

At the *Hotel Lautréamont* · Philip Kobylarz

IN HIS LATEST COLLECTION of poetry, John Ashbery becomes who he has been all along: Isidore Ducasse, the pre-surrealist French poet and author of the epic poem in prose, *The Songs of Maldoror*. Just as Ducasse takes on the persona of Maldoror to personalize his work of automatic writing, Ashbery sets his book in the imaginary context of a Hotel Lautréamont in an attempt to emphasize a cyclical return to the period that spawned Ducasse's, or the name he adopted, the Count of Lautréamont's, famous work of prose poetry.

It is fitting that Ashbery would choose Ducasse as his predecessor for this collection. *The Songs of Maldoror* was written in the early eighteenth century when French popular literature was characterized by the *roman noir*. Gérard de Nerval was writing his hermetic sonnets and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* set the standard for a poetry enlivened by a fascination with evil. There is also the attraction that very little is known of Ducasse. Because the Count died at an early age and *Maldoror* is the only substantial volume he left behind, his book has long been revered as one of the first works to draw largely on the unconscious, hence the Surrealists' interest in him and in his method. His work is also widely held to be the literary precedent of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. Told by an ecstatic narrator, it develops with remarkably little narration, the story unfolding in juxtapositions of images, surprising associations, especially among narrated vignettes, and direct addresses to the reader by the fictional character Maldoror.

These elements of style are all familiar to readers of Ashbery whose poems often play on colloquial language while they attempt to engage the reader in their many faceted tones. At times, however, these missives written from a room in an imaginary hotel, read more like letters addressed to the writer than written to a beloved other or even to his readers.

The style of a good portion of the poems is free verse. But Ashbery doesn't limit himself to any norm of contemporary poetry. Poems written in traditional forms and in the spirit of the tradition are shuffled among

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those with the feel of free verse. All avoid linear development, be it narrative, reflective, or discursive. Open the book to any page and there will be such a passage:

If I had the wings of an angel something, or everything,
would be slightly different, and you'd see: it would
come out in play. The differences that make us inexact now would
chase us into learning from that space, that pure longing
for the pauses just past, multiplying like mythologies, apples.

Here the momentary idealism of angels gives way to ironic understatement—of course everything would be different—then to colloquialism, “you’d see,” then soon to a phrase that gives us nothing concrete but is linked to the surprise of apples. Given his facility with poems in this mode, one could suspect a computer program that assimilates dissimilar phrases and systematically rounds them up into a whole. Ashbery’s fractured *ars poetica* acknowledges convention while at the same time tinkering with a deconstructionist impulse that seems to empower his discursiveness and give it a suggestion of form. His style can be seen as one that attempts to create a new hybrid of poetry that simultaneously looks backward and forward.

Readers of Ashbery may be disappointed by this book’s return to the more conservative style of earlier works such as *Houseboat Days* and *The Wave* especially after the unexpected experiment that *Flow Chart* proved to be. Here again we have a collection of poems separated by titles and of moderate lengths. Although he avoids such obvious tactics as straightforward narration or the adoption of a persona, Ashbery’s reference to a specific author and period of literary discovery does allow the reader one apparent certainty: a context in which he or she might approach this evocative, difficult, and often engaging work.

The title poem of the collection skillfully pits the force of tradition against that of modernism as it plays upon the ballad, substituting concepts for end rhymes and finding a refrain that begins and ends the poem: “Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society . . .” Throughout the poem, the second and fourth lines of each stanza are lifted and used as the first and third lines of the following stanza. Phrases are interwoven and

improvised upon in a way that continually suggests, even if it does not develop a speculative realm of thought:

Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society
working as a team. They just didn't happen. There was no guesswork.
The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it.
We see the results in works as diverse as "Windsor Forest" and "The
Wife of Usher's Well."

This initial stanza metamorphoses throughout the course of sixteen stanzas into:

You mop your forehead with a rose, recommending it thorns.
Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society;
Only night knows for sure. The secret is safe with her:
the people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it.

This is Ashbery true to form. His nod and wink not only to the ballad form, but to that of the villanelle, given the repetition of lines and importance of certain phrases, provide this poem and others with a suggestion of form while at the same time his wanderings from tradition lead the reader toward a no man's land somewhere between the poem and an idea of itself. The poem arrives at combinations of lines that are wholly independent of any theme or connotation suggested by a title: "and night like black swansdown settles on the city./ If we tried to leave, would being naked help us?" The tension between evocative imagery and broken discursiveness suggests a kind of irony. Though he himself often refutes it in interviews and conversations, his destination seems to be the sublime, even though a reader is most likely to grasp that in a stanza, a passage, or even phrases that sometimes seem abandoned to their surroundings. Ashbery's insistence is different, however. The sublime is always encumbered by the incidental and ordinary, or it is found in our imaginative movement as readers, from one register to another.

His method then is usually immersed in paradox. The poem "A Mourning Forbidding Valediction" adheres to a strict rhyme scheme, delights in conceits and utilizes archaic phrasing, but its similarity to Donne is hardly forced. It begins on the pun, "And who, when all is said and done" and continues in an ABCDCBAD rhyme. The form of the poem forces the

use of such modern terms as “zygote” and “shit,” thereby crossing the wires of traditional verse with a modern sensibility. It is extremely difficult to fix on a scene or clearly define a voice. The poem concludes:

Of someone else’s negligence, our cognizance.
O skate too far away, or else backpack, backtrack
Into the hay of an argument dimly seen, unscathed
Like time. The more marbles to our monument
The more the future won’t be any less real to us, enswathed
In Hyperborean conundrums—that’s as may be. To bushwhack
From here to Petaluma, then chance
Failed irrigation canals, faults, is my soul’s sole integument.

Whatever Ashbery’s response to Donne, the poem seems mostly an exercise in word play. Earlier in the book, we find a strictly formal ballad “Seasonal” only to discover in a few pages one entitled “Villanelle” which lacks any adherence to the form, which may be another playful contradiction. The initial lines of “Villanelle” may be a comment on the form itself:

As it unfolded and took on something of the aspect
of a garden in the rain, the acclaim with which others
greeted it scattered too, evaporated. Now who
is to say when battered night comes and you look
distractedly over your shoulder, whether the owners
of that night had the right to remove any of it
in strips and mask-shaped pieces, so that by morning
nothing of it remained except crescent
accents under cups?

Perhaps the poem is what a villanelle becomes when it is released from the bondage of form as well as a comment on what Ashbery, as present “owner” of tradition, is doing. Deep within these fluctuating images, self-referential modifiers, and occasional flirtations with formalism, we find a philosophical questioning of the aesthetic raiment of language that makes Ashbery’s work fascinating, and to some, a frustration.

As disembodied narratives, the poems in this collection often use colloquialisms and sound as if they are spoken under the breath. But they

also reveal a chameleon-like ability to congeal into passages as powerful as many famous runs of blank verse.

Thus the reader is likely to wander with Ashbery as if on a walking tour. It is a pleasant experience somewhat akin to wandering through a museum to stumble on unknown paintings. There are moments of profound insight among the poems' gestures, posturing, and stage directions. And they are often humorous:

. . . Don't squirm,
however, there are other houses on this road to peace
we can actually live in, as a snail its shell
or bird pants. Then a calend grabs your hand
and tugs you into the future, and that's about all the space
there is left. Wipe your nose. Don't fudge
the horizon or it will come clattering down
on us like the earthquake at Lisbon, but always,
be brave. Yet these are old wives' tales,
in truth; nothing insists you believe in them
except as dreams, which permeate the background
of our day like colored raindrops, and so go away
before too long.

Many of the pieces take on an air of consolation and philosophical reckoning. Sometimes, in this book, Ashbery's writing veers towards that of a Merton or even Thomas Traherne in its effort to sum up the inexplicable while sustaining a cerebral discourse on the nature of things, emotion, and memory. This impulse deepens as it combines with his interest with the dark side of the intellect from which many of the poems spring.

No one knows what it's about anymore.
Even in the beginning one had grave misgivings
but the enthusiasm of departure swept them away
in the green molestation of spring.
We were given false information on which
our lives were built, a pier

extending far out into a swollen river.
Now, even these straws are gone.

Assuming Ashbery is speaking of poetry or of art, the promise of our beginnings is overpowered by the insidious burgeoning of nature and perhaps our powers of observation. We then find ourselves all but swept away from our foundation which, like the superficiality of beauty, is but pretense.

The author by now knows well that his audience is a select one; fellow obsessives who relish his endlessly skeptical argument with a world that knows little more than language as its center. The canvass of language is all the artist has for self-discovery.

When you hear the language
(not the spirit of the language) it unfolds like a shelf
just to be equal with the level you have risen to.
A change takes place. No longer are steel leviathans erected
at points of entry to the city. The clouds have come down
to be part of what they and we so long dreaded.

And we who cling in wonderment to a sheer surface
like chains of bubbles, we who talk and lecture,
know that it is half-past five, that what we were learning
has begun.

What the *Hotel Lautréamont* becomes then is a daybook of philosophical speculation grounded in Ashbery's ceaseless consideration of our ability to deal with reality, question reality, and perhaps become real ourselves in language. Here we find the interface of language and consciousness with a world replete in consequence and detail. Ashbery imbues his poems with a negative theology: he is obsessed with writing while he espouses that the poem's meaning is incidental to the words themselves. His is a taxing dialectic on the significance of perception in a world we call "post-modern." To ignore the complexity of his work is to deny that the thorns he identifies break the skin of modern consciousness. It is from this both simple and profound point of view which these poems emanate. Here is a passage from "Love's Old Sweet Song":

I say, the heck with endings. I don't think I want to wear those socks. On any other day of the week my attitude would elicit a few stares; my value-judgments are like what they used to call an "overdressed" woman, and it has come about that my shadow is invisible to me, but I don't know this yet. The conventional wisdom is that we desire what's unattainable (reclining clouds, distant factory chimneys) for precisely that reason. No allowance is made for the goodness that might be lurking therein, like love in a tongue-tied child whose cheek one pinches as one passes along to bigger and better disappointments. We never know what we could walk back to except when we do go back, and then it's as if not knowing and knowing were the same thing.

Perhaps this is why it is so appropriate that this book looks to Ducasse and invents an imaginary hotel as its point of departure. The French poet's famous work of what he himself called "*prosaïques morceaux*" is closer to a prose of aphorisms than it is to a book of verse and is seemingly the literary precedent of this book. Ashbery sees himself as the rightful heir to the count's line and a progenitor of a poetry so completely informed by its time that it is way beyond it.

No one seems to pull this off better than Ashbery. He has astonished his readers with both the sheer amount of his work and his continual experimentations with style. One can only wonder what he will do next. Will he tack to familiar ground while continuing to flirt with traditional forms as he does in this work? Will his skepticism about language lead him ever closer to the ineffable? We can only wait and read. Until then, in the author's own words: "The story falls, mountains conspire, brooks hesitate,/ the storm endures."