

Joseph M. Conte: On "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape"

Ashbery's renovation of the sestina form is extensive and complete--he knocks layers of old thematic plaster off the brick walls of structure. In a diachronic analysis of the sestina, one composes a history of images or themes associated with the form; in a synchronic approach, one undertakes a detailed analysis of the poem's structure at a particular moment in its evolution. The postmodern renovation of the sestina forbids a diachronic analysis since it is precisely the history of images associated with the form that has been gutted; we are comfortably confined to a synchronic analysis of the poem in its third age of renovation. Marianne Shapiro, who insists on both modes of analysis in *Hieroglyph of Time*, readily admits in her brief discussion of Ashbery that his sestinas "seem a prominent exception to the preoccupation with time that characterizes the diachrony of the form. His archaeological layers of diction, from biblical to colloquial, seem to take no measure of sequentiality." Despite Shapiro's best efforts, Ashbery's sestinas cannot be treated as a modern appendix to a pastoral tradition that includes Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. These are not modern examples of a traditional kind of poem. Shapiro fails to recognize that the absence of a diachronic preoccupation ushers in a new, third age of the sestina form; because postmodern renovation excises traditional themes and symbolic content, it requires a separate, synchronic analysis.

The title, "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape," is a pastoral tease, a gossamer-clad nymph sipping from a bubbling spring who vanishes at our approach; the fact is that this is a painterly title, screwed to a wall somewhere in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Ashbery has said that he often begins with a title, before any conception of content or form: "A possible title occurs to me and it defines an area ... to move around in and uncover." In this sense, the title, like the form of the sestina itself, is predetermined--a sort of exploratory device or probing tool. He also admits that his titles are often ironic or satirical. Since this sestina has virtually nothing to do with agrarian landscapes, we could say that the title functions ironically, as an unkept promise, or as a practical joke--offering a chair and then pulling it out from under the guest. But most interestingly, Ashbery's title, our greeting to the poem, is a bold mark of artifice. It points to something previously made, to art and not to nature; his joke is on the artist who agrees, for the sake of an exhibition, to provide a descriptive title for what is plainly visible--except that in Ashbery's sestina there is not a rake or a rutabaga in sight. Such a contextual disjunction between title and poem encourages the reader to uncover and explore, joining the poet in his task.

In his interview for the *New York Quarterly*, Ashbery describes the sestina form as "highly artificial," more so than such "conventional forms" as the sonnet (NYQ 124). The complexity of the retrogradatio cruciata pattern of the end-words and the form's only occasional appearance as an exotic foreign import to the English tradition reinforce this sense of artificiality. To select such a form is to reject the romantic notion of an organic form and the Coleridgean preference for "form as proceeding." Ashbery's membership in the New York School, with Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch, and his long-held position as an editor of *Art News* place him in a "museum culture" that does not hesitate to extol the artificial over the natural, or the imported

over the homegrown; the sestina is an elaborately gilt frame which previously held the portrait of a French baron or his Italian mistress but now, with Ashbery as curator, holds the work of an abstract impressionist. Charles Altieri claims that Ashbery exhibits "the ontology of the aesthete seeking to reverse the Romantic dream of erasing art so nature will stand clear. He dreams instead of erasing nature so that the book might stand free as a dynamic interchange of self-referring elements." Certainly, the highly artificial form of the sestina erases nature and chalks itself up as a made thing.

The predetermined form of the sestina, the canzone, or the pantoum is opposed to Coleridge's "form as proceeding," but Ashbery's use of these forms does not constitute an endorsement of "form as superimposed." He does not have a preexisting subject matter to which poetic structure is applied; rather, he employs elaborate forms--or, occasionally, goofy titles--as exploratory or generative devices. In the New York Quarterly interview, he says that "these forms such as the sestina were really devices at getting into remoter areas of consciousness. The really bizarre requirements of a sestina I use as a probing tool rather than as a form in the traditional sense. I once told somebody that writing a sestina was rather like riding downhill on a bicycle and having the pedals push your feet. I wanted my feet to be pushed into places they wouldn't normally have taken" (NYQ 124). Form, in this description, is neither superimposed on, nor an extension of, an existing content. Ashbery fully exploits the predetermined aspect of these forms; the bizarre requirements of the form are not restraining but generating content. The objection of those with a classical sensibility might be that the poet ought to have something to say--a determinate subject which is then embedded in form. But Ashbery's use of a procedural form as a probing tool into remoter areas of consciousness enables him both to evade traditional subject matter and to discover new material. This exploratory use of the sestina is an important characteristic of renovated form: the old, preexisting structure finds a new content.

The first three lines of "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" confirm our suspicions that the complicated form of the sestina views itself as a game, puzzle, or assemblage; the form has an accomplice in this endeavor, namely the multiple contexts and voices which function as the shifting signs or counters of the game. In line 1, we receive "the first of the undecoded messages." This piece of rhetoric, stolen from a secret agent novel of Ian Fleming caliber, is a mighty contextual leap from the title, itself on loan from the art museum. The two counters, which function metonymically, only fit together from one angle. Both refer to something less than high art, tainted by the botulism of popularity--the secret agent novel as a genre for the semiliterate (though it has recently been described as a closed form by the semiotician Umberto Eco), and the barnyard school of scenic painting.

The renovated sestina points to its own artificiality by referring not to the teeming city of Hong Kong or to the clucking of hens in the barnyard but to their prior depiction in another genre. This self-consciousness marks the sestina as artifice, and admittedly, as high art. Although a modernist such as Ezra Pound packs his bag with allusions to the high art of distant epochs--his "Sestina: Altaforte" is an example of *translatio*, an imitation in homage of the troubadour Arnaut Daniel--the postmodernist is comfortable with references to more popular modes. Ashbery comments, "I want the reader to be able to experience the poem without having to refer to outside sources to get the complete experience as one has to in Eliot sometimes or Pound. This again is a reflection of my concern for communicating which as I say many people don't believe I have--but for me a poem has to be all there and available to the reader and it of course is very difficult to decide at certain moments what the ideal reader is going to know about and what he isn't going to know about" (NYQ 122-23). Although references to

popular culture may be readily accessible to the reader, their import may not in fact be any less elusive. Ashbery's first message still requires decoding.

Roman Jakobson has said that "a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and the addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message)" is necessary in any verbal communication. Ashbery's ideal reader, as addressee, will have as common knowledge the rhetoric or codes of the art gallery or the 007 (itself a code meaning "licensed to kill") secret-agent novel. The author's request for an ideal reader is not new. Ashbery's communicative difficulty lies not with the role of the reader but with the role of the addresser. The first line issues a challenge to the reader and/or the critic to decipher these still "undecoded messages," to interpret the entire poem. We are offered a "tangram," or Chinese puzzle in which a variety of small geometrical shapes can be assembled into a larger square. But who is the encoder? From where is the first message delivered? The addresser in "Farm Implements" is not a traditional speaker, as, for example, in the Arnaldian sestina, the persona of the poet as lover is easily established and thought to preside over the poem. In Ashbery's renovation of the sestina, the reader encounters a collage or multiplicity of voices--the curator and the double agent are only the first of many--none of which is assigned priority.

The message, as we are given it, begins, "Popeye sits in thunder." What is the decoder to do with a comic, cartoon character who ascends to an Olympian throne? Is this Zeus of the massive forearms and an anchor tattoo? One implication is that popular culture has spawned its own versions of mythological heroes--just as Zeus sends the meddlesome Hephaistos crashing to earth with a single lightning bolt, so Popeye sends Bluto, for his aggressive pursuit of Olive Oyl, spinning into the ground with a single spinach-enriched punch. Ashbery claims that he has been influenced by both "'Hollywood B-pictures" and "Gilbert Murray's Greek drama," and that he is interested in both "debased and demotic forms of expression" (APR 30). When the Sea Hag inquires if Wimpy has bought any spinach, he "intercepts" in the second strophe with his trademark address, "M'love," but continues, "the plains are decked out in thunder / Today, and it shall be as you wish." The debased, bombastic rhetoric of a Silver Age epic and the demotic, slurred lingo of the World War II vintage cartoon intersect in a single utterance. In this minestrone of diction, it is the addresser who remains undecoded by the reader. None of the voices is false--rather, all are programmatic. They are a foregrounded device, a recognized element in the poem as, assemblage.

The sestina is not a Rube Goldberg machine in which language inexplicably drops through chutes or is catapulted into the air; in this predetermined form, language is controlled by the elaborate but precise movement of the end-words. The end-words arrange themselves into groups which to a great extent control the immediate context: "apartment," "scratched," and "spinach" evoke the comic and the low; "thunder" and "country" most often instigate epic bombast and lofty sentiment; "pleasant" plays it up the middle, in such banalities as "How pleasant!" We remember that Dante described the sestina as "la battaglia delli diversi pensieri," and that these diverse thoughts and contexts are controlled by the selection of the end-words. In Ashbery's renovated sestina, a "battaglia nova" takes place in which the language, even if it be a variety of recycled rhetoric, speaks for and contends with itself. The subtle and disputatious content of the Renaissance sestina gives way to the multiple, foregrounded voices of the postmodern sestina. Ashbery's contentious contexts are as intimately related to the elaborateness of the form as were the traditional subjects of Arnaut or Dante. The game continues; Ashbery has only replaced the players.

Marianne Shapiro has said that the sestina poet, in handling the end-words, is most likely "to produce oscillations of meaning by maintaining lexical constancy and altering the context, or

to introduce semantic nuances." The end-words in Ashbery's "Farm Implements" enjoy such oscillations and nuances; by examining these semantic and contextual shifts, we can very nearly arrive at the solution to this "tangram." In the first strophe, the end-word "country" is an appositive to the tangram itself; the solution to the Chinese puzzle is related to our understanding of the role of "country" in the poem. In the second strophe, Wimpy's italicized statement, "For this is my country," introduces a sort of breast-beating patriotism in which "country" is semantically equivalent to "nation." But in the third strophe we note a shift: "they remembered how it was cheaper in the country." The earlier elevated tone slips to one of mundane observation; "country" is semantically equivalent to "rural environs." Since we recall that Popeye in line 2 has abandoned "that shoebox of an apartment," we understand that, at one level, the poem describes the escape of the inveterate city-dweller on a hot, summer weekend to a home in Westchester or the Hamptons.

The fourth strophe marks the return of an elevated tone. Olive breathlessly reports that Popeye has been forced "to flee the country" by "the schemes of his wizened, duplicate father." Not only has "country" reassumed the semantic value of "nation," but there is also a significant expansion of the context of escape. Olive tells us, in language that might seem wildly inappropriate in any other poem, that Popeye's duplicate, jealous of her and the apartment, "heaves bolts of loving thunder / At his own astonished becoming, rupturing the pleasant / Arpeggio of our years." "Thunder," as an end-word, evokes an Olympian context and its attendant elevated tone in all appearances (except for the tornada, in which it is the "domestic thunder" of a burp). Here, Popeye's "duplicate father" indulges in the ultimate solipsistic fantasy, attempting to reproduce himself, or at least, as Athena is said to have sprung directly from the forehead of Zeus, to engender and give birth to one's offspring unassisted. According to the psycho-mythologists, this desire is most often manifested by the male jealous of the female's apparent control of childbirth. The shifting semantic value of "country" controls the oscillations in the context of escape: the apartment-dweller from the city, Popeye from his duplicate's solipsistic indulgence.

On an aesthetic level, the poet must consider his or her own escape from the form of the sestina. Charles Altieri claims that "the organicist ideal in art" emphasizes "the act of synthesis as the primary figure for the mind's powers." But Ashbery engages the "processes, not of synthesis, but of repetition and variation." The end-words of the sestina are engaged in such a process of repetition and variation and, as a result, resist the semantic synthesis of a single determinate meaning. Certainly the sestina, which exhibits a formal closure, can be said to manifest a particular type of synthesis. But as Marianne Shapiro explains, "It is well to make the distinction between semantic (conceptual end-stoppage) and formal (the end of the poem) closure apparent from the outset. Sestina-writing poets will be seen as operating with the self-imposed constraints of this form to produce, ultimately, a way of achieving emancipation from semantic closure."

The formal closure and semantic openness of the sestina are a function of its rather unique combination of a paradigmatic closed form and a metonymic mode of language. The most obvious place in which to observe this distinction in Ashbery's sestina is the tornada. All six of the end-words return in this half-strophe, providing a sense of formal closure. But Ashbery's language insists on a semantic openness: the ominous thunder that heralds the Olympian contexts throughout the poem is ironically undercut by the "domestic" context of a burp; Popeye, who had been referred to as if he were Zeus, "chuckled and scratched / His balls" as an act of dismissal or denial of any threat (of castration?) from a "duplicate father." As Shapiro says of an earlier sestina in *Some Trees*, "Attempts to read the 'Poem' under some

hypotactic shelter fail, and two antinomic structures emerge: a poetic structure that is whole and a narrative structure that is fragmented, much like a matrix of fossils." The poet escapes from "his own astonished becoming" because the sestina is semantically open--no end-word has a single determinate meaning; as addresser or encoder, he remains unknown, indeterminate.

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