

ON *CAN YOU HEAR, BIRD*, BY JOHN ASHBERY

LET US ASSUME that when, in a Question and Answer session here this last fall, John Ashbery reminded us of Pater's assertion that "all art aspires toward the condition of music," he was underscoring an idea of significance to himself. And let us notice that in that sentence, "condition" governs "music." Hence questions about rhyme and meter and other melodics of poems, or the lack thereof as is often the case in Ashbery, are not exactly to the point. We might suspect further that Ashbery's claim that same morning, that the influence of painting has been, at best, secondary for him, and his thought—I paraphrase from memory now—"you go to a museum to see a painting, you see it, you see it is great, and then . . . you leave," has much to do with the less satisfying nature of painting than of music as a resource and guide. Then perhaps we can begin to explain why so many left his reading that night as if from a concert, tapping their feet, metaphorically speaking, a tune or a riff almost on their lips and tongues. Throughout the hour there had been ripples of applause, as if our behavior reached toward another norm, for applause is what you add to a number performed. The crowd was a large university and town crowd, not just the Workshop regulars. Ashbery is coming through to us, and it is a wonder.

Ashbery read from *Can You Hear, Bird*, his latest volume of lyric *cum* anti-lyric. He read poems we cannot grasp, cannot bring again to mind except in bits and pieces. We can reduce none of them to anecdote or argument. Specific memory is illusive though refracted feeling lasts. Had someone shouted at the end of a poem, "Play it again, John," I would not have been surprised.

Is that, perhaps, the condition of music? We can return to museums and see favorite paintings again. We can and do reread old and favored books. But we do so less often than we replay the music we most like. Even when I get to the point of humming along with whole passages of *Così Fan Tutte*, I hear it as, well, not new exactly, for the richness of what it offers overwhelms mere newness, which no longer matters. Humming along does not mean I have grasped it. New themes or

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threads, or I don't know what—musician or musical scholar I am not—are always making themselves felt. Polyphonic and flowing, continuously able to assimilate surprise and a new note, never too many notes so long as the arts of connection and blending can be summoned, putting such a wealth of sound before us that we lose track without a score, and even with one rarely feel that we are in command: such is the *condition* of music, I think, the long-renewable disseminations at its source. Ashbery has taken us farther down those pathways than anyone I have read.

Whoa, now! Academic caution rears its head. Chaucer, Shakespeare, I don't want to go too far. But they were assimilated by our culture long before I came to them. That process is just beginning with Ashbery now, and so at least he seems to have found a way we all feel surprisingly different.

I've heard several stories about Ashbery. Let us suppose they are all apocryphal, but that he provokes them testifies further to our wonder. One is that he would put on a piece of music and compose through the music, ending whenever it ended. Another is that he writes with the American Movie Channel on in the background, lifting image or incident from it whenever words fail him, but continuing, continuing, while flickers in the background last. This tale may be supported by his portrait by Larry Rivers, in which a younger Ashbery types on a coffee table—the view is from the side—while looking up at something in the background, but not far off, with no great light welling from that source. We can't see, but it seems less likely to be a window than a TV screen. A third, testified to in a recent poem by Donald Hall, is that while an undergraduate he fetched a poem for the *Advocate* in less than an hour, one that satisfied Hall, Robert Bly, and Kenneth Koch, though they made him fess up that he'd just run off and improvised it. When Hall reminded him of this years later, Ashbery laughed and said, "I took longer then." A fourth is that while listening to Heaney speak of poets' cleansing our language ("purifying the dialect of the tribe"), Ashbery leaned over to Philip Levine and said, "I think I give it a blue rinse."

True or not, those are tales worth preserving. So let me provide one more. I fabricate entirely, but see what you think. I imagine that Ashbery, while still an undergraduate, sensed the magnitude of the great modernists and wanted to compete with them, which meant finding a way

to go where Pound and Stevens had not gone already. I believe he decided that philosophy would be an insufficient guide. For centuries our poems have been read in terms of philosophy, as if, when it is not laboriously working out an insight a poet has already had, philosophy offers the clearest and most succinct form of what poetry goes on to clothe. And the higher the philosophy, the more authoritative: metaphysics over ethics, etc. So the question became, if not philosophy, what? Soon enough music occurred to him as the answer, and so Ashbery set about his investigations into writing a poetry that nears the condition of music. Not that he lacked hints from Stevens, Pound, Pater, and others.

So what is the condition of music I asked the dearest friend with whom I almost always dine by candlelight. "Abstraction," she offered. Maybe so, but that smells a little much of philosophy. We're looking for a different register, a different scale. Her answer though fortified my thought of "repeatability," which is what I think we find in Ashbery.

There was one more remark from the Q & A that morning that seems by now quite telling: the single philosophical idea to which he thought he had ever fully assented was that "everything connects." Doesn't that sound increasingly like Ashbery? And isn't that also what music achieves better than just about anything else, except maybe water?

*D.H.*