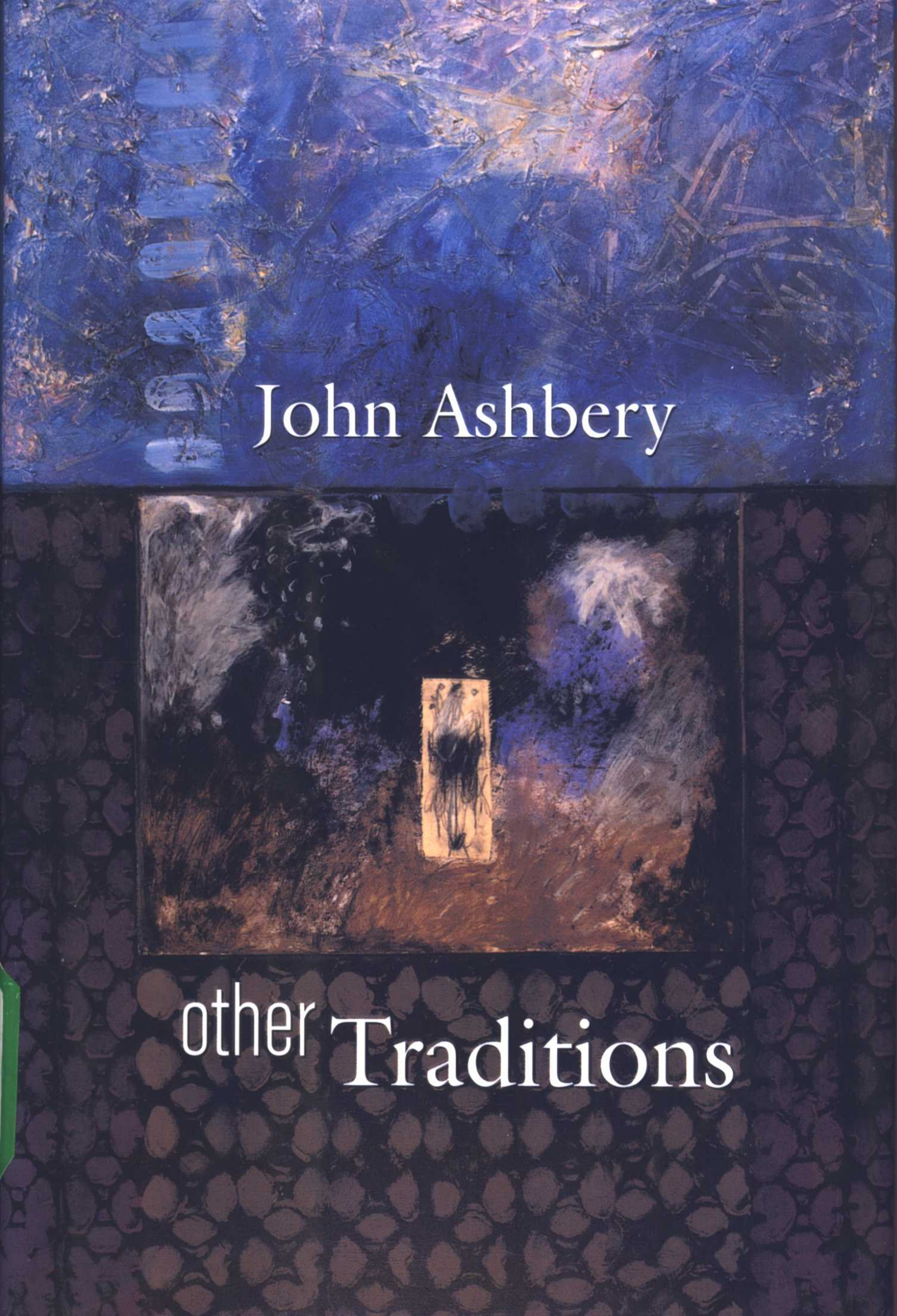

John Ashbery

other Traditions

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Preface

As the millennium drew near, I became increasingly aware of not having fulfilled the bargain made ten years previously when I accepted the Norton lectureship, that of preparing the lectures for publication. My usual tendency to procrastinate was reinforced by the quantity of practical questions involved: concocting footnotes, checking facts, correcting errors, and a host of other problems that a poet is only too happy to postpone in the hope of frittering away the time writing poems. The main problem was that of transforming a lecture into an essay, the spoken language and the written one being subtly at odds with one another. It may have been harder for me since the spoken language is the one I use when I write poetry. Luckily I have a friend who is a superb poet as well as a former book editor and now a professor of literature at the United States Merchant Marine Academy, where she runs a tight ship. Rosanne Wasserman also possesses all the computer skills without which it seems impossible to get anything done these days, and which I was apparently born too early to master. She has been of immense help to me, typing and editing my manuscript and tracking down elusive references, as has her husband Eugene Richie, also a poet and professor. Eugene's practical assistance sometimes extended to driving me to Cambridge to give a lecture while I was putting finishing touches to it in the back seat. I am enormously indebted to both of them, as well as to my friend David Kermani for his intangible but indispensable moral support. More of the same was supplied by hospitable friends in Cambridge, Ed Barrett and his wife Jenny. (Ed teaches poetry at MIT, an even more unlikely incubator for it than the Merchant Marine Academy.) And still more was laid on by the poet Bill Corbett and his wife Beverly at their comforting house in Boston's South End. Helen Vendler and Seamus Heaney were kind presences at Harvard, offering much-appreciated encouragement, as did the late Harry Levin, whom I had the good fortune to study under when an undergraduate. Theodore and Renée Weiss of Princeton most helpfully put me in touch with David Schubert's widow, Judith Kranes (now deceased), and allowed me to reprint a letter that William Carlos Williams had written them concerning Schubert. Stratis Haviaras kindly put the resources of the Lamont Poetry Room at my disposal. Henri Zerner, the art historian who knows about everything, buoyed me by confiding that his friend Charles Rosen hadn't turned in his Norton lectures yet. (They have since been published.) Finally, I would like to thank my editors at Harvard University Press for their soothingly professional editorial know-how.

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1

John Clare

“Grey Openings Where the Light Looks Through”

When I found myself holding the Charles Eliot Norton chair, my thoughts turned to wondering why I had been chosen for this honor. I was somewhat in the dark about this, since the anonymous committee who announced the choice gave no hint of what they expected of me. Naturally, I did have a few theories, however. The first one that came to mind was that, since I am known as a writer of hermetic poetry, in the course of lecturing I might “spill the beans,” so to speak: that is, I might inadvertently or not let slip the key to my poetry, resolving this vexed question once and for all. There seems to be a feeling in the academic world that there’s something interesting about my poetry, though little agreement as to its ultimate worth and considerable confusion about what, if anything, it means.

Unfortunately, I’m not very good at “explaining” my work. I once tried to do this in a question-and-answer period with some students of my friend Richard Howard, after which he told me: “They wanted the key to your poetry, but you presented them with a new set of locks.” That sums up for me my feelings on the subject of “unlocking” my poetry. I’m unable to do so because I feel that my poetry is the explanation. The explanation of what? Of my thought, whatever that is. As I see it, my thought is both poetry and the attempt to explain that poetry; the two cannot be disentangled. I know this isn't going to satisfy anybody and will probably be taken as another form of arrogance from an off-putting poet. On occasions when I have tried to discuss the meanings of my poems, I have found that I was inventing plausible-sounding ones which I knew to be untrue. That does seem to me to be something like arrogance. In any case, as a poet who cares very much about having an audience, I'm sorry about the confusion I have involuntarily helped to cause; in the words of W. H. Auden, "If I could tell you, I would let you know."[1] I'm also mildly distressed at not being able to give a satisfactory account of my work because in certain moods this inability seems like a limit to my powers of invention. After all, if I can invent poetry, why can't I invent the meaning? But I'll leave it at "mildly distressed." If I'm not more apprehensive, it's probably because of a deep-seated notion that things are meant to be this way. For me, poetry has its beginning and ending outside thought. Thought is certainly involved in the process; indeed, there are times when my work seems to me to be merely a recording of my thought processes without regard to what they are thinking about. If this is true, then I would also like to acknowledge my intention of somehow turning these processes into poetic objects, a position perhaps kin to Dr. Williams's "No ideas but in things," with the caveat that, for me, ideas are also things. Here I shall fall back on my habit of quoting other writers (disregarding another quotation, Ralph Waldo Emerson's "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know")[2] by quoting George Moore, a writer considerably to the right (or left) of me as regards the presence of ideas in poetry: "Time cannot wither nor custom stale poetry unsicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."[3] He wrote this in the introduction to a slim anthology of "pure" poetry he edited; by "pure," he meant a poetry totally devoid of ideas. A little further on, he anticipates Williams, a poet he probably wouldn't have cared much for, when he says, "So perhaps the time has come for somebody to ask if there is not more poetry in things than in ideas, and more pleasure in Gautier's *Tulipe* than in Wordsworth's ecclesiastical, political, and admonitory sonnets." The Théophile Gautier poem was a sonnet whose "avoidance of moral questions . . . lifts *La Tulipe* to a higher plane than Keats's sonnet to Autumn." Moore's friend John Freeman protested, "If you can endure no poetry except a description of the external world, your reading will be confined practically to Shakespeare's songs." And the anthology does contain a number of these, as well as two poems by John Clare, whom I will be discussing in this first chapter. (The anthology also virtually excludes John Keats, of whom Moore said, "I think of him too frequently as a pussy cat on a sunny lawn.")[4]

A second possibility occurred to me when I was wondering why I had been invited to give these lectures. But first, let me mention something John Barth said: "You shouldn't pay very much attention to anything writers say. They don't know why they do what they do. They're like good tennis players or good painters, who are often full of nonsense, pompous and embarrassing, or merely mistaken, when they open their mouths."[5] I supposed that since I am known to be a poet and not a scholar, indeed since I am known not to be a scholar, someone thought it might be interesting to have me talk about poetry from an artisan's point of view. How does it happen that I write poetry? What are the impetuses behind it? In particular, what is the poetry that I notice when I write, that is behind my own poetry? Perhaps somebody wondered this. In the end, I decided that this possibility was the one more likely to fulfill expectations. I'm therefore going to talk about some poets who have probably influenced me (but the whole question of influence appears very vexed to the poet looking through the wrong end of his telescope, though not to critics, who use this instrument the way it was intended—I don't think I'll go into that topic now, though it may well creep in later). My list contains only certifiably minor poets. The reasons for this are threefold: first, I doubt I could add anything of value to the critical literature concerning the certifiably major poets whom I feel as influences: W. H. Auden, chronologically the first and therefore the most important influence, as well as Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams at times, Boris Pasternak, and Osip Mandelstam. It will be noted that a number of major twentieth-century poets don't figure in this list, but one can't choose one's influences, they choose you, even though this can result in one's list's looking embarrassingly lopsided. My list of minor poets who have mattered to me would be much longer. Most poets, I suspect, have their own ideas on what the canon ought to be, and it bears little resemblance to the average anthologist's. That is why I at first decided to call this series "The Other Tradition," which I later regretted having done, deciding that it was more accurate to call it "Other Traditions." (Though since every poet has other traditions, perhaps it would be correct after all to refer to these collectively as "The Other Tradition.") Poets who have meant a lot to me at various times are F. T. Prince, William Empson, the painfully neglected English poet Nicholas Moore, Delmore Schwartz (once thought a major poet), Ruth Herschberger, Joan Murray, Jean Garrigue, Paul Goodman, Samuel Greenberg: I could go on, but you get the idea. These are not poets of the center stage, though they have been central for me. If that means I too am off-center, so be it: I am only telling it as it happened, not as it should have happened.

In addition to the poets one has at times been influenced by, there is also a much smaller group whom one reads habitually in order to get started; a poetic jump-start for times when the batteries have run down. For me, the most efficacious of these has always been Friedrich Hölderlin, but since I can't read him in the original and since he is in any case a major poet, I wouldn't dream of discussing him. Pasternak (especially in the little-known translation of J. M. Cohen, which I discovered many years ago in the Lamont Poetry Room) and Mandelstam are two other major writers I use for this purpose. Among the minors, with one exception I have chosen to talk in this series about the jump-start variety, poets I have at some period turned to when I really needed to be reminded yet again of what poetry is. They are John Clare, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, John Wheelwright, Laura Riding, and David Schubert. The exception is the French writer Raymond Roussel, for whom I feel enormous empathy, though I can't say that reading him ever directly inspired

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me to write. The influence came in a curiously backward and indirect way, so that I was only conscious of it much later, and am still discovering traces of it I hadn't realized were there.

These constitute a very mixed bag of writers, though good things sometimes come in mixed bags. I may have presumed too much in selecting a group whose only link is that they have at times been very important to my development as a writer. For those to whom this is a matter of indifference, I can only hope that the relative unfamiliarity of most of them and the fact that most haven't received enormous attention from critics will be a sufficient reason for reading this book.

As I look back on the writers I have learned from, it seems that the majority, for reasons I am not quite sure of, are what the world calls minor ones. Is it inherent sympathy for the underdog, which one so often feels oneself to be when one embarks on the risky business of writing? Is it desire for one-upmanship, the urge to parade one's esoteric discoveries before others? Or is there something inherently stimulating in the poetry called "minor," something it can do for us when major poetry can merely wring its hands? And what exactly is minor poetry?

This question is an invitation to frivolity, and Auden did very well in succumbing to it when he wrote the introduction to his anthology, *Nineteenth-Century British Minor Poets.* To the question, "Who is a major, who is a minor poet?" he replies, "One is sometimes tempted to think it nothing but a matter of academic fashion: a poet is major if, in the curriculum of the average college English department, there is a course devoted solely to the study of his work, and a minor if there is not." He continues:

> One cannot say that a major poet writes better poems than a minor; on the contrary, the chances are that, in the course of his lifetime, the major poet will write more bad poems than the minor. Nor, equally obviously, is it a matter of the pleasure the poet gives an individual reader: I cannot enjoy one poem by Shelley and am delighted by every line of William Barnes, but I know perfectly well that Shelley is a major poet, and Barnes a minor one. To qualify as major, a poet, it seems to me, must satisfy about three and a half of the following conditions.
>
> 1. He must write a lot.
> 2. His poems must show a wide range of subject matter and treatment.
> 3. He must exhibit an unmistakable originality of vision and style.
> 4. In the case of all poets, we distinguish between their juvenilia and their mature work but, in the case of the major poet, the process of maturing continues until he dies so that, if confronted by two poems of his of equal merit but written at different times, the reader can immediately say which was written first. In the case of a minor poet, on the other hand, however excellent the two poems may be, the reader cannot settle the chronology on the basis of the poems themselves.

He adds, "To satisfy all the conditions is not, as I said, essential. Wordsworth, for example, cannot be called a master of technique, nor could one say that Swinburne's poetry is remarkable for its range of subject matter. Borderline cases there must necessarily be."[6]

One poet who flunks all but one of Auden's tests of a major poet, and who is included in his anthology, is John Clare. It seems to me that Clare escapes Auden's last category. This could be debated. In general, though, there are significant differences between his early and later poems, in part as a result of the madness that kept him in an asylum for most of the last twenty-seven years of his life. Broadly speaking, the early work catalogues, to the exclusion of almost everything else, his rural surroundings near Helpstone, a village in the Northamptonshire fen district, while the later work is more introspective and relatively unadorned, with fewer of those teeming lists of rural ephemera. The early period culminates in the beautiful long poem "The Village Minstrel," probably Clare's most sustained performance, and in a constellation of shorter poems, especially sonnets of a kind unique to him, that became ideal vehicles for the brief, crystal-clear encapsulations of nature at which he excelled. These are rare instances of perfection in a poet whose habit, one might even say whose strength, was imperfection. Many were collected in his first volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery,* in 1820. This book was Clare's first and only real success; by the following year, it had gone through four editions, eventually selling more than thirty-five hundred copies, while the publisher, John Taylor, was still trying to unload the five hundred copies of Keats's third volume which he had also printed in 1820.

The "peasant poet" became an overnight success. Taylor invited him to London (the first of four such trips), where he hobnobbed in his green suit with the likes of Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, S. T. Coleridge, and Thomas De Quincey.

He was introduced to rich patrons who talked of starting a subscription to rescue Clare from day labor. This eventually happened, though the annuity never really covered his needs, and in the end chronic poverty became an aggravating factor in his madness. Then too, the patrons, notably a certain Lord Radstock, began to meddle in his poems, trying to excise Clare's so-called radical sentiments (protests against the evils of enclosure and the plight of the rural poor), anticlericalism, and passages considered sexual or scatological. Clare did, however, form lasting relationships with some of his literary acquaintances, who responded to his poetry and could see through what Clare called his "clownish ways" to the keen intelligence underneath. He jotted down portraits of some of them that are as oddly incisive as his sketches of field mice and burdocks; of Hazlitt, he wrote: "When he enters a room he comes stooping with his eyes in his hand as it were throwing under-gazes round at every corner as if he smelt a dun or thief ready to seize him by the collar and demand his money or his life he is a middle-sized dark-looking man and his face is deeply lined with a satirical character his eyes are bright but they are rather buried under his brows he is a walking satire."[7]

Clare's next book, *The Village Minstrel and Other Poems,* appeared with Taylor in 1821 and was moderately successful, but thanks largely to the publisher's dilatoriness, his third volume, *The Shepherd's Calendar,* didn't appear until 1827, by which time the vogue for Clare and for poetry in general had waned considerably. Taylor's enthusiasm seemed to have waned, too. As editor he had from the first the task of transcribing Clare's rough and unpunctuated manuscripts into something that could be printed, in the process frequently changing the text to eliminate the dialect words and "improprieties" that are so vital an element of the poetry, while generally respecting its substance. But *The Shepherd's Calendar* brought out a new strain of impatience in him, and the published version was senselessly mutilated in a way that the earlier volumes had not been; it is often impossible to second-guess Taylor's reasons for the emendations he made, including wholesale rejection of the July section, for which Clare dutifully supplied an alternate, weaker version. The problem was Clare's limited range, which today everybody recognizes as an element of his poetry, and which his admirers are happy to take in stride. After the first intoxicating novelty of *Poems Descriptive,* which swept through London like a blast of fresh air, readers not unreasonably expected Clare to surprise them anew. But more of the same was precisely the name of his game. From the viewpoint of the late twentieth century, this sameness, for those who value Clare, appears not so much a flaw as the very fabric of his writing. And his formal eccentricities, though unwilled, are less troubling to those who have experienced the poetry of our time. A modern editor of Clare, James Reeves, has put the case nicely: "If one reads Clare's poems in bulk, one can get used to these blemishes, ignore them, or even come to love them, though one may continue to fear that they may put off other readers. For the faults are part of the poems and the poems are the expression of the man . . . His poems are like the central English countryside where they grew, unsensational, undramatic, revealing their beauties more to the dweller than the visitor. The qualities of such scenery are secret and intimate. Yet the poems need selection. The landscape has dull stretches, patches of repetition, and occasional intrusions by non-native elements."[8]

A long poem, therefore, is going to suffer in comparison to a judicious selection of shorter ones. *The Shepherd's Calendar* contains some of Clare's finest writing but it also contains doggerel, and even some of the better stretches are monotonous. It takes a special kind of reader to appreciate it for what it is: a distillation of the natural world with all its beauty and pointlessness, its salient and boring features preserved intact.

Poems from the years up until Clare's first confinement in 1837 do seem to gain in polish, though at bottom their structure remains as idiosyncratic as ever. And the elegiac, valedictory tone that dominates the asylum period begins to thrust itself forward even now. Before his committal to the High Beech asylum at Epping Forest in 1837, there had been a previous upheaval: Clare's removal from Helpstone to the nearby village of Northborough, where he and his family occupied a comfortable cottage provided, not rent-free, by a wealthy patron. This was supposed to be a step up, but though his new home was only three miles from the far more primitive cottage where he had been born and raised, it was a new world for him and a strange one. The sense of loss, linked with an automatic, unreflecting joy in nature, had been the dominant note in his poetry from the beginning. And the losses, as well as the joys, were real. Enclosure arrived at Helpstone in 1809, in Clare's sixteenth year: after that his landscape was never the same, its fens drained, its lovely waste places deforested, ploughed, and fenced off.

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