

Leslie Wolf: On "Daffy Duck in Hollywood"

? A close look at even the sounds of some of his lines belies the charge that the poet is not exercising control. ? At the end of "Hop o? My Thumb" ?

There are still other made-up countries

Where we can hide forever,

Wasted with eternal desire and sadness,

Sucking the sherberts, crooning the tunes, naming the names.

? the three pairs of words in the last line move from the consonance to rhyme to literal identity, enacting a subliminal form of convergence. These lines may have been composed rapidly, but we cannot help but see how wedded to the poem?s ambitions are its technical resources.

Let us finally consider one of Ashbery?s most challenging poems, one that engages his entire methodology, to see how we are taken to a place "both here / And not there," where the freedom to inhabit images and ideas is not hampered by formal considerations or "plausibility." Clement Greenberg has found, in paintings like [Willem de Kooning?s] *Gotham News*, a "plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends but continues to suggest representational ones" [in "After Abstract Expressionism," in *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970*, ed. Henry Geldzahler [New York: Dutton, 1969], p. 363]. He calls this "homeless representation" and I think the late poem "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" ? a self-portrait, again ? we can discover a verbal equivalent. ? The sheer length and number of directions taken by some of his sentences are an embodiment of the difficulty with which the mind mired in "consciousness of history" finds its way. Indeed, Ashbery sometimes seems to have the same aspirations for a single statement that poets like [John] Donne brought to whole poems. What is exhilarating and new in this is the way the network of voices in the poem is used to animate and propel the almost impossibly eclectic and allusive diction. This poetry asks readers to hear inflections not only in the briefst fragments but also in the image-choked busyness of complex sentences. For only then are the attitudes summoned that make the poem?s arguments and reversals into emblems of a complicated response to experience. ?

This poem, like de Kooning?s paintings of the fifties and his even more fluid masterpieces of the mid-seventies, appropriates the world and transports it into the imagination where we can move with a freedom impossible in any representational art. Ashbery involves us in sentences whose machinery makes us feel how, not what, they mean and after we have become sensitive to the moves that serve his "desperate quest masked as an ease with things" ([Harold] Bloom), we become ourselves the medium for their operation. This poetry creates in us a palpable current of feeling that is held like some plastic entity, to be shaped, twisted, expanded and diffused, that blossoms from within itself and is replaced by new blossoming. ?

From Leslie Wolf, "The Brushstroke's Integrity: The Poetry of John Ashbery and the Art of Painting" in David Lehman, ed. *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1980), 249-250, 253-254.

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