

Tadeusz Pióro

Beyond Parody: Literariness in John Ashbery's Plays

John Ashbery wrote his first play, *The Heroes*, in 1950, a few years before he began to make his name as a poet. *The Compromise*, his only three-act play, came next (in 1955, a year before the publication of *Some Trees*), and his last play thus far, *The Philosopher*, limited, like *The Heroes*, to one act, was written in 1960. Critics usually find these dramas worth mentioning when they can be used to explain, illustrate or contextualize something in Ashbery's poems, yet in and of themselves they have received scant attention. Such neglect, relative though it be, is nevertheless curious, since precisely because of their proleptic significance the plays should merit greater scrutiny, even if their apparent straightforwardness and simplicity might seem to be at odds with the complexities of the poems, so much so that extended analysis appears risibly redundant. But even treating the plays as, first and foremost, parodic, as David Lehman and Kevin Killian have done, deflects attention from a quality they share with many poems by Ashbery, and it is this quality I would like to examine in some detail, primarily as it appears in his dramas. I call it literariness, and even though the term does not have currency in critical discourse, I find it useful as a kind of shorthand for several simultaneously present aspects of some, but not very many, literary texts.

The most important of these aspects for my purposes here is the text's relation to what Edward Mendelson has called "the world outside." This expression comes up in Geoff Ward's account of influence in Ashbery's work.

Auden's poetry *enacts*, rather than describing, the conditions of menace and trepidation that are its psycho-political base. A comment of Edward Mendelson's in relation to those early texts might have some application to early Ashbery: 'As soon as one stops looking for the key to a set of symbols, and recognizes that the poems focus on the self-enclosing patterns that bar their way to a subject in the world outside, their notorious obscurity begins to vanish.' The self-enclosing pattern of end-rhymes in [Ashbery's] 'Two Scenes' is the shield of a greeting that subjectivity extends to the world only to turn away from its inaccessibility, somewhat as the hand of Parmigianino is ambivalently placed vis-à-vis the viewer in the convex self-portrait that would lend its title to Ashbery's most famous meditation. (99)

Following Mendelson, Ward assumes that “the world outside,” no matter how whimsical its representation in Ashbery’s early poems might be, nonetheless constitutes a referential basis, a broadly shared, experiential concept of reality, necessary to write, read and understand anything at all. While the presence of such a frame of reference in Auden’s early work is quite plausible, encumbering Ashbery’s with it seems to be off the mark. “The world outside” is dynamic, in constant flux, and even conventional constructions of it take this into account. What may pass for “the world outside” in many of the poems in *Some Trees*, but also in later ones, such as “The Skaters” or “The Recital,” as well as in the plays, is static, utterly conventionalized, and with no mimetic ambitions whatsoever. In *Some Trees*, the ultimate frame of reference can be narrowed down to the poetry of Wallace Stevens and W.H. Auden, which is, quite simply, there, and does not change in the way our lives in the world do. Such an approach to “the world outside” is a constitutive trait of literariness, not only in Ashbery’s writing, but also Firbank’s, Borges’, Perec’s, Calvino’s, and Roussel’s.

Literariness, however, is something more than terms such as “autotelic,” “self-referential” or “meta” literature indicate. A text can be completely autotelic, for example, Henry James’ “The Figure in the Carpet,” even if the rest of an author’s *oeuvre* does not have this quality in the smallest degree. Literariness, therefore, is as much a feature of a given text as of its author’s general aesthetic stance. This appears most saliently in the case of Raymond Roussel, whose influence on Ashbery is much greater than Ward makes it out to be.¹ “The world outside” in his writings has the status of a chess board, on which the figures of his imagination can move according to established, but secret, procedures, and that is the only function it has or is allowed to have. His work is radically non-mimetic, or even anti-mimetic. The same quality may be seen in the work of Ronald Firbank, also an important source of inspiration for Ashbery. The plots of most of his novels, as well as of his play, *The Princess Zoubaroff*, are so sketchy as to be barely noticeable: what counts is how the flat characters speak, as well as the brilliant descriptive flourishes that intersperse the dialogue. Of course, they speak like no one on earth, and this, along with the contrived circumstances under which they do so, makes Firbank’s writing akin to Roussel’s, even though stylistically and temperamentally they could not be more different. Ashbery may have read a play or two by Roussel by the time he set to work on *The Philosopher*, but was certainly familiar with Firbank’s fiction while still a student at Harvard. Firbankian camp makes its presence felt quite strongly in

¹ Ward writes that “postmodernist nabobs” such as Calvino, Borges and Perec, “like Ashbery... have adapted the techniques of Chinese-box illusionism developed by Raymond Roussel in texts like *Locus Solus* (1914) and applied them to the complexities of human psychology and behavior, where Roussel could only really offer an appealingly lunatic dandyism” (100). Ashbery’s Charles Eliot Norton lecture on Roussel shows how reductive and excessively glib this account of influence is.

the first two of Ashbery's plays, while Roussel's method of dramatic exposition and the theme of a treasure hunt appear in the third.

In the opening sequence of *The Philosopher*, four characters (the spinster Emily, her orphaned niece Carol, and their devoted servants Lily and Napoleon,) inform one another of who they are and why they have traveled to a gloomy country house on Christmas eve. The aim of this exchange of information is, of course, to let the audience know what brings these characters together and what has brought them to the gothic mansion of Carol's deceased Uncle Jeremiah, but one would be hard pressed to find in the history of modern drama an introduction to events about to unfold on stage as artless as Ashbery's.² When Carol asks Emily whether she thinks that Uncle Jeremiah remembered them in his will, she answers:

I don't know, dear. All I know is that three days ago, just one year after Jeremiah's death, Lawyer Flint sent me a telegram saying that according to the terms of Uncle's will, everyone whose name appears in it must spend Christmas eve here in Woodlawn Hall, where the will is to be read tonight after dinner. (125)

Lily corroborates and expands: "Lawyer Flint axed you to get here early with your niece and two trusted family retainuhs, me and Napoleon, so as to get the place tidied up and the tree trimmed before the others arrive" (125). Then Carol preposterously tells Emily about the day when, still an infant, she was delivered to her aunt's house by kind strangers, and the plot proper can get rolling. Although *The Philosopher* is, on one level, a send-up of murder mysteries set in country houses, the sheer clumsiness of passages such as the ones above suggests that the parody extends beyond immediate inspirations (David Lehman lists "Hollywood movies such as Paul Leni's silent *The Cat and the Canary* and a B-movie from the 1940s called *Who Killed Aunt Maggie*, in which the heirs assemble to hear the reading of an eccentric millionaire's will"; 143). The characters have just told us what they know, referring to a shared past and present. This is the world within which they shall remain until something happens that will shatter or at least radically alter it (it never does – the play breaks off before anything other than foreshadowing can occur). Even though a steady flow of characters arriving at the mansion keeps the conversation flowing, each of them has an equal chance of being exposed as the villain or celebrated as the hero of the play. The only thing audiences can do is conjure up vari-

² There are significant exceptions: in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950), a famous play Ashbery most probably had read or seen in the 1950s, the characters inform one another of who they are and why they have assembled in the same room (Ionesco's inspiration came from handbooks for learners of English). Roussel's influence, however, is at least as likely as Ionesco's.

ous permutations of familiar plots, but when the curtain falls they are still no wiser than Carol or Emily. The knowledge they and we are denied, however, has nothing to do with “the world outside,” and therefore may be referred to as “knowledge,” the quotation marks bringing in one of Ronald Firbank’s favorite ways of keeping references to that world at bay.

Rather than parodying a Hollywood murder mystery for the sake of “good, clean fun,” Ashbery prefers to make holes in what readers think they know, or think they get to know, when they confront a literary text with “the world outside.” The knowledge gained thanks to such a confrontation is merely “knowledge,” just as “the world outside” must forever remain in quotation marks to be cognitively useful, that is, useful in our efforts to come to grips with the text. In other words, the object of Ashbery’s parody is a quest for knowledge, as futile in the text of the play as such as in the minds of disappointed readers. Thus understood, the parodic strain of the play is limited to its unresolved plot, while all of its other aspects, even though they may seem to be parodic, do not belong in this rubric. If *The Philosopher* is “about” anything, it is about the way in which the characters speak, chiefly because their class, age and race-specific idiolects frequently veer away from what we might reasonably, or just conventionally, expect. The following lines are spoken by Rocky, a prize fighter:

Naw – we got engaged on the bus coming out here. The minute I saw her waitin’ in line at the bus terminal I knew I’d seen her somewhere. Then she hitched up her stocking and I recognized her – Gloria ‘Goldilocks’ Anderson – one of the most titillating temptresses of our time. A devotee of the terpsichorean art, I arranged to get the seat next to hers – and before we’d passed Sneden’s Landing I was plightin’ our troth with the ring I always carry for just such as emergency.³ (*Gloria shows ring.*) How do you like that, folks – a 21-carat zircon! (141)

Half a page later, when Whitney Ambleside, who introduces himself as “a professor of oriental philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris,” mentions the whereabouts of his stalled car, Rocky says:

That’s funny – we passed through there on the bus and I didn’t see nothin’ of no broken-down car.

WHITNEY

³ “Terpsichorean art” puts in an appearance in *The Compromise*, when Royal Mounted Policeman Harry Reynolds tells two Indian braves that his traveling companion is “Miss Daisy Farrell, of Elk City, *chanteuse* and devotee of the terpsichorean art.” When one of them, Running Deer, says: “Me no understand last part of sentence,” Harry admits: “Neither do I, Running Deer! That’s the way she describes herself” (62).

Perhaps your powers of observation equal your superb command of English grammar.
(141)

Some professors may speak like Ambleside, but no one speaks like Rocky. While Ionesco parodied the exchanges between characters in language learners' handbooks (for instance, "Good afternoon, Mary, I am your husband, John, and these are our children, Jack and Jill"), Raymond Roussel did not parody anything at all, even though his characters usually sound as wooden as those in Jules Verne's novels. Like Roussel's, Ashbery's motive was not to make fun of non-realistic or non-mimetic speech, but to celebrate it. At the time when the Theatre of the Absurd with its "comedy of menace" was the only kind of contemporary drama savvy critics in Europe took seriously, Ashbery made the political and existential menace lurking in everyday speech into a campily subversive response to the Absurdist's principal assumptions.

The Philosopher breaks off so abruptly because Ashbery had planned to write another act or two, as he indicates in his application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, submitted in 1957. According to David Lehman, "[t]he cardboard characters would begin talking seriously 'and the play would suddenly cease being a farce and become a sort of Ingmar Bergman drama'" (144). This might suggest that the playwright was not quite sure what he was doing when he wrote the first act, except having a good time. But as Lehman points out, even though there is no evidence of Ashbery's having written anything else than the first act of *The Philosopher*, closure or merely its prospect may have been a problem, as in *The Compromise*, where "the Author" must come on stage at the end of the play to explain his failure to bring matters to a satisfying conclusion. Lehman also claims that the conclusion is very satisfying indeed, in spite of a complaint by a critic, possibly John Simon, who wrote in *Audience* that Ashbery all but ruins his "lusty parody," his "spoof of the glorious Westerns from the golden age of the silver screen," by inserting "the Author" into the final scene. Lehman disagrees, calling the Author's speech "the most resonant moment of the play"; "Like the hero of 'The Painter,' [a poem from *Some Trees*] Ashbery the playwright is faced with a crisis in the mimetic ideal. Since he says he could find no patterns or rules for either human speech or human relationships, 'there was nothing in life for my art to imitate'" (143). This is as far as Lehman takes the matter of dramatic closure and its relation to mimeticism, as well as to parody. We might go a step further if we take "patterns" and "rules" to be the key concepts of the Author's mock retraction.

The Compromise travesties a Rin Tin Tin movie called *Where the North Begins* (1923), though Ashbery leaves out the central character, that is, the dog. Margaret Reynolds, the wife of a Mountie named Harry, and the mother of Little Jim, has been wait-

ing for over a year for her husband to come back from a police mission. She has two suitors: Harry's colleague from the police force, Allan Dale, and the local strongman and villain, Sam Dexter. She succumbs to Dexter's advances after Little Jim is kidnapped by an Indian in Dexter's pay. The child is left at an Indian village, and seen as the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy that a white child shall be born to one of the squaws and deliver the tribe from its imminent doom. When Harry, a good friend of the tribe's chief – who has not been taken in by the obviously fraudulent claim that Little Jim is a squaw's son – visits the village, he is told of his son's disappearance and decides to return to his wife, acting on a hunch that Dexter is responsible for the kidnapping. Back home, he confronts both Dale and Dexter, then Dale kills Dexter, then Margaret says she loves Dale and Harry equally, and then the Indians arrive with little Jim. It is only at this point, when the plot of the play has been by and large resolved, that the Author comes on stage. After recounting the problems he has had with writing the play, and saying that even though he had "gotten on" with it "by hook or by crook, as you may have noticed," he still needs "an ending." As he further explains:

[a]nd then I hit upon an idea which seemed brilliant to me and still does. My play would reflect the very uncertainty of life, where things are seldom carried through to a conclusion, let alone a satisfactory one. I would omit the final scene from my master piece! And you, vague and shadowy creatures, would not need any resolution of your imaginary difficulties, you could just walk off into the night, together... Where are you going? Stop! (118)

Coming after the play's effective resolution, the Author's speech is far too contrived to be taken at face value. The real reason for his confession lies in the nature of this resolution: conventionally enough, the villain has perished, and the Reynolds family has been reunited, but with two twists one would never see in a Hollywood film or a contemporary American play: Margaret initiates a *ménage à trois*, and Little Jim is allowed to stay with the Indian chief, with whom he has been living for the past five years. In other words, the play's ending is utterly scandalous, and the stage instructions following the Author's speech leave little doubt as to what the future will bring: "*Margaret, spotlighted, flanked by Harry and Dale, smiles alternately at both of them, and both fondle her. Only the Chief, at the left of the stage in a spotlight, and Jim, who kneels before him, do not move*" (118). The scandal is not merely sexual. The "patterns" and "rules" mentioned by the Author have just been subverted and, indeed, undone, along with the assumption of iterability implied by "rules" and "patterns" and associated with the predictability that underlies mimeticism and realism. By suggest-

ing that this is precisely what he has done in his ending, Ashbery provides a plausible reason for his final speech, while simultaneously saying that the ending we have just witnessed is not an ending at all, or at least not a “real” ending. It is not “real” because it breaks rules and does not follow patterns. The Author’s speech is therefore a parody of such retractions or *ex post facto* explanations, a parody at least as highly motivated as the much more obvious one of Rin Tin Tin or Western – and Northern – lore. The characters, those “vague and shadowy creatures,” are denied the affinities with characters in Westerns that readers or audiences would be quick to spot, and cast as “emanations” of the Author’s wayward “esemplastic power.” This brings into focus their literariness, their role in populating “the world inside,” rather than mediating “the world outside.” The “crisis in the mimetic ideal” Lehman detects in the Author’s speech is therefore nothing but a ruse, since Ashbery denies the existence of such an ideal, at least in his own writing.

This is not to say that he ignores its existence in the writing of others and generally in modern culture: indeed, Ashbery frequently refers to and plays with mimeticism, not only when he says that his poems consist of whatever he happens to be thinking about, or just hearing, as he writes them. While “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” contains his most sustained and profound reflections on artistic imitation, one of his earliest texts, *The Heroes*, inaugurates and augurs, as we can say with hindsight, this major theme of Ashbery’s *oeuvre*. The heroes of the play are Theseus, Circe and Ulysses, as well as Achilles, who has invited them to his country estate for the weekend. Achilles’ live-in boyfriend, Patroclus, falls in love with Theseus at first sight, Circe tries to seduce Theseus, or whoever else she might happen upon, by means of her magic girdle, while a Chorus comments on the proceedings, but nothing really happens until Patroclus dies of a broken heart during a dance, and a few pages later the play ends. Patroclus’ death comes immediately after the following exchange:

PATROCLUS

Oh Theseus, mayn’t I sleep at the foot of your bed tonight, like a pet spaniel? I promise I’ll lie still as a mummy.

THESEUS

Ackgh! You’re revolting!

(He breaks away from Patroclus and goes out.)

PATROCLUS

Oh, dear! I must have said something to hurt him!

(He falls on the couch, sobbing) (26)

This scene, as Kevin Killian reminds us, was quite risqué in the early fifties, for it shows men dancing with one another, and a thinly disguised homosexual proposal is rejected in a way that makes the disguise quite transparent (335). Why these men are Homeric heroes is a different matter, to which neither Killian nor Lehman pays much attention. Yet these men or heroes are crucial referents in High Modernist works, such as Pound's *Cantos* or Joyce's *Ulysses*, as well as some of Yeats' poems: in 1950, these were the most respected, discussed, imitated and implicitly or explicitly referred to literary works in English. By having his heroes expose their lack of heroism (Theseus claims that the Minotaur was just a "great big doodle-bug made of wood and painted canvas"), Ashbery takes their status down a few pegs, while showing how their mythic uniqueness has been absorbed and leveled by various conventions, not least literary ones. Refusing to follow the Modernist school of Homeric or more broadly mythic referential framing – which always had as its ultimate purpose a critique of current socio-political or cultural conditions – Ashbery uses his heroes as counters in an attempt to put forth an alternative to Modernist theory and practice, in which the hitherto fixed meanings of each hero's acts can be manipulated, subverted, or perverted at will. In so doing, he shows up the contingency of myth and implies that using it to impose order on a wildly fluctuating "world outside" is just so much wishful thinking. Stasis and the conventions of representation, as well as the relation between knowledge and beauty, are at the core of the following exchange between Circe and Theseus.

Theseus begins with a delicious blunder: "Well, and how have you been, Medea?" and when Circe corrects him, adding that she knows "what witchcraft does to a woman's face," says: "Forgive me. You're a very beautiful woman." The rest of their exchange must be quoted at length:

CIRCE

Oh that we have to converse in this way! Why can't each one say just what he thinks? If you men would only have the nerve to say, 'Circe, you're a disgusting old bag!' Then after we got the insults out of the way we might accomplish something. Stop calling each other dearie. This way we no more resemble human beings than those silly figures on the front of the Parthenon do.

THESEUS

Excuse me, Circe, but I don't agree with you there. I think those figures are beautiful. And I think that people are beautiful in the same way.

CIRCE

I don't get it.

THESEUS

Let me tell you of an experience I had while I was on my way here. My train had stopped in the station directly opposite another. Through the glass I was able to watch a couple in the next train, a man and a woman who were having some sort of conversation. For fifteen minutes I watched them. I had no idea what their relation was. I could form no idea of their conversation. They might have been speaking words of love, or planning a murder, or quarreling about their in-laws. Yet just from watching them talk, even though I could hear nothing, I feel I know those people better than anyone in the world.

CIRCE

You're a strange man.

THESEUS

Coming from you, that must be a compliment. (9-10)

Circe's initial complaint concerns the similarity between the Parthenon's stone sculptures – conventional and therefore “silly” – and the conventions governing the intercourse of living humans, be they heroes or just “strange men” and witches. In other words, when a hero acts as he is expected to, nothing will be “accomplished,” that is, communicated. A radical departure from convention, for instance telling Circe she is a “disgusting old bag,” or allowing Margaret to enjoy two husbands, is the only way out of such a stalemate. Theseus' response pits realistic representation against established canons of beauty, and since he has earlier called himself a “true aesthete,” whose “indifference” made possible his “slaying” of the Minotaur, it should come as no surprise that he wants to trade on his reputation as a dragon-slayer, his fixed identity within the world of mythical heroes, even as he keeps claiming that there was nothing heroic to his deed. But his claims may be construed as yet another convention, a kind of false modesty that befits a true hero. In fact, there is strong evidence for such a construction: when the agitated Patroclus asks about the virgins fed to the Minotaur, whose bodies Theseus saw in the labyrinth, he confirms that they really were there, though the Minotaur, being just a “doodle-bug,” could not have killed them. This logical lapse comes up several times in the play, and no sensible explanation for it is offered – when pressed as to how he knows the virgins were dead, Theseus merely says: “I just have a feeling” (24). Theseus' illogical persistence belies both his own version of events and the one we know from mythology, while allowing him to play a modest, self-deprecating gentleman, who – unconventionally – puts his faith in feelings, not facts. This, in essence, is the meaning of his account of the people he watched through a train window as they talked: he *feels* he knows them “better than anyone in the world.”

Theseus has no idea what the couple he watches are talking about. He sees their faces, but does not hear the words they speak. He “knows” them as pure surfaces, and that is what makes them beautiful, like the “figures on the front of the Parthenon.” Whatever may lie beneath the surfaces of statues or living people puts at risk their beauty, and therefore feeling you know all that is worth knowing about them makes empirical knowledge useless and/or noxious. David Lehman discerns in Theseus the aesthete the same kind of tension that would later emerge in Ashbery the poet:

It is the mark of Ashbery’s poetry that with ‘the indifference of a true aesthete’ he is able to undermine his own romantic gestures and visionary ambitions, to expose and critique the artifice of his work at the same time as he revels in it. In one other place in Ashbery’s work does he opt for the same theatrical metaphor. ‘Yes, friends, these clouds pulled along on invisible ropes are, as you have guessed, merely stage machinery,’ he writes in ‘The Wrong Kind of Insurance’ (1977). ‘And the funny thing is it knows we know / About it and still wants us to go on believing / In what it so unskillfully imitates and wants / To be loved not for that but for itself.’ (141)

Theseus’ claim that understanding may be an obstacle to experiencing beauty, as well as to gaining knowledge, falls within the sphere of literariness, for it excludes “the world outside” from serious consideration. We know much more than we understand, Ashbery seems to have been saying throughout his career, but imperfect understanding does not diminish our knowledge. Neither should it diminish the pleasure we take in things or texts in which, as he writes in “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name,” understanding is “undone.”

WORKS CITED

- Ashbery, John. *Three Plays*. Calais, Vermont: Z Press, 1982.
 Killian, Kevin. “Ashbery’s Theater.” *Conjunctions* 49 (Fall 2007): 334-340.
 Lehman, David. *The Last Avant-garde*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.
 Ward, Geoff. *Statues of Liberty*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.