

**From *Odra*, (Warsaw), nr. 10 (2008):
Interview with Grzegorz Jankowicz**

Professor Marjorie Perloff: Internet Interview

Questions:

1. In your book called *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* you have suggested that we can't really come to terms with the major poetic experiments occurring in the 20th century without some understanding of what you call "the other tradition". Could you explain this general concept? How should we understand it? Is it historical, formal or geographical?

MP: First, please bear in mind that I wrote *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* about thirty years ago! At the time, the New Criticism still dominated, and John Ashbery was dismissed as much too "difficult," "incomprehensible," purposely obscure. The "right" kind of poetry (e.g. Robert Lowell) was representational and communicated emotion in a comprehensible way, although poetry also had to have some obliqueness, via metaphor and symbol. Lowell's "For the Union Dead" would be an example: the "giant finned cars" that "slide by on grease" in the final stanza *symbolize* the replacement of natural, organic animal life (fish) by the machines that have destroyed our industrial world, and so on. In this context, I wanted to trace the tradition that had produced an Ashbery or John Cage—I found that there was an *other tradition*, in which language was at one more literal and also more mysterious and that couldn't be "translated" or paraphrased. My poets were Rimbaud, Stein, Pound, Williams, Beckett, leading up to David Antin, John Cage, and Ashbery. I contrasted this "other" tradition to the T. S. Eliot "Symbolist" one. In

retrospect, of course this dichotomy is specious. Eliot, surely a major influence on Ashbery, could just as well have been placed in the opposite camp, and of course Mallarmé could have replaced Rimbaud. I think what I really had in mind was less the poetry itself than the way **it was being read**. Eliot's New Critical heirs were read for their "symbolic" meanings and you couldn't do that with Ashbery. So from that point of view, the distinction was, and I hope still is, useful.

2. You took the phrase from the title of a poem by John Ashbery (the poem was published in 1977 in his book *Houseboat Days*). The phrase was actually introduced by our poet in his long poem titled *System* written five years earlier. What is this curious "other tradition" described by Ashbery?

MP. The "other tradition," as the phrase is used in "The System," is, I think, part serious, part parodic. On the one hand, here and later in *Houseboat Days*, Ashbery means that "you can't say it that way any more," that in the later 20th century, there can be no way of representing the "real" outside the poem in any sort of representational way. But if you read *The System*, it's also spoofing art's promises to be revelatory, to give us a special dispensation and insight into the other." The "other tradition" is thus itself ambiguous, open, indeterminate—and that's precisely Ashbery's point, I think.

3. What fascinates me about *The Other Tradition* is that we can read it in two different ways at the same time. On the one hand, it is a pure flow of language and images. But on the other readers are able to adapt this dream plot to fit their own set of particulars. What would you say for such a particular interpretation: the poem describes a poetry reading organized in 1976 (it was written that year) and held in New York. The reading was to

commemorate the 10th anniversary of Frank O'Hara's death. *The other tradition* is actually *O'Hara's poetics*. How far we can go with such reading?

MP. Well, I think that's too literal a construction of the poem. What makes it so delightful is that it relates to so many possible events: college reunions? Political rallies? Poets' Clubs? If you restrict the meaning to the commemoration of O'Hara, why the "branches of Norfolk Island pine" or, later on, "the idea of a forest"—O'Hara, after all was wholly urban! So I will stick to my original reading; the poem is at once *literal*—much particular detail—but also endlessly suggestive. Then, too, if Ashbery had wanted to write an elegy for Frank O'Hara, he would have. Why assume that the poem says X, but means Y?

4. In the title of his lectures Ashbery used plural form: we have many different traditions. What does this tiny but significant change mean?

MP. I actually think that the Charles Eliot Norton lectures use the term in a very different sense. Here "other traditions" means quirky, offbeat, not the usual mainstream, major poets. Ashbery, as he says, wants to place himself with these OTHER poets rather than to claim kinship with the usual suspects. It's a kind of statement of "difference," oppositionality. But not quite the same thing as the mysterious other tradition of *The System* or the poem by the title.

5. He chose six authors (five of them are English-writing individuals and one – Raymond Roussel – is French). Ashbery says that his list contains only certifiably minor poets.

What is their current position in the history of English literature? And why they were ignored by literary criticism?

MP. Well, I must say that from the vantage point of the critic—at least this critic—the list is entirely eccentric. John Clare is a fine poet, and Raymond Roussel very important to Ashbery, but the others are eccentric choices. I personally can't stand Laura Riding's poetry—and even Ashbery admits she has written some awful poems—and I can't see the fuss over David Schubert or John Wheelwright. Beddoes has an historical interest; *Death's Jest Book* is a fascinating quirky work. But I think Ashbery chose these poets precisely in order to be somewhat perverse. As he says, he felt he had nothing that new to say about the Big Names—Stevens, Auden, Stein, or the Romantics, but on these lesser poets, he could be quite original.

The poets in question are largely “ignored by literary criticism” because they are, on the whole, minor poets. Among such minor poets, Clare and Roussel stand out as poets that have a large following of devotees. Riding has gotten her share of criticism because she is a woman poet and has an interesting place in literary history. But the rest are just not that admired.

6. I read Ashbery's project as highly anti-critical (he does like to repeat Nijinsky's maxim that “criticism is death”). Are his essays of any interest for critics? I mean not for those who deal with Ashbery's poetry and want to learn something from his view upon others, but those who work with poetry in general and are looking for a new perspective?

MP. I agree with you. Ashbery's essays are fascinating as perhaps prose poems in their own right; they teach us many things about Ashbery's perspective. But for poetry criticism in general, I find them

a little bit irrelevant. But this is true of Ashbery's writings on painters too. He seems to prefer, say, Fairfield Porter to Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock or Jasper Johns. That doesn't mean we should feel that way. It is Ashbery's *poetic license* to respond as he does. His readings are interesting in taking nothing on faith, in drawing their *own conclusions*.

7. Why do you think experimental poetry is less accepted by literary institutions, establishment, and regular readers than other literary forms and conventions? One can observe (always and everywhere – from Poland to the US) a specific resistance to progressive poetics that subvert our lingual and literary experience. And why does– as some critics try to convince us – this neglected poetry deserve readers' attention?

MP. You answer your own question in your first sentence when you mention both experimental poetry and institutions. The institution (university, publishing house, newspaper) is by definition conservative and the attack must always be launched from outside it. It's so much easier reading little lyric love poems or seeing conventional "problem" plays in three acts than it is to do something new. But there are always pockets of resistance. And indeed Ashbery, after all, has himself become something of an institution. He is praised by all the various camps of critics in the U.S. and abroad. In fact, one could argue that he has been too unquestioningly accepted and it's not quite clear why some of the conservative critics like him.

8. Literary institutions have created another way of rejecting hermetic poetry. Instead of neglecting it they normalize its subversiveness. In your essay *Normalizing John Ashbery* you present how that academic critics, who dismissed Ashbery's poems as so much

obscurantist doubletalk, have accepted its formal variety. Is there any chance for Ashes to remain the invisible avant-gardist?

MP. Yes, this follows from the previous question. Those critics who “normalize” Ashbery—and I think Helen Vendler is one—choose certain coherent moments and relate Ashbery, say, to Keats. But the fact is, as common sense tells us, that he is not like Keats. What I find difficult and interesting is that many Ashbery passages sound, say, like Charles Bernstein poems and yet the same people who love Ashbery don’t usually like Bernstein. Why? Is it a preconceived reaction? One answer, perhaps, is that despite all his strangeness, Ashbery does still “express” selfhood—in ways different from the Language poets. But of course the Ashbery of *The Tennis Court Oath* or *Girls on the Run* or even *A Wave* is different—still the “invisible avant-gardist” as you put it. And that’s the Ashbery younger avant-gardists often prefer.

9. In his 1968 lecture called *The Invisible Avant-Garde* Ashbery writes that there may be a fine distinction to be made between “the” tradition (high modernism) and “a” (or “other”) tradition, but the point is that there is no longer any doubt in anyone’s mind that vanguard and experimental writing have their own strong institution that makes them visible. Today all traditions and institutions seem to be in ruins. Do you think that it is still possible to think about literature through the perspective of “a” or “the” tradition(s)?

MP. I actually don’t think all traditions are in ruins but that critical discourse is very weak these days and doesn’t grapple with the problems. Poetry reviewers especially deal with the present, failing to see how that present relates to, say, the 60s and 70s. I notice that the forgotten poets today are not the Modernists but the mid-century poets—in fact, Frank O’Hara, Allen Ginsberg, etc., not to mention such

once-important poets as W. S. Merwin, James Wright, Adrienne Rich, who came of age in the late 50s-early 60s. The question for literary critics and historians, then, is how the poetry of the early 21st century relates to its past. Another good question: the relation of U.S. to other poetries—a very neglected topic. For instance: why is Ashbery so especially popular in Poland? That's not a rhetorical question. What is it about Polish art/culture that responds to Ashbery so fully? Poland was one of the first countries to recognize the genius of Frank O'Hara too. Why and how?

10. In your response to Harold Bloom's refusal of cultural criticism, you wrote that Bloom's insistence on the Romantic paradigm as *the* paradigm had made him curiously impervious to some of the most exciting poetry now being written. I ignore the whole paradox inscribed in Bloom's argument (he refuses cultural criticism and at the same time he invests his energy in thematic reading) but I am interested in his aims. Don't you think that by refusing linguistic analysis and taking us back to thematic motifs outside the materiality of the poetic language, Bloom focuses on those modes of criticism that enables him to establish the power of a poem over reality and other texts? Shouldn't we all follow that path? In other words: shouldn't we promote poetry and stress its power instead of stressing the reader with linguistic analysis? Or maybe Bloom simply can't see any other way to "promote" his poetical object?

MP. I think what you mean here is that Bloom goes for the big picture, "placing" Ashbery in the larger canon and that this may be better than engaging in close "linguistic analysis." I have actually come to like Bloom's criticism much better than I once did, because at least he deals with the *literary*, whereas so much of our current academic criticism is mostly a way of foregrounding minorities,

women, various ethnicities. At the same time, I think Bloom made Ashbery something he wasn't: the ultimate Last Romantic. But Ashbery has great affinities with W. H. Auden and the Eliot that Bloom dislikes! So the thematic readings are fine but, in this case, can be limited. Still, it was Bloom who put Ashbery on the poetic map to begin with and that was all to the good.

11. What are the new trends focused on poetry in America? What are the emerging traits that define contemporary poetical and critical scene in the US?

MP. Well, much of the most interesting poetry being written today uses appropriation/citation in ways that we find in Ashbery himself, where every line sounds as if it were cited from somewhere! It is a poetry that plays down "originality" in the sense of Wordsworth's "overflow of powerful feelings" in favor of *framing*, recasting the always already seen/read (*déjà dit*) as something new. In this sense, younger poets may be said to be in the Ashbery tradition. But the other news today is less Ashberrian. Concrete poetry is once again very important, looking ahead to the digital. Ditto sound poetry. And rules—like the Oulipo constraints—are very important. I just directed a little symposium on Conceptual Poetry and its Others at the University of Arizona (see website under "Arizona Poetry Center"). The poets included Caroline Bergvall, Charles Bernstein, Christian Bok, Craig Dworkin, Peter Gizzi, Kenneth Goldsmith, Susan Howe, Tracie Morris, and Cole Swensen. Of these, only Gizzi and Swensen are in any sense Ashberrian, and Kenneth Goldsmith, the advocate of "Uncreative Writing" and being "just a Word Processor," mark a return to Futurism and Dada rather than the Ashberrian mode. Tracie Morris is a performance artist, interested in Hip Hop, among other things. Susan

Howe is more Poundian, creating elaborate half-lyric, half documentary prose works.

It's a complicated poetry scene but very lively. I recommend to your readers *Ubuweb* (ubu.com) and *Penn.Sound* (where you can hear Ashbery read). The internet is where, currently, poetry is! And there are brilliant texts to be read, seen, and heard there!