

A Critical Study of John Ashbery's Poem *Syringa*

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John Ashbery (1927-2017)

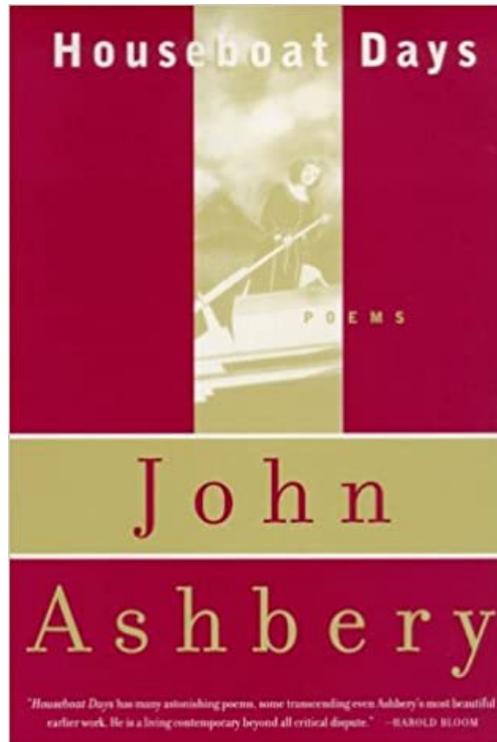
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Abstract

John Ashbery is the most distinguished member of the New York School of Poets. His avant-garde and highly innovative poetry make him one of the most unique poetic voices of America. *Houseboat Days* is a significant volume of poems from the oeuvre of Ashbery. It was published in the year 1977. *Syringa* is a remarkable poem from this volume. This poem which is in the form of an elegy narrates a poet's relation to the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and how he studies it in relation to his personal loss. This poem can be studied as a revaluation of an ancient myth in relation to present times. Essentially the poem is a blend of modernist and traditional elements of English poetry. Although art is emblemized as an abstraction by the poet in this poem, at the same time the ability of art to transcend mutability is affirmed by the poet towards the end of the poem. The strophic structure bestows on the poem a continuity of thought. This poem also expresses the Romantic yearning of a modern poet for transcendence amidst negation and fragmentation. The critical method of close

reading has been employed for the explication of this poem and for arriving at contextual insights.

Keywords: Avant-garde, myth, elegy, revaluation, continuity, transcendence.



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Introduction

Syringa is an important poem from the volume *Houseboat Days*. *Syringa* is an elegy on the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus, a musician who goes to the nether world to bring back his dead wife Eurydice. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is told by Ovid in his celebrated work *Metamorphoses*. The title *Syringa* probably refers to a variety of flowering shrubs belonging to the genus saxifrage which grow besides hard rocks at times and whose roots penetrate through the hard rocks and breaks them open. The flowers are usually yellow in colour.

Essentially the poem is a series of contemplations on the Orpheus legend. The elaborate structure of a conventional elegy is successfully employed by Ashbery in this poem, even as the poem remains impersonal to a large extent. The speaker of the elegy grieves over a loss that remains undisclosed till the conclusion, he reevaluates the Orpheus myth and without alluding to his personal loss directly establishes a correspondence between his sorrow and that of Orpheus. In the first strophe the myth is recounted.

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The poem begins with the poet expressing that Orpheus perceived everything under the sky subjectively.

Orpheus liked the glad personal quality
Of the things beneath the sky. Of course Eurydice was a part
Of this. (1 – 3)

Suddenly everything changed for him with the sudden death of his beloved Eurydice. He broke apart stones with his lamentations, even the sky almost lost its wholeness. At that time Apollo the god of music gently advised him to leave his music which is no longer patronized like in the past.

Then Apollo quietly told him: "Leave it all on earth
Your lute, what point? Why pick at a dull pavan few care to
Follow, except for a few birds of a dusty feature,
Not vivid performances of the past". But why not?
All other things must change too. (10 – 15)

In the following lines the poetic voice seeks to know as to why this has happened. The voice further elucidates that mutability is an inevitable aspect of life, nothing remains static and even the seasons progress and change; and according to the laws of nature everything is seen only once. The flux of life doesn't allow a relook of anything.

And Orpheus made the fatal mistake of looking back at Eurydice when he was bringing her back from the kingdom of death resulting in her disappearance, and the poetic voice furthers says that even if he hadn't looked back, she might have still disappeared. According to the poetic voice it's only love and what the others call as life that defy mutability and remain etched in the mind forever.

No use standing there like a gray stone toga as the whole wheel
Of recorded history flashes past, struck dumb, unable to utter an intelligent
Comment on the most thought provoking element in its train.
Only love stays on the brain, and something these people,
These other ones, call life. (23 – 27)

The first strophe concludes with the voice expressing that the musical notes of Orpheus which soared high above the depths of a dull noon had such an exactness of melody that they surpassed the bright yellow sparkling flowers that grew round the quarry.

Singing accurately
So that the notes mount straight up out of the well.
Dim noon and rival the tiny, sparkling flowers.
Growing around the brink of the quarry, encapsulates

The different weights of the things. (28 – 32)

The second strophe begins with the line,
But it isn't enough
To just go on singing. (33 – 34)

In the following lines the poetic voice says that when Orpheus understood that his music couldn't bring back Eurydice to life, he calmly accepted the punishment meted out to him by the Baccantes who were said to have torn him to pieces after being deprived of their senses by his music, according to another myth this punishment was accorded to him for his treatment of Eurydice. The poet feels that whatever be the reason, music was more or less responsible for the fate of Orpheus. Toward the end of this complex sentence the poet expresses that music is representative of life and likewise we can't evaluate the total effect of music based on a single note. We should wait till the end for a truer summation. He cites a truism and further elaborates that a segment or a sequence can't be a representative or a substitute for the whole. From these lines onwards the impersonal tone is replaced by a more personal one. In the next lines the poetic voice says that though the remembrances of a season can be melded into a single photograph, the said frozen moment can't be preserved to last forever. For time is like a continually moving picture - a living picture which depicts an abstract action in cragged fractured strokes.

For although memories, Of a season, for example,
Melt into a single snapshot, One cannot guard, treasure
That stalled moment. It too is flowing, fleeting;
It is a picture of flowing, scenery, though living, mortal,
Over which an abstract action is laid out in blunt,
Harsh strokes. (47 – 50)

In the following lines the poetic voice expresses his helplessness and says that to seek more from life than this is like becoming the swaying reeds of a slow yet powerful stream which gently pulls at them. Here the flow of time is compared to a slow powerful stream and life to the trailing grasses which are gently pulled at by the stream.

And to ask more than this
Is to become the tossing reeds of that slow,
Powerful stream, the trailing grasses
Playfully tugged at, but to participate in the action
No more than this. (53 – 58)

In these lines the poet also evokes the transformation of Syrinx into a reed. Syrinx was a nymph who was loved by the Pan the Greek god of flocks and shepherds who transformed into a reed when she was pursued by him. He invented the musical pipe of seven

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reeds, which he named Syrix in her honour. In the succeeding lines the poetic voice says that there are faint flashes of lightening in the violet sky which suddenly erupt into a shower of cream-coloured lights. There is a brief episode of the horses toward the end of this strophe. Each of them thought that they have seen a part of the truth but at the same time feel that they are impervious to it. They delude themselves by thinking it couldn't have happened to them for they understand the language of birds as well as the schedule of the lights in the electric storm. They also feel that the duel of the lights would result in music just like the way,

"I'm a maverick. Nothing of this is happening to me,
Though I can understand the language of birds, and
The itinerary of the lights caught in the storm fully
apparent to me.
Their jousting ends in music much
As trees mow more easily in the wind after a summer storm
And is happening in lacy shadows of shore-trees, now, day
after day". (63 – 68)

The horses may represent both Orpheus and the poet, there is an oblique reference to Orpheus in the horse's episode, Orpheus was said to have understood the language of birds and make the trees sway to his music, but when it came to comprehending the mortality of existence, he failed.

The concluding strophe begins with the poetic voice expressing dejectedly that's its always late to regret at some happening knowing well that regrets in retrospect are always late and henceforth meaningless, to this Orpheus who has been transformed into a blue cloud says that the pronouncement of grief is not regrets at all but simply a meticulous expostulation of unquestioned facts; and despite the graveness of the subject or the lack of it, isn't fit material for a poem and the source stands there helplessly even as the poem leaps around with its tail on fire like a bad comet spewing hate and disaster lag its meaning will forever remain obscure and elusive. In the following lines the poetic voice says that a singer builds his song in stages, gradually just like the way a skyscraper is built but suddenly the singer turns away from his creation at the climactic moment. Then the song is immersed in darkness in an instant which in turn immediately turns the whole continent into darkness, and the singer must turn away from sight without experiencing some succor from the fact that he has been relieved from the evil burden of the words. The poetic voice suggests that poetry can't give the poet assurance or a grip over his hallucinations.

In the succeeding line the poetic voice says that stellification or the attainment of fame from the depths of relative obscurity can be aspired by only a few and it comes after they are gone, and the record of their existence is confined to libraries and microfilm.

Stellification is for the few, and comes about much later

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When all record of these people and their lives
Has disappeared into libraries, onto microfilm.
A few are still interested in them. (90 – 93)

The poet uses here the metaphor of stellification which is the process by which a dwarf star is turned into a luminous star. He is probably speaking of those poets who remain obscure and unknown through their entire lives. Though there are some who still evince interest in them. The queries remain unanswered as the addressees remain in a frozen state far removed from life and living; then all of a sudden, an ordinary chorus recounts a totally varied happening with a very similar title.

"In whose tale are hidden syllables
Of what happened so long before that
In some small town, one indifferent summer". (98 – 101)

Toward the conclusion, the poetic voice identifies his loss with that of Orpheus. The poem stops at the "stalled moment", at the memory of his loss which took place a long while ago.

The power of Orpheus's lament is accepted but at the same time, the poetic voice is at loss to affirm the power of song or the stalled moment to transcend the passage of time.

Conclusion

The personal and the universal come together in this poem, and the poem can be taken as an internal dialectic between the passing of time and the transfixed moment-memory, which may be the memory of some loss of the poet that is co-related to the enigmatic myth of Orpheus. There could be found in this poem a juxtaposing of the past with the present and this juxtaposing could be perceived also in its syntax which is characterized by the frequent alternation of mellifluous phrases with prosaic conversational phrases. The lines spoken by Apollo to Orpheus at the beginning of the first strophe can be taken as an illustration of this juxtaposing.

Then Apollo quietly told him: "Leave it all on earth
Your lute, what point? Why pick at a dull pavan few care to
Follow, except for a few birds of a dusty feather,
Not vivid performances of the past". But why not?
All other things must change too. (10 – 15)

In these lines unusual phrases like 'pavan' and 'dusty feather' are employed alongside conversational phrases. The phrase pavan denotes a Spanish stately dance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries where the dancers used to wear elaborate costumes. The phrase birds of a dusty feather is an instance of a transferred epithet here in these lines Apollo conveys

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through this phrase that only some artists are still interested in the aesthetics of a bygone era. These words are followed by the words of the poetic voice which are suggestive of a prosaic conversational style. The poetic voice seeks to know as to why changes should not be accepted when everything on earth is subject to the forces of mutability. Here in these words echoes of Heraclitean philosophy which states that everything exists in a state of perpetual flux could be perceived.

In the lines that succeed these lines the poetic voice further elucidates that everything is seen only once and as all the events continually progress they come into contact with other things somehow managing to come not into conflict with each other.

The seasons are no longer what they once were
But it is the nature of things to be seen only once,
As they happen along, bumping into other things, getting along
Somehow. (16 – 19)

In these lines also conversational phrases are employed to convey complex philosophical insights.

The merging of the past and the present is manifested in the imagery of the poem also. Throughout the poem images from the mythical world are juxtaposed with images of recent times.

A controlled subjectivity runs throughout the poem. The elegy is in three strophes and has a structural unity with few disruptions and the long line with few line breaks is successfully employed in this poem. There are two voices in the text—an elegiac voice and a meditative voice that are counterbalanced in the first strophe; in the concluding strophe both of the voices converge into one.

And as Lawrence Kramer has put it with great insight in David Lehman's important collection of essays on John Ashbery's poetry, *Beyond Amazement*. (1980):

The poem is, in effect, polyvocal. It has a meditative voice that engages in tranquil, resigned consideration of the problem of loss as presented by Orpheus, and it has an elegiac voice, full of lament and desire that uses the Orpheus myth to utter hidden syllables of personal sorrow. (257)

The poet accepts that the fleetingness of time is absolute as he expresses in the second strophe that one can't keep the frozen moment forever in the mind for it transforms into a picture of flowing scenery on which a nonfigurative action is depicted in 'blunt, harsh strokes'. He implies that over time any experience be it tragic or otherwise gets transformed into an abstraction and art can depict only its transformation but never the moment. He also accepts that equivocalness is an intrinsic element of art. As Lawrence Kramer has observed,

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"the flowing and fleeting of time is absolute, and the work of art is so formed that it submits to that flow without trying to wrench it into shape". (266)

The poet remains uncertain of the capability of the imaginative perception to transcend the experience of sorrow and loss or provide a true interpretation of the world. The poet attempts to explore the tensions inherent in the ancient myth of Orpheus in relation to his loss and sorrow and by establishing a correspondence between an ancient myth and his personal sorrow he proposes at the continuity of art and also at its power to transcend time and mutability. He also suggests that artists may never find fame in their lifetime but the possibility of a renewal of interest in their art, post existence always remains.

Toward the conclusion of the poem all the ambivalences and fragmentations are subordinated to a closure of serene acceptance. The speaker of the poem who identifies himself with the meditative voice finally acknowledges that his sorrow is similar to that of Orpheus's but declines to elaborate it any further and refrains from being intensely personal. He also alludes to the parallels between Orpheus an ancient Greek poet and prophet and himself - a poet of recent times. The poet also expresses in the poem that only an artist can locate the resonances and echoes of the past in the present and by doing so can bring together the past and present and that the complex reenactment of the past can take place only through poetry. This poem can also be read as an elegy within an elegy. For the speaker of the poem laments not only of his personal loss but also for a poet of a bygone age. Finally, Ashbery conveys through this poem that despite the limitations art has the capability of rescuing the past from total obliteration by emblemizing memory.

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