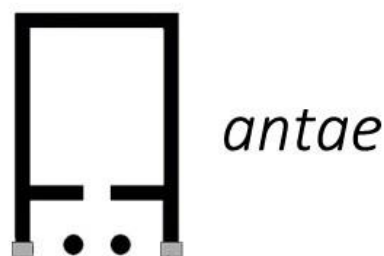


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On John Ashbery's Poetry

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Author Stephen Koch has famously characterised John Ashbery's poetic voice as 'a hushed, simultaneously incomprehensible and intelligent whisper with a weird pulsating rhythm that fluctuates like a wave between peaks of sharp clarity and watery droughts of obscurity and languor'.¹ One may easily speculate why such a characterisation came to be well-known. In claiming that it is Ashbery who borders on the unintelligible, the formula makes a simultaneously independent claim as to its own weird concoction of unintelligibility. It is difficult to comprehend, for instance, intelligence and incomprehensibility as emanating at the same time, just as it is difficult to maintain the notion of simultaneity that relies on a kind of 'pulsating rhythm' with bipolar peaks. If a reviewer must depend on such 'watery droughts of obscurity and languor' to speak of the object he reviews, the effect is that of the review's undeniable reliance. Not "I'm not sure *he knows* what he is talking about", but "I'm not sure *what* he is talking about".

The sense of this evolves unforgivingly should one look through a register of more such prominent reviews. In the *Georgia Review*, for instance, Peter Stitt maintains that 'Ashbery has come to write, in the poet's most implicitly ironic gesture, almost exclusively about his own poems, the ones he is writing as he writes about them',² and Roger Shattuck makes a similar observation: 'Nearly every poem in *Houseboat Days* shows that Ashbery's phenomenological eye fixes itself not so much on ordinary living and doing as on the specific act of composing a poem', and '[t]hus every poem becomes an *ars poetica* of its own condition'.³ Writing for the *New York Times*, Langdon Hammer suggests that 'Ashbery's writing, whatever else it is about, is usually about other writing which it alludes to, borrows from or comments on'.⁴

What these observations have cemented is the idea that Ashbery's is not a simple self-referential relation. In the manner that his poetry *does* fall back upon itself, it refers to things other than its own self—'his own poems', 'other writing', or how it has itself come to be. At the same time, these other things that his poems may direct us to have scant existence independent of this referee. Surely he *sets up* what he writes about. But oddly, he seems to give this bit of tact away. The poet shares with us not only his setting, but the act and fact of setting it up. What often does not fail to strike us is the sense that we, even his audience, may be part

¹ Stephen Koch, 'The New York School of Poets: The Serious at Play', *The New York Times* (11th February 1968), para. 4. <<https://movies2.nytimes.com/books/00/06/04/specials/koch-ny.html>> [accessed 1 December 2020].

² Peter Stitt, as quoted in 'John Ashbery', *Poetry Foundation*, para. 2. <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-ashbery>> [accessed 1 December 2020].

³ Roger Shattuck, 'Poet in the Wings', *The New York Review*, (23rd March 1978), para. 11. <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/03/23/poet-in-the-wings/>> [accessed 1 December 2020].

⁴ Langdon Hammer, 'But I Digress', *New York Times*, (20th April 2008), para. 5. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/books/review/Hammer-t.html>> [accessed 1 December 2020].

of that setup. So that now, if we ask what his poems are about, we do not inquire from the outside, but from the innermost fold: what are *we* about?

This article attempts a critical examination of the limits of a staged conversation between Heidegger's *Being* (of poetry) and Ashbery's poetry (of Being). In a shared phenomenological approach, the philosopher and the poet have either asked or answered the question about Being. While Ashbery's answer is entirely foreshadowed by what Heidegger asks, the response is also one that the very asking of the question (by virtue of itself) refuses. It thereby eludes Heidegger's grasp, perhaps forever. In contrast, Ashbery never asks, and indeed his poetry may be read as the possibility of a relief from (rather than a response to) the agony of questioning.

The shortest address to the question of Being is contained in the notion of "contingency", which is drawn out under different guises from several of Ashbery's poems. But, as such, there is no pretense to explaining Ashbery. This discussion of his work instead hinges upon the discussion of a number of thinkers in general, and Heidegger in particular. In the formation proposed here, it is impossible to discuss Ashbery on his own terms, and not merely because these terms are not his. It is because, in and through his poetry, he actively renounces any claim to the terms at his disposal (thereby rendering them wholly disposable), such that even while using the terms himself, he refuses to put them *to use*. The notoriety of nonsense that his poems have given rise to is one such result. The objective of this exercise is to *read* Ashbery's poetry in terms that may instead in themselves be *readable*. This manner of experiencing Ashbery is like rendering readable what in essence is unreadable—like the figure of the "subaltern" whose subalternity is expressed in a mode that *cannot* be its own. The essence of unreadability that Ashbery's poetry embodies must still in itself be readable for this assumption to work.

If, for Heidegger, a metaphysical enquiry is either a highly sophisticated or a moderately garbled Will-to-Power, for Ashbery it implies simultaneously a self-concealing form of poetic urge. Metaphysics, according to Heidegger, is an inauthentic form of poetry, poetry that sees itself as anti-poetry, a cache of metaphors that its authors thought of as an escape from metaphoricity.⁵ The reason why only poetry is able to successfully address the question of Being is because, for Heidegger's purposes, we are nothing save the words we use. Only a metaphysician, a power freak, would think otherwise. They would repeatedly confuse truth with correctness. If, on the other hand, we were anything other than the words at our disposal, there would be neither a condition nor need for metaphysics. What Judith Butler has designated as 'something'—in 'something about the other can be indexed by language, but not controlled or possessed'—is the sense that language is entirely complicit in its own inadequacy and its excessiveness.⁶ Surely it pays the price for one with the other: language tends to be excessive and get ahead of itself because it fails to self-express adequately, *and* language lacks potency in its trying to overreach its mark. Relying on the failure of language, metaphysics seeks correctness in the denial of the truth (of failure) and art seeks truth in denial of *itself*; apropos

⁵ See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 30-32.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 126.

Being, it locates the ‘language of Being’ in the being of language affirming Jacques Lacan’s formulation: ‘The unconscious is structured like a language’.⁷

According to Heidegger, it is only when we escape from the verificationist impulse to ask the correctness of a particular question that we are asking questions which Heidegger thinks are worth asking. These questions would address not the rightness of the question but rather its questionability. Only then are we Dasein, because only then do we have the possibility of being *authentic* Dasein, Dasein which knows itself to be “thrown”. For, at least in the West, ‘Dasein [...] is ontologically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it’, as Richard Rorty quotes.⁸ And, he goes on: ‘only then is there a *Da*, a clearing, a lighting-up’, a lifting-of-the-veil—that is, the enforced awareness that there is an open space surrounding present-day social practices.⁹ This open space is ironically what Ashbery opens up. What I am getting at is: with his poetics we are Dasein.

The “available reality” that Ashbery pays no mind to, and does nothing to exemplify, would be Rorty’s spin on Heidegger’s world-view: “final vocabulary”.¹⁰ Only there is no finality to it. It fails to both define Being and address the question of Being, because a final vocabulary just happens to be one among many possible ones; it is utterly contingent, and entirely incidental.

Or perhaps not. For such incidence cannot simply designate the purity of a coincidence between the object and its definition, subject and the predicate, motive and motion. Rather it is the motion that creates the motive, the definition that begets (by definition) its object, and the predicate that predicates the subject into being by virtue of itself. Colonising forms and colonised subjects are not natural collaborators. Yet the underlying contingency of the force and form of colonisation dictates that no one final vocabulary can set to terms contingency (Being) as such. Ultimately it is one which we cannot but help using, one which we always, already find ourselves thrown into, straddled with. We cannot undercut it, critique it, or turn it upside down, for it is in every sense *final*. And because of this overarching sense of finality about it, there is no way of reaching beyond it, no way of devising a metavocabulary in which to phrase criticisms of it. Neither can we test it for adequacy in isolation, as there is no non-linguistic access to Being. Being is, as Rorty suggests, what final vocabularies are *about*. This conception of the “about” is as far as we get, therefore. What the final vocabulary is *determines* the indeterminate nature of what the final vocabulary is about. Contrary to the euphemism “what you see is what you get”, here what we (always, already) have is what we get. That which we are endowed with begets that which we shall be endowed with. We are caught in a

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 147.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), p. 32, as quoted in Richard Rorty, ‘Heidegger, Contingency and Pragmatism’, in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (London: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 511-32, p. 523

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ A final vocabulary, according to Rorty, is a sometimes-unique set of words a person depends upon. While the set may not be constitutive of all potential words at a person’s disposal, a final vocabulary may cause *Angst* in its user not because it is exclusive; rather, the cause of discomfort is never the limited range of words, but the limitedness of words (any or all) themselves. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 73.

circular movement of sameness and repetition that always and by default leads to its own starting point; in Hegelese, subject is the name for this movement. In a similar trajectory, Lacan *refound* the meaning of the Freudian death drive in this manner (as the repetitive urge to go back to the primal state, which would be equivalent to death as death of movement, urge, drive), while the concept of refinding—finding the already found, a dog after its tail—is itself Freudian.¹¹

Ashbery's long poem 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' is an indication:

Francesco one day set himself
To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose
In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers...
He accordingly caused a ball of wood to be made
By a turner, and having it divided it in half and
Brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself
With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass.¹²

Admirably described by Vasari, the self-portrait of Parmigianino is a particularly touching creation. The painter depicts himself *as if* on a mirror, albeit a (fake) one. He looks at himself on a convex mirror, and then takes to replicate the image on a replica of the mirror: a same-sized convex surface of wood. The effect is slightly stylised in that, while a self-portrait such as Rembrandt's reminds one less of a mirror and more of a traditional portrait, Parmigianino's would inverse these relations. Because a portrait is generally rectangular in shape and created from the reflection on a plain mirror image, our perception of the framing of a self-portrait is not that of its likeness with an actual mirror (of course, when we are not the painter ourselves). Parmigianino perhaps only after himself replicates a convex image on a convex surface. When we look at his painting, we are not looking at his self-portrait or even a mirror-image in an usual sense (that is, when we know in our heads that this is a mirror image). We are instead looking as if at a mirror in a much more technical sense, such that the mental assumption now reverses itself: we have to remind ourselves not that this is a mirror image, but that this is a portrait. The technique as that special form of artistic talent demonstrates that this is more mirror than mirror-image. And because this a mirror stylistically and not technically, it gives rise to the notion of that which is in the mirror more than the mirror itself. That thing that is capable of transforming wood into mirror, say.

What is at stake here? Something *more* than the technical effect in that the painter may have found himself in an image *not* of his own. With he surface of the painting being convex like the mirror, it is as if he paints on the mirror the image that the mirror itself returns. In painting an image of his that is returned by the mirror, even his (own) image is not simply tendered *his own*, but rather of *his own making*. All self-portraits are an issue after their own, but Parmigianino's is special in that the painter here overtakes the mediating agency of the mirror.

¹¹ Lacan's "partial objects" is another refinding of Freud's "partial drives"—the original designator of circularity and repetition. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), pp. 197-198.

¹² John Ashbery, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 68.

As he paints, in a sense, the image on the mirror *for* the mirror itself, he makes possible the *refinding* of himself on the mirror. Ashbery's obsession in the poem with Parmigianino's technique (that he goes to lengths describing) is an unconcealed form of self-obsession. His own technique of defying, denying, and contesting the many manners of designating essence only takes us closer to his conception of essence, while his concern with aboutness cuts right to it. Every possible final vocabulary, by virtue of their finality, exhausts and circumscribes the question of Being. And in so far as Being is inexhaustible, these vocabularies are automatically excluded from asking after Being while at the same time reifying the impossibility of contemplating Being. Ashbery's contribution is in making his audience aware of this. He is, in the words he uses and the ways he uses them, in the habit of tempting and taunting the vicissitude of Being—the only way of begetting which is. The mirror image that the painter reproduces is not only of but also *as* a mirror image. There is no vanity of *das Ding* here. No pretence of the self behind the self-portrait. The proclamation is, the self *is* the self-portrait.

Ashbery's poem, like its subject of the self-portrait, reveals the contingency at the heart of Being, or that Being ultimately is. Like Parmigianino who paints not a reflection on a mirror but in a sense the mirror itself, Ashbery uncovers not the nature of Being but Being itself. Both artists must make compromises, however. Parmigianino turns with his brush wood into mirror, Ashbery must on his part do with the words he finds himself thrown into. In this, and only in this necessarily compromised state, is Being unveiled to *be*. Here, the Heideggerian assertion is upheld one more time: there can be no "one" better understanding of Being than any other, for every such means of understanding operates on a particular and contingent final vocabulary. To seek a better understanding is therefore to engage in power relations that operate on self-deception. Being is not the one that masters, or one that can be mastered, and even if there is no more to Being's poem than *Dasein*, no being can be related to Being for the simple reason that every being is merely *about* the aboutness of Being. This aboutness of Being is another name for the inevitability of compromise that both Ashbery and Parmigianino must (sur)render (to). For Being *is* but this aboutness of Being. The conceptual leap of faith from writing about Being to writing Being itself in full recognition of Being's metonymic basis. In Being's own relation to itself there is situated the paroxysm of Being itself; that is, Being is situated coincidentally with its being refound. Being's movement unto itself is the only and ultimate guarantee of it.

When Ashbery discloses Being with/in an indispensable universe of words that is the making neither of his nor of a locatable other, he discloses a kind of nothing that would not simply go away. As he attempts to mean nothing at all, which he regularly does, his attempt to positively assert negativity is, however, not nothing. The positivity of this exercise itself lives on. Indeed, it must be tremendously difficult to nearly impossible to mean absolutely nothing in a truly meaningful way. Tied as the final vocabulary is to the finality of meaningfulness (finality that is meaning), Ashbery creates non-meaning out of meaning, nonsense out of words, emptiness out of metaphors. He courts cynicism because he is a practicing cynic. From *Paradoxes and Oxymorons*:

It has been played once more. I think you exist only
 To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there
 Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem
 Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you.¹³

The poem is thus both *sein* and *dasein*. It is the route that takes to Being as well as Being itself, while the irreducible gap between Being and its disclosure all but coincides with Being's self-identity. Being is that which is at a distance from itself. Or, to go further, Being is the distance of itself from itself. It is exemplary how Ashbery here both invokes the sameness of Being unto itself, and the possibility of an irreconcilable difference. The abstract notion of poetics that engenders every poetic arc also endangers it into being greatly deficient.

But why must the self be contained in an image of itself? Why is it that the self is but a replica? It is so because the very conception of Being is a *revelation* of it. In writing Being, Ashbery does not procreate Being, but he does produce the image of Being to/for itself. Being is mediated in a self-image because it is in its nature to reveal itself to itself. *Da* and *sein* are composite primordially. In which case, why insist, however, that Ashbery does not write Being into being? He himself answers. It is *because* Being (already, always) is, that he writes at all. While he may write Being, Being must there already be. That is, Being is *primordially*.

This super-immanence of Being, as also Heidegger's conception of it, is opposed to the traditional ontotheological enterprise. Being is not immanent in the writing of it, as Baruch Spinoza contended God is in his creations.¹⁴ If Being is that which is written and the writing of it, the revelation of Being constantly takes place in the manner of that which is (lacking a predicate). Being reveals itself to be but (not)itself. If Being must *only* appear, its appearance is proof of its existence, yes, but not its existence per se. Appearance being the form of Being and not simply its container, Being is programmed to forever redirect to itself. Essence is appearance qua appearance, as Hegel argued.

The nature of Being in appearance is not, "this is 'it'". But, "'it' is". When Ashbery writes that the inspiration is lacking once it is realised, as if it always already were lacking in itself, he seems to suggest that at the moment he writes Being, Being precisely ceases to be. *As if it never were to begin with*. The subversive negativity of Ashbery's potential is contained also in *not* writing Being, and thus (not) letting it be. If the gap between Being and its image is indeterminable *and* irreducible, it becomes an impossible proposition. For the irreducibility of the gap would amount to its determination, while the indeterminacy of the gap would imply not only that Being and its image are situated in perfect coincidence, but that they are one and the same. Being is only its own image. As a self-image, or as self re-doubled, Being both is and is not, like Parmigianino's peculiar self-portrait that is both a mirror (stylistically) and not one (technically). The reason Being must only ever make an *appearance*, must only be an image of itself, is because every final vocabulary is an enclosure or negation of what every

¹³ John Ashbery, 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons', in *Shadow Train* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 3.

¹⁴ See Catherine Malabou, 'Before and Above: Spinoza and Symbolic Necessity', *Critical Inquiry*, 43(1) (2016), 84-109.

final vocabulary is about: Being. Ontologisation of Being, its dislodging, is simultaneously its only ontic measure. That which sets Being up must necessarily not let Being be, as with Hegel's definition of the subject as that which contains within itself its own contradiction.¹⁵

Thus, the lack of a predicate to Being in this renewal warrants qualification. It is not enough to say only that Being is. One must add with it a negative assertion. Being is (not). Being is that which (it) is not. The positive condition of Being is in its nothingness. In order for this nothingness to be however, Being has to precede it. *Being must be in order not to be*. This is why Being cannot be discounted. It is not simply nothing. To be or not to be is a settled question. To be (something) is to not be (something else). As Rorty suggests:

To be primordial is thus to have the ability to know that when you seize upon an understanding of Being, when you build a house for Being by speaking a language, you are automatically giving up a lot of other possible understandings of Being, and leaving a lot of differently designed houses unbuilt.¹⁶

When Ashbery mentions Being's not-there or a possible change in Being's attitude (to non-Being), he is being primordial. He subjects Being itself to primordiality; in a Heideggerian sense, to Being before the advent of Time, or before Time as eternity began. For instance, in the middle of *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes:

In the end the business of philosophy is to preserve the *force of the most elementary words*, in which Dasein expresses itself, and to keep the common understanding from levelling them off to that unintelligibility which functions as a source of pseudo-problems.¹⁷

The problem here is both Rorty and Heidegger are caught up in concepts such as 'differently designed houses' or 'the most elementary words', as if these do not also form part of a certain final vocabulary. Even the most elementary words are words made possible by the vocabulary that a language presents, and differently designed houses implies that they are built already. Rorty is right, however, in that Heidegger never tells us how we may anticipate or begin to contemplate something truly ontological—that which takes the finality away from a final vocabulary. He does not and cannot set into motion a vocabulary that is *not* final, that bears therefore 'an elementary and fundamental relation to all world-view formation'.¹⁸ But Heidegger's nostalgia delineates the possibility of this very impossibility—it paves the way not for us to reflect on the nature of a particular world view, say the Western, but something deeper. The concept of "world-view" itself is composite of a certain world-view, and to even begin contemplating another world-view is not tantamount to departing from the existing world-view as such. Ultimately, it is the Western world-view that situates its own contradiction

¹⁵ See Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Introduction', in *Who Comes After the Subject?* ed. by Eduardo Cadava (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1-8.

¹⁶ See Rorty, 'Heidegger, Contingency and Pragmatism', p. 528.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 235.

¹⁸ Rorty, 'Heidegger, Contingency and Pragmatism', p. 530.

within its own form. To ask what another world-view may be is a question precisely generated by the Western world-view.

The reverse side of Heideggerian nostalgia, as Jacques Derrida once famously commented, is Heideggerian hope.¹⁹ Heidegger has not failed to engender the conception of the ontic even and especially with the recognition of it being an ontological formation. The question he has thrown us into is not what another world-view may look like, but what a/any world-view is *not*. In order to comprehend this latter scenario, we must rely on our world-view (the only available final vocabulary) and ask what *is*. Or, what is final about our final vocabulary. As such, of course, this is an impossible pursuit. Precisely because our vocabulary is final, using it automatically bars us from situating its finality. A vocabulary is final in the sense that it fails to account for, or come to terms with, its own finality. By rendering the question concerning onticity itself ontological, that is by designating a final vocabulary *as such*, Heidegger's nostalgia for the elementary and the primordial sets up simultaneously the *hope* of its impossibility. Here, I imagine this impossibility in another name, the subaltern.

Originally a Gramscian notion of subalternity designating the oppressed subject, it takes a turn with Gayatri Spivak's 1983 essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, where she makes the startling claim that there simply is no manner of speech available to the subaltern.²⁰ Likewise to the rest of us, it would seem, there is no *other* mannerism available. That is, no vocabulary other than that of the totality of all possible languages, or the summation of all final and definite vocabularies; the manner of speech in effect being *speech* itself. Speech is simultaneously the only "manner of speech", as language is the only means of speaking. Because in speech we may never realise what speech is *about*, we are simultaneously excluded from the knowledge of what speech is *not* about: the subaltern. My contention is with how the subaltern cannot be known, cannot be put to terms, because the subaltern is what "terms" are *not* about. Spivak likewise proclaims that the subaltern cannot speak; which is to say, the subaltern cannot be heard. Subalternity became a highly influential motif in postcolonial theory that scholars in the field continue to wrestle with. My interest in the concept is in regards to its own conceptual (Heideggerian) framework.

Subalternity thus relates to Being in a very particular manner. If, as Rorty claims, Being is what final vocabularies are about, subaltern is what final vocabularies are *not* about. The crucial injunction coming out of the concept that I had framed in a slightly different fashion earlier is the fact that the underlying premise of all final vocabularies is one generated by a singular final vocabulary. A final vocabulary or a particular world view that appears to itself *as such* has come to terms with its own inherent contradiction. Like a universal, in claiming itself to be, foregoes its own universality and becomes reduced to a particular. The negation of universality that lies at the heart of the universal renders it *a* universal, one among many possible ones; that

¹⁹ See Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Boss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1-28, p. 27: "From the vantage of this laughter and this dance, from the vantage of the affirmation foreign to all dialects, the other side of nostalgia {cette autre face de la nostalgie}, what I will call Heideggerian hope {espérance}, comes into question".

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 24-28.

is, the paradoxical rendering of a *particular* universal. It is a mistaken claim, therefore, that ahistoricity appears *as such* within a particular historical epoch. Within the historical epoch itself, questions of historicity can never arise. They only arise *in retrospect* with the givenness of the epoch being already unveiled. The appearance of ahistoricity is a *given* in any historical epoch. For instance, the particularity of the capitalist historical formation is a Marxist problem; it is one that Marx envisages when he has already in theory anticipated antecedents to capitalism.

This is what a final vocabulary designates: the impossibility of possibilities other than itself. The *givenness* of Western metaphysics, of a particular world-view; the *thrown-ness* of our status with regards to *our* world demonstrates in every case the inevitability of the latter. But such a foregone conclusion is not the same as a foreclosure. This concluding is in fact the unfolding of contingency. The inevitability of our world is constitutive also of the contingency of our world. That is, there is no way of commenting on the inevitability of our givenness from outside our givenness. To quarrel with Butler, there is indeed an ahistorical basis to each particular historical contingency.²¹ The ahistorical here is “historicity” itself. To repeat Lacan, the notion of a limit that is internal and not external would precisely be of this limit as a non-limit. Anything, absolutely anything and everything is rendered possible, because the space of “anything” and the totality of all such spaces—everything is defined within the limit of possibility itself. When we say something is possible, the possibility of this “something” has already taken place.

In *Anxiety*, Lacan writes:

In the very locus where your mental wont tells you to seek out the subject, right where, despite yourself, the subject emerges when, for example, Freud indicates the source of the aim, right where, in discourse, there stands that which you articulate as being you in a word, right where you say I—that is where, at the level of the unconscious, the a properly speaking is located. [...] At this level, you are a, the object, and everyone knows that this is what is intolerable and not only to discourse itself, which betrays this.²²

The enunciated subject cannot but be the *object* of enunciation. The I that locates, designates, and fixes me is by design located outside of me. The finality of a final vocabulary as I explained earlier cannot be situated within it. While of course it is generated from within, it is always located on the outside. In claiming Being is that which it is not, that it contends with its own negation at its heart, or in its Hegelian rendition as subject (that which is the carrier of its own contradiction), my wager is Being *is* the subaltern. Furthermore, it is not only that surmising about Being or contemplating its nature is the rendering of subalternity. Subalternity is a problem *of* Being. Spivak’s emphasis on the ‘crisis of subalternity’ as that which reifies the status of subalternity is an alliteration of the crisis of language in passing over the force of its

²¹ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 49-54.

²² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book X: Anxiety* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 141.

most elementary words.²³ The revelation of subalternity *as such* is always in terms other than subaltern, that is in a dominant form; as Spivak writes: 'when a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony'.²⁴ The revelation of subaltern *content* within dominant *form* is curious. The status of the subaltern as such is seemingly disclosed at the very point of its effacement or its negation by dominant forces. While the definition of being subaltern defeats precisely the logic of reification or *appearance*, this definition is only established (appears in the dominant register) as a result of its own radical undoing. In this sense, the essence of the subaltern is in its fundamental unknowability; the very moment it becomes locatable or knowable it simultaneously ceases to be subaltern. From Ashbery's 'Tenth Symphnoy':

They're so clever about some things
Probably smarter generally than we are
Although there is supposed to be something
We have that they don't—don't ask me
What it is.²⁵

If in Being's poem marks the "silence" (the subaltern cannot speak, cannot be heard), in the background of which our understandings of Being take shape (that is, Being must be), Ashbery actively constructs and cultivates this silence. The silence, which is really just a larger openness of other understandings of being as yet unhad, designates the silence also of other, equally elementary words (as yet unspoken) that lies beyond the world that is made available by *our* elementary words. This is the quality of being primordial. In this he shares a profoundly Romantic sentiment coupled with a Heideggerian consciousness. While words are what we use to tell stories to and about ourselves (*aletheia*, let Being be), they cannot possibly express our intuitional being (not let Being be), even though being can only become aware of itself by using them (let Being be by not letting Being be). Wordsworth, like Keats, can tell stories, stories about himself, but his poetry is also beginning to investigate the power of language in poetry to deny explicit meaning, to be precise about nothing more than itself 'and something ever more about to be'.²⁶ If the Romantics had thus cautioned themselves into avoiding explicit meaningfulness, Ashbery throws this caution to the wind. Some way along his predecessors, he fully denounces any attempt at meaning anything at all. There is no need to mean anything, because meaning does not have to *be*. People do not read poetry for the same reason they buy ticket for a bus ride, because they *mean* to go somewhere. With poetry, we do *not* mean, or we do not know what we mean, which in any case is the same thing. Ashbery constructs thus a site of total obscurantism, where authentic *aletheia* may take place. And what truly is the nature of this disclosure, this revelation? It is that words are not inadequate *because* the quest for meaning produces its opposite: absolute non-meaning. The revelation is not the revelation of Being or what it is about; rather, it is what it is *not* about: fixed meaning/final vocabularies.

²³ Spivak, p. 27.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ John Ashbery, 'Tenth Symphony', in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, p. 46.

²⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: A Parallel Text* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 160.

Being is instead what these are about: contingency and its awareness, pragmatism. Ashbery further writes:

Yes, but—there are no ‘yes, buts’.
The body is what all this is about and it dispenses
In sheeted fragments, all somewhere around
But difficult to read correctly since there is
No common vantage point, no point of view
Like the I in a novel. And in truth
No one never saw the point of any.²⁷

In an uneasy time of uncertainties, the unprecedented fusion of a superficial plurality and an all-encompassing uniformity produces, for a poet such as John Ashbery, a universe teeming with diverse opportunities. Combining reminders that only attend to the daily detail to the obstinacy of particular circumstance, the poet creates a utopia with reminders that all things are possible, that there are no *a priori* or destined limits to our imagination or our achievement without getting drawn into grand narratives that only a lost sense of contingency can give rise to, exemplifying all of the Heideggerian nostalgia minus its hope. There is not even a need for the latter. Hope is but a nostalgic form(ul)ation.

Heidegger’s preference for poetry over metaphysics is indeed a metaphysical exercise. I forgive him because, engaged in metaphysical rhetoric myself, I am in no position to be unforgiving. There is another reason. Heidegger has rendered Ashbery relatable, or he has rendered *a me* that relates to Ashbery. And while my relation to Ashbery is not poetic but metaphysical—as *givenness* of my language and my world, the situatedness of a constellation—it nevertheless fails to not appreciate Ashbery and make sense of him. For if the latter were to happen, the ultimate epistemic violence—will-to-power, its madness and relations—would crush Heidegger’s hope.

With Ashbery at least, that is not possible. Heidegger is in safe of hands. In ‘A Man of Words’ the poet says (of himself one must presume):

Behind the mask
Is still a continental appreciation
Of what is fine, rarely appears and when it does is already
Dying on the breeze that brought it to the threshold
Of speech.²⁸

²⁷ John Ashbery, ‘No Way of Knowing’, in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, p. 56.

²⁸ John Ashbery, ‘A Man of Words’, in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, p. 8.

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