Ashbery Alpha and Omega: Presentism, Historicism, and Vice Versa[1]

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Abstract: This reading of a single poem from the last collection of verse John Ashbery published before his death in 2017 sees it as an example of a concept of "presentism" that differs from modernist or postmodern accounts of the "present" associated with abstraction or immanence. Rather, Ashbery's presentism is historical in being based on overlapping and discontinuous linguistic and experiential frames. Ashbery's poetic use of the content of experience is always mediated through its presentation as information, ranging from high to low values and often employing "low-mimetic," pop cultural elements. What results is a suspension of certainty in which meaning is structured and informed by its status as information. Thus leaving open questions of knowledge, Ashbery's poetry does not represent a fully present consciousness but relies on forms of cognition and information processing that are nonconscious, operating in the background and informed by decades of his practice as a poet. A brief comparison with the late paintings of Willem de Kooning, who experienced cognitive disability at the end of his life, points out similar nonconscious forms of cognition such as motor skill and even aesthetic judgment. The reading is thus informed by information theory, cognitive science, and neurophysiology in showing how Ashbery's late style makes a present that is historical and structured on his entire oeuvre.

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> The explanation of what? Of my thought, whatever that is. As I see it, my thought is both poetry and the attempt to explain that poetry; the two cannot be disentangled.
>
> (Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 2)

> Did we once go to bed together? And how was it?
> I need your help on this one.
> Good thing it happened, too—
> Intelligence without understanding
> is like constant frost, pounding at the temples
> until its bargain is overseen. I kid you not. (Ashbery, *Commotion* 77-78)

John Ashbery's last books—specifically, *Breezeway* and *Commotion of the Birds*, in anticipation of final works to be collected in a volume representing his output until his death in 2017—are a defining masterwork of the poetics of presentism. In using the term presentism I do not mean a

poetics of presence, stemming either from Gertrude Stein's continuous present and the modernist turn to abstraction, nor the presence of mastery in the homosocial New American Poets, and especially not the metaphysics of presence that was the point of departure for deconstruction and the turn to language.[2] If, in an earlier formulation, "every presentism is a historicism, and vice versa,"[3] Ashbery's presentism is a construction that brings together historicism and its interpretive horizon—in the form of literary tradition, cultural history, experience and memory, archived data of all kinds—with multiple strategies of unlinking these materials from their temporal indices in recombinations that generate new horizons of interpretation dissociated from the past. In this account, I am inverting the hierarchies of the hermeneutic tradition and all that it has preserved of the theological underpinnings of romanticism and millenarian Marxism, seeking to counter the "fusion of horizons" between the new and tradition after Gadamer.[4] Ashbery, early and late, is hyper-aware of the stultification of meaning that results from merely situating the work of art in a series, and works mightily to propose an alternative. So, for instance, the title poem of *Commotion of the Birds* inaugurates a send-up of historicism that discursively frames the collection: "We know, for instance, how Carissimi influenced Charpentier, / measured proportions with a loop at the end of them / that brings things back to the beginning, only a little / higher up" (1). The response to bad historicism just is a heroic modernism that ejects from the diachronic series, but again his parodic thumbnail qualifies any periodized end: "It's good to be modern if you can stand it. / It's like being left out in the rain, and coming / to understand that you were always this way: modern, / wet, abandoned . . ." (2). The presentism of this opening move is anything but the teleology of mid-century abstraction and the New York School, which has been entirely reformulated. Rather, progressivist and modernist tropes clash uncomfortably as memes in a presentist array, where each element conveys horizons of possibility that modify and are defined by the others. It is as if markers of the historical past or the modernist present have been stripped of their temporal indices, to become poetic metadata that separate and combine to make new meaning effects. Thus, memory and its loss are central (rather than the protension and retention of classic postmodernism): "Did we once go to bed together? / And how was it? I need your help on this one."

> We "bought into" the ephebe-consciousness scam
> that razed our era, and the next one.
> What was it about those boys? Some were plain,
> others smooth. All enjoyed the sun
> for as long as it chose to shine upon them.
> But there were texts to be looked into, dark as forests
> when the sun shines in central summer.
> Nobody did the escaping this time. (*Commotion* 77)

My use of the key verbal operator "as if" shows, on the one hand, that we are in the zone of the aesthetic—which for Ashbery is unquestioned, providing the basic metalanguage by which the data of history and present are to be combined. For the register of Ashbery's "as if," we may begin with the crucial formulation of aesthetic community for Kant, that the work of art is recognized "as if" by a universality of agreement. Ashbery works the universality of aesthetic community into the historicity of queer politics from Day One of his work, evident in the boys of summer in this quote who "all enjoyed the sun / for as long as it chose to shine upon them"; they are the "snows of yesteryear" that lyric poetry records. At the same time, the "buy-in" to "ephebe-consciousness"—that we are

all ephebes even as our desire is for an ephebe, and that the resulting narcissism gives us endlessly something to become—brackets the sun moment through its disappearance into "texts to be looked into, dark as forests" that exert their retrograde pull. No one escapes a cultural logic of presentism, then, in which appearance disappears into its opposite, insofar as the *promesse de bonheur*, as Nietzsche wrote in *The Genealogy of Morals*, becomes the utility and interest of the aesthetic, thus its fundamental historicism. Ashbery's "as if" is historicist in the unlinking of temporal markers in the aesthetic, the purposeless purposefulness that is the basis of aesthetic experience, from the experience of nature to Jackson Pollock. But Ashbery's presentism is not just a collage-like formal structure that assembles discrepant materials; it is a fundamental account of the present *per se*, what we live, as aesthetic.

> Work with your hands a little bit.
> You might want to convert yourself
> on a scholarship. I'm hoping to live with him.
> I can't tell if it's possible. The blood-presence drives
> to sleep longer on the couch, as the fair one pines.
> Oh averages! It was your story that brought us down,
> at the first posts, under green leaves.
> Your logic I forswore, even as its wave reached out toward me.
> Hard lines. Besides, it's poor form. (Pure form?) (Commotion 77-78)

In Ashbery, formalism is suspended in the unformed, and is constantly undone by it; at the same time, form is constantly rising anew through the juxtaposition of the discrepant and incommensurate. It is important, however, that the experience of reading Ashbery is not simply to process paratactic cuts or hypotactic digressions—not Language writing 1A. Ashbery offers continuous hooks like "work with your hands a little bit" or "I can't tell if it's possible" or "it was your story that brought us down" that create possible scenarios at a meta-level that are either pursued, modified, or undone by what comes next. Not simply the accretion of the discrepant, as with the New Sentence, Ashbery's presentism works through forms of "presencing"—substantiating a virtual rhetoric of "as if" or vice versa, rhetoricizing "as if" virtual any substantial claim—that constantly perform their disappearance. If this results in an interpretive meta-level of possible worlds as called up and invoked by the poem, it also happens at the level of the language that builds them up and removes them. It is here that the poetics of information becomes crucial for Ashbery's presentist anti-formalism. The poem does not add up to a constructed meaning guaranteed by its form, seen as either its tensional architecture or verbal unfolding or idealized / disrupted limits, but as an extended or delimited testing of information in its possibility of meaning. There follows a strong reading of Ashbery in terms of the "probability of the message being received," the central concern of information theory after Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver's *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. For Shannon and Weaver, "information" is the radical stripping of content (the message to be conveyed) in the act of communication, which is converted to a measure representing the probability of the message being received as its quantity of information. The mathematic of quantifying information as probability led Shannon and Weaver to reduce information to its minimal unit, the bit or binary digit, from which computing languages and digital media are built. After the 1950s Macy Conferences, the theory of information was extended to questions of meaning and interpretation, on the one hand, and the man / machine interface on

the other.[5] Such reduction of information to binary "switches" begins with a constant discrepant alternation of elements in Ashbery as an underlying binary structure, originating in his work from his encounter with French structuralism in the 60s. It also encompasses the consistent rhetorical trope of the possibility of information being received as meaningful as a unifying figure, as the quoted passage above, always making possibility anew as possibility is undone, demonstrates. Each line in Ashbery's poem is a test case for meaning in terms of whether it can imagine a possible world in being presented as information.[6] Ashbery thus foregrounds the relation of "information" to "knowledge" as an open question, one that Language writing will take up and return to questions of knowledge themselves in terms of a "probability of being known." It is precisely the continuous effect of a subtractive "not knowing" that pushes Ashbery's poetry past any kind of formalism.

> Somebody left their toothbrush on the dance floor.
> My understanding, cool from the diagnosis,
> is they don't want it to be there.
> You mean you're suffering like everybody?
> That, and a few more kicks to the groin, mean we're finished here. (*Commotion* 78)

There is a sentimentality of "not knowing" that reduces it to a naïve index of common humanity, faced with larger issues of life and death, that underpins the many references to "pseudo-culture," genre effects, girl slang, and fanzines in Ashbery work. Ashbery's "low-mimetic" materials continually mask a dumbed-down "ephebe-consciousness" at the level of content, address, even diction: "His aunt was accepted. / How cool is that?" (*Commotion* 17). Such tropes begin as anxiety-relieving comic moments or embarrassing pratfalls that also convey aspects of sexuality not otherwise representable as "high-mimetic": "To wash the stick, icky stuff down the drain—pfui!" (*Double Dream of Spring* 70). These moments are initially camp, but over the long run of his poetry they become cathected placeholders rather than mere blanks. As the work progresses on its life curve, a new use for the incommensurate and blank emerges as its presentism: "Somebody left their toothbrush on the dance floor." If Ashbery's persistent use of contrast and juxtaposition necessitates an information theory of meaning, "nonmeaning" in Ashbery's work—its substantial gaps and blanks—gesture, not toward a reader who will fill them in, but toward an immanent dimension of subjectivity. N. Katherine Hayles's recent *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*, following her earlier work on information theory, opens a new interpretive horizon for what is not represented directly in complex cognitive (or aesthetic or cultural) activity. For Hayles, "consciousness" is to be distinguished from "cognition," which is enacted in millions of often nonconscious processes, from technology and the natural sciences (e.g., data processing or plant neurobiology) to the higher levels of critical thinking and artistic production. "Higher consciousness is associated with the autobiographical self . . . reinforced through the verbal monologue that plays in our heads as we go about our daily business; that monologue, in turn, is associated with the emergence of a self aware of itself as a self" (*Unthought* 9-10)—a movement from everyday life to interior monologue to self-awareness (or lack of it) that is everywhere in Ashbery's work. What subtends consciousness, going on all the time "underneath it," is what Hayles terms the "cognitive nonconscious," which "operates at a level of neuronal processing inaccessible to the modes of awareness but nevertheless performing functions essential to consciousness" (10). These include:

> Integrating somatic markers into coherent body representations, . . . synthesizing sensory inputs so they appear consistent across time and space, . . . processing information much faster than can consciousness, . . . recognizing patterns too complex and subtle for consciousness to discern, . . . and drawing inferences that influence that influence behavior and help to determine priorities. (10)

In Ashbery's work, these processes are embodied more than technological or environmental; they are everywhere readable at the point where surface information elides its greater aesthetic reference, cultural pattern, personal style, bodily schema, or linguistic association. Here, I will bookmark my critique of "affect" as overgeneralizing such embodied effects, particularly in its failure to comprehend the negative dimension of the embodied (or computational or environmental) resonances Hayles is concerned with. While Ashbery's poetic "moves" often are readable in the productive or frustrating gap between the very simple and the very complex—between the pratfalls of everyday life and the highest orders of art—these elisions indicate the much great complexity of continuous neurological, computational, situational resources that are readable in the complex hooks that Ashbery peppers his poetry with. Such tips of icebergs seem to float out of nowhere, indicating a depth of association that they cannot directly convey—as they connect multiple layers of the past as memory and association with the present as their cognitive synthesis. For Hayles, this relationship—which is common to the "old" unconscious of the Freudian tradition as to the "new" unconscious of cognitivism—is meaning making: "Cognition is a process that interprets information in contexts that connect it with meaning" (parsed over several pages; *Unthought* 25-27). It is the interpretation of information in contexts—which are temporally or spatially or culturally or aesthetically or historically specific—that shows Ashbery's presentism to be a historicism of what cannot be fully made conscious. The "cognitive unconscious" theorizes processes going on all the time but not directly perceptible in consciousness or its products that make meaningful the blanks, gaps, and elisions that pervasively structure the provocative (in) coherence of his presentist effects. "That, and a few more kicks to the groin, mean we're finished here."

> O idle light! How polished you were at first!
> If things darkened afterward, that was no one's fault
> except the self-appointed guardians of our civility's,
> who nattered on, dense with the realizing of it.
> We knew it before. So many flowers washed up on the beach
> it was pure chaos, or fun. Now it's time to pray. (*Commotion* 78)

Seeing Ashbery's presentism as a historicism of its elided past (in both aesthetic and experiential senses) makes a precise register of "so many flowers washed up on the beach" as a moment of pity and terror as much as aesthetic pleasure. In a speculative analogy, Ashbery's late poetry can be compared to the late work of Willem de Kooning—certainly a relevant comparison for their mutual commitment to abstraction and painterly technique, and with the meditations on persona and figure found in both the artist and poet's work.[7] In de Kooning's late paintings, made after the onset of neurological and physical impairments of dementia, likely due to Alzheimer's disease (he was diagnosed in 1987 and died in 1997), we see a perceptible register of the "*Unthought*" or "unconscious" in a larger, non-Freudian sense.[8] The "cognitive unconscious" for de Kooning is all the levels of visual memory, motor

skill, color sensibility, bodily proprioception, and aesthetic judgment (of, for instance, when a painting is finished or complete) that evolved in the course of his achievement of technical mastery. With the depredations of dementia, some aspects of these embodied traces are blocked and cannot be accessed, while others continue as before in his painterly skill set.[9] Viewers of his work encounter, as a result, a presentism that is both direct and expressive but as well ghostly and subtractive, a truly terrifying but edifying experience that is related to but distinctly different from the "presence" of his period of technical mastery. Ashbery was no doubt aware of this work, and he also liked to make jokes about the progressive loss of memory or other skills (as most of us do). While his work registers the aging of memory—including the social aging of the experienced world that memory draws from—there is no sense of pathology; we see rather an exemplary capacity to cross generational lines and access diction and cultural styles Ashbery cannot experience directly: "Then suddenly it's forty years later, / and I was like, "Holy Shit! / I'm happy just to be alive!" (*Commotion* 57). In this instance, a gap or elision of forty years takes place on a timeline punctuated by a millennial eruption, an effect found throughout his volume: "Boink I love you" (88).

Rather than being merely a poetic device, however, the structuring of presentist effects on a timeline evokes the Soviet psychology of Lev Vygotsky and Valentin Voloshinov, who theorized the "inner speech" of social consciousness on an ideological timeline. Hayles, whose work complements that of the Soviet period, proposes a "processual and qualitative view of information" where "the processes that nonconscious cognition uses to discern patterns are constantly in motion, reaching metastable states as patterns are discerned and further reinforced when temporal matching with the reverberations between neural circuits cause them to be fed forward to consciousness" (*Unthought* 23-24), a process that may be imagined as Ashbery writing through noncognitive aesthetic registers as a series of "metastable states," i.e., poems. "These processes of discerning patterns are always subject to new inputs and continuing transformations as nonconscious and conscious contexts in which they are interpreted shift from moment to moment" (23-24): the poem itself, for Ashbery, is a contextual shifter as identical to its integration of multiple inputs. Ashbery's presentism is thus a model of experience as ideology, in the Soviet sense, without any sense of progressive unfolding or totalization as necessary or even desirable. The seemingly arbitrary temporality of Ashbery's late work—where the poem begins and ends, how long it takes, what registers of experience it incorporates, and what it elides—takes on its "tip of the iceberg" quality as necessarily fractal and irregular rather than progressive and regulative. At the same time, this seeming formal aspect of his poetry is ethical, as it reveals the mechanism of "drawing inferences, developing proclivities, and making decisions that . . . perform actions in the world" (24-25) in a manner that does not depend on causal justification or narrative embedding. If "these multi-level systems represent externalization of human cognitive processes" (24-25), the poem itself is a moment of distributed cognition that accesses and lays bare its dispersed organization. Poetry is a social argument about the historical construction and limits of knowledge based on the information available to it. In Ashbery's late work, the shifting present is an ethics of the limits of what we can know about it: "It was pure chaos, or fun. Now it's time to pray."

Notes

1. This paper was given in a session titled "Social Readings of John Ashbery" at the Louisville Conference for Literature and Culture After 1900, University of Louisville, Feb. 2018. Thanks to Alan Golding and panelists Sandra Simonds and David Kellogg.
2. A cultural studies critic whose work on the contemporary informs my sense of "presentism" is Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke UP, 2011.

3. My formulation appears in Watten, "Zero Hour / *Stunde Null*," (285); for a more developed account of presentism in this sense, see Barrett Watten, "Periodizing the Present in Language Writing, Conceptual Art, and Conceptual Writing," *Questions of Poetics*, pp. 137-164.
4. See Paul Hamilton, "The Hermeneutic Tradition," *Historicism*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 51-98.
5. On the Macy Conferences, see Hayles, "Contesting for the Body of Information: The Macy Conferences on Cybernetics," *How We Became Posthuman*, pp. 50-83.
6. See my forthcoming article on Larry Eigner and information theory, "Poetry as a Scene of Decision: Larry Eigner as Distributed Author," *Momentous Inconclusions: The Life and Work of Larry Eigner*, edited by Jennifer Bartlett and George Hart, U of New Mexico P, in press.
7. In the conference presentation, I showed a series of images of de Kooning's well-known abstract paintings from his late period.
8. De Kooning's diagnosis, and its relation to the late paintings, remains controversial. The works were originally exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1995, and were shown recently at the Skarstedt Gallery in London in 2017; for a catalogue, see Robert Storr. *De Kooning: Late Paintings,* Skarstedt Gallery, 2018. The debate over the relation of his diagnosis to the values and provenance of the work continues. A press released for the London exhibition discusses the work only in formalist terms, with no mention of memory impairment: "Characterised by their luminosity and the fluidity of their arcing lines, the bright and often translucent colours of the works from the 1980s mark a radical departure from the dense painterliness of earlier periods. Demonstrating de Kooning's capacity for renewal, this final chapter in his long artistic career was one of his most productive and as the works themselves reveal, one of his most accomplished. Pared down to essentials, the smooth surfaces of the paintings are layered with a range of prismatic colours with toned white and pastel areas"; see www.skarstedt.com/gallery-exhibitions/willem-de-kooning2/press-release. But one reviewer calls into question the purely aesthetic reading of the work in relation to their high market value, reporting the following exchange with the gallery director: "My understanding, I tell her, is that he painted faster and faster as he entered his final phase, even one a week. Once upon a time it might have taken him 18 months to make a painting, I mention. . . . This is surely evidence of a marvellous late facility, she replies. As she does so, I think about stories I have read about less pleasant goings-on at the studio: that assistants would take a canvas away when they deemed it finished, and then present him with the next one in order to encourage the emergence of yet another signed late De Kooning. . . . Above all, she wants to talk about his renewal, his greatness"; see Michael Glover, "Late Flowering or Failing: Did Work by Artists Like De Kooning, Renoir, Matisse and Monet Decline in Old Age?". *The Independent*, online ed., 10 Oct. 2017. On de Kooning and dementia, see Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan. *De Kooning: An American Master. Alfred Knopf,* 2006, pp. 608-617.
9. A recent, and again controversial, study published in the journal *Neuroscience* claims to discern cognitive changes due to dementia based on a mathematical analysis of "fractal patterns" in artist's painterly technique, with de Kooning as a central example; See Alex Forsythe et al., "What Paint Can Tell Us: A Fractal Analysis of Neurological Changes in Seven Artists, *Neuropsychology*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1-10.

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