

PROJECT PAPERS

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JOHN ASHBERY

INTRODUCTION

To be a writer and write things
You must have experiences you can write about.
Just living won't do. I have a theory
About masterpieces, how to make them
At very little expense, and they're every
Bit as good as the others. You can
Use the same materials of the dream, at last.

It's a kind of game with no losers and only one
Winner—you. First, pain gets
Flashed back through the story and the story
Comes out backwards and woof-side up. This is
No one's story! At least they think that
For a time and the story is architecture
Now, and then history of a diversified kind.
A vacant episode during which the bricks got
Repointed and browner. And it ends up
Nobody's, there is nothing for any of us
Except that fretful vacillating around the central
Question that brings us closer,
For better and worse, for all this time.

THE ROMANTIC ENTANGLEMENT

Ah, you don't know what fun it is
Arriving in the rain just as night has changed the subject
To a downhill story of professors, pigs and pianos,
To the sermon of the moment.
How the lamplight crackled then! It was like the elision
Of a final vowel, and also a new adventure, proposed on a pinnacle
Not previously noted.

And snaking along a steep shelf of brushwood
To be close to a river, parallel: the fun of that too.

In dreams when you ask me
What kind of time we're having and
I reply something about emerald moss
Coating the standpipes of this century,
It all turns in on us,
Focuses on us,
Is us finally, no beauty left
In the eye of the beholder, only mistaken
Beginnings, false notes, marches, tunes, arias
With so little to recommend them.
But you saw only mussel gatherers
Waist-deep offshore,
Forcing an ever-diminishing sustenance
From the sea's floor.

And we can see now how it's impossible
To answer anything and stay unnatural,
Response being, by its very nature, romantic,
The very urge to romanticism. The precise itch.
What if I met you at the store
Five seconds from now—would the sleepers still elide their snores,
Would the stares of the salespeople compensate us
For what we shoplifted,
Cold as ashes in a grate after we're home?

JOHN ASH

THE EMBARKATION

Hoarded tears
and a sigh on the green surface of a drink.
We were nearly Vikings in our coldness,
our drunkenness and the tendency to rush down on things,
all at once, as if each new idea were a wealthy village
lying undefended on a bay.

The papers had been written,
the texts analyzed like tribes

in anthropology. We agreed
it was time to embark.

How the station echoed!
The simplest farewell became Wagner.
The walls of the restaurant were covered
with enormous, pale paintings,
allegorical and so vague
I remember nothing but the colours -
pinks, greys and blues that seemed
to fade even as you looked -
but surely they must have represented
scenes of heroic science and labour,
the building of a new society of steel and glass.

Our actions were unconsidered.
Our thoughts grew like mint.

Somewhere in a sea of tables a voice detached itself:
“...be thankful the religious phase is over.
The old, bearded concepts have been sent into exile -
a permanent one I hope - and we are safe
from their efforts to redeem us. If the moon rose
or rain fell on the theatre terrace
there might be a song...
What was it I wrote once about pigeons?
Now he calls them *flying rats*,
and they are here in multitudes,
a rabble smearing the statues.
My life has not ended. Merely,
it grows a little tired of me.”

But anticipation
is always an ample and empty chamber
that exists for you alone to fill, if you wish,
with voices and illuminated scenes,
amid which appear, dimly at first like
dusty windows, the faces of persons
impossibly far removed from you in terms
of handsomeness or wealth, poverty or brilliance.

They are to be desired only in the abstract.
A dry perspective stays fixed.
The mansion or monastery with its graceful stones
is built at another time,

and certain possibilities are ignored
like the possibility of failure in love.

The pause reaches massive proportions -
a kind of coliseum or unused racetrack.

The hope of a good destination is suspended
About you like a vine pierced by sunlight,
but you must first descend;
you must wait in line, impatience leashed.
You are almost there -
I mean at the window where you must buy your ticket
if you are ever to escape this clamorous junction.

But this may not be your fate. Your wallet is empty,
and there is nothing to do but return to the hotel
to sleep and dream. And perhaps this is all for the best:

though invisible, untried
your heart already knows those far towns that only drowse and sing;
the structure, whether colonnade or orange grove,
can't be dismantled...

but as you turn back
the air is cold on your hands.

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