

Donald Revell: On "They Dream Only of America"

In writing, Ashbery teaches me to desire not an increase in my individual portion of imaginative freedom but an increase in the stock of freedom available to anyone.

There is nothing to do

For our liberation, except wait in the horror of it.

And I am lost without you.

("They Dream Only of America," TCO 13)

Because freedom is intentionless, its accomplishments, "our liberation," require nothing of us. Yet in a further variation of inversion technique, Ashbery establishes this nothing as neither nugatory nor still. It requires great effort, a redoubling of negative capability, to articulate phrases, lines, and stanzas without resort to the reassurances and little victories of expressed intent. That is why Ashbery poises the line "There is nothing to do" as a positive, proposing absolute indeterminacy as a task?the nothing that somehow must be done. Here, as everywhere in *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery reminds me that the imagination is not an inward quality in search of expression but, rather, an event that occurs when perception contacts the world with the force of desire in the form of words or paint or sounds. Imagination defines itself in what it does, participating in liberty as liberty. Desire declares the unsatisfactoriness of the present moment (emotion "recollected" is not emotion) and directs the mind toward its liberation from that state. And where can the mind go but to the world, and how can it travel but indeterminately, dissatisfaction being the sum of what has been determined? Just as "nothing" is a task, so waiting is an activity, a pioneering. The imagination happens, poems happen in the time pried open by waiting, time made porous to accidents and to new juxtapositions by the deferral of particularity. There, words contrive new syntaxes and thus new meanings because none has been prescribed. There, the mind moves more ways than one.

This multiplicity is the primary prerequisite of imagination, a "horror" owing to the utter defenselessness it prolongs and prolongs. Where there is no horror, no uninterpreted, there is only the awful and unacceptable condition of certainty: that isolated, final, and feckless utterance "And I am lost without you." If I have no single destination, I cannot be lost, only en route. As long as I am waiting, anything may yet arrive. As America failed in the moment it became an ideality instead of a plurality of discrete, then overlapping, events (a city on a hill instead of an explorer's beautiful misinterpretation), voices and poems fail when they reconcile themselves to a solitary posture. Closure victimizes thought. Something victimizes the nothing in which and by which our liberation persists. Every final word expresses defeat. John Ashbery does not deny that a final word always gets said. The trick is to prolong the dream, the recital, the ice storm, all the unfinished originals. The trick is to write as far into the accidents as one can before collapsing into statement. Poetry stops where nothing cannot be said any longer or in only one way: "And I am lost without you."

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