An Interview with Harry Mathews

By John Ashbery

John Ashbery: One is supposed to ask questions about a writer's work, but I thought I would ask you about your life, which I know very little about. As so often with one's nearest and dearests, their biographies have enormous lacunae in them. I don't know, for instance, very much about why you went to Harvard when you did, or why you left it. I don't know why you studied music. I don't know why you went to Majorca. If I knew, I've forgotten all these things.

Harry Mathews: I think it's very kind of you to assume why I did any of these things. I went to Harvard because I disliked Princeton so much--I spent a year and a half there. I didn't leave Harvard early; I actually finished. I think I did two years in a year and a half, or something like that. And I finished college because I thought how much it would upset my parents if I didn't. It was a last gesture to--

JA: I see, I didn't even know that you'd finished college, I thought you'd left.


JA: I guess I knew that you did two years at Harvard. Why did you leave Princeton?

HM: I disliked Princeton for the reasons many people dislike it--its genteel charm, which seemed snobbish and anti-intellectual.

JA: You certainly don't get that at Harvard.

HM: I regret my having been at Harvard at that time, in the sense that if I'd had a different attitude I think I would have learned a lot more there. I felt that I was just going through the motions. Fortunately I did learn a lot about...
music, because most of the courses I took were practical courses in musical theory--harmony, counterpoint--where you had to hand in assignments once or twice a week or fail. But what seemed to me attractive about Harvard, especially in retrospect, was the intellectual life of the students, "among" the students. I was already married and living off campus so I missed most of that, except for my lunches at the Signet, which I liked very much.

JA: Yes--boiled beef, cold potatoes . . .

HM: I didn't mean the "food"! What was the name of the man who took care of us--Archie?

JA: I think it was, yes . . .

HM: Archie was very kind--

JA: . . . the Mrs. Danvers of the Signet.

HM: I had very little money at the time. He allowed me to simply pay for my lunches without having to pay the dues, or something like that. So I was able to keep up this one link with the--

JA: It must have set you back a good forty-five cents each time you had lunch.

HM: Yes, those were the pre-everything days.

JA: What led you to study music?

HM: Well, I had this little notion--I started writing when I was eleven, writing poetry. I was passionately addicted to it; it was my great refuge through adolescence. I felt it was so valuable to me that I didn't want that passion to be sullied by exposure to academic treatments of it. In fact neither at Princeton nor at Harvard did I take a single literature course.

JA: Very wise of you.

HM: I felt that way at the time. I have some regrets now, although not too many. Mainly because I'm so unevenly read.

JA: You're unevenly read in a way that no one else is.

HM: I've never read Fielding, or Thackeray. Balzac--or hardly any.

JA: You didn't have to read Giles and Phineas Fletcher or Roger Ascham.

HM: "Gammer Gurton's Needle"?

JA: Oh--did you or didn't you?

HM: I didn't, no.
JA: Actually it's very delightful.

HM: It sounded so--it inspired one of my moments of regret about not taking English literature courses. Music had been my first love among the arts, and I was fascinated by it, as I still am. And although that wasn't my intention, I think it was very useful to have studied it. I gather you feel the same way about it.

JA: Yes, but I haven't studied it.

HM: You do have a very fine--a "nice" ear.

JA: I feel it's too beautiful for me to want to know anything about it.

HM: Just the way I felt about literature.

JA: Exactly.

HM: There's a big difference, though, because no matter how much you learn about music, it doesn't "tell" you anything about it. You study it through words--you approach it through a different medium.

JA: As a youth, you said, you took refuge in poetry. Refuge from what? The gilded life on Beekman Place?

HM: Please cut that! It's true, I had an extremely delicious life, but that was my life at home, and perhaps because I was only a child, or for whatever reasons, I found the company of others, especially other boys, quite terrifying and upsetting. I was poor at athletics. I didn't know how to get along on their terms in any way I knew about. I probably wasn't as bad as I thought, but anyway I felt socially unhappy. I became very nasty, too. And when I started writing--not when I started, but when I was twelve or thirteen or fourteen, something like that--writing poetry was a great inner (I don't mean that in any "significant" way), a secret, a private place to go to, as was reading poetry, and reading in general. My dream, I remember, when I went to boarding school, was to have a study all my own, a little nook someplace where nobody could get at me--nobody, like the football coach.

JA: Yes. I felt the same way. By the way, when did your parents get this apartment?

HM: I was brought up on East 72nd Street between First and Second Avenues. This place was bought by my maternal grandfather, when my grandmother died. He had a house which he sold in order to move here. My parents already had an apartment here, a smaller one. On the death of my grandfather, my mother inherited this one. My grandfather paid $75,000 for it.

JA: When was that?
HM: In 1952.

JA: Anyway, when did you meet Niki?

HM: When I was twelve years old. Her family and mine were vacationing in the Berkshires at the same time. I used to play with Niki and her brother and the Casadesus sons.

JA: Jean.

HM: Yes, Jean, and the other one I think was called--I can't remember what he was called. They both became musicians, like their parents. And then Niki and I saw each other intermittently through our adolescence. We didn't get along very well. And one day I was riding to Princeton--riding back to Princeton from New York on the train, having lunch in the dining car, as you could then do (such a pleasure!)--this extraordinary beautiful young woman walked by and turned and smiled at me. That was that.

JA: It was Niki?

HM: That was Niki. And I immediately set out in pursuit of her. She didn't dislike this . . .

JA: Since you were on a train, you must have had an easy time.

HM: It took a little longer than the train ride. And then, when I left Princeton in the middle of my sophomore year, I went into the navy. There was then the possibility of enlisting for a year if you were eighteen years old; it satisfied all your military service requirements. While I was in the navy, Niki and I eloped. At the end of that year we went to live in Cambridge together.

JA: Where were you stationed?

HM: I was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, for a while, about which the less said the better, and then I was in the Mediterranean, about which the more said the better.

JA: Then you went to college?

HM: After the navy, I transferred to Harvard and finished there. I was there the spring term of 1951 and I stayed through the summer term and a whole other year, so I was able to do two years in a little less than a year and a half. I graduated in 1952 and went to Europe, with Niki and our first child Laura, who was then a year old.

JA: You went first to Majorca?

HM: No, we went to Paris. At that time Niki was studying acting and I was studying music. My idea was to go to Vienna to study conducting and perhaps play in an orchestra first, so I thought before I got to Vienna I could
do with a little training in Paris.

JA: I hear the Duluth Symphony is looking for a principal guest conductor.

HM: I was thinking of something more like the Stadskeller Orchestra in Innsbruck. Anyway, Niki studied acting in Paris; she was bilingual, and she still is. At the end of the following summer she switched to painting. She had a nervous breakdown and it was while she was in a clinic recovering from it that she did her first collages. She gave up a promising acting career, a leading role offered to her in his next play by Marcel Achard, who as you know was a successful playwright; and also a part by Robert Bresson.

JA: I always confuse him with Marcel Arland.

HM: But they're different.

JA: I know, the other one edits volumes of La Pleiade. I knew about the Bresson.

HM: It was the same role that was offered to our daughter and that she did years later. I forgot to say that after college this great passion for writing poetry started to collapse. To this day I don't really know why, but it was definitely associated with both the colleges I went to. By the beginning of my sophomore year I'd virtually stopped writing, and within a year of leaving Harvard I'd started again. When Niki decided to become a painter, I told myself how wonderful, I want to do something like that. I'd also realized by that time that the chances of me having a musical career that would really interest me were practically nil because my ear training had been so neglected. It's hard to make up at twenty-one what you can learn easily at ten. And I really wanted to write again, and so I started writing, first poetry and then prose.

JA: How long did you stay in Paris then?

HM: We were in Paris and Nice for a little more than a year, and then we went to Majorca, where you could then live for next to nothing. Majorca was much less resorty than it is now. There were quite a few foreigners, but they could be numbered by the dozens perhaps, and there wasn't the great summer influx that there is now.

JA: Is that what made you move back?

HM: No. We lived in this place called Deya, where Robert Graves lived, a beautiful village. There was this artists and writers colony there. It was our first and last experience of an artists colony, and we both found living in such a situation extremely nasty after awhile, although we made very good friends there, one of whom introduced me to you.

JA: Walter Auerbach.
HM: Walter Auerbach, who was living in Barcelona and whom I persuaded
to come live in Deya, told me about you and introduced us, I think in the
early summer of 1956.

JA: Yes. How did you meet Walter Auerbach?

HM: I met him on a trip to Barcelona. I may have met him in Majorca. I got
to know him in Barcelona. In those days you used to go to Barcelona on the
overnight boat from Majorca if you wanted to live the life of a real city and a
change of scene. We had friends in common. I went to a party at his place and
then saw him rather regularly. I can't remember who the friends were, perhaps
Jimmy and Tommie Metcalf, artists living in Deya at this time, perhaps
Alastair Reid, more likely the Metcalfs. Walter stayed on. He died in Majorca,
he lived the rest of his life there.

JA: Yes. We were at his house together. I was in Chicago a couple months
ago where there was a show of Moholy-Nagy photographs and one of them
was of Pitt Auerbach.

HM: That was Walter's first wife. And how did you meet him?

JA: Actually it was through Rudy Burckhardt. Jane Freilicher once said to
me--I hadn't met Rudy yet and she explained about him and said that he was
making a movie using people like us in it. "Not only that, but Walter
Auerbach is going to be in it. It's like having G.W. Pabst on set." So I met
him through making the movie. The only thing I remember about it was the
day we finished making it we went to, I think, Sheepshead Bay to have lunch
at a sort of fish restaurant, and Walter Auerbach emphatically ordered a fillet of
sole sandwich.

HM: Was that cheaper than the other dishes.

JA: They were all cheap; it was that he knew exactly what he wanted.

HM: Because he was a genius at living on small amounts of money. He lived
on fifty-five dollars and later sixty-five dollars a month for years and years, in
what seemed to be great comfort, both in Barcelona and Majorca.

JA: I remember the lunch he served us was something like a brochette of
lungs, lights, beef heart. It was rather good. Anyway, I suppose we should talk
about your work as well as your life.

HM: I think it's very interesting to talk about--I mean I'm very willing to talk
about my work, but I think people feel that they should ask questions about
the work and they're really interested in one's life. So it's nice of you to ask
those questions.

JA: No. When I met you in '56, I think you'd just moved back to Paris.

HM: We'd just bought the apartment--our first apartment, at the Porte de
Vanves.

JA: Yes, I remember it well.

HM: Well, are there any things that remain mysterious to you after that?

JA: Outside of the mystery that you've always deliberately cultivated, I can't think of anything.

HM: Yes, I always thought that the principle of my life was to be leaving for someplace else wherever I was and no matter where I was living.

JA: And to arrive at an unspecified date.

HM: Yes.

JA: When I first met you, you were fascinated by Raymond Roussel, whom I introduced you to, I believe.

HM: That's right.

JA: We must credit Kenneth Koch, however, for the original American discovery.

HM: Yes. I always credit him.

JA: I seldom do. That's why I was doing so now. And since then you've been involved in the Oulipo--and it seems as though the discovery of Roussel's processes and writing must have been one of the things, perhaps the most important one, that occurred at that time since you've evolved more and more towards works that are somehow schematic.

HM: This is something that had appealed to me in poetry; obviously all poets who write in traditional forms are involved in this, and I'd also invented ways of doing it in poetry myself. For instance, I wrote a long poem in sonata form. That seemed to be a thing you could do in poetry or at least try out in poetry. I was dying to write prose, but I didn't know any way of going about doing this in prose. Then Roussel showed me that you can generate prose works with the same kind of arbitrariness that you use in verse. One extraordinary thing about poetry is that, say, if you're writing couplets, every five feet you have to have a word that sounds like another word, whether that makes any sense or not. You have arbitrary, illogical demands that you have to make on yourself. Roussel showed me that you can have more or less autobiographical stories, or stories of things that you'd observed in the world. It's terribly hard to do that, at least it was terribly hard for me- to make it sing and glow. I think that's why Roussel excited me so.
JA: I was very attracted to him when I first read him but probably more the effects that his processes produced almost gratuitously. I've never really used very formal devices, although I don't disapprove of them; but it seems as though by using them you can get a realism, a sort of casual, unbuttoned quality.

HM: I think that's true. The traditional short story or novel comes out very unlike the way things really happen, as though it were a kind of translation of the world. In Roussel, and in Oulipian work, you're forced to do things you wouldn't do otherwise, and this brings a great deal of freshness to them. One thing that I was inspired by in Roussel, most obviously in "The Conversation," is that incredible voice, that very neutral, apparently indifferent tone in which the most insane things are said. This is one of those effects which is so potent.

JA: The fact that he wrote with a very severe attention to writing with as few words as possible, so that he sometimes wrestled four or five hours with a single word, that produced what Michel Leiris has called prose such as that which is taught in manuals of lycees. He also says it allowed effects of extraordinary limpidity, which I think is a very good word for it. It's an experience that one can get nowhere else.

HM: Who was it that said to Pasternak--was it Scriabin or somebody playing Scriabin?

JA: Yes, that he should simplify--

HM: No, he said that he had finally achieved utter simplicity in his last works, which were of an absolutely mind-boggling complexity.

JA: I once quoted that passage to somebody interviewing me who wanted some justification for my complexity, somebody not very sympathetic. She said: "Sobering thought."

HM: It's a very hard point to get across to a lot of people, that a work is much harder to get if it's diluted, whereas if you have it exactly the way it should be, it looks very thorny or cranky but in fact it just fits the space it's taking up. I'm obsessed with getting rid of words, too. Sometimes it seems to me that so much scraping takes place that words end up doing rather interesting things. Perec said when he translated me that I was very hard to translate because I used words "juste a cote leur sens"--just alongside their meaning. Since they were very ordinary words one didn't really notice this as it took place.

JA: Like what?

HM: I have to turn off this tape recorder. I never can remember when people ask me for examples like that.

JA: No. You were just saying you wished you could understand how your work, hard as it may appear, is really easy to follow.
HM: I think that what matters in writing, as in music, is what's going on between the words (and between the notes); the movement is what matters, rather than whatever is being said. I like very much what the English composer Birtwhistle--is that his name?--said about his pieces. He said you could change all the notes in it and it would still be the same piece. That really rang a bell when I read it because it could be said about not only my own work but written work in general. What matters is the process and not the substance that the process is using. I think that's very true of your poems.

JA: Yes, I thought so.

HM: I think that's what's hard to . . . Readers get worried about reading something right or wrong, they don't trust themselves in the act of reading, and so they don't let that process work for them. They try to piece together a sense by taking out the elements that are used in . . .

JA: That's certainly particularly true of poetry, where people will go to any lengths rather than actually read the poem, such as read a thick book about it. What's the position of Oulipo in France? How's it regarded by writers in general?

HM: I went to see Michael Leiris, whom you just mentioned a few moments ago. He said," I'm very interested in what Oulipo does, but don't you think it's results are rather mechanical?" You know, he's very sly. And of course he does his whole--the "Glossaries" he makes up are very Oulipian. I think people who know it from a distance look on it with some suspicion, which is a good thing. I mean, it still has a certain ability to provoke. The position that it claims for itself is slightly suspect. We say that we invent forms (or rediscover old forms) that are very hard to use, very demanding, so that these will be available to other writers, a kind of contribution made to the potentiality . . .

JA: Very thoughtful of you.

HM: Exactly. It's very thoughtful of us and never really happens. But I think its true activity, which is to experiment in forms rather than in writing, "is" interesting. And if it has to be justified, it's justified by the writing of Calvino and Perec, people like that.

JA: Don't be so modest.

HM: Well, nevertheless Calvino is in a class apart.

JA: So are you. What is your standard of a form being sufficiently constricting?

HM: What I say is: a form that makes you write something that you wouldn't normally say, or in a way that you would never have said it. The form is so demanding that you can’t get around it.

JA: But that's true of almost any form.
HM: Not really. The sonnet was once difficult, but it's not difficult any more.

JA: But you would be saying that you could conceivably say something in a sonnet that would not have occurred to you otherwise.

HM: That's true. I think any form can be "suggestive." The constrictive part "makes" you --the sonnet wouldn't necessarily make you write in a way you wouldn't otherwise, or say something you wouldn't otherwise. I think the best example is the lipogram and Georges Perec's book "La Disparition", which is written without the letter "e." If you write without the letter "e," you can say an amazing amount of things, but you use a vocabulary that is so radically different than the one you normally use that you "have" to think about it. You have to be conscious of what you're doing all the time. I've been only able to solve that problem by putting an upturned thumbtack on the e-key of my typewriter. It's very hard no matter how diligent you are to keep them out--to keep an "e" from slipping in.

JA: I suppose every time you went to use a "le" or "je" you're forced to rethink the entire language.

HM: Yes, you have to get around that someway, so you find yourself using modes of expression that are unnatural. On the other hand, practice can make you fluent in it; I translated several pages of "La Disparition" without all that much trouble.

JA: You had to use "e's," though, didn't you?

HM: No, without using any "e's."

JA: Really?

HM: That's kind of a double constraint, because you have the constraint of the translation "and" the other.

JA: May we take a break for a while?

HM: Yes, I think it's time for our dinner.

(Dinner)

JA: People always ask me what influence my years in France had on my work. Of course I'm capable of answering, but I've often felt that there really wasn't much influence, except that it's very nice to live in a beautiful, cultured city with very good food--surely this played as important part in it. But I never felt that French "poetry," with a few exceptions--Roussel, Rimbaud, Lautreamont, etc. . . .

HM: Reverdy, no?

JA: Reverdy, yes, of course--were very influential. In fact, I'm not sure how
influential any of them were. I admire them; they are very great writers. But except for a few fortuitous resemblances to Reverdy or Roussel, they don't seem to have influenced me directly. It's almost as though French and English don't quite mix in a fruitful way. I heard somewhere that Stravinsky wrote his work for violin and piano--a sonata, I guess--because he always felt that the sounds of the two instruments were absolutely incompatible and wanted to see if he could address this problem.

HM: That's quite true, they go very badly together, despite the literature.

JA: It's as though French were like a violin and English, or American, were like a piano.

HM: So what is the question?

JA: Do you feel that your work would have been different, or do you feel that living in France has had a direct forming influence on your work?

HM: I think living away from one's country gives you a difficult privilege. You're not under the pressure of people publicly succeeding better than you at what you're interested in; you're away from that and there's a relief in that sense. And also you have to be conscious of your own language. You're forced to be conscious of your language and your writing and your attitude toward writing. As for the Frenchness of that position, I guess really--that Mallarme as an idea was always very potent for me. It wasn't that Mallarme's present-day disciples seemed like ones to emulate, but I was living in a country--

JA: The six-words-to-a-page school?

HM: Yes, there's that, and the "I'm not saying what I seem to be saying" attitude towards writing poetry. I felt that I was surrounded by language to which Mallarme had a weird relationship. Mallarme wrote like nobody else; even his letters to his friends are very hermetic and hard to read and don't sound like the language of his contemporaries or his successors or his predecessors. So that reading Mallarme or Roussel, for whom these comments are true also, in France is inspiring, and in the fact that he has become the father or grandfather of modern poetry there is something that I could look to for inspiration. I think that would have been harder to do if I'd stayed here. For the personal reasons we talked about earlier--we didn't talk about them so much--those reasons why I didn't want to come back to the United States: since I'd taken refuge in France the way I'd taken refuge in poetry earlier in my life, it seemed appropriate that there was this utterly committed writer, someone who had gone to an extreme that no writer I know in English had ever done--towards formality, a kind of abstraction.

JA: I always felt that what you say about Mallarme was true of surrealism—that idea of it was actually more important than the works it resulted in. I don't know whether you were saying that about Mallarme.

HM: No, I love Mallarme's poetry. And I agree with you about surrealism.
Maybe you're thinking more of what has been made out of Mallarme than what he actually . . .

JA: No, I was putting words in your mouth. I thought that's what you were saying.

HM: I don't know that I'd ever actually like to write like Mallarme.

JA: No.

HM: But I think it's wonderful that somebody did. He seems to have gone much farther than the surrealists, getting to the bottom of the French verse and the French sentence. I think poems like "Le Don du poeme" are extremely moving and irremediably--if that's the word--mysterious.

JA: Well, what other questions would you like me to ask?

HM: I don't know. Some more questions that aren't usually asked in interviews. It's so nice not being asked, How do I write?

JA: Yes, they always want the recipe.

HM: Perhaps I could say a few words about why I did run away from the United States.

JA: Yes, I've never actually known.

HM: In 1952 I ran away from America. Which was not America: it was the milieu in which I'd been raised, and I thought that's what America was, that is to say, an upper-middle-class Eastern WASP environment, which I read as being extremely hostile to the poetic and artistic enthusiasms that I felt were most important at the time.

JA: I'm not sure that you misread it.

HM: Maybe.

JA: That was sort of a low point in America.

HM: It was a very bad moment.

JA: Which we seem to be outdoing in the present time.

HM: Except there hasn't been anything like McCarthyism. There are a lot of things that are awful . . .

JA: The New Right?

HM: Yes, that's true. But then the values of what is now the New Right were standard. You remember Chaplin being kicked out of the America on the
grounds of moral turpitude? Anyway, I've never felt that I was anything but an American, even though I'm an American-living-abroad, which I think is an interesting form of the species that can contribute to what's happening here as much as anyone else. I never have thought of myself as "existing" anywhere else, although I am very happy to have a place in France, you know, to be known to French writers, to have another life. That is very agreeing and sustainable. Although I don't think that the ready reception by many people in France of what I do means that they understand it any better than people who resist it here.

JA: They probably think that you're neglected here, as they believe about Faulkner, and therefore they're going to take you to their hearts, along with Jerry Lewis.

HM: Right. Is there any kind of final thing I could tell you about myself that has been mysterious to you through all these years?

JA: Well . . .

HM: It's been a very long friendship.

JA: Don't speak as though it were over, please. One of the minor mysteries of your activities is how you decide how long you're going to spend in one of your three places.

HM: I sort of schedule it knowing that after a certain time, after a few weeks, I'll grow attached to the place, so that I always manage to leave when I'm longing to stay a little more. But I'm never sorry to get to the place that I move on to.

JA: That makes sense.

HM: It does?

JA: Well, I could ask you about your future plans, now that you've finished your novel and it's actually being published.

HM: Going to be published. I do have plans for another book, one shorter than "Cigarettes," which will have the name "Domestic Tranquility," no, I'm sorry, "Domestic Contentment." There's this marvelous old servant woman whom I've known for years. I can't remember--Arielle is her name--

JA: Dombasle?

HM: I believe it's Arielle Matthis. I'm going to transcribe and edit her memoirs, which she has told me orally.

JA: Is she in Lans?

HM: I don't think it's really fair for me to say. I'm sure you'll like her tales of
her life, which are rather para-oulipian, that is to say, all the dramas of which she's been a witness as a serving woman in the various households in which she's worked have been resolved by her skill in household tasks.

JA: Does this woman actually exist or is she another creation of your fertile brain?

HM: That's a distinction I think I won't make.

JA: Actually that's the way the--I was again starting "La Vie de Marianne" of Marivaux.

HM: Is that one of his novels?

JA: Yes, it is--a masterpiece.

HM: He's supposed to be a wonderful novelist, another one I've been meaning to read.

JA: He is. And at the beginning the author is speaking and says he's recently rented a chateau in Brittany, and while rearranging the furniture he came upon a candle box of letters in the cabinet . . .

HM: I see.

JA: . . . which I found curious enough to perhaps merit the interest of the reader.

HM: Do you think this inspired "The Manuscript Found at Saragossa"?

JA: It was kind of a convention of the time.

HM: I see. Yes, it was a pretext for fiction, wasn't it? Novels were presented as being papers or an account of something discovered by the author in some surprising backwoods.

JA: Did you go and see the Saragossa movie?

HM: No, I only saw it years ago in France. I haven't seen it here. But if we start talking about movies, we're never going to stop.

JA: Oh, I thought we'd finished the interview.

HM: No!

JA: I thought it was all over and I could go home.

HM: I can stop it whenever you want. But I was hoping you'd ask a concluding question.
JA: I thought I'd asked several already.

HM: You have, but why don't you do one more, so that--

JA: Um. (Long pause.)

HM: The tape is still on.

JA: I know.

HM: I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to it.

JA: I was talking to it, too.

HM: Do you think it likes us both, equally? I mean, what are machines for, if not for that?

JA: User friendly?

HM: Impartial love finally realized. (Pause.) Well, let's leave it at that.

JA: At "what"?

HM: At nothing more than that.

JA: OK.

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