

John Ashbery, the Poet of Our Clime

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Now that the elegiac dust is beginning to settle, perhaps we can step back and ask what he meant to us. For a poet who made even sophisticated readers knit their brows, who never, despite his awards and honors, captured the public's imagination, he was for students of poetry someone whose existence was part of our existence and whose death in September 2017 came as a double blow. We felt the loss not only of a singular poetic voice, but also the passing of a cultural era. For along with Richard Wilbur, he was the last of the major poets to emerge in the middle of the twentieth century and was—with the possible exception of Seamus Heaney—the foremost English-speaking poet of his day.

Like Whitman, Frost, Eliot, Stevens, and William Carlos Williams, John Ashbery had a hand in creating the American poem. And when he died at the age of ninety, the encomiums actually exceeded expectations. Even his admirers liked him. Indeed, no poet in recent memory—not Merrill or Walcott, not Strand, Wilbur, or Kinnell—generated the coupling of such affection and respect. It was something to behold, this gentle blizzard of appreciation.

In person he was, by all accounts, shy, modest, funny, erudite, and literary to his core. In his work, he could be winsome, goofy, evocative, boring, and amusing, with a fluency of language that seemed both familiar and newly minted. He was chameleon-like but always recognizably himself. He could be serious and stark, but also whimsical. In fact, he made whimsy into a potent force, which kind of defeats the idea of whimsy, but never mind. His detractors, of whom there were a few, thought many of the poems were more frosting than cake. And some poems were that. But many more were not.

I confess I was one of the naysayers. But now that his living voice has been stilled, the voices in his poems speak a beat more gaily. More tenderly as well. It may be that the passing of the years, as well as his

passing, have led me to reconsider the work. Like Ezra Pound, who, after years of resistance, came to the sane conclusion that Whitman had much to offer, I also acknowledge that “I am old enough now to make friends.”

It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root—
Let there be commerce between us.

Such commerce, however, does not begin with acceptance, but with questioning. Like many readers, I often wondered not only what I was reading, but also *why* I was reading him. Yes, he had a way with words, but often the words left me indifferent or confused. Ashbery, of course, was famous for his impenetrability—a fact that both surprised and annoyed him. Reflecting on the critical response to his poem “Litany,” he remarked, “I’m quite puzzled by my work too, along with a lot of other people. I was always intrigued by it, but at the same time a little apprehensive and sort of embarrassed about annoying the same critics who are always annoyed by my work. I’m kind of sorry that I cause so much grief.”

From any other poet these words might seem disingenuous. But if Ashbery felt bad, he also wrote as he pleased. Indeed it was a guiding principle of his writing. In a statement prepared for the encyclopedia *Contemporary Poets* (1975), he explained, “There are no themes or subjects in the usual sense, except the very broad one of an individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world of external phenomena. The work is a very complex but, I hope, clear and concrete transcript of the impressions left by these phenomena on that consciousness. The outlook is Romantic. Characteristic devices are ellipses, frequent changes of tone, voice (that is, the narrator’s voice), point of view, to give an impression of flux.”

Flux. Not usually something one turns to poetry for, but that’s exactly what Ashbery aspired to because, as he told Bryan Appleyard in the London *Times*: “I don’t find any direct statements in life. My poetry imitates or reproduces the way knowledge or awareness comes to me, which is by fits and starts and by indirection. I don’t think

poetry arranged in neat patterns would reflect that situation. My poetry is disjunct, but then so is life.” Fair enough, but is it fair to the reader? Reasonable as it may sound, such a justification for art rings hollow. Knowledge begins with experience, as Kant wrote, but “it does not follow that it arises out of experience.” In fact, without the ordering structures of the mind, sensations would remain unintelligible, which is why we necessarily perceive “objects,” and objects have order, order has value, and so knowledge is valid.

I don’t bring up Kant to add a dollop of pretentiousness to my reading of Ashbery, but because Ashbery himself, while a student at Harvard in the 1940s, jotted in his notebook: “Kant stinks,” presciently settling on his own view of experience. The man had a philosophical streak, managing to work “epistemological” into one famous poem and to adduce William James in still another, wrapping up with: “Still, there’s a lot of fun to be had in the gaps between ideas. / That’s what they’re made for! Now I want you to go out there / and enjoy yourself, and yes, enjoy your philosophy of life, too. / They don’t come along every day. Look out! There’s a big one.”

Read enough Ashbery and you know this is more a humorous caution than a humorous embrace of big ideas. So how does one represent flux when mind and language yearn for order and stability? Obliquely is the answer, and Ashbery in time mastered the art of approaching life (in poetry) slantwise:

The windows are open again
 The dust blows through
 A diagram of a room.
 This is where it all
 Had to take place,
 Around a drum of living,
 The motion by which a life
 May be known and recognized,

 A shipwreck seen from the shore,
 A puzzling column of figures.

 You are
 So perversely evasive

His work *can* be evasive and often frustrating, but it represents a different esoterica than that of other “difficult” poets. With Donne, Eliot, and Stevens, one feels that the effort to figure out what they’re saying is essential to realizing some important philosophical/theological truth. With Ashbery, not so much. Instead, we think, “Oh, so that’s what he meant. OK, then.” Learning what he means adds to our enjoyment, but it’s not as though something much greater is at stake. Ashbery isn’t shooting for profundity or certainty; in fact, he’s temperamentally inclined to head in the other direction: to show the flux of things as filtered through the changeable medium of the observer himself.

What strikes me is that readers of poetry were perfectly fine with this. They didn’t care that they didn’t know what he was talking about, which, you have to admit, is a pretty sweet deal for a writer. And because Ashbery’s work gives the impression of being simultaneously off-handed *and* impenetrable, it lends itself to so many pronouncements that even contradictory views sound true. By refusing to impose an arbitrary order on the world, Ashbery invites his critics to apply their own sense of order. So Paul Auster in *Harper’s* focuses on Ashbery’s “ability to undermine our certainties, to articulate so fully the ambiguous zones of our consciousness.” Other critics maintain that “difficulty” itself is Ashbery’s answer to the dilemma of living (perhaps in the way that the barbarians in Cavafy’s famous poem were a solution). Or it could be that Ashbery’s poems are simply about poetry itself, about the wavering intersection of art and life, about finding the poem as you write the poem.



In any event, after the publication of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), which won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle prize, he could have written almost anything and have it acclaimed by serious readers, much as Picasso had dashed off sketches on napkins to pay for dinner. I’m not suggesting that Ashbery didn’t put in the time and effort, just that he probably didn’t have to since coherence wasn’t the point.

The question remains: why did we grant him license to puzzle us? Why was *he* permitted to engage in what another poet called an “intolerable vagueness”? The fact that he was a dab hand with cadence and composition does not by itself explain why we readily accepted his elisions, asides, cute figures of speech, pop-culture references, and the arbitrary inclusion of things around him (a telephone ringing, a bird alighting on the window sill). Given these rhetorical tics, how did he become the logical incarnation of the postmodernist poet who legitimately crossed that porous line into solipsism (much as Joyce had done a half century before him) and, furthermore, brought us along without complaint?

Although *sui generis*, he did not emerge from nowhere. His skein of influences—the French Surrealists, the Abstract Expressionists, collage, atonal music, his confreres of the New York school of poets, and such literary precursors as Whitman, Stevens, and Marianne Moore—suggests a grand synthesis of many styles and ideas, yet his work, for the most part, seems a cross between derring-do and non-chalance, a balance of wit and melancholy. There is a genuine modesty about the poems, the best of which attain a light-hearted majesty:

But there is in that gaze a combination
 Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
 In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
 The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
 Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
 Has no secret, is small, and it fits
 Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.
 That is the tune but there are no words.
 The words are only speculation
 (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
 They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
 We see only postures of the dream,
 Riders of the motion that swings the face
 Into view under evening skies, with no
 False disarray as proof of authenticity.

But this, too, doesn't explain his reputation or why we happily took him up (excepting, of course, for those who never came around to his enigmatic artistry). Although I am now convinced there are enough decorative phrasings sluicing through the work to merit the claims made for it, I also believe it was the context of the times that set him on his prosodic course and encouraged us to follow him. This is not something self-evident or even demonstrable but is part of what Lionel Trilling called the hum and buzz of culture, a feeling in the air composed of academic trends, philosophic attitudes, public discourse, and the recognition of scientific and technological innovations.

Goethe coined a more specific late-eighteenth-century version of this: "Epoche der forcierten Talente entsprang aus der Philosophischen." All that remains is to determine just what the current philosophical temper is and see how Ashbery embodied it. I intend no glibness by this. Indeed, I think that toward the last quarter of the last century a way of thinking emerged that might account for our embrace of Ashbery's cruciverbalist poetry. If forced to sum it up, I think it has a predominately neurological component or, more accurately, it reflects the ascendance of the biological and neurological sciences in the ways we think about thinking.

Because the human brain has evolved to the point that we can scan it, we've learned that it is responsible for—well, just about everything we think, say, and do. How we perceive, the preferences we exhibit, and the cognitive miracles and limitations that define us are all byproducts of the brain's activity. Although it has long been known that human beings look for patterns in nature, research by the likes of Daniel Kahneman and Abraham Tversky has also shown that we often imagine and misunderstand such patterns. Evidently, our cognitive biases dissuade us from understanding such biases. For example, our tendency to categorize prevents from us seeing the fuzziness of boundaries. And our tendency to predict future probabilities based on past events often influences our decisions without our carefully weighing the true odds.

Such intuitive biases come into play because we process experience in ways that may not reflect reality. Furthermore, there are scores of such biases, which obviously increase the probability of errors. I, myself, may be writing this in the grip of “confirmation bias”—that is, favoring or interpreting information so that it confirms my own preconceptions. Ashbery didn’t have to know their appellations to know that cognitive biases are part of our neural circuitry. Somehow he sensed that the brain contra Kant can fool itself by structuring what it perceives; and because it misleads us and because experience is never static, a philosopher like Derek Parfit can surmise that identity itself is a convenient fiction since we are continually, if not consciously, evolving.

Although we’re predisposed to create plausible narratives of cause and effect, we also tolerate and even embrace complexity and chance. And why shouldn’t we? We live in an information-soaked, rapidly traversed, and rapidly changing natural and technological universe, where anything can happen and often does—from unpredictable acts of terrorism to the election of a presumably unelectable presidential candidate. There is no reality that cannot be unexpectedly altered. Indeed, it seems almost vulgar to regard anything with an absolute belief in its unassailability. Permanence and stability seem as outmoded as Newtonian mechanics.

Perhaps weirder still is the fact that this doesn’t discombobulate us—that, in fact, it has a practical application. I take my cue from Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Distinguished Professor of Risk Engineering at New York University’s School of Engineering and author of *The Black Swan* and *Foiled by Randomness*. Taleb is all in favor of randomness, believing that regarding it as a risk “is the central illusion in life.” Randomness is salutary not because it offers a rebuke to the sameness of things, but because systems sometimes “get stuck in a dangerous impasse” and “randomness and only randomness can unlock them and set them free.” Casting a cold eye on what passes for the scientific method, Taleb, who numbers among his influences Kahneman

and Karl Popper, has no trouble fitting chance and luck into his worldview; he even thinks that “systems are sometimes stabilized from an injection of confusion.”

Fluidity, ambiguity, the tenuousness of identity all show up in Ashbery’s work, not to mention randomness. Out of nowhere, a burst of the trite or mundane: “No soap,” “lawyering up,” “Heck, it was anybody’s story,” “it was nobody’s biz.” Who can deny the randomness in the ordinary course of events? And Ashbery, allusiveness notwithstanding, is the poet of the ordinary. He always was. Pondering Andrew Marvel’s “The Mower to the Glow-Worms” for a college English course, he wrote: “The things we do in our daily life, the thoughts we have, they have meaning, they are us, for as long as they last, and when they fade and other things take their place, they still have their meaning in us, even if we’re not aware of them.” A quarter of a century later his feelings haven’t changed: “For although memories, of a season, for example, / Melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure / That stalled moment. It too is flowing, fleeting.”



Nothing that I’ve said actually explains the appeal of Ashbery’s poetry, but it does offer a reason why we make fewer logical demands on it. The world is stranger and more fragmented (Internet or no Internet) than ever before, and like every serious poet before him Ashbery offers a gloss on his age—with one important difference: whereas poets in the past advocated for, or consciously reflected, an implicit worldview regarding “the starry skies above and the moral law within,” the majority of Ashbery’s poems are resolutely unsystematic, un beholden to an intellectual cause or creed, often carrying their own dichotomies with them.

Something

Ought to be written about how this affects
 You when you write poetry:
 The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
 Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to
 communicate

Something between breaths, if only for the sake
 Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
 For other centers of communication, so that understanding
 May begin, and in doing so be undone

Ashbery doesn't set himself up as a communication center, but he *does* want to convey how poetry ("a hopelessly minor art") can express the inexpressible ties between living, thinking, writing. It wasn't enough to extend the tradition of the ontological subtleties of Stevens, the plain-spokenness of William Carlos Williams, or the binary inflections of W. H. Auden. Ashbery wanted poetry to be about both the process of creation and the person who creates. "There should be no program," Robert Creeley reports him saying. "The poem, as we imagined it, should be the possibility of everything we have as experience. There should be no limit of a programmatic order."

Any summation of Ashbery's oeuvre, however, is notoriously difficult; the man simply tested too many bodies of water when learning how to swim. He'd majored in English literature at Harvard and did his honors thesis on Auden. As a doctoral candidate at Columbia, he focused on Henry Green; and in his application for a Guggenheim, he stipulated that "[Raymond] Roussel's literary interests closely parallel my own." Later, inspiration came from Luciano Berio's *Omaggio a Joyce*, children's books, pulp novels, *Life* magazine, and atonal music. Could he do in verse what John Cage did in music? What the Abstract Expressionists did on canvas? After listening to Anton Webern, he wondered if he could "isolate a particular word, as you would isolate a particular note, to feel it in a new way."

It's good to be open. It's also good to be closed to certain intellectual trends. One of the outcomes of modernism was a heightened appreciation of the limits of art. How was one to proceed after the Dadaists, Cubists, Surrealists, Projectivists, Imagists, Constructivists, and Vorticists had their say? Although neither Pound nor Joyce put a crimp in literary work (hard to muffle those who feel the need to speak), Braque, Picasso, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Stravinsky, Bruckner, and Schoenberg put into question the validity of harmonic music and

representational painting. So artists looking to strike out in a new direction began to think about the medium itself. I'm simplifying, but for second-generation modernists (including the young Ashbery) art with a capital A became problematic. One could no longer compose or paint without acknowledging a medium's unique essence.

Explaining the thinking behind Abstract Expressionism, the critic Harold Rosenberg imagined artists claiming, "My painting is not Art; it's an Is. It's not a picture of a thing; it's the thing itself. It doesn't reproduce Nature; it is Nature." Rosenberg was skeptical of such work, and with good reason. If I may be permitted a Yogi Berra-ism: just because there's no place to go doesn't mean you have to go there. But artists, of course, did go, and the results were uneven. If some of Ashbery's early poetry was about the art of poetry, he was in a sense emulating the work of atonal composers and Abstract Expressionists.

In the Charles Eliot Norton lectures he delivered at Harvard (subsequently published in 2000 as *Other Traditions*), Ashbery chose six "minor" writers who, he acknowledged, helped jump-start his own work. They are in order of appearance: John Clare, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Raymond Roussel, John Wheelwright, Laura Riding, and David Schubert. Anyone who has ever transcribed for publication a formal address will envy the book's flow of ideas and judicious asides. Ashbery is an excellent guide to these writers' work and provides wonderful capsule biographies. But what comes through is not how gifted these writers are (though he makes a nice case for them), but how they bolstered the sense of his own vocation. "I don't know what it says about my own poetry that I like these poets; whether it means that I wish to be given 'special treatment,' or that for some reason I like writing that isn't simple, where there is more than at first glance meets the eye—or both."

Just in case we still weren't sure, *Other Traditions* reminds us that Ashbery was not interested in writing the perfect poem. Instead, he sympathizes with John Clare, "whose habit, one might even say whose strength, was imperfect." Ashbery welcomed imperfection, not because he found it charming, but because it's an element of thought. One doesn't always think logically or sequentially, so one needn't

pretend to. Which works if you're John Ashbery, but not very well for you or me.

After quoting approvingly Schubert's lines: "But the poem is just this / Speaking of what cannot be said / To the person I want to say it," Ashbery acknowledges, almost casually, that he "enjoy[s] Schubert more than Pound or Eliot." And part of what he enjoys is that Schubert's work "manages to render itself immune to critical analysis or even paraphrase." This is, needless to say, a tactical shift in taste about modernist poetry, whose value was associated with the textual analysis of Jarrell, Blackmur, Wilson, Tate, and Winters. Ashbery doesn't dismiss formalist poets; he just prefers the poem that can't be pinned down. As did Laura Riding, I imagine that he, too, would caution readers "not to construe my poems as poetry in the generally understood sense of the term."

It's this temperamental attraction to the offbeat and eccentric that drew Ashbery to the literary antics and self-referential strategies of Roussel, Duchamp, and Apollinaire. We're not talking Jabberwocky-silly or Ogden Nash-like noodlings. The French writers were both playful and deadly earnest about their non-sense; it shored up a philosophical approach to life, which, I'm afraid to say, wears thin the older one grows, although Tristan Tzara's amiable poem "To Make a Poem" reads like early Ashbery. Nonetheless, after a certain age, one may be excused for ho-humming conceptual art and the linguistic playfulness of the avant-garde. Indeed, one may find an earlier French writer, who also dabbled in the ridiculous, more congenial: "tirez le rideau, la farce est jouée." But before it's over, it has meaning; it matters. And if a work of art is to matter, it has to matter to people other than the artist. In short, a work that takes its audience *only* to the end of the artist's own mind is simply an intellectual exercise. How many people attend a performance of John Cage's 4'33" more than once?



All this is to say—what probably will annoy his admirers—that Ashbery succeeds despite his influences. For good and for ill, he liked to experiment, and experiment, by implication, contains the

possibility of failure. Reviewing *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), John Simon observed that Ashbery “has perfected his verse to the point where it never deviates into—nothing so square as sense!—sensitivity, sensuality, or sentences.” Even critics sympathetic to Ashbery’s modus operandi shook their heads at his willful evasions. As late as 1990, Dana Gioia, acknowledging Ashbery’s unique sound, his “gift of felicitous, natural phrasing,” concluded that “he is a marvelous minor poet, but an uncomfortable major one.”

No such doubts troubled Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom, who championed Ashbery’s verse early in his career. Bloom, as is his wont, expressed such enthusiasm that it made readers like me suspicious: “How it ravished my heart away the moment I heard it!” Bloom said of “Wet Casements.” “Certainly when I recite that poem myself and remember the original experience of hearing [Ashbery] deliver it, it’s hard to see how any poem could be more adequate.” Really? One has to wonder what the hell Bloom is hearing when reciting such lines as: “A digest of their correct impressions of / Their self-analytical attitudes overlaid by your / Ghostly transparent face,” which seem to me prolix, crowded, and—why not say it—bad?

But it’s OK that Ashbery doesn’t always hit the mark. Why should he? We measure a poet by his best work, not his worst or middling efforts. All great poets have their “Queen Mab,” and what does Shelley’s failed attempt mean when measured against “Ozymandias,” supposedly executed between dessert and a digestif? Poets are rather like baseball players in this regard. If they bat over .300 lifetime they’re candidates for the Hall of Fame. And the more often poets step up to the plate, the more likely they’ll ground out or get a routine hit. And Ashbery, it seems to me, got in more licks than any contemporary poet—more than thirty volumes—and his batting average is better than respectable.

Because Ashbery was curious, adventurous, and interested in seeing what he could pull off, Vendler could assert, “Rarely has an exquisite writer deliberately written so badly.” Which is to say that he occasionally liked to botch a good job. But it isn’t the occasional badness of the poems that bothers me; it’s the demands the good

ones make. All his evocative lines cannot tamp down my resentment of their inaccessibility. If a writer doesn't mind ignoring the comfort level of the common reader, then he shouldn't mind provoking the reader's disapproval. "The demand that I make of my reader," James Joyce informed Max Eastman, "is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works." I beg to differ. I have no desire to join a cult, even a cult devoted to Joyce. I'll go as far as *Ulysses* because, after all, the man wrote *A Portrait* and *Dubliners*, but someone else will have to wade through *Finnegans Wake*, which no doubt is also a work of genius. Nonetheless, I'll be damned if I'm going to let Joyce convince me. Why should another mind so subjugate my mind to his? Genius always deserves a break, but not necessarily our time.

If I seem to be equivocating, I suppose I am—not because I want to minimize Ashbery's achievement, but because I want to enjoy it without being guided by highfalutin explanations as to why I *should* enjoy it. More literary criticism has been spent on Ashbery than on any other contemporary poet, and much of it is a valiant effort to justify its lack of clarity. His admirers recommend that it's best to read him in the spirit of something's happening, though we don't know what it is, do we Mr. Ashbery? Mustering Whitman, Stevens, and other poets, critics run through Ashbery's influences as though that alone were sufficient to validate his work. They intelligently examine the poems and convince themselves that clarity is not the same as meaning, and that meaning is less important than sound. As Richard Kostelanetz put it in 1976, "The real key to Ashbery's genius lies, in my opinion, in the 'sound' of his poetry. . . . His poetry initially communicates, as music communicates, at levels that defy conceptual definition. . . . The mastering of it becomes a kind of spiritual experience."

Well, that might depend on whom you ask. No such outcome has thus far repaid my efforts. Nor do I wish for it. There's no denying Ashbery's pleasing rhythms and fluency even when his subject matter might have merited a more austere approach, but I'm not sure that his music is what defines him. Poets have been claiming that music supersedes meaning (or *is* poetry's meaning) ever since Baudelaire first heard Wagner in 1860. Verlaine, Eliot, Valéry, Pound, and Graves have

all touched on the musical element in verse as something apart from pure *techne*, but perhaps Frost put it most succinctly: “Look after the sound and the sense will take care of itself.” Good advice if you have something to say. But sound, while indispensable, is not always sufficient, which is why bookish people took exception to Bob Dylan (wonderful as his early songs are) winning the Nobel Prize for literature. And Ashbery, like all notable poets, is about more than sound. Indeed, listening to him read one might be surprised by the level tone, the lack of affect. His rendering of “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” perhaps not ironically puts me in mind of a knowledgeable docent, someone whose engine is stuck in neutral.



I like what Meghan O'Rourke had to say about him: Ashbery “is the first poet to achieve something utterly new by completely doubting the possibility—and the value—of capturing what the lyric poem has traditionally tried to capture: a crystallization of a moment in time, an epiphanic realization—what Wordsworth called ‘spots of time.’” She’s right, I think. And when she says that at his best he “succeeds better than any other writer at conveying how the barrage [of language] affects a mind haunted by its own processes and by the unstable patterns that shape-shift around us,” she describes him perfectly. But then I think that the satisfactory explanation of a poem does not make it a satisfactory poem.

Ashbery made mistakes, but they were mistakes he had to make. He was, as Karin Roffman’s recent biography informs us, a mix of naked ambition and self-effacement, determined to succeed on his own terms while remaining dubious of his own efforts. He was his own best enemy. His education and wide reading, his intimate knowledge of poetry, his curiosity, his early years in Paris, his attunement to mid-century developments in *all* the arts both stymied and drove him to write. But write what? Write how? Open to all things, he became the first poet conspicuously to view himself as both the subject and object of his work. (Were they not the same thing?) The world could

be known only through himself, so why bother aspiring to objectivity or universality?

Eliot began to teach us that lesson almost one hundred years ago: the idea that poetry is not (as he himself once stated) an escape from personality, but rather *is* the personal, which allows the poet to venture inward unburdened by the conventional rules of prosody. Consider the dismay even literary people felt on encountering these lines in 1922:

With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
 And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
 And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm'aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
 And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,
 My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
 And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
 Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
 In the mountains, there you feel free.
 I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

The changes in subject and pronouns, and the expectation that readers would follow the narrator's jumble of thoughts, must have struck a chord with Ashbery. Ashbery has his own music, but surely Eliot showed him how to hold the instrument. With so much to absorb in the fifties, with all the talk about the meaning of life and art and individual responsibility (it was, after all, the time of phenomenologists and existentialists), a poet intent on saying something new in a new way was almost directed to turn inward. But in Ashbery's case it wasn't, as with many memoirists and minor poets, a headlong rush into significance. Rather it was a sidelong, almost apologetic foray into his mind's workings. ("Still, it is the personal, / interior life that gives us something to think about. / The rest is only drama.") His role was to be aware of himself reacting to things and ideas and to record the mind's perambulations. Not every thought or observation was going to rise to the level of art, not even when artfully conveyed. One simply had to register, as best one could, the meaning of things as the meaning

changes, including the regressive experience of watching oneself experiencing. *That's* the voice he had to find, and he did. His best poems seem to say, "here is a poem, but it's also just me talking to you":

So much has passed through my mind this morning
 That I can give you but a dim account of it:
 It is already after lunch, the men are returning to their positions
 around the cement mixer
 And I try to sort out what has happened to me. The bundle of
 Gerard's letters,
 And that awful bit of news buried on the back page of yesterday's
 paper.
 Then the news of you this morning, in the snow. Sometimes the
 interval
 Of bad news is so brisk that. . .

or

Evening waves slap rudely at the pilings
 and birds are more numerous than usual.
 There are those who find me sloppy, others
 for whom I seem too well-groomed. I'd like to strike
 a happy medium, but style is
 such a personal thing, an everlasting riddle.

or

Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you,
 At incredible speed, traveling day and night,
 Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through
 narrow passes.
 But will he know where to find you,
 Recognize you when he sees you,
 Give you the thing he has for you?

More than any other writer, he angles words in ways we haven't quite seen before. Nor does form inhibit him (see "Le livre est sur la table" or "Hotel Lautréamont"); he can do his precursors and

something else besides, and one reason we accept his rhetorical quirks is that we know he can write otherwise but chooses not to. We also know that in his seamless integration of thoughts and images he is a poet unlike any other, a poet who, for all his peccadilloes, somehow ends up more comforting than perplexing. And maybe on some level we don't wish to understand. Not to understand what ostensibly has meaning suggests that there is something greater *to be* understood. After all, there's precious little comfort in a random universe that is a mere accident of matter exploding out of Nothingness, a gigantic slip on the nonexistent banana into some-thingness where bananas come to be. So perhaps randomness is, as Taleb claims, a necessary corrective precisely because it has no clear or decipherable meaning.

What does this have to do with poetry? Only that we don't have to understand everything about a poem in order to enjoy it, provided that we trust the poet's intelligence and intuition. It's better not to be party to a plan than to think that there is no plan. That's why we can enjoy a sequence of disparate images in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* and why we happily sing Dylan's lyrics without quite knowing what they mean. Although no sustained work of art comes to pass without due deliberation and craftsmanship, there are occasions when the symbiosis of consciousness and unconsciousness produces a mysterious beauty immune to deconstruction. Not every poet gets there, but Ashbery did. His best poems affirm Eliot's adage, "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."