat clearer, much more so than in the aleatory writing of his early *The Tennis Court*

Oath. Only "Frost" and "Railroad Bridge" are clear exceptions to this development.

A poem in this new book that typifies many of these continuing patterns is "A Snowball in Hell." It begins:

In the beginning there are those who don't quite fit in
 But are somehow okay. And then some morning
 There are places that suddenly seem wonderful:
 Weather and water seem wonderful,
 And the peaceful night sky that arrives
 In time to protect us, like a sword
 Cutting the blue cloak of a prince. (5)¹

A borrowed voice appears in the title and opening lines, a voice that seems casual, but which by the last two lines metamorphoses into the pedantic and melodramatic voice of surrealistic writing. The shift in voice shows Ashbery's uses of indeterminacy: the change in direction in the second last line implies a comparison whose synapses misfire, but barely. It is difficult to establish a connection between a "peaceful night sky" and a sword which is "Cutting the blue cloak of a prince." As in much of Ashbery's poetry, the voices themselves, their combination and juxtaposition, reveal more humour than heaviness. The humour at times moves in directions that irritate Ashbery's critics: through his repeating of "seem wonderful," Ashbery teeters at the edge of banality. In what has become another Ashbery trademark, the language has a vagueness ("seem wonderful," "are somehow okay," "some morning") that has overtones of self-assurance rather than of indecision.

April Galleons also shows some new directions. It seems to contain more oblique fables, poems which at their center have a sense of an articulable moral which directs a postmodern narrative. Other contemporary poets, such as James Tate and Seamus Heaney, have also recently constructed such works, but Ashbery's aleatory style seems ideally suited to it. When Ashbery adds narrative elements to his poetry, the narration interacts with the missing connections in such a way that the poem seems to have no choice but to move in the direction of fabulation. "Morning Jitters" gives the clearest sense of this development:

And the storm reestablished itself
 As a hole in the sheet of time
 And of the weariness of the world,
 And all the old work that remains to be done on its surface.
 Came morning and the husband was back on the shore

To ask another favor of the fish,
 Leviathan now, patience wearing thin. Whose answer
 Bubbled out of the waves' crenellations:
 "Too late! Yet if you analyze
 The abstract good fortune that has brought you
 To this floor (4)

Although this writing resembles Ashbery's atypical but heavily anthologized "The Instruction Manual," there is more indirection here than in that early work. Here, the opening four lines don't function so much as part of the narrative, but more as an oblique commentary on the narrative. But the commentary does have a relation to what follows. Unlike much of his other earlier work, in "Morning Jitters" and in other recent work the narrative context and its values are sustained through much of the poem. Especially when the narrative line is quite clear, such poetry has at times the feel of a Postmodern magical realism.

This collection continues Ashbery's changing treatment of people desiring some metaphysical transcendence and their consequently failed epiphanies as the condition of life. Although Ashbery still addresses this topic, there is not as much wise posturing about those failed epiphanies (as there is, for example, in *Three Poems*). He seems less critical of people who desire such transcendence. Perhaps he is resigned to such a lack, but even "resigned" seems too strong a word, for Ashbery's attitude is more mellow than "resigned" would indicate. He is "at home," comfortable in a diminished world. As he is getting older, perhaps he is taking on the posture of the wise, forgiving prophet. "Amid Mounting Evidence" ends with:

And the signs of stress that follow
 in the wake of confusion are there to be read, but the
 electricity
 Bakes them into shapes of its own cognizance, its wanting
 To give us something a little better to spend
 The rest of our lives looking for, wondering whether it got
 misplaced.
 In the old days this would have been on the house. (37, 38)

The deflation, humour, and distance of this last sentence and its attitude to removal is less wistful than Ashbery's attitude was twelve years earlier with the conclusion to "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror":

The hand holds no chalk
 And each part of the whole falls off

And cannot know it knew, except
 Here and there, in cold pockets
 Of remembrance, whispers out of time. (83)²

In *April Galleons* Ashbery acknowledges removal as inevitable, as something so natural that protesting it seems as odd as protesting gravity. The casual acceptance of these lines from his prose poem "The Ice Storm" typifies his attitude in *April Galleons*: "How natural then to retreat into what we have been doing, trying to capture the old songs, the idiot games whose rules have been forgotten. 'Here we go looby, looby'" (91).

But these developments slightly transform a single project; they do not radically change its direction. *April Galleons* will not change anyone's mind about Ashbery; it will confirm opinions. Most noticeably, opinions will continue to solidify around Ashbery's stature, for Ashbery inevitably draws evaluative statements from his readers. Especially since 1975, when *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* reeled in the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award, discussion of Ashbery (more than that of any other contemporary writer) has been directed to fixing his place in the canon. All critical articles on Ashbery make some judgement, either implicitly or explicitly.

Predictably, the characteristic energy of claims for and against Ashbery does not contribute to settling the argument. But the pitch and insistence should raise questions about the nature of the argument itself. *Why* is there such urgency about Ashbery's poetry, and what form does this urgency take? Why, for example, are far fewer people committing themselves to opinions about James Dickey or Robert Bly?

Critics of Ashbery are strident partly because Harold Bloom has set the agenda for the types of claims one can make for Ashbery. One is often tempted to dislike Ashbery because Bloom is so irritatingly effusive about him, effusive for reasons many don't find important. On the other hand, those who like Ashbery can find Bloom's reasons not Ashbery's best defense. On both sides of the question many sense in Bloom's assertions about Ashbery's lasting value a carrying out of Bloom's own time-specific agenda about the place of his own post-structuralist critical theory.

But Bloom is, and should be, a side issue, a symptom of our own, larger problems in dealing with Ashbery. The high pitch in discussion of Ashbery arises less from Harold Bloom, or from the aesthetic value of the poetry, or from the prizes Ashbery has won, than from the na-

ture of Ashbery's celebrated difficulty. Granted, difficulty initially does not seem a valid reason for making the questions about Ashbery's worth so urgent. Other contemporary poets are difficult. Further, post Romantic readers have an arsenal of justifications to separate questions of difficulty from questions of worth. It is the *character* of Ashbery's difficulty, however, that raises questions of evaluation. His difficulty is unsettling because it questions much of what we find important about poetry. Ashbery questions the assumptions of unity, self-expression and single direction that informs our reading of most other poetry. The textures within his poems change often, unannounced, and they do not point to different speakers or narrative or logical development. They just point to change. These lines from "A Snowball in Hell" are typical in the disruptions they present to readers and to contemporary poetry:

But one night the door opened
 And there was nothing to say, the relationships
 Had gotten strangley tilted, like price tags.
 That girl you loved, that former patient of mine,
 Arrives soused on a Monday
 After the crunch it seems.
 Please play this back. All the recording
 In the world won't help unless you or someone else listens (5)

The confident syntax seems infinitely more conservative than the structural pyrotechnics of much Modernist poetry, but the structure has a disconcerting relationship to its content. Syntax and narrative content are at odds with each other. The symbolizing, authoritative voice of the opening three lines shifts to a causal, anecdotal voice which transforms the poem to a narrative. This voice in turn is replaced by a polite imperative followed by an aphorism which simultaneously closes off the imperative, enlarges it, and points in a new direction. The slipperiness increases through the two occurrences of "you": usually, recurrences of that pronoun imply a single context; here (although apparently addressed to the reader), "you" seems to have a different referent in each of its instances.

Through integrating such differing textures into a single poem, Ashbery sets obscuring moments of indeterminacy against glimpses of determinacy. His poems slip in and out of meaning, and do not allow for the possibility of easy reference. Perhaps because of our Modernist heritage, we typically look for irony in such sudden changes in direction. But Ashbery's aims are larger than irony, which after all still works with the concept of a text's unified strategy. Rather, individual

lines in Ashbery's work pull toward a larger, metaphoric context that is not there, and the aggressive specificity that results from such cognitive failure confuses us. If we cannot read the following lines from "April Galleons" as being under the control of a larger but ghostly metaphor, we are left with overwhelming specificity:

Something *was* burning. And besides,
 At the far end of the room a discredited waltz
 Was alive and reciting tales of the conquerors
 And their lilies—is all of life thus
 A tepid housewarming? And where do the scraps
 Of meaning come from? Obviously,
 It was time to be off, in another
 Direction, (95)

The difficulty that results from such failed meanings makes us unsure about the work's unity, for Ashbery's poems seem implicitly to attack such a concept in a way that they couldn't if they were structured by irony.

The difficulty discombobulates the reading process, for such a twisting poetry is less comfortable to read than is most other, conventionally difficult writing. Certainly, critics know the rationale behind Ashbery's shifting writing. Ashbery has stated that his poetry is about the "experience of experience," a form of reality which presumably doesn't have the single-directioned structure that many writers attribute to *their* realities. But knowing the rationale for the writing style doesn't solve the style's problems. Ashbery's notion of experience isn't as commonsensical as it might seem, and it doesn't ease reading comprehension. How does a person, separate from the author, read the author's "experience of experience?" The poem proffers a contract to the reader that in its multi-directioned vagueness allows immense freedom to enter one's own experiences. But I (as do readers generally, I suspect) feel threatened by such freedom because such freedom is not yet a part of my learned reading habits. Because the "experience of experience" in Ashbery's poems is not our own, if we don't lose attention we tend to read for bits of solid meaning. We pounce upon nuggets that sound like "normal" poetry (nuggets that we can quote in reviews), and we drift out of attention when the poem destroys the context it has set up by rambling away from what looks like a stable bit of meaning.

As do reading habits, the style of Ashbery criticism betrays our unease, for as a form of reading it also interacts equivocally with the style of Ashbery's writing. For example, Bloom's reading of Ashbery

has an urbane certainty that *this* way is the way the poem works—he imposes almost allegorical readings on the poems, allegories that mesh perfectly with Bloom's larger project. These restrictive allegories are seen less spectacularly but yet insistently in the examples critics cull from Ashbery. Critics almost always cite Ashbery's self-reflexive moments of clarity. These moments are attractive to academics, for they have an elegance, a sound which seems familiar, a distanced sophistication:

So, although
It's a little damp here, it suits me fine
Since I have so much to think over, and, even worse,
Write a report on, like the rondel or villanelle it is.

("Fall Pageant" 79)

These moments also are useful, for they pithily summarize what the critic has decided the poems are about. True, Ashbery's poetry has these moments of self-reflexive clarity, but they are a small part of the experience of reading his work. Further, this form of citation belies the assertions for indeterminacy and process that most people make for Ashbery. Critics typically cite such illuminating passages to illustrate the point that what really characterizes Ashbery's poetry and gives it value is the *process* as the work moves in and out of meaning. Writers discuss but don't cite the bewildering changes in direction because these changes are not as comfortable or useful as these quotable aphorisms. Given the current conventions of critical writing, this style of citation is probably unavoidable. But it does point out that such quotation of nuggets is an awkward fit; such citation attempts to create a single context or metaphor for a work which resists such reading.

The syntactically-unacknowledged resistance to unity, and our resultant uncertainty in reading and citation begin to point out why questions of reputation are urgently addressed to Ashbery. We are urgent because Ashbery is an uncomfortable poet to read. As a group, academics do not enjoy being uncomfortable, and this work has some uncomfortable implications. What do we say about contemporary poetry if the disconcerting nature of this poetry frames and channels every discussion? What do we say about contemporary poetry if such disconcerting writing is its most valuable force? Critical discomfort also prolongs the debate, for as long as the writing remains profoundly (as opposed to fashionably) disconcerting, Ashbery's value will be inconclusively debated.

However, suppose we read Ashbery's poetry so that its aleatory style no longer takes up most of our critical energy. We may have lost something of Ashbery's power, but we will be able to make a calmer assessment of his worth. As the argument in Charles Altieri's *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* demonstrates, what then frames discussion of Ashbery's value are issues like how ambitious that uncomfortable poetry is, or how successfully one can answer *why* his subject matter and technique are important.

The beginnings of an answer to that question need to deal with the social consequences implied in the word "important." Many critics have addressed this issue, pointing out that Ashbery's style seems to create a poetry that is limited, isolated from other people and from reality. The chance and missed connections in his writing make his experience of experience seem impersonal. Further, especially when compared to a poet such as Adrienne Rich, Ashbery seems to lack commitment, remaining uninvolved with the world. Although Ashbery's project follows in the line of Zukofsky and Olson, these poets were overtly more ambitious, and addressed the experience of experience through the structure and borrowed texts of a larger culture. The lack of commitment and the cerebral nature of his poetry opens him to charges of decadence and of having a limited range.

The charges don't completely stick. Certainly, Ashbery's typical closure of a denied transcendence has become a limiting convention. But unlike the questions one can direct to many other contemporary poets, the relevant questions that one can ask about Ashbery are important questions. Unlike the fashionable poems that so many contemporary poets have written, poems of unarticulable epiphanies, poems that repeatedly and strainedly assert an unspeakable metaphysic, Ashbery's poetry is much more rigorous and honest about the problems of perception and communication, and it does show why these are important issues.

To discover why the issues Ashbery's poetry addresses are important issues, one must recognize that most charges against Ashbery's work attack the style and basic subject matter of Ashbery's poetry. But these attacks are not complete. They are based on a partial reading of his poetry, for they do not ask whether Ashbery's poetry of removal, of failed communication is his limited topic or the superstructure, the given, upon which he builds his varied topics. That sense of removal is as basic to Ashbery as perception is to Stevens. If one grants to Ashbery as a starting point the idea of failed communication, Ashbery's poetry does ask the larger questions. Style, also, becomes a

presupposition for the poetry's other activities. That list from the beginning of this article—Ashbery's puzzling shifts in direction, references to his own writing of the poem, enigmatic titles, different voices, borrowed voices, vague antecedents, unclear addressees, clichés, and humour—contains the means by which Ashbery talks around what is central to his poetry. This panoply of technique is not decadent decoration. It structures his failed epiphanies and his sense of loss; it shows why such losses are believable; and it gives value to such losses.

This selection from "Adam Snow," for example, is more than a wandering discourse about failed transcendence:

And suddenly outlines unlock
 The forms they were sequestering, just to make it simple
 And equal.

Ah, but all fakes aren't alike
 I think we must settle for the big thing
 Since quality, though a matter of survival,
 Is such a personal call. Sometimes it's nowhere at all
 Or a faint girl will make light of it, saying
 In the sprockets in the backwoods there are no noticeable
 Standards, nothing to judge one or be judged by.
 It's true the refreshing absence of color
 Produces an effect like that of time; (10)

Although Ashbery's poetry rarely states its own practical implications, it does address our involvement with the real world. In its first seven lines this passage discusses the ethical dimensions of perception, living with failure, and individual versus public responsibility. The modulations in direction that seem to occur after "personal call" are disconcerting, and because they are disconcerting they give a lightness, an insubstantiality to the previous context while at the same time they develop that context in new directions. The changes in direction show the fleetingness of such perceptions, and attach such perceptions to new contexts. The following selection from Ashbery's "Polite Distortions" has a similar practical bent, although it is practicality at an abstract level: "The sensible thing is to review, always to review. / In this way new steps are seen to have been already / Invented" (62). In their sudden conflating of relationships among ethics, adventure, self-evaluation, and history, these lines show a depth that we often do not discuss when we evaluate Ashbery.

Such depth is part of almost all of Ashbery's poetry. Such depth also is enhanced and modulated, not just confused, by Ashbery's changes in direction. It is difficult to assess since it has shifting emphases which

fade in and out of presence, and the fading away is as important to our reading experience as is the presence. But it is this depth, and its relation to Ashbery's difficulty, which needs to inform analyses of Ashbery's importance.

NOTES

1. Unless noted otherwise, all citations in this review are from *April Galleons*.
2. New York: Viking, 1975.