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## **The Poetics of Plenitude and the Poet's Biography: Self-Creation in Some Later Poems by John Ashbery**

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**Abstract:** The article deals with the status of biographical references in John Ashbery's later poetry. It is an attempt to work out an approach that, while keeping the biographical in view, is an alternative to the way in which the biographical has functioned in recent Ashbery scholarship. In discussing Ashbery's strategy, I use the neo-pragmatist idea of aesthetic self-creation, especially a version of it developed by Alexander Nehamas in his writings on aesthetic objects. The term I am developing to discuss the variety of self-creation in Ashbery is "the emerging self," and I see it as a component of a poetics which I am calling the pragmatist ironist poetics of plenitude. The emerging self of the poetics of plenitude, rising over the expanse of a lifetime of poetry writing, is a type of poetic authorial subjectivity whose relation to the empirical facts of the author's biography reverses the relation between poetry and biography found in confessional poetry. The poetics of plenitude shows the biographical fact to be dependent on the poetic element on which it relies for its authenticity. Within the poetics of plenitude, it is the poetic that is the real and authentic.

**Key words:** John Ashbery, poetry and biography, pragmatist poetics

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John Ashbery, one of the most influential poets of more than the past half-century in English, used to be thought of as a self-less poet. No self or subject, authorial, biographical, lyrical, or other, speaks through this rich linguistic flow, the flow itself being its own simulated speaker, detached and autonomous from the life of the poet—such used to be the main critical formula applied to Ashbery. However, significant recent approaches to his writing have been revising this formula, pointing to mechanisms which reveal more recognizable subjective structures, and leading, in turn, to the renewed question of how personal experience and autobiography function in this poetry.

The discourse on the place of biography in Ashbery's poetry remains fresh. In this article, I am going to inquire into one possible mode in which this poetry proposes to make biography available again, without falling back on the aesthetically and philosophically irrelevant notion of the autonomous expressive subject.

Tracing a type of textual subjectivity that I am going to refer to as the “emerging self,” I will discuss its relations to the actual biography of the empirical author of the poems. In doing this, I will hope to modulate and complement some more recent critical commentary on the role of biography in Ashbery. Finally, I will also attempt to show how my idea of the “emergent self” in Ashbery is part of a poetics which I am elsewhere calling “the poetics of plenitude.”<sup>1</sup>

I am proposing a critical hunt, a search for an ephemeral textual being called “the emergent self.” But the hunt is only possible within a larger poetic environment of the “poetics of plenitude.” Such poetics makes a bold claim of the precedence and priority—epistemological, psychological, and temporal—of the poem over the “facts” of the empirical life. However, as we shall see, this bold claim is made not against these facts but in their interest.

### The Self-less and Biography-less Ashbery

It is worth remembering, amidst all the fluctuations of Ashbery’s critical reception, that his poetry rose to wider public attention, and later acclaim, through a narrative that clearly stressed the shaping of a strong poetic subjectivity through a lifetime of poetry writing: Harold Bloom’s notorious theory of “the anxiety of influence.” In the light of Bloom’s dark gnostic divagations, there is a subjective self, stealthily rising in a poet like Ashbery, through a cunning series of evasive, half-worshipful, half-aggressive stances of opposition toward the poetic predecessors. When successfully evolved, this subject invades and appropriates the imaginative figures forwarded across time by the proud predecessor. This subject becomes its own proud predecessor.

But such posturing—too Romantic, too irrational for the contemporary academic climates—has been too much for scholarship. Contrary to Bloom’s narrative, later poetic and critical responses to Ashbery, influenced by the post-structuralist critique, have been much more suspicious of attempts to trace forms of subjectivity in his poems. This also led to dropping the biographical subject from view almost entirely. David Lehman could write *The Last Avant-Garde* as a biography of a

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1 This article is part of a larger project whose aim is to move toward a definition of a pragmatist poetics which I am calling the “poetics of plenitude.” I am developing this term over a series of articles some of which have already seen print, while others are to be published this year. For a definition of the poetics of plenitude identified and described with reference to Wallace Stevens, see my “Wallace Stevens’s Pragmatist Poetics of Plenitude.” An essay on Richard Rorty’s concept of irony and its significance for the poetics of plenitude is scheduled to be published by a philosophical journal, *Contemporary Pragmatism*, this year.

poetic movement, but he could not write biographically about Ashbery's poetry, since "Ashbery is certainly the least autobiographical of modern poets. No one's poems have less to do with the details of his life" (94). David Herd, the author of a comprehensive study of Ashbery's poetry, has maintained this approach, arguing that although references to biographical facts found in his *oeuvre* can sometimes serve as points of entry, they will not help to shed any explanatory light. They "do not, on the whole, enable one to read it" (20).

Other approaches made it even more clear that the demise of the subjective in Ashbery is particularly well detectable when we consider the evacuation of the biographical self from Ashbery's writing. These critiques saw ways in which the poet simply blocks access to his biography. Antoine Cazé, for example, discussed Ashbery's strategies of evading autobiography and the attendant dissolution of biographical subjectivity in his poems. He described the poet's dense linguistic play of inviting autobiographical references only to thwart the formation of any coherent subject as a kind of "critical lyricism," that is "a conflict-ridden mode of personal expression in which self-distancing strategies ensure a rhetorical dislocation of the autobiographical subject." A similar approach was taken by David LeHardy Sweet, whose discussion of Ashbery's use of painting techniques highlighted gestures aiming at the erasure of any subject-oriented stances (231–74).

This wave of Ashbery's reception as regards the role of biography in his poetry was greatly boosted by two factors: the aesthetic climate of the New York School poetic avant-garde, and the general post-structuralist intellectual air that was inimical to the idea of formulating stable subjectivities in language. The "New York school of poetry" is a rather unhappy and pretentious term in itself, ignoring vast differences between what was mostly a coterie of friends and artists, but if there is a common denominator uniting the writers it would be their pronounced animosity towards the styles of poetry generally described as "confessional." Whatever Ashbery shared with O'Hara in the lesson they took from the painters must have revolved around the idea that if the personal experience enters the medium of the artistic, it does so under a strict regime of ploys, in a formal climate which effectively eliminates the direct flaunting of the personal, especially the personal that expresses deep psychological drama. Ashbery himself spoke repeatedly of his wish to present general versions of common human experience, evoking circumstances that are transferrable from one particular life to another. His own comparison of his poetic method to manufacturing one-size-fits-all socks—which, as Ashbery says in an interview, is his own version of a confessional poem—is among the most popular critical references (Murphy 25).

Additionally, the readings of Ashbery by those commentators who, like Cazé and LeHardy Sweet, focus on blocking or erasing the biographical layer, are backed by a very specific nexus of theoretical argument—the post-structuralist and de-

constructive onslaught on the chances for maintaining any more stable authorial subjectivity in the literary text. Seán Burke has pointed out one paradoxical result of the combined post-structuralist attack on the notion of the author offered by Foucault and Barthes (101–11). Grounded in the earlier theoretical attack on the philosophical subject as an autonomous entity, their argument aimed to liberate texts from the limiting institution of “the author” as a source of transcendental authority on the meanings of the text. However, according to Burke, such a critique led to “affirm[ing] the counter-ideal of impersonality” (105). No wonder that, when applied to advanced forms of postmodern literature, this line of thought has made it unlikely to consider biography as a viable context for the discussion of a work, and Ashbery’s writing is a poignant case in point.

### **The Return of the Biographical in Ashbery**

And yet, with a change in the intellectual climate, the biographical seems to have been surfacing in Ashbery’s complex poetics, and the recent decade has seen a return of more biographically poised readings of the poet. These have been enabled by a shift in the theoretical discourse on subjectivity. Various backgrounds and philosophical platforms have outgrown the strict ban on the forming of subjectivity in linguistic literary output, pointing instead to flexible, playful, complex, dynamic, non-confessional and non-expressive subjectivities found in forms of self-irony or self-awareness in contemporary poetry. These subjectivities seem much more independent of personal expression and the facts of biographies than it is the case in any modes that could be called “confessional.” One notable example in this respect can be found in Charles Altieri’s discussion of Ashbery’s “A Wave” as a display of post-modern self-awareness, in which subjectivity resides in a series of internal reflections on multiple, context dependent self-identifications.

An important example of the continuation of the critical path cleared by Altieri is John Emil Vincent’s study of Ashbery’s later poetry entitled *John Ashbery and You*. It seems that Altieri’s treatment of Ashbery’s opaque verse as a field that tests alternative self-reflexive stances has allowed Vincent to bring the biographical back and to show Ashbery as a poet writing from within quite specific autobiographical and cultural contexts. These contexts, according to Vincent, provide materials within which Ashbery may put in motion an interpersonal, reader-involving play, which will not result in writing about a specific life, but which will produce involving reports from specific cultural moments. Here, the autobiographical “simply means something entirely different”: it is present, but in ways that are different from those uses of autobiography that make it a case

of transparency (20). Rather, in a critical fashion reminiscent of Altieri, Vincent argues that Ashbery's craft is a means of offering "strategies or collections rather than shapes or, say, authorial personality" (20). The poet is present in his poems, but only as a figure "suspended in the solution of poetry and thus is only available when one is suspended in that solution oneself" (22).

Another intellectual platform that has enabled a different take on the biographical layer of Ashbery's poetry has been pragmatism. In his extended study of friendship patterns amidst the New York poets, called *Beautiful Enemies*, Andrew Epstein has reached to Emersonian pragmatism to find the central aesthetic imperative of Ashbery in the impulse pushing the self toward a series of continuous fluid transformations, never allowing it to cling to any formulated stage. This imperative shows in the various tensions constantly present in the poet's friendships, the tensions which are variously reflected in the poems. Friendship becomes an important field of aesthetic and intellectual challenge and it is this thematic that drives Epstein's presentation of Ashbery's poetry. The Emersonian pragmatism that Epstein detects in Ashbery makes friendship both a crucial and a problematic fuel for poetry: "any friendship... must remain... merely a starting point, a spur, for one's own incessant transformations" (71). The poem becomes witness to such tensions, and Ashbery's poetry can be read as an "indirectly autobiographical narrative" (148) on a self that looks for difficult balances between allegiances of friendship and the internal transformative drive that it needs to heed against the danger of reification.

And yet, what remains to be understood is how the more fluid, transitional subjectivities enabled by such discourses affect the biographical. What exactly is the status of the empirical biographical fact in Ashbery? Even more importantly, what is the precise difference between such strategies and the confessional mode? Isn't Ashbery, by any chance, merely a more sophisticated confessional poet who must reach back and find aesthetically modulated access to an experiential platform, a platform always prior to the poem? And how stable, how "personal" or "real," are the ephemeral subjectivities whose birth is sensed in Vincent's and Epstein's critical narrative? If we are now ready to talk of forms of agency in Ashbery, as both Vincent and Epstein suggest, how should we portion out the biographical from the text of poetry within the activity of this agency? Vincent and Epstein's approaches do not seem to say enough of the intense exchanges and achieved balances which emerge in Ashbery between these areas.

To answer such questions, we need to inquire into a crucial difference that Ashbery's poetry introduces into the "ontology" of any given present moment in the life of a poet like himself, and to show how this "ontology" is different from the one presupposed by the confessional poem. In a normal confessional poem, the central problem is finding an aesthetic distance toward an empirical fact,

without obliterating its authenticity, while the fact must be thought of as prior to its poetic realization.<sup>2</sup> It is my contention that Ashbery's emergent self, as a creature of the poetics of plenitude, alters our understanding of this relation and thus has a huge impact on our understanding of what it means, for a poet, to have a biography.

### Ashbery and the "Emergent Self" of the "Poetics of Plenitude"

In what follows, I will try to signal the presence of forms of more dynamic, evolved subjectivity in Ashbery's later volumes, by analyzing their relation to the biographical layer. Delineating the emergence and activity of poetic subjectivity in Ashbery's writing, I will use the term "self-creation." Self-creation as a result of reading, writing, or other forms of artistic participation is a recurrent motif in neo-pragmatist aesthetic theory, notably in the works of such philosophers as Richard Rorty. Here, however, I will limit myself to referring, later in the essay, to the work of Alexander Nehamas. Nehamas's ideas expand and develop the concept of the aesthetics of self-creation found in Rorty, supplying it with more detail and helping us see how the term "self-creation" may be applied usefully to Ashbery's text.

Without insisting on Nehamas's ties to neo-pragmatism, or exploring the differences between his stance and Rorty's, I am going to refer to his special understanding of "self-creation," in which this disputed notion receives a new formula, allowing us to surpass the post-modern idea of the death of the authorial subjectivity in literature. By referring to Nehamas's careful explorations of the writing and interpretive acts, with their consequences for subjectivity, I will trace a form of evanescent authorial subjectivity in Ashbery, related to the procession of the poems themselves, a subjectivity I am going to call "the emerging self of poetic plenitude." As I will argue, this self seeks its authentic reality in a way that makes it differ from the authenticity of the expressive subject of consciousness—the cornerstone of the confessional model. As we will also see, this form

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2 I am far from following a common misconception according to which a confessional poem is a simple report from personal experience. Adam Kirsch is right when he argues, in reference to these poets, that their "verbal equivalent" of experience—a term borrowed from Eliot—"is not a record, transcript, or confession" (xv). With all the artfulness, however, with which such poets as Lowell or Bishop attended to their experience, they do not move beyond the model in which poetry is a *return to prior* experience. The consequence of this ontological priority of experience over poetry is that poetry becomes a search for accurate formal distance to what has always already been lived through. The poetics of plenitude is a more radical proposition of the relation between poetry and biography.

of subjectivity affords a paradoxical return to the biographical element—a return, however, which offers a radical reworking of the confessional model. In Ashbery's poetics, it is the biographical "facts" which begin to depend on the poems for their reality, and not *vice versa*.

My first task is to discuss the emergence of a dynamic, fluid, poetic agency, much indebted to the creative practice itself, which I sense to be informing some of the more poignant poems of Ashbery's later phase. In these poems the dislocations of autobiography continue as attention is shifted from the flatness of autobiographical facts to the progress of the poem itself, its finding itself amidst its own contingent passage, and, eventually, to the affirming declarations of the creative pleasure of its coming into being. In other words, the writing process becomes a platform for a form of agency that I will refer to as the *emergent* self, or the *questing* self. This self is a textual entity, an agent we need to posit behind the linguistic and aesthetic gestures made by the poem. When conceived of as an action, the tensions, shifts, and disjunctions which constitute Ashbery's poetics begin to imply an agent behind them. This agent, or poetic self, is different from any psychologized internal drama. Within the approach I am proposing, the erasure of the autobiographical author signals the birth of a different authorial entity which, although distanced from (auto)biography, is also a more stable factor influencing the empirical biography of the poet than it has been suggested by critics like Vincent and Epstein, even though it seems to have no abode beyond the process of composition. Its stability, as we will see, is in its task. And the task is not to reflect biography but to sustain the possibility of its authentic reality.

A fitting starting point for detecting the presence of this form of subjectivity can be found in a poem from the volume *Your Name Here*, entitled "Life Is A Dream." It opens with what will by now appear as a standard Ashbery denial of any sense of identity that might be variously co-opted by external forces. The speaker of the poem declares: "A talent for self-realization / will get you only as far as the vacant lot / next to the lumber yard, where they have rollcall" (*Your Name* 59). "Your name here," the phrase used in the title of the volume, is borrowed from the world of bureaucratic identifications of human subjects. The phrase evokes the language of rubric-bound categorization, of procedures of identification for the purposes of generating data, their storage and management. Such forms of identification lead to emptiness and vacancy, becoming a standardized paper fiction. If the task of such identification procedures is to establish a stable reality, the calculable availability of hard data has a reverse effect. Ashbery's version of realism finds such a degree of measurability to be pernicious. The fiction of self-realization that is mentioned at the start of the poem is precisely such a construct created and fed by the bureaucratic apparatus. In a world defined by bureaucratic categorizations, the notions of "identity" or "self-realization" are tools

of control. Thus, when Ashbery says that the talent for self-realization will only result in vacuity, I take this “self-realization” to refer to the sad complicity of our biographies with the hard data our empirical being produces.

As this type of self-realization is refuted in the poem, it soon gives way to a different stance. The poem ends with an ambiguous and disturbing image of hand-shaking: “This gloved hand, / For instance, that glides / so securely into mine, as though it intends to stay” (*Your Name* 59). This image brings to mind the act of introduction. Sadly, since the hand is gloved, the gesture is double-edged: it promises openness, perhaps friendship or intimacy, but simultaneously blocks these forms of contact and communication. Moreover, the participants of the situation remain mysterious: the owner of the gloved hand is absent. Yet, amidst such distance and ambiguity, the image does evoke the speaker’s own hand (“glades... into mine”), which may make readers think of the poet’s own act—the writing of the poem—and the way in which the poet is present in it. Of course, the gloved hand locked into the poet’s own hand is Ashbery’s always mysterious *you*: a reader, listener, or the speaker’s own projection of an interlocutor, a fiction of a conversation partner, remaining mysterious, even slightly menacing. Critical commentary has stressed how in Ashbery the “you” pronoun is a firm signal of including the reader’s presence in the poem. Bonnie Costello has discussed the multiple functions performed by Ashbery’s fluid “you’s,” pointing out that “at least one very concrete reification of ‘you’ is an actual reader” (495). John Emil Vincent agrees with Costello that Ashbery’s use of the pronoun “offer[s his] reader a place to enter his poetry” (161), and structures the discussion around the idea of the “you” signifying a conversational partner not just of a single poem but of the entire volume, which, as Vincent compellingly argues, becomes the primary unit of Ashbery’s *poesis* at some point. But my contention here is that the evasiveness with which the “you” haunts certain poems also signal the hidden “I” of the act of inclusion.

Ashbery’s offer is complex: his shielded greetings, while welcoming a “you,” bring echoes of a distant “I.” The “you” does not signal a pure presence of the other and points in the direction of Ashbery’s ironic internal monologue. Thus, if the “gloved hand” introduces any sort of reference to a “you,” it automatically, if ironically and unexpectedly, reintroduces self-reference, a vague aura of an “I,” which, though apparently fictitious, nourishes the poem as its basic reality. This aura is, however, inseparable from the passage of the poem, since its mysterious presence is ushered in with the image of the poet’s hand, the hand that readers may associate with the act of writing. With the dismissal of standard autobiography as a viable platform for the reality of the speaker, such a source is now sought exclusively in the poems themselves, in their contingent, unexpected passage.

A similar development—from the flatness of autobiography as common cliché to some other, more bizarre identifications—occurs in a poem entitled “The Problem of Anxiety” found in the volume *Can You Hear Bird*:

Fifty years have passed  
 since I started living in those dark towns  
 I was telling you about.  
 Well, not much has changed. I still can't figure out  
 how to get from the post office to the swings in the park.  
 Apple trees blossom in the cold, not from conviction,  
 and my hair is the color of dandelion fluff. (121)

This flat, mixed, cliché-ridden, and highly uncertain fragment is then, at the opening of the next stanza, confronted with a blunt question:

Suppose this poem were about you—would *you*  
 put in the things I've carefully left out:  
 descriptions of pain, and sex, and how shiftily  
 people behave toward each other? Naw, that's  
 in some book, it seems. (121)

The question that opens this stanza works in two ways. First, it confronts the reader with the possibility that the previous stanza, with its mixture of cliché and bizarre lyricism, might, in fact, be about the “me” of the poem. “What if the previous sentences were about me,” is, I suggest, the implied question here. Again, and perhaps more clearly than in the previous example, we have to do with the fluidity of Ashbery’s “you,” which is active enough to make the pronoun point in the direction of the “I” of the poem.

With such strategies, the poem interrogates our worn-out self-identifying reports, and finds them unsatisfactory. These attempt to say too much and end up saying nothing, in the sense that they merge back into the predictable. Is the inclusion of the gritty existential detail—pain, sex, disappointment, etc.—of any use? The answer follows immediately: “Naw, that's / all in some book, it seems.” The gritty detail is a cliché itself, much abused by the surrounding culture, awash with exhibitionism and sensationalism. The restoration of the erased material would be of no help. Indeed, it would devalue the experience itself, turning it over to the treadmill of worn-out tropes. Does this mean that the poet blocks them because he craves originality? No doubt, although not for the self of autobiography, but for the poem. And so the poem takes another turn away from cliché, towards “collectibles,” the aesthetic of the bizarre that Ashbery has often praised in the works of Raymond Roussel or Joseph Cornell:

For you

I have saved the descriptions of chicken sandwiches,  
and the glass eye that stares at me in amazement  
from the bronzed mantel, and will never be appeased. (*Bird* 121)

This is Ashbery's variety of surrealism: we move from the American quotidian—a chicken sandwich—to a gathering of objects which are suggestive of much less realistic climes. And yet, the collection is not totally accidental. One object in particular should make us pause: “the glass eye,” gratuitous as it may seem, does bring with it a plethora of references. First, in a familiar ploy, the word “eye” puns, of course, on the word “I.” Secondly, the object itself, being glass and round, recalls another round and glass object, one that brought Ashbery fame and recognition: Parmigianino's convex self-portrait. And finally, the eye, which “will never be appeased,” suggests constant surveillance and an external gaze which is difficult to avoid. As a token of scrutinizing consciousness, pointed at the speaker, it stands for a source of apprehension. In short, for those who have been following Ashbery's biography, it brings to mind a theoretical and interpretive motif that was another factor responsible for Ashbery's rising to poetic prominence in the 1970s: Harold Bloom's theory of the “anxiety of influence.”

If Ashbery is ironizing a critical apparatus which once brought him into public attention, an apparatus based on a narrative of predictable poetic development, he is also absorbing it into the poem. Whatever the tone of the inclusion, the tool lends an aesthetic momentum to the poem of which it becomes a part. The theme of “anxiety” enters a complex play, not so much with its poetic predecessors as with the composition process itself. To ironize the earlier attempts by others to capture and classify his poetic self is to move beyond them, both taking a distance toward them and turning them into the material of the poem.

The series of meandering shifts of tone, the sense of a continuous search for the right mode combined with the action of moving away from the expected, thus produce a singular report, a not fully explicable yet enticing collection which, the poem implies, is the only reliable self-recognition. The set of collectibles closing the poem, with its various reworkings of materials that mix biography and criticism, replaces the story of the “true” autobiography, shedding a strange light on it, and becoming its uncanny analogue. There are two kinds of autobiographical references here: strictly biographical motifs, such as the apple trees in the first stanza, which are reminiscent of Ashbery's childhood spent on an apple farm in New York state, and objects and images related to earlier poems or critical terms, such as the “anxiety of influence,” which have become associated with them. Importantly, the two types of reference blend within one poetic structure. The facts of “biography” merge with earlier poems or the discourse on them. In this

way, Ashbery's poetry constructs a view-point of aesthetic externality, a distance from which to look at the predictability of empirical biography, a distance from which biography appears as something strange—possibly as something that is also created. Such point of view is constructed, and we must inquire of the agent of its construction. The compositional evasiveness of the poem—its mixture of irony and distance, of fact and aesthetic process—becomes a residue of the emergent poetic self. This “self” is the implied inhabitant of the platform from which the empirical self appears as a kind of creation, too.

At first glance, the construct of the emerging self seems too ephemeral when compared with the self of biographical data, which, although largely clichéd and vulnerable to systematic surveillance, seems to possess a greater degree of stability. And yet, a careful reading of some of Ashbery's *ekphrastic* poems from his later phase may show how this dependence is in fact reversed. The operations of putting in and leaving out, of collagistic filling of the space of the poem and of erasing material, present in Ashbery for a long time, have been borrowed by the poet from the experimental inventory of painting. This technical affinity with painting has been described by a number of critics. One of the fuller recent commentaries on these exchanges is David LeHardy Sweet's study *Savage Sight/Constructed Noise*.

LeHardy Sweet concentrates on volumes from Ashbery's early period, from *The Tennis Court Oath* to *Self-Portrait*. According to the critic, poems in these volumes use techniques developed by painters, allowing Ashbery to rewrite the prerogatives of both the more central tradition and the concept of avant-garde. Here the “avant-garde” is seen as an attempt, by various artists, to contest the institutionally established styles of utterance, whether in the visual arts or in poetry. LeHardy Sweet follows Ashbery's use of this term, as the poet refers to those artistic movements or moments—such as the proto-Surrealism of Roussel, the early phase of Abstract Expressionism, or the New York School of poetry before it became a widely acknowledged poetic phenomenon—which proliferate on the outskirts of the centrally accepted aesthetics. It also seems that Ashbery associates the term avant-garde with a tendency to experiment with form—in painting or poetry—beyond the boundary of what is allowed by the critical and academic “establishment” (Ashbery, “Avant-Garde” 390). The redrawing of the received lines of division between the center and the periphery that LeHardy Sweet traces in Ashbery lets the poet avoid, once the avant-garde becomes dominant in the artistic culture, a wholesale cultural acceptance, which would be destructive for the artist (LeHardy Sweet 236–237). In his balancing between an all-too-easy cultural cooptation as a difficult avant-garde poet and as a representative of central traditions, Ashbery follows proto-surrealists such as Roussel and post-Abstract Expressionist painters in order to achieve a specific sort of authorial disappearance. Among the painterly techniques that LeHardy Sweet discusses are collage and the use of flat

diction, borrowed, for example, from Jasper Johns's and Robert Rauschenberg's fascination with ready-mades. These strategies are employed by Ashbery in the interest of "a deadpan collagism that highlights the self-abnegating character of his poetry... against the self-assertiveness of Abstract Expressionist art in its insistence on personal immediacy, energy, action" (LeHardy Sweet 248). As a result, Ashbery's avant-garde stance can be seen as a contradiction of the vibrant, energetic, psychologized, Romantic self, detected behind the work of De Kooning or Pollock. In contrast, Ashbery opts for an "automatism" that, far from being "instinctual," is "merely mechanical, convenient," producing "the same 'impression of absence' that one finds in Johns's painting" (257).

If Ashbery practices a form of authorial disappearance, such banishing trick is performed for the sake of an advanced reader of poetry, who is now freed from certain illusions about self and language. It is hard to suspect, however, that readers would be so enlightened through interaction with the poem, if the poem itself did not behave as an involving, attractive, pleasurable conversationalist. The flow of the compositional pleasure that drives the poem should be treated as the signal of an active self—not necessarily identical with the empirical author—that installs itself in the poem. We have already seen how this self begins to emerge, attached to the stances of externality that mix biography with the poetic occasion. Let us now inquire into the chances of this self receiving any sort of more lasting authentication, bearing in mind that such authentication is something different from the authenticity of the traditional expressive subject.

### **The Reality of the "Emerging Self"**

Ashbery's interest in painting continues well into his late phase and cannot be reduced to a conscious borrowing of techniques which suit one critical discourse, such as the discourse of the erasure of the author. Rather, in this poetry, there is a complex interaction with paintings of various styles and periods that leads to the poem as a prolonged active response to painting. If it is true that Ashbery, like Johns or Rauschenberg, refuses to organize the energies of the aesthetic object so that they reflect the self-organizing powers of the authorial subject (LeHardy Sweet 249, 250), then my claim is that what is organized is the poem itself—the poem as a quasi-self. Here, however, "organization" does not mean the coherence of a totality but the freshness and accountability of the poem's passage. It is this freshness that is always at stake in Ashbery's poetry, as it offers glimpses of a new entity, a new self, caught in transition. The poem's interaction with painting activates and enhances a fluid self whose method of authentication is different from that of the biographical self which seeks expression through its literary avatar.

This approach might also help us to understand Ashbery's stance toward the dialectic of tradition and the avant-garde. In Ashbery's reinterpretation of these terms, tradition stands for the idea of the subject as an autonomous decision-making entity, external and prior to the event of the aesthetic experience, using language as a tool for expressing the reality of the biographical subject. The avant-garde, in turn, represents a departure from this idea for the sake of a subjectivity that is coincidental with the poetic process itself. Here, the avant-garde is the skill of imparting reality to something as volatile as the poetic experience.

Ashbery's painterly pursuits go beyond the evolutions of the post war American art scene. What can we make of his fascination with Vermeer or his mentioning of such painters as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Jean-Baptiste Greuze? What Ashbery the poet takes from Ashbery the art critic is the understanding that painting requires a prolonged interaction, that significant visual experience is never immediate, and that appreciation of the aesthetic object requires time. The process activates unexpected responses by distant areas of selfhood, which are thus both sustained and screened from leveling by bureaucratic knowledge. I see Ashbery's later poems as such prolonged *ekphrastic* records, even when no specific painting is referred to. The *ekphrastic* gesture we see in the poems which contain clear references to recognizable painterly works develops into a method that seems to organize haphazard material intercepted into other poems, those in which no specific painting is in view. This enhancement, while not a rule, might be traced in numerous lyrics of the later period.

On the view I am proposing, Ashbery's poems function as advanced descriptions of paintings in which description is replaced by a mixture of narrative and associations. However extraneous to the visibility of the painting, they become the very fabric of one's own attraction to it. In fact, they become the major context in which the painting's visibility may be held. As such, they are translations of the uniqueness of one's interaction with the aesthetic object. This uniqueness belongs not so much to any biographical subject, however, nor to the object, but to the situation, that is to the poem. This aesthetic can be witnessed in such poems as "View of Delft" from *Chinese Whispers*:

The afternoon is slow, slower and slower  
 until a full stop is reached  
 long before anyone realized it.  
 Only the faintest nip in the air  
 causes these burghers to become aware  
 that their time is passing too, and then but fitfully.

Go stack those bricks over there.  
 See what the horse is doing.  
 Everything around you is waiting.

It is now apologized for.  
 The sky puts a finger to its lips.  
 The most optimistic projections confirm  
 the leakage theory. Another drop in temperature  
 is anticipated. It's all about standing still,  
 isn't it? That and remaining in touch with  
 a loose-fitting impression of oneself:  
 oneself at fifteen, out at night  
 or at a party in the daytime.

Then the sneezes got up to go. (18)

Rather than come up with a presentation of the visual details of Vermeer's famous painting, Ashbery presents a simulated participation in the scene it depicts. Using certain props which signal kinship with the painting, the poem places itself inside it, obliterating borders between the two apparently different aesthetic objects. We hear voices of the imagined conversation between the human figures in the picture. The description of the weather is by somebody who is inside, directly experiencing the stillness of the quiet afternoon hour. The painting and the poem merge, their generic borderlines receding behind the particular type of sensation that has given rise to them.

It may be noticed that this short simulated narrative rehearses one of Ashbery's life-long preoccupations: the attempt to experience and arrest the passage of time. This is the idea that Ashbery's Parmigianino from "Self-Portrait in the Convex Mirror" manages to materialize within his space-time congealing ball of perfect artistic self-consciousness. Ashbery's interpretation of Parmigianino's visual contraption makes it into a self-contained space in which all movement in space-time is suspended by the centrally reigning authorial presence. The power of the artist's gaze bends time-space, and pins things down to its gravitational pull, causing all alterity to vanish:

I see in this only the chaos  
 of your round mirror which organizes everything  
 around the polestar of your eyes...  
 ...  
 desk, papers, books,  
 Photographs of friends, the window and the trees  
 Merging in one neutral band...  
 ...  
 Why it should all boil down to one  
 Uniform substance, a magma of interiors (*Portrait 71*)

Importantly, this "magma," the sucking in of all space so that it falls under the control of the central self, is also a time-arresting device. All time is programmed

in the “whole” that Parmigianino’s globe represents: “*Le temps*, the word for time... which / Follows a course wherein changes are merely / Features of a whole. The whole is stable within” (70). Commenting on Parmigianino’s spherical space, as rendered in Ashbery’s poem, one critic writes: “The medium is a timeless zone, seasonless. It creates its own special unwavering climate, its own time-count” (Lieberman 30).

Ashbery’s interaction with Vermeer’s painting opens on just this same sort of temporal arrest. The painting, at least for Ashbery’s speaker, affects a freezing of time, “until a full stop is reached.” Vermeer isolates an ordinary afternoon in Delft, which, singled out, stares at the viewer with the strangeness of being extracted from the normal temporal sequence. The motifs and references to freezing, thickening of some substance, waiting, removal from the feel of time as a series of moments, proliferate in the latter part of the poem. Again, Ashbery’s musing on the painting returns him to earlier poetic occasions of similar musings, motifs, traces of earlier poems. These, now, have become the proper facts of an “autobiography.” The previous poems have been integrated and become part of Ashbery’s life.

But such poetic readings of painting, inseparable from re-readings of his own poems, can use much more fantastic imagery, and be much less referable to particular paintings. How should we approach the strange disquisition on familial situations in “The Evening of Greuze,” another painterly exercise from the same period, contained in the volume *Chinese Whispers*? The first stanza is a familiar shuffled mixture of loosely connected statements, among which we learn of a skillful “brother-in-law” who has “fixed” the speaker a “tower in the mill.” Later, other strange structures appear: “Across the road they are building a cement house. / It will seemingly have no windows. A columbarium / for cement pigeons” (*Chinese* 53).

Is this another ordinary evening, a moment of which gets selected for special appreciation, which results in its embalming? Not quite. This poem seems more dynamic, with no recognizable painterly object in view. Rather, the piece presents a motley collection of observations with no central point of reference. And yet, the mechanism of selection is not accidental. What exactly is a cement house, a windowless columbarium for “cement pigeons”? The poem speaks of heights, of watching things from a point that is physically elevated. The first stanza’s “tower in the mill” influences our reception of the later appearing “cement house” and “columbarium,” and we see these structures related to a sense of height. The elevated point of view coupled with a note of something overwhelming and ominous in the depiction, might be reminiscent of the Manhattan residential environments with which the empirical author of the poem is associated. The “columbarium” also might evoke some of Joseph Cornell’s box compositions which have been an

important point of reference for Ashbery. A number of Cornell's works on the theme of the "dovecote," or "columbarium," are very tightly related in terms of their method of composition to others which draw upon the theme of windows and window facades. In both cases, the compositions are based on rectangular grids of wooden elements, creating a matrix of slots or niches, which are either blank or contain plain objects, the whole grid playing with the idea of vacancy. Thus the "columbarium" mentioned in the poem, recalling Cornell's "dovecotes," may remind the reader of window facades, which, in turn, brings in the kind of cityscape that would be familiar to the poet.

Rather than confronting a specific painting by Greuze, it is better to think of this poem as a dream of somebody stretched between epochs, spaces, and contexts. The dream consists of elements coming from diverse sources. We may be viewing a painting by Greuze, with its grim late evening atmosphere; but this ambiance becomes a background for a collage of elements related simultaneously to the facts of the poet's empirical biography as well as his long-standing artistic preferences and practices. What matters here is the process of composition, which can be treated as either an inquiry into or a response to a more or less real aesthetic object. In such compositions, however, much more is at stake than mere inquiry. Ashbery's *ekphrasis* makes it clear to us that there is no such thing as pure description. In this, his poetry brings us to a theory of description proposed by Alexander Nehamas.

According to Nehamas, a prolonged interaction with an aesthetic object consists of a special kind of examination of the object which is inseparable from its interpretation: "the distinction between merely describing what a work of art is and interpreting what it means... can't be systematically maintained" (*Promise* 122–123). In such description/interpretation, the object emerges for us in the plethora of its connections to, but also differences from, other objects. It is revealed to us as an expanding network of relations, an active, ever more visible surface: "Interpretation doesn't push the manifest content of a work aside in order to reveal the real meaning hidden beneath... 'Depth' is a metaphor... the deeper it is, the more it encompasses" (*Promise* 123–124). It is within this expanding surface of established relations that the object becomes revealed; we obtain the object in its relations to other objects: "we... look at interpretation as establishing a web of connections between the elements of one thing and between one thing and another" (*Promise* 124).

However, experiencing the object as such an expanding network of connections involves becoming immersed in a vaster process, aesthetic, cognitive, and ontological, in which the object receives its uniqueness, and in which this uniqueness is inseparable from the budding, changing, expanding uniqueness of the viewer. A new viewer, new commentator/interpreter, comes into being, a being that was

not there before, and who is an outcome of the event of the active description/interpretation itself:

To interpret is to try to see in things what is distinctly their own. This in turn is to see them in ways that are distinctly our own... in finding beauty we create it ourselves.... Beauty so understood is a matter of distinction, of standing out among things of one's kind, whether people or objects. (Nehamas, *Promise* 133)

Interpretation so conceived becomes an “arrangement,” and it is “part of anything that is importantly new... *It constitutes an individual*” (*Promise* 133, emphasis mine). But how does this newly constituted individual exist, where is it, and what about its identity? In the case of the poems we have looked at, the individual resides not only within the compositional twists and turns of the individual texts, but also within longer series of poems which constitute a larger bio-textual body: it is a hypothetical agent of the gestures made by the compositional process of each poem, and of the correspondences between the poems. This is what Nehamas, again, describes in one of his earlier works, in which he disputes Foucault's thesis of the disappearance of the author, as the implied agent of the text and of the *oeuvre* of which the text is a part (“Writer” 273–275). An author figure, far from preceding the textual event, is located, or in fact constituted, by our interpretive (in the sense explained above) engagement with the texts, an engagement that befalls both the reader and its writer, the poet himself. Here, interpretation is divorced from the idea of explicating deeply hidden meanings and becomes a procedure in which “we account for the features of an object by appealing to the features of an unusual original agent whose action we take it to be” (“Writer” 277).

Ashbery's writing emanates an awareness of this process. His poems are enhanced acts of interpretation of objects, such as paintings, in the Nehamasian sense. Numerous poems in his volumes of the 2000's can be seen as examples of the expansion of the *ekphrastic* gesture I mentioned above. In *Chinese Whispers*, for instance, the beautiful “View of Delft” is preceded by a short lyric called “Disclaimer.” Its opening fragment contains a succession of remarks whose descriptive character is not validated by any clearly materializing place, but which are not different in their fictive quality from the *ekphrastic* opening of “View of Delft”: “Quiet around here. The neighbors, / in wider arcs, getting to know each other. / The fresh falling away” (*Chinese* 6). Is this an indeterminate description of a place, a neighborhood? Or is there a memory of a painting, whose title is forgotten, that is encoded here? More importantly—is there a difference? In Ashbery's *poesis* each instance of finding oneself in the vicinity of objects—esthetic or “ordinary”—is an act of aesthetic construction. As such enhanced descriptive acts, his poems outline, or generate, the implied agents of the descriptions—hypothetical subjects who may be projected to stand behind the unfolding

description/interpretation. It is also possible to trace genealogical relations of such descriptive passages over the expanse of the entire *oeuvre*. The subjectivity that is thereby obtained never precedes the process, and, as such, can never be understood as given beforehand.

We are back with Ashbery's variety of "avant-garde": the banishing of the illusion of a stable reality preceding the event may be in the interest of constructing a new version of it. What is banished is the myth of the given: the subject of a biography that can be depicted through bureaucratic authentication or "expressed" in a poem. Here, the authentication is different. The dismissal of the given ushers in the newly composed. The poetic experience, even as it leaves behind or annuls the dominance of one's biography—the cliché ridden self—launches a new constellation, an enhanced network of enriched contexts that constitute the emergent self. But this emergent self, which, as we have seen it working for Ashbery, carries with it a mixture of materials or traces of earlier emergent events—of earlier poems as biographical "facts"—is now also included in the subject's "biography." Biography becomes inextricably enmeshed with the poetics.

### The Special Reality of the Poetic Biography

The merging of the empirical and the poetic we have been following so far tells us something about the very structure of biographical facts. The tracing of the nebulous transitions between poems provides a channel of communication with one's self, which becomes a gesture of rewriting one's "empirical" past. This past has now proved to have always been part of an aesthetic object that could never have been anticipated before it actually came to being. The new poem invades the past moment, and newly reveals its meaning, in a way that it has never been revealed before. This revelation of a new meaning is synonymous with the past itself being a highly unstable notion that is continually open to reinterpretation.

This is what happens in the latter parts of both "View of Delft" and "The Evening of Greuze." Both poems bump into some skewed, veiled, indirect references to the notion of the self, the autobiographical self of the poet, with its "facts," which now, however, are closely related to the moments of aesthetic creation. At one moment in "View of Delft" the speaker says: "it's all about... remaining in touch / with a loose-fitting impression of oneself: / oneself at fifteen, out at night" (Ashbery, *Chinese* 18). When he adds, later in the poem, "Oh sure, I knew it was me all along," the statement is double-edged. Its first impact is ironic: here is another distancing of the poem's self from the "facts" and events of autobiography, which begin to be less real than the poem which is now revisiting them. It is as if the speaker were pretending to be worried by the distance he has achieved,

and felt the need to reassure himself, or his readers, that, yes, those fragmentary images are of a more or less coherent empirical self. But on a different level, the statement points in the direction of this distant, newly emerging, implied authorial self of the poem, the subject of a new kind of knowledge, external to the poet's biography at each of its unveilings. The whole process reaches back to and establishes a new communication with this earlier, much younger self of the author. As it does so, however, we also understand that the author's empirical self must be aware of its distant poetic counterpart and stay open to future visitations by poems yet to be written. This is how one's literary output truly alters one's past "biography." It is poetry—a literary "fiction"—which reaches back and validates a "fact," of which the originary structure must have already been eligible for such a visitation if it is ever to enter into any level of reality at all. The moments of a biography so composed cease to be hard facts immune to poetic re-description. The poem invests in the communication channel between the two versions of the self when it says: "it's all about... / remaining in touch with / a loose-fitting impression of oneself" (*Chinese* 18). It is this laxity, this area of fuzziness, open by irony and skepticism, that represents the readiness of the empirical self to become validated by being revisited by future poems. The "reality" of biography does not depend on any hard facts; it depends on its capacity to include the poetic.

A similar exchange confounding the genuinely biographical and the aesthetic is found towards the end of "The Evening of Greuze":

And ever as I talked to you  
 down the decades in my letters one thing was unsure:  
 your reply...  
     Try to keep  
 cold and empty in this bare room.  
 Examine mirrors in the studio. (Ashbery *Chinese* 53)

The mirrors in the studio are paintings, and, by extension, Ashbery's poems which came to being as responses to paintings. These mirrors evoke Parmigianino's bizarrely angelic self-portrait, Ashbery's poem-dialogue with Parmigianino's version of the authorial self's centrality, and, furthermore, other poems, such as "View of Delft." As the emergent self of a new poem invades the facts of the poet's empirical biography, it also revisits the poetic component of this biography, as the two components are not to be separated by now.

As I noted earlier, Ashbery's avant-garde transitionality of the questing self carries with it certain dangers. Its difference from the traditionally stable subject of the strictly "empirical" biography, its resistance to "realization" along any controllable trajectory, exacts its risks. Ashbery's poems of the later phase reveal an awareness of this risk. The skepticism and the ironic distance towards the

empirical moments that enable this type of “self-creation” by literature may elicit emotional coldness. And yet it is such chilly climates that the poet recommends to his future created selves when he says: “try to keep / cold and empty in this bare studio.”

In the later phase of Ashbery’s writing, however, there are also signals that his poetics is now not only aware of its own vicissitudes but also more appreciative and affirmative of them. The processes leading to the birth of the questing self and its specific merger with the biographical is the theme of many poems in *Where Shall I Wander* and *A Worldly Country*. In “More Feedback” we encounter the following mixture of banality and mystery: “Our work keeps us / up late nights; there is no more joy / or sorrow than in what work gives.... / ... there is so little / that gives and says it gives” (*Wander* 46). The mysterious entity “that gives and says it gives” is an ingenuous formula for a lasting substance that survives its own self-proclamation. Whatever the entity under discussion is, its nature—its identity—is not a stable essence, but the very act of “giving.” The crucial idea, though, is that the generosity mentioned does not cease after the identity of its source—the act of giving itself—is revealed. Unlike the subject of empirical autobiography, it remains alive after being self-declared and self-identified. The thing “that gives and says it gives” is a tautological metaphor of poetic power that is here heard asserting itself. The declaration points to the work of the poem itself, as if it were bragging of its continuous freshness. The poem “gives” itself—offers itself—as it declares this very activity. The movement of the poem (the “work [that] keeps us / up late nights”), which is also the integrative work of poetics as autobiography, is here rising to the consciousness of self-affirmation.

### The Emergent Self and the Poetics of Plenitude

Strangeness, distance, vacuity and coldness are at the base of the poetic process, which now is validated in itself. But it is not enough to rest on the idea that this validation is a form of a self-proclaimed aesthetic independence from the non-literary. Ashbery’s poetics, the poetics I have called here the poetics of the emergent self, is part of a “poetics of plenitude,” an aesthetic concept I have been developing elsewhere, with reference to pragmatist models of relations between epistemology and aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> The major idea behind the concept is related to the neo-pragmatist refusal to see any action in language, of whose the poem would be the most concentrated instance, as a “representation” of any “reality”

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3 See footnote 1.

that precedes this action. Instead, the pragmatist poetics of plenitude sees the poem as constitutive of emergent realities; the poem truly is “a cry of its occasion,” to recall Stevens’s enigmatic formulation from his “Ordinary Evening in New Heaven” (404). As such, the poetics of plenitude is also an attempt to sort out in a fresh way the vexed relations between the poetic output and the poet’s biography. The poems of this poetics retain their aesthetic independence and keep a distance from the facts of biography, while at the same time keeping a vital channel of access to the biographical layer by reversing the confessional model.

In this way, the approach I am proposing is an amending complementation to the recent return of the biographical in the critical thought on Ashbery. While Vincent and Epstein reach back to the biographical, I have tried to say more about an elusive transitional area in which the poetic is in a very special sense prior to the biographical, paradoxical as it sounds. Juxtaposed with Vincent’s formula, I am showing how Ashbery’s biography is both personally “real” and poetic through and through at the same time. Unlike Vincent, I do in fact want to return to one specific “shape,” one “authorial personality” entirely modeled by an insistent poetic lineage. This shape, this “personality,” is not a an empirical being processed by the poetic utterance as confession. But neither is it only a general collection of self-reflexive stances that offer insight into a cultural context. Instead, it is a being whose ontology is poetic-self creation. It gives us a “John Ashbery,” an individual created by his poems. My discussion with Epstein, which involves an argument with his notion of continuous transitionality of Ashbery’s selves is more complex, and I am developing it in a separate article.<sup>4</sup>

Viewed in relation to the problem of poetic autobiography, the poetics of plenitude strikes a residue of poetic potentiality within the sediments of the “facts” of biography: the self-validation of the poetic affects the biographical, and excavates new light in its midst. Without it, the non-literary would itself be incomplete. The life-long interaction with the constructed spaces of the poems, the spaces whose action blends the poetically-created with the biographical, makes the reader/writer their genuine inhabitant, a native whose first-hand knowledge of their climates is not to be ignored nor in any other way dismissed as a fiction. This knowledge, which is a form of self-knowledge, becomes a source of authenticity of a new kind. It is validated when the questing self becomes able to find significance in a temporally extensive procession of its artifice. We can hear this questing self of the aesthetic process, authenticating its shape, granting itself its reality, at the end of a poem called “For Now”:

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4 See Bartczak, „Change and the Poetics of Plenitude in Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery”; forthcoming in *Text Matters*.

We brought something else—  
 some enlightenment we thought the months  
 might enjoy in their gradual progress through the years:  
 ‘sudden realizations,’ the meaning of dreams  
 and travel and how hotel rooms  
 can become the meaningful space one has always lived in (Ashbery *Country* 8)

It is in the created “hotel rooms” of the poems, the hotel trope putting Ashbery next to his favorite artists, such as Cornell or Roussel, that the poet lives. Such a life of “externality,” cold and precarious as it is, leaves behind it an eventually warmer trail: it becomes a habitation space, a home, or a spacious edifice, more plentiful and more alive than any literally understood biography. What I have been elsewhere calling “the poetics of plenitude” is here seen to blur the poetic and the biographical, nourishing the latter and making it indistinguishable from the body of poetry. It is not just a poetic “self” that is created; empirical events receive a legitimating perspective, thus enriching and expanding the sense of the real. In general, through my readings of Wallace Stevens as a predecessor of Richard Rorty’s irony, I use the term “poetics of plenitude” to refer to the ironic quality of the poems—such as Ashbery’s poems—which find themselves as constitutive of the “real” events: the poem of plenitude rediscovers the poetic element (an element akin to itself) right at the empirical base of reality. Reality, such as the reality of one’s biography, is a version—just one version—of possible personal interpretive reactions to events. It is such interpretive reactions that evolve into a “biography,” and the poems reveal those interpretive acts as inseparable from the aesthetic sense. In fact, the poem itself is an expression of the inseparability of the interpretive and the aesthetic.

Additionally, the poem also reveals how one set of the interpretive/aesthetic thread by which events turn into “biography” is always accompanied by multiple other such threads. The official “biography” of a poet is just one composition line—a specific lineage of aesthetic/interpretive reactions to events, a thread which joins the fortuitous extraneous materials that the artist intercepts into his or her life—life as a poem, that is. Such single interpretive/aesthetic threads are enabled by the fact that they are parts of larger networks of possible interpretive connections. The poem of plenitude evokes this larger network: it “knows” that the shapes of compositions are plentiful, and the point of Ashbery’s *poesis* is that the alternative aesthetic paths never recede but maintain active communication channels with the official version of the self, that version which the biographer will propound one day as “the life of John Ashbery.” This official “biography” of the poet will only be a pale reflection of the more capacious biography: the one developed over the entire *oeuvre* of the poems of plenitude. In the world of this poetry, one’s reality is an authenticity of a plenitude of paths which coexist and nourish each other.

A very apt comment on this self-authenticating capacity of an artificial, artistic process can be found, again, in Nehamas. Remarking on the inescapability of self-constitution in the process of appreciating the beautiful, Nehamas notes: “I may have managed to put things together in my own manner and form. I may have established, through what I loved, a new way of looking at the world, and left it, if only by a little, richer than I had found it” (*Promise* 134). This seemingly cold and impersonal poetry is there for us to confer meaning on what may otherwise turn out quite meaningless, and in so doing to endow our selves with the quality of the real.

The poetics of self-creation, an aspect of the poetics of plenitude, is a specific treatment of biography. Not ignoring the critiques of the philosophical subject, it evolves a text-bound authorial agency that consolidates separate poems into a continuous and meaningful form of life, thereby also annulling the conundrums posed by the confessional model. Such practice allows the biographical to be recuperated without generating the “confessional” tensions between the need for honesty and the aesthetic needs of the poem. The process itself is a form of commitment whose nature is transformational: it imparts degrees of connective reality on strings of “empirically” rampant and fortuitous “facts.” When so touched, they become a life.

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