

The Romantic Futility of John Koethe.

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Author: YAPHE, ANDREW

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"Besides," answered Goethe, "we hear this substitution of g for k, not merely amongst actors, but even amongst theologians. I once experienced an incident of this sort. When I, some five years ago, stayed at Jena, and lodged at the Fir Tree, a theological student one morning presented himself. After he had conversed with me very agreeably, he made, as he was just going, a request of a most peculiar kind. He begged me to allow him to preach in my stead on the next Sunday. I saw which way the wind blew, and that the hopeful youth was one of those who confound g with k I therefore answered that I could not personally assist; but that he would be sure to attain his object if he would apply to Archdeacon Koethe."

-Conversations with Eckermann

John Koethe is widely recognized as one of our foremost Romantic poets, an inheritor of the tradition of Stevens and Ashbery. Koethe is also a philosopher by trade, and in his recent collection of essays, *Poetry at One Remove* (University of Michigan, 2000), he attempts to bring his art and his profession together by offering "a coherent view of poetry and mentality" Rather than assess his attempt to bridge the gap between these modes of speculation, I will consider Koethe's understanding of poetry, both for the light it sheds on Koethe's own poetic project and, more generally, as a study in the fortunes of romanticism.

Koethe conceives of poetry as an achievement of the agonistic sublime, as "subjectivity's contestation of its objective setting in a world that has no place for it and which threatens to reduce it to nonexistence." Such a romantic understanding of the poet's task is perhaps most associated with Harold Bloom, and Koethe explicitly aligns himself with Bloom's interpretation of Romantic poetry as an art devoid of any subject but "pure subjectivity" a domain of internalized quests whose goal is the achievement of a "former selfless self."

What does it mean to want to achieve a "former selfless self"? When one comes across such phrases in Bloom, the temptation is to read them as religious utterances, formulas lifted from Gnosticism, Orphism, or some even more obscure byway of belief. Koethe's taste for speculation runs to philosophy, as evidenced by his characteristic gloss on the notion of a "selfless self" as a "condition of pure subjectivity, conceptually prior to its objectification in the form of the human person." Both Koethe and Bloom believe in a

poetry that can assert itself against what Wallace Stevens called the "escapades of death" that fill "these external regions!" They part company, however, over the question of the possible efficacy of transformation. While Bloom, at certain stages of his sprawling career, has been less than sanguine about the power of poetry to dominate the universe of death, he is more inclined to the ecstatic optimism of an Emerson than the fatalistic pessimism of a Freud. Koethe takes a gloomier view. For him, assertions of subjectivity are always made in the "face of futility," and the poet is confronted with the "inevitable recognition" that the condition of "transcendental subjectivity" is finally "unsustainable."

Koethe does not explicitly formulate his divergence from Bloom, but one way to tease it out is through an examination of Koethe's readings of Stevens. The book opens with a reading of Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" which is meant to demonstrate the poet's "recognition of the futility of speculation." Koethe disclaims "any pretense of being either a literary scholar or critic," so it would be unfair to complain that he doesn't take into account interpretations of Stevens on which the poet appears to triumph over reality, rather than submit to its rebuff of poetic pretensions. However, the discerning reader will note that Koethe gets his reading afloat by practicing the art of selective citation. For instance, when he quotes the opening lines of Stevens's poem, Koethe halts at "For a moment in the central of our being," suggesting that Stevens is only committing to a flicker of power, a transitory gleam. Koethe omits the following line, which ends the exordium and launches us into the poem proper on a note of serene confidence: "The vivid transparency that you bring is peace. Similarly, Koethe gives us the following as a "remarkable outburst of desperate insistence that betrays [Stevens's] own disbelief":

It is possible, possible, possible. It must

Be possible. It must be that in time

The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,

Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,

To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute.

Again, though, Koethe fails to do justice to the renovatory movement of Stevens's poem, which dips into disbelief only to ascend into a stronger affirmation of the poet's own power:

The fiction of an absolute -- Angel,

Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear

The luminous melody of proper sound.

Stevens acknowledged that poetry "is a finikin thing of air / That lives uncertainly and not for long." Koethe would have that aphorism end there. Stevens, however, preferred to proceed, asserting in full that

Poetry is a finikin thing of air

That lives uncertainly and not for long

Yet radiantly beyond much lustier blurs.

I have contested this interpretation of Stevens, not to show that Koethe is a bad critic, but to question the reasons for his reading. Koethe's Stevens is not the one who said that "In an age of disbelief, it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief," but rather a Stevens who refused transcendence, who bowed to the pressure of reality. In order to present that Stevens, though, Koethe truncates quotations and presents a misleadingly partial reading of the poet.

At this point, the reader may be wondering why anyone should care about Koethe's reading of Stevens. It is important, not because Koethe is "wrong" about his precursor, but because we can use this misreading to better understand Koethe's own poetry. To that end, consider a remark from Koethe's essay on Ashbery's influence. In the course of an encomium on Douglas Crase, Koethe refers to Crase's recovery of "Whitman through Ashbery," the way in which Crase "enlists the rhetorical and psychological strategies of the poet many castigate as our most private and hermetic in the service of a public, Emersonian project of reclamation of his own." Oddly, in a book largely devoted to the tradition of American romanticism that culminates in Stevens and Ashbery, Whitman goes almost entirely unmentioned. We can begin to account for this absence when Koethe tells us that the chief influences on his work have been Stevens, Ashbery, and Eliot. In the light of this avowal of precursors, we can venture an interpretation of Koethe's insistence on the inevitability of failure. Koethe, we may conclude, is involved in his own attempt to recover a poet through Ashbery. In his case, though, the figure of recovery is not the Good Grey Poet of Camden, but rather the Anglo-Catholic classicist royalist of St. Louis. Koethe, we might say, is trying to enlist Ashbery's poetic strategies in the service of a private, pessimistic project of his own.

This explains how Koethe can quote with approval Kant's phrase "rational raving" to describe "the self's identification...with the transcendental ego posited by the imagination. Stevens, who announced that "God and the imagination are one," would have demurred from dismissing this identification as a "mad or comical inflation of the self." On the other hand, one can see Eliot nodding in the background when Koethe states that a "straightforward celebration of subjectivity risks collapsing into posturing and vapidty," especially since a "too vigorous insistence on it" is liable to make that celebration appear an act of delusion." The last phrase condescends to Whitman, while finding value in Eliot's

poetics of abstention. Again, this is not to deny Koethe's interpretation, but to identify an agenda behind Koethe's philosophical and poetic preferences.

In the most philosophical essay in the collection, "Poetry and the Experience of Experience," Koethe asks: "If the capacity for reflective self-awareness leads us to think of ourselves in irreconcilable ways, why are we better off for ceasing to exercise it?" This question tells us a great deal about Koethe. For him, reality presents us with certain irreconcilables. We want to see ourselves as transcendent subjectivities, capable of elevation above the misery of circumstance and into a being beyond time. That's just the way we are, or at least the way those of us are who find ourselves drawn to romanticism. On the other hand, reality resists all our impositions, shrugs off all our attempts to make it over in our image. That's just the way reality is. Viewing the world in this way, Koethe is apt to misconstrue a poet who, like Stevens, would deny the necessity of this dualism. A more romantic reading of Stevens would suggest that, to him, there is no bedrock of reality, no way things really are in themselves. There are only descriptions, and descriptions are always liable to be changed by the next poet clever enough to run rings around your credences.

The question remains: Why should anyone care about Koethe's understanding of reality? Koethe's philosophy matters, inasmuch as his poetry is influenced by his philosophy (assuming, of course, that his poetry matters, as I think it does). Having decided, on philosophical grounds, that the "only form of romanticism tenable now is a truncated and belated one," Koethe has apparently decided to produce a truncated and belated romantic poetry.

To better appreciate Koethe's relation to his precursors, consider a poem from his most recent collection, *The Constructor* (Harper Collins, 1999). "Un Autre Monde" begins

The nervous style and faintly reassuring

Tone of voice concealed inside the meanings

Incompletely grasped, and constantly disappearing

As the isolated moments burst against each other

And subside.

What is he talking about, if not the experience of reading John Ashbery? Koethe moves from description of that reading experience to the visionary project which Ashbery's poetry undertakes: the "naive, perennial attempt to see / And shift the focus of experience, fundamentally / Revising what it means to feel." So much for the romanticism: now for the truncation:

fundamentally

Revising what it means to feel, yet realizing

Merely some minor, disappointing alterations

In the fixed scheme of things.

If Koethe did nothing more than issue pronouncements of futility, *The Constructor* would be a much less appealing book than it is. The saving grace of these poems is their mood of wistfulness, their regret that romantic hope has been clouded by experience. In this case, that wistfulness appears as the desire to get behind the "anger" that is his "real way of feeling" in the present, to return to those "vague anxieties and / Satisfactions that were once so much a part of me / I miss them, and I want them back." That the nostalgia is for a renewal of a mood named "Ashbery" becomes more apparent when we consider that these lines echo Ashbery's "Wet Casements" (*Houseboat Days*, 1977):

I want that information very much today,

Can't have it, and this makes me angry.

But Ashbery plans to "use" his anger to build a bridge so that he "shall at last see my complete face / Reflected not in the water but in the worn stone floor of my bridge," thus transcending Keats's fear of being one whose name was writ on water and establishing his own kind of poetic monument (ironically, out of the very "unswept stone" that Shakespeare denigrated in favor of his own bid for immortality through "powerful rhyme"). Koethe's conclusion is much more tentative:

And yet in time

They did come back as wishes, but the kind of wishes

Long ago abandoned, left behind like markers on the way

To resignation, and then as infinitely fine regrets.

Instead of moving forward, building something out of his "anger," Koethe lingers until his desire returns to him as wishes, markers of resignation, regrets. But what keeps Koethe from progressing beyond regret?

I said that the prevalent mood in *The Constructor* is one of wistfulness over lost hope, but it would be more accurate to say that the volume features two distinct modes of hope. There is the boundless hope of youth, a feeling of being "at the center of some infinite potential / Time and time alone would realize, with an expanding / Sense of what it meant to be alive" ("The Advent of the Ordinary"). And there is the wistful hope of age: "I wish the songs that moved me once might come to me again / And help me understand this person

that I've gradually become" ("A Parking Lot with Trees"). Between those two hopes falls the shadow, which appears most bluntly in "A Lake of White Flowers" as the impress of "poems of knowledge" that "speak with accuracy and gravity and grace." Who but Eliot is the author of those accurate, grave "poems of knowledge"? Their impact is the subject of "A Lake of White Flowers," as they push aside poems like Ashbery's, which were "lovely / In an incidental way, without magnificence," but which have been diminished with time. Once, those poems "seemed so effortless and free, / So unconstrained by anything like knowledge / Or the burden of experience." Now, though, the most that can be said of them is "But I still think that some of them were true."

The surface resemblance of Koethe to Ashbery has been widely noticed, but it is more accurate to say that Koethe is writing the kind of poems that Eliot might have written, had he been forced to struggle with the influence of Ashbery. Ashbery presents us with an extravaganza of different voices, an exuberant profusion of personae. Koethe has but the one persona, and, superficial dissimilarities aside, it is remarkably similar to the prematurely aged observer of life we encounter in Prufrock and Other Observations. While Eliot's persona finds opportunities for regret in the erotic, Koethe's prefers to brood over sublimer disappointments. But this is not, finally, an important difference: both are connoisseurs of dissatisfaction, inhabitants of their peculiar places of disaffection.

In an essay for the Dial on "Modern Literature," Emerson wrote that Goethe "must be set down as the poet of the Actual, not the Ideal; the poet of limitation, not of possibility; of this world, and not of religion and hope; in short, if we may say so, the poet of prose, and not of poetry. He accepts the bare doctrine of Fate, and gleans what straggling joys may yet remain out of its ban." Koethe, I am supposing, is such another, one who would hold that Emerson's ideal poetry that would "dissipate by dreadful melody all this iron network of circumstance" is merely Concord raving.

The measure of Koethe's poetic achievement, I take it, is that he has discovered a way to use Ashbery. Unlike so many of Ashbery's epigoni, Koethe has been able to swerve away into a distinct shade of his own. But by recasting our preeminent poet of possibility in the trappings of a poetry of limitation, Koethe has set himself a severe challenge. Can he continue writing on the periphery of a poetry of prose without ceasing to write poetry altogether? We can grant that Koethe does not share Ashbery's fascination with the detritus of popular culture, and still feel that passages like this description of "monotonous variety" do not bode well for the future of his poetry:

Game shows, an interview with Princess Di,

And happy talk, and sitcoms and the news,

The shit that floats across your living room

Each weekday evening.

In "Mistral," Koethe speaks of "glaring down at the deserted surface / In abject despondency, yet finally acquiescing in its flat, / Fastidious music, with its insistent undertone of sadness / And its persistent tendency towards abstraction." "The shit that floats across your living room" is certainly flat, but the prospects are grim for this kind of "fastidious music." Koethe's charm lies in his resistance to his own prophecies of doom, his yearnings for something more than another rehearsal of futility. But his poetic flirts with its own extinction, as the pressure to accede to the inevitable intensifies. "I say these things, although I recognize their futility," Koethe writes in "The Waiting Game." But how long can he continue to write in the face of his own bleak certitudes? By turning to Eliot, Koethe has found a way to build out from under Ashbery's shadow: but whether he has blazed a new trail, or merely stumbled into a cul-de-sac, remains to be seen.

Andrew Yaphe is pursuing a Ph.D. in English at the University of Chicago.

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