

GAVIN FERGUSON

**THE APPLICATION OF THOUGHT TO POETRY:  
A CRITICISM OF JOHN ASHBERY**

What is it that is abandoned in some modern poetry? The answer is often given as scansion, metre, rhyme, and other definable skills, disciplines and crafts. The primary quantity overlooked, however, I maintain, is thought; or, more precisely, the *application of thought* to poetry. An argument should be constructed from a case, from an *exemplum*, and fairly, or unfairly, I have chosen to concentrate on the work of John Ashbery (one hesitates to call it ‘poetry’):

How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulchre  
Of life, my great love? Do dolphins plunge bottomward  
To find the light? Or is it rock  
That is searched? Unrelentingly? Huh. And if some day

Men with orange shovels come to break open the rock  
Which encases me, what about the light that comes in then?  
What about the moss?

(from ‘How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...’)

What is the grammar, the syntax, telling us here? That life is shifting, difficult to interpret? That is what I think it is about (amongst other things). But what if I asked the local postman, or the chemist down the road, what it was all about? They would tell me they didn’t know, for they are practical, honest and intelligent people. They haven’t been schooled in the academy of nonsense. They recognise piffle when they see it. That is how they get things done, in their several, everyday businesses. They like to use their brains. They do not expect poetry (as neither do I) to be a sacred mystery, an arcanum: they suppose it, at some points, at least, to be a matter of reason, and of common sense (even when, as in Lewis Carroll’s work, for example, those bounds are deliberately broken). They hope not to have to attend lectures on it, or even night-classes, to understand it. They expect, within a reasonable degree of time, and with application, to discover what it is ‘all about’ for themselves. And this they do: they diagnose, or pronounce it, nonsense; and they are proclaimed –let us not deny it—*ignorant*. They don’t ‘get the joke’; they don’t ‘see’ it. But then neither do I, and I have attended all the classes and all the seminars. I have been schooled in poetry as they have been, one hopes, in communications and in pharmacopoeias. I pronounce ‘The Emperor Has No Clothes!’ and am professed – *Philistine!* But, as I said, I am in good company. I am with the hocus-pocus spotters, the postman and the chemist. I have no idea whom Ashbery is apostrophising here, whom his ‘great love’ is, for example, in this supposed poem. The grammar of reason does not tell me, neither does the semantics. Why is the rock searched? I have no idea. Why do ‘Men with orange shovels come to break open

the rock | Which encases' him? God alone knows. One can rely on hunches only, I suppose, but then this is not a crossword-puzzle, or divination (or is it?).

The problem, as I perceive it, is that I (and no doubt most literate readers) am applying the grounds of common sense to the words presented. And this, it seems, is a mistake. 'My bed of light is a furnace choking me' (a line from the same work as above) makes as much sense as my postulated courier stating, 'My bicycle of darkness is a kiln suffocating me' (and being carted off to the nearest infirmary), or my putative apothecary proclaiming, 'My alembic of life is a retort poisoning me' (and being struck off the register, with his customers fleeing for the door). In any case, the thought, if that is what it can be called, is prefigured more felicitously in Robert Browning, in 'A lamp's dearth when, replete with oil, it chokes,' (from 'Death in the Desert').

Ah, but you say, *What about the imagination?* And I say: it mustn't overstep the mark. And the mark here is the limit of reason. Stars, I am afraid, do not paint 'the garage roof crimson and black' (from the same work): the painter does that, with motivation. This the human senses tell us, although the human intellect, as we know, may often be led astray. It is a question of exposing the falsehood of a statement through application to possible sensuous terms. (Ashbery's phrase, for example, is far removed from the clear apprehension of Shakespeare's 'star-cross'd lovers,' or from A.E. Housman's 'The stars have not dealt me the worst they could do,' referring, as they do, directly, to destiny: they have no truck with inapprehension.) Mr Ashbery seems to want to cut us away from the earth, and sever our anchorages of reason and sense (in 'Veniver,' for example, we find the risible 'As the flowers recited their lines'). His apprehensions lack diligence. (Compare them, for example, with those of Beckett in his late work where care for the word is balanced precisely and perfectly, demonstrating a disdain for intellectual incontinence.)

No science can be applied to this judgement, of course, for criticism is an art. Nonetheless, there are certain rules (not to be confused with formulae) which have prevailed over the millennia in poetry, such as grammar, syntax, reflexion, syllable count, stress, and a thousand other technical feats at the command of the practised, thoughtful hand, 'Untwisting all the chains that tie | The hidden soul of harmony' (Milton, in *L'Allegro*). Mr Ashbery has no time for any of this ('The heap of things, the pile of this and that,' as he calls it in 'Finnish Rhapsody,' 'a loose bundle...Monkey business, shenanigans,' in 'Alone in the Lumber Business') because such handiwork, such deftness, has to be learned in 'the school of hard knocks,' in the measurement of decades and not of minutes. (Geoffrey Hill has a fine phrase for this process, calling it pointedly 'the reach and grasp of technical perception and accomplishment.')

You have to look sharp about you in such things, and sharpness –definition-- does not interest Ashbery: see his statement in 'Not a First' where he writes blandly 'You need only rough outlines,' and again in 'Never to Get It Really Right' where he says that all should be 'brio and élan' and nothing else. He wants it all unfocused, relative: 'Because what does anything mean...?' he asks limply at one point (or even more ridiculously, in 'Frost,' 'Have I worn out God's welcome?'), letting himself drift on impressions, cutting all that 'stays banded within the old frame' appending one glimpse on another, *ad infinitum*.

This view might seem old-fashioned, but if my postman delivered fish (unwanted), and my chemist dispensed Corn Flakes (again, unwanted), I'd be (I think, rightly) upset. I would adjudge them to have failed in their professional duties; and so I adjudge Mr Ashbery, and his like, to have failed in theirs; and to blame him, and his like, of bringing the profession of poet into disrepute and marginalisation. 'The problem then,' he says of the tradition, 'is its high readability' (in 'Railroad Bridge'), as if this were in some way a sin.

There was a time when you could memorise a poem. I defy anyone, within the reasonable bounds of perversity, to memorise 'How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...'. The reason for this is that the work lacks all tropes and tricks of traditional prosody; when the text becomes corrupt (as all texts do over time) there is no possibility of restituting it through the traditional rules of scholarship -- through substituting broken text, for example, or sifting the inevitable errors of editors and copyists, or of interpreting lacunae. Any restoration in this case would be difficult; nearly all verbal point already having been buried, if not wholly concealed, within the archetype itself. But all this Mr Ashbery already knows (or does he?), regarding tradition as 'an ever-diminishing sustenance' (in 'The Romantic Entanglement'). The poem is regarded by him as a throw-away item: so be it; we can throw it away. But we don't want the postman to discard our letters (our bills maybe?), or the dispenser to lose our prescriptions, do we?

Mr Ashbery's oeuvre is no doubt sincere enough, as any thoughtless fool's can be on its day. We can all fall into a vat of sympathy, but let's not call it criticism. I would like to apply thought to poetry. You will contend, I hope, that I have to some extent already done this with Mr Ashbery's work, but did he apply the same compliment to the reader? I think not. He did not expect me to think; neither did he expect it of himself.

Metre, and other technical possibilities, depend on a foundation in thought; they are not paramount (I would not be mistaken for arguing this) but they have an intrinsic merit in themselves. When they combine with the apperceptions of sensuous imagination, and are disciplined by knowledge, method and brain-power, we usually find ourselves in the presence of a poem. But if for brains we have blancmange, then we usually find ourselves weltering in mire. It is not the place for tyros, or for anybody else for that matter, to be. It is certainly, however, a place for critics to scorn. Lack of thought is rarely tolerated in any profession. Why on earth should it be tolerated here? The problem is that Mr Ashbery and his like feel that they are 'Backed into a generally accepted notion of what history is' (in 'Winter Weather Advisory') as if that were a negative position, and would like to think that by 'turning the tables' (see 'Railroad Bridge') they are somehow registering newly-discovered 'stress' as if Hopkins had not already shown them the way.

Mr Ashbery's work is illustrative then of a wrong-turning, of muddle-headedness, pretension and intellectual slackness, displaying, as it does, no 'physical effect of pathos' (the phrase is Housman's), no composition, depth or penetration of thought. It is as if a

continuous infraction of the rules (the 'waywardness' praised in 'Polite Distortions,' for instance, 'the defeated memory' endorsed in 'Ostensibly,' and 'the disorder' embraced in 'Offshore Breeze') was sufficient to guarantee the term 'art', and it is not, even though the work, in its way, has paradoxically generated an industry of overwrought academic interpretation. According to this school we are supposed to be witnessing 'the demolition of narrative,' the creating of 'the unhistorical moment,' 'the death of the author,' 'the de-realisation of experience,' 'experiments in language games,' 'the reaction against interpretation,' the 'old epistemic conditions' vanishing before the presence of postmodern 'difference, deconstruction, hyperreality and hermeneutics,' the whole Continental baggage of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Vattimo rolled into one. (All this drivel, in any case, has been expertly exploded by Jurgen Habermas amongst others.) We are being asked to believe, against our better judgment, that poetry is a mere divagation, and this is mistaken, for it is (or, at least, it should be) our very life's blood. We are being asked to accept Dionysian frenzy over and above Apollonian order, at all costs. In reading Mr Ashbery's work what the reader really registers is panic, panic at not being able to do the job properly.

Plato asks, 'Do we want to wallow in ignorance, with the complacency of beasts?' and Ashbery (and his ilk) reply, enthusiastically, 'Yes!' Ulysses, in *The Divine Comedy*, admonishes, 'Consider of what seed you are sprung: ye were not formed to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge,' and Ashbery (and his ilk) choose not to listen, but to lead us, and themselves, further down the path where the spirit cannot pass. Where are the mutual concord of elements, the work of 'the wing-swift mind,' intelligence, history, the primitive charge of words? In this age of egoism, it would appear, -- nowhere, lost.