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'You're so clear here': John Ashbery's *Commotion*

Reading John Ashbery's *Commotion of the Birds* (2016) is an experience that seems as alive with possibility and potential as any of his previous collections, and thoroughly connected to current contexts of language. Baffled surprise and delight inhabits almost every line, and there's barely a poem in the collection that doesn't expand my lexical palette/palate. A partial list of words I looked up while reading it includes *ephebe* (a young man in military training), *plugnutty* (punchdrunk), *jillions* (zillions), *gulches* (ravines), *haruspicate* (foretell), *acadian* (French Louisiana), *inspissates* (congeals), *montgolfière* (hot air balloon), *moyenâgeux* (antiquities; middle ages), *sunchokes* (Jerusalem Artichokes) and *czardas* (Hungarian dance that starts slow and finishes wildly fast). It is in this sense, and others, that I think of Ashbery's work as expansive, and *commotion*, with its suggestion of civil unrest, and its inner movement, (does *commotion* also mean an emotion felt together?), seems the ideal word to describe this effect. These poems set the ear – and the pages of dictionaries – aflutter; they enact the pitter-patter of tapping and clicking, a kind of WD40 for search engines, resisting language as static or fixed.

I think of these moments in the poems when the language seems to exceed itself as examples of what Édouard Glissant calls in *Poetics of Relation*, 'flash agents', where there is an intensified meeting between cultures and where difference is manifest in language. Elsewhere in Betsy Wong's translation she calls these moments in the language, 'agents of commotion'. To choose a word from a poem title, they might also be thought of as 'glitches', and like a glitch, they are an indication, a coming to the surface, an error message. Many of the moments when I found myself looking things up – even words whose meaning I thought was familiar – seem to signal an intensified moment of ethical, social or philosophical crisis.

In 'The Upright Piano', there's a damning and downright scary realisation of what 'ephebe' means in these lines: 'We "bought into" the ephebe-consciousness scam / that razed our era, and the next one. / What was it about those boys? Some were plain, / others smooth. All enjoyed the sun / for as long as it chose to shine upon them.' The blending of discourses of military industrial complex, masculinity, homosocial and queer desire collide in these lines with a terrifying – if still thrilling – precision. This poem also has one of the most deliciously daring lines I've read recently, unfolding an absurdly disarming object-oriented ontology: 'Somebody left their toothbrush on the dancefloor. / My understanding, cool from the diagnosis, / is they don't want it to be there. / You mean you're suffering like everybody?'

Moving from object to abject, 'The President's Toenail', also contains for me a flash agent in the language, in this case in its opening lines: 'Why can't everything stay the way / it used to be, O biggest hipster, dolor?', where a consideration of nostalgia, conservatism, regret and a deep wearying deflation seem to sweep through the question, even as it is so energetically and provocatively posed. Whenever this poem was actually written, published in 2016, it can't help but suggest the huge cheesy clipping of contemporary global politics that it's hard not to keep sniffing. I find myself hoping that apostrophic O could swallow me whole. Is the president's toenail ingrowing? Is there a fungus of the president's toenail that's spreading? Are we compelled through ideas of privacy to leave the president's toenail out of our considerations of politics? Are we the president's toenail? How can we make the president's foot ache?

When the phrase repeats, pre-empted by another apostrophe, two thirds through the poem, I'm wincing with a pleasure-in-pain: 'Stuck with his teeth,/ O great and slippery one! / Not here, not anyone, to / be like the president's toenail, unperforming!' That painful stubbed 'to' at the end of the line! Podiatry is not the only lexical arena in which Ashbery inserts the presidency, in gestures that seem to be a literary equivalent of what philosopher Gianni Vattimo calls 'weak thought', thought that focuses on weakness with the aim to 'cut a dent in power'. In 'Desert Moments', contemporary discourse around truth and politics surface in self-reflexive, localised pockets: 'My gosh! The President of the United States! / Years and years went by like that / It was impossible to keep track of them./ I'm all about truth, and meaning.'

In her essay-poem 'Everyday Barf', Eileen Myles writes against the quotidian and contextless 'everyday': 'Puking would put something on the sidewalk of the everyday so it might begin to be now.' I'm reminded of the essay not just by Ashbery's glorious phrase 'Puke University', from

'Desert Moments', but also because *Commotion of Birds*, with its agitated fluttering of attention to flash agents in the language, opens up fecund clusters of social and ethical thinking that unfold always in the now. The language moves, the poems swarm and teem with linguistic activity, and as the title poem flickeringly predicts: 'It's good to be modern if you can stand it.'