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***Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems* by John Ashbery. New York: Ecco. 276 pages. \$34.95.**

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John Ashbery's earlier *Selected Poems* (Viking, 1985) drew on the first thirty years of his career, from *Some Trees* (1956) to *A Wave* (1985). The new *Selected* covers the twenty years since 1985 in roughly the same number of pages. Indeed, the volumes have a nice symmetry: each covers ten books of poems (the most recent, *A Worldly Country* [2007] is not included); each volume is reduced to approximately one third of its length. Ashbery's preference, in making these selections, seems to be for shorter poems: just as the first *Selected* reproduced only one section of the book-length *Three Poems*, the second gives us only a short section (V) of the 216-page *Flow Chart*.

Because *Notes from the Air* marks Ashbery's eightieth birthday, readers are sure to wonder how the later work compares to the earlier. The first thing to note, perhaps, is that the evolution of Ashbery's lyric mode is startlingly similar to that of Wallace Stevens. Both poets gained recognition relatively late (Stevens was forty-four when *Harmonium* was published, Ashbery forty-nine when he published *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*); in both cases, the central parameters of the verse (even when, in Ashbery's case, it is prose) remain the same, but in the late work, the rhythms become more relaxed, the vocabulary and syntax more informal and inconsequential, and there is a new willingness to take risks, even if that means striking out now and again. In late Ashbery, as in late Stevens, "the edges and inchings of final form" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven") are

never far away, but Ashbery (unlike Stevens) assumes a playful stance to what one of his titles calls "Autumn on the Thruway." Laughter, laced though it is with anxiety, echoes through these pages. Given the times we live in, these poems suggest, the comic modality—burlesque, parody, satire, and always a measure of irony—is surely our Necessary Angel. If Ashbery is, in Harold Bloom's lexicon, the ephebe of Stevens, he is an ephebe for the information age, our blog and cellphone-crazed universe in which, to cite the first poem in *Some Trees*, "Everything has a schedule if you can find out what it is." Never, after all, have there been more rules than in the protocols that govern our daily digital activity: click one incorrect letter or space and you're done for. But is there a "right" click? And where are the words that haven't been used a thousand times by others? Indeed, doesn't everything we hear sound as if it's always already been said?

A 1995 poem called "By Guess or By Gosh" is a case in point. Ashbery has always made connections between high art and popular culture, as in his Popeye poem "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape." But the juxtapositions of "By Guess or By Gosh" strike a new note of absurdity, beginning with the *faux* parallelism of the alliterating title, with its play on "By Hook or by Crook," a cliché that turns out to be quite relevant to this poem's narrative. By Gosh: the near obsolete, coy expletive (the only person I've heard use it recently is George Herbert Walker Bush) has nothing whatever to do with guesswork, but it nicely sets the stage for Ashbery's hilarious fantasy about false portents, omens, and coincidences.

The poem opens with an asymmetrical couplet, recording what sounds like an overheard conversation:

Even so, we have forgotten their graves

I swear to you I will not beat one drum in your absence.

Whose graves? We don't know, but our interest is immediately aroused by the play on «drumbeating.» As Ashbery phrases it, his declaraton can mean

either, «I refuse to do one thing to promote your cause,» or, conversely, «While you're away, I will be so sad I won't play one note of music on my instrument.» Either way, the drumbeat now introduces a tale of absurd proportions, in which a Phoenician sailor (known to us from *The Waste Land*, first as Eliot's own alter ego in the Tarot pack and then in «Death by Water» as Phlebas the Phoenician) turns into Wagner's ghostly Flying Dutchman, trying to «garner a spouse» so as to break the curse that keeps him forever on the high seas. The story (whether fiction or film) becomes sillier and sillier, the narrator commenting that «perhaps» the girls available have rejected our hero for «the lack of something called 'personable,' / though I think I don't even want to know what that is.» But the casual phrasing should not fool us: Ashbery has the whole thing worked out to the last detail. «It was in a garage where tire irons jangled in the breeze,» that the poet first heard the story, those tire irons recalling the grappling irons that attach Captain Daland's vessel to the dreaded ghost ship of the *Flying Dutchman* legend. Wagner, for that matter, provides the link between Phoenician sailor and Flying Dutchman, *Tristan and Isolde* providing a key motif for *The Waste Land*, which also cites Wagner's *Parsifal*.

But what is the point of these conjunctions? A clue is provided in the next lines, «I'll follow / my heart over warm oceans of Chinese lounge music.» The reference, the websites tell us, is to the «lost art of improvisational guqin music,» recently revived as lounge music in elegant hotels or restaurants. The guqin is a plucked seven-string Chinese instrument of the zither family, known as «the instrument of the sages,» because Confucius singled it out for praise. So, the poem suggests, forget those ominous legends, those gloomy Wagner plots and *Waste Land* images: you can always sail those «warm oceans» of music, available, at least, «until the day the badger coughs up that secret.» Follow, in other words, your own lights, for in the public world:

Confused minions swarmed on the quarterdeck.

No one was giving orders anymore. In fact it was quite a while since any had been issued. Who's in charge here?

Can't anyone stop the player piano before it rolls us

in the trough of a tidal wave? How did we get to be so many?

It is all very zany but also serious. Like a player piano, the narrator sees himself as operating on automatic, unable to avoid the «Death by Water» that is the fate of Flying Dutchman and Phoenician Sailor. And it is not only the narrator who is threatened. The final question above echoes Eliot's (or rather, Dante's), response to the trimmers in the vestibule of hell, «I had not thought death had undone so many.» Even the prospect at poem's end of a visit to the local movie theater can't make us forget that fact.

Ashbery's mode, in this and related poems, is not that of collage; indeed, it is not, as is generally claimed, disjunctive and fragmented. On the contrary, this is a poetry that exploits syntactic continuity and a kind of sequential normalcy, only to subvert continuity at every step by injecting alien items and unexpected references into the sequence. It's a matter of careful construction, of finding the Flaubertian *mot juste* or, in this case, *phrase juste*. Only someone as learned, curious, wide-ranging, and expert in all manner of writing, music, and media works, as is Ashbery, could bring it off. No wonder his poetry has proved so impervious to imitation.

The title poem of *Notes from the Air* is remarkable in this regard. It begins:

A yak is a prehistoric cabbage: of that, at least we may be sure.

But tell us, sages of the solarium, why is that light

still hidden back there, among house-plants and rubber sponges?

The equation of the first line makes no sense, even as a potential riddle, for what similarity can there be between the long-haired, humped bovine animal, native to the uplands of the Himalayas or Mongolia, and "prehistoric

cabbage”—a term that sounds ridiculous but, as I learned from a quick Google search, refers to *kale*, whose giant curly cabbage-like leaves evidently provided food for giant insects in prehistoric times. *Yak* (not only the noun but also the verb *yak*) and *kale*: a moment’s thought reveals that the language game in which these two items have a necessary connection is the crossword puzzle, both monosyllables serving to fill up those tricky blanks created by y’s and k’s in final position.

But cabbages and yaks (unlike Lewis Carroll’s “cabbages and kings”) have a further link. In travel narratives about the Himalayas—and they are legion—we often read about tired mountaineers, descending the trail and looking forward to a delicious meal of yak and boiled cabbage. Or again, Ashbery may have been thinking of the 1960 Sci-Fi film (based on Arthur Conan Doyle) called *The Lost World*, in which Professor Summerlee nearly gets eaten by a prehistoric cabbage, and his rival professor named Challenger taunts, “Well, Summerlee, you may not like vegetables, but they certainly like you.» The animals of *The Lost World* are dinosaurs, not yaks: but the latter are almost as exotic.

Can all this material really be packed into a single line, and, if so, how is the unsuspecting reader to process it all? Is Ashbery resorting to the very crossword puzzle tactics he is lampooning? «Notes from the Air» is indeed difficult but no more difficult, I would posit, than the poems of Eliot or Pound, Stevens or Stein or Moore—Ashbery’s Modernist precursors. True, there is a line of poetry popular today that extends from the minor Beats to the «natural speech» lyric still ubiquitous in the popular journals, a lyric perhaps chiefly designed for the poetry reading, where the audience can «get it» as soon as the performance ceases, there being nothing to cross-reference, whether from Milton or Mahler, Rimbaud or Redbook, James Bond or James Dean. But, despite the perennial demand that poetry should satisfy the «common reader,» whoever that is, *difficulty* has been a quality

of the poetry that matters throughout its history. The difference, in the twenty-first century, is that it has become more essential—and also more fun—to look things up.

Or so I felt, rereading «Notes from the Air.» The first line makes everything else in the poem happen. Once we understand that the poet and his fellow «sages of the solarium» are fooling around, one lazy afternoon, doing the crossword puzzle or perhaps swapping stories about old movies and travelogues, we can track the process whereby time, pleasantly wasted late in the day, late in the season, becomes two stanzas later, the time that is «running through die holes / like sand from a bag. And these sandy moments / accuse us, are just what our enemy ordered.» In the Stevensian meditation that follows, the poet comes to see that it's time to ask, «Where shall we go when we leave?», time to eat those «fruits halved for our despairing instruction» and make sure there are «chairs enough / for everyone to be seated in time for the lesson to begin.»

Once that «lesson» is learned, it's time to move on to another poem, one that begins, say, with the line, «We were warned about spiders, and the occasional famine.» The *illogic* of continuity is Ashbery's signature, whether from line to line, poem to poem, or volume to volume. Age, to paraphrase another bard much cited by Ashbery, cannot wither it.

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