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Sarah Manguso

A LARGER ACTIVITY SHROUDS IT*

Although his work does not altogether seek to hide its influences—the Surrealists' collaborations come to mind, for starters—it is only customary to compare John Ashbery, inhabitant of a veritable island of his own voice, to himself before any other poet or artist. *Flow Chart*, Ashbery's book-length magnum opus, includes in its opening section the following lines:

. . . We know life is busy,
but a larger activity shrouds it, and this is something
we can never feel, except occasionally, in small signs
put up to warn us and as soon expunged, in part
or wholly

Both *Flow Chart* and *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery's newest book-length poem, seek to apprehend this "larger activity." And although the books weren't necessarily intended as companion pieces in name or even in form, the new poem describes a sort of Candyland version of the first—luscious and pretty and at least as theoretically or intellectually successful, though by using different terms in its search and discovery.

The vehicle for this poem is the posthumously-acclaimed illustrated novel by Henry Darger (1892–1972), recluse and outsider artist. Ashbery's book at once dramatizes Darger's fantasy world and uses it as an engine for the greater project, the arguably self-sufficient activity of Ashbery's poetry.

The narrative recounts the adventures of a band of imaginary girls, the Vivians, who include Judy, Shuffle, and Tidbit, as they run from an immense, mysterious archetypal storm. The first section begins with Judy's exhortation to her companions to escape, her words neatly confusing the dimensions of space and time, setting the stage for the poem's work to make out of them a new sense.

**Girls on the Run*, John Ashbery. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999. 55 pp. \$20.00.

Let's get out of here, Judy said.
They're getting closer, I can't stand it.
But you know, our fashions are in fashion
only briefly, then they go out
and stay that way for a long time. Then they come back in
for a while. Then, in maybe a million years, they go out of fashion
and stay there. (3)

Judy's explanation of what's coming "closer," what she "can't stand," becomes a general speculation of the dynamic behavior of fashion in time, not in space. And the close relation between the words that refer to space and those that refer to time—here, "in" and "out"—is immediately apprehensible.

The familiar Ashberian contempt for conventional sense behind syntax is present here, to a degree. While *Girls on the Run* is not as concrete as the short poems in *Some Trees*, a style and degree of opacity Ashbery seems to take steps away from or toward with every succeeding project, this new piece is not as elliptical as most of *Flow Chart*. Because, for one thing, this poem has a consistent subject, concrete and in the world.

But the piece does not dwell on Darger's art as much as it uses Darger as a point of origin for general contemplation. The poem's air of secrecy and its tendency to shy away from specific meaning do characterize it a good percentage of the time, and these qualities are not my favorite ones. No matter how intrinsically different a poem is from a biography, or from a spy thriller, it is the promise of sense (or at least of eventual sense) that carries my faith in a text and enables me to read on. Whether or not Ashbery intends on being readable, or whether this should matter, is not a debate in which I wish to become embroiled. *Girls on the Run* is a book; therefore I assume it can and should be read.

And, to a certain extent, it can. The speakers' consistent return to the subjects of time and space give at least the illusion that sense is being sought and won on Ashbery's complex semantic battlefield. In early sections of the poem, the Vivians describe an escape from either time or space, but never from both at once. The realm of the girls' adventures seems to oscillate between the two.

No, only getting away
has any value to her: A stone's throw is better than a mile

since one will have to be up again much later, and this way
saves time. (7)

Later in the poem, its speakers investigate and “explain” space and time, one by means of the other.

Finally when Angela could retrieve her moorings they sent the tide out,
but it came back next day, increasingly bizarre.

Bunny and Philip weren't sure they wanted to see more. “But you
must,”

Angela urged, breathing a little faster. Then they all wanted to know
why it goes on

all the time, and the preacher answered it was due to bats. In the silos.
(15)

The spatial infinity of the water yields to the temporal infinity of the tide cycle yields to the bats in the silos—an image either spatial or temporal, suggesting either finitude or infinitude. The two infinities are interchangeable—but, rather than exhorting nihilism, this condition seems to invoke action, encouraging the Vivians ever onward in their journey.

The bare fact of the Vivians' journey originates in the denotative meaning of Ashbery's lines—“let's get out of here . . . only getting away / has any value to her . . .”—but the details of the journey emerge from the poem's tone. The preacher answers the question about why the tide “goes on all the time” with the explanation that it's “due to bats.” This juxtaposition of the metaphysical (or, at least, scientific) musing with the preacher's wry one-liner communicates much more than the words, alone, “mean.” Ashbery's tonal shift from the philosophical to the mundane—indeed, an answering of one by the other—might suggest, for example, that the whole world, its philosophy as well as its mundanity, is the only true subject and that any limitation of that subject carries with it a certain degree of falseness. Whether or not this particular interpretation is a valid one, the combination of tones—the preacher's wryness with the almost desperate seriousness of Angela, Bunny, and Philip—creates a level of sense altogether separate from mere fact.

Sense in poetry depends not only on denotation, but also on music and tone, words' rhythm and color; conventional poetic sense is considered to depend less on music and more on the devices used in nonpoetic writing.

Balancing writing between pure “prose” and pure “poetry” is the task of any writer—to find a space to inhabit along the spectrum of sense. Ashbery’s detractors fault him most often for his apparent refusal to meet his readers halfway—that is, to steer them firmly enough toward his poems’ specific meaning, to communicate clearly what the poems are “about.” But I think this criticism doesn’t quite address the difficulty particular to Ashbery’s poetry. What Ashbery’s critics should address, instead of what the poems lack, is our cultural inability to uncover unconventional sense in poetry. What they should call for, rather than a return to the Wallace Stevens-inspired *Some Trees*, is *more* poetry like *Flow Chart* and *Girls on the Run*, from Ashbery and from everybody. For if, in our culture, denotative sense could yield to tonal sense, depending on the text, then everyone would have the tools to evaluate Ashberian poetry on its own terms. As yet, we do not have such a culture, and my frustration with *Girls on the Run* is just one result. That the pleasure of reading this poem surpasses, at least sometimes, the frustration of its difficulty, is certainly a mark of its success.