“WHATEVER CHARMS IS ALIEN”: JOHN ASHBERY’S EVERYTHING

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If there’s one thing literary critics know, it is the value of making the known thing unfamiliar. For much of the past hundred years, writers and critics have associated the cognitive value of artworks with the process of defamiliarization. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Victor Shklovsky coined the term to describe how art disentangles things from cultural conventions and symbolic systems, and restores their perceptual immediacy, a vivid sense of their materiality. To defamiliarize, Shklovsky writes, is “to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known.”

While the sense of precisely why defamiliarization is valuable has varied from Russian formalism to Ezra Pound’s “make it new” to de Manian deconstruction, the association of literary value with defamiliarization has proved remarkably consistent. This association seems capable of withstanding the most basic shifts in what we take literary value to be. If for Viktor Shklovsky the point of defamiliarization is to intensify perception, critics have recently identified defamiliarization as a literary technique that produces valuable social scientific knowledge. Bruno Latour, for example, finds a value in the defamiliarizing gaze, in which “even the most routine, traditional, and silent implements stop being taken for granted.” Defamiliarization brings to light the hidden agency of objects and suggests new ways of practicing sociology. Fredric Jameson writes that science fiction novels don’t “give us images of our future, but defamiliarize our sense of our present.” In this and many similar formulations, Jameson finds an elementary social value for writing. In giving us a view of things outside our conceptual scheme, defamiliarizing literature discloses the possibility that things might be different.

Make it new, make it strange, make our familiar conceptual and symbolic systems choke on it: writers, artists, and critics have wanted very different things over the past hundred years, but to a remarkable degree they
have pursued their different aims with defamiliarizing procedures. We
know the value of making the known thing unfamiliar. In the following, I
want to explore a different kind of value: the value of making the unknown
thing familiar. I will argue that John Ashbery’s poetic career consists of a
rigorous and sustained effort to take something you have never seen be-
fore and show you what it would look like if you had seen it every day of
your life. This familiarizing procedure results in the invention of a new
kind of aesthetic shape and a new kind of aesthetic value. The conclusion
of my essay situates this new value, and the terms familiar and unfamiliar,
in the context of the global, transnational, and transcultural horizon of
current humanities scholarship.

In a 1977 essay on Raymond Roussel, Ashbery proposes a striking analogue
for the kind of thing he wants to produce in his poetry. He writes that Rou-
ssel’s images “are like the perfectly preserved temple of a cult that has disap-
peared without a trace, or a complicated set of tools whose use cannot be
discovered.” The artifact from another world, the tools of an unknown
culture: these objects show up in Ashbery’s poems in a variety of registers.
Sometimes they come from the past, as in the 2001 poem that finds the
speaker “caressing the knocker, / a goblin’s face, that drew us back a hun-
dred years.” Or consider this thing from the title poem of 2002’s Chinese
Whispers: “Mute, the pancake describes you / it had tiny roman numerals em-
bedded in its rim. / It was a pancake clock. They had ’em in those days . . .
a hundred years ago.” Girls on the Run, a book-length narrative poem
from 1999, inhabits the world of Henry Darger’s paintings and drawings,
uncovering a “thighbone guitar,” a “pansy jamboree,” and “ice-cream
gnomes.” The speaker of an Ashbery poem has a “money fi sh strapped
to my thigh” (Whispers, 37); another refers to “Zombie set-tos, / the kind
of thing.”

Ashbery’s poems are elaborately constructed theaters where alien and
unfamiliar objects appear as they would to someone who is familiar with
them. I will attempt to trace some of Ashbery’s painstaking, cunning, and
obsessive labors in attempting to familiarize the unfamiliar object. Let’s
return to some of the things I’ve already listed, to show how listing these
things distorts them in a way Ashbery takes great pains to prevent. When
I mentioned the “Zombie set-tos,” I should have noted that they appear in
a conversation between two characters. The reference to “pancake clocks”
in Chinese Whispers is accompanied by a reference to a foreign ritual: “I was
a phantom for a day. My friends carried me around with them” (Whispers,
32). To take another example, the “sheaf of suggestive pix on greige” that
appears in “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” is part of a list of things that a
certain song reminds Daffy of. I’m not arguing that one shouldn’t extract the things I’ve listed from their context in the poems. In fact, as I will show, the relevant context for a thing like the “money fish strapped to my thigh” is not the poem in which it appears. Rather, to attend to Ashbery’s description of things is to note how the poems provide these things with a definite relation to an unknown context.

An Ashbery thing is an artifact of another culture. Furthermore, it is described in the poem just as it is described in that culture. This kind of description is deeply familiar. When Jane Austen tells us Elizabeth Bennet entered a “handsome modern house,” the description condenses the norms, the customs, the world of nineteenth-century England. Elizabeth does not stop, wondering, before the house. She doesn’t see the house like someone who has never seen a house like it before. She does not encounter a rectangular gray stone building thirty feet high with ivy on the walls and a large oak door ten feet wide flanked by square windows. I will argue that Ashbery deploys the descriptive conventions of novelistic realism to show us things that have the same kind of shape as Austen’s “handsome modern house.” As he puts it in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, his descriptions are examples of “unfamiliar stereotype[s].” He describes a knot, a tangle of cultural conventions rather than a solid, delimited object. Like the “temple of a vanished cult,” his things are bound up with a context we know nothing of; they embody the norms of a different world.

For Ashbery as for Austen, a certain abstraction, a certain leaving things out, is basic to the mimesis of things as they appear in a world. One must distinguish this version of novelistic description from the idea of the novel as a project of complete description, the novel Flaubert sometimes dreamed of, in which things are defamiliarized and the writing renders a blade of grass in minute perceptual detail and a house as a gray stone rectangle. For Ashbery, in contrast, to describe a thing as it shows up for someone familiar with it involves leaving this kind of perceptual detail out. He is concerned with the abstraction of novelistic description from the outset of his career, writing in an early poem of “this leaving-out business, on it hinges the very importance of what’s novel.” A poem from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* describes “a woman reading” and continues “All that is unsaid about her pull[s] us back to her, with her / into the silence that night alone can’t explain. Silence of the library, of the telephone with its pad / but we didn’t have to reinvent these either: / they had gone away into the plot of a story / the ‘art’ part-knowing what important details to leave out . . . the background.”

Here Ashbery articulates his view of the “leaving-out process” of novelistic description. The poem reads like a manual for describing things. The “art” of this kind of description is knowing what to leave out. To describe a
woman reading alone at night in her library, the writer leaves out the “background,” the things that surround the focal image, the “important details” like the “silence of the library,” or “the telephone with its pad.” There is no attempt at an exhaustive specification of what is there; the writer doesn’t need to reinvent the background, because it is already present. Silence, books, a telephone, a telephone pad, vines on a house’s exterior: these things are associated in a world; they are gathered around the focal image by the norms, customs, and history of a culture.

Again, this is a familiar principle of a certain kind of novelistic description. If Dashiell Hammett tells us that Sam Spade walked into a kitchen and sat down, we do not feel surprised if he later gets a beer out of a refrigerator, nor do we feel that Hammett should have told us there is a refrigerator in the kitchen. There are a vast number of aspects of the background he can safely leave out: that the refrigerator is not on top of the counter, that there is a sink and a stove, that there is a bottle opener in a drawer, etc. This background is already present, and there is no need for Hammett to do any reinventing; he does not need to motivate the device of having a refrigerator in the kitchen. Hammett doesn’t invent the logic associating refrigerator and kitchen, nor is this logic spelled out in the definition of the words. The relation between refrigerator and kitchen is not syntactic or semantic; one violates no linguistic law in speaking of a refrigerator in a dining room or in the middle of a street. Rather, these relations manifest the background norms and associations of a world. It is only to someone unfamiliar with a world that each thing in the background emerges as clear, distinct, strange, notable. If one wants to represent a thing as it appears to someone familiar with a world, one makes use of the background. And one makes use of the background by leaving it out.

When Ashbery writes of his reading woman that “all that is unsaid about her pulls us back to her, with her,” he refers to the sense in which this figure arises in, and remains part of, a world. The form of the woman reading is not complete, is not entirely given in the description; something remains inexplicit, unsaid. The image is necessarily partial, and in recognizing this partiality we are pulled towards the world. This kind of description embodies a view from within a world. The thing is not cut off, autonomous, bounded, and complete, but condenses relations and associations, the whole background network of connections that organize a culture. As Ashbery writes in another poem, “We copy certain parts . . . they imply / complex relations with one another.”

What is unsaid about the woman, the partiality or incompletion of her form, her relation to an inexplicit background, is the sign of this image’s formal imbrication in a world. The abstraction of novelistic description—Sam
Spade entering a kitchen, Elizabeth Bennet seeing a house, John Ashbery’s woman reading—sinks the thing in a world. These are descriptions of how things show up within a world, as condensing or embodying a range of implicit relations. A “handsome modern house”: the thing shows up as a dense point in a network of cultural associations, as a thickening of worldly connections. To someone familiar with a world, the house does not first appear as a gray rectangle subsequently interpreted as a house, but is immediately recognized as a “handsome modern house.” These descriptions describe the way things appear as connected to other things in a world, as a knot of cultural associations and connections. When Ashbery writes of the “leaving-out process,” he refers to the abstraction of this art of representing the thing as a part of a world. The art of this kind of description is the art of making what is unsaid about things “pull us back” to a world.

In contrast, to attempt a full description of an object’s material shape is to attempt to cut off the thing’s formal involvement with innumerable other things in a world. The description of a house as a rectangular stone building thirty feet high precipitates it from its intraworldly connections, poses it as a complete and distinct object. When absorbed in a novel, we sometimes skip through this kind of description, and the mass-market paperbacks that solicit this absorption contain very little of it. It seems to interrupt our absorption, to eject us from the world. Description that defamiliarizes, description that attempts to represent a thing as if it had never been seen before, recovers a distinctness, a completeness, a wholeness for the thing at the price of distancing it from a world. As Ashbery writes at the opening of 1970’s *Three Poems*, “I thought if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that if I could leave it all out that would be another, truer way.” Ashbery wants the truth that is revealed by what is left out. In his mature poetry, he chooses the art of describing a thing’s partiality, its place as part of a world.

This art presents a different challenge for Ashbery than it does for Austen or Hammett, who, after all, represent the familiar things of a familiar world. The task of describing the familiar thing of an unfamiliar world is a bit harder. How does one describe an alien thing in terms of its involvement in an alien world? This is a problem science fiction has wrestled with since its inception. There seems to be no way around the process of first describing the thing, say a teleporter, in terms of its physical shape, then explicitly rendering the background norms and conventions most relevant to the use of the teleporter, and then referring to it simply as a teleporter or by some colloquial-sounding contraction. This process interrupts the mimesis of a world so jarringly that it is often felt necessary to motivate this device by introducing a time traveler or space traveler from our own world who
needs to have everything made explicit. Since science fiction writers are typically interested in the content of some alien or future society or technology, this mimetic disruption is an acceptable cost.

But Ashbery wants to describe unrecognizable things as they appear in unknown worlds. Two separate problems, two steps, can be isolated in the process of producing these things. The first step is to create things that are not recognizable as parts of our world, and the poems constantly display Ashbery’s inventiveness in this respect. His poetry contains such things as “The money fish strapped to my thigh” (*Whispers*, 37); “The nice octagon trainer” (*Bird*, 111); “The flowers of the lady next door, beginning to take flight” (*Name*, 20); “The new apartment building, now vacant, circling like a moth” (*Name*, 75). These things, made by fusing familiar objects to create strikingly unfamiliar images, recall the famous definition of literary value by Lautréamont, an important influence on Ashbery, who titled one of his books *Hotel Lautréamont*. Lautréamont writes of the “beauty” of “the chance juxtaposition of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table.” But Ashbery doesn’t value this kind of beauty. Lautréamont-style juxtaposition is important to Ashbery as a step in the process of producing a different kind of value. He wants to give the “money fish” and the “octagon trainer” a world, to describe them as a thickening of the relations and associations of a world. He wants the relation between “octagon” and “trainer” to be arbitrary in a different way than Lautréamont’s “chance meeting”; he wants to mimic the arbitrariness of cultural conventions. He doesn’t want the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table, but the chance meeting of a stove and a refrigerator in a kitchen. He wants to give the relation between an octagon and a trainer the same kind of relation that obtains between “milk and cookies” (*Selected*, 172). When an umbrella shows up against the bright, white, blank ground of the dissecting table, its shape appears whole, complete, distinct, independent. But when Sam Spade sits down in a kitchen chair, the shape remains partial, indistinct, and dependent; its edges fold into tables, linoleum, refrigerators. Ashbery wants things to appear as dense points in a matrix of cultural relations, not as objects thrown on a dissecting table.

Instead of a combination umbrella and sewing machine, Ashbery tries to make his things recognizable as the tools of a different world. But how can one represent a “money fish strapped to my thigh” as a kind of tool? How does one make the relation between a “pansy jamboree” and a “thigh-bone guitar” look like the relation between milk and cookies? How does one distinguish the literary production of an alien thing from the arbitrary yoking together of familiar words or things? Ashbery solves this problem by describing these unfamiliar things in terms of the genre of the familiar.
His rigorous investigation of novelistic description furnishes him with a variety of techniques in the art of the unsaid, with a range of methods for inventing things that show up in imaginary worlds. Ashbery has a surrealist knack for creating otherworldly images; he uses the conventions of novelistic realism to make them take root in other worlds.

But before proceeding to investigate the poet’s use of these conventions, I want to make explicit the sense of the shape of Ashbery’s career that organizes this essay. I am arguing that an important goal of his poetry is the representation of things from other worlds, and that the curious properties of these poetic things open a new horizon for literary value. But I think his approach to this goal has altered over the course of his career. The aforementioned poems explored in detail are taken from his early and mid-career; most of the following poems explored are from his late career, with the majority dating from the last fifteen years. The early Ashbery approached the familiarizing procedures I am discussing in a thematic and prospective way. When I say of the aforementioned poem about the woman reading that it is like a manual for describing worldly things, I refer to this thematic dimension of the early poetry. By the late period, Ashbery doesn’t need to speculate about how to make the kinds of things that interest him. The method, the machine, the formula is in place, and is capable of producing unlimited examples. In addition to this difference is another: the focus on the (other)worldly thing moves from the periphery to the center of his poetic project. Where the early poetry is remarkably various in its aims, the late Ashbery is remarkably consistent. It is possible that the readings offered above of Three Poems or “Forties Flick” (1975) would not be possible except from the perspective of the late work.

John Vincent, who has written extensively and beautifully on the later books, believes he needs to defend these poems from the common critical sense that there are too many of them and that they are too much alike. By contrast, I think the standard critical reaction to the late work is correct as description—it is formulaic, and unlimited similar poems could be quickly produced by the formula—but wrong as value judgment. My wager in writing this essay is that once readers understand the formula Ashbery has discovered, they won’t be inclined to dismiss the poems produced by it.

Ashbery’s formula for inventing otherworldly things relies upon the novel, and his most striking novelistic technique is the incorporation of dialogue in his poems. Dialogue represents the most economical means of registering “all that remains unsaid,” all that does not need to be said about a thing between the inhabitants of a world: “Did you say, hearing the schooner overhead, we turned back to the weir?” (Selected, 312); “Now, about those missing fish cards” (Name, 74); “The witch stirred the soup with
a magic spoon, she said ‘We can make this happen’” (Name, 74); “You know the kind of thing I mean. Zombie set-to’s, that kind of thing” (Bird, 111); “‘You remembered to bring the gold stuff?’ ‘Oh sure, but I’m not a catalog’,22 “The bird-sellers walk back into it. ‘We needn’t fire their kilns . . . Grettir is coming back to us’”;23 “Probably the rain never got loose, for all you know.”24

To judge the contribution of dialogue to Ashbery’s characteristic effect, compare these examples with the opening line of a celebrated W. S. Merwin poem: “In a dream I returned to the river of bees.”25 Merwin’s monologic, oracular voice presents the dream image to us in all its stark juxtaposition. If this were an Ashbery poem, the line might read, “I returned to the river of bees,” and the second line might begin with quotation marks and someone saying “What time did you get there? I must have missed you.”

Simply placing the alien thing in the mouth of a speaker registers something very simple: what the speaker expects the addressee to recognize. The reply shows what the addressee does in fact recognize. Dialogue reveals the presence of the background against which things show up. What voices are these? Who is the “you” in an Ashbery poem, who is the “I”? Anyone. These anonymous voices represent the anyone of another world.26

Ashbery uses dialogue to show “all that remains unsaid” about a thing, to provide the thing with a background, to demonstrate its familiar shape. His method is the opposite of the defamiliarization procedure. Ashbery seeks to familiarize his images. By placing a thing in dialogue, placing it between people, he transforms it from a surprising juxtaposition to a familiar thing instantly recognizable to the “anyone” of a world. Another way to put this is to say that dialogue kills Ashbery’s figures. He is always looking for ways to kill his figures, and another of his characteristic techniques involves imitating the dead metaphors of our own world.

Just as he investigates the novelistic “leaving-out process,” Ashbery’s exploration of familiar clichés and sayings provides him with a model for inventing the dead metaphors of other worlds. His poetry constitutes a kind of museum of figures, metaphors, juxtapositions—all kinds of surprising language that has become unsurprising: “where the rubber meets the road” (Bird, 51); “train of thought” (Bird, 74); “having taken a proverbial powder” (Bird, 83); “you know, the nuts and bolts” (Bird, 118); “jump through hoops” (Whispers, 88); “the sands of time as they call them” (Name, 96). Like his use of otherworldly things in general, Ashbery’s clichés run from the archaic expressions of our own past to the sayings of imaginary worlds: “Perhaps we’ll, heh heh, temper the wind to the shorn lamb a bit” (Name, 93); “It gave me the widdershins” (Bird, 111); “Fixed names like ‘doorstep in the wind’” (Selected, 288); “No more apples on the dashboard”;27 “Time to pull in one’s horns, if you catch my drift”;28 “Honey on the lips of elders is not
contenting” \((Whispers, 44)\); “We babbled about the wind and the sky and the forests of change” \((Selected, 83)\); “She had a saying, never stay in the pantry while the mill is operating” \((Bird, 95)\); “As Henny Penny said to Turkey Lurkey, something is hovering over us” \((Name, 20)\).

The form of the saying is another genre of the familiar. In the saying, juxtaposition passes over into worldly connection; the striking juxtaposition of sand and time, forests and change, becomes an association like milk and cookies. The ritual, another form of the familiar, provides an especially vivid example of the thing that condenses or embodies the background practices and norms of a world: “They are giving that party, to turn on that dishwasher” \((Selected, 211)\); “The rite of torpor” \((Selected, 44)\); a “pansy jamboree”;\(^{29}\) “I was a phantom for a day. My friends carried me around with them” \((Whispers, 32)\). The form of the ritual, game, or holiday sinks an unrecognizable thing in an alien world’s matrix of associations and traditions.

Another of Ashbery’s familiarizing procedures relies on a feature of poetic form. Paradoxically, the relative brevity of the lyric renders it uniquely suited to the novelistic mimesis of other worlds. The science fiction novel, as I’ve already noted, registers a certain tension between the mimesis of things as they show up for the inhabitants of another world and the process of making the background norms and practices of that world explicit. This process of making explicit frames the novel. To put it in terms of the Austen example I’ve been using, first one gets the thirty-foot-high stone rectangle, then one is told that people sleep and eat in this kind of thing, and then a character comes along who enters a “handsome modern house.” Everything that shows up must first be presented as a distinct object that is then explicitly related to other things and practices. On the basis of this kind of exposition, a little space is cleared for novelistic mimesis, for things to emerge in relation to what is unsaid.

In contrast, Ashbery’s lyrics open and close in the middle of things. Perhaps the closest analogue for an Ashbery line is a sentence drawn from the middle of a science fiction novel, from the space cleared for the novelistic. Consider the following sequence of examples in which Ashbery lines alternate with science fiction sentences: “Something more three dimensional must be breathed into action” \((Name, 98)\); “He held the fireball close the better to encompass the activating syllables”;\(^{30}\) “Only danger deflects the arrow from the center of the persimmon disk” \((Selected, 219)\); “The fog became the magic arrow”;\(^{31}\) “My megaunits are straining at the leash” \((Bird, 174)\); “How did you become infected with the creature?”;\(^{32}\) “Like a bottle imp towards a surface which can never be approached” \((Selected, 225)\); “My eh, other lobe is onto us”;\(^{33}\) “Scramble the ‘believer’ buttons” \((Name, 77)\); “While the
raft floated placidly along the river, the sun gave an alarming pulse”;34 “The due date kept flashing past the diamond slot” (Name, 67).

It might illuminate the shared features of these examples to subject the science fiction sentences to the kind of questions critics often put to Ashbery’s lines: What are the “activating syllables” of the first science fiction sentence? What is their relation to a “fireball”? Why does the character hold the fireball close? The Jack Vance novel from which this is taken painstakingly details a set of background structures so this action, these things, can show up as condensing and embodying this background. (This world is the earth of the distant future, a future technology has been recovered by the postapocalyptic inhabitants as magic, certain syllables call forth fire, etc.) What logic associates “due date” and “diamond slot” in the Ashbery line? What does Ashbery’s speaker mean by “believer’ buttons” Are “megaunits” something the speaker owns, part of the speaker’s body, or something else? How does it make sense for them to “strain against a leash”? These questions, like the questions raised by the science fiction sentence, pull us towards a world. These things arise in relation to what is unsaid; they condense and embody norms, associations, customs, and standards. Ashbery manipulates the various genres of the familiar (dialogue, ritual, saying, novelistic sentence) to make these unrecognizable things recognizable as the things of a world.

Science fiction commits itself to a careful reconstruction of the other world; its things arise in relation to the unsaid only after the background is made explicit. Ashbery proceeds differently. His lines open in the middle of things. As one poem puts it, the “things to be sung of” are “science fiction lumps,” the thickening of the associations of an alien world.35 His things are like the temple of a vanished cult or the artifact of an unknown culture. They embody norms, associations, and customs of which we know nothing.

Why is this important to him? If Ashbery had some particular vision of another world, he could, like a science fiction novelist, simply tell us what that world is like. Why does he value the apparition of an otherworldly thing in the absence of the exposition of another world? The answer lies in Ashbery’s fascination with a peculiar feature of the encounter with a thing from an unfamiliar culture. One way to show what this encounter is like is to show what it is not. And a way of showing what this encounter is not lies ready to hand in the oddly consistent critical encounter with Ashbery’s things.

Ashbery’s poetry consists of “strange juxtapositions” between familiar things. This formulation, from W. H. Auden’s introduction to Ashbery’s first volume in 1956, has shaped much of the subsequent criticism.36 The influence of this reading is all the more striking in that Auden was an
unsympathetic reader who, as Ashbery remarks, “never liked” the poems and made little effort to understand them. Yet, four decades later, James Longenbach writes of Ashbery’s “virtuoso manipulations of disjunction,” Vernon Shetley analyzes Ashbery’s “style of chaotic juxtaposition,” and Mutlu Blasing writes that Ashbery “figures the self in and as disjunction.” Consider again this line: “The due date kept flashing past the diamond slot.” According to the criticism, the interest of such a line is not the relation that brings “due date,” “diamond,” and “slot” together, but the absence of a relation. For critics from Auden to Andrew Ross, to read Ashbery is to encounter a lack of association between familiar things rather than to encounter a thing composed of unfamiliar associations.

What is the difference between these encounters? The difference turns on the relation of a thing to its context. For the critics, the things that appear in Ashbery’s lines have no relation to a context. Marjorie Perloff, in a series of books and essays, has presented the fullest account of “Ashbery’s ability to modulate linguistic units into repeated new and startling juxtapositions.” He “presents us with clear visual images” that are “parts that belong to no whole.” In Ashbery’s verbal landscape, fragmented images appear one by one . . . without coalescing . . . there is no world, no whole to which these parts belong. Totality is absent.” In these poems, “even familiar things become unfamiliar.”

Ashbery’s images are like movable parts for Perloff. A jamboree, a pansy, a due date are recognizable, self-identical things that have the same shape in any context. The self-identity of these clear images unmoors them from any single context. The formal identity that renders them iterable prevents them from adhering to any one place. Possessing a form independent of context, they have “no connection to the context in which they appear.” Thus the images combined in an Ashbery line have what Perloff calls an “accidental” relation to one another. Like the sewing machine and umbrella that show up on a dissecting table, the relation between these images is “undecidable.” The very idea of a stable context, of a whole that fuses these drifting images together, is destroyed. As William Flesch writes, Ashbery’s images are like a “quotation out of context” that “undoes all context.” When one line refers to a lake as a “lilac cube,” Perloff notes Ashbery’s “refusal to spell out” the connection between lilac and cube. Instead of a description of a single unrecognizable thing, a lake that is a lilac cube, Perloff sees the juxtaposition of three references to recognizable things: the color lilac, a cube, and a lake—three movable parts that could turn up anywhere, in any combination, and appear here as if by accident.

But if Perloff sees the “refusal to spell out” the logic that associates these images as the sign of a purely accidental association, Ashbery sees what he
calls the “leaving-out process” as a way of describing a thing formed by worldly associations. He intends his manipulations of various genres of the familiar to demonstrate that these elements—lilac, cube and lake, pansy and jamboree, octagon and trainer—are associated in and by a world. The “leaving-out process” means refusing to spell out these associations in the text in order to show that the relevant context for the “lilac cube lake” is not the text, not the line or the poem, but a world, a culture.

The description cannot be disassociated from this context, from this world, because it is not fully distinct from that world. It lacks the self-identical shape that would render it the same thing outside that world. As Ashbery writes, “The lady didn’t seem to understand you when you spoke of ‘old dark house’ movies / she thought there must be an old dark house somewhere” (Name, 82). Films in the old dark house genre have been set in castles, asylums, hotels, monasteries, and apartment buildings. The associations and conventions that make a film recognizable as an “old dark house” movie (sliding panels, lost travelers, madmen) are not available to someone unfamiliar with the genre. Nor are these associations made explicit in the description. Like Perloff, the person in the poem sees this description as a juxtaposition of “old dark house” and “movie” and is thus baffled when there is no old dark house in the movie.

This description lacks self-identity. It’s not that it means different things in different contexts; it’s that it isn’t the same thing in different contexts. There is no route from old dark house movie to old dark house movie, no connection between old dark house movie as a juxtaposition of clear images and old dark house movie as a description of a worldly thing. The absence of an old dark house doesn’t necessarily prevent a movie from being an old dark house movie. The description “old dark house” movie is literally not the same when disassociated from its context in a world. It isn’t a juxtaposition of clear images legible to any English speaker but a kind of thickening of worldly conventions. “The lady didn’t seem to understand you.” This person, like the critics, mistakes the kind of thing the description “old dark house” movie is. It’s not that she doesn’t know what the words in the description mean; it’s that she doesn’t recognize the genre of the description. If she had recognized the kind of description it is, she would not have seen it as a juxtaposition of movable parts, wouldn’t have assumed that an old dark house movie is a movie about an old dark house.

By describing things in terms of the genres of the familiar, Ashbery indicates that the elements of these descriptions are fused by a worldly logic that is not identical to semantic or syntactic logic. Ashbery describes things as parts of worlds. They are indistinct from those worlds. They don’t have the same form outside of those worlds. They have no self-identity; the principle
of their identity is identical with the world they are part of. Ashbery’s descriptions are not composed of clear images. They are not like the description of a thirty-foot-high stone rectangle, a movie with an old dark house in it, “petals on a wet black bough,”50 “a shape with a lion’s body and the head of a man.”50 As Bill Brown argues, we need a perceptual clarity, a full material description, in order to prize the worldly thing from its context, to give the thing the self-identity, the distinct form that renders it iterable across different contexts. (“The sensuousness praxis is indistinguishable from the resignifying praxis.”51) Things from handsome modern houses to old dark house movies can be described in this way. But this sensuous description of independent, distinct forms is just what Ashbery’s descriptions, as we have seen, do not give us. The “leaving-out process” leaves out this kind of description. The element that establishes the self-identity of the thing is missing, left out.

“The due date kept flashing past the diamond slot.” Where are the clear images here? What are the movable parts? What is being juxtaposed with what? Recognizing the description’s genre, we will avoid making the mistake of the speaker in this poem. Just as there might not be an old dark house in an “old dark house” movie, there might not be a due date in “the due date kept flashing past the diamond slot.” This line is not a juxtaposition of clear images, but a worldly thing. “Due date” doesn’t find itself next to “diamond slot” by accident; the elements of this sentence are fused by the associations of an unknown world. The genre of the saying, the ritual, or the novelistic sentence presents things as dense points in a network of associations. Ashbery’s lines, as he writes in one poem, “offer something strange to the attention, a thing / that is not itself.”52 These kinds of things, the poem goes on to say, are “things to be sung of.” The worldly thing, the thing that is not itself, is not iterable. It cannot be lifted from its context, from its part in a world.

But doesn’t Ashbery show us these things outside of their worlds? After all, his whole effort, unlike the science fiction novelist, is to show us the thing without showing us the world. If the worldly thing can’t leave its world, and if Ashbery describes things without describing their worlds, then are the critics really wrong? Even if Ashbery does present his lines in terms of the genres of the familiar, can we encounter them as anything other than juxtapositions of familiar images?

To encounter a thing that can’t leave its world without encountering its world is neither an unthinkable nor an unfamiliar experience. Ashbery compares his things to the tools of an unknown culture. If we dig up an ancient tool in the Egyptian desert, our sense of its form, which way is up and which way is down, depends on our sense of what it was used for, what
rituals it was part of, etc. Our sense of its world determines our sense of its form as a thing, as a tool. Our problem in interpreting the artifact is not caused by our encountering it outside its context. If we approached the thing as if it were separate from its world, we could simply give it a complete material description and no one would think anything was missing. The problem is rather that in seeing it as a worldly thing, we never see it as separate from its context. When we uncover the tool of an unknown culture, it’s not quite right to say that the context is absent. Rather, we should say that the context’s mode of presence has changed. When we know the context, we see its form. When we don’t know the context, the presence of the unknown context renders the thing formless. The formlessness of the tool is the presence of its unknown world.

The tool’s finder has a choice. She can either see the thing as an odd-looking lump of bronze, in which case that odd form comes into distinct perceptual focus. Or she can see it as the artifact of another culture, in which case it becomes formless. It loses its form for the simple reason that what counts as crucial or important in its form as artifact can’t be read directly off its shape as odd-looking lump of bronze. This is the same problem the person unfamiliar with American films has in trying to see what an old dark house movie looks like. Ashbery’s speaker and the archaeologist both have a superficial problem: they aren’t trying to discover what the thing means—what its historical, social, political significance is—but simply what it looks like. The problem here runs quite counter to what various critics, drawing on Jameson’s account of postmodernism, see as the “depthlessness” or “pure surface” of Ashbery’s lines. What does the surface look like? What does an old dark house movie look like? What is the octagon trainer’s shape as a tool? Which way is up, which way is down?

It may seem as if Ashbery unjustifiably moves between two different registers when he compares the verbal description of a worldly thing to a “complicated set of tools whose use cannot be discovered.” But both a familiarizing description and a tool represent a thickening of worldly associations. It might be easiest to see a familiar description as a worldly thing when the description is the thing it refers to, as is the case with a saying like “sands of time.” But any familiarizing description is put together by a world. The description and the tool are the same kind of artifact. The words “old dark house movie,” like the physical elements of a tool, are fused by worldly associations. If the person who uncovers the tool is like a science fiction novelist (or like an archaeologist), she’ll want to dig deeper, to begin to piece together the practices and norms of the culture, to begin to establish a link between the form of the material and the form of the tool.
appreciates the kind of value Ashbery cultivates, she'll leave immediately, perhaps taking a photo of the tool with her to stick on her refrigerator.

My sense of the special kind of reference performed by Ashbery's descriptions can be clarified in contrast to John Shoptaw's different reading of what Ashbery leaves out of the poems. In On the Outside Looking Out, Shoptaw also perceives that Ashbery's fragmentary lines “belong” to a context outside the poetic text, which he understands as the poet’s homosexuality. He argues that Ashbery’s poetic words and phrases allude to this context through a process of “cryptography” whereby references to queer sexuality are “displaced” by homological or homophonic words and phrases. This process of encoding, where a word in the poem takes the place of another word, is quite different from the logic I have in mind. Shoptaw’s argument rests on the assumption that the context in which the lines are embedded, while not present in the poem, is or can be known to us. Thus, for him, Ashbery’s allusions “misrepresent familiar sources.” Ashbery’s cryptography is thus, for Shoptaw, a special case of defamiliarization, the process of making a familiar thing strange. Where Shoptaw imagines that one semantic unit takes the place of another semantic unit such that the poem can be “decoded” by a process of substituting the displaced parts back into the poem, I am interested in how the things Ashbery describes exist in a part-to-whole relation with a missing context, an unknown world.

Like a photo of an alien artifact on a refrigerator, the description presented in an Ashbery line is an organization, a knot, a thickening of unknown associations, norms, and traditions. Consider this line from Girls on the Run: “The whistle charged doom / the impact was tremendous.” Ashbery “refuses to spell out” what is happening here. But this leaving out doesn’t mean that the only connection here is syntactic. Perloff might ask, is the doom charged with whistles or is the whistle charging doom? But when we recognize the genre of this description, we are not uncertain of what is happening here because the juxtaposition of “whistle” and “doom” could represent either of these things. We are uncertain because the description embodies unknown associations. The presence of these unknown associations, this unknown world, appears in and as the formlessness of the thing described.

What part of this unknown world appears in the formlessness of the thing? All of it. When one identifies the lump of bronze as a tool of an unknown culture, one exchanges a distinct object for a formless whole. As Ashbery puts it in one poem, “As long as one has some sense that each thing knows its place . . . getting to know each . . . must be replaced by imperfect knowledge of the featureless whole.” Or as another poem states, “everything is like something else” (Bird, 79). Merleau-Ponty writes about a thing
that is “not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, but a sort of straits” through which constellations of associations pass. Colors, paintings, songs, phrases, tools: the things in an Ashbery poem are not solids, but windows through which “everything” passes. This “everything” is a culturally defined everything, the “everything” of a particular world. As Daffy Duck says, “La Celestina has only to warble the first few bars / of ‘I thought about you’ . . . for everything—a mint-condition can / of Rumford’s baking powder, a celluloid earring, Speedy Gonzalez . . .—to come clattering through” (Selected, 227).

Daffy’s “everything” is not the everything of a language or a dictionary, not the material everything of the universe, but the everything of a culture. The surfaces of Ashbery’s things are continually disturbed by the ripples made by everything passing through. A “pansy jamboree,” “the forests of change,” “the due date flashing past the diamond slot”: a whole unknown world, a whole matrix of associations vibrates on the formless surface of these things. To adapt Pound’s famous phrase, Ashbery’s otherworldly thing is a space through which, into which, and out of which the everything of another world constantly rushes.

A totality is present in the thing’s formlessness. In its ability to contain a totality, the otherworldly thing represents a totally dense form of value. The form-devouring worlds that inhabit Ashbery’s things generate a new kind of literary value. I want to conclude with a recent poem that illuminates the value of this value.

“Outside my window the Japanese driving range / shivers in its mesh veils . . . Why is it here? / A puzzle. And what was it doing before, then? An earlier / puzzle.” In 1999, a Japanese driving range that suddenly shows up outside the poet’s window takes the place of 1977’s “temple of a vanished cult.” Ashbery associates the driving range’s alluring formlessness (“I like it,” he says) with its relation to its unknown world (“What were you doing before you got here?”). It is a “puzzle.” Its surface a shifting veil, the “featureless whole” of a foreign world floods its form.

Here Ashbery presents his vision of how otherworldly things store value in terms of the kind of thing that frequently shows up in contemporary America. In addition to Japanese things, his recent poetry contains South Korean (“South Korean Soap Opera” and Chinese (“Chinese Whispers”) things. Things produced in these particular countries (Japanese cars, Korean DVD players, Chinese films) have occupied a central and controversial place in American consciousness over the decades spanned by Ashbery’s career. And, in these late works, Ashbery presents the odd relation between thing and context in his poems as an insight into the possibilities of literary value in the context of globalization.
Ashbery sees the thing from another culture as the model for a new form of value, a new store of value. Earlier writers believed a thing’s universal value depends on the extent to which it is possible to extract it from its cultural context. For Ezra Pound, the clarity and distinctness of the Chinese ideogram renders it valuable. You don’t need to know Chinese to understand the form; Pound’s version of ideogrammic value depends on the formal clarity that enables the symbol to leave its context. We have seen that Ashbery’s critics have read his poetry in precisely these terms. Lautréamont’s operating table, the blank space on which things from incommensurable worlds come together and which Foucault has described as figuring the basic principle of modern taxonomy, remains for critics like Perloff the model for Ashbery’s page.

In contrast to Pound’s ideogram or Lautréamont’s umbrella, Ashbery’s Japanese driving range does not become valuable by a process of alienation; this value does not depend on alienating the thing from the scene, the world of its production. It is not because the Japanese thing has been severed from Japan that it takes on value in America. It shines with a universal value outside Ashbery’s window precisely because it cannot be severed from Japan, because the foreign culture is present in the thing’s formlessness. In Ashbery’s poetry, the most universal value is also the most foreign: “Whatever charms is alien” (Name, 50). But unlike the value of the “exotic” foreign thing, the value of an Ashbery thing depends on its retaining its familiar shape. The driving range, the “octagon trainer,” the “pansy jamboree” retain the shape they have for the members of their culture of origin, persons for whom the thing is a thickening of everyday associations. All of Ashbery’s efforts—the entire art of the unsaid—are directed towards showing us this shape. The source of the alien thing’s universal value is the way it is seen by people for whom it is not exotic, but familiar.

This value—the value of presenting the familiar shape of an unfamiliar world—overturns a basic modern understanding of value. A common definition of modernity equates it with the rise of capitalism as the dominant mode of valuation. And the capitalist market, according to the modern understanding, endows the object with the ability to leave, or to become alienated from, its context. From Marx’s vision of free trade “pitiably tearing asunder” traditional relations to Karl Polanyi’s idea that capitalism “disembeds” human relations from human cultures to Deleuze’s concept of capitalism’s “detranscendentalizing” power, the universal value of the capitalist commodity is obtained by violently severing it from its context in the life-world of a culture. A thing’s global market value stands utterly opposed to its cultural value—the value the thing has in relation to the norms and traditions of a particular place. Universal value and cultural value stand as
stark alternatives, opposed historically, in Marx’s dialectic, and spatially, in recent theories locating the possibility of the resistance to capital on the indigenous periphery of the global market.

This opposition between universal value and cultural value also structures recent debates about the value of literary study in a time characterized by globalizing, transcultural processes and dynamics. Wai Chee Dimock articulates a pervasive worry when she argues that our time reveals a profound threat to literary value. Globalization, according to Dimock, by eroding the boundaries of cultures and nations, erodes the (national, cultural) disciplinary structures within which the study and custodianship of literary value has resided. For Dimock, to respond to this situation by entrenching the value of the texts we study in their old, monocultural contexts is to take the side of reaction. Such an entrenchment equates the “humanities with ‘homeland defense’.” “Nowhere is ‘American’ more secure than when it is offered as American literature . . . nowhere is it more affirmed as inviolate.”

The way forward for literary study is to alienate the work from “its” culture, and to interpret literature’s value and meaning on a global, transcultural scale. The global value of this literature is necessarily opposed to the cultural value obtained by reading texts within the narrow context of a particular culture.

Other critics worry that the problem globalization presents to literary study does not lie in the temptation to cling to cultural value, but in the temptation to discard it in favor of universal value. Some critics connect the impulse to discover a universal, transcultural mode of valuing literature with the “homogenizing” tendencies of capitalism. Rey Chow finds Lautréamont’s operating table beneath the demand to find a space where works drawn from different cultures might be compared. And beneath the apparently flat, blank table of comparison, she sees the ideology of a Eurocentric modernism. By muting cultural difference, “this ideology demands that others be like us.” Chow finds inspiration for an adequate response of the humanities to globalization in new modes of comparativism: “Unlike old-fashioned comparative literature based on Europe, none of the [new comparative] studies vociferously declares its own agenda as international or cosmopolitan; to the contrary, each is firmly located within a specific cultural framework.”

What value can literature have today? It can possess a cultural value, the familiar value a work has in its cultural lifeworld. Or it can have a universal value, the value of the defamiliarized work, the work that travels across cultures and nations. The critics that have attempted to articulate the threat globalization presents to literary value, and to propose solutions,
diagnose our situation in terms of this choice between universal value and cultural value. But perhaps this opposition is inadequate to the possibilities. Ashbery, I want to suggest, invents a form of literary value that escapes this choice. In Ashbery’s objects, universal value does not succeed in driving out cultural value. But neither do these poems present the resistance of the cultural, the rooted, the contextual, to the global. In these works, universal value and cultural value are not alternatives. Here, cultural value becomes a powerful technology for producing global value.

For Ashbery, to value a thing from another culture is to observe how its formlessness absorbs the everything of an unknown world like a sponge. A Japanese driving range, a Paris street, an octagon trainer, “aw nerts.” Here cultural difference is a step in a production process—a process that generates a value accessible by anyone. Ashbery’s poetry presents the theater of a new, global product. In the fluid, volatile surfaces of his things, we are invited to behold the mystery of a commodity that does not alienate the world of its production, but contains it.

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NOTES


3. Fredric Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, Poetics of Social Forms (New York: Verso, 2005), 286. Robert Kaufman’s work provides another example of a critic who discovers the value of literature in its power to defamiliarize. For Kaufman, the “quasi-concepts” generated, in Kantian fashion, by the experience of literary form constitute structures that in turn generate new concepts and a new, unfamiliar perspective on the social world. The aesthetic then looks as if it has an answer to the old question of how one can envision social forms that aren’t contaminated by the dynamics of the familiar forms that surround the social critic (for example, see Kaufman, “Red Kant,” Critical Inquiry 26, no. 4 [2000]: 682–724).


5. In the following I use world and culture as synonymous in the phenomenological sense of Thomas Kuhn, who defines a world as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values,
techniques and so on shared by members of a given community.” Hubert Dreyfus usefully glosses Kuhn’s definition by contrasting “the physical world” with “the world of physics.” It is the latter sense of “world” I intend (Being in the World [Boston: MIT Press, 1991], 88–90). And while I use “world” and “culture” to refer to the same thing, there are shades of emphasis. For example, in discussing Ashbery’s use of invented or imaginary cultures, and to indicate the affinity of his project with that of an important strain of science fiction, I have sometimes preferred “world” to “culture.”


10. Henrik Birnbaum introduces this term in “Familiarization and Its Semiotic Matrix,” in Russian Formalism: A Retrospective Glance, ed. Robert Louis Jackson and Stephen Rudy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). As will become clear, I apply this term within a phenomenological critical framework, in contrast to Birnbaum’s semiotic approach. The special features of the familiar that phenomenology draws out will prove crucial to understanding the value this process has in Ashbery’s works.


18. My understanding of the thing of novelistic realism as condensing the norms and values of a world is indebted to Heidegger’s discussion of the thing as a “gathering” of the principles that structure the experience of a given culture (Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in Poetry, Language, Thought [New York: HarperCollins, 2001], 161–85).

19. Ashbery, Mooring of Starting Out, 309.


23. Ibid., 83.

24. Ibid., 113.

26. John Vincent explores what Bonnie Costello calls the “fruitful ambiguity of the second person” in Ashbery, identifying “you” with either the reader or Ashbery’s lover or friend (John Ashbery and You, 145–60). I think that reading the second person in terms of Ashbery’s investigation of novelistic and dialogic techniques suggests a third alternative: “you” can refer to someone addressed by a speaker in a poem, a person known to the speaker and unknown to both reader and poet.

27. Ashbery, Hotel Lautréamont, 137.

28. Ibid., 109.

29. Ashbery, Girls on the Run, 43.


31. Vance, Tales, 120.

32. Ibid., 275.


34. Vance, Tales, 236.


41. Perloff, Poetics of Indeterminacy, 267, 273.

42. Ibid., 10.

43. Ibid., 274.

44. Ibid., 283.

45. Ibid.


47. Perloff, Poetics of Indeterminacy, 270.

48. In “Hegel,” from Can You Hear, Bird? Ashbery presents the same problem from the opposite perspective: “She said she had ‘dishpan hands’ / No-one quite understood what she was talking about” (56).


50. W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” in Norton Anthology of Poetry (see note 49), 1196. I note that the canonical poems from which these two modernist examples are drawn
suppress or flatten the background. Yeats’s “shape” is seen against a desert; Pound turns the worldly background of a subway station into a flat “black bough.”


57. Ibid., 12.


59. Ashbery, *Self-Portrait*, 16. In this movement from part to whole, I note the difference of Ashbery’s project from that of the subgenre of science fiction Fredric Jameson has described as characterized by the “unknowability thesis” regarding alien cultures (*Archaeologies*, 107–18). Science fiction from Stanislaw Lem to Arthur C. Clarke, on Jameson’s account, focuses on the epistemological problem of how one can know a truly other culture and regards the impossibility of this knowledge as pure deprivation. For Ashbery, the very lack of knowledge about the alien world of the object serves as the technology that makes that world present, as a totality, in the formlessness of the alien thing.


63. The relatively unproblematic availability of Chinese poetry for Pound has led to a number of works exploring the relation of modernism to orientalism (see especially Eric Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel Quel* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003]). Here I simply wish to note the difference between a stance where the Eastern object becomes a more or less clearly delimited, more or less eternal, fixed, unchanging object of Western knowledge, and the radical alterity at stake in Ashbery’s rendering of the Eastern thing as fluid, open, unfixed.

64. Marjorie Perloff, in her recent *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (London: Blackwell, 2002), has revised her earlier classification of Ashbery as “postmodern” and joined Longenbach in arguing for this poetry’s deep continuity with modernism. Her reading of Ashbery’s poetics remains unrevISED, but she now (correctly) locates the dynamics she finds in Ashbery in the work of modernists like Eliot and Pound. On Foucault’s treatment of Lautréamont’s table, see Rey Chow, “The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies,” *ELH* 71 (2004): 293. For an interesting reading of Ashbery’s project as an attempt to carry forward the modernist project as defined by Jürgen Habermas, see David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000). Herd thinks Ashbery’s “occasional poetry” seeks to
re-create a world for modern people who have lost one. Referring to Habermas’s sense of the “background” of norms that allow communication, Herd argues that these poems, in their attention to “details of everyday life,” create a background adequate to our dynamic modern occasion. The problem with this argument is that the background does not consist of an accumulation of details, but rather in the norms, beliefs, and values that enable the details to show up for people in certain ways. The poems withhold this background, and their characteristic effect depends on this withholding.


67. Ibid., 223.

68. Ibid.


71. Ibid., 301. For Chow, to work within the terms of a specific culture is not to accept a fixed, static, or essentialist idea of that culture. On the contrary, the work Chow celebrates reveals the traces of other cultures, the hybridity and impurity of any given culture. But global commensurability is neither the starting nor the ending point of this kind of scholarship. The culture within the frame of study may be mixed and impure, but the “specific cultural framework” remains the horizon of interpretation and value.

72. Ibid., 304. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a similar point in Death of a Discipline (The Wellek Library Lectures) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) when she advocates comparativism as resisting “globalization [as] the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere” (72).