

Alan Williamson: On "They Dream Only of America"

? How many movies have we all seen on the subject of runaway children who cross paths with a murderer ? a subject whose appeal, surely, is to our own anxiety about the relation between normal venturesomeness and the completely out of bounds?

And hiding from darkness in barns They can be grownups now And the murderer?s ash tray is more easily ? The lake a lilac cube.

When the children " can be grownups," the evidence of evil is at once "more easily" ? and I think the missing word has to be "found" or "recognized." So that again it is precisely the recognition scene that is averted ? averted by stopping time, freezing the journey of escape in an eternal present of pastoral beauty. And one notices how the same detail that makes the last line suggest an abstract painting also betrays the effect of psychic containment: the lake water held to the dimensions of a cube.

"?They Dream Only of America?" is one of the most clearly structured poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*, possessing essentially a traditional double plot. The story of the children and the murderer reflects the shadowy story of the narrator?s friend, whose journey to lose himself in America, driving "hundreds of miles / At night through dandelions," becomes more and more terrible, as he takes everything that happens for a "sign" (presumably of impending evil, the broken leg mentioned in the last stanza). He ends, like the children earlier, paralyzed between alternatives of ecstasy and destructiveness: "There is nothing to do / For our liberation, except wait in the horror of it."

I do not mean to maintain that all interrupted stories in Ashbery can be ascribed to psychic censorship. Often, the uncertainties of paranoia, the elusiveness of essentially nostalgic desires, provide more relevant explanations. My point is that it is the imitation of psychological tension ? approach and avoidance, affirmation and denial ? that gives Ashbery?s disjunctiveness a force far exceeding mere aesthetic novelty.

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