



A Worldly Country

John Ashbery

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Thrill of a Romance

It's different when you have hiccups.
Everything is—so many glad hands competing
for your attention, a scarf, a puff of soot,
or just a blast of silence from a radio.
What is it? That's for you to learn
to your dismay when, at the end of a long queue
in the cafeteria, tray in hand, they tell you the gate closed down
after the Second World War. Syracuse was declared capital
of a nation in malaise, but the directorate
had other, hidden goals. To proclaim logic
a casualty of truth was one.
Everyone's solitude (and resulting promiscuity)
perfumed the byways of villages we had thought civilized.
I saw you waiting for a streetcar and pressed forward.
Alas, you were only a child in armor. Now when ribald toasts
sail round a table too fair laid out, why the consequences
are only dust, disease and old age. Pleasant memories
are just that. So I channel whatever
into my contingency, a vein of mercury
that keeps breaking out, higher up, more on time
every time. Dirndl spotted with obsolete flowers,
worn in the city again, promote open discussion.

A Worldly Country Details

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From Reader Review A Worldly Country for online ebook

Jim says

Couldn't get into these poems. A few stuck with me, a few lines did too. Meh.

Reema says

now im no poetry expert--and the one poetry class i took last year taught by an awesome teacher and poet joshua clover pounded the gavel in favor of this guy--but i did like the turn of some of these phrases. masin explains it like a jackson pollack painting. kinetic motion and wording out thought. i guess. i gotta reread some of this. i need to practice reading more poetry. ok, im getting on it.

Mark says

i think what i like most about john ashbery is that he baffles me. with strong images, careful words, traditional and outlandish poetics, there's a poem right here and i can tell you that i like it but not what it is. i could read it to you and tell you what i think is so good but not what it means. i know each work is that word for exactly the right reason but i can rarely tell what the reason is.

in any case, this is a fine and slim volume of mostly short poems. it doesn't overwhelm, the challenges are real but not unswallowable. i enjoyed it very much.

Amy says

Sometimes I think I hate modern male poets. This is definitely not true, but it is mostly true.

Ashbery recently died; this collection was published a decade ago, when he was about 80. You can tell--it deals a lot with the past/memories, time, and, underneath all that, you know, dying is sorta present. I know Ashbery is a Big Deal, and his language certainly can be playful and interesting, but mostly I wasn't too interested. I am sad about this, though!

Old-Style Plentiful

"Up in the clouds they were singing/ O Promise Me to the birches, who replied in kind./ Rivers kind of poured over where/ we had been sitting, and the breeze made as though/ not to notice any unkindness, the light too/ pretended nothing was wrong, or that/ it was all going to be OK some day./ And yes, we were drunk on love./ That sure was some summer."

A Worldly Country

"So often it happens that the time we turn around in/ soon becomes the shoal our pathetic skiff will run

aground in./ And just as waves are anchored to the bottom of the sea/ we must reach the shallows before God cuts us free."

Also, there is a poem called "A Perfect Hat."

Eddie Watkins says

M. Ashbery used the “word” OK twelve times in this book. That’s a lot of occurrences, but not nearly as many as I thought there would be before I actually counted them. This mistaken preconception was due to its occurrence in “clusters” throughout the book – one poem with two OKs and the very next with another one. This occurs I believe twice in the book – 3 OKs on 2 pages twice. With this in mind I trust that anyone reading this will understand why I had the mistaken preconception that there was going to be an average of almost one OK per poem before I sat down and counted them.

Counting OKs in a book of poetry is very easy. As long as the poems are not all caps concrete poems, or poems that for one reason or another have an abundance of caps, counting the OKs is very easy; a quick all-over scan of the page and an OK stands out like a sore thumb. Not to disparage their use with that unpleasant simile. OKs are not like sore thumbs. I actually kinda like the casualness they impart, but when I thought that M. Ashbery had possibly used an average of one OK in every poem I did think that he was over-doing the casualness. My counting them rectified that, but the poems still have a casualness, a masterful casualness.

This is a casual, though masterful, collection of poetry, and in this review I feel like repeating words unnecessarily. I had slightly disparaged it in my earlier review where I said:

I don't know what to make of Ashbery these days. Every year he puts out a new collection of at least superficially similar poems, and every year I buy that book and read it, but at this point I've lost the ability to distinguish one book from the next. And there might not be any fundamental differences between them, because at this point Ashbery seems content to wander around in imaginary worlds he discovered and reported from long ago, but now he's a tourist in those worlds and as an old poet man the very changes in his consciousness wrought by aging are what gives this new take of his on old worlds interest, that and what appears to be a second childhood breaking free from its constraints.

I wish more artists were courageous (or foolish) enough to keep cranking out work in their old age, because I have an interest in how the creative mind continues to work (or not) as the physical mind breaks down, or scatters, or dissolves. Maybe Ashbery's work isn't as “strong” or as “advanced” as it once was, but the pleasure his work gives me as he continues to crank it out with slippery delight in his twilight years is still significant, be this pleasure poetical or pathological.

This earlier review is in many ways utter hogwash. It's as if I hadn't even read the book (let alone counted the OKs), and was simply expatiating on a *general* impression I had of M. Ashbery's later work. My wish that more artists continued to crank out work well into their dotage still stands, but to suggest that the poems in *A Worldly Country* are the product of a mind decaying with age is misguided and idiotic. Misguided and idiotic utter hogwash. Why did I pollute this site with vague generalities based on ignorance? Being an idiot I may never know.

OK, now that I have kicked my earlier self to the curb let me say a few words about poetry. I like *poetry* as much as I like *poems*, which means that when I read a book of poetry I do not necessarily look for a single stand-out masterpiece of a poem - **NO MORE MASTERPIECES** - a poem that encapsulates all concerns and themes of the author into a succinct and self-contained whole that is easily packaged and anthologized. I like it when poems “bleed” into each other and form a sort of colony, like aspens in a forest where what looks like a collection of self-contained single trees is actually a cluster sprouting from a single underground network of roots, so that a stand of aspens can be rightfully referred to as a single organism. This is a quality that is very important when it comes to poetry that is, for the sake of a better term, “experimental”, where the language used is not the language that we use every day, and where often there is not an attempt to write individual masterpieces, but rather to expound a poetics in discrete units called poems often just for convenience, or simply because it can’t go on forever.

These thoughts do not apply to this Ashbery collection, as his “experimental” days are far behind him, though for an old guy he’s spry and surprising, and as his poetics has become so ubiquitous in the poetry world as to become just another convention. But still this “aspen analogy” applies to Ashbery and his poems. Almost every poem seems to be about the same thing – a mind caught in a reverie of rumination on the passages of time and the experiences and emotions occasioned by being in time – and differs only by form, or a clothing of style as it were. There is little attempt on M. Ashbery’s part to write a masterpiece; he seems content to be, to reside, in the realm of poetry, with a mind free to wander into the beginning of a poem, and then to wander through it and then to wander back out, where it takes a break (perhaps tea and/or a scone while reading the work of someone else), and then resume its poetical wanderings freely. Yet throughout there is what I can only call the master’s touch, with a perfect balance of silliness and melancholy and deftly unorthodox language use and total communion between the mind and the words on the page.

I know that I have not lived up to the expectations I had when beginning this review, and though I am not happy with it I do think that it is of some interest. OK? It is still lamentably vague and generalizing, and I have not included any details that could prove that I actually did read it this time around, but I assure you I have read it (actually three full times in the past week), though perhaps I remain an idiot.

The Wordly Country is a late masterpiece, published when M. Ashbery was 80 years old. It as a whole is a portrayal of a lively mind in an old body writing of life that never ceases to end, that never ceases to begin, and that is nearly unmoored from time itself, awash in a sea of poetry with homespun rafts of poems floating atop it dissolving in sunlight and sea spray and fading beyond horizons that never end, until they end.

Dave says

A lake of brambles offered itself like a protective cushion to the outsider, you and me. This had been foreseen, but like a migration, took on another sense as it unfolded, the sky Royal Worcester by now, a narrative that will endure for many years, even if no one reads it. Class dismissed, he said famously. School's out forever. Saddle the theremins, love is on the loose.

Sparrow says

A *Worldly Country*. -- with that strange period in the title -- is John Ashbery's 24th book of poetry, published

in 2007, when he was 79. It's hard to pan a book by an 79 year old, plus this is quite a good book -- or, anyway, sometimes it is. Do some of the poems "miss," or do I just miss them? It is the greatness of Ashbery that one is uncertain.

(Are we the readers Ashbery deserves? Or are his True Readers a race of highly evolved reptiles on the planet Koztika?)

Just before writing this, I listened to a record: *La Mer* by Debussy. The puddling rhythms and sudden shifts of chromatic texture -- just like Ashbery! *La Mer* sounds like it's moving backwards, sometimes, like eddies in a cove. Ashbery also writes backward-sounding lines, such as:

All the reckoning is wrong.

(in "Promenade.")

Wrong is reckoning the all.

is its reversal. Let's continue with the poem:

What the caliph's calipers redeemed
isn't meant for us, far out
at the edge of Saturn's rings...

(Perhaps Ashbery's subtlest readers live on Tethys -- a moon of Saturn.)

And what is "a worldly country"? The book's cover, from a precisionist painting by Jean Freilicher called "Afternoon in the City," suggests that the worldly country is New York City -- or at least its rooftops.

One of the poems begins:

In all plays, even Hamlet, the scenery
is the best part.

This is a poem called "Cliffhanger." It goes on:

Battlements, wintry thickets
forcing their edge on you, cough up their promise
as the verse goes starry.

In other words, while you're watching Hamlet, you're also watching the background: a castle, a Danish moor. (Notice he suddenly addresses you in the second person.) For two hours, you're staring at these pictures, until they "cough up their promise." Meanwhile, the verse -- the language of Shakespeare -- "goes starry." In other words, it gets a little too flowery.

You will leave empty-handed,
others will know more than you.

You leave Hamlet feeling like an idiot, because you don't "get" it.

Time's aged frisson
gets to me more and more, like mice
in a pantomime.

This is a really bad line, I think. It means both: "I hate getting old" and "I'm sick of pretending I like Shakespeare."

And then the prompter
throws up his hands in dismay. You were mortal,
so why didn't you say anything?

The prompter throwing his hands up to dismay means that Ashbery can't think of the next line of the poem. "Why didn't you say anything?" is one of those great quotations from Overheard Speech of 2006 that fills this book.

I had certainly begun to lose faith in "Cliffhanger" by the time I reached the end, which is:

Now even the farthest windows have gone dark. And the dark
wants, needs us. Thank you for calling.

And unexpectedly -- I doubt it's conveyed here, barely quoting stray lines -- this finale perfectly completed the mathematical necessities of the poem. The "equation" balanced! Ashbery is smarter than me! The "bad lines" were necessary, the way a twist of lemon embellishes a cocktail. This is the titular "Cliffhanger"; you expect the actress to fall off the cliff, but at the last minute she's saved.

Chris Lilly says

Coo. I've now read all the poems in this collection twice or three times, and quite often I'm not sure if I've read them before. Maybe that's a good thing? It's like overhearing part of a conversation between people who are both eloquent and verbose, and totally up themselves. Ashbery may be talking to someone, and he may be saying wonderful stuff, but I don't think he's talking to me.

After reading this, it feels very much as though 'My crankcase needs asperging.' In the words of a guy often described as 'America's greatest poet'.

Swarnadeep Banik says

I. DON'T HAVE. PROPER. WORDS. TO. APPRECIATE. HOW. WONDERFUL. THIS. BOOK. WAS.
this is one of the best book of poetry i have read. seriously. previously i have read some of ashbery's poems, but this time it was a wholesome yet extraordinary experience. it takes its time for you to settle in, but once you do, it's priceless. believe you me!

Patricia McLaughlin says

Startlingly inaccessible, these poems demand scrutiny like a strange beauty queen, which is often worth the effort. But by then the last few spectators will have likely given up. Favorites include "The Binomial Theorem," "It, or Something," "Promenade," "One of His Nature Poems," "And Other Stories."

Kassandra says

No one upends a reader's expectations and hopes while reading poetry better than Ashbery. I love his sense of humor and the way he illuminates the way we strive to make patterns, to make sense of our lives by telling stories -- which, in the end, only make sense to those on the "inside". Lesser artists have tried to copy his style, but other poets who attempt to write in this manner usually, to my ears, fall flat. There's no gentle surprise, little to no humor, just in-your-face opaqueness that seems designed to affront and refuse, as opposed to Ashbery's style, which is to wink and grin and let you in on the joke and the sadness of it all. The rhyming in the title poem was a complete surprise, entirely delightful, and I especially loved "A Kind of Chill" and "Mottled Tuesday". Highly recommended.

Kenny says

favorite poems:

Cliffhanger

opening lines: In all plays, even Hamlet, the scenery/is the best part.

and

Imperfect Sympathies

Opening line: So why not indeed try something new?

new words:

fons et origo - sources and origins (latin)

folie de toucher - madness of touch (French)

nympholepsy - a frenzy induced by the nymphs

Christopher Flynn says

This is the first collection I've ready by Ashbery. I've read select poems in random places over the years. I would say I'm an admirer rather than an enthusiast of the New York School's posture towards their world. There are poems scattered through this collection that I connected with, and lines in almost all of the poems that I found compelling. That's pretty good for any collection, I suppose.

Ariadne says

John Ashbery is a talented poet. He has a mastery with language and his works are full of music and sharp images. All that said his poems don't resonate very well with me. His poetry is more abstract in topic and imagery, and less personal than I prefer. In the end I just happen to like a more emotional and revelatory style to my collections.

Book #33 of 2013

Kyle says

I don't think Ashbery is for me. Or probably I shouldn't have started here.
