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## READING LATE ASHBERY

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*Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems* by John Ashbery. New York: HarperCollins, 2007. Pp. xv + 364. \$34.95 cloth.

*Ashbery's Forms of Attention* by Andrew DuBois. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. Pp. xxiv + 161. \$34.00 cloth.

*John Ashbery and You: His Later Books* by John Emil Vincent. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 192. \$32.95 cloth.

John Ashbery is frequently cited as one of America's most important living poets. For over fifty years his work has broadened the horizons of contemporary literature. For at least half as long he has been at the center of debates that have defined the contours of literary criticism. Schools of thought that seem to agree about nothing have been able to see themselves reflected in his work. Thus he is said to be a belated Romantic, lyric inheritor of Stevens. He is also said to be a daring avant-gardist, deconstructing illusions of coherence. Both of these views were already entrenched midway through his career. The recent appearance of *Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems*, however, complicates the story of Ashbery's reception, a story that has tended to proceed as if his output ended with the 1991 publication of *Flow Chart*. Ashbery's immense productivity over the past two decades has been met with a variety of benign neglect summed up by a 2005 review in the *New York Times*: Once considered exasperating and difficult, Ashbery now has "become a part of our mental furniture." At this point he "seems almost avuncular, the grand old man of American poetry."<sup>1</sup> Critics such as Marjorie Perloff have long been arguing against such a "normalization" of Ashbery.<sup>2</sup> To understand his achievement, however, requires more than insisting that the octogenarian is still experimental after all these years. The difficulty of Ashbery's work

stems from the fact that his particular forms of experimentation resist the discourses used to describe avant-garde poetry just as much as they evade traditional understandings of lyric. Though the *Times* review unjustly suggests that readers needn't struggle with his actual work, there is something apt about its description of Ashbery's curious canonicity. He is not the father of contemporary American poetry but its uncle.

The eccentricity of Ashbery's late work highlights, among other things, the impoverishment of the aesthetic vocabulary currently available for understanding experimental art and literature. Two recent monographs make important headway on addressing this deficiency. *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* by Andrew DuBois and *John Ashbery and You* by John Emil Vincent both demonstrate that the poet's decades-long career rewards intensive scrutiny; both offer readers a heuristic map for the poetry without explaining away the difficulties or frustrations it poses. They are, in other words, devoted to close reading. But they also recognize that understanding Ashbery requires a reconfiguration of what it means to read at all. As DuBois explains, Ashbery's career "both challenges and validates how we pay attention, or do not, to what we read" (*Ashbery's Forms of Attention*, xi). Critics have often noted that the particular challenges Ashbery poses have to do with his apparent evasiveness, a quality that

invites readers to peek behind the surface only to find that, in fact, "everything is surface."<sup>3</sup> Both of these new studies offer a vision of Ashbery's evasions and interruptions that stresses their generative rather than negative qualities. In doing so, they address the difficult question of why, given its manifest frustrations, readers might care about Ashbery's poetry in the first place.

Vincent takes up this challenge and addresses the generosity of Ashbery's evasions. His argument hinges on the "intimacy effects" generated by Ashbery's varied formal experiments, notably the exploration of the possibilities of the second-person pronoun. Vincent is not the first critic to remark upon the versatility of *you* in Ashbery, but his study is an impressively nuanced account of the changing work this elastic pronoun accomplishes over the course of a career. *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992), for instance, documents a frustrating moment in which the poet's access to a second-person interlocutor outside his own imagination is blocked. The same deictic in *Your Name Here* (2000), on the other hand, becomes an elegiac gesture to Ashbery's friend and lover, the French poet Pierre Martory. Throughout his later works, Vincent argues, Ashbery wrings paradoxical emotions by mingling publicity and privacy, intimacy and estrangement. The distortions and omissions that critics have often identified as central to Ashbery's poetry are only half of

the story, since Ashbery uses these to forge (and trouble) various forms of affective connection and recognition, constructing an hermetic aesthetic that nonetheless leaves a space open for *you*.

The intellectual center of Vincent's previous book was a treatment of the way this poetry makes use of the affective energies surrounding the open secrecy of the closet.<sup>4</sup> His new study extends this important work on the queerness of Ashbery's poetry. Discussions of Ashbery and sexuality have tended to follow the framework established in John Shoptaw's *On the Outside Looking Out* (1994), which argues that Ashbery's poems sublimate homosexual content into literary form. Shoptaw's book is full of excellent readings and invaluable archival insights, but by approaching Ashbery through the lens of a "misrepresentative poetics," the particularities of the poetry tend to be reduced to little more than symptoms of repression. Because, he argues, "Ashbery leaves himself and his homosexuality out of his poetry, his poems misrepresent in a particular way which I will call 'homotextual.' Rather than simply hiding or revealing some homosexual content, these poems represent and 'behave' differently, no matter their subject. With their distortions, evasions, omissions, obscurities, and discontinuities, Ashbery's poems always have a homotextual dimension."<sup>5</sup> That the poems *behave differently* suggests the possibility of an analysis

of their performative dimension. But by only reading this behavior in relation to the act of disclosure—as a series of *distortions, evasions, omissions*, et cetera—Shoptaw treats the poems as if they were in fact wholly constative, positing a norm of transparency and full disclosure against which they are to be judged. By exclusively focusing on what the poems do not say, critics following Shoptaw's lead tend to ignore, for one thing, the presence of explicitly homosexual content.

Vincent corrects this omissive approach, attending to the intersection of aesthetics and sexuality in the surprising range of generative performative effects that constitute Ashbery's poetry. With its unabashed attention to form and its relative lack of a visible theoretical apparatus, this approach might be understood as an example of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has identified as *reparative reading*, a form of inquiry careful not to dismiss or demolish the identifications and desires audiences invest in cultural forms.<sup>6</sup> In this account, close reading should not be abandoned as an apolitical or elitist practice, but should instead be recognized as an important resource for imaginative thinking that is historically and politically engaged, a tool for understanding—and taking seriously—the role aesthetic experience plays in the survival of subjects and communities in a world often hostile to their existence. This approach opens the possibility of discussing

the presence of history in Ashbery's poetry in a fashion that does not de-code its difficulty into a covert realism. Vincent's argument gets under way by reversing the received estimation of Ashbery's 1987 volume *April Galleons*, persuasively repositioning the book as a profound response to the intolerable losses of the AIDS crisis and an attempt to disrupt the cultural equation of sex and death. A chapter on *Girls on the Run* (1999), Ashbery's book-length poem inspired by outsider artist Henry Darger, suggests that Ashbery's translation of Darger's creations is an attempt to hold off the "proleptic retroactivity" of queer childhood, a temporal logic by which queer children exist only once they survive into the futurity of adulthood. For Vincent, the aesthetic offers a liminal space that one might access to get a distance on the burdens of the past and the demands of the future. This is not to say that poetry exists in an autonomous world apart, but rather to insist that it might enable forms of suspension that enable readers to reconfigure their affective relations to their own histories. Aesthetic experiences don't offer redemption or transcendence, but they do enable readers, for brief interludes, to find the imaginative wiggle room necessary to make "a livable now." Ashbery's poems accomplish this by providing "other material, new images, and new structures with which to feel" (*John Ashbery and You*, 37), resources that have proven important over the last quarter of a century.

As my rough outline indicates, the unit around which Vincent's reading of Ashbery is organized is the book. One explanation for the neglect of Ashbery's later work, Vincent suggests, is that most of the mechanisms through which poetry is assigned value rely on a particular form of canonization: the anthology. For Vincent, this institutional procedure makes it difficult to appreciate Ashbery's achievement, since, from the late 1980s onward, he has specifically experimented with the book as framing device capable of creating certain expectations and effects. Vincent makes a persuasive case that each of the books he discusses is engaged in a discrete and decipherable project. Brilliant and generative as they may be, these readings at times assign what can seem like a dubious degree of intentionality to the patterns and themes they unearth. This gesture might be something of an overcorrection, a rejoinder to the common perception that Ashbery has been engaged in slapdash automatic writing, shapeless and out of control, but it does occasionally stretch credulity.

The view that Ashbery has of late lost control is literalized, in fact, in the vexing final chapter of DuBois's otherwise excellent monograph. "What all of these late books have in common," DuBois argues, "is that in their pages an emphasis on aging and death is transmuted into the gold of dotage. The random quality of the poems is given meaning by being a product of Ashbery's

performance of senility, which is sometimes obviously a performance (he tells us so) and at other times is more *really* realistic; that is, he seems actually to have lost control—an elderly poet’s confidence game” (*Ashbery’s Forms of Attention*, 114). Much of the late work, he declares, “is truly imbecilic” (112), a claim meant to be, at least potentially, a compliment. If this estimation of the last twenty years or so of Ashbery’s poetic production seems inadequate, it is not because it lacks a certain descriptive plausibility. The choice of dotage as the guarantor of meaning is problematic instead because it neglects to follow through with an analysis of what it might mean to *perform* daftness, however realistically. The complicated analysis that grounds DuBois’s treatment of Ashbery’s earlier work breaks down as he sweeps across the most recent publications, omitting an adequate consideration of aesthetic mediation and linking the poetry too directly to the poet’s persona. Thus the book concludes by presenting Ashbery’s poetry as a reflection of his mind, and that mind as a reflection of his historical moment. We are left with the image of the poet as channel surfer that DuBois has earlier complicated: “Get on the couch, turn on the tube . . . The future is senile and already here and Ashbery is its poet” (136). This may be true, but it does not explain why our senile future needs a poet in the first place.

That said, DuBois is correct to recognize that one of the most

important features of Ashbery’s recent poetry is a willingness to experiment with stupidity.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere in his book, he expertly illuminates this quality, uncovering across the span of Ashbery’s entire career a complex dialectic of attention and its opposites. Itself an impressive exercise in attentiveness, his book includes in its purview previously neglected juvenilia from Ashbery’s Harvard days, as well as numerous unnoticed ekphrastic influences and inspirations. The material he makes available and the connections he draws represent major contributions to the scholarship on Ashbery’s poetry and will be of tremendous use to his readers. Many of his most intriguing insights, however, have precisely to do with Ashbery’s forms of *inattention*. Situating Ashbery’s work against what Jonathan Crary identifies as modernity’s “ongoing crisis of attentiveness,” DuBois sheds new light on the critical cliché that Ashbery is the poet of the short attention span. The typical Ashberian vacuities, the seemingly aimless drift from thought to thought, should be seen, DuBois demonstrates, as means rather than ends. Ashbery does not merely mirror the information glut of the contemporary world, but rather explores aesthetic and emotional effects that are available only if one is willing to experiment with distraction, forgetfulness, and fatigue. Thus, a discussion of Ashbery’s *Three Poems* reveals a psychoanalytic lesson about the sorts of forgetting that are often necessary

if one wants to attend to one's experience. A chapter on the long, double-columned "Litany," a poem in a real sense unreadable, turns to studies of a phenomenon known as "attentional blink" to offer a new perspective on how Ashbery's apparently frustrating poetics connect with readers. If Ashbery frequently pushes his readers to the edge of their capacity to comprehend his words, he is also ready to offer condolences for their failures, creating an elegiac beauty from incomprehension. Ashbery's poetry is frequently about the feeling of having missed something important, of not being smart enough, sharp enough—feelings that current anxieties about the demise of "deep reading" demonstrate to be common currency.

By taking seriously Ashbery's generative experiments with bafflement and boredom, DuBois and Vincent both offer means of synthesizing the lyrical and the avant-garde visions of Ashbery. On the one hand, his poetry consistently destabilizes meaning, thwarting its readers' desire for organic coherence and sense. But these disruptions occur within the context of an emotional tie. If the poems explode a reader's expectations, they simultaneously offer an affective connection to recontextualize this experience

of confusion. Both studies illuminate the vital and complex resources Ashbery creates through the aesthetic, demonstrating that his entire career is worth paying attention to, but that you shouldn't be discouraged when you don't really get it.

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## NOTES

1. Charles McGrath, "Mapping the Unconscious," review of *Where Shall I Wander* and *Selected Prose*, *New York Times Book Review*, 6 March 2005, 9.
2. See, for instance, Marjorie Perloff, "Normalizing John Ashbery," *Jacket* 2 (December 1997), <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/perloff02.html>.
3. John Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 190.
4. John Emil Vincent, *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
5. John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4.
6. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 123–52.
7. Sianne Ngai addresses something of this quality in her discussion of "stuplimity." See *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 248–97.