

John Shoptaw: On "Paradoxes and Oxymorons"

The most popular poem in *Shadow Train* is its tantalizingly simple statement of poetics, "Paradoxes and Oxymorons." ? The poem itself voices Ashbery?s populist impulse to reach the common reader, who thinks poems are constructed on many interpretive levels. There is frustration on both sides:

[Shoptaw cites the opening 4 lines.]

On the "level plain" of this communications system, the paradoxical pair of poem and reader stands in for two lovers. A few pronominal substitutions bring the romantic discourse to the surface: "Look at me talking to you," "You miss me, I miss you," and so on. This homoerotic subtext connects the poem to the envoy of "Song of Myself": "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you." Ashbery gives a more explicit rendition of this romance in his suggestively titled "Or in My Throat" where he recommends poetry as an alternative to oral sex: "It?s clean, it?s relaxing, it doesn?t squirt juice all over" [*Shadow Train* (New York: Penguin, 1981), p. 25].

In the second quatrain of "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" the reader interrupts the poet, as in an interview, with a few questions. ? Like his paradoxical formulation "on the outside looking out," the oxymoron "A deeper outside thing" is an apt description of Ashbery?s poetry, "not / Superficial," as he says in "Self-Portrait [in a Convex Mirror]," "but a visible core." What deepens Ashbery?s level playing field are his random [John] Cagean procedures, a hugely varied "division of labor" between the poet and language: "And before you know / It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters." If infinitely many monkeys are set before typewriters, the statistical paradox goes, they will sooner or later produce Shakespeare?s plays. Ashbery?s poem "has been played" like a record or a trick. But perhaps it is the reader?s trick as well. In the communications system, the ideal reader now resembles the Divine Paradox: "I think you exist," the poet asserts, "and then you aren?t there." In his final paradox, "the poem is you," varying the dedication "the poem is yours," Ashbery yields himself to the reader, who nevertheless continues to "miss" him.

From "Fearful Symmetries: *Shadow Train*" (Chapter 9) in *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery?s Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1994) 255-256.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

John Ashbery [2]

Author:

John Shoptaw [3]

Poem:

Source URL: <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/john-shoptaw-paradoxes-and-oxymorons>

Links

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

[2] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/john-ashbery>

[3] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/john-shoptaw>

[4] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/paradoxes-and-oxymorons>