

John Shoptaw: On "The Dream Only of America"

[Shoptaw's study is especially valuable because he worked with Ashbery to obtain manuscripts of his poems, and on occasion he interviewed him about his intentions. He develops the idea that "because Ashbery leaves himself and his homosexuality out of his poetry, his poems misrepresent in a particular way which I will call 'homotextual.' Rather than simply hiding or revealing some homosexual content, these poems represent and 'behave' differently, no matter what their subject. With their distortions, evasions, omissions, obscurities, and discontinuities, Ashbery's poems always have a homotextual dimension" (On the Outside Looking Out, p. 4).]

[If "They Dream Only of America" is only an assemblage of all-purpose stories (perhaps merely linguistic), what can it mean to its maker? How does the poet fit himself into his one-size-fits-all poem? The way Ashbery in particular figures in the poem may be deduced from certain biographical details [that Ashbery volunteered in answer to Shoptaw's query]. The poem was written in Paris in the summer of 1957, probably on his thirtieth birthday (July 28). That day [French experimental poet and close friend] Pierre Martory, to whom [Ashbery's second collection] *The Tennis Court Oath* is dedicated, made the luminous remark, "This honey is delicious / Though it burns the throat." In the summer of 1957 Ashbery was preparing for, and doubtless dreaming of, revisiting America; he did so from the fall of 1957 to the spring of 1958. Martory himself made a first, unplanned visit to America that spring. Though they traveled separately, the little poem looks forward to a fantastic voyage and an Edenic destination.

The misrepresentations of "They Dream Only of America" are homotextual. The "thirteen million pillars of grass" suggest not only Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* but the "pillar of salt" to which Lot's wife, no pillar of the community, was reduced for looking back on the destruction of Sodom. "Was the cigar a sign? / And what about the key?" In this cluttered poem, in which every personal pronoun except "she" is represented, the spermal "honey" and phallic props ("pillars," "key," "cigar," "leg") take on a parodic significance. The dismembered names of the perpetrators, "Ashbery" and "Martory," may be partially reconstructed from the line "And the murderer's ash tray is more easily ? ." The romantic secrecy of the fugitive gay lovers is parallel here to the French Resistance (Martory fought in its ranks, after his escape to Algeria) waiting for America's liberation. Though the term "gay liberation" had not yet been coined, this poem seems to wait for its minting. The utopian "American dream" here fantasizes a time and a place where gay lovers could come out of their lilac cubes.

But the homotextual orientation of Ashbery's misrepresentations, even with biographical particulars smoked out, does not finally crack or unlock "They Dream Only of America." Ashbery's poetry contains no secret to which only an inner circle of readers has access. The compound of inside and outside in this poem is highly unstable. Or one thing, the outside is displaced into the imagined future or the remembered past, or even into the present — once looked forward to or some day to be looked back upon. When and where is (or was or will be)

the liberation? Was it when the American Ashbery arrived in Paris? Will it be when "they" arrive in America? (But Ashbery had left the United States partly for relief from its repressive political climate.) In the barns of Ashbery's childhood in rural upstate New York? In the dandified countryside of Martory's prewar France? It is always elsewhere, a state better dreamt-of than reached. "they" do not wait in "hope" but in "horror" of the "liberation." Remaining in romantic seclusion, creating the illusion of hidden meanings, may in fact be preferable to the "horror" of exposure, where love and poetry may be impossible. But is "he" or are "they" even in "there" while "we" readers investigate out here? In the fifth stanza, "He" himself is elected to investigate, peering inside with us, uncovering not the literal truth, or a body, but a letter. Yet if liberation is forever out of reach, pleasure is not. "They Dream Only of America?" continually intrigues with its narrow escapes and near disguises. The ceaseless activity of its tenses, discourses, and roles presents ample evidence that the fugitives' love is there to stay.

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