

David Perkins: On Ashbery's Predecessors: Stevens, Eliot and Pound

Ashbery's subject matter is similar to that of his favorite poet, Wallace Stevens. Both poets write of the mind forming hypotheses about reality in general, about the ultimate truth or nature of things. Stevens, as I said earlier, took for granted that we cannot know reality in itself. Whether we conceive of it as a colorless, featureless continuum, like gray haze on a winter afternoon, or as a "jostling festival" of concrete, particular identities, like a morning in June full of birdsong, we are in either case forming an imagination of reality. ?

[Ashbery] dwells on the impossibility of credibly imagining any reality. Putting it another way, we might say that for both Stevens and Ashbery the imagination creates, destroys and immediately creates another vision of reality, but that in Ashbery the process is enormously speeded up. His envisionings of reality are not merely provisional; they transform themselves and disappear in the very process of being proposed, leaving, as he puts it, "Nothing but a bitter impression of absence." ?

? In interviews Ashbery denies that he parodies, and if by the term we mean the echoing of a voice for the sake of ridiculing it, we may concede that his phrasing is seldom merely parodic. Like Eliot in *The Waste Land* and Pound in the *Cantos* he adopts or alludes to a style in order to invoke the tone of feeling associated with it, and in comparison with Eliot and Pound, he is less likely to bring to bear literary styles of the past, though he draws on these also. But more frequently he exhibits the modern colloquial voices of different types of people and the styles of contemporary journalism, advertising, bureaucracy, business memos, scientific reports, newspapers, psychology textbooks, and the like. Since these styles are relatively graceless and inactive, we sense a certain irony as we encounter them in one of Ashbery's poems. The irony intensifies when the text shifts quickly from one style to another, exhibiting each in contrast while committing itself to none.

A similar irony is present in Ashbery's deliberate use of stock ideas and phrases. This pervasive technique conveys, among other things, his fear that in all our thought and speech we are helplessly trapped in the ready-made. Our minds cannot get beyond the systems of convention that fill them, and these codes divorce us from reality. Hence every utterance must be spoken with recognition and apology that the words and concepts are to some degree clichés, and this is what we find in Ashbery's texts. But the degree of irony varies enormously. ?

?Through all his volumes Ashbery elaborates the same fundamental insights. That his subject, moreover, is not things in the world but in the mind means that his poetry, like that of Stevens, largely forgoes the interest that attaches to human character and fate. He grips us by the profundity of his premises and by the brio of his expression, but when his skill as a stylist fails, he is boring. But when Ashbery writes well, no living poet in English can rival him in fresh, apt, surprising phrases. His attitudes and emotions are indescribably gallant as he mingles humor with pathos, resignation and elegy with hope, and maintains his relaxed, equable, fluent, wonderfully imaginative speech despite premises that might have led to

despair..

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