

*John Ashbery*, Jess Cotton (Reaktion Books 2023)

Jess Cotton's new volume in Reaktion Books' Critical Lives series is a knockout. It follows John Ashbery's life and work from childhood to death as well as his posthumous influence, thankfully concentrating on what Cotton in her introduction calls 'Ashbery's innovative, evasive, comic and confounding poetic forms' which, she goes on to declare, 'have reshaped [...] the American poem as we know it.'

To be honest the forms Ashbery uses often seem less interesting than the reshaping, although we have him to thank for the Westernised haibun and furthering the possibilities of the prose poem. But it is the adoption of surrealist juxtaposition and collage, of parataxis, that helped reinvent 'the American poem', partly because of the acclaim and fame (if any poet can claim to be truly famous) that accompanied Ashbery's work.

It wasn't always so. Ashbery's first two books of poems, *Turandot* and *Some Trees*, are pretty mainstream, somewhat ordinary products of the 1950s, but 1962's *The Tennis Court Oath* evidenced a change in direction, of technique and content, and led the way to the acclaimed *Three Poems* a decade later, and then *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. In the creative mix are the influences of French prose-poets (especially Rimbaud, one of the first to write 'poetic prose'), fine art painting and critical writing, and queer culture, the products, Cotton argues, from time spent in Paris and then New York.

Although Ashbery suggests that reading Auden allowed more contemporary references and casual language to enter his work, Cotton notes that he 'was self-consciously thinking about the possibilities of a fragmentary, montage-like poetics, freed of the mythological and expansive historical references of his Modernist forebearers that overdetermined the meaning of the poem'. It is this ability to embrace the fact that the reader is as much the creator of a poem as the writer that marks Ashbery out as original and different. Unlike those who choose to grapple with Pound's *Cantos*, there is no need for the reader to read Chinese and Sanskrit or to know Greek and Norse mythology to 'get' Ashbery's poems, they can luxuriate in wordplay and the imagistic, disjointed moments of the text itself. The work itself makes clear there is no confessional subtext or overarching message to be imposed or deduced; we are free to make of it what we will.

That doesn't mean it is random or vague, and Ashbery didn't use chance procedures to create his work; he carefully edited, revised and reshaped his writing, often for years on end. (The posthumous *Parallel Movement of the Hands: Five Unfinished Longer Works* is a marvellous collection evidencing this.) He learnt to allow scenes and moments to imagistically speak for themselves; to embrace camp, high society, friendships and loves, literature and journalism, art, music and cinema: everything could be used to construct his poems. And often was.

Later on in life, Ashbery also allowed himself to write a lot, something he had originally resisted, and in the process gaining a reputation for overproduction. But one senses that is what he did, he was first and foremost a writer, despite by that time being a poetry professor (which became an honorary post towards the end of his life) busy undertaking readings and talks, and also an acclaimed success. However, give him a grant or bursary and Ashbery would retreat from his Chelsea apartment to his Hudson house or take off on new travels for as long as possible. As for the 'zaniness' he was sometimes accused of in later work, to me it reads as simple mastery and control of his juxtapositions allied with a witty self-deprecation and an original sense of humour. I am sure I am not alone in realising, perhaps later than I should have, just how influential Ashbery's work has been upon both me personally and the wider poetry world.

That influence is somewhere in the politicized deconstruction and experiment of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, the British poetry revival (specifically via Lee Harwood, who had a relationship with Ashbery), the surrealist comedy performances and writings of Luke Kennard, and the smartarse poetry of Dean Young, Martin Stannard and Bob Hicock, all busy taking language for long, disorienting walks. Even the mundane and populist poetry of writers such as Billy Collins might be the result of Ashbery, although I would not like to blame him directly.

Ashbery was adept at using others' voices, disparate events and fictional (im)possibilities, whilst allowing his poems to interrupt themselves and wander off to where he hadn't figured out yet. Cotton cites a moment of personal revelation for Ashbery, from his editor's introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1988*, where he notes how he 'was struck, perhaps for the first time, by the exciting diversity, the tremendous power it [poetry] could have for enriching our lives.' What Cotton calls 'Ashbery's idiosyncratic talents' are part of that enrichment, poems which 'make the moment of communication a live act'. Anne Lauterbach notes that 'when you read his work you are reading *being alive*.' Apart from an informed critical introduction like this volume, what more could anyone ask for?

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859 words