

REVIEW: John Ashbery
SELF-PORTRAIT IN A
CONVEX MIRROR (Viking Press) 83 pp.

I want to make a case for the basic intelligibility of John Ashbery's new book, *SELF-PORTRAIT IN A CONVEX MIRROR*: most of the reviews I have read, including John Malcolm Brinin's in *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, and Irvin Ephrenpreis' in *THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS*, virtually throw up their hands when it comes to dealing with the book seriously; Brinin finds Ashbery's syntax and shifts in diction interesting (and for him the language itself is the primary pleasure of the book), while Ephrenpreis, less sympathetic, finds the book incomprehensible. One problem critics have run up against is trying to use traditional, linear means of explication in examining Ashbery's poems, but the poems do not lend themselves to such examination. The poems are most often processes, tracings of mental and associative processes, which, rather than defining or solving issues of experience, choose to dramatize them. The poems are full of endless qualifications, modifications, contradictions; they are always coming *to* something, approaching it. Ashbery's purpose is to propose, to pose questions and explore them from a multiplicity of perspective, to dwell on the complexities of experience, not to solve them. His poems don't mean, to alter a familiar cliché about writing, but rather explore meaning. Or as he says in "Tenth Symphony," "It connects up./ But not to anything, but kind of like/ Closing the ranks so as to leave them open."

The poems reflect, therefore, Ashbery's vision of experience: that, for better or worse, process is everything; and the poems re-create experience analogously. "Everyone is along for the ride," he says in "Worsening Situation," "Besides, what else is there?" Or, more directly, "But I was trying to tell you about a strange thing/ That happened to

perience. Experience is fragmented: attempts to conceptualize are doomed to the relics of abstraction. From the same poem, "Better the months — they are almost persons — than these abstractions/ that sift like marble dust across the unfinished work of the studio/ Aging everything into a characterization of itself."

So this inability to know (one of his poems is called "No Way of Knowing") does not rid one of the longing to know, nor the belief that time is the equivalent of loss, that formerly things were more clear, comprehensible, somehow less empty. This is, for me, Ashbery's essential obsession: loss through time, which creates both an idealization or romanticization of the past, an unrewarding nostalgia, and the ironic perception that to desire the past is man's impossible, tragic doom. Over and over Ashbery echoes the feeling time is loss: "And the past slips through your fingers, wishing you were there" ("Man of Words"). "The history of someone who came too late, . . . only the gap of today filling itself/ as emptiness is distributed/ in the idea of what time it is/ when the time is already past" ("As You Came From the Holy Land").

It is impossible to picture the firmness
Of relationships then. The slack
Was by definition taken up, and so
Everything was useful. People died
Delighted with the long wait . . .
Then sweetness was knocked down for the last time

("All and Some")

And Ashbery maintains we cannot escape the past, we are doomed to remember our history, collective and personal. "But time is a garden wherein/ Memories thrive monstrously until/ They become the vagrant flowering of something else . . . ("Suite"). This quotation points out the duality of time, its monstrousness on one hand, and on the other, how time and memory become the raw material of experience itself. We try to live in the past because it insulates us from the emptiness and inertia of the present and the future, it is the material of the imagination (at odds with what Blake said about memory and the

imagination). Nowhere is this more clear than in the poem, "Mixed Feelings," one of my favorites in the collection. In this poem the narrator is looking at a photograph of some girls posing by an airplane, circa World War II, and, by process of imagination, interacts with his image of them, how he would like to think they were; the middle of the poem is a playful and nostalgic look at the '40's (including attempts to capture the colloquial diction of the time in phrases like "Aw nerts, this guy's too much for me"), but underneath the surface of the poem Ashbery's contemplativeness is deadly serious:

How to explain to these girls . . .
About the vast change that's taken place
In the fabric of our society, altering the texture
Of all things in it?

And while his imagination allows him to linger in the dream-like world of the Forties for a while, the imaginative process breaks down because of the realization that time has changed everything:

I have already forgotten them
Until some day in the not too distant future
When we meet possibly in the lounge of a modern airport
They look as astonishingly young and fresh as when this picture
was made
But full of contradictory ideas, stupid ones as well as
Worthwhile ones, but all flooding the surface of our minds
As we babble about the sky and the weather and the forests of
change.

So to live in the present is to accept, as a condition of existence, chaos and confusion, a world which is no longer comprehensible.

Yet it is the past which is most captivating to Ashbery, because the process of time is not only incomprehensible, but presents us with decay and loss, alienation and self-separation. In two separate poems, "There were holidays we used to/ Match up . . ." and "Him too we can

sacrifice/ To the end of progress, for we must, we must be moving on.”

The greatest loss through time, of course, is death, the final, inescapable loss which forms our existence. One of his poems, “Fear of Death,” deals with the issue directly, and finds Ashbery at his most vulnerable and lucid; he asks, meditatively (so many of his poems have this meditative quality) “Is there no state free from the boundary lines/ Of before or after?” Of course there is none, no way of escaping time and self-separation.

I want to stay with it out of fear

That keeps me from walking up certain steps,
Knocking at certain doors, fear of growing old
Alone, and of finding no one at the evening end
Of the path except another myself . . .

. . . Air in my path, you could shorten this,
But the breeze has dropped, and silence has the last word.

And so death has its victory. The air is free, in the poem, but “that’s all it’s good for”; but it is our nobility, as humans, to experience time, past and present, to live in it and yet not be freed from it.

The tenor of the book, while pessimistic and melancholy, is not totally despairing. This is where language, the imagination, the dream, offers us, if not salvation, at least a resting place, an escape from time, a temporary way of coping.

There are still made-up countries
Where we can hide forever,
Wasted with eternal desire and sadness,
Sucking the sherbets, crooning the tunes, naming the names.

(“Hop O My Thumb”)

For the dream, or the dream-like meditation which Ashbery equates with a kind of song, is the artist's way of making bearable his and our past. And at times this state seems to be sufficient for our salvation, or for a temporary protection from loss and time.

It is good to be part of it
In the dream that is the kernel
Deep in it
For this we pay, for this
Tonight and every night.
But for the time being we are free
And meanwhile the songs
Protect us, in a way, and the special climate.

(“Robin Hood’s Barn”)

Much has been made of Ashbery's affinities with painting, and there is no denying his use of painterly devices: his use of perspective (as in “Farm”), light (images of light and dark, literal as well as symbolic, abound in the book), symmetries contrast with open space, his use of abstraction, and language as texture: this is, it seems to me, what is so important about his shifts in diction and syntax, the apposition of long and short line, the complex sentence with the direct statement. But these are techniques, vehicles of content as well as aesthetic ends. For as much as Ashbery's critics try to make him into an aesthete (and some of Ashbery's own statements have furthered their cause), his poems are important because of their way of seeing, their “vision.” If we love his language, we do not love it for and of itself; this explains the failure, it seems to me, of Ashbery's experiments in *THE TENNIS COURT OATH*.

Naturally, not all the poems in the book seem totally convincing. Many of the short poems seem to just begin a dramatic process, then end before they have a chance to get going. A few of the longer poems do have moments of “privatism” or obscurity or flat spots with rambling in them. And for all the recognized genius of the title poem, the poem at times becomes repetitive, flat and dull with rhetorical speech; the statements sometimes lack the resonance to carry the

weight of the language. Certainly Ashbery was aware of that risk when he wrote the poem, and chose to take it, in order to answer one of his own questions, "Are we never to make a statement?" In the main, though, the book seems to me one of the most original and important to have come out in the seventies; it has a depth of intelligence, a deep concern for language and how it makes us feel, a conviction that process is all, an elegiac melancholy quality and tone of loss; it is this tone, coupled with Ashbery's playfulness and imagination, which makes **SELF-PORTRAIT IN A CONVEX MIRROR** not only a difficult but moving and deeply serious book — one which, given the chance, will illuminate and give pleasure to any serious reader of poetry.

—IRA SADOFF