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In “A Note on Pierre Reverdy” for the *Evergreen Review* (1960), John Ashbery, then an outspoken and barely known young poet, wrote:

Though Reverdy seems to us a Surrealist poet, we must remember that the Surrealists insisted on automatic writing, that is, poetry written down as rapidly and unthinkingly as possible and which could not be altered later. While this discipline might seem to abolish all rules and to bring back spontaneity into poetry, one important rule was retained: *the poets were careful to observe the conventions of grammar and syntax* [...] most Surrealist poetry...is uninteresting from the standpoint of language, and language is poetry, as Mallarmé knew—the frozen shipwreck of his *Un Coup de dés* still looms larger than anything else on the horizon of French poetry. Recording their unconscious thoughts in correct lycée French, the Surrealist poets were forced into mere lists of exotic and goofy images, more exotic than the celebrated *Catalogue d'armes et cycles* of St. Etienne, which comes up so often in discussions of modern French literature.

In his later years, Ashbery has, as is usually the case with famous writers, become much more circumspect: he would not launch this attack on surrealism today. But the distinction he drew fifty years ago remains important, not just for Reverdy but for Ashbery himself. The essay continues:

Reverdy's poetry avoids the disciplines of Surrealist poetry, and is the richer for it. He is not afraid to experiment with language and syntax, and it is often difficult to determine whether a particular line belongs with the preceding sentence or the one following it. The lines drift across the page as overheard human speech drifts across our hearing: fragments of conversation, dismembered advertising slogans or warning signs in the Métro appear and remain preserved in the rock crystal of the poem. And far from banishing poetry to the unconscious, he lets it move freely in and out of the conscious and unconscious. Since we do not inhabit either world exclusively, the result is moving and lifelike. Sometimes his preoccupations seem infinitesimally small—the shadow of a coin on a book of matches, for instance [...] But the small object can suddenly become enormous, be “all there is,” by means of a split-second crescendo like the ones that occur in Webern's music. Reading a poem by Reverdy, one can have the impression one moment of contemplating a drop of water on a blade of grass; the next moment one is swimming for one's life. (Ashbery, *Selected Prose* 20–21)

It is a disconcerting kind of poetry, but one feels it must be very close to life as it is actually lived. I cite this passage at length because, consciously or not, it pinpoints what I take to be the essence of Ashbery's own poetics. From *Some Trees* (1956) to *Planisphere* (2009), his is a poetry characterized by (1) “split-second” shifts from one tonal register to another, producing a *frisson* of surprise; (2) the dismantling of conventional grammar and syntax, creating uncertainty as to whether “a particular line belongs with the preceding sentence or the one following it,” as well as the pronominal indeterminacy for which Ashbery has become famous; and (3) the simulation of overheard speech, with its “fragments of conversation” or reference to Métro signs, moving in and out of intelligibility. Such speech simulation, it should be noted, is not the same thing as collage, despite Ashbery's frequent use of that term to describe his own work.¹ His poetry does not contain “lists of exotic or goofy images”; it does not juxtapose unrelated noun phrases, images, or proper names without connectives.² Indeed, connectives—

and, but, if, though, when, now, yet, so, still, nearly, after, which, so that, what if, and especially as, as in “As Parmigianino did it” or “As we know”—are central to Ashbery’s work. (5) These careful—but often *faux*—connectives produce, as Ashbery says of Reverdy, a “disconcerting” poetry that “feels [...] very close to life as it is actually lived.” Ashbery’s verse—or, for that matter, the prose of *Three Poems*—flows along in a seemingly spontaneous, natural way. It is, in many ways, close to this poet’s actual *talk* to “you” or “us” over lunch or coffee. At the same time, (6) this life-like poetry is studded with often arcane literary, historical, musical, visual, and pop culture references. The Reverdy essay, for example, juxtaposes allusion to Mallarmé and Webern to the *Catalogue* [more accurately, *Le Manufacture*] *d’armes et cycles de St-Etienne*, which was the world’s first mail-order catalogue, predating Sears Roebuck, and specializing in items like guns, tools, and bicycles. “Close to life” must thus be qualified as close to Ashbery’s own life—but not exactly to the lives of most of his readers, who are not likely to have come across *Le Manufacture*, as that “celebrated catalogue” was known in France. And finally (7) Ashbery talks of the “fragments of conversation” and “dismembered” lines “remain[ing] preserved in the rock crystal of the poem”: verse form, that is to say, is by no means conceived of as casual or spontaneous. Ashbery writes sestinas, pantoums, sonnets, centos, and two-column poems, and even his typically long-lined free verse is structured by various rules and devices. The poems in his most recent book *Planisphere*, for example, are arranged alphabetically by titles; indeed, in his interview for *L’Oeil de boeuf*, Ashbery tells Olivier Brossard that he had long been writing *Oulipo* “avant la lettre” (Brossard 15).

What makes these stylistic habits so strange, however, is that they are so contradictory. The use of elaborate artifice like the sestina form (7) would seem to contradict the close-to-life quality (5) that Ashbery values. Arcane learning and literary citation (6) might well undercut the surprise element (1). Syntactic indeterminacy (2) or intimacy of address (5) don’t usually go hand in hand with a surplus of connectives (4) or with set forms (7). And so on. Indeed, it is the self-contradiction of Ashbery’s poetics that makes him such a unique—but also curiously elusive—figure in the annals of late twentieth-century poetry.

Ashbery is generally considered “America’s pre-eminent living poet,” that epithet appearing on the dust jacket of the *Library of America* volume of his *Collected Poems*. He is, to date, the only living poet to be published by the *Library of America* series (the U.S. counterpart of the French Pléiade Editions)—and the volume in question is the first of two: it runs to over one thousand pages and takes us from 1956 (*Some Trees*) to only 1987; a second volume, presumably just as long, will cover the second half of Ashbery’s career. Note that, in being thus chosen, Ashbery has triumphed, not only over the living but also the dead. There are no *Library of America* volumes of Frank O’Hara’s or Robert Creeley’s poetry and certainly none for such poets of the preceding generation as Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, or Charles Olson.

One might conclude from such data that Ashbery is, in the end, an Establishment wolf in experimental sheep’s clothing; the *Library of America*, after all, is, by definition, committed to the canonical. And Ashbery has won every Establishment prize there is, from the Guggenheim and the Pulitzer to a MacArthur Fellowship. But consider the following comment Ron Silliman wrote on his blog in 2003, on the occasion of the publication of the collection *Chinese Whispers*:

It is intriguing, perhaps even shocking, that Ashbery should turn out to be the great cross-over hit of U.S. poetry, the one New American beloved by the schools of quietude. His work consistently parodies such modes, sometimes (as in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*) with a viciousness that makes you question just why Ashbery puts so much energy

into mocking a poetics he so evidently despises, as if somehow he believes (fears) that the realm of the [John] Hollanders, of the [Harold] Blooms & [Helen] Vendlers, were all that was the case.³

Here Silliman reverses the equation: for him, the “real” Ashbery is—or more properly was—an experimental poet, the author of the cut-ups in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) or the list poems in *The Vermont Notebook* (1972), whereas the so called serious lyric meditations in *Self-Portrait* can be justified only if they are understood as parodic, obliquely mocking the Blooms, Hollanders, and Vendlers of the Establishment.

Have, then, the mass of Ashbery critics from, say, Bloom himself, the first major critic to single out Ashbery’s special place among postmodern poets, to Mark Ford, the younger British poet–critic who was chosen to edit the Library of America volumes as well as a number of other important books relating to Ashbery,⁴ merely been conned? Or is it the other way around: is Silliman’s claim for an oppositional Ashbery just wishful thinking? Or is Ashbery sometimes experimental, sometimes traditional? In tackling these tricky questions, one runs into a further conundrum. Given the large amount of critical prose Ashbery has produced and given the even larger amount of such prose devoted to his work, what poets have never been invited to the party, have, that is to say, remained excluded from the Ashbery conversation?

Ashbery’s name has always been linked with that of W.H. Auden and Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop. He has written very perceptively on Gertrude Stein and expressed admiration for William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane.⁵ The T.S. Eliot connection, originally downplayed by both the poet and his critics, myself included, seems more palpable every year.⁶ Behind these great Modernist poets, in any case, stand the English Romantics, whom Ashbery obviously knows by heart, even as, in his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures for Harvard (*Other Traditions*), he singled out the so-called minor Romantics John Clare and Thomas Lovell Beddoes for special treatment. “It will be noted,” Ashbery remarks dryly in the opening Norton Lecture, “that a number of major twentieth-century poets don’t figure in [my] list, but one can’t choose one’s influences, they choose you, even though this can result in one’s list looking embarrassingly lopsided” (*Other Traditions* 4).

The missing figure in this carpet is obviously Ezra Pound and indeed the entire Pound tradition. H.D. is never mentioned, nor are the Objectivists, the Black Mountain poets (with the slight exception, in Ashbery’s later years, of Robert Creeley), or the poets of the so-called San Francisco Renaissance, like Kenneth Rexroth. The Beats, contemporaries and friends as many of them were in the New York of the fifties and sixties, are not taken very seriously. The alignments in Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry*, we might note, are hardly equivalent to Ashbery’s own. And further, although Ashbery was an early admirer of John Cage’s music, he evidently had no interest in Cage’s poetic texts or of such related figures as Jackson Mac Low, David Antin, and Jerome Rothenberg.

All of the above are usually classified, in a broad way, as poets of the Pound tradition: recall Allen Ginsberg’s repeated declaration that, despite his anti-Semitism, Pound was the great poet of his generation.⁷ Not surprisingly, then, the converse has also been true: Pound scholars and critics, ranging from Hugh Kenner and Guy Davenport to Peter Nicholls and Richard Sieburth, and admirers of Zukofsky and Oppen in France, from Jacques Roubaud and Anne-Marie Albiach to Abigail Lang or Helène Aji, have had little to say about Ashbery. Clearly, terms regularly used in discussion of Ashbery and, say, Zukofsky or Mac Low—terms like *anti-lyric*, *collage*, *dislocation*, *dispersal of the unitary ego*, *non-referentiality*, *linguistic innovation*, *generic breakdown*—don’t quite tell the story.

We, need, accordingly, to rethink the poetic alignments of the late century as they look to us in 2010. I propose here to go back to basics by looking more inductively than has recently been the case in the premises and working out of Ashbery's poetics. In his case, this is entirely possible because his lyric mode has not really changed appreciably in the course of his career: we do not, in other words, have a case like early versus late Yeats here, although the late work of Ashbery is looser than the earlier and more open to topical references. Let's take as our example a characteristic but not-much-discussed poem of the middle years. Here is "Variant" which appeared in the volume *Houseboat Days* (1977):

Sometimes a word will start it, like
Hands and feet, sun and gloves. The way
Is fraught with danger, you say, and I
Notice the word "fraught" as you are telling
Me about huge secret valleys some distance from
The mired fighting—"but always, lightly wooded
As they are, more deeply involved with the outcome
That will someday paste a black, bleeding label
In the sky, but until then
The echo, flowing freely in corridors, alleys,
And tame, surprised places for from anywhere,
Will be automatically locked out—*vox*
Clamans—do you see? End of tomorrow.
Don't try to start the car or look deeper
Into the eternal wimpling of the sky: luster
On luster, transparency floated onto the topmost layer
Until the whole thing overflows like a silver

Wedding cake or Christmas tree, in a cascade of tears. (*Collected Poems* 493, lines 6–18)

"A small object can suddenly become enormous," Ashbery wrote of Reverdy's lyric; it can be "all there is." "Variant," with its enigmatic title (a variant of what?), begins with the casual assertion that "Sometimes a word will start it"—an assertion that assumes the poem's addressee, the "you" of line 3 but perhaps also the reader, knows what "it" is. But the examples given don't help: "like / Hands and feet, sun and gloves." What can these words "start"? Hands and feet are an obvious pair, but sun and gloves don't go together: we don't wear gloves to protect us from the sun. Will the words trigger a memory? Begin a train of thought? Or prompt "you" to rehearse a familiar story or poem? The cliché "fraught with danger" in line 3 suggests that the poet is referring parodically to a Victorian book, perhaps a fairytale or mystery. Then again, politicians to this day use such clichés as "fraught with danger."

The conversation, in any case, is squarely between two people, although we cannot say who or what they are. Friends? Lovers? Acquaintances at a party? The "you," of course, needn't be consistent; the long quoted passage, for that matter, could just as easily be spoken by a third party, quoted from a book, or refer back to the "I." It doesn't really matter because the tone of *intimacy* that characterizes "Variant" has been firmly established. Speech is not so much heard as overheard, with

the reader in the position of someone, say, on a train or at the next table, trying to make sense of the bits and pieces of other people's talk. What to make, for example, of "you are telling / Me about huge secret valleys some distance / from the mired fighting." How can huge valleys be secret, or, vice-versa, if the valleys are so secret, how do we know they are huge? And can we think of "fighting" (battling in the valley of death?) that isn't mired in blood or mud? Again, "huge valleys" suggest emptiness, but these are "lightly wooded" and have something to do with an outcome, not immediately but "someday," when a "black, bleeding label" will be pasted "In the sky." Veronica's Napkin with the imprint of Christ's bloody face? A shooting star? Pie in the sky by and by? A second fearful portent—this one heard, not seen—is "the echo" (line 10), penetrating "corridors, alleys, / And tamed surprised places far from anywhere [...] automatically locked out." Tamed places suggest pasture or garden: a tame place can be surprising but surprised? Yes, if we think of a community caught unaware by a frightening echo—but echo of what?

Vox clamans—a voice crying, most usually in the wilderness or the desert—is introduced almost parenthetically in line 12 as perhaps the source of the echo, "do you see?" But in Ashbery's poetry, the small object suddenly takes over the room. The reference here is evidently to John Gower's *Vox Clamantis*, the long (ten-thousand-line) fourteenth-century poem that recounts in elegiac verse the events and tragedy of the 1381 Peasants' Rising under the reign of Richard II. *The Vox Clamantis* has a moral and prophetic charge, excoriating all orders of mankind and social class for their corruption and need for reform. "The way fraught with danger," the "mired fighting," the "bleeding label in the sky": all these could relate to Gower's dark political tale.

But the poem has no sooner introduced the *vox clamans* than, in a typically Ashberian move, it turns playful. "Do you see?" in line 13 is the turning point. No use worrying about the "end" when it's the "End of tomorrow" and hence not yet imminent. Then again tomorrow will come. And now, in one of those split-second shifts that Ashbery has spoken of vis-à-vis Reverdy, Gower's landscape of empty valleys morphs into the world of film. "Don't try to start the car," observes the speaker—a warning that brings to my mind the famous scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, where young Charlie (Theresa Wright) tries to start the car with which her evil Uncle Charlie has tampered and is almost asphyxiated in the family garage. It is, after all, Charlie's attempt to find out the truth—to "look deeper / Into the eternal wimpling of the sky" (the medieval word "wimpling," suggests impenetrability, literally a woman's head covering, or rippling)—that gets our heroine into trouble. And, come to think of it, *Shadow of a Doubt* is full of portents, signs to be read and echoes to be heard and deciphered. The truth will out "luster/ On luster, transparency floated onto the topmost layer."

But what exactly is happening? Despite the warning not to "look deeper/ Into the eternal wimpling of the sky," there seems to be a flash of light—"luster / On luster"—above what may be layers of cloud. Or is the "topmost layer" that of the "silver / Wedding cake" about to dissolve and "overflow"? The preposition "like" introduces another false analogy; neither wedding cakes nor Christmas trees are normally silver unless the reference is to one's silver wedding or an artificial little Christmas tree, all sparkly, from the drugstore. Again, neither cakes nor Christmas trees melt; hence how can they overflow? And since these are emblems of happy occasions, why should the "overflow" produce "a cascade of tears"? Perhaps the memory that was triggered in line 1 of "Variant" is too painful, triggering a Wordsworthian "overflow" of powerful feelings. The poem's "you" did warn the "I" that the way might be "fraught with danger." And now there is not only a pool but a veritable cascade of tears. Or has the tale told proved to be cathartic, allowing for the tears to be tears of joy?

I have purposely submitted “Variant” to what may seem to be an overly pedantic reading so as to dispel some common misconceptions about the Ashberian poetic mode. It will not do, for starters, to say that this poem has no subject matter or that it is designedly “non-sensical” or non-referential. Clearly, this is a memory poem, the two (or more?) friends (or lovers?) sharing their recollection of a haunting—and evidently painful—event. But it is true that the suspension of meaning allows for an unusually high latitude in interpretation. As Charles Bernstein has remarked of the poetic syntax in question:

Ashbery introduces a nonlinear associative logic that averts both exposition and disjunction. Ashbery’s aversion (after *The Tennis Court Oath*) to abrupt disjunction gives his collage-like work the feeling of continuously flowing voices [...]. The connection between any two lines or sentences in Ashbery has a contingent consecutiveness that registers transition but not discontinuity. However, lack of logical or contingent connections between every other line opens the work to fractal patterning [...]. In order to create a third way between the hypotaxis of conventional lyric and the parataxis of Pound [...] and his own “Europe” in *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery places temporal conjunctions between discrepant collage elements, giving the spatial sensation of overlay and the temporal sensation of meandering through. (“The Meandering Yangtze”)

Brian Reed has called this mode *attenuated hypotaxis*—a sequence of “tenuously interconnected” clauses and phrases “possessing some relation of subordination to another element,” but with the connections blurred, “inhibit[ing] the formation of clear, neat, larger units” (59–60). Such “nonlinear associative logic” is reinforced by the verse form itself: note the suspension of line endings, as in “Sometimes a word will start it, like,” where the reader has to wait to resolve the question “like what?” and when the answer is given in line 2, the mystery remains unresolved.

What Bernstein calls “the third way” between the parataxis of collage and the hypotaxis of conventional lyric, here depends on the dialectic between overheard intimate speech (do you see?) and the artifice produced by echo: here, literally “the echo / flowing freely in the corridors,” but also in the larger sense that every line has already been spoken elsewhere in another context. Everything we see, as Wittgenstein put it, could also be otherwise. Indeed, “Variant” is, as the title indicates, a variant on the poet’s other approaches to the same subject as well as a variant on many earlier poems from Wallace Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West,” with its own “*vox / Clamans*” of the girl who “sang beyond the genius of the sea” and whose “fragrant portals” are echoed in Ashbery’s “eternal wimpling of the sky,” to Eliot’s “Gerontion,” where “Signs are taken for wonders,” to the Victorian motif of the “cascade of tears.” Every line of this and related poems sounds just familiar enough to recall something else and yet the collocation of narrative fragments and meditational bits is entirely Ashbery’s own. Indeed, when we call this poetry “very close to life,” what we mean is that it is very close to Ashbery’s own life—his own highly particular radius of discourse. But because that discourse is capacious, charged with “news that stay news” whether literary, filmic, operatic, or pop cultural, the reader feels challenged to participate. Indeed, with each reading, something new will strike us: when I reread the last three lines of “Variant” in the light of the poem immediately following it in *Houseboat Days*, “Collective Dawns,” with its glacier “shot through / With amethyst,” I think of the silver shower of fairy tale and legend, where the heavens suddenly open in a parched land, providing a silver flow of water, a cascade or waterfall of tears. Certainly in animated film there are many such scenes.

Now let us reconsider what Silliman has called Ashbery’s “crossover” appeal. For Harold Bloom, poems like “Variant” can be seen to carry on the Romantic visionary tradition: the poet, meditating on a particular situation, is moved, by a series

of perceptions and memories, to epiphany, to what Stevens calls in “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself,” “a new knowledge of reality.” For the poet Susan Stewart, a scholar of Classical and Renaissance poetry, it matters more that an Ashbery title like “As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat” comes from the first line of Andrew Marvell’s 1650 satiric poem “Tom May’s Death,” spoken in the voice of Ben Jonson. Stewart traces the threads of allusion in this, the opening poem of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, “the kind of book,” she notes, “you can read again and again, constantly churning your first-hand knowledge into second-hand knowledge, holding a pencil or a blue pen or black pen in your hand over and over until just about every line has its underlining and every word is englobed, watching your handwriting change over time, noticing your marginalia become deeper [...] the wave of your own history of reading washing over the pages and your sense of things not developing, but changing, turning into a better fit, a more capacious sense—which is, in the end, what we mean, I would guess by style.” (312–13)

For Bloom and Stewart—two very different critics—it is Ashbery’s misreading of earlier English literature that is especially fascinating. At the other end of the spectrum, are those—say, the Language poets—who admire Ashbery for precisely the opposite quality: not for his ability to carry on the great Renaissance or Romantic traditions, but for what is taken to be Ashbery’s radical deconstruction of the neo-Romantic lyric—the postwar first-person mode of a W.S. Merwin or Mark Strand, a Rita Dove or Derek Walcott—in which a consistent and coherent voice is heard throughout, a definable subject relating to the world of external objects outside the self. Such lyric, it is argued, has none of Ashbery’s tonal and emotional range, his refiguring of voice, his quick shifts from high to low, his syntactic deformations and inversions, reflecting on the state of our culture.

Ashbery’s poetry thus draws heavily on the prior experience and preconceptions of his readers: he is much easier to make over in a given reader’s own image than is, say, Charles Olson, the historical and geographical parameters of whose work allow no such variability of response. For the critic, the danger of the Ashbery mode has been the ease whereby the reader can trace one thread in the poetry, ignoring those ones one personally likes less, and making that thread *the* Ashbery signature. In her review of *A Wave*, for example, Helen Vendler reads the opening poem, “At North Farm” (*Collected Poems* 733), as a deeply Keatsian lyric (it has lines like “Yet the granaries are bursting with meal”), ignoring the very unKeatsian conclusion “Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings” (32). John Shoptaw’s *On the Outside Looking Out* finds a queer erotic subtext everywhere, as when he asserts that the lines ““This honey is delicious / *Though it burns the throat*” (“They Dream Only of America”, *Collected Poems* 44) refer to sperm—a suggestion Ashbery, for one, rejected emphatically, insisting that when he said *honey* he meant honey (*John Ashbery in Conversation* 65–66). And the assertion, made by Language poets early on, that Ashbery’s best volume of poetry was *The Tennis Court Oath* because here he dared to really make it new, is a judgment that flies in the face of the reality that, in the twenty-plus books that have followed, the cut-up mode of “Europe” has rarely been recycled and that Ashbery himself has repeatedly disavowed it.⁸

If criticism has tended to foreground one thread in Ashbery’s poetics at the expense of others, what about Ashbery’s legacy to later poets? In a thoughtful essay for Susan Schultz’s collection *The Tribe* of John, John Koethe, who was certainly a charter member of that “tribe,”⁹ describes the “generic [Ashbery] poem of today” as follows:

The tone is liable to be nostalgic, and its motions those of reverie. Its predominant feelings are passive ones like resignation and loss; its language is resonant and suggestive; the use of the narrative past tense invests it with a

mythological quality; and its overall effect is one of tenderness. It dissociates itself, especially in its transitions and patterns of inference, from everyday ideas of rationality and control; its awareness of language is informed by a sense of its limitations [...].

This poem is constituted in large part by qualities that have been associated with Ashbery's work since its public reception in the seventies—passivity, an acquiescence in indeterminacy, an avoidance of rationality, and self-reflexivity (Schultz 85–86). Influential as this paradigm has proved to be, its results, Koethe reluctantly concludes, have been “somewhat disappointing.” “What seems lacking are substantial bodies of work by individual poets that manifest [Ashbery's] influence but have a distinctive character of their own” (Schultz 87).

And there's the rub. A poetic signature as unique as Ashbery's allows for little breathing room among the poets who considered themselves his heirs. A notable exception, Koethe believes, is Douglas Crase: in *The Revisionist*, the “high meditative style that emerges in Ashbery from ‘Clepsydra’ on” is adapted to a more public model; the “private phantasmagoria” characteristic of Ashbery gives way to “the common locales and features of the contemporary American landscape.” Indeed, says Koethe, Crase “recovers Whitman through Ashbery—or put another way, he enlists the rhetorical and psychological strategies of the poet many castigate as our most private and hermetic in the service of a public, Emersonian project of reclamation of his own” (Schultz 89).

Readers will readily recognize Ashbery's rhetoric in such Crase titles as “Heron Weather,” “Color Peak Weekend,” and “The One who Crossed the Hudson,” and in such opening lines as follows:

What we bring back is the sense of the size of it (“Blue Poles”)

The sound of it is always there (“Locale”)

The way the physical things add up (“The House at Sagg”)

So many versions at any time are all exemplary (“The Lake Effect”)

As in Ashbery, the “it” remains undefined, the references indeterminate, and the discourse shifts imperceptibly from concreteness to abstraction, from the conceptual to the names of persons and places. At the same time, Crase's verse smooths out the Ashbery bumps, as in this section (#7) from the title poem:

It wasn't a real season when I saw you last.

Between clouds maybe, because the sun makes me

Remember it as if autumn was rattling

In the air: it was only California though.

It could've been fall but I'd need a calendar

To tell.

Maybe, as if, only, could've been. Despite the tentativeness, the poet goes on to give a perfectly coherent account of happy days with his lover in a newly discovered San Francisco, taking in “the view from the top / Of one of those hills, Russian or Telegraph”—days bound to come to an end when “you figure[d] out a way to remain,” even as

I'd return overland the way we came,

Through the vast states that entered the Union

At various times, past the little towns

Empty of population and holding their names

On metal sticks at the side of the road:

Fair Haven, Buena Vista, Pleasant View (Crane 8–9)

Here Crane's mapping of the cross-country trip is indeed, as Koethe says, more public than Ashbery's, if by *public* we mean straightforward. On the other hand, it is also less interesting: the irony of those pretty place names is obvious enough, and the poem's narrative does not allow for the complex layering of meanings found in such Ashbery poems as "Variant," with its "silver wedding cake" and "vox / *Clamans*." Crossing the all-too-huge continent, the solitary lover finds himself in those "little towns / Empty of population" in the "vast states that entered the Union / At various times." Gently elegiac, the poem displays Ashbery's manner without the master's matter—without the sense that, in Ashbery's words on Reverdy, "one can have the impression one moment of contemplating a drop of water on a blade of grass; the next moment one is swimming for one's life."

But in 1981, in the wake of what were often taken to be the intractable obscurities of Ashbery's poetry, such lowering of the temperature evidently must have come as a relief. *The Revisionist* won its hitherto unknown author a Guggenheim as well as a MacArthur Fellowship. "This is the most powerful first book I have seen in a long time," declared John Hollander on the dust jacket; a second blurb, by David Kalstone, compared *The Revisionist* to such first books as Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* and Elizabeth Bishop's *North and South*. This emphasis on first books turned out to be unfortunate because *The Revisionist* turned out to be not only Crane's first book of poems but his only one to date. In the intervening years, he has written charming essays, nonfiction, and both art and literary criticism, but he seems to have understood, better than his early admirers, that his was a performance that could not quite be repeated; indeed, *The Revisionist* is best understood as a symptom of an aesthetic of willed indirection and abstract meditation that soon hardened into a period style. As Crane himself put it in a poem called "Felix Culpa Returns from France," "As the fact is too difficult to forgive / It seems unnatural to resume" (lines 1–2).

In interviews, Ashbery has always insisted that the label "New York School" was misleading, at least so far as the poets rather than the painters were concerned, that he, O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler just happened to be good friends who exchanged their work and sometimes collaborated. Thus, in an address written for the National Book Awards symposium of 1968, Ashbery wryly remarks:

On the whole I dislike the name ["New York School of Poets"] because it seems to be trying to pin me down to something. That's the trouble with all these labels like Beat, San Francisco School, Deep Image, Objectivist, Concrete and so on. Their implication seems to be that poetry ought to be just one thing and stick to it. If you start out writing haikus, man, then it's haikus from here on in sort of thing. (*Selected Prose* 113).

Rather than such prescriptions, Ashbery insists, the poet should be free to do what he wants, "without feeling that someone is standing behind him, telling him to brush up on his objective correlatives or that he's just dropped an iambic foot" (113). And he cites Henri Michaux's insistence that "he wasn't a Surrealist, but that Surrealism for him was *la grande permission*—the big permission." "The big permission," concludes Ashbery, "is, I think, as good a definition as any of poetry, of the kind that interests me at any rate" (116). Ashbery uses the phrase *la grande permission* again in an essay for *Art News* on "The Heritage of Dada and Surrealism" (*Reported Sightings* 7), where he is critical of Surrealism but praises its opening of the field—

an opening that allowed later poets to take certain chances. What, we might now ask, has Ashbery's own grande permission made possible for poets writing in the first decade of the twenty-first century?

Influence, of course, never moves in a straight or predictable line. In the 1950s, William Carlos Williams wrote enthusiastic essays on such of his disciples as Norman MacLeod, Merrill Moore, Reed Whittemore, Parker Tyler, and Eli Siegel—disciples now largely unread. At the same time, later “strong” poets, to use Harold Bloom's well-known designation, eluded Williams's grasp: he did not like the direction Allen Ginsberg's work was taking in *Howl*—“His longer lines don't seem to fit in with the modern tendency at all” (Breslin 30)—even as he regularly complained to Louis Zukofsky that the latter's language was too “abstract” (Ahearn xiii-xxiii). Even Robert Creeley, a poet clearly in Williams's debt, came to invert the programme of “No ideas but in things.” Conversely, Pound's highly particularist collage mode, repudiated as it was by American poets of the post-World War II era, turns up in, of all places, the Concrete poetry of Brazil of the 1950s, the poets Augusto and Haroldo de Campos naming their journal *Noigandres* in honor of the *Cantos*, where the mysterious word first appears.

When we try to assess Ashbery's place in current poetry, therefore, we must look beyond the immediate family, the tribe of John from John Ash to John Yau, and follow some other leads. When, in 2002, Mark Ford asked Ashbery whether he had been following the experiments of the Language poets, Ashbery responded: “Yes, but from a distance [...]. Probably like Surrealism it will become more fascinating as it disintegrates—or like Minimalism in music: it's like there's a certain hard kernel that can stand the pressure only so long, and then it starts to decay, giving off beneficial fumes” (Ashbery, *John Ashbery in Conversation* 65).

This is not as silly as it sounds. What Ashbery is saying, I think, is that, whereas the hardcore theorizing of the Language movement of the 1980s and 1990s did not speak to him, the passage of time has shown him that, as the movement has, like all movements, “disintegrated”—opened up, become less doctrinaire—a number of its individual practitioners have come to seem congenial to him. One such poet is Charles Bernstein; indeed, the first blurb on the dust jacket of *All the Whiskey in Heaven: Selected Poems*, recently published in the United States by Farrar, Straus Giroux, is Ashbery's: “Charles Bernstein's poems resemble each other only in being unexpected. Simultaneously mad, tragic, and hilarious, they seem written to illustrate the truth of his lines ‘thing are / solid: we stumble, unglue, recombine.’ *All the Whiskey in Heaven* is a vast department store of the imagination.”

The link between A(ashbery) and B(ernstein) seems, at first glance, quite improbable. The reticent, gay, Protestant poet from an upstate New York farm, who comes out of the Romantic tradition with a predilection of English (over American) lyric poetry and dislikes having to write literary or art criticism, seems wholly unlike the New York Jewish, purposely brash and culturally oriented theoretician-poet, more than twenty years his junior, who has always been heavily engaged in group activities, making his early reputation as the co-editor of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (first the journal, then the book), then as the founder of the Buffalo Poetics Program and, with Al Filreis, Penn Sound. Although Bernstein is now quite well known and his countless readings draw large audiences, he has never had anything like the approval ratings of Ashbery or come anywhere near the latter's prize-winning capacity. For many mainstream poetry readers and reviewers, he is still the Bad Boy of poetry—incomprehensible, incoherent, and hyper-theoretical. I still often hear my colleagues (and their students)

say that Charles Bernstein may be all right as a critic or impresario—but his poetry?¹⁰ And by the way, is it really poetry? But now that Bernstein is turning sixty (Ashbery was close to fifty when *Self-Portrait* made him famous), a more just picture is emerging. The two poets read together for a *Poetry* magazine event at Mo Pitkin's in June 2007, and Bernstein was one of the poets invited to contribute an essay on *Rivers and Mountains* to the *Conjunctions* volume, commemorating Ashbery's eightieth birthday.

What, then, is the permission the elder statesman has given to the radical younger poet? The most overtly Ashberian poems in the new *Selected* are, ironically, the earlier ones: for example, "Dysraphism" (from *The Sophist* of 1987). The title is taken from a medical dictionary: when it was first printed in *Sulfur* in 1983, Bernstein provided the following headnote:

"Dysraphism" is actually a word used by specialists in congenital diseases, to mean "dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts—a birth defect..." Raph" of course means "seam," so for me dysraphism is mis-seaming—a prosodic device! But it has the punch of being the same root as rhapsody (*rhaph*)—or in Skeats—"one who strings (lit.stitches) songs together, a reciter of epic poetry." cf. "ode" etc. In any case, to be simple, Dorland's [the standard U.S. medical dictionary] does define "dysrhafia" [...] as "incomplete closure of the primary neural tube; status dysraphicus"; this is just below "dysprosody" [sic]: "disturbance of stress, pitch, and rhythm of speech." (39)

This elaborate definition was removed in all subsequent printings of "Dysraphism": evidently Bernstein—and Ashbery would surely agree—found the elaborate explanation too pedantic, too extra-poetic. The long poem begins:

Did a wind come just as you got up or were
you protecting me from it? I felt the abridgement
of imperatives, the wave of detours, the saber-
rattling of inversion. *All lit up and no*
place to go. Blinded by avenue and filled with
adjacency. Arch or arched at. So there becomes bottles,
joshed conductors, illustrated proclivities for puffed-
up benchmarks. Morose or comatose. "Life is what
you find, existence is what you repudiate." A good example
of this is 'Dad pins puck.' Sometimes something
sunders; in most cases, this is no more than a hall. (lines 1–11)

The entry into the poem's conversation in medias res, with the direct address, or rather question, to an unnamed "you" is certainly Ashberian as is the lack of continuity between question and answers. Like Ashbery, Bernstein emphasizes the confusion and contingency of contemporary life: if the authority of imperatives is abridged, dissolving in a wave of detours and threats of inversion, something is obviously wrong. But the tone of the poem is comic rather than tragic; the italicized words are a play on the common cliché, "All dressed up and nowhere to go." And, as in Ashbery's poems, the play on words "Arch or arched at" leads to a connective—"so" ("So there becomes bottles")—that doesn't follow. "Life is what you find,"—a burlesque version of "Truth is where you find it"—is followed by insurance-speak: one can formally file a claim, *resisting* the existence of a policy. And of course, the example given is again a dysraphism, an echo of "Pin the tail on the donkey" morphing into hockey (puck) and football (punt) talk.

Ashberian surprises and sudden shifts thus abound, as does word play, syntactic indeterminacy, and a loose free verse that is tightly constructed, with internal rhyme (“Morose or comatose”), alliteration, and parallelism (“Blinded by avenue and filled with / adjacency”). But despite these similarities, Bernstein’s discourse radius is rather different from Ashbery’s: his lines are not erotically suggestive or sexually charged; rather, they deal with business practices and capitalist exploitation, as in “puffed- / up benchmarks.” The clichés of modern urban life, whether of family or business life, the inanity of popular culture: these replace Ashbery’s deeply literary discourse and make for a nervous, urban speech unlike Ashbery’s, which is primarily rooted in the natural landscape. Stylistically, however, I would say that “Dysraphism” is more genuinely Ashberian in its conception of what a poem is than are the imitations I cited earlier.

But—and this is where permission comes in—the more recent Bernstein, with his satiric list poems, ballads, and pseudo-songs, has moved in a rather different direction. Ashbery has never been an aphoristic poet; Bernstein, whether in the “Amphibolies” of *Shadowtime* or in “War Stories,” is given to creating whole poems out of faux-aphorisms, like the following:

War is the extension of prose by other means.

War is never having to say you’re sorry.

War is the logical outcome of moral certainty.

War is conflict resolution for the aesthetically challenged.

War is a slow boat to heaven and an express train to hell. (*All the Whiskey* 283, lines 1–5)

And so it goes for another eight pages, a sequence much more overtly critical of the U.S. role in the world than anything we would find in the refractions of Ashbery’s self-ironies. Even when the poems seem personal, the alienation dramatized is that of the social order, not so much of the poet himself. Let me close with “Doggy Bag,” dedicated to the French poet Olivier Cadiot:

have you seen my doggy bag
hate to nag, hate to nag
have you seen my emerald chain
hate to brag, hate to brag

I ate the supper in the village
lunch at the lodge
if you don’t give me back my
upper teeth
I am going to drool like a

man that once had silver
man that once had gold
man that once had everything
but a tune of his own

so have you seen my nodding mare
my lurking pony, my sultry donkey
have you seen my cuts and jags
hate to frag, hate to frag
have you seen my broken drum
hate to gab, hate to gab

the toilet seat is down now
it's there I plan to sit
until I find that doggy bag

I lost while just a kid (*All the Whiskey* 241–42)

The plaintive opening question—doggy bags are used by restaurants to wrap up the leftovers the customers may take home—is absurd, since the contents of a doggy bag are not exactly valuable. In the stanzas that follow, with their faux fairy-tale content and childish rhymes, expectations are repeatedly raised only to be deflated, as when, in stanza 2, “lodge” doesn’t rhyme with “teeth,” and the “child” turns into a toothless and drooling old bum, wholly disoriented and without a “tune of his own.” But the crescendo comes in stanza 4, where the rhyming on “bag,” “nag,” “brag” leads us to “frag”—army slang, dating from the Vietnam War, for killing one’s own officer with a fragmented bomb or hand grenade. The war over, *frag* came into use in video games: to knock off someone on one’s own side. In this context, the “cuts and jags” and “broken drum” of stanza 4 take on a much more sinister air as does the village of stanza 2 and the mysterious “nodding mare,” “lurking pony,” and “sulky donkey.”

But again, as in Ashbery, although the latter is not given to writing ballads, the story presented is hardly coherent. If this is, as “frag” suggests, a war poem, it is also a ballad of narcissism and regression: in the end, the sulky “I” announces grandly that he is sitting on the toilet seat “Until I find that doggy bag / I lost while just a kid.” “Kid” fails to rhyme with “sit,” the sonic deflation pointing to the absurd bravado of this speaker, wounded physically or at least mentally, who has obviously never grown up. “Doggy Bag” is hilarious in its inconsequentiality, its comic air of self-importance. It is also a very sad little poem.

“Have you seen my emerald chain [...] my sultry donkey?” In his late poetry, Ashbery often constructs similarly absurd catalogues, as when, in a late poem called “Mottled Tuesday,” the speaker complains:

Hey, you’re doing it, like I didn’t tell you
to, my sinking laundry boat, point of departure,
my white pomegranate, my swizzle stick. (lines 7–9)

The curious frisson of such lists depends on the possessive pronoun “my.” What, in the current climate, is ownership? A neighboring poem in *A Worldly Country* called “The Binomial Theorem” begins with chit-chat about “shortfalls” and the “chattering classes,” only to turn, as suddenly as that water drop in Reverdy, to the urgent question, “What time is it? Or was it?” And then:

Imagine that you can have this time any way it comes
easily, that a doctor wrote you a prescription
for savage joy and they say they can fill it
if you'll wait a moment. What springs to mind? (lines 16–19)

Wouldn't it be nice to have such a prescription filled? Almost as comforting as a doggy bag to take home. But the reality is very different: the poet walks out of the drugstore, trying to catch "the bus that stops at the corner of 23rd street," only to have the traffic light change from red to green so that the bus chugs off, leaving him "out of breath and silly from running."

It is the archetypal New York experience. But what happens next? Does our protagonist have a heart attack? Or trip on the curb? No, he is merely accosted by "Someone standing near the door" who is "doing a survey / of transit users." Life, this poem reminds us, is like that: the mathematical theorem is never solved. Rather,

All the way home we argued about whether
refunds would be made in cash or against future purchases.

It's the only way you said. We'll end up wanting these anyway. (lines 28–30)

In this, the poem's conclusion, the slapstick of the traffic incident takes a dark turn. The references to "future purchases," "the only way," and "we'll end up" turn metaphorical: there are no rebates against death.

"Funny odd or funny peculiar?" (10) Bernstein quips in the poetic preface to *Content's Dream*, denying the alternatives posed by the familiar grade-school "Funny peculiar or funny ha-ha?" The irreducible oddity of private as of public life is as central to Ashbery's poetics as it is to Bernstein's. The introspective mode of Romantic lyric is no longer an option, given the "new trends in passionate landscapery" (*All the Whiskey* 48) that characterize our preposterously mediated present—a present where the *event* has always already been replaced by what Pound called, as long ago as 1920, "the march of events" ("Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" 85).

Funny odd or funny peculiar? What I see happening in poetry today is that the "circulation of the nowhere seen, everywhere disturbed," (10) presented in *Content's Dream* and so poignantly and comically conveyed in Ashbery's famous ruminative lyrics, is increasingly being grafted onto its ostensible other: the literalist, highly concrete, and nominalist Poundian mode, made up of ideograms, images, and proper names that have long been absent from lyric, including Ashbery's own. From Bernstein's "Dysrhythmism" and "Doggy Bag," to the sardonic, appropriative mini-meditations in Rae Armantrout's *Versed*, to the lyric documentation of Cole Swensen's *Ours* or Elizabeth Willis's *Turneresque*, to Peter Gizzi's juxtaposition of his Ashberian "The Outernational," to the mock-troubadour "Phantascope," with its echo of Pound's "Cino"—"I have twirled, dropped crumbs, / spent days in archives"—to Craig Dworkin's ekphrastic *Dure*, whose deconstructive play on a Durer drawing represents a latter-day version of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," the two modes begin to fuse. Ashbery himself is not likely to come round to a taste for Zukofsky's "A" or to the Jackson Mac Low of *The Pronouns*. But the *planisphere* (star chart analog computer) that gives Ashbery's most recent book of poems its title pays its own curious homage to Pound's view of poetry as a kind of "inspired mathematics." In the words of Ashbery's "Oleum Misericordiae,"

To rub it out, make it less virulent
And a stab too at rearranging
The whole thing from the ground up. (*Collected Poems* 472, lines 1–3)

NOTES

- ¹ See, for example, Olivier Brossard, “Entretien avec John Ashbery,” 22: “Je crois qu’en un sens toute mon oeuvre tient du collage même si je ne fais pas de découpage à proprement parler. Mon esprit passé d’une chose à une autre chose totalement différente, les juxtapose pour voir ce à quoi tout cela va ressembler.”
- ² The obvious exception to this is the poem “Europe” in *The Tennis Court Oath*.
- ³ See Silliman’s Blog, 26 January 2003. The reference here is to the dichotomy Silliman himself has established between the poets in Donald Allen’s famous anthology *The New American Poetry* of 1960—he calls their heirs the “post-avants”—and the traditional confessional or “scenic” lyric Silliman has dubbed and continues to refer to as *the* “School of Quietude.” Louise Glück would be a quintessential “School of Quietude” poet, as would Charles Wright.
- ⁴ See Ford, *The New York Poets: An Anthology* (2004); *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams* (2001).
- ⁵ Frank O’Hara was strongly influenced by Hart Crane as well as by William Carlos Williams, but neither the baroque locutions of the former nor the vernacular free verse rhythms of the latter have had much impact on Ashbery. See my *Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters*, 31–74.
- ⁶ In the opening chapter of *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, I contrasted the Ashbery of “These Lacustrine Cities” to the Eliot of *The Waste Land*. I gradually came to see that this was a false dichotomy. In his 2002 interview with Mark Ford, Ashbery says, “It was really only later in life that I suddenly realized how good [Eliot] was” (32). The Eliot echoes in Ashbery’s work deserve careful study.
- ⁷ See Allen Ginsberg, “Advice to Youth” in *Allen Verbatim*, 111 (April 1971): “Ezra Pound has never failed me as a model; I mean he is still my master.” And in “The Death of Ezra Pound,” when asked whether Pound deserved the American Academy of Arts and Sciences prize, Ginsberg spluttered, “Certainly, give him *all* the awards. It’s a shame he didn’t get the Nobel and all the other awards at once—he was the greatest poet of the age! Greatest poet of the age [...].” (*Allen Verbatim* 180).
- ⁸ See Ashbery, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford*, 54.
- ⁹ The story of Koethe’s discipleship to Ashbery, beginning with their first meeting at Princeton where Koethe was an undergraduate, is told in the long autobiographical title poem of the volume *Ninety-fifth Street*. Other members of the original “tribe” were John Ash, Ann Lauterbach, David Lehmann, David Shapiro, Marjorie Welish, and John Yau, to name just the most prominent.
- ¹⁰ Helen Vendler, who has been dismissive of Bernstein for over twenty years—the first time at the “What is a Poet?” symposium at the University of Alabama (see Hank Lazar, *What is a Poet?* 185–225)—remarked acidly, in a review of Jorie Graham’s *A Sea Change for the New York Review of Books*, “Graham, unlike such Language Poets as Charles Bernstein and Susan Howe (whose moment seems to have expired), always rewardingly makes sense, whatever her acrobatics.” (<<http://www.nybooks.com/issues/2008/jun/12>>)

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