

On the Value of Criticism; on Good Working Conditions for Poetry

Gangel: How do you feel about formal criticism of your work?

Ashbery: Criticism, in general, has less and less to do with my work. I'm sometimes kind of jealous of my work. It keeps getting all the attention and I'm not. After all, I wrote it.

I really don't know what to think when I read criticism, either favorable or unfavorable. In most cases, even when it's sympathetic and understanding, it's a sort of parallel adventure to the poetry. It never gives me the feeling that I'll know how to do it the next time I sit down to write, which is my principal concern.

I'm not putting down critics, but they don't help the poetry to get its work done. I don't have much use for criticism, in general, even though it's turned out I've written a lot, mostly art criticism.

Very few people have ever written a serious mixed critique of my poetry. It's either dismissed as nonsense or held up as a work of genius. Few critics have ever accepted it on its own terms and pointed out how I've succeeded at certain moments and failed at other moments at what I was setting out to do.

I will quote one of my favorite lines from Nijinsky's journal: "Criticism is death." He doesn't elaborate on that statement at all.

Gangel: You mentioned before you get inspiration from conversations overheard in the streets. Where else?

Ashbery: I'm very much of a magpie as far as reading goes. I read anything which comes to my hand. National Enquirer, Dear Abby, a magazine at the dentist, a Victorian novel. I don't have a program in anything, as a matter of fact.

Someone remarked about an obscene passage in a poem. I replied that this shocked him not because it was there, but because there were not more of them.

There is an American feeling that if you do one thing, you've got to do that and nothing else. It goes against my grain.

Poetry includes anything and everything.

Gangel: Do you find it easy to relate to people?

Ashbery: Yes I do. I am a very gregarious person. This often surprises people, because my poetry does have a reputation for being aloof and antihuman. But I'm quite the reverse. I enjoy talking with just about anybody. My students, for instance. We get along very well socially. I don't believe in closing myself off from anybody or anything.

My best writing gets done when I'm being distracted by people who are calling me or errands that I have to do. Those things seem to help the creative process, in my case.

From Sue Gangel, "An Interview with John Ashbery" (originally printed in the San Francisco Review of Books [November 1977], rep. in Joe David Bellamy, Ed. American Poetry Observed: Poets On Their Work (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1984), 14.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:

Sue Gangel [2]

Criticism Target:

John Ashbery

Source URL: <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/content/value-criticism-good-working-conditions-poetry>

Links

[1] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/sue-gangel>