

**“Trying to have it both ways”: John Ashbery and Anglo-American Exchange**

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*Alice's looking glass is reached by Emily's riddle.*  
—John Ashbery, Introduction to Mark Ford's *Soft Sift*



## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores John Ashbery's interactions with several generations of English poets, during a period which ranges from the late 1940s to the present day. It seeks to support two principle propositions: that Ashbery's engagements with contemporaneous English poets had a decisive influence on his poetic development; and that Ashbery's own poetic and critical work can be employed to revise our understanding of mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century English poetry. The dissertation demonstrates that Ashbery's relationships with four English poets—W.H. Auden, F.T. Prince, Lee Harwood and Mark Ford—occurred at significant junctures in, and altered the course of, his poetic development. Ashbery's critical and poetic engagements with these poets, when read together, are shown to constitute an idiosyncratic but coherent re-reading of the English poetry of the past and present. The dissertation addresses the ways in which each poet theorises the difficulties posed, and opportunities afforded, by perceived changes in Anglo-American poetic relations at different points during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapter one re-evaluates Ashbery's relationship with Auden. It traces the legacy of Auden's coterie poetics in *The Orators* for Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, offers a revisionary reading of *The Vermont Notebook* as a strident response to Auden's late-career conservatism, and reads in depth Ashbery's unpublished, highly ambivalent elegy for him, "If I had My Way, Dear". Chapter Two attends to the extensive correspondence between Ashbery and Prince, argues that Prince's work provided a model for Ashbery's "encrypted" early lyrics addressing his homosexuality, and reads "Clepsydra" as an early elaboration of Ashbery's conception of a reciprocal influential model. Chapter Three examines Lee Harwood's "imitations" of Ashbery, and considers the latter's first critical formation of an English "other tradition" through his association of Harwood with the work of John Clare. Chapter Four portrays Ashbery's relationship with Mark Ford as a successful enactment of reciprocal influence, a form of engagement which allows Ashbery a means to "shake off his own influence" and to retain his status as a "major minor writer".



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## INTRODUCTION

This is an account of John Ashbery's career in which the “minor eras / Take on an importance all out of proportion to the story”.<sup>1</sup> The “minority” of any part of any story is, of course, a relational status always open to dispute, but in the available stories of Ashbery's life and work his personal and textual engagements with contemporaneous English poets have occupied only a marginal position. This is unsurprising. When compared with the most ambitious, compelling narratives of Ashbery's place within literary history—portraying him as a practitioner of the “American sublime”, a Francophile avant-gardist, or a coterie poet of the New York School, among many other possible identities—concentrating on Ashbery's English engagements might seem a limited perspective from which to view the work of an era-defining poet. Yet because the idea of “minority” has been a central preoccupation for Ashbery throughout his career, it is apt to discover that many of the important, enduring points of interest which have come to define his poetry and poetics—the relation of the margin to the centre, the ways in which art represents the historical moment of its composition, the processes by which canons are formed, the methods through which aesthetic “strength” and “weakness” are determined, the connection between national identities and traditions and individual poetic expression—are foregrounded and illuminated when raised within such a “minor” context. The limitation of scope in this study—which attends to Ashbery's relationships with W. H. Auden, F. T. Prince, Lee Harwood and Mark Ford—allows for a localised, concentrated sample of his thought and work to be attended to, and only obliquely to substantiate or contradict more general themes or practices in his oeuvre. Ashbery's project is broad and varied enough to justify its fragmentation into specific sub-categories, which in combination will allow for a larger, more comprehensive and more complex picture of this inexhaustible poet to be presented. This thesis hopes to make three central contributions to that broader picture: to demonstrate the

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<sup>1</sup> John Ashbery, *Collected Poems: 1957-1987* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), 438.

significance of Anglo-American contexts to Ashbery's work, to illustrate his importance in understanding the work of four English poets, and to examine how these contexts inflect Ashbery's key concept of "other traditions".

The Anglo-American backdrop in which his engagements with these poets take place is particularly apposite for a study attentive to the shifting valence of "minority" as an aesthetic category. The dramatically changing nature of Anglo-American relations during the long historical moment of Ashbery's career has provided an ideal set of circumstances for the articulation of a version of literary history which has attended as much to the recently diminished and occluded as the newly powerful and visible. Ashbery's is a critical project in which aesthetic values are posited as changing, historical phenomena, destined to be abandoned or superseded, and this interest in impermanence and contingency reflects acutely the period of its expression, in which the location of the most innovative practices in Anglophone poetry crossed the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup> His playful interventions in the histories of English and American poetics can be viewed as correctives informed by broader historical and literary transitions, but also as self-reflexive, intended to mediate how his own poetic career is read. While often described as a distinctly "American" writer, Ashbery has been careful to identify himself multiply and inconsistently with different poetic traditions and national contexts.<sup>3</sup> The concepts and traditions which circulate in his ever-changing use of "Englishness" (comparable to, but distinct from, his interest in and association with ideas of "Frenchness", proper examination of which require another thesis) have served as a valuable tool to resist excessive identification with

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<sup>2</sup> *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery's long poem based on the art of Henry Darger, features a relevant dialogue between three of its characters on the subject of changes in taste over much wider historical periods: "But you know, our fashions are in fashion / only briefly, then they go out / and stay that way for a long time. Then they come back in / for a while. Then, in maybe a million years, they go out of fashion and stay there. / Laure and Tidbit agreed, with the proviso that everyone would become fashion / again for a few hours" John Ashbery, *Girls on the Run* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 3.

<sup>3</sup> As Ben Hickman demonstrates abundantly, critics as diverse in motivation and practice as Harold Bloom, Marjorie Perloff, Helen Vendler and Susan Schultz have characterised Ashbery as a poet whose American-ness runs from the "irrepressible" to the "obvious and inescapable". See Ben Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) 2-3; Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 130; Susan Schultz, *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 1; Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 225.

a single nationality, much as interest in and identification with minority has served as a way of destabilising any attempt to establish his “major” pedigree as a descendent of, say, Whitman or Stevens. The functionality of national oppositions to Ashbery, then, is in many ways analogous to that of “minority” and “majority” as aesthetic categories.

A number of critics have attended to Ashbery's English sources, though many have been afflicted by outdated, biased or insufficiently scrutinised conceptions of “American” and “English” national and poetic traditions. I won't rehearse the familiar arguments regarding Anglo-American poetic exchange (or the perceived lack thereof) during the late twentieth century—Romana Huk's recent essay, “The View from the USA”, does this with commendable patience and thoroughness—but rather suggest briefly the bearing simplistic divisions between the two poetic cultures have had on criticism which views Ashbery's work within an Anglo-American context.<sup>4</sup> Geoff Ward's *Statutes of Liberty* was valuable as one of the first texts to illustrate Ashbery's extensive debt to Auden, but undermined the significance of such connections by caricaturing the forms of resistance Ashbery's poetry encountered across the Atlantic: “The British hope sincerely that, when it comes to his language, the writer will always be in possession of a controlled substance . . . if he is going to lose control, he must not do so semantically, like the foreigners Stevens, Ashbery, the surrealists”.<sup>5</sup> While this is true of a particular strain of English criticism, such generalising sentiments simplify the complex terms of engagement Ashbery establishes with his various “English constituency”, and the historical contexts in which such engagements occur.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Marjorie Perloff has made passing reference to the importance of Auden, but is curiously hamstrung—for a critic who has

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<sup>4</sup> Romana Huk, “The View from the USA”, Peter Robinson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 576-96.

<sup>5</sup> Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 87.

<sup>6</sup> Ashbery has received some valuably resistant reviews in English publications, but on the whole negative reactions to his work have been so extreme as to preclude serious critical engagement. Perhaps most extravagantly, Tom Paulin stated: “Ashbery, it has to be said, is a poet so talentless that it's a wonder his work has been published, let alone received the extravagantly lunatic praise some critics have accorded it.” (Tom Paulin, “A Naked Emperor?” *Poetry Review*, Vol.74, no.3, Sept.1984, 33.) Sean O'Brien is particularly interesting for the way he articulates his objection to the “monotony” of Ashbery's late work in specifically national terms: “You could argue that the monotony is of a particularly American sort - teeming and 'ungovernable' - an imperial monotony which, in its Tiggerish energy comes to seem somewhat oppressive.” (Sean O'Brien, *Poetry Review*, Vol.88, no.1, Spring 1998.)

written well on the work of Roy Fisher, among other contemporary English poets—by an occasionally narrow conception of Anglo-American exchange. In a recent interview, she recapitulates the view that

It's important to understand that American poetry, poetics and criticism are very much divided between those who come out of a British tradition and those who don't. The British poetic tradition is much more conservative than ours: they look for echoes of Thomas Hardy or the Victorians in contemporary poetry. Critics like Sir Frank Kermode are wholly suspicious of avant-garde developments and prefer, say, Richard Wilbur to John Ashbery.

It seems a little unfair that Perloff can say this, then only moments later chide Harold Bloom for forgetting that “many of our [American] poets, after all, were influenced by European developments”.<sup>7</sup> Despite the work of Harwood, Fisher, J.H. Prynne, Tom Raworth, and Denise Riley, among many others, in Perloff's view the “British poetic tradition” worthy of the appellation remains somehow divorced from “European developments”, as though hermetically sealed from centuries of innovation by the English channel. In such instances, Ward and Perloff seem suspended in the kind of divisional critical model explored by Donald Davie in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, which, in its famous “Afterword for American readers”, asserted that the two poetries were no longer on “hearing terms”.<sup>8</sup> Perloff's generalisation in particular reflects what can be thought of as a broader view among American critics regarding the dominant strains of postwar poetry and criticism produced in England.<sup>9</sup> While there are elements of truth in her remarks, their general scope allows little room for the narrative this thesis wishes to tell, which is that, in fact, Ashbery has not simply been rejected by a philistine, implicitly xenophobic “mainstream” of English poetry, nor solely embraced by its avant-gardes, but has rather confined his deepest engagements to individual poets whose own careers have fallen outside simplistic, categorical narratives of the development of modern Anglophone poetry.

Happily, such divisive approaches have been complicated and refuted in recent years. In

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<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays*, ed. David Jonathan Y. Badot (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 61.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 185.

<sup>9</sup> Notable exceptions include Romana Huk, Keith Tuma, and Charles Bernstein, all of whom have engaged in depth with poets associated with the British Poetry Revival.

broad terms, Jahan Ramazani's *Transnational Poetics*, Keith Tuma's *Fishing from Obstinate Isles*, Paul Giles's *Atlantic Republic*, and C.D. Blanton's recent *Companion to Contemporary British Poetry* have illustrated the rich vein of Anglo-American poetic exchange which flourished throughout the twentieth century beyond Davie's hearing. Within Ashbery studies, more nuanced narratives than those advanced by Ward and Perloff have begun to explore sensitively his debt to and influence upon English poetry. John Shoptaw has illustrated the depth and complexity of Ashbery's English lineage further, going so far as to call *The Orators* "perhaps the single most productive poem behind Ashbery's own poetry".<sup>10</sup> Both David Herd and Aidan Wasley have substantiated this connection in relation to *The Sea and the Mirror*, and the latter has been particularly valuable in delineating the effect of Auden's developing conception of national identity on his poetry.<sup>11</sup> Steve Clark, Tony Lopez, Ian Gregson and Helen Vendler have traced the influence of Ashbery on contemporary English poets, from John Ash to Mark Ford, though without situating such transmissions in a sufficiently broad context.<sup>12</sup> The most recent, relevant and substantial critical text in this vein is Ben Hickman's *John Ashbery and English Poetry*. This book does a great deal of valuable work in restoring "English" contexts to their central position in Ashbery's poetic development, complicating the picture of Ashbery as a distinctly "American" or "French" poet by examining the influence of the Metaphysical poets, John Clare, William Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot and Auden on his work. The chapters on Clare and Auden, in particular, establish significant and convincing connections between the poets. Yet Hickman follows many of the critics named above in neglecting to scrutinise sufficiently the boundaries of "Englishness" and "Americanness" as they occur (and, more often than not, are subverted) in Ashbery's work. Viewing nationality and national

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<sup>10</sup> John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 76.

<sup>11</sup> David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Aidan Wasley, *The Age of Auden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Ian Gregson, "The Influence of John Ashbery in Britain", *PN Review* 99, Vol. 21. No.1, Sept-Oct 1994; Helen Vendler, "The Circulation of Large Smallnesses", in *Something We Have That They Don't*, ed. Steve Clark and Mark Ford (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004); Steve Clark, "Uprooting the Rancid Stalk: Transformations of Romanticism in Ashbery and Ash", in *Romanticism and Postmodernism*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Tony Lopez, "The White Room in the New York Schoolhouse", in *The Salt Companion to Lee Harwood* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007).

literary traditions as stable categories leads many of those critics listed above to overlook the key questions regarding transnational exchange with which this thesis attempts to engage: What is Ashbery's conception of “Englishness”? How does it change during his career? How is it informed by broader Anglo-American cultural and political exchanges? How is it inflected by his personal relationships? How does it define, by opposition, his conception of “Americanness”? And, most importantly, what influence do these ideas of Englishness have on his poetic modes and critical writing?

Throughout this thesis I employ the terms “English” and “American” in relation to poets and their work, and such usage requires some contextualisation. The idea of “the nation state as an unproblematic location of definition and character” has for some time been acknowledged as inadequate as a discrete subject of study, and has been, for many critics, superseded by a transnational perspective which views the cultural products of nations from within broader historical and geographical contexts.<sup>13</sup> However, this development towards a transnational perspective hasn't, of course, precluded the formation by poets of an enduring, idiosyncratic sense of poetic tradition and practice informed by the set of material, ideological and aesthetic constructs which constitute nationality. Despite the vagueness and instability of its parameters, and its clear ideological dangers, nationality was, and remains, for many poets a significant determining context in their choice of and rationalisations for particular expressive modes. These factors have been too often neglected in discussions of twentieth century poetry, particularly in criticism with an Anglo-American dimension. As Huk has suggested, there have been “unspoken assumptions in post-modern poetics that its overall project does or should transcend such boundaries [of nationality]”, and this drive towards a post-national criticism “slights the site-specific inflection of cultural difference that national imaginaries silently conduct”, even in “seemingly seamless racial

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, “Introduction: What Is Transatlantic Literary Studies?”, in *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 3.

communities”.<sup>14</sup> Such elisions have been abundant in Anglo-American poetry and criticism “perhaps because shared assumptions of fundamental sameness preclude respect for differences”, assumptions which rather than encouraging routine mutual evaluation have resulted, ironically, in “even deeper contempt on either part for what is perceived as lack of sophistication in the other's work—whether it be described as being due to residual “traditionalism” or jejune naiveté”.<sup>15</sup> Such oversights and assumptions are common in studies of Ashbery's work, and as such this thesis is particularly attentive to the points at which national imaginaries make themselves felt in the works of these poets, as either pressure or resource.

This is not to suggest that the terms sustain a consistent meaning throughout this thesis. Rather, the “Englishness” referred to by Auden, Prince, Harwood and Ford is demonstrated to be distinct for each of them, according to individual sensibility and the difference of their particular historical moments; indeed, they each articulate multiple versions of the same concept throughout their careers. It is employed and discussed as an elective identification each poet made at some point in his career, rather than a label conferred through a weighing up of biographical facts. It is arguable, indeed, that for three of these poets “Englishness” is only one nationality among many which could be ascribed to them: Auden spent much of his life in America and obtained US citizenship, Prince was born in South Africa, Ford in Kenya. Such details remind that “Englishness” is an imaginative construct for these poets as much as it is for Ashbery. My goal is not to suggest a particular, standardised set of terms for engagement between Ashbery and English poets, but to highlight at particular moments each friendship's specificity and volatility. Ramizani provides a helpful observation when he states that

Not all poetries are transnational in the same way . . . they differ, for example, in how they configure the relations among their cross-cultural ingredients. What we might call disjunctive poetic transnationalisms . . . emphasize the intercultural discontinuities and conflicts between the materials they force together, while others—call them organic poetic

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<sup>14</sup> Romana Huk, “Introduction”, in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

transnationalisms—integrate these materials without playing up their unlikenesses.”<sup>16</sup>

These poets shuttle between “disjunctive” and “organic” poetic transnationalisms with disorientating regularity. Ashbery's own chronically changeable poetic identity renders any definitive identification with a particular national tradition absurd, and yet his attitude towards nationality is not one of disavowal (as it was, for a significant period, for Auden) so much as a determinedly inconsistent engagement with it as a concept. Ashbery's habitual seeking out of other traditions in England and France can be seen as both a means of protecting the complexity of his own poetic lineage, and as a way of foregrounding and exploring the rhetoricity of national identity. What these Anglo-American encounters represent, for Ashbery and the English poets I discuss, are performances of identity specifically valuable for the purpose of comparison; in their poems, criticism and correspondence, the poets “invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others” in order to elicit “mutual self-definition”.<sup>17</sup>

Ashbery's oeuvre is particularly suitable for study within a transatlantic context as it, in idiosyncratic, indirect ways, “explodes mononationalist conceptions of culture and pushes toward the transnational and perhaps even the global”.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it is appropriate not just for this cultivation of national and contextual multiplicity, but for its overt resistance to conceptions of transnational exchange under the dubious rubric of “influence”, that is, “a hierarchical form of connection . . . in which a dominant (prior) position exerts power and imposes uniformity on a subdued other”.<sup>19</sup> What Ashbery advances is a model of influence which is reciprocal, a dialogic process which equalises the statuses of its participants. This is a centrally important feature of his engagements with all poets, regardless of their location or age. At the same time as propounding and practising this doctrine, however, his poetry acknowledges pragmatically the endurance (and imaginative purchase) of hierarchical conceptions of influence, as demonstrated by his deep

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<sup>16</sup> Jahan Ramizani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ramizani, *A Transnational Poetics*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Manning and Taylor, *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, 3.

engagement with Harold Bloom's influential model as articulated in *The Anxiety of Influence*.<sup>20</sup> Bloom's reading of Ashbery placed the poet into a lineage which helped to establish his canonical status, and Ashbery was, despite his serious reservations about Bloom's approach, not “so deceived as to hanker / After that cool non-being of just a few minutes before”, as he put it in “The Other Tradition”.<sup>21</sup> The breadth of Ashbery's critical appeal, and his exceptional suitability as a subject for transnational critics, derives in part from his mediation between these two opposed forms of intertextual and interpersonal exchange. It's important to note that these models also function as figures for his relations to different influential temporalities: what might traditionally be thought of as the horizontal, coterie forms of exchange employed with the poets of the present, and the vertical, hierarchical exchange with the poets of the past. The balance and forms of representation of the poetry of the past and present are decisions which every poet has to establish, but Ashbery's approach is highly original: in short, he reverses the conventional methods of engagement with each model. At certain points in his career, he treats poets and poems of the past as though they were members of a present-tense coterie—as “brothers not ancestors”, as he puts it in “Young Man with Letter”—from whom he can borrow ideas and establish an idiosyncratic language and economy of exchange.<sup>22</sup> This is the impetus behind “The Suspended Life”, a parody of Frank O'Hara's coterie poetics, in which Ashbery name-drops “Julian” from Shelley's “Julian and Maddalo”, and “Grand Gallop”, which describes writing with the “gorgeous raw material” left around by Wyatt and Surrey. In the other direction, Ashbery treats his contemporaries as though they are established, prematurely textualised historical subjects, whose literary endurance is ensured by association with a particular tradition, and by whom he can himself then be “influenced” in important and explicit ways.

This combination of two separate spatial and temporal influential models is particularly important for framing Ashbery's conceptions of Anglo-American exchange. At certain points in his career, Ashbery has exhibited a tendency to associate each nationality with a particular sense of

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<sup>20</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 143-155.

<sup>21</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 492.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

“cultural time”: that is, in Robert Weisbuch's terms, “British lateness and American earliness”.<sup>23</sup> The four relationships with English poets explored here provide an account of American cultural time as Ashbery perceives it across six decades. It elucidates a series of significant transitions, from his conception of American “earliness” or prematurity, as articulated in his 1950s letters to F.T. Prince, to the culturally “mature” US of the mid-1960s evident in his interactions with Lee Harwood, to an acute registration of a developing sense of belatedness at the beginning of the 1990s, as formulated in his correspondence with Mark Ford. By this final point, Ashbery seems to associate late 20<sup>th</sup> century America with Britain at the turn of the previous century, a set of circumstances which in “The Decline of the West” leads the poet to identify, perhaps surprisingly, with Robert Browning.

At such moments, it seems as if Ashbery views the trajectory of his own career as wedded to the fortunes of the United States; it is perhaps revealing that, in a handwritten addition to a 1992 letter to Michael Schmidt, Ashbery writes: “Am I perhaps an idea whose time has come – and gone?”<sup>24</sup> The attempt to draw a direct causal relation between the military, economic and cultural ascendancy of the US in the postwar period and the trajectory of Ashbery's own career would, of course, be doomed to fail; and yet it is equally implausible to assert the absence of any correspondence between historical context and the composition and reception of Ashbery's poetry, as Mutlu Konuk Blasing has suggested: “Poetic creation partakes of the whole economy of empire building, and the poet cannot be holier than what is around him”.<sup>25</sup> Ashbery's poetry consistently risks, even facilitates sweeping historicist readings, but such contexts are invoked only inconsistently in this thesis, as they are registered by the poets themselves.

Ashbery's identity as a poet, in influential and national terms, is as multiple and various as any American poet of the twentieth century, and the story of his personal and literary relations with

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Weisbuch, “Cultural Time in England and America”, in *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Michael Schmidt, 17 February 1993. Ashbery Papers, Houghton Library Collection, Harvard University, AM-6, Box 25.

<sup>25</sup> Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O'Hara, Bishop, Ashbery and Merrill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 52.

contemporaneous English poets is a central part of that identity. This thesis pays closest attention to those of Ashbery's poems which illuminate the biographical contexts of his relationships to this group of English poets, rather than to those long works, such as "A Wave", "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror", "Fragment" and "The Skaters", for which he has been widely and justly acclaimed. Situating him in relation to his English contemporaries, he seems a very different poet to the one aligned with Stevens and Whitman, O'Hara and Koch, Pasternak and Pascal, Roussel and Reverdy, Bernstein and Andrews. Through Ashbery's responses to Auden, we can trace the complex development of his own Auden-esque poetics from its very beginning as a Harvard undergraduate, through important revisions of *The Orators* performed by *The Vermont Notebook*, to its elegiac apotheosis in *A Wave*. Through his engagement with F.T. Prince, we can further trace the development of Ashbery's conceptions of his relation to national context, and witness his most explicit early formulations of his vision of Anglo-American poetic relations. Through the assumptions and modifications of Ashbery we find in Lee Harwood, Ashbery's attitude to his role as an influential poet and creator of counter-canon can begin to be discerned. Through his reading of Mark Ford, we can see clearly Ashbery's deliberate transition into his diffuse, abundant later modes, and observe the ways in which he establishes reciprocal forms of exchange with younger poets. Through Ashbery's idiosyncratic reading of twentieth-century English poetry, we can understand the development of his conception of English and American senses of "tradition", and his own poetic identity in relation to its specific historical and national contexts.

The attention apportioned to Ashbery's works is at least equalled by that given to the English poets I read alongside him. This is an important feature to note. This study is not a conventional critical account of Ashbery's career; rather, it employs the poetic and critical models he has developed—particularly his related notions of "minority" and "other traditions"—and uses them as a way of re-reading and re-aligning several English poets who have been marginalised in dominant critical narratives of twentieth century poetry. If the narrative of English poetry the thesis presents is

new, the method of re-orientation is well-established, as C.D. Blanton has suggested: “each new attempt to map the terrain of British poetry returns compulsively not only to the question of American influence, rejecting or embracing it by turns, but also to those informing political categories through which cultural influence operates”.<sup>26</sup> This thesis admittedly does employ Ashbery to conduct a tentative re-mapping of contemporary English poetry, but it deviates, I hope, from Blanton's slightly dispiriting assertion by offering an account of reciprocal exchange rather than hierarchical influence, a process through which English poets are shown to be indebted to Americans yet demonstrably central to the development of American poetry in turn. In this way, I hope not to “convey the impression of one-way traffic, of British poets passively absorbing the influence of Americans”, a charge of which Peter Barry thought Eric Mottram guilty, but rather to stress the symbiotic nature of the relationships Ashbery has established with English poets.<sup>27</sup> The poets I attend to are ones whom Ashbery knew personally, whose work reflects his own engagement with the cultural triangle of London, Paris and New York, and who have, for the large part, yet to receive sufficient critical attention due to the lack of a coherent literary-historical context. Auden is the exception, of course, but I would nevertheless argue that his centrality to the development of both English and American poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been underplayed, in part because of the ambiguity surrounding the question of the national tradition to which he “belongs”. Re-asserting his importance to Ashbery and O'Hara in new terms, I hope to demonstrate how he continues to influence poetry being produced today, and to complicate the impression in recent surveys of English poetry, such as Keith Tuma's *Fishing By Obstinate Isles*, which assess him according to his less significant late output rather than his ground-breaking early work. Prince is perhaps the most neglected of all, being something of a “poet's poet's poet”, though thankfully this is likely to change with the publication of a collection of essays on the poet in 2015. Lee Harwood has been the subject

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<sup>26</sup> C.D. Blanton, “Transatlantic Currents”, in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, eds. Nigel Alderman, C.D. Blanton (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 143.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2006), 145.

of close critical attention—a collection of essays, *The Salt Companion to Lee Harwood*, was published in 2007—but, perhaps like Roy Fisher, he remains too isolated, his lineage and influence in both the US and Britain insufficiently explored. Mark Ford, being the youngest of the poets by some distance, has received little substantial critical attention, and his place in a broader picture of contemporary Anglophone poetry is marginal; indeed, David Wheatley's recently published *Contemporary British Poetry* mentions him only once. My hope is that situating him in an Ashberyian context will demonstrate the significance of his absorptions of and resistances to the American poet.

Ashbery's poetry and criticism supply a unifying context for these poets, in some instances through his dialogue with and elaborations upon their work in his own poems, and in others by his critical positioning of them as contemporaneous extensions of figures prominent in his decisive re-reading of poetry of the past in *Other Traditions*. The four English poets I discuss represent four different forms of engagement with him, in their roles as, respectively, primary influence, secondary mentor, contemporary, and pupil. What unifies them is that they all maintained relationships with the American poet which were mutually influential, and, crucially, both textual *and* personal. The thesis pays attention to both types of engagement, exploring how the biographical, social and historical circumstances of a poem's composition inflect and are represented by that poem. Utilising Ashbery's work, and the poet himself, as the connective element between them, what emerges is an account of the American poet's concerted attempt to establish an “other tradition” of English poetry which runs parallel to, and sometimes in contradiction with, existing critical narratives of the postwar period.

The definition of a particular group of poets necessarily operates through exclusion, and in this instance there are particularly obvious dangers in identifying a “tradition” constituted exclusively of white men under the label of “otherness”. That there are no women, or poets of colour, attended to in this thesis is reflective of the poets made available for discussion by my

biographical approach, a fact which itself reflects the predominant whiteness and maleness of Ashbery's significant transatlantic connections. This is not, of course, an unusual phenomenon: it has been widely noted that transnational literary studies' "interest in examples of mobility and circulation tends to privilege certain class, economic and racial groups".<sup>28</sup> This is certainly the case here, and as such it is worth considering the validity of the term "other traditions" when the poets attended to can only be described as "other" in limited terms. It is worth remembering that, of the poets addressed here, four were, at some point in their lives, involved in relationships with men, a fact which entailed significant forms of social and political marginalisation reflected in and subverted by their works. Yet Ashbery's use of "other" is steadfastly aesthetic in its inflection, descriptive of a particular literary-historical relation rather than any politically-marginalised subjectivity. There is a danger that his employment of the label, claiming the location of otherness and minority for these poets and himself, comes at the expense of occluding or pushing out of frame other "other" traditions, including more substantially, purposefully dissenting poetics (hence, it seems, the careful removal of the definite article from his Norton lectures). Yet within the localised field of his usage, the term seems defensible, and I will therefore retain it. It is worth keeping in mind that Ashbery's critical interventions mix playfulness and seriousness freely, and there is something knowingly absurd about his assessment of and claim to marginality from a position of, in strictly poetic terms, unassailable centrality; indeed, to paraphrase the opening of "The Invisible Avant-Garde", it is such an eloquent characterization of his relation to minority that no further comment seems necessary. Nor is this a situation particular to Ashbery: as Maggie Nelson suggests, such seeming contradictions can be found in virtually all of the first generation of New York School poets, who were "Harvard grads railing against the academy; bohemian poets with a taste for bourgeois pleasures; art-world insiders who represent an avant-garde; outsider poets who eventually win Pulitzer prizes; a group of openly gay men in the middle of a straight man's world, not to

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<sup>28</sup> Manning and Taylor, *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, 3.

mention an incredibly macho painting movement . . .”<sup>29</sup> The limitations of this thesis reflect this proclivity towards contradiction; the poets I attend to are “minor” in the specific, delimited sense Ashbery employs, when from an entirely different perspective—feminist or post-colonial, for example—they might seem emblematic of absolute cultural centrality. Above all, my own limited purview is responsible for the narrowness of the group of poets attended to. There are surely further theses to be written about Ashbery's relation to English poets founded on less constraining principles than the biographical ones I employ, which could, for example, attend to the significant debt Ashbery's work owes to Laura Riding, and his reception by Denise Riley and Veronica Forrest-Thomson, among others.<sup>30</sup>

Ashbery's salutary sense of caution and mistrust about the act of tradition-forming per se are reflected in the extremely subtle, and often only provisional, ways in which he connects these poets to one another. Such hesitancy also suggests something about the English poets themselves, and the relations they established to the broader poetic communities of their periods. “The fault” of F. T. Prince and Robert Fitzgerald, Ashbery has written, “is that they cannot be attached to any group; therefore, their excellence confuses people. Fitzgerald's voice is lost in America where the loyalty-oath mentality has infiltrated even poetry, where you cannot see the poet for the disciples. And Prince is simply alone in England”.<sup>31</sup> By refusing to acknowledge or affiliate themselves with the recognised movements and groupings of postwar English poetry, the poets I discuss here are united by nothing so much as their sense of aesthetic independence (and, sometimes, isolation); as such, it is fitting to gather them together in a way that doesn't seek to exaggerate their similarity or normalize them by association. There are obvious difficulties in attempting to identify a tradition of

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<sup>29</sup> Maggie Nelson, *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 93.

<sup>30</sup> For an example of how Ashbery and Riley might be read together, see David Herd, “Occasions for Solidarity: Ashbery, Riley and the Tradition of the New”, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 30 (2000), 234-49. Forrest-Thomson in particular was instrumental in mediating Ashbery's reception by poets associated with the Cambridge school, and as such her absence from this thesis, as well as that of other “Cambridge poets” like J.H. Prynne, Tom Raworth, John Wilkinson and Drew Milne, is particularly illustrative of the narrowness of its scope.

<sup>31</sup> John Ashbery, *Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004), 178.

poets united by a desire to resist commonality; and yet it is that very Ashbery paradox—a tradition of anti-traditional poets, who have a sense of their own exceptionality in common—which is one of the central themes of this thesis. Above all, it is the fact that Ashbery *himself* views these poets as constituting a tradition—and how this critical gesture reflects his own poetics—that is of importance. While acknowledging their difference, then, I will suggest that there is value in reading them together, as I want to propose that each of their poetries can be said to be reflective of, and sometimes composed in accordance with, a set of partially overlapping aesthetic principles whose terms Ashbery has been central in determining and clarifying. Thus the important continuities and differences between Auden, Prince, Harwood and Ford (as well as the earlier constituents of this other tradition, such as John Clare and Nicholas Moore) are highlighted, and critical trends which have hitherto sidelined these poets are interrogated.

Despite their shared exceptionality and isolation within their own historical periods, I will suggest that this is a genealogy of English poets which can be gathered and read together not *simply* as a consequence of historical or biographical overlaps—having Ashbery as a friend, writing about gay experience, being interested in Anglo-American relations, or subject to canonical marginalisation, and so on—but in light of significant aesthetic convergences. These convergences or continuities can, broadly speaking, be described by a phrase Ashbery employs in his lecture on Clare: these are poets “whose habit, one might even say whose strength, was imperfection”.<sup>32</sup> This re-framing of imperfection as strength is the idiosyncratic, decisive critical manoeuvre which brings these poets together. They are poets whose “richness stem[s] from a basic, functional ambiguity” regarding their aesthetic identities, who can be many things at once, contain a multitude of seemingly incompatible elements in a way which strikes Ashbery as more “realistic” than the apparently cohesive work of other poets. “Imperfect” is an adjective which can be applied, in varying degrees, to the work of all poets—there is, of course, no oeuvre deserving of its antithesis—

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<sup>32</sup> John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 8.

but the forms of imperfection these four English poets exhibit are often unusually pronounced, to the point that it is precisely their flawed state which seems to constitute their primary appeal to Ashbery. “The Bungalows” describes the particular functionality of the imperfect as a way of diversifying “the monotony of perfection”:

Your program worked out perfectly. You even avoided  
The monotony of perfection by leaving in certain flaws:  
A backward way of becoming, a forced handshake,  
An absent-minded smile, though in fact nothing was left to chance.<sup>33</sup>

The attractive “flaws” displayed by these poets are various—including formal inconsistency, severe limitation in subject or perspective, irregular grammar or syntax, apparent “artlessness” in construction, political disengagement—but what unites them is the sense that in their peculiar singularity the works of these poets deviate from and thereby challenge the established aesthetic values of their period. Their very inconsistency questions categories of majority and minority, and resists the idea of the poet as a producer of consistent texts representative of a particular, stable aesthetic. This is not by any means to suggest that these poets are iconoclasts. With the notable, complex exception of Auden, they are not, on the whole, highly politicized minor figures, or avant-gardists deliberately seeking to *épater la bourgeoisie*; rather, they seek independence from both the accepted aesthetic conventions of their period, and the “aggressively or complacently up-to-date” gestures of the avant-garde or counter-culture.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, a further form of salutary imperfection might be their only partial consciousness of the significance of such aesthetic deviations; that is, many of these poets are, in Ashbery's eyes, stranger, and more innovative, than they themselves think they are.

This possibility gives rise to the question of intent. In his review of *Other Traditions*, Charles Simic states that Ashbery's central critical preoccupation lies in “the degree to which originality is the product of a peculiar kind of inability”.<sup>35</sup> This is well-formulated, and is, in a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Ford, *A Driftwood Altar* (London: The Waywiser Press, 2005), 221.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Simic, “Tragicomic Soup”, in *New York Review of Books* 20, Vol.47, no. 19 (November 30, 2000).

sense, the inverse of Pound's suggestion that “‘originality’, when it is most actual, is often sheer lineage, is often a closeness of grain”.<sup>36</sup> It accurately conveys Ashbery's sense of literary history as a mixture of intention and chance, progress within a tradition and individual talent, deliberate revolution and sidelong development. Ashbery's own various style is equally indebted to both traditional and unexpected forms of advance—on the one hand, the highly sophisticated, scholarly syntheses of T.S. Eliot and Auden; and, on the other, “la gloire” of Raymond Roussel, the visionary asylum poems of John Clare, and the outsider art of Henry Darger. Simic's observation tells us that Ashbery's poetry constitutes in itself a “reading” of poetic history which legitimises and clarifies the previously inscrutable or isolated poetic innovations of the past by incorporating individual deviations into a tradition of idiosyncrasy, a tradition his own “rescuing” aesthetic preserves and perpetuates. His work, then, might be viewed as a point at which inability becomes tradition, where originality which resulted partly from incapability is capably re-enacted as homage. This unresolved interplay between “originality” and “inability” can be traced throughout Ashbery's reading and development of this other tradition of original, imperfect poets, who themselves shuttle between the deliberate and the unintended, the purposeful and the arbitrary, in their innovations.

As with “imperfection”, Ashbery's related conception of “minority” as a canonical category and aesthetic term is vague, shifting, provocative, specific to his historical moment, and instrumental for the promotion of his own poetry and critical reading of literary history. His use of it is inevitably informed by Clement Greenberg's conception of the “minor artist” (considering Greenberg's dominance in art-historical discourse in the early years of Ashbery's career), though with significant modifications. Greenberg viewed “minor” art as “agreeable” to the time of its production, a category definable by its failure to produce “the more or less prolonged resistance” major art provokes in its early reception.<sup>37</sup> Ashbery's version of the “minor” is more nuanced and equivocal, reflective of a period in which the avant-garde production of shock and critical resistance

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<sup>36</sup> Ezra Pound, “Irony, Laforgue and Some Satire”, *Poetry*, Vol.11, No.2 (November 1917), 93.

<sup>37</sup> Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 308.

had itself become an institutionalized gesture, as “The Invisible Avant-Garde” outlines. For him, the “minor” is more descriptive of art which has been, for various reasons, more-or-less entirely overlooked during the artist's lifetime, than that which was for a period successful and has since passed out of fashion. Yet the term is also employed as an aesthetic as well as an historical term, whose meaning, even in its most localised usages, is so vague and changeable that attention to it requires some defence. The label has a fraught history in critical writing about poetry. In an exasperated article discussing T.S. Eliot's “On Minor Poetry”, Christopher Ricks itemised many of the criticisms which can be levelled at the term, concluding:

In true literary criticism, there is a continuity, at once natural and imaginatively challenging, between the words which the artist was moved to choose and the word which the critic is moved to choose . . . Masculine is a valuable word for a critic of Dryden because Dryden found it a valuable word. Abrupt is an indispensable word for a critic of Hopkins because Hopkins found he could not dispense with it. Has any writer (real writer, not aspiring pedagogue) ever found necessary the words “major” or “minor”—except for satire or banter?<sup>38</sup>

Ashbery is that rare thing, a “real writer” for whom “major” and “minor” are valuable, necessary, indispensable parts of his poetic and critical vocabulary. It is its use-value to him as a functional mode of classification and self-identification that marks “minority” as a significant term for this thesis. I have no interest in defining the term in the abstract, but simply in following its various uses and applications in Ashbery's often vague and imprecise critical vernacular. There are some points of overlap with its usage by other critics, but for the large part I will follow Ashbery's hazy, changeable conception and exfoliation of the idea. His most explicit discussion of the term is typically elusive. In the opening pages of *Other Traditions*, Ashbery concedes that the question, “What is minor poetry?”, is “an invitation to frivolity”. It is an invitation he praises Auden for accepting, and at its beginning his discussion of the term follows Auden's purview: “One is sometimes tempted to think it nothing but a matter of academic fashion: a poet is major if, in the curriculum of the average college English department, there is a course devoted solely to the study

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<sup>38</sup> Christopher Ricks, “Notes Away from the Definition of Major and Minor”, *Ploughshares*, Vol.4, No.3, 1978, 115-121.

of his work, and a minor if there is not.” Swiftly digressing from any attempt at definition, Ashbery turns his attention to the question of his own reasons for being interested in such writers:

Is it inherent sympathy for the underdog, which one so often feels oneself to be when one embarks on the risky business of writing? Is it desire for one-upmanship, the urge to parade one’s esoteric discoveries before others? Or is there something inherently stimulating in the poetry called ‘minor,’ something it can do for us when major poetry can merely wring its hands?”<sup>39</sup>

It is this final question which is most pertinent: what is it that “minor” poets offer Ashbery? It is, of course, all of the above: his interest comes from a mixture of sympathy for the marginalised, the thrill of recovering an overlooked artist, suspicion of cultural consensus, and, perhaps most pertinently, the fact that they represent a usable resource. Garret Caples summarises the potential use-value of minority for Ashbery in helpfully straightforward terms: “To write major poetry, the poet perhaps *must* resist the major, to find fault with what, at a given time, is held to be major poetry and propose another way, in order to not simply repeat the past, in order to ‘make it new.’”<sup>40</sup> What Caples doesn’t address, and what this thesis hopes to illustrate, are the specifics of how that resistance is enacted, and how plausible alternative traditions are discovered and established. What this group of English poets do is throw vividly into the foreground the ways in which minor poetry functions as a resource for Ashbery. It is the very *incompleteness* of such work that stimulates him; the only partial fulfilment of such poetry’s aesthetic potential which serves as a spur for his own composition. As Ashbery has put it himself: they are poets “to whom poets turn when they cannot write, that is, [they] are a source of poetry”.<sup>41</sup>

The function of imperfection—or, to employ a related term, “imprecision”—for Ashbery’s own poetry is hinted at in a late essay, “Poetical Space”:

[*The Waste Land*] seems to me an example from among thousands I might have chosen from twentieth-century poetry of the kind of anti-descriptiveness forced to do the work of description that I have pointed out in modern painting. To me, the river scene as Eliot describes it is very hard to see. Lines like “The barges wash / Drifting logs” are strangely

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<sup>39</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Ed Parks, “Minor Poets, Major Works”, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/240622>. Accessed July 17, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 180.

out of focus; how indeed does a barge wash a log? . . . Yet Eliot's ungraceful rhythms do convey something, something perhaps more to the point for us today: the blotchy, out of focus scene, the river refusing to roll, the awkwardly laid-on oil, tar, and sweat add up to a picture of crisis that is mental, but just as surely takes in the visual world, transforming it as it does so into a blurred copy that is all the more meaningful for being imprecise and out of focus—accurate in its inaccuracy.

This is perhaps close to the poetical phenomenology that I was asked to address: a process of description and classification that succeeds in its twin tasks precisely by shirking them. The river miraculously caught in the Lady of Shalott's mirror is a wonder, but the semicoherent daubs laid down over Eliot's Thames are of more value to us, for they point a way in which our own inexpert and falsifying accounts of the truth can eventually ring true, describing and classifying all the more searchingly even as they seem to abdicate this task. "You too can be a phenomenologist," he seems to be saying, "if only you'll abandon the task, let it work through you, let the river carry you where it wants to rather than trying to immobilize it."<sup>42</sup>

This rich, revealing passage at once provides an account of Ashbery's conception of poet-reader relations, an *ars poetica*, and a model for his critical interventions in poetic history. Imprecision is a way of experiencing and describing the world which allows for the reader's participation in the creation of meaning; it allows for engagement with and development upon the poetry of the past by latching onto its mysterious ambiguities, its "semicoherent daubs"; and it is a means of reading and promoting marginal poetry by emphasising its utility for future practitioners. His seemingly nonchalant, idiosyncratic engagements with English poets conceal a precise and strategic promotion of a particular grouping and aesthetic in which his own work is demonstrably invested; we might view his own essays, reviews and blurbs as themselves "describing and classifying all the more searchingly even as they seem to abdicate this task". This predilection for imprecision in poetry and critical writing is significantly informed by Ashbery's career-long engagement with the work of Walter Pater. Pater's aestheticism appealed to Ashbery in part because of the authority it granted the individual to resist established ideas of value and significance inherited from earlier literary-historical narratives by placing emphasis on subjective response: the questions central to Pater's Preface to *The Renaissance* are illustrative: "What is this song or picture to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? And if so what degree of pleasure?"<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 210.

<sup>43</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Furthermore, Pater's distinctly "impressionistic" critical vocabulary enacted formally his ambivalence about the establishment of cultural hierarchies, themselves enabled by the kind of precise, diagnostic terminology employed by his contemporary, Matthew Arnold. As Adam Phillips has suggested, "*The Renaissance* was, implicitly, an exposure of Arnold's rhetoric of competent evaluation and willed cultural consensus, that in different terms Eliot was himself to inherit. Pater's impressionistic criticism threw the crucial issue of cultural consensus into disarray."<sup>44</sup> If Arnold employed the critical method of the "Touchstone" to reinforce an existing canon and to substantiate established criteria for aesthetic success, Pater employed the same model to legitimise an expansion of critical attention to incorporate the "vagrant genius", the "unclassified talent" and "many precious though imperfect products of art":

The old masters indeed are simpler; their characteristics are written larger, and are easier to read, than the analogues of them in the modern mind. But when once we have succeeded in defining for ourselves those characteristics, and the law of their combination, we have acquired a standard or measure which helps us to put in its right place many a vagrant genius, many an unclassified talent, many precious though imperfect products of art.<sup>45</sup>

This early formulation of a model for an "other tradition" is accompanied in *The Renaissance* by a suggestion of the functionality of imperfection for the spectator and the later artist, echoes of which can be found throughout Ashbery's critical writing:

[Michelangelo] secures that ideality of expression which in Greek sculpture depends on a delicate system of abstraction, and in early Italian sculpture on lowness of relief, by an incompleteness, which is surely not always undesigned, and which, as I think, no-one regrets, and trusts to the spectator to complete the half-emergent form.<sup>46</sup>

This Paterian idea of "the half-emergent form" which involves the spectator in meaning-creation, and which through an "incompleteness" affords the later artist a locus for speculation and elaboration, is central to the specific occasions of Ashbery's engagements with these English poets, and his attempts to perceive other traditions in English poetry beyond the ones bequeathed by earlier critics. It is also, as the pre-echo of "The Bungalows" in the above passage indicates, a way

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1986), xxix.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 49.

of reading Ashbery's own poetry.

It is apt that the thesis begins with a poet who only imperfectly fulfils the criteria for inclusion: W. H. Auden. In Ashbery's view, Auden at his best is neither "minor" nor "imperfect", and yet the deep engagement between the two poets was central in establishing the terms of Ashbery's involvement with questions of minority and Anglo-American relations throughout his career. Chapter One focusses quite deliberately on an instance of "imperfection" in Auden's oeuvre which Ashbery returns to habitually: *The Orators*, an exceptional work which Auden later claimed must have been written by a "madman". (This work might be said to be the doppelgänger of that other, vastly influential Auden poem, *The Sea and the Mirror*, which Ashbery praised in his undergraduate thesis for its pristine "hygienic self-consciousness".)<sup>47</sup> The chapter discusses the significance of Auden's revisions of *The Orators* for Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, and suggests that Auden's exclusion of coterie materials—particularly proper names—in those revisions offered Ashbery a means of figuring the social contexts from which his work emanated, and of differentiating himself from O'Hara's "rival ambience of cordiality". The later Auden's resistance to manifestations of imperfection—which can be seen in, among other instances, the revisions and excisions of *The Orators*, his objections to scatological content in the early manuscript of *Some Trees*, and his attitudes towards the "torture rooms of the living idiom" employed throughout the US—were significant for Ashbery, and afforded him a means to articulate his independence from his most significant English mentor in *The Vermont Notebook*. By illustrating Ashbery's resistance to Auden's "prudishness" regarding form and content, the American's celebration of imperfection in other English poets is thrown into relief. The issues which circulate throughout their friendship are shown to inform Ashbery's elegies for Auden, "If I Had My Way, Dear" and "At North Farm".

Chapter Two suggests that it is the "imperfection" Ashbery perceives in F.T. Prince's work that makes it compelling and viable as a resource. "His works are either over- or under-ambitious",

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<sup>47</sup> "The Poetic Medium of W.H. Auden". Ashbery Papers, Box 31.

Ashbery wrote in his notes towards an essay on Prince, and it is the incompletely-realised modernist gestures “striating” the traditional surfaces of Prince's poems which Ashbery was able to identify and elaborate on, in the fully-developed depictions of coterie in “The Grapevine”, and the generic instability of “Clepsydra”.<sup>48</sup> This latter poem, heavily influenced by Prince's “The Tears of a Muse in America”, is presented as a work in which Ashbery's mature thinking about intergenerational and reciprocal influence is first formulated. A complicating factor in establishing Ashbery's relation to Prince is his own set of critical responses to the English poet, which, counter-intuitively, praise those of Prince's poems which had little detectable influence upon Ashbery's work. This seeming contradiction demonstrates that Ashbery's critical and poetic works are not seamlessly continuous, but rather that the points of conflict between them are revealing.

Chapter Three examines Lee Harwood's imitations of Ashbery's work, arguing that the latter provided the former with a means of addressing gay experience through lyric encryption, and served as a point of entry into the community of the New York School. Their collaboration, “Train Poem”, is read as a text in which the transmission of Ashbery's poetic techniques is transcribed. Ashbery's desire to encourage his imitators to diverge from his example is first demonstrated here, in his attempt to “bounce off” or deflect Harwood towards his own English sources, which include Clare and Prince. In his remarkable blurb for Harwood's *The White Room*, Ashbery establishes a lineage between Clare's “artlessness” and Harwood's “careless wisdom”, in the first instance of the American poet assuming the role of mentor, former of counter-canon and advocate of a “pearly, soft-focus” poetic. The connections Ashbery makes between Clare and Harwood in this blurb, connections repeated and substantiated 30 years later in Ashbery's Charles Eliot Norton lecture on Clare, provide an illuminating example of the American poet's idiosyncratic forms of critical intervention.

Chapter Four analyses Ashbery's tracing of Nicholas Moore's complex, apolitical

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<sup>48</sup> Notes towards an essay on F. T. Prince, undated. Ashbery Papers, Box 32.

aestheticism in the work of Mark Ford, which itself displays an original imperfection through a studied circumscription of perspective. “Hardly a world-view, but a snapshot of the world with a startling and specific gravity”, Ashbery wrote of *Landlocked*, a remark which is shown to resonate throughout Ashbery's late period.<sup>49</sup> Ashbery's enthusiasm for Ford's work is shown to rekindle his engagement with Anglo-American contexts after a long period of disinterest, and the chapter suggests how Ashbery's selective affiliation with and enthusiasm for English poetry in the early 1990s is reflective of a broader, career-long tendency to strategically identify with Englishness as a mode of complicating his national and poetic identity. Ashbery's volume *And the Stars Were Shining*, for which he declared Ford to have been a “major inspiration”, is read as an example of Ashbery's desire to return himself to the cultural margins; and as a model of his engagements with younger poets, who through their deviations from his example have shown Ashbery “how to shake off [his] own influence”.

My approach is predominantly biographical. The study suggests that, in the words of Keith Tuma, “literary influence and literary movements are made in the modern world as much person by person, via direct contact and active encouragement, as they are made by the effective dissemination of some aesthetic or political platform in hortatory prose”.<sup>50</sup> Recognising this to be particularly true in the case of Ashbery's engagements with these four English poets, I have made extensive use of archival materials, including drafts, unpublished notes, and correspondence between the poets, to inform my readings of relevant poems. Without, I hope, reducing the work of these poets to a mere literary residue of concealed biographical experience, my intention is to demonstrate how the difficult problem of figuring biographical experience is tackled by these poets repeatedly and through a dazzling array of modes. In some instances, as in Lee Harwood's deliberate imitations of Ashbery and O'Hara, poetic gestures are inextricably bound to social contexts which his letters help to illuminate. In others, there is a chronic, playful transgression of

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<sup>49</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 236.

<sup>50</sup> Keith Tuma, *Fishing By Obstinate Isles* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 115.

genre between poems and correspondence which necessitates attention to both kinds of text. The use of various kinds of writing, published and unpublished, private and public, is defensible particularly for these explicitly literary, densely allusive poets. They are poets who think *with* the poetry of the past—employing its phrases, images, forms and resonances—regardless of the medium in which they are expressing themselves; one is as likely to encounter an allusion to John Clare in one of Ashbery's blurbs, an echo of Elizabeth Bishop in one of Mark Ford's letters, or a revealing contextual detail in one of F.T. Prince's diary entries, as to find comparable gestures in their poems. While there are some instances in which the poets discuss, in clear terms, the aesthetic principles which inform certain poems—the correspondence between Prince and Ashbery is particularly rich in such examples—they are for the large part brought to bear upon poems in unobtrusive and indirect ways.

The Anglo-American contexts described above are by no means exclusive; indeed, more often than not French literature is presented, however glancingly, as a mediating context for such exchanges. Auden's reading of Ashbery was influenced by his own dislike of Rimbaud; Prince's importance for Ashbery lay partly in his appropriations from Mallarmé; Harwood found in Ashbery a clarification of the work of later surrealists, including Tristan Tzara; while Mark Ford was introduced to Roussel through Ashbery's critical writing. This triangulation of context serves as a model for the flow of ideas and styles between poets and cultures during the twentieth century, valuable not just for the dissemination of innovations but as a means of guaranteeing the continuation of temporarily suppressed or forgotten styles. Paul Giles is particularly convincing in his account of the crucial role American poetry played in re-introducing English poets to traditions which had been marginalised by prevailing trends at home, and in mediating that re-introduction: “America operated as a point of triangulation, a means of refracting the disturbingly alien, foreign aspects of European culture in a more amenable and recognizable form.”<sup>51</sup> Ashbery seems to

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<sup>51</sup> Paul Giles, *Atlantic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 284-5.

anticipate the imbrication of these national contexts in a letter to Fairfield Porter, written during his early days in Paris, which in its playful confession of awkwardness and failure in social performance, conveys his sense that it is only through imperfect imitation, through the inability to comprehensively convey exactly what is intended, that strange and original things are created: “I have taken to combing my hair straight back in a big sweep, a la française, but all these things tend to make me look English, an impression that is not effaced by my accent in speaking French.”<sup>52</sup> The “imperfect”, then, is a model of cultural flow as much as a principle of composition, as “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” tells us:

This always  
Happens, as in the game where  
A whispered phrase passed around the room  
Ends up as something completely different.  
It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike  
What the artist intended.<sup>53</sup>

The phrase “trying to have it both ways”, which gives this thesis its title, is a little double-edged, as Ashbery's original usage of it was.<sup>54</sup> The connotations of indulgence—of having one's cake and eating it—are intended to reflect Ashbery's inconsistent, occasionally self-interested engagement with English poetry. His “English” strain has been often a strategic identification, made when it best suited his purposes, and equally it has been on occasion rejected in quite general terms. Yet the more important sense, I hope, is that of mutuality. Ashbery is rare among American poets of his generation in providing a decisive re-reading of parts of English poetic history, and engaging with contemporaneous English poets in demonstrably and mutually productive ways. His contact with English poets has had a significant and lasting effect on the poetry that has been written here in the past half-century, and influenced in clearly definable ways the poetry he has written. This thesis

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<sup>52</sup> Letter from John Ashbery to Fairfield Porter, undated. Ashbery Papers, Box 16.

<sup>53</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 485.

<sup>54</sup> It is used in an introduction to a reading given by Robert Creeley and Charles Tomlinson, commenting on the Anglo-American themes of the latter's poem “Autumn”: “The paradox of a memorial not to be hoarded seems very American to me; we Americans are constantly, for better or worse, remembering and squandering memory at the same time, trying to have it both ways”. Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 242. I provide a full reading of this passage in Chapter Three.

attempts to show some of the ways in which that reciprocal influence has been enacted.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “With mixed feelings”: Ashbery and W.H. Auden

In his *Paris Review* interview, conducted in 1983, Ashbery remarked: “It’s odd to be asked today what I saw in Auden. Forty years ago when I first began to read modern poetry no one would have asked—he was *the* modern poet.”<sup>1</sup> The comment is revealing, both as a reflection of dominant critical narratives of Ashbery’s poetry which were developing at the time, and the trajectory of Auden’s posthumous reputation. Since his work began to generate extensive critical attention in the 1970s, Ashbery has asserted that the influence of Auden upon his poetry has been neglected. The main culprit for this oversight, in Ashbery’s eyes, is Harold Bloom, who, by situating Ashbery in the lineage of the “American sublime”—stretching from Emerson through Whitman to Stevens—“overemphasised the influence of Wallace Stevens” at the expense of Auden, thereby relegating the English poet to the position of “benevolent Uncle” in Bloom’s familial arrangement.<sup>2</sup> The responsibility should be evenly distributed, however: few of the other significant critical accounts of Ashbery’s significance—as a distinctively American poet in the tradition of Whitman and Stevens, an eccentric importer of French surrealist techniques, or an avant-garde forerunner of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets—have allowed for the presence of Auden as a central influence. Such formulations of Ashbery’s identity and position within literary history are not just reflective of the interests or limitations of particular critical models, but of a more general depletion of Auden’s own reputation as a poet; a decline which can be attributed to the direction Auden’s poetry took after his arrival in America in 1939.

Auden’s position on the fringes of histories of twentieth century poetry is partly a consequence of a problem of categorization—that is, the question of how to define his nationality. This seems never to have been properly resolved. As Tony Sharpe has noted, Auden’s “abandonment” of England in 1939 and later assumption of American citizenship rendered any

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<sup>1</sup> Peter A. Stitt, “The Art of Poetry No. 33: John Ashbery,” *The Paris Review*, Winter 1983, No. 90.  
<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery> Accessed June 20, 2015

<sup>2</sup> “Interview with John Ashbery”, *City Limits*, November 20-27, 1986.

identification of him as an English poet problematic, while American literary historians and anthologists seem equally happy to exclude him from accounts of postwar American poetry.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the transatlantic perspective which lies at the heart of some of his most interesting poetry—what Nicholas Jenkins has called his “new kind of hybrid ‘mid-Atlantic’ style”—has had a damaging effect upon his posthumous reputation.<sup>4</sup> The British turn from Auden has been described as resulting from a shift in postwar aesthetic tastes, as demonstrated by the admonition which greeted Auden's work from the 1950s onwards, and revisionary accounts of his early work by Leavisite critics: “Postwar Britain was irritable, exhausted and lacking in self-confidence, and nowhere was this bad-temper and uncertainty more apparent than in re-assessments of Auden's work”.<sup>5</sup> Across the Atlantic, Auden's reputation was arguably damaged, at least among many of the avant-garde poets who had idolized his early work, by the increasing conservatism of his poetic and cultural position. From the 1940s onwards, he was seen as an important adjudicator and conferrer of value in American poetry, not least through his role as judge of the Yale Younger Poets competition, but one whose tastes and, more importantly, own poetry, had lapsed into domesticism and formality. This perceived decline in Auden's career began relatively early: as Aidan Wasley notes, his importance for writers such as Jarrell, Bishop and Lowell was already on the wane by the time he arrived in New York.<sup>6</sup> By the 1950s, the young poets of the New York School struggled to match the poet they venerated—the radical, formally experimental early Auden, memorialised alongside Picasso and Genet by Frank O'Hara in “Memorial Day 1950”, and by Kenneth Koch in “Fresh Air”—with the increasingly conservative figure they encountered in the flesh. While in many of their pronouncements about him the New York School seemed to continue to hold Auden in high regard—O'Hara said that it was a “privilege to be alive” at the same time as him, while Koch

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<sup>3</sup> In various anthologies of British poetry, Auden “is excluded for being an expatriate . . . unfortunately for Auden the official keepers of American poetry have been happy enough without him” Ian Sansom, “Auden and Influence”, in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 229.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Jenkins, “Auden in America”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Auden*, 43-44.

<sup>5</sup> Sansom, “Auden and Influence”, 231.

<sup>6</sup> Aidan Wasley, *The Age of Auden*, xiv.

praised his “great poetic amusement park, a park of poetic forms to try out”<sup>7</sup>—there were expressions of dissatisfaction with his late work. James Schuyler's assessment of Auden's *The Old Man's Road* can be viewed as representative of a more general view of the English poet's development, expressing particular distaste for the pomposity of his “self-exile” and his penchant for revising the earlier works the New York School valued highest:

I read some of it and dropped it with a little whinny of disgust. He really is a pig. Well, now let's see. First, he wrote the poems at the end ... of his self-exile in 'Amedica'. He has the chair of poetry at Oxford, his bally old university ... Well, he has always been envious of Eliot, and if *The Old Man's Road* is no 4 *Quartets* it may be, in a nasty sort of way, his *Ash Wednesday* (why should the aged beagle stretch its legs, he yawned, scratching himself with his singing bone) ... The poems are probably also the expression of a periodic self-disgust (another instance is the kind of mutilation that got into his *Collected Poems*: putting camp titles on serious poems; tearing apart *The Orators*; ripping choruses out of plays he has written with Isherwood ...) Now, you like his early work. Isherwood had a great deal to do with it: he criticised his poems, cut them to pieces and so on. It's all in *Lions & Shadows*. But as the boy grew older, there wasn't anybody bright enough to keep up with him ... And he has little faculty for self-criticism (which is a quality – if it is worth anything – one might expect a poet, an artist, to develop rather than possess innately).<sup>8</sup>

Though articulated in less forceful terms, Ashbery has been candid about his view of Auden's development after arriving in the USA in 1939:

I cannot agree, though, with the current view that his late work is equal to if not better than the early stuff. Except for “The Sea and the Mirror” there is little that enchants me in the poetry he wrote after coming to America. There are felicities, of course, but on the whole it's *too* chatty and too self-congratulatory at not being “poetry with a capital P,” as he put it.<sup>9</sup>

This turn towards triviality, domesticity and conservatism in poetic, religious and cultural perspective has resulted in permanent impairment of Auden's reputation, obscuring the radicalism of his early poetry which animated a whole generation of American poets. His continuing legacy among a divergent tradition of American poets, which has its origins in the formal work of James Merrill and Richard Wilbur, means that his significant contribution to the genesis of the New York School has been neglected, so that it is possible for Keith Tuma to discuss Auden purely in terms of

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Koch, *The Art of Poetry: Poems, Parodies, Interviews, Essays and Other Work* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 193.

<sup>8</sup> *Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler, 1951-91*, ed. William Corbett (New York: Turtle Point Press, 2004), 74.

<sup>9</sup> Stitt, “The Art of Poetry”.

his “neo-Augustanism”.<sup>10</sup>

There have been significant recent attempts to resist and redress this oversight. Wasley, Andrew Epstein and Ben Hickman have substantiated earlier, more gestural work by Marjorie Perloff and Geoff Ward, by tracing the stylistic and conceptual debts Ashbery in particular owes to Auden. However, these critics have been understandably limited by the obligation to emphasise the continuities between the two poets, and what has been elided as a consequence is an account of the development of their relationship which attends as much to its complexities—the significant antagonisms and points of difference between the two poets—as the substantial areas of agreement. Furthermore, none of them has attended in any detail to the central role Anglo-American contexts—the two poets' radically different conceptions of “Englishness” and “Americanness”—informed the development of this relationship. In this chapter I hope to provide a part of that account.

The story of these two poets' association is one of the best-known in 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry. Auden was the first “modern” poet Ashbery read, having been given some of his work as a teenager. At Harvard, he wrote poetry with a strongly Auden-esque inflection, and two substantial pieces of critical prose about the English poet: his undergraduate thesis, “The Poetic Medium of W.H. Auden”, and a brief essay for F.O. Matthieson's class on anthologies.<sup>11</sup> It was also at Harvard that the two poets first met and became friends. Famously, in 1956 Auden awarded the Yale Younger Poets Award to Ashbery after rejecting all the other entries and personally soliciting submissions from Ashbery and O'Hara. His introduction to *Some Trees*, to which I'll return later, is notoriously ambivalent about the young poet's work. Nevertheless, Auden's influence on Ashbery's mature poetry, from *Some Trees* onwards, is all-pervasive; he is perhaps the most clearly detectable and enduring influence upon Ashbery's work through all of its distinct periods. It's worth paying some cursory attention to two of Ashbery's best-known poems to illustrate Auden's overall centrality:

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<sup>10</sup> Tuma, *Fishing By Obstinate Isles*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Among the most significant poems which came from this period are “The Painter”, an explicitly Auden-esque sestina on the subject of the relationship between an artist, his medium and his audience, and “Illustration”. The essay is mainly of interest for Matthieson's marginal comments; he states that Ashbery does not “attend to what makes Auden an English or American poet”.

“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” and “Paradoxes and Oxymorons”.

“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” can be characterised in an important sense as a massive elaboration upon Auden's ekphrastic poem “Musée des Beaux Arts”, which Ashbery has stated several times to be one of the few examples of ekphrastic poetry he admires, and about which he writes approvingly in his undergraduate thesis. The similarities between the poems are both structural and procedural, and are signalled by extensive allusions in Ashbery's work. The central element of Auden's poem is an interrogation and dramatization of the trope of “turning away” he finds in the work of “the Old Masters”, using several of Breughel's paintings metonymically to create a poem which is about—yet independent of—the artworks which inspired it. Its ekphrastic mode is therefore a slant one, a circulation of images rather than a conventional descriptive response; the poem itself engages with not a single image but a compound of images which exists only within the idiosyncratic perspective of the poem. Its diction, pared back and ironic, is Auden at his most poised:

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along<sup>12</sup>

As John Fuller notes, there is an important ambiguity in the opening adverb, “about”; it declares both the poem's subject—it is *about* suffering—and the poem's formal procedure: it turns *about* on itself, circulating both its perspective and its syntax.<sup>13</sup> The opening line enacts precisely what the poem later describes: as the characters of the Old Masters' paintings look in the “wrong” direction—away from suffering—the opening line of Auden's poem is, in syntactical terms, arranged with the words in the “wrong” order. Structured more conventionally, the line would read: “The Old Masters were never wrong about suffering”. But the order of the sentence has changed because the forms of (in)attention the poem describes are similarly misdirected. The subject of the sentence—the Old Masters—is displaced from its rightful position at the forefront of the sentence

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<sup>12</sup> W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 179.

<sup>13</sup> John Fuller, *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 266.

by the formal declaration of the adverb. Through this single syntactical gesture, Auden implicates himself in a lineage of artists who have not looked directly at the human catastrophe which is occurring while they go about their daily business; in Douglas Mao's phrase, "the poem invites a formal replication of the inattention it decries".<sup>14</sup> As many commentators have noted, this is Auden's simultaneous condemnation and confession of complicity in turning "away / quite leisurely from the disaster" facing Europe in the months leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

Ashbery's poem resembles Auden's in its shifting perspectives and minutely detailed forms of self-description. Where Auden's poem opens with an adverb describing the poem's formal processes in terms of "turning", Ashbery's opens with one connoting both imitation and simultaneity:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand  
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer  
And swerving easily away, as though to protect  
What it advertises.<sup>15</sup>

Like Auden, Ashbery creates an intensely absorbing poem whose purpose is to re-direct the reader's attention away from itself towards the context of its composition, and by extension towards the various contexts of the reader's own life: to "elbow the reader out of themselves, and camouflage him into the memory of his intentions when he began to read the poem".<sup>16</sup> In an extreme version of Auden's own beginning, it opens with an adverb which has displaced a more conventional sentence opening; Ashbery's "as" leads us to expect a resolution, but provides none. What is being done in the style of Parmigianino, or occurred at the same time as Parmigianino painted, is left unanswered. Allusions to "Musée des Beaux Arts" abound throughout, highlighting the connections between the two poems. Where Auden's poem describes how "everything turns away / Quite leisurely", Ashbery provides an account of "swerving easily away"; where Auden's poem notates someone "just walking dully along", Ashbery's "attention / Turns dully away"; Auden's "expensive, delicate ship"

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas Mao, "Musée des Beaux Arts", in *Encyclopaedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Eric L. Haralson (New York: Routledge, 2012), 43.

<sup>15</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 474.

<sup>16</sup> John Perrault, *Camouflage*, introduction by John Ashbery (New York: A LINES book, 1966).

becomes Ashbery's "tiny, self-important ship". What is important for this chapter, and will be returned to at length later in the thesis, is the striking similarity between Auden's conception of the artist's relationship to society in "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Ashbery's articulation of that problem in "Self-Portrait". The two poems share a commitment to the oblique registration of historical events, a foregrounding of an object which diverts the attention of the observer towards context, the shaping forces which are always just out of view of the poem's perspective.

The question of restoring a reader to "now"—of bringing a reader "closer to the world in which they live", as Ashbery put it in his thesis—even if that consists only of a heightened awareness of bodily presence, is equally central to "Paradoxes and Oxymorons". This brief, "very plain" poem represents with a revealing mixture of fondness and resistance, seriousness and flippancy, the debt Ashbery owes to Auden's Buber-inflected conception of the "You" to whom a poem is addressed. It is, like many of Ashbery's poems, a love lyric, and the "you" it addresses is intended as both a specific, continuous individual and a generalised, all-purpose "thou", a Whitmanite, non-exclusive communal personage which the reader can access and assume through the poem.<sup>17</sup>

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.  
Look at it talking to you. You look out a window  
Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.  
You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.

The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.  
What's a plain level? It is that and other things,  
Bringing a system of them into play. Play?  
Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be

A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,  
As in the division of grace these long August days  
Without proof. Open-ended.<sup>18</sup>

This negotiation between the specific and the general as a process of "play" is mediated by Auden's

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<sup>17</sup> Bonnie Costello and John Emil Vincent, among many other critics, have provided full readings of Ashbery's conception of the second-person pronoun. See Bonnie Costello, "John Ashbery and the idea of the reader," *Contemporary Literature* 23, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 493-514; and John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 698.

example. “You”, a late lyric, exhibits its own consciousness of the “open-ended” flexibility of the pronoun, and in its ambivalent opening anticipates Ashbery's poem in its conception of “sacred play”:

Really, must you,  
Over-familiar  
Dense companion,  
Be there always?  
The bond between us  
Is chimerical surely:  
Yet I cannot break it.

Must I, born for  
Sacred play,  
Turn base mechanic  
So you may worship  
Your secular bread,  
With no thought  
Of the value of time?<sup>19</sup>

The questions of address, audience and compositional context these poems explore are the focus of this chapter. Specifically, I will focus on the localised problem of how both poets represent artistic communities in their work, in the process articulating several points of agreement and conflict between them. In the first part, I will demonstrate how Auden's work can be employed to illuminate two divergent forms of coterie poetry which descended from his early output: Frank O'Hara's poetry of proper names, and Ashbery's poetry of objects. In the second part, I will address the ways in which Auden's *The Orators* is transfigured in Ashbery's work, and suggest that the American's much-noted appropriation of his mentor's cataloguing techniques has multiple meanings, both negative and positive, which have yet to be fully explored. Reading both poets in the context of their conceptions of their respective national and poetic cultures, I will suggest that *The Vermont Notebook* represents a decisive rebuke to the later Auden, who saw his adopted homeland as, in Ashbery's words, “a barbarous wasteland”. In the third part, I will read Ashbery's unpublished elegy for Auden, “If I Had My Way, Dear”, then provide a revisionary reading of “At North Farm”,

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<sup>19</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 722-3.

framing it as an oblique elegy for the poet who Ashbery viewed as “chronologically the first and therefore the most important influence” on his work.<sup>20</sup>

### **I. “a rival ambience of cordiality”: Representations of Coterie**

Auden was, for a significant period, a member of a coterie which would cast a long shadow over mid-to-late twentieth century poetry. The central, titular member of what became known as the “Auden group”, during the 1920s and 1930s he found himself surrounded by a group of writers—including Edward Upward, Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day-Lewis and Stephen Spender, many of them compounded under the name of “McSpaunday”—whose community was unified by, among other factors, experience of public school, an Oxbridge education, the mythology of Mortmere, and a shared reticence in their articulations of disparate forms of gay experience.<sup>21</sup> These shared experiences and interests led to the formation of a group whose creative output was often reflective of the insularity of that group; characteristic properties shared by the texts these writers produced include in-jokes, coded allusions, name-dropping and the use of other kinds of recondite material. Auden's own position within and figurations of this artistic community, and his eventual development beyond it, has received a significant amount of critical attention worth attending to.

Richard Bozorth has written most extensively about Auden's conflicted relationship with coterie. He views the gestures of name-dropping or coded allusion in various “Auden group” texts,

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<sup>20</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> These poets occupied a marginal position in society in multiple senses. As Richard Bozorth suggests, the laws governing sexuality and expression at the time meant that they had to practise elaborate forms of self-censorship in order to evade charges of obscenity. They were involved in radical politics and interested in advances in psychoanalysis. Many of them also spent time in inter-war Germany, where in the Weimar republic they found a place of greater permission for the free performance of sexuality. Stylistically, they were at the very forefront of developments in English poetry, a position marginal perhaps only in a salutary sense. Most importantly, they created texts which grew out of and reinforced the bonds of coterie; mutually referential, crammed with in-jokes, code-names, and recondite information, these texts served in many ways to divide their audiences between those unaware of the contexts which gave rise to much of their content, and those “in the know”. However, the period in which Auden can be described as writing out of and for a coterie is, as Edward Mendelson has demonstrated, fairly brief; his developing sense of the social position of the poet in the 1930s, and his potential role as a public poet, soon overtook the pleasures and intimacies of operating within a relatively stable, self-involved community. This is clearly reflected in the transition from the difficult early lyrics of *Poems* and the dazzling, cryptic performance of *The Orators*, towards the more public-orientated works of *Paid on Both Sides*.

including Stephen Spender's *The Temple* and Christopher Isherwood's *Lions and Shadows*, as emanations from specific social and historical contexts, complete knowledge of which would have been limited to a select group of close friends and initiates. The apparent discreetness or reticence of such texts—of which Auden's own notoriously challenging early works are presented as a prime example—is depicted as a response to governmental censorship of works deemed “pornographic” according to the law at the time. The textual instability of Auden's early poems, “produced within and received by a limited, coterie readership”, is shown to transform “unspeakability from a condition of repression into a weapon against the uninitiated reader”.<sup>22</sup> Bozorth's conception of the function of coterie gestures in such works is problematic; while he is right to emphasise the degree to which the “semantic weirdness” of many of these works is intended to dramatize and critique the conditions of censorship under which these writers worked, he pays insufficient attention to the multiple, distinct audiences addressed beyond that of the “Auden group”, the potential afterlives of such works beyond the coterie, and the forms of response beyond a sense of exclusion such gestures might provoke in contemporaneous or subsequent non-coterie readers. By asserting that the social “codes” embedded in *The Orators* “divide the poem's audience”, telling “the uninitiated they are just that”, Bozorth makes the works of the Auden group seem more deliberately exclusive, more explicitly hostile, than seems correct.<sup>23</sup> Though other critics, including Edward Mendelson, have also suggested that Auden was exploring “a language that gathers the group within its borders and excludes those outside”, this is only one of the many intentions and effects of Auden's work in his early period.<sup>24</sup> Many of these poems were, even in their early, small-circulation printings, intended to be read by (or at least fleetingly conscious of and attentive to) a larger audience than a coterie. *The Orators* declares as much in its oblique fashion:

Crofter, lender of hay, working in sweat and weathers, tin-streamer, heckler, blow-room major, we are within a vein's distance of your prisoned blood. Stranger who cannot read our

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Bozorth, *Auden's Games of Knowledge: Poetry and the Meanings of Homosexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 32, 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 93.

letters, you are remembered.<sup>25</sup>

This remembrance is both a satirical rebuke to the letter-reading censor *and* a sincere message to the non-coterie reader; it is not, at the very least, a definitively exclusionary statement. As Brian Reed has written of the New York School, “the clique was a possible but by no means the only intended audience”.<sup>26</sup> The important questions such instances raise about the early Auden's conception of his poetry's audience are best approached through analysis of Auden's two central, opposed modes of reflecting the social circumstances of a poem's composition: explicit address and reference to historical individuals identified by the use of their proper names, and the exclusion of such localising features in favour of alternative, less specific identifiers of individuals. His experiments with both modes in different versions of *The Orators* result in the divergent approaches towards representations of coterie taken by Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery.

In its original printed form, the first of the six odes which conclude *The Orators* included multiple references to “Christopher” and “Stephen”—referring, of course, to Isherwood and Spender—as well as including a certain amount of information the significance of which would only be understood by a small group of Auden's friends:

And Stephen signalled from the sand dunes like a wooden madman  
“Destroy this temple”.

It did fall. The quick hare died to the hounds' hot breathing,  
The Jewess fled Southwards;  
The drunken Scotsman, regarding the moon's hedge-rising,  
Shook and saluted:  
And in cold Europe, in the middle of Autumn destruction,  
Christopher stood, his face grown lined with wincing  
In front of ignorance—“Tell the English”, he shivered,  
“Man is a spirit”.<sup>27</sup>

Others of the book's concluding odes features the names of several Mortmere characters, one is dedicated to the son of Rex Warner, while the airman's Uncle was based on Isherwood's own Uncle Henry. It is clear that though the proper names are included in a larger cast of fictional characters

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<sup>25</sup> W.H. Auden, *The Orators* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 21.

<sup>26</sup> Brian M. Reed, *Hart Crane: After His Lights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 196.

<sup>27</sup> Auden, *The English Auden*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1977), 95.

(and can as such be viewed legitimately as fictional entities), these are nevertheless instances in which Auden can be said to be writing with a “favoured few” in mind; in which a hierarchy of knowledge is clearly established in the poem's readership. As numerous commentators have noted, the poem exhibits many traits of a coterie product. The “world” of the poem is “Mortmere-ish” to the point that David Garrett Izzo classifies it as “a new Mortmere story written with a more conscious understanding of the Isherwood-Auden schema that the Isherwood-Upward originals did not have”.<sup>28</sup> Mendelson views elements of the poem as “an inside joke” for Isherwood's benefit, but more broadly as “a transcript of the rhetorics that make a group coalesce and decay”.<sup>29</sup> This second assessment seems most accurate: what is important about *The Orators* is its refusal to limit such games of exclusion to those beyond a specific coterie, that the poem's recondite references play “games of exclusion” against the Auden group themselves. The multiple local references to the town of Helensburgh, for example, can hardly be said to have the unification or defence of a coterie as their purpose. Rather, as Stan Smith puts it, “such localised and specific data are central to *The Orators'* postmodern assault on the universalist pretensions of modernism”, specifically the Eliot of *The Waste Land*.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the effects of “contextual loss” experienced by non-coterie readers of Auden's work are just as likely to have been felt by even his closest “initiates”.

As important as Auden's initial employment of coterie gestures (name-dropping, direct address to specific individuals), however, is their subsequent retraction in later editions of the poem. Auden later modified the first ode in several ways, most significantly by changing “Christopher” and “Stephen” to “Maverick” and “Pretzel”.<sup>31</sup> This is a slight but important gesture. While these alternative monikers might still represent encrypted, private references to Isherwood and Spender, there is a significant difference between the category of name “Maverick” and “Pretzel” represent,

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<sup>28</sup> David Garrett Izzo, *Christopher Isherwood: His Gang, His Era, and the Legacy of the Truly Strong Man* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 100.

<sup>29</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 93.

<sup>30</sup> Stan Smith, “Remembering Bryden's Bill: Modernism from Eliot to Auden”, in *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London: Longman, 1997), 62.

<sup>31</sup> Auden, *The Orators*, 78-9.

and the simple, common proper names Auden had previously employed. Through their cartoonish, exaggerated qualities, the cognomens “Maverick” and “Pretzel” are intended to “give the impression of somebody that someone might know, not a specific person”, as Ashbery has put it.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, they are closer to Stevens's “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay”, or Ashbery's “Penny Parker”, than they are to O'Hara's “Grace”, “Norman” or “Vincent”. Auden's correction seems not—as Bozorth interprets it—a deepening of the encrypted gesture the inclusion of Christopher and Stephen already represents, but rather a deliberate dilution of a prior coterie poetics in which proper names of a “favoured few” are included without contextual substantiation. In his study of Auden's revisions, *The Making of the Auden Canon*, Joseph Warren Beach summarizes the effects of such “discreet” changes well: “Those in the know will recognize the code names, while the uninitiated reader will be amused by the colourful sobriquets”.<sup>33</sup>

This move away from the inclusion of proper names can be seen even more forcefully in other instances. The most significant is the opening stanza of the same ode. In the initial 1932 version, it reads:

Watching in three planes from a room overlooking the courtyard  
 That year decaying,  
 Stub-end of year that smoulders to ash of winter,  
 The last day dropping;  
 Lo, a dream met me in middle night, I saw in a vision  
 Life pass as a gull, as a spy, as a dog-hated dustman:  
 Heard a voice saying—“Wystan, Steven, Christopher, all of you,  
 Read of your losses”.<sup>34</sup>

This explicit address to a particular group of friends was modified, when Auden began gathering poems for an early *Collected* in 1944, to: “Subjects, objects, all of you”. This minor alteration represents a crucial point at which Auden's influence upon Ashbery and O'Hara diverges. As Shaw has shown, for O'Hara, Auden's initial inclusion of the names offered a further example of the kinds of communal figurations he had found in Apollinaire and Pierre Albert-Birot. Seeing in the Auden

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<sup>32</sup> “Interview with John Ashbery”, *City Limits*, November 20-27, 1986.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, *The Making of the Auden Canon* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1957), 37.

<sup>34</sup> *The English Auden*, 94.

group a partial model for the intimate community of poets and artists developing in 1950s New York, O'Hara mimicked their name-dropping tendencies in an attempt to replicate some of their “alternative kinship structures” and appropriate some of their performative, self-canonising powers.<sup>35</sup> As both Koch and Schuyler suggested, for many poets his substitution of “abstractions” for “real persons” was a betrayal of the early work, and a signal of Auden's increasing conservatism in his expressive modes. For Ashbery, however, Auden's correction was a salutary one, since in his view the exclusion of actual proper names represented a welcoming gesture to those readers who might not know who Isherwood and Spender were, and would consequently have felt “left out”. As David Herd has suggested, Ashbery generally prefers “the inclusive implications of the pronoun to the exclusive implications of the name”.<sup>36</sup> Through this equalizing gesture, Auden offered a model for a poetry which reduced exclusionary details like proper names, but nevertheless retained in important ways an oblique sense of fidelity to its compositional contexts. The distancing gesture is one which appealed strongly to Ashbery, whose early poetry constantly negotiates between a desire to represent the artistic communities of which he was part, and a need to establish a position of independence from those communities in order to speak to a broader, Auden-esque “You”.

Beyond the modification of proper names in itself, Auden's decision to replace a proper name with the word “object” in his revision of the ode is of particular significance for Ashbery. Indeed, it supplies him with a talisman-like word to employ as a marker of a crucial point of difference between his work and O'Hara's poetry of proper names. Ashbery's use of the word “object” throughout his career is various and changeable, and, as Stephen Ross has pointed out, imbricated with vocabularies employed by various other, largely unrelated 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic programs: “poets of all stripes following in the wake of the high modernist moment conceived of

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<sup>35</sup> Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 61. Shaw has provided a good account of the forms of attraction Auden held for O'Hara: “collaborations, his cultivation of camp, his interest in popular culture and light verse, and his thematization of homosexual bonds” (59). I'll return to Shaw's book at length later in the essay, but it is important to note that while it provides a sound account of O'Hara's engagement with Auden, he doesn't differentiate between O'Hara's and Ashbery's very different responses to Auden and the question of coterie.

<sup>36</sup> David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 194.

poems as objects, though they did so in the service of vastly differing agendas”.<sup>37</sup> Ashbery uses the word on numerous occasions in ways which signal its specific importance to his triangulated relationships with Auden and O’Hara, and which diverge from Auden’s primarily psychoanalytic usage in *The Orators*. In a 1962 catalogue essay, Ashbery paid particular attention to the objects employed in various works by the group gathered under the banner of “The New Realists”, positing them as a form of response to the new ways in which “machines and machine-made objects. . . play such an important part in daily life.” He then asks: “But why *the* object? Why are objects any more or less important than anything else?”

The answer is that they are not, and that, I think, is the secret of their popularity with these artists. They are a common ground, a neutral language understood by everybody, and therefore the ideal materials with which to create experiences which transcend the objects (and which transcend them all the more effectively when they seem least to, as in the work of several artists in this group whose policy is simply to leave the objects alone).<sup>38</sup>

This paragraph illustrates one of the important ways in which Ashbery thinks about Auden’s substitution of “object” for a proper name. It articulates both Ashbery’s conception of an ideal audience for art—“everybody”—and the vocabulary by which that audience might best be addressed: “objects”. These objects are, as Ashbery conceives them, the “neutral language understood by everybody”, rather than, we might conjecture, a non-neutral or overly specific language used by only a certain group of people. They are a language fit for a poet who seeks a generalised intimacy, whose work attempts to privilege no one section of a readership over another. This commitment to a general reader is asserted even when the subject and addressee of the poem is extremely intimate, as Ashbery’s undergraduate thesis on Auden suggests—even the most intimate forms of address can be made accessible or “popular” through the substitution of “desirable objects” for a “localised and specific detail”:

Instead of a traditional presentation and examination of an object, its illumination through metaphor and simile, Auden gives us lists of objects interesting and significant without description; which are, indeed, often only named, and then draws or allows to be

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen Ross, “An Invisible Terrain: John Ashbery and Nature”, unpublished D.Phil thesis, 305.

<sup>38</sup> John Ashbery, *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987*, ed. David Bergman (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1989), 81-2.

drawn the poetic conclusion...Such a poetic theory seems peculiarly of our time. In the first place, when we think of the ubiquity of the list, the sheet of tabulations, in almost every category of modern life; in science, business, even in popular poetry—think of the numerous popular songs in which the beloved is designated by lists of desirable objects (“You’re a Paris hat, a month in the country, a hot fudge sundae,” etc.) it is not surprising that a poet so completely contemporary as Auden should have absorbed the process.<sup>39</sup>

Ashbery's detection of the trope “in which the beloved is designated by lists of desirable objects” is a significant anticipation of his own later tendency to designate his “beloved” by object-synonyms. Auden's substitution of “Pretzel” for “Christopher”, and of “object” for a proper name (“Stephen”) in *The Orators*, then, serves as an enduring example of how to convert biographical material into the “neutral language understood by everybody” that objects constitute. The methods Ashbery employs to achieve this are more diverse than any Auden employed, drawing on influences as varied as Eliot and Luciano Berio to distort the proper names of himself, his friends and lovers—“stretching out syllables, cutting and blurring the originals”—in order to render them approachable, and “more meaningful”, for a “general reader”.<sup>40</sup> Stripping them of their referential particularity, Ashbery turns names into objects for contemplation in such a way that allows the reader to become themselves a “phenomenologist”.<sup>41</sup> In this way, Ashbery works towards the sort of balance between generality and specificity Auden articulated in a review of Joseph Brodsky: “One demands two things of a poem. Firstly, it must be a well-made verbal object that does honor to the language in which it is written. Secondly, it must say something significant about a reality common to us all, but perceived from a unique perspective.”<sup>42</sup>

Both Ashbery and O'Hara were comfortable in signalling the importance of Auden as a joint influence, one of few “poetic fathers” the two poets were happy to share. Yet, as Andrew Epstein has observed, the “sibling rivalry” which existed in all arenas between the two poets meant that the

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<sup>39</sup> John Ashbery, “The poetic medium of W.H. Auden,” Ashbery Papers, Box 31.

<sup>40</sup> “I remember also being impressed by Berio's *Hommage* to Joyce. I rather liked the kind of smear effect he did on the poems of Joyce and in my own humble way I was trying to do something like that in those problematic poems.” ([PN Review](#) 46, Vol. 12 No. 2, November - December 1985.)

<sup>41</sup> This is a term Ashbery employs in an essay on “Poetical Space”, during a discussion of Eliot. (Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 210.)

<sup>42</sup> W.H. Auden, “The Poems of Joseph Brodsky,” in *New York Review of Books* 20, no. 5, April 5, 1973, 10.

seeking of approval from this adopted father was one among many points of conflict between them, both in stylistic and material terms.<sup>43</sup> From O'Hara's perspective, Auden's decision to award the Yale Younger Poets prize to Ashbery was recognition of the relative similarity of Ashbery and Auden's styles, whereas his own work represented a too-radical deviation from the elder poet's, a distinction for which he was duly penalized. O'Hara responded with typical wit to this knock-back, writing in a letter to Grace Hartigan—referring to the surrealistic elements Auden had criticized in his verse—that “I don't care what Wystan says, I'd rather be dead than not have France around me like a rhinestone dog-collar”.<sup>44</sup> He was affected by the rejection, however, if only by being spurred into a greater conviction in his own radicalism; Epstein states that a dialogue O'Hara improvised in a letter to Fairfield Porter “implicitly criticizes Ashbery for being more Audenesque, less aggressively experimental than himself”.<sup>45</sup> The awarding of the Yale prize, then, is an event which segments Auden's career according to its importance for the later poets. His choice of Ashbery for the Yale prize arguably authenticated O'Hara's credentials as the more marginal, avant-garde artist of the two, closer in spirit to the irreverent, iconoclastic early Auden; while Ashbery had received a form of establishment acceptance from the already less admired later Auden. The continuities between Auden and Ashbery in the realm of proper names seem to support this, but the reality is, of course, less clear-cut, not least because of Ashbery's significant, intermittent resistance to Auden throughout his career. My focus in the following section will be the complexities of this relational triangle as they are performed in Ashbery's work. I will trace the implicit conflict which takes place between Ashbery's objectifying poetic and O'Hara's “rival ambience of cordiality”, from their shared origins

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<sup>43</sup> As Andrew Epstein has shown, the relationship between Ashbery and O'Hara concentrates a variety of tensions and oppositions each poet was grappling with in a rich and revealing way: “avant-garde versus conservative, candid about sexuality and personality versus evasive and reticent, dedicated to empirical reality versus metaphysical and abstract, Williams versus Stevens”. *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 129. Epstein's chronicle of the development of this friendship, and its central influence on each poet's work, is essential to any account of the relation between Ashbery and O'Hara, illuminating superbly the mutual support and competitive “sibling rivalry” which was a constant throughout their time together. Yet in his discussion of how both poets figure or conceal the artistic communities from which they emanate, one major element he pays only passing attention to is the question of proper names.

<sup>44</sup> Shaw, *Frank O'Hara*, 59.

<sup>45</sup> Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 284.

in *The Orators* through to O'Hara's death, and suggest that these two extreme elaborations of an only incompletely-articulated conflict in Auden's work can help us to understand both the American poets and their English mentor better.

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In an interview with Piotr Sommer, John Ashbery, referring to Frank O'Hara's poem "Adieu to Norman, Bonjour to Jean-Paul and Joan", asked: "what is someone who doesn't know who Norman and Jean-Paul and Joan are going to think of this?".<sup>46</sup> In a later interview, Ashbery reasserted his unease regarding the presence of proper names in poetry in even more forceful terms:

I don't approve of that [name-dropping]. The reader might not know the person you are talking about and would feel left out. I certainly wouldn't want a reader to feel left out! In fact a critic wrote me about *Shadow Train* saying "Well, I like it but you have all these private references like 'Penny Parker's Mistake and Corky's Car Keys'." This critic implied that I was talking about people I knew, when in fact they're not people I knew, but just people I made up. Like Wallace Stevens in his poem "Mrs Alfred Uruguay", I try to give the impression of somebody that someone might know, not a specific person.<sup>47</sup>

These remarks demonstrate a consistent strain of thinking on the subject of the inclusion of proper names in poetry, and such is Ashbery's commitment to the principle he elucidates that it gives rise to an exceptionally rare moment of equivocation regarding O'Hara's work. In all other published instances Ashbery has praised O'Hara's poetry, founding his appreciation on its ability to equalise all its constituent parts under the unifying category of the poem. As he put it in his essay, "Frank O'Hara's Question":

Here everything "belongs": unrefined autobiographical fragments, names of movie stars and operas, obscene interjections, quotations from letters—the élan of the poem is such that for the poet merely to mention something somehow creates a place for it, ennobles it, makes us realize how important it always has been for us.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, in his introduction to O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, at the culmination of a paragraph which includes some mild reproaches for the "posturing" and "obfuscation" of "Oranges" and "Second Avenue", he describes the form of "Easter" as "that of a bag into which anything is dumped and

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<sup>46</sup> Piotr Sommer, "An Interview in Warsaw". In *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, ed. Michael Palmer (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1983), 294-314.

<sup>47</sup> "Interview with John Ashbery", *City Limits*, November 20-27, 1986.

<sup>48</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 82.

ends up belonging there”.<sup>49</sup> “Belonging” is a recurrent trope in Ashbery’s readings of O’Hara’s work, and connotations of community and kinship are central to his employment of the term. So forceful is O’Hara’s “ambience of cordiality”, Ashbery implies, that even the nameless objects which “wheel through [O’Hara’s] consciousness” become subject to a process of “belonging”, as if by being included in his poems they necessarily undergoing a process of personification, of conversion from “static objects” into proper names. It’s revealing that one of the seven poems Ashbery singles out for discussion in the introduction is a minor piece, “Louise”, which describes, in a style partly borrowed from Elizabeth Bishop’s “12 o’clock News”, the progress of a louse across the Gothic landscape of O’Hara’s “immaculate person”. This poem, which converts an animate object—the louse—into the proper name of the title, is glossed in a telling manner by Ashbery. He writes:

Even at its most abstract, or even when it seems to be telling someone else’s story (see Donald Allen’s footnote to the poem “Louise”, whose title was suggested to Frank by a louse he says he “found on my own immaculate person”) [O’Hara’s work] is emerging out of his life. Yet there is little that is confessional about it—he does not linger over aspects of himself hoping that his self-absorption will make them seem exemplary.<sup>50</sup>

Ashbery mentions this slight poem—which is a fairly unlikely candidate for the illustration of the point about “self-absorption” he is trying to make—in part because it demonstrates the complex interrelation between proper names and objects that is so often dramatised in O’Hara’s poems, and with which Ashbery himself was so deeply concerned. It’s particularly apt that Ashbery should prompt the reader to refer to Donald Allen’s footnote, since it is largely constituted of a quote from a letter O’Hara wrote to Ashbery: “Louise is a louse I thought I saw in the john of this very museum one day on my immaculate person.”<sup>51</sup> In this “chronicle” of the poem’s creation, O’Hara playfully blurs the boundaries of object and proper name in a way Ashbery sees as characteristic; as the louse is elevated into a proper name, so Ashbery, the addressee of the letter, is included in de-capitalised form as the “john” in which the louse appeared to O’Hara. In this way, the imaginative inspiration for the poem (Ashbery) is translated into a material context (the museum bathroom) in which the

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<sup>49</sup> Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), ix.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 540.

object (the louse) becomes a proper name (Louise). Thus objects and proper names are demonstrably porous, circulating throughout the poem and the account of its compositional context in a playfully loose and unresolved manner.

The blurring of categories between objects, proper names and the people they represent was a central preoccupation for the New York School poets during the period of their closest collaborations in the mid-to-late 1950s. As has been widely noted, Ashbery appears regularly as part of the vast milieu of friends and acquaintances which populate O'Hara's work, as "John", "J.A.", or under the nickname "Ashes" (in this latter form, representations of Ashbery in O'Hara's work shuttle playfully between the categories of object and proper name). As Stephen Burt has noted, in the 1957 play *The Coronation Murder Mystery*, written collaboratively by Ashbery, O'Hara and Koch for Schulyer's thirty-third birthday, "stock characters become 'real' people, real people become one another (Ashbery plays 'Jimmy Schulyer') and all are conflated with works of art", just as Ashbery's essay on O'Hara shifts seamlessly between the categories of person and artwork in his mention of "names of movie stars and operas".<sup>52</sup> The following dialogue attributes such categorical confusions to "John", which name could be taken to refer to Ashbery or the Myers who responds:

GIRL: John has this new Bessarabian poet he wants to publish who's not as good as Jimmy's novel. He paints gravel-poems!

JOHN MYERS: Jimmy's novel isn't a person and you know it. And neither is he Bessarabian, for that matter.<sup>53</sup>

There is an echo of this fragment in a later conversation between Ashbery and Koch, from 1965, in which the following exchange takes place:

JA: Poetry does not have subject matter, because it is the subject. We are the subject matter of poetry, not vice versa.

KK: Could you distinguish your statement from the ordinary idea, which it resembles in every particular, that poems about people?

JA: Yes. Poems are about people and things.

KK: Then when you said "we" you were including the other objects in this room.

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Burt, "Hi Louise!", *London Review of Books*, volume 22 no. 14, July 2000, 27-29.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 27-29.

JA: Of course.<sup>54</sup>

Ashbery's expansion of the plural pronoun to include the “objects” of the room as part of a collective identity is, while clearly an improvised *bon mot*, revealing of his distinctive conception of the flexibility of pronouns. The interchangeability of objects and proper names is extended to a comparable interchangeability of identities that collaborative authorship instantiates: as O'Hara puts it in another play: “I'm Jane, I'm Jimmy, I'm Larry, I'm Kenneth, I'm John, I'm Barbara, I'm Bob, how are you, folks?” The conflation of objects and proper names and the persons they represent was a central trope of the social and artistic relations of this group of friends, as much as it was for the Auden group upon whom they modelled themselves. The swapping of identities was part of the social syntax of their community, cemented by collaborations on plays, novels and poems, and the process made itself felt, in very different ways, in all of their work.

However, despite his close involvement in “coterie” works that delight in the interchangeability of objects and proper names, it is one of the great curiosities of Ashbery's work that he only very rarely allows proper names of friends and lovers to occur unaltered in it. Because of this, I want to suggest that despite his careful expressions of admiration for O'Hara's work, the remark to Sommer, combined with some elements of his own poetry, suggest that Ashbery retained throughout his career significant reservations about the presence of proper names in poetry, and the idea of “coterie” that could underlie this presence (“Imperfect Sympathies” might be said to condense the reservations expressed in those interviews into its opening lines: “How minor can you get in writing about subjects, / Flowers or stamps or people the reader / Can't be expected to know?”).<sup>55</sup> I would like to suggest that Ashbery's attitudes towards proper names, and their “formal” alternative in his own work—manifested in neutral “objects” that recur as synonyms in place of proper names—concentrate as a metonym much of his thinking around how to locate himself in relation to the “family” of the New York School; that is, whether to embrace its fertile,

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<sup>54</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 55.

<sup>55</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 980.

identity-blurring, homosocial context, or extricate himself from it, and in doing so achieve a form of Auden-esque independence, or Stevensian “self-reliance”. This question, which recurs throughout his career, necessitates a consideration of Ashbery's conception of how community and context should be figured, or make themselves present, in his work. Through this same question Ashbery was also able to begin to delineate the terms of his own relations with his always-undefined “general reader”.

O'Hara's well-known poem “Adieu to Norman, Bonjour to Jean-Paul and Joan” is most clearly illustrative of the potential strengths and weaknesses of his approach to figuring community.

Here it is in full:

It is 12.10 in New York and I am wondering  
if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch  
ah lunch! I think I am going crazy  
what with my terrible hangover and the weekend coming up  
at excitement-prone Kenneth Koch's  
I wish I were staying in town and working on my poems  
at Joan's studio for a new book by Grove Press  
which they will probably not print  
but it is good to be several floors up in the dead of night  
wondering whether you are any good or not  
and the only decision you can make is that you did it

yesterday I looked up rue Fremicourt on a map  
and was happy to find it like a bird  
flying over Paris et ses environs  
which unfortunately did not include Seine-et-Oise which I don't know

as well as a number of other things  
and Allen is back talking about god a lot  
and Peter is back not talking very much  
and Joe has a cold and is not coming to Kenneth's  
although he is coming to lunch with Norman  
I suspect he is making a distinction  
well, who isn't

I wish I were reeling around Paris  
instead of reeling around New York  
I wish I weren't reeling at all  
it is Spring the ice has melted the Ricard is being poured  
we are all happy and young and toothless  
it is the same as old age  
the only thing to do is simply continue

is that simple  
 yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do  
 can you do it  
 yes, you can because it is the only thing to do  
 blue light over the Bois de Boulogne it continues  
 the Seine continues  
 the Louvre stays open it continues it hardly closes at all  
 the Bar Americain continues to be French  
 de Gaulle continues to be Algerian as does Camus  
 Shirley Goldfarb continues to be Shirley Goldfarb  
 and Jane Hazan continues to be Jane Freilicher (I think!)  
 and Irvine Sandler continues to be the balayeur des artistes  
 and so do I (sometimes I think I'm "in love" with painting  
 and surely the Piscine Deligny continues to have water in it  
 and the Flore continues to have tables and newspapers and people under them  
 and surely we shall not continue to be unhappy  
 we shall be happy  
 but we shall continue to be ourselves everything continues to be possible  
 Rene Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett it is possible isn't it  
 I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don't believe it<sup>56</sup>

The poem is a particularly rich example of O'Hara's use of proper names, because its purpose is to concertedly question and de-stabilise the roles proper names play within it. The anaphoric passage beginning "the Seine continues" morphs from an itemisation of places and objects to one of proper names, undermining through its accretion of examples the idea of a personality's continuity; "Shirley Goldfarb" continues to be herself only inasmuch as the Seine continues to be itself, though the water it is constituted of is entirely changed. Though he employs a number of proper names which would be unknown to those outside of "a limited, coterie readership", O'Hara "ventilates" (to re-apply Ashbery's term) his use of proper names by situating them in a context of blanket discontinuity; though in the moment of the composition of the poem, the proper names refer to precise moments in the personal histories of the friends mentioned ("and Allen is back talking about god a lot / and Peter is back not talking very much") these moments are ephemeral and as such almost immediately non-representational. It's arguable, then, that the proper names are as estranged from real historical figures for a "coterie" readership as they are for a non-coterie one; and, as such, their presence can be considered non-exclusionary. To answer Ashbery's question, "someone who

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<sup>56</sup> O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 328.

doesn't know who Norman, Jean-Paul and Joan are” might consider these proper names as referring to continuously shape-shifting entities, and consequently a reader is being asked to substitute their own cast of names to fill in such referential vacancies, to recognise in the “social syntax” of the poem something of their own lives, something they can “use” as a structure upon which to hang their own set of proper names.<sup>57</sup> This is the view of the poem taken by Geoff Ward, who writes: “Any of us middle-class speaking subjects has a friend like Kenneth and a lunch appointment next week with our own Joan or Jean-Paul”.<sup>58</sup> As Lytle Shaw notes, however, Ward's patience with O'Hara's proper names is tried in other instances, such as “It's another case of nature imitating Alfred Leslie!”, which he deems “simply an in-joke, conforming to the more incestuous associations of 'coterie”’. It's arguable that the validity of Ashbery's objection to O'Hara's use of proper names hinges upon whether such subjective substitutions as Ward proposes can occur.

Shaw's is the most powerful defence of O'Hara's use of proper names, and he makes several points which bear repeating here. Firstly, he retrieves the term “coterie” from the common, pejorative usage implying a “private, privileged clique” to re-establish its original description of “an authentically marginal group”, a valuable distinction. Within this context, O'Hara's variable use of proper names has multiple functions; firstly, it establishes a “secure context” of reception for the work outside of the parameters afforded by the literary establishment (in O'Hara's period, this came in the guise of New Criticism; as Marjorie Perloff has summarised, O'Hara and Ashbery were both “engaged in a battle against the prevailing orthodoxy in American poetry, the legacy of symbolism as codified by the New Critics in their unqualified admiration for what they took to be the style of Eliot”).<sup>59</sup> Secondly, it demonstrates the “performative power of canonization” by including names of friends – Allen, Peter, Norman etc. - alongside those of Char, Reverdy and Beckett, and in its replication of gestures performed three decades before by the Auden group. Thirdly, it disputes the primacy of familial relations by implying other forms of communal kinship, creating an alternative,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>58</sup> Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 61.

<sup>59</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 177.

queer family of names, from Hollywood stars to his own friends. Fourthly, and perhaps most radically, his use of obscure proper names is said to anticipate the contextual loss enforced by the poem's transition from being a “coterie” to a “literary” text, by including names which function as “recalcitrant matter” for both O'Hara and his non-coterie reader equally. To illustrate this point, Shaw cites “Poem (Khrushchev is coming at the right time)”, emphasising its inclusion of the names of “unknown figures of the morning”. These “unknown figures” might be said to function much as the almost universally-recalcitrant Helensburgh material did in *The Orators*. Shaw summarises these arguments, and can best be responded to, through his division of O'Hara's use of proper names into three categories: “first, proper names too obscure to have a family of attributes; second, those, just as obscure, that pick up such a ‘family’ only contextually within his work; finally, famous proper names that gain a surrogate, often queer, ‘family’”.<sup>60</sup>

While Shaw's revisionary assessment of O'Hara is valuable, it has some significant limitations. O'Hara's employment of this first category of names is not consistent or common enough for it to be classified as typical; while it convincingly illustrates O'Hara's own interest in the effects of contextual loss, “the unknown figures of the early morning” that populate his poems are massively outnumbered by the “known” ones. Shaw's claim that this moment “crucially and self-reflexively puts O'Hara in the position of a reader of his own *Collected Poems*” is therefore momentarily valid, but perhaps more forcefully reminds of how exceptional such a position is for O'Hara, particularly in contrast to the chronic identifications with a “general reader” we find throughout Ashbery's work. Regarding the second category, Shaw argues (anachronistically) that O'Hara circumvents the difficulties presented by the presence of proper names of his then-obscure friends – Jane, Larry, JA etc. - since they gain a cumulative value through their recurrence across the *Collected Poems*, like characters in a novel. This is a significant point, and Shaw's distinction between the kind of obligations forced upon a reader by O'Hara in this way and those enforced by

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<sup>60</sup> Lytle Shaw, “On Coterie: Frank O'Hara”, *Jacket* #10, October 1999. <http://jacketmagazine.com/10/shaw-on-ohara.html> Accessed June 20, 2015.

Pound – whose names “bullied or shamed us into research” – is important. However, in this instance Ashbery's objection remains valid, since he situates his objection at the level of the individual poem; if the accumulated significance Shaw argues for is to occur, we are obliged to read across the *Collected Poems*, and the reader Ashbery has in mind is not someone who has done, or is perhaps not likely to do this. It is only really the third category that is exempted from Ashbery's scrutiny, since he too has employed “famous” names in his poems – not just historical figures, but fictional characters, figures from literature and art. It might easily be argued that one of the intentions behind Ashbery's assembly of famous names is the cultivation of a “queer family” - thinking here of the pages of names found in *The Vermont Notebook*, of which more later - but Ashbery is too sceptical of the performative power of his poems to attempt such a thing without stringent qualifications. More likely is that this impetus to accumulate names is embroiled in a “social syntax” that includes numerous competing impetuses; Ashbery certainly is interested in the formation of “other traditions”, as his critical writings have shown, but the instances in his poetry which attempt such a gesture scrupulously register the contingencies upon it.

As Shaw's discussion of O'Hara's “coterie” poetics demonstrates, the latter's employment of proper names is much more complex than has previously been described by those critics who express their periodic sense of exclusion from his work. Ultimately, what O'Hara's proper names emphasise is the particularity of the poet's experience at the expense of commonality with an unknown reader. While this policy can be viewed as “self-absorbed”, it can also be thought of as implicitly respecting or reaffirming the particularity of the reader's own experience; an arguably more modest goal than Ashbery's attempt to establish a “neutral language” which “as many people as possible” can access.<sup>61</sup> It seems strangely excessive on Ashbery's part to imagine this readership

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<sup>61</sup> In his *Paris Review* interview, Ashbery suggests that his depersonalization of his poetry is in fact a personalizing gesture. The answer is knotty: “I try to aim at as wide an audience as I can so that as many people as possible will read my poetry. Therefore I depersonalize it, but in the same way personalize it, so that a person who is going to be different from me but is also going to resemble me just because he is different from me, since we are all different from each other, can see something in it.” (Stitt, “The Art of Poetry”.) The implication of these remarks is that since we can work from the assumption that we are all different, Ashbery can write from a position which presumes our

incapable of ignoring or postponing any sense of exclusion O'Hara's proper names might engender, when he consistently risks such alienation himself through the inclusion of potentially “unknowable” figures like Parmigianino, Daffy Duck, or Happy Hooligan in his work. That is, Ashbery's objection to O'Hara's use of names represents a peculiar exception for a poet who otherwise has a very permissive policy regarding content. Proper names represent a particular order of knowledge, admittedly difficult to access, but which is in itself no more exclusive than any of the many other forms of culturally-specific knowledge displayed by Ashbery's own work. The excessiveness of this position—which is only explicitly advanced at particular, important points in his career, as I will show—while related to a desire to speak to an audience of Whitmanian breadth, might be more plausibly understood primarily as a means of differentiation from the powerful counterexample of O'Hara. The significance of Auden's work to this decision is that it offered Ashbery a means of resistance to O'Hara through its own shift in attitude towards coterie in the revisions to *The Orators*; a process which, as I will show in the second part of the chapter, is reversed later in Ashbery's career (that is, he employs O'Hara's position as a way of resisting Auden). I would now like to turn to some instances in which Ashbery responds poetically to the problem of proper names and the “coterie” poetics that underline their extensive use, demonstrating how he attempts to put into practice the idea that an Auden-esque “neutral language of objects” offers an alternative means of figuring the contexts of his poems' composition.

The best place to begin tracing Ashbery's engagement with Auden and O'Hara's use of proper names, and thereby the development of his own conception of his relations with the New York School and a “general reader”, is *The Tennis Court Oath*. “The Suspended Life”, written in 1961, is the first of Ashbery's poems to feature proper names extensively. The poem's allusions to Shelley's “Julian and Maddalo” frame it as an exploration of conflict between two poet-friends who have differing aesthetics, with Ashbery and O'Hara implicitly substituted for Shelley and Byron.

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essential sameness in that shared difference. For Ashbery, O'Hara's poetry can be seen as placing too great an emphasis on a difference which can always already be assumed.

The allusions come thick: it begins with two figures starting on a “round-the-world cruise / Aboard the *Zephyr*”, notes that “In the hay states of Pennsylvania and Arkansas / I lay down and slept”, and describes how “Night grew clear over / Mount Hymettus / And sudden day unbuttoned its blouse”, recalling Shelley's vision of Hymettus in “The Revolt of Islam”: “Among the clouds near the horizon driven / The mountains lay beneath one planet pale”.<sup>62</sup> The following passage, which explicitly mentions “Julian”, seems to dramatise some of the perceived difficulties that result from the name-dropping practised by O'Hara:

What can you do with people far away?  
Only those near me, like Bob,  
Mean to me what Uncle Ben means to me  
When he comes in, wiping a block of ice  
On a chipmunk dishtowel, his face glittering  
With the pleasure of already being absent.  
Or when someone places a cabbage on a stump  
I think I am with them, I think of their name:  
Julian. Do you see  
The difference between weak handshakes  
And freezing to death in a tub of ice and snow  
Called home by some, but it lacks runners,  
Do you?<sup>63</sup>

The passage begins with a wilfully esoteric, arbitrary-seeming domestic scene, featuring two characters - “Bob” and “Uncle Ben” - whose (homosocial) relations with the speaker are resolutely undefined. Why should we care about this relational triangle, the poem seems to ask, since it is little more than an aggregation of random names? The implied target of this question is clearly O'Hara, and, by extension, the Auden of the 1932 text of *The Orators*. Ashbery's poem seems to suggest that to “people far away” from the New York poetry scene, O'Hara's references to Joan, Norman and Jean-Paul—like Auden's references to “Christopher” and “Stephen”—would have been equally estranging or irrelevant as the activities of these three characters, perhaps inciting a state comparable to Uncle Ben's “pleasure of already being absent”. Though a poem that refers in detail to its social context may be “called home by some”, its weakness is that “it lacks runners”: that is,

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<sup>62</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley, Volume Two: 1817-1819*, ed. Kelvin Everest, Geoffrey Matthews (New York: Routledge, 2014), 97.

<sup>63</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 67-8.

messengers from this insular community sent out to communicate with the wider world. Ashbery seems to be asking O'Hara whether he sees “the difference between weak handshakes”—a coded greeting of an insular community—“and freezing to death in a tub of ice and snow”, that is, a rarefied context cut off from the “heat” of involvement with the outside world. At the time of its composition, Ashbery himself was, of course, one of those “people far away” from O'Hara's New York world, and as such the name-dropping tendencies of the latter poet are objected to on both aesthetic and personal grounds. It's arguable that Ashbery's position as a Parisian “exile”, as he later calls himself in “The Skaters”, afforded him the opportunity to identify more forcefully with a potential reader outside of a specific community. While this is in a sense a fun, localised dispute with O'Hara and early Auden, “The Suspended Life” signals that even at this early stage of his career Ashbery was seeking to look, in his conception of an audience, beyond the horizon of the community of the New York School.

Beyond this satirical piece, Ashbery actively proposed alternative approaches to O'Hara's depictions of community based on an alternative reading of Auden. His most widely-recognised strategy in opening up the poem's imagined community is his employment of undefined pronouns, which, among other effects, allow the reader (as Ward and Shaw suggest we do with O'Hara's poems) to populate the poems with their own shifting cast of speakers and characters. As Herd has suggested, Ashbery's “poetry of pronouns” views itself as inclusive, maintaining a much “stronger appeal for the outsider, drawing him or her in not, finally, to indicate something to which they cannot have access, but rather to ready them for that to which they do.”<sup>64</sup> Hence, to take only a few prominent examples, the title of the late collection, *Your Name Here*, the famous conclusion of “Paradoxes and Oxymorons”—itself significantly indebted to Auden's late poem “You”—and his elusive early poem “The Grapevine”, which enacts perhaps more fully than any other of Ashbery's early works his assertion that pronouns operate in his poems as “variables in an equation”:

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<sup>64</sup> Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 67.

Of who we and all they are  
You all now know. But you know  
After they began to find us out we grew  
Before they died thinking us the causes

Of their acts. Now we'll not know  
The truth of some still at the piano, though  
They often date from us, causing  
These changes we think we are. We don't care

Though, so tall up there  
In young air. But things get darker as we move  
To ask them: Whom must we get to know  
To die, so you live and we know?<sup>65</sup>

This is one of Ashbery's most explicitly Auden-esque early works. Its resistance to the communication of a clear, intelligible scene from its clusters of undefined pronouns recalls such highly-charged, inscrutable poems as that later titled "The Secret Agent", which opens in a world of ambiguous pronouns, wondering "who would get" their meaning: "Control of the passes was, he saw, the key / To this new district, but who would get it?"<sup>66</sup> Bozorth writes that in Auden's poem, "figurations of frustration and deception convey neatly one problem of desire in the closet, where 'Is he/she or isn't he/she?' is an inevitable question when there are no obvious clues".<sup>67</sup> Like Auden's poem, Ashbery's is substantially about "bogus" signs, about difficulties of interpretation in coterie and non-coterie contexts, and the folly of attempting to identify a single "key" to unlock the truth of a situation.<sup>68</sup>

Beyond this tendency to work with unspecified pronouns, the second method by which Ashbery attempts to defuse the potentially alienating effects of work which depicts the contexts of its composition, is in his "objectification" of proper names. Where in O'Hara's work proper names, and the passions which organise their interrelation into a social context, are employed enthusiastically, in Ashbery's work names and their social relations are "blurred" and "smudged", abstracted into a state that turns them into non-symbolic "phenomena": "our names only in a

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<sup>65</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 32.

<sup>67</sup> Bozorth, *Auden's Games of Knowledge*, 34.

<sup>68</sup> For a full reading of "The Grapevine", see the chapter on Ashbery and Prince.

different / pronunciation”, as he puts it in “April Galleons”.<sup>69</sup> In this form, proper names are rendered so that a reader does not require specific social knowledge extraneous to the poem to “get it”, but is rather permitted involvement in the process of meaning-creation; as Ashbery puts it, with striking candour, in “A Last World”: “Passions are locked away, and states of creation are used instead, that is to say synonyms are used”.<sup>70</sup> For Ashbery, the “states of creation” cultivated by the neutral object, the “synonym” for the proper name, afford him the possibility of greater intimacy with a broader audience. As he remarked in an interview: “I want the reader to be able to experience the poem without having to refer to outside sources to get the complete experience as one has to in Eliot sometimes or Pound. This again is a reflection of my concern for communicating which as I say many people don’t believe I have—but for me a poem has to be all there and available to the reader. . .”<sup>71</sup> According to Ashbery, only by turning potentially-alienating biographical details into the “neutral language of objects” can the reader themselves become “a phenomenologist”, someone involved in the creation of meaning.<sup>72</sup>

The objectifying techniques which allow the poem to be “all there and available” are first employed in *The Tennis Court Oath*. The second poem of the volume, “America”, is the most densely-packed with Ashbery’s objectifications; it is at once the most abstract and intensely personal of the poems in the book, shuttling between private and public registers, names and objects, French and English, with astonishing agility. The main subject of its objectifying technique is Pierre Martory, the French poet with whom Ashbery had a relationship for many years while living in France, and to whom *The Tennis Court Oath* is dedicated.<sup>73</sup> The second section of “America”

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<sup>69</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 884.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>71</sup> Janet Bloom and Robert Losada, “Craft Interview with John Ashbery”, in *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly*, ed. William Packard (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 122-3.

<sup>72</sup> There is perhaps some irony in the fact that Ashbery’s attempts to achieve accessibility involved some fairly peculiar and idiosyncratic compositional methods.

<sup>73</sup> Many critics have noted the importance of the relationship between Martory and Ashbery for some of the volume’s most celebrated poems: “They Dream Only of America” has been commonly interpreted as a homotextual parable of escape, and includes a line once spoken by Martory: “This honey is delicious, though / *it burns the throat.*” With some ingenuity, John Shoptaw has demonstrated how the names of the two poets can be detected in some of the volume’s most striking lines, such as “And the murderer’s ashtray is more easily”.

begins:

The pear tree  
moving me  
I am around and in my sigh  
The gift of a the stars.  
The person  
Horror—the morsels of his choice  
Rebuked to me I  
—in the apartment  
the pebble we in the bed.  
The roof—  
rain— pills—  
Found among the moss  
Hers wouldn't longer care—I don't know why.<sup>74</sup>

This intimate and abstract (what “Clepsydra” calls “empty yet personal”) passage demonstrates Ashbery's conversion of an intimate occasion shared by the two poets into an abstracted, objectified, “all-purpose” love scene. The first line “blurs”, “smudges”, or, to employ the elided syllable, “mars” the name Pierre Martory into a “desirable object”, “the pear tree”, that is “moving” Ashbery. (This movement is both emotional and aesthetic, since “pear tree” also suggests “poetry”.) Further on, Ashbery self-reflexively notes “the person / horror” of the passage—its resistance to identification with an individual—and the elided syllable returns in an altered form to suggest the limitations of singular experience: “the *morsels* of his choice”. Martory's own tendency in his own poetry towards object/name puns is an important context for these lines. As Ashbery writes in a note beneath his translation of Martory's “On the Pont Marie”, the poem features “several plays on the word pierre (stone) and Martory's first name”. It begins with the serial punning of these lines:

La peur m'agrippe au parapet.  
Pierre qui moule le grain de mon nom  
  
(Fear clamps me to the parapet.  
Stone that mills the grain of my name pierre)<sup>75</sup>

(It is interesting to note how Ashbery de-capitalises the name “Pierre” in his translation, introducing its French meaning into the poem and reversing the expected object-name relationship. This might

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<sup>74</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 46.

<sup>75</sup> Pierre Martory, *The Landscapist* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008), 20-21.

be compared to O'Hara's remarks about the composition of "Louise".) So while Martory appears initially in "America" as an English play on words as "pear tree" (then later as "pear mist"), we might also read his presence into the occurrences of "stone" throughout. The word occurs in four of the poem's five sections: "the stones piled up", "stone this is desert", "Messenger the snow / stone", "In the hall. The stone." This objectification reveals French as an intimate, coded vernacular at one further remove than even the blurrings of English that "pear tree" represents. Such processes are a kind of compromise, an agreement between the poet and reader that the former will not trespass too far into the realm of the specific. These blurring processes diminish or dilute the presence of details like proper names, but nevertheless retain an encrypted fidelity to the poem's compositional contexts.

Similar tendencies to those displayed by "America" can be seen in "A Last World", which describes the process of objectification in these terms:

What have you get there in your hand?  
It is a stone

So the passions are divided into tiniest units  
And of these many are lost, and those that remain are given at nightfall to the uneasy old  
man  
The old man who goes skipping along the roadbed.  
In a dumb harvest  
Passions are locked away, and states of creation are used instead, that is to say synonyms  
are used.

Honey  
On the lips of the elders is not contenting, so  
A firebrand is made.<sup>76</sup>

The object "in your hand" is the object-synonym for Martory, "a stone", one of Ashbery's personal passions "divided into tiniest units", altered to a point almost beyond recognition. Such "synonyms" are employed since Martory's "Honey"—which "burns the throat" in "They Dream Only of America"—"on the lips of elders is not contenting". In place of the intimate details of his own life, then, "A firebrand is made"; a firebrand referring both to a piece of wood which is being burnt and

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<sup>76</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 85.

is thus partly disfigured, and also to Ashbery himself, an incendiary mischief-maker. John Shoptaw's alertness to the relations between the Biblical "firebrands" and the "faggots" present in an early Ashbery poem, "A Sermon: Amos 8:11-14", and their suggestion of Eliot as a point of resistance, is particularly helpful here.<sup>77</sup> In this passage, Ashbery's objectifications are more rebarbative than those at work in "America", employing what Shoptaw terms "crypt words" to critique the "elders" for whom the details of a homosexual relationship would not be "contenting". In such instances, it seems valid to view Ashbery's work as, like Auden's more rebarbative coterie work, seeming to convert "unspeakability from a condition of repression into a weapon", and yet he always remains conscious of and considerate towards a reader whom he views without hostility. His desire to communicate to a broad audience, and his resistances to the homophobic culture of America in the early 1960s, co-exist here in suspension.

The "passions" referred to in "A Last World" are returned to in "The Skaters", the long poem which concludes Ashbery's next volume, *Rivers and Mountains*. This poem extends the conflict between proper names and objects to refer to a broader conflict between community and isolation which his relationship with Auden and O'Hara brought to light. The speaker of much of the poem is a "professional exile" not only in the sense of living away from America, but an exile from the specific communal contexts from which his earlier work emanated and was indirectly addressed towards—"everybody in this place". The bland irony of the following lines, from part III, is expressive of this estrangement:

You will wear the same clothes, and your friends will still want to see you for the same reasons—you fill a definite place in their lives, and they would be sorry to see you go.

There has, however, been this change, so complete as to be invisible:

You might call it . . . "passion" might be a good word.

I think we will call it that for easy reference. This room, now, for instance, is all black and white instead of blue.

A few snowflakes are floating in the airshaft. Across the way

The sun was sinking, casting gray

Shadows on the front of the buildings.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 22.

<sup>78</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 172.

The skaters who “elaborate their distances” provide a template for a journey of active extension into isolation, and contraction into community, that Ashbery will replicate throughout his career. As Andrew Epstein has remarked, Ashbery is “invigorated by the oscillation *between* motion and repose, and [is] particularly drawn toward paradoxes and oxymorons that impossibly yoke together movement and stasis”.<sup>79</sup> Following O'Hara's death in 1966, Ashbery's work began to address with a new urgency the question of community (or coterie) and isolation for which the tension between proper names and objects functions as a metonym. In a series of oblique elegies for his friend, Ashbery conducted a stringent and thorough examination of the assumptions about community and readership underlying his own poetry.

Excellent work has been done by Shoptaw and Epstein in resisting Marjorie Perloff's curious assertion that “one poet who did not write an elegy for Frank O'Hara . . . was John Ashbery.”<sup>80</sup> To disprove this, Shoptaw focusses on “Lithuanian Dance Band” and Epstein on “Street Musicians”, but I would like to suggest that these are not, in fact, the most revealing of Ashbery's covert elegies for O'Hara. The first of these, while a beautiful and evocative tribute to O'Hara, lacks the fascinating balance of attachment and enmity, longing and conflict, Epstein reads into “Street Musicians”; beyond its identification of O'Hara's “rival ambience of cordiality”, it is perhaps too straightforwardly celebratory, a poem still in the grip of an intense grief that precludes serious engagement. “Street Musicians” depends a little too much upon Epstein's critical ingenuity to establish O'Hara as one of the poem's referents—the points of intertextual dialogue he finds between it and O'Hara's “Blocks” are not entirely convincing, and while the tensions he describes between isolation and community and their rural and urban analogues are illuminating, the poem remains too general or abstracted to be definitively or exclusively termed an elegy for O'Hara. The poem of Ashbery's that combines the qualities of specificity and complexity present only in

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<sup>79</sup> Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 129.

<sup>80</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 190.

isolation in these poems, but which has been curiously overlooked by Ashbery's critics, is "Rural Objects", from *The Double Dream of Spring*. Like "Lithuanian Dance Band", it employs elements of O'Hara's idiosyncratic style, and numerous intertextual gestures, in order to signal its status as an elegy for him, while also containing the anguished psychological conflict Epstein traces in "Street Musicians"; that is, between the drive for Auden-esque artistic independence from "a place of origins" in "the obscure family" of the New York School, and the competing desire to maintain or rekindle the "mythical kingdom" of Mortmere-like homosocial community his friendship with O'Hara represented. As throughout Ashbery's career, this conflict is dramatised in a tension between proper names and Wordsworthian / Stevensian "rural objects" or, as he re-terms them in the poem, "nameless things":

When, in that sense, is it to be?  
An ultimate warm day of the year

With the light unapproachable on the beaches?  
In which case you return to the fork in the road  
Doubtless to take the same path again? The second-time knowledge  
Gives it fluency, makes it less of a choice

As you are older and in a dream touch bottom.  
The laburnum darkened, denser at the deserted lake;  
Mountain ash mindlessly dropping berries: to whom is all this?  
I tell you, we are being called back

For having forgotten these names  
For forgetting our proper names, for falling like nameless things  
On unfamiliar slopes. To be seen again, churlishly into life,  
Returning, as to the scene of a crime.

That is how the singer spoke,  
in vague terms, but with an eternity of thirst<sup>81</sup>

In light of O'Hara's death, Ashbery recognises with renewed force the degree to which he had internalised resemblance and dispute with O'Hara's work ("And now you are this thing that is outside me, / And how I in token of it am like you is / In place"). This initial identification with O'Hara acts as a prompt for Ashbery to interrogate the forms of differentiation he had previously

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<sup>81</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 204.

employed. The poem questions the validity of Ashbery's previous objectifications of proper names, clearly identifying the limitations of impersonal address, and the sacrifices necessitated by such an approach, in contrast with the intimate legacy of O'Hara's work. In this scathing self-portrait, Ashbery seems to castigate himself for the obliquity of his poetry: "Mountain ash mindlessly dropping berries: to whom is all this?" Here Ashbery (ash / berries) positions himself as the solitary inhabitant of the mountain described by O'Hara's poem "To John Ashbery", which opens: "I can't believe there's not / another world where we will sit / and read new poems to each other / high on a mountain in the wind."<sup>82</sup> The too-general Ashbery then asks himself "to whom is all this?", a question which highlights the stark contrast with the directness and specificity of address found in O'Hara's poem. As in "Lithuanian Dance Band", Ashbery appropriates O'Hara's anaphoric, non-grammatical style at the point of his most stringent self-scrutiny, internalising his objections to himself through an inhabitation of O'Hara's aesthetic: "We are being called back / For having forgotten these names / For forgetting our proper names, for falling like nameless things / On unfamiliar slopes." This should be read as an expression of guilt for obscuring the "proper names" of his compositional context, for excluding his friends and lovers from his work, and turning them into the "vague terms" of objects. These imitative elements of the poem re-inscribe, however momentarily, Ashbery's lapsed affiliation with the New York School; as Jacque Bens has written, "the goal and result of heteroparody is to enlarge the dimensions of a work, or rather to inscribe it within a vaster creative ensemble."<sup>83</sup> Here we see Ashbery at his most unsure; O'Hara's death seems, at least momentarily, to call the whole project of Ashbery's poetry into question.

Ultimately, though, Ashbery concludes, with mixed feelings, that (addressing himself) "in the end you were right to // Pillage and obstruct. And she / stared at her toes." This is at first classified as "just a cheap way // Of letting you off", but ultimately, as the title suggests, Ashbery's conversion of material into "rural objects" through the processes of pillaging and obstruction is a

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<sup>82</sup> O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 211.

<sup>83</sup> Warren Motte, ed., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 70.

considered gesture of artistic independence, founded upon an unflinching acknowledgement of the costs of such a position.<sup>84</sup> Though O'Hara's death precipitated an unprecedented moment of self-doubt in Ashbery, it is addressed and overcome in the text of the poem; O'Hara's style retaining a place but ultimately being subsumed beneath Ashbery's pillaging and obstructive tendencies.

Ashbery's dialogue with O'Hara on the subject of names and objects is returned to in a different, though still elegiac, manner in *The Vermont Notebook*. This collection was published in 1975, the same year as Ashbery's multi-prize winning *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. After many years of neglect, having been treated as something of a curious anomaly in Ashbery's oeuvre, it has recently been the subject of revisionary consideration, and is now seen to play a crucial role in Ashbery's development. Though its compositional processes of collage and found text are unusual for Ashbery by the mid-70s, it is thematically and tonally continuous with much of his other work. As with all Ashbery's collections, it is full of "objects" both urban and rural, casually brought in alongside one another in a way that, as Andrew Ross has suggested, "plays upon the purely artificial differences between 'town' and 'country'".<sup>85</sup> This urban / pastoral staging repeatedly illustrates Ashbery's concern with repetition and return, community and independence: "Places have a way of coming back; the full curve of expectation meets halfway one's pipsqueak pretensions starting out".<sup>86</sup> In his discussion of *The Vermont Notebook*, Christopher Schmidt suggests that the collection functioned as an "evacuation" or "dump" of textual matter deemed unsuitable for *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*—a "bathetic appendix" to that multi-prize winning collection moulded in advance "so as to fit into the system of awards and critical acclaim that did in fact greet it".<sup>87</sup> Schmidt's

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<sup>84</sup> Ashbery's withdrawal or expansion into "rural objects" is, in one sense, an implicit rejection of the urban contexts of O'Hara's own poetry; here Epstein's reading of "Street Musicians" as an account of Ashbery's change of scene from urban bohemian poet to "increasingly suburban airs" rings true. But this reading fails to acknowledge Ashbery's continual assertion throughout his poetry and critical works that the distinction between "natural" and "cultural" objects does not exist: as Gertrude Stein puts it in *Ida: A Novel*, which Ashbery reviewed positively: "Nature is not natural, and that is natural enough." Ashbery's "rural objects" are intricately developed, complex cultural artefacts.

<sup>85</sup> Andrew Ross, "Taking the Tennis Court Oath," in *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Susan Schultz (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 220.

<sup>86</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 379.

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Schmidt, "The Queer Nature of Waste in John Ashbery's *The Vermont Notebook*", *Arizona Quarterly*, Volume 68, Number 3, Autumn 2012, 71-96.

reading overreaches a good deal. It is not only unnecessary to set up the Ashbery of *Self-Portrait* as a straw man to prove the value of *The Vermont Notebook*, but it demonstrates a misunderstanding of the complex dialogic relations between the two collections; as Ellen Levy has remarked, it resembles more an “uncanny double” of *Self-Portrait* than “a waste basket”.<sup>88</sup> However, the figure of evacuation or dumping remains a valid one for the collection's methodology, as this at once Stevensian and Auden-esque passage declares:

The book I read is the dump it is printed in dump letters. As the wind on dump light so the acid red light of wells of dump leaves. I tell the old story of the dump. I work on the story to be the real story of the dump which is never telling. If it was telling it would not be the dump which it is. The dump escapes the true scape of the telling and in doing so it is its own scape—the dump dumped and dumping. As I swear the dump is my sweet inner scape self so do I condone the dump for having nothing left for me only the will to go on dumping creating it out of its evacuation. I will go to the dump. I am to be the dump. I was permanently the dump and now the dump is me, but I will be permanently me when I am no longer the dump air. The dump air lasts<sup>89</sup>

What Ashbery “dumps” in *The Vermont Notebook* are not only the various neglected objects of which the poems are constituted, but also the proper names of his contemporaries which are otherwise excluded from his oeuvre. Where in “Rural Objects”, Ashbery seems to defiantly declaim his independence from O'Hara, in *The Vermont Notebook* Ashbery takes up a stance in extreme opposition to this; he not only accedes to O'Hara's use of proper names, but takes the practice of name-dropping to its logical extreme, constructing two poems made up exclusively of them: in this way, they take the form of “a bag into which anything is *dumped* and ends up belonging there”, as Ashbery wrote of O'Hara's work. The first begins:

Maggie and Clyde Newhouse, Egon von Furstenburg, Bill Blass, Rex Reed, Pauline Trigere, Betsy Theodoropoulos, Nan Kempner, Chessie Rayner, Arthur and Elain Cohen, Huntington Hartford, Bobo Rockefeller, Lady Malcolm Douglas Hamilton, Jacques Kaplan, Larry Rivers, Howard Kanovitz, Alex Katz, Lawrence Rubin, William Rubin Robert and Ethel Scull, Paul Cornwall Jones, Brook Alexander, Kynaston McShine, Pierre Apraxine,

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<sup>88</sup> Ellen Levy, *Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery and the Struggle Between the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 170. Schmidt suggests that Ashbery divides the two collection according to the division at the beginning of *Three Poems*: “I thought that if I put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave it all out would be another, and truer, way.” He suggests that there is a conflict between the “extraneous” *Vermont Notebook* and the perfected *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, which desires “to perfect and rule out the extraneous forever”.

<sup>89</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 353.

Ruth Kligman, Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, Fairfield Porter, Anne Porter, Robert Dash, Jane Freilicher, Jane Wilson . . .<sup>90</sup>

The names here include those of visual artists, designers, models, celebrities, gallery owners, collectors, royals, patrons, dancers, singers; figures both well-known and obscure, the mere placement of whose names in relation to one another is suggestive of a rich and vibrant community, though the poem is in itself little more than a list. Their relations to one another – what Shaw calls their “social syntax” - are subsumed. A reader willing to do the research would discover ties between them which are familial, marital, financial, and institutional; yet what is important is that, as with O'Hara's use of proper names, there is no privileging of one form of connection above another in Ashbery's assembly: the “queer family” Ashbery creates is as legitimately formed by artistic or social relation as by genetic, legal or religious ties.

By composing two poems constituted entirely of proper names, Ashbery outplays O'Hara at his own game, but with curious results: the poems themselves are both deeply expressive, but also oddly lifeless.<sup>91</sup> The animating element which would convert these Ashberyan list-poems into vivid and complex depictions and creations of social relations between proper names and the people they represent—that is, Frank O'Hara—is precisely the proper name that we would expect to find there, and precisely the name which is absent. Ashbery's poems fail at their adopted task deliberately, and implicitly attribute this failure to the absence of the unifying properties of O'Hara's “rival ambience of cordiality”. In this way, *The Vermont Notebook* is perhaps the most moving of Ashbery's elegies for O'Hara, since it is an elegy which operates by imitation and mimetic omission.

As “Rural Objects” and *The Vermont Notebook* demonstrate, the moment of conflict between objects and proper names, and by extension between Ashbery and O'Hara, is returned to repeatedly throughout Ashbery's career. A similar tension between objects and names is present in “Just Walking Around”, from *A Wave*, a poem which implicitly contrasts O'Hara's light but

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>91</sup> In the next section of this chapter, I will explore how the use of names in *The Vermont Notebook* also represents a significant moment of resistance to the later Auden.

purposeful “step away from them” with Ashbery's own leisurely, circuitous wandering style:

What name do I have for you?  
Certainly there is no name for you  
In the sense that the stars have names  
That somehow fit them. Just walking around,

An object of curiosity to some,  
But you are too preoccupied  
By the secret smudge in the back of your soul  
To say much, and wander round,

Smiling to yourself and others.  
It gets to be kind of lonely  
But at the same time off-putting,  
Counterproductive, as you realize once again

That the longest way is the most efficient way,  
The one that looped among the islands, and  
You always seemed to be travelling in a circle.  
And now that the end is near

The segments of the trip swing open like an orange.  
There is light in there, and mystery and food.  
Come see it. Come not for me but it.  
But if I am still there, grant that we may see each other.<sup>92</sup>

Here names and objects are once again incompatible, since names that “somehow fit” are for “stars”, both human and celestial, of which O'Hara is, by this point, one. The “object of curiosity” which might be taken to refer to Ashbery, is “too preoccupied / By the secret smudge in the back of your soul / To say much”, the smudge being, of course, the deliberate blurring of focus which turns proper names into rural objects, nameless things. This is the “lonely” way but also the “most efficient”, the path of solitude and indirection, which, like Ashbery's depictions of the titular characters and the Baudelaireian voyage in “The Skaters”, is involved in a continual process of intimacy and distancing from society, friends, other poets.<sup>93</sup> In this circuitous fashion “Just Walking Around” returns once again to a scene that precedes the conclusion of “Street Musicians”: in the earlier poem we are shown the aftermath of musicians who “picknicked in pine forests, / In coves

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<sup>92</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 738.

<sup>93</sup> Geoff Ward notes a crucial and related difference in walking pace between the two poets: “Where O'Hara always does, sees, says, makes connections between, more things than one might have though possible in one day or one lyric, Ashbery opts deliberately for an amiable, slow shamble”. Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 102.

with the water always seeping up, and left / our trash, sperm and excrement everywhere, smeared on the landscape”, and here we are returned to a point that precedes that departure: “there is light in there, and mystery and food”.<sup>94</sup> In this way, Ashbery and O'Hara's friendship, the central elements of which are figured so often as landscape in the former's work, becomes a permanent one that Ashbery traverses repeatedly throughout his career.

Ashbery's attitudes towards proper names and objects altered considerably over the course of his career. From the role objects held as a means of developing his conception of “a neutral language understood by everybody”, to their function as a metonym for his self-positioning in relation to the New York poets, they are a central, flexible part of his imaginative vocabulary. His attitudes towards names and objects never fully coalesced into the often contextually-dependent coterie writings of O'Hara, or the excessively stringent “objectivity” of the later Auden, but were continually marked by oscillations between the oppositions: intimacy and distance, community and isolation, personal and impersonal forms of address, movement and repose. The narrative of Auden's career was itself highly influential for the ways in which the poets of the New York School developed their own conceptions of communal relation and figuration; from the earliest points in their careers, they saw their aesthetic decisions as occurring within the context of the literary climate Auden had created, and as such, whether adhering to or deviating from his example, they felt themselves to be involved in a dialogue with his work. For Ashbery, it's arguable that Auden offered a helpful model for a type of poetry which was addressed beyond the coterie, which included elements of his own biographical experience but rendered in such a way as to be non-exclusionary for the non-coterie reader. Ashbery's most Auden-esque poems retain a mysterious fidelity to their compositional contexts, while generously addressing themselves to an infinitely inclusive, Whitmanian “you”. At the same time, Ashbery was well aware that Auden's “object” approach could be too broad; indeed, as David Herd notes, in “Another Chain Letter” Ashbery goes

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<sup>94</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 491.

so far as to compare the Auden-esque “you” to the “very unintimate “you” of the mailshot”.<sup>95</sup> O'Hara's counterexample, his poetry of pronouns, remained a largely unacceptable approach for Ashbery, and yet it was of significant value in the way it kept him alert to the dangers of his own Auden-esque abstractions, continually prompted him to ask of his own poetry the question posed in “Rural Objects”: “to whom is all this?” After providing this example of how Ashbery cleaved marginally towards Auden's example, in the following section I'll explore the ways in which Ashbery came to resist Auden's later work, both as a means of critique and of self-development. His engagement with Auden's work implicitly criticizes the English poet's conception of Anglo-American cultural relations after his arrival in America, and advances an alternative reading of the Auden oeuvre, in which the innovative early poetry is recuperated and perpetuated in Ashbery's own work.

## II. “without description”: *The Orators* and *The Vermont Notebook*

Beyond his importance in developing Ashbery's various conceptions and articulations of his relations to coterie, perhaps the most significant influence exerted on Ashbery by Auden is through his innovations in the prose poem. There are two strands to this aspect of Auden's legacy. The first relates to *The Sea and the Mirror*, Ashbery's favourite of Auden's poems, which has had a profound impact on the former's development, as a host of critics from David Herd to Aidan Wasley have demonstrated. The second is the more complex case of *The Orators*, that curious anomaly within Auden's oeuvre which combines various forms of prose and poetry, and whose presence in Ashbery's work is equally significant, though the complexities of that presence have yet to be properly attended to.

*The Sea and the Mirror*, an “epic of self-consciousness”, broadened Ashbery's understanding of what it was possible for a poem to contain and do. Its elastic, Jamesian syntax, luxurious range of

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<sup>95</sup> Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 194.

diction, and pervading sense of spaciousness and mobility can be seen as influential in all of Ashbery's major works, from "The Skaters" through to *Flow Chart*. Ashbery has a relatively uncomplicated relationship with the work, in that he admires it virtually without reservation, as he has demonstrated through his remarks on it throughout his career. In his undergraduate thesis on Auden, Ashbery praises *The Sea and the Mirror* as a work written in a "style in which clarity, transparency, wit, verbal decoration, and imagery are all superbly functional, so much so as to be invisible".<sup>96</sup> This assessment of Auden's poem as "transparent" is, as Stephen Ross has shown, among Ashbery's highest terms of praise, since it suggests an achievement of such magnitude and completeness that critical engagement is virtually precluded. Ashbery has stated in interview that "to create a work of art that the critic cannot even talk about ought to be the artist's chief concern", and "transparency" is, in many senses, a term for that salutary foreclosure or denial of critical engagement. As a counterpoint to the traditional symbolist poem, which depends upon a critic for elucidation and exegesis, the "transparent" poetics of Auden—among a number of other poets to whom Ashbery ascribes the quality, including Pierre Reverdy and Friedrich Hölderlin—aim to create a non-symbolic terrain which is always "trying to bury itself in the landscape" of itself, a landscape in which the reader becomes immersed in turn.<sup>97</sup> Such a poem becomes, in Ashbery's view, "a superior form of criticism in itself", and as such any comment upon that commentary veers towards tautology.<sup>98</sup> Ashbery offers an account of his aversion to the kind of highly structured, systemic composition exemplified by Eliot, and his attraction to the alternative Auden's work seemed to offer, earlier in the thesis: "[Auden] depends more on the witty instantaneous localizing of its objects rather than on the detailed exploration of certain truths, on clear adjectives and far-fetched parallels rather than a continuous system of related metaphors throughout a poem".<sup>99</sup> He would develop this rejection of a "continuous system of related metaphors" in *Three Poems*. Its

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<sup>96</sup> "The Poetic Medium of W.H. Auden", Ashbery Papers, Box 31.

<sup>97</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 316.

<sup>98</sup> Wasley, *The Age of Auden*, 141-2.

<sup>99</sup> "The poetic medium of W.H. Auden", Ashbery Papers, Box 31.

central resemblance to Auden's poem lies in its “transparency” of purpose, its own epic self-consciousness, which is realised so exhaustively that it “manages to render itself immune to critical analysis or even paraphrase”, as Ashbery wrote of David Schubert.<sup>100</sup> Towards the end of “The System”, Ashbery begins a new paragraph in this fashion:

Inevitable, but so often postponed. Whole eras of history have sprung up in the gaps left by these pauses, dynasties, barbarian invasions and so on until the grass and shards stage, and still the answer is temporarily delayed. During these periods one thought enclosed everything like the blue sky of history: that it really was this one and no other. As long as this is the case everything else can take its course, time can flow into eternity leaving a huge deltalike deposit whose fan broadens and broadens and is my life, the time I am taking; we get up in the morning and blow on some half-dead coals, maybe for the last time; my hair is white and straggly and I hardly recognise my face any more, yet none of this matters so long as your reply twists it all together, the transparent axle of this particular chapter in history.<sup>101</sup>

This elastic series of statements seeks to achieve an Auden-esque, transparent self-reflexiveness; its sweeping, time-bending account of its own formal gesture in concluding and beginning a new paragraph would outstrip even the most ambitious critical account. The poem's “invisible goal of concrete diversity”, of being as various as the experiences the reader can bring to it, is achieved in this instance not through abstraction or vagueness but by an Auden-esque free-floating specificity, the “witty instantaneous localizing of its objects” animating the passage's bland arguments, the “far-fetched parallels” vitalizing its broad, self-descriptive conceptual gestures.<sup>102</sup> The similes and metaphors Ashbery employs give the impression of being incidental, and certainly do not accrete into the circumscribed system of meaningful symbols typical of the symbolist poem: “the system”, the poem reminds us at its opening, “was breaking down”.<sup>103</sup> Most importantly, there seems to be no detectable antagonism between the two texts; Ashbery's poem appears to be a benign extension of Auden's, a vast elaboration of its conceptual premise. The relation between Ashbery and Auden is simplest, and least fractious, in the relation established between these two poems.

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<sup>100</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 128.

<sup>101</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 312.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>103</sup> This line echoes Auden's own diagnosis of crumbling societal and aesthetic systems in *The Orators*: “Systems run to a standstill”, “A system organises itself, if interaction is undisturbed”. (Auden, *The Orators*, 16, 41.)

The presence of *The Orators* in Ashbery's work is more complex. Indeed, it can be viewed as the minor or imperfect double of *The Sea and the Mirror*; its formal variety, five-part structure, vast range of speakers and dazzling range of diction foreshadowing the later work.<sup>104</sup> The agile, witty, unstable prose and poetry of *The Orators*, which John Shoptaw has called “the single most productive poem behind Ashbery's own poetry”, introduced Ashbery to a host of post-modernist techniques and ideas, among the most significant for his later work being its irreverent use of traditional forms, a polyvocality which runs from Steinian pastiche to the rhetoric of the public school master, and the incorporation of demotic speech into the poem, as Ashbery has remarked: “What immediately struck me was his use of colloquial speech—I didn't think you were supposed to do that in poetry.”<sup>105</sup> The significance of this example for Ashbery's later poetry can hardly be exaggerated; indeed, the incorporation of demotic speech is one of the centrally constitutive features of Ashbery's work, consistently present from *Some Trees* through to his most recent work. As significant for Ashbery was the sheer range and ambition of *The Orators*, not just in the breadth of verse forms and dialects employed, but in its attempt to create a portrait of a culture and period through this formal and stylistic variety. John Fuller has described Auden's volume as “a portrait of a culture sketched both by social and political allusion . . . a self-referential display of literary and verbal forms, and . . . a quasi-autobiographical analysis of a variety of socially embedded rites of initiation, conflict and sympathetic magic”.<sup>106</sup> The social and political implications of utilising a range of verbal forms, then, were arguably first revealed to Ashbery through *The Orators*. Its explicit engagement with gay experience, and the linguistic encryptions necessarily employed to communicate those experiences, resonate throughout Ashbery's early work. Ben Hickman's assessment that Auden's use of parataxis functions as “a formal imitation of the disjointed, schizophrenic and confused mental lives of characters living in 'the modern world'” summarises

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<sup>104</sup> These structural symmetries are noted by Edward Mendelson in W.H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror*, ed. Arthur C. Kirsch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 70.

<sup>105</sup> Stitt, “The Art of Poetry”.

<sup>106</sup> Fuller, *W.H. Auden*, 86.

well the connection the poet establishes between expressive modes and social contexts.<sup>107</sup>

One of the most important “verbal forms” Ashbery drew from *The Orators* was the list or catalogue. Many of the critics who have written on Ashbery's relationship with Auden have noted that Ashbery picked up this technique in part from the English poet. What these critics have failed to do, however, is to distinguish between Ashbery's very different usages of the list as a poetic device across his career, and consequently neglected to see when it is intended as an homage to Auden, and when it is employed as a rejoinder. Ashbery's relationship with Auden changes dramatically over the course of three decades, and the American poet's various uses of prose poetry—and particularly the technique of the list—provide a sensitive index of those changes. If *Three Poems* can be viewed as Ashbery's ultimate tribute to, and extension of, the early Auden whose achievement culminated in *The Sea and the Mirror*, *The Vermont Notebook* can be read as a balancing riposte to the later Auden. The poet Ashbery is addressing in this later volume is the Auden who, after his move to America, produced work that was “*too chatty and too self-congratulatory at not being 'poetry with a capital P'*”, and was unable to see the value in those parts of his own oeuvre—particularly *The Orators*—which Ashbery cherished the most. Just as importantly, *The Vermont Notebook* resists the Auden who had become an outspoken, culturally-conservative public figure, and who had reacted against his adopted home in the USA in a series of volatile essays. It is this combination of poetic and cultural conservatism in the later Auden which Ashbery addresses directly in his use of *The Orators*, and led to a significant development of Ashbery's ideas regarding his own relation to “English” and “American” poetic traditions.

Ashbery's undergraduate thesis on Auden is a vital resource for understanding his relationship with *The Orators*, as it contains many observations which set the terms of his engagement with the English poet and which resonate throughout his own poetry. Particularly relevant, as mentioned above, are his remarks regarding Auden's cataloguing tendencies:

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<sup>107</sup> Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry*, 150.

Instead of the traditional presentation and examination of an object, its illumination through metaphor and simile, Auden gives us lists of objects interesting and significant without description; which are, indeed, often only novel, and then draws or allows to be drawn the poetic conclusion.<sup>108</sup>

As Hickman has argued, Auden's lists represent for Ashbery a nascent form of parataxis, the consequences of which for the latter's style are substantial; indeed, Hickman goes so far as to say that "insofar as Ashbery has a prosody, it is Auden-esque".<sup>109</sup> This overstates the case a little, but it pays due attention to the significance of the list as a hugely fertile and versatile technique. Rather than tracing the prosodic consequences of Auden's lists, however, initially I would like to re-frame Ashbery's appreciation of Auden's cataloguing tendencies to emphasise its attention to poetic objects presented "without description".

The immediately striking thing about Auden's lists is the difficulty of determining the grouping principles for the elements they contain. Here are two examples from *The Orators*:

A leading article accuses prominent citizens of arson, barratry, coining, dozing in municipal offices, espionage, family skeletons, getting and bambling, heresy, issuing or causing to be issued false statements with intent to deceive, jingoism, keeping disorderly houses, mental cruelty, loitering, nepotism, onanism, piracy on the high seas, quixotry, rumping at forbidden hours, sabotage, tea-drinking, unnatural offences against minors, vicious looks, will-burning, a yellow streak, is on the table of every householder in time for a late breakfast.<sup>110</sup>

One charms by thickness of wrist; one by variety of positions; one has a beautiful skin, one a fascinating smell. One has prominent eyes, is bold at accosting. One has water sense; he can dive like a swallow without using his hands. One is obeyed by dogs, one can bring down snipe on the wing. One can do cart wheels before theatre queues; one can slip through a narrow ring. One with a violin can conjure up images of running water; one is skilful at improvising a fugue; the bowel tremors at the pedal-entry. One amuses by pursing his lips; or can imitate the neigh of a randy stallion. One casts metal in black sand; one wipes the eccentrics of a great engine with cotton waste. One jumps out of windows for profit . . .<sup>111</sup>

Since both lists are compiled according to an indeterminate or concealed governing principle, they can be said to re-direct our search for a unifying context away from the page. In its simplest form, the grammaticality of the first list appears to be the crime, organised alphabetically. And yet there

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<sup>108</sup> Ashbery, "The poetic medium of W.H. Auden", Ashbery Papers, Box 31.

<sup>109</sup> Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry*, 151.

<sup>110</sup> Auden, *The Orators*, 69.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

are non-criminal acts included under this rubric—"vicious looks" and "tea-drinking"—and as such the purpose of the list seems to be to question not just some of the other "crimes" and the terms employed to determine that legal status ("unnatural", for example, is a highly charged word in this context), but the validity of categorical thinking wholesale. That "keeping disorderly houses" is followed by "mental cruelty, loitering", the proper alphabetical positions reversed, is typical of Auden's geeky wit, but it maintains a serious satirical thrust. In the second instance, we are presented with a list of characteristics and features of an undetermined number of individuals which have been collated seemingly at random. When the implied grammaticality of a list doesn't cohere, as in this instance, we are confronted even more forcefully with the possibility that ordering categories as a general principle are not to be trusted. The absurdity of speaking of a particular group of society—such as gay men—as a homogeneous entity is surely the subject of such rampant, resistant diversity. In this way, Auden expressed how particular prosodic effects, such as parataxis and anaphora, can be used as a form of sociological critique.

The list makes itself felt in much of Ashbery's early work. There is "Into the Dusk-Charged Air", of course, with its riverine uncoiling:

Far from the Rappahannock, the silent  
Danube moves along toward the sea.  
The brown and green Nile rolls slowly  
Like the Niagara's welling descent.  
Tractors stood on the green banks of the Loire  
Near where it joined the Cher.  
The St. Lawrence prods among black stones  
And mud. But the Arno is all stones.  
Wind ruffles the Hudson's  
Surface. The Irawaddy is overflowing . . .

Here we might say that Auden's presence is a salutary one; providing Ashbery with a structural anchor (one river per line, more or less), the list permits him to explore fluid, reticulated syntax as the primary expressive form of the poem. Many of the poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* have an Auden-esque ambience to them; the list makes itself felt as a structuring principle, a form in which a "bunch of impressions" might be dropped without explanation or justification. A test-piece for

“Into the Dusk-Charged Air”, “The Suspended Life”, features the following Auden-esque catalogue, which is closer in tone to the irreverent humour of *The Orators* than the serene, elegant later poem: “Isn't Idaho the wolverine state / Anyway Ohio is the flower state / New York is the key state. Bandana is the population state. In the hay states of Pennsylvania and Arkansas / I lay down and slept.”<sup>112</sup> John Shoptaw has rightly noted how the evocations of spying and intrigue in “Europe” have an intonation and atmosphere reminiscent of *Poems*; in a wry acknowledgement of this debt, section 51 seems to describe the Auden-esque “stamp” of many of the poem's impressions: “They are written upon English paper, and English penny stamps are upon them . . .”<sup>113</sup> One of the most neglected, and incidentally one of Ashbery's least favourite, poems from the volume, “The Ascetic Sensualists”, is structurally and thematically related to *The Orators*, particularly the *Airman's Journal*. Here is the conclusion of the *Journal*:

*Fourth Day.*

All menstruation ceases. Vampires are common in the neighbourhood of the Cathedral, epidemic of lupus, halitosis, and superfluous hair.

*Fifth Day.*

Pressure of ice, falling fire. The last snarl of families beneath the toppling column. Biting at wounds as the sutures tear.

*24<sup>th</sup>.*

Four days. What's the use of counting them now?<sup>114</sup>

And a section of Ashbery's similarly-segmented poem:

FOURTH FUNERAL

So we sabotaged the car  
 The rangers loved. Not to protect  
 Is to give all, we found  
 Under the topical night.  
 The weeds, miserable, and yet, topmast,  
 The performance is worth knives.

We shall not call you  
 On that. Panorama. Over the glue garage  
 The sky was blue fudge.  
 The sky was white as flour—the sky

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<sup>112</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 67.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>114</sup> Auden, *The Orators*, 71.

Like some baker's apron. Or the margarine  
Of an April day. Pig. The sea. Ancient smoke.

#### FIFTH FUNERAL

After the New Year  
The tide changed.  
Green thorns flushed in from the New England coasts and swamps,  
All kinds of things  
To make you think. Oh heart  
You need these things, leaves and nubile weeds,  
I guess, ever present.  
They changed the time  
And we were supposed to be back an hour earlier.<sup>115</sup>

Both Auden's and Ashbery's poems might be said to offer us a series of “objects interesting and significant without description; which are, indeed, often only novel”. In addition to their clear structural similarity, there are purposeful overlaps in *types* of object included by both poems, and as a result it might be said that the principles governing Ashbery's poem resemble Auden's. The *Airman's* journal notates a widespread biological shift in the population (“All menstruation ceases”), self-inflicted injury (“biting at wounds as the sutures tear”), supernatural occurrences (“Vampires”, “epidemic...of superfluous hair”) and intimations of revolution (“The last snarl of families beneath the toppling column”). Ashbery's poem offers imagery which shares an oblique causal or consequential relation to many of Auden's objects; lunar or bodily cycles (“After the New Year / The tide changed”), consistent intimations of harm (“The performance is worth knives”), suggestions of ritual practices (“Ancient smoke”) and attempted sabotage to existing, highly policed orders (“So we sabotaged the car / The rangers loved”). These similarities are itemised to suggest that with *The Tennis Court Oath* Ashbery was attempting to emulate the technical and perspectival expansion which Auden achieved with *The Orators*—enlarging the scope of his poetry beyond the predominantly subjective manoeuvres of *Some Trees* to include societal critique, however occluded or indirect.

The similarity in types of content found in both Ashbery and Auden's lists are, as Geoff

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<sup>115</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 80-1.

Ward has noted, one of Auden's primary legacies in Ashbery's writing, a consequence of a range of converging political and aesthetic issues.<sup>116</sup> Both Ward and Hickman seem unjustified, however, in their assertion that Ashbery appropriated Auden's style "while eschewing its politics"; it seems quite clear that "The Ascetic Sensualists" is as vivid a depiction of its own historical moment as the *Airman's Journal*. Regardless of the degree and type of its influence, however, it's clear that *The Orators* was of prime importance for the early Ashbery. His impression of Auden as "the modern poet" was founded on its innovations, and it's arguable that it had a crucial liberating effect upon his imagination. However, Auden later rejected *The Orators*, and in doing so rejected a work which, along with *The Sea and the Mirror*, was closest to Ashbery's own developing aesthetic position. In doing so, the mentor distanced himself from his student, a consequence of which was a failure or refusal to note potentially productive continuities between their poetries. Ward has observed how little Auden recognised his own presence in Ashbery's early poetry, stating that "Auden noticed the Surrealist influence on *Some Trees*, but, by an understandable irony, missed the influence of his own early work, about which he now felt uncomfortable".<sup>117</sup> Ashbery himself saw it not so much as a blindness to the two poets' association, as a deliberate rejection on the elder poet's part, as he remarked in an interview from 1986:

He doesn't write much about the book in the introduction. He compares my work to Arthur Rimbaud, which is very nice, except I don't think Auden liked Rimbaud at all! In later years, he told somebody that he had not been able to understand a line of my poetry. In this case, "the anxiety of influence" seems to have got reversed—my father-figure as a poet is rejecting *me*, not the other way round . . .<sup>118</sup>

The most public manifestation of this rejection of Ashbery's poetry was, oddly, in the foreword to *Some Trees*, which Auden had selected for the Yale Younger Poets series. Auden's "remarkably disaffected" introduction is an extraordinary document, which offers insight not just into his view of

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<sup>116</sup> "Auden's homosexuality ran counter to the laws prevailing for most of his lifetime, and could not be given direct expression in his poetry. Obliquity, menace, anxiety and a forlorn self-consciousness are hallmarks made emphatic by the Depression and danger on the political horizon at the end of the twenties. The stylistic consequences of these pressures have helped shape Ashbery's writings, though the latter emerged in a different climate, with less direct menace on either the personal or the political front". (Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 131.)

<sup>117</sup> Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 96.

<sup>118</sup> "Interview with John Ashbery", *City Limits*, November 20-27, 1986.

Ashbery, but the older Auden's attitudes towards the dream-like ambiguities in which his younger self had dealt.<sup>119</sup> Ashbery himself makes this connection between his own work and Auden's early poetry in his *Paris Review* interview, the implication being that Ashbery's first book offered a forum for Auden to articulate his growing sense of distance from his younger self:

Auden was of two minds about my own work. He once said he never understood a line of it. On the other hand he published *Some Trees* in the Yale Younger Poets Series. You'll remember, though, that he once said in later life that one of his early works, *The Orators*, must have been written by a madman.<sup>120</sup>

Edward Mendelson identifies the central issue at stake when he observes that Auden's introduction is an attempt to write “a prose manifesto” on the problem of poetry describing subjective experience versus a poetry of social engagement. Auden's aversion to Romanticism in favour of an outward-looking, socially-engaged poetics is well-documented; to take only one example, in the introduction to the *Oxford Book of Light Verse*, he criticises Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Hölderlin for having “turned away from the life of their time to the contemplation of their own emotions and the creation of imaginary worlds”.<sup>121</sup> Auden saw himself as an oppositional force, “preoccupied with reconnecting the artist to the actual world”, conscious of the fact that a purely inward-looking poetry would be limited in its resources: “the private world is fascinating, but it is exhaustible”.<sup>122</sup> In Auden's view, *Some Trees* fell within this tradition of reprehensible interiority, as he indicated not just in his introduction (by invoking the example of Rimbaud) but also in a letter to Frank O'Hara: “I think you [and John] must watch what is always the great danger with any 'surrealistic' style, namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue”.<sup>123</sup> The introduction's reading of “Illustration”, one of the most Auden-esque of Ashbery's early lyrics, provides the English poet not only with an opportunity to refute the supposed solipsism of Romanticism but his own earlier self,

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<sup>119</sup> Richard Howard, “John Ashbery”, in Harold Bloom, ed. *Modern Critical Views: John Ashbery* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 21.

<sup>120</sup> Stitt, “The Art of Poetry”.

<sup>121</sup> W.H. Auden, *Prose, Volume I: 1926-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 434.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

<sup>123</sup> Quoted in Perloff, *Frank O'Hara*, 62.

the poet of *The Orators* who involved himself in the mythology of Mortmere and was “a year or two from becoming a Nazi”: “the subject of Mr. Ashbery's “Illustration” is a woman who acts out her private mythology and denies the reality of anything outside herself; that is to say, she is insane”. Despite Auden's qualifying note of identification with the novice, his reading of the poem represents, in Mendelson's words, “a lesson for the young poet”.<sup>124</sup>

The aesthetic distancing from surrealism (“No, surrealists, no! No, even the wildest of poems / must, like prose, have a firm basis in staid common-sense”) and his own earlier work, as articulated in the introduction, was prompted, in Ashbery's view, by an associated conservatism in Auden's social and cultural attitudes which followed his move to the US.<sup>125</sup> There is a mixture of disappointment and irritation in Ashbery's observation that Auden “seems never really to have come to terms with his adopted homeland, at least the part of it west of the Hudson river”.<sup>126</sup> Auden's investment in the idea of a socially-engaged poetry presupposed the existence of recognisable society to engage with; something the disorientating diversity and fluidity of American society did not provide. The older Auden was incapable of embracing America in the way the younger Auden might have; indeed, of Auden's two tutelary spirits, Whitman and Arnold—“Arnold speaking for his English past and Whitman for his American present”<sup>127</sup>—Auden moved incrementally closer to Arnold during his time in America. What resulted were frequent outbursts against his “big and empty and noisy and messy” adopted home.<sup>128</sup> Provocative, generalising asides about the American landscape and people occur with curious frequency in his essays and book reviews of the 1960s and 1970s. Auden's conception of the country as a “country as yet untouched by history”, a place of

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<sup>124</sup> Mark Ford's observation that by asserting “one cannot possibly like Prospero” Auden reflects his “ever-gathering distrust of the Prospero-ish gifts with which he had himself been showered, and his dislike of the drive towards an authoritative, enchanting rhetoric so exuberantly enacted in his own early work” is pertinent here. (*A Driftwood Altar*, 144.)

<sup>125</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 857. Randall Jarrell's account of Auden's decline remains definitive: “Auden at the beginning was oracular (obscure, original), bad at organization, neglectful of logic, full of astonishing or magical language, intent on his own world and his own forms; he has changed continuously toward organization, plainness, accessibility, objectivity, social responsibility”. (Randall Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden and Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935-1964* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 48.)

<sup>126</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 241.

<sup>127</sup> Wasley, *The Age of Auden*, 49.

<sup>128</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 450.

agonistic relations between humans and nature, is articulated many times.<sup>129</sup> In one revealing passage, he goes so far as formulate the battle between “Nature” and “man” in this most English of analogies: “Nature is seen as the Other, the blind neuter savage realm of necessity against which man must pit his will and his wits; nature, so to speak, is the dragon and man St. George”.<sup>130</sup> In other instances, Auden seems less vitalised by this imagined antagonism, but rather daunted by a vision of human insignificance in the vast space of America:

It is an unforgettable experience for anyone born on the other side of the Atlantic to take a plane journey by night across the United States. Looking down he will see the lights of some town like a last outpost in a darkness stretching for hours ahead, and realize that, even if there is no longer an actual frontier, this is still a continent only partially settled and developed, where human activity seems a tiny thing in comparison to the magnitude of the earth, and the equality of men not some dogma of politics or jurisprudence but a self-evident fact. He will behold a wild nature, compared with which the landscapes of *Salvator Rosa* are as cosy as *Arcadia* and which cannot possibly be thought of in human or personal terms.<sup>131</sup>

Needless to say, the disregard for the historical development of North America, and for the experiences of others, evident in these remarks runs counter to Ashbery's own, historically-engaged vision of the USA, as evidenced by “Pyrography” and “Grand Gallop”, among many other works. Such views can be found, articulated in lighter form, in Auden's later verse, as in the flippant, complacent “On the Circuit”, which describes Auden's obligations as a touring speaker:

Another morning comes: I see  
Dwindling before me on the plane,  
The roofs of one more audience  
I shall not see again.

God bless the lot of them although  
I don't remember which was which:  
God bless the U.S.A., so large,  
So friendly, and so rich.<sup>132</sup>

In such instances, Auden was, in Aidan Wasley's view, projecting his own feelings of bewilderment

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<sup>129</sup> Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 359.

<sup>130</sup> Auden, W.H. Auden, *Prose, Volume III: 1949-1955* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 373.

<sup>131</sup> Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 358.

<sup>132</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 731.

and isolation onto the landscape, “which he then extrapolated onto the rest of its citizens”.<sup>133</sup> This sense of personal and existential isolation had direct stylistic consequences. In a letter to MacNeice, Auden connected the vastness and loneliness of the USA with a feeling that aesthetic innovation was futile: “In America, [the artist] is just lonely, but so . . . is everybody else; with 140 million lonelies milling around him he need not waste his time in conforming or rebelling”.<sup>134</sup> His personal unhappiness, his sense of being out of step with the culture of the 1960s, and his dissatisfaction with his political and cultural environment, inflected his late poetry in a way Ashbery found increasingly alienating and dispiriting. He wrote in stanzaic forms employed to resist the kind of poetry Ashbery produced, traditional forms and metrical rules which “forbid automatic responses, / force us to have second thoughts, free from the fetters of the self”.<sup>135</sup> For Ashbery, Auden became a caricature; having begun his career as an innovator and iconoclast, he concluded it as an arch-traditionalist.

These two traits—the increasing domesticity and conservatism of his verse, and his tendency to rattle off screeds against his idea of “America”—were, in Ashbery's mind, closely associated. They were, crucially, also related to what Ashbery perceived to be a shift in the national “character” of Auden's written output. In an unpublished letter to Piotr Sommer, Ashbery wrote:

You aren't correct in assuming that American poets have not had any influence on me. Even though Auden was the first modern poet I read with pleasure, he was in a sense an American poet, and not just because he lived there. In a funny way, I think you could say his pre-American poetry was American (in his restless experimentation), while the poetry he wrote in his years in America was more English, perhaps out of a nostalgia for English neatness and conventions which he might have experienced during life in the barbarous wastes in America. After coming to modern poetry through Auden, I next turned to Williams, Stevens, Whitman, Crane and all the others. There is still, however, a fascination with great English poetry of the past which I think almost any American poet has.<sup>136</sup>

Ashbery's conception of Englishness and Americanness in this passage is complex, and suggests how each changes in accordance with the context and poet being discussed, as later comparable

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<sup>133</sup> Wasley, *The Age of Auden*, 52.

<sup>134</sup> Patrick Deane, “Auden's England”, in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, 33.

<sup>135</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 856. Auden's emphasis on form brings to mind Edna Longley's discussion of Yeats' late “over-insistence on form” as a deliberate response to the “formless spawning fury” of Pound's modernity. In Ford and Clark, eds. *Something We Have That They Don't*, 46.

<sup>136</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Piotr Sommer, 7 January 1981. Ashbery Papers, Box 25.

pronouncements in relation to Prince, Harwood and Ford will demonstrate. In this instance, Englishness functions as a means through which Ashbery can articulate his own distinct poetic identity as an “American” poet. This not only entails a rejection of the later Auden, but an appropriation of the early Auden for a specifically American poetic tradition of innovation. I will discuss at length the importance of this appropriative gesture in chapter 3, in relation to Harwood and John Clare. For now it is sufficient to say that, much as Eliot once stated, regarding his ambiguous Anglo-American national identity, that “whichever Auden is, I suppose I must be the other”, Ashbery exaggerates into caricature his impressions of the national and poetic characters of England and America in order to differentiate himself decisively from Auden. Such crude simplifications are unusual for Ashbery, and are explicable only by reference to Auden's own pronouncements on Anglo-American relations; that is, Ashbery's harnessing of Anglo-American poetic dialogues in order to repudiate the work of the later Auden should be understood as responding to the English poet's own simplifications and rejections of American culture. Broadly speaking, the relation Ashbery establishes with English literary tradition is much as Terry Eagleton describes, when he states non-English modernists from James to Joyce to Pound could “approach indigenous English traditions from the outside, objectify and appropriate them for their own devious ends, estrange and inhabit English culture in a single act, as those reared within its settled pieties could not”.<sup>137</sup> Ashbery's national caricature in this instance is thus a simultaneous “estrangement” from and an “inhabitation” of an English poetic tradition, a series of remarks both satirical in intent and offered as a means of establishing independence from Auden; a re-assertion of the significant American lineage of Ashbery's poetry in response to Sommer's suggestion that its English sources are more important.

The position of Auden's which Ashbery is parodying here—“nostalgia for English neatness and conventions which he might have experienced during life in the barbarous wastes in

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<sup>137</sup> Terry Eagleton, “The end of English”, *Journal of Literary Studies*, Volume 2, Issue 3, 1986, 1-8.

America”—is most fulsomely articulated by the English poet in an essay, “The American Scene”, first published in the New York Review of Books in 1972, then republished in *The Dyer's Hand*. It is ostensibly a review of Henry James's *The American Scene*, but also provides a forum for some of Auden's most trenchant criticisms, and inspired observations, on American modernity. It also provides Ashbery with the formal model and subject for *The Vermont Notebook*.

Auden's argument in “The American Scene” ranges over a good deal of territory. It reaches its climax in a discussion of the question of “nearness” and Henry James's notion of “The Great Good Place”. Auden reads James's story not as the “vulgar daydream of a rich bourgeois intellectual”, as F. O. Matthiessen does, but as a “religious parable”: the “great good place” being not a “social Utopia, but a spiritual state which is attainable by the individual now”. The essay concludes with the following paragraph, beginning with a quotation from James's short story:

'Every man must arrive by himself and on his own feet—isn't that so? We're Brothers here for the first time as in a great monastery, and we immediately think of each other and recognize each other as such: but we must have first got here as we can, and we meet after long journeys by complicated ways.'

'Where is it?'

'I shouldn't be surprised if it were much nearer than one ever suspected.'

'Nearer “town,” do you mean?'

'Nearer everything—nearer everyone.'

Yes. Nearer everything. Nearer than James himself, perhaps, suspected, to the “hereditary thinness” of the American Margin, to “the packed and hoisted basket” and the “torture rooms of the living idiom,” nearer to the unspeakable jukeboxes, the horrible Rockettes and the insane salads, nearer to the anonymous countryside littered with heterogeneous *dreck* and the synonymous cities besotted with electric sign, nearer to radio commercials and congressional oratory and Hollywood Christianity, nearer to all the “democratic” lusts and licenses, without which, perhaps, the analyst and the immigrant alike would never understand by contrast the nature of the Good Place nor desire it with sufficient desperation to stand a chance of arriving.<sup>138</sup>

In this passage, Auden seems to be suggesting that the ideal of the Good Place can only be known by antithesis. The reprehensible forms of expression, commerce, and spirituality displayed across the US are valuable simply by throwing into relief “by contrast the nature of the Good Place”. This reactionary position is as far from the early Auden—who Ashbery praised for “bring people closer

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<sup>138</sup> Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 321.

to their own lives”—as it is from the Ashbery who would mine the endlessly rich and heterogeneous American vernaculars for his own poetry. Beyond this vivid depiction of the “barbarous wastes” of America, another passage from Auden's essay seems to provide a structural or procedural template for *The Vermont Notebook*:

Indeed, perhaps the best way to approach it is as a prose poem of the first order, i.e. to suspend, for the time being, one's own conclusions about America and Americans, and to read on slowly, relishing it sentence by sentence, for it is no more a guidebook than 'Ode to a Nightingale' is an ornithological essay. It is not even necessary to start at the beginning or read with continuity; one can open it at almost any page . . . James' firsthand experiences were, necessarily, mostly those of a tourist, namely scenic objects, landscapes, buildings, the faces and behaviour of strangers, and his own reflections on what the objects stood for.<sup>139</sup>

Auden's description of James's book could be transposed directly onto Ashbery's work. This is, I think, a quite deliberate move on Ashbery's part. Taking Auden's dismissive observations of American culture as its impetus, *The Vermont Notebook* sets out to produce a work which treats America with the same wit, attention and complexity with which Auden addressed inter-war England in *The Orators*. It does so not only by pointedly reproducing those techniques which Auden had by 1975 distanced himself from, but by combining them with the methods of James's book as Auden describes them with heavy condescension. With this context in place, the extensive structural and stylistic similarities between the two texts seem less a simple act of homage than a complicated mixture of pastiche and censure on Ashbery's part.

*The Vermont Notebook* is, in structural, thematic and stylistic terms, as direct and sustained a response to *The Orators* as Ashbery has produced. It is, importantly, a collaboration with Joe Brainard, a gesture which brings to mind Auden's own early collaborations with Isherwood on *The Ascent of F6* and MacNeice in *Letters from Iceland*. It was composed on bus journeys around New England, thereby obtaining the same relation between its ostensible subject (“Vermont”) and the location of its writing as *The Orators*, an “English study” which was written in Scotland, where Auden was working as a master at Helensburgh School from 1930 to 1932. It is, as Ashbery has

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 310.

remarked, quite deliberately about the uniformity Auden describes with such distaste in his essay, being “a catalogue of a number of things that could be found in the state of Vermont, as well as almost anywhere else—another 'democratic vista’”.<sup>140</sup> It is a mixture of original compositions and found material, taken from a variety of sources, including the *Boston Globe*, anonymously-authored postcards, articles about ecological projects, and lonely-hearts columns from local newspapers. It is Ashbery's most “American” book; indeed, in draft form, it was entitled “American Notes”, bringing to mind the eponymous journals published by two English writers, Dickens and Kipling, about their visits to the US. It engages satirically with these books' more outrageous observations about Americans, and in doing so supplies an implied lineage for Auden's own remarks on the country, suggesting he operated within a tradition of English condescension to the US. Richard Bozorth has suggested that Auden's poem is “a kind of anthropological examination of English culture and language, particularly the ways in which political power is exerted through rhetoric”, and the same might be said of *The Vermont Notebook*, taking America—and all its “overlapping strata of reality and artifice”—as its subject. While *The Orators* takes as its organising institution the public school, Ashbery takes, with punning deliberateness, the summer camp (“real camp life”) and the Sunday school. Its use of a variety of rhetorical styles and forms of address—listing devices, correspondence, journal entries, interleaved verse—is as various as Auden's book, while the position it holds within Ashbery's oeuvre resembles, in some respects, that which *The Orators* holds in Auden's; its self-conscious atypicality, in terms of its inclusion of elements—particularly proper names—otherwise excluded for the large part from Ashbery's poetry, means that it has been viewed as a “dumping ground” for those elements the poet did not want to include elsewhere.

Early in the volume, Ashbery explicitly alludes to his text's deep engagement with Auden. This list of crimes is a clear signpost of the debt he owes to *The Orators*, and yet it also conveys its own departures from its source-text:

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<sup>140</sup> Quoted in William Watkin, *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde* (Bucknell University Press, 2001), 219.

Murder, incest, arson, rape, grand larceny, extortion, forgery, impersonating an officer, resisting arrest, loitering, soliciting, possession of a controlled substance, drunken driving, reckless endangerment, slander, mental cruelty, non-assistance of person in danger, perjury, embezzlement, sodomy, child abuse, cruelty to animals, bootlegging, adultery, bigamy, bearing false witness.<sup>141</sup>

Ashbery's list of crimes overlaps exactly with Auden's in only one instance—mental cruelty—but there are other paraphrases of Auden's list to suggest both sympathy with and deviation from the elder poet. The notation of “forgery” and “impersonating an officer” are playful acknowledgements of Ashbery's appropriation of Auden's poetic techniques, and yet its positioning of Auden as the “officer”, the figure on the side of an oppressive establishment, is also significant. It suggests that Auden has gone from a poet who in his early work satirised the absurdity of categorical thinking to one who enforces orthodoxy, who metes out punishment to those who deviate from the law. There are clear engagements with the Auden of “The American Scene” too, particularly in its engagement with the question of “nearness” and Henry James's notion of “The Great Good Place”. This attitude towards the things and objects of the US is what Ashbery deliberately resists, in a paragraph which seems to explicitly invoke Auden's conception of “nearness” in his reading of James, as well as Ashbery's own “sympathy” for Auden:

8 mi to Danbury (Charles Ives). Can I believe that I am back on this same freeway. What startles though is the relation of the hills to the towns—their *nearness*. Their complete—yet benign—lack of cooperation. Bit of old Charlie there. Yet also—reminds me of certain people I know. You can't always trust those most in sympathy with you, with your ideals. Often it's the warmth and understanding you obtain only from the sliest of your enemies that is your life's blood, your symbol of why you are on earth.<sup>142</sup>

The idea of Auden as an implementer of regulations has some biographical resonance, as it's arguable that some of the more explicitly scatological elements of *The Vermont Notebook*—particularly the much-discussed “dump” passage—seem to have an oblique relation to Auden's role as editor of *Some Trees*. In an interview with John Tranter, Ashbery recalled that

[Auden] had a couple of problems with three or four poems that were in my manuscript, and asked me if I would take them out. In fact they were ones I didn't particularly like myself, so I removed them. I think there was some sort of scatological language in them

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<sup>141</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 339.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

that he objected to. He was quite prudish, in his way. I thought he was right, really, in these particular instances.<sup>143</sup>

Schmidt has suggested that “the appearance and disappearance of the scatological from Ashbery's work . . . serves as an index of the poet's position along a spectrum of obedience-disobedience to factions of his readership, whether to conservative critics like Bloom or poet-mentors like Auden”.<sup>144</sup> This seems to me a valid reading of how *The Vermont Notebook* situates itself in relation to Auden. Its use of scatological language as an index brings to mind Auden's late poem “The Geography of the House”, from *About the House* (1965), which in its schoolboyish humour might well be the kind of poem Ashbery has in mind when he speaks of Auden's later poetry being “too chatty and too self-congratulatory at not being 'poetry with a capital P'”. The poem mixes parodically “high” allusions to St. Augustine, Freud and Swift with infantile euphemistic language:

Lifted off the potty,  
Infants from their mothers  
Hear their first impartial  
Words of worldly praise:  
Hence, to start the morning  
With a satisfactory  
Dump is a good omen  
All our adult days.<sup>145</sup>

This light verse is, for Ashbery, really prudishness masquerading as comedy. The later Auden couldn't conceive of “poetry with a capital P” as being able to include waste or excrement as a constituent part, and so it had to be relegated to his ostentatiously “light” verse; according to the same principle, he edited *Some Trees* to exclude the scatological elements. Ashbery's irritation with this prudishness results in his conversion of Auden's use of the phrase “a satisfactory / Dump” into an entire passage of “dumps”: “I will go to the dump. I am to be the dump. I was permanently the dump and now the dump is me, but I will be permanently me when I am no longer the dump air.

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<sup>143</sup> John Tranter, “John Ashbery in Conversation with John Tranter”, *Jacket* #2, 1997.

<http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html> Accessed August 6, 2015.

<sup>144</sup> Christopher Schmidt, *The Poetics of Waste: Queer Excess in Stein, Ashbery, Schuyler and Goldsmith* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 79.

<sup>145</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 698.

The dump air lasts”.<sup>146</sup> This concern with the representation of excrement provides a useful analogy for all of the other forms of content Auden sought to exclude, and which *The Vermont Notebook* as a consequence seeks to include, illuminate and ventriloquize: the “torture rooms of the living idiom . . . the unspeakable jukeboxes, the horrible Rockettes and the insane salads . . . the anonymous countryside littered with heterogeneous *dreck* and the synonymous cities besotted with electric signs . . . radio commercials and congressional oratory and Hollywood Christianity . . . all the “democratic” lusts and licenses”. In this way, it's arguable that *The Vermont Notebook* represents a form of resistance to the less waste-full poet Auden had attempted to shape Ashbery into through his editing of *Some Trees*; that is, a poet which the later, “prudish” Auden found acceptable. In this book, then, Ashbery attempts to recast himself in the image of the early Auden—himself so welcoming of textual “waste”—and in doing so expresses a gesture of simultaneous resistance and adherence to the same poet.

Significantly informing this complex relationship with different incarnations of Auden are, as previously suggested, a range of tense, unresolved Anglo-American literary contexts. There are signs throughout the volume that Ashbery is operating with his distinctly American lineage and technique in the foreground; this is the tradition, as described in his letter to Piotr Sommer, that Ashbery thought of himself as graduating into after his initial infatuation with Auden: “Williams, Stevens, Whitman, Crane and all the others”. Susan Rosenbaum is right to identify the multinational lineage of *The Vermont Notebook* in the “democratic catalogs of Walt Whitman and . . . the ready-mades of Duchamp”—indeed, it's hard not to see “*Duchamp*” in the repetitions of “dump” quoted above—and, of course, Stein is as significant a presence as any of those mentioned above.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, the absurd oppositions between “man” and “Nature” which the late Auden specialised in are exactly the kind of binaries *The Vermont Notebook* is, in deliberately Steinian fashion, interested in

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<sup>146</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 353.

<sup>147</sup> Susan Rosenbaum, “Permeation, Ventilation, Occlusion”: Reading John Ashbery and Joe Brainard's *The Vermont Notebook* in the Tradition of Surrealist Collaboration”, in Mark Silverberg, ed. *New York School Collaborations: The Color of Vowels* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 72.



to a captive audience of his toes  
retreat from rhyme and reason into some mallarmesque  
syllabic fog  
for half an hour<sup>151</sup>

Williams had earned this imitation in part through his 1948 lecture “The Poem as a Field of Action”, in which he had taken Auden to task for his enduring commitment to established verse forms, and his inability to take advantage of the American liberation from tradition which his move to the USA might have enabled:

Auden might have gone to France or to Italy or to South America or following Rimbaud to Ceylon or Timbuctoo. No! He came to the United States and became a citizen. Now the crisis, the only crisis which could drive a man, a distinguished poet, to that would be that he had come to an end of some sort in his poetic means—something that England could no longer supply, and that he came here implicitly to find an answer—in another language. As yet I see no evidence that he has found it...I wish I could enlist Auden in an attack, a basic attack upon the whole realm of structure in the poem. I have tried but without success so far. I think that’s what he came here looking for, I think he has failed to find it (it may be constitutional with him). I think we have disappointed him. Perhaps he has disappointed himself.<sup>152</sup>

Williams's final assessment of mutual disappointment here seems to anticipate Ashbery's own feelings about Auden's presence in America. It is natural, then, that in his moments of resistance to Auden—in his letter to Sommer, and in *The Vermont Notebook*—he should turn to Williams.

Ashbery positions the Williams of *Paterson*, of “no ideas but in things”, in opposition to the Auden of “The American Scene” in multiple ways. One of the most significant is in relation to the personified abstraction. By the mid 70s, the employment of allegorical figures was one of Auden's signature stylistic gestures, as Randall Jarrell noted, with obvious irritation, when describing Auden's *Another Time* as “like attending an Elk's Convention of Capital Letters”,<sup>153</sup> in which all manner of capitalised abstractions mingle, including the Present, the Past, the Future, the Brothered-One, the Not-Alone, the Just, the Happy-Go-Lucky, the Good Places, and so on. In one passage, *The Vermont Notebook* seems to pointedly lampoon such personifications: “Mrs. Threnody was

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<sup>151</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 703.

<sup>152</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 283.

<sup>153</sup> Stephen Burt, ed., *Randall Jarrell on W.H. Auden* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 50.

having Madam How and Lady Why in. They didn't understand. Mrs. T. was desperate.”<sup>154</sup> The page concludes with this peculiar scene: “But the man had wanted to speak. And all that he was able to get out was “thicity”. He was talking about himself—his “authenticity”? Or “this city”? No, not likely.” This collision of the self with “the city” explicitly invokes the most famous section of *Paterson*, which in its detailed attention to the quotidian “common language” and landscapes of America offered an affirmative alternative to Auden's bombastic rejection:

—Say it, no ideas but in things—  
nothing but the blank faces of the houses  
and cylindrical trees  
bent, forked by preconception and accident—  
split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained—  
secret—into the body of the light!

From above, higher than the spires, higher  
even than the office towers, from oozy fields  
abandoned to gray beds of dead grass,  
black sumac, withered weed-stalks,  
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves—  
the river comes pouring in above the city  
and crashes from the edge of the gorge  
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—

(What common language to unravel?  
. . . combed into straight lines  
from that rafter of a rock's  
lip.)

A man like a city and a woman like a flower  
—who are in love. Two women. Three women.  
Innumerable women, each like a flower.

But  
only one man—like a city.<sup>155</sup>

This turning away from Auden towards a self-characterised American poetic is signalled by this turn towards Williams, Stein, Whitman and O'Hara, poetry of things and of names. It is at the same time a lament for Auden's early, “American”, experimental work, which itself overlapped significantly with and was informed by Stein and Whitman. As such, the “national” status of this text remains

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<sup>154</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 365.

<sup>155</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 6-7.

indeterminate; it is Ashbery's most "American" book, yet it remains substantially informed by English and French poetics, and as such refuses to commit itself wholeheartedly to the forms of nationally-inflected rhetoric employed by Williams. Such instability informs our conception of the text's ambivalent relation to Auden; *The Vermont Notebook* can be seen as both a rebuke to the reactionary later Auden, and a continuation of the early work Auden rejected; a curious mixture of rejoinder and homage, as indistinguishable as its collage of found and original text, its distinctions between "nature" and "culture", and its American, French or English elements.

As these examples demonstrate, the presence of Auden's cataloguing tendencies in Ashbery's work takes on various meanings. In the early works, such as "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" and "The Ascetic Sensualists", Ashbery is clearly emulating the innovative techniques of *The Orators* in the hope of expanding his own range. Yet the lists of *The Vermont Notebook* show how Ashbery re-deployed these techniques in order to illuminate and resist the poet Auden later became, the reactionary conservative who Ashbery had to momentarily reject in favour of the distinctively American poetics of Williams and O'Hara. This prose-poem can be seen not just as a sensitive indicator of the highly conflicted relationship between Ashbery and Auden, but a unique forum in which Ashbery articulated his developing sense of his relations to national and poetic contexts. It can be seen as a crucial stage in Ashbery's positioning of himself in terms of Anglo-American poetic relations. Blasing's account of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century models of US-European poetic and political tensions is helpful in illustrating the significance of Ashbery's self-positioning as an American poet with equally significant debts to English and French poetics:

If Whitman challenges English and European literary traditions and institutions, it is because he is not—indeed, cannot be—oppositional to American political values and cultural experience, since the very ground of his work is its alignment with such experience. Hence Whitman's agony, as his century rolled on. Williams's career provides another example. His political and cultural values oppose England, personified half by his father and half by T.S. Eliot, by appealing to American political and cultural experience; since the gap between the ideal and the real is too glaring to be ignored, however, he turns increasingly reformist. O'Hara resists the reformist temptation; his aesthetic values are

inseparable from his culture's vices.<sup>156</sup>

Ashbery's variable and occasional identification with one nation or the other allows him to evade such questions. When he adopts the Whitmanian or Williams-esque pose, as in *The Vermont Notebook*, it is to protect the US from Auden's simplistic account of America, to advance it as a legitimate subject of attention; and yet he neither idealises US political and cultural experience nor grounds his work exclusively in it, makes it inseparable from it—he always remains an English or French poet equally. This strategy is not a form of evasion, but rather an attempt to rehearse both sides of an argument in order to foreground the rhetorical terms in which it has been conducted, to disprove the validity of such binaries. His relationship with Auden can be said, therefore, to have had a significant impact on Ashbery's conception of the relation between his nationality and his poetic identity. Furthermore, his re-deployment of formal elements of *The Orators* can be viewed as both satirical and recuperative; by inhabiting the processes of that volume, Ashbery signals its importance to him as a text to engage with, and as such provides a critical re-reading of the Auden canon. Using Auden's early work as a tool to disparage the late work, Ashbery performs a creative, critical gesture which provides an alternative account of Auden's career to the one the poet himself advanced. In doing so, Ashbery conducts a revisionary gesture which anticipates some of the subtle, idiosyncratic engagements with the English poetry of the past and present which this thesis will explore in later chapters.

### III. “If I Had My Way, Dear”: Ashbery's Elegies for Auden

Ashbery's career-spanning ambivalence towards Auden is enacted in two later poems which can be plausibly identified as elegies for the English poet. The following poem, two different drafts of which are held in the Houghton library, is Ashbery's first attempt to write an elegy for Auden. It is dated September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1974, almost exactly a year after Auden's death on September 29<sup>th</sup> of the previous year. The title—a characteristically Audenesque turn of phrase—the opening line of the

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<sup>156</sup> Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 34.

early draft, and the references to “Great Britain” should be sufficient to demonstrate that it was his deceased mentor that Ashbery had in mind.<sup>157</sup> Here are the two drafts in full:

(1)

A year added itself, fantastic, to the list.  
Behind the cabbages men in tails  
Tapped to the tune of yesterday. Wry music  
 (“And her tears flowed like wine”) leaking substance  
Of the besotted song within: *Ah, vous-dirais-je, maman!*

A cloud shaped like a map of Great Britain deployed landscapes  
Of corded ships, vistas of trade,  
Skyscrapers, titanic domes, obsidian terraces  
Inundated with the ocean's reflected light.  
Yet all who went out from there seemed not to know  
Or care about the play of the waves  
And their meaning. And so whatever mystery it was  
Passed on with the years.

Someone goes out with a letter  
And it has to happen again. We use our environment  
As a stage set for us and that is why  
We see it only from behind.  
Yet on that sunlit counterpane  
Sprinkled with tiny trees and farm animals the testimonials  
Showered like autumn blessings:  
Many had been helped, they said  
By the leaking voltage around us.  
The extra hazard made it worth while, they said.

(2)

A cloud shaped like England unpacks landscapes  
Of Corded ships, vistas of trade,  
Skyscrapers, titanic domes, obsidian  
Terraces bathed in the ocean's reflected light.  
A year has added itself, triumphant, to the list.

Behind the cabbages men in tails  
Tapped to the tunes of yesterday: wry music  
(*Ah, vous-dirais-je, maman!*) leaking stories  
Of the sodden song within (“And her tears flowed like wine.”)  
Yet all who went out from there seemed not to know  
Or care about the play of the waves  
And their meaning. And whatever mystery it was  
Passed on with the years.

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<sup>157</sup> For an examination of Auden's “trademark” use of the term “dear”, see Bonnie Costello's essay, “A Whole Climate of Opinion”, in *Something We Have That They Don't*, 98-117.

Someone comes in with a letter  
And it has to happen again. We use our environment  
As a stage set for us which is why  
We only see it from behind. If we could sneak up on it . . .

But on the sunlit counterpane  
Dotted with farm animals and tiny trees the testimonials  
Showered like autumn blessings. Many have been helped  
By electricity, they said.  
The extra hazard made it worth while, they said.<sup>158</sup>

In his re-writing of the poem Ashbery made some significant alterations. The sequence of statements is altered, so that the poem opens with an expansive appreciation of Auden's spectacular entrance into poetry rather than a registration of his death. The "landscapes" unpacked by Auden's English-shaped cloud tell a history of Auden's emergence from several traditions of English poetry: the Metaphysical poets, such as Donne and Marvell, from whom Auden derived his early facility for paradox, are evoked by the "Corded ships, vistas of trade"; Coleridge's visionary "dome" is present; the "obsidian terraces / Inundated with the ocean's reflected light", the finest lines in the poem, bring to mind "The Sea and the Mirror". Through the density of its allusions, Ashbery's poem seems to suggest that Auden carried within his work the whole history of English poetry. The modification of "fantastic" to "triumphant" marks a change from disbelief in the hardly credible to acceptance of brute fact. The peculiar lines "Behind the cabbages men in tails / Tapped to the tunes of yesterday", for all their whimsicality, are a serious attempt at characterising the relationship between Auden's schoolmasterish, prescriptive, didactic public persona and the "wry" musicality which lay behind it. The "cabbages", while arguably a more general figure for Ashbery's sense of Auden's increasing English localism in his final years, might well have derived from one of Auden's aphorisms. The didactic impulse behind it, its minor deceptions and manipulations, is something it's easy to imagine Ashbery reacting against:

You do not educate a person's palate by telling him that what he has been in the habit of eating - watery, overboiled cabbage, let us say - is disgusting, but by persuading him to try

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<sup>158</sup> Draft composition. Ashbery Papers, Box 28.

a dish of vegetables which have been properly cooked. With some people, it is true, you seem to get quicker results by telling them - 'Only vulgar people like overcooked cabbage; the best people like cabbage as the Chinese cook it' - but the results are less likely to be lasting.

Despite this mild censure, the poem remains marginally on the side of the laudatory, one of its central implications being that Auden's work had been misunderstood by many, including those whose own work was prompted or enabled by it: "Yet all who went out from there seemed not to know / Or care about the play of the waves / And their meaning". This sentiment is returned to at the conclusion of the poem, with an additional ironical edge. The "testimonials" for Auden, whom Ashbery called "*the* modern poet", are absurd in their attempts to recognise his achievement. For Ashbery, his innovations were equivalent to the introduction of "electricity" into the world, which the unnamed "they" are thankful for though unable to comprehend.

It is understandable why Ashbery didn't publish the poem. It seems undecided about what it wants to say; it attempts to acknowledge and represent Auden's significance, yet the image of early Auden which inspires Ashbery towards the landscapes which open the poem is too soon extinguished by the unpalatable later Auden, both wry and maudlin, didactic and evasive. Ashbery's distaste for late Auden is so evident it clouds his attempts at praise, and the poem collapses under that ambivalence. Its ultimate recognition that Auden was not fully appreciated is too slight a testimonial to be worth the utterance.

As we have seen with his elegies for Frank O'Hara, Ashbery tends to write elegies which do not explicitly identify themselves as such. "If I Had My Way, Dear", while a fascinating document, remains similarly contestable as a poem memorialising Auden. A further example of an ambiguous elegy is "At North Farm", written in 1980 and placed as the opening poem of *A Wave*, in many ways a poem even more explicitly about the English poet. As Forrest Gander has noted, this "heartrending sonnet" is "a kind of homage, an imitation really, of the early Auden, the English

Auden, and even the very early stuff of the English Auden”.<sup>159</sup> Gander's intuition is apposite; the poem is both homage to and imitation of Auden, and in its moving return to the puzzling early lyrics of *Poems* represents a much more fitting elegy than the incomplete “If I Had My Way, Dear”:

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

Hardly anything grows here,  
Yet the granaries are bursting with meal,  
The sacks of meal piled to the rafters.  
The streams run with sweetness, fattening fish;  
Birds darken the sky. Is it enough  
That the dish of milk is set out at night,  
That we think of him sometimes,  
Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings?<sup>160</sup>

There are several elements that indicate its status as an elegy for Auden. Its resonant conclusion on the phrase “mixed feelings” brings to mind Auden's definition of poetry as “the clear expression of mixed feelings”; an appropriation which moderates the intensity of Ashbery's ambivalence, positioning it as a reflection of the existing conflicts in Auden's work. It engages with sources and contexts shared by Auden; John Shoptaw elucidates Ashbery's admission that the “North Farm” of the title is taken from a collection of Finnish oral epic poems, *The Kalevala*; “a place,” Ashbery explained, “referred to frequently in that poem, with the epithet 'gloomy and prosperous north farm'...It's situated somewhere near hell”.<sup>161</sup> Shoptaw reads the poem alongside Auden's “The Wanderer”, citing the “syntax of variant repetition . . . Anglo-Saxon alliterative stress meter, and . . . homosexual displacements” as their unifying properties. Yet it is the poem's startling similarity to another early Auden poem, later titled “No Change of Place”, which illuminates Ashbery's relation to his antecedent more substantially. Here is the opening of Auden's poem:

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<sup>159</sup> Forrest Gander, “In Search of John Ashbery: *A Worldly Country*,” review of *A Worldly Country*, by John Ashbery, *Boston Review*, July/August 2007, [http://bostonreview.net/BR32.4/article\\_gander](http://bostonreview.net/BR32.4/article_gander). Accessed June 6, 2015.

<sup>160</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 733.

<sup>161</sup> Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 12.

Who will endure  
Heat of day and winter danger,  
Journey from one place to another,  
Nor be content to lie  
Till evening upon headland over bay,  
Between the land and sea  
Or smoking wait till hour of food,  
Leaning on chained-up gate  
At edge of wood?<sup>162</sup>

Auden's opening question, "Who will endure / Heat of day and winter danger" is re-cast by Ashbery in the affirmative: "Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you, / At incredible speed, traveling day and night, / Through blizzards and desert heat . . ." The scene of an imperilled and mysterious traveller journeying great distances—itsself derived from Herodotus, and the motto inscribed on the central post office in New York—is replicated identically. Ashbery then follows Auden more closely by posing a series of questions in the subsequent lines, relating to identification, communication and exchange: "But will he know where to find you, / Recognize you when he sees you, / Give you the thing he has for you?". Auden's poem describes a situation in which "signals all along are down", and yet secret communication continues to flourish, this subterranean exchange of messages illuminated after a turn upon "yet":

Metals run,  
Burnished or rusty in the sun,  
From town to town,  
And signals all along are down;  
Yet nothing passes  
But envelopes between these places,  
Snatched at the gate and panting read indoors

Ashbery's poem similarly turns upon a "yet", though the context is re-cast. In place of a depiction of thwarted public communication, he describes a scene of apparent poverty and destitution: "Hardly anything grows here . . ." And yet despite this infertility, what follows is a description of extraordinary, even miraculous plenty and abundance:

Yet the granaries are bursting with meal,  
The sacks of meal piled to the rafters.

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<sup>162</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 33.

The streams run with sweetness, fattening fish;  
Birds darken the sky.

Ashbery's surprising plenitude is, like Auden's, tainted by intimations of mortality, by complicity with mysterious and suspect forces. Patrick Deane's reading of Auden's early work is helpful in illuminating how Ashbery has leaned upon the English poet to establish his own fraught relation to American society: "It is a measure of Auden's ambiguous relationship with England that his thirties poems repeatedly assert the imminent and welcome demise of the imperial power while simultaneously making bravura use of a language inseparable from the country's imperial, class-bound history".<sup>163</sup> From this point on, Ashbery chooses his own route, deviating from Auden's poem to reflect upon his own engagement with his mentor in this and other poems, asking himself whether or not this engagement is sufficient tribute to or acknowledgement of "the thing" Auden gave him. In these lines, Ashbery condenses his powerful feelings of ambivalence about Auden into a question which has persisted in various incarnations throughout his oeuvre:

Is it enough  
That the dish of milk is set out at night,  
That we think of him sometimes,  
Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings?

The powerful ambivalence towards Auden and the English poetic tradition he embodied so fully has extensive implications for Ashbery's engagement with English poetry throughout his career. His resistances to Auden's version of "Englishness" (as Ashbery conceived it) are thrown further into relief by the discussion in chapter two of his relationship with F.T. Prince, a distinctly "minor" English poet with whom Ashbery maintained a less fractious relationship. As with Auden, Prince's Englishness allows Ashbery an opportunity to elaborate his sense of his identity as an American poet, but it also permits him the chance to articulate a vision of English poetry defined by "imperfection", a significant element of Ashbery's developing conception of "minority" as it relates to English poetic history. His engagement with Lee Harwood in chapter three is different again, as it

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<sup>163</sup> Patrick Deane, "Auden's England", in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, 39-40.

allows Ashbery to read the English poetry of the past and present through the rubric of “artlessness”. Ashbery's endorsement of apoliticality in Mark Ford, described in chapter four, is again implicitly shadowed by disagreement with Auden's vision of a socially engaged poetry. Due to his substantial poetic achievements and huge influence on numerous generations of poets, Auden can hardly be thought of as part of the “other tradition” of minor English poets Ashbery attempts to establish; yet Ashbery's fractious relationship with this most important of English poets has proved so central to the development of his relationship with English poetry throughout his career that it significantly informs each of the following relationships to which I'll attend.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Ashbery and F.T. Prince

When called upon to list the most important influences upon his poetry, John Ashbery has on numerous occasions mentioned the name of F.T. Prince, an English poet with whom Ashbery maintained a friendship for over forty years. Prince was one of the first modern poets to engage Ashbery in his youth, yet despite the significance of this early encounter, and the regularity of Ashbery's citation, Prince's marginality as an influence on the American poet has never been in dispute. Indeed, in *Other Traditions*, Ashbery himself placed Prince at the head of a catalogue of certifiably “minor” or second-tier writers who had “meant a lot” to him at various times: “F. T. Prince, William Empson, the painfully neglected English poet Nicholas Moore, Delmore Schwartz (once thought a major poet), Ruth Herschberger, Joan Murray, Jean Garrigue, Paul Goodman, Samuel Greenberg . . .”<sup>1</sup> As a consequence of this, the influence of Prince upon Ashbery has been noted in passing by several critics, though with a lack of emphasis and detail the casualness of Ashbery's references seems, at first, to justify.

However, Prince's relative unimportance in the vast roster of poets who influenced Ashbery is complicated by a few factors which suggest that, though the period in which he was influential was brief, the influence he exerted was intense and deserving of particular attention. This is suggested by Ashbery's three detailed and passionate essays on him, written over the course of thirty years, and by the extensive correspondence between the two poets. By attending to these supplementary materials, this chapter isolates and illuminates the time in which Prince was significant for Ashbery's poetry. The curious discrepancy between Ashbery's critical account of Prince, and the ways in which his poetry appears to have learned from Prince's, is shown to be illustrative of Ashbery's particular interest in the “imperfect” aspects of a poet's oeuvre. It proposes that Ashbery's early encrypted figurations of homosexual desire and community were in part

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<sup>1</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 5.

derived from, and reactions to, Prince's own cryptic operations in *Poems*. It also suggests that this relationship—in which the two poets quite quickly exchanged positions, in terms of the hierarchy of influence and influenced, mentor and student—allowed Ashbery an early opportunity to think about how he would like to shape and conduct his influential relationships with other poets. “Clepsydra” is read as an elaboration of his conception of levelled, non-hierarchical forms of exchange between poets, a lateral influential model which perhaps precipitated Prince's own declaration in 1972 that he was “on the brink of learning from” Ashbery, a tantalising prospect which failed to materialize in Prince's work. The final part of the chapter charts the gradual distancing between the two poets, and examines how Ashbery still considers himself, to some degree, responsible for the promotion and maintenance of Prince's posthumous reputation; in this way, we see how Prince acts as a metonym for Ashbery's engagement with “minor” poets of the past and present more generally. The relationship between these two poets is also valuable for its role in the evolution of Ashbery's conception of Anglo-American poetic exchange and influence. From the beginning of their extensive correspondence, Ashbery articulated in exceptionally explicit terms his ambitions as a young poet, his dissatisfaction with contemporaneous American poetry, and his sense of himself as a poet upon whom the burden of responsibility for innovation has fallen. In his responses to Prince's expression of his own anxious relation to national and transnational contexts, these letters also provide a fascinating insight into Ashbery's early conceptualisation of Anglo-American literary and cultural relations more generally as they stood at the time.

### **I. “all things as they might be”: Early Prince, Early Ashbery**

In his essay for the *PN Review* issue celebrating F.T. Prince, John Ashbery claims that “the essence of Prince” is to be found in three early poems: “The Babiaantje”, “The Moonflower”, and “Cefalù”. Ashbery praises these poems' “simplicity”, “mystery” and “cool elegiac smoothness”, attributes which lead him to compare Prince to Matthew Arnold and Walter Savage Landor. This is, to say the least, an idiosyncratic account of Prince's qualities. For many of his admirers, the enduring interest

of Prince's poetry lies in its complexity, its often luxuriously rich surface, the coiling syntax and lavish, varied diction that characterise his dramatic monologues in particular. Ashbery's atypical tribute seems all the more puzzling when considering the various ways in which he was himself influenced by Prince's poetry, few of which can be understood in the terms he proposes. This apparent disjunction between the ways in which Ashbery's appreciation of Prince is formulated, and those in which Prince's work makes itself felt in Ashbery's own poems, is a revealing one. The significant aesthetic convergences and differences elaborated in the extensive correspondence between the two poets might suggest that, in his critical writing on Prince, Ashbery was guided by a desire to misdirect readers looking to trace continuities between the two poets. In a more generous light, it might be said that he simply avoided writing about those of Prince's poems he thought were unsuccessful. Most plausible and revealing, however, is the possibility that the most fully-realised, and in some senses most praiseworthy elements of Prince's oeuvre—as embodied in those curious short poems Ashbery mentions—were, in their very completeness, the least useful for Ashbery's own work. Ashbery's remark about John Clare's handful of truly successful poems might be applied to his strange grouping of Prince's short lyrics: “These are rare instances of perfection in a poet whose habit, one might even say whose strength, was imperfection”.<sup>2</sup> Of greater practical importance than these poems which fulfil, in Ashbery's view, their own aesthetic potential, are those “half-emergent” works in which a sudden, unexpected modernist gesture troubles an otherwise classical surface; poems which, as Christopher Nealon writes of “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”, exhibit moments of “distortion in a realist vocabulary”.<sup>3</sup> These innovative techniques, or striations of uncertainty—generic disobedience, unconventional syntax, almost excessively rich diction, ambiguous pronouns—proved valuable to Ashbery precisely because of their incomplete state, their “imperfection”, since they remained largely unelaborated gestures which he could develop in

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<sup>2</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 98.

heterogeneous ways.<sup>4</sup> What sometimes appear to be enigmatic formal curiosities within Prince's complex, conflicted and inconsistent body of work, come to seem, when incorporated into Ashbery's broad and comprehensive aesthetic, not only more explicable but continuous with a host of modernist and post-modernist writers, from Stein to James to Barthes to the multiple generations of the New York School. As I hope to show, they were also central to Ashbery's early development as a poet.

Ashbery and Prince first met in 1956. Ashbery had by that point admired Prince's work for over a decade, as he told him when soliciting a poem for *Art and Literature* in 1963: "You know that you are one of my favourite poets, and almost the first poet whose work moved me, when I was about fifteen".<sup>5</sup> Even for an Anglophile like Ashbery, this was a relatively unusual enthusiasm at the time; Prince was very little-known as a poet, particularly in America. His first volume, *Poems*, had been published by T. S. Eliot at Faber & Faber, but its publication had coincided with and been obscured by the outbreak of the Second World War; a varied and highly stylised collection, for many reviewers it proved too far removed from its historical moment to be of any significance.<sup>6</sup> In a literary climate which prized the often explicitly political work of Day-Lewis, Spender, MacNeice and Auden, the volume's monologues by Edmund Burke, a Renaissance architect and an African tribal leader, set among a series of brief, gnomic sketches of landscapes set "outside of history", appeared to exhibit a puzzling disinterest in the contemporary world. Though, as Prince himself declared, the poems were concerned with questions of power and ethics on a personal and international scale, this engagement was oblique and subtle, and in this way entirely out of sync

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<sup>4</sup> The term "striation" might be regarded in itself as an Ashberyan signal of marginality or minority, of difference and strangeness; compare Ashbery's remarks on Prince and the following description of the proto-outsider artist, Cousin Bessie, in *A Nest of Ninnies*: "The young marrieds gaped at what seemed to be a large cube of cordovan leather, with strange grooves and striations. "Cousin Bessie did this one after she was a bit around the bend," Alice explained, none too charitably. "It's a replica of the Carson Pirie Scott Company—exact in every detail. The poor dear never saw it, though. She never got farther west than Binghamton."

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Prince, 13 August 1963. Prince Papers, University of Southampton.

<sup>6</sup> As Prince himself declared, the monologue "Chaka", ostensibly spoken by a Zulu king, was an investigation of contemporaneous European drives towards "war and conquest and 'nation building' . . . [t]he recrudescence of militarism and tyranny in Germany, and the racist genetics of Nazism" ("Note on Chaka", 8, as quoted in Wylie, 180). For further illustrations of the relations between Prince's early work and its political moment, see Sean Pryor, "Poetry and Decision: F. T. Prince in September 1938", *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 262.

with the “earnestly moral, thoroughly evangelical, and indisputably authoritative” didacticism which characterised so much poetry of the time.<sup>7</sup> Prince later conceded in an interview that “reviewers were saying it was distinguished work, but altogether out of tune with the needs and thoughts of the time. It was the kind of poetry that had to be put aside or left behind. Generally the reviewers acknowledged the quality of the poetry, but the feeling that it was out of step now looks right.”<sup>8</sup> After the quiet reception *Poems* received, Prince's poetry became more explicitly public in its orientation, as his best-known poem, “Soldiers Bathing”, demonstrates. Eliot rejected this later work, however, which led to *Soldiers Bathing*, *Doors of Stone* and the remainder of Prince's poetic output being published by small, independent presses in the UK. His work would, like many of the modernist, French-inflected poets of the 1940s (such as Dylan Thomas, W.S. Graham, and Nicholas Moore) be for a significant period overshadowed by the rise of Movement, who resisted experiment in favour of an empirically-grounded “anti-romanticism”.<sup>9</sup> The later enthusiasm of the New York School for his work, a phenomenon which baffled Prince, was central in restoring and maintaining interest in a poet who for much of his life was neglected in the UK.

Though Prince's poetry would be taken up by a range of American poets, including Ted Berrigan, it was Ashbery who was primarily responsible for the introduction and dissemination of his work. Ashbery had been particularly drawn to Prince's first volume, *Poems*, which, in its combination of traditional poetic forms and sporadic use of modernist techniques, provided an early example of how “classicism and atonality” might be productively combined into a poetry “mined by shifting, opposing forces”, as Ashbery's own would soon become.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the very fact that it was “out of step” with its time, and that its registrations of the tremendous political upheavals of the 1930s were veiled and oblique, may have appealed to the American poet. As I will suggest in

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<sup>7</sup> Robin Skelton, ed., *Poetry of the Thirties* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 22.

<sup>8</sup> From *F. T. Prince Interviewed by Stephen Devereux*, quoted in Pryor, “Poetry and Decision”.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Duncan notes this division between the dominant and marginal modes of English poetry at the time with typical restraint: “Poets such as Terence Tiller, Alan Ross, and F.T. Prince stand as representatives of the positive potential of British poetry in the 1950s, while the living death of The Movement was occupying the public sphere.” Andrew Duncan, *Origins of the Underground: British Poetry Between Apocryphon and Incident Light, 1933-79* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 179-80.

Chapter Four, Ashbery's deep imaginative involvement with questions of "minority" is often inflected by considerations of a poet's relation to the dominant aesthetic of their historical moment, and Prince's exceptionality and obliquity will be returned to as a formative model for these concerns. It's important to note at an early stage that this early enthusiasm for Prince's work was not simply an isolated attachment to an individual poet, but part of a more general Anglophilia displayed by the young Ashbery, who, rather against the general tide of opinion among poets in 1950s America, thought that "even the English poetry I didn't like somehow seemed superior to its American equivalent".<sup>11</sup> The shifting nature of Anglo-American literary relations during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century inflected the personal relationship between the two poets from the very beginning. In a revealing letter of 1958, written after their first meeting, Ashbery expounded at length on his recent trip to England, telling Prince that he had found the country "an endlessly fascinating though not an exciting place; being there is "a high oddity" (H. James) for me."<sup>12</sup> Ashbery's impressions of the country were defined, perhaps inevitably, by contrast with the USA: "It rather reminds me of America in the 'thirties: the architecture, slightly less modern look of everything, politer people."<sup>13</sup> This remark offers by implication an early assessment of English poetic culture which echoes throughout Ashbery's career. Over twenty years later, in a review of the exhibition *British Art Now*, Ashbery would write that "tact, courtesy, good taste, honesty" were constitutive features of, and the "problem in general" with British art, and that "Americans swoon over English good manners, not noticing that they can be an effective cover-up for rudeness".<sup>14</sup> Though "politeness" has a shifting valence in Ashbery's writing—it is, indeed, a characteristic he prides himself on—in this instance it seems to be reflective of the regressive, conservative nature of English culture as he conceived it at the time.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford* (London: Waywiser Press, 2003), 40.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Prince, 28 May 1958. Prince Papers.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry*, 160.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of Ashbery's relationship with "politeness", see Luke Carson, "Dreams of Decorum: John Ashbery's Manners." *Genre* 36, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 163-87.

Prince provided an ideal foil and audience for such observations. As Ashbery was coming to a realisation that English poetic culture was no longer at the forefront of modernity, Prince responded by expressing a mixture of envy and hostility towards the apparent license America's postwar economic, political and cultural centrality had afforded its poets. In 1957, by way of response to the publication of the seminal anthology *New Poets of England and America*, Prince wrote to Ashbery: "Sometimes I feel that you Americans are all poor little rich boys, or girls, but one consolation you have, and that is you can't help being modern. Whereas we in England are always being plucked back into something that has been done before."<sup>16</sup> Ashbery disputed this supposition of the modernity of America's poets in strong terms; though England may have vacated the position of prime innovator, in his view America had not yet taken it up:

Perhaps you are right in believing that we Americans are all poor little rich boys. It is something I don't think much about when I'm here, being surrounded by people so much richer than I am . . . I don't think you're right in believing one has to be modern in America. What modernism there is in poetry seems to be confined to me and a few of my friends. The new English poets are constantly being held up to us poor folk as examples. We are supposed to learn from the past, though modernistic poetry is of course old hat. Most of the literary quarterlies are violently reactionary and publish frequent articles defending the young English poets from non-existent attacks. Like them, they say, young American poets have "had their fill of surrealism" (where and when this saturation occurred is never mentioned) and they call for a return to principles of "solid craftsmanship", whatever that may mean. If it merely means smooth rhyme and meter the movement is still a failure, since most of these poems make Kipling look tasteful.<sup>17</sup>

This statement is uncharacteristically forthright for Ashbery. Having an older, sympathetic English poet as a correspondent gave him the chance to measure the achievement of American art against its English equivalent, and this moment of dissatisfaction is an indicator of how central a transatlantic context was in determining the artistic "modernity" or otherwise of himself and his peers. It is particularly interesting that, at this stage of his career, he associates the "young English poets"—presumably the Movement poets—with only the most "violently reactionary" periodicals. Ashbery would later equivocate over his views on Larkin in particular, in one instance disparaging him along with Ted Hughes for his "Blood and Stone" aesthetic, with its "intimation that you're going to get

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<sup>16</sup> Letter from Prince to Ashbery, 29 September 1957. Ashbery Papers, Box 16.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Prince, 17 November 1957. Prince Papers.

something highly serious that's going to teach you a lesson that you *badly need*"; then later regretting the remark, stating that he "admired" Larkin, and that he wrote "poems you can tap all over with a hammer and find no hollow places".<sup>18</sup> At that particular stage in the late 1950s, however, it's clear that the formality and dourness of the Movement would have been a development to which Ashbery would likely have been resistant. Prince himself found the poetic climate of the late 50s intolerable. He reports a meeting with Larkin in these terms:

The only English poet I have met recently is Philip Larkin, whom I found much like his verse, tall drab rather sour and consciously modest: all forms of smugness and conceit, of course, in the finest English middle-class manner. All poetry is illuminating, and his does its little job of revealing truth, but what a truth, --- it makes me quite murderous when I contemplate it, the more because I am here in the thick of it; the world I live in is really like that.

Later in the same letter, he generalises about the failings of younger English poets:

I was plainly talking in the dark when I said that American poets must at least be "modern", -- at least if that is taken to refer to "form". I didn't know there was so strong a movement among you towards traditional verse-forms. But I think I can measure how much or little it means when you tell me that our younger English poets are held up as examples. They are a most dreary lot, with no sense of form whatever, either in free verse or in any other. Indeed their supposed cultivation of regular forms is only a way out of facing the formal problem. They have made the discovery, not very difficult to make, that it is much easier to write in rhyme and stanzas, especially if you have no coherent thought or impulse; and that people will be quite impressed, as things are, by the mere fact that a poem is in a form of the recognisable kind. We in England have lapsed back into Georgian and late-Victorian mediocrity, but with the difference that now every kind of inadequacy and oddity is justified in advance by the claim that the poet is experimenting. That claim is all that is retained of the 'modern movement'.<sup>19</sup>

What this exchange demonstrates is that, for a period, the two poets provided one another with the opportunity to articulate their relations to their respective national contexts, and to the broader transatlantic dialogues in which they found themselves involved. Through their display and examination of cultural difference, such dialogues enabled various forms of "mutual self-definition" which were valuable for Ashbery in particular in defining the scope of his poetic ambitions.

On a personal level, what their correspondence makes clear is that the early admiration

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<sup>18</sup> Bryan Appleyard, "The Major Genius of a Minor Art", *The Times*, 23 August 1984, <http://www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=1;doctype=interview>, accessed August 6, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Prince to Ashbery, 23 November 1957. Ashbery Papers, Box 16.

Ashbery felt for Prince, while intense and influential, seems not to have been inflected by any diffidence or deferral on the young poet's part. From an early stage of their relationship, it was clear that Ashbery was quite at ease exhibiting his independence of thought and taste; indeed, the two poets clashed over some deep aesthetic differences. The highly eccentric French poet Raymond Roussel seems to have prompted a particularly charged altercation, which Ashbery refers to in a mordant letter of 1958:

On to France, where I'll spend the summer working on my thesis on "my boring Raymond Roussel". I'm sorry my literary preferences and "direction" seem to annoy you seriously. I don't know whether I merit your criticism of callowness, snobbishness hence naiveté, atrocious cynicism etc. Perhaps I do. I would like to plead innocent to the heinous charge of over-intellectualism, however. I find this is often used by intellectuals to describe non-intellectuals.<sup>20</sup>

The sparring and aesthetic positioning which characterise their early correspondence was soon replaced, however, by simpler forms of mutual appreciation and support. Though their communication became less regular from the early 1960s onwards, the two poets continued to meet whenever possible, and would send copies of their books to one another. After Donald Davie published a negative review of Prince's *Collected Poems* in the *New York Times Book Review*, Ashbery drafted a forceful letter in defence of his friend, concluding:

That Prince is capable of original thought doesn't have to mean that his poetry is bloodless and cerebral – indeed it pulses with the sap of life, and the world reflected there seems even more real because it is seen in the light of an extraordinary modern consciousness... I hope that Mr Davie's assessment won't prevent readers from discovering the delights of this major and neglected poet, who, *pace* Davie, belongs very much to the here and now.<sup>21</sup>

Prince's responses to Ashbery's work varied widely over the years. *Houseboat Days*, published in 1977, met with this assessment, recorded in Prince's journal: "Expecting J. Ashbery, for his reading; looked again at *Houseboat Days* last night, but react against it, finally. (Is it like Yeats's comment on George Moore's prose – that it comes like ribbons of toothpaste from a tube?)".<sup>22</sup> And yet, though he professed himself baffled by much of Ashbery's work—and much of that produced by the New

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<sup>20</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Prince, 1 July 1958. Prince Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Ashbery to the *New York Times Book Review*, 8 April 1979. Ashbery Papers, Box 16.

<sup>22</sup> Unpublished Journal Entry, 3 April 1979. Prince Papers.

York School in general, despite the high regard in which he was held by them—Prince clearly expended a good deal of effort coming to terms with it. Twelve years after their first meeting, Prince provided an evaluation of Ashbery's most recent work, *Rivers and Mountains*, which suggested his former protégé had transcended not just its partial origins in Prince's own poetry, but the Anglo-American contexts in which their early exchanges had been situated:

I am also much impressed by your “Clepsydra”, a really astonishing display of your extraordinary powers. I wouldn't know what you are doing, why you do it, how you do it, but I can read the piece as I would read a piece of Mallarmé's prose, feeling the words to convey an extended metaphysical operation . . . As I say, I don't profess to understand you, ever, but that is probably part of your lasting charm. Most of us are so obvious, even banal—not only the English, but the Americans.<sup>23</sup>

For a brief but significant period early in his career, however, Prince's work had been hugely important for Ashbery, particularly for several important pieces included in his first book, *Some Trees*.

One of the central ways in which Prince's work influenced Ashbery's is through its idiosyncratic, encrypted representations of gay experience. The visibility of these elements in Prince's work is enhanced by Ashbery's development of them; as previous criticism of Prince's work has demonstrated, they are subtle and elusive, and easy to ignore. Although it has been widely recognised that Prince's oeuvre contains many clearly homoerotic poems, his sexuality hasn't as yet been considered seriously as a context for his writing. One point of consensus between Prince's very diverse group of admirers is their recognition of the absence of a consistent poetic identity or persona throughout the early poems, but what the motivation for such inconsistency or variability might be has either been entirely ignored as a question, or the subject of only hesitant speculations. For Mark Ford, the studied avoidance of personal revelation displayed in the almost diversionary diversity of the early work is strikingly “original” because of “the lack of a discernible ulterior motive”; the “masks and personae” Prince employs are not ironical or defensive concealments, oblique satires or cultural commentaries, but represent an almost purely aesthetic, self-occluding

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<sup>23</sup> Letter from Prince to Ashbery, 5 February 1966, Ashbery Papers, Box 16.

involvement with “the past for its own sake, or, perhaps rather, for the sake of poetry per se.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Rajeev Patke asserts that “each poem creates its own, unique stylistic microcosm” which “makes it difficult to infer a singular stylist behind an almost bewildering variety of tones, prosodic forms, and variations in syntax and diction”.<sup>25</sup> In one of the most perceptive essays yet written on Prince's work, Geoffrey Hill identifies the early poems “An Epistle to a Patron”, “The Tears of a Muse in America” and “Words from Edmund Burke” as “powerfully individual structures in which mannered statements are simultaneously instances of cloaked, equivocal speech and of naked revelation”.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Ford and Patke, Hill ventures to imagine an impetus behind such equivocations and revelations, proposing the latent, conflicting forces which constituted Prince's religious identity—at the time of the composition of *Poems* becoming obliquely threatened by political developments in Europe—as the primary spur: “Prince's mother was Presbyterian, his father Jewish; he himself is a Catholic convert.” Hill identifies the “freedom from fear and freedom to speak directly rather than obliquely” as the “real luxuries” *Poems* is reluctant to risk; and while Prince's religious identity is certainly a significant context for understanding his poetry, it feels important to consider the indeterminate performance of complex sexuality as an alternative way of interpreting such equivocations. The numerous, clearly homoerotic poems—from his best-known work, “Soldiers Bathing”, to “Apollo and the Sibyl” and “The Old Age of Michelangelo”—suggest that such a reading might be fruitful, but as yet only Jane Hedley has been explicit in her assessment of the potential functions of Prince's historical personae in this context; in hiding “behind 'substitute selves’”, she writes, Prince “does not succeed in concealing from the patiently attentive reader his attitudes to men, to love and beauty, and to art”.<sup>27</sup> This context is particularly pertinent for a discussion of the relationship between Prince and Ashbery, as the latter had been told by a mutual

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<sup>24</sup> Ford, *A Driftwood Altar*, 220.

<sup>25</sup> Rajeev Patke, “Elegance and Poetic Economy in John Crowe Ransom and F. T. Prince”, *Connotations* 21.2-3 (2011-12), 218-40. <http://www.connotations.uni-tuebingen.de/patke02123.htm>, accessed August 6, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Hill, “Il Cortegiano: F. T. Prince's Poems”, *PN Review* 147, Vol. 29, Number 1, September-October 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Hedley, “Imprisoning and Expressing Him: The Dramatic Monologues of F.T. Prince”, *Malahat Review*, #7, July 1968, 93.

friend of the two poets, the film critic Richard Roud, that Prince was gay; and Ashbery's appropriations from Prince's work can, at times, be seen as influenced by this information. My purpose in this chapter is not to speculate extensively about Prince's sexuality—indeed, as Richard Bozorth has suggested, outing can seem a kind of “police entrapment”, and seeking a “latent, unitary 'homosexual meaning' below the surface”<sup>28</sup> of poems is reductive—but rather to think about his work's various and indeterminate performance of desire, and in particular to examine those poems descriptive of individuals and communities prevented from articulating those desires by the societies in which they live.

For all the rhetorical expertise the early poems display, their syntactical complexity and almost excessively elaborate diction are reflective of a poet whose work operated according to a paradigm of disguise. Their discretion is partly a consequence of the social context from which they emanated, but is also a question of sensibility. It was possible for a contemporary like Auden, for example, to write, however obliquely, of his sexuality; such a choice does not seem to have been available to Prince, who was by all accounts an intensely private person. He addressed a question about his poetry's discretion in the following terms:

One is basically limited by temperament, and my temperament is not an expansive or assertive one; and that comes out in the way I put things and work them out. I also have all those tensions or conflicts or whatever they are, which are the basis of most people's poetry: divided temperament, divided mind, and so on. I think that, without any conscious purpose and certainly without any theory about it, when I'm simply trying to write a poem, it comes out in the way you've indicated – as *nuancé* or reserved - because that's how I am.<sup>29</sup>

Though possessed of very different sensibilities, it's arguable that much of Prince's early work was subject to comparable compositional conditions to those under which Hart Crane, a similarly oblique yet much more celebrated near-contemporary, wrote much of his most powerful and indirect poetry. For Prince as for Crane, exuberance in expression is not evidence of liberty and confidence, so much as a diversionary tactic; Gregory Woods' account of the American poet could

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<sup>28</sup> Bozorth, *Auden's Games of Knowledge*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Howell, “F. T. Prince in Conversation”, *PN Review* 83, Vol. 18, No.3, January-February 1992. [http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=3834](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=3834) Accessed August 6, 2015.

quite easily be applied to Prince's work and its reception: "Crane hid relatively straightforward emotion under an ornate carapace of difficulty. Thereafter, he suffered a critical response which denied, or ignored, any contribution of his sexuality to his poetry . . . Baroque with the stratagems of the oppressed, his work was read as being gratuitously overwrought."<sup>30</sup> If anything, Prince's poems are often even further removed from the straightforward expression of "straightforward emotion" than Crane's were; strategically employing the barrier of the dramatic monologue to further dissociate poem and poet, and by placing those speakers in distant historical or geographical locations, the poems challenge in advance any speculative conflation of the poem's speaker with the poet. However, a dialogue enacted in Prince's late poem "Not a Paris Review Interview" demonstrates that Prince was always conscious of a delicate interplay of authorial presence and absence in even the most seemingly-dissociated works of art. The "questioner" asks:

But could one, not unfairly,  
Argue that you have suppressed your  
Identity, or tried -  
See the persons and occasions  
In long pieces as evasions?

To which "Prince" responds:

Why set poetry on one side  
And apart from other art,  
And plays and novels? . . .  
A dramatist becomes  
Himself in every jot  
Of plot, murder or love-affair,  
And those who act or suffer.  
Oneself as an old buffer  
Or young fogey, is both there  
And not there, in what one makes.<sup>31</sup>

The two final poems of *Soldiers Bathing*, "Apollo and the Sibyl" and "The Old Age of Michelangelo", while intensely religious in their themes, could be read as thinly-veiled accounts of Prince's own "tensions or conflicts" with sexuality. "The Old Age of Michelangelo" employs a

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<sup>30</sup> Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-eroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>31</sup> F. T. Prince, *Collected Poems 1935-92* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012), 248.

speaker whose identity allows Prince to address a male lover directly. It is Prince's most openly homoerotic poem, and is interesting not only for the candour in its sections addressed to Michelangelo's lover Thomas Cavaliere, but in its association of "half-veiled" sexual desire with the compositional process, as the opening vividly demonstrates:

And the dream sleeps in the stone, to be unveiled  
Or half-veiled, the lurking nakedness;  
Luminous as a grapeskin, the cold marble mass  
Of melted skins, chains, veils and veins,  
Bosses and hollows, muscular convexities,  
Supple heroic surfaces, tense drums  
And living knots and cords of love<sup>32</sup>

This tightly-wound, highly evocative description implicitly associates the discipline of Prince's own art, its powerful and muscular syntax, with the spectacular bodies (both created and observed) the poem describes. Later in the poem, there are passages of extraordinarily direct eroticism, in which the syntax becomes looser, itself "bewildered and distraught" by the intensity of its attachment to what it describes:

For you must know I am of all men ever born  
Most inclined to love persons, and whenever I see someone  
Who has gifts of mind and body, and can say or show me something  
Better than the rest,  
Straightway I am compelled  
To fall in love with him, and then I give myself  
Up to him so completely, I belong no longer to myself,  
He wresting from me  
So great a part of my being, I am utterly  
Bewildered and distraught, and for many days know nothing  
Of what I am doing or where I am.

In these lines Prince might be described as addressing not just the speaker's tendency to be overwhelmed by desire, but also self-reflexively commenting upon his extensive use of dramatic personae. His immersion in his character's "voice" is so complete, "I give myself / Up to him so completely, I belong no longer to myself". Prince's deliberate self-dispersal among dramatic personae reconfigures the absence of the "singular stylist" Rajeev Patke craves from an involuntary

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 73.

inconsistency to a deliberate cultivation of multiplicity.

“Apollo and the Sibyl” offers a fascinating counterpoint to “The Old Age of Michaelangelo”. Where the latter affords its speaker free expression of his desire, the former is narrated by one who has denied love. Prince himself considered it a failure, an attempt to return to the startling energies of his first book:

“Apollo and the Sybil” is not a good example, for me, of one of my longer poems. It was essentially a technical exercise, consciously trying to get back, after the war, to the richer texture and more vivid sensations of my earlier verse, which I had lost during the war; so it doesn’t have the degree of narrative or dramatic structure in some other longer poems.<sup>33</sup>

The poem re-tells the story of Sibyl, from Book IV of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*. The question that agonises Prince’s Sibyl is, as she puts it in the first section: “What was it I refused, refusing love? / ‘It was the vision of the light / From which I am shut out.’” The consequences of this refusal of love are the themes to which Prince returns throughout the poem: “Questions of hope, despair, changes of mind...” Sibyl is perpetually haunted by the powerful desire to experience the “furtive love” that she has refused:

Love is the web, the bed  
Soft-burning with religious breath,  
  
For which the constellated waste, sage clarities,  
Are brimmed with ghastliness of light  
And echo silent cries of ours;  
For only furtive love,  
Known in the great fear, captive  
Of the dire luxurious clarities,  
Can find within our exile (damned,  
Vituperated, loathed)  
The sigh of peace, the delicate flight! . . .<sup>34</sup>

In this passage Prince positions two highly significant words from two earlier works in close proximity to the poem’s central phrase and concern: “furtive love”. The idea of the “web, the bed” recalls the “rich web” of “Words from Edmund Burke”, and directly links this web of composition with the context of emotional discretion; while “dire luxurious clarities”, a phrase densely packed

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<sup>33</sup> Howell, “F. T. Prince in Conversation”.

<sup>34</sup> Prince, *Collected Poems*, 68-9.

with conflicting forces, recalls and extends the “prudish luxuries” of “Epistle to a Patron”. As Hill has noticed, “luxury” is an important word in Prince’s vocabulary. His usage of it involves a delicate interplay of its etymological connotations of material, sexual and moral excess, and is substantially informed by Shakespeare. Writing of *The Rape of Lucrece*, Prince suggests that it is “a brilliant, uneasy, luxuriant work, and its greatest beauties can hardly compensate for its obvious faults. Some of these faults lie in exaggerated and superfluous detail”.<sup>35</sup> This phrase is, in many ways, remarkably self-descriptive. *The Rape of Lucrece* was key to Prince’s thought and style, particularly in its extensive associations between rhetorical excess and violence, and is a helpful context for understanding those of Prince’s poems which attend to questions of power and speech. In numerous poems, rhetorical excess functions as a defensive mode of a supplicant individual, a form of imaginative protection within an oppressive context. “Luxury”, in Prince’s multiple, nuanced modifications of the word, becomes a pivotal signal of this expressive strategy and its motivations, describing as it does forms of speech which are excessive precisely in order to protect the speaker’s right to a private reticence.

Luxury—or, rather, “bewildering luxuriance”—was a stylistic element Ashbery was acutely conscious of and drawn to during the early stages of their friendship. His review of Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, from the July 1957 issue of *Poetry*, contains a paragraph which elaborates a theory of complexity in a discussion of Stein and Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*:

If these works are highly complex, and, for some, almost unreadable, it is not only because of the complicatedness of life, the subject, but also because they actually imitate its rhythm, its way of happening, in an attempt to draw our attention to another aspect of its true nature. Just as life seems to alter the whole of what has gone before, so the endless process of elaboration which gives the work of these two writers a texture of bewildering luxuriance—that of a tropical rainforest of ideas—seems to obey some rhythmic impulse at the heart of all happening.<sup>36</sup>

Despite being what makes them virtually “unreadable”, it is exactly the “exaggerated” and “superfluous” qualities of these works that draws Ashbery to them, that makes them in his eyes

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<sup>35</sup> *Shakespeare: The Poems*, ed. F. T. Prince (London: Longman’s Green, 1963), 15.

<sup>36</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 13.

powerful and mimetic. Ashbery would repeat this argument in a letter to Prince the following year, when explaining the fragmentation and “obscurity”—a particularly charged word throughout their exchanges during the late-1950s—of his latest compositions, some of which would be published in *The Tennis Court Oath*. At certain points Ashbery laments the fact that the predominant impression these austere new works provoked is one of obscurity: “I have finally been writing a little—very obscurely, I don't quite know what to make of it. I feel incapable of writing something simple that would please me. But most of the things I admire in poetry are simple and clear.”<sup>37</sup> In a different letter from this period, however, he seems less puzzled by the new turn in his work, contending that obscurity was a deliberate part of the poems' purpose, being reflective of the general abstruseness of “life”:

I am glad you enjoyed my poems, though I would naturally like it if you had not found them so obscure. I cannot really tell what they are. However, the poems I like best (not mine) are ones I don't really understand (including some of yours). Then if one does understand them, one doesn't know why one likes them. (The charm of “The Babiaantje”, for example, has nothing to do with its “meaning”, which is obvious. Why is it such a beautiful poem? I wanted to write a similar poem in “The Instruction Manual”, in which the “meaning” would be placed way over to one side so as not to interfere with the “beauty”.) Also, life is very obscure and many of my poems are obscure to point out different kinds of obscurity in life and to scold it for being this way. This aspect of my work depresses me somewhat. I often feel the milk of human kindness is what I lack. Maybe if I had it my poems wouldn't be so obscure.<sup>38</sup>

Re-framing his celebration of mimetic unreadability in Stein and James—“life is very obscure and many of my poems are obscure to point out different kinds of obscurity in life and to scold it for being this way”—Ashbery seems to be both cautiously justifying his new aesthetic direction, and trying to point out to Prince that his own work is perhaps stranger than he might think, both in terms of its obscure, luxuriant qualities and its unstable relation to genre.

Since it's clear that his remarks on Stein and James could quite easily be applied to many of Prince's own bewilderingly luxuriant works, it is strange that Ashbery's critical writing on Prince focusses on entirely unrelated qualities: his “simplicity”, “mystery” and “cool elegiac smoothness”.

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Prince, 19 October 1958. Prince Papers.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Prince, 1 July 1958. Prince Papers.

Handwritten notes on Prince's work, held at Harvard's Houghton Library, reveal the underlying doubts which explain Ashbery's reticence on the subject of the longer poems: "The poems are in 2 groups: over ambitious & under ambitious".<sup>39</sup> In another set of notes on Prince, Ashbery writes: "He is not always successful. The historical dramatic monologue, his favourite form, sometimes comes dangerously near the costume piece, and his Michelangelo and Richard Coeur de Lion sound like the Magi, Bertrand de Born and even Fra Lippo Lippi. He is at his best when the impersonal 'I' of the poet takes over from the historical personage (Burke, Patron etc.)."<sup>40</sup> With this observation in mind, it is perhaps less surprising that the Prince presented in Ashbery's *PN Review* essay is almost unrecognisable, and that any mention of the qualities for which he is best known is absent. The terminology he employs to classify the poems is revealing. The poems he mentions in these notes might be thought of as the "over-ambitious" ones; works which over-elaborate a thin premise. Of greater value to Ashbery were his "under-ambitious" pieces, those poems which display momentary, flickering striations of uncertainty in otherwise classical surfaces. These poems were more valuable to Ashbery, particularly for those poems in *Some Trees* which explored the performance of sexuality in an oppressive society, as they offered germinal intimations of ideas which Ashbery was able to elaborate on. Later in his *PN Review* essay, Ashbery praises "Prince's landscapes of migration and the history outside of recorded history, of the engulfing and engulfed past that is lost to us", and this can be taken as a description of the most under-ambitious, imperfect and valuable of Prince's works.<sup>41</sup>

Of those poems which take place in "anonymous but precise wilderness settings", Ashbery mentions "For Fugitives" and "For the Deserted" as exemplary; however, it is "For Thieves and Beggars", one of Prince's most unstable and conflicted works—and which Ashbery in his notes calls a "good example of his rewarding difficulty"—which resonates most extensively throughout Ashbery's early work. Here are the opening lines:

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<sup>39</sup> Notes towards an essay on F. T. Prince, undated. Ashbery papers, Box 32.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 180.

On the plain is a tower  
For robbers, with a grey wall where  
A tattered sentry leans upon his pike,  
And the pious viper dwells:<sup>42</sup>

The opening of the poem presents a recognisable scene rendered in straightforwardly descriptive language. We are presented with a simple landscape populated by some clearly allegorical inhabitants: “the tattered sentry”, “the pious viper”. Though like “The Moonflower”, a poem which Ashbery has written about on multiple occasions, this scene seems to stand “outside of recorded history”, it immediately differentiates itself from the other poem by depicting a society with its own internal laws and conflicts, forms of transgression and methods of punishment. Following this opening, the poem abruptly becomes something entirely different; in place of a clearly described allegorical scene, we are presented with a chain of undefined pronouns, lacking any clear referent, whose relations to one another are further occluded by slippery, unconventional syntax:

And the pious viper dwells: but you  
Who are gone we also who  
She and I here wander, we  
Not refuse to remember, and all of you.

These pronouns in lines 4-8 are concatenated according to a dramatically condensed logic, leaving only the barest signals of connection by which to construct a scene or set of relations. Where the opening lines describe various forms of restriction and prohibition, physical, emotional or moral—*tower, wall, sentry, pike, piety, and viper* might all be classified as agents of constraint—these subsequent lines are fluid, free to “wander” and to “not refuse”, the pronouns exchanging positions freely, resisting grammatical restriction and syntactical propriety in a manner which opposes the normative mode of the poem's opening. Having passed through this sudden transition, the poem changes style once again, interleaving the two oppositional approaches—the “half-realistic, and half-ethereal”, as Ashbery puts it elsewhere—of the poem's opening; in the final four lines of the stanza, Prince combines allegorical objects with an ambiguous and agile syntax and an undefined

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<sup>42</sup> Prince, *Collected Poems*, 40-1.

pronoun:

And the wall melts,  
The boughs toss, the rocks  
Nod overhead at nightfall while  
We see all things as they might be.

In the space of 11 lines, the poem achieves a strange balance of the public and the private, the explicit and the discrete, the classical and the modern; Ashbery's remark that Prince's poems often have "traditional surfaces striated with uncertainties"<sup>43</sup> seems particularly apt here. The poem describes and enacts the painful transitions between the language of public life—its notation of expressions of power, architectural, personal, and mythical—and an intensely private language, in which the absence of a context suggests either total isolation, or a community in which any elaboration of context would endanger its inhabitants. It is through the mediation of the passage of pronoun-play in the opening stanza that a possible alternative future is imagined, distinct from the bleak present inhabited by the "pious viper"—one in which the barriers are broken, the world literally turns upside down ("the rocks / Nod overhead"), and a speculative prophecy announces itself: "we see all things as they might be". Further on, against a resolutely undefined landscape and setting—" (Who cares in what full year?)"—we are offered a succession of more general scenes which could be interpreted as dramatizations of marginal communities—outlaws, nameless pronouns operating "outside of history"—seeking each other out on the fringes of society and of language. These are described as the men who "went in want":

So we who in love at this hour  
Walking as dumbly as beggars,  
Cover the shabby moor and use  
The blind shells of cracked houses,  
We who no longer matter go  
Against a veil of voices dying  
Into the voices of  
The dead a virtual twitter, seeking  
A naked word we find  
A dead man lying on his background  
Under a sooty tree. He went in want.

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<sup>43</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 179.

Prince's "veil of voices" can be seen, like "the blind shells of cracked houses", as a figure for an encrypted dialect in which marginalised community takes place, a necessarily "ornate carapace" which conceals as much as it discloses. The poem concludes with Prince's characteristic observation that any form of liberation comes with its own inherent constraints (and vice versa), in lines recalling the opening of "The Tears of a Muse in America":

And for our voices,  
None could aloud more loving do  
Than when prolonging terminations we  
Ourselves in our voices  
Captured, caressed, and freed.

This is one of Prince's most acute formulations of the problems inherent in the articulation of the self. Relating limitation ("captured") and liberty ("freed") and the mediating experience of luxurious pleasure ("caressed"), these lines exemplify his facility for creating "powerfully individual structures in which mannered statements are simultaneously instances of cloaked, equivocal speech and of naked revelation". Discrete and explicit, this rich and unsettling poem contains some of Prince's most powerful and conflicted dialogues with himself, and some of his most significant stylistic innovations.

Substantial elements of Prince's poem echo throughout Ashbery's early work. The passage of pronoun-play in the opening stanza—"but you / Who are gone we also who / She and I here wander, we / Not refuse to remember, and all of you"—is of particular importance for one of the central poems of *Some Trees*, "The Grapevine":

Of who we and all they are  
You all now know. But you know  
After they began to find us out we grew  
Before they died thinking us the causes

Of their acts. Now we'll not know  
The truth of some still at the piano, though  
They often date from us, causing  
These changes we think we are. We don't care

Though, so tall up there

In young air. But things get darker as we move  
To ask them: Whom must we get to know  
To die, so you live and we know?<sup>44</sup>

In this puzzling, elusive poem Ashbery extends the technique Prince momentarily gestures towards into an extreme form. While Prince's poem depicts a scene of isolation and marginality for the undefined pronouns which populate it—their social relations concealed, their failure to operate correctly in the poem is deliberate and mimetic—Ashbery's poem is, in contrast, written from and with a greater emphasis on the “inside” of the marginalised community it depicts, and thus is afforded a vantage from which to describe it more fulsomely, and also to provide an implied critique of it. As I suggested in Chapter One, “The Grapevine” is, unlike “For Thieves and Beggars”, a “coterie” (as the New York School of poets has often been characterised) text; but it is also a critique of the dangers of insularity such communities can lead to. Where in Prince's poem the pronoun-passage represents a sudden and dramatic loss of context, an abrupt transition from an intelligible allegorical world into a discreet, barely articulated one, Ashbery's poem makes no effort to dramatise this transition, refusing to acknowledge it. It opens almost confrontationally in a world of pronouns whose relations to one another are undefined; only by voluntarily entering into the poem, and accepting non-knowledge as a condition of this entry, is a reader permitted to become part of its fluid depiction of community.

The “homotextual” impetus for Ashbery's evasive use of pronouns in “The Grapevine” has been well-described by John Emil Vincent, in his recent study *John Ashbery and You*. Vincent finds in the poem an expression of an utopian ideal enabled by the fluidity of its pronouns: “In its refusal to specify gender, “you”... harbors a utopian fantasy that homosexual desire is both everywhere and unlocatable . . . Ashbery uses the flexibility of “you” to fantasize about a future unendangered gay community.”<sup>45</sup> Though this is a persuasive reading of Ashbery's powerful and obliquely political poem, it makes the mistake of eventually assigning consistent meanings to the pronouns. Vincent

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<sup>44</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Vincent, *John Ashbery and You*, 146.

states that “as it develops, the poem grows bolder in its delineation of “us” and “them””, when in fact the reverse seems more likely: the delineation between pronouns grows ever more unclear as the poem progresses. Vincent assumes the change in meaning between the first incidence of “You” and its final one to be that from an intrusive, persecuting “you” who desires knowledge of “our” sexuality, to a “you” which refers to a community of young gay men whose “on-going well-being” the poem’s “we” seeks to ensure. This is, without doubt, a reading sustained by the poem—perhaps the most significant one—but it is ultimately only one of many. Also latent in the poem is a self-reflexive commentary on the assumptions “coterie” poetry often makes regarding its relationship with its readers. The title, “The Grapevine”, refers to the covert systems of communication employed by a privileged community of those “in the know”, a community defined by the process of gossip or information exchange; this is, of course, a depiction of the authentically marginal group of gay writers of which Ashbery was part, which, existing in “a dangerous time”, necessarily developed encrypted forms of expression. Yet the easy transition between undefined pronouns allows the poem to function both as a protective defence of this marginal group and the coded vernacular it necessarily had to employ, and a critique of such a group’s insularity and self-mythologising tendencies. This critique is evidenced in the lament for those previous poets “at the piano”—of which Prince, in Ashbery’s understanding, was one, and who is perhaps the poet Ashbery has in mind here—who have had to conceal their “truth”, a fact which marks “these changes we think we are” as hubris. Similarly, “We don’t care / Though, so tall up there / In young air” is not simply the utopian image of community and vitality Vincent reads, but a potentially exclusive form of self-exaltation. The crucial fact illustrated by “The Grapevine” is that, though the poem emanates from a specifically gay context, Ashbery desires it to transcend the details of that context; stripped of its localising features, the poem becomes “a general all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars”, as Ashbery wrote of *Stanzas in Meditation*. Ashbery’s perspective is of one “on the outside looking out”; a poet marginalised by his sexuality,

he nevertheless directs his attention outwards, towards a broader readership than the coterie audience he had available to him. In this way, a small element of Prince's poem can be seen to have provided an impetus for what became a central characteristic of Ashbery's work; "The Grapevine" provides the imaginative template for his conception of pronouns as "variables within an equation", an idea which has informed virtually every poem he has ever written.

Further resemblances to "For Thieves and Beggars" can be found in "Answering a Question in the Mountains":

It is pain in the hand of the ungodly  
To witness all the sentries,  
The perfumed toque of dawn,  
The hysteric evening with empty hands.  
The snow creeps by; many light years pass.

We see for the first time.  
We shall see for the first time.  
We have seen for the first time.

The snow creeps by; many light years pass.<sup>46</sup>

This under-appreciated poem from *Some Trees* is one of Ashbery's most austere early performances of grammatical play, one which significantly foreshadows the more comprehensively realized and populated poems of *The Tennis Court Oath*; David Shapiro puts it well when he writes that the poem extricates "fabulous prophecy out of a lesson of grammar".<sup>47</sup> More importantly, the poem represents an elliptical chronicle of Ashbery's experiences of reading what he calls the many "hosts of my young days", the many poets who contributed to making Ashbery the poet he had become. The opening, as Shapiro notes, is strikingly indebted to Rimbaud, but as the landscape and lexicon of the remainder of the poem demonstrate, central among these "hosts" is Prince; indeed, it's arguable that in the poem's second section Ashbery re-writes "For Thieves and Beggars" from several different "angles". In an assertive, Stevensian gesture, Ashbery marks how the surrounding world re-models itself according to the new vision of it supplied by the poet: "The towers of justice

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<sup>46</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 36.

<sup>47</sup> David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 49.

are waving / To describe the angles we describe.” Prince’s “tower / For robbers”, then, becomes the pluralised “towers of justice”, moving according to a new poet’s vision of them; his “tattered sentry” is multiplied to become Ashbery’s “sentries”. Most crucial of these perspectival multiplications is that which describes a collective vision; where Prince’s poem imagines a place in which “We see all things as they might be”, Ashbery’s poem asserts three versions of Prince’s hypothetical pronouncement: “We see for the first time. / We shall see for the first time. / We have seen for the first time.”

“We see all things as they might be” makes itself present elsewhere, anticipating the very first line of “Two Scenes”, the first poem of *Some Trees*: “We see us as we truly behave: / From every corner comes a distinctive offering.” This declaration of faith in formal heterogeneity—“from every corner comes a distinctive offering”—is one derived in part from Prince, whose poems are unified perhaps most forcefully by their dissimilarity from one another, the distinctiveness of each offering. There is a marked difference between the two poets, however, which Ashbery’s partial appropriations in “Answering a Question in the Mountains” and “Two Scenes” illustrate. It might be said that Prince’s poems occupy a hypothetical or conditional world—he sees things as they *might* be—while Ashbery’s take place in an actualized climate, in which, rather than fantasising about utopian possibilities outside of history, we are presented with communities and their contexts as they *truly behave*. Ashbery does not merely prophesise, but “sees” in the present and past tenses. As in “The Grapevine”, in “Two Scenes” there is the sense that the gay community out of which Ashbery is writing is one he can address openly; the “We” that refers, in part, to that community, are the ones who see themselves as they truly behave; they are the ones capable of detecting in one another the evasions and encryptions necessary in order to operate in society without persecution.

In his depictions of marginalized communities, we might say that Ashbery learned technically from Prince, but was also enabled by various cultural conditions and by his own very different temperament to extend Prince’s experiments, and to be more direct and forceful in their

application. Sean Pryor has observed how Prince's poems often remained lodged in “wholly hypothetical realms”, and that this conditional element is often inscribed at the level of his poems' syntax.<sup>48</sup> What this illustrates is an important difference in the two poets' conceptions of who the speaking “we” refers to, which in turn describes important differences in their compositional contexts. For Prince, the “we” of “For Thieves and Beggars” remains aloof, secretive, reticent, wary, having to operate through a “half-veiled” language, seeking but never finding “a naked word” by which to describe those who “went in want”. His poems continually pursue a distant fantasy of “furtive love”, and the tremendous difficulty of having to avoid the “real luxuries” of explicit revelation give his poetry its distinctive mystery, but also the sense that it never fully realized itself, that in his multiple allegories of inhibition and indecision Prince only testified to what he would never be able to achieve. Prince' late poem “Memoirs in Oxford” might be said to look back on such missed opportunities:

And here am I now forced to try  
Thirty years later as it is.  
To take their measure and unravel  
Before and after – look and travel  
Back over opportunities

I missed! And can I now forgive  
Myself for having missed so much?  
I was afraid to take or give,  
Disabled or unfit to live  
And love – reach out and touch.<sup>49</sup>

Ashbery's infinitely inclusive “we”, on the other hand, is founded upon a candid acceptance of his identity as enabled by very different personal and cultural circumstances. Prince was an isolated academic at a regional English university, while Ashbery was a member of an extraordinarily sophisticated and vibrant artistic community which was marginalised both in cultural and civil terms.<sup>50</sup> Neither poet was permitted the luxury of “freedom from fear and freedom to speak directly

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<sup>48</sup> Pryor, “Poetry and Decision”, 834.

<sup>49</sup> Prince, *Collected Poems*, 122.

<sup>50</sup> Prince expressed his awareness of the differences in their circumstances in a letter of 1958: “I suppose that your letter from New York made me feel that there you were in the midst of a brilliant metropolitan life...while I am tied

rather than obliquely”, but Ashbery's cultural environment provided him with the chance to describe, protect and critique the community of which he was part, however indirectly. He saw in Prince's work a means of communicating obliquely, but even in his early poems carried the English poet's experiments into new territory, using them as prompts for the development of his own strange and authoritative maneuvers. The puzzling tributes Ashbery pays to Prince in his critical prose, then, can be seen as Ashbery deliberately turning away from those of Prince's poems which do not fully develop their sporadic modernist gestures, which remain either over-or-under ambitious; with characteristic generosity, Ashbery attends to those of Prince's poems which can be simply praised, though the terms of praise he employs—“simplicity”, “mystery” and “cool elegiac smoothness”—necessarily misrepresent the highly complex, inconsistent poet Prince was. His use of Prince's work in *Some Trees* is the first instance of engagement with a minor, imperfect body of work which could be isolated and elaborated upon; the next section will demonstrate how in later work Ashbery began to develop more substantially the terms of engagement he hoped to employ in relation to minor poets.

## II. “That rich indirectness”: Contextual Estrangement

Beyond the continuities evident between “For Thieves and Beggars” and several poems from *Some Trees*, Ashbery's enduring debt to Prince relates to his unstable operations within established generic modes, particularly the dramatic monologue. Prince's monologues, perhaps the most celebrated pieces in his oeuvre, range from the elaborate digressions of “Epistle to a Patron”, to the knotty inhabitation of “Words from Edmund Burke”, to the troubling ventriloquizing of the Zulu prince in “Chaka”; but what unites these disparate characters is the poems' strained relation to their supposed speakers. In short, Prince's monologues disobey the demands of their genre; rather than using a generic structure as a template to adhere to, many of Prince's poems employ one precisely in order to license a greater freedom in content and expression. Having asserted that a poem is of a particular

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to this life of provincial academic drudgery.” Letter from Prince to Ashbery, 2 July 1958, Ashbery Papers, Box 16.

genre, type or form, Prince finds himself at liberty to populate that form with diverse, strange poetry. The relation between genre and content such poems establish was significant for Ashbery's work, as suggested by a letter asserting the importance of Prince's work to the genesis of "The Instruction Manual": "The charm of "The Babiaantje", for example, has nothing to do with its "meaning", which is obvious. Why is it such a beautiful poem? I wanted to write a similar poem in "The Instruction Manual", in which the "meaning" would be placed way over to one side so as not to interfere with the "beauty".

Ashbery's letter, which I'll return to at length, is significant for numerous reasons, not least because it announces a shift in authority between the two poets. Ashbery seems to be attempting to explain to Prince the profound possibilities of his own work, of which Prince himself appears unaware; the American poet's "creative reading" of Prince's poem enlarging the scope of its potential meaning and import. Furthermore, by outlining the ways in which "The Babiaantje" influenced the composition of "The Instruction Manual", Ashbery begins to complicate, even reverse the influential flow in their relationship while appearing to deepen its original terms. By taking control of the narrative of the ways in which he has been influenced by Prince, and articulating them in ways the English poet could not have anticipated, Ashbery paradoxically uses an explicit elucidation of Prince's influence on him to demonstrate his own poetic and theoretical independence. Stating the terms by which Prince's work affects his own, Ashbery provides a decisive re-reading of Prince's poetry which in a germinal form modifies the ways in which it is to be later considered.

"The Instruction Manual" is one of Ashbery's most-discussed poems, and critics have explored its origins in poets as diverse as Bishop, Roussel, Pasternak, Jacob and Whitman.<sup>51</sup> Reading it in the context of its affiliation with Prince, however, reveals something quite new, and provides an opportunity to describe some points of overlap between the two poets. In order to do this, it's necessary to think of "The Instruction Manual" as situating itself in part within a poetic

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 263-5, Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 36-40, and Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 47-9

tradition explicitly dealing with poetry performed for financial reward—that is, the poetry of patronage. In this context, Ashbery's poem can be viewed as a product of a post-patronage world, in which the necessity of white-collar work has supplanted the complex poet-patron relations of earlier periods, but in which the generic properties of poems about patronage are retained. Like all poems about patronage, then, “The Instruction Manual” is both enabled and circumscribed by its relation to an income source, in this case the McGraw-Hill Book Company, where the poet was working when he composed the poem. In this sense, Ashbery's poem owes a great deal more to Prince's “Epistle to a Patron” than to “The Babiaantje”, though the conditions of its debt are exactly as Ashbery states: “the 'meaning' would be placed way over to one side so as not to interfere with the 'beauty’”. That is, if we take the “meaning” to stand for the poem's generic identity, and the “beauty” for what it is that the poem actually expresses.

Ashbery's poem builds upon the structure of “Epistle to a Patron” closely. Prince's poem opens in an explicitly flattering mode, but soon deviates with greater confidence from its professed epistolary purpose through excessive, self-gratifying attention to its imaginative constructions, the architectural details which hang “together / Like an argument”:

My lord, hearing lately of your opulence in promises and your house  
 Busy with parasites, of your hands full of favours, your statutes  
 Admirable as music, and no fear of your arms not prospering, I have  
 Considered how to serve you and breed from my talents  
 These few secrets which I shall make plain  
 To your intelligent glory. You should understand that I have plotted,  
 Being in command of all the ordinary engines  
 Of defence and offence, a hundred and fifteen buildings  
 Less others less complete: complete, some are courts of serene stone,  
 Some the civil structures of a war-like elegance as bridges,  
 Sewers, aqueducts and citadels of brick, with which I declare the fact  
 That your nature is to vanquish. For these I have acquired a knowledge  
 Of the habits of numbers and of various tempers, and skill in setting  
 Firm sets of pure bare members which will rise, hanging together  
 Like an argument, with beams, ties and sistering pilasters:  
 The lintels and windows with mouldings as round as a girl's chin; thresholds  
 To libraries; halls that cannot be entered without a sensation as of myrrh  
 By your vermilion officers, your sages and dancers . . .<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Prince, *Collected Poems*, 13.

Ashbery's poem unfolds a fictional travelogue as a form of distraction from the tedious compositional task at hand. Its attitude to its source of patronage is much more straightforward, but its method of digression is familiar. Here is the opening:

As I sit looking out of a window of the building  
I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.  
I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace,  
And envy them—they are so far away from me!  
Not one of them has to worry about getting out this manual on schedule.  
And, as my way is, I begin to dream, resting my elbows on the desk and leaning out of the  
window a little<sup>53</sup>

Titled after, perhaps even dedicated to, the source of the poet's income (the instruction manual he is supposed to be writing), in the proper generic manner "The Instruction Manual" begins with a reference to the source of income, then features an elaborate and extended imaginative deviation, before returning dutifully to a recognition of the source of patronage at its conclusion. In this way, Ashbery's poem, like many poems of patronage, structurally resembles the "out-in-out form" characteristic of "the Greater Romantic Lyric", as Marjorie Perloff describes it, but in a significantly altered form; the transformative journey which constitutes the middle section of such poems is simply an elaborate fantasy with no bearing on the original scene, its cartoonishly heightened features only serving to underline the futility of the intermediary action. There is no "altered mood and deepening understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation", as M.H. Abrams leads us to anticipate: all is the same.<sup>54</sup> Hence the very abrupt endings of Prince's and Ashbery's poems, both of which conclude having exhausted their own patience with their fantasies:

indeed how should it be  
That you employed them less than we? but now be flattered a little  
To indulge the extravagant gist of communication,  
For my pride puts all in doubt and at present I have no patience,  
I have simply hope, and I submit me  
To your judgement which will be just.

We have heard the music, tasted the drinks, and looked at coloured houses.

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<sup>53</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> As quoted in Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 265.

What more is there to do, except stay? And that we cannot do.  
And as a last breeze freshens the top of the weathered old tower, I turn my gaze  
Back to the instruction manual which has made me dream of Guadalajara.

David Herd has suggested that the conditions of the poet-patron relationship can often be seen as inscribed in the poetic product it enables. Arguing that Prince's poem in particular illustrates “the way art takes instruction”, Herd asks of all poems to patrons: “Who is talking . . . the putative artist, or the person paying the bill?”<sup>55</sup> The answer is, of course, both: Ashbery's poem, like Prince's, is to an extent “spoken” by his source of patronage—hence its unusually straightforward parodies of corporate language—and also continually seeking forms of escape from it through its elaborate and agile syntax; the flight of imagination provides a brief, almost hallucinatory source of respite from the overbearing consciousness of the poet's debt to the patron. Both poems establish certain forms of expressive freedom while adhering to the generic constraints under which they operate.

The relationship between “meaning” and “beauty” Ashbery alludes to in his letter, and that between genre and expression the two poems negotiate, illustrate a central aspect of the influence Prince exerted on Ashbery; that is, both poets' use of established forms and rhetorical modes seem, paradoxically, to license their most extravagant deviations from convention. Several critics have noted this aspect of Ashbery's work, but the most perceptive remains Marjorie Perloff, in her essay, “Barthes, Ashbery and the Zero Degree of Genre”, which identifies convincingly a series of continuities between the two writers. Central among these is the manner in which both Barthes and Ashbery enter into an engagement with what the former calls “the original banality”, a term which is employed to refer to any form of stable discourse, inclusive of all conventions of genre or poetic form, up to and including “lineation, stanzaic structure, indeed the whole visual arrangement of the poem”.<sup>56</sup> In an interview, Barthes outlined how engagement with genre could be productive for an avant-garde artist, and how such engagement might be conducted: “The position is a bit paradoxical

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<sup>55</sup> David Herd, “The Patron and the Snare: Punk Faun and the Constraints of Utterance”  
<http://poetscriticsparisest.blogspot.com/2012/10/david-herd-on-dell-olsens-punk-faun.html> Accessed August 10, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Perloff, *Poetic License*, 279.

in relation to avant-garde style, but perhaps the best way to prevent . . . solidification is to pretend to remain within an apparently classical code, to keep the appearance of a writing subject to certain stylistic imperatives, and thus to attain the dissociation of an ultimate meaning through a form that is not spectacularly disorganized".<sup>57</sup> Perloff helpfully glosses Barthes' explanation, suggesting that "the seemingly orderly sequence" by which *Barthes By Barthes* is composed "is no more than a form of etiquette, as if to say that once these codes are established, the author can do precisely as he pleases".<sup>58</sup> By accepting the shell of the banal discourse, whether that takes the generic form of the "novel" or "autobiography", or the epistolary poem, the travelogue, sestina, pantoum, or eclogue, the writer is licensed to turn his attention to something with which he might establish some relation of desire. Or, to return to Ashbery's words, a poem "in which the 'meaning' would be placed way over to one side so as not to interfere with the 'beauty'". For Prince, the dramatic monologue provided a relatively stable formal or generic identity in which to situate texts which deviate dramatically from the conventions of that form. The opening of "The Tears of a Muse in America", in this context, can be viewed as a self-reflexive description of its own relation to genre: the "classical code" both "imprisons" the poet and affords him the freedom of relatively uninhibited expression: "Call out and celebrate the beam / imprisoning and expressing him". The interplay of these elements is what Prince calls "the soft ostensibility of story", or what John Hall, writing of "Epistle to a Patron", defines as the "generic structure that will mark its being as poem and its severance from 'the world'".<sup>59</sup>

Beyond "Epistle to a Patron" and "The Instruction Manual", the closest point of contact between the two poets in these terms can be seen in Prince's "The Tears of a Muse in America" and Ashbery's "Clepsydra". If the relationship between "Epistle" and "The Instruction Manual" is one of Ashbery imitating the genre-content dynamic Prince had established in the earlier poem, then that

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<sup>57</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 210.

<sup>58</sup> Perloff, *Poetic License*, 274.

<sup>59</sup> John Hall, "Terms of Engagement in F. T. Prince", *PN Review* 147, Vol29, No.1, September-October 2002.

between “The Tears of a Muse in America” and “Clepsydra” is an index of the substantial development of their relationship in later years, and Ashbery's consciousness of his increasing powers as a poet. The latter poem was significant for both poets, as the following remarks from Prince suggest:

I am also much impressed by your Clepsydra, a really astonishing display of your extraordinary powers. I wouldn't know what you are doing, why you do it, how you do it, but I can read the piece as I would read a piece of Mallarmé's prose, feeling the words to convey an extended metaphysical operation...As I say, I don't profess to understand you, ever, but that is probably part of your lasting charm. Most of us are so obvious, even banal—not only the English, but the Americans.<sup>60</sup>

It is strange, in a way, that Prince should profess to be so puzzled by “Clepsydra”, since it is a poem which derives again substantially from his own practice, though developed, admittedly, to such an extent as to be almost unrecognisable. It is certainly, as he suggests, one of the closest points of contact between Ashbery and Mallarmé, a relationship inevitably mediated by Prince's own exercises in “the French symbolist conviction that a poem can meaningfully speak of nothing but itself, the laws of its own being, the processes by which it came to birth”.<sup>61</sup> Prince was, as Davie pointed out, one of few serious practitioners of symbolist techniques in English; and in poems such as “Epistle to a Patron”, “Cefalù” and, particularly, “The Tears of a Muse in America”, he offered Ashbery an early glimpse of a poetry which could proceed by paying attention to and elaborating upon its own development.<sup>62</sup> In “Clepsydra”, Ashbery tries to write, in Bloom's words, “the last poem about itself and about poetry, last by rendering the mode redundant”.<sup>63</sup>

“The Tears of a Muse in America” first appeared, without the first four lines, as “A Muse for William Maynard” in Eliot's *Criterion*. It is a curious, generically-ambiguous poem. John Hall's questions deserve repeating: “Who is speaking to whom? Is this the poet, fully conscious of literary

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<sup>60</sup> Letter from Prince to Ashbery, 5 February 1966, Ashbery Papers, Box 16.

<sup>61</sup> Donald Davie, “Beyond the Here and Now: Review of Collected Poems”, *The New York Times Book Review*, April 8, 1979.

<sup>62</sup> While Prince had first-hand access to Mallarmé and Valéry, and had been engaged with them since his early adolescence (as his journals, which feature copied-out versions of poems by both these poets, demonstrate), his access to them was inevitably mediated by Eliot. However, there is a similarity in their manner of absorbing symbolism which means that Prince's role for Ashbery should receive some attention.

<sup>63</sup> Bloom, “The Charity of the Hard Moments”, in Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Views*, 56.

tradition, invoking the Muse? Or is this the Muse instructing the poet? Is this the poet talking to himself about the composition? Or the poet hooking the reader into being a writing-reader?"<sup>64</sup> The poem uses such ambiguities of identity, of passivity and activity, as propulsive. The ill-defined "I" and "He" circulate in the poem in such a way that it is often unclear what is being said and to whom the litany of descriptive terms enumerated are to be applied. This confusion of the speaker and the Muse is deliberately cultivated by Prince, who in the opening lines of the second section draws out an abundant list of attributes that "may cluster" around "the ray of his intelligence", before informing us finally that it is not some other figure but the speaking "I" who is "luminously possessed of" them:

He arrives thus with the ray of his intelligence  
With what may cluster around it, dispositions  
Recollections and curiosity, the state  
Of reason and vision, the deceits of passion,  
Play of reserves, reflections, admirations  
I am luminously possessed of.<sup>65</sup>

The broader difficulties of Prince's poem, in addition to those generated by his idiosyncratic syntax, are derived from a kind of contextual indefiniteness. This is not a technical lapse, but an autotelic quality shared by Prince and Ashbery; so preoccupied are both the poets with "the musing surface" they occupy while writing that the stimulation and material for further action can only be sourced from its current and recently-passed activity; consequently, the poems occupy a liminal space in which they are simultaneously "half-meant, and half-perceived". The following passages illustrate Prince's astonishing facility in this mode:

And all of which are anxious  
to acknowledge makes him another of the many-minded, another  
Exposed and assaulted, active and passive mind,  
Engaged in an adventure, and interesting and interested  
In itself by so being. But here solutions bristle,  
For the case seems to shine out at me from the moment  
I grant him all the mind I can . . .

It comes to me afresh,

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<sup>64</sup> Hall, "Terms of Engagement".

<sup>65</sup> Prince, *Collected Poems*, 19-22.

There glimmers out of it upon me that I want  
Nothing to come of it at once. It glimmers,  
It glimmers from the question, of how, how shall it fall  
The moment of simple sight? And where  
In what green land the simple sorrow? And  
Under what boughs beneath whose hand wherever,  
As in a fog upon the perfumed Cape,  
A falling together of many gleams  
Neither remembered nor forgotten, and neither  
Undesiring nor desiring, the moment of despair?  
Only say it should fall, as it will fall, as it fell  
Or will have fallen, hanging back but to take the place  
All at once in the tacit air and on the ground  
Of this period: the process  
Of confrontation, reflection, resolution  
That follows, it is this that will ascend  
To the last point of fitted and related clarity.

The subject of these lines seems to be continually shifting, to the point that, as has been said many times of Ashbery's work, it seems that the subject is in fact the “movement of the mind”, rather than any particular object or idea: not thoughts, but ideas about thoughts, as Ashbery puts it in “Ode to Bill”. Such vagueness is authorised by the generic structure which supports Prince' poem. In its sections describing the speaker / Muse, it has worked hard to clear a space for the “active and passive mind” to become “engaged in an adventure” that is indeterminate in its limits, since the adventure consists of its own uncertain and unpredictable processes; it is “interesting and interested / In itself in so being.” These central lines are, as Prince later stated, lifted from Henry James's notes for his unfinished novel, *The Ivory Tower*, which Prince in his youth had momentarily toyed with the idea of completing. Particularly interesting is what Prince chose to redact from his source. Of his protagonist, Gray Fielder, James writes:

All of this makes him, I of course desperately realize, another of the “intelligent”, another exposed and assaulted, active and “passive” mind, engaged in an adventure, and interesting in itself by so being; but I rejoice in that aspect of my material as dramatically and determinandly general. It isn't centrally a drama of fools and vulgarians; it's only circumferentially and surroundedly so – these being enormously implied and with the effect of their hovering and pressing upon the whole business from without, but seen and felt by us only with that rich indirectness.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Henry James, “The Ivory Tower: Working Notes”, <http://www.henryjames.org.uk/itower/ITnotes.htm>. Accessed June 6, 2015.

Prince curtails his appropriation at an important moment; while James rejoices “in that aspect of my material as dramatically and determinandly general”, Prince refuses generality—“solutions bristle”, and he once again turns his attention to the description of subjective experience. The “Muse” is notes for an unfinished, absent fiction, and it's arguable that the “generic structure” of the poem, as well as its contexts—Spenser, James, certainly Eliot and Mallarmé—make themselves felt only “circumferentially and surroundedly so”; what the poem is really in pursuit of is “that rich indirectness” which it itself constitutes. The intermittently high diction, self-reflexive themes, and contextual estrangement, alongside Prince's conception of the “moment of simple sight” as “a falling together of many gleams” occurring outside a fixed tense and returned to endlessly in a cycle of “confrontation, reflection, resolution”, anticipate Ashbery's poem. Its conflicted reasoning, elastic syntax and lexical choices arguably provided Ashbery with a subject and approach. Visually, also, the poems are close relations.

What makes “Clepsydra” such an initially foreboding poem is the apparent absence of any of these formal, rhetorical or occasional identifiers. It realises in more extreme form than anything Prince attempted the latter's avowed aim to produce “a verbal object, a self-contained structure from which the scaffolding had been removed, and in which the poet's motives and intentions had become invisible, having been completely absorbed”. The “scaffolding” which Prince desired to remove is the generic structure, the “original banality” of Barthes; Ashbery successfully achieved its removal in “Clepsydra” since, rather than employing an established generic context to licence digression, he proposed the poem as analogous only to itself; the water-clock that the poem is becomes its own originary structure, both enabling and resisted. It is perhaps the most “transparent” of Ashbery's poems in its transcription of the present moment, the always-shifting “movement of the mind”, as demonstrated by its longest sentence:

Each moment  
Of utterance is the true one; likewise none are true,  
Only is the bounding from air to air, a serpentine  
Gesture which hides the truth behind a congruent

Message, the way air hides the sky, is, in fact,  
Tearing it limb from limb this very moment: but  
The sky has pleaded already and this is about  
As graceful a kind of non-absence as either  
Has a right to expect: whether it's the form  
Of some creator who has momentarily turned away,  
Marrying detachment with respect, so that the pieces  
Are seen as part of a spectrum, independent  
Yet symbolic of their spaced-out times of arrival;  
Whether on the other hand all of it is to be  
Seen as no luck.

A central theme extended by the poem's endless circulations is that the “insistent now”<sup>67</sup> of writing modifies the past in “its being furthered”, a proposition the poem seeks to enact. As James Longenbach has shown, “Clepsydra” attempts to make the reader experience through its rhetoric and grammar “the way in which one moment supersedes another, slipping from the future to the past without any sense of a teleology”.<sup>68</sup> The “inverted syntax” of the poem, which recalls Prince's own inversions, actualises its conception of the fluid passage between the past and the present by reversing the order of questions and answers (“assurance, / Which you might say goes a long way towards conditioning / Whatever result?”), to take only one example. This is an effect intended to, in Ben Lerner's phrase, mediate immediately the reader's experience of reading, to restore them as fully as possible to consciousness of the act of reading itself. More importantly, it also serves as an early analogy for Ashbery's incipient conception of a lateral influential model. Which is to say, Ashbery discovers in the writing of “Clepsydra”—in which temporalities are moved between on a flattened plane—the influential relation he wishes to establish with other poets. This relates specifically to Prince in the following passage, from early in the poem, which seems to rehearse section four of “The Tears of the Muse in America”, conscious even at this early stage of having absorbed its lesson and overtaken it in ambition and achievement:

We hear so much  
Of its further action that at last it seems that  
It is we, our taking it into account rather, that are  
The reply that prompted the question, and

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<sup>67</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 323-4.

<sup>68</sup> James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95.

That the latter, like a person waking on a pillow  
Has the sensation of having dreamt the whole thing,  
Of returning to participate in that dream, until  
The last word is exhausted; certainly this is  
Peace of a sort, like nets drying in the sun,  
That we must progress toward the whole thing  
About an hour ago.

Ashbery's "taking it into account", while a self-reflexive comment upon the poem's autotelic procedures, also refers outside the poem towards Prince and the two poets' influential relationship. It might be suggested that Ashbery's assimilation of Prince is so total that his response to Prince's provocation has reversed the authoritative order of influence; that the "question" of Prince's work, in light of the singular achievement "Clepsydra" represents, now seems only to have existed in order to provoke Ashbery's definitive answer: "It is we, our taking it into account rather, that are / The reply that prompted the question". In one sense, this might be read as a synoptic statement of Ashbery's approach to the "imperfect" minority Prince's poetry represents: having only gestured incompletely and imperfectly towards the post-modernist poetics Ashbery fully realises, Prince remains forever dependent on the American poet to locate and elucidate his poetic innovations. This excavation and exegesis of the obscured poetry of the past is part of Ashbery's generosity as a poet and critic, and yet, viewed in this light, there's also something predatory about the approach. "Clepsydra" itself suggests as much:

But its fierceness was still acquiescence  
To the nature of this goodness already pasture-fields  
And it was a kind of sweet acknowledgement of how  
The past is yours, to keep invisible if you wish  
But also to make absurd elaborations with  
And in this way prolong your dance of non-discovery  
In brittle, useless architecture that is nevertheless  
The map of your desires, irreproachable

In this sense, Ashbery's commitment to "other traditions" has a self-interested slant, and comes to seem simply a name for an untapped resource. And yet, having delivered this decisive statement of influential reversal, Ashbery turns his attention again to the "question" which gave rise to his digression: "Peace of a sort, like nets drying in the sun, / That we must progress toward the whole

thing / About an hour ago.” Rather than insisting upon the significance of the present moment, the answer, and his own victory over the past, the question, and his influences, Ashbery asserts that because *circularity* is the poem’s formal principle, the “question” is never overcome by the “answer”, the influencer never definitively defeated by the ephebe, but rather both are part of a continuing dialogue between poets and poems which is never reduced to a definitive resolution. The water-clock is continually turned on its head. The poem suggests that influence is not linear, but rather a flattened, lateral process which is ongoing, in which all parties are equalised. The image of the “nets drying in the sun”, in preparation for further haulage from the sea, aptly recalls Prince’s own formulation for his unfolding poem:

Caught in that leisurely and transparent train  
Of the soft ostensibility of story,  
His motions and his thoughts are their own net<sup>69</sup>

“Clepsydra”, then, provides an account of the moment Ashbery has realised his own capacity to surpass earlier poets, including Prince, and this realisation precipitates his first lengthy consideration of the terms of engagement he wants to cultivate with those poets. The past is vulnerable to the present “to make absurd elaborations with”, and this poem is Ashbery’s first recognition of his sense of responsibility “to provide a protected medium for the exchanges” between poets to occur, generously and without a hierarchy being imposed. The recognition that Prince’s work may be read in the context of his own inaugurates not a moment of triumph—of a strong poet achieving imaginative independence—but rather an acknowledgement that, for Ashbery, influence is reciprocal and circular, and entails a particular set of responsibilities, a duty to be respectful towards the past which is being drawn upon. The temporal circularity of the poem allows Ashbery to achieve this conceptualisation of influence itself as non-linear, non-hierarchical. Conscious of its own mediating power, Ashbery’s poem clarifies the incompletely-developed elements of Prince’s “half-emergent” work, with the consequence that it influences the ways Prince

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<sup>69</sup> Prince, *Collected Poems*, 21.



For reasons that are more or less unbeautiful.<sup>71</sup>

For all this visual fragmentation and structural peculiarity, though, its attitudes towards narrative are quite different from perhaps the most narrative-driven of Ashbery's poems, "Europe", which uses the eviscerated narrative template of *Beryl of the Bi-Plane* as its "original banality". In *Drypoints*, Prince doesn't use histories of the Hasidic Jews as a scaffold upon which to relay or perform "a bunch of impressions"; it is, rather, a perhaps overly-earnest attempt to illuminate a particular series of fragmentary histories. In this way it might be seen as a counterbalance to the provocatively ahistorical "Chaka", one of his first dramatic monologues, which for all its extraordinary syntactical and lexical range remains a deeply troubling poem. Where "Chaka" "converts that Zulu warrior—except for a few adventitious stage properties—into a prince or princeling of the European Renaissance", *Drypoints* maintains a scrupulous fidelity to the language and historical contexts of its resources. It's also arguable that whatever Ashberyan elements there are in *Drypoints of the Hasidim*, they are overridden by the foregrounding of its sustained dialogue with Pound, which Donald Davie went some distance to note.<sup>72</sup> It's possible to speculate in this way regarding which poem Prince may have been referring to in his letter, but perhaps more important than any close tracing of reciprocated influence is the acknowledgement that, while Prince's importance for Ashbery is clearly detectable in the latter's work, the lessons Prince learned from Ashbery are, on the whole, only faintly detectable, if at all. Indeed, the "brink of learning" Prince claims to find himself upon might simply have been another form of generous compliment to Ashbery.

As time passed, and the two poets developed in increasingly idiosyncratic directions, neither could sustain much beyond polite interest in the others' work. Prince gathered his views on Ashbery a short essay, "In a Glass Darkly", for the *PN Review* issue dedicated to the American poet, including verbatim many of the assessments he had included in the poets' correspondence. It opens:

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<sup>71</sup> Prince, *Collected Poems*, 163.

<sup>72</sup> "Everyone will take the point that in *Drypoints of the Hasidim* a gentile's tribute to the Jewish cultural heritage is managed in an austerely spare technique by that most notorious of Jew-baiters, Ezra Pound". Davie, "Beyond the Here and Now". *The New York Times Book Review*, April 8, 1979.

When I read *Some Trees*, which John Ashbery sent me in 1956, I had seen very little of his poetry, and though I was impressed by the sophistication and elegance of the book, I felt more or less baffled throughout. As I made my comments, I knew they were inadequate, and I could do little better as he continued to send me his books, in those years when he was living in Paris and when we sometimes met in London. I read him assiduously, and after some time became involved to the point of thinking I might learn something from him. In fact I have never been able to. Eventually, as the poetry moved towards its maturity and efflorescence, in *The Skaters*, for example, and *Three Poems*, I could not fail to see that he had extraordinary powers, and remember telling him so - though I suppose he hardly needed to be told.<sup>73</sup>

The puzzled admiration with which Prince greeted Ashbery's work throughout his life continued to the end, but in this essay he recognised Ashbery's singular achievement in expanding American poetry to incorporate surrealist influences, but also in tempering American-ness by being hospitable to English voices: "What his continual reading of older and out-of-the-way writers has given him is, I would say, a sensitivity to language (extending to the strangest excesses of demotic American) which saves his writing from the limitations of 'the American voice' that we hear in, for example, Wallace Stevens or Laura Riding." This is an astute observation, suggesting the ways in which Ashbery has played off various influences and national contexts in order to evade limitation.

As with almost all of Prince's admirers, Ashbery was relatively disinterested in the English poet's later work, preferring to focus exclusively on the early poetry in his public expressions of admiration. Ashbery's thoughts on the arc of Prince's career are similar to his conception of Auden's development; after a startling arrival, both poets lost the will to experiment, and regressed into what Ashbery saw as conservative verse forms, indicators of the "strong sense of possession"—or what Marjorie Perloff has called the British poet's "persistent and burdensome sense of tradition"—which underlies the relationship between English poets and their formal inheritance.<sup>74</sup> It hardly needs to be said that Prince's later work failed to extend or even significantly replicate the energies and innovations of the first three books, and in that sense Ashbery's silence on the subject of the later work is typically tactful. While there are moments of extraordinary lyricism and clarity in *Memoirs*

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<sup>73</sup> Prince, "In a Glass Darkly", *PN Review* 99, Vol.21, No.1, September-October 1994.

<sup>74</sup> Perloff, "The Two Poetries: the Postwar Lyric in Britain and America", *Contemporary Literature*, 18.3 (Summer 1977), 264.

in *Oxford* and the poem collaged from Sterne, *A Last Attachment*, they lack the energy and focus of earlier pieces.

Prince was open about his feelings of dissatisfaction with his own work; as Will May notes, his refusal to provide a blurb for Lee Harwood's *The White Room* was qualified with the remark “my position and my reputation are such—so obscure and doubtful—that any remarks of mine would do you no good at all”.<sup>75</sup> “Not a Paris Review Interview” concludes with the following question and answer:

Q. And how, with him or without,  
Do you now see, may one ask,  
The poet and his task  
And your own work?

A. I doubt  
That there could have been  
But wish there had been, more  
And better.<sup>76</sup>

These instances should be understood with the caveat that Prince came to think that dissatisfaction was likely to be the condition of producing any work of worth. His journal entry of January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1979, from which the lines quoted above clearly derive, reads: “When I look at the collected poems I can't feel satisfied, bring myself to say I am satisfied. Everything should have been better, all these should have been more, far more . . . isn't the feeling 'it should have been better' a token of the awful aspiration that sustained it all? A proof, as in James, that it has quality, is worth something.” Few would disagree with the implicit assessment here, that Prince could have achieved far more than he did. But what he did achieve was significant, particularly in the early work, and beyond itself has a value for this study for its significant contribution to the development of perhaps the major American poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prince's enduring importance for an incredibly diverse group of poets, both English and American, gives some indication of the strength of his legacy; among his admirers can be counted Ashbery, Hill, Tom Raworth, Lee Harwood, Mark Ford, Peter

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<sup>75</sup> Will May, “Obscure and Doubtful: Stevie Smith, F. T. Prince and Legacy”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, 86.

<sup>76</sup> Prince, *Collected Poems*, 253.

Riley, and Susan Howe. Prince died in 2003, and Ashbery included a poem called “The Black Prince” in *A Worldly Country* which can be thought of as a typically oblique elegy. This is the poem in full:

It might be a footfall in the forest  
or an outdated dispatch from the Mouse King,  
saying, come back to the frontier, all is forgiven.

And he was lost, gibbering on the coast of some  
uncharted isle. His gestures and speech made perfect sense  
when taken together. It was only when the wind blew them apart  
that they didn't matter, mattered only to some.<sup>77</sup>

That Prince is the subject of the poem is indicated not just by the funeral colour of the “Prince” of the title, but by the “foot” in the first line: Ted Berrigan had thought F. T. Prince (“foot prints”) was a cryptic pseudonym. Through indirect means, the poem summarizes quite neatly Ashbery's attitude towards Prince. It positions him perennially on the verge of modernity, a “half-emergent form” communicating partly through the “outdated dispatch” his dramatic monologues represented, and partly through territory-expanding, seemingly-nonsensical modernist gestures (“gibbering on the coast of some / uncharted isle”). The poem seems to worry that in this liminal space, located between eras (and stanzas), Prince “was lost”, partly because of a separation between his “gestures and speech”. Its final conclusion that “it was only when the wind blew them apart / that they didn't matter” can be thought of as a plea to read Prince's work in its proper contexts, sensitive to the pressures and energies which led him to establish his unique expressive modes. It is a delicate, deeply felt tribute to a poet who “mattered only to some”.

Ashbery's reading of Prince can be seen as the first significant instance of productive engagement with a definitively “minor” contemporary poet, and offers an explicitly-articulated template for the forms of interaction he would employ with writers of “other traditions” throughout his career. His observation that Prince was a predominantly classical poet disrupted by occasional uncertainties and modernist gestures provides a model for Ashbery's own interactions with genre,

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<sup>77</sup> Ashbery, *A Worldly Country* (New York: Ecco, 2005), 42.

his own developing sense of how an avant-garde artist might productively employ conventional forms or types of rhetoric not as constraint or signal of lineage but rather as a license to greater imaginative freedom, finding “avant-garde potentialities even within the most traditional means—by virtue of a kind of non-discrimination between the tradition and the other tradition, the figurative and the abstract, the narrative and the presentational, the speculative and the spontaneous.”<sup>78</sup> That is, in Ashbery's terms, how he might separate “beauty” and “meaning”. Prince attains further significance in the narrative of Ashbery's development as the first English poet to whom Ashbery could articulate his sense of an American poetic lineage. Prince's assertion regarding the necessary modernity of American poets provides Ashbery with his first recorded opportunity to elucidate his sense of his own relation to the American cultural moment as it unfolded in the late 1950s. He intuited this as a kind of “cultural earliness” which he felt it was his role to describe and advance.

This is the first instance of Ashbery's realisation of his power to determine the terms of influential relationships, and it is highly significant that he refused to elaborate a model which is hierarchical. His attempt to cultivate a reciprocal, dialogical relationship with Prince's work resonates in later chapters, in which we see Ashbery's careful management of Lee Harwood's imitations of his own work, and Ashbery's own voluntary assumption of influence with one of his own disciples, Mark Ford. The model of influence Ashbery begins to develop in his relations with Prince, and begins to sketch in “Clepsydra”, are realised in his mature works, and in his continuing engagement with English poets. Indeed, the friendship between Prince and Harwood I describe in the following chapter seems to fulfil Ashbery's conception of his role as a mediator of other traditions, as articulated in “Clepsydra”: “any direction was the right one, / Leading first to you, and through you to / Myself, that is beyond you and which is the same thing as space . . .”

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<sup>78</sup> David LeHardy Sweet, *Savage Sight/Constructed Noise: Poetic Adaptations of Painterly Techniques in the French and American Avant-Gardes* (Chapel Hill: UNC Department of Romance Languages, 2003), 235-6.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Distanced and Intimate”: Ashbery and Lee Harwood

This chapter addresses a different stage in Ashbery's engagement with English poets, through attention to his interactions with Lee Harwood. In contrast to the opening two chapters, which examine Ashbery's role as the secondary or subordinate partner (initially, at least) in influential relationships with Auden and Prince, this chapter attends to a relationship in which Ashbery holds, for the first time, a position of aesthetic priority. It is an important transition, since it allows Ashbery further opportunities to articulate his developing sense of American poetry as the primary Anglophone innovator, the terms of the relationship between his work and the English literary tradition, and his changeable sense of national identity. It also sees an elaboration of his conception of non-hierarchical exchange through his collaboration with Harwood. His relationship with Harwood is particularly helpful for the demonstration and elucidation of these developments. Harwood's modes of engagement with Ashbery's work are highly sophisticated, and demonstrate an acute awareness of the ways in which national literary contexts inform and apply pressure to his and Ashbery's very distinct expressive modes. Though he explicitly involves himself in an imitative relationship with Ashbery, what is interesting is how the apparent candour of that declaration leads to a range of idiosyncratic stylistic responses. Ashbery's work provided Harwood with an example to emulate and to resist, and it was in exploring the differences in their poetics—Ashbery's maximalist tendencies in *Rivers and Mountains* and the small-scale operations of Harwood's *The Man with Blue Eyes* and *The White Room* could hardly be less alike—that Harwood makes his most valuable and authoritative contributions to the poetic discussion surrounding Anglo-American poetic relations. His engagement with Ashbery tells us much about English poetry cultures of the 1960s, and also tells us much about Ashbery's own work—the ways in which it is successful, and some of its central assumptions and aspirations.

The first part of the chapter pays close attention to the influence of Ashbery's work upon

Harwood's volume *The Man with Blue Eyes*, an account of the affair the two poets conducted between 1965 and 1966. It delineates how Harwood's entry into an imitative relationship with Ashbery reveals information about the development of Harwood's conception of his national and poetic identities. The chapter proposes that Harwood traces their literary and erotic relationship through subtle conjunctions and dislocations in his language, which have broader implications for Harwood's attitudes towards the transatlantic contexts out of which the poems arose. It suggests that Harwood learned much from Ashbery's encrypted form of addressing his homosexuality, and reads their collaborative work, "Train Poem", as the culmination of their shared interest in cryptographic language. The second part of the essay analyses Ashbery's reading of Harwood, and suggests some ways in which this reading can inform our understanding of Ashbery's attitudes to Anglo-American literary relations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and how the development of these attitudes can be seen as important for certain elements of Ashbery's poetry. It suggests that Ashbery's attempt to establish an "other tradition" of English poets is most fully articulated in the connection he draws between Harwood and John Clare.

### **I. "I imitate you": A Triangle of London, Paris and New York**

Lee Harwood has spoken extensively about the significant impact encountering and reading John Ashbery had upon his own development as a poet. As he remarked in his book-length interview with Kelvin Corcoran:

Meeting and spending time with John Ashbery in 1965 gave me the choice to move into a whole new approach to writing... You're presented with a scene and invited to walk in and wander around, like entering a toy theatre, and you can create things to entertain yourself and possibly a reader. The idea of constructing poems that did this seemed wonderful. Poems like Ashbery's 'Europe' and 'How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulchre' are marvellous examples of this building with fragments and suggestions.<sup>1</sup>

As this comment suggests, it is the poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* which are most prominently felt in Harwood's writing of the mid-60s. A number of characteristics are shared by that volume and

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Harwood and Kelvin Corcoran. *Not the Full Story: Six Interviews* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2008), 14.

Harwood's *The Man with Blue Eyes*, an elliptical chronicle of the affair the two poets conducted between 1965 and 1966: these include a gentle, distracted parataxis, the explicit embrace of extraneous interjections and interventions in the text, a tendency to exploit syntactical ambiguity, and a continual preoccupation with the inextricable association between private and public discourses. Even in his depictions of intimate scenes, the impingement of the historical moment upon Ashbery's attention is continually registered, as in the opening lines of the volume:

What had you been thinking about  
the face studiously bloodied  
heaven blotted region  
I go on loving you like water but  
there is a terrible breath in the way all of this  
You were not elected president, yet won the race<sup>2</sup>

Here the studious attention the poem pays to a loved one's face is intruded upon by extraneous voices and images. Acting as a partial bridge between the private discourse of the preceding line and the explicitly public discourse of the subsequent one, the inconclusive fifth line, "there is a terrible breath in the way all of this", directly addresses how the poem absorbs the fact of public intrusion into private space and involves it as part of the poem's compositional process. It achieves this by forming an incomplete part of two potential phrases. Firstly, it suggests the phrase "there is a terrible breath in the way all this [*unfolds* or *occurs*]", which is truncated by a remark about failed democracy ("you were not elected president, yet won the race"); in this sense, the poem unfolds in a deliberately anti-social manner, "the piano of your halitosis", as "The Lozenges" has it, being played to reflect the "terrible breath" of the corrupted political discourse of the time.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, it suggests the phrase "there is a terrible breath in the way [*of*] all of this"; in this competing sense, Ashbery implies that the "terrible breath" is that which intrudes upon the intimate scene of the opening lines, getting "in the way" of his attempt to portray it (similarly, "A Last World" addresses "You who were always in the way"). By keeping these two intimated meanings in suspension

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<sup>2</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 43.

<sup>3</sup> David Herd links this with a general failure of political language at the time of its composition: 'The language of the poem is not working because the language of democracy is not working, the political idiom surviving in spite of, rather than as a consequence of, events.' (Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 83.)

through the ambiguity of the elision, Ashbery absorbs the tension which might prevent his ability to communicate into the act of communication, and thereby mediates its impact, leveraging its force on his behalf rather than being subject to it. In this way, by colliding the public and the private, the political and the erotic, Ashbery's lines are capable of sustaining two mutually affecting perspectives—the distanced and the intimate—simultaneously.<sup>4</sup>

Ashbery's ability to be both distant and intimate is further demonstrated in one of the more dramatically disjunctive poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*, “America”, the perspectival transitions of which would provide an even closer model for Harwood. Its second section features the following passage:

The pear tree  
moving me  
I am around and in my sigh  
The gift of a the stars.  
The person  
Horror—the morsels of his choice  
Rebuked to me I  
—in the apartment  
the pebble we in the bed.  
The roof--  
rain-- pills—  
Found among the moss  
Hers wouldn't longer care—I don't know why.<sup>5</sup>

As with “The Tennis Court Oath”, these lines describe a scene of great intimacy, and are in part a direct address to a specific loved one, yet the reader is kept at a distance, in this instance not by the staged incursion of the public into the private realm, but by Ashbery's conversion of biographical details into abstracted objects. The “pear tree / moving me” which opens the section “encrypts”—to employ John Shoptaw's term—the name “Pierre Martory” (the French poet with whom Ashbery was living at the time, and to whom *The Tennis Court Oath* is dedicated), as well as suggesting the noun “poetry”, implying a fusion of personal and literary forms of influence. As Chapter One suggested, this conversion of proper names into depersonalised objects is a tendency which runs

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase “distanced and intimate” is Robert Sheppard's description of the strange double-effect of much of Harwood's work. I will explore how this relates to both Ashbery and Harwood throughout the essay.

<sup>5</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 21.

throughout Ashbery's poetry, and is a part of his overall strategy to make his poetry as accessible to as many readers as possible. Though the poem emanates from a specific biographical context, its aspirations for itself transcend the details of this context, and it becomes “a general all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars”, as Ashbery wrote of Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*.<sup>6</sup>

The features exhibited by “The Tennis Court Oath” and “America” are present in the opening poem of *The Man with Blue Eyes*, “As your eyes are blue”:

As your eyes are blue  
you move me – and the thought of you –  
I imitate you.  
and cities apart. yet a roof grey with slates  
or lead. the difference is little  
and even you could say as much<sup>7</sup>

Here Harwood positions himself in relation to Ashbery as Ashbery had related to Martory, creating a referential triangle which is both absolutely private, and also reflective of a broader relationship between English, American and French poets, which I'll return to later in the essay. Ashbery now becomes the undeclared subject and recipient of the poem—represented metonymically, and abstracted to a non-specific pronoun, he is more fully present as an individual than Martory is in “America”, yet the “movement” enacted on one by the other is identical. In this way, Harwood imitates not only Ashbery's idiosyncratic methodology, but his method of appropriation from the French. As in Ashbery's poems, the four disjointed syntactic units which constitute the first three lines are ordered not in a linear or causal relationship, but suspended in an associative state in which their relationship to one another remains undefined. This distinctively Ashberyan syntax means that Harwood is “moved” by Ashbery both in the sense of being emotionally affected by his physical presence, and of being transported or guided by the methodologies of his poetry; as such, the poem can be characterised as both descriptive and performative. Furthermore, the poem is open to the inclusion of information from outside the immediate intimate scene it depicts; it soon turns away

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<sup>6</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Lee Harwood, *Collected Poems, 1964-2004* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2004), 28.

from its opening recollection to encompass elements of the exterior world which impinge upon it, turning upon the hinge of a qualification (“yet” for Ashbery’s “but”) to demonstrate an awareness of the “roof grey with slates” for Ashbery’s “The roof-- / rain— pills—”, then further outwards to a description of “cities apart” for Ashbery’s “the gift of a the stars”. Harwood has directly attributed this tendency to his involvement with Ashbery’s work, as he told *The Guardian*: “I talked about Ashbery creating a poem outside himself and in one of my poems I describe a love scene and the last line is about a car starting up outside. I was very conscious of trying to make people realise that there is always something else going on.”<sup>8</sup>

It is with this technical or stylistic similarity in mind that the poem’s central statement, “I imitate you”, should first be considered. Some critics have taken this as a bald asseveration of stylistic mimicry, a wilful capitulation of, in Bloomian terms, a “weak” poet before his “strong” progenitor. This does a disservice to the complexity of Harwood’s poem, and represents a misunderstanding of the imitative relationship Harwood is attempting to involve himself in, which has more in common with classical conceptions of imitation, as practised by the poetic disciples of Anacreon, for example, than it does with the agonistic model of inter-poet relations proposed by Bloom. Rather than being an “open, somewhat ingenuous avowal”<sup>9</sup> of imitative purpose, “I imitate you” represents the beginning of a complex engagement with Ashbery whose motives are various.

One of the primary factors in this engagement was Ashbery’s ability to provide for Harwood a conduit to other forms of poetry beyond what was being produced in Britain at the time, as well as access to an abundantly fertile artistic community in New York. His imitative gestures, therefore, can be read as signs of performative entry into the textual community of a coterie. As Jacques Bens has written, “the goal and result of heteroparody is to enlarge the dimensions of a work, or rather to inscribe it within a vaster creative ensemble.”<sup>10</sup> The imitative gesture represents both a positive and

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<sup>8</sup> Article sent as part of an undated letter from Harwood to Ashbery. Ashbery Papers, Box 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Something We Have That They Don’t*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Warren Motte, *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 70.

negative identification: by appropriating techniques from New York writers, Harwood declares his affiliation with the “creative ensemble” of the New York School, and also signals his difference from much of the poetry being written in England at the time. Harwood's letters from this period testify to a longing for the richness of the American poetic scene, personified by Ashbery, matched by his resistance to what he saw as the ailing and insular equivalent in England. As he wrote in August 1966: “to say that London is a rather poor second to New York is understatement of the year. Nothing much happening except the same old gang airing their egos.”<sup>11</sup> In an interview he has remarked:

At that time in England there were some terrific people, but I didn't know about them. I'd so given up; the stuff you saw published by Faber, or came across, the Movement—it was so remote. It was talking in clichés—middle-aged, middle-class men talking about trivia. Much later, I found out about some amazing people, like Jocelyn Brooke, or Brenda Chamberlain, but they were completely out, completely forgotten in England. And so – I didn't find anything at all attractive, or that sparked me.<sup>12</sup>

As these comments indicate, Harwood's entry into an imitative relationship with Ashbery was closely intertwined with his feelings of cultural dissatisfaction, and therefore constituted, in Emerson's phrase, “a form of travel”. They are reflective of a broader sense of discontentment among Harwood's contemporaries with the dominant poetic modes of the time, typified by the Movement and the Group, which had displaced the varied, Francophile modes of the 40s movements like the New Apocalyptic poets. Jeff Nuttall's view that the Movement generated an “insular provincialism [in] British poetry” is substantiated by Tom Pickard: “a diet of Larkin and the Movement . . . and the usual dreary offerings from the Oxcam Literary Mafia . . . made me despair”.<sup>13</sup>

It should also be noted that Harwood's choice of Ashbery as model constitutes an attempt to align himself with a particular tradition of international, rather than exclusively American, avant-garde practice; in interviews, Harwood routinely groups Ashbery together with Tristan Tzara and

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from Harwood to Ashbery, 30 August 1966. Ashbery Papers, Box 9.

<sup>12</sup> Personal interview with Lee Harwood, 18 October 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Nancy M. Grace, Jennie Skerl, eds., *The Transnational Beat Generation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 150.

Jorge Luis Borges, and claims that what drew him to Ashbery's work was its affinities with that of those two writers:

I realised then that while Ashbery had triggered this realisation, it had already been building up, like a chemical build-up. A taste for this had begun in 1962 when I read Jorge Luis Borges' *Ficciones*... Even earlier, around 1959 / 1960 I'd become interested in Tristan Tzara's poetry and his Dada activities. He collages material and it's even more abstracted than Borges and Ashbery, but it has the same principle. So the taste, the curiosity was there, but Ashbery was the one who sparked me to put it into action.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, while Ashbery was a contemporary, Harwood saw him as only the most recent incarnation of an already-established tradition, whose lineage stretched back early into the century and across various parts of the world; and therefore his attachment to him cannot simply be characterised as an imitation of one poet's style, or even the imitation of an American poetic style, but rather as an attempt to establish an association with a whole tradition of poetics whose origins were diffuse (though the Anglo-American context remains the predominant one). Ian Gregson makes a relevant point with reference to the relationship between Ashbery and the English poet John Ash: "what is impossible to determine is the extent to which what looks like the influence of Ashbery is actually the direct influence of earlier poets who were also influential in making Ashbery the poet he was".<sup>15</sup> Gregson's caution here is instructive, but whether or not Ashbery or his own sources are the primary influencer, there is a painful irony at work in the fact that a succession of English poets, including Harwood, Ash and Mark Ford, were obliged to negotiate access to a European tradition of poetics through the mediation of contemporaneous American poets; a symptom, perhaps, of a climate of hostility towards non-English poetics prevalent from the 1950s onwards, generated largely by the Movement poets, whose "poetics of decency", in Donald Davie's phrase, suppressed a whole dissenting tradition of European writers. As Paul Giles has argued: "America operated as a point of triangulation, a means of refracting the disturbingly alien, foreign

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<sup>14</sup> Corcoran, *Not the Full Story*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 225.

aspects of European culture in a more amenable and recognizable form”.<sup>16</sup> Harwood himself uses a similar phrase to describe how he was operating at the time in “a triangle of London, Paris and New York”. He was acutely conscious not only of the importance of New York in directing him towards French literature, but also of its mediating effects:

There was a bit of a link [with France], my going over to see Tzara in about '63...so there was quite a lot built up inside me. But it was a delight to find American poets, especially – Gregory Corso, and O'Hara and Ashbery, using [French poetry], but somehow making it more lively. There's something dead about late Surrealism. It's a bit formulaic. That French influence in the US poets wasn't a dull, automatic writing – it had used the French in order to be free and have fun, but it somehow touched you far more, it was close, it was more real, it wasn't words.<sup>17</sup>

The “deadness” of French poetry when contrasted with its Anglophone inheritors is enacted literally in a crucial poem from *The White Room*, “The Late Poem”, in which the triangle of France, Britain and the US is personified by three carefully-selected poets:

Today I got very excited when I read some  
poems by Mallarmé and Edwin Denby, and later  
in the evening, by F.T. Prince.  
I don't get “excited” very often,  
but today was an exception;  
and the fact I got “excited” was only  
increased when I realised two of them – Denby  
and Prince – are still alive and are probably  
now asleep in their beds in nice apartments.

Ted Berrigan has met Edwin Denby.  
I don't know anyone who's met F.T. Prince.  
I wish I could meet F.T. Prince;  
maybe I will some day, but it will have to be soon  
as he must be getting old.

The sequence of the poets' appearance here reflects the genealogy of poetic influence between cultures as Harwood conceived of it at the time; attention to the originary French source passes on to an American mediator, before concluding with an English poet. The abrupt exclusion of Mallarmé from the poem is significant; it's only the Anglophone poets, “still alive”, who matter to Harwood, as they offer not just technical resources but the possibility of interaction and exchange.

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<sup>16</sup> Giles, *Atlantic Republic*, 284-5.

<sup>17</sup> Personal interview with Lee Harwood, 18 October 2013.

This represents another deceptively simple moment of candour on Harwood's part; much as he imitated Ashbery's techniques in order to gain access to the New York School, in this poem Harwood is employing his new American models to negotiate entry into an English tradition of poetry represented by Prince, a poet who might (and, indeed, eventually did) offer opportunities for community comparable to the encounters between Berrigan and Denby. In this way, the poem represents the ways in which Harwood's advances into American poetic communities provided him with a fresh perspective from which to view his own English poetic heritage. Furthermore, this poem represents an important articulation of a productive tension between different models of influence: that is, hierarchical (or, vertical or cross-generational) and coterie (horizontal) forms of influence. In this instance, Harwood acknowledges both forms of influence upon his own work—through his affiliation with Mallarmé and his attention to two contemporaries in Denby and Prince—and though he seems to emphasise the importance of the living poets and, by extension, affiliate himself with the flattened forms of influence present in a coterie, he is in fact signalling in a faux-naïve manner the importance of shuttling between the two resources / axes. I'll return to the significance of this poem, and of Prince for Harwood, toward the end of the chapter, but for now it's sufficient to say that the mediation of literature for Harwood by the New York School reconfigured his conception of English poetry as significantly as it did his relation to the French.

Despite this triangular structure of exchange, the Anglo-American context remained the predominant one for considerations of Harwood's work, and of utmost social importance for Harwood, and consequently he was often obliged to frame his poetry in transatlantic terms. Rather than explicitly identifying himself with Ashbery, however, he was keen to stress that his assumptions and modifications of Ashbery's aesthetic affirm the specific and distinct historical circumstances that gave rise to them, and therefore constitute a distinctively "English" response to an American model. In an interview with the *Guardian*, he drew a significant distinction between the concerns engaged with by American and English poets during the late 1960s: "It's not that I'm

some kind of mid-Atlantic freak. I am English in that my concern with gentleness and tenderness is an English concern, and very different from the American writer's preoccupation with identity and place."<sup>18</sup> This perceived distinction is reaffirmed in the later poem "The doomed fleet", in which Harwood explicitly engages with the diminishing status of England in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the consequences of this for writers with an "English concern":

In such a setting, it is not surprising  
That tears or tenderness, shown by a small  
But delicate gesture or caress, were of no consequence.<sup>19</sup>

In these lines Harwood defines his own conception of what constituted a distinctively English set of techniques and concerns – the "delicate gesture", "tears or tenderness" – as seeming "of no consequence" in the larger context of poetry written in English. However, this apparently humble act of self-definition is more significant for its quiet assertion of difference than for its admission of marginality; it is the kind of "delicate gesture" that allows us to conceive of how Harwood's own sense of his poetic self was developing in relation to his American progenitors. This kind of differentiation from the expansive aims and purposes of American poetry, more abundantly realised in the poetry Ashbery was writing than in any of his contemporaries, was in fact present even from the beginning of their relationship.

In contrast to the large structures Ashbery was working in at the time of their relationship (in poems such as "Clepsydra" and "The Skaters", which would go on to be included in *Rivers and Mountains*), the significant formal operations of Harwood's poems in *The Man with Blue Eyes* occur on a deliberately small scale, not so much on the level of stanza or line, but in the relations of word to word and letter to letter. Such meticulousness on a minute scale complicates the overall feeling of openness and improvisation that characterises the larger structural elements of his work, and creates a paradoxical sensation of, on the one hand, an unusual intimacy necessitated by the intense forms of attention one has to pay to his miniature matrices of meaning, and on the other, a

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<sup>18</sup> Article sent as part of an undated letter from Harwood to Ashbery. Ashbery Papers, Box 9.

<sup>19</sup> Harwood, *Collected Poems*, 85.

distancing effect achieved by the work's apparent casualness of construction. One of the unique ways in which Harwood encourages this intimate form of attention in the reader, only to affirm a fundamental sense of distance, is by strategically employing words constituted of potentially-discrete conjoined words at significant points during the collection. The conjunction and separation of these word-units elaborate on a small scale the broader issues of distance and intimacy that form the thematic background to the collection, including the complex interrelations of national and poetic identity. The collection is bookended by two very distinctive occurrences of such highly pressurised language. Returning to the opening poem, set in London, Ashbery and Harwood are described as “cities apart”:

As your eyes are blue  
you move me – and the thought of you –  
I imitate you.  
and cities apart. yet a roof grey with slates  
or lead. the difference is little  
and even you could say as much

The formulation “cities apart” has two functions here. Firstly, it acknowledges the geographical distance between the two poets (Harwood was living in London, while Ashbery was in Paris and soon to return to New York), and, secondly, it signifies an awareness of how the cities that divide them are “a / part” of their relationship in a central way. The intimacy of the scene represents a temporary hiatus from the geographical distances that formed the backdrop to their relationship, which nonetheless continue to make themselves felt even in this moment of closeness. In Harwood’s intimate recollection, the two constituent elements of the second word, “a” and “part”, are forced together, creating a compound word whose meaning ironically undercuts the unifying process of its production; as the poem later suggests, the paradox of “meetings disintegrating” is its primary compositional method and concern.

The second occurrence can be found in “New York will welcome me”, from near the end of the collection. In contrast to the earlier poem’s patient progression from one fragmentary recollection to another, “New York will welcome me” is largely a wilfully superficial exercise in

Frank O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” mode, which was by the time of its composition already well-established. Its method of surreal disorientation within a cityscape feels a little hackneyed, as though Harwood were not quite convinced of it himself, to the point that he gives up the act halfway through:

“life gets tedious...” he said  
as the last indian arrow  
passed through the breast pocket  
of his last check shirt  
one dollar is seven shillings and tuppence<sup>20</sup>

Here Harwood’s self-identification as a foreign interloper rebuffed by the Natives seems an admission of his failure fully to assimilate an American style. Characteristically, though, it is in his identification of the limits of his own voice that Harwood most strikingly asserts himself; the anachronistic (and, needless to say, misjudged and misattributed) role-play of Native Americans and colonial aggressors is undercut by the brilliant non-sequitur “one dollar is seven shillings and tuppence”, crystallising the inadequacy of the terms of comparison between American and English systems of value at the time. For Harwood’s speaker, the dollar is an abrupt symbol of power, a single unit of meaning which when translated into an English idiom becomes the quaint and archaic-seeming “seven shillings and tuppence”. This sense of creating a somehow diminished or inadequate version of the powerful innovations of the New York School is present in another imitation of O’Hara, “letterpoem”, in which Harwood describes himself doing nothing during his lunch hour, an inertia exacerbated by his use of heroin:

nothing happening. I don’t do much.  
fix every so often  
and a couple more days drift by in cloudy footsteps.  
I go to work each day and come home in the evenings.  
sit around and listen to the radio.  
It’s colder these nights.<sup>21</sup>

O’Hara’s quickness and lightness of step is re-cast as dreamy and lethargic, though distinctly Wordsworthian, “cloudy footsteps”. This is a pale imitation, not much revived by the accuracy of its

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<sup>20</sup> Harwood, *Collected Poems*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

self-diagnosis and the suggestion of a distinctly English allusive context, and it is hard to disagree with the critic who claims that at such points Harwood reads like “a sedated Frank O’Hara”.<sup>22</sup> Harwood testifies to having deliberately imitated O’Hara several times, going so far as to write a “lunch poem” on the typewriter on which O’Hara wrote his own, thereby mimicking not only the style but also the material circumstances of those poems’ composition:

Remington’s, I think, a typewriter manufacturers, had outside their showrooms a stand, and on it was bolted their latest model. So he would walk along on his lunch-break, put a bit of paper into the typewriter, and write a lunch poem. Of course I had to do it myself. I wrote him a lunch poem, which of course I didn’t dream of giving him, but Ashbery gave it to him. He sent me that lovely Tibor de Nagy book of *Love Poems (Tentative Title)*, with an inscription thanking him for his lunch poem...it wasn’t a very good lunch poem.<sup>23</sup>

This anecdote illustrates how imitation was an act which, while extending Harwood’s own poetic range, further expanded his community. Also significant is Harwood’s acknowledgement of his failure successfully or productively to adopt O’Hara’s style. This perhaps tells us something as much about the imaginative legacy of the two American poets as it does about Harwood’s imitative abilities; while Ashbery’s intimate yet abstract work leaves “signs to be developed in heterogeneity”, O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* leave comparatively little room for the imitator, being so closely tied in technique to a particular compositional context.<sup>24</sup> Revealingly, in a letter to Ashbery, Harwood directly contrasts his own lunchtime experiences with O’Hara’s:

Meantime content myself with continual daydreams & walking round Soho in lunch breaks imagining I’m riding through the Painted Desert, Arizona. hey-ho silver! (aside; talking of lunch-breaks. What does Frank O’H do at lunch time when he isn’t meeting Leroi Jones or buying watch straps??)<sup>25</sup>

It is precisely because of the sense of cultural inadequacy Harwood articulates here, removed from the more secure sense of self suggested by “As your eyes are blue...”, that the separation of conjoined words occurs in “New York Will Welcome Me”. To put it in simplest terms, the conjunction occurs in London, while the separation occurs in New York. The final stanza of “New

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<sup>22</sup> Joshua Adams, ‘Review of Lee Harwood’s Collected Poems’, *Chicago Review* 53:1, Spring 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Personal interview with Lee Harwood, 18 October 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 2004), 35.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Harwood to Ashbery, 31 January 1966. Ashbery Papers, Box 9.

York will welcome me”, cut adrift from the unbroken passage of which the rest of the poem is constituted, reads:

so the love song and finger strokings  
and eyes meeting on the stairs  
of east side tenements  
all at a meeting planned a year  
a head

The single space separating “a” and “head”, while only a “delicate gesture”, signals the distance he has travelled since “As your eyes are blue...”. Removing the “a” from the “head” cleverly performs Harwood’s sense of cultural dislocation, creating a stilted, goofily inert noun, a head on a stake the context for which is disturbingly unclear. The poem’s situation, recast “on the stairs / of east side tenements” and organised a year in advance, has removed the intimacy and spontaneity that characterised the time Harwood and Ashbery shared in London. Forcing the ambiguity between noun and adverb, the separation of “a” and “head” precludes any potential future for the affair—in this disjointed form, there is no “ahead” to look to, only a lifeless “head”—and as such, the imaginative fusion that the relationship with Ashbery legitimised is broken. This represents the extreme of distance from the intimacy described by the conjunction present in “As your eyes are blue . . .”.

While this is a painful moment, it also marks a productive imaginative breach between Harwood and the American poets he had imitated. The moment of disjunction between Ashbery and Harwood is effectively rewritten, with greater clarity, in a poem from *The White Room*, “The maturity”:

Yet it was so obvious that eventually  
the melodrama and its adolescent hero’s role  
must come to an end, and in the same way  
that the relationship between the young  
man and his older patron would cease  
just as the young man would cease  
when he became a “grown-up”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Harwood, *Collected Poems*, 56.

“The maturity” described here is both poetic and erotic, an undoing of Harwood's social and imaginative engagement with his “older patron”, and a declaration of intent to seek out new forms of expression for himself. What those new forms should be is a question which vexes the English poet throughout *The White Room*, newly independent as he is of the structure upon which he had previously developed: “Not being a vine, it was hard / to know where and what to grow into.”<sup>27</sup> At the same time, by acknowledging Harwood's failure to imitate American poets successfully, this poem further legitimises explorations of the kinds of poetry he can produce as a distinctly “English” writer. He acknowledged his gradual distancing from the New York poetry scene in a letter to Ashbery from 1970: “where I’m trying to develop now seems to be regarded as rather eccentric by the young New Yorkers, & something better avoided. Ho-humm.”<sup>28</sup> This distancing was implicitly encouraged by F. T. Prince, whom Harwood became acquainted with in the mid-60s, and who offered detailed notes on the manuscript of *The White Room* (1968), as Harwood has recalled:

At that point because I was spending a lot of time in New York, there was a whole tone of voice that was around a lot in poetry then, it was very effective, very attractive, and it was fun. You could produce yards of this stuff—it would always be published and people would say “great”. But for me Prince made me really stop and think, “why am I doing this, and does it matter? Does it come from any real necessity? So I shifted, double-checked, and tried writing not pattering-on. And writing barely. The book *Landscapes* reflects that. But old habits die hard, and the two wove back together again in a combination.”<sup>29</sup>

This connection between Prince and Harwood represents a fascinating development in the aftermath of Ashbery and Harwood's relationship. The English poet Harwood turns towards in order to resist or deviate from a specifically “American” set of poetic practices is one towards whom he has been directed by American poets, including Ashbery and Berrigan. As such, his conception of the “Englishness” of Prince can be thought of as an American-sanctioned one, itself developed as a means of contrast to Americanness. The relative narrowness and insularity of American conceptions of English poetry are suggested by Harwood, recalling the broad assumption that he must have already known Prince: “On my early visits to the States, they would say, “Do you know F T

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Harwood to Ashbery, 25 January 1970. Ashbery Papers, Box 9.

<sup>29</sup> Personal interview with Lee Harwood, 18 October 2013.

Prince?" You know, you're English, you must do. If you're from England, you must all be in the same village!"<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, "The Late Poem", mentioned earlier, illustrates how Harwood's desire to encounter Prince was framed quite self-consciously by the example of community provided by the New York School: "Ted Berrigan has met Edwin Denby. / I don't know anyone who's met F.T. Prince. / I wish I could meet F.T. Prince; / maybe I will some day . . ." As much as the specific technical lessons he derived from Ashbery, O'Hara, Berrigan and others, it was the social structures of New York poetry, and the coterie art such structures produced, that Harwood was attempting to emulate and transpose back onto English poetry. His engagement with Prince, in these terms, represents a partial success. The fact that Ashbery's intervention was required for this connection between Harwood and Prince to occur doesn't diminish the real significance of the encounter, but rather expresses something fundamental about Ashbery's influential legacy in Harwood's work. The rediscovery and performed extension of an obscured, English "other tradition", and the re-orientation of contemporary English poets towards versions of their past marginalised by more powerful influential narratives, might be said to be Ashbery's central goal in terms of his poetic and critical interventions in English poetry. Ashbery's intention is not simply to disseminate his own distinctive poetics, but to alert contemporary English poets to those English poets of the past who have served as resources for his own poetry, and then to encourage them to deviate in idiosyncratic ways from that point of origin. In this sense, the development of a dialogue between Harwood and Prince must have been particularly satisfying for Ashbery, as must have been Harwood's account of what drew him to Prince's work:

[Discovering Prince] was again not through anybody in England, I'd never heard of him here, like Jocelyn Brooke. He was published by Ashbery in *Art and Literature* and also there was a magazine called *Kulchur*, which had a two-thirds of a page rave review by Ted Berrigan of *Doors of Stone*. On my early visits to the States, they would say, 'Do you know F.T. Prince?' You know, you're English, you must do. If you're from England, you must all be in the same village! So I then grabbed a copy of *Doors of Stone* when I got back, and I was bowled over because his tone of voice was very much akin to Ashbery, this kind of indirect thing.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

In this instance, Ashbery's "influence" upon Harwood can be viewed as present, but operating in a quite unconventional way. Through its appropriation from and development of Prince's work, Ashbery's poetry can be said to indirectly provide Harwood with a way of reading Prince, a context or example which makes sense retrospectively of Prince's only incompletely developed ideas. As I suggested in the previous chapter, Ashbery's extensions of Prince's example in poems like "The Grapevine" and "Clepsydra" foreground those elements of Prince's poetry which might otherwise be overlooked or obscured by its superficial classicism; a process of development and elaboration borne out by these remarks, which suggest that it is only with Ashbery's clarifying "tone of voice" mediating Harwood's reading that the value and innovation of Prince's work makes itself felt. In this way, Ashbery's influence upon Harwood became, from *The White Room* onwards, increasingly "indirect", more evident in Harwood's developing independence than in his adherence to Ashbery's own example.

## II. "Be supple, young man": Encryption and Collaboration

Harwood's retrospective imagining of the progress of his relationship with Ashbery, from imitation to eventual physical and imaginative estrangement, resembles narratives of relation prominent throughout the imitative tradition. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the exchange of "homotextual" gestures is an element of Harwood and Ashbery's relationship that has yet to receive much attention from critics. One of the primary elements in Harwood's work fostered through contact with Ashbery was a way of articulating elements of his homosexual relationships through forms of representation that foreground vividly the necessity of their encryption. By providing him with expressive modes that allowed for the oblique address of his sexuality, Ashbery functioned for Harwood much as Robert Duncan did for Thom Gunn, whose relationship was, similarly, closely tied to national context: for Gunn, the US was "a scene of greater permission, the location for the more adequate

performance of the sexual identity which has to be muffled or repressed at home.”<sup>32</sup> Rather than offering a means of adequate expression of his sexuality, however, Ashbery offered Harwood a way of critiquing its repression. For this purpose Harwood drew primarily upon Ashbery’s first volume, *Some Trees*. In its earliest and most explicit manifestation, Ashbery’s “The Thinnest Shadow” outlines how an agile metaphorical vocabulary has to be cultivated by gay writers:

Be supple, young man,  
Since you can’t be gay.<sup>33</sup>

These lines articulate a traditional conception of how gay writers have had to express themselves throughout history, as Gregory Woods suggests: “The strength of the literature of homosexuality lies in obliquity, arising from the need to resort to metaphor to express sexual meaning”.<sup>34</sup> In Ashbery’s work, such a mode of reading is most valuable for the early poems, in which coded or “encrypted” language is employed on numerous occasions in order to evade a criminalising explicitness, and which by the nature of its evasions critiques the situation that has given rise to them. One of the most commonly-discussed examples of this technique occurs in “A Boy”, in which evasions and their detection are the basis for a sequence of elliptical sketches. Ashbery’s codifying technique is most explicitly employed in the final two stanzas:

*My boy.* Isn’t there something I asked you once?  
What happened? It’s also farther to the corner  
Aboard the maple furniture. *He*  
*Couldn’t lie.* He’d tell ’em by their syntax.

*But listen now in the flood.*  
They’re throwing up behind the lines.  
Dry fields of lightening rise to receive  
The observer, the mincing flag. *An unendurable age.*<sup>35</sup>

The situation suggested by the poem is one of confession by a son to a father (or, perhaps more pertinently, from the “older patron” in a sexual relationship to the younger party), as suggested by the reference to “Dad” in the poem’s opening line, the italicised interjection “*My boy*”, and the

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), 106.

<sup>33</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 9.

assertion that “he couldn’t lie”. In his presentation of the situation, Ashbery both employs and problematizes an evasive mode of expression. Out of necessity, he has had to forge an agile poetic vocabulary that is able to address his own experience in an oblique manner (“They’re throwing up behind the lines”); and yet the poem resists any contention that such a manner of expression might be interpreted as typical or characteristic of a particular grouping of people. Ashbery may have been forced to adopt this evasive style by the “unendurable age” in which he lives, but he is acutely aware of the dangers of connecting a form of expression, and, by implication, a distinctive pathology, with a particular grouping of people: “He’d tell ’em by their syntax.” This poem exhibits, in a parodic, exaggerated form, the syntax by which his homosexuality might be “told”, or given away; while also ventriloquizing, and thereby neutralising, the crude urge to detect concealed meanings. In the poem’s third stanza, this urge is satirized through camp exaggeration:

“My child, I love any vast electrical disturbance.”  
Disturbance! Could the old man, face in the rainweed,  
  
Ask more smuttily?

As Michael Scharf has indicated, Shoptaw’s distinction between “concealment” and “cryptography” in his reading of this poem is crucial; because of the powerful critique implied by Ashbery’s deflections of homophobic language - as in the last line, in which the derogatory “mincing fag” underlies “mincing flag” - they cannot simply be classified as forms of disguise.<sup>36</sup>

Such techniques can be seen throughout *The Man with Blue Eyes*. It shouldn't be forgotten that, at the time of Harwood’s writing of the volume, homosexual relationships were illegal in the UK, and the necessity of coding or concealing explicitly homosexual elements is clear throughout the book. As Robert Sheppard has argued, we might read a critique of this situation in the dramatic disparity between Harwood’s depictions of heterosexual and homosexual sex acts; while Harwood

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Scharf, “An Unendurable Age: Notes on John Ashbery’s ‘A Boy’ from *Some Trees* (1956).” *Almost Island* (Winter 2012 Special Issue: Style).  
[http://almostisland.com/winter\\_2012/special\\_issue\\_style/m\\_scharf\\_test\\_page.php](http://almostisland.com/winter_2012/special_issue_style/m_scharf_test_page.php) Accessed August 6, 2015.



ambiguous: the “erratic rhythms” overriding the erotic rhythms which move just beneath its surface. In its staging of its own interrogation, the poem anticipates and mocks the urge towards sexual and semantic clarity in a way which explicitly recalls “A Boy”. Similarly, “The interrogation” resembles both these poems in the sense that it is a dialogic poem in which the revelation of the poet’s sexual identity is sought by an outside agent, and concealed or evaded through the encrypted language of the speaker. In such instances, Harwood can be said, like Ashbery and Auden before him, to be attempting to transform “unspeakability from a condition of repression into a weapon against the uninitiated reader”. There are moments, as in “The white cloud”, when Harwood exposes in simpler form the absurd doublespeak he finds necessary as a poet writing about homosexual relationships:

no –  
one does exist outside this town

dove love<sup>40</sup>

As with the twinned statements “*It had been raining / but it had not been raining*” we find in “A Boy”, Harwood evokes a paradoxical state in which one does and does not exist outside of a particular “town”, a geographical, emotional or semantic location with a unique set of social conditions (elsewhere in the volume, Ashbery’s kiss is described as “containing such towns”). This desire to point to the potential of double-meaning—as both constraint and license—is made explicit by the abrupt juxtaposition “dove love”; the words are, visually, virtually the same, distinguished only by a “delicate gesture”, the slightness of whose differentiating impact reveals Harwood’s own, idiosyncratic kind of “suppleness”.

The fusion of erotic and literary interactions between the two poets, and the central role evasive forms of expression play in their description, are central to Ashbery and Harwood’s collaboration, “Train Poem”, which appeared in *The Man with Blue Eyes*. In this work, individual words prove themselves even more duplicitous than those of “A Boy” or “The white cloud”. Here is the poem in full:

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

## Train Poem

dog daisies poppies metal knitting  
needles snail eyes backward  
and then discord the records-file  
prehensile tankers and block  
which way the stage perimeter OK  
block again greenhill rears upward mutinous  
“back!” So until January  
telegraphs twitching north to so and so  
and a handkerchief slowly chopping heavens  
“ne nous fachons pas” so that the houses  
laughing in your eyes nearer the bang  
let a forest caress unlace the instant  
lovecog – did you really understand what I meant by that?  
the farmyards in an uproar of freed peasants’ cough drops ah the old dogs at the window  
but my love for you outgrew the shed  
tools in disorderly heaps and wasps  
a beam sagging into twisted visions of nowhere  
and at this the small engine appeared from the siding  
to inspect the phantoms and slowly disappear

paris-grenoble 11 june 65<sup>41</sup>

This intermittently playful, romantic, and sinister work operates primarily by exploiting the possibility of reading a range of words as both noun and verb, an effect heightened by skilful enjambment. At any point, a word which initially functions as either one of these grammatical categories can be modified into its alternative, without entirely nullifying the initial incomplete meaning. This creates a series of situations in which a single word can act as a keystone or hinge between two competing interpretations of a sentence. Examples of this include: “knitting / needles” (the verb “knitting” changes to the noun “knitting needles”) “eyes backward” (the noun “eyes” changes to its verb form with the introduction of “backward”), “tankers and block / which way the stage” (the noun “block” converts to verb form), “rears upward” (noun to verb) “telegraphs twitching” (verb to noun), and so on. These keystone words enact the concept of “meetings disintegrating” identified by Harwood and Ashbery in earlier work; phrases such as “let a forest caress” meet and disintegrate on impact with the secondary meaning introduced by a verb, “unlace”,

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<sup>41</sup> Harwood, *The Man with Blue Eyes* (New York: Angel Hair Books, 1966), unpaginated.

and embark on a divergent syntactical and semantic path. This impulse to rapidly lace and unlace is explicitly sexual in its connotations, as suggested by the neologism “lovecog”, which recalls Whitman's own condensed figure for sexual union, “love-root”. Because the poem is constituted of a series of “meetings disintegrating”, it’s necessary to read the poem with “eyes backward”, as it were; the metamorphic progression of the poem forces a reader to continually revise or qualify their understanding of earlier words or passages as new information is incorporated.

The main functions of this technique are to inscribe on a small scale the broader intentions of the poem to evade emotional or sexual clarity, to satirise the obviousness of the double-entendre as an encoding strategy, and to elude a single authorial classification: “Train Poem” is neither by John Ashbery or Lee Harwood, as the individual words are neither definitively nouns or verbs, their function in the syntax always variable, as is our imagined attribution of particular elements of the poem to one poet or the other. The line “tools in disorderly heaps and wasps” demonstrates all of these intentions; self-reflexively describing how the obviously erotic “tools” are piled in “disorderly heaps”—their metrical and grammatical positions jumbled and re-arranged—the process of exchange by which the poem was written is occluded: Ashbery and Harwood's “swaps” become “wasps”, a waspish concealment of the poem's compositional context.<sup>42</sup>

This desire for variability is further suggested by the poem's unusual notation of the circumstances of its composition, on a train between Paris and Grenoble. This gesture draws an analogy between the location of its composition and its authorship as equally unstable referents: the train being a fixed place which is itself always moving between geographical points. The European context is a neutral space for both poets, neither England and America, either of which might have produced the kind of cultural dislocations or imbalances evident in Harwood's “New York will welcome me”. This intermediary zone between movement and stasis also foreshadows a theme familiar from Ashbery's later work, such as “The Bungalows” and “Houseboat Days”, which

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<sup>42</sup> “One of us would write a line and pass it across. With no alterations or changes.” Personal interview with Lee Harwood, 18 October 2013.

express “the idea of being on the move and being stationary . . . which is sort of what life is like”. More revealingly, the work provides us with a significant informative context for one of Ashbery's most notoriously challenging poems, “Leaving the Atocha Station”, written in 1960 while travelling with Frank O'Hara through Europe. The poem prefigures “Train Poem” in multiple ways, not least in its elucidation of a poetics responsive to travel and technology, elements which are themselves illuminated by the later collaboration. Indeed, it can be said that “Train Poem” represents a crucial moment in which Ashbery reflects upon and re-articulates elements of “Leaving the Atocha Station” in order to demonstrate its compositional principles to Harwood; as such, it can be viewed as a form of instruction for the English poet.

“Leaving the Atocha Station” opens with a series of images which convey the chaotic auditory and visual atmosphere of a station as a train pulls out:

The arctic honey blabbed over the report causing darkness  
And pulling us out of there experiencing it  
he meanwhile . . . And the fried bats they sell there  
dropping from sticks, so that the menace of your prayer folds . . .  
Other people . . . flash  
the garden are you boning<sup>43</sup>

The poem moves, as James Longenbach has noted, by imitating the fleeting impressions observable from the window of a train passing through an unfamiliar country. It is a technique drawn in part from the flat, automatic, object-registering prose of the school of the *roman du regard*, as suggested by Ashbery's 1958 review of Michel Butor's *La Modification*:

It begins as the hero, a middle-aged Paris representative for a large Italian typewriter firm, boards a train at the Gare de Lyon, and it ends as he arrives in the Stazione Termini in Rome. During the trip his eye has automatically registered whatever there is to see (the stations passed, the passengers who come and go, even the bits of paper on the floor of the train and the motion of the raindrops on the window) and his mind has just as automatically reflected on his past and future . . .<sup>44</sup>

Like *La Modification*, “Leaving the Atocha Station” narrates obliquely an erotic relationship which occurs within the moving stasis of the train carriage, and which appears intermittently among the

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<sup>43</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 63.

<sup>44</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 16.

“dislocated, incoherent fragments of images which make up the movement of the poem”.<sup>45</sup>

Blind dog expressed royalties  
comfort of your perfect tar grams nuclear world bank tulip  
Favourable to           near the night pin  
loading formaldehyde.     the table torn from you  
Suddenly     and we are close  
Mouthing the root           when you think  
generator     homes enjoy leered

The sequence of nouns “tar grams nuclear world bank tulip” might be said to describe the text overlap of a pack of cigarettes lying on a newspaper, a chain of elliptically-evoked contexts which broaden the poem's perspective from the immediate to the global. Following this rapid sequence of nouns the poem again changes its focus abruptly to an intimate, elliptical scene: “Suddenly     and we are close / Mouthing the root     when you think”. For the space of two lines, Ashbery contracts the focus of his poem to employ a direct, intimate form of address to an unidentified individual. This shift in focus, from the general perspective to a localised, intimate scene recalls, of course, the transitions of “America” and “The Man with Blue Eyes”. It also anticipates the dizzying transitions of “Train Poem”, which veers sharply from a “dislocated, incoherent” vision of bucolic uprising to a sudden declaration of love: “the farmyards in an uproar of freed peasants’ cough drops ah the old dogs at the window / but my love for you outgrew the shed”. Significantly, the phrase “Mouthing the root” recalls Whitman's “love-root” even more explicitly than “Train Poem”. Its modified incarnation in the later poem, as “lovecog—did you really understand what I meant by that?”, perhaps suggests that at least one of the two poets was composing their poem with “Leaving the Atocha Station” in mind. The modification is playfully instructive, a moment which arguably reveals “Train Poem” to be the site of explicit technical transmission between the poets, a text in which the innovations of “Leaving the Atocha Station” are integrated observably into Harwood's poetics: he is led through the compositional processes and contextual, environmental attention which allowed Ashbery to write the earlier poem. In this sense, “Train Poem” can be considered a

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<sup>45</sup> Longenbach, *Modern Poetry After Modernism*, 93.

textual record of influence as it is happening, and the point of closest imaginative contact between Ashbery and Harwood. The English poet would seek out his own imaginative pathways from this point on, but it is a moment of extraordinary convergence. It's also a significant early demonstration of Ashbery's imaginative openness, his willingness to involve himself in a collaboration which effectively teaches Harwood how Ashbery had written a central earlier poem; how he responded to and embodied his environment by "standing outside the ordering principles of language". It demonstrates Ashbery's willingness to have his poetics disseminated, but also to see them differentiated in their application. Most importantly, it shows how Ashbery's mediation of his own influence upon an English poet unexpectedly illuminates elements of his own poetics, and provides an opportunity for the American poet to reflect upon his own work in the wake of its reception by others.

### III. "Try to have it both ways": Ashbery's Anglo-American Interventions

Harwood's next volume, *The White Room*, featured a paragraph of jacket copy written by Ashbery.

It reads thus in its entirety:

Lee Harwood's poetry lies open to the reader, like a meadow. It moves slowly toward an unknown goal, like a river. It is carelessly wise, that is, wise without knowing or caring what wisdom is. In these things it seems more like recent American poetry than English poetry. The English language is constantly trying to stave off invasion by the American language; it lives in a state of alert which is reflected to some degree in English poetry. The American language does not know it is invading the English language and would not understand about this, since it considers all worlds desirable and is always borrowing or inventing new, not always necessary ones. Lee Harwood's English is like American English in that it lacks a strong sense of possession. At the same time, it has a pearly, soft-focus quality one rarely sees in American poetry, and which I associate with poets like William Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold. The "great" poetry I like best has this self-effacing, translucent quality. Self-effacing not from modesty but because it is going somewhere and has no time to consider itself.<sup>46</sup>

This extraordinary sequence of statements, closer to a prose-poem than conventional criticism, reveals a great deal about the depth of Ashbery's involvement with issues of Anglo-American poetic relations. Through its summoning of questions of nationality and possession, it engages with a long

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<sup>46</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 116.

debate regarding power-relations between English and American poetries, and represents one of his most explicit statements on the subject. In its combination of assertiveness and playfulness, it represents a significant development on the anxious conversation regarding the undeveloped state of US poetry of the 50s in his letters to Prince.

Ashbery's comments reflect the common equation posited between the developing imperial power of the USA during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the energies and inventiveness of its language, which C.D. Blanton has recently substantiated: "America is something that takes over everywhere and adapts all histories to its own... lagging behind exchangeable goods, but imposing its own culture with just as much force".<sup>47</sup> George Steiner famously remarked upon the "almost Elizabethan rapacities and zest of American English", and in Ashbery's remarks on Harwood a similar connection between imperial power and linguistic vitality is made. Crucially, though, for Ashbery this vitality is legitimised and energised by its lack "of a strong sense of possession"; this is intended in the sense Doris Somner suggests, that Americans "may sense that their culture is made, whereas other societies may more easily mistake culture for nature, human products for natural givens".<sup>48</sup> In broad terms, Ashbery's sense of American poetry is that it functions as a patchwork of previous and contemporaneous cultures assembled through the vitality of its inquisitive and acquisitive instincts, while English poetry is hamstrung by the retention of this misguided and archaic "strong sense of possession".

This was not always the case, however. As chapters 1 and 2 have demonstrated, Ashbery's early attitudes towards English poetry were, in the context of the startling energies of American poetry in the early 1950s, somewhat anachronistic. Up to and including his time as a postgraduate student at Columbia in 1951, Ashbery was convinced of the inherent superiority of English verse:

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<sup>47</sup> Blanton, *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, 135. As the covert support provided by the CIA for various branches of the arts—most famously, Abstract Expressionism—during the Cold War demonstrated, the ideologically-motivated promotion of "American" cultural products was a widespread practice which touched the New York School of Poets indirectly at various points. See Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> As quoted in Tuma, *Fishing By Obstinate Isles*, 60-61.

I was very Anglophile then – to the extent that even the English poetry I didn't like somehow seemed superior to its American equivalent.<sup>49</sup>

This attitude was partly generated by a rejection of the predominant forms of American poetry being written at the time; as David Herd has argued convincingly, many poems in *Some Trees*, such as “The Mythological Poet”, are forceful reactions to the overbearing presence of Lowell. Yet some accounts endorse the young Ashbery's view. Jed Rasula has argued for the strength and influence of English poetry during this time: “the spectre of English verse, from the Metaphysicals to Yeats and Auden, animated postwar poetry in a spectacularly ghoulish way, as if the American poet were little more than a wax mannequin outfitted with British couture”.<sup>50</sup> Ashbery's opinion of English poetry, however, bucks the general trend in the the development of Anglo-American poetic relations, an anomaly caused predominantly, in all likelihood, by the strength of his attraction to Auden.

As Chapter 1 suggested, Ashbery's work is deeply indebted to Auden's example. Ashbery's modes of managing this influence have varied across his career. At times he has explicitly identified with the English poet, and been unabashed in describing the licence his mentor's work afforded him in exploring the possibilities of a polyvocal lyric, citing *The Orators* and *The Sea and the Mirror* in particular as deeply influential. At other points later in his career, Ashbery has been keen to qualify his admiration for Auden, and in distinctly national terms. It is worth returning to the unpublished letter he sent to the Polish poet Piotr Sommer:

You aren't correct in assuming that American poets have not had any influence on me. Even though Auden was the first modern poet I read with pleasure, he was in a sense an American poet, and not just because he lived there. In a funny way, I think you could say his pre-American poetry was American (in his restless experimentation), while the poetry he wrote in his years in America was more English, perhaps out of a nostalgia for English neatness and conventions which he might have experienced during life in the barbarous wastes in America. After coming to modern poetry through Auden, I next turned to Williams, Stevens, Whitman, Crane and all the others. There is still, however, a fascination with great English poetry of the past which I think almost any American poet has.<sup>51</sup>

Blanton's remark that America “adapts all histories to its own” rings true here. In this instance, we

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<sup>49</sup> Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford*, 40.

<sup>50</sup> As quoted in Tuma, *Fishing by Obstinate Isles*, 83.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Piotr Sommer, 7 January 1981. Ashbery Papers, Box 25.

might say that Ashbery deliberately and provocatively exhibits the acquisitive impulse he describes in his comments on Harwood. Not only does Ashbery re-define Auden, or at least the Auden that Ashbery finds interesting, as American—as though a poet exhibiting signs of formal experimentation could only be that—he associates the neat and conventional poems of Auden’s later years with regressive “English” tendencies. It should be noted that this statement comes from a letter in which Ashbery is attempting to assert his poetry’s American provenance perhaps a little too forcefully, as Somner is attempting to deny it altogether—it certainly doesn’t tally with his assertions elsewhere that he considers his work “more English than American”—but its partial resemblance to his comments about Harwood suggests a consistent strain of thought over a number of years regarding the national character of the two poetries.<sup>52</sup>

Here we might summarise two attitudes. When referring to Englishness as an element within his own work—“I consider my poetry to be more English than American”—from the mid 60s onwards, it is most likely to suggest Ashbery’s engagement with and debt to a number of English writers from previous centuries, such as Keats, Wordsworth, and Marvell, or “the England of the sonnets”.<sup>53</sup> As he suggests in “Grand Gallop”, he writes “Using what Wyatt and Surrey left around, / Took up and put down again / Like so much gorgeous raw material”.<sup>54</sup> In other words, Ashbery employs modern American technologies to shape and manipulate English source material. At other times, Englishness can serve as casual shorthand for a national caricature. In literary terms, Ashbery seems still partly preoccupied with the impression he formed of modern English literature in the years after the war: that it is generally conservative, fiercely protective of what it sees as traditional, and that those who stray from its traditional elements become almost by default American, since America stands for innovation. In fairness, this is a crude but admittedly fairly accurate account of the development of much English poetry since the end of the Second World War; with some significant exceptions, the vast majority of innovations in English poetry have come as responses to

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<sup>52</sup> Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford*, 38.

<sup>53</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 30.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

American models, as a host of critics from Donald Davie to Keith Tuma have indicated. Furthermore, this will have been the impression Ashbery formed of English literary tastes if he were to use the early reception of his own work as a gauge, bar some significant interventions by critics such as Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Geoff Ward. Yet it remains a problematic position. What is fascinating about his comments on Harwood is that both these conceptions – the reverence for English poetry of the past, and scepticism about contemporary English poetry – are simultaneously present.

While Ashbery praises Harwood's "openness" and resemblance to recent American poetry (and, by implication, lack of resemblance to recent English poetry), he also offers an elusive suggestion of how Harwood's poetry is continuous with certain English poetries of the past: "it has a pearly, soft-focus quality one rarely sees in American poetry, and which I associate with poets like William Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold." This gesture is intended, in one sense, to distance Harwood from what Ashbery considers to be the "typical" notions of what constitutes contemporary English poetry, with its "strong sense of possession". This is a characteristically Ashberyan critical manoeuvre; he attempts to reformulate conceptions of tradition or present typicality, by positing an "other tradition" of English poetry parallel to extant narratives of literary history, often defined by only a vague, "soft-focus" set of terms. The imprecision of his critical terminology here illustrates his ongoing sympathy with and debt to the aesthetic approach of Walter Pater, one of Ashbery's favourite writers and one whose work resonates throughout his poetry (most famously in "Houseboat Days"). Pater's impressionistic criticism claims little cultural authority for itself; it attends to individual responses to artworks rather than attempting to establish a cultural consensus regarding value, and rejects "precise", Arnoldian evaluative methods in favour of an evocative inexactness. This subjective response to art, and the concomitant imprecision in vocabulary it entails, allows for a rejection of accepted notions of aesthetic value and significance based simply on individual response. Adam Phillips' observation that Pater's indefinite critical vocabulary—often

constituted of words like “sweet”, “peculiar”, “strange” and “delicate”—is “resonant with blanks that can evoke powerful personal associations in the reader”, can be seen as applicable to Ashbery's own.<sup>55</sup> As significant as the curious—even deliberately inappropriate—selection of Wordsworth and Arnold as precursors to Harwood, however, are Ashbery's subtle gestures throughout the statement towards a more relevant antecedent for him, whom Ashbery would later discuss at length in *Other Traditions*: that is, John Clare. This substitution of unsuitable names for the intended one is a typical example of the kind of rhetorical sleight of hand Ashbery has been known to employ, but, more importantly, the very process of substitution, concealment or displacement of Clare by Wordsworth and Arnold enacts the canonical processes of exclusion and marginalization he is attempting to illuminate and critique in his Norton lectures.

There are multiple resemblances between Clare and Harwood, both favourable and uncomplimentary, which Ashbery discreetly gestures towards in his critical responses to both poets. In his Norton lecture on Clare, written thirty years after the statement on *The White Room*, Ashbery writes of Clare's tendency to begin talking to the reader “before you've arrived on the scene, telling you about himself, about the things that are closest and dearest to him”.<sup>56</sup> This trait is, Ashbery remarks, “like that 'instant intimacy' for which we Americans are so notorious in foreign climes”. While Ashbery is clearly interested in, and fond of, Clare's disregard for stage-setting formalities, there is also the sense that his habit of beginning *in medias res* is expressive of the poet's slight social inexperience, his technical or temperamental limitation, of a disregard for etiquette which could be mistaken for lack of knowledge or sophistication. Charles Simic's observation that, in *Other Traditions*, Ashbery is attracted to work in which “originality” seems to be a product of “a peculiar kind of inability” seems pertinent here. Both Clare and Harwood, we might say, were liberated into originality by both their disinclination *and* inability to conform to the conventions of their time, a process which in Ashbery's view becomes by analogy an account of the imperfect

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<sup>55</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, ix.

<sup>56</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 16.

originality of American poetry in relation to the English tradition. The potential for limitation or inability to be viewed pejoratively is implied by Ashbery's comical aside, in which the “foreign climes” the poet refers to can quite easily be assumed to be England, the place where American manners have been so ruthlessly scrutinised over the centuries, and where “American” poetic identity has been viewed in such limited terms.<sup>57</sup> Most importantly, with this remark Ashbery subtly and mischievously claims Clare, like the early Auden, for America; implicitly citing Clare's rejection by a host of English critics—from the poet's own contemporaries, to Donald Davie and Elaine Feinstein, both of whom Ashbery quotes reprovably in his lecture—as grounds for the appropriation. He claims that “Clare's modernity is a kind of nakedness of vision that we are accustomed to, at least in America, from the time of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, down to Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg”; the kind of modernity, he implies, to which conventional English tastes remain unaccustomed.<sup>58</sup> The crux of the matter is, in Ashbery's eyes, the very different statuses of the asylum poems to English and American readers; while Davie and Feinstein argue that “the mad poetry” has won “disproportionate praise”, the pointedly American Harold Bloom is summoned to deliver the verdict that Clare achieves “a final authority” in those works, articulating “an apocalypse akin . . . to Blake's”. This is, to Ashbery, a further example of certain types of English narrowness and unresponsiveness in the face of unconventional, provocative art. Ashbery has been explicit about the strand of sanctioned English art and criticism of which he disapproves, and which he views as having occluded marginal figures who do not work within its parameters, despite being “as characteristic of their time as were the guardians of its orthodoxy”.<sup>59</sup> In a 1980 review of Guggenheim exhibition entitled *British Art Now*, he wrote: “Tact, courtesy,

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<sup>57</sup> Ashbery's discussion of his reception in England is pertinent here: “Americans, if they're going to be accepted as writers, have to act 'like Americans'. They have to be loud-mouthed, oratorical. That might be why Whitman was very widely accepted, and they loved Bret Harte, whom nobody reads anymore, just because he came to England and walked around in boots and a cowboy hat. This is an American, so we can, you know, we can understand this, because the Americans are a bunch of Yahoos.” Sommer, “John Ashbery in Warsaw”, 15. For a history of manners as a significant element of the Anglo-American relationship, see Fred M. Leventhal and Roland Quinault, eds. *Anglo-American Attitudes: From Revolution to Partnership* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 15.

<sup>59</sup> Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 380.

good taste, honesty, craftsmanship—these are some of the qualities associated with the British. Americans swoon over English good manners, not noticing that they can be an effective cover-up for rudeness. The French grudgingly admire 'le fair-play Anglais'. And there you have the problem of English art in general.”<sup>60</sup> Clare lacks the manners or civility of conventional English art, Ashbery seems to suggest, and consequently his work—so full of “improprieties” as it is—has been unduly sidelined in dominant critical accounts of English poetry.<sup>61</sup>

Those characteristics of Clare's work enumerated above can be applied, with little modification, to Ashbery's conception of Harwood. Like Clare, Harwood's work plunges us into the middle of the poem, privileges improvisation and intuition over design and structure, is occasionally artless, and is immediately intimate. His is a poetry of immanence, predominantly characterised by immersion in the world rather than reflection upon it, and as such it seems to build in various ways upon Clare's own commitment to registering natural or contextual phenomena without preconceptions, making “no connection between an abstract, presumed structure of landscape and the landscape at hand”.<sup>62</sup> In its scrupulous attention to its surroundings, it becomes a “self-effacing” body of work, “not from modesty but because it is going somewhere and has no time to consider itself”. The implicit connection between Harwood and Clare complicates the Anglo-American slant of Ashbery's statement: his claim that Harwood's work is “more like recent American than English poetry” is intended not just to link it to contemporary American poetry, but to associate it, at one remove, with a dissident tradition of English writers who do not conform to classic notions of “English” artistic production as Ashbery conceives them. It is both an attempt to disparage English poetry of the present and to recuperate an obscured lineage from the margins of literary history; and, further, to demonstrate how undervalued poetry of the past continues to inform and shape poetry of the present in unacknowledged ways. Ashbery's statement about *The White Room* enacts this recuperative intention through a playful duplicity; while it signals Wordsworth and Arnold as

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<sup>60</sup> As quoted in Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry*, 160.

<sup>61</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry*, 61.

the “pearly, soft-focused” precursors of Harwood, Ashbery in fact structures the whole passage, from its imagery to its phrasing, to indicate that a more congenial forerunner is Clare. Indeed, Arnold is posited as one of the “guardians of orthodoxy” Ashbery refers to so disparagingly in his essay on “Fantastic British Illustration and Design”, while in the Norton lecture Wordsworth is set up as the figure against whom Clare's poetics of immediacy are most dramatically and favourably contrasted. As I will demonstrate, there is a deliberate irony in the fact that Ashbery employs an Arnoldian critical manoeuvre—that of the “touchstone”, which advises that we should “always have in mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and apply them as a Touchstone to other poetry”—in order to subvert Arnold's presence, dispute the identities of “the great masters” and the “tradition” they constitute, and show “how that-which-is has not always been”.<sup>63</sup> This subversion of Arnold is itself a Paterian gesture; where Arnold had employed this methodology to substantiate a coherent tradition of “great masters”, Pater employed it as a means of attending to and contextualising marginal, unclassifiable talents:

The old masters indeed are simpler; their characteristics are written larger, and are easier to read, than the analogues of them in the modern mind. But when once we have succeeded in defining for ourselves those characteristics, and the law of their combination, we have acquired a standard or measure which helps us to put in its right place many a vagrant genius, many an unclassified talent, many precious though imperfect products of art.<sup>64</sup>

It is worth pausing to attend to the numerous mentions of Wordsworth in the lecture. The first arrives in a quote from George Moore: “So perhaps the time has come for somebody to ask if there is not more poetry in things than in ideas, and more pleasure in Gautier's *Tulipe* than in Wordsworth's ecclesiastical, political and admonitory sonnets”. Four pages later, quoting one of Auden's criteria for poetic majority, Ashbery has another proxy swipe: “Wordsworth, for example,

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<sup>63</sup> “Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them. Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently.” Matthew Arnold, *Selected Prose*, ed. P. J. Keating (London: Penguin, 1970), 347. For a clear, convincing discussion of Ashbery's cultivation of a Foucauldian “historical awareness”, see Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry*, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, 62.

cannot be called a master of technique". Thirdly, he quotes Bloom's statement on Clare's "Wordsworthian vision", a comparison cited with the playful intent, I believe, to undermine it. He then quotes from Clare's "To Wordsworth" to illustrate the distance between the poets: "Merit will live, though parties disagree!" Three pages later, Ashbery alerts us that with Clare "We are far from emotion recollected in tranquility", before several sentences later affirming the difference between Clare's walking poems and Wordsworth's "exalted rambles". In this way, Ashbery quite clearly diverges from Charles Altieri's ideas about Wordsworthian "immanence" as oppositional to Coleridgean "symbolism"; indeed, Clare is positioned as the immanent alternative to Wordsworth's ordering strategies. The opposition established here between Clare and Wordsworth provides some insight into "For John Clare", one of Ashbery's most beautiful prose poems, from *The Double Dream of Spring*. Composed two decades before the Clare lecture, it exhibits in germinal form a preference for the poet for whom "experience is the same as telling" rather than one who saw poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility", as the opening passage suggests:

Kind of empty in the way it sees everything, the earth gets to its feet and salutes the sky. More of a success at it this time than most others it is. The feeling that the sky might be in the back of someone's mind. Then there is no telling how many there are. They grace everything—bush and tree—to take the roisterer's mind of his caroling—so it's like a smooth switch back. To what was aired in their previous conniption fit. There is so much to be seen everywhere that it's like not getting used to it, only there is so much it never feels new, never any different. You are standing looking at that building and you cannot take it all in, certain details are already hazy and the mind boggles. What will it all be like in five years' time when you try to remember? Will there have been boards in between the grass part and the edge of the street?<sup>65</sup>

The mind-boggling detail of the city is conveyed by the disorientating transitions between sentences, intimating the comparability of the experience described by the poem and the experience of reading it; an immersive technique which makes the projection "five years" into the future—the vantage from which Wordsworth recollected his earlier experiences on the Wye in "Tintern Abbey"—seem artificial, even precious. This contrast between Clare's immersion in "hazy" or "pearly, soft-focus" details and Wordsworth's ordering, interpretive poetics is suggested in a later

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<sup>65</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 198.

poem, “The Preludes”, from *As We Know*. It distances itself from the Wordsworthian “presence that explains”—which, it should not be forgotten, is itself a substantial part of Ashbery's work elsewhere—by suggesting “The difficulty with that is / I no longer have any metaphysical reasons / For doing the things I do”, much as the “point” of Clare's poetry is “that there is no point”. Such statements should always be approached cautiously. As Ashbery put it at the opening of his Clare lecture: “As I see it, my thought is both poetry and the attempt to explain that poetry; the two cannot be disentangled”.<sup>66</sup> The same can be said of Clare and Wordsworth, poets from polarised points—the immersive and the explanatory—on Ashbery's imaginative spectrum, both equally significant.<sup>67</sup>

In the blurb for *The White Room*, though, Wordsworth and Arnold are introduced precisely because they are the least apposite figures for comprehending Harwood's poetry; they are put in place in order to highlight the poet they conceal—Clare. The purpose of this partial concealment of Harwood's supposed lineage is, firstly, to avoid any potentially negative connotations a comparison with Clare might entail, and, secondly, to suggest that Harwood's work, because of its disobedience to prevailing norms in English poetry at the time *The White Room* was published, might well be subject to the same marginalisation Clare's suffered for a long period. Thus Clare is present in Ashbery's statement, but subsumed beneath the better-known, orthodox names of Wordsworth and Arnold; similarly, Ashbery implies, Harwood will continue to live in the language, but might be obscured by more characteristically “English” (in the pejorative sense) contemporary poets. Ashbery's critical gesture in this blurb only really becomes clear thirty years later, when he indicates his sources for it in the Norton lecture.

To return to the opening of Ashbery's statement, itself something of a “pearly, soft-focused” sequence of images: “Lee Harwood's poetry lies open to the reader, like a meadow. It moves slowly toward an unknown goal, like a river.” We might think of these two sentences as “soft-focused” not

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<sup>66</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 2.

<sup>67</sup> For substantial discussions of Clare's relation to Ashbery, see Hickman, Angus Fletcher's *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) and Stephanie Kuduk Weiner's *Clare's Lyric: John Clare and Three Modern Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

just because of the dream-like metamorphosis they describe, but because they represent a partial transfiguration—a characteristically Ashberyan blurring out of focus—of a significant source-text. This text, a critical account of Clare's work by James Reeves, is one Ashbery quotes extensively in his Norton lecture: "His poems are like the central English countryside where they grow, unsensational, undramatic, revealing their beauties more to the dweller than the visitor. The qualities of such scenery are secret and intimate. The landscape has dull patches, patches of repetition and occasional intrusions by non-native elements."<sup>68</sup> Ashbery renders this passage slightly out of focus, excluding some elements, adding detail (replacing "countryside" with "meadow" and "river") and, while changing its tone towards the exclusively laudatory, maintaining its concern with secrecy, intimacy, and—crucially—"non-native elements". For Ashbery, the connection between Clare and Harwood seems to form partly around the shared "non-nativeness" Reeves identifies, but also centres on "artlessness" and its effects. Of Clare, Ashbery writes: "Like Kierkegaard, Clare could have said of himself: 'It seems as though I have not drunk from the cup of wisdom, but had fallen in it.'"<sup>69</sup> The salutary carelessness evoked by this image is echoed by Ashbery's approving assessment of "the general air of artlessness" which he ascribes to Clare's poems. This concern with artlessness and wisdom recalls the third line of Ashbery's statement on Harwood's poetry: "It is carelessly wise, that is, wise without knowing or caring what wisdom is." This remark not only anticipates the comments on Clare quoted above, but its phrasing is directly drawn from Clare's poem "I Am!", which begins: "I am, yet what I am none cares or knows". Through Ashbery's "soft-focus" transfiguration of that line, its Touchstone-like estimation of Harwood through the invocation of Clare, we are invited to make a general, non-definitive identification between the two poets: Clare's work happens without caring or knowing what it is; Harwood's is wise without knowing or caring what wisdom is.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Other Traditions*, 10-11.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>70</sup> Considering Ashbery's penchant for playful but significant anagrams—as demonstrated by "Train Poem"—it is perhaps not excessive to find a further indication of affiliation between Clare and Harwood in his suggestion that the

Ashbery refers to the opening of “I Am!” explicitly in his lecture, in a passage whose vocabulary recalls that of the Harwood statement further: “all the turbulent details of landscape and loss are distilled in a transparency as seamless and as timeless as the poems of Hölderlin 's madness. There is “I Am” with its famous beginning, 'I am, yet what I am none cares or knows . . .’”<sup>71</sup> The American poet's use of “transparency” here is telling; it is a “clarification” of the merely semi-transparent adjective employed to describe both Harwood, and Ashbery's own “soft-focus” critical approach, in the earlier statement: “translucent”. This is a very delicate, careful adjustment. In the text accompanying *The White Room*, Ashbery is deliberately writing in a way that is a little unclear—a little un-Clare-like—not wanting to alert the reader or Harwood himself too explicitly to the connection he sees between the poets; whereas in the later text, where the subject is the (trans)parent of both Ashbery and Harwood, he can be more explicit. By arranging this delicate interplay of allusions in two texts composed thirty years apart, Ashbery demonstrates the consistency of his thinking not just about the traits of individual poets, but also about the prevailing traditions of poetry in his idea of England; a situation which he views as, on the whole, unsympathetic enough to the kind of nonconformist art produced by Clare and Harwood as to require critical intervention. It is also a deeply personal gesture towards Harwood. In a moving moment in his lecture, Ashbery quotes in its entirety a short poem of Clare's, “The Elms and the Ashes”, which Ashbery terms a “talisman-poem”:<sup>72</sup>

The elm tree's heavy foliage meets the eye  
 Propt in dark masses on the evening sky.  
 The lighter ash but half obstructs the view,  
 Leaving grey openings where the light looks through.

It is not hard to see how Ashbery might light upon this poem as a talisman for the whole network of connections between Clare, Harwood and himself. The title anagrammatically encrypts the name “Lee” and Ashbery's own nickname, “Ashes”, and as such seems like a peculiar, ready-made

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type of “wisdom” he sees in the latter poet—*careless*—contains an anagram of the name of the former.

<sup>71</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

portrait of the couple. The line “the lighter ash but half obstructs the view” also seems an uncanny premonition of Ashbery's half-obstructive critical presentation of Harwood, and of his own Clare-and-Harwood-inflected, “hazy” poetic modes; the semi-transparent “translucence” of its “pearly, soft-focus” observations leaving just enough “grey openings where the light lets through”.

This intervention is a significant moment in Ashbery's career, as it presents us with the first instance of the American poet at work as a shaper of an “other tradition” of English poetry. The connections he establishes between Harwood and Clare—and the extremely subtle methods through which he articulates them—demonstrate the idiosyncrasy of Ashbery's particular understanding of influential models and canon-formation. Not only does he resist definitive, reductive associations between poets, thereby resisting the limiting and exclusionary dangers inherent in Arnoldian models of cultural value or Bloomian narratives of poetic influence, he manages to articulate a poetic genealogy in a form which is, crucially, generically unstable. The statement about Harwood can be viewed as an unusual alloy of critical account and prose-poem, and it is this generic instability or ambiguity which provides a valuable figure for Ashbery's careful negotiation between differing models of influence. The critical, hierarchical, vertical forms of literary-historical, cross-generational canon-formation practised by, for example, Arnold and Bloom, are acknowledged as necessary by Ashbery in the piece's identification of specific names and allusions through which Harwood's work may be understood. At the same time, “coterie” forms of influence—that is, flattened, horizontal, mutual forms of influence, which can be understood only by reference to the biographical intersections of the historical figures of Ashbery and Harwood—cut across and resist the authority of this first form. The two forms of influence—the cross-generational and the interpersonal, the critical and the poetic, the vertical and the horizontal, all versions of what Arnold calls “the historic and the personal”—are employed to balance one another out, to deny one another supremacy. As such, Ashbery's critical approach reflects Harwood's own concern—as articulated in “The Late Poem”—with the complex dynamic between these two forms of influence, as exerted by

canonical historical figures (Mallarmé) and by unrecognised or marginalised contemporaries (Denby and Prince). Such staged conflicts regarding critical authority seem to acknowledge that the creation of literary history is, and has always been, far from an objective process, that unknown vectors influence it at all points, including in Ashbery's own interventions. As the names of Arnold and Wordsworth are undercut by the allusions to Clare, Ashbery's own authority as a critic is shown to be informed or compromised by his personal association with Harwood, the Paterian forms of response which cloud (sometimes quite productively) his judgement. If in "The Study of Poetry" Arnold pleads with his readership not to allow the "real estimate" of a poet's worth to be superseded by the "historic estimate and the personal estimate", in the text for *The White Room* Ashbery suggests that it is exactly at the meeting point of those two perspectives that a critical position towards contemporary poetry might be established. This prose passage demonstrates Ashbery's tendency to reverse the expected representations of the many figures of his imagination; he treats poets from literary history as though they were members of a coterie—see his casual, even O'Hara-esque name-dropping in "Grand Gallop": "Using what Wyatt and Surrey left around, / Took up and put down again / Like so much gorgeous raw material"—and his contemporaries as though they were established, authoritative literary-historical figures: his engagement with them is a projection of their future status. This approach seeks to bring the past urgently into dialogue with the present, and to cultivate a "historical awareness awareness of our present circumstances".<sup>73</sup>

The key poem to illustrate this double engagement with lateral and vertical forms of influence is "Young Man With Letter", from *The Double Dream of Spring*. Ashbery's fourth collection is the volume in which the poet, as Charles Berger has put it, "first truly stands up to assume the task of poethood", and consequently begins to populate his works with "vague allegories" of his own career and concerns, particularly the intersections of contemporary communities and the vertical temporality of literary history.<sup>74</sup> "Young Man With Letter" is his first

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<sup>73</sup> Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Berger, "Vision in the Form of a Task: The Double Dream of Spring" in David Lehman ed., *Beyond*

vague allegory of canonical arrival as a poet, in which Ashbery, “whose time has come”, becomes conscious of his new standing as part of a flattened coterie populated by all his poetic predecessors, and in which the “corrosive friends” of the present take on the appearance of “tattered pretexts”; that is, prior texts, or always already historical figures. Here is the poem in full:

Another feeble, wonderful creature is making the rounds again,  
In this phraseology we become, as clouds like leaves  
Fashion the internal structure of a season  
From water into ice. Such an abstract can be  
Dazed waking of the words with no memory of what happened before,  
Waiting for the second click. We know them well enough now,  
Forever, from living into them, tender, frivolous and puzzled  
And we know that with them we will come out right.

But a new question poses itself:  
Is it we who are being transformed?  
The light in the hallway seems to indicate it  
And the corrosive friends whose breath is so close  
It whistles, are changed to tattered pretexts  
As a sign, perhaps, that all's well with us.  
Yet the quiet bickering on the edge of morning

That advances to a steady drone by noon  
And to hollow rumblings by night: is there so much good then  
Blushing beyond the sense of it, standing straight up for others to view?  
Is it not more likely that such straining and puffing  
As commas produce, this ferment  
We take as suddenly our present  
Is our waltzing somewhere else, down toward the view  
But holding off? The spiked neon answers it  
Up against the charged black of a full sky:  
“We thought you knew, brothers not ancestors;  
Your time has come, has come to stay;  
The sieved dark can tell you about it.”<sup>75</sup>

The crucial phrase “brothers, not ancestor” is not, as Andrew Epstein reads it, an indication of the poem's particular subject of interest, but is rather a re-categorization of a *type* of person brought about by Ashbery's assertion of his own significance, his “standing straight up for others to view”.<sup>76</sup> The quoted speech or text which concludes the poem is best viewed as an address to Ashbery from the poets of the past, telling him that they are his brothers *rather than* his ancestors, and that they

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*Amazement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 162-280.

<sup>75</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 219-20.

<sup>76</sup> Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 147.

are to be treated as such in his poetry—that is, as members of a coterie rather than a resource to be known only by “living into them”, or mimicking the arc of their careers. It is this conception of his relation to poets of the past that led to “For John Clare”, the poem dedicated to Clare in a way more commonly employed by coterie poets addressing works to one another (as Ashbery does when dedicating “Ode to Bill” to Bill Berkson, or “The Double Dream of Spring” to Gerrit Henry.) The implicit inverse of this conversion of vertical, hierarchical forms of influence to lateral, coterie ones, is the transformation of the present into a prematurely historicised temporality. The success of Ashbery and his friends—“all's well with us”—has the consequence that they themselves become “tattered pretexts”, visibly worn and textualised even in the moment of their youth by Ashbery's prediction of his and their literary utility for future generations. Yet there is also a sinister resonance to “pretext”: the intimation being that a reader might come to know of his “corrosive friends” only as a pretext for getting to know the central figure, Ashbery, better. The powerful, unsettling conclusion of the poem—with its wonderful image of the “sieved dark” as a figure for the starlit sky—registers with chilling poise the exclusionary process of sieving required for individuals to be identified as significant and elevated above the specific, localised social and artistic contexts of their work into a cross-generational narrative of poetic influence and exchange.

Situating Ashbery's heightened consciousness of his own centrality, and his increasingly authoritative critical interventions, in an Anglo-American context places the terms of the poet's engagement with the past and present dramatically into the foreground, and provides a sensitive index of their progress. Following this reading of Harwood, perhaps the most significant of Ashbery's later pronouncements on the subject of Anglo-American literary relations comes in the poem “Tenth Symphony”, from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. It provides a subtly amended vision of Anglo-American differences:

There is some connexion  
(I like the way the English spell it  
They're so clever about some things  
Probably smarter generally than we are

Although there is supposed to be something  
We have that they don't—don't ask me  
What it is. And please no talk of openness.  
I would pick Francis Thompson over Bret Harte  
Any day, if I had to)  
Among this.<sup>77</sup>

In this poem, written over a decade after the Harwood blurb, Ashbery exhibits a weariness with some of the now-stale terminology (“openness”) he himself had employed to describe Harwood's work. Despite this shift, Ashbery continues to insist upon a point of difference between the two poetries characterised by American possession and English lack of possession, a suggestion significantly complicated and ironised by the layering of English, American and French stylistic elements of which the poem is composed. The Dickensian assertion, “There must be some connexion . . . among this”, is divided by a Rousselian parenthetical digression, which in turn encases a conversational, grammatically loose, parodically American voice (“They're so clever about some things / Probably smarter generally than we are”).<sup>78</sup> In these lines, then, Ashbery manages to write in a manner which appears simultaneously English, French and American, the contexts embedded within one another like a Matryoshka doll. Such a style reveals, as Eagleton has put it, “the profoundly dialogical nature of all such modernism, which inflects its own interests in the tongue of another, inside and outside an hegemonic discourse at the same moment”.<sup>79</sup> The “we” of the poem, then, is heavily ironised, and any sense of it as describing a single, nationalised collective pronoun should be taken with a barrel of salt.

Despite this note of caution, within the “hegemonic discourse” the poem deploys a revealing opposition regarding possession—what the “something” that points to Anglo-American difference is—continues to be played out. This speculative passage has generated some helpful critical

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>78</sup> “What connexion can there be between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world who from opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!” Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), 235.

<sup>79</sup> Eagleton, “The end of English”, 1-8.

discussion. The most relevant here is Steve Clark's suggestion that the "something" American language possesses is the dubious authority of "empire", a force which endows it with its characteristic rapacity and capaciousness, in contrast to much poetic language of post-imperial England, which Clark views as enervated by its sense of belatedness.<sup>80</sup> While a valuable intervention in the subject, Clark is perhaps too eager to create concrete points of connection between historical developments and the expressive modes of particular poets. Indeed, such connections risk sentimentality, as Jed Esty has suggested: "the recurrent tendency to metaphorize literary change as national decline . . . causes a great deal of critical haziness; it sustains myths of a fallen heritage in the land of Shakespeare, of an island's poetic sourcewaters run dry".<sup>81</sup> I would contend that the possessed "something" Ashbery is referring to here is confined to a literary-historical context; that is, the "something" is really the American's *lack* of the English "strong sense of possession" identified in his statement about Harwood. While the tone of Ashbery's poem is more generous, this passage bears a strong resemblance to a letter William Carlos Williams wrote in response to an article by F.R. Leavis: "It seems to me unfortunate that the English who often have a special critical aptitude far more scholarly in temper than that of most Americans, should allow themselves to be lamed by what is, I suppose, a national prejudice in favour of respectability and conservatism."<sup>82</sup> Both Williams and Ashbery seem to be proposing that, while the English have the weight of tradition behind them, it is through their very lack of possession of it that American poets are enabled to overcome such prejudices as "respectability and conservatism". Eagleton summarises this position well: "Positioned as they were within essentially peripheral histories, such artists could view native English lineages less as a heritage to be protected than as an object to be problematised."<sup>83</sup> The "something" Ashbery refers to, then, is what the poem itself performs; a dialogic movement between cultural traditions enabled by a consciousness of the artifice of national

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<sup>80</sup> Steve Clark, "Uprooting the Rancid Stalk: Transformations of Romanticism in Ashbery and Ash", in Edward Larrissy (ed.), *Romanticism and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 177.

<sup>81</sup> Jed Esty, *Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>82</sup> As quoted in Tuma, *Fishing By Obstinate Isles*, 121.

<sup>83</sup> Eagleton, "The end of English", 1-8.

imaginaries.

This characteristic is, of course, an element of the imperial impulse underlying Ashbery's poetry as Clark conceives it; in his view, American writers of the late twentieth century were able to employ the strategies of bricolage, subversion, appropriation and parody established by the exiles and émigrés of the modernist period as a way of resisting "English bourgeois tradition", in the service of an increasingly imperialist culture. The embrace of the idea of "cultural earliness" as a contrast to the "predominantly anxious and late" cultural time of England was also the only available way for the former to engage with the historical achievement of the latter, as Robert Weisbuch has suggested: "Cultural earliness became the tradition to substitute for the lack of more tangible traditions; and this in part because the Americans, glaring at the omnipresent comparative model of Britain, could have no hope of competing for the rewards of cultural maturity".<sup>84</sup> Ashbery is acutely aware of the dangers and contradictions of his position, and at no point seeks to evade them. In his revealing introduction to a reading by Charles Tomlinson, Ashbery describes Tomlinson's exquisite prose-poem "Autumn" as proceeding through a landscape initially marked by "oak leaves and field mice", signifiers of "English tradition", before the "landscape turns itself inside out [in a way] more reminiscent of American modernist poetry". The poem concludes with these lines: "These greens are the solace of lakes under a sun which corrodes. They are memorials not to be hoarded." Of this conclusion, Ashbery writes: "The paradox of a memorial not to be hoarded seems very American to me; we Americans are constantly, for better or worse, remembering and squandering memory at the same time, trying to have it both ways".<sup>85</sup> This final remark can be taken as a synoptic statement of Ashbery's engagement with Anglo-American contexts. He employs the techniques of the minor, the marginal and the imperfect to establish for himself a position of cultural centrality, and employs that centrality to promote the marginal and the minor. He adopts the pose of the American avant-gardist opposing the staid English poetry of the

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Weisbuch, "Cultural Time in England and America", in *Transatlantic Literary Studies Reader*, 100.

<sup>85</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 242.

present, but finds that rejection on a detailed re-reading of canonical English writers. He claims to feel “more English than American”, and yet re-aligns the English poets he most identifies with a specifically American tradition of experimentation and irreverence. It is the dialogic movement between these positions which is characteristic of Ashbery's work more generally; antithesis chirping to antithesis in order to foreground the terms of the conversation, to highlight points of difference and similarity between traditionally opposed positions. Mutlu Konik Blasing's observation on the subject bears repeating: “while he does not exactly reject the framework of 'old', culturally conservative versus 'new', culturally oppositional art, he destabilizes the binarism, exposes the metaphoric nature of the connections between techniques and values”.<sup>86</sup>

The ways in which Ashbery tries to have it both ways are developed further in the following chapter, which jumps forward to the early 1990s, when Ashbery first encountered the English poet Mark Ford. If at the beginning of his career, Englishness was used as a mark of difference from American culture, then became a means of defining Americanness by opposition, in this late period it is returned to as a means of returning Ashbery to his favoured position as a marginal, Anglophile poet.

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<sup>86</sup> Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 111.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “Discordant Data”: John Ashbery and Mark Ford

John Ashbery opens his review of Mark Ford's first book of poems, *Landlocked*, with this curious paragraph:

Mark Ford's *Landlocked* is one of the most refreshing books of poetry I have seen in years. When was the last time you actually felt refreshed? *Landlocked* will do it for you. Waves and waves of refreshment coming at you, like those “curiously strong” mints they have (or used to have) in England. We know about “strong” poets; attention must now be paid to the “curiously strong” like James Tate and Charles Simic in America, and England's Anthony Howell and Peter Robinson (like Ford currently residing in Kyoto), especially in his recent collection *Leaf Viewing*.<sup>1</sup>

As with his earlier critical remarks on Auden, Prince and Harwood, Ashbery's comments about Ford represent a significant development in his sustained engagement with English poetry during the twentieth century. As in his blurb to *The White Room*, Ashbery is keen to distinguish between the “strong” canonical poets “we all know about” and the “curiously strong” poets operating in the margins, whose qualities are less easily discernible. Significantly, this is a grouping constituted of both American *and* English poets: there is no implied antagonism between, or hierarchy differentiating the two poetries. Nevertheless, there is a familiar intimation of Ford's belatedness or exceptionality among contemporary English poets; the fact that the “waves and waves of refreshment” Ford provides remind Ashbery of “those “curiously strong” mints *they have (or used to have) in England*” [my italics] is a typically subtle gesture, indicating that Ford's work represents a return to a kind of English poetry which has been dormant or marginalised in recent years. As significant (and, by now, familiar) as this critical intervention is its reflection of the state of Ashbery's own imaginative engagement with English poetry in the preceding decade. Though he had visited numerous times to read, and been in contact with various English poets—including Peter Ackroyd, Anthony Howell, and, most significantly and enduringly, John Ash, of whom more later—he hadn't been moved to write about a contemporary English poet in such depth and detail

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<sup>1</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 231-2.

since his remarks about Harwood. In letters written in the early 1990s to Michael Schmidt, his English publisher, he joked about the existence of his small “English constituency”, and remarked that an upcoming Spanish version of *Flow Chart* means “there may soon be almost as many unsold volumes of Ashbery in Spain as in England”.<sup>2</sup> In the lead up to the 1994 *PN Review* supplement devoted to his work, both Ashbery and Schmidt struggled to identify sympathetic potential contributors (“Do you think Geoffrey Prynne might be approachable”, Ashbery wonders at one stage), while Schmidt registers the highly-charged nature of Ashbery's transatlantic reception when he states that his intention with the supplement was precisely “not to use your work as a baton with which to beat the British”.<sup>3</sup> As Ashbery reported in a letter to Ford, the supplement had been conceived as a way to counter the prevailing hostility towards his work in Britain: Schmidt had been “nettled by the English reception of *Hotel L*[autréamont], though it seemed to me no more bleak than usual”.<sup>4</sup> As this remark suggests, at this stage in his career Ashbery was highly sensitive to what he perceived as negative critical responses to his work across the Atlantic, and as such was particularly grateful to have found an advocate in Ford:

Thanks so much for the wonderful review for *Scripsi*. So far, and perhaps for a long time to come, it's the only serious piece of criticism it's received, and the only criticism of my work for a very long time that doesn't make me cringe. (A case in point—Geoff Ward's book “Statutes of Liberty” from MacMillan, England, which is about the New York School though principally O'Hara, who is his favorite. He dwells fondly on my work for a long time before ultimately, unless I misread him, gently rejecting it. This is more upsetting than the really stupid reviews I've gotten lately in England (e.g. Reading: “A waste of trees”) since Ward is very smart and insightful.<sup>5</sup>

It was not just the perceived lack of interest in Ashbery's own work across the Atlantic, but Ashbery's own aversion to the English poetry he encountered during this period, that accounts for the strength of his interest in Ford's work. Ashbery explained his reasons for taking the exceptional step of reviewing *Landlocked* in a letter to Ford:

I've asked Michael Schmidt to review your book for *PN Review* and he's said yes. Now I

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Michael Schmidt, 31 August 1993. Ashbery Papers, Box 25.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Michael Schmidt, 17 February 1993. Ashbery Papers, Box 25.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Mark Ford, 6 April 1993. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Mark Ford, 6 April 1993. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

have to write the review. I'm very reluctant to review books of poetry, but have been strengthened in my resolve by wading through the latest Bloodaxe catalogue, a virtual tidal wave of gore and political correctness. I now see some of what Michael is up against. One of their hotshots is a brat named Simon Armitage whom I met at the Rotterdam poetry fest in June. Actually his behaviour did not offend, but he read a long poem in which some burning topic such as Viet Nam or the Falkland Islands was mentioned in every line. Oddly, he didn't bring things up to date by mentioning the Gulf War, perhaps because Tony Harrison has already mined its fertile sands.<sup>6</sup>

This critical intervention on Ford's behalf was accompanied by an avowed Fordian turn in Ashbery's own poetry of this period. The second poem of *And the Stars Were Shining*—the first collection Ashbery published after reading *Landlocked*, and for which, he claimed, Ford had been “a major inspiration”—can be viewed as a cautious celebration of this re-establishment of mutual interest “across the marsh”.<sup>7</sup> It concludes with lines which pun in familiarly Ashberyian ways upon the English poet's first name, and the bridging properties of his surname:

Its recapitulations exhaust the soil. Across the marsh  
some bird misses its mark, walks back, sheepish, cheeping.  
The isthmus is gilded white. People are returning  
to the bight: adult swimmers, all of them.<sup>8</sup>

Ford's gilding of the isthmus between the two nations (which returns us to Auden's own “isthmus”, from the first ode of *The Orators*, and Ashbery's earliest Anglo-American engagements) is achieved, Ashbery suggests, not through a “strong” new integration of or resistance to the poetry of the past, but through a “curiously strong” poetry which maintains an unusual, oblique, less-easily-defined relation to its antecedents.<sup>9</sup> In its off-handedness and vagueness, this phrase is reminiscent of the “pearly, soft-focus quality” Ashbery employs to delineate an “other tradition” of English poetry leading up to Harwood, and once again reflects Ashbery's mixture of playfulness and reticence in his exercises in canon-formation. For all its apparent casualness, though, the intention in this instance is just as serious as in the comments on *The White Room*: where Ashbery had attempted to establish a lineage for Harwood in the “artlessness” and “intimacy” of John Clare, in

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Mark Ford, 9 July 1992. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Mark Ford, 6 April 1993. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ashbery, *And the Stars Were Shining* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), 2.

<sup>9</sup> “Has he crossed the isthmus already? Is he seeking brilliant / Athens and us?” Auden, *The Orators*, 80.

his review of *Landlocked* he seems to be situating Ford in the distinct English tradition of nonsense verse of which Lewis Carroll is a prominent exemplar, and whose phrase “curiouser and curiouser” surely lies behind the epithet “curiously strong”. Indeed, later in the review Ashbery states that he “finds pre-echoes of Ford” throughout the *Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry*, published in the same year as *Landlocked*, and then declares that “it’s perhaps not so much a question of specific poets having influenced him but a whole tradition of which he is merely a late practitioner—one of the purest streams of poetry and a specifically English one, though it bubbles up everywhere”. Ford’s work, like all “nonsense verse”, provides “hardly a world-view but a look at a small piece of it possessing a startling specific gravity”, Ashbery writes, describing a significantly circumscribed perspective which is presented as both a mark of its imperfection and its primary appeal. The localised viewpoints of Ford’s poetry, its definitive and self-conscious modesty, are in Ashbery’s view compensated for by the diligence and strangeness of its execution, the fullness of realisation in its severely delimited snapshots of the world.

In the first part of this chapter, I will suggest that the whole tradition of which Ford is a late practitioner is a various, “English”, and specifically Ashberyan one. Rather than exclusively identifying continuities between Ashbery’s poetry and Ford’s—of which there are, beyond superficial effects, surprisingly few—I will suggest that there exist “pre-echoes” of Ford’s work in the “other tradition” of English poets Ashbery has been central in recovering and illuminating in both his poetry and his critical work. Therefore, rather than a study of the “influence” of one poet upon another, this chapter will attempt to delineate the effects upon an English poet of Ashbery’s decisive re-reading of the English poetry of the past, a critical manoeuvre which has provided Ford with an “other”, distinctly English lineage. The success of Ford’s elaboration of and integration into this tradition is, perhaps, part of why Ashbery values him so highly: after Ford’s initial enthusiasm for Ashbery, he has been “bounced off” in various other directions, so that Ashbery can see the English poetry of the past that he values endure in the poetry of the present. The Ashberyan

tradition which Ford taps into and elaborates upon arguably includes all three poets I have discussed so far, plus significant additional figures including Thomas Lovell Beddoes and Nicholas Moore. It is Ford's relation to Moore, and Ashbery's mediation of that relation, that I will attend to in particular. By tracing the continuities between the three poets, I hope to demonstrate the process by which Ford had to negotiate access to an "other tradition" of English poetry through Ashbery's intervention, and suggest that, as Paul Giles has of Auden, Denise Levertov and Davie, Ford "elected to affiliate [his] work with the American tradition as a means of recuperating a purified version of that modernist impulse which had . . . been fatally suppressed by the reactionary mood brought about in Britain by the exigencies of war."<sup>10</sup>

In the second part of the chapter, I will suggest that the influential relationship between Ashbery and Ford was, for a significant period, reciprocal. Ford's work offers a valuable new perspective from which to approach a neglected area of Ashbery's oeuvre. Using correspondence between the two poets to structure my reading, I will examine several key poems from the 1990s as evidence of Ashbery's increasing openness to poets he himself influenced. These works, which came in the wake of the massive expenditure of energy involved in the creation of *Flow Chart*, inaugurated what has long been thought of as a minor period in Ashbery's career, one which was highly productive but characterised by a peculiar kind of depleted, amorphous and scatter-brained lyric which has been his hallmark ever since. Considering the abundance of critical work written about Ashbery, the absence of satisfactory approaches and terminology in place for the discussion of this late period is remarkable, and as such this section of the chapter attempts to establish a mode of reading which attends to their stylistic innovations. Employing Deleuze and Guattari's conception

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<sup>10</sup> Ford chronicles this occlusion of a generation of significant poets in an essay on Nicholas Moore and Wallace Stevens: "[Moore] was, in turn, one of the few English poets of his generation – something of a 'lost generation', in many ways, ever-shadowed by war and its aftermath, uneasily suspended in literary history between the edgy brilliance of the poets of the thirties and the sober ironies of the Movement – to establish a significant reputation in America . . . *Recollections of the Gala* appeared in 1950, but rather than being hailed as Moore's most accomplished volume, it aroused little interest. By the middle of the decade the work of two of Caton's other protégées, Amis and Larkin, had contributed to a decisive alteration in the climate of British poetry; the ideals all associated with the New Apocalypse were routinely derided by the new vanguard as vain and silly." Ford, "Nicholas Moore, Stevens and the Fortune Press", in Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg, eds., *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 179.

of “minor literature”, I’ll consider the possibility that these books represent a performance of minority which resists and challenges developing narratives about Ashbery’s career, a provocative questioning of the terms by which the academic consensus surrounding his canonical status was reached. I’ll also consider the possibility that Ashbery allows himself to be influenced by others so as to promote their work; that his poetry became, after a certain period, a way of advertising other poets, a temporary display window for their styles. Bringing them into the narrative of his development, he ensures their own endurance as a supplement or footnote to his own, his poetry thereby becoming in a literal way a kind of “collective speech”. In this sense, influence becomes a voluntary, even willed process as a form of tribute to a personal relationship. Furthermore, the engagement between Ford and Ashbery demonstrates how Ashbery adapts and learns from Ford’s resistance to and modifications of his work, using them as a model for his chronic and fearless self-estrangement.

### I. “one of the purest streams”: Moore, Ashbery, Ford

Ford’s calligrammatic poem “Arrowheads”, from his second collection, *Soft Sift*, provides a precise diagram of his multiple poetic influences and identities. The second stanza consists of three lines originating in the word “Mister”, each branching off in a separate direction like the parentheses of Roussel’s *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* (the “Mister R—” surely refers to the French poet), or Ashbery’s own merely double-columned “Litany”:

it here: Horatio!  
but will practice  
I find this difficult  
by his first name;  
to address him  
begged me twice  
R—has now  
Mister was her nom de plume, or rather spray can, the police revealed.  
Mister he might  
have been called  
for he was an old-

style outlaw,  
a saddle and trigger-  
happy hero, the last  
genuine hombre.<sup>11</sup>

What this poem describes and performs, with a programmatic literalness rare in Ford's work, is the kind of inter-cultural network Harwood described as “a triangle of London, Paris and New York”. The sentence extending upwards from “Mister” can be said to have as its generative context Ford's “English” heritage, as signalled by the exclamation of the comic, cartoon-aristocrat's name: “Horatio!” The sentence extending downwards describes a strange, Dorn-esque, gunslinger figure, a figment, perhaps, of Ford's “America of the mind”; while the middle sentence, the “shaft” of the arrow and the equilibrium between the two extreme points, is the “French” context, as signalled by the phrase “nom de plume”. The directions of the stanza-arrows, one pointing each way, achieves a further form of balance, the implication being that Ford's work is in a continual state of flux, moving both ways at once, attracted and repelled by England and America in equal measure. As well as its mediating effects, the poem can be seen as presenting French poetry as a form of escape from the Anglo-American polarities which constitute much thinking and discussion surrounding English-language poetics; and, in a related sense, the wacky characters described can be seen as, in Ford's words, “embodying a yearning to confound the rationalist assumptions implied by [the poem's] strict and elaborate forms”.<sup>12</sup> Ford's positioning of Frenchness in this way—as an escape route from Anglophone insularity—is illuminated by an earlier essay on Ashbery and Elizabeth Bishop:

Her poetry is continually attempting to escape the principle of order and place on which it knows it depends, just as the fantasies of 'The Map' depend upon topography's refusal to display 'favorites'. The forces of instability and disorientation - the urge 'to see the sun the other way around'...express themselves in many ways in Bishop, through travel, word-play, whimsy, dreamscapes. In a number of poems in her first book, *North & South* (1946), they seem associated with Frenchness, which, like the Man-Moth's third rail, can be seen as intimating an enticing but potentially fatal realm that almost simultaneously promises and

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<sup>11</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2014), 71.

<sup>12</sup> “Mount Despair or Mount d'Espoir: Early Bishop, Early Ashbery and the French”, *PN Review* 114, Vol.23, No.4, March-April 1997.

denies escape from the polarities of the book's title.<sup>13</sup>

The forms of circulation in Ford are distinct from those in Ashbery and Bishop, however, and quite specific to his historical and personal circumstances. His work represents a significant departure from that of Harwood, who saw little of value in the formal English poetry of the early to mid-60s, and viewed American poetry as a form of imaginative liberation from such constraints. The relation Ford strikes between the two Anglophone poetics is less drastic, more cautious and conciliatory. Unlike Harwood, he was and remains sympathetic to the work of the Movement, particularly Larkin, and has speculated that the unqualified embrace of American models by some twentieth-century English poets may represent a form of “cultural obsequiousness”.<sup>14</sup> This despite a ready acknowledgement that, when he first began reading and writing poetry, the Americans were indisputably more various and invigorating than their English counterparts:

When I started reading poetry during my student days all the cool poets of the postwar era were American – there were the crazy Beats, the larger-than-life Confessionals, the alluringly named New York School poets, Deep Image people, the Black Mountaineers, the San Francisco Renaissance, all sorts. Wherever you went in American poetry, it looked like more fun than being bored and lonely up in Hull. Plus there was Harold Bloom saying that poets such as Ashbery and Merrill were as ‘strong’ as Wordsworth or Tennyson; his extravagant pronouncements made contemporary American poetry seem like a vital, going concern, whereas my impression, no doubt erroneous, was that English critics felt contemporary English poetry was something to keep quiet about or be apologised for.<sup>15</sup>

“Arrowheads”, then, reflects a fundamental tension, evident throughout Ford's work, between the desire to learn from American poetic innovations, a reluctance to sacrifice what is portrayed as a specifically “English” provenance and character, and the urge to escape such limiting binaries through an identification with French poetry. In this sense, Ford has much in common with poets like Charles Tomlinson, Geoffrey Hill and Thom Gunn, who also created bodies of work open to the technical developments of mid-century American poetry, but who remained steadfast in asserting the importance of specific and localised historical, national, geographical and poetic contexts.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ford and Clark, eds., *Something We Have That They Don't*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Caleshu, “Mark Ford in Conversation with Anthony Caleshu”, *PN Review* 192, Vol.36, No.4, March-April 2010.

Indeed, Gareth Reeves' comments on Tomlinson can be applied to Ford, if we think of his work as “assimilati[ng] some characteristics and qualities of American literary modernism to help shape a distinctly personal yet essentially English voice and vision”.<sup>16</sup> This “essentially English voice and vision”, the constituent elements of which I'll attend to shortly, is inscribed repeatedly throughout *Landlocked*, *Soft Sift* and *Six Children*, as a parodically stereotypical image from “Beyond the Boulevard” suggests: “My mind – had it been weighed – would have been / About the mass and density of an old-style association / Football”. In critical accounts of Ford's work, these transnational conflicts have often been reduced to an embodied conflict between two poetic models; that is, between the formal, reserved, “realist” poetry of Larkin and the dream-like indeterminacy of Ashbery.<sup>17</sup> Donald Davie once speculated that “between Hardy's precedent and Whitman's there can be no compromise”,<sup>18</sup> and yet Ford's intention has been to fuse the “salutary reticence” of Larkin and the liberating devices of Ashbery—perhaps Hardy and Whitman's most powerful descendants—into an unlikely compound.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the much-repeated observation that Ford is like an English Ashbery, or American Larkin, originated in the jacket copy for *Soft Sift*, which Ford wrote himself. “Jack Rabbit”, from *Soft Sift*, dramatizes the risks and difficulties of such a gesture with a characteristic lightness of touch:

So I reckoned to get quicker, leaner, braver, more  
 Self-effacing; I'd pick my way between  
 The mounds of junk cast off by warring factions, cleverly  
 Disguised and idly humming. I swam mid-stream  
 With the freshwater boys, and lounged on rocks  
 At evening.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gareth Reeves, “A Modernist Dialectic: Stevens and Williams in the Poetry of Charles Tomlinson”, *Wallace Stevens Journal*, Vol. 30, No.1, Spring 2006, 57.

<sup>17</sup> See Steve Clark, “Postmodernism and its Discontents in the Poetry of Mark Ford and James Keery”, *Essays on Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Shiochiro Sakurai, Rinsen (1998), 143-167.

<sup>18</sup> Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, 129.

<sup>19</sup> Ford himself has posited the two poets as competing tutelary spirits. In an account of his early poetic development, he writes: “As a teenager I had been obsessed with the work of Philip Larkin, and produced a couple of pallid imitations of the standard Movement poem, in which everything turned out badly, rhymed (just as badly), and proved, if proof were needed, that a miss was “as bad as a mile” but really left “nothing to be said.” In contrast, I remember a feeling of something like floating while reading “The Other Tradition,” as if some mysterious Zephyr had swept me gently aloft, then let me drift in a state of delicious weightlessness.” (Ford, “My Position Now”, *Harvard Review* 22, 110-12.)

<sup>20</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems*, 52.

Ford's desire to swim “mid-stream”, to establish for himself a position of precarious independence from the various “warring factions” of contemporary poetry, is the generative impulse at the heart of his early work. This position is attained not through a “strong” rejection or revision of dominant modes but a modest, subtle, selective receptivity, resulting in poems which allow entirely unexpected aesthetic affinities to be noted for the first time. The highly regimented procédé of Roussel, or the chronic, labyrinthine patterns of the Oulipo, for example, act as an unlikely bridge between the “inflexible etiquette” of the English strand in his work (Hopkins, Auden, Larkin) and the flux and contingency of its American equivalent (Dickinson, Whitman, Ashbery). The triangulation of these influences is registered astutely by “Snags and Syndromes”, the poem which follows “Arrowheads” in *Soft Sift*: “It becomes clear that each flaw, from /The structural to the trivial, must end up taking / The shape of a triangle”.<sup>21</sup>

Ford's highly self-conscious negotiations with these national and poetic contexts were of great interest to Ashbery, and provided him with an opportunity to articulate a fresh vision of cross-cultural flow. Revealingly, in his introduction to *Soft Sift*, Ashbery casts Ford's own intuition of this triangulation of national contexts as a *sequential* process: American poetry acted as a means of access to “other traditions” of English and French poetry:

[T]he path to the “looking-glass realm of art”—and how courageously right he is to locate the realm of art there, despite those who would insist that bloody chunks of reality should be transferred directly to the page, like meat to the butcher's waxed paper—is a *porte étroite*, a narrow way through which life is transformed into poetry by a process something like dying. Alice's looking glass is reached by Emily's riddle.<sup>22</sup>

This casual-seeming concluding remark concisely conveys Ashbery's vision of Anglo-American poetic exchange and influence in the latter decades of the twentieth century: that is, an obscured tradition of non-realist, highly experimental English poetry—“a whole tradition of which [Ford] is merely a late practitioner—one of the purest streams of poetry and a specifically English one”—is opened up to contemporary English poets only through the mediation of an American. (The

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<sup>21</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems*, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 293.

strategic deployment of the phrase “porte étroite” signals the lingering presence of French poetry as an informative context.) More generally, it represents precisely Ashbery's conception of his own relation to English poets of the past and present, and his function as an influential poet. In each of his significant engagements with younger English poets, his intention has been to re-direct them back towards the English poets from whom he himself drew inspiration, in part to remind them that the apparent “strangeness” of modern American poetry is a feature which inheres in English poetry, however obscured that particular strand might have become. In the previous chapter I demonstrated how Ashbery introduced Harwood to the overlooked work of F.T. Prince, and how Ashbery's own poetry provided for Harwood an explanatory gloss for Prince's incompletely developed work. Reading Prince's poetry through the lens of Ashbery, Harwood was able to appreciate it through the tonal continuities the two poets shared; while Prince offered a stylistic corrective which allowed Harwood himself to develop beyond the imitative works he had produced as an English imitator of the New York School. I would like to suggest something similar about the relationship between Ashbery, Ford, and Nicholas Moore, which if anything is more revealing about Ashbery's strategies as a mediator of his own influence and conception of English poetic history. If for Harwood, the “looking-glass realm” of F.T. Prince and John Clare was reached by Ashbery's “riddle”, for Ford, it was the realm of Prince, Moore and Beddoes which he reached through his American model.

The ways in which this occurred are quite distinct, however, from the coterie imitations and exchanges described in Chapter Three. By the time Ford began to read and write poetry, Ashbery was already a canonical figure, and as such the English poet's first encounters with his work occurred not in improvised, Anglo-American poetic communities but on the page, in institutional settings. These textual encounters later gave way to an enduring personal friendship, but it is important to note that, as a scholar as well as a poet, Ford was from the beginning a great deal more conscious of Ashbery's position within literary history, and of his significance as a facilitator of cross-cultural exchange, than Harwood ever was. Indeed, in letters from the 1990s Ford notes good-

humouredly the conflicts which arise in transitioning between the roles of casual correspondent and “Ashbery buff”: “I did in fact recognize the Browning allusion as I happened to have been reading that poem the day before your letter arrived; but – oh dear, and here you come up against the problems of corresponding with an Ashbery buff – I thought you didn't like Browning . . .”<sup>23</sup> This is a collision of roles—partly awkward, partly productive—borne out in the poetry. Ford's work is deliberate and supremely self-conscious in its engagements with Ashbery, where Harwood's is personal, unselfconscious, irreverent and intimate. Indeed, it's hard not to see the bringing together of influences and contexts in “Arrowheads” as anxiously strategic, little more than a particularly prominent signpost, particularly when compared to the relaxed, conversational complexity of Harwood's “The Late Poem”. Such self-consciousness is, indeed, addressed as a routine crisis in Ford's poetry, which abounds with alternately angst-ridden and flippant ruminations on the over-determination of potential expressive modes.<sup>24</sup> At times, Ford seems nearly paralysed by his exhaustive considerations of what styles might still be permitted the post-Ashbery poet, or lifted from the slush-pile of “imaginative new methods . . . in constant use”: “As I emerged from my hip-bath it suddenly dawned / The facts might be remarshalled and shown to rhyme”.<sup>25</sup> These fraught formal decisions often take place in an oppressive, institutionalised world, in which conflicts with other poets and poetic factions occur in bland academic jargon. *Soft Sift*, in particular, is full of grimly comic encounters with theoretical opponents in the seminar room, as in “I Wish”, the title of which runs into its opening lines: “you would spare me your Western logocentricism! / Isn't it clear I'm the sort who rejoices when the Queen Mother / chokes on a fish-bone?”<sup>26</sup> While on some occasions Ford's sensitivity to theoretical and historical contexts can be viewed as immobilizing, it's also a reminder that his identification and elaboration of Ashbery's re-reading of the poetry of the

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<sup>23</sup> Letter from Ford to Ashbery, 30 March 1992. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

<sup>24</sup> In his thesis, Ford writes of Ashbery's “self-conscious attempt to assimilate the urge for “novelty” with a despairing sense of the predeterminations of tradition”, which seems applicable to Ford's own struggle to overcome the impasse. (Ford, “A Critical Study of the Poetry of John Ashbery”, unpublished D.Phil thesis, 75.)

<sup>25</sup> Ford, *Soft Sift* (London: Faber, 2001), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems*, 58.

past is as much a critical project as a poetic one.<sup>27</sup> The connectedness of his critical writing to Ashbery's reconfiguration of literary history is something he is conscious of: as he put it himself, he has “done all the work that [Ashbery] didn't do, with people like Roussel—he didn't finish his thesis, so I went and did it for him . . . I feel a bit like a disciple, in some ways, doing these things—I've picked up on his leads or tips”.<sup>28</sup> Beyond his Roussel biography, Ford has written lengthy articles on Auden, Prince, Harwood, Beddoes, Moore, Bishop, Harry Matthews, Ern Malley and Joan Murray, among many other Ashbery favourites. His own poetry represents the other side of the coin, and can be thought of as a considered performance and perpetuation of the poetic modes his critical prose explicates so adeptly.

Ford's education in Ashbery's poetry and critical taste began around the time he started to compose his own poems. When Ford embarked on his DPhil thesis on Ashbery, the first thing he did was to read “every writer ever mentioned in interviews as being important to him: Proust, Raymond Roussel, Reverdy, Henry Green, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, Jane Bowles, Nicholas Moore, Pasternak, Lautreamont, John Wheelwright, Max Jacob, Delmore Schwartz, David Schubert . . .”<sup>29</sup> Of these writers, Nicholas Moore is perhaps the most significant figure in the Ashberyian “other tradition” of which Ford is a late practitioner, not least because of the biographical resemblances between the poets. Ashbery's own enthusiasm for Moore is well-documented. He selected and introduced a number of Moore poems for the newsletter of the Academy of American poets in 1986, the year the English poet died. In this brief essay, Ashbery finds Moore's “roots in the brilliant and jarring British poetry of the 1930s, particularly that of Auden”, and, perhaps more significantly, praises him for being “unique among English poets of the forties in his awareness of

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<sup>27</sup> He has remarked that his attraction to American poetry was as attributable to Ashbery's critical reception as his poetry: “I was just as excited by Bloomian pronouncements that [Ashbery] was a strong poet, as great as Wordsworth, as Ashbery's idiom and difference from anything I'd read before. I think that notion of poems being written now that were in any way comparable to Milton and Wordsworth or Tennyson—that Bloomian discourse was very intoxicating.” Personal interview with Ford, 15 May 2015.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Ford, “My Position Now”.

contemporary American poetry, especially Wallace Stevens”.<sup>30</sup>

The relation between Moore and Ford is one Ashbery has made explicitly. In his *TLS* “Books of the Year” selection for 2014, Ashbery writes briefly about Moore's recently-published *Selected Poems*, before mentioning the “English poet, Mark Ford, perhaps Moore's most brilliant disciple”, whose own *Selected* had just been published.<sup>31</sup> The connections between them are implicit elsewhere. In his introduction to *Soft Sift*, Ashbery remarks of Ford's own tendency to include “trace elements” of American pop culture in his poetry: “To the English, I imagine [Ford] sounds American, perhaps because of the occasional dash of U.S. Local colour”.<sup>32</sup> Ford's exceptionality within his historical period, his unstable, undefinable mid-Atlanticism, is also comparable to Moore's: “Maybe it's the continual determination to experiment with words, which is certainly not a trait of most contemporary British poetry. But Ford's tense, deliberate experimentation isn't American either: its seriousness, though little else about it, connects it to Larkin and his disciples, rather than the anxious glitter of early W.H. Auden and prewar British poetry”. In an essay on the relationship between Moore and Stevens, Ford himself seems to find an analogy for his own critical and poetic involvement with Ashbery in the English poet's efforts to import and explain the Stevensian aesthetic:

Moore's *The Glass Tower*...contained...a poem, “Yesterday's Sailors”, subtitled “In homage to Wallace Stevens”, and a number of pieces that make direct use not only of Stevensian rhetoric, but of Stevens' method of creating a long sequence out of a set of interconnected lyrics. Moore was also aware, however, that Stevens' work was likely to meet with resistance or bafflement or both from British reviewers and readers, so decided to write an article outlining the ways in which a Stevens poem could be approached, interpreted and enjoyed.<sup>33</sup>

Such a close association with a single American poet was, of course, a risky manoeuvre for Ford. His decision to introduce and explain Ashbery's poetry to an English audience through his critical writing was motivated, in part, by a desire to create a space in which his own work might be better

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<sup>30</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 191.

<sup>31</sup> “Books of the Year”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 November 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 292.

<sup>33</sup> Ford, “Nicholas Moore, Stevens and the Fortune Press”, 179.

understood, with the result that he exposed himself to charges of excessive identification. Representatively, David Wheatley declared in a recent discussion of Anglo-American literary relations that “sometimes the best way to digest an influence (think of Mark Ford and John Ashbery) is to externalize it as blatantly as possible”.<sup>34</sup> Despite this similar role as an importer and exegete of modernist American poetics, it would be reductive to suggest simply that Ford is to Ashbery as Moore was to Stevens. There is a relationship between Moore and Ford which bypasses the Anglo-American context, and their roles as facilitators of exchange between the two nations. The continuities are aesthetic rather than strictly biographical. There are two significant debts Ford owes to Moore, and to Ashbery's mediation of him: the relation their poetry establishes to its historical moment, and the tone through which those particular relations are enacted.

Christopher Nealon's account of Ashbery's 70s work is helpful in establishing the continuities between the three poets. Nealon analyses this period in terms of the relation it establishes with its historical context, focussing on the the topos of “wandering away” in *Three Poems*, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and *Houseboat Days*. “Again and again,” Nealon writes, “the poet describes scenes of spectacle, pageantry, and even apocalypse, which are made harmless by the poet's turning to face the other way, or drifting in a different direction”.<sup>35</sup> In Nealon's view, this reluctance to engage directly with the overwhelming horrors and complexities of the historical moment, this act of turning away, is intimately connected with Ashbery's continual investment in and elaboration of his idea of “minority”. Ashbery's interest in poetic minority is, in Nealon's view, “not only about the formation of a countercanon, or even the critique of canonicity; there is also a political component to it, a defense of apoliticality.”<sup>36</sup> “The Other Tradition”, from *Houseboat Days*, is cited as the central exemplar of Ashbery's yoking together of an account of political paralysis, indifference or complacency, and a celebration of the marginal, those figures obscured

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<sup>34</sup> David Wheatley, “The Passionate Transitory”, *Poetry London*, 2 January 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital*, 78.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

when “the idea of a forest had clamped itself / Over the minutiae of the scene”.<sup>37</sup> Though Nealon concludes with a reading of “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” which demonstrates that poem's confrontation of its own Auden-esque “turning away”, the dominant strain in Ashbery's poetry of the 70s nevertheless “encodes a wish not to be party to violence, which shades into a wish not to be responsible for it, which shades into a wish not to know about it”.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the 1970s work Nealon attends to, it is *Flow Chart*, the poem Ashbery had recently completed when he first met Ford, that sets forth the fullest articulation of Ashbery's ideas about his right to attend exclusively to his own severely delimited subjectivity; for all its uncontrollable running over, its unlimited fluency and invention, the poem abounds with images of withdrawal into constricting structures which preclude any broad pronouncements on the Reaganite society in which the poet found himself:

it wasn't until you found yourself inside a huge pen  
or panopticon that you realized the story had disappeared  
like water into desert sand<sup>39</sup>

As Ben Hickman has noted, the pun on pen here is quite deliberate, and makes the connection as explicitly as anywhere else in Ashbery's oeuvre between the multiple images of imprisonment within “stockades”, “prisons”, and “camps” and his own strictly bounded authorial perspective. This re-iteration that “my politics shouldn't matter. It's my finger / that should – it's here I'll take my stand” suggests Ashbery's state of mind at the time of encountering Ford, and why he may have been particularly receptive to Ford's Rousellian representations of agonised restraint and paralysis. Ashbery's remarks on “La Vue” resonate throughout *Flow Chart* and *Landlocked*: “the poet, like a prisoner fascinated by the appearance of the wall of his cell, remains transfixed by the spectacle before his eyes”.

Nealon's association between Ashbery's ideas surrounding minority and the exclusion of explicitly political content from poetry has a significant bearing on the associations between

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<sup>37</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 492.

<sup>38</sup> Nealon, *The Matter of Capital*, 78.

<sup>39</sup> Ashbery, *Flow Chart* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), 84.

Ashbery, Ford and Moore. Ashbery's foreword to *Soft Sift* is again the significant text, as it seems to offer a definition of the "minority" Nealon ascribes to him and to install Ford firmly into that tradition: "how courageously right [Ford] is to locate the realm of art [in the "looking-glass"], despite those who would insist that bloody chunks of reality should be transferred directly to the page, like meat to the butcher's waxed paper".<sup>40</sup> In an interview with David Herd, Ashbery suggested that it was exactly this refusal to allow politics into his poetry which drew him to Ford's work: "He is somebody whose poetry I read when I am trying to put myself in the mood for writing poetry. It is playful and improvisational, it doesn't preach. It doesn't have any political content, which is a good thing. And it's funny, and mysterious, and melancholy."<sup>41</sup> It is worth recalling that the English "political" verse which Ashbery likely had in mind, from which Ford's work is presented as deviating, was that of Simon Armitage and Tony Harrison, poets Ashbery presented in his correspondence with Ford as crudely and complacently topical ("[Armitage] read a long poem in which some burning topic such as Viet Nam or the Falkland Islands was mentioned in every line. Oddly, he didn't bring things up to date by mentioning the Gulf War, perhaps because Tony Harrison has already mined its fertile sands"). Ashbery has on numerous other occasions outlined a more sophisticated conception of poetry's relationship with politics than the approval of blanket apoliticality mentioned above—as a host of critics from Mutlu Konuk Blasing to James Longenbach have shown—but perhaps the most apposite remain his remarks on Frank O'Hara's poetry: "Unlike the 'message' of committed poetry it incites one to all the programs of commitment as well as to every other form of self-realization—interpersonal, Dionysian, occult, or abstract".<sup>42</sup> This seems a more thoroughly articulated version of the phrase, employed to describe John Clare's poetry, which can be taken to represent Ashbery's catch-all attitude towards the relation between the experience of reading a poem and the life outside that poem: "the effect of Clare's poetry, on me at

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<sup>40</sup> Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 293.

<sup>41</sup> David Herd, "In Conversation with John Ashbery", *PN Review* 99, Vol.21, No.1, September-October 1994.

<sup>42</sup> As Longenbach has stated: "he does not deny poems may have a political valence; he believes that poetry cannot perform the substantive work of social protest". *Modern Poetry After Modernism*, 87; Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 82.

least, is always the same—that of re-inserting me in my present, of re-establishing 'now'".<sup>43</sup> There is, in many of Ashbery's pronouncements on the subject, the intimation that the least explicit a poem is about its relation to the world, the greater the potential political effect of reading it, since the obscurity of relation between them requires a greater effort of imagination on the reader's part to establish it. As I suggested in chapter 2, Ashbery is partly drawn to canonically minor writers for the space they leave for aesthetic elaboration, and this observation is as true for other forms of response beyond stylistic appropriation and development. Yet as Nealon suggests, there remains something curious about the fact that in much of his work Ashbery hopes to replicate this sensation "of re-establishing 'now'" for readers specifically by performing or foregrounding the act of disengagement. This repeated gesture suggests that it is not so much the absence of political content in Moore's and Ford's work which engages and elicits sympathy in Ashbery, so much as the poems' very deliberate staging of spectacles and explicitly political scenarios, which are painfully and anxiously turned away from.

Ford is sympathetic to this conception of poetry's oblique relationship with its historical moment, and conscious of the susceptibility of any text to historicist misreading: "Nowadays, almost any poem can be given a thorough New Historicist work-over, and, however seemingly abstract or *bien pensant*, can be shown to be complicit with the invasion of Iraq or the economic policies of George Osborne . . .".<sup>44</sup> It is apt that in a note entitled "My Position Now", published in 2014, Ford describes his first encounter with an Ashbery poem, which happened to be "The Other Tradition", in the following terms: "I remember a feeling of something like floating while reading "The Other Tradition", as if some mysterious Zephyr had swept me gently aloft, then let me drift in a state of delicious weightlessness."<sup>45</sup> His own interest in Ashbery's minority poetics arguably derives in part from this desire to wander, or, rather, "float" away from the historical moments in which they were composed. This is made evident more in the implications of the poems' formal

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<sup>43</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Personal interview with Ford, 15 May 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Ford, "My Position Now".

transitions than by explicit statement. His poems' rapid contextual shifts suspend the reader in a perpetually shifting present tense, refusing to allow for any social or historical vantage to be attained: "*In medias res* we are born and end", "Twenty Twenty Vision" tells us, putting into practice an earlier critical observation on Ashbery's "Rivers and Mountains": "In its complex intertwining of its elements and evenly energized progress it is impossible to establish a fixed vantage point on events. Everything happens *in medias res*."<sup>46</sup> Even when such a "fixed vantage" is attained, it begins to crumble beneath the feet:

Others—I am not the first—have found themselves standing  
on a seemingly solid patch of cliff that suddenly  
starts to slide: as the knees tense and hips swivel, the winding  
path is transformed into a slalom. Through a blizzard of loam  
and pebbles, oaths and jests, I tumbled toward the proverbially  
treacherous soft landing.<sup>47</sup>

In such circumstances, the desire to "float" away is quite rational. The attainment of a fantastical vantage away from the pressures of reality is also a trait Ford identifies as one of Nicholas Moore's most appealing traits, one evident in the strange narratives of escape his poems describe, and which is enacted by their peculiar, jarring buoyancy of tone. In his introduction to the latter's recent *Selected Poems*, Ford notes that "given the historical context in which they were composed, Moore's poems of the late 30s and early 40s are often surprisingly upbeat in tone, radiating a "gladness" starkly at odds both with the outbreak and progress of the war, and with the dire threats and predictions of doom made by poets such as W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice".<sup>48</sup> Numerous poems from *The Glass Tower* reflect Moore's desire to turn away from the significant historical events of his time in favour of a self-preserving circumscription of focus. "Poem", which opens the *Selected*, begins by stating:

It is better that I dally with angels,  
Taking them to peaks of fire, with life,  
And teach them among the green woods the clever

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<sup>46</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems*, 62. Ford, "A Critical Study of the Poetry of John Ashbery", 74.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>48</sup> Ford, Introduction to John Lucas and Matthew Welton, eds., Nicholas Moore, *Selected Poems* (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2014), xiv.

Ways of love and the little preliminaries.  
It is better not to trouble them with grief<sup>49</sup>

Elsewhere, Moore notes that “while the guns / Boom on over the continent, I see / Amply the simple movement of our love”.<sup>50</sup> As with the early work of F.T. Prince, whose first book was obscured by the outbreak of the Second World War—and which consequently seemed so “out of step” with the explicitly political works of the McSpaunday group—Moore's work occasionally exhibits an obtuseness which borders on the gleeful. Ford defends what might seem a complacent attitude towards contemporaneous political developments by characterising the poetry as a kind of salve or distraction: for him, Moore's poetry is determined to be a “vital, indeed necessary means of resisting the otherwise overwhelming encroachments of what Stevens called 'the pressures of reality’”.<sup>51</sup> Later in his essay, Ford singles out for praise the poem “Happy Without Sex”:

He sits and gazes on the taut volcanoes  
Ready to explode, and muses on the speeches  
Of the politicians. It is never-never land.

Down below, as he watches from his cape,  
Lie the happy countries, green and yellow with sun,  
And people moving about like beetles. Ah!

To sit alone on a rock above the world  
In the sweet sunshine, and to hear the chatter  
Of the diplomats as a distant murmur of bees  
On a summer's day!<sup>52</sup>

This poem is a fantasy of escape, a surreal parable in which the horrors and distractions of experience are neutralised by a refusal to engage. The narrator has elevated himself “alone on a rock above the world”, a position from which the communications and manoeuvrings of politicians are rendered benign and unintelligible “as a distant murmur of bees”. Beneath him he can observe “the happy countries” of ravaged postwar Europe, and its traumatised populace “moving about like beetles”. This transition from the “real” world of politics into a dream-like, depoliticized “rock

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<sup>49</sup> Moore, *Selected Poems*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>51</sup> Ford, “Introduction”, *Selected Poems*, xiv.

<sup>52</sup> Moore, *Selected Poems*, 67.

above the world” is marked by small phrasal modifications: “muses on the speeches” becomes “moving about like beetles” which in turn removes further to “murmur of bees”. It is as if the lens through which the poet sees the world is gradually misted over, and what he observes becomes ever-more benignly distorted into a “pearly, soft-focus” version of itself. This strange, curiously upbeat, Kafka-esque vision is concluded with a complacent exclamation of satisfaction or contentment: “Ah!” It is possible to see how this dream-like landscape, articulating a pronounced disjunction with the historical circumstances of its composition, would have appealed to the Ashbery of the 70s; indeed, it is possible to hear in its celebration of “turning away” a pre-echo of the conclusion of “The Other Tradition”:

You found this  
Charming, but turned your face fully towards night,  
Speaking into it like a megaphone, not hearing  
Or caring, although these still live and are generous  
And all ways contained, allowed to come and go  
Indefinitely in and out of the stockade  
They have so much trouble remembering, when you forgetting  
Rescues them at last, as a star absorbs the night.

Moore's defiant refusal to listen to the “diplomats”, his desire to view something horrific as “happy”, and his disturbing landscape and populace, are all echoed throughout this passage. The highly ambiguous, troubling opening scene of “The Other Tradition”—which depicts a kind of one-size-fits-all public event, “rite, orgy, meeting, rally, party, retreat, Encounter session, or a combination of these”—is responded to with the facile assertion, “you found this / charming”; the “you” who takes up the conclusion of the poem has “turned your face fully towards night . . . not hearing or caring”; while a comparable implied vantage is attained, since from the perspective of the poem “these” are observed to be “all ways contained, allowed to come and go / Indefinitely in and out of the stockade / They have so much trouble remembering”.<sup>53</sup> This poem is also a fantasy of escape into minority, and Moore, perhaps the most “minor” of Ashbery's English “other tradition” in his defiant apoliticality, is a central presence in it.

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<sup>53</sup> Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 261.

Moore's directness and his wild shifts in tone are modulated into subtler keys by Ashbery, so that both the original poem and Ashbery's mediation of it can be heard in Ford's own version of this scenario, "Invisible Assets", from *Landlocked*:

After he threw her through a  
plate glass window, nature seemed that much closer.

Even the dastardly divisions in society  
might be healed by a first class glazier.

Of course, on Sundays families still picnicked  
boldly on the village green, and afterwards

marvelled at the blacksmith's glowing forge—  
how strong they all were in those days!

And yet how small! Even a man only six foot tall  
was then esteemed a veritable giant.

Surely the current furore over architecture  
would have evoked from them only pitying smiles.

Meanwhile, the market for landscapes has never  
been firmer. This view, for instance, includes

seven counties, and a bull charging around in its paddock.<sup>54</sup>

Like its predecessors, "Invisible Assets" opens with a vision of public political spectacle, a woman (a protester?) being thrown through a window, an incident which is then expanded and generalised through the curious combination of diction drawn equally from political discourse and a children's adventure story: "Even the dastardly divisions in society / might be healed by a first class glazier". This jokey couplet represents Ford's most direct statement about the relation between art and politics; knowing that poetry "makes nothing happen", he, like Ashbery, seems to be asserting that "Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest", and even a "first-class" poet can't heal political rifts. An ironised pastoral scene (a severely circumscribed and stiffened version of Ashbery's chaotic troubadour protest) is then evoked ("Of course, on Sundays families still picnicked / boldly on the village green"). The sarcastic exclamations ("how strong they all were in those days! / And yet how

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<sup>54</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems*, 8.

small!”) add a welcome cutting edge to the complacencies of Moore's “Ah!” and Ashbery's “charming”. The poem concludes with a landscape borrowed equally from Moore and Ashbery, and happily declares its status as a commodified set piece with which to conclude a poem about the difficulties of addressing “the pressures of reality” in poetry: “Meanwhile, the market for landscapes has never / been firmer. This view, for instance, includes // seven counties, and a bull charging around its paddock”. Moore's “happy countries” are evoked from this lofty perspective, while Ashbery's “stockade” has transformed into Ford's “paddock”, which rather than allowing people to “come and go” constrains a single charging bull.

While the structural elements of this wilfully, flagrantly apolitical poem are derived equally from Moore and Ashbery, the tonal register in which this “turning away” occurs is, in Ford's view, specifically English in its origins. While Ashbery turns towards night with a resigned politeness, a drained or etiolated sublimity, both Moore and Ford register their abandonment of social realist art with an acute sense of anxiety. This turning away is not just a placid aversion of gaze, but rather an act of misdirection whose duplicity is implicitly signalled by the exaggerated “gladness” of its expression. Ford connects the crazed upbeatness in his early work with a particular tradition of response to stress which he views as a “slightly deranged trench humour, one that is possibly particularly English”:

the comic paranoia on display in *Landlocked* and *Soft Sift* may also have its origins in the strict routines and feral animosities of a boy's prep school, which tend to foster a kind of slightly deranged trench humour, one that is possibly particularly English – I'm thinking of Edward Lear and Monty Python and so on. I believe it was Auden who said that he completely understood totalitarian regimes because he'd been sent to an English boarding school.<sup>55</sup>

Hyper-conscious of its aesthetic exceptionality, and plagued by guilt and uncertainty over its refusal to represent its historical contexts in “bloody chunks of reality” form, Ford's early poetry—before the more constrained, graceful but self-conscious work of *Soft Sift*—is characterised by a relentless over-excitement and enthusiasm which masks an underlying sense of misery and desperation. The

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<sup>55</sup> Personal interview with Ford, 15 May 2015.

poem “Christmas”, from *Landlocked*, exemplifies this best:

I very much enjoyed your latest book I lied having  
NOT read it. Hurrah! We're all of us bright as chickens  
as if Jack liked Chrissie and Chrissie liked Jack.  
Ah, we had a good season, then, we drew all five fixtures!  
For Christmas, I asked my mother to knit me a tie  
to go with my tunic. No! she snapped,  
Go out and buy one. So off I samba-  
When it was Sunday and all the shops were shut-  
The streets are full enough though and there are  
Some fine ankles showing through-my fertile imagination!-  
I see miniskirts where others see only galoshes . . .<sup>56</sup>

This passage exhibits all the features by which this tone can be defined; a Moore-ish exclamation (“Ah!”), manic positivity in perception (“I see miniskirts where others see only galoshes”), expression (“we're all of us bright as chickens”) and punctuation (“we had a good season, then, we drew all five fixtures!”), even when what is being communicated is in itself bleak or lugubrious. Some critics have mistaken this manic positivity as an indicator of affiliation with Frank O'Hara, when in fact it is merely a deliberate, self-conscious and highly ironic redeployment of O'Hara's technique; though the poets share surface effects—exclamation marks, wild interjections, a bizarre and unpredictable range of characters—the sensibility generating them could not be less alike.<sup>57</sup> While much of O'Hara's work was generated by his actual lived experience, Ford's poems describe and animate “an America of the mind”, as he has put it. These are wholly artificial environments, forms of escape from the reality in which the poet found himself. Yet according to the sometimes cruel logic of Ford's poetic universe, attempts at evading the reality of the poet's circumstances serve only to re-inscribe more deeply his original relation to that reality. Representative is the chiasmus in the passage above (“as if Jack liked Chrissie and Chrissie liked Jack”), which reinforces the constraint the poem hopes to free itself of, a rhetorical device emerging from even the

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<sup>56</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Though it is offered with some reservation and he does differentiate them through Ford's emphasis on the “constructedness” of the text, Ian Gregson's observation is representative: “The most obvious influence on Ford is Frank O'Hara, with whom he shares a tendency to exclaim (‘What a life!’, ‘Hurrah!’, ‘What a thought!’, ‘Hush!’, ‘Hark!’), a desire to register the vertiginous rush of the present moment – for which driving with no hands is a vivid hyperbolic analogy, and which entails the use of a head-over-heels free verse – and a tendency to sound blasé or deadpan when the imagery becomes surreal.” *London Review of Books*, Vol.15, No.1, 7 January 1993, 22-23.

most seemingly informal, “head over heels free verse”, as though to deny any possibility of escape from the rigorous determinations of “inflexible etiquette”.

Many of Ford's early poems seem to develop from an understanding (and sense of despair) that the translation of the thrilling, delivering aesthetic of the New York School to 1980s England was an impossibility. Once again, his essay on Moore seems to offer this oblique self-diagnosis, with Stevens standing in place of Ashbery and O'Hara: “A number of [Moore's] poems seem to develop out of the premiss that it is impossible to imbue the English scene, its landscapes and politics and social and poetic conventions, with Stevensian vistas of possibility . . . Torquay's lupins and roses and the women's reams of wool are specific and actual, rather than symbolic or illustrative.”<sup>58</sup> The conversion of the “symbolic and illustrative” into the “specific and actual” might serve as a formula for Ford's relation to American poetry, or his conception of Anglo-American exchange more generally; the abstraction and range of American poetry becoming anchored to the specifics of a particular, coherent narrative or grammatically correct expressive mode. At the beginning of his career, Ford viewed the distinctive products of the two poetic cultures in a rather dispirited light, as he has remarked:

When I started reading poetry during my student days all the cool poets of the postwar era were American – there were the crazy Beats, the larger-than-life Confessionals, the alluringly named New York School poets, Deep Image people, the Black Mountaineers, the San Francisco Renaissance, all sorts. Wherever you went in American poetry, it looked like more fun than being bored and lonely up in Hull. Plus there was Harold Bloom saying that poets such as Ashbery and Merrill were as ‘strong’ as Wordsworth or Tennyson; his extravagant pronouncements made contemporary American poetry seem like a vital, going concern, whereas my impression, no doubt erroneous, was that English critics felt contemporary English poetry was something to keep quiet about or be apologised for.<sup>59</sup>

What is impressive about the poetry of this period is that Ford's sense of cultural inferiority is displaced by the sense that the inability to imitate US examples is itself a viable subject. As Ford has written, many British and Irish poets “invoke some aspect of America as a prelude to an attempt to define, and sometimes defend, the poet's own locale, rituals, career, and culture”, and Ford's work

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<sup>58</sup> Ford, “Nicholas Moore, Stevens and the Fortune Press”, 170-1.

<sup>59</sup> Anthony Caleshu, “Mark Ford in Conversation with Anthony Caleshu”.

displays a defiant sense of vitality even in its registrations of cultural and political imbalance.<sup>60</sup> While “Affirmative Action” begins with an embittered vision of America's cultural supremacy, it eventually acts as a prompt for Ford to scrutinise, however obliquely, his own cultural and political contexts, in a highly ironic sequence of inquisitions:

Come on, Government! You're supposed to be in charge!  
What about these here hooligans running naked through the streets?

What about the stream winding through pleasant meadows  
And the cows brooding in the grass?

What about midges, and toffee-apple, and washing days?<sup>61</sup>

“If You Could Only See Me Now!” is a further bathetic parody of O'Hara's early poems of self-creation as a poet (“Letter to a Young Poet” etc.), in which the opening adumbration of a specifically political context is, as in “Invisible Assets”, swiftly deviated from by a registration of entrapment:

When I'm in power I will pursue landlords  
across the country. Right now, life  
has me boxed in, and my cries for help drift inscrutably  
around willows, oak trees, and grief-stricken elms.  
I left home young, and since then I've roamed  
and roamed, following my nose, through deserts and cities,  
always alone, in forests, living in trees-  
What a life!<sup>62</sup>

In a letter to Ashbery from 1992, Ford suggested a particular biographical and historical provenance for this tonal dissonance in his work, connecting it to his experiences as a pupil of British boarding schools:

I hope you're well...Pretty much all British public school boys start their letters like this, I think. We had to write letters home every Sunday, but we also had to show our housemaster these letters, so you had to pretend you were loving every minute of everything and having a wonderful time. My brother's first letter apparently ran something like “I hate it here, I hate it here, I hate it here. Please take me home!” Needless to say, that one didn't get through. I sometimes wonder if all the duplicitous exclamations of excitement and delight in my poems descend from these early exercises in deceit...<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Something We Have That They Don't*, eds. Ford and Clark, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems*, 23.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Ford to Ashbery, 28 October 1992. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

Ford was a boarder at various schools in different countries during his peripatetic childhood; born in Nairobi, he attended schools in Kenya, Sri Lanka and Chicago, before finally ending up in England. While these experiences are present indirectly in *Landlocked* (“I left home early and since then I've roamed / and roamed”), it's only recently that he has addressed them explicitly in his work (“In Loco Parentis”, “Jeeves and Wooster”, “World Enough”) and in interviews. Ford's perception regarding his “duplicitous exclamations of excitement and delight” and the “comic paranoia” engendered by his upbringing is significant for his conception of the function of tonal duplicity in a wider sense. As Ford's comments suggest, the localised biographical detail of tonal disjunction is employed as a metonym for a broader historical context; while Auden saw resemblances between public schools and totalitarianism, Ford draws upon his own experience of the former to make sense of the legacy of the decline of the British Empire, which is, increasingly, his primary historical, aesthetic and biographical concern. “If You Could Only See Me Now!” exemplifies this; it is a poem not simply about the poet's biographical experience or his difficulty in integrating himself into a hostile poetic community—though these pressures inform it—but a glancingly-evoked portrait of an imperial power in decline following the Second World War, a complex and oblique examination of “post-imperial tristesse”.<sup>64</sup>

Moore's anachronistic “gladness”, then, can be said to have offered Ford a means of expression of an acute sense of post-imperial anxiety which operates through a brittle denial of its existence. Like “The Other Tradition” and “Happy Without Sex”, Ford's poetry often takes place in what Nealon calls “the minority time of “the other tradition”, that “sits about” instead of rushing, that skips the parade, as it were, avoiding “pageantry” in favour of an aimlessness that's “rescued” by “forgetting” the dread of the emerging spectacle.”<sup>65</sup> It describes as vividly as Moore's bald disclosure of resistance to spectacle, or Ashbery's nervous avoidance of complicity, if not a defence of poetic apoliticality then a concession of its apparent inevitability. It is perhaps for the solace of

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<sup>64</sup> *Something We Have That They Don't*, eds. Ford and Clark, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Nealon, *The Matter of Capital*, 83.

this attitude that Ashbery describes the lack of political content in Ford's poetry as “a good thing”, as it provides a space of respite for the American poet whose own engagements with his historical moment have been a great deal more fraught. Ford's work provides “hardly a world-view but a look at a small piece of it possessing a startling specific gravity”, Ashbery remarked of “Invisible Assets”, and it's a comment which tells us something about Ford and about the minor poets Ashbery enjoys and promotes. Indeed, it is hard not to see Ford's conversion of the open “stockade” of “The Other Tradition” into a closed, inescapable “paddock” as a sign of a deliberate constriction of ambition, a self-conscious denial of the world outside the stockade in favour of a vitalized elucidation of a specific locale. Ford himself has suggested that “If Ashbery is trying to take the cork out of the bottle, in psychic terms, I'm trying to put it back in . . . because, you know, I'm English”.<sup>66</sup> And yet while the poem provides an image of its own restriction of perspective, its form implicitly refutes such a conclusion. It is one of several poems in *Landlocked* which are thirteen lines long, a calculated deviation from the conventions of the fourteen-line sonnet. This nonce form is employed specifically to complicate the apparent surety regarding constraint and fixity the poems themselves articulate, an instance of “discordant data” which invites the reader to question the authenticity of the apoliticality the poems claim for themselves. Nealon's idea of Ashbery's “turning away” is useful in coming to terms with Ford's own tense relationship to historical events, and reveals that his situation of his poetry in the “looking-glass realm of art”, in “minority time”, runs the same risk as much of Ashbery's work, for it “encodes a wish not to be party to violence, which shades into a wish not to be responsible for it, which shades into a wish not to know about it”. Yet the discordant data, formal rigidity and tonal dissonance of his poetry are not purely escapist tendencies. Rather, their exaggerated states are employed to highlight what they conceal.

From Ashbery, Ford derived the lesson that “obvious, excessive and legion” inaccuracies—both factual and tonal—can lead to an “increased awareness of what any given discourse excludes

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<sup>66</sup> Personal interview with Mark Ford, 15 May 2015.

or represses to sustain its illusion of coherence”.<sup>67</sup> It is in the “column of white space” opened up by such discrepancies that a more productive and creative form of political thinking can take place, Ashbery and Ford suggest, than in any more explicitly “committed” poetry. Such examples of excessive inaccuracy, of discordant data, include the famous conclusion to “Worsening Situation” (“My wife thinks I’m in Oslo: Oslo, France”)<sup>68</sup> and comparable instances can be found throughout Ford’s work, particularly in “A Natural History”, which recounts a litany of bizarre curatives offered up by Pliny’s *Natural History*, including: “for sweet breath / Rub the ashes of burnt mice mixed with honey / Around the gums”. From Bishop, Ford learned that through a severe formal program such exclusions and repressions can be further indicated and foregrounded; highly structured, severely programmatic poems make a feature of the poet’s limitation of perspective, thereby confessing to an “addiction to order that diminishes all otherness to a geometrical version of the self and its history”. The insistent rhymes of Bishop’s “Quai d’Orleans” or the vertiginous circulations of end-words in “A Miracle for Breakfast” become, in Ford’s work, the “circular geometrical figures” which conclude “Funny Peculiar”, which is like Bishop’s work “far from innocent” in its implications.

These exchanges represent a fascinating example of Ashbery’s conception of an ideal of Anglo-American influence in action; having encountered Moore through Ashbery’s mediation of him, Ford was connected to an obscured tradition of English which both provided him with a means of expression, and which he was able therefore to perpetuate. As Ashbery put it, “Alice’s looking-glass is reached by Emily’s riddle”. Ford’s later work has deviated from this early, Ashbery and Moore-inflected poetry, while maintaining its continuities with and structural relation to other elements of Ashbery’s other tradition. Its historical and allusive scope has dramatically broadened, and its early formal and tonal procedures have on the whole been displaced by new modalities, including calculated anachronism. *Six Children*, in particular, aims in poems like “A Natural

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<sup>67</sup> Ford, *A Driftwood Altar*, 201.

<sup>68</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 429.

History”, “The Snare Unbroken” and the beautiful “Hourglass” to place itself deliberately outside of its own historical period, to self-identify as “minor”, in a way which recalls Chatterton, Beddoes, and Prince. Once again, Ford's critical writing seems strikingly self-descriptive, in this instance in a commentary upon Prince: “Prince blithely dissents from what had become, by the thirties, Modernist orthodoxy; the archaic well done, he suggests, can be just as effective as contemporary idioms and much more than the aggressively or complacently up-to-date.”<sup>69</sup> This represents a dramatically diminished sense of anxiety about Ford's relation to his historical moment, and has resulted in some of his most confident, fully-realised poetry, enabled by an acceptance of its minor status. In the next section of this chapter, I will argue that Ford's performance of this minority has been significantly influential for Ashbery in his post-*Flow Chart* work, and allows us an unusual vantage from which to survey this vast late part of his oeuvre.

## II. “We are where we exchanged / positions”: Ford and Late Ashbery

Ashbery has regularly testified to the influence of Ford's work upon his own. In an interview with David Herd, he remarked that Ford was one of the poets he read to “get started” with his own writing. When asked to describe his attitude to Ford's poetry, he commented:

He is somebody whose poetry I read when I am trying to put myself in the mood for writing poetry. It is playful and improvisational, it doesn't preach. It doesn't have any political content, which is a good thing. And it's funny, and mysterious, and melancholy...It's more in the same hemisphere as my poetry, in the sense that it's improvisational, and non-didactic. But I don't see much of a resemblance.<sup>70</sup>

This final remark is, as Herd has shown, one of the more substantial forms of praise Ashbery can bestow on his followers: “the highest compliment the older poet can pay the younger is to not recognise his poetry as a continuation of his own; Auden, it will be recalled, paying Ashbery just such a double-edged compliment in his introduction to *Some Trees*.”<sup>71</sup> Ford's work goes some way

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<sup>69</sup> Ford, *A Driftwood Altar*, 221.

<sup>70</sup> David Herd, “In Conversation with John Ashbery”.

<sup>71</sup> Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 190.

to illuminating the strange, critically-neglected period in Ashbery's oeuvre which follows *Flow Chart*, when the American poet's scope radically contracts and he writes a series of several hundred brief lyrics (with the exception of "And the Stars Were Shining", which is a long poem in a very different mode to his long meditative pieces of earlier years, resembling more a series of Auden-esque scenes stitched together) before the extended work of *Girls on the Run*. This is the period in which Ashbery's work begins to attract criticism for its "incoherence" and profuseness, becoming, in Clive James' words, "one interminable outpouring that deals with everything in general, with nothing in particular, can be cut off at any length from six inches to a mile . . ." <sup>72</sup> Ashbery's deliberate shift in his ambitions for his poetry during this period, which leads right up to the poetry he is writing today, was, as their correspondence suggests, significantly informed by the development of his friendship with Ford.

In April of 1992, Ashbery wrote in a letter to the English poet that he hoped Ford was "well and happy and writing poetry. If you have some I'd love to see it. I think you've been a major inspiration on my next book, *And the Stars Were Shining* . . ." <sup>73</sup> Ashbery's signalling of influence here represents a significant development in his attitudes towards his followers. As Herd has shown, Ashbery's work had, for a period, expressed a growing frustration with the throngs of "young guys" imitating his aesthetic. *Shadow Train*, in particular, is a volume full of tense encounters between the poet and his followers. "Here Everything Is Still Floating" features some unusually embittered observations about young poets "living off the interest of their // Sublime receptivity to everything", concluding with a pointed modification in its assertion of "the long sweetness of the simultaneity, yours and mine, ours and mine". <sup>74</sup> Within the Anglo-American context, perhaps the most thorough imitator of Ashbery's work during this period was John Ash, a poet whose own work is hugely indebted to Ashbery's but is, due to his negligible importance to Ashbery, of limited interest in the context of this thesis. Their relationship is worth attending to briefly, however, as the reasons behind

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<sup>72</sup> Clive James, *The Revolt of the Pendulum: Essays 2005-2008* (London: Picador, 2009), 57.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Ford, 6 April 1993. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

<sup>74</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 708.

Ashbery's relative disinterest in him are helpful for throwing into relief the rationale for his powerful attraction to Ford, and his more general interest in poets who attempted to resist an explicitly, slavishly Ashberyan aesthetic.

Ash first encountered Ashbery in the late 70s, after a reading at the Poetry Society in London. At the time of the encounter Ash was, like Prince and Harwood before him, immensely dissatisfied with his British poetic peers, as the following passage from a letter to Ashbery suggests:

Everyone here seems to think the most significant literary event of the moment is P. Larkin's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. Groan. I don't buy poetry books anymore, just records, - most recently 'SULK' by Associates which features a disco version of Billie Holliday's 'Gloomy Sunday' that's worth any number of slim volumes by our current poetlings, - whose main aim seems to be to fill the literary windowframes with yet more Georgian bow windows and 'bottle' glass. Erf.<sup>75</sup>

He viewed Ashbery, and the New York School more generally, as a means of imaginative and social liberation. New York as a geographical location seemed to exert an almost irresistible pull on Ash ("It's my own ambition to get to New York, of course, but I've not quite worked out how yet"), as a glamorous alternative to the dreary Manchester he describes in his letters to Ashbery. It was only after a great deal of effort on both his and Ashbery's part that Ash finally emigrated to the USA in 1985. In the extensive correspondence between the two poets prior to this move, Ashbery also assumed a gentle tutorial role, offering recommendations for Ash's reading, and alerting him to other traditions of English poetry obscured by the contemporaries Ash seems so antagonistic towards. At one point, Ash reports having read Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, of which he writes:

While finishing, by slow degrees, 'The System' and 'The Recital' I turned to Auden's 'Caliban to the Audience'. Reading this again was something of a revelation: it is dazzling and (now) possibly my favourite thing by any English 20<sup>th</sup> century poet. In fact I plan to use two quotes from it in my new book, - 'The Goodbyes', which is to be published by CARCANET sometime in May, - shortly after your own 'Shadow Train' I imagine. I feel very honoured to be in such good company, - and, at last, after 12 years hard labour I really do seem to be getting somewhere!<sup>76</sup>

While shades of Auden can be detected throughout Ash's work, the evidence of Ashbery's mediating influence is so dominant that any connections to shared sources are obscured. It's barely necessary

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<sup>75</sup> Letter from Ash to Ashbery, undated. Ashbery Papers, Houghton Library Collection, Harvard University, Box 2.

<sup>76</sup> Postcard from Ash to Ashbery, undated. Ashbery Papers, Box 2.

to demonstrate through textual analysis the ways in which Ashbery is present in Ash's work; one could simply list those poems of Ash's which have identical or similar titles to works by Ashbery—"Street Musicians", "Incidental Music", "Three Scenes", "The Philosophies of Popular Songs", etc.—or those which employ Ashberyan conceits, such as "The Ungrateful Citizens", which in its minor deviations from "The Instruction Manual" only serves to highlight the subtlety of the original:

It occurs to me I would like to write a poem about Naples.  
Perhaps I have always wanted to do this, and only realized it just a moment ago,  
but, alas, I have never been to Naples, and yet my desire to write about the place  
becomes more insuperable by the second.<sup>77</sup>

Ash's desire to involve himself in the poetry world of New York is evidenced to an almost uncomfortable degree by his collection *Disbelief*, which features poems dedicated to David Kermani, Eugene Richie, Douglas Crase, Harry Matthews, Rosanna Wasserman, an epigraph from Ashbery ("October in the Capital") and an astonishingly thorough imitation of Ashbery's style from this period. Such behaviour, of course, recalls the performative imitations of Lee Harwood, but the crucial difference between the two poets is Ash's apparent eagerness to be conflated with his model; at no point does he express a wish to differentiate himself, or exhibit any particular anxiety about the pervasiveness of Ashbery's influence. One letter features this passage: "I am taking excursions on the 'Shadow Train': I love the branch-lines and the blissful delays... I noticed one poem begins with the phrase "Despite or because / Of..." So does a poem in my new Carcanet collection (THE GOODBYES). This is getting embarrassing . . ." <sup>78</sup> Such coincidences seem to have been noted with more delight than embarrassment. And this was not merely a private imitation: Ash's reception in the UK was consistently coloured by his association with Ashbery, yet the former saw such comparisons more as an endorsement than something to be evaded. Writing to Ashbery in 1982, Ash revelled in accusations of his similarity to his American mentor, then proceeded to deepen their

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<sup>77</sup> John Ash, *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), 165.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Ash to Ashbery, undated. Ashbery Papers, Box 2.

association: “One poem is dedicated (in part) to you, and of course I’ve already been accused by Brit Critics of being too much under your baleful influence. They find us both formless. Ha! I find them utterly contentless. It’s odd that you mention your poem ‘Incidental Music’, because there’s one of that name in my GOODBYES.”<sup>79</sup> Yet for all the psychological interest of such a curious case of mimicry, Ash remains of strictly localised interest. He lacks Ford and Harwood’s critical distance from their own work; where those poets are always alert to their successes and failures, abilities and limitations, and are scrupulously self-conscious about the Anglo-American contexts they view themselves as writing in and out of, Ash seems during the period of his contact with Ashbery to have been more interested in denying his own provenance, distancing himself from those elements of his identity he was uncomfortable with, and producing detailed pastiches of Ashbery.

Ashbery seems to allude to this trait in his introduction to a reading the English poet gave in New York in 1992. He writes, “before he emigrated [John] was already living, in his poetry at least, in other places”.<sup>80</sup> This remark represents the crux of Ashbery’s own essential disinterest in Ash—that is, he doesn’t see him as an English poet (perhaps more a European one), and as such has no interest in establishing a genealogy for Ash’s work in English poetry, as he did with Harwood and Ford. Indeed, what Ashbery actually advocates in this introduction is the wholesale division of Anglophone poetries; quite deliberately employing the terminology of his earlier pronouncements on Anglo-American relations—that is, a rhetoric of “connexion”—Ashbery demonstrates how his own views on the subject are significantly inflected by the particular context of a personal relationship:

Since he moved to New York from Manchester in 1985, John Ash has been able to do a great deal for himself and for everybody who gets seduced by poetry. First of all, his love for the city, kept in check by his exemplary “disbelief”, has produced a body of poetry in which we recognize ourselves and our neighbourhoods in a new mirror. And since New York isn’t just a place that one lands on but is also a trampoline that bounces one off or back in other directions, it has enabled John to be even more madly cosmopolitan than he was before he got here. Before he emigrated he was already living, in his poetry at least, in other places, as this line from a poem in his first book, *The Goodbyes*, suggests: “Their

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<sup>79</sup> Letter from Ash to Ashbery, undated. Ashbery Papers, Box 2.

<sup>80</sup> Introduction to a reading by John Ash and Ann Lauterbach, 2 March 1993. Ashbery Papers, Box 32.

shoes have left them, / and winter follows them from Berlin / to Adelaide.” I don't for a minute think that John functions as a sort of bridge between the mutually hostile worlds of British and American poetry; it's certainly the last thing he would want, and the last thing we need—both countries would probably sink like Atlantis if they found themselves so intimately, so embarrassingly connected.

It is highly unusual for Ashbery to assume the position that disconnection, even hostility between the two nations and the two poeties is somehow advantageous or necessary. The suggestion of the curious “Atlantis” remark is, indeed, that it is only through a carefully-managed distinctness that the two poeties are able to continue to exist. Yet despite the explicitness of this sentiment, it is both anticipated and undermined by the remainder of the essay's insistence on the significance and pervasiveness of connection between the two nations. The introduction opens with a mention of the World Trade Centre bombings, before reflecting on a recent news story that asserted New York to be the “safest city in the world”. Ashbery then remarks:

And then, since everything seems interconnected today, or a coincidence (but there is no such thing as coincidence, only the appearance of coincidence), I pick up a poetry magazine published in Manchester by the English publisher of Ash's books and my own, and read an interview with the American poet and critic Eleanor Wilner, who takes aim at the revival of the Battle of the Ancients and the Moderns that is being fought again today between partisans of the so-called New Formalism and so-called Free Verse.

The text's insistence on the interconnectedness of everything asks us to understand that this modern enactment of the “Battle of the Ancients” is in some sense a development upon the terms of conflict which have obtained between British and American poets from Whitman onwards. It also contradicts the later assertion of the text that “a bridge between the mutually hostile worlds of British and American poetry” is “the last thing we need”, since he provides an example—Carcenet—of a publishing house which functions in exactly that role. It's possible to see this text as an expansion of the jokey paradox the lines from “Tenth Symphony” enact; their insistence upon “connexion” is itself disconnected by the interference of the parenthetical sentence, thereby achieving a state of “having it both ways”. This rhetorical doubleness is an important feature of Ashbery's conception of himself as an influential poet and a transatlantic canon-shaper.

The emphasis placed on differentiation between the two countries here is, partly, a

distancing effect introduced by Ashbery to disassociate himself from Ash—indeed, the ambivalence of the introduction veers occasionally into very thinly-veiled mockery (“John Ash has been able to do a great deal for himself”)—which conveys a sense that the “intimacy” of the “connection” between the two poets is to a degree “embarrassing” for Ashbery. Indeed, the “ourselves” Ashbery “recognizes” in Ash's work might not be, as it so often is, a generalized “we” so much as a particular self—the American poet—abstracted for reasons of tact (“yours and mine, ours and mine”). It's perhaps also a word of warning to Ash, a suggestion that a too-ready identification with Ashbery would “sink” them both, an observation which illuminates Ashbery's conception of the function of an influential poet. Ashbery seeks above all to encourage the heterogeneity of those whom he has influenced, to encourage them to be idiosyncratic, for, as he has stated in interview, “the more you like a poet, the less you ought to write like him, because what you were liking in him is a uniqueness”. This is how he himself has developed in relation to his own progenitors, as Albert Cook has suggested with reference to “The Tomb of Stuart Merrill”: “He does not here imitate Merrill or refer to him much but rather presents a stylistic development that amounts to the homage of diffuse derivation”.<sup>81</sup> The crucial statement in his introduction for Ash, in terms of Ashbery's conception of his own function as an influential poet, is the remark about New York, with which Ashbery has identified his own work on numerous occasions: “New York isn't just a place that one lands on but is also a trampoline that bounces one off or back in other directions”.<sup>82</sup> This is perhaps

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<sup>81</sup> Albert Spaulding Cook, *Forces in Modern and Postmodern Poetry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 210.

<sup>82</sup> The identification of the poet with the city as a point of linkage and digression is suggested abundantly throughout Ashbery's work. Both poet and city aspire, in Ashbery's view, towards the condition of an “an anti-place, an abstract climate” (*Selected Prose*, 114) in which one can “live and meet people” rather than acting as a “specific place whose local colour influences the literature produced there” (*Selected Prose*, 133). In the words of “Rivers and Mountains”, we might say Ashbery wants to be the city that is gone around “to get to other places” (*Collected Poems*, 126). In an interview with Ash, the connection between poet and city is suggested more explicitly. Ashbery states: “I love the way New York looks, the way everything is mashed together and somehow gives one a sense of elation. I think that New York resembles Rome, rather than Paris which is more harmonious. In Rome beautiful buildings that don't necessarily compliment each other are jammed against each other. Of course Rome is much more beautiful than New York in most people's understanding of the term, but I like the odd contiguity that everything has here. New Yorkers are always bemoaning the tearing down of lovely old buildings and the construction of ugly new ones, but that seems to me very much the way the whole place is organised - it's a sort of disposable city and always has been.” To which Ash responds: “Perhaps you would agree that your own diction and syntax imitate that, in the sense that you will use very shop-worn phrases, very slangy phrases, neologisms, and lyrical, 'poetic' language and any kind of diction juxtaposed.” (*PN Review* 46, Vol.12, No.4, November-December 1985.)

as succinct an expression of Ashbery's hopes as a poet and mentor as he has ever articulated; those who gravitate towards his poetry and New York are—since it is a “logarithm of other cities”, as he is a logarithm of other poets—re-directed towards a disparate array of “other directions” or other traditions, or “back” towards their own point of origin with a new perspective. However, as David Herd has suggested, by “abjuring influence in favour of, so he hopes, prompting others into their own fresh way of looking at the world”, Ashbery necessarily puts himself in a contradictory position; that of one instructing others not to follow him.<sup>83</sup> There is a tension between the didacticism of the gesture and the apparent anti-didacticism of the message. Ashbery acknowledges the conflict in *Flow Chart*:

And Joan she said  
too it was like being dead only she didn't care, she might as well be anyway, for all  
she cared, and then someone came back with beef. And said here  
put a rose on this, you're not afraid, you do it, and someone said, O if the law  
decree it he must do it . . .  
And then in the shade they put their heads  
together, and one comes back, the others being a little way off, and says, who  
do you think taught you to disobey in the first place? And he says, my father.  
And at that they were all struck dumb . . . And it was all over for that day.<sup>84</sup>

This paradoxical position is, of course, part of Ashbery's sense of his “trying to have it both ways”: the “memorials not to be hoarded” he finds so appealing in Tomlinson's poem express a desire to be memorialised in the language but for that memorisation not to come in the form of a hoarding of specifically Ashberyan techniques and innovations, but rather a diffuse dispersal among diverse forms. As he put it in “The New Spirit”: “But we must learn to live in others, no matter how abortive or unfriendly their piecemeal renderings of us: they create us.”<sup>85</sup> Both his aversion to Ash's too-intimate imitations, and his enthusiasm for the distinctness of response in Ford, derive from this fundamental principle.

Ashbery's relationship with Ash represents a low point of interest in his Anglo-American relationships, after the significance of the exchanges with Auden, Prince, and Harwood. What it

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<sup>83</sup> Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 213.

<sup>84</sup> Ashbery, *Flow Chart*, 107.

<sup>85</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 253.

demonstrates is the particularity and rigour of Ashbery's conception of his role as an influential poet in an Anglo-American context. While he was eager to support Harwood, and situate his work in a particular lineage of English poetry, his response to Ash—in whose work Ashbery's own is arguably more obviously evident—was one of distance and disinterest. Following this lull, Ashbery's engagement with Anglo-American poetic relations was re-activated by the development of his friendship with Ford, a poet who, like Harwood, seems to honour the uniqueness of Ashbery's work by deviating substantially from its example. It is in *And the Stars Were Shining*, the first volume Ashbery wrote after meeting Ford, that the consequences for his own poetry of this salutary form of exchange can be detected.

The madcap narratives and clipped, elliptical style of *Landlocked* are evident throughout *And the Stars Were Shining*. “Spring Cries”, the second poem of the book, seems to refute Ashbery's earlier suggestion that “a bridge between the mutually hostile worlds of British and American poetry” were “the last thing we need”:

Our worst fears are realized.  
Then a string of successes, or failures, follows.  
She pleads with us to stay: 'Stay,  
just for a minute, can't you?'  
  
We are expelled into the dust of our decisions.  
Knowing it would be this way hasn't  
made any of it easier to understand, or bear.  
May is raving. Its recapitulations  
exhaust the soil. Across the marsh  
some bird misses its mark, walks back, sheepish, cheeping.  
The isthmus is gilded white. People are returning  
to the bight: adult swimmers, all of them.<sup>86</sup>

The poem employs Ford's distinctively abstracted narrative style (“Our worst fears are realised. / Then a string of successes, or failures, follows”), which reads like a formula or blueprint for all disaster narratives, from the expulsion from Eden into “the dust of our decisions” onwards; and exhibits the condensed integration of unidentified allegorical figures, non-sequiturs and clear

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<sup>86</sup> Ashbery, *And the Stars Were Shining*, 4.

purposive statements which *Landlocked* specialises in: “Knowing it would be this way hasn't / made any of it easier to understand, or bear. / May is raving.” Ashbery's interest in Anglo-American poetic relations is implicitly rekindled by Ford's example (“the isthmus is gilded”) and he returns to his habit of including distorted versions of friends' names in his poems: “Across the marsh / some bird misses its mark, walks back, sheepish, cheeping.” Ashbery puns on the particularly apposite meaning of Ford's surname (a shallow place or causeway to cross a body of water) to describe a scene set in marshland, and then declares that “some bird”—perhaps the bird which “trills bleakly” in “Cross Section”, which Ashbery expressed his admiration for in his review of *Landlocked*—“misses its mark”. This is a low-key, funny tribute, which after the huge efflorescence of *Flow Chart* signals a return to the smaller-scale poetics of Elizabeth Bishop (“People are returning / to the bight”) which Ford himself had appropriated and re-animated in such unexpected ways in *Landlocked*.

Later letters were more explicit about which individual works were inspired by Ford. In a letter of April 20<sup>th</sup> 1992, he enclosed what he termed “a copy of one of my 'Ford' poems (Mark, this time)”, which was “The Decline of the West”.<sup>87</sup> It's a fascinating moment of explicit homage from master to pupil, a role reversal which locates the two poets as being “where we exchanged / positions”. As well as being a private, personal tribute from Ashbery to Ford, the poem also contains a more generalised argument about the role reversals undergone by America and Britain, former colony and coloniser, in which the poet reflects upon the cultural dominance of the former over the latter; a situation perhaps registered more acutely by *Landlocked* than any other English poetry book of the 1990s. Susan Schultz explicitly reads *And the Stars Were Shining* in this Anglo-American context:

I read Ashbery's latest volume, *And the Stars Were Shining* (at least in certain moods) as a colonial allegory, manipulated by Ashbery to his own ends. This allegory reads as follows: a famous American poet, wishing to write about his own inevitable decline and fall, uses his own position as an intellectual well-versed in European art, music and literature, to tell his

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<sup>87</sup> Letter from Ashbery to Ford, 20 April 1992. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

own story. The decline of the West is embodied (or disembodied) in the poet's decadence (or belatedness). In so doing, he reveals the extent to which Americans are still colonized by Europe, even as Europe ingests large quantities of American culture. And so Ashbery appropriates his own appropriation: "What! Our culture in its dotage! / Yet this very poem refutes it", he proclaims. He becomes an odd colonist of the colonial.<sup>88</sup>

As I have shown throughout this thesis, Ashbery's relationships with English poets have been inflected by his attention to shifts in power relations between Britain and America. This attention to Anglo-American relations, and selective identification as "English", has continually afforded Ashbery the opportunity to modify his relation to Americanness. Auden's rejection of America, his regression to "little England", led Ashbery to the troubled celebration of Americana *The Vermont Notebook* represents. Prince's assertion that American poets are "modern" by default led Ashbery to articulate his own view that modernity had not yet been achieved by US poets, but that he was a central part of the vanguard that was creating the work which might justify the term. Lee Harwood's imitation of American poetry allowed Ashbery the chance to articulate his sense of the developing power and authority of American literature, its salutary deviation from tradition through a lack of "a strong sense of possession". Ashbery's engagement with Ford comes at another crucial stage in his poetic career, and in his thinking about the relation between his national context and his poetry. In the intervening 25 years between the publication of Harwood's *The White Room* and Ford's *Landlocked*, Ashbery had become America's most famous, and most discussed contemporary poet. This was, of course, primarily a consequence of the three prizes won by *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* in 1975: the National Book Critics' Circle Award, the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. His distinctive style became hugely influential in American poetry, a phenomenon attested to not least by the publication of a collection of essays titled *The Tribe of John: John Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*. His once-marginalised work had, through the advocacy of Bloom, Perloff, Lehman, Schultz and other prominent critics, become the dominant poetic mode. His once-unacceptable aesthetic had become acceptable. It is perhaps revealing that Ashbery was at this point

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<sup>88</sup> Susan Schultz, "Decline of the West", *RIFT*, Version 3.1, Summer 1994.

often described as a specifically “American” product, a postmodern poet of excess particularly suited to the “technological society” he seemed to transcribe with an almost excessive fluency. It was a commonplace of reviews of *Flow Chart* to regurgitate the Bloomian thesis that Ashbery was “a part of the continuum of American poetry that includes Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane”, as the *LA Times* did, and to celebrate the “pure Americanness” of his diction, as Vendler had. Furthermore, as many critics have pointed out, Ashbery's poetry from the late 70s onwards is constantly alert to its new status at the forefront of its culture, a status which foregrounded questions of complicity with broader American cultural and political activities his earlier work could turn away from, exhibiting “an anxiety that his own new-found authority and acceptance is analogous to American imperialism”.<sup>89</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in response to this alignment of his work with assertions of his cultural centrality—the suggestion that he somehow exfoliates something particular to one nation—that he should have decisively re-asserted the very significant English thread in his work.

Throughout his career, Ashbery has employed Englishness as a means of differentiating himself from a “mainstream” of American culture. In the 50s, he and James Schuyler had shared an Anglophilia which celebrated the quirky or marginal elements of English culture, from the novels of Ronald Firbank, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Henry Green—on whose work Ashbery wrote his M.A. thesis—to the poetry of Prince and Moore. The belief in the “inherent superiority” of contemporary English art and poetry was one of Ashbery's early precepts, and the mixture of archness, formality, camp and aestheticism displayed by much of this work gave much of his early poetry its particular offbeat character, and distinguished it from the earnest East Coast “academic verse” of the 1950s, which Schuyler described as written by “campus dry-heads . . . who wishfully descend tum-ti-tumming from Yeats out of Graves with a big kiss for Mother England”.<sup>90</sup> In poetic terms, for

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<sup>89</sup> Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry*, 83.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Ford, *A Driftwood Altar*, 172. The work of Lowell, in particular, whom Ashbery rejected very forcefully (as Herd has shown), in works like “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” celebrated unabashedly its particularly American pedigree.

Ashbery, as for Schuyler, Englishness came in various guises, both offensive and seductive; the subservient poetry of those Schuyler mocks, operating within conservative English paradigms, and the other tradition of English literature ranging from the sophistication of Edith Sitwell to the nature writing of Gilbert White. This latter is a tradition of apparent “modesty”, but one which despite its reticence was capable of piercing critique. In a letter to John Ash, Ashbery confessed that “I keep forgetting that England is no longer the land of Firbank and Oscar Wilde, and that attempts to approximate their style from an American especially aren't appreciated.”<sup>91</sup> The remark reveals Ashbery's distinctive conception of “Englishness” in one significant state; that is, the kind of exaggerated Englishness created by two writers whose own relation to the construct was ambivalent in the extreme, their operations within it a mixture of perfect inhabitation and estrangement.

In one sense, the Englishness enjoyed by Ashbery is that kind which is conscious of itself as a fiction, the Englishness of the novel of manners, of pastoral description, of deliberate minority. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the continual assertion of Ashbery's Americanness led to a desire to evade that categorization through recourse to the pose of Englishness. As he puts it in “Litany”, the poem which enacts formally his enduring curiosity with Anglo-American mutual mishearing and description: “I wish to keep my differences / And to retain my differences / to the rest. That is why / I raise these flowers all around”.<sup>92</sup> This erection of a protective boundary constructed from symbols of English pastoral poetry—as suggested by his reading of Tomlinson's “Autumn”—is a representative gesture. Much as the USA and England of Blake's “America” “revolve in a circle of mutually defining contraries”, Ashbery's conception of his American identity is continually defined by setting it dialogically in opposition with Englishness. As “Litany” puts it, the two poetries have at times engaged productively in this oppositional manner: “Antithesis chirping / to antithesis”.<sup>93</sup>

It is this “acceptability” in the USA, then, that Ashbery found unacceptable, and it is what he seeks to dismantle in “The Decline of the West”. The poem is, in this context, an illustration of

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<sup>91</sup> Letter from Ashbery to John Ash, 22 April 1985. Ashbery Papers, Box 2.

<sup>92</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 554.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 563.

Ashbery's deterritorialization of himself. In *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari employ the term “deterritorialization” to describe the desire of writers to escape codification by institutions and cultures which they have no interest in being attached to, or seen as representatives of. Achieving “deterritorialization” involves the employment of compositional strategies by which writers can resist glib, reductive interpretation, and assumption into state culture against which they have previously positioned themselves, a gesture of difference which is “particularly crucial for minorities who want to remain minorities and affirm perspectives that are not those of the culture they inhabit.” This theory has been effectively applied by Alan Golding to contemporary American poetry in his reading of Susan Howe, whose deliberately “minor” texts implicitly argue that “literary masters (traditionally understood) may well resist their own literature's cultural mastery, resulting in the anomaly of what one might call a major minor writer”.<sup>94</sup> Though it is intended as a description of Howe, Golding's phrase, “a major minor writer”, is as apt a description of late Ashbery—post *Flow Chart*—as any other yet produced. Ashbery's late work can be seen as strategically dissembling the elements of his poetry which have granted him canonical centrality, undermining “the priority given to distinctive individual voices in canonical criticism”, and by extension offering a critique of American literature's “cultural mastery”. This move is not a radical change in direction for Ashbery, but is rather continuous with his conception of the characteristics which define “greatness”, as proposed in his Yale lecture on “The New York School of Poets” in 1966; he claimed then that what made Jackson Pollock a great painter was that there was something “fundamentally unacceptable” about him. The curiosity of Ashbery's predicament is that, having challenged and changed the terms and conditions of poetry several times over the course of his career, he has been obliged to become “unacceptable” again in several different ways, disputing and rendering obsolete the terms of value his work helped to establish. This has resulted in an endless series of evasive gestures intended to ensure that he remains on the

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<sup>94</sup> Alan Golding, “Authority, Marginality, England, and Ireland in the Work of Susan Howe”, in *Something We Have That They Don't*, 177.

margins of the centre, that there are elements of his oeuvre which remain fundamentally unacceptable to even the most fervent of his supporters. For some time, this function was performed by the apparent anomaly which *The Tennis Court Oath* represented within his oeuvre; considered a “fearful disaster” by Bloom and Vendler, it ensured that Ashbery's body of work lacked an acceptable coherence. This volume, has, however, long been assimilated by a competing canon, that created by the institutional avant-garde of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, and, as such, late in his career Ashbery has been obliged to set about deviating in new ways from even that most unlikely of institutional totems. This strategic deterritorialization of his own work has been achieved, in the post-*Flow Chart* era, by the execution of a deliberate “badness” in his poetry, realised on an epic scale over the course of thirty years.

Ashbery's “badness” can perhaps be best defined by referring to the harshest evaluations of his late output. Andrew DuBois is only the most forceful of a multitude of critics who have expressed disappointment, impatience and anxiety over Ashbery's recent work; in his book *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* he characterises all Ashbery's post-*Flow Chart* verse as “a performance of senility, which is sometimes obviously a performance (he tells us so) and at other times is more *really* realistic, that is, he seems actually to have lost control.”<sup>95</sup> DuBois misses the point of Ashbery's work spectacularly, and in doing so performs a useful function by inadvertently throwing the poet's actual purpose into the foreground; “control” is exactly what Ashbery seeks to lose from *Flow Chart* onwards, precisely to prickle critics like DuBois who would, as Brian M. Reed suggests, prefer Ashbery to “petrify into a well-wrought urn”, turn into the comfortable canonical figure he has no interest in being.<sup>96</sup> Which is not to say that Ashbery's compositional methods are chaotic or formless—rather, many later works are highly structured—but rather they cast off the forms of “control” evident in the canonical earlier works, such as “Self-Portrait in a

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<sup>95</sup> Andrew DuBois, *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 114.

<sup>96</sup> Joshua Clover's assertion seems right here: “Ashbery is the poet who does give more than he takes: working always to keep the language workable, refusing in the insistence of his motion to allow it to settle into the decrepit fixity of institution” (*Iowa Review*, Volume 25, No.1., Winter 1995, 183).

Convex Mirror”, or the dizains of “Fragment”, and thereby challenge critics to think beyond their existing conception of him, a challenge taken up by a depressingly small number.

One of Ashbery's most enthusiastic advocates, Brian Reed, views the poet's late “transgressive play” as an expression of anti-institutional defiance towards “the self-styled purveyors of truth—civic leaders, organized religion, educational institutions—[which] have consistently pretended that you don't exist, treated you as a problem to be solved, or advocated your non-existence.”<sup>97</sup> This seems justified; Ashbery's canonical centrality sits awkwardly with a lifetime of avant-garde activity in a country which has systematically oppressed gay men and women. It is typical of the poet that his resistance to that position comes in the form of work which renders the idea of centrality absurd through the production of wilfully irreverent work; as such, I would suggest that Ashbery has not so much “renounced canonical ambition”, as Roger Gilbert implies, as embarked on a fun-filled assault on canonicity itself. Among the most powerful elements of this is a refusal to cohere with the late-career trajectory of preceding major poets like Stevens or Yeats; where their late poems “suggest a severe paring down of linguistic and imaginative resources to achieve a final, wintry lucidity”, Ashbery has pursued a path of unprecedented linguistic and imaginative fecundity, astonishing in its range, vibrancy and joyous illogic. It is, of course, arguable that Ashbery has simply lost the imaginative powers which sustained the “great” earlier works, and has capitalised upon that loss by converting it into an opportunity to regain a lost “unacceptability”. If this is the case—as it undoubtedly is to a degree—then that doesn't diminish in the slightest the boldness of his gesture. Since *Flow Chart* Ashbery has been writing in a style which truly defies categorization, avoiding as he has the employment of features which have afforded him canonical status in the first place. He hasn't written one of his hitherto characteristic long poems since 2001's *Girls on the Run*, which itself deviated radically from the meditative epics of his early career. He has pared his forms down to brief, chatty lyrics, featuring extensive allusions, recondite diction, and

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<sup>97</sup> Brian M. Reed, *Phenomenal Reading: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Poetics* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2012), 188.

extensive use of cliché. They have proved unacceptable both to Ashbery's most fervent champions and veteran detractors. In this sense, it's possible to view Ashbery's late career as a struggle of “minorities who want to remain minorities”. These poems resist “interpretation” and “inscription”, and actively seek to question and dispute the stature of his previous works, seeking to diminish conceptions of Ashbery as a “master” poet “who could be separated from collective utterance”.

“The Decline of the West” is a central poem which inaugurates this new phase in Ashbery's development. It performs all of the elements of deterritorialization listed above, and situates this performance in an uncharacteristically broad and explicit historical context, charting the displacement of Britain by the USA as the dominant world power in military, economic, political and cultural terms over the course of the twentieth century. *The Decline of the West* which supplies the title is Oswald Spengler's work of 1918, which gained widespread recognition and attention in postwar Europe for the aptness and timeliness of its ideas regarding the decline of European civilization in the year before the Treaty of Versailles, and survived, despite comprehensive rebuttals, as an expression of cultural anxiety in a period of enormous upheaval. Its pervasive pessimism is perhaps intended as a playful, ironic counterpoint to the poses adopted by *Landlocked*, which repeatedly, chronically draws attention to its own belatedness within poetic tradition, and in the history of Empire (as mentioned above, “If You Could See Me Now!” contains the line “For the West / has been ruined”).

O Oswald, O Spengler, this is very sad to find!  
My attic, my children  
ignore me for the violet-banded sky.  
There are no clean platters in the cupboard  
and the milkman's horse tiptoes by, as though  
afraid to wake us.

What! Our culture in its dotage!  
Yet this very poem refutes it,  
springing up out of the collective unconscious  
like a weasel through a grating.  
I could point to other extremities, both on land  
and at sea, where the waves will gnash your stark theories  
like a person eating a peanut. Say, though,  
that we are not exceptional,

that, like the curve of a breast above a bodice,  
our parabolas seek and find the light, returning  
from not too far away. Ditto the hours  
we've squandered: daisies, coins of light.

In the end he hammered out  
what it was not wanted we should know.  
For that we should be grateful,  
and for that patch of a red ridinghood  
caught in brambles against the snow.

His book, I saw it somewhere and I bought it.  
I never read it for it seemed too long.  
His theory though, I fought it  
though it spritzes my song,  
and now the skateboard stops  
impeccably. We are where we exchanged  
positions. O who could taste the crust of this love?<sup>98</sup>

The poem is, like many of Ashbery's from this period onwards, an extraordinary patchwork of distorted allusions and private references. It opens with an ironic complaint about the colonist being ignored by the colonised: "My attic, my children / ignore me for the violet-banded sky. / There are no clean platters in the cupboard". Objects, images and tonal shifts from *Landlocked* recur throughout, and there is a remarkable description of Ford's work as "springing up out of the collective unconscious / like a weasel through a grating". Ford's own slightly baffled response to the poem reflects how oblique any influence is: "I suppose there are certain things which may have seeped in from my book – the attic and horse, the peanut, "ignore me" at the beginning of a line, the "shriek marks", to use Hofmann's derogatory phrase – yet I wonder if I'd have noticed them if I'd come across it in a magazine or book."<sup>99</sup> Its engagement with Ford's poetry provides a leaping-off point (or a "springboard", as Ford calls it) for a playful but serious engagement with Ashbery's previous work, and its relation to the culture from which it has emanated. "Say, though, / that we are not exceptional", the poem proposes, conflating Ashbery's own position as the central poetic figure of his age and the myth of American "exceptionalism". Taking exceptionality as a myth, the poem then proceeds to revisit the powerful terms and images of Ashbery's earlier work—the "parabolas"

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<sup>98</sup> Ashbery, *And the Stars Were Shining*, 46.

<sup>99</sup> Letter from Ford to Ashbery, 6 June 1992. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

of “The Skaters”, the dolphins of “How Much Longer . . .” that “seek and find the light”—but drastically reduces their scope; the parabolas do not extend vast distances, as in the Baudelairian voyage in “The Skaters”, but rather return “from not too far away”. After the grandiloquent Victoriana of the metaphor “like the curve of a breast above a bodice”, the diction becomes studiously casual: “Ditto” etc.

Curiously, the whole poem operates between two allusions to Robert Browning. The opening line alludes to the opening of “A Toccata at Galuppi's”, while the final line, “O who could taste the crust of this love?” re-writes “If thou tastest a crust of bread, thou tastest all the stars and the heavens”. “A Toccata at Galuppi's” is a particularly apt poem to evoke, as it is about a self-consciously modern poet re-orientating his views of an older society, that of 18<sup>th</sup> century Venice. George Ridenour's observation about Browning's poem perhaps reflects the “refreshment” Ashbery experienced when reading *Landlocked*:

The Englishman who had expected to find Galuppi's music conforming to his sentimental notions of eighteenth-century Venice is surprised to find it embodying quite a different aspect of the Rococo: clear and elegant, to be sure, but ironic, witty, destructive.<sup>100</sup>

In a letter, Ford expressed surprise at the allusion to the Victorian poet, since Ashbery has elsewhere disavowed any affiliation with him, noting that Ashbery had remarked on his dislike of Browning despite their “shared garrulousness”.<sup>101</sup> Yet it is precisely this resistance on Ashbery's part which makes the allusion so apt. The final stanza is, firstly, an account of Ashbery's powerful resistance to Browning—and by extension the resistance of US writers to popular English models at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—and the condescension of the English poet towards American culture, as evidenced in “too long” poems such as “Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'”. However, it is also an account of how the tables have turned, and is therefore also a narrative of Ford's resistance to Ashbery: the American poet's “theory” is “fought” by Ford, though it inevitably “spritzes” Ford's “song”, as Browning's indirectly spritzed Ashbery's own. The pronouns “he” and “I” exchange positions,

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<sup>100</sup> George M. Ridenour, “Browning's Music Poems”, in *Browning's Mind and Art*, ed. Clarence Tracy (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), 174.

<sup>101</sup> Letter from Ford to Ashbery, 20 March 1992. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

functioning as metonyms for the broader exchanges in power relations between the US and Britain. In this scenario, the US has become the cultural hegemon that must be resisted, and England has become the culturally marginalised region which must be “rediscovered” from dominant cultural caricatures, much as the wit of Galuppi was rediscovered by Browning. Ashbery's poem is remarkable for its willingness to stage and facilitate that resistance. In this way, the poem is quite deliberate in its minor, deterritorializing strategies, its refusal to coalesce into something “exceptional”; traits which are extended in Ashbery's later works, from *And the Stars were Shining* through to his most recent collection, *Breezeway*.

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A later poem, “Discordant Data”, dedicated to Ford and included in *Wakefulness*, further explores the ways in which Ashbery registers his own influence on a younger generation of poets, and how their versions of him inflect his own development. The poem is, like “The Decline of the West”, preoccupied with poetic influence and the cultural and political processes which underlie canonisation, and is also constituted of a lexicon and image-set shared by the two poets. The opening lines contain an image which occupies a crucial position in both poets' work:

Still in spring, my coat  
travels with the pack, unbuttoned as they.<sup>102</sup>

For both Ashbery and Ford, the coat is an image of individual identity, both voluntary and involuntary, transformative and defensive, illuminating and limiting, depending on the circumstances. In “Take These Chains”, Ford notes how “these black leather, all- / Weather jackets repel both frost and fire; their zips / And buckles defend our motives from one another”, providing a defensive stance against American poets who might be overly influential (“frost and fire” directly invokes Robert Frost, and, at a further remove, Ashbery; unrepelled fire would presumably turn Ford to “Ashes”), and recalling Emerson's injunction not to “let your moods get in a room

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<sup>102</sup> Ashbery, *Wakefulness* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), 40.

together”.<sup>103</sup> It's an illuminating moment of self-perception from Ford, who sees how the formal straits of his poetry, figured in this instance as clothing, allow him to preserve both his own sense of identity and to keep his “cloudy strategies” concealed from himself. Even more revealingly, in an earlier poem, “Contingency Plans”, Ford had described how

in a quandary I seized  
My innate Englishness, and practised  
Wrapping it around me like an old army coat.<sup>104</sup>

In an interview, Ford has elaborated on the protective function of the image, which is designed as an explicit figure for the resistance to the powerful influence of Ashbery and O'Hara: “I’ve a line myself about wrapping my Englishness about me like a cloak, as if deliberately defending myself against too much exposure to the work of these great American poets.”<sup>105</sup> The irony of this defensive figure, as Matthew Sperling has recognised, is that it is itself partly derived from Ashbery. “Street Musicians”, which, as I've previously suggested, is a poem concerned with Ashbery's deliberate acts of differentiation from O'Hara, opens with the following lines:

One died, and the soul was wrenched out  
Of the other in life, who, walking the streets  
Wrapped in an identity like a coat, sees on and on  
The same corners, volumetrics, shadows  
Under trees.<sup>106</sup>

The protective coat Ashbery wore to maintain the integrity of his own poetic identity here becomes an image of his isolation from the world, his inability to see anything refreshing or provocative in it since the “soul was wrenched out of” him. Harold Bloom has conducted a powerful reading of a later poem, “Tapestry”, in similar terms. Bloom views the poem as a revision of a famous tercet of “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” (“Within a single thing, a single shawl / Wrapped tightly around us, since we are poor, its warmth, / A light, a power, the miraculous influence”), which it repeats in altered form to comprehend its own process of influence and reality displacement:

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<sup>103</sup> Ford, *Soft Sift*, 30.

<sup>104</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems*, 50.

<sup>105</sup> Caleshu, “In Conversation with Mark Ford”.

<sup>106</sup> Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 491.

“Outward reality, isolated to outline or blueprint, and rendered dead on the line, as tapestry or poem, is replaced by a tercet that substitutes a repressive “blanket” in a trope at once Keatsian and Stevensian”: “If it has the form of a blanket, that is because / We are eager, all the same, to be wound in it: / This must be the good of not experiencing it.” The winding of the blanket—with the punning on “wound”—brings to mind another of Ford’s beautifully condensed, elliptical early lyrics, “Winter Underwear”, which is precisely concerned with “the good of not experiencing it”; that is, experience displaced to the external object of the artwork, transfigured as protective clothing which also distances the wearer from experience of the world. In Ford’s poem, the trauma which remains unacknowledged is only recalled through a vivid reminiscence of the concealing materials, the “dark purple scarves”:

How vividly the football flew  
Only he would remember;  
And likewise the dark purple scarves  
In which the body was later wound.<sup>107</sup>

This sequence of self-protective gestures exhibited by the two poets goes to demonstrate how generous the opening lines of “Discordant Data” really are; recognising how his own self-protective motilities have been appropriated and re-purposed by Ford as ways of resisting him—and that his work will be influential not only in the active forms and gestures which are successfully adopted, but also in the manner in which his influence is denied or blocked—Ashbery opts for a strikingly Whitmanian unbuttonedness, explicitly invoking the communal extensions of the self present in “Song of Myself”:

Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity,  
Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,  
Traacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them,  
My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly different from myself,  
On all sides prurient provokers stiffening my limbs,  
Straining the udder of my heart for its withheld drip,  
Behaving licentious toward me, taking no denial,  
Depriving me of my best as for a purpose,  
Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist,

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<sup>107</sup> Ford, *Selected Poems*, 10.

Deluding my confusion with the calm of the sunlight and pasture-fields,  
Immodestly sliding the fellow-senses away,  
They bribed to swap off with touch and go and graze at the edges of me,  
No consideration, no regard for my draining strength or my anger,  
Fetching the rest of the herd around to enjoy them a while,  
Then all uniting to stand on a headland and worry me.<sup>108</sup>

Ashbery sees the dispersal of his poetry among others as an erotic extension of feeling which leaves the poet himself ravished and depleted, a process he declares himself willing to undergo again: “unbuttoned as they”. Ford's work, since it is derived from the body of Ashbery's own, is perceived as “hardly different from myself”. Yet the allusion is striking since the intensity of Whitman's passage increases the contrast of the dryness of Ashbery's own. The following lines seem to rehearse Whitman's verse from the perspective of one unable to feel the passion it describes, which is both saddening and salutary, as in “the good of not experiencing it”:

The weather report is useless. So,  
sigh and begin again the letter.

“This is the first time in weeks  
I've had to communicate with you. It all

falls, in balls of fire. I guess the  
North Dakota landscape doesn't do much for you. Have you

no conscience, or conscious, conscious conscience?

“The weather report” is a droll description of Whitman's “flesh and blood playing out lightning”, while the assertion that “it all / falls, in balls of fire” seems more depleted than invigorated. The remark that “I guess the / North Dakota landscape doesn't do much for you” may refer ironically to the abundance of American landscapes in Ford's first volume, but perhaps also to the town of Whitman, North Dakota, a witty acknowledgement that, despite the process elucidated above, Ashbery's Whitmanian strand doesn't “do much for” Ford. The poem proceeds from this point in a sprightly, haphazard manner, jumping from perception to perception, advancing and retracting images, concluding with a description of an “old man” who could be “over the hill” but disproves

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<sup>108</sup> Walt Whitman, *Selected Poems* (Avenel, NJ: Gramercy Books, 1992), 47.

the suggestion immediately by the strength of his “flapping in the net”:

His glass fire hydrants can have no end.  
Oh it was just an idea;

there, don't rail. The posse is coming  
by for drinks, we can skip enslavement today.

Concentrate, instead, on this day's canonicity.  
It has to be from somewhere,

right? May prisoners have left downtown, the old man  
assents. He was tremendous and bald. Liked a practical joke

now and again. Look, the white rain is writing on the wall  
of his saloon. Could be he was over the hill,

we'd assumed, but the flapping in the net's too  
strong for that. Don't you agree? Have you

any further ideas on the subject? Yes, you  
could well afford to give up a few.

This Whitmanian openness is a central part of Ashbery's late conception of his relation to poetic history and to contemporary communities; having achieved canonical status through, in Bloom's view, powerfully misreading his predecessors, by protecting himself from influence, his later attitude is “unbuttoned”, absorptive, less concerned with the masterly individual voice than with the conception of his poetry as a form of collective utterance. “Hotel Lautreamont” strikes a qualifying note regarding the plausibility of this idea by overstating it:

Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society  
working as a team. They didn't just happen. There was no guesswork.  
The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it.  
We see the results in works as diverse as “Windsor Forest” and “The Wife of Usher's  
Well.”<sup>109</sup>

What is clear, however, is that Ashbery's engagement with Ford was a pivotal moment in his own development, and provides an insight into his practice of engaging with younger poets as both a means of perpetuating his own conception of tradition and as a resource. Ashbery's openness about the influence younger poets have had on him is a readily-acknowledged strategy the terms of which

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<sup>109</sup> Ashbery, *Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems* (New York: Ecco, 2008), 70.

are foregrounded within a transatlantic context. Acutely conscious of his own guaranteed canonical status, Ashbery has been eager to promote a number of young poets whose work he enjoys and views as developing productively on his work, and the other traditions which informed it. While he is conscious that this promotion is achieved in the short-term through critical attention and by personal dissemination—in a letter, Ashbery reports recommending *Landlocked* to numerous people in New York, and trying to secure a US publisher for it—the more lasting gesture is to state the influence of such minor or neglected poets upon his own poetry.<sup>110</sup> In this way, it's possible to think of Ashbery as on occasion using his own work as a way of advertising his preferred poets through explicitly signalled interest or imitation. As a consequence of such gestures, they will continue to be read and studied, possibly as corollaries of his work, but possibly as independent figures in their own right. Ashbery's continual advocacy for the work of friends ensures that they, like the minor poets he attends to in his Norton lectures, will at the very least become part of the narrative of Ashbery's career. His phrase from “The New Spirit” encapsulates the basic pragmatism of this position: “we must learn to live in others, no matter how abortive or unfriendly their cold, piecemeal renderings of us: they create us”.

As important as this generous act of “unbuttonedness” is the practical function Ashbery's engagement with younger poets holds for his own work; he is not simply “created” and renewed by his continued presence in the work of those younger poets in dialogue with him, but obliged to resist and develop beyond the earlier versions of himself they imitate. In turn, those who deviate from his example provide models for his own self-resistance. In a recent interview, he re-iterated his interest in learning from poets' resistances to him: “I'm told that my poetry has influenced a lot of younger poets, so it's nice to find someone who might have absorbed it at second hand and be

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<sup>110</sup> “I've been good-mouthing your book to so many people that a collective fever to own it, alas unslakable at present, has arisen in the New York poetry world. Perhaps not eternally, since one of those who sounded interested was Jonathan Galassi, chief editor at Farrar, Strauss & Giroux . . .” Letter from Ashbery to Ford, 20 April 1992. Ashbery Papers, Box 23.

trying to shake it off — nice, that is, for showing me how to shake off my own influence.”<sup>111</sup> This commitment to learning from those poets who have resisted him almost successfully has sustained him for several decades. The Anglo-American encoding of these reciprocal relationships—from his defining early exchanges with Auden and F.T. Prince, through his collaborative engagement with Lee Harwood, to his late imitations of Mark Ford—has been important in illuminating the terms in which they have been, and continue to be, conducted. These poets have been changed through their distinctive encounters with Ashbery's work, and they in turn have contributed to making Ashbery the poet he is today.

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<sup>111</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/books/review/john-ashbery-by-the-book.html>



## CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the various ways in which John Ashbery's interactions with English poets have shaped his own work, and suggested a new angle of approach to postwar English poetry. In his exchanges with Auden, Prince, Harwood and Ford we have seen Ashbery in his different guises of student, peer, teacher, and critic, in a period which spans 60 years. The Anglo-American dimension of his work, I have argued, illuminates central episodes in his career, including the satirical thrust of *The Vermont Notebook*, the influence-modelling of "Clepsydra", the transatlantic transmission of technique in "Train Poem", and the imitation of his own imitators in *And the Stars Were Shining*. Important facets of his critical writing have been foregrounded, particularly his conception of "other traditions" and the role "minority" plays within it. Though the English poets he organises into a loose tradition will by definition remain a marginal grouping, they nevertheless reflect the significance of "Englishness" and English poetry to his poetry and criticism, and remind that the narratives of modern English poetry are perpetually incomplete, open to dispute and reconfiguration. Ashbery's modification of his Norton lectures from "The Other Tradition" to *Other Traditions* was an exemplary one: as my own exclusions and simplifications have shown, there are innumerable "other traditions" beyond the one I have identified.

The first two chapters effectively chart Ashbery's attempt to establish himself in a position of sufficient power to define his own set of relations with the poets of the past and present, and specifically with English poets. The third and fourth chapters provide a narrative of how Ashbery sought to disrupt that power, to dismantle hierarchical forms of influence and create conditions for equal exchange between himself and those poets who have learned from his work.

Ashbery continues to seek out influence from younger poets, from Geoffrey G. O'Brien to Todd Colby. His influence on English poets grows, as his reputation develops and his once-strange aesthetic becomes increasingly central. It can be seen in poets like Miles Champion, Ian Pindar, Sarah Howe, Jeremy Over, Luke Kennard and Sam Riviere, who seem to have learned

predominantly from Ashbery's later modes, his goofy, punning, yarn-spinning, post-*Flow Chart* work. These poets are of interest for being the first generation to treat Ashbery's work as a resource to be plundered without an informing biographical context. Their historical distance from Ashbery, and the arrival of the internet, has for some of these poets diminished the fraught registrations of nationally-inflected subjectivity so evident in Prince, Harwood and Ford. Of the younger poets, Riviere in particular illustrates how the expansive elements of Ashbery's aesthetic, seemingly unavailable to Harwood and Ford, can be accessed blithely through collage techniques which elide any sense of historical or geographical location. The sweeping vistas and ruined stages of "Pyrography" are summoned effortlessly through fragments of search-engine text:

This peeling façade was once the grand entrance  
to a long-gone attraction in what is now a slightly  
beautiful light at the end of day, Saturday.  
The light will be dimmed for atmosphere swims.<sup>1</sup>

Ashbery's reading of the English poetry of the past continues to be influential, partly through the continuing efforts of Ford to elucidate and elaborate on the American poet's taste. Recent years have seen the publication of a volume of essays on F.T. Prince, and a *Selected Poems* of Nicholas Moore, books enabled by and marketed in light of these poets' centrality to Ashbery's development. Both Prince and Moore can be seen as increasingly influential in their own right, as suggested by the work of Matthew Welton, which takes the cartoonish musicality and subtle phrasal adjustments of the latter and filters it through a range of Oulipian constraints:

A slow summer breeze through the first-storey window, Groucho smoking at the bathroom sink. A delicate summer breeze through the first-storey window, Guglielmo Marconi smoking at the bathroom sink. A sudden summer breeze through the first-storey window, Gummo smoking at the bathroom sink. A fresh summer breeze through the first-storey window, Harpo smoking at the bathroom sink.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Burt's assessment that "John Ashbery is everywhere, ramifying still" gives a sense of the breadth and significance of his influence on contemporary poetry. As this thesis has shown, this influence has extended to some of the most important postwar English poets, and to the ways in

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Riviere, *Kim Kardashian's Marriage* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Welton, *We needed coffee, but . . .* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009).

which the English poetry of the past is interpreted and engaged with. His work will continue to ramify in unexpected ways.

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