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Publication Date

2024-05-15

**“Toward an infinity of wavering susceptible variables:” Camp, Audience, & Productive
Distortion in John Ashbery’s “The Vermont Notebook”**

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ENL 199: Independent Study

Dr. Margaret Ronda

Winter 2024

Introduction

“[O]blique, indeterminate, and periphrastic”¹ represents a common reaction to the uncontestedly complicated poetry of John Ashbery. His style drew both great acclaim and criticism during his lifetime and encouraged endless, conflicting critical analysis of his body of work. Indeed, Ashbery himself is quoted as admitting, “I often wonder if I am suffering from some mental dysfunction because of how weird and baffling my poetry seems to so many people and sometimes to me too.”² One way literary scholars may attempt to wrestle his poetry into submission is by citing it as “camp.” This mode of aestheticism, made famous by Susan Sontag’s seminal essay “Notes on Camp,”³ is itself difficult to delineate strictly and precisely, making it an attractive match for Ashbery’s enigmatic sensibility. However, few are willing to assign the term without qualification. Mark Silverberg characterizes Ashbery’s poetry as a “lowkey camp,”⁴ begging the question, how can a mode that values exaggeration and excessive stylization ever be lowkey? Dean Brink describes a “critical high camp,” emphasizing the political uses of a sensibility originally considered inherently apolitical.⁵ Clearly, Ashbery’s relationship with camp is nuanced. Looking further into the employment of camp and its effects can help us better approach Ashbery’s individual works and understand his oeuvre as a whole.

A more widely-accepted category for Ashbery’s writings is postmodernism, representing a period generally located as occurring from the 1970s and 1990s. Postmodernism is a far-reaching concept, originating most powerfully in architecture, to broadly mean a disruption

¹ Nasrullah Mambrol. “The New York School of Poetry.” *Literary Theory and Criticism*, July 10, 2020. <https://literariness.org/2020/07/10/the-new-york-school-of-poetry/>.

² John Ashbery, ‘Paris Review - Writers, Quotes, Biography, Interviews, Artists’, *The Paris Review*, 1983

³Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” (London: Penguin Classics, 2018)

⁴ Mark Silverberg, ‘Laughter and Uncertainty: John Ashbery's Low-Key Camp’, *Contemporary Literature*, 43.2 (2002), 160

⁵ Dean Brink, ‘Critical High Camp: The Political Dimension in Ashbery's A Worldly Country’, *Foreign Literature Studies*, 31.1 (2011), 71–84

of rationality, objectivity, and ideology.⁶ The departure from traditional definitions of art, reason, and self, are reflected in Ashbery's poetry and have led him to be declared as "rank[ing] among the exemplary postmodernist poets."⁷ While Ashbery's work is in allegiance with the experimental ideals of postmodernism, this does not automatically qualify him for, nor exclude him from camp.

Critics admit that the line between sensibilities is blurry; camp's "rampant eclecticism, sense of theatricality and artifice, and conflation of categories are all trademarks of postmodernism."⁸ So, what exactly differentiates camp from its contemporary, postmodernism? Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp,'" defines the term widely as valuing artifice, exaggeration, and sentimentality.⁹ However, what exactly makes it into the camp of camp is a relatively precise art: an ornate lamp might be camp, but not every ugly pair of curtains can be. A medium-bad movie is not camp, but a truly terrible one is likely to earn the badge. For the purposes of this thesis, it will be useful to provide a working definition for camp. Despite its amorphous nature, several features of camp remain essential: artifice, stylization, sentimentality, and theatricality. Ultimately, camp is not just an aesthetic, but a method; Petersdotter Apelgren argues "camp neither lies within the object or subject, but instead in the meeting of those and their common knowledges."¹⁰ While postmodernism in poetry can be viewed as the "further movement into self," leading the writer to ultimately stand "at the aesthetic center of themselves," camp hinges

⁶ Rachel K. Fischer, and Aimee Graham. "Postmodernism." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2014): 29–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/refuserserq.54.1.29>. 1

⁷ McHale, Brian. "How (Not) to Read Postmodernist Long Poems: The Case of Ashbery's 'The Skaters'." *Poetics Today* 21, no. 3 (2000): 561-590. muse.jhu.edu/article/27836.

⁸ Vincent Brook. "Puce Modern Moment: Camp, Postmodernism, and the Films of Kenneth Anger." *Journal of Film and Video* 58, no. 4 (2006): 9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688535>.

⁹ Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 2-4

¹⁰ L. Petersdotter Apelgren, "When Camp becomes a Method : a conceptualization of conversational performatives and curatorial agencies within 'the camp-eye'" (thesis, Stockholms universitet, Filmvetenskap, 2020), 2, <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-184801>.

on an exaggerated performance of the self and its recognition by an audience;¹¹ the camp poet is looking into the crowd. Thus, looking at Ashbery's relationship to the camp aesthetic can help us understand the relationship between the narrator and the audience in his poetry.

An important candidate for this exploration is John Ashbery's *The Vermont Notebook*, published in 1975. Frequently overshadowed by *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* of the same year, this book-length text explores icons of art, processes of waste, desire, American society, and ecology, a range that is matched in Ashbery's command of tone and form. Text written by Ashbery, in stanzas, in page-long blocks, in single words or sentences, is accompanied by custom illustrations from Joe Brainard. Some sections resemble news articles, others love letters, others still the ravings of a paranoid man. These eclectic elements make *The Vermont Notebook* fertile ground for exploring if and how the camp aesthetic is used. In this thesis, I will examine how Ashbery camps traditional expectations of poetry itself in *The Vermont Notebook* to draw his audience into a camp reality. Ultimately, I will argue that this reality, the environment of language in *The Vermont Notebook*, replicates for the audience Ashbery's understanding of language.

Ashbery & Camp in Popular Criticism

Several generalizations are often used to bring Ashbery into the camp fold, and should be addressed. One likely reason that Ashbery is commonly included in the genre of camp poetry is his close relationship with fellow New York School poet Frank O'Hara, whose theatricality, queerness, and references to camp icons have made him a widely-accepted camp poet. Jason Lagapa writes that the "centrality of parody, exaggeration, mannerism and artifice to camp style certainly makes camp a logical and salient concept with which to examine New York school

¹¹ Neal Bower. "W. S. Merwin and Postmodern American Poetry." *The Sewanee Review* 98, no. 2 (1990): 250. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27546210>.

poets and their influence” extending a broader camp sensibility across poets of the time period.¹² Despite their shared community, the New York School was hardly a monolith: few would confuse Ashbery’s apparent opacity with O’Hara’s conversational “I do this, I do that” poems. Ashbery’s relationship with camp is his own.

Additionally, camp, having arisen from gay subculture, often references queerness or explicitly celebrates it. Ashbery’s identity as a gay man is a likely contributor to the willingness of many critics to declare him camp, though his exploration of sexual orientation is far more subtle than many camp works. Ashbery acknowledged both these facts when, after being told his poetry could be thought of as belonging to a queer “campy” sensibility, he replied, “I could certainly see it applied to my poetry, but I’m trying to think of another poet who is gay, who doesn’t write specifically about homosexuality, and whose work could be said to have a gay sensibility.”¹³ Reflecting this, critics have sought to “de-essentialize the link between gaymen and camp,” emphasizing that despite its obvious roots to queer culture, being a (white, cisgender) gay man is not a necessary nor sufficient condition for camp.¹⁴ I will reference both Ashbery’s contemporaries and his “queer aesthetics” (or lack thereof) throughout this thesis but, in the interest of fidelity to his work, it is worth noting that neither of these associations are principal to camping in Ashbery’s poetry.

Theatricality & Audience

Central to camp is the concept of theatricality. Ashbery has a longstanding preoccupation with theatricality; he went as far as to write several plays that fall roughly into the era of Poets

¹² Jason Lagapa. ‘Parading the undead: Camp, horror and reincarnation in the poetry of Frank O’Hara and John Yau’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 33(2) (2010), 92.

¹³ John Ashbery, ‘An Interview with Christopher Hennessy’, *Free Online Library*, 2011

¹⁴ Pamela Robertson. “‘The Kinda Comedy That Imitates Me’: Mae West’s Identification with the Feminist Camp,” 57.

Theater, “a radical modernist continuation of classical theater”¹⁵ that sought to bring elements of poetry to the stage and, thus, to the public.¹⁶ Because of Ashbery’s relationship to the theater, it is necessary to tease out what elements of his theatricality can be attributed specifically to camp. Having broken away from the physical space of a stage, theatricality is now better encapsulated as the expectation of performance or the awareness of an audience. Because camp needs to be recognized by an audience regardless of the intention of the artist, camp is determined through interaction with the object, media, etc. Thus, for something to be theatrical in a camp way, there must be an expecting audience, an aware performer, and a moment of connection in which the audience recognizes the exaggerated performance. In order to discuss the possibility of this interaction in Ashbery’s writing, we must first establish an audience and narrator. In *The Vermont Notebook*, following a general theme for Ashbery’s work, both are complex.

Joe Brainard

For the purpose of this thesis, I will consider Ashbery’s text as the sole originator of the conceptual “subject.” However, any discussion of speaker and audience in *The Vermont Notebook*, specifically, would be incomplete without Joe Brainard. To be strict, the most immediate audience is Brainard, as the illustrator of the volume. *The Vermont Notebook* represents the first time Ashbery has set himself in intentional harmony (and, at times dissonance) with original art. It seems that Brainard, intentionally or coincidentally, has reflected some of Ashbery’s relationship between art and poetry. His illustrations oscillate between obvious, tangential, and bizarre. Next to a long list of American writers (“Anne Waldman, Tom Veitch, Hilton Obenzinger...”) is a drawing of eight human silhouettes symmetrically arranged

¹⁵ Thom Donovan, ‘What is Poets Theater?’, *Poetry Foundation*, 2010
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2010/04/what-is-poets-theater> .

¹⁶ Ashbery’s plays are occasionally considered camp, with Kevin Killian claiming that “Ashbery adds two tons of camp” to his source material for *The Compromise*.

in a circle, legs together and arms outstretched, resembling an overhead shot of a synchronized swimming team.¹⁷ At times, the association between text and illustration is more clear. Next to a list describing the view down an average suburban street (“Side porches, door jakes, window sills...”) is a drawing of a named object, a window sill, complete with frame and curtains.¹⁸ In other cases, the drawing can be understood as intentionally jarring to provide contrast to Ashbery’s writing; set beside a rant on American society is a naked man, confidentiality inviting the reader to behold him.¹⁹

Importantly, as Susan Rosenbaum points out, the images and text within *The Vermont Notebook* are not exactly in conversation with one another: Ashbery had written the entirety of the poem before Brainard created his illustrations.²⁰ In this way, the illustrations serve as a reverse ekphrasis with the caveat, perhaps, of Ashbery’s awareness that his work will be translated or accompanied by visual art. This is another way in which the text is inherently theatrical; Ashbery is aware of an audience and Brainard is expecting a performance. The combination of these understandings result in *The Vermont Notebook*. Brainard’s drawings are then folded into the concept of the performer for a new audience, the reader, who sees them paired. Ashbery is no stranger to ekphrasis, (see: “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” “The Tennis Court Oath,” “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape,” etc.) though he often performs this ekphrasis in a way that deviates from poetic tradition. DuBois points out that Ashbery is generally resistant to the narrative tradition of ekphrasis (such as in “The Tennis Court Oath”) and often takes his poems out of the standard museum context, along with its expectations of

¹⁷ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 344-45.

¹⁸ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 346-47.

¹⁹ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 382-83.

²⁰ Susan Rosenbaum. “‘Permeation, Ventilation, Occlusion’: Reading John Ashbery and Joe Brainard’s ‘The Vermont Notebook’ in the Tradition of Surrealist Collaboration.” *New York School Collaborations*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 59–89. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137280572_4. 60.

value and education.²¹ For Ashbery, ekphrasis is not necessarily a description of a poet's narrative experience with a work of art, nor does it need to reveal or explain. Brainard illustrations, likewise, do not attempt to clarify, instead reacting to a performance with another performance.

Absorption

Broadly, one might consider the text's readers as its audience. Ashbery once stated a desire "to slant [his poetry] at as wide an audience as possible, odd as it may come out in practice."²² There are, of course, elements of his writing that seem to defy this, such as a style so oblique it seems to refuse entrance and widely-drawn references that appear out of reach for the average reader. The extensive lists ("Paraphernalia, Tapemeasure, Dorothee Bis, La Boutique Alice Schweitzer...")²³ with which *The Vermont Notebook* begins are something we might expect to see scrawled into a kitchen notepad, harboring meaning for only the author. In other sections, the narrator depicts epistolary conversation between unknown characters "Beverly" and "Autumn Addict." Even the title adds ambiguity: the term "notebook" is evocative of a more private account. Could it be that Ashbery is really talking to himself?

This vague, guarded, or indirect property of Ashbery's poetry is often described in criticism as "reticent,"²⁴ implying again a shyness or hesitance to connect. As some have argued, this reticence may also be interpreted as belonging to a queer aesthetic: the oppression of and violence against queer people has fostered indirect expression as a performance element.²⁵ Ashbery himself lived through McCarthyism and the Lavender Scare. Though Ashbery's reticence may be generated in part from his queerness, I do not believe that it is intended to

²¹ Andrew Lee DuBois. *Ashbery's forms of attention*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 40-41

²² John Tranter, 'John Ashbery interviewed by John Tranter, 1988', *Jacket magazine*, 1984
<http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html>

²³ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 337.

²⁴ Silverberg, "Laughter and Uncertainty: John Ashbery's Low-Key Camp" 28.

²⁵ Imbriglio, Catherine. "'Our Days Put on Such Reticence': The Rhetoric of the Closet in John Ashbery's 'Some Trees.'" *Contemporary Literature* 36, no. 2 (1995): 249-88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208902>.

select a narrower audience for his works. Ashbery maintained throughout his career that “What I am trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience.”²⁶ His intention seems to be inclusive rather than exclusive: as John Shoptaw points out, “Ashbery disorients all readers equally.”²⁷ However, in a method or aesthetic where some level of recognition is essential, the choice to apparently keep the audience at arm's length creates an essential complication. How can camp be present with this distance between the narrator and audience? I argue that it is precisely the disinterest Ashbery displays in the comprehension of the reader that allows for the execution of a camp relationship between the poetry and its readers.

Michael Fried argues in “Absorption and Theatricality” that the way an artist can create a specific role for the audience is through the interiority of their subjects. By depicting subjects thoroughly engrossed in their own context, an artist can generate:

... a paradoxical relationship between painting and beholder [in which the artist can] find a way to neutralize or negate the beholder’s presence, to establish the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas. (The paradox is that only if this is done can the beholder be stopped and held precisely there.)²⁸

Fried goes on to argue that in absorbing paintings “the beholder is removed from in front of the painting” and enters the painting itself, present at the represented scene.²⁹ I suggest that Ashbery’s insularity is a tool that brings the reader closer. By keeping the narrator entirely absorbed in the literary space, even to the extent that they refuse to elaborate for clarity, Ashbery draws the audience into a liminal space between being a spectator and, simply, no one. From

²⁶A. Poulin Jr. “John Ashbery,” *The Michigan Quarterly Review* 20.3 1981, 250-251

²⁷ John Shoptaw. *On the outside looking out: John Ashbery’s poetry*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994. 4

²⁸ Michael Fried. *Absorption and theatricality: Painting and beholder in the age of Diderot*. Chicago, CA: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976, 108.

²⁹ Fried, *Absorption and theatricality*, 103

there, he is able to invite the beholders into the work as if they were within the text. In camp, an aesthetic largely characterized by its coterie, pulling the reader into the frame allows them to have the aforementioned moment of connection of recognition.

Language as Environment

Ashbery draws his audience into the frame of *The Vermont Notebook's* extended poem, but where exactly are they being pulled? Ashbery provides descriptions of various scenes and scenes but never delineates the stage upon which the poem plays out. Are we to imagine ourselves in Vermont, real or fictional? The audience of a painting is drawn into the painting, not the reference used by the artist. In parallel, the poem becomes an environment in and of itself. It is this setting in which the speaker absorbs himself, and this environment into which the reader is pulled. Moreover, language becomes a space in which Ashbery can explore, revealing and exploring the act of creation through his engagement with the poem.

One way in which the poet can create a poetic environment is by having the subject act upon the poem, rather than experiencing the poetic space as an object or projection of the self (as is the case in the Romantic tradition). This is in keeping with the idea of absorption; the speaker telegraphs their absorption by presenting nature as an external entity with which they actively engage. Perry Meisel uses D. H. Lawrence as an example of this “poem as environment” achieved by granting agency to the speaker. Meisel writes that this practice “not only places the poet in the landscape—any subjective utterance does that. Its subjectivity creates, not foils for itself, but predicates that it interrogates and that pass from possibility to recognition, from sowing to harvest.”³⁰ To paraphrase: when a poet expresses their thoughts, feelings, or experiences, it naturally involves a relationship with the surrounding environment. What sets this

³⁰ Perry Meisel. “‘Green They Shone’: The Poem As Environment.” *The D.H. Lawrence Review* 43, no. 1/2 (2018): 66–80. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26865913>. 71

type of subjectivity apart is its dynamic nature. Instead of merely presenting the poet against the backdrop of nature, it actively shapes the landscape through linguistic and poetic expression, the subjectivity becoming a force that influences the environment. "Predicates" here refers to elements or qualities attributed to the landscape through the poet's subjective expression; these predicates are not fixed or absolute but are products of the poet's interpretation and creativity. The poet doesn't take these for granted but rather explores and challenges. As a result, the poetic subjectivity initiates a transformative journey for the landscape from "possibilities" —potential ways of perceiving or describing the environment— to "recognition," a particular, realized option achieved through the poem's specific language.

What is particularly important in the *The Vermont Notebook* is that creation stems from language. Ashbery emphasizes these possibilities through an interrogation of language: "In other times 'frontage' meant relief to enjoy, not a nameless dark forced familiarity with things."³¹ Here, calling out the versatility of a single unit of language highlights the possibilities that exist before Ashbery moves to cement them. In another example, he describes an unnamed character who "felt good, in an unusual sense of the word 'good,' as in 'good night.'"³² Over the course of the sentence, we are confronted with the standard use of "good," a broadening into "an usual sense," and finally a decision on the meaning as deriving from part of a phrase. Thus, the subject works to generate meaning in the environment through specific language. Ashbery also achieves this environment through constant conversation with the poetic space, as in, "Did I know you, split levels? What's it like to inhabit your dangerous divided spaces with view of celery plantations?"³³ Moving past the environment as a metaphysical landscape of the poet's ego, as in

³¹ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 391.

³² Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 371.

³³ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 391.

Keats or Elliot,³⁴ Ashbery plants himself on solid ground by interacting with nature directly, without gesturing toward metaphor. Thereupon, Ashbery emphasizes his ability to affect the scenery, dissolving the space between the speaker and the environment through the move from possibility to recognition: “We dance on hills above the wind / And leave our footsteps there behind.”³⁵ In another section, Ashbery demonstrates an ability to not only shift or narrow the environment but to maintain ambiguity: “The matter is: stones building up under the surface that finally swell and burst into the sunlight. Patient phenomena—well. Not really.”³⁶ In this instance, he first personifies nature as “patient” and then backtracks, played up by the enjambment through punctuation of “well. Not really.” The environment must not be perfectly defined, as language must not necessarily come to a decisive conclusion.

Materials

Through an embodied materialism, Ashbery enforces his reality as not just a projection of the self but a environment. In *The Vermont Notebook*, a general air of materialism is apparent in the listing of stores (“Colgate, Motorola, Crysler”³⁷) and actual materials: “suede, tweed, cotton, silk, jersey” (349). Furthermore, Ashbery adopts a first-person materialistic recurrently in the *The Vermont Notebook*:

Man dreams of putting penis between girl’s boobs. Is mankind diminished? Or strengthened? What do you want? I want a pair of orange pants and a pair of orange and white shoes to go with them. I know nothing will work out unless I get them, but I also know if I do get them I probably won’t wear them to a dogfight.³⁸

The camping of the speaker is clear: the outrageous sexuality, the disinterest in pursuing serious

³⁴ Meisel, “Green They Shone,” 69.

³⁵ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 417.

³⁶ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 369.

³⁷ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 355.

³⁸ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 377.

conversation, obsession with the superficial. Here, materialism is a shallow reaction to a serious issue — a cop-out toward the reader, sure, but also a pointed exploration of the way artifice cannot answer to reality (“nothing will work out unless I get them”) and the attempt to find force cooperation, or to find answers for the natural world in the artificial ends in disappointment (“but I also know if I do get them I probably won’t wear them to a dogfight”). Here, Ashbery “wanders away,” as Chris Nealon would put it, glancing off questions of heavy consequence, a trend that recurs throughout Ashbery’s poetry.³⁹ Again, his acting on the environment does not need to come in the form of resolution. In this way, indecision is not passivity; it is instead, a choice.

Notably, DuBois argues that prose itself in Ashbery’s work is a sign of him moving the needle from “dreams” toward “things,” or from the conceptual toward the concrete. DuBois writes, “the prose in Ashbery’s work is meant to produce and record not only various states of mind but also the material forms that produce those states and make them manifest.”⁴⁰ The predominance of prose in *The Vermont Notebook* is an extension of his commitment to the material, situating him and the audience in a physical world. Even the thick blocks of text, while fragmented semantically, ground the reader in a way that Ashbery’s lyrics often refuse to, reminding them of the material nature of the text itself. Certainly, this prevalence of prose is a break from the expectations of poetry, another way in which Ashbery expands his relationship past the literary expectation to assert authority over his own poetic environment.

A Camp Reality

Though the use of language as an environment is a useful tool for understanding the context of the poem, it does not seem to entirely account for some of the bizarre elements found

³⁹ Christopher Nealon. *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011. 13

⁴⁰ DuBois, *Ashbery’s Forms of Attention*, 57.

in *The Vermont Notebook*, including the difficulty identifying a setting and tone of the poem. In his collection of essays titled “Other Traditions,” Ashbery praises a work of Gertrude Stein as “the most successful of her attempts to do what can't be done, to create a counterfeit of reality more real than reality.”⁴¹ I argue that in *The Vermont Notebook* he attempts a similar counterfeit.⁴² In order to reflect an artificial super-reality, Ashbery pushes against poetic tradition to create a poem that resembles a poem but undermines the expectations of its audience: a poem with the same kind of relationship to poetry that its cannon reality has to reality. In other words, this reality is created through a camping of poetry itself.

The Vermont Notebook frequently makes use of the pastoral traditions, such as in the isolated lines, “This is where we are spending our vacation. A nice restful spot. Real camp life. Hope you are feeling fine.”⁴³ Other moments, however, such as those that focus on industry, commercialization, and excess, directly contradict this. Serenity is found not just in nature, but in artifice. Ashbery can more accurately be described as aligning with Empson’s urban pastoral, which he defined as “the pastoral method applied to Newgate,” Newgate being a famous London prison.⁴⁴ Urban pastoralism is a self-aware combination of the pastoral idealization and the unnatural or man-made. The ability to hold these two ideas in one gaze is what led Sontag to remark that “[a] great deal of camp suggests Empson’s phrase ‘urban pastoral.’”⁴⁵ Ashbery makes use of this sensibility to blur the lines between artifice and nature, subverting expectations in his poetry and undermining poetry’s habit of idealizing and delimiting.

One way Ashbery explores urban pastoralism is in his catalogs. In *The Vermont Notebook*, lists of easily identifiable images stream past to create an expansive but familiar

⁴¹ John Ashbery, *Selected Prose*. Ann Arbor, MI: Univ Of Michigan Press, 2005, 15.

⁴² Ashbery admitted that *The Vermont Notebook* is “one of the few things I’ve written that seems to have been influenced by Gertrude Stein” (Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 14).

⁴³ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 411

⁴⁴ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 196.

⁴⁵ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 3.

setting: “The climate, the cities, the houses, the streets, the stores, lights, people.”⁴⁶ Ashbery, instead of viewing America from a bird’s eye view, records an account of America in the side-view mirror, concepts rushing past without stopping to explain themselves. When no one moment encapsulates a setting or concept, the list allows for the unification of discrete concepts to form a tangible environment. Catalogs are a notorious facet of Walt Whitman’s poetry, such as in “Song for Occupations,” where he lists “Blacksmithing, glass-blowing, nail-making, coopering, tin-roofing, / shingle-dressing.”⁴⁷ Critics have long found this element of Whitman’s poetry awkward or unrefined, with William Sloane Kennedy declaring the catalogs resulted in a “universal howl.”⁴⁸ Ashbery replicates these lists to inherit one of the “other traditions” of poetry. James Machor describes Whitman’s catalogs as a formal method of synthesis in his urban pastoralism: “Whitman subsequently naturalized the city by imaginatively dismantling it...the city and the country become one by a series of imaginative leaps.”⁴⁹ Selections of urban scenes are housed in disproportionate density in Whitman’s catalogs, such as in “snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls.”⁵⁰ Ashbery catalog construction of America echoes this “dismantling” of the anthropocentric. Ashbery recounts “vacant lots, yards, enclosures, fields, arenas, slopes.”⁵¹ These places are of human construction but defined by an absence of people and the presence of nature: a grassy field or yard, even an overgrown lot intertwining the artifice of society with a sense of natural serenity. Traditionally at odds, nature and society both belong in Ashbery’s poetic space.

In Whitman’s catalogs as in Ashbery’s, “skimming seems intended by the syntactic

⁴⁶ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 4.

⁴⁷ Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*. Vol. 1. New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1997. 169.

⁴⁸ William Sloane Kennedy. *The Fight of a Book for the World: A Companion Volume to Leaves of Grass*. (West Yarmouth, MA: The Stonecraft Press), 1926, 155.

⁴⁹ James L. Machor. “Pastoralism and the American Urban Ideal: Hawthorne, Whitman, and the Literary Pattern.” *American Literature* 54, no. 3 (1982): 333. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2925847>.

⁵⁰ Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 8.

⁵¹ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 33.

parallelism.”⁵² Nothing is given the elegiac priority such as the object of an ode might receive. In one sense, this is realistic: life is not edited for clarity and style. However, Ashbery takes Whitman’s intentional excess to an extreme in *The Vermont Notebook*, spending the first twelve pages on various lists ranging from a few lines to full pages. Only the most dedicated readers will make it through the entire page listing names of American writers. Even the reader’s engagement with the text is superficial at these moments, returning attention to the theatricality of a poem. Again, everything belongs, even to a tiresome extent. The result is something familiar that mimics neither reality nor traditions of poetry.

Stranger still, many catalogs in *The Vermont Notebook* seem to self-impose a class, and then defy those rules within a few words. “Darkness, eventide, shadows,” for instance, quickly becomes, “roost, perch, leaf, light, evasion...”⁵³ Even in catalogs that feel more cohesive, the lists seem to be internally fraught:

...reckless endangerment, slander, mental cruelty, non-assistance of person in danger, perjury, embezzlement, sodomy, child abuse, cruelty to animals, bootlegging, adultery, bigamy, bearing false witness...⁵⁴

As Shoptaw points out, “[t]he letter of the law (civil or criminal, felony or misdemeanor) gets fuzzier and its repressive spirit gets clear as the list continues.”⁵⁵ The unwritten rules that govern Ashbery’s poetic reality seem to disintegrate. Both “sodomy” and “adultery” are included, social attitudes more than laws at the time of *The Vermont Notebook*. The difference in severity between “child abuse” and “bootlegging”⁵⁶ also serve to complicate or undermine an attempt to map the catalog onto the real world.

⁵² John B Mason. “Walt Whitman’s Catalogues: Rhetorical Means for Two Journeys in ‘Song of Myself.’” *American Literature* 45, no. 1 (1973): 44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2924537>.

⁵³ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 351.

⁵⁴ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 339.

⁵⁵ Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 15.

⁵⁶ Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 16.

Of course, Ashbery's brand of urban pastoralism extends outside of the catalogs, such as when he describes how "[t]he trees have their galoshes, the little boxes where the newspaper is delivered."⁵⁷ Through personification the lines between the city and the countryside, between man and nature are blurred, this time with a quaint, charming tone. In another section, Ashbery casually folds in classical allusions by speculating that "the horny grocery boy may be god Pan in disguise."⁵⁸ Pan's mythological home, Arcadia, was a rural area of Greece often compared to the Garden of Eden and the setting for many pastoral poems. By tacking on these associations to the "horny grocery boy," Ashbery conflates moments of artifice and nature, without judging either's value. According to Ashbery, "What startles though is still the relation of the hills to the town—their nearness. Their complete—yet benign—lack of cooperation."⁵⁹ Both artifice and nature coexist without negating each other, but also without combining to some greater meaning. By situating the natural world within the context of the man-made, Ashbery builds his familiar but categorically unreal camp reality.

Misrepresentation

The overall effect of this super-reality is distortion: as Shoptaw notes, "Each representative usage, idea, feeling, and observation in *The Vermont Notebook*, and in Ashbery's poetry in general, may strike us either as conventionally sincere or parodic."⁶⁰ Shoptaw coins this deliberate disorientation of the reader "misrepresentation," a term I will use in describing the way Ashbery's super-reality rebuffs understanding. One central element that both causes and reflects misrepresentation in *The Vermont Notebook* is tone, or rather, lack thereof.⁶¹ No tone is

⁵⁷ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 355.

⁵⁸ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 383.

⁵⁹ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 367.

⁶⁰ Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 17.

⁶¹ Readers may be interested in the poem "Fugue in Variations of Calypso, in the Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," in which Ashbery embodies the naively-camp Wilcox in what Silverberg called it a "low-key drag performance."

constant over the course of the poem. Or rather, the consistency lies in inconsistency, in a refusal to commit to a tone. Ashbery allows the speaker to shift far and wide, becoming many different voices. This moves beyond traditional practices of poetry as the voice of the author or a singular character to create a conglomerate, transient sense of perspective. The effect of the cast of voices is an underlying tone of irony, where no one voice can be trusted to speak for Ashbery himself or to represent the constructed reality. In fact, each new voice adds a layer of misrepresentation, moving the audience's understanding in a new direction.

Artificial Authenticity

Ironically, Ashbery performs a degree of casualness in many places throughout *The Vermont Notebook*. This style may suggest a degree of authenticity; Ashbery intentionally creates an unassuming and unaffected tone throughout the text. Narratorial insertions, for example, convey an off-hand, conversation tone: “‘Oscar’ as I call him,” “wait, I know the name, I don’t have to look it up.”⁶² However, because the audience is aware of *The Vermont Notebook* as an intentionally crafted work, these moments draw attention to Ashbery’s performance and the fictions sewn into his voice. The artificial authenticity subsequently contributes to the more than real feeling of the text: not a snapshot of the world, but an entirely different world that builds upon familiar feelings and scenes.

We see this performed authenticity also in Ashbery’s contemporary, Frank O’Hara, who was known for his off-the-cuff poems, which collect a number of apparently trivial moments to create a snapshot of life. An iconic example is in “The Day Lady Died,” in which he describes the day Billie Holiday died by writing “it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine / Because I will get off at the 4:15 in Easthampton / at 7:15 and go straight to dinner.”⁶³ Fred Moramarco notes how

⁶² Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 421.

⁶³ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 325.

“what is seemingly a random list of selected moments from a day in the poet’s life is actually a tightly structured, artfully contrived series of events.”⁶⁴ Such is the case in *The Vermont Notebook*, where apparently arbitrary scenes are compiled with intention, and the intention to make everything appear arbitrary. Ashbery and O’Hara are camping: their work cannot be casual or organic due to its self-preoccupation; it can only be stylized to appear casual. This is a seriousness that fails in the sense that the audience knows otherwise. By carefully attending to each line to make it appear organic, these poets are able to create an experience of authenticity more pronounced than it might be if the poems were really off-the-cuff, an experience that asks the audience to evaluate their relationship of poetry to the quality of being “real.”

In describing a beach, he notes how “Life comes naturally there, and goes too: no sense worrying about naturalness with so much natural fuzz (fuss?) everywhere, in corners, in bushes, and the aired mystery of the open field (?)”⁶⁵ He emphasizes the incongruity between manmade and the natural by interrupting his own sentence to second-guess himself. While the beach has “no sense worrying,” Ashbery must equivocate: “natural fuzz (fuss?).” Even in *The Vermont Notebook*’s published form he behaves like a writer in the midst of their first draft, working out ideas in the margins. This draws the audience’s attention back to Ashbery’s performance, his human inability to ignore the “mystery of the open field.” He extends this quality to things outside himself as in, “The landscape is countryish without looking countryfied [...] as though if it could talk it would say, ‘Sorry, I don’t have time to think of such things.’”⁶⁶ Of course, the very idea of a landscape being expressly nonchalant is a projection of Ashbery onto nature; his intense attention to the degrees of “countryish”-ness highlights the way he must perform while nature

⁶⁴ Fred Moramarco. “John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara: The Painterly Poets.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 5, no. 3 (1976): 444. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831077>.

⁶⁵ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 387.

⁶⁶ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 395.

cannot. Within this reality, the gap between nature as it is experienced and how it is artificially described.

Another tone shift happens when Ashbery takes a detour to spend six pages describing an environmental project at the Marco Ecology Station to improve biodiversity and promote sustainability. This may be the moment in the text that strays furthest from the expectations of poetry. In contrast to other parts of the text, the text appears straightforward and the prose reflects an academic, informative style: “Another first at Marco, is that no sewerage effluent is returned directly to the water.”⁶⁷ Still, Ashbery makes sure to complicate the tone. In introducing the environmental research station, he writes “One of the projects causing a lot of excitement while I was there trying to concentrate on casting for spotted trout and reds.”⁶⁸ He inserts an ironic self-interest in a moment otherwise dedicated to the greater social good, undermining his own authority. Again, this reveals to us Sontag’s “failed seriousness,” reminding the reader of the artifice underpinning the text even as Ashbery describes an actual research project in Florida.

As a result, when Ashbery displays uncharacteristic clarity on his relationship to America, we have difficulty taking it at face value: “America is a fun country. Still, there are aspects of it which I would prefer not to think about.”⁶⁹ Is this a genuine encapsulation of Ashbery’s relationship with American, or yet another fun house mirror of what is real? On the next page, the answer is revealed: it’s complicated.

[O]ne mustn't be in too much of a hurry to make fun of such pursuits. They stand for something broader and darker than at first seems to be the case. The silver-painted flagpole in its concrete base surrounded by portulacas, the flag itself straining in the incredibly strong breeze, are signposts toward an infinity of wavering susceptible

⁶⁷ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 407.

⁶⁸ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 399.

⁶⁹ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 381.

variables, if one but knew how to read them aright.⁷⁰

Neither disingenuous nor representative of the truth, Ashbery's constructed reality functions to disrupt any one reading, fracturing our understanding into "an infinity." Each section, voice, or word might be considered a "signpost," broadening the audience's understanding without giving us the tools "to read them aright," that is, to come to any conclusion. Because one voice in *The Vermont Notebook* is granted more authority, the audience is forced to recognize that every voice belongs. Everyone is speaking. The ever-present uncertainty creates a sense of instability for the reader, dissuading them from putting complete faith in anything said and forcing them to consider each scene as it is presented rather than as part of an underlying theme or lesson.

Waste

Another instance of this dramatic leveling of authority comes from Ashbery's preoccupation with waste, which recurs throughout *The Vermont Notebook*. Ashbery campily rejects waste to argue against poetic traditions which attempt to find meaning. Often, critics and poets reject traditional narratives and exalt what is overlooked. Ashbery argues that neither is superior: everything belongs. He recounts, "Nov. 3. Sometimes the idea of going to the bathroom makes me sick. I feel ashamed for myself and everybody on this planet."⁷¹ By letting what he initially framed as a note fit for a diary quickly spin into a globally collective shame, Ashbery heightens the disgust of waste to a theatrical paranoia. Camp echoes in this obsessive desire to move away from the real but ugly moments of life and return to a glittering artifice, what Davis Galef refers to as "camp's underlying anxiety about the natural, the unfeigned."⁷² Even in his private moments, the speaker cannot escape the necessity of waste. In another instance, he

⁷⁰ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 381-82.

⁷¹ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 362.

⁷² David Galef, "What Was Camp." *Studies in Popular Culture* 13, no. 2 (1991): 11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414496>.

narrates “Man removes booger from nostril. Man examines booger. Man relives booger. All the shame. But could it not have been avoided?”⁷³ Here, anaphora creates a documentary-style narration fit for describing a natural, albeit unseemly process before Ashbery subverts this tone with a pleading question: Can we not find a way to live without ugliness? Of course, we can’t. Playing with expectation of waste allows Ashbery to highlight how ridiculous it is to reject waste without exalting it. Of course, *The Vermont Notebook* itself is a dumping ground, for pieces of Ashbery’s scrapped poetry, from magazine articles, and many more disparate sources. His approach to language is what makes this project possible: what for others might result in an unhappy pile of rubble is a genuine exercise in the limits of language because of Ashbery’s attention to the surface. What is traditionally considered waste is neither idolized nor dismissed, simply observed.

Productive Distortion

The way in which Ashbery constructs a reality reveals his relationship with language to be one of productive distortion. As David Spurr argues, a keystone of Ashbery’s work is that he “represents language as constitutive rather than reflective of reality, implying a collapse of the ordinary hierarchical distinction between signifier and signified.”⁷⁴ Ashbery poetry is self-aware of the limits of language; it acts as metalanguage, exploring the ways in which language twists and creates understanding. In simple terms, language is artifice.

In “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” Ashbery explores poetry’s unavoidable disfigurement of the subject rather directly:

This thing, the mute, undivided present,

⁷³ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 377.

⁷⁴ David Spurr. “John Ashbery’s Poetry of Language.” *The Centennial Review* 25, no. 2 (1981): 152. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23738823>.

Has the justification of logic, which
 In this instance isn't a bad thing
 Or wouldn't be, if the way of telling
 Didn't somehow intrude, twisting the end result
 Into a caricature of itself. This always
 Happens, as in the game where
 A whispered phrase passed around the room
 Ends up something completely different.⁷⁵

The “mute, undivided present,” reality, is limited by its “mute” nature in expressing itself. An attempt to describe reality as it is, however, is fruitless, as the processes are “intrud[ing]” and “twisting.” Ashbery describes an attempt to capture reality in *The Vermont Notebook*: “More seagull snapshots. You know they reduce to brownish blobs like old Bible camp photos.”⁷⁶ No art, from photorealism to poetry, can transcribe what the human experience without inserting its own interpretation. Instead, a “caricature” is produced, sharing some elements of an experience but dramatically colored by perspective and emotion, like the nostalgia of “old Bible camp photos,” so as to ultimately communicate something entirely different. Just as in the children’s telephone game in which one delights in the distortion of “A whispered phrase passed around the room”, one knows already what “always / Happens,” and yet still watches something be twisted into a new thing.

What “the way of telling” produces, then, is not reality transcribed. *The Vermont Notebook* emphasizes the twisting nature of poetry, despite traditional beliefs that poetry reveals the truth. In one passage, a rant begins: “Jewelers say that some lie on the heights. They say that

⁷⁵ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 485.

⁷⁶ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 387.

some go unnoticed long gone on the heights. Jewelers say we cannot long understand what goes on on the heights. They say we are treason to understand what goes on on the heights.”⁷⁷ The assertive but self-contradictory tone undermines the authority of poetry. As we search for “understanding,” we encounter incongruity. The narrator goes so far as to imply that attempting understanding is “treason,” not just dishonest but a betrayal of art and reality themselves. Later, we see the impossible search for truth realized: “Why not the ending? I dunno. You said it. No I didn’t. You did too. I did no such thing. Now it is ending” (Collected Poems 355). A voice argues with itself, the distinction between characters blurred by a lack of quotation marks or line breaks. In the end, the question — “Why not the ending?” — is sort of resolved, but not answered — “Now it is ending.” Again, Ashbery pushes against the notion of poetry as a search for clarity, preferring to spend time inhabiting instability or uncertainty than to assert truth.

Moreover, he proposes that art feigning as reality to be a distraction from truth, positing that “the rest of this symbolic crap that is so much eyewash to divert our gaze from the ruthless pageant whose stage is now being hammered together.”⁷⁸ Here, emphasis is placed on the “ruthless[ness]” that is distracted from by marrying the signifier and signified. In believing that symbols can reflect the truth (falling victim to the “justification of logic”), one becomes ignorant to the nuance that separates them (the “bad thing” of which Ashbery warns).

If not truth, what does “the way of telling” produce that makes it worthwhile? Why does Ashbery continue to engage with poetry knowing its inability to convey pure reality? An answer lies, again, in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror:”

But your eyes proclaim

That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there

⁷⁷ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 353.

⁷⁸ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 398.

And nothing can exist except what's there. [...]

And just as there are no words for the surface, that is

No words to say what it really is, then there is

No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience.⁷⁹

This exploration of surface brings to mind a quote by Frank O'Hara in response to a question about his quasi-surrealist poem "Second Avenue:" "Perhaps the obscurity comes in here, in the relationship between the surface and the meaning." O'Hara continues to say, "I hope the poem to be the subject, not just about it."⁸⁰ For both poets, the aim of poetry is not truth. In keeping with postmodern ideals, Ashbery rejects the need for sweeping, unifying theories of life. In keeping with the camp aesthetic, he revels in the realm of the surface and the appearance, content with a lack of successfully profound meaning. The artifice does not cover a hidden meaning, but is instead a meaning itself; "everything is surface." Both O'Hara and Ashbery's use of language reflects this: language for its own sake, rather than to declare any grand truths.

Just as in the previous excerpt, Ashbery's decision on the ceiling of language is final; "nothing [except surface] can exist" and there are "no words for the surface," "no words to say," and "no way out." Therefore, his continued engagement with poetry, despite its acknowledged limitations, is an exploration of the very problem he identifies as "pathos vs. experience." The poem becomes a testament to the inherent limitations of words in capturing the depth of experience rather. The act of telling, even if it falls short of capturing absolute truth, becomes a worthwhile endeavor in its own right. As put by *The Vermont Notebook*:

I work on the story to be the real story of the dump which is never telling. If it ever was telling it would not be the dump which it is. The dump escapes the true scape of telling

⁷⁹ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 476.

⁸⁰ Frank O'Hara. 1995. *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 497.

and in so doing it is its own scape—the dump dumped and dumping. [...] I am to be in the dump.⁸¹

Ashbery asserts his commitment to the "dump," a space resistant to conventional narrative or expressive representation, as reality is unable to be captured by language. The phrase, "dump dumped and dumping" creates a recursive loop, mirroring the perpetual cycle of existence that eludes encapsulation through language. Ashbery's dedication to being "in the dump" signifies a deliberate immersion into the challenge of conveying the ineffable while not planning to ever succeed.

Conclusion

It is increasingly obvious why Ashbery's work seems to resist critical exploration, and more pointedly, why so many interviews Ashbery does on the subject of his poetry seems like an exercise in psychological warfare against the interviewer; the very act of searching for grand theories or answers in poetry is precisely the expectation with which Ashbery plays. With this frame, we see what may be thought of as oblique in Ashbery's poetry is inviting the audience into a new reality, one created by language's distortion. We see what may be thought of as equivocating is the constant assertion of language's inability to faithfully recreate the world and its wonderful ability to produce something new, something artificial, abundant, and theatrical. To complete the circle: Ashbery's language must feel evasive for the very reasons that its evasiveness reveals: all language is oblique to reality. Ashbery's recurring habit "wandering away" is another byproduct of this assertion; to decisively answer a "real-world" problem with language is to carve with a flawed tool.

Camp is the essential lens for this process of intentional superficiality. Camp is aware of

⁸¹ Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 353.

its theater, as is language. It recognizes the failed seriousness of a language (that is, its failure to reflect the world without warping) and revels in the artifice created, the beautiful surface.

Ashbery leans into the camping of reality as parallel to what language does to reality through its limitations of representation. . In grappling with the productive distortion of language, Ashbery claims the act of poetry as unable to record reality but still a necessary, meaningful pursuit. Even if we cannot reach a deep, total understanding of reality, there is comfort in the surface. There is something worth considering. In *The Vermont Notebook*, considering the merits of an paradoxical America, Ashbery offers us hope: “looking down into a bottomless well or some kind of deep pool that is very dark with the reflected light so far in the distance it seems like a distant planet, and you see only your own face.”⁸²

The Vermont Notebook, essentially a scrapbook, is perhaps the best example of the surface as meaning, the best chance to view disparate messages as not cooperative but all belonging. With this understanding, Joe Brainard’s illustrations take on new life, needing only to be appreciated for what they are. In keeping with Ashbery’s ekphrastic unwillingness to use poetry to clarify art, the art in *The Vermont Notebook*, does not act as a key to the enigmatic text. It does not explain and the drawings are neither more or less important than the text. What is explored so jarringly *The Vermont Notebook* lends a broad understanding to the centrality of language over meaning in Ashbery’s oeuvre. If one can release the poem from the expectation of depth, a new experience unfolds. No longer defined by its distance from the real world or by a hidden meaning, the language of the poet is finally allowed to speak for itself. The sounds of the words, the immediate mental images, the feelings that arise without introspection: this becomes the new playground of the poem. As Ashbery wrote in an essay commemorating Joe Brainard

⁸² Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 383.

“everything will be okay if we just look at it, accept it, and let it be itself.”⁸³

⁸³ Constance Lewallen, John Ashbery, and Carter Ratcliff. 1999. *Joe Brainard: A Retrospective*. Berkeley, CA: Granary Books, 1.

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