

“The end of friendship with self alone”: Autobiographical Erasures in John Ashbery’s “Fragment”

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Argument

The poetry of John Ashbery is deceptively autobiographical. This apparently simple statement draws the critic’s attention to the much commented upon disjunctions characteristic of Ashbery’s poetic matter and manner, premising them upon an essential rift that splits open the integrity of the subject; such an evaluation of his poetry has consequently been reiterated in various guises by several critics. Chief among these is John Shoptaw, whose book-length study of the poet relies throughout on the notion that his work is a form of encrypted autobiography, claiming that the poet’s forms of self-expression are not confessional but rather create an “‘all-purpose’ [the adjective is Ashbery’s] poetic representativeness”: “By making his poetry the stream of everybody’s or anybody’s consciousness, he creates an all-purpose subjectivity which is neither egotistical nor solipsistic.” (3). Brian McHale, arguing along similar lines, uses cautionary inverted commas to speak of “the elusiveness of ‘autobiography’” which he deems to be characteristic of Ashbery, in particular in “The Skaters,” the focus of his analysis (150). This feeling is shared to some extent by David Lehman, who first states that “Ashbery is certainly the least autobiographical of modern poets” (94), but quickly quotes “Soonest Mended”—a poem its author has claimed to be his “‘one-size-fits-all’ confessional poem”—to concede that “This is autobiography raised to the abstract level of allegory.” (95). More debatable—probably because more polemical and radical—is John Koethe’s contention that “one thing that can never be said of Ashbery’s poetry is that its primary function is to serve as a vehicle of personal self-expression.” (1995: 86). This might be correct only if the emphasis of his declaration were to fall on the adjective “primary,” but even then, one suspects Koethe’s definition of “personal self-expression” to be purely negative, based on confessional poetic practice and its often unsubtle, drab psychological trappings, as the hesitation of his next sentence shows: “This is not to say that it lacks a distinctive psychological character—indeed, the most problematic aspect of its influence is a misapprehension of what its psychological (or better, spiritual) character actually is.”

Contrary to this last approach, I will try to show in the following pages that “personal self-expression” is a strategically conflict-ridden poetic mode in Ashbery’s works, which creates “an effect of ontological ‘hovering’” (McHale 15); that it raises interesting theoretical questions about the status of the autobiographical in poetry; and finally, that it makes of Ashbery a representative poet of a putative post-lyric era, if the prefix is to be taken here as an index of ironical distance, or even better, ironical dialogue, opening up the possibility of plurivocal self-representation. In other words, my discussion will not be as exclusive regarding autobiography in Ashbery’s poetry as either Shoptaw’s, which at the end of the day reduces the poetry to autobiography,¹ or Koethe’s, which at the other end of the spectrum rejects autobiography as a valid interpretative key to the poems. Rather, I would like to suggest that John Ashbery’s characteristically fluid movement from the autobiographical to its rhetorical displacement into the lyrical is rendered possible thanks to an interaction between the inscription/encryption of the self and various forms of self-cancellation, and in particular to show to what extent the formal procedures of a given poem can act as sites of resistance to, and containment of, the lyric self. In this perspective, self-expression would be made possible only “under erasure,” displaced to apparently transpersonal poetic forms which in fact become the repository, or crypt, of the self.

¹ He has been virulently and somewhat unfairly criticized for this by Lehman in the latter’s chapter on Ashbery (Lehman, 155-8).

Intimations of Autobiography

The poem I have chosen to discuss in detail in order to substantiate my sense of a flickering autobiographical presence in Ashbery's oeuvre is one of the most challenging texts the American poet has ever written: "Fragment" (Ashbery, 1997, 1970: 290-305). Its 500 lines organized in 50 ten-liners are indeed an excellent instance of the kind of complex negotiation between form and formlessness which is so characteristic of Ashbery's manner whenever he has more or less indirect recourse to the self-portrait genre.² Written from December 1964 to March 1965, this long poem was published in 1970 as the closing piece of *The Double Dream of Spring*, the collection marking the apotheosis of Ashbery's first period before he embarked upon the prose experiments of *Three Poems* which substantially altered his writing. In the general economy of his poetic works, "Fragment" takes its place alongside the long poems that conclude several of Ashbery's collections—"The Skaters" in *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), the eponymous "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1975) and "And the Stars were Shining" (1994), "Fantasia on 'The Nut-Brown Maid'" in *Houseboat Days* (1977). Therefore, unlike what its title might indicate, it belongs to the "summation-poem" genre, whose purpose is to round off a poetry volume by giving it the sense of a lofty ending.³ It might actually be tempting to interpret this poem's title as designating a fragment of that loose series of long concluding poems in which Ashbery seemingly yields to an urge to recapitulate many of his aesthetic concerns, following the poet's lead: "The title Fragment [...] was a kind of joke because it's very long and yet like any poem it's a fragment of something bigger than itself" (Bloom & Losada, 127). From this perspective, "Fragment" would be an ironic long poem in the postmodern vein, a kind of "built ruin," to take up the suggestion of Brian McHale (15), the monumental and apparently orderly character of which would be defeated by both its textural inconsistencies and its fragmentary status as merely a piece in an ongoing series.

Such paradoxical monumentality is given another, less metatextual dimension since "Fragment" is also a homage—though a rather perverse one, as we shall see—to the poet's father, who had died on December 1st, 1964: "The father's unmarked and untold plot," John Shoptaw summarizes, "is the monumental poem itself; the father and his marker are inseparable." (114).⁴ This monumental aspect and function (with respect to both senses of the adjective) of the poem place it in an intermediary category, halfway between occasional poetry and perennial aesthetic statement. The textual and biographical dimensions of such monumentality seem to be vying for visibility throughout the poem in various images and metaphors encapsulated by the elegiac vignette in the following passage:

[...] This time
You get over the threshold of so much unmeaning, so much
Being, prepared for its event, the active memorial.

And more swiftly continually in evening, limpid
Storm winds, commas are dropped, the convention gapes,
Prostrated before a monument disappearing into the dark. (293, 108-113)⁵

The sadness and gloom of the occasion seems to be shifting because it hovers half-way between world and text: the referential "evening" and "storm winds" are framed by metatextual "unmeaning" and "commas," so that the "dark" into which the monument disappears is as much that of print and language—willfully obscured by a dropping of commas out of their proper place—as that of night and sorrow. As a matter of fact, the latter seems reduced to mere linguistic routine expressed in the initial phrase of this passage: "You get over the

² The most salient other examples of such self-portraiture are obviously the even longer two poems: "The Skaters" (Ashbery, 1997, 1966: 194-223) and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (Ashbery, 1975: 68-83).

³ An interesting inversion of this pattern is offered by "Litany," the 70-page long, double-columned poem that opens *We Know* (1979), rather than closing it.

⁴ Shoptaw gives a detailed account of the poem's composition and a full-length analysis, 111-124.

⁵ Page and line references to "Fragment" will be given parenthetically in that order.

threshold," a hackneyed metaphor for dying which opens an awful "gap" of formal, impersonal language ("the convention gapes"), literally voiding the occasion of genuine feeling. Instead of the yawning chasm of the father's grave, we get the gaping emptiness of conventional words, which nonetheless leave the speaker—if we can still call him that since he, too, is implicitly "gaping"—"prostrated" in front of both the monument and its poetic sign. On the whole, the poem/monument teems with more or less indirect mentions of writing and its tools or products. By the time Ashbery uses the phrase "the grave of authority," one cannot help hearing in it not only the father's funeral but also an entombment of the "author" himself who makes fun of his own grave tone: "The grave of authority/Matches wits with upward-spinning lemon spirals/telling of the influences of night" (296, 202-4). Strategically, as John Shoptaw underlines, "'Fragment' is framed by reflections on its own nature as a sign" (121)—a word appearing in the first and last stanzas of the poem in a gesture which firmly yokes its autobiographical project to its metapoetic dimension.

This intermediary character of the poem is reinforced by a further circumstance of its composition. Indeed, "Fragment" was begun in Ashbery's hometown of Sodus, New York, where he had come back on the sad occasion of his father's death, then completed in Paris "before Ashbery returned permanently to New York that summer" (Shoptaw, 114) after almost ten years of more or less permanent exile in France. Moreover, the poem is formally modeled after *Délie, objet de plus haute vertu*, a sequence of 449 *dizains* published in 1544 by Maurice Scève in Lyons—a model which problematically casts the poetic *tombeau du père* into the mould of a passionate, and passionately abstract, love poem. Striding two continents and two languages, not to mention literary and personal past and present, "Fragment" is a traveling poem, so to speak, which marks Ashbery's repatriation to the United States. Its 50 stanzas, paying tribute to the 50 emblems around which Scève's sequence is organized,⁶ are so many cryptic, ironical emblems of the 50 American states—the word "emblem" appears as early as line 29—themselves emblemized by the patriotic stars of the poet's "father land," to which he had had to return in order to bury his own father: "Returning late you were not surprised to meet/This gray visitor, perpendicular to the weather." (298, 258-9), Ashbery writes rather dryly in a striking image of the dead father that reverses the roles of permanent resident and transient "alien." While "gray" is undoubtedly the most elegiac of all colors, it is also the visual signature of one of Ashbery's favorite painters, Jasper Johns. Associated with the adjective "perpendicular," the color of these lines more particularly evokes Johns's "Gray Rectangles" (1957-58), a painting in which the art critic David Sylvester has seen an unmistakably funereal dimension: "Their formlessness is corrected by the insertion into the surface of simple geometric shapes placed symmetrically or by a one-word inscription painted in capital letters of a classical mould. Both devices evoke the tomb, and this matches the elegiac atmosphere engendered by the grey." (464). Ashbery has in fact commented upon Johns's use of gray in one of his critical essays on art, "Four American Exhibits of 1968," describing three paintings entitled "Screen Pieces" which he opposes to the more famous series of American flags Johns had painted earlier. The passage deserves to be quoted at length for its autobiographical overtones, Ashbery speaking of Johns's career in terms that could easily be applied to his own:

Johns has never cared much about pleasing or disconcerting his admirers. He has gone his rather leisurely way, sometimes turning out a bumper crop of flags, to the delight of those who collect them; sometimes (as in his 1966 show and now) producing work whose calculated "no look" was bound to throw off those who were proud of having assimilated the flags.

Johns knows how to buttonhole the viewer. One may puzzle over his pictures, but one does not escape them. What is there to see? Three of them were called "Screen Pieces," carelessly daubed over in "Jasper Johns gray," a color that may be as significant for the 1960s as Lucky Strike green was for the 1930s. (Ashbery, 1989: 253)

⁶ "Emblem" is here to be understood literally as an engraving with a motto, "emblem books" being very much in vogue in the 16th century (Scève, 18-22). Ashbery had initially planned to have Alex Katz illustrate his poem, and the Black Sparrow Press edition of "Fragment" (1969) does feature twenty-five drawings by Katz facing each page of text on which are printed two *dizains*.

The “gray visitor, perpendicular to the weather” appears therefore as a double image in which the father’s coffin—its rectangle shape implied by its being perpendicular to the *weather*, this word being a persistent metonym for “time” in this poem as elsewhere in Ashbery⁷—is blurred by the subliminal evocation of Jasper Johns’s paintings, very much like Johns’s *Flags* blur the image of the American national emblem by daubing it with paint as he does in “*White Flag*” for instance (1955), where the Stars and Stripes is actually coated over with paint that discolors it into shades of gray.

Even though the poem claims that “We should not separate in misunderstanding” (297, 223), it should be clear by now that the poet is left without any illusions about a reunion between father and son. Quite the contrary, the autobiographical dimension of the poem offers Ashbery an opportunity to desecrate as much as consecrate the memory of his father as well as those of the nation, an ambivalence which the second stanza already expresses quite forcefully:

These last weeks teasing into providential
Reality: that your face, the only real beginning,
Beyond the gray of overcoat, that this first
Salutation plummet also to the end of friendship
With self alone. And in doing so open out
New passages of being among the correctness
Of familiar patterns. The stance to you
Is a fiction, to me a whole. I find
New options, white feathers, in a word what
You draw in around you to the protecting bone. (290, 11-20)

It is difficult to tell whether the meeting described in these lines (ante or post mortem?) bodes well for the rest of the poem: a “*New Spirit*”—to take up one of Ashbery’s later titles—seems to set up the conditions for less tense relationships between father and son (the “familiar patterns” barely hide a *pater familias*), but this is not without misunderstandings, since “The stance to you/Is a fiction, to me a whole.” If the word “stance” certainly means “way of being,” one cannot fail to hear its proximity to “stanza”: poetry writing is here as much the bone of contention as is lifestyle.⁸

In his book, David Lehman has argued that the relationship between John Ashbery and his father remained distant, to say the least, and everything seems to indicate in particular that Chet Ashbery was not prepared to accept his son’s homosexuality.⁹ Several passages of “*Fragment*” may certainly be read in this light as indirect comments upon the autobiographical meaning of the *return* from metaphorically “disorderly” foreign lands to a much more “square” fatherland:

That hole, towering secret, familiar
If one is poking among the evening rubbish, yet how
Square behind you the mirror, so much authority
And intelligence in such a miserable result.
Could it bind you because of the simplicity
Or could you in fact escape because of that limp frame,
Those conditions tumbling upward, like piles of smoke?
In that way any disorderly result is often seen
As the result of the general’s fixed smile, calipers,
Moustache, and the other way was closed too. (301, 361-370)

⁷ This makes sense considering Ashbery’s having been steeped in French language, where *temps* means both “time” and “weather” (See Cazé, 2000: 96-7, for a discussion of this point). Recurrent mentions of the weather in “*Fragment*” start with “the signs of the oblong day” in stanza one (290, 7), in which the adjective already evokes the coffin’s shape while its first syllable suggests an “obituary.”

⁸ Other oblique allusions to poetic stanzas are to be found in the poem’s first line, “*The last block* is closed in April” (290, 1) and in a mention near the end of “*The words sung in the next room*” (305, 489).

⁹ “That John was closer to his mother than to his father is instantly evident to one spending time with the Ashbery archive at Harvard’s Houghton Library, in which there is but one postcard from Chet Ashbery to his son as opposed to the more than three dozen folders full of letters from Helen [Ashbery’s mother]” (Lehman, 121).

Addressing himself self-reflexively as he does throughout the poem, the speaker contemplates the emptiness—"That hole" having replaced the still hopeful "whole" of stanza 2—left in the mirror by his "dirty" secret, a condition of self-effacement that is "familiar" and overwhelming ("towering") to him since it constitutes his intimate self, but which must not be discovered by his family, not to mention the *pater familias*, however hard they try "poking among the evening rubbish." Earlier in the poem, a similar episode shows the speaker happy to return to his secret which had been in danger of being revealed, absorbing himself into his mirror again:

gradually old letters used as bookmarks
 Inform the neighbors; an approximate version
 Circulates and the incident is officially closed.
 And I some joy of this have, returning to the throbbing
 Mirror's stiff enclave, the sides of my face steep and overrun. (296, 196-200)

In these disconsolate, almost self-pitying moments of introspection ("such a miserable result"), the distance between the speaker's image of himself and the facade he offers to the rest of the world is kept—or even "commanded," as perspective is said to command the view in a painting—by the literal *and* metaphorical squareness standing behind him in the mirror, and even as the mirror. Indeed, it is the mirror itself which is said to be "square," although the syntax at this particular point is slightly distorted, thus making of "you" the central focus of a double geometrical reflection. Ashbery's subtle decision to elide the copula in this line—"how square behind you the mirror" instead of a more standard "how square the mirror is behind you"—precisely at a climactic moment of self-identification, allows the latter to be made more fluid by shifting syntactic patterns: coming to the front, "square behind" could be quite incongruously construed as a noun group, giving the image a nicely improper twist, while the sequence of words "you a mirror" sounds like a desperate attempt on the speaker's part at merging with his own reflection, at seeing himself where he *is* not, indeed cannot be, since no verb of existence is left to substantiate any kind of presence. The whole stanza fluctuates between self-control—which a binding "simplicity" might allow, as opposed to the implied "duplicity" of a mirror image—and the impossibility to rule one's own life, to make it "straight," a familiar version of the father-son conflict and its internalization. In this conflict, the word "authority" (l. 363) looms large again—and is therefore prominently poised at the end of a line: it may point either biographically outward to the antagonist father figure, author of the son's life, or poetically inward to the author of the poem, the "miserable result" being the poem itself. Naturally, this double movement and meaning are not in the least original, which the speaker has already acknowledged earlier when stating that "your only world is an inside one/Ironically fashioned out of external phenomena" (292, 91-2). Thus, by looking in the mirror of his lines the speaker/poet sees both himself and his father/author *as* himself, he may either "be bound" and forced to return to himself or allowed to "escape." Even though this escape seems to have first been made possible by the loose syntax creating a "limp frame"—i.e., both a limping phrasal construction and a Dali-like *miroir mou* implying a detumescent self that could escape the square rigidity of any pre-constructed image—, this flight remains uncertain in the end, more a matter of *speculation* than anything else, as the question mark indicates.¹⁰ Indeed, all the ways out appear to be blocked by the rigid father figure, returning now as a rather Edwardian-looking military man complete with moustache (see "Waxed moustache against the impiety/Of so much air of change," 296, 194-5), measuring instrument and artificial grin. Even as he mocks the Freudian interpretation of his personal history—according to which the father's rigidity deterministically results (the word is used twice) in the son's waywardness—Ashbery nonetheless adds a final indirectly autobiographical touch by opposing "that way" to "the other way," thinly coded language pointing to different sexual orientations. "This way," the straight (or square) way, not being an option, it becomes clear that the country the wayward son

¹⁰ That the escape should be made through and into language is crucial for Ashbery, who has on several occasions praised the virtues of literary escapism: "When we escape life into literature, we are actually substituting something real for something unreal. It is what we think of as literature that is clean, definite, solid and meaningful. Through the years there has been a confusion, nurtured by literature, that life is what is outside and that what is inside is fantasy, so that the two terms have actually gotten substituted for each other." (quoted in Lehman, 37)

returns to for this bittersweet homage is not prepared to accept him. Nor will it be even ten years later. When in 1976 the Department of the Interior will commission Ashbery to write a poem to celebrate the Bicentenary of the Republic—and so commemorate the Founding Fathers—, the poet will resort to the same coded words: “If this is the way it is let’s leave,” he starts rather ominously (1977: 8), before claiming at the end of his poem, “That way, maybe the feeble lakes and swamps/Of the back country will get plugged into the circuit” (1977: 10).¹¹

The next two stanzas of “Fragment,” nearing the end of the poem, confirm the largely unchanged conditions the father’s country has to offer to its expatriate son upon his return:

Out of this intolerant swarm of freedom as it
Is called in your press, the future, an open
Structure, is rising even now, to be invaded by the present
As the past stands to one side, dark and theoretical
Yet most important of all, for his midnight interpretation
Is suddenly clasped to you with the force of a hand
But a clear moonlight night in which distant
Masses are traced with parental concern.
After silent, colored storms the reply quickly
Wakens, has already begun its life, its past, just whole and sunny.

Thus reasoned the ancestor, and everything
Happened as he had foretold, but in a funny kind of way.
There was no telling whether the thought had unrolled
Down to the heap of pebbles and golden sand now
Only one step ahead, and itself both a trial and
The possibility of turning aside forever. It was the front page
Of today, looming as white as
The furthest mountains, and oh, all kinds of things
Caught in that net and shaken, so often
The way people respond to things. (302-3, 371-390)

With the phrase “whole and sunny” concluding the first of these stanzas, the poem seems to be returning to its initial hope of reaching some sense of self-integrity through reunion with the father (stanza 2), but on the “whole,” the son—and here Ashbery obliquely reactivates the age-old pun on “sun/son”—has been permanently wrecked by the no less homonymous “hole” defeating any easy self-identification. The mixed feelings of elation and dejection which the many contradictions (also in the poetic sense of incommensurate dictions) of this passage underline—“freedom” is “intolerant”; the implicit embrace is threatening in its violence (“clasped to you with the force of a hand”—like a slap in the face?); past, present and future appear to be mixed up; the ancestor’s prediction is fulfilled, but “in a funny kind of way”—finally reinforce the ambivalence of the son’s return, both a painful taking up of old ways and a new departure, “both a trial and/The possibility of turning aside forever.”

From Autobiographical Presence to Lyrical Self

Building upon such autobiographical elements, Stephen Paul Miller has gone so far as to propose to read such lines, and indeed the whole of “Fragment,” as an instance of Ashbery’s “period poetry” because it so clearly evokes the 1960s, down to the detail of catch phrases such as “swarm of freedom” or “parental concern,” two expressions which are fraught with social strife and personal unease simultaneously. To Miller, “a typical Ashbery poem is effective as a poem and cultural product because it clarifies the workings of that poem’s historical period and our present understanding of that period” (149). This rather neat, straightforwardly autobiographical reading of Ashbery’s poem, however, paradoxically appears to be too literal by half. The nature of such an interpretation needs to be deconstructed in order to unravel what exactly is “autobiographical” in and for poetic writing, and to see to what extent a possible, provisional status may be envisaged for a subject (rather than *the* subject) in postmodern poetry in general, and in Ashbery’s in particular. Though it may sound an impossible critical task

¹¹ See my analysis of this poem in Cazé, 2000: 109-111 and Cazé, 2001: 84-91.

within the scope of a necessarily limited article, it is nonetheless indispensable to sketch out at least its beginnings if one is to perceive the ironies of theory that seem to be refracted in Ashbery's poetry and therefore to be one of the ruling principles of his poetics. Among these ironies, indeed, not the least is that the inflation of discourse about the self in critical commentaries on Ashbery, whether to emphasize or denigrate the autobiographical dimension of the poems, should be concomitant with—or perhaps even the consequence of—the self-aggrandizing tones of the speaking voice *within* his poems, as exemplified in the following selection of quotations from “Fragment”: “No brother/Bearing the notion of responsibility of self/To the surrounding neighborhood lost out of being” (292, 78-80); “a flame of yourself/Without meaning” (293, 97-8); “But now the tidings are dark in the/Expected late afternoon suddenly dipping into/Reserves of anxiety and restlessness which dutifully/Puff out these late, lax sails, pennants” (295, 181-4); “But meanwhile if I try to turn away/Looking for my own shadow in the excess” (296, 218-9); “Because the first memory/Now, like patches, was worn, only as the inadequate/Memento of all that was never going to be?” (304, 445-7).

As this last example suggests, Ashbery's “end of friendship/With self alone” (290, 14-15) is recorded in his poem as a double gesture of self-inflation (“all that was never going to be”) and self-effacement (“patches,” “the inadequate/Memento”), a gesture which is the measure of the gap that opens up once this “self” accepts to be divorced from its “singleness,” and thus join the company which its “loneliness” had estranged it from. This curious double take—whereby being wrapped up with oneself is paradoxically presented as a kind of social interaction (“friendship”), while putting an end to such a paradox, and thus reaching out for a more correctly perceived sense of self, might “open out/New passages of being *among* the correctness/Of familiar patterns” (290, 15-17, my emphasis)—can be identified as the hallmark of what I propose to call “critical lyricism,” a conflict-ridden mode of personal expression in which a succession of self-distancing strategies ensures a rhetorical dislocation of the autobiographical subject, and its subsequent relocation in, and as, the text's formal procedures. A good example of such strategies is offered by the following stanza of “Fragment”:

Like the blood orange we have a single
Vocabulary all heart and all skin and can see
Through the dust of incisions the central perimeter
Our imaginations' orbit. Other words,
Old ways are but the trappings and appurtenances
Meant to install change around us like a grotto.
There is nothing laughable
In this. To isolate the kernel of
Our imbalance and at the same time back up carefully;
Its tulip head whole, an imagined good. (293-4, 121-130)

Instrumental here in creating a bifocal—or even better, *bivocal*—self, caught between assertion and dispersion, is the rapid shift of this stanza from the high-flown diction of “the central perimeter/Our imaginations' orbit”—a geometrical metaphor whose metaphysical abstraction is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's “circumference” motif in her ambivalent presentations of herself¹² — to the rather mundane and studiously bathetic mention of “the kernel of/Our imbalance”—evocative this time, perhaps, of the Robert Lowell of “Memories of West Street and Lepke” or “Skunk Hour” (91-2 & 95-6). Placed in such a solipsistic posture, this seminal self appears simultaneously to be acknowledged as the focus of attention and to be the counter type of what a “poetic” self might be, as if it were an unwanted guest at a party whose obnoxious presence one wishes to retreat from. Note that this retreat takes place as much in meaning as in style, the sentence falling rather flat on its face with the colloquial phrase “back up carefully”—as though wary of the very lyric language of self-mastery through containment (“isolate the kernel”) it seems to advocate. Of course, as the antiphrastic line 127 signals, there

¹² “My Business is Circumference,” she wrote famously to her mentor T.W. Higginson. The confusion between, or rather conflation of inner and outer “circles” of one's self—to use Emerson's concept in the essay bearing that title—is palpable in several of Dickinson's poems which all deal with the meeting point between life and death. See for instance “I saw no Way - The Heavens were stitched -” (vol. II, 623) or “'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch” (Dickinson, vol. I, 450).

is everything to laugh about in such an incoherent, jarring presentation of one's self. Matters are made worse (or better, maybe) by the transformation of Plato's cave into a literally grotesque "grotto": it indicates that not taking reality ("old ways") for granted and opening oneself to the permanent change of one's circumstances, and therefore existence, leads one to an ontological instability that was certainly not foreseen, let alone implied, by Plato's philosophical allegory.

It is interesting to note that this mock-Platonic "grotto" was in fact introduced earlier in the poem under the guise of a more standard "cave": "The hollow thus produced/A kind of cave of the winds; distribution center/Of subordinate notions to which the stag/returns to die: the suppressed lovers" (292, 64-7). A recurrent symbol of change and instability, "winds" seem to stand in Ashbery's poem for a somewhat wavering and ridiculous poetic inspiration, giving vent to self-expression in an artificially inflated manner, thus following one colloquial meaning of the word *wind*:

The apotheosis had sunk away
As *wind* incarnates its glass cone
Aiming where further *identifications* should
Not be worked for, are reached. The *whole*
Is a mound of *changing valors* for some [...] (297, 241-5, my emphasis)

The same Homeric, or more properly Joycean, "cave of the winds"—a problematic "distribution center" from which potentially contradictory versions of the self are published, i.e. written about, edited and dispatched—recurs later, again in punning connection with a change of wind: "Waxed moustache against the impiety/Of so much air of change, but always and nowhere/A cave." (296, 194-6). At this point, one may wonder why this "cave" has been changed to a "grotto" in the stanza under consideration. The answer seems to lie in the linguistic texture of the poem. In this variation, indeed, the instability of self-identification is reinforced by the fact that the word "grotto" itself is in part triggered off by its phonetic/graphemic environment, in which the letters OR and the sounds associated with them abound: "*orange*," "*our*," "*orbit*," "*words*"—to which may be added variations such as "*vocabulary*," "*other*," "*old*," "*isolate*," "*whole*." As a matter of fact, this two-letter sequence proliferates throughout the poem and forms the matrix of several of its key-words: "*memory*" (290, 3) and "*memorial*" (293, 110), "*mortality*" (293, 120), "*author*" and "*authority*," and "*mirror*"—to which should be added "*words*," which are the heart of the matter.¹³ In this connection, let us add that the word "orbit" ("the central perimeter/Our imaginations' orbit"), while playing both a semantic and a phonetic part in the transformation of "cave" into "grotto," is itself a crucial and telling variation on the very occasion and purpose of the poem: an "obit" written as a memorial to the father. So, while one might agree with Charles Berger that by construing an image of the self as shaped by "an inside lodged within the periphery," this orbit "speaks of centrality wandered away from the center yet not errant, but moving in a fixed path" (201), one can now doubt that a straightforward autobiographical reading of such centrality may be possible. For, the orbit/obit pun forces us by a curious twist to focus our attention back upon the real circumstances of the poet's life the better to avoid and deflect, rather than confirm, any easy identification with either a real self or an ideal subject which the metaphysical image of an interior circumference seems to propose. Ashbery's rhetoric is very literally self-defeating here: "other words," as he suggests, must serve as substitutes to recover a sense of presence in absence and death, of which *language* is a figuration in its "grave authority." By pointing simultaneously to "grotto" (the "cave of the winds") and to "obit" (a standard piece one expects to read in a newspaper), Ashbery's *orbit* reconfigures the autobiographical text as a poetic one, and substitutes linguistic diffraction for the image of a central, mastering self. Thus, very much like the mannerist "convex mirror" in which Ashbery will later paint his "self-portrait," this orbit actually suggests more the deathly hollowness of an eye-socket than the majestic plenitude of an encompassing

¹³ "words like disjointed beaches/Brown under the advancing signs of the air," Ashbery writes at the very end of his poem (305, 499-500). According to the same logic of the signifier, might we not overhear "disjointed *speeches*" floating in this charged air?

circumference. Always already disseminated in the play of signifiers, the self cannot be stabilized in any of the metaphysical identifications the image used by the poet seems to provide.

So it is in fact the *rhetorical* nature of such an instability that Ashbery's lines emphasize, in this particular stanza of "Fragment" as much as in the entire poem. The self's determinants are indeed unmistakably linguistic here: "we have a single/Vocabulary," "Other words," "Meant to," are so many phrases thanks to which the poet seeks a close identification of being with language. This identification is confirmed by the complex syntactic moves of the stanza, which frame the self's ontological determinations ("have," "see through," "are") between two comparisons, the first one ("Like the blood orange") giving way to a metaphor ("the central perimeter") while the second ("like a grotto") results from another ("trappings and appurtenances"). This symmetrical pattern is but an illusion, however, for in spite of the faint semantic connection that might be perceived to exist between the blood orange's skin and the grotto—roughly linked by their being both round, protective envelopes—there is a substantive difference in the nature of the comparison, which in the first instance applies to a subject ("we") whereas in the second it applies to what is *not* this subject ("change around us"): in one case, the self, in the other the conditions required for this self to go on existing. This rhetorical trick is enough to set off the ensuing movement, both centering upon and backing up from a subject, a contradiction which nonetheless succeeds in producing, in the last line of the stanza, what comes closest to a lyrical image of completeness and selfhood: "Its tulip head whole, an imagined good." Yet, any mention of wholeness being quite suspect in a poem entitled "Fragment," as previously seen, the "good" of all this can only be "imagined," the substance of the self must remain intangible—which does not mean disincarnated, but rather forever fluctuating because its apparent wholeness results from contradictory syntactic moves, from manners of speech (utterance and diction) which are impossible to reconcile with one another. For this reason, I cannot share John Koethe's view of Ashbery's self as metaphysical:

The conception of the self underlying Ashbery's poetry is, I believe, that of the transcendental or metaphysical subject [...] Ashbery's impulse is not so much to dismantle the various emblems with which the self might mistakenly try to identify as to try to see them, from the vantage point of the metaphysical subject, as what they really are, things among other things, and so to transcend them (1980: 96, 99).

I can see no such "vantage point" in Ashbery's poetry, neither in an autobiographical posture justifying, or framing, "the various emblems" of the self, nor in an abstract, godlike presence commanding these emblems by virtue of its disembodiment. On the contrary, Ashbery persistently refuses to essentialize any kind of self he seems to be building in his poems. This, I believe, is one of the reasons why he has frequent recourse to particularly plastic pronouns—a characteristic of his poetry that has been much commented upon—forbidding all stabilizing interpretation that would resolve into a central self. Thus for instance, in another long poem entitled "Litany"—in which the text is laid out on the page in two columns leaving a blank space in the middle that might *seem* to offer a figurative site for a metaphysical abstraction of the uttering self—we read the following lines: "Furthermore, there was nothing like/Shadows of oranges/In the new game, nothing fanciful,/And abstract one step away from foggy/Reality. [...] We never should have parted, you and me." (Ashbery, 1980: 15-6). At this point, the figure of a "transcendental or metaphysical subject" (Koethe), whose absence had seemed to be delineated almost too visibly by the poem's central blank space, is exposed as a fallacy: no central self can be embodied in the poem, not even by virtue of its paradoxical disembodiment. The Ashberyan subject cannot disappear into the abstract white space of its de-figuration the better to reappear as a quasi metaphysical entity. Rather, this subject is permanently bogged down, so to speak, in the materiality, the "foggy reality" of language events such as comparisons—and oddly enough, the two poems are linked by a similar comparison to "oranges"—or paronomasia, or epenthesis, all of which create provisional configurations of uttering postures, resulting here, as in the stanza of "Fragment," in the self's redefinition as a first-person plural pronoun combining community and singularity: "We should never have parted, you and me"; "We have a single/Vocabulary." Unlike John Shoptaw, however, I do not see this "inclusive plural" as an attempt to voice what he calls "anybody's autobiography" (310),

but rather as an attempt to mend the rift between several potentially contradictory versions of the self, insofar as it relocates them within language. Hence the insistence with which "Fragment" keeps returning to the material circumstances of the poem (sign, page, word, line, stanza) and the various forms of its deciphering (version, interpretation, meaning, reading).

What is being suggested in the movement of "Fragment," therefore, is that Ashbery's ontology depends entirely upon a rhetorical dynamic: the logic is literally "to install change" as both rhetorical instrument and substantive strategy. Rather than a stable point of reference from which an autobiography could be projected, or unraveled, the self thus becomes a mere *motive* whose fluctuations, and even inconsistencies, are foundational. James Longenbach has precisely identified this disjunctive rhetorical strategy as characteristic of Ashbery's poetry, allowing him paradoxically to salvage a sense of self *thanks to* its being de-structured by a series of linguistic moves, a self which can no longer be autobiographical since its linguistic nature defeats any transparency it may have possessed in the first place. The "disjunctive manner" of Ashbery's poems, Longenbach contends,

does not preclude the fiction of the human subject, however intricately constructed the manner might suggest the fiction to be. Rather than relying on heavily fragmented syntax, consequently, Ashbery's disjunctiveness depends on the collision of normative syntax and wayward argument; the poems sound as if they ought to make logical sense but never quite do (2004: 33).

Thus buried so deeply under layers of rhetorical re-description, and re-inscription, the self Ashbery offers to the reader appears to instantiate a model of post-lyric utterance, which problematizes autobiography as self-effacement, or at the very least self-disfigurement. In "La référence dédoublée," the French critic Dominique Combe argues that the lyrical subject should not be opposed to the "real" subject so much as to the "autobiographical" one:

La genèse du concept de "sujet lyrique" est donc inséparable de la question des rapports entre la littérature et la biographie, et du problème de la "référentialité" de l'œuvre littéraire. Mais, à bien réfléchir aux implications de cette hypothèse, il semble que le sujet "lyrique" ne s'oppose pas tant au sujet "empirique", "réel" – à la personne de l'auteur –, par définition extérieure à la littérature et au langage, qu'au sujet "autobiographique", qui est l'expression littéraire de ce sujet "empirique". Le poète lyrique ne s'oppose pas tant à l'auteur qu'à l'autobiographe comme sujet de l'énonciation et de l'énoncé. (50)

In this perspective, the presence of the subject is felt to be the tension toward its autobiographical absence, a dynamic inscription rather than a contemplative narcissistic stasis. Not surprisingly, this configuration is particularly efficient in a poem like "Fragment" working as a *tombeau* for the poet's father in which Ashbery's literally *cryptic* wordplay allows the self to hover between embodied and disembodied forms of presence. Poised on the threshold between life and language, the self remains spectral, or speculative, a shadow in the mirror. In "Fragment," the *bio* may become *graphic* only as it crosses itself out; the fragmentation of the self, "ultimately dissolving the boundaries between art and life by questioning the ontologizing of both Art and Self" (Mohanty & Monroe 42), offers us a poetically formalized re-definition of the autobiographical gesture as a paradoxical act of survival *in* death. One realizes that in such a funereal chain as the one linking cave to grotto to orbit to obit to grave, Ashbery has invented a slanted mode of "personal self-expression," which we might call, with Louis Marin, the "autobiothanatographic": "Autobiographical writing," Marin states, "is the writing of death in each and every sign it traces" (152, my translation). John Ashbery locates the poetic self in just such a dislocation, the dismemberment of remembrance.

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