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Ashbery's Poetry and the Scenarios of Strangeness in Contemporary Criticism

Gregory T. Polletta

"Strangeness" figures pervasively in John Ashbery's poetry. It is a familiar word, a familiar theme or property or mood, a familiar scene or climate or condition in the by now imposing bulk and body of his writings.

A particularly telling instance occurs in the long and late poem "A Wave," the closing poem in Ashbery's collection of his *Selected Poems*, where he tallies once again, as he has done so many times before, the course of his career as a poet and weighs the prospects that lie before him. His meditations on his development assume the form of a narrative, as if he were a personage "in a novel that has somehow gotten stuck/ To our lives" (338). Approaching his sixtieth year he wonders, "Is there something new to see, to speculate on?" (337). He reflects on his beginnings: on starting out, starting over, and always returning to what he thought he had left behind. He broods about the possibilities he had put by and saved "for a later phase of intelligence" (338) but which seem to have been put off, postponed, and left undeveloped in the enterprise of going "about our business as usual" (337).

As the passage meanders through the usual scenery, the recognizable landscapes or stage settings, of Ashbery's poetry, recounting adventures in perception and speculation, he presents a list of the things that come into view: acres of bushes, treetops, orchards, roads and roadways, farragoes of flowers

everything, in short,
That makes this explicit earth what it appears to be in our
Glassiest moments when a canoe shoots out from under some foliage
Into the river and finds it calm, not all that exciting but above all
Nothing to be afraid of, celebrates us
And what we have made of it. (338—39)

All of which, everything and what the poet has made of it, Ashbery avers, is

Not something so very strange, but then seeming ordinary
Is strange too. Only the way we feel about the everything
And not the feeling itself is strange. . . . (339)

This crossing of the strange and the familiar, of what is ordinary and what is out of the ordinary, is characteristic of Ashbery's musings. And so is the reflexivity of the reflections, the turnings of the words in upon themselves as speculations on the language and vocation of poetry, so that the text becomes its own subject, the making of poetry the poem's subject. Which is, of course, hardly novel either for Ashbery's poetry or for poetry at large. And if in "A Wave" we might discern something that is distinct about its reflexivity, a defocalization, say, or a sliding back and forth of metaphor between tenor and vehicle, or a diffusiveness in the treatment of the subject so that it is difficult to say what these musings are about precisely and to what they add up — still they are familiar oddities to readers of Ashbery's poetry. The way the speculations make their appearance, the way they float or drift rather than heave into view, the pace and tonality of the rumination, the syntax and the phenomenology of these measured musings are recognizably Ashbery's style — or at least the style of a substantial number of Ashbery's discursive poems written at various stages of his career as a poet.

What is worth remarking, however, about these passages from "A Wave" is that Ashbery by the style of his musings *de-dramatizes* whatever seems to be out of the ordinary. "Reflecting on shades of difference/ In past performances" (341), not only his own but the shades, the ghostly presences, of difference in past poets and poetry, Ashbery fights shy of confrontation and contestation. He seems bent on defusing whatever drama attaches to the act of writing or reading poetry, whatever allure or glamor or histrionics attach to the vocation of poetry; "one must be firm," he admonishes, "not to be taken in by the histrionics" (347). For, oddly enough, given his reputation of being an impossibly difficult poet, Ashbery writes with the conviction that poetry, and everything that poetry brings into being or consciousness, is "not something so very strange," not all that out of the ordinary. "But then seeming ordinary," he adds with a deceptive simplicity and clarity, "is strange too."

It is stranger in fact, this poetics and this way with words, than we imagine or comprehend by the terms which govern or underwrite our most

compelling discourses of theory and criticism — stranger than we imagine or comprehend by the stories we spin and the scenarios we act out in the discourses of strangeness in contemporary criticism. And to make an emphatic point of the difference, I will contend that writing poetry is for Ashbery distinctly *not* a transgressive act — not a breaking of conventions and a disruption of norms as an act of transgression. My argument will be that Ashbery's performance as a poet, by refusing the conviction that writing is transgressive, puts blithely into question the scenarios of contemporary criticism which embody this conviction. Ashbery's writing exorcises, so to speak, such powerful scenarios as those of Harold Bloom and Paul de Man which are both about strangeness and themselves strange; discourses of strangeness that themselves enact the transgressive strangeness of the language, rhetoric, and figuration of the writing about which they speak. In "seeming ordinary" Ashbery's writing gives a quizzical turn to the most spellbinding tropes of strangeness in contemporary criticism.

But what does it signify to say that "seeming ordinary is strange too"? Once the terms are posed as contraries and once the notion of strangeness is accorded a privileged or governing status, as it has been from, say, Walter Pater onwards, transferring the properties or effects of one term to the other becomes a fairly predictable and facile exercise of verbal play. Everyday things — representations of the quotidian, of dailiness, of the ordinary — may be invested, however negatively, with the mystery and the dramatic allure of strangeness.

Walter Benjamin's treatment of the matter in his reflections of 1929 on Surrealism is especially pertinent. The aesthetic of Surrealism, he argues, "is enmeshed in a number of pernicious romantic prejudices," and the revolutionary energies of intoxication in its project are vitiated by "an undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication":

Any serious exploration of occult, surrealist, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena presupposes a dialectical intertwinement to which a romantic turn of mind is impervious. For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday. (189–90)

This might be taken as strikingly apt for any discussion of the dynamics of Ashbery's poetry, particularly because of his avowed though ambiguous affiliations with Surrealism, and more generally because of the similarities as well as the differences between Benjamin's notions and those of Freud on the uncanny, which have become so influential and familiar in contemporary discourses of strangeness. The aura of the arcane with which Benjamin invests "the everyday world" might be taken as correlative to the aura with which Ashbery surrounds the ordinary. Ashbery's poetry, by making ordinary or everyday things mysterious and strange and mysterious things as "not something so very strange" but perfectly ordinary, might be seen without much straining as embodying "a dialectical optic" which enacts the perception of "the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday."

It may be more germane, however, to think of Benjamin's statement as representing a discourse of strangeness, a vocabulary and congeries of notions of strangeness, that Ashbery's poetry simultaneously performs and renounces, avows and disowns. Benjamin's statement inscribes an aura that Ashbery's poetry both invests and divests. Or, perhaps it would be even truer to say, Benjamin's statement is a discourse of strangeness that Ashbery, in all seriousness, makes light of and does funny things with by his poetry. And it may be this doubleness that makes Ashbery so difficult a poet. So hard to read. So baffling, undecidable, or indeterminate of interpretation. It may be this duplicity that makes his poetry so difficult and strange.

But it may well be that the duplicity inheres in the language of poetry rather than being singular to Ashbery's performance. In that case, writing on the theme of the strange and the familiar, Ashbery would be compelled by the mechanisms of language itself to do what I have just said: simultaneously invest the ordinary with an aura of mystery and divest or undo that aura by the rhetoric or figuration of the poem's performance at words. The difficulty here would be an aporia after the fashion of Paul de Man.

But what would make Ashbery's poetry more difficult yet would be his making light of such an aporia and refusing to be drawn into any lurid or histrionic consequences contingent upon such a performance. So the doubleness would be at once the duplicity of a performative construction and deconstruction, i.e. the de Manian aporia, and a playing between or

making light of this so-called "double bind."¹ That would redouble the difficulty of Ashbery's poetry. Make it not only more undecidable or indeterminate of interpretation but, as Ashbery says in the poem aptly entitled "No Way of Knowing," "difficult to read correctly" (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* 56).

Like everyone else, then, who discourses on Ashbery, I will be speaking of the difficulties his poetry presents. It has become a familiar and almost obligatory *démarrage*. But I will take for granted the perplexing of meaning in his poetry — the difficulties of comprehending what he is writing about — and of how hard it is to grasp or delineate the techniques of his writing. There are phrases, lines, passages, whole poems by Ashbery I do not understand, like all his readers, but we get to be at home in his poetry. Living with strange compositions or decompositions of language in literature has become our familiar habitat as readers or teachers or critics; it has indeed become a routine . . . for how long has it been now? — at least since T.S. Eliot proclaimed in his 1921 essay on "The Metaphysical Poets" that "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*" and that "the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (248).

Ashbery's poetry could be read as the consummation of this project of forcing and dislocating language into meaning. Ashbery could be taken as the latest in the series of practitioners of disruptive modes of linguistic performance: a poet who practices dislocation, disjunction, disconnection, and the like, in order to express, as one of his critics was bound to say, "the meaning of meaninglessness." Ashbery could easily be made into the perfect contemporary representative of Eliot's figure of the difficult poet. But any such undertaking would be quite misguided, I believe, because Ashbery dismantles completely, piece by every essential piece, the edifice of presuppositions on which Eliot's notions of difficulty depend. He is more in keeping with recent literary theory in being preoccupied with altogether different orders of difficulty. And if Eliot is worth mentioning at all in this connection it is because his notions rather than those, say, of Paul de Man continue to govern our institutional practice of the analysis of

¹ For a suggestive treatment of the relation of Ashbery's poetry to the de Manian notion of "the inevitable double bind of language," see Sokolsky 250.

texts. Accordingly, I should like to move ahead to what I consider to be the more pertinent and contemporary difficulties of Ashbery's poetry. I want to see where the difficulties lie.

One set of difficulties that interests me particularly has to do with the career and vocation of the poet. Not simply the actual unfolding of Ashbery's career as a writer, nor even, as Keats called it, the poetical character that is exemplified by his career, but the difficulties attaching to the representation of what Robert Lowell has called (in his poem "For John Berryman") "the generic life" of the poet (27). Even more specifically I mean the difficulties of how "to read correctly" the narrative of the career and vocation of being a poet which forms so massive a portion of the body of Ashbery's writings. Are we to take this as a sort of development novel or Bildungsroman — one progressive unfolding of a poet's responses to the challenges and exigencies incumbent upon any poet worthy of his gifts — or are we rather to take it as a parody or pastiche of "the generic life" of the poet? How are we to read the poet's meditations on the course of his career in poems like "A Wave"? As the expression of stages of growth in Ashbery's narrative of the generic life of the poet, or rather as the undoing of the narrative itself: a de-familiarizing and de-dramatizing of the need and the practice of constructing a novel of the development of a poet?

Consider, to begin with, some passages from an early work, right when Ashbery was starting out, a one-act play entitled *The Heroes*, which was produced off-Broadway in 1953, the same year his first book of poems, *Turandot and Other Poems*, was published. Ashbery's play is a comedy about the heroes of the Trojan War and Greek mythology, who speak as if they were at a Long Island house-party in a Woody Allen movie. Here is a speech by Theseus, which he delivers to Circe, and to which she responds by saying, "You're a strange man":

Let me tell you of an experience I had while I was on my way here. My train had stopped in the station directly opposite another. Through the glass I was able to watch a couple in the next train, a man and a woman who were having some sort of conversation. For fifteen minutes I watched them. I had no idea what their relation was. I could form no idea of their conversation. They might have been speaking words of love, or planning a murder, or quarreling about their in-laws. Yet just from watching them talk, even though I could hear nothing, I feel I know those people better than anyone in the world. (*Three Plays* 10)

This is a recurring scene in Ashbery's poetry. Not the event itself, to be sure, but the staging of the event as a specular scene in which the onlooker or spectator is disconnected and dissociated from what is being acted out. The scene is anything but impenetrable to comprehension. There are a plurality of interpretive possibilities to choose among.

Looking ahead to certain notions in contemporary literary theory, the scene might be taken as a licencing of invention by radical decontextualization, a severing of the intentionalities on which any speech act depends, and by extension an early representation by Ashbery of what he will later play every trick in the book on in his poetry: the free play of signifiers and the detaching of signification from any referential grounding.

Or, if one is more drawn by the affectivities of the scene, it might be read as a dissociation or disconnectedness between an observing subject and an observed subject which produces less an absence of affect than an odd circuit of affective energies. It might be read, in fact, as a kind of primal scene. And whether one were to drive that, as Harold Bloom has, in the direction of a crisis poem of incipient solipsism which becomes a "family romance" wherein Ashbery contends against his progenitors and precursor poets, or in another direction, towards a reflection of the self-estrangement and self-absorption that have disturbed a number of readers of Ashbery's poetry, the scene is repeated many times over in his writings and in a variety of guises. It might well be taken as an abstract or a paradigm of the forms and the figures of disconnection that are so distinct a feature of his writings that he has frequently been labeled a "poet of disconnections."

My own emphasis would fall on the representation in the passage of the relation of knowledge to story, event, and narrative. What I would gather from this little scene is that we invent stories of the conversations that we imagine or actually hear and sort out what is said according to the genres of the love-story, the murder-mystery, and so on, as a way of giving a novelistic structuring to what is being said or imagined as said. The radical disconnection or decontextualization enables the bemused onlooker or spectator (or, in other like scenes, the listener) to be free to muse upon the effects and traces for which he finds the matching stories and by that distancing gets to know these remote creatures "better than anyone in the world." Their uncoupling and remoteness from the world enables an intimate knowledge. And in my view what is most telling here is that the process opens a certain space and time by which the rumination can move

towards knowledge.

One more passage from *The Heroes* provides a kind of forecast of Ashbery's stylistic development as a poet. Here it is the Chorus who speaks the lines:

So far this play has been easy. From now on it's going to be more difficult to follow. That's the way life is sometimes. . . . Yea, a fine stifling mist springs up from the author's pure and moody mind. Confusion and hopelessness follow on the precise speech of spring. Just as, when the last line of this play is uttered, your memory will lift a torch to the dry twisted mass. Then it will not seem so much as if all this never happened, but as if parts continued to go on all the time in your head, rising up without warning whenever you start to do the simplest act.² (13)

In this passage Ashbery stakes out pretty nearly the whole ground he is going to cover in the poems that will follow: the territory of consciousness and of what we know or desire to know or cannot know, that great expanse of familiar matter for poetry which Ashbery will de-familiarize by the manner of his exploration. Where things are going to be difficult to follow. Where the boundaries between an event and a non-event will be folded up and allow one to flow into the other. Where part and whole will shift their ratios. Where even if things never happened, what will be remembered will be the ruminations on the prospects of things that might have happened. What will be remembered, what will leave its traces on consciousness, will be the thoughts of things that might have happened, prospects rather than retrospects — or retrospects of our prospects — and these memories (how different a realm we are in from that of Proust's voluntary or involuntary memory), these Ashberean memories, where things thought can never be unthought or forgotten, will rise up "without warning whenever you start to do the simplest act."

More specifically, the passage may be seen as a preview or even as a manifesto for the technique of randomness, or of fragmentation, or of a collage of random bits and fragments. Ashbery's random constructions, his *assemblages* of random elements, has become the most familiar way of identifying the strangeness and difficulty of his poetry. And with good

² For a different interpretation of this and the preceding passage from *The Heroes*, see Howard 19–22.

reason, for Ashbery has said so many times over in his poems, as in the poem "The One Thing That Can Save America," which begins with the question, "Is anything central?" and goes on to include the lines: "I know that I braid too much my own/Snapped-off perceptions of things as they come to me" (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* 44). Or in the poem "Grand Galop," after a depiction of random movements, imaginary peregrinations, the journey is dropped and the scene dissolves:

And so on to afternoon
On the desert, with oneself cleaned up, and the location
Almost brand-new what with the removal of gum wrappers, etc.
But I was trying to tell you about a strange thing
That happened to me, but this is no way to tell about it,
By making it truly happen. It drifts away in fragments.
(*Selected Poems* 184)

The consequence of this receptivity to the random drift and flow of impressions, or the drift of random impressions without making an effort to get them to cohere, "to add up," as Ashbery puts it, is that openness of form and effacing of boundaries or hierarchies that has by now become exhaustively catalogued as postmodern. "Nothing is too 'unimportant'" Ashbery says in the poem "The Explanation," "Or too important, for that matter. The newspaper and the garbage/ Wrapped in it, the over, the under" (*Houseboat Days* 14). And these techniques of random assemblage and fragmentation enable Ashbery to mix registers riotously, to incorporate the "wacky analogies" he mentions in the poem just cited, and a virtual encyclopedia of colloquialism and idioms, and all the clichés and dead metaphors that have their busy after-life there, into poems that register high seriousness and echoes not only of Stevens, Auden, and the Eliot of *Four Quartets*, but of most of the great English and American poets. Ashbery's poetry shares the avidity of the postmodern for movies, comic strips, newspapers, and all the other forms of popular culture. "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" (*Selected Poems* 235–38) is probably his best-known poem in this vein and it is certainly an hilarious example of the comic side of Ashbery's random assemblies.

On the serious side, the claim has been made that his techniques of randomness and fragmentation are a representation of how consciousness really works: that they are, in Ashbery's words, a "kind of mimesis of how experience comes to me" (cited Howard 44). These claims are no more

trenchant or convincing than those of the same sort that keep being trotted out for the modernist techniques of stream of consciousness. Without arguing the issue here of their respective status as modes of mimetic realism the point is that Ashbery's postmodern techniques do not present any special order of difficulty, following as they do upon the techniques of the great modernist practitioners such as Joyce and Gertrude Stein. We are perfectly at home with their strange ways of random and fragmentary structurings, however much they may elude or baffle understanding in places. And it does not require something radically different to be at home with Ashbery's departure from the practice of his precursors.

A very different order of difficulty is posed by the notions of randomness that figure in Paul de Man's writings under the rubric of what he calls the "errancy of language" (*The Resistance to Theory* 12). This might be described as the propensity of language to wander freely, at random, rather than being controlled in its meanings and effects by the intentions of any speaker or writer. "Referential detachment" and "gratuitous improvisation" (*Allegories of Reading* 294) are general properties of language in performance (rather than an idiosyncratic technique of decontextualization practiced by Ashbery) and these properties deconstruct the illusion of intentionality on which any speech act is predicated. "A radical estrangement" exists, in de Man's view, "between the meaning and performance of any text" (298). At the limit in performative utterance "the estrangement between subject and utterance is then so radical that it escapes any mode of comprehension" (289). De Man pushes these notions to disconcerting extremes when he discusses the alteration by Rousseau of the figure of the text from that of a physical body to that of a machine, for the "machinal" text represents "the absolute randomness of language, prior to any figuration or meaning" (299). This utterly de-familiarizes our received notions of the language of literature and makes of randomness something unnervingly strange.

Setting aside for now the question of how close or far from de Man's notions Ashbery's practice may be, his technique of random and fragmentary structurings may be difficult to accommodate because his indifference to whether poetry "adds up" would appear to be at odds with, or even contradicted by, the way he writes of his career and vocation as a poet. These poems are signally narrative in their forms of lyric or meditation. They not only recount beginnings and endings, and the passages between, in Ashbery's career, they incorporate the narrative

qualities attaching to these themes or categories of experience. No contemporary poet, indeed, ends his poems with a shapelier finish. However haphazard and disjointed the pieces of Ashbery's poems may be, however difficult they may be to follow, whatever their disconnections, they rarely fail to advance an arresting and strong sense of ending. His meditative and lyric poems end as narratives should: not on a note of closure but on a note of *being done*. This is beautifully exemplified in the last lines of "Soonest Mended":

For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
Making ready to forget, and always coming back
To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago.

(*Selected Poems* 93)

The poem was published as Ashbery was nearing middle age, and, as these lines show, it represents yet another meditation on the progress of his career. Capitalizing on the etymology of the word, a common tactic of his, he reflects on "some hazards of the course" and, as in "A Wave," he measures the furlongs, reckons the positions he has reached, what he has made of his vocation, and how far he has still to go from where he started.

Ashbery's poetry may be seen as one long poem or one voluminous poetic sequence of meditations on his career as a poet, one continuous self-reckoning of where he is now (in his thirties, his forties, his fifties, his sixties), how far he has come in the course, as each decade succeeds the other, and of what remains to be hazarded as the end, the finish line, draws nearer. It is as if Ashbery has been writing a long development novel, a work-in-progress which, when all the chapters are published and all the separate poems collected, would add up to a single grand narrative of "the generic life" of the poet.

But it is difficult to know how to take Ashbery's treatment. The unfolding of his career as a story, a drama, a novel is "difficult to read correctly" because the narrative itself may be an object of parody. It may be that he is writing a pastiche of the novelistic narrative of "the generic life" of the poet. These suspicions are most pointedly aroused by the 1972 poem or volume entitled *Three Poems*, most of which is written as prose. This is still, after all the commentary it has elicited, the most baffling of Ashbery's poems, the hardest to read and accommodate in any account of his career, the hardest to place. That is to say, it may be the strangest of his poems.

And it is the one that is most elaborate in using the figure of the novel to represent a turning point in Ashbery's poetic development.

Three Poems are addressed by an "I" writing to a "You." Ashbery's way with pronouns has occasioned much comment and puzzlement over their shifting or indeterminate referents, but in this case the "I" is pretty clearly the poet writing now, the poet he is and has been, and the "You" is that which he is in the process of becoming. The poet reviews his past performances, speculates on new thresholds, new anatomies, new directions he might take or should be taking.

The reader who has been following Ashbery's career, reading him as the work came volume after volume, watching it unfold, might well wonder about *Three Poems*: why prose and why a prose so laden with clichés or with orotund sentences that sound like a put-on of poetic afflatus? After the formal mastery of the preceding volume of poems, *The Double Dream of Spring*, which includes "Soonest Mended," why this plunge into slackness and triteness? How could a poet who worked the strict forms of sestina, eclogue, and pantoum with such skill and novelty in his first volume of poems, when he was starting out, descend to so loose and turgid a prose? What is Ashbery up to in *Three Poems*? Is he trying to keep from repeating himself and going stale — trying, as we say, to find a new voice? Or is it rather that he is deliberately depersonalizing his writing — forswearing the effort to find a voice, a style, a subject, or any of the other conditions and premises for the narrative of a poet's progress — and simply trying to be different?

The uncertainties implicit in these questions, which are anything but rhetorical, are intensified by the way Ashbery employs the figure of a novel-like narrative of the poet's development. The figure is interwoven throughout the whole of the text but characteristically in a style and with a tone that borders on parody or pastiche. Here is an example:

This possibility of fulfillment creates the appetite for itself, with the result that the dislocations come through to us as romantic episodes or chapters: "There's the one in which I fell away gradually, without even realizing it until we were already far apart, separated by new habits and preoccupations that had arisen even as we sat close to each other, talking about the weather and so on." (25)

The tone and style of such passages are hard to gauge or to place, as in many pieces of postmodern writing where banalities are delivered in so

deadpan a manner, with so few cues from a speaking voice, that we can't tell how to take or what to make of what is being said. Deprived of the orientations that a speaking voice customarily provides, we are at a loss as to how to identify what we hear or read. There are places in *Three Poems* where the recyclings of clichés, platitudes, and banalities are unmistakably funny, sometimes hilariously so, but they don't add up to parody because they lack its ulterior satirical motives; they certainly are not what we can label simply as irony; and we are left with the impression of their being a gratuitous and playful pastiche. These difficulties in classification are hardly formalities for they are the product of the momentous postmodern enterprise at decentering the subject or speaker. The speaking subject, as Ashbery remarks in "No Way of Knowing" about the body,

disperses

In sheeted fragments, all somewhere around
But difficult to read correctly since there is
No common vantage point, no point of view
Like the 'I' in a novel.

(*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* 56)

This dispersing of the speaking subject has become familiar enough in contemporary criticism, and it is certainly something we have become accustomed to since "Joyce's voices," but there is more involved in postmodern writing than a writer's impersonating a plurality of identities or of "doing the police in different voices." Postmodern writing aims at the radical dispossession of the speaking subject from what is uttered in performance: the erasure of the identifying features or vocalities of a speaking subject by which as listeners and readers we are able to catch the tone and style of an utterance and know with some certainty how to read it correctly.

Ashbery's treatment of his career as a poet, to my view, is neither a parody nor a pastiche exactly of the novelistic narrative but a mimicry that works contrary to what narrative is supposed to be and do — contrary, as well, to the investment we make as readers or critics in the "generic life" of the poet. Looking at the performance we are lured into expectations that a drama is unfolding — a progress, a self-interrogation, a reckoning, a searching self-criticism that darkens as the light ebbs. A reviewer who has closely followed Ashbery's career intones of a late volume, as any of us might do: "Increasingly, Ashbery's poems are about the 'fear of growing

old/Alone" (Vendler 110). He writes of that assuredly, and with suitable gravity, but without the pathos that clings to the narrative, for he makes light of and looks askance at the story he imitates. We seem to crave and need such stories in order to lend savor and drama to an activity or *métier* of writing poetry that has no need of such fictions to be and to be of value. We need the concept of a career in order to make a poet's work add up — to give it shape and heft and salience; to make it a novel, a generic life, a *Bildungsroman* — but for Ashbery it is the career that is the figure and not the novel that is the figure of the career. The career is a figure of "making ready to forget, and always coming back/ To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago" — the *mooring* of starting out rather than the collocation we expect, the *morning*; which is to say less the chronological and narrative marker than the anchorage from which one starts and to which one is always returning. The poet ages, the distance grows, he sees and tries new things, but he is always coming back to his beginnings as a poet and going about his business as usual. So the movement reverses or undoes the narrative, as well as the dramatizations or histrionics with which we invest the narrative, even as it appears to be imitating it. Ashbery refuses the likeness to "the 'I' in a novel" even as he appears to represent that likeness in poem after poem.

And with that uncoupling of the novelistic "I" from the adventures in perception and speculation that comprise the matter of his poetry, Ashbery plunges us into the disorientations and uncertainties that are general in the poetics of the postmodern. "A Wave" closes with the line, "But all was strange," and this has become a common state of poetry, for Ashbery's musings, like those of so many of his contemporaries, take place in a theater of the mind, or in a scene of writing, which is bereft of a presiding consciousness or an informing voice and vision. The effects of strangeness that are produced by such dispersions or absences are distinctive. They are unlike the fright and *frisson* that were aroused by the older notions of strangeness as something mysterious and uncanny, but they are unsettling all the same and even unnerving.

Ashbery is often placed as writing in the wake of the great tradition of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry of vision and knowledge, and more particularly that portion of the tradition which revolves about the terms by which Wordsworth referred to *The Prelude* as being "the poem on the growth of my own mind" and "the poem of my own poetical education" (xxxvii). But my argument would be that Ashbery's forays into seeing and

knowing are detached from any of the varieties of consciousness which underwrite and valorize the great project of Romantic poetry. Ashbery is writing in the aftermath of that project; he has left it behind. He does not call it into question — bringing this or any other question to a pitch of crisis is not Ashbery's style — nor does he look backwards with nostalgia. His poetry is as fully open as that of Wordsworth or any other Romantic poet to adventures in seeing and knowing, but these do not serve the ends of his own poetical education or the growth of his own mind. Poetry has its own reasons for being in the world; it does not require the project of educating a mind or building a self or representing a poetical consciousness to justify its activity.

The passage from "A Wave" I cited at the outset is reminiscent of the famous episode of the stolen boat which is narrated in Book I of *The Prelude*; indeed, it might well be taken as Ashbery's rewriting of Wordsworth's scene. And the differences are revealing. Ashbery changes the idiom by making the skiff a canoe; he invents a scene or gives it the appearance of a hypothetical construction rather than a remembered event; he allows speculation to wander freely over the imagined site; and, perhaps most important, he does not invest the episode with the troublingly mysterious apparition of a dream. Ashbery tones down, he all but silences, the notes of transgression, of the uncanny, and of the sublime that figure so powerfully in Wordsworth's account. The "ministry of beauty and fear" that shadows the poet's experience — the consciousness that "huge and mighty Forms that do not live / Like living men mov'd slowly through my mind / By day and were the trouble of my dreams" (26) — this visitation or eruption of imaginative power, and the dread or awe it inspires, are missing in Ashbery's rewriting. The familiar dramaturgy of strangeness is undone; the scenarios of strangeness as an act of transgression are dispelled.

Read in concert with Harold Bloom's theory of poetry, Ashbery's rewriting of Wordsworth would be an instance of turning the Sublime into the Counter-Sublime. But such an antithesis, like the notion of the anxiety of influence and in fact pretty much the whole of Bloom's theory of poetry, clings tenaciously to the very centralities of consciousness that, I believe, Ashbery is determined to do without. His poetry disowns the strangeness attaching to the sublime or the uncanny and embraces instead the difficulties, uncertainties, uneasiness, the whole array of strange effects that are produced when the events, scenes, or objects of perception and

speculation are cut adrift from a novelistic "I" and allowed to float at will and to rove at liberty: wherever the words go and whatever it is — anything or everything — the words turn up and light upon. As such, Ashbery's practice would seem to be closer to Paul de Man's notions of the strange waywardness or errancy of language. But there is a lurid cast to de Man's investigations of figural language (as Neil Hertz has demonstrated) and little of Ashbery's ordinary playfulness at language, his sportive seriousness. When de Man speaks in *Allegories of Reading* of "the anxiety with which Rousseau acknowledges the lethal quality of all writing" and adds that "writing always includes the moment of dispossession in favor of the arbitrary power play of the signifier and from the point of view of the subject, this can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading or a castration" (296), the theory is that of deconstruction but the figures are those of the familiar scenarios of strangeness: the uncanny, the sublime, the fatal transgression. Ashbery might well be diverted by such a terrific drama, as if it were a late night horror show, but as a writer, as far as his writing goes, his poetry recoils from anything resembling a "power play," it is supremely indifferent to any "lethal quality" in the act of writing, and in its waywardness it searches after those scenes or properties of strangeness, and the attendant access of wonder or amazement, to be found by "seeming ordinary."

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