



Tidbit and Uncle Margaret

Girls on the Run

by John Ashbery

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999

Hard cover, 96 pp., \$20.

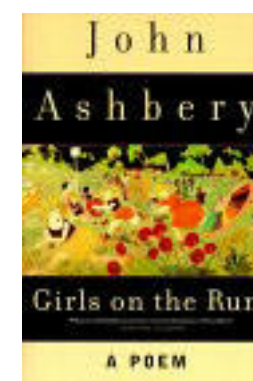
Elaine Terranova

Someone else's work obliquely inspired your new book: the paintings of Henry Darger, an outsider artist who chronicled fictional armies of little girls. How did the paintings affect you?

The girls are constantly under attack by violent enemy forces and being saved and surviving storms and evil armies. I was fascinated by little girls when I was a little boy, and their clothes and their games and their dolls appealed to me much more than what little boys were doing. Therefore I was sort of ostracized.

Interview with John Ashbery in the *New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 1999¹

Girls on the Run : thought smashed against rock. It swirls off in the wind like the little girls on the cover, whimsy breaking the apt phrase, sending the word back for reconstruction, soaking up primary color. Oh, flowers are twirling, hats and beach umbrellas and little bell-shaped skirts. Maybe the little girls are earthlings representing life on this planet, and language is what holds them down, what connects them to us. In the wrap-around jacket illustration, the trees are bent, the sky blackening like² Heade's painting of an approaching storm. However, in Henry Darger's drawing, the world is menaced by enormous flowers and strawberries the size and solidness of boulders. Hurricane force winds have risen. Huge blue bells and lilies clutch the air. The girls run because that is what to do, all we are able to do, faced with disaster.



Girls On the Run
by John Ashbery

And so it starts: a run to get out of the way of "the great plane." Then a fashion discussion (well, it's about GIRLS). The Children's clothes as Darger draws them, after all, are traced from old comics, hopelessly out of date. There is an invocation to the muse, like an oath in blood, "Write it now, Tidbit said,/ before they get back./ And, quivering, I took the pen." And a magic potion, "Drink the beautiful tea," the Principal orders Henry. Then "Dimples builds an ark...a big, blue boat." All the preparations are made. The adventure can begin.

Henry Darger. Night-shift dish washer, hospital aide. Picture the old duffer, blue-eyed, straggly-bearded, poking through back-street Chicago for interesting rubbish, his single room appointed with stacks of Sunday comics in juicy colors, children's books, eye-catching rags, broken furniture, towers of Pepto-Bismol bottles. And sandwiched among it, the 19,000-page illustrated epic of war, evangelism, and child slavery, undiscovered until his death, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. Then picture the decorative panels with titles such as "Angel with American Flag Wings"; going for \$75,000, hanging in world-class museums.

Darger's collage of life, and his own life as well, serve as ironic commentary on our own. The Vivians (their last name), seven "Abbiennian" princesses, are his heroines, aided by angel or warrior guardians, his alter egos. The little girls escape pursuit or are caught and jailed or endure tortures such as flogging and crucifixion that Ashbery only hints at in *Girls on the Run*. What the Darger and the Ashbery works share: an apotheosis of childhood, among other things. One of those "things": the little girls are not entirely little girls. Darger pictures them with penises in various scenes of undress. The ambivalent sexuality is captured in the poet's morphing appellations, Larry-Sue, Uncle Margaret.

The action in Darger's epic unravels like the single strand of an enormous ball of string, amassed over years. But *Girls on the Run* keeps the characters in hopping, word-mad motion, as if they are spinning off the edge of the world. Here is poetry wound up like the first days of a permanent wave. Language is skewed in each line, aphorisms lopped in half, non-sequiturs vie with one another. Like someone plagued by Tourette's, Ashbery cannot resist a pun: "elastic trains," "compacted truths." In 1976, in *Figures of Capable Imagination*, Harold Bloom saw two Ashberys: he of *The Tennis Court Oath* had reformed to write *The Double Dream of Spring*. "Ashbery, at last, says farewell to ellipsis,"

Bloom unreliably predicted.

Sometimes in his twenty or so books, the poet's words relax back into sentences, conventional stanzas. Sense, the more common kind, becomes paramount. This first stanza, for instance, of "Sometimes in Places" in *And the Stars were Shining* :

*And patient, exacting
no confirmation from those who know him,
the poet lies down under the vast sky,
dreaming of the sea. For poetry, he
now realizes, is cleverer than he.*

But what it tells us we already know: the poet trusts what he does. In *Girls on the Run*, we have the madly whirling Ashbery, difficult to pin down, and in other books, the still-inventive but somewhat "deflated" one, the one who gives us more of a chance to catch up.

Although Ashbery maybe be considered an interpreter of Darger's vision, *Girls on the Run* seems more process than statement. Ashbery is a reflective commentator, facilitator, and prime mover who ecstatically snips and pastes, spacing out sign and idea, letting chance operate. In an essay in the *Hollins Critic*, Harriet Zinnes calls Ashbery "Cagean."³ The concept of chance operations does seem to be guiding Ashbery. Maybe when he produces a book like *Girls*, it's the difference between writing with the window open, as Cage would say, and writing with it closed. It's wide open here. When you go out on the errand of a sentence there is no straight ahead, only intriguing, devious turnings. You meet again what you passed without noting fifty lines back. Bats. Silos.

But I love the way it flies by.

Not every reader may be willing to play Ashbery's game. Say you are just skirting, or read that skating, too, the thin ice of the real world. He's not taking you anywhere concrete, and he'll give you a hard time getting there, but it's a hell of a ride through the shooty-shoots of his brain. Ashbery is for giving a jolt to the linear personality.

Think of all that fashion that revs up the poem. Is Ashbery in the middle of reading a *Vogue* article? Laure (an allusion to Ralph Lauren?), Tidbit and Pliable. Tidbit, little girl or sliver-sized fashion model? So clothes "are in fashion only briefly, they go out/and stay that way for a long while." A mutt named Rags. Think of "the tiny doggy door Rags had made with a T-square./surplus sequins." (He's fond of these phonetic melanges). Later, a broken garbage disposal and perhaps a conversation between a paint-store clerk and customer. A drugstore package insert: "Daytime drowsiness, dizziness, headache, nausea, stomach upset./vomiting, diarrhea, lightheadedness, muscle aches and dry mouth may occur." And there are echoes of Gracie Allen ("there were no two ways to have it," "it was just their pot luck"), Groucho Marx ("The fat clock ticks. It's time to repair/to the orchard, or just to repair.") and '30s film comedies. The insistence on disparate or conflicting meanings: how their invalid adventure "takes a little blancmange" and recovers.

Darger's work is a collage of real and imagined worlds. Ashbery's is a collage of the real and imagined worlds and of Darger's invention. It's not, as some have said, that Ashbery has cleaned up Darger and omitted the violence; he has omitted the story. There is no continuous narrative in *Girls*, as there is in Darger. There are 21 beginnings, sections like an odyssey's, many of which tell us that they represent the events of a single day. And so we have the fragmented beginnings of story, coming out of the longings of childhood, somewhat like Once upon a time or There were seven beautiful princesses or Drink the magic potion. Maybe that's what we remember most, after all.

And the characters, Jack, Heidi, Rags. (Each section of *Girls* adds a few new ones, Angela, Bunny and Philip, Aunt Clara, Tootles, General Metuchen, etc.) And maybe an accent, reminiscent of Dickens or Peter Pan: "I just want to say I respects/all what is good, and don't come here any more, I won't." The story is only alluded to, "The thread ended up on the floor./where threads go." So we are busy cutting and making, to no avail. "Such a lot of going around and doing! Sometimes they were in sordid sexual situations;/at others, a smidgen of fun would intrude on our day/which exists to be intruded on, anyway." In a beautiful passage about time and death, "a child lay dying, there was more other/to be sad over." Duration kills, Ashbery tells us. And, although you have learned a language, what is there to do, he says, but forget it? Whereas, "an illustration changes us." But Ashbery's illustrations take the form of words. He goes to the same primary sources as Darger: children's books. Comics-"Aw, don't be such a grouch, Dimples curdled," and "Hold it, I have an idea, Fred groaned."

We come upon a dated diary entry, Nov. 7, and a song lyric, "Dream lover, won't you come to me?/Dream lover, won't you be my darling?" There are allusions to the Mass and to the Psalms, to self-help manuals: "They danced and became meaningful to each other." And a whole canon's poets, invoked by a word or two, a line here or there ("the great here and there"): T.S. Eliot, "Often a strange desire/mingles cats and near greatness," "April surprised us with mistrials" (mistrals?). Stevens, "that crow ululates, undoing me." Milton, "the bower of empowerment." Lowell, "But the skunks were swaggering among us."

Is one meant to think of *Girls* as a collaboration between Ashbery and Darger? And does that necessitate a comparison of *Girls* with Darger's epic? A. Ashbery, too, fragments reality. Checkmark. B. Ashbery creates a new reality. Checkmark. C. He, like Darger, offers us a collage of things we have seen or heard somewhere — but where?

Checkmark, decidedly. And why look for correspondences at all? Partly because Ashbery must have seen them. It's unlike him to "collaborate" although he did before in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (with Parmagianino, another dead visual artist). Partly because, even if Darger is unknown to many readers, the alien, exile character of *In the Realms of the Unreal* lends a resonance to *Girls on the Run*. From the get-go, there's the mystery, the shadow quality of Darger's world, which Ashbery takes for granted and in which he finds fertile ground. For Ashbery is himself so much a loner and an original.

ALSO DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

Ashbery, John. *And the Stars Were Shining*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994. Hard cover, 88 pages, \$18

Ashbery, John. *Can You Hear, Bird*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. Paperback, 188 pages, \$12

Bloom, Harold. *Figures of Capable Imagination*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1976. 273 pp. Out of Print.

¹ Rehak, Melanie. "Questions for John Ashbery: A Child in Time." *The New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 1999: p. 15.

² Martin Johnson Heade was a nineteenth-century painter of the Hudson River School.

³ "John Ashbery: The Way Time Feels as It Passes." *The Hollins Critic*, June 1992: 1-13.

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