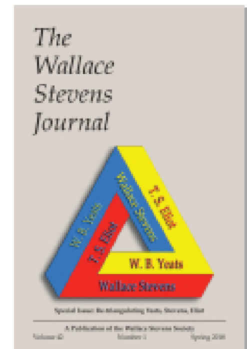
The Songs We Know Best: John Ashbery's Early Life by Karin Roffman (review)



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As for the musicality of words, throughout the volume we find a sensitive treatment of Stevens's concern with lyrical form, which manifests itself most visibly in the case of "The Man with the Blue Guitar." While it is nearly impossible to capture the poem's iambic rhythm in its entirety in Turkish, Çelebioğlu manages to keep line lengths as close as possible to the originals. He also keeps most of the rhymes, and inserts additional ones to compensate for those he glosses over, as in "eğildi" / "göverdi" of the very first couplet (95). The use of inverted sentences also enables the translator to preserve some of the rhymes—for instance, in section IV of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," where the translation of the rhyme "are" / "guitar" (*CPP* 136) as "olanlar" / "gitar" (98) comes close to capturing the interplay between "things as they are" (reality) and "the blue guitar" (the instrument of poetic imagination). On other occasions, however, the change of rhyming patterns fails to register the link between the "blue *guitar*" and "things as they *are*" (see, for instance, sections I, VI, and XXVIII). Notably, here the translation of Stevens's dialogue between the poet-speaker and the audience is skillfully integrated into the Turkish text with the adaptation of the "dedi" / "dediler" (s/he said / they said) pattern—a folk form characteristic of Anatolian "müracâ'a poetry." It is precisely with respect to such aesthetic features that Çelebioğlu's translation of the poem surpasses Biçen's earlier version.

Ultimately, *Bir Karakuşa Bakmanın On Üç Yolu* is a highly accomplished and genuinely ambitious presentation of Stevens to Turkish readers. Even though Stevens's poetry entered into Turkish as early as the mid-fifties, public reception has so far been limited. With its expansive range of selections and beautiful physical design, Çelebioğlu's new translation has the potential to attract a broader audience and to elicit new forms of readerly attention, as several online reviews have already indicated. As such, the book is not only a welcome addition to the expanding body of translated poetry into Turkish, but also an important contribution of this canonical American poet to the sphere of world literature.

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The Songs We Know Best: John Ashbery's Early Life.
By Karin Roffman. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

Most devoted readers of John Ashbery know the strange story of his first poems to see print: how a prep-school classmate submitted Ashbery's work to *Poetry* as his own, a fact their author discovered, to his intense chagrin, only when he read them in the magazine. Or, at least, most of us thought we knew this story. In Karin Roffman's gripping account of the poet's formative years, however, the incident forms part of a still stranger tale. The poetry thief, a boy by the name of Bill Haddock, haunted Ashbery during their time at Deerfield Academy like a demonic doppelganger out of a Patricia Highsmith novel, alternately befriending and tormenting him, spreading rumors that he was "an

h.o." (homosexual; true) and public masturbator (not true) (105). Haddock himself was gay, and an aspiring poet who envied his friend's precocious talent; the one real edge he had on Ashbery was that he was upper-middle-class, while Ashbery was made to suffer for being a farmer's son from the moment he entered Deerfield. The two boys, in other words, could be seen as distorted mirror images of one another, bound together by anxieties about class and sex, as well as an ambition that only one would realize.

"The Thief of Poetry," "My Erotic Double," "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"—these Ashbery titles inevitably came to mind as I was writing the previous paragraph, still more evidence that this poet is always steps ahead of his would-be interpreters. Still, I hesitated to cite the poems. An aesthetics and ethics of impersonality is central to Ashbery's writing; by deliberately omitting recognizable biographical details, he means to leave room in the poem for the reader. He often said that, like Gertrude Stein, he wanted to write "everybody's autobiography," and famously described his anthology piece "Soonest Mended" as a "one-size-fits-all confessional poem" (*Poetry Review*, vol. 75, Aug. 1985, p. 25). One startles at the scant handful of moments when bits of the life do surface in the poems; when Roffman cites one such moment, in "The History of My Life" (from *Your Name Here* [2000]), she remarks on the poet's "unusual candor" (78). "Once upon a time there were two brothers," the poem begins, "Then there was only one: myself" (qtd. on 78). The lines refer to what emerges, in Roffman's sensitive narration, as the first great earthquake of Ashbery's life: the death of his younger brother Richard, at the age of nine, of leukemia. Richard had been their father's son—masculine, sports-loving, outgoing—as John never could nor would be. "This otherness, this / 'Not-being-us' is all there is to look at / In the mirror," Ashbery insists, in "Self-Portrait" (*Collected Poems 1956–1987*, Library of America, 2008, p. 486): for all his differences from John, Roffman suggests, Richard remained for his brother the model of the haunting other, the absent-present second self.

So, perhaps the Haddock story, for all its cringe-inducing adolescent pettiness, can be made relevant to the poems after all. In one of Roffman's many fascinating and telling citations from the young Ashbery's unpublished writings, the high-school senior tackles the vexed question of why modern poetry must be so difficult: "the poems are complex because they spring from a mind which has been made complex by its double existence—its social responsibility and its inward enigma" (qtd. on 121). One recognizes in this phrase the Ashbery who follows Wallace Stevens in conceiving poetry as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without," "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (*CPP* 665). Stevens has been central to discussions of Ashbery's poetic development at least since the mid-1970s, when Harold Bloom portrayed Ashbery, eloquently if too insistently, as an "ephebe" almost wholly shaped by "the necessary anxiety induced in him by the siren song of Stevens' rhetorics" (*Figures of Capable Imagination*, Seabury P, 1976, p. 172). Roffman, for her part, notes that, during a crucial period in college, Ashbery's "appreciation for Stevens's work rapidly grew," and that when the poet gave a reading at Harvard in 1947, "John was in the front row" (144). My sense, though, is that it was not so much Stevens's "rhetorics" that

were the draw for Ashbery at this point as it was the elder writer's incomparable handling of the dialectical relation between our inner and outer lives.

"[N]othing illustrates the importance of poetry better than this possibility that within it there may yet be found a reality adequate to the profound necessities of life today," Stevens declares (*CPP* 705), in a 1948 essay on Marianne Moore that, according to Roffman, Ashbery found "revelatory" (168). Which reminds me, in turn, of Ashbery's self-revealing remark apropos the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, like him an ephebe of both Stevens and Moore: "We live in a quandary, but it is not a dualistic conflict between inner and outer reality; it is rather a question of deciding how much the outer reality is our reality, how far we can advance into it and still keep a toe-hold on the inner, private one" (*Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie, U of Michigan P, 2004, p. 121). The biographer is, by necessity, more accountable to outer reality—"the unsubstantial, fluctuating facts of the world about us," as Stevens loftily calls them (*CPP* 700)—than the poet is. Yet the pattern of social tensions that Roffman traces in the fluctuating facts of Ashbery's life also bespeaks a double existence, one that, in the crucible of the poetic sensibility, would transform into an imaginative dialectic.

Thus, as a child, Ashbery continually moved back and forth between the home of his parents, to whom he would always seem somewhat alien, and that of his maternal grandparents, highly educated people who recognized and nurtured the boy's gifts. The farmer father and scientist grandfather also represented different class positions, between which John remained uneasily suspended, until he finally escaped, after college, into the declassed world of New York bohemians. As adolescence approached, he began to live another kind of double life, struggling to conceal the nature of his burgeoning sexuality from his family and friends, an effort that extended to using various kinds of coded language in his diary, in case his mother should read it. Roffman is not the first to suggest that coded quality of Ashbery's adult work stems from an urge to deflect our curiosity about his sexuality, but the examples she adduces from the early writings offer an unparalleled view of that enigmatic style as it develops. The most eye-opening example is a diary entry Roffman describes as "John's first original modernist poem" (68), which, she tells us, commemorates another first, the thirteen-year-old Ashbery's first ejaculation achieved in bed-play with another boy, and which reads exactly like something out of *The Tennis Court Oath*:

tulip garden
old dutch
home all our own until
recall once more
fashion in shows
dog cast in
days before
were almost learning to forget
happy fear came from
a trough
kin
(qtd. on 67–68)

Roffman traces a more complex, but no less suggestive, connection between the poet's sexual and poetic development via his teenage enthusiasm for Hart Crane, a poet whose influence on Ashbery, unlike Stevens's, has gone largely unremarked until now. She mentions that Ashbery and his first real boyfriend, a summer worker at his father's fruit farm, bonded over their love for Crane, and that at the end of that summer, the poet read Philip Horton's Crane biography and was disturbed by "Horton's assertion that homosexuality was 'abnormal' and 'an aberration'" (100). But it is the poems she quotes that show just how deep an impression Crane made, and how intricately bound up his influence was with the emergence of themes that would remain with Ashbery even after he had shed all traces of Crane's seductive style. Read Crane's "Possessions" and "Recitative," and then "Poem," which Roffman offers us from Ashbery's junior year at Deerfield:

> Always the left hand flickers, falls to right;
> The eyes groping at mirrors
> Strike the sought self, opaque and firm,
> Safe in its frame. A sweet disorder
> Arranges mirrors, and the tensile gaze
> Turns inward, calls the turning love.
>
> Let our dual sight
> See not so clearly, and turning, take daylight.
> And before mirrors long unvisited
> Award the milk white and translucent face
> That stays there, that we know not how to name.
> (qtd. on 111–12)

The writing knows something that the writer doesn't quite yet, about the dizzyingly complex relation between inner and outer, self and other—and that uncanny mediator between them, the mirror. One can see why Bill Haddock went a little mad with envy.

Certainly, the Ashbery that Roffman portrays was prodigiously gifted. His first poem, an adept pastiche of the verse in a children's anthology he found in his grandparents' well-stocked library, astonished the adults, and "demonstrated, above all else, a quick and naturally musical ear" (30). But the early diaries, letters, stories, and poems that Roffman has unearthed, and put into rich context via extensive interviews with Ashbery and others in his life, also show a boy and young man driven by a persistent desire for "escape" and "improved . . . social status" (72, 73)—for an out from the double bind of the family situation. We watch as, year by year, the young Ashbery cultivates a fearsome work ethic, writing every day and drawing up ambitious book lists: "get the diary of Samuel Pepys from the library," he reminds himself, at thirteen, "so as to inspire mine" (60). It is less of a mystery, now, how he grew into the dazzlingly inventive, overwhelmingly productive writer with whom we have only just begun to reckon. With Ashbery, one hesitates to turn one's focus from the inward enigma, his natural subject, to the pressure of reality, but, as

Roffman so deftly demonstrates, to know this poet we must learn to turn and turn again, to master the difficult practice he presciently called "dual sight."

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Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance.
By Matthew Mutter. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017.

Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance is a daunting study of the relation between writing and religion in modernist literary discourse. With its broad-ranging focus on the work of both American and British literary practitioners of the last century—Wallace Stevens, Virginia Woolf, W. B. Yeats, and W. H. Auden—Matthew Mutter endeavors to rival what he nominates some of the "best recent books on twentieth-century literature and religion" (7): Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010), Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion after 1960* (2010), and John McClure's *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007). Flagged by his title, Mutter's particular contribution to all this prodigious critical achievement is to focus on "secularism" rather than "religion," as he states at the outset, clarifying further that "this book investigates not post-secular religious experience but the secular frames that alter the coordinates of all experience, religious or other" (8). The overriding frame, moreover, is Stevens's famous declamation that "The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God," and that "One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God" (qtd. on 8). For Mutter, then, "secular" becomes a kind of shorthand "for the imaginative frame within which Stevens resists or reworks all of the perspectives he thinks of as religious," so that for the remaining writers he takes up in the book, the term "could mean a number of things and take a number of shapes, including ones that show significant continuity with religious ideas" (218). With that somewhat ambiguous swerve back in the direction of religion, therefore, readers are given to think that "secularism" is a considerably "restless" notion indeed.

Stevens's own programmatic secularization of the idea of God, as that famous declamation above goes on to elaborate, suggests a trio of creative alternatives: namely, adaptation, substitution, and elimination. These alternatives can further suggest more particular and highly individualistic gathering points or "fields of experience" from which modernist secularization might be viewed: "language" in the case of Stevens himself, "aesthetics" for Woolf, "emotion" for Yeats, and, finally, "material life" for Auden (3). Some of these idiosyncratic (and in all cases quite extensive) elaborations work better than others, but none is ever facile or uncomplicated or seamlessly uninflected. Be warned, therefore: this is not a book for speed readers.

With Stevens, the secular movement away from God by means of language can suggest a kind of "demythologized, self-conscious anthropomorphism" to take His place, according to Mutter (38), a stance about which Stevens can