

chapter 3

Modernism's Last Aesthete

“At one of the later performances you asked why they called it a ‘miracle,’ // Since nothing ever happened. That, of course, was the miracle.” To come to terms with John Ashbery’s poetry is to come to terms with a sensibility deeply divided, nervously giddy, utterly fraudulent. How will those gimlet-eyed readers of the future judge our age’s critical fascination with him? As a typical example of our culture’s infatuation with fashion rather than meaning? As the inflation of a small, delicate talent for absurdity into a helium balloon six stories high, fit only for Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade? Or as the rare recognition of an innovative genius by a time with little else to recommend it?

If Ashbery’s poetry is the acid test for contemporary criticism (one could compose a handbook of evasion from the critical responses to him), it is due less to its quality than to the questions it provokes. It would be a mistake to believe his fractured vision, his reflexive concern with the mind, and his radical technique have deep

affinity with abstract expressionist painting or the structures of French philosophy and criticism, though it would be easy to align his work with either, given his long affiliations with the art world and matters French. That would be to mistake the movements for the mind itself. The “miracle” of his work is not what is present, but what is denied and effaced, and what does not happen at all.

As We Know, Ashbery’s ninth collection, ranges from a quartet of one-line poems (whose titles in three cases exceed the length of the poems themselves) to “Litany,” two sixty-six-page “simultaneous but independent monologues” printed in adjacent columns. It is hard to repress a weary sigh when turning to another long poem by Ashbery: the form—perhaps it should be called the length—has been responsible for his weakest, most indulgent experiments, as well as his finest poem, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” the title poem of a book that won the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize.

Unlike the focused intensities of “Self-Portrait,” which possessed something very much like an argument, “Litany” has no center. Ashbery is at his most irritatingly ephemeral here, no moment sustained into stability, each sentence erupting at an angle to the last (and yet those angles sometimes charming and irresistible). The sensibility is there long after the sense; but what *is* erases what *has been*, the poem a linear palimpsest. The luxations of thinking, the random insertion of detail, and the reliance on deflations of mood limit the reader’s attention to twenty or thirty lines that immediately vanish from memory, as if they had never been read, as if they had never been written. We are often told that modernism’s disjunctions of form imitate the fracture of modern life, which is the imitative fallacy at its most brutal. Most of the protocols of our thinking are little different from those of Tacitus or Chaucer, and if there has been a fragmentation of consciousness it does not necessarily demand a technique so self-devouring.

Ashbery is modernism’s last aesthete, a case of aestheticism so arrested he is often mistaken for a monument. However coldly au courant the strategy of his poems, they require a passivity toward

(even a fatal ignorance of) feeling. I don't want to raise an intuition to the rigidity of a rule, but I doubt any poetry can exist beyond the manners of its moment—beyond the diction and syntax and even mannerisms the poet unknowingly reflects, which together might be called a medium—without providing the reader some recourse to emotional life, if only because the emotions have a grammar older than local circumstance.

The immediate pleasures of Ashbery's poems are so separate from textual analysis it is difficult not to be entranced by the surface—the wily gestures, the knowing tones, the great range of diction—and to dismiss a poem without attempting to dismantle it. Many of his poems will yield to an analysis far less rigorous than that needed for Hart Crane or even Emily Dickinson. Unfortunately, most of them resolve into an aesthetics of perception that would little trouble and little interest a freshman philosophy class. Ashbery is so adept at creating the illusion of thought it is depressing to find his dressed-up ideas just sweet banalities.

A poet can live on the banality of ideas far longer than he can live on the banality of expression. Ashbery's gift is a vague suggestiveness that is also a brilliant suggestiveness. When he writes, "Where day and night exist only for themselves / And the future is our table and chairs," he has supplied the small consolations of language (personification and metaphor being the core of etymology) in selfish nights and days and fateful meals. The adversities of logic do not interest him (it would be unfair to say they elude him), and a poetry deprived of logic always devolves into suggestion. It should not be surprising the only poet in our past to whom Ashbery shows any affinity is Wallace Stevens, the other great modernist aesthete, and also a master of pacing, wit, and galumphing off-centeredness. Ashbery's work, like Stevens's, is a *tabula rasa* for modern criticism—any theory interested in perception and reference can draw its symbols there.

Ashbery is a brilliant example of a condition, a *fin de siècle* sensibility with the attention span of a stand-up comic. "Taglioni danced what Kant thought," a dance critic once wrote, and Ashbery writes

what Wittgenstein thought as he watched his beloved cowboy movies. *As We Know* continues the melancholy concerns of Ashbery's recent books, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) and *Houseboat Days* (1977), without altering or advancing his style. "Litany" is the litany of reciprocative prayer and the litany of monotonous account. The construction of vast rhetorical machines, spewing out meaning and non-meaning indifferently, defines the mocking originality of a poet who may have a lasting status as an American eccentric. It accounts as well for the cruel tedium of so much of his work.