

TIME WATCHING ITSELF:

Narrativity and the Ordinary Sublime

in John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

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1.

I did not foresee, when Olivier Brossard kindly invited me to speak about John Ashbery's most celebrated book, that it would prove to be quite so recalcitrant; that speaking into the absence of my great friend would arouse so many disparate impulses; among them, the desire to be cogent and useful to you; the desire to say something fresh about this writer whose work has attracted so much commentary by poets and critics; the desire to register at least some of the ways in which Ashbery the poet and John the friend were guides to me for more than four decades, beginning in 1971, when I was living in London, and working at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. I had invited John Ashbery to be part of a series I curated on contemporary French, East European, and American poetry. It was a fortuitous moment, just enough beyond the furies of '68, but near enough to the counter-culture, to allow stuffy England to embrace this most cosmopolitan, elusive, and beguiling poet's work. It was an encounter that proved to be enduring for me, about which I could say many things, but for now I will say simply that I loved him, his person, who is now in the past, and his work, which is in the present and the future. So perhaps it is not surprising that I chose to speak to you about one of its signal traits: its relation to time, and how that affected the making, and unmaking, of narrative. So much can be said on this topic, I can only suggest the ways in which an awareness of time informs this book, perhaps most clearly in the title poem. It is one of many paradoxes, or contradictions, that a poem dedicated to a painting, to a visual experience, should elicit a profound meditation on time.

Across much of John Ashbery's work, temporal conditions, tenses and weathers and their variables, are often foregrounded, even as they act as a kind of backdrop, one that calls forth our, and his, continuous "attention." But beyond these intrinsic reasons, I want to acknowledge that Ashbery was writing at the terminus of the modernist project, and at the beginning of whatever it is that has followed. The radical energies of modernist form-making had subsided, but the muddy waters of the postmodern condition had not quite taken hold. The peculiarly American urge for a transcendent sublime had given way to what Wallace Stevens called an "an age of disbelief;" whatever wonder and amazement and awe might be discovered will arise from a state of disenchantment.

So we might say that Ashbery's acute awareness of time was both personal and historical, as he came into his mature years on the cusp of post-war optimism both at home and here, in Paris. Along with others in his immediate cohort, he turns the sound or diction of poetry away from grandeur

and solemnity, toward the demotic and ordinary. But he was unwilling to sacrifice the ambition for a poetry that asks enduring questions about the nature of life, the limits of reality. I recall, when first hearing him read, a sense of rare excitement; it was as if he were offering liberation from the constraints of the perfectly made poem; the tidy artifact of personal insight and perception. Ah, I remember thinking, a poem can be capacious! Not because of length, but because you can put pretty much anything into it.

It can move within itself; it can be a strange, uncertain adventure, like life.

Very broadly speaking, Ashbery's work variously addresses what I take to be the core quandaries of the modern period: what is the contemporary and how does it encounter history; what is the relation between the one and the many; how does art engage both the particular and abstract; what is the self in relation to an Other? To this list I would add : what separates the empirical real from the moral true?

"But the truth has passed on, to divide all," Ashbery would write in "The New Spirit."

The second part of my title, "the ordinary sublime" is a bit risky, as both the term "ordinary" and the term "sublime" are difficult for me to fully grasp. A friend, Richard Deming, at Yale, has written a book, *The Art of the Ordinary*; he asked me to contribute to an essay collection about the ordinary, and I could not. I didn't know how to separate ideas of the normal from ideas of the ordinary. As for the sublime, it is here to indicate a certain tradition in American poetics and philosophy, from Dickinson and Emerson, through William James and Whitman, Santayana and Stevens, Richard Rorty and Susan Howe, which has had an uneasy but palpable relation to the transcendental sublime that animated the Romantic period; what my colleague at Bard, Matthew Mutter, has called "Restless Secularism." This is what Harold Bloom writes about so convincingly in his 1976 book Figures of Capable Imagination, where he draws a line from Pater and Coleridge through to Stevens and Ashbery, whose work, he says, has "A skeptical honesty, self-reflexive, and an odd faith in a nearly inscrutable order . . ." which, Bloom elaborates, is to be found in Ashbery's "largest aesthetic principle, the notion that every day the world consented to be shaped into a poem." These two observations seem right, and are helpful in thinking about *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*; about Ashbery's relation in general to time, and to the ordinary, as capable of giving up or out a specific kind of sublimity, call it a poem, one that constantly flirts with moments of amazement and awe, but

swerves away on the willing wings of a supple --- if sometimes exasperating --- syntax. The Ashberian poem hovers like a bird over its subjects, sometimes diving into focus, and sometimes staying just above, observing, circling, reflecting. And so, early in the book, "Absolute Clearance," he writes:

And out over the ocean  
The wish persisted to be a dream at home  
Cloud or bird asleep in the trough  
Of discursive waters.

\* \* \*

Teasing the blowing light  
With its ultimate assurance  
Severity of its curved smile  
'Like the eagle  
That hangs and hangs, then drops.

pp. 11-12

The familiar Ashberian tone is convivial, relaxed, mildly detached, free of emotional urgency, neither as chatty and personal as his friend Frank O'Hara's, nor as elegant and stately as Wallace Stevens. The poems unfold at their own pace, in their own time. The casual diction is one of someone speaking, even when it moves toward abstruse thoughts. But to whom?

I have sometimes thought that the experience of reading a poem by John Ashbery is akin to riding in an airplane. The engine goes smoothly on, its drone uninterrupted and invariable, while the air outside is by turns turbulent or calm, the view a vast blue, or obscured by pressing clouds; the light brilliant, mottled, or ink dark, punctuated by floating stars. Inside the cabin things happen; the cabin is crammed with persons and their belongings and with various devices that make us think we are still in touch with the other, outer, world. It is not always clear we have bought the right ticket; we thought we were heading for Miami but the plane has veered off to Iceland. We thought we were inside a tidy compartment (a poem) but it is suddenly wet and cold and there are strangers flying beside us like a flock of seagulls. Time is in relation to other time.

As he writes:

The times when a slow horse along  
A canal bank seems irrelevant and the truth:  
The best is its best sample  
Of time in relation to other time.

I hate to fly, as did John. When I asked him in 1971 to come to London to read, he said no, because he didn't want to fly. Well, he said, perhaps I could come if I can stay at the Ritz. We managed to find the necessary funding, and indeed, he stayed, with the very young David Kermani, at the Ritz. It is in their room that he read to a small group of us, one evening after dinner, from a manuscript of new work.

2.

As is well known, Ashbery also had an aversion to explaining his poems; he thought they were their own best explanation, and he was no doubt correct. So, in the opening pages of the 1989-90 Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard, he remarked "I'm not very good at 'explaining' my work... I am unable to do so because I feel that my poetry is the explanation. The explanation of what? Of my thought, whatever that is. As I see it, my thought is both poetry and the attempt to explain that poetry; the two cannot be disentangled. . . . On occasions when I have tried to discuss the meanings of my poems, I have found that I was inventing plausible-sounding ones which I knew to be untrue." He dwells a bit more on this conundrum, and then resumes, "For me, poetry has its beginning and ending outside thought. Thought is certainly involved in the process; indeed, there are times when my work seems to me to be merely a recording of my thought processes without regard to what they are thinking about. If this is true, then I would like to acknowledge my intention of somehow turning these processes into poetic objects, a position perhaps kin to Dr. Williams's 'No ideas but in things,' but with the caveat that, for me, Ideas are also things."

What, we might ask, does he mean when he says that "poetry has its beginnings and endings outside of thought." This outside, this otherness, this beyond, is at the core of his poetics.

For John Ashbery, poems and thoughts, or ideas, are things; I would add that for him, language was also a kind of thing, if we mean that it has certain material qualities that we commonly associate with things : weight, color, density, shape. Writing moves in tandem with our consciousness of language; words cross and re-cross the horizon of the page or the screen as it moves vertically down; they create a kind of fabric, weaving thought patterns across temporal paths. The word and its referent are in a shadow play rather than a transparent window. This isn't metaphysical, but it does touch on some of the philosophical ideas around language that were circulating in the 1970s.

Ashbery lived in Paris, from 1955-57 on a Fulbright, and then again from 1958-1965, and I have wondered how deeply he was engaged with the philosophical and poetic conversations in those times. As you know, his translations from French authors, both in prose and poetry, are voluminous and they range from Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel, Henri Michaux and Marcelin Pleynet in prose to Mallarme, Rimbaud, Rene Char, Pierre Martory and Franck André Jamme, among the many poets. I wish my French were not rudimentary, so I could speak a little about this profound engagement with your writers, but I am conscious of how little he seemed to be drawn to the philosophical thinkers who we so present when he was writing *Self-Portrait*.

I never heard him mention Derrida or Barthes or Deleuze. I don't think he cared for theory, but at the same time "theory" was everywhere when he lived here, and when he returned to New York: the hyper-theoretical journal *October* was founded in 1976. He found his poetic footing in experience itself, including of course the experience of reading, looking at art, listening to music, and he wished his work to be a record of his continuous engagement with the materials and processes of living, where "living" is a plurality, an inclusivity, a wide horizon of thought, perception and incident, unfettered by notions of linear cause and effect, what Gertrude Stein --- whose work he greatly admired (he called it "a hymn to possibility") --- had dismissed as puerile ideas of "beginnings, middles and endings." How does one convert empty time into the life of time? Well, one way is to write; this is one way to observe "time watching itself." As he writes in *Scheherezade*:

The light in the old house, the secret way  
The rooms fed into each other, but all  
Was wariness of time watching itself  
For nothing in the complex story grew outside:  
The greatness of the moment of telling stayed unresolved

Until its wealth of incident, pain mixed with pleasure,  
Faded in the precise moment of bursting  
Into bloom, its growth a static lament.

The poems in *Self-Portrait* mention time so frequently that it may seem redundant to even bring it up; time as both subject and object, the poems are “about” time while simultaneously enacting its performance within poetic structures. Here, for example, in the odd poem, whose lines are set without capitals on the first words, “As you Came from the Holy Land”

it is finally as though that thing of monstrous interest  
were happening in the sky  
but the sun is setting and prevents you from seeing it

p. 7

out of night the token emerges  
it leaves like birds alighting all at once under a tree  
taken up and shaken again  
put down in weak rage  
knowing as the brain does it can never come about  
not here not yesterday in the past  
only in the gap of today filling itself  
as emptiness is distributed  
in the idea of what time it is  
when that time is already past

It is probably not an accident that Deleuze and Guattari, in *Anti-Oedipus*, were thinking about “a basis for a production that was at once social and desiring in a logic of flows” at more or less at the same time as John Ashbery was reinventing the poem for our time. A poetics of what Deleuze would later call *pure immanence*. As Gertrude Stein remarked, “Nothing changes from generation except the thing seen, and that makes a composition.”

What was the thing seen for Ashbery and how did it compose itself? I would say that he saw that the world is not divided into oppositions and dualities, but is fluid, a flow chart, made up of countless images and events that generate forms of disparate inclusivity. He made the syntactical membrane

between subject and object moot, or at least blurred, so that what might be considered internal or subjective fuses with the external or objective. In fact, he seems to have wholly rejected the harsh dualities that are so obdurate in post-enlightenment thought: good, evil; true-false; man-woman and so forth. Not surprisingly, we find ourselves often in the liminal world of dream, but dreams free from their psychological, Freudian baggage. Sentences, in English, begin with the subject which, in the predicate, finds its object. This is what we are taught in school, or what we were once taught in school. But in an Ashbery poem, this separation is often confounded. The "Self"; that is, the "I" is not going to lead directly to its "am," or "is," so that how it thinks or knows itself will be as an encounter with the things of and in the world, to such a degree that the whole question of the "self" becomes seen, or understood, as contingent, perspectival, aspectual. Ashbery undertakes to explore the self as a sequence of responses to the world; the poems are fields of attention that unwind or unfurl along paths of astounding variety; paths that lead nowhere in particular, except into the next path. The poems in *Self-Portrait* could be construed as a series of questions about the relation of the self to the other that constitutes a self.

This is announced on the very first page of *Self-Portrait*:

A look of glass stops you  
And you walk on shaken: was I the perceived?  
Did they notice me, this time, as I am,  
Or is it postponed again? p. 1

Some day I'll claim to you how all used up  
I am because of you but in the meantime the ride  
Continues. Everyone is along for the ride,  
It seems. Besides, what else is there?  
The annual games? p. 3

Questions occur in nearly all the poems; they act as friction to keep things going; to interrupt or assuage or evade intensities. In "Grand Galop," we find a protracted meditation on time as passive, a waiting game. He writes:



Only waiting, the waiting: what fills up the time between?  
It is another kind of wait, waiting for the wait to be ended.  
Nothing takes up its fair share of time,  
The wait is built into the things just coming into their own.  
Nothing is partially incomplete, but the wait  
Invests everything like a climate.  
What time of day is it?  
Does anything matter?  
Yes, for you must wait to see what it is really like,  
This event rounding the corner  
Which will be unlike anything else and really  
Cause no surprise : it's too ample.

p. 14

This ample “ thing of monstrous interest” that will be unlike anything else, what is it?

3.

That Ashbery wrote about visual art for many years has affected our sense of his poetics; his attention to the visual was acute, informed and informing. But he knew, also, a great deal about music, in particular the dissonant music of radical modernity --- Berg, Webern, Schoenberg, – as well as more lyrical composers --- Satie, Berio, Delius. I have long believed that it is this aspect of his knowledge gave his poems their peculiar pacing, tone and narrative complexity. (His biographer, Karin Roffman, tells me that he was listening a lot to the Schoenberg string quartets during the time he was writing the poems in *Self-Portrait*; the inspiration for *Litany*, which he and I read together on a number of occasions, was inspired by Elliot Carter’s duo for violin and piano). Just as there are few intact stories in his poems, there are few pictorial scenes; rather, there are glances, fragments, some more lasting than others, but mostly we feel we are always moving toward or away from something, just as in a piece of music; and as we move along the past, or previous, notes are joined by other notes; at times, as in chamber or orchestral music, we hear many notes simultaneously. In the title poem of *Self-Portrait*, this musical sense is everywhere evident, especially in the way a particular word and its variants will be sounded through a whole sequence of lines: “dream,” “possible” “promises” “today.” The musical analogy may be one way of thinking about Ashbery’s frequent use of such modifying adverbs as “meanwhile.” Things are happening while other things

are also happening; time is dynamic, spatial, layered. Ashbery's poems are invariably a record of this phenomenon, only in his case, what is happening is the poem, and the poem is a recording of its own happening: again, "time watching itself."

In the opening poem of the collection, "As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat," the relation between, or rather the simultaneous existence of, the one and the many, singular and plural, is an aspect of his poetics of inclusion, in which there is a constant effort to balance the single episode, or the single person, against the ongoing expansive panoply, what is called, a few lines later, "the promise of that fullness."

New sentences were starting up. But the summer  
Was well along, not yet past the mid-point  
But full and dark with the promise of that fullness.  
That time when one can no longer wander away  
And even the least attentive fall silent  
To watch the thing that is prepared to happen.

We will not, or course, be told what that thing is; this is the magical if sometimes infuriating trait of Ashbery's chronic swerve away from declarations or statements, let's call them conclusions or consequences, understood as the result of a prior experience. Over and over, we are invited to anticipate or await an unnamed, never arriving, momentous *something*. This perpetual habit was undoubtedly informed by his earlier reading and translating of Mallarme's *Igitur*, figured into his own 1965 work "Fragment," where he explicitly engages or tests the continuity of experience against the supreme fiction, the visionary Idea. The fragment haunts late modernity as a trope of disintegration and ruin; for Ashbery, it begins to transform into a kind of humility, an acceptance of the partial as sufficient, if one pays sufficient attention to it.

In our poem, summer is well along. Ashbery's birthday was the 28<sup>th</sup> of July; and so we might conclude that the "one" to whom he is referring is himself. The earliest poems in *Self-Portrait* were published in 1972, when Ashbery, born in 1927, was 45. As it happens, this was exactly the middle of his life's journey. We are in a kind of a dark wood, --- "full and dark with the promise of that darkness" and we are uncertain about the path, the straight road, ahead. But, as we all know,

Ashbery was not interested in writing about himself. Indeed, I once heard him say: "Ashbery writes the poems. I am John." I think he made this comment in accepting one of his many awards, and it was on this occasion also that I first heard him quote the now famous remark by Rimbaud, "*Je est un autre*." The other that is I, Ashbery took to heart, as it allowed him to move with his now famous promiscuity across the pronominal landscape.

The poem continues:

The children  
Still at their games, clouds that arise with a swift  
Impatience in the afternoon sky, then dissipate  
As limped, dense twilight comes.

Shifts in the atmosphere, weather and light, provide Ashbery with a continuous awareness of both setting and a change in that setting. Are the *children still at their games* in the same place we were at the beginning of the poem? It is the same sun, but is it the same place? We were, in the beginning, waiting for someone to come. Here, the waiting has moved to the action of the clouds that "arise with a swift impatience." The temporal and spatial exigences of the poem are layered in undecidable relation, a typical Ashberian combining of local incident with the vagaries of ordinary set conventions: children, sky, twilight, clouds meet up with impatience, postponement, perception.

The third stanza gathers itself into a new tonal register, brought to us by "the tooting of a horn," which could be either a car, or a musical instrument, or both. This *tooting* brings on a crescendo:

Only in that tooting of a horn  
Down there, for a moment, I thought  
The great, formal affair was beginning, orchestrated,  
Its colors concentrated in a glance, a *ballade*  
That takes in the whole world, now, but lightly,  
Still lightly, but with wide authority and tact.

As so often, the poem tells us about itself, about its desire to enact *the great formal affair* which is both concentrated and glancing, orchestrated, capable of taking in "the whole world" with a light

touch but also with, indeed, *wide authority and tact*. Here again, there is a suggestion of a great, important event that never fully arrives.

Ashbery likes to rise to a sonorous or melodic consonance, and then to begin again in a new, unexpectedly dissonant key; a new mood. The grandeur of the phrase *wide authority and tact* is followed by a question, which in turn brings us back, or forward, to the setting sun and to yet another scenic moment, one where “You” have fallen asleep, and “I” reappears, and a “her” “*come to ask once more / If I was coming in, and not to hurry in case I wasn't*.” This return to a glimpse of the vernacular, this outtake from a scene, grounds the poem, keeps it from losing touch with the ordinary, even as it flirts with the extraordinary.

The final stanza of this first poem in *Self-Portrait* ends with yet another tone, one in which, I want to say, Ashbery gathers many of his most enduring and endearing characteristics: the pleasure of the catalogue or list, a diction that employs both simple and arcane words, an ability to say something profound without sounding profound – lightly, lightly --, all combined to register something like an ordinary sublime:

The night sheen takes over. A moon of cistercian pallor  
Has climbed in the corner of heaven, installed,  
Finally involved with the business of darkness.  
And a sigh heaves from all the small things on earth,  
The books, the papers, the old garters and union-suit buttons  
Kept in a white cardboard box somewhere, and all the lower  
Versions of cities flattened under the equalizing night.  
The summer demands and takes away too much,  
But night, the reserved, the reticent, gives more than it takes.

Here we get a sense of Ashbery’s habitual receptivity. I often had a sense that his mind was constantly scanning for new materials. He loved reading the local papers for the oddness of the normative. He was curious, and he liked facts, especially little-known, overlooked, or arcane facts; he was drawn to the minor, “The Other Tradition.” Many years ago I was told that Marcel Duchamp had said that he never did anything unless it amused him. I feel this was true also of John. He liked to be amused, and he liked to amuse.

4.

I told Olivier that I would not speak about the title poem but then I found myself lost inside of it, as if I had inadvertently wandered into a room in a museum I had no intention of visiting and found it was closing time when I finally left. So I shall spend the remaining time with you thinking about this most engrossing and kinetic ekphrastic meditation.

Accepting the Robert Frost Medal in 1995, Ashbery remarked: "It . . . seemed perfectly natural that the subject of my remarks would be myself, or my poetry, since they --- we --- are what is getting honored here, though normally I go to extreme lengths not to talk about either of us, because I don't really know that much about us."

A self-portrait, even one in a convex mirror, is a kind of reckoning; an assessment. Ashbery's choice of the Parmigianino painting as his poem's subject, as well as the title of the whole collection, creates a doubling effect, so we are invited to contemplate simultaneously Ashbery's description of the painting "As Parmigianino did it," and his own way of doing it, "it" being his own self-portrait, even as "we were hoping to keep (it) hidden." Here the temporal relations we have been noting are rendered literal, if extremely complex, or convex.

The first observation in the poem is that the painting distorts, making the "right hand / bigger than the head," thrusting out toward the viewer and then "swerving easily away" "as though to protect / What it advertises."

These words resonant: *swerving*, *advertises*. The first reminds us of Lucretius and the swerve of atoms that suggested to the philosopher the possibility of free will; and the many ways the idea of the *clinamen* has informed some thinking about writing since. It also announces what we already know, that the poem itself will also protectively *swerve*. The second word, "advertises" has of course a distinctly American flavor, even as it is an old word meaning to draw attention to something. It is a typical Ashberian gesture to choose words that are both ordinary and unexpectedly fresh in their usage.

The time of day or the density of the light  
Adhering to the face keeps it

Lively and intact in a recurring wave  
Of arrival. The soul establishes itself.

We sense that at some level Ashbery is here once again describing his own way of establishing his own poetics, as *a recurring wave / Of arrival* if we can say that the lines of this poem behave like waves – earlier I said a textile -- that are in a continuum, a sequence, of arrivals, or a continuous presentness.. Later in the poem, we return to the wave, comparing the “forms of ideal beauty” to “ a wave breaking on a rock, giving up / Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape.” This recursive doubling refutes an account of past, present and future as a sequence of events and their consequences, since, “. . . one / Is always cresting into one’s present.”

The narrator dwells on the idea of the “soul,” which is kept in captive suspension, awaiting “your look” as it “intercepts the picture.” The soul, somehow perceptible, longs “to be free;” we do not receive a description of the face itself, but only of its expression, its gaze

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 fits  
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.

The swiftness of the shifts in these lines is unnerving, as we move from the affective register of *tenderness, amusement and regret* to the sudden, anguished contraction. This is one of the very few moments in my reading of Ashbery when the calamity of recognition occasions bleak sorrow : *hot tears spurt*. The entire spiritual realm collapses into the small hollow of a room. A fleet, agonized, reduced, containment. It has the feeling of a confession, or the dropping of a mask; rescued only by “our moment of attention.” This is the very definition of the ordinary sublime as a negative space: a contracted . There is a sense of attenuation, as if suddenly there is only one instrument playing its meagre tune; perhaps an etude by Eric Satie. The poem continues:

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.

As the doubt about the possibility of finding meaning arises, so too the image of the globe is introduced: *But it is life englobed*. We could trace from here the many references to circularity and roundnesses that ensue: sphere, ping-pong ball, balloon, curved hand, round mirror, carousel, circle, bubble-chamber, eggs; much later in the poem, “a crystal ball.” Circularity is posited against linearity; throughout Ashbery’s work, the circadian rhythms of day and night are constant temporal markers. In *Self-Portrait*, the fact of Parmigiano’s “mirror portrait” , his “rendering / The veilleities of the rounded reflecting surface,” gives Ashbery a way to think about the relation of a given self to the inhabited world, and to ask how much that self and that world can ever be conveyed, captured, realized in any medium: words, pictures, music. Here, as elsewhere, these questions revolve around singularity – a self, fragment, or sample, and wholes, or sums. The globe or circle, extracted and elaborated from the Portrait’s rounded mirror, is the trope for entirety, inclusivity, and the poem turns through partial arcs that imply the necessary givenness of incomplete knowledge. So, toward the end of the poem:

Each person

Has one big theory to explain the universe  
But it doesn’t tell the whole story  
And in the end it is what is outside him  
That matters, to him and especially to us  
Who have been given no help whatever  
In decoding our own man-size quotient and must rely  
On second-hand knowledge.

And, earlier:

And the vase is always full  
Because there is only just so much room  
And it accommodates everything. The sample  
One sees is not to be taken as  
Merely that, but as everything as it

May be imagined outside time --- not as a gesture  
But as all, in the refined, assimilable state.

What does it mean to imagine “outside time” and how does the vase represent the “all” or “everything” “in the refined assimilable state”? My sense is that here Ashbery is resisting the temptation to reach for the transcendent register, and settles instead for the vase, the local container of the refined and knowable, so that whatever is imagined “outside of time” is contained within it. This material image (*no ideas but in things*) suggests that objects indeed are the locale of what I am calling the “ordinary sublime,” where everything is contained in a “refined, assimilable state,” something between the distillations of a still life, *nature mort*, or self-portrait, and the presence of living beings; a bouquet.

The brilliant collusion or collision of the visual and aural, the cerebral and the material, the mirror and the music, speculation and its uncertainties, is central to this poem and to my sense that all of Ashbery’s work is an inquiry into the ways acts of perception fuse with acts of saying or knowing, in the search of a reality that cannot ever be contained; a very exacting kind of epistemological undertaking, in which ideas of the real and ideas of the true are in tantalizing tandem relation: empirical reality and beliefs about reality in an intimate dance. I am reminded here of William James’ remark that “truth is what happens to an idea,” which is about as succinct a definition of Ashbery’s poetics as I can imagine. The visual world of scenes and pictures, of objects in space, of colors and light, all are under the illuminating spell of the mind listening to itself at its “moment of attention.” This brings to mind another of William James’ descriptions, that thought happens, not as a stream of consciousness, but rather like a bird, with its *flights and perchings*.

As darkness encroaches --- “a perverse light whose / Imperative of subtlety dooms in advance its conceit to light up” we encounter a “pinpoint of a smile,” “a spark” “a star” and, finally, “a dozing whale on the sea bottom / In relation to the tiny, self-important ship / On the surface.” Ashbery gathers us toward sites of illumination, and then draws attention to the unilluminated darkness (which seems always to be a place of an unknown and profound possibility), and to new thoughts about scale – the relation of one thing to another in space ---and to the *surface*.

We might note here that Ashbery elides not only the subject-object divide, but he avoids most of the harsh dualities of our divided and divisive world. He likes the in-between, the almost, the not quite,



the twilight. He saw, I think, that in the ambiguities of the undecided there is most freedom; in the plural is the chance for demotic inclusion. So in his poem's next sequence of waves of arrival we enter a prolonged contemplation of the fact of the sphere, or globe, of convex mirror, and the variable scale, or spatial relations, they suggest. It arrives as a kind of aria or soliloquy, in which a constellation of related terms, starting with the "globe" and ending with a return to an instantiation of the original gesture in the painting:

Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning  
But which holds something of both in pure  
Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything.

On his way to this inconclusive paradox, Ashbery contemplates both the spherical "globe like ours" and the depiction of the room, in which there is "A sliver of window or mirror" that reflects the weather which, he remarks,

in French is  
*Le temps*, the word for time, and which  
Follows a course wherein changes are merely  
Features of the whole.

In Ashbery, as in Stevens, there is a continual juggling of the materials of the sensorium – what we encounter in the world of objects -- as they meet the objects of mental interiority on the surface of the poem. "The surface is what's there / And nothing can exist except what's there."

Forgive me for quoting so much. You all have read this poem and do not need me to keep reciting from it. But one of the problems of writing about Ashbery, as we have commented, is that his work describes itself better than anything I might say; everything I say is by way of postscript.

Now the tone shifts as "the balloon pops," and "the attention / Turns dully away." There ensues a confusion of person, an "I", a "he," and a "you" appear, along with "many people", speaking through the foggy chiaroscuro of memory, who become "part of you" "until *no part remains that is surely you.*" *I is another.*

Things become turbulent, with thoughts being torn, as the round mirror becomes a carousel, speeding into chaos, “Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty, / Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing.” The world of objects, the “magma of interiors” is suddenly reduced to a neutral band, a silver blur, a blind leveling. This passage of the poem presents us with a thicket of confusion, as we contemplate how the portrait “rules out the extraneous / Forever” attesting only to the “enchantment of self with self.” We are in the crux of a narcissistic moment, a kind of trap proposed perhaps by art’s will to seek perfection through available materials: *Eyebeams, muslin, coral*, but only by eliminating the “extraneous” which, for Ashbery, is often the source of greatest interest. Our narrator concludes:

It doesn’t matter  
Because these are things as they are today  
Before one’s shadow ever grew  
Out of the field into thoughts of tomorrow.

Once again, the temporal cord twists into a knot.

5.

The next section takes up ideas of the possible, of promise, and of dreams. Variants of these words recur, threaded across a “Landscape sweeping out from us to disappear / On the horizon.”

“Of course some things / Are possible”  
“we will try / To do as many things as are possible”  
“Even stronger possibilities can remain”  
“what is promised today”  
“To keep the supposition of promises together”

One cannot read through these passages without being reminded of Stevens’ *Notes toward A Supreme Fiction*, with its litany of anxious *possibles*, as he entreats the poem to discover the order of the real. Stevens was of course beset by the very dualities that Ashbery refuses to embrace. Whatever ultimate questions the two poets share, their ways of approaching them are as different in tone as Bach is from Berg. Stevens wants “the real” to emerge as the order of “major weather”

from the discoveries of the imagination which, for Ashbery, is sourced in the play between dreams and the artifactual. Stevens' meditation calls up an Angel of the Absolute; Ashbery never permits such a figuration to arrive. But the Parmiganino Portrait does allow an angel to make a mediated appearance. Indeed, what I am calling the ordinary sublime comes as the "unfamiliar stereotype" of the face in the Portrait, which, the narrator tells us, Vasari has called "rather angel than man." The narrator then muses,

Perhaps an angel looks like everything  
We have forgotten. I mean forgotten  
Things that don't seem familiar when  
We meet them again, lost beyond telling,  
Which were ours once.

This moment strikes me as having the strange quality I am trying to evoke: the utterly unexpected alliance of how an "angel" looks, with forgetting and reencountering things "which were ours once." The sublime is sublimated into acts of forgetting the familiar and then meeting them again---making the familiar strange ---, this time "lost beyond telling." For Ashbery, the act of telling is what constitutes life. He is not able to speak about that which is lost, outside of time, or thought, but nevertheless he is willing here, as elsewhere, to acknowledge it. You could pass over this moment without noticing it, as the narrator does, as he continues on to a deft exploration of later portraits, before returning to the titular picture, which begins to converge into the narrative present, hinging on the repeated words "surprise" and "reflection."

What is novel is the extreme care in rendering  
The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface  
(It is the first mirror portrait),  
So that you could be fooled for a moment  
Before you realize the reflection  
Isn't yours.

These convergences, the painting with the "you," the self, the angel with forgotten things, notions of surprise and reflection, all insinuate a possible transcendent moment, when an actual, high-end,

auratic sublimity might occur, but the passage devolves into the ordinary, if exquisite, vision of snowfall:

The picture is almost finished,  
The surprise almost over, as when one looks out,  
Startled by a snowfall which even now is  
Ending in specks and sparkles of snow.

Ashbery's need to keep his poems within the navigations of the ordinary while providing hints of the extraordinary is what has kept so many of his readers on high alert; the habit of the poems, like the Parmigianino portrait, is to constantly swerve away from "the momentum of a conviction that had been building."

But we know it cannot be sandwiched  
Between two adjacent moments, that its windings  
Lead nowhere except to further tributaries  
And that these empty themselves into a vague  
Sense of something that can never be known  
Even though it seems likely that each of us  
Knows what it is and is capable of  
Communicating it to the other.

The initial subject of the "it" in this passage is "love," but the meandering syntax is such that it is difficult to recall; it gets "lost" in that unknown, nameless thing, one that can be communicated but perhaps not in words. A displaced Eros, hiding far from the bodies in which this unknown known resides.

6.

As we have seen, across the poems in *Self-Portrait*, specificity is sacrificed, and an indefinite, hovering articulation arouses and thwarts our need for stability; we are kept in an animated continuum of linguistic play that almost never adds up; it's a poetics of heightened contingencies, temporal signals, ciphers for eventfulness. References to time and to its numerous tropes --- days,

nights, weathers, light; tomorrows, yesterdays, meanwhiles, the past, moments, the hours, waiting, pauses, forgettings and tellings are so abundant they seem to be a kind of invisible substrate or matrix onto which Ashbery can hang his various objects. Proust may be the only other writer for whom time was such an insistent subject, but Ashbery is not concerned with retrieval or even with memory as such; as we have noted, the work is constant in its desire to inscribe its own present, the making of its present into the “emptiness distributed” across time. Time is a construction that allows him to move in and out, forward and back, around, behind, all in the service of “this painful freshness of each thing being exactly itself.” The method is one of continuance through deflection; anticipatory moments devolve away from their fruition. The affective result hovers between the pleasurable mystery of a secret and the frustration of the forever postponed.

The self-portrait of the artist as a poet thinking about a painter’s self-portrait. The poem crests and retreats, crests and retreats on its “smooth, perhaps even bland ( but so enigmatic) finish.” Painting and poem converge into each other and separate, like uncomfortable, estranged lovers.

Is there anything  
To be serious about beyond this otherness  
That gets included in the most ordinary  
Forms of daily activity, changing everything  
Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter  
Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation  
Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near  
Peak, too close to ignore, to far  
For one to intervene?

This otherness, this  
“Not-being-us” is all there is to look at  
In the mirror, though no one can say  
How it came to be this way.

And then, finally, or at last, we are all released from the mesmeric “shield of a greeting” that the Portrait has caused the poet, and his readers, to endure:

The hand holds no chalk  
And each part of the whole falls off  
And cannot know it knew, except  
Here and there, in cold pockets  
Of remembrance, whispers out of time.

#### CODA

At some point I began to think of John Ashbery as a great bird. I thought that all his poems occurred in air, on the breath, in the spirit, but also, as I suggested at the beginning, almost literally slightly above the landscapes over which they hover and glide. He looked a bit like a bird, with his starting eyes and his pronounced, elegant nose. It was a vision that never dissipated, even as it was a form of magical thinking. On the morning of his death, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September, 2017, David Kermani phoned to let me know. I went outside and wandered a bit on my back lawn. Then, suddenly, a large bird flew directly overhead and toward the Hudson river. Ah, I thought, there you are, and there you go. I wrote a short poem, which became the epigraph of my latest book, *Spell*:

*And then you sail past in your effortless bravado, the sky  
A blue wind of ease, wings outstretched on a continuous  
whim, as if there were no time, and there isn't,  
but the rest of us pause, watching as you go, you go on by.*