

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

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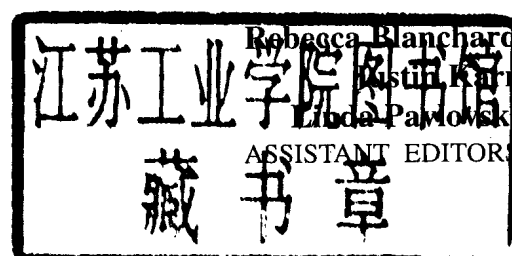
Volume 125

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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Preface

A Comprehensive Information Source on Contemporary Literature

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Format of the Book

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Features

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the author’s name in the form under which the author has most commonly published, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- A **Portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **Biographical and Critical Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author's full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. To provide users with easier access to information, the biographical and critical essay included in each author entry is divided into four categories: "Introduction," "Biographical Information," "Major Works," and "Critical Reception." The introductions to single-work entries—entries that focus on well known and frequently studied books, short stories, and poems—are similarly organized to quickly provide readers with information on the plot and major characters of the work being discussed, its major themes, and its critical reception. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.
- A list of **Principal Works** notes the most important writings by the author. When foreign-language works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets.
- The **Criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing, ranging in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The critical and biographical materials are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- Critical essays are prefaced by **Explanatory Notes** as an additional aid to readers. These notes may provide several types of valuable information, including: the reputation of the critic, the importance of the work of criticism, the commentator's approach to the author's work, the purpose of the criticism, and changes in critical trends regarding the author.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book precedes each critical piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- A concise **Further Reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors for whom a significant amount of criticism exists in addition to the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. Each citation in this section is accompanied by a descriptive annotation describing the content of that article. Materials included in this section are grouped under various headings (e.g., Biography, Bibliography, Criticism, and Interviews) to aid users in their search for additional information. Cross-references to other useful sources published by The Gale Group in which the author has appeared are also included: *Authors in the News*, *Black Writers*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *DISCovering Authors*, *Drama Criticism*, *Hispanic Literature Criticism*, *Hispanic Writers*, *Native North American Literature*, *Poetry Criticism*, *Something about the Author*, *Short Story Criticism*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*.

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- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in the various literary criticism series published by The Gale Group, with cross-references to Gale's biographical and autobiographical series. A full listing of the series referenced there appears on the first page of the indexes of this volume. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death dates cause them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet F. Scott Fitzgerald, a writer often associated with him, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.
- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which the authors appear.
- An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the titles of long poems are printed in italics.
- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paper-bound Edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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²Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale, 1995), pp. 223-26.

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The editors hope that readers will find *CLC* a useful reference tool and welcome comments about the work. Send comments and suggestions to: Editors, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, The Gale Group, 27500 Drake Rd., Farmington Hills, MI 48333-3535.

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John Ashbery

1927-

(Has also written under pseudonym Jonas Berry) American poet, playwright, novelist, critic, editor, and translator.

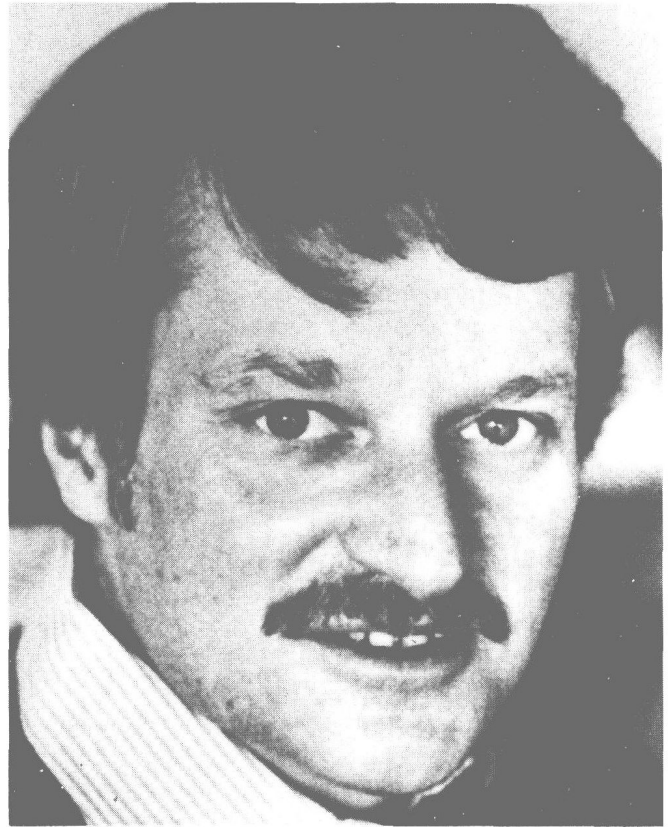
The following entry presents an overview of Ashbery's career through 1997. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 13, 15, 25, 41, and 77.

INTRODUCTION

John Ashbery is considered among the most influential and challenging American poets of the postwar period. His highly inventive, often enigmatic verse defies the conventions of logic, linear thought, and realism in an effort to deconstruct language and the paradoxical limits of verbal expression. Drawing attention to the fragmentary quality of unconscious thought and the creative process itself, Ashbery's provocative linguistic experiments, narrative juxtapositions, and improvisational style illustrate the infinite possibility of multidimensional perspective and random experience. Associated with the "New York Poets" during the 1950s and 1960s, Ashbery established his reputation with the award-winning volumes *Some Trees* (1956), *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), *Three Poems* (1972), and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). He received subsequent acclaim with additional volumes such as *A Wave* (1984) and *Flow Chart* (1991). An innovative poet of remarkable intelligence, humor, and originality, Ashbery is recognized as one of the leading poets of his generation.

Biographical Information

Born in Rochester, New York, Ashbery was raised in Sodus, a small upstate New York town near Lake Ontario. His father was a fruit farmer and his mother a former high school biology teacher. Ashbery's maternal grandfather, Henry Lawrence, was a renowned physicist at the University of Rochester whose personal library became a resource for the precocious Ashbery. Though initially interested in painting and later music, Ashbery began writing poetry as a child. Upon graduation from Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts in 1945, Ashbery enrolled at Harvard University, where he majored in English literature, completed a senior thesis on W. H. Auden, and befriended poets Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara. After finishing his undergraduate degree at Harvard in 1949, Ashbery moved to New York City to begin study at Columbia University, where he earned a master's degree in French literature in 1951. While in New York, Ashbery entered the booming postwar arts scene with painters Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher and poets Koch, O'Hara,



and James Schuyler—later labelled the "New York Poets" with Ashbery as their foremost representative. Ashbery's first volume of poetry, *Turandot and Other Poems* (1953), was a limited edition publication with illustrations by Freilicher. Between 1951 and 1955, Ashbery worked as copywriter for Oxford University Press and McGraw-Hill. During the early 1950s, Ashbery also wrote two plays—*The Heroes* (1952) and *The Compromise* (1955). A third play, *The Philosopher* (1964), appeared in *Art and Literature* magazine and was later republished with his earlier two in *Three Plays* (1978). The manuscript of Ashbery's second volume of poetry, *Some Trees*, was selected by Auden as the winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize in 1956 and published the same year. The recipient of two Fulbright scholarships, Ashbery set off for Paris where he lived and worked for the next decade as a poet and art critic for several prominent periodicals, including the *New York Herald Tribune*, *Art International*, and *ArtNews*, for which he later served as executive editor from 1966 to 1972. While overseas, Ashbery produced *The Tennis Court Oath*, earning him the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award from *Poetry* magazine the next year. Upon his return to New York in 1965, Ashbery published

Rivers and Mountains (1966), a National Book Award nominee, *Sunrise in Suburbia* (1968), *Fragment* (1969), and the novel *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969) with Schuyler. He also received several Guggenheim fellowships, grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1969. Over the next decade, Ashbery published *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), *Three Poems* (1972), recipient of a Shelley Memorial Award, and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and National Book Critics Circle Award in 1976. He has since published additional volumes of poetry—*Houseboat Days* (1977), *As We Know* (1979), *Shadow Train* (1981), *A Wave* (1984), *April Galleons* (1987), *Flow Chart* (1991), *Hotel Lautreamont* (1992), *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), and *Can You Hear, Bird* (1995)—and a collection of art criticism, *Reported Sightings* (1989). An art critic for *Newsweek* during the 1980s, Ashbery has also edited numerous anthologies of contemporary poetry, translated several French titles, and taught English and creative writing at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York from 1974 to 1990. He was awarded the Robert Frost medal from the Poetry Society of America in 1995.

Major Works

Ashbery's preoccupation with the indeterminate relationship between language, perception, time, and artistic expression is a prominent feature of his poetry. Influenced by French symbolist writers, modern abstract expressionist art, particularly the action paintings of Jackson Pollack and Robert Motherwell, and the avant-garde music of composer John Cage, Ashbery's poetry derives from the post-logical literary and artistic traditions of the early twentieth century. *Some Trees*, Ashbery's first major publication, displays his technical skill as well as early attempts to articulate multiple levels of reality in flights of imagination and word play. In one poem, "The Instruction Manual," the speaker is a disenchanted technical writer who daydreams about a faraway trip to Guadalajara, suggesting the ironic tension between order and the longing to escape. *The Tennis Court Oath* focuses on the incomprehensible totality of language in disjointed compositions resembling surrealist visual art. The collage poem "Europe," divided into 111 parts with cut-outs from the 1917 British detective novel *Beryl of the Biplane*, revolves around themes of postwar espionage, political paranoia, and the failure of technology and language. In another poem, "They Dream Only of America," Ashbery similarly evokes the disorienting simultaneity of lived experience in a random assemblage of non sequiturs and wide-ranging references to politics, literature, and popular culture. *Rivers and Mountains* is a transitional work that introduces the innovative roving perspective of Ashbery's mature style, particularly as revealed in the poem "Clepsydra," whose title refers to a water clock. This poem, characteristic of many of Ashbery's subsequent compositions, begins mid-thought

and contains alternating first and second person observations, exposing the nonverbal interaction between conscious and unconscious reflection. The interchangeable use of first, second, and third person pronouns to portray shifting perspective would become a staple device in Ashbery's work. Another poem from this volume, "The Skaters," suggests the performativity of linguistic displays as a series of dissolving and surfacing activities and entities. *Three Poems* consists of a book length prose meditation divided into three parts. The middle poem, "The System," is among Ashbery's most important linguistic experiments in which he reflects on the living, open-ended qualities of poetry and posits that in the elusive malleability of language inheres the foundation for love, understanding, and interpersonal connectivity. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* signals the culmination of Ashbery's previous innovations, incorporating fragmentary digressions, crosscuts, irregular syntax, and dreamlike self-examination in evocative language and sensuous phrasing that denies logical comprehension. The title poem, inspired by the self-portrait of sixteenth century Italian painter Francesco Parmigianino, foregrounds the distortions of self-image and sensory perception to explore the limitations of form and the sprawling byways of conscious thought. In a final recital, a recurring feature of Ashbery's poetry, he summarizes the significance and affirmative power of poetry and art as a means to approach the "otherness" of language. "Litany" a notable poem from *As We Know*, further probes the ineffable gap between perception and language. Consisting of two columns of verse, one in roman the other in italic type, Ashbery illustrates the disharmonious intersection of experience, mood, and free association in a cacophony of competing voices. The lengthy title poem of *A Wave*, another significant work, explores the perpetual unfolding of experience and the preconditions for love, particularly as found in epiphany and replenishing moments of speechless withdraw and distraction. Ashbery's investigations into the essence and dimensions of expression is foremost in the book length poem *Flow Chart*. Divided into six sections, the lengthy composition is a pastiche of personal memory, literary allusion, extraneous fragments of daily experience, and internal dialogue that suggest the regenerative nature of language despite its inherent inadequacy and perpetual deconstruction. Subsequent volumes, including *Hotel Lautreamont*, *And the Stars Where Shining*, and *Can You Hear, Bird*, evince similar efforts to come to terms with the insufficiency and ambivalence of language in Ashbery's trademark amalgamation of meandering ruminations, semantic puzzles, deadpan rhetoric, artful solecisms, and moments of awestruck revelation.

Critical Reception

Ashbery is regarded as one of the most important American poets of the last half century. His demanding, idiosyncratic studies of perception, thought processes, and the

mutability of language are consistently praised for their capacity to conjure disquieting verbal landscapes of exceptional depth and resonance. While *Some Trees*, *The Tennis Court Oath*, and *Three Poems* established Ashbery's reputation as a formidable emerging talent, he is best known for his acclaimed *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, generally considered his most significant work. Subsequent volumes, particularly *Flow Chart*, have also attracted considerable critical attention and esteem. Though some critics find fault in the opacity of Ashbery's solipsistic poetry, often oblique to the point of impenetrability, most focus on his remarkable ability to evoke the totality of being in accumulations of random observations, incongruous associations, and the fleeting sensations of awareness. Despite the daunting aspirations of his ambitious investigations into the limits of knowledge and expression, as many critics note, Ashbery counters hopelessness with irony, parody, and invigorating language that extracts nascent and residual meanings from seemingly disconnected musings and the mundane minutiae of everyday experience. Distinguished for his linguistic dislocations and capacious vision, critics frequently cite the influence of Wallace Stevens and Walt Whitman in Ashbery's poetry, as well as the aesthetic concerns of avant-garde art and music which informs so much of his work. A highly original and much honored poet, Ashbery is hailed as one of the most significant American poets of the twentieth century.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Heroes (drama) 1952
Turandot and Other Poems (poetry) 1953
The Compromise (drama) 1955
Some Trees (poetry) 1960
The Poems (poetry) 1960
The Tennis Court Oath (poetry) 1962
The Philosopher (drama) 1964
Rivers and Mountains (poetry) 1966
Selected Poems (poetry) 1967
Sunrise in Suburbia (poetry) 1968
Three Madrigals (poetry) 1968
Fragment (poetry) 1969
A Nest of Ninnies [with James Schuyler] (novel) 1969
The Double Dream of Spring (poetry) 1970
The New Spirit (poetry) 1970
Three Poems (poetry) 1972
Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (poetry) 1975
The Serious Doll (poetry) 1975
The Vermont Notebook [with Joe Brainard] (poetry) 1975
Houseboat Days (poetry) 1977
Three Plays [includes *The Heroes*, *The Compromise*, and *The Philosopher*] (drama) 1978
As We Know (poetry) 1979
Shadow Train: Fifty Lyrics (poetry) 1981

A Wave (poetry) 1984
Selected Poems (poetry) 1985
April Galleons (poetry) 1987
Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987 (criticism) 1989
Flow Chart (poetry) 1991
Hotel Lautreamont (poetry) 1992
And the Stars Were Shining (poetry) 1994
Can You Hear, Bird (poetry) 1995
The Mooring of Starting Out: The First Five Books of Poetry (poetry) 1997

CRITICISM

Kevin Clark (essay date Spring 1990)

SOURCE: "John Ashbery's 'A Wave': Privileging the Symbol," in *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Spring, 1990, pp. 271-9.

[In the following essay, Clark offers critical analysis of the poem "The Wave." According to Clark, "Ashbery's poetry is distinguished by an enigmatic style which privileges indeterminacy rather than the traditional symbolist style practiced by most modernist and postmodernist poets."

... [long poems] are in a way diaries or logbooks of a continuing experience that continues to provide new reflections and therefore [a long poem] gets to be much closer to a whole reality than the shorter ones do.

John Ashbery
 Interview, *New York Quarterly*

That Ashbery believes long poems are "much closer to a whole reality" than shorter poems is telling. Despite their sometimes inhibiting length and poetics, his own long poems written since 1975 are considerably closer not only to "a whole reality" but to conventional poetic technique, one which few critics acknowledge. One of his most brilliant critics is Marjorie Perloff, who without making a distinction between long and short poems, maintains that Ashbery's poetry is distinguished by an enigmatic style which privileges indeterminacy rather than the traditional symbolist style practiced by most modernist and postmodernist poets. I would like here to refine Perloff's thesis by suggesting that, while Ashbery makes much use of this enigmatic style in his long poems, passages characterized by such a style are blended into and subordinated to a dominant symbolist technique, rendering his later long poems surprisingly conventional and more easily interpretable. A good example is his most recent long poem, "A Wave" (1984).

Taken from the book by the same title, "**A Wave**" is characterized by the poet's desire to represent experience as ongoing impression, "the tender blur of the setting." Where most poets write as if meaning can be gathered from distinctly unique or intense episodes, Ashbery—particularly in his more recent long poems—insists that only a sense of meaning can be felt, and this only for short periods.

And the issue of making sense becomes such a
far-off one.
Isn't this "sense"—
This little dog of my life that I can see—that
answers me
Like a dog, and wags its tails, though excitement
and
fidelity are
About all that ever gets expressed?

While his subject here may be the indeterminacy of consciousness, his writing is conventionally referential. By "sense" of meaning he intends the emotional world we inhabit. Since the publication of "**Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror**" (1975), Ashbery's long poems render this interior world so accurately by transmitting such a multitude of deceptively casual musings, like the one above, that the ideas give way to effect: we retain the impression of a human being continually engaging elementary questions about life more than we retain any of the specific questions or answers. Meaning is not forgotten, but, because Ashbery seems always to doubt but never entirely reject the *possibility* of meaning, we are left with a notion of his continuing uncertainty.

But this is not to say his long poems are afloat, unfixed in a universe of non sequiturs. Most of Ashbery's recent long poems are accessible, though their style can seem at first prohibitively resistant to understanding. Eventually, competent readers can find that the truly enigmatic passages are blended with those of reasonably straightforward language to produce an impression of the conscious mind in alternating periods of perplexity and clarity. And throughout the poem, Ashbery nearly announces his technique as well as his point of view. He is not evasive; he is referential—that is to say, he employs symbolist tools.

Perloff sees symbolist writing as that kind described by Eliot in his call for an objective correlative. In Eliot's words, the "only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding 'an objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion. . . ." Perloff also turns to Auden's claim that a poet may describe the "sacred encounters of his imagination" in terms of something other than the components of that encounter. Surely Perloff is correct in her translation of Eliot's and Auden's poetics, con-

tending that the two High Modernists were committed to a style of writing which renders even the "ineffable" through "concretion of the symbol." Her notion of symbolist writing is nothing new: words signifying discernible referents outside the poem. But focusing on the poet's early verse, Perloff asserts that an Ashbery poem, regardless of length, cuts off "the referential dimension" (266) and that his images usually "have no discernible referents."

For the sake of discussion, then, let us think of the term "symbolist" as nearly synonymous with "referential." Symbolist poetry usually achieves meaning by means of a system of imagery which renders an idea or attitude. In this sense, most poems are symbolist. Those that are not are poems which intentionally sabotage their own grammar in order to call into question conventional poetic processes for communicating. Rimbaud, Stein, Olsen, and even Pound, in certain cantos, practiced variations of such an antisymbolist poetics. Today, while language poets are most actively antisymbolist, their poems are rarely long. (Michael Palmer's "Notes for Echo Lake" [1981] is an exception).

Ashbery's shorter poems are most often antisymbolist in technique, though both long and short have often been incorrectly accused of unnecessary obfuscation, much in the way Gertrude Stein's work was attacked. As Perloff points out, both Stein and Ashbery rise out of the same reformational strain of literature, one which is not primarily symbolist as is most modernist writing. The works of this genre often "seem to have no external referent." The poem is intentionally unclear, "and yet one does keep listening. For the special pleasure of reading a poem like '**These Lacustrine Cities**' [*Rivers and Mountains*] is that disclosure of some special meaning seems perpetually imminent. . . . As readers, we are thus left in a state of expectancy: just at the point where revelation might occur, the curtain suddenly comes down."

"**These Lacustrine Cities**" is much like the more recent "**Purists Will Object**," published in *A Wave*. The poem's images hint at a logic which continues to evaporate, almost with each subsequent line:

We have the looks you want:
The gonzo (musculature seemingly wired to the
stars)
Colors like lead, khaki and pomegranate; things
you
Put in your hair, with the whole panoply of the
past:
Landscape embroidery, complete sets of this and
that.
It's bankruptcy, the human haul,
The shining, bulging nets lifted out of the sea,
and

always a few refugees
 Dropping back into the no-longer-mirthful
 kingdom
 On the day someone else sells an old house
 And someone else begins to add on to his: all
 In the interests of this pornographic master-
 piece,
 Variegated, polluted skyscraper to which all
 gazes are
 drawn,
 Pleasure we cannot and will not escape.

It seems we were going home.
 The smell of blossoming privet
 blanketed the narrow avenue.
 The traffic lights were green and aqueous.
 So this is the subterranean life.
 If it can't be conjugated onto us, what good is
 it?
 What need for purists when the demotic is built
 to last,
 To outlast us, and no dialect hears us?

The poem intimates a world of disturbingly radical, almost perverse style, one which privileges the "gonzo," the "pornographic," the "demotic." But beyond the suggestion of this mode of fashion, it is quite difficult to grasp clearly the relationships of images in the poem as well as our own relationship to the poem. How, for instance, does one put "the whole panoply of the past" in one's hair? If the poem is about the innate indecency of civilization or even more particularly about the inhumane aspects of capitalism ("It's bankruptcy . . . / On the day someone sells an old house / And someone else begins to add on to his"), what is the relationship between the mercenary "We" of the first line in the first stanza and the nostalgic "we" of the first line in the second? And how could a dialect "hear"?

And so Perloff borrows a term from critic Roger Cardinal and calls works like this "enigma texts." She contends that all the possibilities of meaning generated by this kind of poem "give way to . . . an 'irreducible ambiguity'—the creation of labyrinths that have no exit." But while we may read one of Ashbery's shorter poems for the pleasurable "state of expectancy" Perloff describes, such a state may not carry us comfortably through all of his longer poems. Indeed, his recent longer poems bring us much closer to "that disclosure of some special meaning" than do his shorter poems. The key is this: in his later long poems Ashbery writes as if he doubts the plausibility of meaning, absolute or relative, and yet he also remains unconvinced about his own doubt. Furthermore, these poems exhibit both nonreferential and referential styles, but clearly privilege the latter, symbolist method. Again, in the long poems of his current phase he favors a symbolist style with which to write about an inde-

terminate state of existence. His readers must engage his depiction of reality on the chance that it will provide instances of enlightenment and hope. And while Ashbery can seem like an obsessive agnostic, some of his recent long poems, particularly "**A Wave**," earn a hard won, if temporary, peace of mind in which the questions are either suspended for a time or answers are tentatively proffered.

Before "**Self-Portrait**" Ashbery's long poems were more enigmatic and more nonreferential than those from "**Self-Portrait**" on. His long poems have evolved in three distinct phases, moving from the first radically fractured, Cubist, collage phase to that of the more prosaic, nonreferential phase. This second phase is marked by a newer elegiac tone and a deceptively unexciting grammar. For all their problems, the poems of this second stage are marvelous attempts at stretching language into a more fruitful zone between utter opacity and conventional symbol.

The first important poem of Ashbery's third and current phase is "**Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror**." In "**Self-Portrait**" Ashbery uses Francesco Parmagianino's strange painting by the same title as an object of meditation. Here, every gesture, every intellectual position holds its own antithetical possibility; every premise is scrutinized by the poet for its likelihood of falsity. The grammar of the long poems of this phase is not always as intentionally self-sabotaging as that of the shorter. It helps the reader to remember that in these Ashbery is considering the ephemerality of experience while also attempting to render the confusion often brought on by that ephemerality. In most of his shorter, more enigmatic poems, readers are usually set randomly adrift at any given point, referentiality having disintegrated in a chaos of pronouns and lost syllogisms. In "**A Wave**" as in "**Self-Portrait**," readers oscillate between such a void and a more symbolist terrain with clearer landmarks. In the context of his own canon, Ashbery's suggestion that long poems are "much closer to a whole reality" than shorter poems can be read as an admission that, because of their length, long poems should be grounded by referential, determinate writing—or the reader may simply dismiss the poem as so much endless nonsense. In fact, quantitatively there seems to be far more conventionally discursive writing in these poems than secretive writing. The language virtually achieves what Perloff would have to call "the symbolist."

In "**A Wave**" there exists for the narrator the assumption that there had been an earlier stage in life which was continually fulfilling, when metaphysical anxieties were unnecessary and the spirit was happily replete. But that time of unexamined childlike confidence was abandoned for an adult self-assessment made difficult by a nearly ceaseless skepticism and an equally skeptical approach to that skepticism. The result is the present tentative self-consciousness he describes, a perpetual state of trustlessness. Accordingly,