JOHN ASHBERY

A Poetry Reading in Genoa. Edited by Massimo Bacigalupo

On April 30, 1993, *John Ashbery gave a reading at the University of Genoa. A selection of his poems had been distributed to students a few days before, and he was asked to read and comment on these. Once in a while, during the reading, I threw in a few questions for the benefits of my students. Mr. Ashbery's answers were both illuminating and notably gracious.*

Ashbery: I'll perhaps mention a little bit about the circumstances of each poem—if there are any that I can remember—about my having written it. "Some Trees" is really the oldest poem, except one, written in the same year, that I have kept in my publications. It was written in 1948, when I was still an undergraduate in college. It is in a way, or I've thought of it as, my farewell to poetry as we know it, since it is recognizably modernist and typical of poetry of that time. It kind of makes sense, it has not rhyme but assonance at least, which was very fashionable at the time thanks to Auden and particularly to Marianne Moore whom I was reading quite intensively at that time, and this poem I always felt showed the influence of her poetry. She remains one of my very favorite poets.

[Reads "Some Trees"]

The next one, "If the Birds Knew," is somewhat later, written I think in the early sixties during a ten-year period when I lived in Paris. I frequently steal titles from other places. I have a sort of magpie instinct as far as titles go. This was actually the English translation of "Si les oiseaux savaient," the French title of a film by Kurosawa that I read about in a French film magazine. But this film never appeared and I never knew what the film was, until in Japan several years ago I met the American who had written the definitive work on Kurosawa, and he was able to tell me that this was a film title that was discarded by

Kurosawa. The film was given another title and then yet another title before its release. Unfortunately, or fortunately perhaps, I don't remember what the actual film is.

Bacigalupo: *Have films played as large a role as painting has in the creation of your work?*

Ashbery: Oh yes. I think that, in fact, my poetry has a kind of cinematic quality. Dissolves, for instance, a term from cinema, is something that I can recognize in it, and there are many allusions to films in my poetry as well.

Bacigalupo: *Could you mention the painters that interested you at that time?*

Ashbery: At the time I was still in college and I hadn't seen a great deal of art, except in Boston where I was a student at Harvard. "A chorus of smiles," in "Some Trees," I think, was suggested by a drawing by someone like Watteau which was a study for smiles in which one saw only smiles and not the rest of the face drawn on paper. I can't think of any parallel painting for "If the Birds Knew." I don't know where it came from. It's one of the poems I don't really remember writing. Many are in that category.

[Reads "If the Birds Knew," from *Rivers and Mountains.*]

Actually I did remember another Japanese film. The wheel that lights up is from a very popular film *(Ricksha Boy,* by Hiroshi Inagaki) about a man who pulls a ricksha, and finally this wheel dominates the screen and rolls over and over.

[Reads "Summer," from *The Double Dream of Spring.*]

"Twittering Stars" is, I think, a memory of a painting by Paul Klee called "Twittering Machine," an abstract drawing of a bird which is in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Bacigalupo: *Would you care to say something about the colloquial character of your poetry. You mentioned Moore. Your use of idioms reminds me of William Carlos Williams who defended the necessity of everyday language.*

Ashbery: My poetry always has seemed to be fed by colloquial speech,

American in particular. In fact, Marianne Moore in some of her poems makes collages, sometimes taking items from newspapers or overheard conversations in which the same pattern does occur. I remember there is one line of hers in which she overhears somebody saying at a parade, "They make a nice effect, don't they?" This is the kind of overheard remark that is prevalent in New York City particularly. I have heard many lines that later became lines of poetry, just from my wandering around the streets or shops. You spoke of the necessity of Williams to write this way and perhaps that is correct for him, but I don't feel it as a necessity, it's just the way I do it. I wouldn't defend it by saying that it's better than another way.

The next poem is called "Variant": "Sometimes a word will start it". That's an example of what I was just saying.

[Reads "Variant," from *Houseboat Days*.]

I don't think I have any comment to make about that one. The next one is called "Crazy Weather." It's a very common phrase in English—the weather is always acting crazy—and I suppose that in Italian it is probably an ordinary expression too. One of my earliest memories is walking with my mother while she was shopping and she ran into a friend of hers and said, "This is some crazy weather we are been having." I don't know why that memory stuck with me, but the phrase, even though it is one that you hear quite often, I associate with my earliest childhood. I suppose I was thinking about how there isn't any weather that isn't crazy. And that is the impetus, if you want to call it that, that started me writing this particular poem.

[Reads "Crazy Weather."]

Bacigalupo: *As you were reading, the transpositions in your poem reminded me of what Wallace Stevens has the listeners tell the poet: "You have a blue guitar, / You do not play things as they are." This could fit just as well a line like "Stitching the white of lilacs together with lightning / At some anonymous crossroads." Your poetry has often been called Surrealist. What is your stance toward "things as they are"?*

Ashbery: Well, "things as they are" are different things for everybody. Probably for each poet the "Blue Guitar" does intercept and interpret what is generally conceived as reality. I don't know that I have to add much more than that. Every writer distorts reality, and every reader in

turn distorts that distortion of reality. That's the situation of writing and reading. Perhaps it's more acute in my case than in many others.

[Reads "And Other, Vaguer Presences."]

Perhaps the way in this poem "It is argued that these structures address themselves / To exclusively aesthetic concerns" is what the audience of the man with the blue guitar might have objected to—"To which it is answered / That there are no other questions than these," that are considered "aesthetic" but are also part of "mud," land, and "the moment we all live, learning to like it."

[Reads "Frontispiece."]

This poem is from a book called *Shadow Train,* in which I decided arbitrarily to write fifty poems of twenty lines each, the twenty lines being arranged in stanzas of four lines each. They are somewhat like sonnets, but they don't have the annoying asymmetry of the sonnet. In fact, they are kind of subversive sonnets since they are so flat and regular. The fake drama that the sonnet form necessitates by having one section longer than the other so that the other is a commentary on it, is not there. I've had a love-hate affair with the sonnet for many years, which I shan't bore you with. It began even in my early twenties when I wrote a 13-line sonnet.

Bacigalupo: *A poet like Auden, whom you mentioned earlier, did write sonnets in a masterful way. Was this a model you followed?*

Ashbery: Well, it's not so difficult to use the sonnet form in a masterful way, and still avoid writing a masterful poem. I've borrowed many of the forms that Auden used, but it was the more difficult and arbitrary ones such as the sestina and the canzone (which are two that he used) that attracted me, because these strict forms are so strict that they oblige you to pay more attention to following the rules than to writing the great poem that you think you want to write. And by taking your mind off it you very often get closer to it than you would if you were consciously working on it. At any rate, that is what I tell my students whom I give these forms as assignments to make themselves forget about poetry just so as to be able to write.

Next is "Forties Flick." Aldo Busi in his translation used the title "Telefoni bianchi," I suppose a generic name for Hollywood movies of the thirties and forties where everybody seemed to have a white

telephone, and since there is a telephone in the poem it is appropriate. I know that I had seen a movie on TV made during World War Two in Hollywood. It took place in Nazi Germany. I think Fritz Lang directed it—"Rangmen Also Die." It was about Heinrich Rimmler. I was struck by how realistic the obviously fake Hollywood sets seemed to be—more so perhaps than if the film had been filmed in Munich or wherever it was taking place. This of course was impossible at that time, anyway. This is also an idea that I absorbed from one of the thoughts of the central character in a novel by Giorgio de Chirico, *Hebdomeros,* which I translated partly—a novel he wrote in France in the 1920s, in French, in a wonderful French style that he invented which is unlike anything else in French literature. In fact, when I was speaking of the cinematic quality of my poetry I was thinking of how I got a lot of it from that particular book, which has very long sentences in the course of which the cast of characters and the location and the story may change, maybe even several times before we get to the end of the sentence. Just as cameras can do this in movies, or make swift montages and changes.

[Reads "Forties Flick," from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.*]

The next poem, "Marchenbilder," has another stolen title from a musical work by Schumann, *Pictures from Fairy Tales.* It begins with the traditional opening of a fairy tale, in German:

[Reads "Marchenbilder."]

I suppose everyone recognized "the steadfast tin soldier" from Hans Christian Andersen's story, which for the some reason keeps haunting or bugging me. I had kind of forgotten this poem, until I read it and realized that I just had the steadfast tin soldier in another poem I wrote recently. It's hard to forget Andersen, one of the first writers many of us read and one of our first great loves probably. I've actually been reading him again now. We had a huge snowstorm in America a few weeks ago and I read "The Snow Queen" during the snowstorm, and felt very happy. The next poem comes from the early eighties, from a book called *A Wave:*

[Reads "Just Walking Around."]

The last two poems are going to be in a book coming out next year, called *And the Stars Were Shining,* which will seem strange when it's translated, if it ever is, in Italian—*E lucevan le stelle.* I wasn't really

referring to the opera *Tosca* but I happened to think of the title of that aria, and suddenly it translated itself into English for me and I thought it seemed very beautiful, and also rather funny since the stars usually are shining, or they are very often, and it's not something that necessarily needs to be called attention to, except of course in an opera where you never can take anything for granted. The first poem is "The Mandrill on the Turnpike"—a mandrill is a kind of monkey I would think...

Bacigalupo: *In Italian, "mandrill" has a sexual connotation. One says of somebody that he is a mandrill if he is "lecherous as a monkey."*

Ashbery: That's very interesting, because *man-drill* would seem to have a sexual connection too. But I don't think the animal has that reputation in English.

"The Mandrill on the Turnpike"

It's an art, knowing who to put with what,
and then, while expectations drool, make off with the lodestar,
wrapped in a calico handkerchief, in your back pocket. All right,
who's got it? Don't look at *me,* I'm
waiting for my date, she's already fifteen minutes late.
Listen, wiseguy—but the next instant, traffic drowns us
like a field of hay.
Now it's no longer so important
about getting home, finishing the job—
see, the lodestar had a kind of impact
for you, but only if you knew about it. Otherwise,
not to worry, the clock strikes ten, the evening's off and running.

Then, while every thing and body is getting sorted out,
the—well, *you* know, what I call the subjunctive creeps back in,
sits up, begs for a vision,
or a cookie. Meanwhile where's the bird?
Probably laying eggs or performing some other natural function. Why,
am I my brother's keeper, my brother the spy?

You and Mrs. Molesworth know more than you're letting on.
"I came here from Clapham,
searching for a whitewashed cottage in which things were dear to me
many a summer. We had our first innocent
conversation here, Jack. Just don't lie to me—

I hate it when people lie to me. They
can do anything else to me, really. Well, anything
within reason, of course."

Why it was let for a song, and that seasons ago.

Ashbery: Mrs. Molesworth was an English novelist of the early 19th century, whom I've never read anything of. It's a kind of memory that came out of reading the novel by Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. I read Victorian novels quite a lot, although I still haven't got around to Mrs. Molesworth.

Bacigalupo: *What about the mandrill, what has he to do with it?*

Ashbery: He's just there, on the turnpike.

Bacigalupo: *I've been wondering about "lodestar" in this poem. Is it a kind of solution, a direction that you found? It is really the polar star, isn't it.*

Ashbery: I don't really know. I thought I knew, but now that you ask me I realize I don't. Doesn't it mean a kind of bonanza, an unexpected windfall? Or am I thinking of mother-lode? I think "solution" is probably what I meant even if the word doesn't mean that.

"The Love Scenes"

After ten years, my lamp
expired. At first I thought
there wasn't going to be any more of this.
In the convenience store of spring

I met someone who knew someone I loved
by the dairy case...

The dairy case in supermarkets is where they keep the milk and butter and things. People often seem to meet people there whom they fall in love with.

[Finishes reading "The Love Scenes."]

Bacigalupo: *Thank you very much. Perhaps now we could take some questions.*

Ashbery: I'll take questions but no prisoners.

Audience: *A British reviewer said that your poetry is a linguistic assault on the reader. Are you aware of a particular British incomprehension of your work?*

Ashbery: Yes, definitely. I subscribe to the *Times Literary Supplement* and my English publisher always forwards the reviews. My last book, *Hotel Lautréamont,* was reviewed in the London *Times,* and the critic said that publishing it was a waste of trees. Some English readers do like my work very much, and I do get invited to England to poetry readings with some frequency. In fact, another reviewer of the *Times* once called me "quite simply the best poet writing in English today"—high praise for an American coming from an Englishman. It's a kind of exaggeration of the situation in America, where people either love or hate my poetry, but the vast majority aren't aware of it. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground of people who kind of like it. In fact my last book was hardly reviewed at all in America, and it got lots of reviews in England, mostly quite hostile ones. The *Times Literary Supplement* gave it a nice review. Well, the English and the Americans will never be able to understand each other, no matter how close they get. It's like distance in Zeno's paradox. At any rate, more attention is perhaps paid to me at the moment in England than it is in America. Many people say that it is better to have bad reviews than none at all. So I feel I shouldn't complain.

Audience: *Have you been inspired by any authors in particular? Who are your favorite writers?*

Ashbery: When I began to read contemporary poetry I was still in my teens, and at first I was puzzled by it as everybody is when they first pick up a volume of contemporary poetry. It seems strange or incomprehensible, and then little by little perhaps you find it interesting and then go on and like it a great deal. The first poet that really clicked for me was Auden. I think he was the most important influence on my poetry, at any rate his earlier work. I believe that after he left England for America his work began a slow but inexorable decline. He even somewhat renounced some of his early poems, which were kind of Surrealist—there was a strong strain of Surrealism in England in the 1930s, unlike in America where it kind of made a token

appearance but there wasn't anything of much value produced. Auden's use of colloquial speech was something that I thought you weren't supposed to do in poetry, and it affected my own use of the vernacular. Also his shifts of tone and language: sometimes he will go back to Middle English and then abruptly reemerge into some contemporary conversational style. All these things affected me. At that time I still found Wallace Stevens too difficult to read. It wasn't until several years later that I began to read him, and he has had an influence on me too. I think it's really the first influence that counts, like the first love. There'll be others, but the first one is the *first.* Other poets—Hölderlin, Rilke, Georg Trakl (all of these I have to read in translation since I don't know German), Rimbaud, Pierre Reverdy, the French Surrealist movement in France, Boris Pasternak, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop who was kind of influenced by Marianne Moore but is very much her own person. And also forgotten novels, what's written on boxes of cereal you have for breakfast, TV guides, whatever.

Bacigalupo: *Harold Bloom, who has written extensively about your work, is obsessed with the idea of influence. He believes that poets are continuously concealing their real fathers. If what Bloom says is true, we would have to conclude that those writers you have mentioned have played no role, and that you are hiding some other poets who have really influenced you.*

Ashbery: I have frequently told him that I don't believe in his theory at all. It's one of those critical theories that work out very nicely and explain everything except that they don't happen to be the actual explanation. Also, he refuses to recognize the influence of Auden, because Auden is no longer a very fashionable name in academia. In America the poetry world basically is kind of split between Pound and Stevens, I would say. I said, if you are going to elaborate this theory at least choose the poets that I have actually been influenced by, such as Auden. "No, my darling"—he calls everybody darling—"I don't see that, I don't see that at all." He also has me being very much influenced by Emerson, whom I really haven't read much of.

Audience: *Does a poet need a literary background?*

Ashbery: There can be serious poetry written by people who have no

background in poetry. I think it depends very much on the poet. I've had students whose poetry I thought was terrific but they hadn't read any contemporary poetry. There are poets who are deeply steeped in poetry and its traditions and don't write very good poetry, and there are those who do.

Audience: *Are you writing more poems about the city than you used to?*

Ashbery: No, that may be suggested by the poems I've been reading this morning, which I didn't choose myself. I grew up in the country on a farm and always detested it, couldn't wait to get to the city, and wrote about it even before I did.

Bacigalupo: *Well, thank you very much Mr. Ashbery for this exciting hour. I am sure we will always remember it.*