Paul Munn

VESTIGIAL FORM IN JOHN ASHERBY’S A WAVE

The poetry of John Ashbery has become a lightning rod for major critics of contemporary poetry. Harold Bloom, Marjorie Perloff, and Charles Altieri, for example, have variously emphasized Ashbery’s anxious responses to poetic, especially Romantic, precursors; his indeterminacy in “the other tradition” of the French Symbolists; or his complex postmodernism in contrast to a simpler scenic mode. Not wrangling directly with any of these views, I wish to defend a modest claim about three poems in his 1984 volume, A Wave.

Ashbery’s vestigial forms suggest a poet who, however anxious and indeterminate in many poems, is capable in some poems of a rhetorically comprehensible use of poetic form, however complex and ingenious. In three poems, Ashbery’s vestigial forms suggest three related poets: an almost comfortably conventional sonneteer, an ironic usurper of the English hymn, and a witty remaker of the Japanese haibun.

A Wave is composed of forty-four poems, counting his “37 Haiku” as one. Twenty-seven of these are what most would call “free verse,” what Lewis Turco, I believe, would call poetry in the mode of lineated prose. Three are prose poems, unlineated poetry. The remaining fourteen are poems written in what I have chosen to call vestigial form, poems that recall to some significant degree visual and other devices of poetic artifice with substantial conventional precedent, such as rhymed couplets, sonnets, quatrains, haiku, and haibun. I might have called the perceived form in these fourteen poems echoic form, tendentious form, threshold form, gestural form, subdued form, marginal form, or fossilized form—all these rubrics are near synonyms for vestigial form, each placing a different emphasis on how form appears to us.

The label “vestigial form,” though it has perhaps the disadvantage of suggesting too strongly the organic and the nonfunctional, has the virtue of evoking connotations of genetic links with the past, a visible and rudimentary trace of a more vigorous preceding generation. Like little toes on the human foot, once very useful to our barefoot ancestors, vestigial poetic forms serve to remind us of previous purposes. But little toes are still somewhat useful: they do provide some balance, and on the beach or in the bed, they may function or entertain. Similarly, vestigial forms contribute subtly to

---

1 Altieri has also identified in Ashbery and other poets what he calls “rhetoricity... the complex states of mind that go into self-conscious manipulation of language” (Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984] 146). Recently, James McCorkle has explored in Ashbery and others poetic “interconnection [which is] the means of engaging the phenomenal world and implies a reinvention of the self that can engage a variety of voices, fragments, and inadvertent glimpses” (The Still Performance: Writing, Self, and Interconnection in Five Postmodern American Poets [Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1989] 4).

2 Richard Howard observes Ashbery’s career moving from conventional forms (his virtual first volume, Some Trees, 1956, included poems titled “Eclogue,” “Canzone,” “Sonnet,” and “Pantoum,” as well as three sestinas) through the prose poems of Three Poems, 1972. Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror, 1975, is representative of what Howard calls “a prosody... of intermittence and collage; no such conventional markings as rhyme or repetition—rather, seamless verse, jammed rather than enjambed, extended rather than intense; it must go on and on to keep the whole contraption from coming round again, to work upon us its deepest effect, which is a kind of snake-charming” (“John Ashbery,” in John Ashbery: Modern Critical Views, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea, 1985] 45). But Houseboat Days, 1981, is a fifty-poem sequence, each poem four unrhymed quatrains. Ashbery’s flamboyant experimentalism throughout his career often invoked conventional forms, and the concept of vestigial form often usefully applies to Ashbery’s earlier work and to his April Galleons, 1987, which includes poems in paired lines, four-line stanzas, and five-line stanzas.

---

240x721
poetic meaning. Primarily, they invite us to apply the conventions of lyric poetry in general. But they may also invite us to make meaning by considering the conventions of a particular antecedent form. This is the case in three Ashbery poems in which vestiges of the sonnet, the quatrain, and the Japanese haibun appear.

"At North Farm," the first poem in *A Wave*, directly preceding another poem of fourteen lines, is a vestigial sonnet:

Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you,
At incredible speed, traveling day and night,
Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow passes.
But will he know where to find you,
Recognize you when he sees you,
Give you the thing he has for you?

Hardly anything grows here,
Yet the granaries are bursting with meal,
The sacks of meal piled to the rafters.
The streams run with sweetness, fattening fish;
Birds darken the sky. Is it enough
That the dish of milk is set out at night,
That we think of him sometimes,
Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings?

The first verse paragraph is six lines; the second is eight lines, suggesting an inverted Italian sonnet, its slightly uneven bipartite form quite conventionally suggesting "build-up" in the first part and "release" of "pressure" in the second part. More resistant than traditional sonnets to translation into prose paraphrase, the poem nevertheless—like fine examples of the Italian sonnet in Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, and Auden—uses the two-part formal asymmetry to reinforce a significant shift in scene, idea, or mood. The first part creates a feeling of mysterious activity. We wonder at the nature of the errand of the unknown furioes traveler. The second part creates a contrasting feeling of stasis and inexplicable fruition. From a hazardous landscape we shift to "here" (l. 7). "At North Farm," we suspect, where the landscape has been domesticated for cultivation, where the activities are habitual, not hazardous, farmers harvest, and, customarily and superstitionnally, "the dish of milk is set out at night."

In spite of the inversion of the length of the two parts and lack of rhyme, this poem is, in its intervolvement of form and theme, almost comfortably conventional. Five-stress or decasyllabic lines occur (2, 8, 10, 12), vestiges of the pentameter line of the sonnet in English. Although the poem lacks end rhyme, it abounds in traditional devices of lyric poetry, contributing to the urgency of tone in the first part and the atmosphere of stasis in the second: repeated words, internal rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. It is a poem about a relationship between one person and another person or persons who perceive him as at once menacing and alluring, and its subject and tone emerge as part of the artifice of the vestigial sonnet. I say "almost" because Ashbery's pronouns create a strangely dislocated fictional utterance as we attempt to make meaning and connect the two parts of the poem. And the poem as introduction to a book of poems suggests perhaps a menacing and alluring poet who through his words travels furiously toward his readers and leaves us indeed with "mixed feelings."

The title of a later poem in *A Wave* asks a question that applies to Ashbery’s work generally and to the role of form in his work: "But What Is the Reader to Make of This?" The answer to the question of the role of vestigial form in "At North Farm," I believe, emerges when one sees the similarity between the achievement of the Renaissance lyric, including the sonnet, and what Ashbery states as the goal of his poetic art. David Kalstone, writing on Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, tells us, "The movement of mind, so often praised in Donne, is already present in many of the sonnets of Sidney’s sequence." Ashbery, commenting on his use of what he calls "the floating pronoun," tells us, "I’m interested in the movement of the mind, how it goes from one place to the other.


Ashbery has said, "I don’t much like sonnets" ("An Interview with John Ashbery," *Substance* 37/38 [1983]: 178-86, 183). In his interview with me, he observed that sonnets and certain other "forms...are really too loose & have this liberating effect that I’m looking for, especially in teaching." ("An Interview with John Ashbery," *New Orleans Review* 17.2 [Summer 1990]: 56-63, 62). But these statements do not at all preclude his writing a vestigial sonnet, a transformation of the form suited to particular ends similar to the ends of its antecedents.
and the places themselves don't matter that much. It's the movement that does" (Munn, "Interview" 62). However "indeterminate" Ashbery often appears, his words here suggest that he attempts to do what the greatest Renaissance lyricists attempted to do, to imitate human consciousness more realistically through poetic artifice, not to describe or transcribe but to render experience in language. "At North Farm" is a participant, however belated and estranged, in a formal tradition that has, since its introduction into English in the Renaissance, imitated mental movement.

"At North Farm" uses vestigial form to achieve ends similar to its antecedent form. "Just Walking Around" uses vestigial form ironically: in its use of the quatrains to express a quasi-religious vision of human love or friendship over time, it is a usurpation of the English hymnal stanza. The opening question—"What name do I have for you?"—cues us for a moment to a convention of poetic aperture in certain love poems: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" or "How do I love thee?" But name, a vigorously biblical term, especially in a cryptic postmodern question, also cues an address to God. Quickly, without withdrawing either possibility, the tone turns casual, even mundane, as lyric-like, the title occurs in line 4, "Just walking around," and the "you" seems more and more a person known to the speaker. But the potentially religious language of name and soul becomes active in the sign-board proclamation "the end is near" and in the colloquy of "light" and "mystery" and "food" in the final stanza. Life, as in Auden's intricate sonnet "Our Bias," is a circuitous journey, here a religious pilgrimage suggested in "walking around," "wander around," "looped among islands," "traveling in a circle," and "the trip." The last two lines are a prayer to a friend or lover to validate the cliché of life as "a circle" or to enter into the spherical "orange" of life's uncanny unity.

The use of the quatrains in conjunction with vestiges of Christian belief suggests Ashbery's usurpation of the hymnal stanza. We are invited to think of common attributes of the traditional hymn: affirmation of conventional belief; public choral performance; rhymed and metrical verse. Of course, Ashbery gives us only traces of each of these, but these traces are part of poetic meaning. For example, the humor of "secret smudge in the back of your soul," a deflation of the concept of venial sin, is compounded by the vestigial artifice of the hymn.

A clause of the poem suggests both the way of life and the way of poetry: "the longest way is the most efficient way." Humans have always "looped among islands," wandered Odysseus-like to "the end." And the end of poetic meaning also emerges by circuitous route. Marjorie Perloff's paraphrase of Ashbery "On Raymond Roussel" is essentially correct: "Language always on the point of revealing its secret—this pattern of opening and closing, of revelation and revelation, of simultaneous disclosure and concealment is the structural principle of the Ashbery poem." The jet and the tank make direct trips; the poem travels by play and delay. And David Perkins' assertion that Ashbery "has used procedures which produce neither formlessness nor form but a continual expectation of form that is continually frustrated" is true in general. But sometimes in Ashbery, language is not entirely secretive and expectation of form not entirely frustrating. In "Just Walking Around," form contributes to meaning, the vestige of a formal tradition conspiring with suggestive linguistic reference to make a poem in which, in a manner reminiscent of Blake and Dickinson, private vision usurps public form and language.

In the case of Ashbery's haibuns, most American readers will recognize neither traditional nor vestigial form. At a loss for clear antecedent, readers could accurately describe each of Ashbery's haibuns as a prose poem plus cryptic, one-liner without end-punctuation. They might guess that Ashbery is doing something with a form he adopted or adapted, and they would be correct. The haibun is a Japanese form mixing prose and haiku. The most famed practitioner of the form was Basho, whose


"These two questions are among those on the "Great Opening Lines" Tote Bag, offered Christmas 1989 by the NCTE. This is, of course, convention run amuck.


Narrow Road to the Deep North, a travel diary in the form of haibun, is readily available in English. Ashbery’s page layout resembles most closely the Corman-Susumu translation of Basho, where, unlike other translations, both the Japanese text and facing-page English translation print sections of the diary on a single page, as if each were the unit Ashbery calls “haibun”; and also unlike other translations, each haiku is printed as one line.

Just as one can understand “At North Farm” reasonably well without thinking about sonnets and “Just Walking Around” without concerning oneself too much with antecedent uses of the quatrain, one can understand Ashbery’s haibuns without knowledge of Basho, even reading the Ashbery haibun only thematically. Better than this, one can read more descriptively, observing the apparent intrinsic rules of the form. (For example, prose and haiku, it seems, must be thematically or imagistically related, but as is the case with many of Ashbery’s poem titles, the relation is not always readily discerned.) But much is gained by incorporating into one’s reading of the haibun the precedent of Basho, his vigorous sense of particular time and place as an instant and instance of eternity, his keen perception of the observed world as continuous with the self, his power of showing writing as part of emergent dialogue between past and present, self and other. (Basho even includes in his haibun haiku written by his servant who accompanies him on his journey.) Ashbery’s haibuns do not make up a travel diary precisely, but Ashbery may recall the wanderlust of Basho’s prologue in his opening phrase: “Wanting to write something . . . .” And there is something of Basho’s muted enthusiasm in Ashbery’s “It is a frostbitten, brittle world but once you are inside it you want to stay there always.” More cryptic than Basho’s, Ashbery’s haiku partake of the master’s power of surprising juxtaposition of imagery: “The year—not yet abandoned but a living husk, a lesson.”

One effect of Ashbery’s use of the haibun is potentially educative. As in certain allusions of Eliot or reworkings of non-Western traditions in Pound, we are invited to become better informed readers as we ponder the relations between a contemporary text and its possible antecedents. Basho’s most famous haiku is this:

Listen! A frog
Jumping into the stillness
Of an ancient pond!

(A Haiku Journey 9)

When Ashbery remakes these images in his Haibun 6, humorously and colloquially, he retains Basho’s evocation of simultaneous immediacy and depth, naturalness and perfection:

To be involved in every phase of directing, acting, producing and so on must be infinitely rewarding. Just as when a large, fat, lazy frog hops off his lily pad like a spitball propelled by a rubber band and disappears into the water of the pond with an enthusiastic plop. It cannot be either changed or improved on.

Poetic forms have traditionally provided readers with a sense of order, a space of stability where utterance may unfold. Many poems of Ashbery thwart our sense of order, savagely parodying formal tradition. But Ashbery’s art is various, and his vestigial forms remind us that sometimes Ashbery makes meaning not precisely by parody but by less savage imitation and allusion. It is possible to read Ashbery—sometimes—by synthesizing artifice and theme, reference and form. The image of a wave suggests one view of the Ashbery poem, not an object but a phenomenon, a motion stoppable only in concept and in the frame of a photograph. But the alternate image of the poem as urn persists, architectonic form speaking to and through the past. The Ashbery poem may partake of both images—a mimesis of unfolding meditation, fluid mental movement, and of such mimesis playing off visual and conventional form.

Paul Munn is Associate Professor of English at Saginaw Valley State University.