

Impersonating a River

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A Worldly Country: New Poems, by John Ashbery,
Ecco Books.

DRIVEN FROM HIS house by mysterious stones thrown in the night, the exiled and embittered Jean-Jacques Rousseau—his books and his bride left behind—found a momentary haven on the picturesque Ile St. Pierre in the Lake of Biemme during his fugitive years abroad. Inspired by the tale of a German scholar who had composed a voluminous treatise on the rind of a lemon, Rousseau devoted his mornings to examining through a magnifying glass the lichens, flowers, and grasses that filled each square of the imaginary grid which he had, like an amateur cartographer, superimposed upon his Edenic refuge. Remembering his sojourn on St. Pierre a decade later in the “Fifth Promenade” of his Homeric peripeteia, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau describes his afternoon flights from this idyllic occupation:

I would make my escape and install myself all alone in a boat, which I would row out into the middle of the lake when it was calm; and there, stretching out full length in the boat and turning my eyes skyward, I let myself float and drift wherever the water took me, often for several hours on end, plunged in a host of vague yet delightful reveries, which though they had no distinct or permanent subject, were still in my eyes infinitely to be preferred to all that I had found most sweet in the so-called pleasures of life.

Rousseau’s boat provides a curious vehicle of “escape” from his island escape. Freed from his earthly focus on the flora of St. Pierre, the wanderer turns his eyes skyward to drift through digressive reveries with “no distinct or permanent subject.” Within the ambulatory

framework of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, these floating excursions deconstruct the poetics of promenade as a proto-Romantic imaginative practice. “When I walk,” concedes Jeffrey C. Robinson in the introduction to his study *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image*, “my mind does not flow like a stream.” Compared with the idle pleasures of merely floating recumbent with one’s eyes fixed on the heavens, even Rousseau’s famous perambulations assume an aspect of pedestrian discipline. Step by step, the ten textual walks in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* circuitously progress toward the promised land of self-vindication—a journey begun with *The Confessions* in 1770 and continued six year later in *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques*—though death overtakes the disgraced author before he arrives at the end of this unfinished work’s final promenade. It comes as no surprise, then, that Rousseau, when recalling his years of wandering in the proverbial desert of exile, regards his precious few hours afloat as “infinitely to be preferred to all that I had found most sweet in the so-called pleasures of life” afoot.

Rousseau is widely regarded as the author of a pedestrian poetics that underwrites the rambling Romanticism of writers like John Clare in the following century. Critical studies such as Celeste Langan’s *Romantic Vagrancy* (1995) and Toby Benis’s *Romanticism on the Road* (2000) have examined the peripatetic critique of Enlightenment progress within the period, reading the cultural practice of walking as a method for interrogating industrialization, the legislation of the rural landscape, and class mobility in nineteenth-century British society. But Rousseau’s drifting rowboat, its oars laid aside, shows how even the solitary walker may traverse a teleological labyrinth of social critique and self-defense. In this respect, the scholarly fascination with peripeteia has obscured a more digressive and wayward poetics of merely floating—a poetics that is central to our contemporary critical understanding of modern literature.

Two hundred years after Rousseau’s aleatory reveries, the New York School solitary John Ashbery finds himself wandering on foot through the *selva oscura* of modernity:

. . . I had to find a way out of the woods.
 Now, in some cases, this is easy—you just walk straight along a
 road and pretty soon
 you're out of the woods and there are suburban backlots. In
 my case,
 though, it wasn't that simple, though it wasn't extraordinarily
 demanding either—I
 just lay down in a boat and slept, Lady-of-Shalott style.

In this little allegory, Ashbery rejects the vigorous Wordsworthian poetics of walking in favor of a more recumbent postmodern sensibility. Thus the Lady of Shallot, who passively floats downriver in a vessel metonymically inscribed with her name—"And around about the prow she wrote / The Lady of Shalott," in Tennyson's version—provides a campy figure for Ashbery himself. For this meandering writer, the solitary walker advances all too purposefully toward the most unpoetical of destinations, striding "straight along a road" that leads to bleak "suburban backlots" on the outskirts of a modern metropolis. Unlike his chatty Manhattanite friend O'Hara, Ashbery fashions his identity in opposition to the *socius*: "Soon I was gliding among you," our floating subject continues, "taking notes on your conversations and otherwise making a pest of myself. / I pretended to be angry when onlookers jeered and cows moored and even the heralds told me to shut up, / yet at bottom I was indifferent." Noting the conversation of others from the seclusion of his little shallop, this outsider relishes his self-removal from social life so thoroughly that he can only feign perturbation—"I pretended to be angry. . . yet at bottom I was indifferent"—at his outcast state. Thus Ashbery frequently reflects upon the moving surface of the contemporary with no other company than his digressive craft.

The Enlightenment blueprint of Rousseau's little rowboat undergoes endless variation in the postmodern shipyard of Ashbery's literary consciousness. To compile an exhaustive archive of the imaginary vessels mobilized by this poet would be to rival Homer's sonorous catalogue of ships in *The Iliad*: the "lamé barge" of "Daffy

Duck in Hollywood," the pleasure craft from "All Kinds of Caresses," the cruise ship on which "Fascicle" is set, the blossoming boat on page 28 of *Flow Chart*, the gambling ship from "The Village of Sleep," the packet boat into which the poet drunkenly steps in the opening poem of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, the hotel boats from "The Business of Falling Asleep," and the eponymous vessels of "Pleasure Boats," "April Galleons," and "Houseboat Days" comprise only a fraction of this writer's imaginative armada. And though boating may be Ashbery's preferred method of travel, his drifting personae rarely hesitate to make use of any number of other floating conveyances, from inner tubes to icebergs to the poet's beloved hot-air balloons. "You could step up / Into the little balloon carriage and be conducted / To the core of bland festival light," writes this author in *As We Know*: "And you mustn't forget you can sleep there." The genial reminder that we can indeed sleep aboard this floating carriage—like the speaker of *Flow Chart* who, "Lady-of-Shalott style," naps while a dinghy conveys his dreaming body through a dark wood—illustrates Ashbery's desire to share with the reader his sense of utter ease and surrender while adrift. At times, it seems like this poet has been happily afloat since time immemorial. In *Can You Hear, Bird?* for instance, Ashbery playfully assumes the Old Testament identity of a famous newborn—"me, Moses on my little raft"—borne through the Biblical reeds. From the Lady of Shalott's little bark to the infant Moses's raft to the mysterious ark, quietly constructed over the course of *Girls on the Run*, which "future generations will live in, and thank us for," the horizon of Ashbery's oeuvre is dotted with a motley flotilla of literary vessels upon whose decks the poet stages the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta of his imaginative life.

Anyone who has relinquished paddle or oar to float idly downstream will remember sensing that the surrounding world, rather than one's drifting self, is in motion. "Our journey / flows past us like ice chunks," observes the speaker of *Flow Chart*, "maybe it is we that are stationary." This is Ashbery's favorite optical illusion. But tricks of perception, for the postmodern prestidigitator, always unlock the

door to hidden realities. Like Whitman's ferry passenger, who marvels that "I stood yet was hurried," Ashbery's speakers repeatedly discover that simply to stay in place is to be, in some metaphysical sense, cast adrift. This imaginative shipwright thus sets his lyric vessels afloat not on the waterways of the external world, but, rather, on the swiftly coursing medium of inwardness itself:

We are afloat
 On our dreams as on a barge made of ice,
 Shot through with questions and fissures of starlight
 That keep us awake, thinking about the dreams
 As they are happening.

In this passage, Ashbery elaborates Prospero's valedictory thesis that "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on" into a beautiful and haunting image for what might be called the interiorization of drifting. But it is a nascent social science—and not the art of poetry—that provides the most enduring image for the inward migration of floating in American intellectual life. In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James famously argues against the artifactual models for consciousness which reigned in his day, proposing instead a metaphor for interiority derived from the natural world:

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as "chain" or "train" do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A "river" or a "stream" are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.

Within late nineteenth-century American culture, the rhyming figures of constraint ("chain") and conveyance ("train") fail to describe thought "fitly," under James's account. No image has so altered the course of American writing on consciousness as this thinker's fiat that we should hereafter imagine our subjective life as a river flowing inside every person. If, as James holds, "it is just this free water of

consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook" in the period, poets like Ashbery carry on the cultural work of bringing this swift fugitive surface into linguistic representation in the twentieth century. "Casting for consciousness like an angler" throughout his literary career, Ashbery extends and elaborates the metaphor floated by James in the field of psychology nearly a century earlier.

Of course, to imagine that brook, creek, or rill might provide a figure for identity is willfully to court that most déclassé of literary blunders, the pathetic fallacy. And yet the old farm boy Ashbery invests the streams which run through his work with what James called subjective life: "Egad, / Trixie, the water can speak! Like a boy / it speaks," the poet playfully alerts his companions on the surreal inner-tube journey of "The Burden of the Park." Though Ruskin may write of Kingsley's restless waters that "the foam is neither cruel nor does it crawl," in this lyric Ashbery finds fellowship with the avuncular "Great Array River," which, like Wordsworth's tutelary Derwent, prepares its literary pupil for the hardships ahead: "And the current murmured to us to mind your back / for another day." The poem "Myrtle" from the collection *And the Stars Were Shining* provides what might be the most charming example of the riverine pathetic fallacy in Ashbery's work:

How funny your name would be
 if you could follow it back to where
 the first person thought of saying it,
 naming himself that, or maybe
 some other persons thought of it
 and named that person. It would
 be like following a river to its source,
 which would be impossible. Rivers have no source.
 They just automatically appear at a place
 where they get wider, and soon a real
 river comes along, with fish and debris,
 regal as you please.

Though it would indeed be comic to witness some primitive forefather initially “naming himself” Myrtle, Ashbery’s little joke on the gendering of names quickly gives way to a sly profundity via the threefold invocation of the philosophical category of the “person” in the poem’s opening sentence. (Ordinarily one would write “some other *people* thought of it” rather than “some other *persons* thought of it.”) Indeed, the most colorful verb in this lyric reflects Ashbery’s underlying concern with the nature of identity:

. . . and someone
has already given it a name: St. Benno
(saints are popular for this purpose) or, or
some other name, the name of his
long-lost girlfriend, who comes
at long last to *impersonate* that river
on a stage, her voice clanking
like its bed, her clothing of sand
and pasted paper, a piece of real technology,
while all along she is thinking, I can
do what I want to do. But I want to stay here.

To name a body of water after the patron saint of anglers—(St. Benno is commonly pictured holding a fish in his hand)—is to confer some small degree of personhood to its inhuman flux. But convincingly to “impersonate” a river, one must more wholeheartedly subscribe to the fiction that streams are people too. Cycling through the full complement of subjective attitudes, “Myrtle” opens with a second-person address—“How funny your name would be”—before digressing into a third-person narrative—“and someone has already given it a name”—only to discover its perspectival resting place in a theatricalized scene of first-person identification with a river. Costumed in the materials of riverbed (“sand”) and literary composition (“paper”), the protagonist of this drama declaims her clanking utterance while inwardly reflecting in stream-of-consciousness monosyllabics upon the existential predicament she shares with all water: “I can do what I want to do. But I want to stay here.”

Though the flowing contours of consciousness remain hidden from view, writers from Heraclitus to Ashbery have long studied rivers as a surrogate for the mind in the world. Perhaps the most assiduous pupil of rivers in modernity, Gerard Manley Hopkins, continually revisits this topography of transition in order to examine the intersection of consciousness and creation:

Oct. 20—*Laus Deo*—the river today and yesterday. Yesterday it was a sallow glassy gold at Hodder Roughs and by watching hard the banks began to sail upstream, the scaping unfolded, the river was all in tumult but not running, only the lateral motions were perceived, and the curls of froth where the waves overlap shaped and turned easily and idly.—I meant to have written more. . .

Framed by the “*Laus Deo*” of Christian praise, Hopkins’s journal entry exemplifies the natural prayer of the soul. (The passive construction “were perceived” illustrates the suppression of Hopkins’s perceiving ego in this passage.) Fixing his gaze on the Hodder’s glassy gold surface, the poet delights in Ashbery’s pet mirage: “by watching hard the banks began to sail upstream.” Though they may seem to be worlds apart, these two writers partake of a riverine fellowship. “Just because the river looks like it’s flowing backwards / Doesn’t mean that motion doesn’t mean something, / That it’s incorrect as a metaphor,” writes the postmodern skeptic, philosophically defending Hopkins’s *Laus Deo* in the secular language of meaning and metaphor. The historical distance that separates these writers is thus bridged by the timeless “river today and yesterday” of Hopkins’s account. If the Jesuit poet documents the lavish baroque surface of “the burly water-backs which heave after heave kept tumbling up from the broken foam and their plump heap turning open in ropes of velvet” on the Hodder, Ashbery, too, is capable of marvelously sensuous riverine observation: “the swiftly flowing / current is like green cream, like baizē unfit for fulling.” The gorgeous materiality of such thick descriptions reflects the rich literary material inscribed within running water’s ephemeral figure. Ending his remarkable spiritual exercise with an admission of failure—“I meant to have written

more"—Hopkins indicates the inexhaustibility of the river as an imaginative topos within Western poetics.

"For classical authors, as well as for Catherine of Siena, Spenser, Drayton, and Milton, the river was a place in which to locate ideas about history, time, and the nature of man's relation to the world," writes Wyman Herendeen in his study *From Landscape to Literature: The River and the Myth of Geography*. Throughout the history of Western poetry, knowledge of rivers signifies not only an understanding of interiority, but, through a strange synecdoche, a geographical grasp of the globe as well. In book 4 of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser demonstrates his encyclopedic knowledge of rivers in an epithalamium for the Thames and the Medway:

And after [Nereus] the famous riuers came,
Which doe the earth enrich and beautifie:
The fertile Nile, which creatures new doth frame;
Long Rhodanus, whose sourse springs from the skie;
Faire Ister, flowing from the mountaines hie;
Diuine Scamander, purpled yet with blood
Of Greekes and Trojans, which therein did die;
Pactolus glistring with his golden flood,
And Tygris fierce, whose streames of none may be withstood.

Great Ganges, and immortall Euphrates,
Deepe Indus, and Maeander intricate,
Slow Peneus, and tempestuous Phasides,
Swift Rhene, and Alpheus still immaculate:
Ooraxes, feared for great *Cyrus* fate;
Tybris, renowned for the Romaines fame,
Rich Oranochy, though but knowen late;
And that huge Riuer, which doth beare his name
Of warlike Amazons, which doe possesse the same.

Mapping the major rivers known to the early modern world, Spenser's catalogue provides an index of various methods by which an archive of knowledge is constructed within the period. From the

Renaissance humanism implicit in the use of the Latin name "Ister" for the Danube to the assimilation of New World rivers—such as the Orinoco, "though but known late," and "that huge Riuer," the Amazon—discovered in the Age of Exploration, Spenser's wedding retinue provides an occasion for the virtuosic performance of authorial knowledge. Atlas in hand, Ashbery constructs a postmodern version of this catalogue in one of his more audacious early lyrics, from the collection *Rivers and Mountains*:

Far from the Rappahannock, the silent
 Danube moves along toward the sea.
 The brown and green Nile rolls slowly
 Like the Niagara's welling descent.
 Tractors stood on the green banks of the Loire
 Near where it joined the Cher.
 The St. Lawrence prods among black stones
 And mud. But the Arno is all stones.
 Wind ruffles the Hudson's
 Surface. The Irawaddy is overflowing.
 But the yellowish, gray Tiber
 Is contained within steep banks.

Unlike Spenser's literary excursus—embedded within the ongoing romance of Florimell and Marinell—no framing story provides an occasion for the wholly decontextualized catalogue of rivers called "Into the Dusk-Charged Air." Ashbery's poem is simply a river of rivers. But how can the lyric hold even one river within its prosodic form, let alone a compendium of waterways? Even the epic poet Spenser expresses anxiety regarding this question: "How can they all in this so narrow verse / Contayned be, and in small compasse hild?" For Ashbery, this formal anxiety becomes most apparent in relation to the problem of textual closure. To impose a sense of an ending upon "Into the Dusk-Charged Air," the poet must exhort the rivers which course through his catalogue to cease motion: "Let the Brazos / Freeze solid! And the Wabash turn to a leaden / Cinder of ice! The

Marañón is too tepid, we must / Find a way to freeze it hard." From the exclamatory jussives of prayer ("Let the Brazos / Freeze solid!") to the first-person plural imperative of collective emergency ("we must / Find a way"), Ashbery dramatizes the threat to literary shapelessness posed by his endlessly propulsive subject. By its end, the poem only achieves a precarious terminal equilibrium in which "The / Thwaite, cold, is choked with sandy ice," and "The Ardèche glistens feebly through the freezing rain." Like a river, the poem can only slow to a stop when it freezes over. In this respect, the literary experiment of "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" concludes with a surprisingly conservative alignment of content with form. This river of rivers grows increasingly mimetic of a river as it draws toward closure.

In a brief lyric called "The Template" from his recent collection *Where Shall I Wander*, Ashbery wryly relates a Borgesian parable regarding the mysterious palimpsest upon which all poems are inscribed: "[The template] was always there, its existence seldom / questioned or suspected. The poets of the future / would avoid it, as we had." As one might expect from such an accomplished illusionist, Ashbery reveals precious little about this magical template over the course of the poem. We only learn that "It / was like the Amazon, but on a much smaller scale." Contracting an entire *ars poetica* into the compass of a single sentence, Ashbery proposes that the ideal poem should resemble a tropical river in miniature. If, as Herendeen observes, "with increasing frequency in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the river dictated the shape of whole works or principal parts of them," Ashbery quietly revives this bygone tradition within the realm of contemporary American literature. The very title of a volume such as *Flow Chart* highlights the riverine narratology of the poem that follows. Indeed, in this text the river provides a figure not only for individual works of art, but for *poesis* itself:

And the river threaded its way as best it could through sharp
 obstacles and was sometimes not there
 and was triumphal for a few moments at the end. I put my
 youth and middle age into it,

and what else? Whatever happened to be around, at a given
 moment, for that is the best
 we have.

By simply replacing “river” with “poem” in this passage, we discover a narratological clue to the meandering and elusive yet ultimately jubilant Ashbery lyric: “And the poem threaded its way as best it could through sharp obstacles and was sometimes not there and was triumphal for a few minutes at the end.” (Though various critics have argued that Ashbery writes against triumphalist modes of closure, the incandescent ending of *Flow Chart* itself belies this poststructuralist commonplace.) More important, we learn here that this writer’s relationship to the river of poetry is sacrificial in nature. Ashbery offers *poesis* his youth, his middle age, and whatever else happens to be around precisely because these things are “the best we have.” This may be as close as Ashbery ever comes to adopting a religious attitude within his work. Thus the deities memorialized by *Flow Chart* are the classical offspring of Oceanus and Tethys: “Sad grows the river god as he oars past us / downstream without our knowing him,” writes the poet at the outset of his digressive masterpiece, in an invocation that shades into a jeremiad on behalf of the forgotten divinities of the stream.



In his latest collection, *A Worldly Country*, Ashbery quietly continues his riverine devotions. Publishing a new collection roughly every year over the past decade, this writer has amassed a body of late work which displays a remarkable diversity of interests and styles, from the ekphrastic mock epic of *Girls on the Run* (1999) to the wry epistemological exercises of *100 Multiple Choice Questions* (2000) to the autumnal lyrics of *As Umbrellas Follow Rain* (2001), *Chinese Whispers* (2002), and *Where Shall I Wander* (2005). Though at first glance such varied output might be construed as the imaginative flotsam and jetsam of a writer at the twilight of a prolific career, underneath this literary miscellany courses the propulsive

current of the metaphysical river which drives and unifies all of Ashbery's work: "Oh the mill sang of many things but its wheel / was always rolling whether you noticed it or not." Just as one might not recall the stream that turns the waterwheel when faced with various goods produced by a mill, one could easily overlook the river running below the surface of *A Worldly Country*, were it not for Ashbery's pointed reminders that his lyric speaker still sings from aboard "my sinking laundry boat, point of departure." Though each new collection lifts its curtain on an ever-expanding array of *dramatis personae*, theatrical scenery, whimsical props, and stage machinery, the poet here acknowledges that "it's the same old stuff / we groped through before: reeds, old motor-boat / sections, skeins of herring." Indeed, Ashbery's figurations of the river assume a somewhat retrospective cast in this volume, as if the author were bidding farewell to the moving surface that has so profoundly influenced his idea of poetry:

What if we are all ignorant of all that has happened to us,
 the song starting up at midnight,
 the dream later, of lamb's lettuce and moss
 near where Acheron used to flow?

Charon will have to tie his ferry elsewhere, for even the river of woe no longer flows as it used to. If the waterways of the underworld are subject to change, however, this does not mean that the river has evaporated as an imaginative topos in this writer's work. On the contrary, Ashbery testifies to the enduring nature of the terrestrial rivers which will outlast us all: "rivers kind of poured over where / we had been sitting," he writes in the wistful lyric "Old-Style Plentiful." Here the lyrical buoyancy of earlier collections like *Houseboat Days* and *April Galleons* is tempered by an awareness of one's own place within the framework of geological time, as Ashbery imagines a landscape vacated by that most universal of pronouns, the poet's beloved first-person plural.

Readers of *A Worldly Country* will find Ashbery in just such a pensive mood throughout this collection, caught at the crossroad

between his own literary legacy and the dubious blank page of futurity:

What were the rights and the right ways?
 Did we invest our strength in the kind grains
 of conversation that blew across our page, and out?
 Is this the time to tackle a major oeuvre,

or are we banished to the shallows of content . . . ?

Neither "a major oeuvre" nor a collection of trinkets unearthed by a beachcomber idly wading through "the shallows of content," *A Worldly Country* represents a leisurely continuation of Ashbery's riverine poetics into the dusk-charged air. ("Content," of course, is a tricky word in the work of a writer who so artfully changes the subject of his poems from one sentence to the next; if one construes "content" as a trochee, the phrase "the shallows of content" conveys Ashbery's abiding disdain for poetry governed by the dictates of subject matter.) At times, the poet seems to worry that his meandering method has fossilized into mere mannerism: "The weary river passed / to ask you the same song over again," Ashbery writes in the poem "Ukase," projecting his digressive repetition compulsion onto the imaginary stream that compels him to take up the riparian lyre once more. Though it is poignant to hear this note of weariness entering into the work of such an extraordinary innovator, Ashbery goes on to find beauty in his wayward progression toward dusk later in this poem: "And I digress, too, / in the gloaming where all can be finessed / as we are incurably, undeniably aging." Incurably, undeniably, aging cannot be avoided; but this digressive speaker nonetheless prefers to take the most circuitous route possible toward his final destination. Even with nightfall approaching, Ashbery insists, there is still time to digress.

Throughout *A Worldly Country*, Ashbery finds consolation for his own mortality in the riverine evasions that have marked his career from the outset. Facing the East River—a watercourse that is actually a tidal strait—the aging poet notes how "all swims iridescently, /

as though there were no whither" at evening tide. As he marvels at the play of light spreading outward in every direction on the water's glittering surface, not only is the teleological pressure of destination—"whither"—momentarily suspended, but Ashbery's sense of his own senescence is alleviated as well. (One cannot help but hear the variant "as though there were no wither" in this Dickinsonian line.) Yet the East River is, of course, no river at all. It more closely resembles the ineffable current that appears toward the end of Wallace Stevens's final collection of verse:

an unnamed flowing,

Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore
Of each of the senses; call it, again and again,
The river that flows nowhere, like a sea.

River meets sea in this final line from "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," a poem that beautifully imagines the river's mouth as a place where movement is finally freed from the burden of destination. Ashbery's late work, too, "flows nowhere," for the figure of the river has now become sublimated, so to speak, into an abstract epistemological framework for thinking about utterance without end in this writer's literary consciousness. "The wraparound flux we intuit / as time has other claims on our inventiveness," writes this postmodern Heraclitus near the end of the collection. If we can never step into the same river twice, Ashbery suggests, this intuition may at least spur us on to further acts of discursive invention. *A Worldly Country*, then, brings us closer to the river's mouth in this writer's ongoing journey to the sea. In a collection by turns whimsical, elegiac, avuncular, and philosophical—yet perpetually open to the work of transformation—Ashbery continues to open new horizons of change within the landscape of contemporary American poetry.



The story of modern verse may be told through a series of images for literary utterance. M. H. Abrams has documented the historical progression from the faithful mirror of mimesis to the incandescent lamp in our evolving conceptions of the English lyric; and, satisfied with neither mirror nor lamp, William Carlos Williams added the Modernist machine to the iconography of American poetry in the early twentieth century. But postmodernism has yet to coin a compelling image for the poem of our time. This may reflect, in miniature, contemporary theorists' failure to name "postmodernity" as anything other than the aftermath of the modern. Or perhaps we dwell in an era when such images for writing proliferate, like Deleuze's rhizomes, making it difficult to select only one objective correlative for poetry itself. In either case, Ashbery's river occupies a curious position within the dynastic succession of mirror, lamp, and machine in our critical understanding of the lyric. Unlike those earlier artifactual models, the river is not a human invention, but rather something that exists independently of our design. As a figure for poetry, the river belongs to a family of metaphors drawn from the natural world, like Whitman's leaves of grass or Goethe's trees. (Indeed, one surprising consequence of Ashbery's adoption of the river as an image for *poesis* rests in the latent Romanticism embedded within such a notion; Rousseau on his boat would find Ashbery's flowing model more in tune with his wandering sensibilities than Williams's industrious machine.) But the river is, in a sense, more abstract than the organic models of the nineteenth century—its serpentine form less anthropomorphic than a tree, its surface less stable than the grass underfoot. An elusive figure, the river entails no fixed idea of art, for such a fugitive muse asks only that the poet perpetually change literary course in midstream. In the end, only the collected poems themselves will allow us to glimpse the ramifying implications of Ashbery's riverine poetics. So it seems somehow appropriate to conclude this discussion of his wandering work with an *ars poetica* culled from Ashbery's own continuing reflections on rivers:

River Cento

Floating heart, why wander on senselessly?
To praise this, blame that,
Leads one subtly away from the beginning, where
We must stay, in motion.
It rolls from view, like a river which is never really there because
of moving on someplace,
A wide way of evading,
But it is hard, this not knowing which direction to take, only
knowing that you are moving in one,
Which brings me to my original argument.
Ah, what was the argument?
The real time of water gives you little wiggling room.
The center keeps collapsing and re-forming.
It too is flowing, fleeting;
It is a picture of flowing, scenery, though living, mortal,
Over which an abstract action is laid out in blunt,
Harsh strokes. And to ask more than this
Is to become the tossing reeds of that slow,
Powerful stream, the trailing grasses
Playfully tugged at, but to participate in the action
No more than this.

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