Forever coming closer.
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Forever coming closer

Lawrence Norfolk

JOHN ASHBERY
April Galleons
97pp. Manchester: Carcanet. £8.95.
0 85635 776 6
Three Plays: The Heroes; The Compromise; The Philosopher
160pp. Manchester: Carcanet. £10.95.
0 85635 745 6

John Ashbery's position as the Grand Old Man of American poetry seems secure. The academies in which these decisions are made have announced their approval in a series of articles over the years, and they have been endorsed by the reading public, spectacularly in the case of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), more steadily since. Yet the relationship between poet and public has not been all that cosy. The adoption of *Self-Portrait* as definitively par for the Ashbery course has led to the exclusion of much that seems out of place or bizarrely constructed next to that sleek, argumentative exercise. The Ashbery canon, as it has come to seem, includes not one of the three plays, nor the collaborative novel nor the three long prose poems he has written, nor the more whimsical experiments and unlikely successes to be found in all his collections of poetry.

By reissuing the three plays which Ashbery wrote in the 1950s with his latest collection, *April Galleons*, Carcanet are helping to counter this purist policy of exclusion, and their initiative is to be welcomed. The plays themselves reveal quite different facets of Ashbery's ability at a very early stage in his career. Of the three, *The Compromise* is the most substantial and least successful. It features stage-Mounties who always get their man, stage-Indians who say "Ugh" a lot and, in a Pirandello-ish twist at the end, Ashbery himself being carried off by a stage-raven. The remaining two are much shorter. *The Philosopher* assembles a boxer, a reporter, an innocent girl and a professor of Eastern mysticism, among others, for the reading of a will. The "plot" involves an elaborately engraved scarab which holds the key to a lost language which in turn holds the key to the secret of life. The will might hold the key to both, but we are in Raymond Roussel territory and the curtain comes down long before it is read. *The Heroes*, set somewhere between 1950s New York and ancient Troy, finds Circe, Ulysses and Theseus round at Achilles' place for the weekend. Patroclus sulks, Circe flirts and everyone indulges their taste for elegantly malicious gossip. The sophistication of their social round is a latter-day version of the labyrinth which Theseus has escaped after using "the only weapon with which the minotaur might be vanquished – the indifference of a true aesthete". In all three plays the basic problem of Ashbery's lack of dramaturgical skills is circumvented by the same strategy: dramatic conventions are the object of a lofty indifference.

A similar tactic has often brought successful results in Ashbery's poetry, although they jar with the received idea of what an Ashbery poem should look like and so tend to be ignored. Few critics seem willing to admit that a poem constructed on the principle that every line must contain the name of a river might succeed or that thirty-seven haiku (in *A Wave*, page 37) *do* make a poem. When this critical pruning is complete ("Litany" looks like being the next major casualty), the Ashbery poem *de luxe* emerges: coolly witty, decorous and aloof, euphonic to the ear, slippery to the grasp but essentially well-behaved.

Less poetic effects, such as jokes, allusive asides, snatches of dialogue and calculated uglinesses, are cast as gate-crashers at a stylish party and politely ignored. In their various ways they all tend to "off-set" the poem, to place the reader at a remove. Asked once whether he played tricks on his readers, Ashbery cited his use of the word "foehn" at the end of *A Nest of Ninnies*, the novel he wrote with James Schuyler: "I liked the idea that people, if they bothered to, would have to open the dictionary to find out what the last word in the novel meant. They'd be closing one book and opening another." In the present volume, "Finnish Rhapsody" derives its "Finnishness" not from its content, but its dominant trope, parallelism, which Ashbery borrowed from the *Kalevala*, a nineteenth-century Finnish pseudo-epic.

One wonders how much more of this kind of thing we are missing, and this is really the point: there is always more, always further to go. To outline potential without fulfilling it is a hallmark of Ashbery's work, a continual putting-off of the Day of Judgment. The pages of *April Galleons* are littered with the pages of other interesting books that we might be reading if we weren't reading this one. The "book one has never read" in "Winter Weather Advisory" or the letters "strewn across the floor / Singing the joyful song of how no-one was ever going to read them" in "The Big Cloud" offer the possibility of other stories. A glance down the title-page reveals Ashbery's predilection for potential texts; the pleasures offered by titles like "Forgotten Song", "Unreleased Movie" or "Life as a Book That Has Been Put Down" reside in their being acknowledged as possible rather than grasped as actual.

Time, in this "what-if?" view of the world, is always branching out in resistance to the idea of a single end or purpose, while history is a deletion of its more interesting possibilities. The Ashbery of *April Galleons* senses something radically inhuman in this dictatorial, cause-and-effect ordering of events and experiences but, perhaps characteristically, does not take on the thornier issue of responsibility:

Yet one can only question how the system arose
Creating itself, I suppose,
Since nothing else has yet taken the responsibility.

"System", "schema" and "program" are baleful, delimiting structures, accomplices to Eliot's placing of the intellect "at the tip of the senses" where it rationalizes to its heart's discontent.

Ashbery's post-Romantic sensibility is rightly distrustful of this order of priorities; in "No, I Don't", from the present collection, he cites

Our fathers
Who had so many categories
For so few things

as an instance of reason's self-serving tendencies. The point at which experience gets engaged historically with the world and becomes knowledge generally evokes hostile responses in Ashbery, ranging from paranoid fantasies of entrapment to genial debunkings of enlightenment philosophy in which "it all just gets gradually lost for the betterment of mankind" ("Dreams of Adulthood"). Ashbery's point is not to say that history should be meaningless, our every action indeterminate, but to acknowledge the damaging rigidity which goes along with the cause-and-effect view of the world:

That's how determinism does it
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling after . . . .

As oaths of poetic allegiance go, this is lightweight, but Ashbery's commitment to a Romantic standpoint has been consistent and his distrust of rationalization and the means/ends mentality deeply felt. *April Galleons* offers a more fluid, less dictatorial idea of narrative; lines of imagery taken up between poems offer whimsical correspondences; the "sigh of a sleeping giantess" in "Forgotten Song" is rudely answered by "the giant's last belch" in "No, I Don't", and the dialogue only peters out when "A sleepy giant" is inspired "To deeds that would later turn out to be misdeeds" ("Letters I Did or Did Not Get"). The turning-out of our childhood fables is one of several themes which weave in and out of each other through the volume: the temporary nature of relationships, the false promises offered by contemporary experience, the disappointment when they are fulfilled, the passage from childhood to age and, most importantly, the journey back.

All are elegantly worked out with a high degree of faith in the ramshackle machine of Romantic poetics, the fine-tuning of which has been an enduring project in Ashbery's work. If a tutelary deity had to be found for *April Galleons* it would be the Keats of "Ode to Autumn"; "seasoning" is a metaphor which surfaces throughout and "autumnal" is as good a word as any to describe the generous sensibility which keeps Ashbery from sounding like his imitators.

Many of the overly subtle distinctions and too-ingenious twists of thought in his earlier collections are brought to heel in this new volume. Evenness of tone – one that refuses solemnity, the characteristic tone of "the late work" – acts as a consolidating device while hints of an underlying unity are matched by the complicating urge to include a very broad range of experience. Many poems allude nonspecifically to autobiography and Ashbery can sometimes be glimpsed taking stock: "And in some room someone examines his youth / Finds it dry and hollow, porous to the touch . . . ." The poem ("Vetiver") reserves its elegiac force for the point where the life and times it describes can be recuperated in

a situation
That has come to mean us to us, and the crying
In the leaves is saved, the last silver drops.

This recuperation is at work on other levels as well as the personal. The matured feel of the poetry in *April Galleons* is in large part due to the successful incorporation of its influences. Throughout the book there exists a strong, if rarely explicit, sense of *déjà-vu* which is always shifting the real action back into somebody else's poem. Stevens is an obvious context for "a jar / Marvelling at its own emptiness", as is Auden's "Our Hunting Fathers" for "Generations of reciters told the tale / From the factory of your worn roots . . .". More frequent than these direct allusions is a baffled sense of familiarity worked into the texture of the verse; take the opening of the title poem:

Something was burning. And besides,
At the far end of the room a discredited waltz
Was alive and reciting tales of the conquerors
And their lilies – Is all of life thus
A tepid housewarming?

Whether this is a slightly over-sophisticated joke at the expense of Eliot's "ordinary man", who smells cooking and reads Spinoza, or the low-down on what really happens on Fire Island at the weekend, isn't as important as the calculated balancing-act between oddity and normality that is being performed. One doesn't feel so much at home as in one's best friend's home; the welcome extended by Ashbery's poetry is always, and necessarily, slightly protective. *April Galleons* comes closer than any other Ashbery collection to achieving that difficult intimacy, and of course it's the coming closer that is his real subject.

Shadowing the present

Tim Dooley

LACHLAN MACKINNON
Monterey Cypress
62pp. Chatto and Windus. Paperback, £4.95.
0 7011 3264 7

A casual dip into Lachlan Mackinnon's first collection of poems seems like an encounter with old friends. Has that "ant pushing an egg like a refugee's handcart" wandered in off the set of *Martians IV*? Isn't there a touch of Muldoonery about the dead frog on the lawn? Mackinnon impresses first as a knowing contemporary, a master of the common denominators of recent poetic styles. But as one reads on into *Monterey Cypress*, a different figure emerges, whose sense of the immediate moment is shadowed by a sense of its history and possible future. This is not, as one had feared, designer poetry but a poetry targeted to disrupt a cynicism of surfaces.

Fairly early on in the book, an unfashionably precise yet lyrical observation of the natural world makes itself known. The speaker in "Fallondon Wood" "walked out one weekday by the knots of tussock-sedge" to observe

a recent import, some Siberian
willow, a sappy brittle wood that gave sharply

with a crackle anticipating flames, a recoil spray
of shavings and silence before bow-saws
twanged as they stripped the fallen limbs.

What interests Mackinnon is both detail and context: "what it is to grow up in foreignness, / warp to that weather and become at home". This theme of estrangement is deepened in several of the autobiographical poems of the central section. These draw on childhood memories of an elusive estuary, "a cold North European city" or exile in America as a "kid who couldn't play baseball / or count a general's stars / but in a year's absence / forgot the names of British cars."

Names in *Monterey Cypress* are often the focus of fixation. "Heyford and Alconbury, / Lakenheath, Mildenhall" are among the American bases Mackinnon "implored to be taken to / on open days". The names of the aircraft themselves – "Phantom, Intruder, Voodoo" – operate a kind of closure "that could not / tear these beauties from their purpose". The writer's own first name – the subject of "A Family Tradition" – is a fixed form whose significance is irrecoverable, an inheritance "I have carried / since I first answered to it" and a legacy to be offered to an unconceived son in "the sealed future".

The richest writing to be found in *Monterey Cypress* comes in the final section of the book – a group of poems set in Paris while their author is researching a biography. It is here that the concerns that have been touched on in earlier poems are most fully stated.

After dinner, I understood
the heaviness
in my heart was the longing

the sense of not belonging here
incites, inflames. If flowers
have a folk-memory, those flowers will know
empires and republics rise and fall

like water in a fountain, but the sound
of children hasn't changed. Neither perhaps
is the history of human feelings possible,
though every feeling has a history.

The poem's internal echoes adumbrate a pattern in human events that the argument of the poem remains agnostic about. In two of these poems, Mackinnon refers to living in the last years of the century – a fact that seems to be approached with more millenarist foreboding than *fin-de-siècle* escapism. An earlier poem, "Stirring Times in 1963", mocks the delusion of being bound up in a "generation's restlessness", yet "La Défense" warns

The century will end
and we'll have made it
through to the next, if only
we can forget the future
we were promised in children's books and more

dismayingly,
the nothing it could come to.

The stoicism of a self-critical husband and anxious father haunts the desire to hold dreams in check. Not only has every feeling its history but every action its consequence. The final poem in the collection (as well as acting as a kind of trailer for Mackinnon's forthcoming *The Lives of Elsa Triolet*) encapsulates the tensions of this fragile present. From the Closerie des Lilas, the poet observes the closing of the Luxembourg gardens, thinks of his wife and his subject and frames his meditation with two references to Albuquerque, where a nine-megaton bomb was dropped by accident in the 1950s and which Chuck Berry rode through "on his trip to the Promised Land".

John Loveday's poems in *Particular Sunlights* (56pp. Headland. Paperback, £4.25. 0 903074 47 8) are characterized by a natural economy of expression. This is, in effect, a "Selected Poems", and so is in any case well-pruned, but it would be hard to find a superfluous word or dud image in the book. Loveday is partly a poet of place, that place being the Norfolk of the 1930s where his father worked a foundry. And he is concerned to keep alive the last tenuous link with a past of individual skills and man-made artefacts – "the nuts and bolts, dark iron things / That fastened England" – and gave communities a wholeness and coherence long since shattered by technology. The same deft sureness of touch extends to other themes – childhood, the visual arts, a lingering erotic nostalgia, and poetry itself – proving John Loveday to be a poet who deserves to be better known and more widely read. **S.R.**

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