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In the Act: John Ashbery's *And The Stars Were Shining* · Joshua Clover

THE RISK OF FALLING into oneself, of disappearing inside the welter of strategies and signifiers aggregately known as individual style, is endemic among those gifted enough to have such a style in the first place; the more cultural weight that style achieves, the greater the risk. In the case of the greatest poet of our time the risk becomes enormous making the consistency of Mr. Ashbery's poetic achievement since *Some Trees* all the more astounding. Almost every book has done something different, has challenged even readers already versed in Ashberiana; each has been dazzlingly full of good stuff. Even *Hotel Lautreamont*, which seemed dangerously close to the self-parody and reflexive pastiche of someone who has been famously brilliant—and then brilliantly famous—for too long, can now be seen as a passing through rather than a falling into, the feints and strategies of a mercurial artist in the act of shifting gears. With the exception of the title poem which closes the new collection, *And The Stars . . .* is composed exclusively of shorter poems: the majority are less than a page, none longer than two. Within the strictures of this formal space, Ashbery has recontextualized—and regenerated—the poetics his readers are used to encountering in more elaborated circumstances.

Perhaps his most signatory gesture has always been in his transition from line to line: in the words of Louis-Georges Schwartz, “at the beginning of one of Ashbery's canonized works the uninitiated reader expects the slight disjuncture between juxtaposed lines to be patched over by the end, but the space between the lines is slowly revealed as a gaping abyss. The modernist protocol of reading falls off (or in).” Yet against these constructed slippages that keep the reader always *in the act of understanding*, Ashbery's motion is dreamily seamless: line one leads reasonably to line two, and then two to three. . . . However, should lines one and three be introduced at a party they would swear up and down they'd never met. Ashbery though is a master host: his lines, once introduced, always get on famously. This capacity is thematized in “The Mandrill on the Turnpike,” which begins, as

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he so often does, with a casual philosophical proposition: "It's an art, knowing who to put with what." That said, he continues, "and then, while expectations drool, make off with the lodestar / wrapped in a calico handkerchief, in your back pocket." The sinuous, elusive motion here brings to mind the Action Painters who played such a visible role in the New York School from which Ashbery sprang fully grown—but the slyness of this motion is all his. We have been trained to expect certain things from Ashbery: arbitrary detail which does not set the scene (the calico handkerchief), sudden plunges into the lowbrow (the Pythonesque drool)—but aren't these items rather well-wedded? And doesn't this daffy rigor give us the faith to track his ever more fugitive motion? "Mandrill" leads us, over the course of the partial page it occupies, through peregrinations beyond what this essay can easily contemplate: "the clock strikes ten, the evening's off and running" and during its passage "every thing and body are getting sorted out," including the speaker, who either is or isn't "Jack"; his brother the spy; "You and Mrs. Molesworth" (a winking nod to Thomas Pynchon, that); and of course "the subjunctive creeps back in, / sits up, begs for a vision, / or a cookie." Well, what's a poem without a speaking part for a (grammatical) mood?

This array of *dramatis personae* and technical measures (and one of Ashbery's tropes has always been the dissolution of the barrier between these categories—the language *is* a character) would sound merely catalogical and frantic from another poet. Ashbery's compositional gift—his unique grace in transitions so fluid they're practically dissociative—has catalyzed his work since the beginning. Such motion in, for example, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* or *Rivers and Mountains* served to keep open the possibility of further exploration: the very device for composing longer poems. Returning to such a gesture in a poem of perhaps 25 lines does a different trick entirely, allowing philosophy without conclusion, brevity without the closure he's always rejected. Indeed, Ashbery often does exactly the opposite of that for which he so exalts music: his is a poetry of propositions—philosophical, flirtatious—without resolution. The generous, anti-hegemonic politics of this are rather easy to explicate; the poetics more elusive. Among the few poets who are genuinely moving, most rely on either the carrot of familiar pleasures or the stick of righteousness; Ashbery carries us in his own motion—a motion so often described by both him and his critics in aquatic terms (a wave, the act of looking through a

running stream at an intelligence in action) that by now it's second nature to believe it so. But the transits of wave and stream are essentially unidirectional; their endpoints are fixed long in advance; and their motion is, at least in human terms, infinite.

Ashbery's poems defy all three of these qualities. Much has been made of his sudden shifts of direction, and of his explosion of our expectations regarding where (or if) a poem might conclude. However, it's the third quality—his finitude, as it were—which dominates *And The Stars*. . . . The concerns of aging, or of time's relentless passage, permeate all the integuments of the book, from "Now it's years after that. It / isn't possible to be young anymore" ("Token Resistance," on the first page) to "As children we played at being grownups. / Now there's trouble brewing on the horizon" (part XIII of the title poem, on the final page). Thus it is in concern as well as in construction that the poems of *And The Stars* . . . are written under the sign of "At North Farm," which Helen Vendler has read persuasively as a magical token against aging (in which "the dish of milk is set out at night" to propitiate the agents of the afterlife).

In "Token Resistance," age makes its incursions on the speaker over the course of a journey, a descent

*from checkered heights
that are our friends, needlessly
rehearsing what we will say
as a common light bathes us,*

*a common fiction reverberates as we pass
to the celebration. Originally
we weren't going to leave home. But made bold
by the rain we put our best foot forward.*

The voice of this middle portion of the poem is oddly, amorphously collective in discussing the travels, particularly given how the first line of the poem foregrounds the isolations available to language with excruciatingly awkward syntax: "As one turns to one in a dream." Of course, this "one" is vintage Ashbery, the pronoun which above all suggests French in translation and in turn calls up his beloved Surrealists. If "one" in English is resolutely third-person, in French it's often a formalized displacement of

the first person—the linguistic equivalent of holding the self in abeyance which has always charged Ashbery’s poetry (as in the similarly phrased passage from “Self-Portrait,” the poem which most directly takes up the otherness of the self: “One would like to stick one’s hand / Out of the globe, but its dimension / What carries it, will not allow it”). In “Token Resistance,” this distanced self comes out the other side of the group passage as the far more defined “me” in the last stanza:

*Now it's years after that. It
isn't possible to be young anymore.
Yet the tree treats me like a brute friend;
my own shoes have scarred the walk I've taken.*

Before the last two lines there is no individual speaker in the poem aside from the one we know to have caused the poem to exist; the suggestion is that age has concretized the self. But only a sucker would go for that: Ashbery has been dodging such fixity for about as long as Moses was in the desert. The next poem will have only “us” and “them”; when the first person does return, it will be to insist, “Don’t look at *me*.”

Yet, at the end of “Token Resistance,” something *is* made tangible, visible, available: “the walk,” which has apparently now been made so many times that its course is “scarred” into the ground. This simple transformation crystallizes—with staggering precision—that which has always set Ashbery apart from lesser poets. His poetics have been those of a man with a deeply troubled relationship to the image: he’s been—like de Kooning, for example—more gripped by the processes of life than the pictures it provides. The very first line of his *Selected Poems* is “We see us as we truly *behave*” [italics mine]. Our view of ourselves is composed of what we do, which begs the question of how such an appearance can be rendered. Frank O’Hara answered the question by exfoliating a genre sometimes dismissed (by fools) as ‘I do this, I do that, I go here, I go there’ poetry; Ashbery has taxed his and our imaginations by deploying a constellation of solutions, evasions, workarounds, and inventions which become, in the end, what he is. In his way, O’Hara was poet-as-urbanist, tracing the passage of the body through the landscape of industrial modernism; Ashbery in turn traces the passage of the mind through that same landscape. And, having survived the collapse of the modernist project in a way that

O'Hara's I-g-centricity couldn't have, he gets the dolorous treat of playing in the rubble.

I don't mean to suggest that Mr. Ashbery *can't* write an image: few poetic visuals match the uncanniness of "In a far recess of summer / Monks are playing soccer" (*Some Trees*), or the hi-def cinematography of this book's "like a terrier a lady has asked one to hold for a moment / while she adjusts her stocking in the mirror of a weighing machine" ("Like A Sentence"). It's that he knows that the image, despite its good publicity in writing workshops, is not the sensual core of experience but rather one amongst an array of roughly coeval phenomena passing through the medium of language.

And language is truly the medium Ashbery inhabits, unlike a host of poets who seem to use words only incidentally, because they've been the dominant mode of distributing one's thoughts and feelings for so long. The final line of "Token Resistance" is legible as a figuring of legibility itself, as the great reconciliation of language and image: "the walk," the action, the motion, is transmuted into the visible—is *in-scribed* on the world—through the act of its repetition. Repetition, as Berryman reminds us ("What do poets do? They do things *again*"), is the marker of style: in Ashbery, we see style transforming action into image.

John Cage has said that a musical note has four qualities: pitch, timbre, volume, and duration; it's around that final quality that much of his explorations revolved. Ashbery seems to have taken up this gauntlet on poetry's behalf; his theorizing of the effect of style (which is in turn the location of the personal—it's what *one* does) also allows the action—the transit of the self through the language—to elude the transitory, to become a permanent mark. Of course this transformation occurs in the opening poem of *And The Stars . . .* as it must: it provides the key which opens (or perhaps unfolds) the entire collection. For not only does it illuminate the relationship amongst the seen, the done, and the said (and this has always been among Ashbery's multifold projects), it supposes an escape from the book's emotional problematic: the sorrow of time's passage. There's a weariness in "My own shoes have scarred the walk I've taken," but also a deeply earned calm moment. If *And The Stars . . .* is bound between that rueful "Now" in the first poem and its companion in the last, Ashbery comes within those boundaries to a new sense of the self's duration, of what

it means to leave one's mark on the world—and in doing so finds revelation inside the problem of the image.

Twining—or twinning—the internal problem (that of action and image) and the external (the self and time) into a single *topos* also ensures a permeable border between the world and the poem. This becomes a deeply generous gesture, foreclosing on the risk of the hermeticism at which the author has always glanced come-hitherly, without sacrificing the complexity and grand undecidability that he has long owned. It would be a mistake to praise the book's accessibility. Nothing could be less true; in fact, there are ways in which the tracking of Ashbery (and it often feels just like that, like the exulting pursuit of a mind that's departed the familiar maps) is made all the more difficult for the compressed space in which the sudden turns and leaps occur. It's more the case that his grace in providing us with the necessary tools is at its zenith. In "Like A Sentence" for example, he takes up the mantle of difficulty—indeed, unknowability—immediately (here again his appropriation of philosophy as a pick-up line): "How little we know / and when we know it!" But having announced epistemology as the topic, he shortly renders it irrelevant:

*It was prettily said that "No man
hath an abundance of cows on the plain, nor shards
in his cupboard." Wait! I think I know who said that! It was . . .*

*Never mind, dears, the afternoon
will fold you up, along with preoccupations
that now seem so important . . .*

Having collapsed both the possibility and usefulness of knowing your stuff, the poem (and it's with Ashbery as with no one else that we're tempted to speak of the poem itself as the actant, rather than those two phantasms 'the speaker' and 'the poet') travels by ricochet from "a child / running around on a unicycle" to "where the paths through the elms, the carnivals, begin." This is Ashbery at his most wizardly: shouldn't it be the performing child who is carnivalesque? A small detail, surely, but this virtually aphasic use of language serves to destabilize our faith in knowability as much as the more direct propositions and disclaimers with which the

poem opened. And this act required of us, of the readers—the relinquishing of the desire to know—equips us for the poem’s final occasion:

. . . for though we came
to life as to a school, we must leave it without graduating
even as an ominous wind puffs out the sails
of proud feluccas who don’t know where they’re headed . . .

This is the most elegant of hoodwinkings: having persuaded us to abandon knowing where *we’re* headed both in the poem’s overt rhetoric and covert mechanism (again, his signatorily elusive motion), Ashbery makes us complicit in the spiritual circumstance of the poem: the sorrow of age’s procession. This cunningly forced complicity is a gift: we’re lured absolutely to that place—that melancholia-suffused lea against time’s onslaught—so that we can feel what that is, rather than what it’s like. And having gotten us there, he plays one last trick—one which might not have been comprehensible if he hadn’t so carefully laid the ground for it in the book’s beginning. As we prepare for that mythic water-crossing into the afterworld, we know “only that a motion is etched there, shaking to be free.” With such a gesture, returning to the essentiality of time’s transformation of action to image, *And The Stars* . . . is suddenly apprehensible as a secretly unified whole—and time, like night, “gives more than it takes” (“As One Put Drunk Into The Packet Boat,” *Self-Portrait*): a permanence, something to steer by.

If I mention majestic figures from other disciplines, it’s all a way of suggesting what a pure poet Ashbery is, traveling beyond compare. In that same way that we praise a painter for simultaneously laying bare and detonating the possibilities of craft by calling her *malerich* (‘painterly’), Ashbery is consummately *dichterich*. If language is a medium we pass through, taking what we think we need (and it is), Ashbery is the poet who *does* give more than he takes: working always to keep the language workable, refusing in the insistence of his motion to allow it to settle into the decrepit fixity of institution.