An Invisible Terrain: John Ashbery and Nature

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The first person singular occurs throughout these poems, like a key signature in music, but the poems are not meant as autobiography and in fact tell us nothing about the poet. The "I" is really a kind of familiar-sounding threshold that brings us immediately into contact with the unfamiliar world one step away—"the" world. The poet is this world. He has "camouflaged" himself to look like everything, if camouflage is the art of calling attention to things by trying to make them invisible. The poems are simultaneously big, important and world-ordering; and small, odd and private. They cover everything, elbow the reader out of themselves, and camouflage him into the memory of his intentions when he began to read the poem.

—John Ashbery, introduction to Jean Perreault's *Camouflage* (1966)

To pass through pain and not know it.
A car door slamming in the night.
To emerge on an invisible terrain.

—John Ashbery, "A Wave"

Abstract

This thesis reads John Ashbery as a major poetic thinker about nature whose work convenes a multitude of nature writing traditions, from classical pastoral to the 21st-century eco-sublime. Challenging a critical consensus that would cast Ashbery as either a belated romantic in search of lost nature or an arch-postmodernist who dissolves "nature" into text, this study reveals his deep historical awareness of the transmission and collision of literary ecologies. The poet who emerges delights in putting different poetic natures into contact with each other—and in humorously making nature unnatural. Surveying Ashbery's long historical moment, the thesis uses four terms of critique—transparency, vagrancy, flow, and badness—to map his "invisible terrain."

Chapter one historicizes Ashbery's turn to a poetics of contradictory "transparencies" during his sojourns in France from 1956-1965 and his concurrent dream of writing poems that would be like "natural landscapes" in a world of "painted ones." Chapter two considers the pastoral and anti-pastoral topoi of Ashbery's Vietnam-era poetry and his tendency to "wander away" from political commitment. Chapter three examines Ashbery's recurrent tropes of "flow" and his tendency to literalize the stream-of-consciousness metaphor and "dissolve" his own style at decisive moments of his career. Chapter four reads the "bad" nature poetry of Ashbery's late period (1987 to the present) as the culmination of a career-long investment in camp irony's "good taste of bad taste" and as a response to ecological crisis. The coda, a survey of Ashbery's critical prose, examines his penchant for "a completely new kind of realism."

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INTRODUCTION

How could he explain to them his prayer
That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?
—John Ashbery[1]

Reviewing a 1972 gallery show of the Icelandic-American painter Louisa Matthiasdottir, John Ashbery singles out for praise a painting titled "Man in a Landscape." "It could be a Wordsworthian celebration of nature," he writes,

> a volumetric proto-abstraction or an exercise in painterly improvisation. In fact, it is all three, each element curbing the others so that the final result has a richness stemming from a basic, functional ambiguity.
>
> It is this ambiguity, projected not for its own sake but as a means of getting more content into the picture, that is one of the major rewards of Louisa Matthiasdottir's painting.[2]

This quotation condenses the core concern of the present study: the ambiguous status of nature in Ashbery's poetry. Typical of Ashbery's art criticism, the passage recalls his own poetic practice. Ashbery, too, is at once a neo-romantic, a writerly adherent of painterly abstraction, and an uncategorizable improviser. His work also partakes of a rich ambiguity projected not for its own sake but in the service of a "semi-abstract"[3] maximalist aesthetic, or what he might call "a completely new kind

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[1] John Ashbery, *Collected Poems: 1956-1987* ((New York: The Library of America, 2008), 28.

[2] The review of Matthiasdottir's show at the Schoelkopf Gallery was originally published in *ARTnews*. John Ashbery, *Selected Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 135-36.

[3] Ashbery favors the term "semi-abstract" to describe his style, as he explains to the *American Poetry Review* in 1984: **JA:** "I think that it's very good to combine the general with the particular since that takes in just about everything. I was very pleased once when Elizabeth Bishop, in commenting on my poetry said that it seemed sort of semi-abstract. I thought that was a good thing because that's what everything is. **APR**: Could you explain a little more what you mean by 'that's what everything is'? **JA**: Well, everything is concrete and it's also abstract in the sense that we deduce from it or interpret it ourselves, and semi-abstract is what our interpretation of it is." Ross Labrie, "John Ashbery: An Interview with Ross Labrie," *American Poetry Review* 13, no. 13 (May-June 1984): 33.

of realism."[4] At every point along the way Ashbery offers his readers choices on how to take him. Literal or figurative, concrete or abstract, referential or non-referential, autobiographical or fictional: the poetry somehow allows for all of these contingencies, without confining itself to any of them. Critics and readers, whether praising or hostile, have tended to agree on this point, even as they continue to disagree about the status and value of the poetic landscapes Ashbery paints.[5]

To speak of nature in Ashbery might seem like a paradoxical proposition. Surely this poet, long ago elevated as the godfather of postmodernism, would disdain any effort to read him after the lights of so quaintly romantic a notion. On the other hand, even a casual reading of his work reveals a fertile abundance of natural artifacts and phenomena. Nature might not ever be quite natural in Ashbery, but it is ubiquitous. In addressing nature's ambiguous status in Ashbery's work, this thesis repeatedly poses the biggest question of all: How can we make any claims about Ashbery without giving short shrift to his wild eclecticism?

My solution to this problem involves a four-part push beyond generalized accounts of Ashbery's eclectic manner to specify the means by which he produces its effects. Organized around four key terms of critique—transparency, vagrancy, flow, and "badness"—the project attempts a pluralist account of Ashbery's poetics of nature that reveals his deep historical awareness of the transmission and collision of literary ecologies. This task requires attention both to the stylistic developments of

[4] John Ashbery, *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987*, ed. David Bergman (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1989), 16. This phrase originally appears in relation to the work of Joseph Cornell. I elaborate on Ashbery's "completely new kind of realism" in this study's "coda."

[5] Every Ashbery critic has his/her own way of theorizing this "ambiguity." The accounts that most profoundly inform this study include Marjorie Perloff's "indeterminacy," Brian McHale's "ontological hovering," and Charles Altieri's "self-occluding transparency."

his poetry and to his struggles with the bugbears of his long historical moment, from the mid-century hegemony of the New Criticism to the economic and environmental crises of the twenty-first century. It also requires careful navigation of the minefield of his biography.

We are not in the habit of thinking of Ashbery as a "nature poet," though his poetry is awash with nature imagery. Despite the predominance of such images from *Turandot and Other Poems* (1953) to *Quick Question* (2012), Ashbery's work does not assume a fixed stance toward the natural world and its literary depictions. Nor, given his relative lack of interest in the "real world," is he likely to satisfy anyone's criteria of "eco-poet." Opting for a label with less overt ethical investments (eco-poetics being, among other things, a way of questioning the ideological assumptions of traditional nature poetry), we might call him a "landscape poet." Critics who have read him this way have tended to focus on his use of landscape images as tropes for states of consciousness. Willard Spiegelman, for instance, argues that "[t]ime, consciousness, and landscape are his primary subjects,"[6] and reads his "poetic scenes" as "expressionistic or metonymic figures for human drama and consciousness." [7] Similarly, Bonnie Costello observes that "consciousness *of* landscape has become, for [Ashbery], indistinguishable from consciousness *as* landscape."[8] For these critics, invested as they are in an essentially neo-romantic Ashbery whose transcendental aspirations are qualified by the ironic belatedness of

[6] Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138.

[7] Ibid., 159.

[8] Bonnie Costello, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 174.

his age,[9] poetic landscapes figure the motion of the poet's mind. Other critics, such as Marit Macarthur, Timothy Gray, and Anne Marie Mikkelsen,[10] have pressed the links between Ashbery's pastoral landscapes and his biography, searching his poems "for the patchwork landscape of childhood, north of here,"[11] the fruit farm by Lake Ontario where the poet grew up. Indeed, the landscape of western New York State—Ashbery calls it "undramatic, slightly melancholy: your basic landscape"[12]—does seem to pervade his poetry. Macarthur's work in particular has brought to light previously unavailable information relating to Ashbery's past. Her work fills in an important piece of the puzzle. But, tempting as it might be to unearth buried personal secrets in his poetry, we must be wary of pressing too heavily on biography; if we may be sure of anything, it is that Ashbery mystifies the relationship between his work and his life, so that even the most transparently autobiographical of details may never be reduced to mere "confessionalism."

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[9] Costello, for instance, writes: "But the dream of self-transcendence, of forgetting our humanity, our existence in time, place, society, is the human appeal of traditional landscape. Ashbery asks how we might engage this aspect of our humanity without falling prey to its devices and delusions. In his landscapes we never do quite come out on the other side, transcendental or otherwise, though he is always alluding to it; landscape leads into landscape. But there is a great deal of room for reverie in this method." *Shifting Ground*, 179. Compare these remarks with those of Spiegelman: "These rich nuggets, more often than not in a high nostalgic, sensuously romantic mode, usually perform acts of description (primarily of landscape, sometimes of interiors). In other words, Ashbery *uses* the landscape, and the general availability of data, to focus our senses and to steady us momentarily within or on top of the shifting sands of his spatially and temporally unlocatable terrain." *How Poets See the World*, 143.

[10] Marit Macarthur, *The American Landscape in the Poetry of Frost, Bishop, and Ashbery: The House Abandoned* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Timothy Gray, *Urban Pastoral: Natural Currents in the New York School* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010); Ann Marie Mikkelsen, *Pastoral, Pragmatism, and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Macarthur, Gray, and Mikkelsen presented together in a panel on "Ashbery's Landscapes: The Role of Landscape in Ashbery's Work" at the "New School Ashbery Festival" in 2006.

[11] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 795.

[12] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 210. The remark appears in a 1980 review of the painter Edwin Dickinson.

The main limitation of these critical approaches is that they require us to equate Ashbery's landscapes with *something else*, be it his thoughts, memories, biography, or language. Thus, Spiegelman asserts, rather nonsensically, that "[l]andscape and syntax are, for [Ashbery], the same,"[13] while Costello suggests that "we might think about how the contours of landscape, for him, form a grammar subject to particulars that press against the promise of a stabilizing system in nature." Such attempts to simplify Ashbery's "subject matter" into this or that (a parlor game inaugurated by Helen Vendler's 1981 review of *As We Know*)[14] have produced thoughtful criticism that tends to tell us more about the critic than the poet. Perhaps this is the case with all literary criticism, but it is an especially acute problem with a poet like Ashbery who lays so many different kinds of interpretive traps.

Acutely aware of these traps, Marjorie Perloff's early reading of Ashbery's Rimbauldian "anti-paysage" offers a preemptive corrective to the perceived over-determinacy of the approaches above. For Perloff, the romantic apprehension of landscape marks a decisive point of departure between Ashbery and his modernist predecessors. In the opening pages of *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981), Perloff cites Ashbery's "These Lacustrine Cities" as an example of "undecidable" art: "In Ashbery's verbal landscape, fragmented images appear one by one—cities, sky, swan, tapering branches, violent sea, desert, mountain—without coalescing into a

[13] Spiegelman, *How Poets See*, 141.

[14] Helen Vendler, "Understanding Ashbery," *New Yorker*, March 16, 1981, 108-136. The review-essay begins: "It seems time to talk about John Ashbery's subject matter."

symbolic network."[15] Read against canonical modernist poems like Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Stevens's "The Auroras of Autumn," and Auden's "Bucolics"—poems notably concerned with the poetic mediation of landscape—Ashbery's poem distinguishes itself, in Perloff's account, by replacing romantic and symbolist tropes of self and world with an "open field of narrative possibilities."[16] Perloff equates Ashbery's landscapes precisely with themselves as puzzling verbal artifacts that resist the symbol- and self-making processes of the "Greater Romantic Lyric." This influential reading, which has more or less set the tenor of "avant-gardist" criticism, powerfully forecloses the possibility of reading Ashbery as a visionary humanist.

"Landscape is our trope of knowledge," Costello writes, "because it makes the knowledge seem to be 'of' something, not an entirely self-enclosed system."[17] Perloff would disagree with this judgment, as would Angus Fletcher, who has recently proposed that we think of Ashbery as a writer of "environment-poems": "a genre where the poet neither writes *about* the surrounding world, thematizing it, nor analytically represents that world, but actually shapes the poem to *be* an Emersonian or esemplastic circle."[18] Fletcher reads Ashbery alongside Clare and Whitman as a poet whose work sheds the mimetic pretentions of "descriptive poetry" in order to literally plunge the reader into a self-enclosed poetic system. *Paysage moralisé* becomes poetic ecology. Fletcher is especially perceptive in his treatment of what might be called the "word-world" issue in Ashbery. "With Ashbery," he writes, "the

[15] Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 35-7.

[16] Perloff's phrase, quoting Ashbery's *Three Poems*. See Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 273.

[17] Costello, *Shifting Ground*, 175.

[18] Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of the Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 9.

typical lyric uses its being written down, its textuality, to carry the reader away from the focused materials into a flux whereby those materials are processed."[19] In other words, Ashbery's poetry draws the reader into a poetic environment self-conscious of its status as text, calling attention to the mediated experience of all literary encounters with nature. Ashbery has made similar comments about his poetry. In one interview, he describes *Three Poems* as

> a kind of discourse that's almost like a landscape that one can get lost in and explore and find new things all the time, an environment which I feel one can plunge into and live in enjoyably.[20]

Elsewhere, he calls the long, double-columned "Litany" "a sort of environment," adding, by way of explaining the poem's radical discursiveness, that "one is not obliged to take notice of every aspect of one's environment."[21]

There is certainly something to be said for reading Ashbery's poems as poetic environments, the irreducible meaning of which we must let simply wash over us. And yet, Fletcher's "environment-poem" model really only applies meaningfully to longer works like *Three Poems* and "Litany," or *Flow Chart*, to which he devotes two chapters. In their teeming involutions, their purposive purposelessness, these poems do seem to simulate natural processes of systemic variation. We do not read them so much as find ourselves immersed in them. In this sense, they are conceptual poems in the way their "meaning" resides in an abstracted, global effect of luxuriant expansion. As with all of Ashbery's poetry, traditional close reading will get us only

[19] Ibid., 195.
[20] Labrie, *American Poetry Review*, 31.
[21] Peter A. Stitt, "The Art of Poetry No. 33: John Ashbery," in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, 7th series, ed. George Plimpton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 194.

so far. But not all of Ashbery's poems are conceptual in this (eco)systemic way. How might Fletcher's theory apply to the cartoonish/Miltonic world of "Daffy Duck in Hollywood," for instance, or to the harshly anti-referential one of "Europe"? Moreover, in aligning Ashbery with Clare, Whitman, and Emerson, Fletcher privileges the neo-romantic Ashbery in a way that shuts out his other, more experimental selves. Fletcher's main flaw, however, is his odd insistence on the "actuality" of Ashbery's environments:

> Despite common interests in nature, the poets I deal with, unlike Keats, tend to focus on actual horizons and only secondarily on surmised boundaries of thought. They remain sharply conscious of the extended real world, whose materiality tempers the Romantic surmise. For poets like Clare, Whitman, and Ashbery horizon is a guide to natural constraints, necessary to any critical reading of the surrounding natural environment.[22]

These words apply, perhaps, to Whitman and Clare. But one will search in vain in Ashbery's *Collected Poems* for a "critical reading of the surrounding natural environment" or "actual horizons." Reading Ashbery, we are more likely to "grab sex things, swing up / over the horizon like a boy on a fishing expedition."[23] In this instance, Fletcher gets it precisely wrong: Ashbery's poetry is anything but "sharply conscious of the extended real world."

Ultimately, the label "landscape poet" is too narrow for Ashbery, while "environment-poet" is too broad. Taken by themselves, these rubrics fall short of capturing the full range of natures that appear in his work. Nor do they give proper attention to Ashbery's many (often humorous) ways of making nature seem unnatural. In short, they do not provide adequate accounts of what it means to

[22] Fletcher, *New Theory*, 7.
[23] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 512.

traverse, in a matter of pages, the romantic pastoral landscape of John Clare, the technicolor countryside of the Popeye cartoons, and "the margins of our technological society," as we do, for instance, in *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970). In this thesis, I want to think about the status of nature in Ashbery in the broadest and least prescriptive terms possible, in keeping with the way he himself thinks of it. To this end, I would propose that we read his work in relation to what Timothy Morton has called "environmental art," defined as art that "plays with, reinforces, or deconstructs the idea of nature"[24] (a concept distinct, at that, from Fletcher's "environment-poem"). I find Morton's formulation especially useful for its open-ended and value-neutral account of how artists might approach the question of nature[25]—Ashbery himself being a good example of an artist equally at home playing with, reinforcing, and deconstructing it in the course of a single poem.

This thesis challenges prevailing critical tendencies to cast Ashbery as either a belated romantic in search of lost nature or an arch-postmodernist who dissolves "nature" into text. Neither an idealized space nor a site of postmodern play,[26]

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[24] "*Ecology without Nature* examines the fine print of how nature has become a transcendental principle. This book sees itself, in the words of its subtitle, as rethinking environmental aesthetics. Environmental art, from low to high, from pastoral kitsch to urban chic, from Thoreau to Sonic Youth, plays with, reinforces, or deconstructs the idea of nature. What emerges from the book is a wider view of the possibilities of environmental art and criticism, the 'widescreen' version of ecological culture." Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5.

[25] Though, Morton himself is far from value-neutral in his push to jettison the concept of "nature" itself. In the present account, Ashbery will be shown to challenge the concept in numerous ways, though without going so far as Morton in moving to eliminate it.

[26] By "idealized space" and "site of postmodern play" I have in mind, roughly, the critical positions of Angus Fletcher and Fredric Jameson. Where the former reads Ashbery's text as a kind of "pure depth," or real environment, the latter would read it as "pure surface," mere *écriture* "at the moment of a radical eclipse of Nature itself." Both accounts give short shrift to the hybrid texture of Ashbery's poetry, the way it allows itself to be read both "deeply" and "superficially." Fletcher, *New*

Ashberyan nature is a generative merging and interrogation of such concepts. It encompasses "rural objects" and "haunted landscapes"; "a moon of Cistercian pallor" and "algolagnic *nuits blanches*"; "life's rolling river" and the "wide, tepidly meandering,/ civilized Lethe"; "Vermont" and "Warren, Ohio"; "the Thousand Islands" and "the artificial reef of the Marco Applied Marine Ecology Station"; "the gazing grain" and "the dump". Offering neither ecological wisdom nor strict mimesis of place, Ashbery's work instead stages encounters for the reader with the unstable status of nature-in-language. Self-conscious of their own fictionality, Ashbery's green spaces—*Some Trees*, *Rivers and Mountains*, *A Wave*, *A Worldly Country*—work to expose the linguistic basis of all literary evocations of the natural world.[27] In his tendency to reduce natural artifacts and phenomena to pure language, Ashbery follows in the footsteps of figures such as Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and Pierre Reverdy, whose language experiments "make the visible a little hard / to see."[28]

But like the poetry of Stevens, Stein, and Reverdy, something of the "fresh and sprouting world"[29] continues to peek tantalizingly through Ashbery's writing. Language remains stubbornly referential; "Some Trees" evokes some trees. Well aware of this quirk of language to continue referring even in conditions of extreme linguistic estrangement (as in the collage poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* or "Farm

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Theory, passim; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1995), 34.

[27] Ashbery's neutral use of these natural phenomena reflects a broader penchant for using generalized categories as titles. *Some Trees*, in particular, is full of poems with such titles: "Pantoum," "Sonnet," "Eclogue," and so on. Other examples include "French Poems" and *Three Poems*.

[28] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 275.

[29] J.H. Prynne, *Poems* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), 99.

Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape"), Ashbery leverages it throughout his career. Commenting in 1995 on his work's relation to Language poetry, he said that his aim has been to "stretch the bond between language and communication but not to sever it."[30] "As to bringing together words and worlds," Ashbery told another interviewer in 1983, "I don't think we can separate them in poetry. The physical and meaningful aspects of language always reverberate with one another in a way that leads to further language."[31] By "physical and meaningful" he means the sound and shape of words versus their semantic content, two vectors of meaning of which he remains keenly aware.[32] Language, as he well knows, will reach out to the "real world" in meaningful and unexpected ways, even if it makes no effort to conceal its status as mere language. As Joshua Corey puts it, Ashbery "resorts continually to

[30] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 251

[31] Richard Jackson, *Acts of Mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets* (University: The University of Alabama Press, 1983), 73. On the topic of "language reaching out to further language," Ashbery makes a comment in a 1973 review of A.R. Ammons' *Collected Poems: 1951-71* that will ring true for many readers of his own work: "Reading the poems in sequence one soon absorbs this rhythm of making-unmaking, of speech facing up to the improbability of speech, so that ultimately Ammons' landscape—yard, riverbed, ocean, mountain, desert, and soon "the unseasonal undifferentiated empty stark"—releases the reader to the clash of word against word. . ." Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 145.

[32] Ashbery has made interesting remarks about his poems' "physical" aspects: "And for stanzas the ultimate look of a poem is something that I visualize in advance. Again it's the box, the framework, which is going to contain the poem and which is arranging it for the viewer. I think very much of the way that the poem will look, not just the lines, the stanzas, but even the form of the letters, all these are things that come into one's experience as one is reading poems which I, insofar as it's possible, try to take into account." 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), 125. Ashbery's claim to plot the look of his poems down to the shape of individual letters is indeed borne out by numerous examples from the Houghton Library manuscripts. One particularly telling example occurs in a draft of "Hotel Dauphin," in which the phrase "Consisting in ultimate removals of the self" is crossed out and replaced with "Warning of sad renewals of the spirit." Clearly, the similar sound and appearance of "removals" and "renewals" mattered more to Ashbery than the fact that the words are antonymic. The change from "ultimate" to "sad" also shows that Ashbery wanted his noun—be it "removals" or "renewals"—to be modified by an adjective with an opposite emotional valence. This example alone raises very interesting questions about how we ought to construe Ashbery's meaning in relation to his exceedingly fine and specified sound of sense and his sensitivity to his poems' physical appearance. Ashbery Papers, Houghton Library Collection, Harvard University, AM-6, box 28.

images of the natural world. . .while constantly undercutting their mimesis, producing a simulacrum of the old romantic relation between poetic word and natural object."[33] His goal "is less the conjuring of an ideal landscape than involving the reader in the flux between word and image, foreground and background,"[34] so that his poetry takes the form of a "pattern that may carry the sense, but / stays hidden in the mysteries of pagination."[35] Consider these lines from "Crazy Weather," which vibrate between text and earth, poetry and mud:

> The sky calls
> To the deaf earth. The proverbial disarray
> Of morning corrects itself as you stand up.
> You are wearing a text. The lines
> Droop to your shoelaces and I shall never want or need
> Any other literature than this poetry of mud
> And ambitious reminiscences of times when it came easily
> Through the then woods and ploughed fields. . .[36]

Or consider, in its entirety, "The Serious Doll":

> The kinds of things are more important than the
> Individual thing, though the specific is supremely
> Interesting. Right? As each particular
> Goes over Niagara Falls in a barrel one may
> Justifiably ask: Where does this come from?
> Whither goes my concern? What you are wearing
> Has vanished along with other concepts.
> They are lined up by the factory balcony railing
> Against the blue sky with some clumsy white paper clouds
> Pasted on it. Where does the east meet the west?
> At sunset there is a choice of two smiles: discreet or serious.
> In this best of all possible worlds, that is enough.[37]

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[33] Joshua Corey, "A Long Foreground: Exploring the Postmodern Pastoral," 20, accessed November 10, 2012, http://arcadiaproject. net/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/A-Long-Foreground.pdf
[34] Ibid., 18.
[35] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 512.
[36] Ibid., 503-4.
[37] Ibid., 523.

This poem, a minor piece from *Houseboat Days*, seems to narrate the experience of reading other Ashbery poems. As each of its "particulars" flows by we find ourselves asking, "Where does this come from?" "How should I take it?" "Where does east meet west?" These are, of course, rhetorical questions; less important than their "meaning" is the way they succeed each other in a neutral, decontextualized procession, lodged in the sinuous, "semi-abstract" syntax that from the mid-1960s would be Ashbery's house style.[38] Patently "unreal," the poem's dreamy parade of natural phenomena and "vanishing concepts" nonetheless conjures up the illusion of an extra-textual space, making gestures toward the "real world" even as it trumpets its own artifice. Reading it, we experience the roaring mists of Niagara Falls, knowing full well that the poem does not really "take place" there in any meaningful way. "In this best of all possible worlds" we must be prepared to move between the real and the fictional at a moment's notice. In lines 8-9, we shift without warning from an apparently "realistic" image (the "factory balcony railing") to an openly "fake" one (the "blue sky with some clumsy clouds painted on it"). Oddly, they seem to be part of the same scene. Something similar happens with the clouds and other natural phenomena that appear in "The Wrong Kind of Insurance," the poem that precedes "The Serious Doll" in *Houseboat Days*:

> Yes, friends, these clouds pulled along on invisible ropes
> Are, as you have guessed, merely stage machinery,
> And the funny thing is it knows we know
> About it and still wants to go on believing
> In what it so unskillfully imitates, and wants
> To be loved not for that but for itself:
> The murky atmosphere of a park, tattered

[38] See chapter three for a fuller account of this "house style."

> Foliage, wise old treetrunks, rainbow tissue-paper wadded
> Clouds down near where the perspective
> Intersects the sunset, so we may know
> We too are somehow impossible, formed of so many different things,
> Too many to make sense to anybody.
> We straggle on as quotients, hard-to-combine
> Ingredients, and what continues
> Does so with our participation and consent.[39]

Both "The Serious Doll" and "The Wrong Kind of Insurance" foreground their own shabbiness and artifice to remind readers of their necessary "participation and consent" in the creative act. "Nature," as it occurs in these and many other Ashbery poems, is never far from merging into a stage prop. As he writes in his prose poem, "For John Clare":

> There ought to be room for more things, for a spreading out, like. Being immersed in the details of rock and field and slope—letting them come to you for once, and then meeting them halfway would be so much easier—if they took an ingenuous pride in one's blood. Alas, we perceive them if at all as those things that were meant to be put aside—costumes of the supporting actors or voice trilling at the end of a narrow enclosed street. You can do nothing with them. Not even offer to pay.[40]

Ashbery's method is to announce the fictionality of his natural scenes before he has even tried to convince us of their reality. By doing so, he blocks our ability to define them as merely literal or figurative, allowing them to hover vividly between these states. As he puts it: "[I]t knows we know / About it and still wants to go on

[39] Ibid., 522. These lines stand in marked contrast to superficially similar ones in "East Coker," which narrate an episode of spiritual evacuation: "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,/ The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed / With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,/ And we know that the hills and trees, the distant panorama / And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away. . . ." T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 180.

[40] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 198.

believing / In what it so unskillfully imitates." Such is the ambiguous status of Ashbery's nature.

Rather than collapsing his landscapes into his syntax, as Spiegelman proposes, Ashbery actively does the opposite, forcing word and image askew in ways that play with readerly expectations, without fully disrupting them. John Shoptaw's reading of Ashbery's "crypt words" is relevant here. As Shoptaw points out, Ashbery is in the habit of skewing words or phrases to generate fresh, unexpected meanings.[41] In his work, the fortuitous change of a single letter may bring a new world into existence. The phrase "the mooring of starting out," from the end of "Soonest Mended," evokes the image of a docked boat preparing to set sail into a golden sunrise, while also making an obvious pun on "morning." In fact, the echo of "morning" here positively contributes to the image of a sunrise. As we ponder this passage, we find ourselves pulled between the imaginative "world" of the text and the text's ironic awareness of its own "wordiness." Ashbery's poetry thrives on this kind of tension; he does everything he can to exacerbate it. Had he written "the docking of starting out," there would be no sunrise flashed on the mind's eye.

This study attends to Ashbery's complex dialectic of "word" and "world" in four chapters, focusing on four themes: Ashbery's non-figurative, or "transparent," poetics and the dream of poems like "natural landscapes"; his reception of the pastoral tradition and its trope of "wandering away"; his literalization of the "stream

[41] Though Shoptaw's reading of Ashbery's "homotextual" poetics borders on nonsense, he does an excellent job of drawing attention to the inventiveness and ubiquity of Ashbery's subtle wordplay. John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

of consciousness" metaphor; and the "camp sublime" of his later work. Providing a synoptic, though not strictly linear, account of Ashbery's career in the context of his figurations of the natural, I show how his "environmental art" is nourished by a variety of techniques derived from nineteenth-century meditative humanism, international modernism, French Surrealism, the mid-century American neo-avant-garde, and the "literary" painting of figures like R.B. Kitaj and Henry Darger. More broadly, I engage Ashbery's oeuvre as exemplary of the dense cross-pollination of traditions, modes, and genres that characterizes post-1945 experimental poetry. As such, the project intervenes in contemporary critical accounts of nature and environmental poetics of the late-modernist and postmodern periods, with special reference to ongoing debates surrounding postmodern pastoral.

Chapter one analyzes Ashbery's commitment to a non-figurative, or "transparent," poetics and its correlation to a poetics of "natural" presentation. In a 1962 homage to Pierre Reverdy, Ashbery praises the French poet's "transparent, non-philosophical" style and describes the sensation of reading his poetry as "seeing a natural landscape for the first time, having before only seen painted ones."[42] These comments echo Clement Greenberg's claim in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) that the avant-garde artist tries "to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is aesthetically valid."[43] Ashbery's early thinking about avant-gardists like

[42] John Ashbery, "Reverdy en Amérique," *Mercure de France* 344 (January-April 1962): 109-111.

[43] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 541.

Reverdy and Greenberg, as well as figures at the margins of French surrealism such as Raymond Roussel and Giorgio de Chirico (whose styles he also praises for their "transparency"), would be foundational to his mature poetics. In Ashbery's critical prose over many decades, "transparent" becomes a term of endearment for his favorite artists, from Auden to Hölderlin.

At the same time, Ashbery's focus on "transparency" links him to the western visionary lyric tradition, handed down from the romantics and transcendentalists to the high modernist Stevens, in which clarity and splendor serve as tropes for the imagining mind's communion with the perceived world. To Emerson's iconic "transparent eyeball"[44] Ashbery opposes the "transparent diagram"[45] of his poem "Clepsydra," an "empty yet personal / landscape, which has the further advantage of being / what surrounds without insisting."[46] Thus, Ashbery poises himself between two artistic modalities—Franco-American multimedia avant-gardism and Anglo-American meditative lyricism—disparate traditions that would seem to have equal claims on him, yet from which he beguilingly stands apart. By aligning himself in this way, Ashbery manages to court the favor of such ideologically opposed critics as Marjorie Perloff and Harold Bloom. The former reads Ashberyan "transparency" as the signal feature of his presentational, anti-symbolist avant-gardism, the latter as part and parcel of his romantic sublime inheritance. Charles Altieri, mediating between Perloff and Bloom, observes in Ashbery's "flatness of voice" a "self-occluding transparency" that links him to visual artists like Jasper Johns and

[44] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems* (New York: Bantam 2007), 18.
[45] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 145.
[46] Ibid., 142.

Kenneth Noland. Close readings of exemplary poems like "The New Realism," "French Poems," and "Haunted Landscape" offer glimpses of Ashbery putting his "transparent" poetics into practice.

Chapter two examines the free-play of pastoral sub-genres in Ashbery's work as an expression of his global tendency to evade political instrumentality. The broad contention is that Ashbery's trademark evasions, deferred revelations, discursive fantasy-making, wistfulness, and ironized nostalgia operate on a kind of pastoral logic, writ large. The chapter situates Ashbery's work within the rubric of "postmodern pastoral,"[47] and reads his lack of political commitment as a strategic pastoralist tendency to "wander away" from the heated political realm of the Vietnam era. It also challenges the findings of recent critics like Macarthur, Gray and Mikkelsen who invest too fully in Ashbery's biography as an interpretive key to his pastoralism. For a more attractive alternative to the strictly biographical approach, I turn to Brian McHale's reading of "The Skaters," which focuses on the need for a more provisional reading of Ashbery organized by environmental, autobiographical, and ars-poetic "interpretive nodes." From there, I attend to readings of Ashbery's politics by Mark Silverberg, Bob Perelman, and Christopher Nealon and draw out the latent pastoral terms of their critiques. Throughout the chapter, I apply these findings in a series of close readings that bring into focus the

[47] The debate about "postmodern" pastoral has taken many forms, with various critics proposing alternate rubrics for roughly similar concepts. Highlights include Joshua Corey's "avant-pastoral," Terry Gifford's "post-pastoral" and Andrew Lawson's "philosophical pastoral." See Chapter 3 for a further discussion of this topic.

full scope of Ashbery's engagement with pastoral topoi in works such as "Some Trees," "Evening in the Country," and *The Vermont Notebook*.

Ashbery's pastoral "wandering" represents just one of the many forms of evasiveness in his work. Chapter three examines Ashbery's tendency to literalize the stream-of-consciousness metaphor, and revises conventionalized accounts of his "meandering" style and linguistic "flux." From "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" to "A Wave," Ashbery's work merges formal and thematic notions of liquidity in order to become "all of a piece, like a stream." Tracing Ashbery's links to the riverine poetics of Wordsworth, Hölderlin, and Eliot, I survey the progress of his career as a series of what he describes as "dissolving and putting in solution" of his established forms, a process repeated at several pivotal moments over half a century. The chapter concludes by turning to Ashbery's long poem, *Flow Chart* (1991), a work that extends his riverine thematics into the register of what Sianne Ngai has called the "stuplime": the aesthetic experience of simultaneous boredom and astonishment.[48] Drawing inspiration from Gertrude Stein's "long dull poem" *Stanzas in Meditation*, Ashbery produces a work whose rambling flowscape "generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power."[49]

The "stuplime" *Flow Chart* brings us to the threshold of "late Ashbery" (1987 to the present), a period marked by great productivity—thirteen books in twenty-five years—and anarchic, sometimes tedious comedy. Chapter four addresses

[48] "One way of calling attention to the affinity between exhaustion and the astonishment particular to the sublime, invoking the latter while detaching it from its previous romantic affiliations, is to refer to the aesthetic experience I am talking about. . .in which astonishment is paradoxically united with boredom as the *stuplime*." Sianne Ngai, "Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics," *Postmodern Culture* 10, no. 2, (January, 2000): unpaginated.

[49] Quoting Ashbery's 1957 review of *Stanzas in Meditation*. Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 11.

Ashbery's career-long evasions of the literary and his ironic play with what Susan Sontag in "Notes on Camp" calls "the good taste of bad taste." In "late Ashbery," the natural sublime of Kant and Burke evolves into the "camp sublime" of postmodern culture and the "ecosublime" of global environmental crisis. I frame the discussion of these topics with Ashbery's early struggle to articulate a poetics of camp irony in opposition to the "mature" irony of the New Criticism. A reading of "How To Continue," from *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992), shows late Ashbery putting camp irony to good effect. After providing a consensus survey of late Ashbery's critical reception, focusing on his "democratic sublime," I conduct an extended reading of his most exemplary "bad" poem, "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox" (1969). My reading of "Variations" anchors a subsequent discussion of the twin strains of sublimity in late Ashbery as they feature in select later works such as "Tuesday Evening," "The Ice Storm," "Korean Soap Opera," and *Girls on the Run.*

The thesis also includes a "coda" which expands the discussion of the "word/world" theme in Ashbery to the larger question of his work's relation to realism. In the process of doing so, it provides a theoretical survey of his critical prose. Contrary to what we might expect, Ashbery in his critical writings on art and literature expresses a consistent predilection for "realist" art—realism, in Ashbery's specialized sense, being defined as a kind of maximalism in which a "polyphony of clashing styles" resolves conventional binary oppositions of the figurative and abstract, the visual and narrative, and the literary and painterly. "All kinds of things

exist," Ashbery writes in "French Poems,"[50] and the more generously a work of art abides by this principle the more "realist" it is in his eyes. Ashbery variously refers to this effect, among other ways, as "heightened realism," "imaginative realism," "a more integral kind of realism," and "a completely new kind of realism." Ashbery's interest in "heightened realism" also informs his aspiration to make what he calls "poetic objects"—an unusual claim, to be sure, given the generally disembodied affect of his poetry, but one which reveals much about his affinities to favorite poets like William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop, whose work evinces for him a "quality of thingness." Ashbery's stated aim, as too few critics have noticed, is to create what he calls, quoting Stevens, "a completely new set of objects," a claim he makes explicitly in his *Paris Review* interview, among other places.

In the *Paris Review* interview, Ashbery also praises Proust for "the way somehow everything could be included in this vast, open form that he created for himself—particularly certain almost surreal passages."[51] Pondering a career that began during World War II and continues to evolve, surreal as ever, into the second decade of the twenty-first century, it seems appropriate to praise Ashbery for a similar achievement. The present study addresses as much of that "vast, open form" as possible, though it cannot include everything. Ashbery criticism, unlike his poems, ought not to be "one-size-fits-all." Some works, like "Clepsydra," take on a special, almost talismanic, importance to this study and make appearances throughout; other major works, most conspicuously "Litany" and "Fantasia on the

[50] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 200.
[51] Stitt, "Art of Poetry," 189.

Nut-Brown Maid," play less central roles. This outcome does not represent an attempt to reconfigure the "Ashbery canon," if such a thing exists. Rather, it highlights the particularities of one chosen path through his work—a path which, though my own, aspires to lead other readers into the poetry as well.

CHAPTER ONE

"The Invisible Avant-Garde": Ashbery's Transparent Landscapes

Ashbery's language is opaque; you cannot see through it any more than you can look through a fresco. And as the most interesting thing about abstract painting is its subject matter, so one is held by the sibylline clarity of Ashbery's simple sentences, in which words have more objective reality than reality of meaning. One is back in first grade, about to learn to read. —Fairfield Porter[1]

John continued to write these kinds of lines, and many variations; by the time he was forty he had a poetic language that seemed capable of beautifully covering everything, like an endlessly incoming transparent tide. —Kenneth Koch[2]

This chapter takes the measure of the multiple, often contradictory, meanings that John Ashbery allows to constellate around the concept of "transparency," a key term of critique located at the intersection of the major traditions which feed his art. To understand how Ashbery's use of this term convenes the central concerns of these traditions, without subordinating itself to them, is to understand his major achievement. On the one hand, transparency in modern art means witnessing the process of the artist at work; on the other, it connotes a heightened visionary encounter with the world achieved beyond or through the artwork at hand. Ashbery wants his poetry to be transparent in both ways, so that it might become like a "natural landscape" in a world of "painted" ones, as he writes in a 1962 homage to Pierre Reverdy. Though most critics who have addressed this important statement on Reverdy have stressed its attack on the Symbolist movement, I argue that it cuts deeper into Ashbery's use of natural figures. For if Ashbery's decontextualized natural worlds pointedly lay bare, or make transparent, the literary mechanism

[1] Quoted in J.D. McClatchy, *Poets on Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth-Century Poets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 248.

[2] Kenneth Koch, *The Art of Poetry: Poems, Parodies, Interviews, Essays, and Other Work* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 50.

behind the Baudelairean "forest of symbols," they retain an eerie—one is almost tempted to say romantic—mystery emanating from their resistance to meaning anything other than themselves.

The decade from 1956 to 1966, roughly coinciding with his stay in France, is the key transitional period of Ashbery's career. During this time, he moved to France just before the publication of his debut collection of late-modernist showpieces, then six years later published a controversial volume of collage poems, only to reemerge four years after that in his third book as the master of a suavely demotic lyric mode that he would continue to refine for the rest of his career. Contemporary French developments in the arts—the *nouveau roman* in literature, the *nouveau réalisme* in visual art, the *nouvelle vague* in film, to name the predominant "new" movements—informed this transition as much by the particulars of their practices as by the degree to which they fruitfully alienated Ashbery from the aesthetic contexts which had nourished his early work. The transition from *Some Trees* (1956) to *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), via *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), is the story of Ashbery learning to use the French avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s to resist, and then reabsorb, the influence of the surrealist, modernist, and abstract expressionist traditions which presided over his early years.

Ashbery's critics have done a good job of documenting his various genealogies, but we still lack a fully historicized account of his struggle to place himself within those genealogies during his long sojourn in France. Instead, two subjects have dominated critical commentary on Ashbery's work since his rise to prominence in the mid-1970s. The first is his debt to Anglo-American romantic

visionary humanism, the tradition of the meditative personal lyric in the Stevens grain. The second is his debt to the American and French visual and literary avant-gardes, the "other tradition" of artists like Rimbaud, Stein, Reverdy, and Cage. Though this binary only crudely encompasses the full range of Ashbery's concerns, it does signal a lingering ideological divide in Ashbery criticism along lines first articulated in groundbreaking studies by critics like Harold Bloom and Marjorie Perloff. In response to these critics' work of the 1970s and 1980s, much subsequent criticism has been preoccupied with—or has at least taken for granted—Ashbery's status as either a belated romantic or as a "poet of indeterminacy."[3] Or, more precisely, it has assumed an oppositional relationship between these competing tendencies, so as to give us an Ashbery divided against himself.

But if Ashbery is and has always been a committed avant-gardist, his avant-garde has been an omnivorous one. As David LeHardy Sweet aptly puts it, Ashbery "find[s] 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."[4] Stated otherwise, Ashbery, perhaps to a greater degree than any of his contemporaries, has throughout his career resisted being pigeonholed. His strongest statement of resistance came in 1968, when he addressed the Yale Art

[3] Nick Lolordo provides an excellent précis of these two critical genealogies and their internecine skirmishes, drawing on the specific example of *Flow Chart* (1991). "Charting the Flow: Positioning John Ashbery," *Contemporary Literature* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 750-774.

[4] 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.

School on the subject of "The Invisible Avant-Garde" and the perilous "acceptance-world" of modern art:

> Is there nothing then between the extremes of Levittown and Haight-Ashbury, between an avant-garde which has become a tradition and a tradition which is no longer one? In other words, has tradition finally managed to absorb the individual talent? . . .The Midas-like position into which our present acceptance-world forces the avant-garde is actually a disguised blessing which previous artists have not been able to enjoy, because it points the way out of the predicament it sets up—that is, toward an attitude which neither accepts nor rejects acceptance but is independent of it.[5]

Though Ashbery now tends to dismiss the notion of an "Invisible Avant-Garde,"[6] his talk remains an important account of his "independent" mid-life position (he was 41 in 1968) in relation to a reading public that got its art news from *Time* magazine. More to the point, Ashbery's formulation of an "invisible" avant-garde—an avant-garde that exists neither publicly nor perhaps even in manifesto form, where "to experiment was to have the feeling that one was poised on some outermost brink"[7]—chimes with his broader preoccupation with themes of invisibility, emptiness, and transparency, or what he calls in his *Paris Review* interview "the fullness, or, if you wish, the emptiness of life. . .its dimensionless quality."[8] More than a fit of existential angst, this statement reflects Ashbery's tendency to draw strength from "accepting everything and taking nothing"—that is, by making

[5] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings,* 393-4.

[6] Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford* (London: Waywiser, 2003), 55. Of the lecture, Ashbery told Mark Ford in 2003: "I'm so sorry I ever wrote that! People seem to take it so seriously. It was something I scribbled on the train going from New York to New Haven because I had to make some remarks to an art class taught by Jack Tworkov at Yale." It must be said, though, that Ashbery takes a perverse delight in dismissing, particularly in interviews, his most influential work, such as "The Invisible Avant-Garde" and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror."

[7] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 390.

[8] Stitt, "Art of Poetry," 193.

himself invisible.[9] It is with no small measure of irony, then, that "The Invisible Avant-Garde" portended his rise to cultural visibility. When he addressed the Yale Art School, he had recently published his third book, *Rivers and Mountains*, which would be a finalist for the 1967 National Book Award. That same year he received his first Guggenheim Foundation fellowship. After nearly a decade of writing in Parisian isolation, he had entered the early stages of becoming the "major" poet whose reputation would be solidified eight years later with *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

To understand how Ashbery arrived at the "independent" mid-life position that would inspire his great period of poetry from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, we must begin by looking to the French wilderness years that preceded it. For it was during his time in France that the "non-discriminatory" Ashbery learned how to appeal to critics as discriminating—and disparate—as Bloom and Perloff while also standing free of them. This chapter asks how he accomplished this feat by examining the artistic and intellectual transformations he underwent in Paris, focusing on his turn to a "transparent" poetics guided by the advent of the *nouveau roman* in literature and the *nouveau réalisme* in the visual arts. Ashbery's critical awareness of these movements—the one concerned with objective narrative presentation of the world, the other with turning everyday objects into art—offers the crucial context for the account that follows. Within this context, three earlier figures at the margins of Surrealism—Pierre Reverdy, Raymond Roussel, and

[9] David Lehman recounts that Ashbery once ended an argument at a party by saying, "You can't argue with me because I don't exist." *The Last Avant-Garde: the Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 97.

Giorgio de Chirico—form a kind of tutelary trinity, each in his own way being a representative of the "transparent" art toward which Ashbery aspired.[10] For Ashbery, these writers served many roles. For one, they suggested an alternate surrealist line not governed by the "automatic writing" practices of orthodox Surrealism. They also offered an antidote to the "mania for over-interpretation"—what Ashbery dubs "*objective correlativitis*" in a 1966 review[11]—that for him characterized the academic strain of modernism ascendant at mid-century under the aegis of the New Criticism.[12]

But in addition to resisting Surrealist automatism and over-determined New Critical regimes, the "transparent" poetic practice Ashbery developed in Paris would

[10] Reverdy, Roussel, and de Chirico are, however, just three of a much larger group of poets and visual artists to whom Ashbery has attributed "transparent" or "invisible" qualities. Among these are **Friedrich Hölderlin** and **John Clare**: "Finally, in the handful of perfect lyrics from [Clare's] last asylum period, 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." John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 21; **Yves Tanguy:** "Tanguy's world is hardly an inviting one, but its space seems to promise infinite possibilities. It has the limpidity of the poetry of Hölderlin or Novalis, where times becomes a solid, transparent medium, no longer a vehicle of change and vicissitudes." Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 23; **Fairfield Porter:** "The local color is transparent and porous, letting the dark light of space show through. The painting has the vehemence of abstraction, though it speaks another language." Ibid., 317; **Trevor Winkfield:** "And the visual phantasmagoria of Winkfield's work is such that we hardly notice the painting, which is nonetheless an affair of style—an invisible one—rather than of content." John Ashbery, "Trevor Winkfield at Fischbach," *Art in America* (May-June 1977): 116; and **John Wheelwright:** "It isn't a question of Eliot's 'shadow' that falls between the conception and the act, but a fertile short-circuiting, the result of many tensions pulling in opposite directions, that is the air [Wheelwright's] poetry breathes. Rather than chaos, the resulting layers of ambiguity result in a dense transparency." Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 82.

[11] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 76.

[12] It is important, though, to distinguish between Ashbery's position toward the mainstream neo-modernism, or "neo-Symbolism," codified and handed down by the New Critics, that dominated the American poetry scene at mid-century (Tate, Ransom, early Wilbur, Lowell and Berryman, etc.) and his more friendly disposition toward the French Symbolists and Eliot. His general opposition to the mid-century "well-wrought urn" is a straightforward enough countercultural response to stifling norms. But his criticism of Symbolist figurative language and his frequent early jabs at Eliot are harder critical positions to assimilate to his actual writing, which is redolent of both. Above all, he seems most concerned to separate himself from certain of his peers, to deflate those who (to quote his 1962 homage to Pierre Reverdy) "weakened or denatured the intellectual content" of Eliot's writing rather than deflate Eliot himself (or, for that matter, earlier models like Baudelaire and Mallarmé—both of whom he has translated).

help him define himself in relation to—and apart from—the "heroic age" of Abstract Expressionism which so decisively reigned over his early years in New York City and which, by the late-1950s, "had already become for [him] part of the dominant existentialist culture from which he had to extricate himself."[13] Tutored by a French experimental tradition handed down from Reverdy, Roussel, and de Chirico to the *nouveaux romanciers*, Ashbery elides the spiritual struggles of Pollock and de Kooning and their "expressivist insistence on the purity of the medium,"[14] while extending into the verbal realm their practice of making transparent every fold and seam in the artwork's surface.

In "Reverdy en Amérique," published the same year as *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery places the French poet's "transparent, non-philosophical" style in favorable contrast to the "eternal dead-weight of allegory and symbolism" which overburdens the high modernism of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and Joyce. To read Reverdy, Ashbery writes, is like "seeing a natural landscape for the first time, having before only seen painted ones." With lines "as natural and varied as waves of the sea," composed of "changes, fluctuations, archetypes of events, ideal situations, and movements of transparent forms," Reverdy's work is "the very stuff of poetry, pure of all metaphysical afterthoughts." Fifty years on, this brief essay, the core text of this chapter, reads like a primer of Ashbery's own art in its avowal of a mysteriously decontextualized natural world and its resistance to the allusive high modernism of Eliot and Pound. But what, precisely, does Ashbery mean here by "transparent"? I

[13] Charles Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 55.
[14] Ibid., 71.

would argue that he means something akin to the following definition offered by Susan Sontag in 1964:

> Transparence is the highest, most liberating value in art—and in criticism—today. Transparence means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are.[15]

But Sontag, too, leaves room for debate about the meaning of "transparency." Is this the "luminousness" of transcendentalist communion with the perceived world? Or does this state of "things being what they are" more closely resemble the sheer facticity of abstract art? In short, is it closer to Emerson's "I become a transparent eyeball" or Pollock's "I am Nature"? Oddly, in Ashbery's case it is both at once. And this fact, more than any other, has occasioned the tug-of-war between critics like Bloom and Perloff, who are cleanly divided over the meaning of Ashbery's "transparency."

I. Ashbery's Critical Transparencies

Literary transparency inevitably connotes transcendentalist tropes of imaginative intensity and communion with the perceived world. Besides the "transparent eyeball" of Emerson's "Nature,"[16] a key precedent for this use would be the "vivid transparence" of Stevens's muse in the epigraph to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."[17] This is the chief modality of Bloom's Ashbery:

> Ashbery's poetry is haunted by the image of transparence, but this comes to him, from the start, as a "puzzling light," or carried by beings who are "as dirty handmaidens / To some transparent witch." Against Transcendental

[15] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994), 13.
[16] Emerson, *Selected Essays*, 18.
[17] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 329.

> influx, Ashbery knows the wisdom of what he calls "learning to accept / The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out," and knows also that: "One can never change the core of things, and light burns you the harder for it."[18]

Bloom reads Ashbery as a reluctant conduit for an eerie "Transcendental influx," muscling him into a line of inheritance within an American meditative tradition extending from Emerson and Whitman to Stevens and Crane. Later, on the subject of Ashbery's Emersonian penchant for rehabilitating clichés and proverbs, Bloom qualifies his own position, but on the whole maintains Ashbery's transcendentalist *bona fides*:

> Emerson insisted each worn proverb could become *transparent*. In his rare startlements into happiness, Ashbery knows this transparency, but generally his hopes are more modest. He is, in temperament, more like Whitman than like Emerson or Stevens. Even the French poet he truly resembles is the curiously Whitmanian Apollinaire, rather than Reverdy. . . .[19]

This reading of Ashbery has conditioned much subsequent criticism. But Perloff would take issue with Bloom's judgment on several counts, including his placement of Apollinaire before Reverdy in Ashbery's canon. In "'Transparent Selves': The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara" (1978), written two years after Bloom's essay, Perloff revisits Ashbery's 1962 homage to Reverdy, and asks how a "transparent" image might differ from a "symbolic" one, begging the larger question about The New York School's opposition to the New Critical "neo-Symbolism that

[18] Harold Bloom, introduction to *Modern Critical Views: John Ashbery*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 8-9. Bloom quotes, respectively, from "The Picture of J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers," "Soonest Mended," and "A Last World."

[19] Harold Bloom, "The Charity of the Hard Moments," *Modern Critical Views: John Ashbery*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 51.

dominated Establishment 'little magazines'" in the fifties and well into the sixties.[20] "An aesthetic of *presence* thus replaces one of transcendence," she writes, anticipating the line of argument she would pursue in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981):

> The great Action Paintings of Jackson Pollock are regarded as surfaces that exist for their own sake; there is nothing behind them. The surface of the painting, and by analogy the surface of the poem, must be regarded as a field upon which the physical energies of the artist can operate without mediation of metaphor. The positioning of images in the poet's 'field' rather than their signification now becomes all important. Indeed what we might call a surplus of signification, endemic to much of the poetry written in the Eliot tradition, becomes so suspect that Ashbery and O'Hara tend to go, at least in their statements about poetry, to the opposite extreme, longing to create a poetic mode that eliminates subject matter completely.[21]

In Perloff's account, Ashbery's "transparency" relates not to "Transcendental influx" but to the various experimental painterly movements of the twentieth century—Cubism, Surrealism, Dada, and Abstract Expressionism—which "transparently" foreground their genesis and materiality. Illusions of depth and dimension are jettisoned in favor of a "pure" flatness. Every fold and seam is

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[20] Marjorie Perloff, "'Transparent Selves': The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 8 (1978), 177-8. Here, Perloff is careful to observe that in criticizing "Establishment" tastes O'Hara and Ashbery are "objecting less to Eliot himself" than to his legacy.

[21] Ibid., 178. Perloff reads Ashbery's *Mercure de France* essay along similar lines in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, taking what Ashbery terms the "phènomenes vivants" and "formes transparentes" of Reverdy's verse as exemplary of the mid-twentieth-century move way from symbolism toward the presentational (rather than representational) poetics of indeterminacy. See *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 35-7. In "Transparent Selves," she echoes Reverdy himself, who wrote in October 1918 that "une oeuvre d'art ne peut se contenter d'être une *représentation*; elle doit être une *presentation*." It should be noted that this concept of "presentation" differs, albeit in less than straightforward terms, from the similar notion of "presentation," handed down from Henry James, that was of central importance to Pound's avant-guerre imagist aesthetic. The difference between the two concepts of "presentation" (and between Pound's theory of the poetic image and that of Reverdy, who wrote that the image "est une création pure de l'esprit. Elle ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moin éloignées") would form the subject of an interesting study. Pierre Reverdy, *Nord-sud, Self-defence, et autres écrits sur l'art et la poésie (1917-1926)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 133.

revealed to the viewer. "The surface is what's there," Ashbery writes in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," "and nothing can exist except what's there."[22] Perloff's account, it must be said, has a greater critical purchase than Bloom's on the peculiarly charged yet neutral quality of Ashbery's poetry. Though at times densely allusive, Ashbery's poems tend to point at rather than outside themselves. In a 1974 interview, Ashbery said, "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. . . ."[23] If this is not quite Abstract Expressionism made poetry, it certainly reflects the degree to which the experimental painterly milieu of 1950s New York colored Ashbery's imagination.

Charles Altieri, responding to Bloom. Perloff, and others in the late 1980s, provides still another gloss of Ashbery's "transparent" poetics, reading his "verbal transformation of a painterly relation between transparency and depth"[24] by the cross-light of works by Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Kenneth Noland, rather than Pollock, De Kooning, and other first generation abstract expressionists. Altieri argues that Ashbery's poetry, like the visual art of the figures above, partakes of a "self-occluding transparency" that operates on an ironic principle of hiding-in-plain-sight. These artists, like the abstract expressionists before them, make transparent every fold and seam in their visual medium, though they do so in an

[22] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 476.
[23] Bloom and Losada, "Craft Interview," 122-3.
[24] Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now*, 55.

effort to ironize their forebears' "heroic" expressivist aspirations.[25] As we stare at Noland's *Separate* (1958) and Johns's *Target with Four Faces* (1955), both images of targets, we find "the entire image vacillat[ing] between the perceptual and the conceptual"[26] as "sight and insight become waves in an epistemological ocean."[27] Is it a target or a work of art? Cycling between these options plunges us into a critical awareness of the interpretive process itself. This "effort at transparency," Altieri writes, "paradoxically implicates its absolute other":

> There is nothing hidden; every structural seam and shift in tone is completely open to view as an effect of crude material relations. . . . Yet that very transparency refuses to allow us to read the work simply as an assemblage of instrumental effects. As the instrument is laid bare, the relations are set free to compose complex rhymes and rhythms that in effect restore all the mystery of veils and hints and feelings of a deep psychic life, based now less on what we see than on how we imagine ourselves as viewers."[28]

Ashbery, by analogy, shows us how we imagine ourselves as readers. Consider the opening lines of "Wet Casements," from *Houseboat Days* (1977):

> The concept is interesting: to see, as though reflected
> In streaming windowpanes, the look of others through
> Their own eyes. A digest of their correct impressions of
> Their self-analytical attitudes overlaid by your
> Ghostly transparent face.[29]

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[25] Ibid., 71. "Johns accepts the crucial principle of optical transparency: painting must rely on the actual flatness of its two-dimensional surface and must deny any hope that one can capture certain mystical qualities of the medium itself in order to compensate for the loss of illusionary depth. . . . But for Johns and Rauschenberg a cool flatness need not deny all mystery. Instead, it presents a challenge to pursue the possibility of locating mystery within the purely transparent play of visual details." Ibid., 63.

[26] Ibid., 60.

[27] Ibid., 80.

[28] Ibid., 64.

[29] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 508.

Altieri contends that Ashbery achieves this "self-analytical attitude" in his poetry by "calling our attention to the complex textures of a fully demotic spoken language"—by allowing his language to "stink" a bit, as Sweet puts it.[30] In other words, Ashbery makes transparent the materiality of his verbal medium not in an effort to record a "heroic" struggle for personal expression in a purified medium but in order to demonstrate the "mysterious lyrical expansiveness"[31] of language that "recovers the self's position within a shareable and manipulable history."[32] In doing so, Ashbery manages to deploy irony without succumbing to it, achieving a "second-order" lyric language. And here Altieri seems to distance Ashbery somewhat from Johns and Rauschenberg (and from Pop Art). For in contrast to these painters' cool irony, Ashbery's

> flatness of voice makes transparent the instrumental thickness of his medium without subordinating it to some mimetic logic that would simply invoke the ironic inversion of the assertions. Instead of relying on oppositions between irony and unequivocal denotation, Ashbery elaborates a second-order

[30] In his excellent study of the early twentieth-century French avant-garde and its influence on O'Hara and Ashbery, Sweet distinguishes between "pure communication, sheer transparency—a transparency Bloom likes to think of as the hallmark of the American sublime" and the work of "French poets writing in the symbolist tradition [who] saw the virtue of allowing language to 'stink' a bit, to call attention to itself as a medium, to distract the reader from the domineering assumption of meaning." Yet, more than being a merely symbolist virtue, Sweet explains that this willed "putrefaction" of language was "lodged at the core of all subsequent avant-garde elaborations, from the cubist one of treating language as an almost physical medium, to the surrealist one of professing a kind of child-like faith in the accidents of language." In this sense, Sweet rejects Perloff's binary of the Symbolists on one side and the indeterminate "other tradition" on the other. These various "avant-garde elaborations," Sweet argues, posited "a new, 'marvelous,' transparency to the medium [of writing] when used automatically," in which "putrefaction" of language seems to imply different things: a language voided of certain denotation (i.e. semiotic de-familiarization) or a language overburdened with hermeneutic potentiality by virtue of an almost crystalline encrustation of previous uses, all reflecting, resonating, reinforcing, but also contradicting or canceling each other." Sweet, *Savage Sight,* 243-44.

[31] Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now*, 64.

[32] Ibid., 73.

> language that makes its awareness of potential ironies part of a repertoire of names set free to evoke a lyrical sense of mystery.[33]

This sense of mystery equates to what Altieri calls the "noise of the world": the echo chamber of an interpretive process thinking aloud about itself in the presence of a work of art. The "mobile demotic transparency"[34] of the resultant "second-order language" allows Ashbery to put on elevated romantic airs without delivering romantic content, "locat[ing] in the folds of language use all the lushness of a romance spirit that others pursue by efforts to purify the lyrical of the demotic."[35] In other words, Ashbery hits the romantic high note by polluting his language rather than purifying it. And he does so without the risk of a bathetic fall, since he has already incorporated bathos (and other "undesirable" effects like clichés) into his "second-order" language. Ashbery employs the charged language unique to the romantic sublime, but within the indeterminate contexts that are the hallmark of the "other tradition." In this sense, he performs a poetic sleight-of-hand, exploiting the potency of the former tradition's language and the undecidability typical of the latter's means of expression, playing them off each other without privileging either.

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[33] Ibid., 66. Altieri adds: "Because [Ashbery] not only acknowledges the full duplicity of language but also deploys it, he establishes a style that need not yield to the self-pitying paralysis imposed by demands of infinite irony. The flatness of tone and of diction dispels both the theatrical lyricism that inflates our expectations for the romance imagination and the bitter anguish that stems from the experience of the failure of those dreams. . . . Ashbery's form of transparency need posit neither the epistemological hopes nor the emotional desires that foster irony (and are undone by it) because he makes acceptance of the imperfections in the medium the vehicle for another kind of naming—whose emblem is the volume's ability to have verse and prose serve the same lyrical ends." Ibid., 68.

[34] Ibid., 69.

[35] Ibid., 68.

In making these claims for Ashbery's work, Altieri challenges the humanist "concern for perennial lyric subjects and strategies"[36] of critics like Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom, who would force Ashbery into a neo-romantic mold that succeeds in showing us "how [his] craft produces the pleasures and consolations essential to a fully civilized life"[37] but omits his affinities to the medium-conscious "postmodern sensibility"[38] of figures like Johns and Rauschenberg. At the same time, Altieri endorses Perloff's reading of Ashbery as a practitioner of undecidable or "indeterminate" art, but stresses this technique's importance as a means rather than an end.[39] In all, Altieri presents Ashbery's "transparent" poetics as antecedent both to his romanticism and his avant-gardism.

Altieri supports his argument throughout with close readings of select passages from "A Wave," a text very much preoccupied with the "demotic duplicity of language." Had he looked to the slightly earlier collection, *As We Know* (1979), he would have found an even better précis of his version of "transparency" in "Tapestry":

> It is difficult to separate the tapestry
> From the room or loom which takes precedence over it.
> For it must always be frontal yet to one side.

[36] Ibid., 54.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 55.
[39] Altieri challenges Perloff's reading of indeterminacy on the grounds that she does not fully account for the ways in which "works can be determinate as acts even when the verbal level is riddled with ambiguities." Ibid., 53. He explains: "Were we to rest content with attributions about the work's indeterminacy, we would miss a good deal of the force of inherent in this particular treatment of the indeterminate because we would continue to focus on the specific configurations of images, on meaning as the interpretation of illusionistic events. But if we shift from the images to what the process of negotiating these vacillations affords, we find the experience of undecidability becoming a quite determinate image of our inescapable entrapment in the traces, transformations, and equivocations that constitute the anxious process of coming to terms with intentional activity, with proposing meanings and being the target of meanings proposed by others." Ibid., 60.

It insists on this picture of "history"
In the making, because there is no way out of the punishment
It proposes: sight blinded by sunlight.
The seeing taken in with what is seen
In an explosion of sudden awareness of its formal splendor.

The eyesight, seen as inner,
Registers over the impact of itself
Receiving phenomena, and in so doing
Draws an outline, or a blueprint,
Of what was just there: dead on the line.

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.

But in some other life, which the blanket depicts anyway,
The citizens hold sweet commerce with one another
And pinch the fruit unpestered, as they will,
As words go crying after themselves, leaving the dream
Upended in a puddle somewhere
As though "dead" were just another adjective.[40]

As an ekphrastic, or perhaps meta-ekphrastic, poem, Ashbery's "Tapestry" resembles Johns's *Target with Four Faces* and Rauschenberg's *Monogram* in the way it theorizes its own "self-occluding transparency" in the time of its telling. As with Johns's target, we cannot be sure how to take "the tapestry," which, by the final stanza, ingeniously becomes "the blanket," as if artwork and instrument have switched roles, or merged. The tapestry "must always be frontal yet to one side" in the way it forces us to reflect on its context ("room") and provenance ("loom")—its materiality—even as it presents an utterly plain intention to signify, either as something to adorn a wall or to wrap ourselves in. It "insists" on being taken at face value, whatever that might be, and this is the "punishment it proposes": in

[40] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 674.

foregrounding its own materiality, or "history," it plunges us into the infinite regress of an interpretive process interpreting itself. Or as Ashbery more elegantly puts it: "The eyesight, seen as inner,/ Registers over the impact of itself / Receiving phenomena."

The preceding sketches of the "romantic" and the "avant-garde" Ashberys, rendered in broad strokes, will remind us just how seductive and grand the strongest critical claims for his importance have been. But they will also remind us that although he is an important successor to Emerson and Pollock, Stevens and Johns, he is not their clone. Having absorbed the lessons of these models, Ashbery went on to compose poems with a curiously charged yet also neutral or transparent texture, meditative and self-reflexive, perhaps, but without concealed symbolic meaning—poems that allow themselves to be read both "deeply" and "superficially," putting readers into contact with the linguistic pressures of a thinking mind without the pay-off of a conclusive revelation. Turning to his years in Paris, we will now consider how he felt his way toward this "dense, transparent" poetics.

II. "Dense, transparent mediums": Reverdy, Roussel, and de Chirico

In the spring of 1962, several months after the February publication of *The Tennis Court Oath*, the French journal *Mercure de France* printed a special memorial issue for the cubist poet and avant-garde journalist and theorist Pierre Reverdy, recently deceased in Solesmes, France. The issue featured both new and reprinted recollections, homages, and critical statements of dozens of luminaries, including Guillaume Apollinaire, Louis Aragon, Blaise Cendrars, René Char, Max Jacob, and

André Malraux. Among the contributors to the "Homages de L'Etranger" section were Frank O'Hara and Bill Berkson, as well as the thirty-four-year old Paris expatriate John Ashbery, then an art critic for *ArtNews* and the *New York Herald Tribune* and the author of two obscure books of poems. Ashbery begins his foreigner's homage, "Reverdy en Amérique," with an account of Reverdy's exalted status in the pantheon of the first generation of New York School poets. For Frank O'Hara, Ashbery writes, Reverdy's name is "une sorte de talisman," while Kenneth Koch considers the French poet to be "un guide spirituel."[41] He then launches into the most memorable, and oft-cited,[42] section of the essay, an attack on Eliot and his followers, in defense of the "transparent, non-philosophical" poetry of Reverdy:

> D'une façon générale, la plus grande partie de la poésie américaine actuelle (et celle de l'Angleterre aussi) languit à l'ombre de T.S. Eliot. Les poètes qui lui ont succédé ont affaibli ou dénaturé le contenu intellectuel de la poésie d'Eliot, mais ils en ont retenu certains aspects superficiels: le langage sec et digne, ou le ton de J. Alfred Prufrock—celui d'un bourgeois sensible dépassé par les événements.
>
> Ce genre de poésie est à l'opposé de celle de Reverdy: transparente, sans <<signification>> philosophique. Donc il n'est pas surprenant que la poésie de Reverdy puisse paraître à certains de mes compatriots, qui ont besoin d'eau et d'air pur, comme une bienfaisante source dans le desert d'intellectualité de la poésie américaine actuelle. . . .[43]

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[41] Ashbery, "Reverdy en Amérique," 109. We will remember, too, the ending of O'Hara's "A Step Away from Them," written on August 16, 1956: "My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy." *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 258.

[42] See Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 35-7; Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 50; Mark Ford, "Mont d'Espoir or Mount Despair: Early Bishop, Early Ashbery, and the French," in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic: Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery*, ed. Lionel Kelly (Amsterdam: Rodopoi, 2000), 15-16; and 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), 197.

[43] Ashbery, "Reverdy en Amérique," 110. "In a general sense, the greater part of contemporary American poetry (and that of England too) languishes in the shadow of T.S. Eliot. The poets who followed him weakened or denatured the intellectual content of Eliot's poetry, but they kept certain superficial aspects: the dry and dignified language, or the tone of J. Alfred Prufrock—that of a sensitive bourgeois overtaken by events.// This genre of poetry is the opposite of that of Reverdy: transparent, without philosophical 'meaning.' So it is not surprising that Reverdy's poetry could seem

Here, as elsewhere, Ashbery proposes an "other tradition" to oppose that of Eliot and his legacy.[44] He condenses his oppositional poetics into the phrase "transparent, without philosophical meaning." Having begun his assault, Ashbery sharpens his argument against Eliotic modernism, boldly bringing Pound, Yeats, and Joyce into the fray as well:

> A l'inverse des écrivains importants de langue anglaise de ce siècle (Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce), Reverdy parvient à restituer aux choses leur vrai nom, à abolir l'éternel poids mort de symbolisme et d'allégorie que excède chez les auteurs que j'ai cités. Dans *The Waste Land* d'Eliot, le monde réel apparaît avec les rêves qui lui sont propres, mais il est toujours artificiellement lié à une signification allégorique—l'usine à gaz et le <<dull canal>>, par exemple. Tandis que chez Reverdy un canal ou une usine sont des phénomènes vivants, ils font partie du monde qui nous entoure, dont le souffle cru se fait sentir partout dans sa poésie. C'est comme si on voyait pour la première fois un paysage naturel, n'ayant vu jusque là que des paysages peints.
>
> J'ai toujours regretté que les rythmes sombres d'Eliot et de Yeats, par exemple, soient au service d'une signification precise, et que leurs élans poétiques—différents, en cela, du faucon de Yeats—soient comme un cerf-volant dont le fil est fermement tenu par le poète rivé à sa terre. Ce que nous enchante chez Reverdy, c'est la pureté de sa poésie, faite de changements, fluctuations, archetypes d'événements, situations idéales, mouvements de formes transparentes, aussi naturels et variés que les vagues de la mer. C'est l'étoffe même de la poésie, sa matière première pure de toute arrière-pensée métaphysique.[45]

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to certain of my compatriots, in need of pure water and air, like a refreshing spring in the desert of intellectualism of contemporary American poetry. . . ." [translations mine unless otherwise specified]

[44] It should be noted, though, that far from adopting a programmatically opposed stance to Eliot, Ashbery prefers to use him as a kind of all-purpose measuring stick for his own artistic values, often casting him in a favorable light. In his essay "Poetical Space," for example, he expresses support for Eliot's "semicoherent daub" technique (discussed in chapter three) in *The Waste Land*, as opposed to the "alchemical" effects of Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott," demonstrates the malleability of his position toward Eliot.

[45] Ibid., 111-12. "In contrast to the important English language writers of this century (Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce), Reverdy succeeds in restoring to things their true name, in abolishing the eternal dead weight of symbolism and allegory which is excessive in the authors I have cited. In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the real world appears with the dreams that are peculiar to it, but it is always artificially tied to an allegorical meaning—the gas-house and the 'dull canal,' for example. Whereas in Reverdy a canal or a factory are living phenomena, they form a part of the world which surrounds us, whose raw wind is felt everywhere in his poetry. It is as if one were seeing for the first time a natural

The recklessness of pitting Reverdy against the titans of Anglophone high modernism could not have been lost on Ashbery. More than a glowing endorsement of Reverdy's work, this passage shows just how eager Ashbery was to find a way around the ossified high modernist modes of Pound, Joyce, Eliot, and Yeats. By abolishing "the eternal dead weight of symbolism and allegory," Reverdy's work offered Ashbery an attractive alternative mode composed of "living phenomena" and "natural landscapes," rather than one "artificially tied to allegorical meaning." In this passage, Ashbery notably emphasizes the "natural" quality of Reverdy's poetry: the French poet restores to objects their "true name"; reading his poems is like seeing a natural landscape for the first time, having only seen painted ones before; the purity of his poetry, its fluctuations, ideal situations, and transparent forms, are as natural and varied as the waves of the sea. We might hear an echo of Clement Greenberg, who more than twenty years earlier had written in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939):

> The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.[46]

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landscape, having seen until then only painted landscapes. // I have always regretted that the somber rhythms of Eliot and Yeats, for example, should be put in the service of a precise meaning, and that their poetic force—different, at that, from Yeats's falcon—should be like a kite whose string is firmly held by poet riveted to his ground. That which enchants us in Reverdy is the purity of his poetry, made of changes, fluctuations, archetypal events, ideal situations, movements of transparent forms, as natural and varied as the waves of the sea. It is the very stuff of poetry, its primary material pure of all metaphysical afterthought."

[46] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 541. In 1965 Ashbery reprinted Greenberg's seminal essay, "Modernist Painting," in issue 4 of *Art and Literature*.

That Ashbery articulates an almost by-the-book "avant-garde" position in his homage to Reverdy does not diminish its impact. His "neo-avant-garde"[47] commitments at this time reflected broader contemporary trends. We might also hear an echo of this position, for instance, in Frank O'Hara's comments in 1959 on Morton Feldman's *Intersection 3 for Piano* (1953). This work "avoids the symbolic aspect of sound which has so plagued the abstract works of [Feldman's] contemporaries," O'Hara writes, and "exists without references outside itself, 'as if you're not listening, but looking at something in nature.'"[48]

In any event, Ashbery was not alone in admiring Reverdy's marriage of language and a kind of robust, lucid naturalism. In the same *Mercure de France* Reverdy issue, Olivier de Magny makes the similar point that, in Reverdy, "le paysage est un poème, le poème est un paysage," adding that "la terre *est* le langage redécouvert, le langage vierge de Reverdy."[49] Other *Mercure de France* contributors also echo Ashbery's emphasis on Reverdy's "transparency." Brassaï, for instance, writes that Reverdy's poems "avaient la transparence, la solidité et la pureté d'un cristal,"[50] while Pierre Schneider observes that Reverdy's work resembles "un peu d'eau dans le creux de la main. . . L'image est si mince qu'à travers elle on en

[47] For a full account of this topic, see Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010).

[48] O'Hara is presumably quoting Feldman. Frank O'Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1983), 116.

[49] "The landscape is a poem, the poem is a landscape"; "the land *is* the rediscovered language, the virgin language of Reverdy." Olivier de Magny, "Pierre Reverdy et la contradiction poétique," *Mercure de France* 344 (January-April 1962): 182.

[50] ". . .had the transparence, solidity, and purity of a crystal. . . ." Brassaï, "Reverdy dans son labyrinth," *Mercure de France* 344 (January-April 1962): 160.

entrevoit une autre, et encore une autre; leur somme, leur succession n'amoncelle pas des trèsors, elle creuse un gouffre transparent."[51]

The overlap between Ashbery's critical comments and the work of his French contemporaries suggests a kind of unofficial critical consensus on Reverdy's achievement in avant-garde circles of the early 1960s that might be summed up by André Malraux's *Mercure de France* statement (recycled from 1920): "Ce qu'il voulait, c'était un poème absolument different du poème symboliste et il le réalisa par la concentration et la synthèse."[52] While the concentration and synthesis of Reverdy's work mattered relatively little to most French and American poets at the time, a few iconoclasts outside the first-generation New York School circle, such as Kenneth Rexroth and, slightly later, Ron Padgett, had discovered and begun to translate it. In the introduction to his 1955 collection of Reverdy translations (the first in English), Rexroth joins Ashbery and many other contributors to the *Mercure de France* memorial issue in praising the unusual clarity of Reverdy's poetry. Like Ashbery, Rexroth sets Reverdy's poetic practice against Eliot's. "The elements, the primary data of the poetic construction" in Reverdy's verse are

> simple, sensory, emotional or primary informative objects capable of little or no further reduction. Eliot works in *The Waste Land* with fragmented and recombined arguments; Pierre Reverdy with dismembered propositions from which subject, operator and object have been wrenched free and restructured into an invisible or subliminal discourse which owes its cogency to its own strict, complex and secret logic.

[51] "Reverdy's work resembles a bit of water in the cup of the hand. . .The image is so thin that through it one sees another, and then another; their sum, their succession does not add up to any treasures, it crosses a transparent gulf." Pierre Schneider, "Vues critiques," *Mercure de France* 344 (January-April 1962): 246.

[52] André Malraux, "Des origines de la poésie cubiste," *Mercure de France* 344 (January-April 1962): 27. "What he wanted was a poem absolutely different than the symbolist poem, and he achieved it by concentration and synthesis."

> Poetry such as this attempts not just a new syntax of the word. Its revolution is aimed at the syntax of the mind itself. Its restructuring of experience is purposive, not dreamlike, and hence it possesses an uncanniness fundamentally different in kind from the most haunted utterances of the Surrealist or Symbolist unconscious.[53]

For Rexroth, as for Ashbery, the dogged clarity and "purposive" (as opposed to automatic, i.e. orthodox Surrealist) restructuring of experience of Reverdy's poetry distinguishes it from the symbolic and allegorical ("haunted") work of the Surrealists and Symbolists. His is a poetics founded on an "invisible or subliminal discourse" that seems to follow a recondite logic all its own. Later, Rexroth places Reverdy's work in the tradition of natural mysticism, a tradition of writing characterized by "vertigo, rapture, transport, crystalline and plangent sounds, shattered and refracted light, indefinite depths, weightlessness, piercing odors and tastes, and synthesizing these sensations and affects, an all-consuming clarity."[54] There is a certain validity to the claim that Reverdy was a kind of mystic; despite his vexed relationship with Catholicism, he spent the last decades of his life living near Solesmes monastery as a layperson. And regardless of whether or not Ashbery would agree to classify Reverdy as a natural mystic, he would certainly recognize the "all-consuming clarity" of the early cubist work.

In their essays, Ashbery, Rexroth and their French contemporaries pay homage to an artist who would be a vital guide out of the institutionalized thicket of academic poetry in the late 1950s and early 60s. At the same time—and this is perhaps the more important point—Reverdy also offered an escape from the limiting

[53] Pierre Reverdy, *Selected Poems*, trans. Kenneth Rexroth (New York: New Directions, 1969), vi-vii.

[54] Ibid., viii.

conventions of Surrealism and "automatic writing."[55] Readers and critics have frequently linked Ashbery to Surrealism, though he has always been ambivalent about its orthodoxies. In 1973, for instance, he told Louis Osti, "I think my poetry was surrealist, in a way, from the beginning. But I don't think there is any direct influence from French surrealist poetry, which, as a rule, I am not very interested in."[56] This claim might sound willfully perverse coming from Ashbery, a self-described "harebrained, homegrown surrealist whose poetry defies even the rules and logic of Surrealism."[57] But Ashbery did not swallow Surrealism whole. For him, the upshot of Surrealism was "la grande permission" (in Henri Michaux's words)[58] that it bequeathed to subsequent artists for choosing their subjects and methods—"la grande permission," that is, to compose in dizains, à la Maurice Scève's *Délie*, or to write a sestina about Popeye, or a book of poems containing collaged material from *Beryl of the Biplane* and American fashion magazines. The "great permission" entailed the choice *not* to use the methods of automatic writing if one should so choose.

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[55] As David LeHardy Sweet notes, "Reverdy distinguishes himself from the Surrealist poets insofar as his experiments with verbal fragments and visual space reveal a degree of conscious deliberation that official Surrealism eschews, opting instead (at least in theory) for the marvels of automatism—a sort of repressed Futurism of the unconscious. . . .Violence and confusion were an unacceptable potentiality, so he reduced the risks by working in a highly controlled environment. . . .This control is evident in the symmetry and clarity of his poetics." Sweet, *Savage Sight*, 130.

[56] Louis Osti, "The Craft of John Ashbery," *Confrontations* 9 (Fall 1974): 86. He adds, "There are a few exceptions, such as Raymond Roussel, who is not really a surrealist, and Pierre Reverdy. He was a surrealist of a kind but not of the hard-core group of Berton [sic], Eluard, and so on."

[57] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 164.

[58] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 398. In interview with Ashbery in 1961, Michaux told Ashbery: "I love the work of Ernst and Klee, but they alone wouldn't have been enough to start me painting seriously. I admire the Americans less—Pollock and Tobey—but they created a climate in which I could express myself. They are instigators. They gave me *la grande permission*—yes, yes, that's very good—*la grande permission*. Just as one values the Surrealists less for what they wrote than for the permission they gave everybody to write whatever comes into their heads."

In "A Note on Pierre Reverdy," published alongside six of his Reverdy translations published in the January-February 1960 issue of *Evergreen Review*, Ashbery had already claimed the French poet as an important alternative to the Surrealist legacy:

> Though Reverdy seems to us a Surrealist poet, we must remember that the Surrealists insisted on automatic writing, that is, poetry written down as rapidly and unthinkingly as possible and which could not be altered later. . . . Automatic writing as practiced by the Surrealists seems to have been merely a euphemism for extreme haste. In any case, most Surrealist poetry (with the exception of some of Éluard's and of a handful of transparent gems by Aragon and Breton which are beautiful precisely because they do not seem to have been written according to the formula) is uninteresting from the standpoint of language, and language is poetry. . . . Reverdy's poetry avoids the disciplines of Surrealist poetry and is the richer for it. He is not afraid to experiment with language and syntax, and it is often difficult to determine whether a particular line belongs with the preceding sentence or the one following it. The lines drift across the page as overheard human speech drifts across our hearing: fragments of conversation, dismembered advertising slogans or warning signs in the Métro appear and remain preserved in the rock crystal of the poem.[59]

Ashbery has stood by this early position on orthodox surrealist procedures throughout his career, stressing constantly the importance of both the unconscious *and* the conscious mind in poetic composition and the need for creative accountability and deliberation. Tellingly, he characterizes his favorite Surrealist work in lapidary terms—Aragon's and Breton's finest poems are "transparent gems," while Reverdy's work elicits comparison with "rock crystal." Underlying these comments is an awareness of and admiration for a certain hard simplicity anchoring

[59] Ashbery, *Selected Prose,* 20-1. On many occasions, Ashbery has criticized the "automatic writing" technique of orthodox Surrealism, as in his *Paris Review* interview: "I don't believe in automatic writing as the Surrealists were supposed to have practiced it, simply because it is not a reflection of the whole mind, which is partly logical and reasonable, and that part should have its say too." Stitt, "Art of Poetry," 197.

the otherwise unmoored imaginative excursions of the Surrealists. Later in his "Note," Ashbery compares Reverdy to the French filmmaker Robert Bresson, who, like the poet, "created an ascetically transparent world" (Sontag also mentions Bresson, along with Renoir and Ozu, as exemplars of "transparence" in the penultimate section of "Against Interpretation").[60] It is a world most readily comparable to the spare, sharp-edged one of *The Tennis Court Oath*, as David Sweet has persuasively shown.[61] Consider for instance the following excerpt from "Europe," in which the jagged margins and emphatic "thingness" of the lines, phrases, and individual words appear in too-clear focus, as in a Reverdy poem:

85.

ghosts of stone—massive
hangs halfway
polishing
whose winding
Strong, sad half-city
gardens
from the bridge of
stair
broom
recent past symbolized
hair banana
does not evoke concrete image
the splendid[62]

[60] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 22.

[61] Sweet, *Savage Sight*, 257-8. Sweet quotes sections 28 and 85 of "Europe" to illustrate its similarities to Reverdy's work. He argues that unlike certain of Reverdy's cubist poems, "in which an architectonic organization is revealed, Ashbery's sections [from "Europe"] present something closer to random gaps in what may once have been a coherent, descriptive line or passage." He adds that "the difficulties of comprehension here [in "Europe"] are less the result of instilling new insights (say, of form, per Reverdy) than of simply withholding information. Yet the incompleteness produces an almost accidental sense of poetic mystery (as well as funny juxtapositions) not unlike that in Reverdy's poems."

[62] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 107.

We might compare this passage with the following excerpt from Ashbery's *Evergreen Review* translation of Reverdy's "A Lot of People":

> Over there is only a black hole
> Through the gate a laughing head
> And in the dust the noise died out
> Cloud
> Chiaroscuro
> Stop breathing
> All the birds are dead
> The sun has collapsed
> Blood flows
> In the water where his eyes were drowning[63]

Ashbery drew this aesthetic of "thinginess" in large part from avant-garde currents surrounding the advent of the *nouveau réalisme*, France's response to Pop Art in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He would start to develop his thinking on this subject in a catalogue essay, also published in 1962, for the "New Realists" exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, a landmark showing of American and European Pop Art.[64] Ashbery begins by defining the "New Realism" as the "European term for the art of today which in one way or another makes use of the qualities of manufactured objects." The "New Realists," he adds, "are at an advanced stage of the struggle to determine the real nature of reality which began at the time of

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[63] This translation is reprinted in *Pierre Reverdy: Selected Poems*, eds. Timothy Bent and Germaine Brée (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), 147. From "Un Tas de Gens": Là ce n'est qu'un trou noir / A travers la barrière une tête qui rit / Et c'est dans la poussière que s'est éteint le bruit / Nuage / Clair-obscur / Cesse de respirer / Tous les oiseaux sont morts / Le soleil s'est crevé / Le sang coule / Dans l'eau où ses yeux se noyaient."

[64] As a practice grounded in the presentation of everyday objects, the rubric of "New Realism," can be traced most directly to a 1926 essay by the painter Fernand Léger, "A New Realism—The Object." Ashbery would almost surely have been aware of this essay, having reviewed Léger's work four times between 14 December 1960 – 17 October 1962 for the *New York Herald Tribune* (Paris Edition). See *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, edited by Herschell B. Chipp, Peter H. Selz, and Joshua C. Taylor. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968. Originally published in *The Little Review* 11, no. 2 (Winter 1926): 7-8.

Flaubert," Ashbery writes, adducing similar aims to other contemporary European art:

> One could point to other examples in the arts today (the "objective" novels of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute, or the importance of objects, especially artifacts, in the recent films of Resnais or Antonioni) of this continuing effort to come to grips with the emptiness of industrialized modern life.[65]

As David Herd observes, Ashbery broadly couches his discussion of the "New Realists" in the "traditionally avant-garde" language of "struggle and industrialized emptiness,"[66] though the specifics of his argument mark it as distinctly his own. Tracing the "New Realism" to the emergence of Dada and, before it, to the introduction of everyday objects into the art of Picasso, Apollinaire, Gris, and others, Ashbery captures the contemporary moment in the familiar terms of "Reverdy en Amérique":

> The explosion of Dada cleared the air by bringing these new materials violently to the attention of the public. Today's New Realists are not neo-Dadaists in the sense that they copy the Dadaists; they are using a language which existed before Dada and has always existed. The way back to this language is what Dada forcibly laid bare. Today it is possible not to speak in metaphors, whereas in the 1920s a poet such as Eliot couldn't evoke a gasworks without feeling obliged to call the whole history of human thought into play. In today's violent reaction to threadbare intellectualism the artist has brought the gasworks into the home.[67]

Here Ashbery forcefully recapitulates his position on Eliot's legacy, which he had already outlined in his Reverdy essay and, as we will see, in his undergraduate thesis on Auden from more than a decade earlier. The "gasworks" once again makes an appearance as the token image of contemporary art set free from "threadbare

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[65] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 81.

[66] David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 74.

[67] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 82.

intellectualism." By turning attention to everyday objects and other "new materials," the *nouveau réalisme*, like the *nouveau roman*, gains access to a non-figurative mode of expression consonant with the demands of the "emptiness of industrialized life." "But why *the* object? Why are objects any more or less important than anything else," Ashbery asks:

> 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. . . . What these artists are doing is calling attention with singular effectiveness to the ambiguity of the artistic experience; to the crucial confusion about the nature of art, which, let us remember, has never been properly defined.[68]

I would draw attention here to the rhetoric of "emptiness," "neutrality," and "ambiguity" with which Ashbery frames his discussion of the "New Realists." More than simply denouncing the vacuity of modern life, these concepts are congruent with the "transparent" poetics as I have defined it. For Ashbery, the pure products of post-industrial society might be void of human warmth, but, *détourned* from their usual contexts, they may also assume a "mysterious opacity."[69]

New forms of realism were on Ashbery's mind even before the 1962 Janis Gallery show. In February 1961, he composed "The New Realism," which appeared the next year in the winter 1962 issue of *Locus Solus* and in *The Tennis Court Oath*.

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[68] Ibid., 82.

[69] Ashbery is very conscious of the "mystery and opacity" produced by "New Realist" treatment of objects outside of normal contexts: "The sight of a fire hydrant may give me an aesthetic pleasure keener than the sight of the 'Mona Lisa'; both in fact are objects, things external to myself which accumulate the electrodes of my feelings on a number of subjects. As the French critic Françoise Choay points out, speaking of Duchamp: 'On one side the product of industry is denounced in its anonymity, its banality, its essential poverty which deprives it of human and poetic qualifications. On the other hand it still remains an object which a simple decision on the part of the spectator can tear out from its context to give it mystery and opacity. . . . The ready-made is satire, but at the same time it is also a proposition of asceticism and conversion.'" Ibid., 82.

Featuring a litany of more or less discrete images, the poem suggests a verbal analogue to "New Realist" *décollage*: "a torn page with a passionate oasis."[70] In fact, Ashbery had already identified elements of *décollage* in his 1960 *Evergreen Review* essay on Reverdy, whose lines include "fragments of conversation, dismembered advertising slogans or warning signs in the Métro." Though less aggressively disjunctive than other *Tennis Court Oath* collages like "Europe" and "Idaho," "The New Realism" makes, at best, a fitful kind of sense. Meaning tends to terminate at the line break:

> The tree streamed with droppings
> Mountain air the subject of our three conversations
> The child skipped happily over
> The western pages—even better than it is
> Stones of day
> Police formed a boundary to the works
> Where we played
> A torn page with a passionate oasis. . .

Blending the quotidian and the exotic ("the scooter and the Ethiop had gotten away"), the poem is an exercise in constant, often violent shifts of context and scale. It is a vast collage of objects, real and fanciful, proclaiming the simple fact that "all kinds of things exist." One moment we find ourselves at "a gray Niagara" and the next we are "under the crushed water on the rock."[71] The poem concludes with a rush of landscape images, recalling the cataclysmic middle section of "Haunted Landscape":

> The zinnias
> Had never looked better—red, yellow, and blue
> They were, and the forget-me-nots and dahlias

[70] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 87.
[71] Ibid., 88.

> At least sixty different varieties
> As the shade went up
> And the ambulance came crashing through the dust
> Of the new day, the moon and the sun and the stars,
> And the iceberg slowly sank
> And the volcano and the sea ran far away
> Yellow over the hot sand, green as the green trees.[72]

"The New Realism" offers a prime example of Ashbery making his way toward the "synthetic" style of his middle years, which, as chapter three shows, he would pioneer so brilliantly in the litany of rivers in "Into the Dusk-Charged Air."

Ashbery seems to have intuited the formal advances of "The New Realism" (both the art movement and the poem) as early as his Harvard senior thesis on Auden. The close reading of *The Sea and the Mirror* in the final chapter of his thesis, "The Poetic Medium of W.H. Auden" (1949), shows that as an undergraduate he had already arrived at the critical position and language he would later apply to so many of his favorite artists. Auden, it seems, was the first poet to whom he would attribute "transparent" qualities:

> The writing in "The Sea and the Mirror" is the closest to perfection that Auden has ever attained. The roughness and obscurity of his earlier work has entirely disappeared; what we have now is a style, smooth, alive, different, and beautifully equipped for its task. . . .What I mean is that 'the style which is no style'. . .is a style in which clarity, transparency, wit, verbal decoration, and imagery are all superbly functional, so much so as to be invisible.[73]

In this passage, Ashbery flips critic Francis Scarfe's denigration of Auden's "style which is no style" into a compliment Ashbery himself would covet. Later, he sets Auden in favorable opposition to Eliot, echoing in almost every particular the

[72] Ibid., 91.

[73] John Ashbery, "The poetic medium of W.H. Auden," Ashbery Papers, Houghton Library Collection, Harvard University, AM-6, box 31, 28.

argument he would level against Eliot in "Reverdy en Amérique," and in his entry for the "New Realism" catalogue:

> Mr. Eliot, it is true, introduced the tired clerk and the gasworks to poetry, but in his hands they are general and symbolic; not corresponding to the reality we know. Auden, on the other hand, has particularized them for us by presenting them in a language that is neither stylized and over-literary nor a too-hearty imitation of everyday speech; and when he generalizes them he makes them personify certain immediately grasped and vital ideas.[74]

By 22, Ashbery had more or less lighted on his mature critical position vis-à-vis Eliotic modernism. And given the vast differences between Auden and Reverdy, the thesis showcases Ashbery's eagerness to find viable non-Eliotic influences wherever he could. In this passage Auden serves exactly the same role that Reverdy would serve thirteen years later, that of a "transparent, non-philosophical" alternative to Eliot. Noteworthy, too, is the fact that he comments both in this passage and in *Mercure de France* on the peculiar unreality of the gashouse in *The Waste Land*, a detail that evidently lodged itself in his imagination. The differences Ashbery detected between Eliot and Auden might appear in sharper relief when we read them alongside each other. Here is the "gashouse" passage from "The Fire Sermon":

> A rat crept softly through the vegetation
> Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
> While I was fishing in the dull canal
> On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
> Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
> And on the king my father's death before him.[75]

And here is an excerpt from "Caliban to the Audience," Ashbery's favorite section of *The Sea and the Mirror*:

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[74] Ibid., 32.
[75] Eliot, *Complete Poem*s, 67.

> All the voluntary movements are possible—crawling through flues and old sewers, sauntering past shop-fronts, tiptoeing through quicksands and mined areas, running through derelict factories and across empty plains, jumping over brooks, diving into pools or swimming along between banks of roses, pulling at manholes or pushing at revolving doors, clinging to rotten balustrades, sucking at straws or wounds; all the modes of transport, letters, oxcarts, canoes, hansom cabs, trains, trolleys, cars, aeroplanes, balloons, are available, but any sense of direction, any knowledge of where on earth one has come from or where on earth one is going to is completely absent.[76]

While both passages evoke a kind of creeping post-industrial squalor, Eliot's "gashouse" and "dull canal" assert a symbolic resonance, owing to *The Waste Land*'s larger mythopoeic structure, absent in Auden's "derelict factories" and "empty plains," which are laid down in haphazard fashion as items in a larger list. Eliot's spectral lyric "I" and careful prosody— the alternating ten- and eleven-syllable lines; the trochaic participles "dragging," "fishing," and "musing" (recalling the first lines of the poem); the calculated nominal end words—markedly contrast with Auden's impersonal, breathless prose line in which "all voluntary movements are possible." In short, Auden's frenetic vision of modern madness, though comparable to Eliot's in many respects, is not underwritten by any mythic method. This is not to set Eliot up as a straw man—he has been very important to Ashbery, as chapter three shows—but rather to emphasize Auden's care in not modeling himself on Eliot. There lurks in much of Ashbery's work an eagerness to reproduce Auden's effects of "clarity, transparency, wit, verbal decoration, and imagery," which achieve such a superbly "invisible" functionality in *The Sea and the Mirror*. For Ashbery,

[76] W.H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror: A Poem*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 48.

Auden's transparent, "particularized" poetic medium—or at least the thought of it—proved deeply sympathetic to his artistic ambitions.

Ashbery's early critical insights into Auden's style proved momentous. He would go on to reapply and refine these insights not only in his Reverdy and "New Realism" essays but also in his writings on Roussel and de Chirico. Ashbery discovered Roussel's *La Vue* in the early 1950s through the good offices of Kenneth Koch, and his early exposure blossomed into a lifelong passion. After completing his master's degree in French literature at NYU, he made his way to Paris for a second time in the late 1958 under the pretext of writing a doctoral dissertation on Roussel. Though his project eventually lost steam, Ashbery did succeed in gathering much research material and in meeting members of Roussel's family, earning a reputation around Paris as "ce fou d'américain qui s'intéresse à Roussel." He went on to make some important contributions to Roussel studies, including the discovery of a lost manuscript, *Documents pour servir de canevas*, which he edited and translated. He has translated various other Roussel works over the years.

Though at mid-century Roussel was mostly forgotten in France (and completely unknown in America), his work had already attracted the attention of the first-generation Surrealists and Dadaists and, later, that of Michel Foucault, who published his early study, *Raymond Roussel*, in 1963. Foucault observed that Roussel's various literary "appareils," or devices, appeared "d'une façon plus ou moins claire, avec plus ou moins de densité." Such writing projects an "image invisiblement visible, perceptible mais non déchiffrable, donneé en un éclair et sans

lecture possible," and offers nothing more than "le mutisme d'une page blanche."[77] Roussel's *écriture blanche* had also attracted the notice of the *nouveaux romanciers*; Michel Butor published an essay, "Sur les procédés de Raymond Roussel,"[78] in 1950, while Alain Robbe-Grillet included a thoughtful piece on "Enigmes et Transparence chez Raymond Roussel" in his influential 1963 essay collection, *Pour un nouveau roman*. "Aucune transcendance, aucun dépassement humaniste," writes Robbe-Grillet of Roussel, "ne peuvent s'appliquer aux séries d'objects, de gestes et événements qui constituent, dès la première vue, son univers."[79] Roussel, like Reverdy, eschewed symbolism and allegory in his writing, creating an effect Robbe-Grillet describes as "opaque et décevante."

> Voyons d'abord l'opacité. C'est, aussi bien, une excessive transparence. Comme il n'y a jamais rien au-delà de la chose décrite, c'est-à-dire qu'aucune sur-nature ne s'y cache, aucun symbolisme (ou alors c'est un symbolisme aussitôt proclamé, expliqué, détruit), le regard est bien obligé de s'arrêter à la surface même des choses. . . .Une transparence totale, qui ne laisse subsister ni ombre ni reflet, cela revient en fait à une peinture en trompe-l'oeil. Plus s'accumulent les précisions, la minutie, les détails de forme et de dimension, plus l'objet perd de sa profondeur. C'est donc ici une opacité sans mystère: ainsi que derrière une toile de fond, il n'y a rien derrière ces surfaces, pas d'intérieur, pas de secret, pas d'arrière-pensée.[80]

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[77] "More or less clear, with more or less [the same] density." "An invisibly visible image, perceptible but not decipherable, given in a flash and lacking any possible reading." "The muteness of a blank page." Michel Foucault, *Raymond Roussel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 75-6.

[78] Michel Butor, *Essais sur les moderns* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 199-221.

[79] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 70. "No transcendence, no humanist metamorphosis can be applied to the series of objects, gestures, and events which constitute, at first glance, his universe." Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 79.

[80] Robbe-Grillet, *Nouveau roman*, 71. "Let us consider first the opacity. It is, quite as much, an excessive transparency. Since there is never anything beyond the thing described, that is, since no supernature is hidden in it, no symbolism (or else a symbolism immediately proclaimed, explained, destroyed), the eye is forced to rest on the very surface of things. . . . A total transparency, which allows neither shadow nor reflection to subsist, this amounts, as a matter of fact, to a *trompe-l'oeil* painting. The more that scruples, specifications, details of shape and size accumulate, the more the object loses its depth. What we get, then, is an opacity without mystery: as behind a painted back

Though Roussel never breaks the rules of French syntax, as Reverdy does, his writing resembles Reverdy's poetry in its lack of what Ashbery and Robbe-Grillet would call "arrière-pensées metaphysiques." The writing is marked by a complete lack of symbolism or allegory. "Stylistically," Mark Ford writes, "his work is lucidity itself. It contains no symbols, obscurities or metaphors that we need explained."[81] The pure, mystery-less opacity of Roussel's work constitutes, then, a condition of transparency; its content, though often diffuse in the extreme (one thinks of the swarming parenthetical asides in *Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique*), exists solely on the surface and for its own sake. As Robbe-Grillet writes, "la signification trop transparente rejoint la totale opacité"—the too-transparent meaning becomes a total opacity.

While in Paris, Ashbery took an interest in the emergent *nouveau roman*, favorably reviewing Butor's *La modification* (1957) in 1958 and comparing it to Roussel's book-length poem *La source* (1900).[82] In his review, he cites a "significant passage" from Butor's novel which returns us to the question of "real" and "painted" landscapes that he would broach four years later in "Reverdy en Amérique." Butor's narrator describes a visit to the Louvre, where he marvels at the "third-rate" paintings of Pannini featuring salons with landscape paintings covering the walls and distinguished "personages" promenading

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cloth, there is nothing behind these surfaces, no inside, no secret, no hidden motive." Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, 81.

[81]Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), xxii.

[82]Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 17.

> en faisant des gestes d'admiration, d'intérêt, de surprise, de perplexité, comme les visiteurs dans la Sixtine, avec ceci de remarquable qu'il n'y a aucune différence de matière sensible entre les objets représentés comme réels et ceux représentés comme peints, comme s'il avait voulu figurer sur ses toiles la réussite de ce projet commun à tant d'artistes de son temps: donner un equivalent absolu de la réalite, le chapiteau peint devenant indiscernable du chapiteau réel, a part le cadre qui l'entoure. . . .[83]

Ashbery kept up with contemporary developments, and almost certainly read Robbe-Grillet's Roussel essay at the time of its publication. He went on to cite it thirty years later in his Norton Lecture on Roussel:

> As Robbe-Grillet says of Roussel: "The clarity, the transparency, exclude the existence of other worlds behind things, and yet we discover that we can't get out of this world. Everything is at a standstill, everything is always happening all over again." He argues: "Here we have the perfect reversal of what people agree to call a good writer: Raymond Roussel has nothing to say, and he says it badly." One could quarrel with this. If 'nothing' means a labyrinth of brilliant stories told only for themselves, then perhaps Roussel has nothing to say. Does he say it badly? Well, he writes like a mathematician: his prose, in the words of Michel Leiris, "is French prose as one is taught to write it in the manuals of lycées." In other words, it is a totally neutral medium for the "nothing" he is telling us.[84]

Though he has not recapitulated Roussel's paronomasic "procédé"[85] in his own work, Ashbery has developed his own variant of Roussel's "totally neutral medium" for the "nothing" he has to tell us. The reference to the Surrealist poet and Roussel scholar Michel Leiris here is also telling: Ashbery met Leiris while conducting his doctoral research on Roussel in the late 1950s, and published his English translation

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[83] Ibid., 18. ". . .making gestures of admiration, interest, surprise, perplexity, like visitors to the Sistine Chapel, with the remarkable fact that there is no difference of sensible material between the objects represented as real and those represented as painted, as he [Pannini] wanted to figure on his canvases the success of that project common to so many artists of his time: to give an absolute equivalent to reality, the painted marquee becoming indistinguishable from the real marquee, aside from the frame that surrounds it. . . ." [my translation]

[84] Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 67-8.

[85] A notable exception to this would be his early "The Instruction Manual," which he has linked to Roussel. Mark Ford provides the definitive account in English of Roussel's sibylline "procédé" in *Raymond Roussel*.

of Leiris' essay "Conception and Reality in the Work of Raymond Roussel" in the Summer 1964 issue of *Art and Literature* (a short-lived but impressively wide-ranging journal he co-edited from 1964-67). Responding to Robbe-Grillet's essay of the previous year, Leiris informs readers that "it should be noted that [his] abstention from any strictly stylistic effects led Roussel to an extraordinary transparency of style."[86] He goes on to differentiate Roussel's work from that of orthodox Surrealism along similar lines as Ashbery, questioning "the abandon, pure and simple, implied by the use of a process like automatic writing."[87] Ashbery would be sympathetic to these views. In a 1962 introduction to an unpublished Roussel text, "In Havana," he writes: "As regards style, the text ["In Havana"] has the same radical concision and the peculiar transparency of *Documents*," and praises the way in which Roussel "submits his sentences to processes of condensation that result in amazing verbal crystallizations."[88]

Along with Reverdy and Roussel, Giorgio de Chirico has been one of the primary French influences on Ashbery's work, despite the fact that he was not a native French speaker. The Italian-born de Chirico, most famous for his early Surrealist paintings featuring desolate cityscapes and alluring juxtapositions of objects like rubber gloves, Greek statuary, and tailor's dummies, also authored *Hebdomeros* (1929), which Ashbery considers the finest Surrealist novel.[89] In this astonishing fictional phantasmagoria, de Chirico invents a French style composed of

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[86]Michel Leiris, "Conception and Reality in the Work of Raymond Roussel," trans. John Ashbery, *Art and Literature* 2 (Summer 1964): 19.

[87]Ibid., 19-20.

[88] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 48-9.

[89] Ibid., 88.

breathless run-on sentences connected by semicolons, set in a constantly evolving series of landscapes and situations, all detailing the exploits of the novel's eponymous hero, who never quite merges into view. Ashbery translated large portions of *Hebdomeros* as well as various other de Chirico prose fragments, which he published in *Art and Literature* and elsewhere.[90] In his 1966 review of the Four Seasons Book Society's English translation of *Hebdomeros,* Ashbery praises de Chirico's language, which, "like his painting, is invisible: a transparent but dense medium":

> The hypnotic quality of *Hebdomeros* proceeds from de Chirico's incredible prose style. His long run-on sentences, stitched together with semicolons, allow a cinematic freedom of narration; the setting and the cast of characters frequently change in mid-clause. In this fluid medium, trivial images or details can suddenly congeal and take on a greater specific gravity, much as a banal object in a de Chirico painting—a rubber glove or an artichoke—can rivet our attention merely through being present. His language, like his painting, is invisible: a transparent but dense medium containing objects that are more dense than reality.[91]

And so de Chirico, like Reverdy and Roussel, achieves a "transparent" style that resists symbolic orders of meaning and simply allows his objects to be what they are. We might recall here Ashbery's observation four years earlier that Reverdy's poetry "restores to objects their true name." As I show in the following section, the concept of a "transparent but dense medium" would play a central role in the poetry and translations that followed *The Tennis Court Oath*.

[90] These translation are collected in *Hebdomeros* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1992).
[91] Ibid., 90

III. "French Poems": Ashbery's French Translations

"French Poems" bridges Ashbery's experiments of the early 1960s and the elevated lyric mode he would pioneer in *Rivers and Mountains* and perfect in the work that followed. Originally composed in French for the purpose of being translated back into English, the poem was written in the mid-sixties and published in the Autumn 1966 edition of *Tel Quel* (in French) and spring 1967 edition of *Art and Literature* (in English), before appearing in *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970). In a note appended to the English text, Ashbery writes: "I wrote the group of 'French poems' in French and translated them myself into English, with the idea of avoiding customary word-patterns and associations." What he succeeded in composing was an unusually beautiful poem caught in a state of semantic limbo between English and French.

"French Poems" has an unusual place in Ashbery's oeuvre, being a poem that arrives at an original via a translation. In "Légèreté et Richesse: John Ashbery's English 'French Poems,'" Sara Lundquist rightly reads the bilingual "French Poems" as a central Ashbery text, one "paradigmatic of communication itself" which "dramatizes some central linguistic concerns of his work as a whole."[92] Lundquist goes on to suggest certain affinities between the achievement of "French Poems" and Walter Benjamin's concept of "pure language," formulated in "The Task of the Translator." Indeed, Benjamin's challenging reverie on translation offers a useful

[92]Sara L. Lundquist, "Légèreté et Richesse: John Ashbery's English French Poems," *Contemporary Literature* XXXII: 3 (1991), 403-20 (p. 405).

critical framework within which to consider the achievement—the peculiar transparency—of "French Poems." Benjamin writes that

> it is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language. Rather, the significance of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that the work reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation A real translation is transparent [durchscheinend]; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade.[93]

By Benjamin's reckoning, interlinear translations of the bible represent "the prototype or ideal of all translation."[94] While there is no evidence that Benjamin's essay planted the seeds for "French Poems" in Ashbery's mind, the "transparent" quality that Benjamin attributes to "real translations" fits the mutually interlinear versions of "French Poems" like a glove.[95] Though preoccupied with the central existential questions of the ages—"whence does all this come? and again:/ Shall I some day be a part of all this fullness?"[96]—"French Poems" is, of course, not a religious text. At the same time, it does come very close to the condition of interlinear translation, as side-by-side analysis of the French and English texts shows:

> But this hope (which doesn't exist) is
> Mais cet espoir (qui n'existe pas) est
>
> Precisely a form of suspended birth,

[93]Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 79.

[94]Ibid., 82.

[95]Ashbery was, however, certainly familiar with Benjamin's work, having published a translated excerpt from "A Berlin Childhood" in the Spring 1965 issue of *Art and Literature* (4), around the time he composed "French Poems."

[96]Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 200.

Précisément une forme de naissance suspendue.

Of that *invisible light* which spatters the silence
De cette *lumière invisible* qui éclabousse le silence

Of our everyday festivities. A glebe which has pursued
De nos journalières fêtes. Une glèbe qui a poursuive

Its intentions of duration at the same time as reinforcing
Ses intentions de durée tout en renforçant

Its basic position so that it is now
Ses positions de base jusqu'à être à présent

A boiling crater, form of everything that is beautiful for us.
Une cratère bouillant, forme de tout ce qui est beau pour nous.[97]

Without recourse to an "original" text, the French and English are, awkwardly enough, interlinear translations of each other, existing in a state comparable to Benjaminian "pure translation." Lacking the authority of this hypothetical "original," the poems—really a single bilingual text—interpret and become transparent to each other; their "meaning" lies in the nonexistent linguistic space that readers inevitably search for between them. Still, this nonexistent space proves to be a "refreshing vacancy."[98] As Lundquist notes, "The common ground where English and French speak in unison can be an ambient space 'full of attentions,' of true naming qualities, where 'we' are recognized and valued."[99] The subject of "French Poems," then, can be said to be the "*invisible light* that spatters the silence" between the English and French texts. "*Invisible light*" is the poem's only italicized phrase; in being set apart this way, it becomes a kind of organizing principle.

[97]Ashbery, *Collected Poems,* 200; John Ashbery, "Poèmes Français," *Tel Quel* 27 (Automne 1966).
[98] Mark Ford, "A New Kind of Emptiness," *PN Review* 99, 21: 1 (1994), 54.
[99]Lundquist, "*Légèreté et Richesse*," 412-13.

But what sort of organizing principle is it? More than an experiment in "pure translation," "French Poems" is a prime example of Ashbery's use of charged yet neutral language that reproduces the pyrotechnics of the romantic and Transcendentalist visionary modes without reproducing their content. There is an Emersonian resonance to lines like the following: "And it does seem that all the force of / the cosmic temperature lives in the form of contacts / that no intervention could resolve,/ even that of a creator returned to the desolate / scene of this first experiment: this microcosm."[100] Harold Bloom, for one, offers a rather different (and no less accurate) definition of the suggestive "*invisible light*" which Ashbery invokes: "[Ashbery] seems most himself when most ruefully and intensely Transcendental, the almost involuntary celebrator 'of that *invisible light* which spatters the silence/ Of our everyday festivities.'"[101] But trying to parse the exact meaning of these lines, we come up empty.

This emptiness is, however, a familiar enough hallmark of the Ashberyan poetic landscape as I have defined it. In Mark Ford's words, this landscape is "apprehended as the site of quotidian impositions of varying types of possible significance, but is itself neutral."[102] It is in light of this broader formulation of the "neutral landscape" of Ashbery's poems that we might interpret the non-specified landscapes which emerge in Part Four of "French Poems":

> Everything is landscape:
> Perspectives of cliffs beaten by innumerable waves.
> More wheatfields than you can count, forests

[100]Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 200.
[101]Bloom, *Modern Critical Views*, 8.
[102] Ford, "A New Kind of Emptiness," 54.

> With disappearing paths, stone towers
> And finally and above all the great urban centers, with
> Their office buildings and populations, at the center of which
> We live our lives, made up of a great quantity of isolated instants
> So as to be lost at the heart of a multitude of things.[103]

In "French Poems," as in so many other Ashbery poems, time is transformed into space; experience and emotion are figured in a landscape. "Now time and the land are identical,/ linked forever,"[104] concludes "Haunted Landscape." And so it is with "French Poems," a poem that vibrates invisibly between two languages and whose universally comprehensible topography—"Everything is landscape"—has folded into it a quasi-existentialist allegory of human existence:

> But the existence of all these things and especially
> The amazing fullness of their number must be
> For us a source of unforgettable questions:
> Such as: whence does all this come? and again:
> Shall I some day be a part of all this fullness?[105]

Lundquist observes "a kind of homeliness to the landscape language of the poem, an assumption that elements of landscape are self-evident and self-evidently connected to the ways 'we live our lives." She adds that "we recognize human archetypes and can concede to be part of the 'we' that cannot help but read human import into landscape irrespective of the language we use to present it."[106] Thus, a "perspective of cliffs beaten by innumerable waves" will summon for English and French speakers alike a sense of battered glory. As the pathetic fallacy leads us to read symbolic meaning into a natural landscape, so, Ashbery seems to imply, our readerly

[103]Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 201.
[104]Ibid., 667.
[105]Ibid., 200.
[106]Lundquist, *Légèreté et Richesse*, 414.

habits will lead us to read meaning into the transparent facticity—the "*invisible light*"—of his text and its "perspectives of cliffs beaten by innumerable waves," "wheatfields," and "forests with disappearing paths."

Landscape is a crucial theme in Ashbery's dialogue with French. Beyond "French Poems," its importance is most clearly reflected in Ashbery's translations of Pierre Martory's poems, collected in *The Landscape is Behind the Door* and *The Landscapist* (both the titles of Martory poems). Indeed, Martory's strongest poems, such as "The Landscapist" ("Le Paysagiste"), sound as if they were lifted directly from Ashbery's "French Poems" (or vice versa). Here is an excerpt from Ashbery's translation of the last stanza:

> You need only open your mind to the palpable
> Evidence, each curiosity wrapped around each thing,
> Each desire content to be realizable—perhaps—
> Somewhere else than under crushing infinity
> All the possible fantasies, lakes, cliffs,
> Innumerable variety of verdure changing with the weather
> Which will have to be counted, qualified with as many nuances
> As they contain, and populated [. . .][107]

In the introduction to his translations, Ashbery observes that both he and Martory "shared an enthusiasm for Raymond Roussel, whose otherworldly landscapes are perhaps 'behind the door,'" adding that Martory's "dreams, his pessimistic résumés of childhood that are suddenly lanced by a joke, his surreal loves, his strangely lit landscapes with their inquisitive birds and disquieting flora, have been fertile

[107]Pierre Martory, *The Landscapist*, trans. John Ashbery (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), 111. In this translation, more so than in many of his other French translations, Ashbery's recognizable voice overpowers somewhat the more tentative original: "Que l'esprit s'ouvre aux evidences palpables,/ Chaque curiosité autour de chaque chose enrouleé,/ Chaque désir satisfait d'être realizable—peut-être— / Quelque part ailleurs que sous l'écrasant infini,/ Toutes les fantaisies possibles, lacs, rochers,/ Variété innombrable de verdures, changeant avec le temps,/ Qu'il faudra dénombrer, qualifier avec autant / De nuances qu'elle en comporte, et peupler—". Ibid., 110.

influences for me. . . ." Finally, Ashbery compares Martory to "fringe" Surrealists like Reverdy and Queneau, and observes that "both the humor and the sadness in his poems are always rendered with an unemphatic clarity."[108] This "unemphatic clarity" signals Martory's place among Ashbery's pantheon of favorite "transparent" writers.

The Landscapist was published in 2008. The year before, Ashbery published the first English translation of Reverdy's *Haunted House* ("Maison Hantée"), a long prose poem originally published in *Risques et périls* (1930). The translation is an important late work in Ashbery's oeuvre which critics have as yet mostly neglected. While *Haunted House* invites comparison with Lautréamont's proto-Surrealist *Chants de Maldoror* in its atmospheric hint of evil, its real counterpart among Ashbery's chosen works is *Hebdomeros* (*Haunted House* was written in 1928, a year before de Chirico's novel). Indeed, its run-on sentences, involuted metaphysical reveries, and rapidly shifting landscapes call to mind not only de Chirico's prose masterpiece but also Ashbery's *Three Poems*:

> There is no longer any common measure between the one who sees and the one who is seen; between the one who speaks and the one who hears. Confusion and doubt continually guide our steps. Pleasure is a king in the vacuum. Soon a marvelous, limpid and dazzling chime is heard in the distance, marking the hour.
>
> But within this music whose harmonies are so new, it is never possible to take into consideration the concept of number. Time is no longer divisible. Remarks flow along the surface of the ether, and the cruelest witticisms float motionless on their wings for a long time. Without the law of gravity all this gratuitous gossip would vanish into sparks. But here everything becomes luminous; like a brutal shepherd the magic lamp chases away the shadows. The walls are rays, gestures are more luminous in this world where only

[108]Martory, *The Landscapist*, xx-xxi.

> images live. On the slopes, groups of people mingle among the cliffs and springs of this magnificent landscape.[109]

As I will show in the following section, the endlessly evolving "haunted" themes in Reverdy's prose poem—"And suddenly I became so insignificant that I disappeared entirely: I became totally invisible"; "An innate brightness bathed everything and rendered all flesh transparent"[110]—find a kind of corollary in the ghostly evocations of self and landscape in poems like "Clepsydra," "Pyrography," and "Haunted Landscape."

Finally worth mentioning is Ashbery's 2011 translation of Rimbaud's *Illuminations,* the capstone to his career-long dialogue with modern French poetry. Commentators from W.H. Auden to Marjorie Perloff, among many others, have cited this book's foundational importance to Ashbery, who himself places it "somewhere at the root" of all twentieth-century experimental art:

> The self is obsolete: In Rimbaud's famous formulation, "I is someone else" ("*Je est un autre*"). In the twentieth century, the coexisting, conflicting views of objects that the Cubist painters cultivated, the equalizing deployment of all notes on the scale in serial music, and the unhierarchical progressions of bodies in motion in the ballets of Merce Cunningham are three examples among many of this fertile destabilization. Somewhere at the root of this, the crystalline jumble of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, like a disordered collection of magic lantern slides, each an "intense and rapid dream," in his words, is still emitting pulses. If we are absolutely modern—and we are—it's because Rimbaud commanded us to be.[111]

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[109]Pierre Reverdy, *Haunted House*, trans. John Ashbery (New York: Black Square Editions, 2007), 33. See Pierre Reverdy. *Risques et périls* (Paris: Flammarion, 1972), 160-1.

[110]Reverdy, *Haunted House,* 25; 44.

[111] Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations*, trans. with a preface by John Ashbery (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 16.

From the "rock crystal" of Reverdy's poems to the "crystalline jumble" of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, Ashbery draws on the magical lucidity of the experimental French tradition.

IV. "I am only a transparent diagram": "Clepsydra" and Other Poems

"Clepsydra" (Greek for "water clock") is one of the last poems Ashbery wrote in France. Like "French Poems," it is a key transitional work from *The Tennis Court Oath* to *Rivers and Mountains*, and is perhaps his most successful attempt to fashion a "transparent, non-philosophical" style to rival that of de Chirico, Roussel, and others. In this poem, which Ashbery visualized as being "all of a piece, like a stream,"[112] form and content merge into a mysteriously self-conscious substance, an "empty yet personal / landscape, which has the further advantage of being / what surrounds without insisting." "The content of the clepsydra is a transparent medium," Ben Lerner writes, "the content is pure form, and Ashbery's labyrinthine sentences derive their force less from their paraphrasable content than the way they measure time with their flow."[113] Here is a medium-length passage which illustrates this effect:

> There was only a breathless waste,
> A dumb cry shaping everything in projected
> After-effects orphaned by playing the part intended for them,
> Though one must not forget that the nature of this
> Emptiness, these previsions,
> Was that it could only happen here, on this page held
> Too close to be legible, sprouting erasures, except that they
> Ended everything in the transparent sphere of what was

[112]Richard Kostelanetz, *The Old Poetries and the New* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 101.

[113] Ben Lerner, "The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy," *boundary 2*, (Spring 2010): 204.

Intended only a moment ago, spiraling further out, its
Gesture finally dissolving in the weather.
It was the long way back out of sadness
Of that first meeting: a half-triumph, an imaginary feeling
Which still protected its events and pauses, the way
A telescope protects its view of distant mountains
And all they include, the coming and going,
Moving correctly up to other levels, preparing to send the night
There where the tiny figures halt as darkness comes on,
Beside some loud torrent in an empty yet personal
Landscape, which has the further advantage of being
What surrounds without insisting, the very breath so
Honorably offered, and accepted in the same spirit.[114]

Something interesting happens if we take these lines as a commentary on their own unfolding. As we read this "empty yet personal / landscape," this "transparent sphere of what was intended a moment ago," we find that it is already reading itself to us in "the time of its being furthered," producing a sensation of uncanny doubleness:

To have this to be constantly coming back from—
Nothing more, really, than surprise at your absence
And preparing to continue the dialogue into
Those mysterious and near regions that are
Precisely the time of its being furthered.[115]

It is as if "Clepsydra" were narrating, in real-time, its own relentless coming into being, "here on this page held / too close to be legible." Lerner terms this effect "lyric mediacy," arguing that "Ashbery's best poetry. . .seems to narrate what it's like to read Ashbery's best poetry, and when his work manages to describe the time of its own reading in the time of its own reading, we experience mediacy

[114]Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 142.
[115] Ibid., 141.

immediately."[116] Ashbery's readers will be familiar with this "immediate" doubling effect as one which he continuously revisits (and theorizes) in his poems. Consider, again, the first lines of "Wet Casements":

> The concept is interesting: to see, as though reflected
> In streaming windowpanes, the look of others through
> Their own eyes. A digest of their correct impressions of
> Their self-analytical attitudes overlaid by your
> Ghostly transparent face.[117]

And the following passage from "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," which makes reference to Freud's exemplar of uncanniness, E.T.A. Hoffmann:

> What is novel is the extreme care in rendering
> The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface
> (It is the first mirror portrait),
> So that you could be fooled for a moment
> Before you realize the reflection
> Isn't yours. You feel then like one of those
> Hoffmann characters who have been deprived
> Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
> Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
> Otherness of the painter in
> His other room. We have surprised him
> At work, but no, he has surprised us
> As he works.[118]

Similarly, "Clepsydra" surprises us by reading itself to us as we read it. The mirrors in both Ashbery passages above bear comparison to Johns's and Noland's target paintings, as Altieri interprets them; they are calculated to make us aware of ourselves at the moment we become aware of them. Lerner picks up on the mirroring effect in Ashbery and the way it has us "attend to our attention":

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[116] Lerner, "Future Continuous," 204.
[117] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 508.
[118] Ibid., 479-80.

> His poems are glosses on poems we can't access; it's as if the "real" poem were written on the other side of a mirrored surface: when we read, we see only the reflection of our reading. But by reflecting our reading, Ashbery's poems allow us to attend to our attention, to "experience our experience"; they offer what we might call lyric mediacy.

Reading "Clepsydra" we see our own "ghostly transparent face" reflected in the poem's "self-analytical attitudes" and undergo the eerie sensation of hearing the poem reading our reading of it back to us, which produces a "strange experience of presence."[119] The poem notably contrives this mirroring effect within an "empty yet personal landscape"—featuring "fronds," a waterfall", an "invisible fountain," "the edge of a harbor," a "torrent," "rocks and foliage," "sky," "clouds," "the ether," "the branches of a tree"—an abstracted non-place in which it may sketch its "wooden and external representation" of "how you see yourself."[120]

For all its experimental difficulties, "Clepsydra" is saturated in the diction and sentiments of American Transcendentalism. A central passage of "Clepsydra" poses questions of legibility, transparency, and the medium of self-expression in a moment of visionary intensity redolent of Emerson:

> I mean now something much broader,
> The sum total of all private aspects that can ever
> Become legible in what is outside, as much in the rocks
> And foliage as in the invisible look of the distant
> Ether and in the iron fist that suddenly closes over your own.
> I see myself in this totality, and meanwhile
> I am only a transparent diagram, of manners and

[119] Lerner, "Future Continuous," 210. This reading might sound unnecessarily convoluted, especially in light of the scorn that Ashbery heaps (in "Self-Portrait") on "those assholes / who would confuse everything with their mirror games / which seem to multiply stakes and possibilities." Yet, it is also worth noting that, for all his claims to making his poems "all there and available for the reader," Ashbery knows full well they will beget ingenious wild goose chases. As attentive readers of "Clepsydra," we might have no choice about being "assholes," but we should also remember that Ashbery's most famous poem is itself a mirror game. The joke is on everyone.

[120] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 146.

Private words with the certainty of being about to fall.[121]

"The sum total of all private aspects that can ever / become legible in what is outside"—here we have the core Transcendentalist trope of the outer and inner becoming transparent to one another.[122] Stevens often connotes this "transparence" with states of imaginative tranquility, as in the epigraph to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," cited above, or in "Owl's Clover," when he imagines "a heaven all selves" in which

> each man,
> Through long cloud-cloister-porches, walked alone,
> Noble within perfecting solitude,
> Like a solitude of the sun, in which the mind
> Acquired transparence and beheld itself
> And beheld the source from which transparence came […][123]

Here, we have one of Stevens' many stagings of Emersonian communion, wherein "the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object are one."[124] By contrast, Ashbery's transparent communion with the outer is enacted not between the natural world and the imagination but between the poet and his self-reflexive, imaginary poetic field, the "transparent diagram, of manners and,/ Private words." We travel a long way from Emerson's "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all" to Ashbery's "I am only a transparent diagram, of manners and / private words with the certainty of being about to fall" (though, Emerson does remain inscribed in Ashbery's words, both in spirit and in sound, as

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[121] Ibid., 145.

[122] Kenneth Burke traces the concept of transparency in Emerson in "Eye, Ay, I—Concerning Emerson's Early Essay on 'Nature' and the Machinery of Transcendence." See *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1966), 193-4.

[123] Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 158.

[124] Emerson, *Selected Essays*, 176-7.

we see in the terminal "fall" which echoes Emerson's "all"). Ashbery's "transparent diagram" is a paperbound impression—"an outline, or a blueprint," as he puts it in "Tapestry"—of "manners and private words" that doubles as an artistic artifact in its own right; it is both the poet and his poem. Ashbery uses the term "diagram" often as a surrogate for the self, as understood to be a spectral collective of will and circumstance that can literally write itself into (or out of) existence.[125]

So where does Ashbery go from here? "Pyrography," written roughly ten years after "Clepsydra," features another "empty yet personal landscape" in which "we fit / rather too easily. . .become transparent,/ almost ghosts." In this case, the landscape is a hallucinatory "America" cluttered with "fake ruins" built up "in the image of ourselves." Commissioned by the U.S. Department of the Interior for a "Bicentennial traveling exhibit of American landscape paintings called 'America 1976,'"[126] the poem also centers on a mirroring trope:

> Out here on Cottage Grove it matters. The galloping
> Wind balks at its shadow. The carriages
> Are drawn forward under a sky of fumed oak.
> This is America calling:
> The mirroring of state to state,
> Of voice to voice on the wires,
> The force of colloquial greetings like golden
> Pollen sinking on the afternoon breeze.
> In service stairs the sweet corruption thrives;
> The page of dusk turns like a creaking revolving stage in Warren, Ohio.[127]

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[125] Toward the end of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," he writes of "the diagram still sketched on the wind,/ chosen, meant for me and materialized / in the disguising radiance of my room." Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 487. And in the opening stanza of *Flow Chart*: "Still in the published city but not yet / overtaken by a new form of despair, I ask / the diagram: is it the foretaste of pain / it might easily be? Or an emptiness / so sudden it leaves the girders / whanging in the absence of wind,/ the sky milk-blue and astringent?" *Flow Chart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 3.

[126] Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 205.

[127] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 495.

This poem, of course, does not take place on Cottage Grove or in Warren, Ohio, at least not in any meaningful sense; rather, it invites us to ponder an American landscape staged as a series of melancholy images of "Americana." Metaphors are not mixed so much as collapsed into each other: the wind becomes a horse that balks at its shadow; the "fumed oak" of the carriage surreally merges into the sky; both images vaguely suggest westward expansion and the frontier. The barbaric yawp of Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" mellows to the "colloquial greeting" of a telephone call—mystical democratic communion is reduced to a relay of "voice to voice on the wires," a parodic "body electric." The point is not to deflate Whitman, though, but to show how his universalist rhapsodizing, intoned in the nation's infancy, has aged into musty rhetoric a hundred years on. For the nation's bicentennial, the "mirroring of state to state," the "golden pollen sinking on the afternoon breeze"—all the familiar patriotic props—crank into motion "like a creaking revolving stage" in Anyplace, USA.

Of course, "Americana" was an attractive subject for post-war American experimentalists—attractive precisely for its disqualifying corniness ("what could be dopier than a painting dedicated to a national cliché," Larry Rivers gloats to Frank O'Hara in an interview about his 1953 painting, "Washington Crossing the Delaware").[128] But if Ashbery's government-commissioned "bicentennial" poem indulges a similarly deconstructive spirit of play to that of Andy Warhol's soup cans and Jasper Johns's American flags, it also does something more. It cross-pollinates the cool irony of Pop Art with the pompous sentimentalism of Manifest Destiny—

[128] Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles, 1954-1966* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), 112.

the "halcyon days when nature could still be read as a message of hope set down in God's cursive, unfaltering hand"[129]—in a way that alerts us to the "complex textures of a fully demotic spoken language," which Altieri identifies with Ashbery's transparent mode. Where modern visual artists from Pollock to Warhol would make transparent the physical particulars of their visual medium, Ashbery here draws our attention to the transparent "staginess" of the American landscape as it has been imaginatively organized over the centuries:

> The land wasn't immediately appealing; we built it
> Partly over with fake ruins, in the image of ourselves:
> An arch that terminates in mid-keystone, a crumbling stone pier
> For laundresses, an open-air theater, never completed
> And only partially designed. How are we to inhabit
> This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing,
> As in a stage-set or dollhouse, except by staying as we are,
> In lost profile, facing the stars, with dozens of as yet
> Unrealized projects, and a strict sense
> Of time running out, of evening presenting
> The tactfully folded-over bill? And we fit
> Rather too easily into it, become transparent,
> Almost ghosts. One day
> The birds and animals in the pasture have absorbed
> The color, the density of the surroundings,
> The leaves are alive, and too heavy with life.[130]

"The land wasn't immediately appealing" parodies Frost, who concludes his Kennedy inauguration poem, "The Gift Outright," with a vision of "the land

[129] Here I quote the concluding words of Ashbery's 1997 essay on the Hudson River School painter, Frederic Church. The essay, surely one of Ashbery's most incongruous, offers another forum for his thoughts on Manifest Destiny and the American Dream. Published in *Architectural Digest*, of all places, the essay ponders the rise and fall of Church in the middle decades of the nineteenth-century: "Those were the years of Manifest Destiny, when the lush, sparsely peopled landscapes of America were taken as a sign of God's special benevolence toward the fledgling nation and a symbol of the spiritual and material blessings about to fall like manna on its people. Then the Civil War intervened; the mood of the country turned bitter, and as early as 1865 artistic backlash set in. Sublimity went rapidly out of style, and Church and his colleagues found themselves derisively dubbed the Hudson River School." Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 263-67.

[130] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 496.

vaguely realizing westward,/ But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,/ Such as she was, such as she would become."[131] We "fit rather too easily" and "become transparent, almost ghosts" in this landscape for the simple reason that we have constructed it "in the image of ourselves." Where Frost plots the parallel expansion of space and time toward a hopeful future, Ashbery asks how we might meaningfully "inhabit" a space in which our national destiny has been so self-consciously and transparently staged. Time seems to be "running out" on the illusion of a national heritage rooted in the land, even as the "real" inhabitants of the American landscape—"the birds and animals in the pasture"—have come to seem like stage props, too deliberate, "too heavy with life" to be considered authentic.[132] They have "absorbed" the "color, the density" of the "fake ruins" which have been built up around them.

Ashbery revisits the themes of ghostly transparency and the staginess of landscape in the slightly later "Haunted Landscape," a poem that pushes the frontier themes of "Pyrography" to a further degree of abstraction. This poem, like "Pyrography," ponders the ways in which "time and the land are identical,/ linked forever." The "haunted landscape" is not that of America, *per se*, but a generalized space in which the patterns of human settlement and dissolution are dwarfed by larger patterns of geological change. What begins as a pastoral "legend" on "an outcropping of peace / In the blurred afternoon slope" suddenly veers into a series of

[131] Robert Frost, *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 379.

[132] Ashbery introduces similar themes of landscape, color, and staginess in "A Tone Poem": "But it is all the same color again, as though the climate / Dyed everything the same color. It's more practical,/ Yet the landscape, those billboards, age as rapidly as before." Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 690.

cataclysms extending over geological epochs, followed in turn by sentimental reflection on "the petty ordering of our days":

> They were thinking, too, that this was the right way to begin
> A farm that would later have to be uprooted to make way
> For the new plains and mountains that would follow after
> To be extinguished in turn as the ocean takes over
>
> Where the glacier leaves off and in the thundering of surf
> And rock, something, some note or other, gets lost,
> And we have this to look back on, not much, but a sign
> Of the petty ordering of our days as it was created and led us
>
> By the nose through itself, and now it has happened
> And we have it to look at, and have to look at it
> For the good it now possesses which has shrunk from the
> Outline surrounding it to a little heap or handful near the center.[133]

"Pyrography" also meditates on "the petty ordering of our days" as we imagine it to be figured in the landscape. Here, as in many other poems, Ashbery layers different versions of nature on top of each other—the "haunted landscape" is not only an idyllic middle landscape and a site of vast geological change, but also an abandoned picnic ground "on which so many picknickers / had left no trace."[134] Nature and culture interpenetrate as the "haunted landscape" later becomes a "phantom village" and a "house" that "materialized elsewhere." As in the later long poem, "A Wave" (another poem featuring a "haunted house") we "pass through pain without knowing it. . .to emerge on an invisible terrain."[135] The nature and value of this "invisible terrain" is a subject which Ashbery has explored throughout his career, notably in his many poems that engage with pastoral conventions.

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[133] Ibid., 665-66.
[134] Ibid., 665.
[135] Ibid., 787

CHAPTER TWO

"Free to wander away": Ashbery's Postmodern Pastoral

A style of rhetoric expresses a notion of what is to be considered nature.
—W.H. Auden[1]

Could one return
To the idea of nature summed up in these pastoral images?
—John Ashbery[2]

John Ashbery's experimental pastoral begins with the recognition that pastoral's traditional conventions, as handed down from Theocritus to Wordsworth, have been utterly exhausted. As he writes in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror":

> This could have been our paradise: exotic
> Refuge within an exhausted world, but that wasn't
> In the cards, because it couldn't have been
> The point. Aping naturalness may be the first step
> Toward achieving an inner calm
> But it is the first step only, and often
> Remains a frozen gesture of welcome
> Etched on the air materializing behind it,
> A convention.[3]

The "inner calm" promised by traditional pastoral poetry has been thoroughly exposed in our time as a false state of natural grace, "aped" through the "frozen gestures" of literary "conventions." The pastoral dream of an "exotic / refuge within an exhausted world" is now a defunct literary topos.[4] Yet, for Ashbery this state of

[1] W.H. Auden, introduction to *Some Trees*, by John Ashbery (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 16.
[2] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 502.
[3] Ibid., 487.
[4] The pastoral, always a knowingly artificial mode, has been dying a long death since the onset of the Industrial Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, when Dr. Johnson famously disparaged the artificiality of pastoral elegy in his "Life of Milton" (1779) and George Crabbe penned his famous anti-pastoral, "The Village" (1783). See Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, vol. 1

exhaustion presents an opportunity rather than a dead-end. Stripped of fixed aesthetic or political significance, pastoral becomes in Ashbery's hands a dynamic experimental medium that authorizes a form of lyric "vagrancy" that allows him to resist Cold War pressures to instrumentalize his art. Despite his persistently non-committed stance, Ashbery uses pastoral to respond to the challenges of his historical moment. In this chapter, I examine how the "transparent, non-philosophical" naturalism that Ashbery learns in France and puts into practice in poems like "Clepsydra," "Pyrography," and "Haunted Landscape" allows him to reactivate the pastoral at a time when it seems most obsolete. In tracing the evolution of Ashbery's "postmodern pastoral" from *Some Trees* (1956) to *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), this chapter also challenges the recent critical vogue for reading Ashbery's pastoral themes through the lenses of his biography and sexuality.

Ashbery is, above all, a writer of what Leo Marx calls "complex pastoral," writings that "manage to qualify, or call into question, or bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture."[5] He writes many different versions of pastoral, even the eclogue, often rotating between them in the course of a

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(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 278-79; George Crabbe, *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 155-74. Terry Gifford has shown that pastoral, in its modern usage, can be construed in three ways. The first refers to the classical pastoral of Theocritus and Virgil; the second, emerging from classical pastoral, includes the broader category of writings in which the country is favorably contrasted with the city and in which "a delight in the natural is assumed"; the third, by contrast to the first two, views pastoral as a worn out tradition which perpetuates dangerous myths about the natural world and shirks the important political questions. Such pastoral writings are seen to whitewash the harsh realities of the wilderness and of agricultural labor, presenting a dangerously flattened-out vision of "the country" and "nature" as reified sites of retreat, epiphany, and restoration. Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1-2.

[5] Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 25.

single poem.[6] But his pastoral landscapes are never as fully realized as such traditional *loci amoeni* as Virgil's Arcadia, Shakespeare's Arden, Thoreau's Walden, and Frost's New Hampshire. Rather, Ashbery's work models a robust version of "postmodern pastoral": a mode that seeks neither to sanctify "nature" as a numinous, purified space nor to demythify the natural world as a cultural construction, but rather dissolves and reconstitutes categories like "nature" and "culture" into knowingly hybridized interspaces.

I take the rubric of "postmodern pastoral" from the poet-critic Joshua Corey, who traces its emergence to the poetry of figures like Charles Olson and Frank O'Hara who recognize that "nature" forms just one of the many world-framing discourses poets have at their disposal.[7] "[T]he site of postmodernism's intersection with the pastoral," Corey writes, "can be located at the moment that 'nature' becomes recognizable not as outside history but part of history, a discourse in itself."[8] Ashbery himself often makes this recognition: "Could one return / To the idea of nature summed up in these pastoral images?" he asks in "Business Personal,"

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[6] Ashbery makes experimental use of the eclogue form in works like "Eclogue" and "Fantasia on 'The Nut-Brown Maid.'" For a further discussion of the latter's pastoral overtones, see Luke Carson, "Dreams of Decorum: John Ashbery's Manners," *Genre* 36, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 163-88.

[7] Corey begins his essay with the following useful account of "postmodern pastoral": "In the twenty-first century it is only a short leap from civilization and its discontents to the postmodern pastoral. *Postmodern* and *pastoral*: two exhausted and empty cultural signifiers reactivated by forced proximity, united by the logic of mutual and nearly assured destruction. . . . The universe of postmodern pastoral must be a universe of language, with none of the naive pretensions to an immediate presentation of reality held by 'nature poetry.' But it is also a demystified point of connection to what Charles Olson called 'the human universe.'" Later, Corey writes that "for O'Hara, the postmodern condition means that 'man and nature have become one.' This merging, as he is aware, creates the potential for catastrophe on an unprecedented scale. . . . But it also suggests the potential for a fully postmodern poetry to enter this zone of the pastoral—the vision of humanity undivided from nature—and activate its ambiguities, making readers more fully conscious of the discursive and social reality churning beneath the surface of either idyllic or appalling images." "Long Foreground," 1-4.

[8] Ibid., 4.

written in the late-1970s.[9] In a quintessential move, we find Ashbery turning the pastoral's own rhetoric of "retreat and renewal"[10] against itself in an ironic interrogation of its viability. Knowing full well that "the romantic apprehension of pastoral landscape is itself a consumption and an elusion of consumption,"[11] his work worries over the loss, not of a pre-civilized Arcadia or the visionary romantic gaze, but of "pastoralism" itself as a viable poetic mode. But here we must be careful to distinguish between Ashbery's ironic salvaging of the pastoral and his (less credible) avowal of its principles. Never one to simply indulge in sentimental mythmaking, he presses pastoral rhetoric into experimental service in an effort to enhance the "complex textures of his fully demotic spoken language."

Corey goes on to identify Ashbery as "the most influential figure for postmodern pastoral, as for postmodern lyric generally," in the way his work insistently foregrounds the mediacy of modern experience:

> The ego is not so much silenced in Ashbery's work as it is rendered multiple and fragmentary. . . . Ashbery presents the reader with the constant chatter of a mediated world meeting an equally mediated self, endlessly deferring and teasing the false pastoral of authenticity.[12]

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[9] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 502.

[10] Pastoral works often hinge on a "retreat and renewal" motif, whereby urbanites flee the city or royal court in search of moral or spiritual recovery in a gracious pastoral landscape. They then return to the city refreshed and enlightened, their senses of balance and harmony restored. For many critics, "retreat and renewal" is the defining trope of the pastoral mode. Renato Poggioli, author of an influential study of the avant-garde and one of Frank O'Hara's favorite professors at Harvard, opens an essay collection on the pastoral by asserting, "[T]he psychological root of the pastoral is a double longing after innocence and happiness, to be recovered not through conversion or regeneration but merely through a retreat." Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1. Similarly, Eleanor Terry Lincoln remarks in the introduction to *Pastoral and Romance*: "In its widest sense pastoral becomes a figure for the contemplative life, a withdrawal from action that affords a perspective upon battlefield and marketplace." Eleanor Terry Lincoln, *Pastoral and Romance: Modern Essays in Criticism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 2.

[11] Schmidt, "Queer Nature," 77.

[12] Corey, "Long Foreground," 17.

But even as Ashbery's dispersal of the lyric speaker defers and teases the "false pastoral of authenticity," it also relieves the speaker of social obligations; it sets him free from the pressures of the *polis*, from which the pastoral subject conventionally absconds. Ashbery's chronically drifting focus—his tendency to "wander away" from what Christopher Nealon calls "optional apocalypse"—serves a liberatory purpose analogous to pastoral retreat. In their deferral of politics and the "real world," Ashbery's mediated selves and worlds, in fact, have been seen by some critics as "utopian prefigurations of liberation."[13] Whether or not Ashbery's "dematerialized subjectivity"[14] finally evades or affirms political responsibility remains a subject of debate. But the fact that it can be taken either way aligns it very closely with the pastoral, which, as a self-consciously artificial staging ground for both political commentary and idealist speculation, has always brokered a difficult peace between politics and aesthetics. As Terry Gifford observes, "Pastoral is essentially a discourse of retreat which may, as we have seen, either simply *escape* from the complexities of the city, the court, the present, 'our manners', or *explore* them."[15] Ashbery's work raises the same interpretive problem.

Ashbery's poetry, like all pastoral, inclines toward both idealized and heavily qualified evocations of the natural world in a productive quarrel between aesthetic hopes and political reality. From the traditional sentiments of "Some Trees" and the parodic formalism of "Eclogue" and "A Pastoral" to the ironized "returns-to-nature"

[13] Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 121.
[14] Silverberg, *New York School*, 203-4.
[15] Gifford, *Pastoral*, 46.

in "Evening in the Country" and *The Vermont Notebook*, his pastoral writings—a kaleidoscope of set-pieces featuring sub-genres of pastoral—never solidify into an orthodox stance.[16] In this way, Ashbery's "incorrigibly plural" pastoralism showcases what Lawrence Buell has called "pastoral's multiple frames."[17] Ashbery's pastoral encompasses a number of related themes, all familiar trappings of his work: escapism and fantasy-making, alluring landscapes "on the other side of the mountain,"[18] abstracted forms of nostalgia (often for childhood), fleeting moments of Edenic balance and grace, and attenuated or qualified modes of utopian speculation—these latter two being especially prominent in *Three Poems*.[19] Beneath it all is an abiding need to "wander away" from unsavory reality. The question is whether this move is heroic or cowardly.

[16] In conversation with Mark Halliday, Allen Grossman has commented eloquently on this multivalent aspect of Ashbery's writing in terms that are especially pertinent to the question of his "management of traditional resources" like pastoral: "Ashbery seems to search the resources of discourse without ever allowing them to complete themselves. . . .In the case of Ashbery I should think, it is the sentimentality of his relationship to the past that he undertakes to conserve in a structure which has, as he says [in "The Skaters'], the shape, or antishape, of falling snow, but which is still a world characterized by snow and by rain and by sentiment: is still a landscape with the seeds of tragedy inside it, seeds which he does not allow to germinate, but from the promise of which he derives his significance as a writer. Ashbery I suppose would be alien to you in part because he is fundamentally a manager of traditional resources." Allen Grossman and Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 44-5.

[17] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 36.

[18] Quoting "Grand Galop," *Collected Poems*, 440.

[19] Consider, for instance, the following lines from the second paragraph of "The Recital": "It became a delight to enumerate all the things in the new world our maturity had opened up for us, as inexhaustible in pleasures and fertile pursuits as some more down-to-earth Eden, from which the utopian joys as well as the torments of that older fantasy-world had been banished by a more reasonable deity." Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 319.

I. Ashbery's Pastoral Inheritance and Early Work

Ashbery's pastoral inheritance is rich and various, reflecting the rich variety and contradictoriness of the tradition itself. His primary models range from the busy naturalistic sketches of John Clare and the mannerist romantic sublime of Wordsworth and Hölderlin to Auden's various idylls and baroque eclogues and Stevens' abstracted encounters with the natural world.[20] Among these figures, Auden alone had a chance to read and appraise Ashbery's work, and doing so, was quick to note its pastoral overtones. He begins his foreword to *Some Trees*:

> A poet is perhaps the only kind of person who can say, honestly and knowing what he means, that he would rather have been born in an earlier age than the present. Very much earlier, for his golden age might be defined as the time when the statement "The real man speaks in poetry" was as self-evident as the statement "Men really speak in prose" is today.[21]

In terms that seem rather more monitory than praising,[22] Auden places Ashbery in a tradition of writers stemming from Rimbaud each of whom daydreams of a poetic

[20] Stevens' pastoralism is perhaps the least explicit of all the poets here mentioned (though Anne Marie Mikkelsen devotes a chapter to him in *Pastoral, Pragmatism, and Twentieth-Century Poetry*). Yet like Ashbery, the pastoral tradition nourishes his work in important ways. George Lensing has read Stevens' poems of the seasons as a kind of "intertextual and complementary" modernist shepherd's calendar: "Stevens' use of the four seasons constitutes a pastoral sequence adopted over the while of his career, surprisingly balanced out among each of them" (8). Lensing adds: "Though Stevens does not often address the qualities of pastoral poetry in his essays and letters, in 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet' he quotes from Mallarmé and Hopkins, adding, 'The pleasure that the poet has . . is a pleasure of agreement with the radiant and productive world in which he lives (NA 57). . . .He is far more concerned with finding (and then relinquishing) his pastoral foci than in using such discoveries (and disavowals) to generalize about the human condition. He does not seek so much to teach the truths of nature as to attain them." George Lensing, *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 14-15. Paul Alpers also touches on Stevens' pared down, wintry pastoral in a chapter on "Modern Pastoral Lyricism," from his study, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 306-9.

[21] Auden, introduction to *Some Trees*, 11.

[22] In fact, Auden expressed ambivalence about both Ashbery's and O'Hara's Surrealist affinities. Writing to O'Hara on June 3, 1955, to break the bad news that he had chosen Ashbery for the Yale Younger Series prize, Auden takes the opportunity to admonish both young poets: "I think you (and John too, for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with any 'surrealistic' style,

"golden age" where "the old magical notions" still have a powerful purchase on the imagination. For this school of writers, such escapism into the world of childhood and of dreams offers essential access to "the imaginative life of the human individual":

> From Rimbaud down to Mr. Ashbery, an important school of modern poets has been concerned with the discovery that, in childhood largely, in dreams and daydreams entirely, the imaginative life of the human individual stubbornly continues to live by the old magical notions. Its world is one of sacred images and ritual acts, the marriages of gods and goddesses, the recurrent sacrifices and rebirths of sacred kings, a numinous landscape inhabited by demons and strange beasts.[23]

Auden's Ashbery is a kind of aesthetic pastoralist of the old school, one more concerned with pastoral mythmaking's potential to liberate the imagination than with its political edge. In his six-page foreword, which effectively introduced the young Ashbery to the world (and preempts the surreal childhood scenes of "The Skaters"), Auden gets it both right and wrong. The fifty-six years since the publication of *Some Trees* have only confirmed Rimbaud's central importance to Ashbery (as his recent translation of *Les Illuminations,* at the age of 83, shows). Nor has his work wandered far from its early draw toward dreamy, if not always serene, escapism, balancing wistfulness and light touch humor within a drifting focus. Yet at the same time, his world is emphatically not a "numinous" one of "sacred images and ritual acts," divine marriages, sacrifices, rebirths (all suggesting precisely the sort of high modernist mythic methodology he disavows).

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namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue." Quoted in Perloff, "Transparent Selves," 175.

[23] Auden, introduction to *Some Trees*, 13.

These quibbles aside, Auden's ear was well attuned to Ashbery's pastoral strain. This was only fitting, as Auden himself had written some of the century's finest and most challenging pastoral verse, such as *The Age of Anxiety*, "In Praise of Limestone," "Paysage Moralisé," and "Bucolics," in the decade or so leading up to and including the appearance of *Some Trees*. No doubt, the Thirties Poets' revival of traditional forms like the eclogue and sestina as tools for irreverent critique would have a deep effect on Ashbery and his own circle as they came of age in the post-war years. The Thirties Poets created a climate in which writing pastoral, or sestinas, or Byronic *ottava rima*, would seem to be far more than hopelessly reactionary exercises. Here was a form of late-modernist engagement with tradition—urbane, fluent, worldly without being politicized—which aroused the young New York School poets' instinctive sympathy.

In the early 1930s, Louis MacNeice penned a number of grimly sardonic eclogues, set "in an evil time."[24] The satiric pointedness of these short pieces paved the way for more substantial later achievements, like Auden's great war-time "baroque eclogue," *The Age of Anxiety*, written 1944-46. This book-length "psychological, or psycho-historical, poem," set in war-time New York and centering on four characters—Quant, Malin, Rosetta, and Emble[25]—transforms the eclogue into a truly "baroque" amalgam structured around Jung's psychology of types, pastoral topoi, Jewish mysticism, English murder mysteries, and much else.

[24] Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 3. "Eclogue for Christmas" and "Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate (*Death and Two Shepherds*) appeared in *Poems* (1935), "Eclogue from Iceland" and "Eclogue Between the Motherless" in *The Earth Compels* (1938).

[25] Each character represents a Jungian psychological type: Malin-Thinking, Rosetta-Feeling, Quant-Intuition, and Emble-Sensation.

As John Fuller notes, the nature of these characters' encounter is both "a classic pastoral one," involving a journey through an idealized symbolic landscape and a love triangle, and a "mystical" one focusing on the prospects of interpersonal communion in a time of crisis.[26] "Woven through it," Alan Jacobs writes, "is [Auden's] nearly lifelong obsession with the poetic and mythological 'green world' [he] variously calls Arcadia or Eden or simply the Good Place."[27] The Arcadia obsession surfaces throughout the poem and is most openly critiqued in the character of Rosetta (in many ways Auden's double), whose early reveries about the idealized English landscape of her youth mature, as the poem progresses, into a sober skepticism about such fantasies. Auden adapted pastoral topoi in other ways as well, as in the "Seven Stages" section of Part Three in which the bodies of the four characters symbolically merge into a primeval landscape.[28] While Auden mystifies

[26] John Fuller, *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), 371.

[27] W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*, ed. Alan Jacobs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), xi. Auden returned often in his poetry and essays to the topic of the "Good" or "Happy Place," outspokenly voicing his preference for Arcadia/Eden over Utopia/New Jerusalem. In 1948, the same year he wrote "In Praise of Limestone," he addressed the gulf between "backward-looking Arcadians" and "forward-looking Utopians" in his essay "Dingley Dell & The Fleet": "Our dream pictures of the Happy Place where suffering and evil are unknown are of two kinds, the Edens and the New Jerusalems. . . .In their relation to the actual fallen world, the difference between Eden and New Jerusalem is a temporal one. Eden is a past world in which the contradictions of the present world have not yet arisen; New Jerusalem is a future world in which they have at last been resolved. . . .The psychological difference between the Arcadian dreamer and the Utopian dreamer is that the backward-looking Arcadian knows that his expulsion from Eden is an irrevocable fact and that his dream, therefore, is a wish-dream which cannot become real; in consequence, the actions which led to his expulsion are of no concern to his dream. The forward-looking Utopian, on the other hand, necessarily believes that his New Jerusalem is a dream which ought to be realized so that the actions by which it could be realized are a necessary element in his dream; it must include images, that is to say, not only of New Jerusalem itself but also images of the Day of Judgment." W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 409-10.

[28] "For it can happen, if circumstances are otherwise propitious, that members of a group in this condition establish a rapport in which communication of thoughts and feelings is so accurate and instantaneous, that they appear to function as a single organism.// So it was now as they sought that state of prehistoric happiness which, by human beings, can only be imagined in terms of a landscape bearing a symbolic resemblance to the human body." Auden, *Age of Anxiety*, 46.

somewhat the symbolic relation between landscape and body in this state of "prehistoric happiness," he would return to this conceit with even greater poignancy in "In Praise of Limestone" (1948), the mid-career masterpiece which has been called "the first postmodern pastoral."[29] Like O'Hara and Ashbery after him, Auden attends in this poem to pastoral's social edge while also remaining sensitive to its strengths as a meditative lyric form. Rather than Yeats' dead "woods of Arcady,"[30] Auden sets his pastoral in the "limestone landscape" of the island of Ischia, his longtime Mediterranean vacation spot and a setting variously interpreted as a figure for human history and for the body.[31] "If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones,/ Are consistently homesick for," it begins, "this is chiefly / Because it dissolves in water."[32] In an ingenious conflation of personal and collective history, Auden's idealized landscape merges his beloved northern English Pennine countryside (another "limestone landscape")[33] with the Mediterranean world of Theocritus and Virgil:

. . .when I try to imagine a faultless love

[29] Rainer Emig, "Lust in the ground: The erotics and politics of soil in contemporary poetry," *Critical Survey* 14, no. 2 (May 1, 2002): 37-49.

[30] W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 7.

[31] "The landscape Auden first wrote about in Italy was human in a double sense: it was the landscape of the human body itself and the landscape in which human beings belonged." Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 291. Anthony Hecht makes a similar point: "With its 'secret system of caves and conduits,' [the limestone landscape] resembles both the human body, with its hidden arterial life, and the human mind, with its buried, nocturnal and subconscious life. In addition to all these affinities, the poet claims that it is a landscape particularly hospitable to humankind. . . ." Anthony Hecht, *The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W.H. Auden* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 305.

[32] W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 540.

[33] In his 1971 Freud Lecture Auden links the "limestone landscape" of Italy to the lead-mining region of his childhood: "The lead-mines, of course, could not come in, because there aren't any in Florence, but the limestone landscape was useful to me as a connecting link between two utterly different cultures, the northern protestant guilt culture I grew up in, and the shame culture of the Mediterranean countries, which I was now experiencing for the first time." Quoted in Fuller, *Auden: A Commentary*, 406.

> Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur
> Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.[34]

Auden revisits and revises both his personal origins and the origins of the pastoral itself, achieving a postmodern pastoral form that "accommodates the largest questions of universal meaning while speaking in the conversational voice that is the twentieth century's closest possible approach to an authentic personal tone."[35] It is difficult to describe the poem's impact on Ashbery in anything other than foundational terms; many of his poems are simply unimaginable without its example. Its conversational intimacy and graceful, elusive blending of personal and collective history anticipate some of Ashbery's finest work, like "These Lacustrine Cities," "Soonest Mended," and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror."

While Ashbery eagerly read and assimilated Auden, other influences were also at hand. As Jed Perl has shown, the mid-century New York avant-garde art milieu in which Ashbery, O'Hara, and their confreres made their debut was strongly attracted to pastoral productions.[36] Perl presents this experimental pastoralism as a mutually influential development between painters and writers, tracing it partly to the revival of interest in the impressionistic technique of works like Monet's *Water Lilies* among arbiters of taste like Clement Greenberg, Louis Finkelstein, and Willem De Kooning. Perl observes in Monet's painting "the essential pastoral vision of twentieth-century art":

> Monet had eluded Cubism, and simultaneously retreated into [Roger] Shattuck's Garden of Eden after the Fall. This was a pastoral outside of

[34] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 542.
[35] Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 292.
[36] Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 245-78.

> human history, a mythic pastoral that, as the swervings and gesturings and unfurlings of Monet's brush became ever wilder, passed into near-abstract pastoral, a pastoral of sensation materialized into a dispersed, personalized painterly calligraphy.[37]

While this eloquent précis of Monet's "pastoral of sensation" openly describes Pollock and De Kooning, it also captures something essential about the New York School poets who apprenticed themselves at these painters' feet. O'Hara and Ashbery would have dismissed the "mythic" side of pastoral ("mythic," once again, smacking of Eliot and the New Criticism), but their early work often passed into a realm of "near-abstraction" notable for the tensions it produced and managed between "dispersal" and "personalization" of subject matter. This tension is most apparent in O'Hara,[38] whose "pastoral of sensation" is probably the key influence on Ashbery's own early forays into pastoral.[39] In addition to a handful of experimental eclogues,[40] many of which were probably not intended for the stage, O'Hara explored

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[37] Ibid., 246-49. Perl also names a number of other influential works of the time that contributed to this intellectual pastoralism, including Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935); Auden's lectures on Shakespeare (1946-47); Erwin Panofsky's art historical writings of the 1930s, focusing on the phrase "Et in Arcadia ego"; and Paul Goodman's novel, *The Empire City* (1959, first volume appeared 1942), which includes a chapter titled "An Urban Pastoral Romance (After Longus)." Ashbery, O'Hara, and their artistic coterie were very much plugged into this intellectual current. Goodman's 1951 *Kenyon Review* essay on "Advance-guard writing 1900-1950," for instance, had an immense influence at the time of its publication. For a useful account, see Herd, *Ashbery and American Poetry,* 7-8; 53-55.

[38] O'Hara's work, like Ashbery's, insistently challenges the distinction between the personal and the impersonal, transforming the self into an abstracted congeries of selves. Consider the following lines from "In Memory of My Feelings": "My transparent selves / flail about like vipers in a pail, writhing and hissing / without panic, with a certain justice of response / and presently the aquiline serpent comes to resemble the Medusa." *Collected Poems*, 253.

[39] In making this claim, I do not mean to minimize James Schuyler's influence on Ashbery in this regard. As Timothy Gray's shows in chapter four of his *Urban Pastoral*, "The Figurative Vision of James Schuyler and Jane Freilicher," Schuyler practiced the most traditionally pastoral art of all the New York School poets.

[40] These include "Very Rainy Night," "Amorous Nightmares of Delay," "Grace & George," "Lexington Avenue," and "Love's Labor," all subtitled "An Eclogue." O'Hara's and Ashbery's early playwriting activities are worth brief mention in the context of the avant-garde pastoralism under discussion. In the early-mid 1950s, Ashbery and O'Hara were involved, as playwrights and actors, in a number of theatrical projects centering on the Poets' Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as well

the pastoral with great flair in a number of poems from the period, notably "A Pastoral Dialogue," "To the Mountains of New York," "Oranges: 12 Pastorals,"[41] and "Meditations in an Emergency." These and similar works provide an important context for Ashbery's own plays[42] as well as his early formalist stabs at parodic pastoral in *Some Trees*. Among the New York School poets, O'Hara's work best embodies what Timothy Gray and others have called "urban pastoral,"[43] whereby, in a reversal of the traditional conceit, the city itself, with its supportive network of artistic milieus, becomes a pastoral refuge. Perhaps the defining statement of the New York School "urban pastoral" ethos occurs in "Meditations in an Emergency":

> Even trees understand me! Good heavens, I lie under them, too, don't I? I'm just like a pile of leaves.
>
> However, I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes—I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life.[44]

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as other theaters in New York City. The Poets' Theatre in particular produced plays during this time by Ashbery and O'Hara, as well as James Schuyler, Richard Wilbur, James Merrill, Robert Duncan, Richard Eberhart, Archibald MacLeish, Edward Gorey, and V.R. "Bunny" Lang (the theater's founder). For these young writers the conventions of pastoral proved to be an expedient medium as much for topical satire and veiled autobiography as for pure experimentation. Prominent among these was Bunny Lang's[40] "I Too Have Lived in Arcadia (A Pastoral, In the Present Time)," an allegory of her troubled personal life with the painter Michael Goldberg. Staged in 1954 at the Poets' Theatre in Cambridge, the award-winning play appeared in *Poetry* the following year. See V.R. Lang, *Poems and Plays* (New York: Random House, 1975).

[41] "Oranges" was first published in a mimeographed Tibor de Nagy pamphlet in 1953, on the occasion of an exhibition of Grace Hartigan's twelve paintings called *Oranges*, which incorporates the twelve pastorals. O'Hara famously makes reference to the twelve-poem suite in "Why I Am Not a Painter." Most of the twelve parts were composed in 1949. See *Frank O'Hara: Poems from the Tibor de Nagy Editions*, ed. Eric Brown (New York: Tibor de Nagy Editions), 2006.

[42] John Ashbery, *Three Plays* (Calais, VT: Z Press, 1978).

[43] See Helen Vendler, "New York Pastoral," in *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 62-70; and Herbert A. Leibowitz, "A pan piping on the city streets: The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara," in *New York Times Book Review* (November 8, 1971): 7; 28.

[44] O'Hara, *Collected Poems,* 197.

With its raucous humor and squalid naturalistic tableaus, "Oranges: 12 Pastorals" sports with the flippancy and hauteur of the anti-pastoral tradition and exemplifies the "urban pastoral" mode.[45] "O my posterity!" it concludes, "This is the miracle: that our elegant invention the natural world redeems by filth."[46] Yet it also features passages of serene beauty in the key of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*:

> 9
>
> The lily and the albatross form under your lids. Awaken, love, and walk with me through the green fields. Under the mist we need not fear the sound of wings or sneak of tangled roots; the sun will lift. And until heat of day I'll not disturb the pearl grey hangings on your flesh and hair.
>
> Awaken, love, the horses are grazing at our flanks; the gramophone is damp. I forgot to post your letter yesterday. What shall we have for lunch?
>
> Where you go, I go.[47]

The anachronistic "damp gramophone" brings this idealized landscape into contact with an urbanized contemporary moment; though, both the ideal and real worlds are allowed momentarily to co-exist. At the start of his career, O'Hara uses the pastoral for parody and satire, but also breathes new life into it.

Ashbery, too, was given to writing "pastorals" at the start of his career. "Eclogue" and "A Pastoral," both published in *Some Trees*, showcase their author's early interest in pushing traditional forms to the point of collapse. These parodic formalist pieces fit most superficially into the traditional mold of the convention and also rank among the slightest performances of Ashbery's debut. "Eclogue" appears third among the poems in *Some Trees*, but was excluded from the 1985 *Selected Poems*. It is not hard to see why. This thirty-line snatch of Renaissance

[45] A tradition inaugurated in modernity by George Crabbe's *The Village* (1783), which contrasts the traditional representation of the rural idyll in Augustan poetry with the realities of country life.

[46] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 9.

[47] Ibid., 7.

dialogue between "Cuddie" and his son, "Colin"—characters from Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*—appropriately unfolds in a "land of whistling goats" and stages an obscure dramatic falling out between the two characters. The poem hinges on the revelation of some "secret" about Colin and could be read as a labored allegory of gay outing.[48] In any event, it eschews the carefree amorousness and easy moralism which its title might suggest in favor of something altogether less happy. Like "Eclogue," "A Pastoral" was excluded from the *Selected Poems* and promises more than it delivers. One of Ashbery's less successful early imitations of Auden, it is a sestina using the words "showboat," "deep south," "handsome," "melodies," "shade," and "animals." Hardly an Audenesque *paysage moralisé*, though, it seems a pastoral in title alone.

In the work leading up to and including *Some Trees*, Ashbery tries on a variety of traditional forms (pantoum, sonnet, sestina, eclogue, canzone—all the titles of poems), while occasionally hitting the more exploratory mode which will become his métier. This tension bespeaks a broader trend: from his 1956 debut onward there is in his work a productive tension between parodic formalism and a more nebulous—and more generically "Ashberyan"—push toward discursive fantasy-making and ironized nostalgia. Within the pastoral domain, we could point

[48] Mikkelsen, for instance, read "Eclogue" as an allegory of Ashbery's troubled relationship with his father, Chester Ashbery. See *Pastoral,* 235. Even where Ashbery's linguistic misdirection most obviously suggests an epistemology of the closet—as in "The Grapevine": "Of who we and all they are / you all now know"; or "The Thinnest Shadow": "A face looks from the mirror / As if to say,/ 'Be supple young man,/ Since you cannot be gay.'"—the autobiographical readings which such interpretations entail still seem inadequate. The inadequacy stems from the suggestion that Ashbery's experiments in rhetoric, syntax, tone, genre, and convention are all deployed in the cryptic service of some confessional message, that the poem's riddling language can be unlocked by a biographical key, a form of misreading which Ashbery himself has repeatedly lamented. Stated differently, the complexities of Ashbery's queerness are given short-shrift by being reduced to mere autobiography.

to early poems like "Eclogue" and "A Pastoral," as specimens of the former and to "Grand Abacus",[49] "The Young Son," and "The Instruction Manual"[50] as tending toward the latter. This tension is already palpable in "Some Trees," Ashbery's most conventional pastoral poem, a rhyming lyric with recourse both to traditional form and to an emotionally charged self-reflexivity. As per convention, the poem stages an amorous retreat from the corrupt world of men to a serene natural environ that promises physical and spiritual renewal:

> Arranging by chance
>
> To meet as far this morning
> From the world as agreeing
> With it, you and I
> Are suddenly what the trees try

[49] This poem offers a glimpse of a more tantalizing, evacuated pastoralism than that which appears in "Eclogue" and "A Pastoral. It begins: "Perhaps this valley leads into the head of long-ago days./ What, if not its commercial and etiolated visage, could break through the meadow wires?" It is difficult to judge the tone of this troubling, opaque scene in which hopefulness quickly bleeds into grinding sarcasm. The blend of the grandiose and the run-down and the commercial-industrial language seem to anticipate the opening lines of later works like "Soonest Mended," "Decoy," and "Definition of Blue." As such, this excerpt hints at the mature Ashberyan discursive mode which emerges in full force in the collections of the mid-late 1960s and early 70s. Yet the nascent pastoralism of these opening lines does not give way to a full-blown idyll; the convention is tested then quickly discarded. A bizarre fantasia ensues in which "the head of long ago days" is literalized as an enormous head in the landscape, which floods the meadow with its tears and scares off the local birds in a comically surreal deluge.

[50] In "The Instruction Manual," we find the urgent, cosmic frustration of poems like "Grand Abacus" and "The Young Son" yielding to a more winsome, stylized frustration with the quotidian. Indeed, this fluent escapist masterpiece enacts an escape not only from the poet's boring workaday life but also from the unease of much of his early work. Alongside "The Painter," it stands out as the signal achievement of *Some Trees*. In "The Instruction Manual" Ashbery recovers a viable sentimental escapist mode by pushing it too far, with the effect of bringing readers into a kind of knowing complicity about the poem's banality. While the manual writer's boredom constantly undercuts his pretentions to a neutral documentary tone (Roussel's *La Vue* is the obvious intertext), a cooler irony tacitly guides the whole. The poem hovers between superficial drollery and the suggestion of deeper textual play; its great achievement is to remain fixed between these two points without finally inclining in either direction. Any sense of authorial irony or knowingness is entirely folded into the amusingly oblivious text. Or rather, a knowing authorial presence is everywhere felt but nowhere perceived. Jacek Gutorow reads "The Instruction Manual" as a "pastoral fancy" which both indulges in and undermines the genre, paradoxically salvaging it by pointing up its insufficiency. Gutorow, "John Ashbery and Difficult Idylls," presented at John Ashbery in Paris International Conference, March 2009.

To tell us we are:
That their merely being there
Means something; that soon
We may touch, love, explain.[51]

Tellingly, Ashbery has characterized "Some Trees" as his "farewell to poetry as we know it,"[52] by which he means his farewell to poetry with paraphrasable content written in a traditional form. But he also means it as a farewell to himself as an identifiable subject in his poems. In other words, it is just the sort of easy love poem which he would never feel the need to write again. Perhaps this was a pragmatic decision, in light of the early Cold War cultural climate. In such times—with the star of early Lowell ascendant—few things could be less timely than pastoral love poetry celebrating blithe abandonment of the world's ills in favor of an idealized, if tacit, homoeroticism. Reading *Some Trees* as a product of its oppressive moment—and Ashbery has said he felt it to be an especially frightening and depressing period to be gay—certainly helps account for the volume's hollow formalism and its evasion of subject matter (issues brought to a brilliant crisis in "The Painter"). With the exception of "Some Trees," Ashbery's debut is a profoundly non-committal collection of poems, a candy-box of experimental formalism. But for all of its well-manicured showcasing of form, it is also a profoundly uneasy book. This unease helps explain Ashbery's dissatisfaction with the perfectly formed (or forced) style of his early career, and why he might have felt the need to take the extreme tack that he did with *The Tennis Court Oath*.

[51] Ashbery, *Collected Poems,* 26.
[52] Quoted in Dinitia Smith, "Poem Alone," *New York*, May 20, 1991, 50.

Yet, we must not to be too reductive here. To read *Some Trees* merely as a work of closeted angst is to inject an unnecessarily strong dose of biography into it. Surely the anxieties and coded references are there, as many critics have noted, but they are not the full story; rather, they form an important backdrop to the larger story of Ashbery finding his place in the diverse landscape of the post-war avant-garde, a landscape soon to be mapped by Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960). Only one of the poems in *Some Trees* was a "farewell to poetry as we know it." Many of the others show an already advanced degree of willingness to go out on an experimental limb, and to do so untouched by autobiographical angst. If "Some Trees" is a diffident idyll, other poems in *Some Trees* featuring natural or bucolic scenes, such as "The Young Son," demonstrate the degree to which the pastoral mode—and, in fact, all literary conventions—were fair game for experimental retooling.

"The Young Son", one of Ashbery's first prose poems, exemplifies a more complex and attenuated version of pastoral than that of "Eclogue" and "Some Trees." As a nightmarish pre-figuration of "For John Clare," it anticipates the mature work of the 1960s and 1970s in its discursive push beyond formal preciosity. The "wanderer" of this poem, however, is not a youthful version of Clare tramping inquisitively through the wild, but the disaffected prisoner of a worn-out arcadia:

> The screen of supreme good fortune curved his absolute smile into a celestial scream. These things (the most arbitrary that could exist) wakened denials, thoughts of putrid reversals as he traced the green paths to and fro. Here and there a bird sang, a rose silenced her expression of him, and all the gaga

> flowers wondered. But they puzzled the wanderer with their vague wearinesses.[53]

The conventional retreat down bucolic "green paths" and communion with an originary cast of bright flowers and singing birds have assumed a "vague weariness," overshadowed by a cosmic horror. This vagueness seems expressive of a more general malaise, frighteningly typified by the later assertion that "the trees are hinged to no definite purpose or surface." It also hints at broader misgivings about traditional forms and figural representation. The linguistic play of the first sentence—the permutation of "screen" into "scream" and the garish chiming of these words with "supreme"—complicates our ability to take it entirely seriously as a descriptive scene. This weary tableau is laid out with careless disdain: "Here and there a bird sang"; "all the gaga flowers wondered." It is a truly "tired" natural scene, one which will not rouse itself into sharper relief or offer spiritual renewal. As the poem progresses, the scene tumbles completely out of focus:

> Surely the trees are hinged to no definite purpose or surface. Yet now a wonder would shoot up, all one color, and virtues would jostle each other to get a view of nothing—the crowded house, two faces glued fast to the mirror, corners and the bustling forest ever preparing, ever menacing its own shape with a shadow of the evil defenses gotten up and in fact already exhausted in some void of darkness, some kingdom he knew the earth could not even bother to avoid if the minutes arranged and divine lettermen with smiling cries were to come in the evening of administration and night which no cure, no bird ever more compulsory, no subject apparently intent on its heart's own demon would forestall even if the truths she told of were now being seriously lit, one by one, in the hushed and fast darkening room.[54]

This breathless, surreal montage features certain recurrent Ashberyan effects: mixed abstractions and concrete images; streaking objects of puzzling significance; closing

[53] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 20.
[54] Ibid.

images of night or darkness; and, most prominently, natural scenes or prospects which merge into view only to disappear, scenes "gotten up and in fact already exhausted" (consider the "wonder" which "shoots up" but quickly becomes a "view of nothing," or the "bustling forest" which is "ever preparing, ever menacing its own shape"). Note, too, the indifferent tone: "some void of darkness, some kingdom he knew the earth could not even bother to avoid." Once again, the sticking point for Ashbery is not a return to a gracious "middle landscape" but rather a return to the exhausted tropes of nature writing itself, figured here as a "putrid reversal." Ashbery's "some trees" are not a Baudelairean "forest of symbols" but rather "these things (the most arbitrary that could exist)." In "The Young Son," Ashbery produces at best a pitying, at worst hostile, resume of "sentimental" pastoral fantasy.

"The Young Son," like "The Instruction Manual," is a version of "complex pastoral" which challenges the "sentimental" ideology of a poem like "Some Trees," and troubles the rather straightforward reading of Ashbery's "hollow formalism" which I sketch above. It establishes a sophisticated dialogue with other poems in Ashbery's debut, giving parodic works like "Eclogue" and "A Pastoral" a new value as touchstones of Ashbery's thematic variation. Placed in each others' proximity, these poems blur the line between pastoral and anti-pastoral, presaging the collapse of these categories into each other in later works like "Evening in the Country" and *The Vermont Notebook*. Yet some critics have read "The Young Son" as little more than expressionistic autobiography. Timothy Gray, for instance, argues that "the predominant message of 'The Young Son' is that retrospective flights of fancy back to the countryside, rendered here as 'putrid reversals,' are best avoided by avant-

garde writers seeking immediacy." The meanings of "avant-garde" and "immediacy" in this context remain unclear as Gray goes on to adduce a tenuous link between the surreal landscape of "The Young Son" and the rural landscape of Ashbery's youth: "New York City trumps Sodus in these instances. Elsewhere, the erstwhile country boy validates his decision to repair to the 'vast gloom of cities,' since 'only there you learn / How the ideas were only good because they had to die.'"[55] These last quoted lines would support Gray's general argument were it not for the fact that they come from "Variations, Calypso, and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," Ashbery's most ludicrously self-parodic poem. Perhaps they do refer to Ashbery's rural past; even so, they must be contextualized. Always a product of his historical moment, Ashbery has nonetheless been ill-served by the current vogue for linking his pastoral landscapes to his biography.[56]

II. Pastoral and Biographical Criticism

Because Ashbery was raised on a farm, critics have been especially keen to link his pastoral themes to his biography. Several recent critics have attempted to construe the "natural currents"[57] in his writing as veiled references to his rural childhood. Born in 1927 in Rochester, NY, Ashbery grew up on a fruit farm located near the village of Sodus. By his own account, his childhood was a lonely, boring time, relieved by lengthy visits to his maternal grandparents's homes in Rochester

[55] Gray, *Urban Pastoral*, 49.

[56] Mikkelsen similarly refuses to see the blatant humor in "Variations, Calypso and Fugue," reading it as a poem that "exemplifies an urbane sensibility that works with pastoral tropes in order to defuse and delimit mainstream ideology in favor of new forms of knowledge and subjectivity." *Pastoral*, 146.

[57] Gray, *Urban Pastoral*.

and, later, in nearby Pultneyville. He had a particularly warm relationship with his maternal grandfather, a physics professor at the University of Rochester and, by Ashbery's account, a learned, humane man. His separation from his grandparents at a young age to return to full-time living with his parents seems to have been a traumatic experience, as was the death of his younger brother, Richard, in 1940. Throughout his youth and adolescence, he participated in farm life, much of which seems to have revolved around picking, preserving, and selling fruit from the family orchards. He also took piano lessons and painting classes, developing an ambition to be a surrealist painter, and from an early age felt nostalgia for city life. After leaving for Deerfield and then Harvard, he became a city dweller. Since 1979, he has divided his time between his Chelsea apartment and his house in Hudson, NY, on the Hudson River. Though the family farm in Sodus was sold in 1965 following the death of Ashbery's father, Ashbery continued to visit his mother in "the holy land of western New York state" until her death in 1987.[58]

Such are the basic facts of Ashbery's formative years and family life. As more and more of these details have emerged, critics have turned increasingly to biographical readings of his work, with mixed results. Marit Macarthur's *The American Landscape in Frost, Bishop, and Ashbery: The House Abandoned* (2008) represents the most groundbreaking of such critical studies. Aided by archival work on Ashbery's childhood diaries and an interview with the poet in which he volunteers an unprecedented amount of personal information, Macarthur paints the fullest picture yet of Ashbery's early life. Following her detailed account of his

[58] Macarthur, *American Landscape*, 24.

childhood, she diligently scans through the poems in search of landscape imagery reflecting his rural roots. The results confirm that Ashbery has indeed made widespread, if rather ambiguous, use of the rural landscape of his youth. In fact, he admitted as much as early as 1977, affirming that although he was mostly unhappy in the "*average* countryside" of upstate New York where he grew up, "it does enter into my poetry a lot."[59]

By introducing such a wealth of biographical information, Macarthur refreshes critical debates about Ashbery but also risks sponsoring a dubiously reductionist reading of his oeuvre. Though she acknowledges the pitfalls of the biographical approach, she argues nonetheless that readers and critics have overlooked the preponderance of childhood landscape imagery in Ashbery's work "because of our assumption that [he] is an urban poet, which derives partly from the anti-biographical stance of most Ashbery criticism."[60] This seems true enough, if also a touch embattled. While at this point most "anti-biographical" readings of Ashbery would seem inadequate, the question remains as to whether Ashbery's

[59] "John Ashbery Interviewed by Sue Gangel," *American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work*, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 15. Ashbery tells David Herd the same thing in 1994: "When I was very small I lived with my grandparents much of the time, in the city, in Rochester, New York, where my grandfather was professor at the university. But when I was seven years old he retired and left that house and moved to the country to a little village [Pultneyville] where he had grown up, on the edge of Lake Ontario. My parents lived a few miles away on a farm. I always felt great nostalgia for living in the city, and for that house in particular and for the fact that there were lots of kids to play with, and when I was taken back to the farm I was really quite solitary and lonely for much of the time, except during the summer when I spent much of the time at my grandfather's house. The village was a summer resort and I had a lot of friends there; mostly children whose parents lived in Rochester. I enjoyed very much the lake and the countryside. Somehow the lake which was also close to where my parents lived, which I could see from my window, was a kind of soothing presence. And even though I wasn't very happy living at home, sometimes those landscapes do turn up in my poetry. I probably appreciate it more now than I did then." "John Ashbery in Conversation with David Herd," *PN Review* 99, vol. 21, no. 1 (1994): 32.

[60] Macarthur, *American Landscape*, 23.

poems harbor personal secrets, and if so, how we should take them. In light of Ashbery's insistence, over many decades, that his poetry is largely non-autobiographical, how might we productively assimilate the facts of his life?

In a reading of "The Skaters" which remains one of the finest pieces of critical writing on Ashbery, Brian McHale hazards a provisional answer to this question by situating the biographical element of Ashbery's work in a larger constellation of interpretive concerns. McHale takes issue with the notion that portentous moments or apparently biographical passages within a poem like "The Skaters" (and presumably many other Ashbery poems) can serve as interpretive keys to the poem's meaning. He examines

> three types of key or nodes in "The Skaters," demonstrating how Ashbery's text anticipates and preempts interpretative moves in each case. The types of keys to be considered are (1) descriptive (world-oriented) statements; (2) autobiographical (or speaker-oriented, expressive) statements; and (3) ars-poetic (or text oriented, textually self-reflexive) statements.[61]

Rather than "solve" the textual puzzles and problems thrown up by "The Skaters," McHale instead merely "enunciates" them in a bid to "reflect on our own interpretative procedures." Preliminary to his three-part reading of "The Skaters," he takes aim at those critics who would read Ashbery's poem by "selecting 'key' lines or passages, treating these as interpretative centers or 'nodes' around which to organize the heterogeneous materials of the poem." Such readings, McHale argues, "subordinate" the non-nodal parts of the poem or elide them completely, leaving "a skeletal structure of points that yield most readily to a particular interpretative

[61] Brian McHale, "How (Not) To Read Postmodernist Long Poems: The Case of Ashbery's 'The Skaters,'" *Poetics Today* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 562.

orientation, the rest having disappeared, like the soft tissue in an X-ray image."[62] Here we have a succinct statement of the main interpretive difficulty facing Ashbery critics.[63]

McHale's reading of "ontological hovering"[64] in "The Skaters" is particularly helpful in questioning the use to which the major biographical facts of Ashbery's life might be put, facts such as his rural childhood and his time in Paris, which until recently were among the few widely known biographical specifics. "Armed with one or two familiar facts about Ashbery's life," McHale writes,

> such as that he was raised on a farm in western New York State, that he lived an expatriate life in Paris, and so on, critics seek out passages like the "middle-class apartment" one and treat them as nodes of autobiographical veracity, relative to which the putative "reality" of other passages can be gauged. . . . Such touchstone passages as the snowy farmyard seem compatible with what we take to be the poem's autobiographical materials, and so are tentatively admitted to its "real world," whereas passages like the castaway fantasy, so flagrantly incompatible with the poem's autobiographical touchstones, end up being classified as fictional, fantastic, or secondhand.[65]

Here, McHale anticipates Macarthur's reading of "The Skaters," a poem that "seems to contrast [Ashbery's] lonely, repressive youth on his father's farm on Lake Ontario, and the drudgery of office work in New York City in the early fifties, with

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[62] Ibid., 566.

[63] I, too, selectively quote from Ashbery at the start of this chapter when I isolate a few lines from "Business Personals" as representative of Ashbery's play with pastoral rhetoric. Rather than a chronic form of misreading, however, the tendency to select passages as provisional interpretive keys seems a necessary part of the experience of reading, or misreading, his poems. It is worth adding that Ashbery often asks to be read across poems and volumes, rather than poem-by-poem, insofar as certain themes, phrases, and words—such as "lesson," "true way," "aspect," "occasion"—recur throughout many decades of work.

[64] "Entire blocs of text, cancelled, reframed, or otherwise 'weakened' ontologically, fall under erasure. . .throughout Ashbery's 'The Skaters'. . . . The result is a textual world poised strangely between being and nonbeing, yielding an effect of ontological 'hovering.'" Brian McHale, *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 15.

[65] McHale, "How (Not) To Read," 576.

the rather hedonistic, rich cultural and social life he led in Paris."[66] While McHale's deferral of interpretive orientation (toward world, self, and art) does not resolve the difficulties articulated above, it does offer an attractive model for *preparing* to read Ashbery. Rather than spinning out predetermined readings from cherry-picked passages, McHale opts for a more provisional, inclusive form of commentary that calls attention to a variety of hermeneutical concerns without privileging any of them. This model places the biographical in a non-hierarchical relation to the descriptive and ars-poetic elements of Ashbery's work, acknowledging it without affording it undue importance. This reading method allows us to read the *whole* of Ashbery without reducing him to his parts.

Ashbery's biographical critics have a hard time reading Ashbery as anything more than a "simple" pastoralist, and seem reluctant to address his more "complex" tendencies. Timothy Gray, going against all critical orthodoxy, argues Ashbery and his New York School peers out of their experimental contexts altogether, asserting that "however devoted they may have been to avant-garde techniques like abstraction, [they] should be placed alongside Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry, and Mary Oliver in the ranks of contemporary American Nature writers."[67] Macarthur makes a similarly perfunctory claim for Ashbery's "experimentalism" in order to set up a stronger claim for his "romanticism":

Stylistically, Ashbery is the most experimental major American poet since T.S.

[66] Macarthur, *American Landscape*, 169. Macarthur is not completely misguided in making this link, as Ashbery himself has called the poem "a meditation on my childhood." The question remains, though, as to what readers are meant to do with the seemingly biographical elements in Ashbery poems that are clearly more than just "confessional." One would be interested to see how Macarthur might accommodate McHale's reading to her biographical method.

[67] Gray, *Urban Pastoral,* 3.

> Eliot, but simultaneously, in some of his most experimental poems, he meditates lyrically on the American rural landscape, "according equal importance" to his rural childhood and to his innovative poetics. The rural landscape of his childhood, and his affinities with Romantic landscape meditation and rural poetry, are highly significant and moving themes in the wide and dazzling range of reference of his poetry.[68]

Macarthur and Gray make obligatory mention of Ashbery's "experimentalism" without defining it or explaining how it relates to the biographical element of his work. How, precisely, is Ashbery "stylistically" experimental? Pretending to "accord equal importance" to Ashbery's "rural childhood" and his "innovative poetics," their readings focus almost exclusively on the former, a move which they take to be a corrective measure to the supposedly anti-biographical stance of most Ashbery criticism. By focusing all of our attention on Ashbery's "urban associations" and overlooking his rural upbringing, Macarthur argues, "we may assume that the rural landscapes in Ashbery's poetry lack personal significance, and thus perceive them as pastoral parody."[69] Once again, the embattled tone masks the fact that the best Ashbery criticism since McHale's essay (published in 2000, the same year as Herd's *John Ashbery and American Poetry*) has had no difficulty taking Ashbery's rural landscapes as both "pastoral parody" and autobiographical sketches. Insofar as Ashbery's work is "experimental," it contains both forms of writing and many others besides. Why should the one preclude the other? Moreover, the division that Macarthur, Gray, and others propose between Ashbery as impersonal urban sophisticate and "former hayseed"[70]misleadingly recapitulates the "sentimental"

[68] Macarthur, *American Landscape*, 31-2.
[69] Ibid., 25.
[70] Gray, *Urban Pastoral,* 69.

country/city opposition which his poetry so brilliantly troubles in the first place. This remains the case with Gray's "urban pastoral" paradigm, which reverses the country/city equation but still traffics in a classically pastoral binary.

The trouble with the strictly biographical approach comes from its pretentions to "solving" the hidden meaning of Ashbery's poems, as if they were confessional all along. But Ashbery uses the pastoral tradition, and every other tradition, as a vehicle for something much more interesting than cryptic confessionalism. These objections might appear in clearer relief with the help of an example. Let us consider the following lines from "The One Thing That Can Save America":

> Is anything central?
> Orchards flung out on the land,
> Urban forests, rustic plantations, knee-high hills?
> Are place names central?
> Elm Grove, Adcock Corner, Story Book Farm?
>
> […]
>
> I know that I braid too much on my own
> Snapped-off perceptions of things as they come to me.
> They are private and always will be.
> Where then are the private turns of event
> Destined to boom later like golden chimes
> Released over a city from a highest tower?
> The quirky things that happen to me, and I tell you,
> And you know instantly what I mean?
> What remote orchards reached by winding roads
> Hides them? Where are these roots?[71]

The roots of this passage might be in any number of places, from Ashbery's childhood to the iconic tower imagery of Stevens, Yeats, and Crane. The "remote orchards" could refer to the Ashbery fruit farm in Sodus, NY, but they could just as

[71] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 457.

easily hark back to Wordsworth,[72] or to nowhere in particular. The same goes for the "quiet small houses in the country"[73] which emerges at the poem's close and could be real places or poetic inventions. The insistent questioning about the process (and prospects) of centering oneself and one's world forms a subject rhyme with any number of other Ashbery poems, such as "How Much Longer Will I Be Able To Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher," "No Way of Knowing," and "What Is Poetry." There is also a hint of formal artfulness in the rhyme (be / me) and slant rhyme (roads / roots). The speaker is pensive and solicitous, eager to voice his concerns to a sympathetic, perhaps even intimate, interlocutor. But we do not have a definite sense of either figure's identity; nor is this lack of information likely to hamper our readerly enjoyment. In short, even with these apparent references to Ashbery's apple-picking days, this passage remains typically "Ashberyan" in its engaging polysemy. Why reduce these "snapped-off perceptions" to mere autobiography?

One could argue that McHale's always-provisional reading method goes too far in stripping Ashbery's writing of potential truth-value, preempting the advances of all interpretive criticism. If this is the case, it is Ashbery, not McHale, who is to blame. A more productive quibble would be McHale's failure to include the political as a possible fourth angle of interpretive orientation in his critical paradigm. It is an

[72] Consider these lines from the opening stanza of "Tintern Abbey": "The day is come when I again repose / Here, under this dark sycamore, and view / These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,/ Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,/ Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves / 'Mid groves and copses." William Wordsworth, *The Major Works: including The Prelude* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 131.

[73] "The message was wise, and seemingly / Dictated a long time ago./ Its truth is timeless, but its time has still / Not arrived, telling of danger, and the mostly limited / Steps that can be taken against danger / Now and in the future, in cool yards,/ In quiet small houses in the country,/ Our country, in fenced areas, in cool shady streets." Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 458.

understandable omission, given Ashbery's chronic avoidance of politics. Consider the fact that a quarter century ago, Jerome McGann could write, without appearing to overstate the matter, that "Ashbery's avoidance of a conscious political position defines the style of his postmodern address."[74] While such a statement must be read partly as a product of its time,[75] its message remains one of the most persistent (and persuasive) twice-told tales of Ashbery. If Ashbery's critics and readers have fretted over the apparent non-question of his politics, it is because he has had such a decisive political impact, most directly on the "oppositional politics"[76] of the Language poets, his most committed heirs. On the one hand, it would seem that Ashbery has declined to "cash out" his own political potential; on the other, we might discern in his "non-politics" a shrewd orientation toward politics which allows him to "accept everything and take nothing."[77] In any event, Ashbery's avoidance of political commitment—his retreat to what Seamus Heaney has cleverly (if a bit unfairly) called the "centrally heated daydream"[78] of his poetry—poses pressing questions about the political implications of his escapist tendencies.

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[74] Jerome McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 200.

[75] In the paragraph preceding this statement, McGann draws a comparison between Ashbery's uncommitted "postmodern stance" and the non-oppositional politics of the American deconstructive mode, as represented by the Yale school. Since the late 1980s, critics have shied away from pairing Ashbery with deconstruction, and have even begun to issue more qualified claims about his "postmodern" status. See in particular Joshua Clover's provocative review of *Planisphere* (2009): "It is time finally," Clover writes, "to leave behind the long-settled idea of John Ashbery as a postmodernist—but not without some parting glances." Joshua Clover, "The Bubble and the Globe," *The Nation,* March 15, 2010, http://www.thenation.com/article/bubble-and-globe

[76] McGann, *Social Values*, 200.

[77] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 14.

[78] Heaney made this statement in the 1970s and walks it back somewhat in *Stepping Stones*. Dennis O'Driscoll, ed., *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), 281-2. Ashbery is, of course, fully aware of sealing his work off from the "real world." "How we move around in our little ventilated situation, how roomy it seems!" he writes in *Three Poems*. *Collected Poems*, 305.

Here I would again highlight the fact that pastoral has always been shadowed by the political. From Virgil's depiction of Roman farm appropriations in his first eclogue to contemporary eco-feminist critiques of an alternatingly purified/ despoiled feminized American landscape,[79] pastoral writing has struggled with the evasions of its own aestheticized dreams of peace. Far from undermining pastoral, however, this tension has extended its life by endowing it with a kind of special interest, turning it, at its best, into a neutral stage where thought experiments in the good life might be performed. Terry Gifford helpfully interprets pastoral's opposing intensities as a function of its twin aesthetic and political edges:

> So the pastoral can be a mode of political critique of present society, or it can be a dramatic form of unresolved dialogue about the tensions in that society, or it can be a retreat from politics into an apparently aesthetic landscape that is devoid of conflict and tension. It is this very versatility of the pastoral to both contain and appear to evade the tensions and contradictions—between country and city, art and nature, the human and the non-human, our social and our inner selves, our masculine and our feminine selves—that made the form so durable and so fascinating."[80]

For the remainder of this chapter, I turn to Ashbery's Vietnam-era poetry, from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) to *The Vermont Notebook* (1975) to consider how he both contains and appears to evade the tensions and contradictions of the pastoral. Rather than reading Ashbery as a "sentimental" pastoral poet masquerading as an avant-gardist, as his biographical critics would have him, I argue that the major work of

[79] Annette Kolodny, L.H. Westling, and others have conducted trenchant eco-feminist readings of pastoral. Westling takes specific aim at the American pastoral tradition and its nineteenth-century ideological roots, asserting that Emerson and Thoreau "consolidate the imperialist nostalgia that has always been at the heart of American pastoral—a sentimental masculine gaze at a feminized landscape and its creatures that masked the conquest and destruction of the 'wild' continent." L.H. Westling, *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 52. See also Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

[80] Gifford, *Pastoral,* 11.

his middle period operates on a "complex" pastoral logic of "wandering away" from the political call to action.

III. "Free to wander away": Ashbery's Pastoral Politics

Critical discussions of Ashbery's politics, as James Longenbach has shown in an illuminating reading of "John Ashbery's Individual Talent," might productively begin with two short essays: "Frank O'Hara's Question" (1966), an elegy for his recently deceased friend, and "The Invisible Avant-Garde" (1968), his famous lecture to the Yale Art School.[81] Both pieces, written within two years of each other, propose an indifferent stance toward the "acceptance world" of all establishments, mainstream and experimental alike, as a vital prerogative of contemporary artists concerned to preserve the integrity of their art. In Ashbery's account such indifference can offer a potent form of resistance:

> Frank O'Hara's poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak out against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic Age: in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe.[82]

The memorial essay containing this passage was a source of particular annoyance to Louis Simpson, who shot back with a cranky editorial in *The Nation* taking issue with what he took to be Ashbery's flippant attitude toward the anti-war movement, to which, he pointed out, most members of their generation of poets had subscribed. Ashbery in turn replied that his comments had unjustly been taken out of context so

[81] James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85-101.

[82] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 81.

as to make him appear to derogate the consciences of his poetic contemporaries. Reluctantly, he added that he himself had also taken part in the protest movement in various ways. While, as Longenbach has noted, Ashbery was consciously advancing "a dangerously subtle argument" for its time, he also had a point to make and stuck to his guns, asserting: "All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn't poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action."[83] This exchange and certain passages of "The Invisible Avant-Garde" are often cited for their uncharacteristically direct commentary on the artist's role in society. We have every reason to believe that Ashbery spoke in earnest when he made these rare statements. One explanation for their rarity is that they inevitably backed him into an uncomfortable corner from which he grudgingly felt compelled to defend himself. For Ashbery's preferred pose is, if anything, a neutral one—"a kind of fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an aesthetic ideal."[84] Rather than a simple refusal to take a political stand, however, such fence-sitting proved to be an effective way of managing the divergent demands of art and politics. The pastoral nuances of this "politics of alterity" will be fleshed out in what follows.

In his study of the New York School poets and the neo-avant-garde, Mark Silverberg proposes a common origin for Ashbery's "aesthetics of personal dispersal or dislocation" and his "politics of alterity." In doing so, he helps to synthesize various strands of the foregoing argument:

[83] Quoted in Longenbach, *Modern Poetry*, 86-7.
[84] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 185.

> John Ashbery once commented in an interview that "My own autobiography has never interested me very much. Whenever I try to think about it, I seem to draw a complete blank." […] Comments like these are crucial for understanding not only Ashbery's *aesthetics* of personal dispersal or dislocation (a poetry of multiple consciousnesses, shifting and ambiguous pronouns and speakers, and temporal and spatial dislocations), but also his *politics* of alterity. […] Ashbery is interested in the way that experience is manufactured through an ongoing dialogue between language, the environment, and the individual. Thus, ironically, while readers may have a powerful sense of Ashbery as *auteur*, our sense of him as an individual or subject is constantly unstable. Politically, Ashbery's dematerialized subjectivity, this poetics of otherness or alterity, is an important weapon in the battle against essentializing politics which would define individuals on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or *any* given determinant.[85]

Alert to the simultaneous orders of descriptive ("environment"), biographical ("the individual"), and ars-poetic ("language") meaning in Ashbery's work, Silverberg introduces a fourth, political order of meaning to McHale's interpretive triad. Silverberg's distinction between "Ashbery as *auteur*" and the biographical Ashbery is well judged; the degree to which the poems point to the author himself, or whether it even matters if they do, remains unclear. Underlying Ashbery's "aesthetics of personal dispersal" and "politics of alterity" is a more basic anxiety about being pinned down. This anxiety is, of course, a highly productive one for a poet whose "poetry of multiple consciousnesses, shifting and ambiguous pronouns and speakers, and temporal and spatial dislocations" affords an escape route from every situation.

Other critics have also interpreted Ashbery's "dematerialized subjectivity" as a form of escape from "essentializing politics." Bob Perelman, for instance, observes a nascent form of utopian speculation in the menagerie of high-, middle-, and low-

[85] Silverberg, *New York School*, 203-4.

brow culture in "Daffy Duck in Hollywood." In contrast to Ginsberg's "Wichita Vortex Sutra," which defiantly situates itself in a determinate contemporary landscape and wears its politics on its sleeve, Perelman argues, "Ashbery's writing . . . uses public materials casually and unpredictably. The contemporary world is visible, but the manner in which it touches any individual is hard to pin down."[86] Perelman reads Ashbery's "avoidances" of real-world problems as a "constitutive feature" of the poetry that serves as a "force for liberation."[87] Though Ginsberg's "highly centered" lyric subject would seem a far more politically impactful speaker than Ashbery's Daffy Duck, Perelman proposes that Ashbery's "decentered subject" might employ a different kind of political agency:

> The question whether a decentered subject can be a political agent and oppose centralized power is of course quite problematic. Empirically, a highly centered subject such as Ginsberg has had more effect. But assuming that the figure of a decentered subject stands as a utopian prefiguration of liberation, the question remains to what extent Ashbery's writing *does* posit such a subject. . . . But as often happens with Ashbery's work after *The Tennis Court Oath*, the game dies down at the end. Here, an external landscape begins to peep through. . . . The precondition is that politics, domestic or international, be pushed away.[88]

I am especially interested in Perelman's final observation that at the end of the Ashbery poem an "external landscape begins to peep through" as politics gets "pushed away." Perelman, as Language poet, sees unrealized political potential in

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[86] Perelman, *Marginalization of Poetry*, 118.

[87] He adds: "It is dangerous, with Ashbery to read too much into any particular image, but here, the hospital and ambulances are characteristic in their avoidance of the finality of damnation, which the lines from Milton evoke: the Ashberyan traveler can return from death as easily as a cartoon figure can be reconstituted." Ibid., 120. Perelman refers to the following lines from "Daffy Duck in Hollywood": "While I / Abroad through all the coasts of dark destruction seek / Deliverance for us all, think in that language: its / Grammar, though tortured, offers pavilions / At each new parting of the ways. Pastel / Ambulances scoop up the quick and hie them to hospitals." Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 511.

[88] Perelman, *Marginalization of Poetry*, 121.

Ashbery, whose work stops short of conclusively positing the "decentered subject" who would "release the energy usually bound into the signifier." But this is not necessarily a flaw. Indeed, it would seem that Perelman's "decentered subject" (in this case a spectral cartoon character rambling in a Pop-Miltonic patois) could never fully "posit" itself or face the real world of Ginsberg's poem without directly undermining the very conditions of its liberty. In other words, Ashbery resists the claims of the political on his work not by bringing politics into the poem in order to control it, as Ginsberg does, but by pushing it *out* of the poem when it threatens to intrude.[89] The poetry never sits still long enough for the "real world" to grab hold of it, and only in this way can it "prefigure" its own "liberation." Ashbery's method is to veer toward "the coasts of dark destruction" only to wander freely away toward a new tonal register, a new speaker, a new landscape.

In a recent essay on "John Ashbery's Optional Apocalypse," Christopher Nealon speaks to Ashbery's tendency to "wander away" from "dark destruction" as a necessary corollary to his neutral politics. Turning from the "recurrent themes of Ashbery criticism," Nealon reads Ashbery's work of the 1970s (generally considered his major period) "as trying to solve aesthetic problems that are the product of political conditions."[90] The specific political context Nealon has in mind is the rise

[89] Charles Altieri makes a related point: "Daffy is obviously a figure of the paralysis inherent in a world where there is neither force nor authority in high-cultural traditions, but he is equally a figure of the new freedom such a vision brings, because it enables us to stop dreaming of cures for our anxieties." *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 133.

[90] Nealon lists the recurrent critical themes as follows: "Ashbery as endlessly elusive, as a poet of perception, of the experience of time, of nostalgia, a poet laughing at us for trying to grasp meanings that aren't there, a poet who has secured his majority by way of an insistent minority." While Nealon's essay does not necessarily invalidate these themes as worthy subjects of critical

of neo-liberalism in 1970s New York City and the "consolidation of the private sector" following the city's transition from federal support to private financing. Reading Ashbery as a sheepish subsidiary of these municipal transformations, Nealon draws attention to Ashbery's recurrent tropes of "wandering away" in the poetry of this period. For Nealon, Ashbery's "posture of minority"—best reflected in his championing of the "Other Tradition"—not only mounts "puckish resistance to classicality" but also "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." "This uneasy dynamic," Nealon adds,

> is especially vivid in figures of what I call "optional apocalypse," looming disaster that the poet believes he can simply choose to "wander away" from. The insistent minority of *Three Poems* and *Self-Portrait* represents a guilty, unstable and covert alignment of the hapless subject of the hegemon with other wanderers and vagrants, whom Ashbery locates in an elsewhere he calls "the other side of the mountains" [quoting "Grand Galop"].[91]

Whether we think of Ashbery as "pushing away" or "wandering away" from unpleasant political and economic realities, Perelman's and Nealon's readings offer politically inflected accounts of the same general phenomenon: Ashbery's drifting focus. Pushed a degree further, their arguments reveal a classic pastoral move.[92] If,

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contemplation, it does point a way out of entrenched modes of reading Ashbery, one which subsequent critics will be obliged to take into account. Christopher Nealon, "John Ashbery's Optional Apocalypse." paper presented at the Poetry of the 1970s Conference, National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, June 14, 2008, http://vectors.usc.edu/thoughtmesh/publish/172.php. A revised version of the essay appears in Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[91] Nealon, "Optional Apocalypse."

[92] While Perelman's and Nealon's respective notions of "pushing away" and "wandering away" from the socio-political world are not expressly deployed as terms of pastoral critique, they share deep affinities with the pastoral rhetoric of retreat, withdrawal, and escape. I have in mind something roughly equivalent to the utopian escapist sentiments of Birkin, from D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*: "That's the place to get to — nowhere. One wants to *wander away* from the world's somewheres, into our own nowhere." [italics in original] Susan Reid has commented on the pastoral overtones of

like Nealon, we read Ashbery's alignment with wanderers and vagrants "on the other side of the mountain" as a hardscrabble form of resistance to "the hegemon," might we not also read it as a gesture of pastoral retreat?[93] Or better yet, might we not interpret both as two sides of the same coin? Perelman and Nealon help us begin to form a consensus about the political dimensions and evasions of Ashbery's work, but they stop short of pointing out that they seem to be describing a pastoral paradigm, in which the poet retreats from the encroachments of the modern world—and the culture industry—in a bid for a freer, more felicitous relationship with himself, his art, and his readers. The fact that this retreat can be seen as either an aestheticized evasion of political responsibility or a negative affirmation of it only heightens its pastoral intrigue. Modifying Perelman's terms, I would suggest that this pastoral logic of avoidance—the endless tendency to "push" or "wander away" from one situation or train of thought and regroup in a more amenable "elsewhere"—itself represents a constitutive feature of Ashbery's writing.

Nealon comes close to making this observation in linking Ashbery to the tradition of wandering or vagrancy in English poetry,[94] a tradition deriving from the

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this passage, and related texts like Morris' *News from Nowhere*, in "Idylls of Masculinity: D.H. Lawrence's Subversive Pastoral," *New Versions of Pastoral: Post-Romantic, Modern, and Contemporary Responses*, eds. David James and Philip Tew (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2009), 97-8. Worth mentioning, too, in this regard is David Herd's essay, "Poetry and Voice: The Urge to Nowhere," which appropriates the phrase, "the urge to nowhere," from Ashbery's "Sunrise in Suburbia," in an ambitious Agambenian-Heideggerian-Badiouan reading of the "non-place" of the Dover Immigration Detention Centre. Herd briefly suggests that the passage from which this phrase is taken showcases Ashbery's "migrant poetic." David Herd, "Poetry and Voice: The Urge to Nowhere," *PN Review 197*, vol. 37, no. 3 (January-February 2011): 41-3.

[93] The Arcadia region of Greece is notably mountainous, and the retreat to "the other side of the mountain" has long been a pastoral topos.

[94] Nealon, in turn, builds his argument from several key works on this subject, notably Richard Halpern's *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulaton: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital*

troubadours and "the history of enclosure and displacement that obliged singers and players to wander the English countryside, perpetually in danger of being on the wrong side of a rapidly mutating law."[95] Nealon here hints at the lifelines between Ashbery and John Clare, the exemplar of English enclosure-era pastoralism and one of Ashbery's favorite poets. One thinks also of Wordsworth, for whom "vagrancy" and the "simulation of freedom" were key concepts, as Celeste Langan has shown.[96] While I would not conflate romantic vagrancy and pastoral retreat, I would submit that by the time we get to Ashbery these conventions have cross-pollinated. For if Ashbery wanders away, he crucially never wanders back; his is a chronically "migrant poetic"[97] that draws strength from not having roots. His perpetual wandering (among lyric voices, genres, tones, landscapes) generates a precarious condition of liberty predicated on never touching down in the "real world." The precondition is that the speaker never stop moving, that he never take a stand. For to take a stand in a poem, political or otherwise, would be to stand still, and to stand still is at best an ambivalent thing for Ashbery:

(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Celeste Langan's *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[95] Nealon, "Optional Apocalypse."

[96] Like Perelman's and Nealon's essays, Langan's study of "Romantic vagrancy" as "the pathos of liberalism," while not strictly engaged with the conventions of pastoral, supplements the present reading of Ashbery's pastoralism as liberatory wandering. "Romantic vagrancy," Langan writes, "is the Romantic representation of vagrancy, a representational practice particularly concerned with those aspects of vagrancy susceptible to analogy and subsequent idealization: first, the mobility that appears to guarantee to the vagrant a residual economic freedom, despite his or her entire impoverishment; second, the speech-acts that appear to consolidate a residual political identity. The poet and the vagrant together constitute a society based on the twin principles of freedom of speech and freedom of movement. 'Romantic vagrancy,' then, describes a certain idealization of the vagrant: a reduction and an abstraction. The vagrant's mobility and expressivity are abstracted from their determining social conditions—the fiscal-military state that effectively produces the vagrant's mobility and the specific purpose of the vagrant's speech: entreaty or begging. This reduction and abstraction crucially elevate the vagrant to the status of the poet's double." Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy,* 17.

[97] Herd, "Poetry and Voice," 42.

> For only you could watch yourself so patiently from afar
> The way God watches a sinner on the path to redemption.
> Sometimes disappearing into valleys, but always *on the way*,
> For it all builds up into something, meaningless or meaningful
> As architecture, because planned and then abandoned when completed,
> To live afterwards, in sunlight and shadow, a certain amount of years.
> Who cares about what was there before? There is no going back,
> For standing still means death, and life is moving on,
> Moving on towards death. But sometimes standing still is also life.[98]

So ends "The Bungalows," an exemplary specimen of Ashbery's mid-career pastoral in which life literally has the ambiguous last word. The titular bungalows are an idealized destination neither to be reached nor even mentioned in the body of the poem. For Ashbery, a poet who relishes clichés above all his contemporaries, the journey is the destination.

Ashbery's willful rejection of political grandstanding and of the weighty utterance might be a form of selling out, or selling short, but, *pace* Perelman, Simpson, and others, it is also a canny move. "American pastoral representation," Buell writes, "cannot be pinned to a single ideological position. Even at its seemingly most culpable—the moment of willful retreat from social and political responsibility—it may be more strategized than mystified."[99] Ashbery, no doubt, mystifies his socio-political responsibilities, but his "willful retreat" from them is also strategic. In addition to an escape from "the hegemon" and from the "social antagonism" that Adorno identifies with the contemporary lyric poem,[100] Ashbery

[98] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 225-26

[99] Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 44.

[100] Silverberg's, Perelman's, and Nealon's arguments are broadly indebted to Adorno's influential essay, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," which interprets the lyric poem's illusive autonomy from social pressures as a kind of pastoral allegory. Adorno argues that despite the lyric poem's pretense to a heightened condition of unfettered utterance it "is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism" (45). At the heart of Adorno's critique lies a concern for the autonomy of both the lyric

strategizes an escape from normative political activism. As he told Louis Simpson, "Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action."

Arguably, the mere writing of books as politically indifferent and drenched in nature as *Rivers and Mountains, The Double Dream of Spring*, *Three Poems, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,* and *The Vermont Notebook* itself constitutes a political

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subject and the lyric form: "You experience lyric poetry as something opposed to society, something wholly individual. Your feelings insist that it remain so, that lyric expression, having escaped from the weight of material existence, evoke the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation." Yet, as Adorno goes on to argue, these "feelings" are premised on an illusory faith in the lyric's autonomy from social pressures: "This demand, however, the demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws. The work's distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different" (39-40). In Adorno's account, the traditional lyric, with its emphatically centered speaking subject, strives, in a classic pastoral move, to "escape the weight of material existence" to a freer, more amenable condition outside the social order. Yet, in the process it falls prey to and even becomes complicit with the very social pressures it resists and attempts to transcend, revealing itself to be beholden to these pressures in equal proportion to how strongly it asserts its independence from them. The illusion of autonomy under which the lyric labors notably takes the form of a pastoral fantasy—it is "the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation"; it "expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different." While I would not make any claims about Ashbery's indebtedness to Adorno, I would maintain that the broad strokes of Adorno's argument jibe with Ashbery's own reservations about the personal lyric mode and its social contingencies. Adorno's essay, therefore, helps explain how Ashbery's dispersed lyric subject might prefigure a condition of "utopian liberation." For as critics have been noting for decades, Ashbery's poetry is nothing if not "sensually skeptical" toward the lyric "I," even as his work garners praise for drawing readers into a condition of intimate dialogue. See Helen Vendler, *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)*;* Bonnie Costello, "John Ashbery and the idea of the reader," *Contemporary Literature* 23, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 493-514; and Charles Altieri, "Ashbery as love poet," *Verse* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 8-15.

Yet, if Ashbery treads lightly, to say the least, around the issue of centered subjectivity, his work seems drawn again and again to fleeting "images of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation." Thus, as I have argued, Ashbery's trademark evasions, deferred revelations, discursive fantasy-making, wistfulness, and ironized nostalgia—his global tendency to "wander away"—operate on a kind of pastoral logic, writ large. As far as Adorno's argument is concerned, then, Ashbery would try to have it both ways: while sidestepping potentially "antagonistic" social pressures by uncentering his lyric subject ("submitting" to "heteronomy," as Adorno has it), he also partakes of a kind of "transparent" lyricism that reproduces the pyrotechnics of certain visionary lyric modes without reproducing their content. I am not prepared to adjudicate whether or not these strategies finally relieve Ashbery from Adorno's social pressures. Ashbery wrote the poems he did, when he did, and the rest is literary history. Theodor Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," *Notes on Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

statement "in favor of life." Life, in these books, remains a complex and contradictory affair, maximally opposed to sloganeering. Ashbery's reservations about normative activism find corollaries (and outlets) in poem after poem of the period shot through with pastoral and anti-pastoral topoi. The important thing is that he was able to write both kinds of poems (or poems open to both tendencies), never simply indulging a sentimental yearning for a "golden age" or succumbing to cynicism. The opening lines of "Rural Objects," for instance, show him cautiously invoking the memory of the former mode:

> Wasn't there some way in which you too understood
> about being there in the time as it was then?
> A golden moment, full of life and health?
> Why can't this moment be enough for us as we have become?[101]

Crucially, the "golden moment, full of life and health" never quite materializes, even as it haunts *The Double Dream of Spring*.[102] The opening stanzas of "These Lacustrine Cities," from the earlier *Rivers and Mountains*, throw a different gloss on the golden pastoral moment as the cynical tool of an advanced civilization:

> These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing
> Into something forgetful, though angry with history.
> They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for instance,
> Though this is only one example.
>
> They emerged until a tower
> Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back
> Into the past for swans and tapering branches,
> Burning, until all that hate was transformed into useless love.[103]

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[101] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 203.

[102] A glance at some of the volume's titles produces this impression: "Spring Day," "Summer," "Song," "Evening in the Country," "For John Clare," "The Double Dream of Spring," "Rural Objects."

[103] Ibid., 125.

In this retelling, pastoral's artificial tactic of "dipping" into the past curbs the hateful realities of history into the "useless love" of nostalgia. In a dark twist, this process has been coopted by the "tower" that "control[s] the sky"—the powers that be—and should be severely mistrusted. Pastoral's fraudulence has been revealed. Yet by the poem's end, the search for lost time drifts into more ambiguously personal territory, giving way to some of the most beautiful lines Ashbery ever wrote:

> But the past is already here, and you are nursing some private project.
>
> The worst is not over, yet I know
> You will be happy here. Because of the logic
> Of your situation, which is something no climate can outsmart.
> Tender and insouciant by turns, you see
>
> You have built a mountain of something,
> Thoughtfully pouring all your energy into this single monument,
> Whose wind is desire starching a petal,
> Whose disappointment broke into a rainbow of tears.[104]

The artificial "lacustrine cities" of the first stanzas are naturalized at the poem's end into the "mountain/monument," a "private project" informed by the "past" and immune to the vicissitudes of "climate." The cities become a kind of abstract pastoral haven, though hardly in the simplistic manner of the "urban pastoral." "You will be happy here," the speaker says, where natural phenomena—wind, petal, rainbow—merge with emotional states like "desire" and "disappointment"; where, "tender and insouciant by turns," subjects and objects harmonize.

Ashbery himself was very much engaged in a "private project" at this point in his career, experimenting on his own in a foreign country. The work of the 1960s—

[104] Ibid.

composed half in Paris and half in America—falls into a long American tradition going back to Thoreau in which nature writing and political subversion touch ends at the extreme pole of social disengagement. Herd astutely traces Thoreau's influence on Ashbery's early- to mid-1960s work, going so far as to claim that "*Rivers and Mountains* is, in its rhetoric at least, one of the most environmental works by an American since *Walden.*"[105] "Like *Walden*," Herd adds,

> Ashbery's third book is the work of a writer in retreat from society, cutting himself off in order to develop a language capable of making meaningful contact with the circumstances in which he finds himself. There is then, as Ashbery seems to see it, a fundamental similarity between his situation and Thoreau's, Thoreau being the type of the experimental writer.[106]

Herd's reading shows how we might discuss Ashbery's biography and experimentalism in the same breath, without violating McHale's interpretive provisos. While there are important differences between Thoreau and Ashbery,[107] Ashbery's position can be seen to mirror that of Thoreau from roughly a century earlier in its deliberate deferral of social obligations. Ashbery, too, wandered away from mainstream America in 1956, the year *Some Trees* came out, not, in his case, to the Massachusetts wilderness, but to the enabling anonymity of a major European capital, where he would eventually write *The Tennis Court Oath* and most of the poems in *Rivers and Mountains*. It is no coincidence that he did not return to the US until his mature style had had a chance to gestate in the *locus amoenus* of Paris. In a 1965 *Art News* piece on the painter Joan Mitchell, Ashbery offers a rather

[105] Herd, *Ashbery and American Poetry*, 105.
[106] Ibid.
[107] "But there are crucial differences also [between Thoreau and Ashbery], the most important being that, whereas Thoreau gladly shunned company, Ashbery conceives of his isolation in *Rivers and Mountains* as a necessary evil." Ibid., 105.

transparent account of his own reasons for becoming an *apatrides* (a term preferred to expatriate) in Paris: "Unlike New York and most other capitals, it provides a still neutral climate in which one can work pretty much as one chooses. . . . It seems that such an artist [as Mitchell] has ripened more slowly and more naturally in the Parisian climate of indifference than she might have in the intensive-care wards of New York."[108] Once again, we see the importance Ashbery places on neutrality and indifference—in being at a remove, in not being smothered, in standing freely apart. "[R]emember you are free to wander away," Ashbery reminds himself in a poem published in 1975, ten years after his return to American and the year the Vietnam War ended.[109]

IV. Ashbery's Postmodern Pastoral: 1965-1975

Ashbery returned to America permanently in 1965 after the death of his father, just in time for the Vietnam War and "The Sixties." The free-play of pastoral and anti-pastoral themes in his work of this period allows him both to "wander away" from political pressures and to revive the pastoral's critical potential at a time when it had been aestheticized to the point of exhaustion. But rather than merely recast the old conventions in new forms, the pastoral mode of Ashbery's middle years "propels pastoral away from the static 'middle landscape' described by Leo Marx and into the dynamism of postmodernism at its most robust and regenerative."[110] Turning to the poems themselves, this final section considers the

[108] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings,* 99.
[109] Quoting "As You Came From the Holy Land." Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 430. Nealon also quotes this poem in his essay.
[110] Corey, "Long Foreground."

nuances of Ashbery's "postmodern pastoral," with special reference to "Song," "Evening in the Country" and *The Vermont Notebook*, Ashbery's most sophisticated—and funniest—exploration of pastoral topoi.

Since Leo Marx introduced the concept of "complex pastoral," there has been a healthy debate about the prospects for advanced or experimental pastoral: writings invested in rehabilitating pastoral's worn-out conventions as tools of critique. Terry Gifford's "post-pastoral" builds most directly from Marx in its recognition that "some literature has gone beyond the closed circuit of pastoral and anti-pastoral to achieve a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human." In a number of recent articles and essays, Gifford traces the broad contours of the "post-pastoral" in everything from the poetry of Ted Hughes and A.R. Ammons to Charles Frazier's debut novel, *Cold Mountain*. Other critics, like Joshua Corey and Andrew Lawson, have looked for models of "complex pastoral" in more strictly experimental work. In his short essay, "On Modern Pastoral" (1992), Lawson argues that, in Britain at least, "the pastoral impulse did not fade into vacuity. . .it simply went 'underground.'" According to Lawson, a "philosophical pastoral" mode took root and flourished in Cambridge in the 1960s and 1970s, whence it spread to other nerve centers of the experimental British poetry scene. Lawson derives his notion of "philosophical pastoral" largely from William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) and from Paul de Man's essay, "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism."[111] "What is the pastoral convention, then," de Man writes,

[111] Andrew Lawson, "On Modern Pastoral," *fragmente* 3 (Spring 1991): 35-41.

> if not the eternal separation between the mind that distinguishes, negates, legislates, and the originary simplicity of the natural? […] The pastoral theme is, in fact, the only poetic theme, that is poetry itself.[112]

Lawson takes the landmark anthology, *A Various Art,* as his textbook of "philosophical pastoral," his exemplary poem from the anthology being Andrew Crozier's "The Veil Poem," a piece which "settles neither for the supreme fiction" "nor resplendent Being" but rather evinces a "sensual skepticism pending further illumination." While the connection between Cambridge School experimentation in the 1960s and 1970s and Ashbery's own work of the period remains implicit in this account,[113] Lawson's "sensual skepticism," always on the cusp of merging into revelation,[114] aptly formulates Ashbery's own dominant affect.

Something akin to Lawson's "philosophical pastoral" is at play throughout *The Double Dream of Spring*, especially in poems like "Song" and "Evening in the Country," in which a "sensually skeptical" lyricism courts an abstracted pastoral ideology. Here is the first half of "Song":

> The song tells us of our old way of living,
> Of life in former times. Fragrance of florals,

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[112] Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Criticism* (London, Routledge, 1983), 239.

[113] Veronica Forrest-Thomson was one of the earliest critics (as early as the mid-1970s) to detect kinship patterns between the Cambridge poets and Ashbery. In *Poetic Artifice*, her posthumously published study of contemporary Anglo-American poetry, she conducts separate readings of both J.H. Prynne and Ashbery almost as a matter of course, at a time when such a thing would have been a rare undertaking indeed. Forrest-Thomson's knotty but ingenious reading of Ashbery focuses on "pastoral and parody" in his work, with specific reference to "They Dream Only of America," from *The Tennis Court Oath*. *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 152-60. Ashbery himself has played down any connections between his work and that of the Cambridge School poets, though the latter openly claim him. See Ford, *Ashbery in Conversation*, 55.

[114] One is reminded of any number of lines from Ashbery's work featuring impending revelations or illuminations—what he refers to in a 1967 review of Borges' *A Personal Anthology* as "the imminence of a revelation not yet produced" which is perhaps "the aesthetic reality." See Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 103.

How things merely ended when they ended,
Of beginning again into a sigh. Later

Some movement is reversed and the urgent masks
Speed toward a totally unexpected end
Like clocks out of control. Is this the gesture
That was meant, long ago, the curving in

Of frustrated denials, like jungle foliage
And the simplicity of the ending all to be let go
In quick, suffocating sweetness?

These lines return us to the scene of "The Young Son," with its "denials," "thoughts of putrid reversals," and "screen of supreme good fortune curv[ing] his absolute smile into a celestial scream" (in "Song," by comparison, "some movement is **reversed**," suggesting "the **curving** in of / Of frustrated **denials**"). But unlike the anti-pastoral "Young Son," "Song" offers a more ambivalent account of "our old way of living,/ of life in former times." Numerous pastoral themes could be teased out of these lines ("fragrance of florals," "beginning again," "reversed movement," "simplicity"), but like the final lines of "These Lacustrine Cities," it is unclear whether they add up to something positive or negative. This poem showcases the complexity of Ashbery's mature pastoral, which elevates itself even in the act of self-sabotage, "beginning again into a sigh." Ashbery remains skeptical of the "suffocating sweetness" of "sentimental" pastoral, but does not disavow it. Likewise, he affirms the power of the old "song," though he does not sing it. These tensions give way to a drama of deflated expectations and "growing up" in the poem's second half:

The day
Puts toward a nothingness of sky

Its face of rusticated brick. Sooner or later,
The cars lament, the whole business is hurled down.
Meanwhile we sit, scarcely daring to speak,
To breathe, as though this closeness cost us life.

The pretentions of a past will some day
Make it over into progress, a growing up,
As beautiful as a new history book
With uncut pages, unseen illustrations,

And the purpose of the many stops and starts will be made clear:
Backing into the old affair of not wanting to grow
Into the night, which becomes a house, a parting of the ways
Taking us far into sleep. A dumb love.[115]

This passage seems to narrate the disillusionment of a pastoral fancy: "the day's" rustic façade confronts the emptiness of reality, and "the whole business is hurled down" by the intrusion of "lamenting cars," agents of Marx's "interrupted idyll." As in "These Lacustrine Cities," the present falsifies the "pretentions of a past" into something it can leverage, in this case "progress," resulting, not in "useless love," but "dumb love." And yet, this "love" might be more mute than stupid; remember, after all, that the "song" is invoked but nowhere sung. And so we are left wondering: does this poem dramatize the death of pastoral, or its rebirth? The "progress," which is a "growing up,/ As beautiful as a new history book / With uncut pages, unseen illustrations" calls to mind Elizabeth Bishop's "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," one of Ashbery's favorite poems, which also ends on a movingly ambiguous note of "growing up":

Everything only connected by "and" and "and."
Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen

[115] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 194-95.

this old Nativity while we were at it?
—the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets,
—and looked and looked our infant sight away.[116]

The emphatic gaze of the final line erodes the "infant sight" even as it sates it beyond fulfillment. "Song" does something similar to the pastoral, deconstructing its pretenses with one hand while rebuilding its "face of rusticated brick" with the other.

"Evening in the Country," one of Ashbery's most "complex" pastoral lyrics, offers an elegant resume of pastoral ideology in a similarly "philosophical" key. Like "Song," it, too, dramatizes the failure of pastoral, though in doing so it redeems it on a rhetorical level. The poem begins in a quintessential "happy place":

I am still completely happy.
My resolve to win further I have
Thrown out, and am charged by the thrill
Of the sun coming up. Birds and trees, houses,
These are but the stations for the new sign of being
In me that is to close late, long
After the sun has set and darkness come
To the surrounding fields and hills.[117]

The perfect state of contentment expressed here comes equipped with the usual pastoral props: energizing sunrise, birds and trees, fields and hills. As per convention, these are the harbingers of spiritual renewal, "the stations for the new sign of being / In me." There is something suspicious about the textbook exactitude of this scene, though, beginning with the first line's unnerving flatness of affect; on

[116] Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (New York: Library of America, 2008), 46.
[117] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 196-97.

reflection, "I am still completely happy" begins to sound more lobotomized than jubilant. And though this is meant to be a peaceful "evening in the country," there is something ominous about the coming of "darkness." A dark turn comes in line nine:

> But if breath could kill, then there would not be
> Such an easy time of it, with men locked back there
> In the smokestacks and corruption of the city.[118]

But this passage, too, is textbook in its way, introducing the "Et in Arcadio ego" topos—death's disruption of the pastoral scene—and the familiar prospect of the "corrupt" city. These standard antithetical elements only enhance the pastoral loveliness of the "evening in the country." Everything is in place for the anticipated moment of gracious communion of self and world, which arrives in lines 12-20:

> Now as my questioning but admiring gaze expands
> To magnificent outposts, I am not so much at home
> With these memorabilia of vision as on a tour
> Of my remotest properties, and the eidolon
> Sinks into the effective "being" of each thing,
> Stump or shrub, and they carry me inside
> On the motionless explorations of how dense a thing can be,
> How light, and these are finished before they have begun
> Leaving me refreshed and somehow younger.[119]

Once again, we are presented with an almost too-perfect pastoral scenario. As the speaker's expansive gaze sends him on a fabulous imaginative journey, touring "my remotest properties" and exploring "how dense a thing can be,/ How light," he finds himself "refreshed and somehow younger." The "eidolon" or ghostly representation of all things, even unremarkable things like stumps and shrubs, melts away as the

[118] Ibid., 197.
[119] Ibid.

"effective 'being'" reveals itself. Note here that "being" appears in quotation marks, having first appeared without them in line five. It is as if, in this heightened state, "being" itself may be bracketed for reflection. Yet tempted though we might be to take cues here from Whitman and Heidegger, the references to eidolons and "being" seem more notional than grounded in philosophical design. Rather than transcribing a "real" experience of mystical communion with a "middle landscape," this poem occurs primarily at the rhetorical level, each of its parts being precisely scripted moments of pastoral "retreat and renewal." This poem narrates not a specific pastoral retreat but the traditional moves of pastoral itself. Lines 21-31 reintroduce the threats of the outside world, the fallen political realm, but only to reaffirm the pastoral landscape's restorative magic:

> Night has deployed rather awesome forces
> Against this state of affairs: ten thousand helmeted footsoldiers,
> A Spanish armada stretching to the horizon, all
> Absolutely motionless until the hour to strike
> But I think there is not too much to be said or be done
> And that these things eventually take care of themselves
> With rest and fresh air and the outdoors, and a good view of things.
> So we might pass over this to the real
> Subject of our concern, and that is
> Have you begun to be in the context you feel
> Now that the danger has been removed?[120]

A superficial reading of these lines might find the Vietnam War figured in the "ten thousand helmeted footsoldiers" and "Spanish armada stretching to the horizon," and take Ashbery to task for blithely assuming "these things eventually take care of themselves / With rest and fresh air and the outdoors, and a good view of things." A deeper reading might do the same but would also note the way in which these blithe

[120] Ibid.

assumptions have been couched in suspiciously conventional terms. In doing so, it would be more cautious of linking the "ten thousand helmeted footsoldiers" to a specific historical event and would allow for the possibility that Ashbery is here criticizing critics like Louis Simpson for caricaturing him as an apolitical snob. In that case, the by-the-book pastoral sentiments of this poem would parody Ashbery's supposedly uncommitted aesthetic stance and its denial of political crisis. This would not be the only time Ashbery parodies himself to get the upper hand on his critics.

An even deeper reading might find Ashbery doing all of the above while *also* recovering the pastoral on an abstract level by recasting it as a nexus of competing tendencies, outside of praise or censure. As in "Song," this poem neither embraces nor disclaims its own pastoral fantasy, but creates a textual space in which pastoral's contradictory intensities may be schematized, if not quite resolved. Like "being," "pastoral" gets bracketed off as a category of reflection. The heavy line break at line 28 ("So we pass over this into the real / Subject of our concern") reminds us that our passage into a "realer" natural state in this poem is primarily a textual matter; though, it does not fully dissolve this special moment into pure text. Pronoun play raises the poem's stakes, as the declarative "I" becomes a "we" and then a "you" in lines 28-30. The speaker, eager to affirm that "the danger has passed," inquisitively urges his new companion (or perhaps himself) to begin "to be in the context you feel," heralding another return to "being." In the subsequent lines, "we" find ourselves still in the happy place, though not for long:

Light falls on your shoulders, as is its way,

And the process of purification continues happily,
Unimpeded, but has the motion started
That is to quiver your head, send anxious beams
Into the dusty corners of the rooms
Eventually shoot out over the landscape
In stars and bursts? For other than this we know nothing
And space is a coffin, and the sky will put out the light.[121]

The first sentence, which begins by affirming that "the process of purification continues happily,/ Unimpeded", is ironically impeded by a new state of uncertainty. What starts in a confidently declarative mood turns warily interrogative. The ominous "motion" that "is to quiver your head" and "send anxious beams / Into the dusty corners of the rooms / Eventually shoot out over the landscape / In stars and bursts," resembles the "wonder" in "The Young Son," which "would shoot up, all one color" over the poem's anti-pastoral scene. The "questioning but admiring gaze" turns ambivalent and then macabre, as the earth becomes a tomb and the "sky will put out the light." This poem vacillates between an idealized encounter with the natural world and sober reflection on the threats to that "process of purification." In doing so, it exhibits "the immense hope, and forbearance,"[122] common to all pastoral, of daydreaming after a truer relation with one's self and one's world. It concludes:

I see you eager in your wishing it the way
We may join it, if it passes close enough:
This sets the seal of distinction on the success or failure of your attempt.
There is growing in that knowledge
We may perhaps remain here, cautious yet free
On the edge, as it rolls its unblinking chariot
Into the vast open, the incredible violence and yielding

[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., 181.

Turmoil that is to be our route.[123]

This is not an atypical ending to an Ashbery poem, nor does its anti-pastoralism necessarily disavow what precedes it.[124] For Ashbery, ever alert to the contingencies of the physical text, the catastrophe of the final lines—"the vast open, the incredible violence and yielding / Turmoil"—presages the end of the poem itself and the blank space that follows. The pronouns are notably free-floating in this passage, so as to confuse what precisely is happening, and to whom. "It," for instance, might refer to any number of things, including "the motion," "anxious beams," "knowledge," "here," "the edge". By the poem's end, the gracious "middle landscape," set apart from the corrupt city, has become "the edge," while the "completely happy" speaker is now "cautious yet free." Ben Hickman locates the "interest" of this poem "in its movement from a static and ironically idealized description of the day. . .to the realization and ultimate acceptance of the dynamism and 'turmoil' of life."[125] I would agree that the poem dramatizes a "movement" away from idealism toward the "growing knowledge" that pastoral's condition of complete simplicity will cost not less than everything. Though, the speaker hardly seems to accept the charity of this hard moment as it is doled out ("We may perhaps remain here," he says uneasily).

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[123] Ibid., 197-98.

[124] Consider the following endings: "In the flickering evening the martins grow denser. Rivers of wings surround us and vast tribulation" ("Glazunoviana"); "Everything is being blown away;/ A little horse trots up with a letter in its mouth, which is read with eagerness / As we gallop into the flame" ("A Last World"); "It was the holiness of the day that fed our notions / And released them, sly breath of Eros,/ Anniversary on the woven city lament, that assures our arriving / In hours, seconds, breath, watching our salary / In the morning holocaust become one vast furnace, engaging all tears" ("Sunrise in Suburbia"). This kind of textual play with endings occurs throughout Ashbery, notably in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," which concludes with the poem literally whispering "out of time": "The hand holds no chalk / And each part of the whole falls off / And cannot know it knew, except / Here and there, in cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time." Ibid., 10; 87; 211; 487.

[125] Ben Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 72.

"Evening in the Country" and "Song" are "complex" pastoral lyrics in the way they balance pastoral and anti-pastoral gestures. But they also draw complexity from their context within *The Double Dream of Spring*, being implicitly critiqued by the volume's intentionally "bad" pastorals (in this sense, they resemble "The Young Son" placed in the vicinity of mock-pastorals like "Eclogue" and "A Pastoral"). Any pretentions to seriousness we might have as readers of "Evening in the Country" are utterly deflated several pages later by the final lines of "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape": "Popeye chuckled and scratched / His balls. It sure was pleasant to spend a day in the country."[126] Meanwhile, these lines from "Some Words" tease the peaceful "evening in the country" into the realm of parodic doggerel:

> Weary of seeking day you will relish the night
> In night's dim orchards you will find some rest
> The counsels of the trees of night are best
> Better than knowledge, which corrupts us at birth
> And which you allowed to flourish in the accursèd earth.[127]

Or, perhaps most pointedly, consider these lines from "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," which parody both the "growing up" theme of "Song" and the "growing knowledge" of the bitter final lines of "Evening in the Country":

> Growing up under the shade of friendly trees, with our brothers all around.
> And truly young adulthood was never like this:
> Such delight, such consideration, such affirmation in the way the day goes
> 'round together.
> Yes, the world goes 'round a good deal faster
> When there are highlights on the lips, unspoken and true words in the heart,

[126] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 207.
[127] Ibid., 217.

> And the hand keeps brushing away a strand of chestnut hair, only to have it
> fall back into place again.
> But all good things must come to an end, and so one must move forward
> Into the space left by one's conclusions. Is this growing old?
> Well, it is a good experience, to divest oneself of some tested ideals, some old
> standbys,
> and even finding nothing to put in their place is a good experience,
> preparing one, as it does, for the consternation that is to come.[128]

Chapter four takes up the question of Ashbery's "bad" nature poetry in greater detail. For now, I want to highlight the way in which Ashbery's pursuit of both the visionary heights and comic depths of pastoral—"the effective 'being' of each thing" and "Popeye's balls," as it were—allows him to develop a "postmodern" pastoral mode that does more than simply imitate or ironize romanticism's visionary gaze. Nowhere is he more alert to these competing tendencies than in *The Vermont Notebook*, his most "complex" pastoral project.

Where poems like "Song" and "Evening in the Country" abstract pastoral's traditional moves into a "sensually skeptical" lyric drama, *The Vermont Notebook* concretizes pastoral's competing intensities into a parodic roll-call of objects and fantasies found in the American cultural landscape. "In *The Vermont Notebook,*" Ellen Levy notes, "the metaphoric keeps giving way to the literal, and as it does so, the conflicts—between poetry and painting, art and society, 'commerce' and disinterestedness—come out in the open."[129] To this list one might add the conflict between "nature" and culture," categories which the book subversively merges into

[128] Ibid., 190.

[129] Ellen Levy, *Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery, and the Struggle Between the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 198.

what Christopher Schmidt terms "queer nature."[130] A "kind of messy grab bag," as Ashbery puts it, the book tends to be read (or, more often, recovered) as the evil twin of the prize-grabbing *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, also published in 1975.[131] In time, it might come to seem an equally important achievement, the necessary counter-statement to Ashbery's most polished and canonical achievement.

Ashbery wrote the poem, "an experiment in writing in an uninspiring environment," on a bus journey through New England, a mechanized inversion of the retreat to nature: "Writing on a moving vehicle. Not only did my mind move, the landscape was moving as well," he said.[132] The "Vermont" landscape which he moves through

> is quite different, for some reason, from the surrounding New England states. The minute you cross the arbitrary border into New Hampshire, it looks slightly scruffy. Vermont seems greener and lusher. But on the other hand, Vermont is full of things like carports and supermarkets and x-rated movie theatres and all the other things that exist everywhere else.[133]

From the start, then, the purist fantasy of a "green" Vermont is bathetically corrupted by "things that exist everywhere else" and, as it turns out, by the fact that Ashbery's bus journey never actually passed through Vermont.[134] A collaborative

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[130] In the "queer nature" of *The Vermont Notebook* "the boundary between the natural and the cultural is not only transgressed but thoroughly undermined." Schmidt deftly analyzes the "queering" effect of the book's recurrent trope of "waste," which "possesses a power to disrupt the tidy categories that govern and normalize our behavior, not least the categories of 'nature' and 'culture.'" Christopher Schmidt, "The Queer Nature of Waste in John Ashbery's *The Vermont Notebook*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 68, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 97, 72. In his comprehensive reading of *The Vermont Notebook*, Schmidt provides a detailed inventory of the book's "waste" themes, from the various images of "dumps" and "landfills" to the recurrent references to defecation and anal eroticism.

[131] *The Vermont Notebook* was written before but published after *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

[132] Quoted in Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 14.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Ashbery told Shoptaw that he wrote the book primarily "on buses traveling through New England, though not Vermont. . . . Generally speaking I guess it's a catalogue of a number of things

work featuring facing-page line drawings by the visual artist Joe Brainard, *The Vermont Notebook* samples a variety of prosaic and poetic forms: lists (of games, crimes, companies, cities, artists), found text, Steinian language experiments, pseudo-romantic fairy poetry, and postcard greetings. What emerges from this "grab bag" is an unstable, pluralist conception of "nature" as the proliferating specter of an unrecoverable ideal. As Christopher Schmidt notes,

> Ashbery's way of addressing the encroachment of consumerism into the American landscape is not through an escape into nature—such a flight is suggested but ultimately debunked by *The Vermont Notebook*—or in a complicit presentation of the commodity as art, as in Warhol's work. Rather, in *The Vermont Notebook*, Ashbery finds the humanity within the commodity, and exposes the natural as false advertising.[135]

In *The Vermont Notebook*, "Nature" appears in a number of contradictory forms: it is an abstraction ("the climate"); a corny personification ("Mother Nature"); an ecological restoration site ("Marco Applied Marine Ecology Station"); an environmental development project ("artificial islands and reefs"); "national park zones"; the "insipid flowering meads" and "dreaming manure piles" of a disaffected community of fairies; a parody of itself ("The landscape is countryish without looking countrified"); a geological event ("stones building up under the surface that finally swell and burst out into sunlight");[136] a sublime space ("So many marvelous

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that could be found in the state of Vermont, as well as almost everywhere else—another 'democratic vista.'" Ibid.

[135] John Ashbery, *The Vermont Notebook* (New York City: Granary Books; Calais, Vermont: Z Press, 2001), 77. It is worth noting that one of Brainard's sketches features a cut-off image of Warhol's "Mobilgas" Pegasus prints, with facing text in the form of two lists, featuring clubs /groups and corporations (Gulf Oil, but not Mobil). Ibid., 12-13.

[136] This text is accompanied by a Brainard drawing of a "thrust fault" as it might appear in a geology textbook.

empty mountains. . .The ultimate lightness"); a "landfill"; and "the dump." And this is only a partial inventory.

The book's debunking of a core concept of "nature" is compounded by the ironic dissonances produced by Brainard's drawings, which comically contradict and amplify Ashbery's texts. The sketch of a rural scene that appears on page ten, for instance, featuring a pasture, silo, and other farm buildings, contrasts with a facing-page list of urban and suburban installations:

> Industrial parks, vacant lots, yards, enclosures, fields, arenas, slopes, siding, tarmac, blacktop, service roads, parking lots, drive-in deposits, libraries, roller rinks, drag racing, karting, plazas, reflecting pools, evergreen hedges, war memorials, turn arounds, supermarkets.[137]

Similarly, a sketch of an island and palm tree appears alongside found text from an article on the "Marco Applied Marine Ecology Station," a conservationist research program in Florida's southern Gulf coast (Ashbery took the text from an article that appeared in the *Sodus Record*).[138] The island sketch and the following lines come from the ninth and tenth pages of the twelve-page "Marco" sequence:

> Since biologists know the value of the mangrove islands to spawning fish such as snook and tarpon, the Station is now experimenting with the establishment of artificial islands. A large reference collection of marine life is being created, and some extremely valuable records on the dissolved oxygen in the water are being established. Another first at Marco, is that no sewage effluent is returned directly to the water—after three stage treatment it is used to irrigate one of the golf courses.[139]

The explicit joke here, and throughout the "Marco" section, is the way in which conservationist interventions "denature" the natural world with supposedly eco-

[137] Ashbery, *Vermont Notebook*, 10-11.

[138] Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 355, n.43. The reference to the "southern Gulf coast of Florida" chimes with the earlier mention of "Gulf Oil" on page 13.

[139] Ashbery, *Vermont Notebook*, 84-5.

friendly projects like the "artificial islands" and the complicated sewage treatment system (which, ironically, ends up irrigating the pastoralized space of a golf course). In an earlier section, we discover that the Marco Station has also built two "artificial reefs":

> At a location one mile off Marco, 57,000 old automobile tires have been wired together forming an underwater structure. At another location four and one-half miles into the Gulf, some 5,000 tons of construction debris has been piled along the bottom.[140]

Dumping trash on the ocean floor would hardly seem a sound environmentalist practice; yet, "studies revealed" that fishing improved dramatically after the creation of the artificial reefs. And so the Marco Applied Marine Ecology stations succeeds in turning the Gulf's "natural environment" into an ecologically and economically prosperous "development":

> Marco is an example of how a new community can be sensitive to the natural environment. One hopes there will always be nesting eagles, the mangrove wilderness, and jumping fish. And one hopes that other developments will take note.[141]

This closing text appears alongside an appropriately ominous Brainard sketch of two flies on an indeterminate rough surface.

Schmidt's reading of Ashbery's "queer nature" (or what Ashbery punningly calls "real camp life" in the entry succeeding the "Marco" section),[142] helpfully situates the book's many inversions of "nature" and "culture" within a queer theoretical framework. Languishing in the shadow of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

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[140] Ibid., 81.

[141] Ibid., 87.

[142] "This is where we are spending our vacation. A nice restful spot. Real camp life. Hope you are feeling fine." Ibid., 89. Shoptaw notes that Ashbery copied this text from a 1949 postcard signed "Em & Edythe." *On the Outside*, 16.

and in its own various "dumps," *The Vermont Notebook* is a triumph of camp disaffection. With its artless imitations of real places and emotions, it presents an ideal arena for "deferring and teasing the false pastoral of authenticity." Consider the following passage, from a prose poem titled "To the Hard Barn Road Cafeteria":

> Bev would have loved it here. The rural look of everything, even city intersections. . . . The landscape is countryish without looking countrified. In fact it looks as though it had its mind on more basic preoccupations, as though if it could talk it would say, "Sorry, I don't have time to think of such things." Up there of course is the subdued glow where McDonald's, Carrol's, Arthur Treacher, Colonel Sanders and Dunkin' Donuts succeed each other at the pace of a stately gavotte. But back here even this close all is already rubble and confusion—the country, in other words.[143]

Numerous other instances could be adduced here, but I would like to conclude with a look at "The Fairies' Song," *The Vermont Notebook*'s only proper "poem," which appears toward the end of the book:

The Fairies' Song

> Clouding up again. Certain days there is a feeling that whatever we arrange
> Will sooner or later get all fucked up.
> Then there are explosions of a 19th-century, garden-variety form of
> intellectual rage.
> We have moved too far in the glade, the way this is all about harassing.
>
> Sometimes one of us will get included in the trash
> And end up petulant and bored at the multiple opportunities for mischief,
> Screaming like a seagull at vacuity,
> Hating it for being what it is.
>
> There are long rides around doubtful walked-in spaces,
> Dreaming manure piles under the slop and surge of a March sun,
> Rivers of reeds, rivulets of webbed mud,
> Pale plumes of dullness portentously fixed at the four corners of a moment of
> Tearing around only to be caught out.
>
> Thunderheads of after-dinner cigar smoke in some varnished salon

[143] Ashbery, *Vermont Notebook*, 73.

Offer ample cover for braiding two coat-tails together
Around the clumsy arm of an s-shaped settee.
In a screech the occasion has disappeared, the clamor resumed like a climate.

There are limpid pools of quiet
Offering themselves to the relaxed curve of a pebble,
Baskets of normal occurring, insipid flowering meads,
Wastes of acting out daytime courtesies at night,

Deadfalls of resolution, arks of self-preservation,
Arenas of unused indulgence. Where do we get off
The careening spear of rye? The milk meanwhile is soured
But it all gets mixed up in your stomach anyway.

We dance on hills above the wind
And leave our footsteps there behind.
We raise their tomatoes.
The clear water in the chipped basin reflects it all.
A spoiled life, alive, and streaming with light.[144]

The poem's first five quatrains are printed opposite a sketch of an open meadow—a caricature, perhaps, of Robert Duncan's "place of first permission,/ everlasting omen of what is" (Brainard's field, in fact, closely resembles the cover photograph of the 1973 New Directions reprint of *The Opening of the Field*). Ashbery's fairies, however, are not the blissful dreamers "of the grass blowing / east against the source of the sun / in an hour before the sun's going down,"[145] but pessimistic and marginalized creatures who have "moved too far in the glade." The fairies of these "insipid flowering meads," whom Schmidt identifies as queer subjects,[146] more closely resemble the embattled Popeye cartoon characters of "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" than the vatic, disembodied speaker of "Evening in the

[144] Ibid., 92-95.
[145] Robert Duncan, *The Opening of the Field* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 7.
[146] "'The Fairies' Song' elaborates a queer nature not only because it exposes the lie of a natural landscape in its mutual interimplication of the natural and the cultural, but because here Ashbery essays the very nature of queerness." "Queer Nature," 92.

Country." Yet their "spoiled life, alive, and streaming with light" gives us as good a model as any of Ashbery's "postmodern pastoral"—"that circus of dusty dramas, denuded forests and car dealerships, a place / where anything can and does happen, and hours and hours go by."[147]

[147] John Ashbery, *Hotel Lautréamont* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), 80.

CHAPTER THREE

"The delta of living into everything": Ashbery's Riverine Poetics

I allow myself eddies of meaning:
yield to a direction of significance
running
like a stream through the geography of my work
—A.R. Ammons[1]

In *The Vermont Notebook*, Ellen Levy writes, "the metaphoric keeps giving way to the literal" in a way that foregrounds submerged cultural tensions. *The Vermont Notebook*, however, is not unique in this regard, being one of many Ashbery texts that literalizes figural language in order to dissolve the boundaries between categories like "art and society" and "nature and culture." This chapter extends Levy's insight beyond the purview of *The Vermont Notebook*, and examines Ashbery's tendency to literalize nature-based figures of speech, especially the stream-of-consciousness, in key works across his career. From his early to late periods, Ashbery has used flowing water to dramatize streams of thought in ways that both simulate and unseat romantic visionary mimesis. Rivers, both as images *within* Ashbery's poems and structural tropes *for* them, repeatedly manifest spaces where meaning literally drifts by or flows past, vividly present yet unknowable. Like the "transparent diagram" of "Clepsydra," Ashbery's rivers tend to be tropes for both the text and its maker. Time and again, we find Ashbery striking out in original directions by a process of dismantling his earlier styles and then "dissolving the

[1] A.R. Ammons, *The Selected Poems: 1951-1977* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 43.

poem or putting it in a solution,"[2] a process that informs the progress from *Some Trees* to *Rivers and Mountains* (via *The Tennis Court Oath*), from *The Double Dream of Spring* to *Three Poems*, and from *A Wave/April Galleons* to *Flow Chart.*

I. "Semicoherent daubs": Ashbery, Eliot, and Hölderlin

The extent to which Ashbery visualizes the act of writing in terms of flowing water emerges in the 1976 interview with Richard Kostelanetz:

> I have a feeling that in my mind [there] is an underground stream, if you will, that I can have access to when I want it. I want the poetry to come out as freshly and unplanned as possible, but I don't want it to be stream of consciousness. I'm bored by the automatic writing of orthodox surrealism. There is more to one's mind than the unconscious. I have arranged things so that, as this stream is coming out, I make a number of rapid editorial changes. My poetry has an exploratory quality. I don't have it mapped out before I sit down to write.[3]

Here, in slightly different terms, is a resume of Ashbery's familiar position regarding orthodox Surrealism. Yet, while it has become a critical commonplace (following Ashbery's lead)[4] to speak of his work's "flux" and meandering style—what David Herd calls "a language equal to the flow of its contemporary environment"[5]—critics have tended to ignore his tendency to literalize the stream-of-consciousness metaphor.[6] Ashbery's rivers are never as specified as Eliot's Thames, Williams'

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[2] A. Poulin, Jr., "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20, no. 3 (1981): 254.

[3] Kostelanetz, *Old Poetries*,106.

[4] In a 1970 entry in *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*, Ashbery lists characteristic devices of his writing as follows: "ellipses, frequent changes of tone, voice (that is, the narrator's voice), point of view, to give an impression of flux." Rosalie Murphy, ed., *Contemporary Poets of the English Language* (Chicago: St. James Press, 1970), 33.

[5] Herd, *Ashbery and American Poetry*, 104.

[6] Srikanth Reddy surveys a related topic in his recent study of "digression" in American poetry, arguing that Ashbery's "floating speakers provide a figure for what might be called the interiorization of drifting. . .for, in Ashbery, the experience of inwardness is modeled upon the very rivers that convey his literary protagonists to their fugitive elsewheres. Formalizing William James' notion of

Passaic, or Stevens' Swatara; rather, they are "the element in which you live and which is you," as he writes in "The System."[7] In a 1989 lecture entitled "Poetical Space," Ashbery comments on the difference between Tennyson's river in "The Lady of Shalott" and Eliot's Thames in *The Waste Land*, suggesting as well some of the broader shifts in poetic technique and sensibility that distinguish the Victorians from the Modernists. The lecture also offers a key statement of Ashbery's own artistic objectives and strategies, written around the time he completed *Flow Chart*. He begins by quoting lines 266-76 of *The Waste Land*, then touches on the necessarily "anti-descriptive" techniques that modern poets have been obliged to adopt. I quote him at length:

> The river sweats
> Oil and tar
> The barges drift
> With the turning tide
> Red sails
> Wide
> To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.
> The barges wash
> Drifting logs
> Down Greenwich reach
> Past the Isle of Dogs.

> This seems to me an example from among the 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 out of focus; how indeed does a barge wash a log? Nor do the limp, static rhythms conjure up the movement of a

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the 'stream of consciousness,' Ashbery ultimately constructs a riverine poetics in which both the inner life and literary enunciation assume the digressive contours of a river's shifting topology." Observing that "writers from Heraclitus to Ashbery have long studied rivers as a surrogate for the mind in the world," Reddy aligns himself with critics like Costello and Spiegelman, who would equate Ashbery's consciousness to his landscapes. *Changing Subjects: Digressions in Modern American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28; 134.

[7] Ashbery, *Collected Poems,* 304.

> river flowing; we are far from such an onomatopoeic tour de force as Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" of exactly eighty years previous, whose rippling meters convey the sight and sound of a swiftly flowing stream in a way that seems almost alchemical. Yet Eliot's ungrateful 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.[8]

These observations offer a number of useful points of critical purchase for Ashbery's own work. Firstly, they foreground his disinterest in Tennysonian euphony, the traditional "alchemical" effects of regular rhyme, meter, and artful rhythm, a bias which has persisted throughout his career.[9] More importantly, they highlight his complicated relationship with Eliot, to whom he feels both drawn and repelled. Although Ashbery consistently omits Eliot from his list of poetic models, the "semicoherent daub" technique, imputed to Eliot's "The Fire Sermon," certainly informs his experimental collage work of *The Tennis Court Oath*, which he would later resynthesize into the fluid style of *Rivers and Mountains*.

As the phrase "semicoherent daubs" shows, Ashbery is happy to export the language of art criticism to his poetry criticism. In a 1982 essay on the painter R.B.

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[8] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 215-16.

[9] Consider Ashbery's lampooning of Tennyson in "Darlene's Hospital," from *Houseboat Days* (1977): "The Lady of Shalott's in hot water again." *Collected Poems*, 780.

Kitaj, Ashbery takes the same river passage from "The Fire Sermon" as a touchstone of modern artistic practices, writing that "such a passage is less a description than a miming of a way of seeing wherein objects will clear for a moment and then blur, adjacent phenomena are compressed into a puzzling homogeneity, and clear outline abruptly turns illegible."[10] Like the river passage of *The Waste Land* and Kitaj's paintings, Ashbery's work is persistently informed by notions of spatial and temporal flux punctuated by moments that dramatize "clear outline abruptly turning illegible," often within the ambit of river or otherwise watery scenes. Alan Williamson observes that "it is John Ashbery's uniqueness that he identifies the state of imaginative ecstasy with the point at which the object goes out of focus, multiplies, dissolves."[11] Rather than "rejecting a poetry of privileged moments or privileged phrases,"[12] as Harold Bloom contends, Ashbery is continuously drawn to such moments but keenly aware that they cannot be brought into focus or scrutinized. In "Syringa," for example, Ashbery takes the myth of Orpheus' loss of Eurydice as a metaphor for the inevitability of loss and of the slippage of meaning, in this case the slippage of poetic meaning over time and even over the course of a single reading. For Ashbery, this is a natural, indeed trite, process that occurs "in the context of a stream or river": "The seasons are no longer what they once were,/ But it is the nature of things to be seen only once,/ As they happen along /

[10] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 302.
[11] Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 118.
[12] Bloom, "Charity," 54.

Somehow."[13] In lines that echo the ending of Elizabeth Bishop's "At the Fishhouses,"[14] Ashbery later invokes the language of painting to depict the inevitable ("seasonal") transition from clarity to obscurity:

> For although memories, of a season, for example,
> melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure
> that stalled moment. It is too flowing, fleeting;
> It is a picture of flowing scenery, though living, mortal,
> Over which an abstract action is laid out in blunt,
> Harsh strokes. And to ask more than this
> Is to become the tossing reeds of that slow,
> Powerful stream, the trailing grasses
> Playfully tugged at, but to participate in the action
> No more than this.[15]

The "blunt / harsh strokes" call to mind the "semicoherent daubs" with which Eliot renders his portrait of the deranged modern world. Ashbery's work is, indeed, "a picture of flowing scenery," a literary canvas replete with prospective privileged "moments" always being deferred into obscurity, as in the following lines from a later moment in "Syringa," in which the poem itself takes on vivid but recondite significance:

> Its subject
> Matters too much, and not enough, standing there helplessly
> While the poem streaked by, its tail afire, a bad
> Comet screaming hate and disaster, but so turned inward
> That the meaning, good or other, can never
> Become known.[16]

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[13] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 534. Ashbery explains the riverine overtones of this passage to Richard Jackson: "I have a line in one of my poems, 'Syringa,' about the way things happen, moving along, bumping into other things, which occurs in the context of a stream or river. That's not a very original metaphor, but in fact its triteness is one of the reasons I'm attracted to it." Jackson, *Acts of Mind*, 72.

[14] "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:/ dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,/ drawn from the cold hard mouth / of the world, derived from the rocky breasts / forever, flowing and drawn, and since / our knowledge is historical, flowing and flown." Bishop, *Poems*, 52.

[15] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 535.

[16] Ibid., 536.

The "bad comet" with its inscrutable meaning suggests not only the "lesson" which eddies into the night in "Parergon" (discussed at length below) but also Eliot's "sudden illumination" from *The Dry Salvages*:

> The moments of happiness—not the sense of well-being,
> Fruition, fulfilment, security or affection,
> Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination—
> We had the experience but missed the meaning,
> And approach to the meaning restores the experience
> In a different form, beyond any meaning
> We can assign to happiness.[17]

Reading Ashbery often means to have an experience but miss the meaning. Ashbery's notion of missed meaning differs, however, from Eliot's notion that "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood"[18] to the extent that Ashbery's poems are not necessarily meant ever to be "understood." Rather, they attempt to reproduce, in Ashbery's well-known phrase, the "experience of experience,"[19] which, as I have argued, substitutes a "transparent" order of meaning for a symbolic one. At its best, this contingent writing mode—call it "indeterminacy" or "ontological hovering" or "self-occluding transparency"—still manages to communicate even as it remains resistant to logical exposition.

Eliot's presence is palpable in Ashbery from the start, both in major works like *Three Poems* and in unpublished materials. In an uncollected poem, "Evening

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[17] Eliot, *Complete Poems*, 186.

[18] T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 238.

[19] Poulin, "Experience of Experience," 245. "Most of my poems are about the experience of experience. As I said before, the particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through to me. I believe this is the way it happens with most people. I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long. . . .I have a feeling that everything is slipping away from me as I'm trying to talk about it—a feeling I have most of the time, in fact—and I think I was probably trying to call attention to this same feeling in 'Leaving the Atocha Station' and in other poems as well."

Quatrains," written around 1958, Ashbery mimics the language, if not the rhythm, of the river passage from "The Fire Sermon":

> From the walking river a huge sound of barges
> Means the true dispersal of the buzzing halo of the day.
> All around—for inches—light again retreats along beside the caked sand
> layer
> Of the squat alas city of electronic new space communicator page.[20]

While not a particularly strong or characteristic piece of writing, the passage does convey, like Eliot's "Fire Sermon" passage, a claustrophobically myopic vision ("all around—for inches") of an opaque modern cityscape bisected by a barge-clogged river. Nearer to the clotted and "semicoherent daub" effect of Eliot's verse, if not the meaning, are the experimental collage pieces of Ashbery's second book *The Tennis Court Oath*. Consider the following passage from "Idaho":

> For who dies
> The crocus ideally
> On life's playing field
> The "never mind" rubbish
> All, all fixed
> running water
> And the proper names,
> blood out of courage
> to fix
> to feel
> the stem of air[21]

Both poetic styles were, finally, one-off experiments, written within a few years of each other while Ashbery was living in Paris and working through the artistic crisis that followed the publication of *Some Trees*. Read in contrast to Ashbery's first great poems ("Clepsydra" and "The Skaters") in his third volume, *Rivers and Mountains*,

[20] Ibid., 918.
[21] Ibid., 121.

they bespeak the sea-changes his poetic style was to undergo in the mid-1960s. Moving away from the Stevensian mannerism of *Some Trees*, Ashbery effectively dismantled his writing style with the choppy, rebarbative collage work of *The Tennis Court Oath*, only to reassemble it in the form of his fluid, inclusive mature style that followed.

Among his juvenilia, Ashbery's mature themes of flux are perhaps best anticipated not by "Evening Quatrains" and "Idaho" but by a relatively obscure poem from his Harvard days entitled "A Sermon: Amos 8:11-14," first published in the *Harvard Advocate* in April 1947. "A Sermon" ranks with "Some Trees" as one of Ashbery's only poems to be written, in earnest, in conventional rhyme. And like "Some Trees," "A Sermon" is an ethical admonition to learn to "touch, love, explain."[22] The second stanza reads like a blueprint for the effects of freefall and dissolution, propelled by an inexplicit emotional directive, that characterize his best long poems, from "Clepsydra" to "A Wave":

> Move as water: soon gone
> Lightly girdling the dry stone.
> Touch nothing long: involve
> Nothing ever. Your fate and history
> Meet in geometry
> And in radiant law dissolve.[23]

Some of the hallmarks of his mature style (or styles) also emerge in the first stanza of the first poem in the *Collected Poems*, "Two Scenes":

> We see us as we truly behave;
> From every corner comes a distinct offering.
> The train comes bearing joy;

[22] Ibid., 26.
[23] Ibid., 890-1.

The sparks it strikes illuminate the table.
Destiny guides the water-pilot, and it is destiny.
For long we hadn't heard so much news, such noise.
The day was warm and pleasant.
"We see you in your hair,
Air resting around the tips of mountains."[24]

Many of the later Ashberyan trademarks appear in this early passage: personal pronouns lacking antecedents, references to weather ("The day was warm and pleasant"), water and rivers ("the water-pilot"), meteoric objects that streak by joyfully and offer some kind of lesson or illumination ("The train comes bearing joy; / the sparks it strikes illuminate the table"), landscape imagery ("Air resting around the tips of mountains"), and free use of abstractions ("Destiny guides the water-pilot"), to name a few salient examples. The river imagery, joyful comets, and ambiguous resolution appear again in more explicit form in "Grand Abacus," also included in *Some Trees*:

Wait! What large raindrops! The eyes—
Wait, can't you see them pattering, in the meadow, like a dog?
The eyes are glorious! And now the river comes to sweep away the last of us.
Who knew it, at the beginning of the day?
It is best to travel like a comet, with the others, though one does not see them.
How far that bridle flashed! "Hurry up, children!" The birds fly back, they say, "We were lying,
We do not want to fly away." But it is already too late. The children have vanished.[25]

The birds and the disappearing children bear a vestigial resemblance to the bird and ghostly children of the first section of *Burnt Norton*, though there is no reason to believe that the lines contain more than a superficial or, more likely, an unconscious echo of Eliot. Most of the elements of this passage from "Grand Abacus"—the flood-river, the streaking comet-like vision—reappear in a more developed form in "Parergon" from *The Double Dream of Spring*. I introduce "Parergon" at this point before considering works from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) because it condenses

[24] Ibid., 3.
[25] Ibid., 16.

many of the elements of Ashbery's *leitmotiv* of "clear outline abruptly turning illegible" and therefore serves as an index for works still to be discussed. "We are happy in our way of life. / It doesn't make much sense to others," it begins, then shifts into an oneiric monologue delivered from "those respectable purlieus where life is motionless and alive." The speech ends, prompting a moment of qualified revelation featuring a mysterious lesson that blazes by and trails into the night:

> As one who moves forward from a dream
> The stranger left that house on hastening feet
> Leaving behind the woman with the face shaped like an arrowhead,
> And all who gazed upon him wondered at
> The strange activity around him.
> How fast the faces kindled as he passed!
> It was a marvel that no one spoke
> To stem the river of his passing
> Now grown to flood proportions, as on the sunlit mall
> Or in the enclosure of some court
> He took his pleasure, savage
> And mild with the contemplating.
> Yet each knew he saw only aspects,
> That the continuity was fierce beyond all dream of enduring,
> And turned his head away, and so
> The lesson eddied far into the night:
> Joyful its beams, and in the blackness blacker still,
> Though undying joyousness, caught in that trap.[26]

The "river," the "lesson," the "joyful beams," and the presence of awe-stricken spectators all later become commonplace, while "How fast the faces kindled as he passed!" echoes "How far that bridle flashed!" from "Grand Abacus." It is instructive to consider "Parergon" in light of Ashbery's debt to Friedrich Hölderlin. As early as 1970, Ashbery cited Hölderlin as a major influence, along with Stevens, Auden, Pasternak, Moore, and Mandelstam, in his entry in *Contemporary Poets of the*

[26] Ibid., 212-13.

English Language.[27] In his Charles Eliot Norton lectures, delivered in 1989-90 and published in 2000, Ashbery places Hölderlin among the small group of poets "whom one reads habitually in order to get started; a poetic jump-start for times when the batteries have run down." Although unable to read Hölderlin in the original, he maintains that the German poet has been the "most efficacious" for jump-starting purposes,[28] though he does not cite specific poems for which this was the case. While several studies have recently acknowledged Hölderlin's presence in late Ashbery, critics have less frequently recognized the former's presence in his early and middle period work.[29] Consider two passages, both taken from Michael Hamburger's Hölderlin translations.[30] The first comes from "Ganymede":

> …he laughs at his fetters now,
> And takes and tears and throws the torn fetters down,
> Wrath-drunken, playing, here and there on
> Banks that observe him, and at the stranger's
>
> Peculiar voice, the herds that were resting rise,
> The woods awake, far down all the land can hear
> The river-god, and roused within the

[27] Rosalie Murphy, ed., *Contemporary Poets of the English Language* (Chicago: St. James Press, 1970), 33-4.

[28] Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 5.

[29] Luke Carson, "'Render Unto Caesura': Late Ashbery, Hölderlin, and the Tragic" *Contemporary Literature* 49, no. 2 (2008): 180-208; Roger Gilbert, "Ludic Eloquence: On John Ashbery's Recent Poetry," *Contemporary Literature* 48, no. 2 (2007): 195-226. Gilbert dubs Hölderlin the "tutelary figure" of Ashbery's *Where Shall I Wander* (2005). David Shapiro is an exception, having registered Hölderlin's influence as early as 1979: "The 'I' in this poem ["How Much Longer Will I Be Able To Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . ."] begins by asking questions in a lugubrious style derived from a parodied Hölderlin (Hölderlin is Ashbery's favorite elegiac master)." David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 65.

[30] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin Books, 1998). Hamburger's translations first appeared in 1943, with a revised edition appearing in 1952 and the first edition of *Selected Poems and Fragments* in 1966. In addition to the French translations of Hölderlin with which Ashbery would have been familiar, Hamburger's would have been the standard English edition at the time of the composition of *The Double Dream of Spring* and is therefore the text of choice for the current study. In recent years, Ashbery has expressed a preference for Richard Sieburth's translations, *Hymns and Fragments by Friedrich Hölderlin*, trans. and introduced by Richard Sieburth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Navel of Earth now the spirit shivers.

Spring comes. And everything, in its way and kind,
Blossoms. But he's far off; is no longer there.
Has gone astray; for all too good are
Genii; heavenly talk is his now.[31]

As in "Parergon," we find a mysterious, river-bound "stranger" taking his pleasure "here and there" and awakening an unspecified group with the splendor of his passing, then abruptly dashing out of sight, leaving behind a benighted yet joyful group. Even more suggestive of "Parergon" is the following passage from "At the Source of the Danube":

…so the word

Came down to us from the East,
And by the rock of Parnassus and by Cithaeron,
O Asia, I hear the echo of you, and it breaks
Upon the Capitol and sudden down from the Alps

A stranger it comes
To us, that quickening word,
The voice that moulds and makes human.

Amazement then took hold of
The souls of all who were struck, and night
Obscured the eyes of the best men.

[…]
But when,
Led down, in frolicking breezes,
The holy light, and with its cool beam
The joyful spirit descend
To blessèd Earth, it succumbs, unfamiliar
With utmost beauty, and drowses in waking sleep,
Though stars are not rising yet. So it is with us.[32]

[31] Hölderlin, *Selected Poems*, 107.
[32] Ibid., 179.

Once again, the "stranger" comes in a dazzling theophany. The "joyful spirit" descending "with its cool beam" chimes with the lesson that "eddie[s] into the night / Joyful its beams, and in the blackness blacker still." "Parergon" reproduces the elevated tone of Hölderlin's poems, if not their content. And like Hölderlin, Ashbery issues a grandiose volta ("Yet each knew he saw only aspects,/ That the continuity was fierce beyond all dream of enduring") toward the end of his poem. We may hear Hölderlin in Ashbery's free interplay of abstractions and concrete images, visionary landscapes, bold yet indeterminate lyric voice, and sensitivity to the rhetorical power of personal pronouns without antecedents.

Full of imaginative landscapes and portentous yet ambiguous moments, Hölderlin's work has obvious attractions for a poet like Ashbery. Richard Sieburth has argued that "Hölderlin's landscapes are most frequently imagined as a pattern of vectors or moving energies: paths through mountain passes, bridges over abysses, the course of rivers or winds, the track of the sun from east to west, the flight of migratory birds—all trace a process of becoming, a motion at once toward and away from the source."[33] By a similar token, Ashbery's "rivers and mountains," his "some trees," his "waves" all trace processes of becoming; like objects reflected in a convex mirror, they seem to move "at once toward and away from" the conscious source that imagines them.[34]

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[33] Sieburth, introduction to *Hymns*, 40.

[34] The authority on "processes of becoming" and on Hölderlin's landscapes is Martin Heidegger, whose writings on Hölderlin's rivers often sound like Ashbery criticism. In his lecture series *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* for instance, Heidegger writes, "The flow of the rivers does not simply run its course 'in time,' as if the latter were merely an indifferent framework extrinsic to the course of the rivers. The rivers intimate and vanish into time and do so in such a way that they themselves are thus of time and are time itself." The phrase "intimate and vanish" comes from Hölderlin's "The

II. "Into the Dusk-Charged Air," "Clepsydra," and Dysraphism

In *Rivers and Mountains*, Ashbery "reconnects the syntactical fragments of *The Tennis Court Oath*" [35] to purposes more amenable to his contemplative, maximalist disposition. While many of the poems in the volume still exhibit the paratactic qualities of the *Tennis Court Oath* collage pieces, they have shed the stark collage lineation in favor of more streamlined narrative façades. Ashbery achieves this façade in part through the artful use of transitional phrases or words, especially "meanwhile." The strategically placed transitions between disparate linguistic units create a sensation of narrative flow in the absence of strict semantic continuity.[36] "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" and "Clepsydra," the volume's major river/water poems, are notable hybrids of Ashbery's early experimental modes and his inclusive middle-period style.

The achievement of *Rivers and Mountains* must be understood in the context of *The Tennis Court Oath* and the ongoing critical debate it engendered, ranging from Harold Bloom's huffy dismissal of it to Bruce Andrews' privileging of it as Language Poetry *avant la lettre.*[37] Mediating between Bloom and Andrews, Williamson argues that while *The Tennis Court Oath* understandably leaves most readers cold, it also signals Ashbery's discovery of "the means of rendering the blurred, in-between

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Voice of the People": "Unconcerned with our wisdom / The rivers still rush on, and yet // Who loves them not? And always do they move / My heart, when afar I hear them vanishing / Full of intimation, hastening along not / My path, yet more surely seaward." Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* trans. Julia Davis and William McNeill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 12.

[35] Shoptaw, *On the Outside,* 74.

[36] For a fuller discussion of this narrative façade built from "primary transition (or hinge) phrases" in *Rivers and Mountains*, see Charles Bernstein, "The Meandering Yangtze: *Rivers and Mountains* (1966)," *Conjunctions* 49 (2007): 263-71.

[37] Bloom, "Charity," 52; Bruce Andrews, "Misrepresentation," in *In the American Tree*, ed. Ron Silliman (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), 524. For a fuller account of this critical debate, see Shoptaw, *On the Outside,* 42.

states of consciousness without which many of his later, clearer poems would be little more than dry philosophizing."[38] Here, Williamson picks up on an early manifestation of Ashbery's *leitmotiv* of "clear outline abruptly turning illegible," tracing its origin to *The Tennis Court Oath*. With "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" and "Clepsydra," Ashbery learned to apply the technique of rendering "blurred, in between-states," first minted in *The Tennis Court Oath*, in much the same way he would use it in later works like "The System," "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," and "A Wave."

"Into the Dusk-Charged Air" was written with the unusual formal constraint that each line must include the name of at least one river (though four lines contain none). Ranging in tone from straightforward description ("The Irawaddy is overflowing") to cliché ("the Rhine sings its eternal song") and dead-pan humor ("Hilarious, the Canadian is solid ice"), the poem has its roots in Dada and in the ludic experimentation of Ashbery's New York School days.[39] Despite its rigid formal constraints, "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" lays the groundwork for later work. The title itself bears the traces of later developments: like the last section of "Parergon," it mingles notions of forward motion ("Into…") with a mysterious, electrified night-vision (…the Dusk-Charged Air"). In theory, the poem could meander on indefinitely and in an indefinite number of ways; its ending is as arbitrary as its

[38] Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, 120.

[39] Shoptaw cites as a source for "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" Ashbery's collaboration with Kenneth Koch on the poem "New Year's Eve," published in *Locus Solus* II, which begins, "Water flowed slowly over the bridge in Danbury / On New Year's Eve, while a Chicago of chocolate milk / Formed in Zurich. The root beer went floating by./ You could see the coke on the dazzling mountaintops of Trieste." *Locus Solus* II, ed. Kenneth Koch (Summer 1961): 166-68. "In this contemporary variation on Japanese linked verse," Shoptaw writes, "Ashbery wrote the odd and Koch the even lines, each of which contains a place name and a drink." Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 75.

beginning. At the same time, the motion of the 155 rivers across the poem's 151 lines, modulating from free flow to frozen stagnation, introduces an indeterminate emotional and psychological dimension to the poem, arising in part from Ashbery's extended use of the pathetic fallacy ("the Susquehanna still pushed / bravely along," "The Vistula seized the shadows,"[40] and so on). In this sense, the poem becomes a literal "consciousness stream," with each river's action approximating a discrete thought unit within the larger a flow. Like a Hölderlin hymn, it opens with a sublime view of the Danube:

> Far from the Rappahannock, the silent
> Danube moves along toward the sea.
> The brown Nile rolls slowly
> Like the Niagara's welling descent.[41]

For the first hundred or so lines, the poem courses from one river to the next in a more or less constant flow:

> The dark Saône flows silently.
> And the Volga is long and wide
> As it flows across the brownish land. The Ebro
> Is blue, and slow. The Shannon flows
> Swiftly between its banks.[42]

At line 107, however, the rivers abruptly begin to freeze, signaling, too, a change in the poem's emotional tenor:

> Let the Brazos
> Freeze solid! And the Wabash turn to a leaden
> Cinder of ice! The Marañón is too tepid, we must
> Find a way to freeze it hard. The Ural
> Is freezing slowly in the blasts. The Black Yonne
> Congeals nicely.[43]

[40] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 132.
[41] Ibid., 131.
[42] Ibid.

The sudden freezing of the Brazos, emphasized by the exclamation marks and the shift into the subjunctive mood, announces a decisive transition, perhaps from open-mindedness to dogmatism, or from uncertainty to certitude, or from happiness to anger, or, in fact, from any mental state to any other.[44] The unspecified narrative voice or voices seem to take an almost sadistic pleasure in the freezing of the rivers, though this point remains unclear. From here onward, the rivers will be more or less frozen, they will "bask in the cold."[45] Rather than ask what the poem "means," we must note merely that *something* has changed in the course of the poem's unfolding, that the poem's fluid medium has progressively congealed and that, by extension, the hypothetical conscious mind behind the poem has modulated from one wavelength to another, more rigid one. Though the poem has no speaker, it feels as if it does. In this way, Ashbery began to experiment with ways of "recording mental processes" by welding together discrete elements to create a synthetic whole, while keeping the specifics of those mental processes "unknown quantities."[46] "Rather than relying on heavily fragmented syntax," James Longenbach observes, "Ashbery's disjunctiveness depends on the collision of normative syntax and wayward argument; the poems sound as if they ought to make logical sense but

[43] Ibid., 133.

[44] In the context of this unspecified attitudinal "freezing," we might consider the following passage from "The System": "Yet this is not so bad; we have at least kept our open-mindedness—*that*, at least, we may be sure that we have—are not in danger, or so it seems, of freezing into the pious attitudes of those true spiritual bigots whose faces are turned toward eternity and who therefore can see nothing." Ibid., 295.

[45] Ibid., 134.

[46] In an interview conducted just after the completion of "Into the Dusk-Charged Air," Ashbery said, "What I like about music is its ability of. . .carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of the argument remain unknown quantities. . . . I would like to do this in poetry." Paris Leary and Robert Kelly, eds., *A Controversy of Poets* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), 523.

never quite do. As a result the poems are always ripe with pathos."[47] Carrying out a poetic argument without revealing what is at stake will become a trademark of his work.

Charles Bernstein has made similar comments on Ashbery's "contingently consecutive" transitional technique, arguing that, with *Rivers and Mountains*, he

> introduces a nonlinear associative logic that averts both exposition and disjunction. Ashbery's aversion (after *The Tennis Court Oath*) to abrupt disjunction gives his collage-like work the feeling of continuously flowing voices, even though few of the features of traditional voice-centered lyrics are present in his work. The connection between any two lines or sentences in Ashbery has a contingent consecutiveness that registers transition but not discontinuity."[48]

The aversion to abrupt disjunction inverts the effect of poems like "Europe" and "Leaving the Atocha Station," which register, at best, a kind of fitful transition. Elsewhere, Bernstein appropriates the medical term "dysraphism" (meaning "a congenital mis-seaming of embryonic parts")[49] to characterize this "contingent consecutiveness that registers transition but not continuity." Drawing a comparison between Ashbery's "dysraphic" poetics and those of Hart Crane, Brian Reed has defined dysraphism as "the stitching together of disparate 'embryonic' elements,

[47] James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 33. In an instructive reading of Ashbery's later poem, "Notes from the Air," Longenbach anatomizes two forms of modern poetic disjunction—"wet" and "dry"—and casts Ashbery as a master of both.

[48] Bernstein, "Meandering Yangtze," 264.

[49] Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986), 359. See also Bernstein's poem, "Dysraphism," in Charles Bernstein, *The Sophist* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2004), 37-44. Bernstein notes dysraphism's felicitous echo of "rhapsody" (literally, "stitched song"). Both words draw from the Greek verb *rhaptein*, to sew.

Frankenstein-like, in order to see if a viable poem develops."[50] This is the transitional technique pioneered in "Into the Dusk-Charged Air."

But while "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" represents an early breakthrough in dysraphic composition, it relies too much on formulaic Dada compositional practices to be called a complete success. It is the playful first attempt of a writer keen to move beyond his experimental mode but not quite sure how to do so. "Clepsydra," written several years later, marks a bold step forward, the first successful galvanization of a dysraphic composition into a vital state. With "Clepsydra," Ashbery remembers

> feeling for the first time a strong unity in a particular poem. After my analytic period, I wanted to get into a synthetic period. I wanted to write a new kind of poetry after my dismembering of language. Wouldn't it be nice, I said to myself, to do a long poem that would be a long extended argument, but would have the beauty of a single word. 'Clepsydra' is really a meditation on how time feels as it is passing. The title means a water clock as used in ancient Greece and China. There are a lot of images of water in that poem. It's all of a piece, like a stream.[51]

To an even greater degree than its predecessor, "Into the Dusk-Charged Air," "Clepsydra" conceals its drastic parataxis within a streamlined narrative façade that literalizes its model of consciousness into a "stream." Note, too, the extent to which Ashbery's talk of "dismembering" language in *The Tennis Court Oath* in order to re-

[50] Brian M. Reed, *Hart Crane: After His Lights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 120. Reed adds that "[d]ysraphic poets [like Ashbery and Crane] are dissatisfied with the limitations imposed by the rigors of collage. They do not wish to constrain their artistic activities to selecting, categorizing, and arranging found texts. They permit themselves to invent, borrow, rework, and suture whatever materials they wish, however they desire. They delight in asymmetry, non sequiturs, and shifts in tone. They are less interested in global features of a poem than in local ones: the way specific statements connect (or fail to), the way certain series of sounds hit the ear, the way one feels rough and smooth textures as lines and phrases segue into one another. Witnessing the procession of words, rent or whole, conveys much of the work's 'meaning.'" Ibid.

[51] Kostelanetz, *Old Poetries*, 101.

stitch it into a new synthetic whole resembles Bernstein's notion of poetic dysraphism. Arguably, Ashbery has never left the "synthetic" period ushered in by the composition of "The Skaters," "Fragment," and "Clepsydra," a point borne out by his subsequent turn away from the kinds of "analytic" formal constraints implemented in his collages and in "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" in favor of paratactic work that is made to hang together synthetically, or what Bernstein calls "collage-like work [with] the feeling of continuously flowing voices." Written in the spring of 1965, after "The Skaters" and also after "Fragment," which appeared in *The Double Dream of Spring*, "Clepsydra" was, we will recall, one of the last poems Ashbery wrote while in France.[52] As the "fluid, single stanza successor"[53] to "Into the Dusk-Charged Air," it prefigures the imposing, block-like prose of *Three Poems* and marks Ashbery's first successful "dissolving and putting in solution" of his style.

Having alienated words from their meanings by setting them in arbitrary relation to each other on the pages of *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery reverses the process in "Clepsydra." "Clepsydra" is a long extended argument that has the beauty of a single word, which is, of course, the title itself. But the word might also have been "moment," which occurs a dozen times in the 253-line poem. As I have argued, Ashbery does not reject privileged moments but rather meditates on the impossibility of freezing them as they occur:

> Seeing it, as it was, dividing that time,
> Casting colored paddles against the welter

[52] Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 83.
[53] Ibid., 75.

Of a future of disunion just to abolish confusion
And permit level walks into the gaze of its standing
Around admiringly, it was then, that it was these
Moments that were the truth, although each tapered
Into the distant surrounding night. But
Wasn't it their blindness, instead, and wasn't this
The fact of being so turned in on each other that
Neither would ever see his way clear again?[54]

Ashbery would later mine this passage for material like the "lesson" in "Parergon" that eddies far into the night and the "bad comet" in "Syringa" that is "so turned inward" that its meaning, good or bad, can never become known. Likewise, the mysterious "reply" of an earlier passage in "Clepsydra" that "dart[s] from / untruth to willed moment, scarcely called into being / before it swells" calls to mind the "river" of the stranger's passing in "Parergon" that "grows to flood proportions":

This means never getting any closer to the basic
Principle operating behind it than to the distracted
Entity of a mirage. The half-meant, half-perceived
Motions of fronds out of idle depths that are
Summer. And expansion into little draughts.
The reply wakens easily, darting from
Untruth to willed moment, scarcely called into being
Before it swells, the way a waterfall
Drums at different levels. 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. . . .[55]

"Moments" keep occurring, though their particulars have been withheld from us, a predicament summed up by the notion that "each moment / of utterance is the true one; likewise none are true." Each moment disappears as soon as it comes into

[54] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 141.
[55] Ibid., 140.

being. Herd refers to these recurrent moments in "Clepsydra" as "moments of relief." "Such moments are familiar—" he writes,

> Wordsworth called them spots of time, Eliot called them still points—and Ashbery's poetry does not deny the reader the reality of their satisfactions. But the reality, also, as this poem observes, is that such moments are always slipping away, and no sooner, in fact, than they have manifested themselves. So Ashbery's poem moves on, and in moving on asks the central post-Romantic question (to which we will return in *Three Poems*) what is one to do with such moments of clarity once they have gone.[56]

Herd's mention of Wordsworth and of the post-romantic question concerning the dissolution of "moments of clarity" brings us to the advent of Ashbery's dissolution of his own style in the "poet's prose" of *Three Poems*.

III. *Three Poems* and *The Prelude*

Ashbery mentions only two writers by name in *Three Poems*: Blaise Pascal (in "The System") and William Wordsworth (in "The Recital"). In his attentive reading of *Three Poems*, Herd situates the poems in the context of "spiritually inclined" texts within the "skeptical tradition" of Western thought, with specific reference to Pascal's *Pensées*. By a similar token, Ashbery's brief invocation of *The Prelude* alerts us to the fact that the speculative mode of *Three Poems* occurs in the context of a post-romantic poetics of deferred revelation.[57] Wordsworth presides over

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[56] Herd, *Ashbery and American Poetry*, 108-9.

[57] It has become a convention of Ashbery criticism to identify Ashbery's *Prelude*. Helen Vendler and Ben Hickman find it in "A Wave," Marjorie Perloff in *Flow Chart*, while many others, including Costello and Herd, have found it in "The Skaters." Several critics have tapped *Three Poems* for this distinction, too. Shoptaw briefly compares the penultimate prose block of "The New Spirit" to the Mount Snowdon scene in *The Prelude* XIII, 58-9. See *On The Outside Looking Out*, 144-5. Laura Quinney traces a line from Wordsworth to Ashbery, via Shelley and Stevens, in the tradition of the "poetics of disappointment," though neither *Three Poems* nor *The Prelude* feature in her discussion of Ashbery. See *The Poetics of Disappointment* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 136-70. Stephen Fredman draws attention to Wordsworthian parallels in "The System," but only as they relate to "Ode, Intimations of Immortality." See *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse* (Cambridge:

Three Poems, though, like Pascal, he is mentioned only once. Speaking of "the insistent now," the continuous series of moments of which life is constituted, Ashbery writes:

> It always presents itself as the turning point, the bridge leading from prudence to "a timorous capacity," in Wordsworth's phrase, but the bridge is a Bridge of Sighs the next moment, leading back into the tired regions from whence it sprang. It seems as though every day is arranged this way. The movement is the majestic plodding one of a boat crossing a harbor, certain of its goal and upheld by its own dignity on the waves, a symbol of patient, fruitful activity, but the voyage always ends in a new key, although at the appointed place; a note has been added that destroys the whole fabric and the sense of the old as it was intended. The day ends in the darkness of sleep.[58]

The phrase "timorous capacity" comes from *The Prelude*, I.243: "Thus from day to day / I live, a mockery of the brotherhood / of vice and virtue, with no skill to part / vague longing that is bred by want of power / from paramount impulse not to be withstood,/ a timorous capacity from prudence;/ from circumspection, infinite delay."[59] Rather than charting the growth of the poet's mind over time, *Three Poems* records the "infinite delays" of a text recording its own "majestic plodding" toward and away from revelatory moments that never quite materialize. "[T]he motion of the story is moving," Ashbery writes in "The New Spirit," "though not getting

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Cambridge University Press, 1990), 110-11. The most extended analysis of *The Prelude*'s impact on *Three Poems* is that of Karen Mills-Courts in *Poetry as Epitaph: Representation and Poetic Language*. Mills-Courts contrasts Wordsworth's "attempt to preserve meaning in a privileged site, in poetry that behaves as engraved stone" with Ashbery's "vision of an unsituated consciousness, 'almost' empty of meaning as content" which is "constantly in motion and exists as sheer longing." See Karen Mills-Courts, *Poetry as Epitaph: Representation and Poetic Language* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 267-314.

[58] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 323-24.

[59] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind (Text of 1805)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 7. Ashbery quotes from the 1805 text in *Three Poems*.

nearer."[60] As in "Parergon" and "Clepsydra," the moment of sudden lucidity must decline into obscurity, "the day ends in the darkness of sleep."

When Ashbery sat down to write *Three Poems* in the early 1970s, he had been experimenting with forms that recreated the river-like "experience of experience" for about a decade. In composing his new prose poems, he did not neglect the technical lessons learned from "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" and "Clepsydra," nor did he hesitate to pillage and refine the richest material from these works (which explains the abundance of "aspects" and "continuities," blurry "moments," "true ways," and "lessons" in *Three Poems*).[61] *Three Poems* is organized around the principle of flowing water to a degree surpassing all work before it, a creative decision partly explained in a 1981 interview:

> At the same time, the poems in *The Double Dream of Spring*, which preceded *Three Poems*, had gotten to a tightness and strictness that bothered me, and I began to feel I'd have to start moving in some other direction because I had become too narrow, even though I liked those poems. And the wonderful thing about writing prose, or so it seemed to me at the time, was that you do away with the line of poetry. . . . **This dissolving of the poem, or putting it in a solution throughout the whole page**, so that there are some pages in that book where there are no paragraphs or breaks of any kind, was a sudden release for me, one which I found very stimulating.[62] [my emphasis]

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[60] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 252.

[61] Consider the following passage from "The System," which smacks of "Parergon." Relevant words and passages are bolded: "We might at least wind up with a knowledge of who *they* are, with whom we began, and at the very least with a new respect toward the others, reached through a more perfect understanding of ourselves and **the true way**. But still the "career" notion intervenes. It is impossible for us at the present time not to think of these people as separate entities, each with his development and aim to be achieved, careers that will **"peak"** after a while and then go back to being ordinary lives that **fade quite naturally into the air** as they are used up, and **are as though they never were, except for the "lesson"** which has added an iota to the sum of all human understanding. And this way of speaking has **trapped** each one of us." *Collected Poems,* 292.

[62] Poulin, "Experience of Experience," 254.

This is the familiar process, first implemented in *Rivers and Mountains*, whereby Ashbery escapes the strictures of his own art through stylistic dissolution and re-synthesis. The "poet's prose" he came to develop in *Three Poems* filled this need perfectly; neither beholden to traditional poetic effects like rhyme and meter nor imitative of the prose poem form as handed down by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, it represented a completely open medium. The extent to which Ashbery was conscious of his self-revision at this point in his career emerges in the opening lines of "The New Spirit," the first poem in the trilogy, which recapitulate the progress from *The Tennis Court Oath* to *Three Poems*:

> I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And the next thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, truer way.
>
> clean-washed sea
>
> the flowers were.
>
> These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself. It is you who made this, therefore you are true. But the truth has passed on
>
> to divide all.
>
> Have I awakened?[63]

The tension between "putting it all down" and "leaving all out" has always been a cornerstone of Ashbery's art, though the maximalist approach has tended to win out. Here, as many commentators have noted, the free-standing phrases "clean-washed sea" and "the flowers were" are made to reenact the collage experiments of *The Tennis Court Oath,*[64] the "analytical" mode that Ashbery flirted with and later

[63] Ashbery, *Collected Poems, 247.*
[64] Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 125-26.

discarded. Toward the end of "The Recital," he revisits the transition from the "analytic" period to the "synthetic" period, when "the point was the synthesis of very simple elements in a new and strong, as opposed to old and weak, relation to one another. Why hadn't this been possible in the earlier days of experimentation, of bleak, barren living that didn't seem to be leading anywhere and it couldn't have mattered less?"[65] This synthesis of very simple elements picks up where "Clepsydra" left off, as he explains in a 1981 interview:

> I returned [in *Three Poems*] to something like "Clepsydra" that would be extremely long and involved, and yet would be as one strand. I used prose because I'm constantly trying to think of things I haven't done yet, and prose poetry until that point, as in Baudelaire or Rimbaud, always seemed slightly askew and not quite right.[66]

The question, "Have I awakened?" harks back to the beginning of "Clepsydra": "Hasn't the sky?" Fittingly, it was at this point in his career that Ashbery "awoke" to the fluid mature style predicated on "putting it all down." *Three Poems*, like "Clepsydra," is aimed at a maximum of psychological inclusivity, so that "everything can take its course, time can flow into eternity leaving a huge delta-like deposit whose fan broadens and broadens and is my life."[67] The "huge deltalike deposit" of memory and experience is the prose poems themselves, which broaden and broaden across the whole page. In the context of this imaginative delta—"the delta of living into everything," as he puts it at the end of "The Skaters"[68]—we can begin to understand Ashbery's debt to *The Prelude*, a work, like Hölderlin's hymns,

[65] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 325.
[66] Kostelanetz, *Old Poetries*, 102.
[67] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 312.
[68] Ibid., 177.

rich in imaginative landscapes, particularly rivers, that reflect and are attuned to the processes of the poet's mind. As Wordsworth writes in *Prelude* I:

> Who knows the individual hour in which
> His habits were first sown, even as a seed,
> Who that shall point, as with a wand, and say,
> "This portion of the river of my mind
> Came from yon fountain?"[69]

Consider also the following passage, from *The Prelude* IV, "Summer Vacation,"[70] which neatly sums up the bittersweet dialectic of experience and memory out of which the fluid text of *Three Poems* emerges:

> As one who hangs down-bending from the side
> Of a slow-moving Boat, upon the breast
> Of a still water, solacing himself
> With such discoveries as his eye can make
> Beneath him, in the bottom of the deeps,
> Sees many beauteous sights, weeds, fishes, flowers,
> Grots, pebbles, roots of trees, and fancies more;
> Yet often is perplex'd, and cannot part
> The shadow from the substance, rocks and sky,
> Mountains and clouds, from that which is indeed
> The region, and the things which there abide
> In their true dwelling; now is cross'd by gleam
> Of his own image, by a sunbeam now,
> And motions that are sent he knows not whence,
> Impediments that make his task more sweet;
> —Such pleasant office have we long pursued
> Incumbent o'er the surface of past time
> With like success; nor have we often look'd
> On more alluring shows (to me, at least,)
> More soft, or less ambiguously descried,
> Than those which now we have been passing by,
> And where we still are lingering. Yet, in spite
> Of all these new employments of the mind,
> There was an inner falling off.[71]

[69] Wordsworth, *Prelude*, 26.

[70] Adam Kirsch also comments on this passage's Ashberyan overtones in *The Modern Element: Essays on Contemporary Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 48-9.

Three Poems are Ashbery's intimate record of being "cross'd by gleam / of his own image,/ by a sunbeam now,/ and motions that are sent he knows not whence" as he remains "incumbent o'er the surface of past time." From this vantage, "there is always something fading out or just coming into focus."[72] Though, as he reminds the unspecified addressee in "The System," "the apotheosis never attracted you, only those few moments in the next-to-last act where everything suddenly becomes momentarily clear, to sink again into obscurity. . . ."[73] *Three Poems* contains Ashbery's most sustained and eloquent expression of the theme of "clear outline abruptly turning illegible," composed, as he writes, "at the blurred edge where life is hinged to the future and to the past,"[74] where memory and experience throw off a seemingly endless round of alternately disheartening and joyous impressions.

Ashbery, though, unlike Wordsworth, is more often disquieted than ravished by the endless series of reflections that pass before him, just as his readers might be disquieted by the seemingly undifferentiated flow of text from page to page. Ashbery

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[71] Wordsworth, *Prelude*, 59-60. Mediating Wordsworth, Thoreau also presides over *Three Poems*. David Herd has persuasively demonstrated *Walden's* thematic influence on *Rivers and Mountains*, and it is apparent that *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* exerted a similar influence on *Three Poems*. See *Ashbery and American Poetry*, 104-112. The extent to which Ashbery is indebted to the meditative, meandering language and subject matter of *A Week*, not to mention its narrative frame of the river journey, is suggested by the following passage, one of many that could have been chosen, which in turn suggests the *Prelude*: "It required some rudeness to disturb with our boat the mirror-like surface of the water, in which every twig and blade of grass was so faithfully reflected; too faithfully indeed for art to imitate, for only Nature may exaggerate herself. The shallowest still water is unfathomable. Wherever the trees and skies are reflected, there is more than Atlantic depth, and no danger of fancy running aground. We notice that it required a separate intention of the eye, a more free and abstracted vision, to see the reflected trees and the sky, than to see the river bottom merely; and so are there manifold visions in the direction of every object, and even the most opaque reflect the heavens from their surface. Some men have their eyes naturally intended to the one and some to the other object." Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1985), 40.

[72] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 298.

[73] Ibid., 309.

[74] Ibid., 315.

describes this procession as "the unrelated happenings that form a kind of sequence of fantastic reflections as they succeed each other at a pace and according to an inner necessity of their own."[75] Rather than bending down from the side of a slow-moving boat and gazing, rapt, into still water, Ashbery assumes

> a position of blankness and ill-conceived repose on the edge of the flood, so that looking down into it one no longer saw the comforting reflection of one's own face and felt secure in the knowledge that, whatever the outcome, the struggle was going on in the arena of one's own breast.[76]

And yet, from this position of blankness, later identified with Locke's *tabula rasa*,[77] there also arises a kind of joyousness, what Ashbery calls in the succeeding passage "the undeniable fact of exaltation on many fronts, of a sense of holiness growing up through the many kinds of passion like a tree with branches bearing candelabra higher and higher up until they almost vanish from sight and are confused with the stars whose earthly avatars they are."[78] Here, Ashbery affirms with Stevens that "God and the imagination are one./ How high that highest candle lights the dark."[79] Yet, without belaboring the point, it must be noted that for Ashbery this kind of revelation, however powerful, will inevitably dematerialize as soon as it appears, only to recur in slightly different form later on in an endless process of deferred revelation. *Three Poems*, like the other works discussed in this chapter, enacts an elaborate series of variations on this theme.

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[75] Ibid., 282.

[76] Ibid., 283. Compare this passage with a similar one from "The New Spirit" referring to "this perilous position on the edge of the flood, looking down awestruck into the coiling waters that sometimes strike out and ensnare a parcel of land that had seemed secure." Ibid., 275.

[77] Ibid., 298.

[78] Ibid., 283.

[79] Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 444.

To provide a thorough list of evidentiary quotations from *Three Poems* would require transcribing practically the entire text, so replete is it with the theme of "clear outline abruptly turning illegible." Indeed, the fluid surface of the prose poems ("the blurred edge where life is hinged to the future and to the past"), characterized by an ever-changing panoply of watery images, is itself best evoked by a list. It is, by turns, a "huge deltalike deposit"; "the meandering stream of our narration"; "the fast-moving stream of traffic that flows endlessly from horizon to horizon like a dark river"; "the abrupt sharp accretions of regular being"; "the clear waters of the reflective intellect"; "the moving world that is around us"; "this cosmic welter of attractions"; "this inundation which will last an eternity"; "that river of humanity"; "life's rolling river"; "the tide of humanity"; "the onrushing tide of time"; "the onrushing spectacle"; "the whole vast waving mass"; a "channel of possibilities"; and "a vast wetness as of sea and air combined, a single smooth, anonymous matrix without surface or depth."[80] One is inundated by the poem's flood of water images, its "abrupt sharp accretions of regular being." Like "Clepsydra," but on a grander scale, the writing formally and figuratively evokes wateriness. "The System" concludes by flowing into the sea, its progress revealed to be that of a river: "The allegory is ended, its coils absorbed into the past, and this afternoon is as wide as an ocean. It is the time we have now, all our wasted time sinks into the sea and is swallowed up without a trace. The past is dust and ashes, and this incommensurably wide way leads to the pragmatic and kinetic future."[81]

[80] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 312; 316; 308; 280; 283; 319; 293; 278; 284; 307; 309; 277; 325.
[81] Ibid., 317.

"The Recital," too, closes with a vision of onward flow ("the performance had ended, the audience streamed out"[82]), while "The New Spirit," the first of the *Three Poems*, features early on a "river pour[ing] into the sea" signifying the "new merging" of the poem's unspecified "you and I."[83] Later, Ashbery addresses this unspecified you on the subject of "everything": "But meanwhile I am to include everything. . . meanwhile you *are* it all, and my efforts are really directed toward keeping myself attached, however dimly, to it as it rolls from view, like a river which is never really there because of moving on someplace."[84] Still later, the act of meditation is likened to "approaching a river at night, uncertain of the direction of the current."[85]

Often read after the lights of such quirky late-modernist works as W.H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* and Giorgio de Chirico's *Hebdomeros*,[86] *Three Poems* also invites comparison with modernist masterpieces like *Finnegans Wake* and *The Waves*. To this end, one could cite its appropriation of the circular "riverrun" trope or its reliance on regular watery images to represent the waxing and waning of life.[87] And yet, one must also be wary of drawing too close of a comparison here. While Joyce's and Woolf's advances in the stream of consciousness genre preempted many of the conventions of Ashbery's "poet's prose," the meticulously planned and crafted

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[82] Ibid., 326.
[83] Ibid., 248.
[84] Ibid., 254.
[85] Ibid., 266.
[86] Kostelanetz, *Old Poetries*, 103.
[87] The following passage from "The System," for example, suggests the italicized coastal sunrise-sunset motif around which *The Waves* is constructed: "[The day] is a microcosm of man's life as it gently wanes, its long morning shadows getting shorter with the approach of noon, the high point of the day which could be likened to that sudden tremendous moment of intuition that comes only once in a lifetime, and then the fuller, more rounded shapes of early afternoon as the sun imperceptibly sinks in the sky and the shadows start to lengthen, until all are blotted out in the stealthy coming of twilight. . . ." *Collected Poems*, 289.

quality of their fiction differs from the often aleatory quality of Ashbery's prose poems and, indeed, of much of his other work.

IV. Vague Sense: "Self-Portrait," "A Wave" and *Flow Chart*

I have traced the motif of "clear outline abruptly turning illegible" in John Ashbery's poetry as it relates to his persistent use of river imagery from his Harvard days to *Three Poems*. In the course of doing so, I have sketched a parallel critical narrative of Ashbery's early and middle periods to the ones advanced in chapters one and two, with the aim of adding texture to our understanding of the plurality of Ashberys at play. In this final section, I would like to extend the discussion briefly to "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," "A Wave," and *Flow Chart*, key longer works governed, in their own ways, by the conceit that "there is always something fading out or just coming into focus."[88] I want to suggest that these poems fit into the sequence, begun with "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" and "Clepsydra," of poems that speak of liquid motion as they assume its form. Rather than dissolving across the page, however, like *Three Poems* and *Flow Chart*, "Self-Portrait" and "A Wave" enact this trope through their fluid syntactic oscillations between opposing concepts: "always and sometimes questioning the old modes / And the new wondering."[89]

"Self-Portrait" and "A Wave" both use mirror and wave tropes to literalize the act of conscious reflection, or what Ashbery calls the "recurring wave / Of

[88] Ibid., 298.

[89] Ibid., 798. Ashbery reverses this equation in the final lines of "At North Farm," the first poem in *A Wave*: "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?" Ibid., 733.

arrival" through which "the soul establishes itself."[90] We find this theme beautifully rendered throughout Ashbery's work; in major poems like these and in earlier ones alike, it often materializes as an expression of "love." Consider the ninth *dizain* of "Fragment," which anticipates the lyrical ebb-and-flow of "Self-Portrait" and "A Wave":

> Slowly as from the center of some diamond
> You begin to take in the world as it moves
> In toward you, part of its own burden of thought, rather
> Idle musing, afternoons listing toward some sullen
> Unexpected end. Seen from inside all is
> Abruptness. As though to get out your eye
> Sharpens and sharpens these particulars; no
> Longer visible, they breathe in multicolored
> Parentheses, the way love in short periods
> Puts everything out of focus, coming and going.[91]

These elegant lines are ghosted by Emerson's "Experience": "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in focus."[92] Ashbery here not only echoes Emerson but crucially *enacts* his continuous refocusing process through the "coming and going" motion of his syntax—the world "moves in" and then we "list toward" it; we "see from inside" and then the eye "gets out"; the "particulars" are "sharpened" and then they are "no longer visible" and finally "out of focus." The passage itself begins "slowly," and

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[90] Ibid., 474. The mirror theme in "Self-Portrait" is self-evident and ubiquitous, but it is also deeply embedded in "A Wave": "So a reflected image of oneself / Manages to stay alive through the darkest times, a period / Of unprecedented frost, during which we get up each morning / And go about our business as usual." Ibid., 795. By a similar token, wave and swimming tropes recur in "Self-Portrait," beginning in line six where Parmigianino's face "swims / Toward and away like the hand / Except that it is in repose." A few lines down, Ashbery literalizes this swimming trope, asking "how far can [the soul] swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest?" Ibid., 474.

[91] Ashbery, *Collected Poems,* 231.

[92] Emerson, *Selected Essays,* 232.

then "abruptly" turns illegible. While *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* ushered Ashbery into the world of international celebrity, its title poem in some ways marks an insignificant stylistic advance over this passage of a decade earlier. Consider the following passage, another elegant refrain of love's poignant "coming and going" (key parts are bolded):

> But what is this universe the porch of
> **As it veers in and out, back and forth,**
> **Refusing to surround us and still the only**
> **Thing we can see?** Love once
> Tipped the scales but now is **shadowed, invisible,**
> **Though mysteriously present, around somewhere.**
> But we know it cannot be sandwiched
> Between adjacent moments, that its windings
> Lead nowhere except to further tributaries
> And that these empty themselves into a vague
> Sense of **something that can never be known**
> **Even though it seems likely that each of us**
> **Knows what it is** and is capable of
> Communicating it to the other.[93]

The tentative framing of the question of love, the recourse to river imagery, and the "universe" that refuses to reveal its mystery are all familiar tropes, as is the veering "in and out, back and forth." This passage, like the one from "Fragment," rides the waves of its own "vague sense" (vague = Fr. "wave"). A decade later, Ashbery returns to this statement-counterstatement form in "A Wave," his great poem of love and death written after a near-fatal spinal illness in 1982. Once again, the poem's sensual wavering evokes love's ebb and flow:

> There's no one here now
> But émigrés, with abandoned skills, so near
> To the surface of the water you can touch them through it.
> It's they can tell you **how love came and went**

[93] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 482.

And how it keeps coming and going, ever disconcerting,
Even through the topiary trash of the present,
Its undoing, and smiles and seems to recognize no one.
It's all attitudinizing, maybe, **images reflected off**
Some mirrored surface we cannot see, and **they seem both solid**
As a suburban home and graceful phantasms, at ease
In any testing climate you may contrive.[94]

Ashbery weaves these "antiphonal deliberations"[95] throughout "A Wave," both in extended passages and in a series of shorter, not-quite-paradoxical phrases, like "abandoned skills," "topiary trash," "tragic euphoria," and "dumb clarity,"[96] that make us stop and wonder about their possible meaning. Wouldn't the meticulous craft of "topiary," for instance, be opposed to the notion of "trash" (or is it the clippings *from* topiary)? In "A Wave," Ashbery produces an abstract self-elegy that is "clear as water. . .though in darkness." Note, again, the statement-counterstatement effect in the following passage which, harking back to the cascading "moments" of "Clepsydra," describes

[m]oments as clear as water
Splashing on a rock in the sun, though in darkness, and then
Sleep has to affirm it and the body is fresh again,
For the trials and dangerous situations that any love,
However well-meaning, has to use as terms in the argument
That is the reflexive play of our living and being lost
And then changed again, a harmless fantasy that must grow
Progressively serious…[97]

Elsewhere in the poem, this occurs as the "cimmerian moment in which all lives, all destinies / And incompleted destinies were swamped / As though by a giant wave

[94] Ibid., 801.
[95] 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.php
[96] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 788; 792.
[97] Ibid., 793.

that picks itself up / Out of a calm sea and retreats again into nowhere / Once its damage is done."[98] A decade earlier, Ashbery had already provided in "Self-Portrait" a blueprint for these portentous vanishing "moments" that are "as clear as water," introducing the wave theme that informs the whole of "A Wave":

> Now their importance
> If not their meaning is plain. They were to nourish
> A dream which includes them all, as they are
> Finally reversed in the accumulating mirror.
> They seemed strange because we couldn't actually see them.
> And we realize this only at a point where they lapse
> Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up
> Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape.[99]

A "wave" may refer to a disturbance or oscillation that travels through water or air, but it may also refer to a gesture of greeting or farewell. Unlike a waving hand, we do not "actually see" a wave of energy but instead perceive its effect on the medium through which it passes. Ashbery wants us to waver between these possible meanings of the word, which the poem itself insistently merges in its various themes of passage—passing through and passing away. The first three lines of the poem condense all of these themes into a neat equation of suffering and release:

> To pass through pain and not know it,
> A car door slamming in the night.
> To emerge on an invisible terrain.[100]

In these sentence fragments, the senses of touch, hearing, and sight are stimulated but blocked: we do not know the pain we feel, nor can we see the car whose door slams or the "invisible terrain" onto which we emerge. We have the experience but

[98] Ibid., 800.
[99] Ibid., 479.
[100] Ibid., 787.

miss the meaning. The first two lines resemble Pound's "In a Station of the Metro"[101] in the way they focus the apparition of a powerful sensory experience into a crisp metonym. And just as Pound slant-rhymes "crowd" and "bough," Ashbery compresses "know it" into "night." Unusually for Ashbery, there is a good deal of prosodic invention at work here: the *p* and *n* alliteration in line one; the intensification of *n* and *r* sounds in lines two and three; the internal rhyme on "pain" and "terrain," which produces an *abba* chiastic effect with the "know it/night" rhyme. The rhetorical symmetry of lines one and three, which both begin with infinitives, seems to enact a transition from one state to another—we "pass" from line one through line two and "emerge" on line three (travel being implied by the car). There remains a structural equivalency between these lines, but with a difference. And in that expression of equivalent difference—the "reflexive play of our living and being lost / And then changed again"—we experience the "call and response dialectic"[102] of the whole poem. Passage and emergence are thus installed as key concepts from the start. The passage through pain onto "an invisible terrain" could be thought of both in temporal and spatial terms, referring either to a period of time (of illness perhaps?) or to a physical transition from one place to another. Like the "haunted landscape" and the "empty yet personal landscape" of "Clepsydra," this "invisible terrain" is another of Ashbery's "transparent" word-worlds; anchored to its textual status by its rhyme with "pain," it also describes the

[101] Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations* (New York: Library of America, 2005), 287.

[102] Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 210. Altieri uses this phrase in a reading of "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name," and its staging of the imagination's continuous "war with the imaginary and its efforts to fix images worthy of desire."

space in which the text itself will unfold. Or, at least, it conditions us to read it as such. A page later, in a reversal of fortunes, "it passes through you, emerges on the other side," becoming "a kind of tragic euphoria / In which your spirit sprouted."[103]

The "invisible terrain," then, is the poem itself, and it is also "nowhere," another of the poem's recurrent (negative) topoi. Recall, once more, the "giant wave" that emerges "out of a calm sea and retreats again into nowhere," or the following moment of poignant self-reckoning toward the poem's close:

> I feel at peace with the parts of myself
> That questioned this other, easygoing side, chafed it
> To a knotted rope of guesswork looming out of storms
> And darkness and proceeding on its way nowhere
> Barely muttering.[104]

The "easygoing side," "chafed" into a "knotted rope of guesswork" and making its way nowhere, "barely muttering," is, in fact, the direction Ashbery would incline after *A Wave* and *April Galleons* (the transitional work between his middle and late periods, chapter four argues). Ashbery published the latter in 1987, the same year he reentered the "published city" to begin work on *Flow Chart.* Fittingly, Ashbery's longest and most discursive work—an experimental diary in which "I keep mumbling the litany / of all that has ever happened to me"[105]—begins with a mash-up of earlier works:

> Still in the published city but not yet
> overtaken by a new form of despair, I ask
> the diagram: is it the foretaste of pain
> it might easily be? Or an emptiness
> so sudden it leaves the girders

[103] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 788.
[104] Ibid., 807.
[105] Ashbery, *Flow Chart*, 81.

whanging in the absence of wind,
the sky milk-blue and astringent? We know life is so busy,
but a larger activity shrouds it, and this is something
we can never feel, except occasionally, in small signs
put up to warn us and as soon expunged, in part
or wholly.[106]

The "diagrams" of "Clepsydra" and "Self-Portrait," mentioned in chapter one, reappear, as does the "pain" from the first line of "A Wave." The "sudden emptiness" and "absence of wind" of lines four to six, in their proximity to "pain," call to mind the "invisible terrain" of "A Wave," and reprise Ashbery's trademark emptiness/transparency theme—what he calls in *Three Poems* "that emptiness which was the only way you could express a thing."[107] Meanwhile, lines seven to eleven echo the final lines of "Self-Portrait": "and each part of the whole falls off / And cannot know it knew, except / Here and there, in cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time."[108] In short, the poem sets itself up, for the seasoned Ashbery reader at least, to be read as a valedictory exercise, even as it points a new way forward to the looser, anarchic style of his late period (he has written half his books since 1987). Dissolving his earlier themes, Ashbery will put them "in a solution that has become permanent through inertia."[109]

One could continue teasing out references to Ashbery's earlier poems and to other writers—the 216-page *Flow Chart* is glutted with both. But rather than index

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[106] Ibid., 3.

[107] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 253.

[108] Ibid., 487. "Self-Portrait" is, in fact, parodied throughout: "you suddenly / see yourself as others see you, and it's not such a pretty sight either, but at / least you know now, and can do something to repair the damage, perhaps by / looking deeper into the mirror, more thoroughly / to evaluate the pros and cons of your success and smilingly refuse all offer of assistance. . ." *Flow Chart*, 124.

[109] Ibid., 3.

the book's staggering array of allusions, citations, parodies, and travesties (a task already undertaken, in any event, by John Shoptaw in his bravura 40-page analysis of the poem),[110] I want to focus on more global structural effects as they relate to the riverine themes examined so far in this chapter. Like *Three Poems*, *Flow Chart* "is a kind of continuum, a diary, even though it's not in the form of a diary,"[111] whose governing conceit is the solvent expansion of the text itself across its many pages. The title invites—indeed forces—this reading, even as it lightly ironizes the usual meaning of flowchart as a diagram representing an algorithm and process (Ashbery's "diagram" hardly represents such a thing).[112] *Flow Chart*, like *Three Poems*, is replete with watery images—"the river god," "wavelets in a reservoir," "a lake of regret," "the friendly gurgling of rills," "the mineral springs," and "the heavy water of eternity," to name a very few[113]—as well as overt likenesses between the text and the motion of water:

> ...the chatter never subsides
> but like the tide of dust of the oceans, returns and retreats, forever opaque,
> forever itself:
> a longing one does not subdue.[114]

Those resolute enough to persist to the end of this poem without being subdued by its chatter will observe the consistency with which Ashbery drops these kinds of obvious hints that his text is meant to embody "flow." "Like a plangent river my life

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[110] Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 301-41.

[111] Quoted in Smith, "Poem Alone," 48. In 1972 Ashbery told A. Poulin, Jr. that the recently completed *Three Poems* "gained dimension just from having been written over a long period of time, a dimension like that of a diary, for instance, which in a way those poems are." "Experience of Experience," 255.

[112] "And he said that's the way it was, it was a tangle and will never be anything / more than a diagram pointing you in a senseless direction toward yourself." *Flow Chart*, 109.

[113] Ibid., 3; 5; 25; 21; 110; 127;

[114] Ibid., 73.

has unrolled this far," he writes, "to a fraction of this place. . ."[115] McHale would warn us away from isolating *ars-poetic* passages like these and using them as interpretive keys for the whole text. But this is less of a problem with *Flow Chart* than it is with "The Skaters." For unlike "The Skaters," which wants to leave us constantly second-guessing ourselves, *Flow Chart* does all it can to have us read it as a poem that describes "flow" while embodying it. It is as if Ashbery has finally caught up with his own technique of literalizing the stream-of-consciousness figure, so as to make *Flow Chart* not only another instance of it but also an uncanny commentary on it. The poem is studded with *ars-poetic* statements around which readers are openly invited to organize their readings. Srikanth Reddy, for instance, suggests that by switching "poem" for "river" in the following passage, we produce "a narratological template for the meandering and elusive yet ultimately jubilant Ashberyan text":[116]

> And the river threaded its way as best it could through sharp obstacles and
> was sometimes not there
> and was triumphal for a few moments at the end. I put my youth and middle
> age into it,
> and what else? Whatever happened to be around, at a given moment, for that
> is the best
> we have. . .[117]

Reddy is correct, though he avoids harder questions about the reading experience demanded by this "meandering and elusive" form. Where *Three Poems* draws the

[115] Ibid., 60.
[116] Reddy, *Changing Subjects*, 137-38.
[117] Ashbery, *Flow Chart*, 96-7.

reader in and compels a kind of meditative state,[118] *Flow Chart*, like "Litany," tends to push the reader out and provoke a frustrating experience of attention deficit. The body, with its awkward and irrelevant demands, is always intruding on the mind. On page 201, for instance, readers are greeted with the following announcement: "Excuse me while I fart. There, that's better. I actually feel relieved."[119] A bathos like this would be devastating in *Three Poems,* but in *Flow Chart* it almost goes unnoticed. Unlike *Three Poems*, *Flow Chart* is very funny and very boring. It is tedious to the point of being amusing and even, at times, entrancing. "[B]y entering into some bizarrely tuned pitch inside myself," Helen Vendler writes in her *New Yorker* review of *Flow Chart*, "I can find myself on Ashbery's wavelength," adding that "the irritating (and seductive) thing about this tuning in is that it can't be willed; I can't make it happen when I am tired or impatient." But when it does occur, "it is a form of trance."[120] The irony of Vendler's account is that Ashbery prompts readers of *Flow Chart* to experience *both* "irritation" and "trance"—indeed, the two responses are inseparable. Ben Lerner gives another account of being "hypnotized" by *Flow Chart*":

> But what do you see when you look at yourself in the Ashberian medium? A subject that always almost arrives on the waves of predication. A process that never stabilizes into an essence. Certainly not something I can capture: if the

[118] Ron Silliman discusses this effect in his entry on *Three Poems* for the 2007 "John Ashbery Tribute" in *Conjunctions*: "Ashbery in *Three Poems* reminds me, more than anything, of the Buddhist adage that *You are not your thoughts*, and with the underlying idea that thinking itself represents a form of anxiety. . . . As experience, the poem's mode is one of continually refocusing, then drifting, then refocusing again, then drifting further. If it never settles, this is because there is, as Stein once characterized her hometown of Oakland, 'no there there,' no topic sentence, no secret center, no 'I' or 'eye' at the work's heart." Ron Silliman, "Four Contexts for *Three Poems*," *Conjunctions* 49 (2007): 300.

[119] Ashbery, *Flow Chart*, 201.

[120] Vendler, *Soul Says,* 130.

> terms are fixed, they've missed the point, which I suppose is a way of saying: there is an Ashberian sublime. . . . I was hypnotized by the reflection of my attention in *Flow Chart*, how I felt I was reading a record of my reading as I read it, and I found that liberating, but also annihilating. I felt like a linguistic effect.[121]

For Lerner, *Flow Chart* is "one of the most exciting books I've ever read. It is also often boring. It is impossible to finish and, of course, it knows it."[122] I would add that Lerner's sublime experience of *Flow Chart* as an agent of liberation and annihilation might be understood as an example of what Sianne Ngai has called "stuplimity": the aesthetic experience of simultaneous astonishment and boredom.

Ngai coins the portmanteau term "stuplimity" (stupidity + sublimity) in a recent study of "ugly feelings," explaining that the "stuplime" entails "not so much the sublimity of information, but the sublimity of its ability to thicken and heap up." "Stuplime" texts, in her account, "tend to draw us *down* into the sensual and material domain of language and its dulling and irritating iterability, rather than elevating us to a transcendent, supersensible, or spiritual plane."[123] *Flow Chart* is a "stuplime" text, and it achieves this effect through its extensive rehearsal of the "flow" conceit. Its monotonous expansion produces a paradoxical state of awe, a stupefied trance at the intersection of irritation and excitement. *Flow Chart*, in fact, narrates its own boredom with itself:

> *It seems I was reading something;*
> I have forgotten the sense of it or what the small
> role of the central poem made me want to feel. No matter.
> The words, distant now, and mitred, glint. Yet not one
> ever escapes the forest of agony and pleasure that keeps them

[121] Ben Lerner, "The Reflection of a Reading," *Conjunctions* 49 (2007): 373-76.
[122] Ibid., 373.
[123] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 267.

> in a solution that has become permanent through inertia. The force of meaning never extrudes.[124]

Ngai applies her concept to a number of literary and visual works, such as Beckett's *How It Is*, Stein's *The Making of Americans*, and Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget*, returning most frequently to Stein. "[W]hile both Kantian and popularized versions of the sublime might be conscripted to account for the astonishment, awe, or 'respect' that a massive, even stupefying text like *Americans* solicits from its reader," Ngai writes, "no theory of sublimity seems adequately equipped to account for its concomitantly solicited effect of boredom." Ngai's choice of text here is fortuitous, as Ashbery himself has made similar comments about *The Making of Americans.* In a 2004 tribute to Stein hosted by the PEN American Center, Ashbery places Stein's "endless impossible novel" alongside the masterpieces of Proust and James as a "monument of world literature," and praises the "immersive" effect of its "tide of words." His terms of praise might very well be directed at *Flow Chart*:

> That's what's so wonderful when you immerse yourself in the tide of this novel. It's somewhat like listening to a piece of music by Philip Glass or John Adams in which a theme is repeated over and over with such subtle variations that you don't get them at first, and then you realize that the whole situation has changed, that you've sort of lost something, and you've got to go back, but you can't, because it's music, or a tide of words.[125]

Ashbery has been making similar statements about Stein for decades. In his foreword to *The Third Rose: Gertrude Stein and Her World* (1987), he describes her as

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[124] Ashbery, *Flow Chart*, 3-4.

[125] John Ashbery, "Being in Her," PEN America 5: Silences (2004), http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/1130/prmID/483. Ashbery confesses in this talk to having never finished *The Making of Americans* until recently: "After many years of pretending that I'd read this book, and making several attempts (never getting beyond about page 30), I decided to actually do it several years ago, and I'm very glad that I did. I would like to do it again although I've already read it about three or four times since I had to read every sentence, I think, at least that many times."

"both arduous and exciting. That is to say, some of her work is arduous, some of it exciting, and much of it a stubbornly entangled mixture of both."[126] Thirty years earlier, in 1957, he gives a fuller account of this effect—eerily congruent with Ngai's "stuplimity"—in a review of Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (which, as Lerner notes in another essay on Ashbery, "is a wonderful account of what—long after '57—it will be like to read Ashbery himself").[127]Ashbery has said on numerous occasions that poets tend to write about themselves when they write about other artists,[128] a precept that especially holds true for this piece of writing. He writes of *Stanzas*:

> There is certainly plenty of monotony in the 150-page title poem which forms the first half of this volume, but it is the fertile kind, which generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power. . . . Like people, Miss Stein's lines are comforting or annoying or brilliant or tedious. Like people, they sometimes make no sense and sometimes make perfect sense or they stop short in the middle of a sentence and wander away, leaving us alone for a while in the physical world, that collection of thoughts, flowers, weather, and proper names. . . . *Stanzas in Meditation* gives one the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a 'plot,' though it would be difficult to say precisely what is going on."[129]

Once again, the choice of examples is fortuitous. Ngai, too, resorts to an image of a dam in her account of the "stuplime," quoting Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*: "Language leaped out of Homer in a muddy, twisting torrent. . . . The lake behind the dam replenished itself too fast. The more he talked the greater the pressure grew because the flood was circular and ran back behind the dam again."[130] From this passage Ngai develops the idea of "thick language"—language that

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[126] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 201.
[127] Lerner, "Future Continuous," 204.
[128] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 106. Ashbery, incidentally, makes this comment in another piece about Stein.
[129] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, *11*.
[130] Quoted in Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 249.

"agglutinates" and "congeals," thereby producing a "stupendous proliferation of discrete quanta held together by a fairly simple syntax or organizing principle"[131] (in *Flow Chart*'s case, this simple "organizing principle" would be the idea of "flow"). "Thick language" is thick because it accretes but also because it tends to simulate stupid or inane babbling. Though he could not have availed himself of Ngai's critical lexicon, Ashbery, too, is alert to Stein's "thickness," noting in his review of *Stanzas* her tendency to discourage readers with the "lack of seriousness in her work, characterized by lapses into dull, facile rhyme; by over-employment of rhythms suggesting a child's incantation against grownups; and by monotony."[132] Thirty years later, he takes particular pleasure in muddying the waters of his own *Flow Chart*:

> Only let that river not beseech its banks too closely,
> abrade and swamp its levees, for though the flood is always terrible,
> much worse are the painted monsters born later
> out of the swift-flowing alluvial mud.[133]

Ngai's "stuplime" aptly characterizes the aesthetic experience of reading *Flow Chart*, a text that induces astonishment and boredom, accretes without advancing a linear plot, and generates a kind of hydro-electric charge through monotonous flow. Accretion and flow (boredom and excitement) might seem like contradictory processes, but in Ashbery's case it is important to see how they merge into a single "stuplime" effect:

> …and meanwhile the dam is overflowed
> by some water, even as it comes rolling even to your feet.[134]

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[131] Ibid., 263.
[132] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 11.
[133] Ashbery, *Flow Chart*, 5.

With *Flow Chart*, Ashbery brings to pass the aesthetic program of blending "excitement" and "monotony" that he praised in Stein thirty years earlier. But there are further links to be made. Later in the essay, Ashbery likens Stein's writing style to that of Henry James in *The Golden Bowl*, highlighting the way in which both writers' dense involutions yield "sudden inrushes of clarity":

> In addition, the almost physical pain with which we strive to accompany the evolving thought of one of James's or Gertrude Stein's characters is perhaps a counterpart of the painful continual projection of the individual onto life. As in life, perseverance has its rewards—moments when we emerge suddenly on a high plateau with a view of the whole distance we have come. In Miss Stein's work the sudden inrush of clarity is likely to be an aesthetic experience. . . .It is for moments like this that one perseveres in this difficult poem, moments which would be less beautiful and meaningful if the rest did not exist, for we have fought side by side with the author in her struggle to achieve them.[135]

The first thing to notice here is the curious anticipation of the first three lines of "A Wave"; persisting through Stein's and James' texts causes "almost physical pain" that is relieved by "moments when we emerge suddenly on a high plateau." Reading these works, we pass through pain *and* know it, to emerge on a terrain whose full contours are disclosed to us in momentary bursts of clarity. Several times in *Flow Chart*, Ashbery refers to this moment of "emerging at the top of the monument, that lets you see / in the vastest if not the least clotted vistas and places / no value-judgment on your being there, on the fact of your being there. . ."[136] Midway through the book, he writes:

> Then I like the idea of coming out at the top

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[134] Ibid., 155.
[135] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 13-14.
[136] Ashbery, *Flow Chart*, 56.

> for a brief time to survey what's happened down below
> and retreat, the better to tidy up loose ends, weave reports
> around this affair that brought us so much ridicule, so much deserved
> attention.[137]

As might be expected, Ashbery not only thematizes the "sudden inrush of clarity" throughout *Flow Chart,* but literally enacts it in the form of the virtuosic "double sestina" that emerges toward the poem's end. In an ingenious, and bizarre, reading of *Flow Chart* through the lens of Complexity Theory, Angus Fletcher interprets the sestina as an "emergent" ordering of the poem's chaotic system.[138] While Ashbery almost certainly did not have Complexity Theory in mind when he wrote the poem, Fletcher's argument does clarify the way in which Ashbery merges the thematic and structural dimensions of his poem, literalizing themes of "flow" and "clear outline abruptly turning illegible" to an unprecedented degree. The "sudden inrush of clarity" effected by the double sestina, however, does not "explain" the undifferentiated flow of gibberish that precedes it for 186 pages and succeeds it for a further 23, but rather points up the impossibility of doing so. Ngai helpfully identifies the "stuplime" as a species of slapstick humor,[139] the endless perils and pratfalls of which most directly inform the "tragic farce"[140] of Ashbery's late period.

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[137] Ibid., 139.

[138] Fletcher, *New Theory*, 209-224.

[139] "And there is often a comical and even farcical element to stuplimity. Inducing a series of fatigues or minor exhaustions, rather than a single, major blow to the imagination, stuplimity paradoxically forces the reader to *go on* in spite of its equal enticement to readers [to] give up (as many readers of *The Making of Americans* inevitably do). . . . In the stuplimity of slapstick comedy, which frequently stages the confrontation of small objects with the big systems that circumscribe them, one is made to fall down—often, as in the case of Keaton, with an exaggerated expression of inexpressiveness—only so as to get up again, counteracting the seriousness of one-time failure with an accumulation of comic fatigues." Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 272-73.

[140] "In Ashbery's poem-theater lately the repertoire consists mostly of tragic farces." Charles Simic, "Tragicomic Soup," *New York Review of Books* 47, no.19 (November 30, 2000): 10-11.

Flow Chart is the first of Ashbery's texts that may be squarely situated under the rubric of his "late period," a period dominated by the "camp sublime."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Out of the endless bathos": Late Ashbery's Camp Sublime

Laugh and the world laughs with you,
Weep, and you weep alone;
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
But has trouble enough of its own.
—Ella Wheeler Wilcox[1]

There is a hole of truth in the green earth's rug
Once you find it you are as snug as a bug.
—John Ashbery[2]

Summer in the trees! "It's time to strangle several bad poets."
—Kenneth Koch[3]

In the preceding chapters, I have examined two recurrent tropes of evasiveness in Ashbery's work: pastoral vagrancy and riverine flow. I have framed my readings of these tropes within a more general analysis of Ashbery's "transparent" aesthetic, which I have traced in the poetry and criticism of his early and middle periods and which emerges most immediately from Ashbery's stay in France. My readings have shown that the alleged instabilities of Ashbery's syntax, subject matter, and modes of address, while pervasive and daunting, do not prohibit rigorous analysis, so long as they are read in the context of broader thematics within his work, such as his figurations of the natural. If close reading of individual Ashbery poems often proves a difficult proposition, close reading *across* his poems remains an attractive option for appraising his general aims and theories. In this chapter, I consider another of Ashbery's recurrent features: his late-period evasions of the literary.

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[1] Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *Poetical Works of Ella Wheeler Wilcox* (Edinburgh: W.P. Nimmo, Hay, & Mitchell, 1917), 42.
[2] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 191.
[3] Kenneth Koch, *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 120.

Throughout his career, Ashbery has been an ironic perpetrator of "bad" writing: he has courted sentimentality and bathos, written doggerel and nonsense verse, sported with clichés, and generally cultivated a "low-key camp" aesthetic.[4] From the madcap cartoonish sublime of "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" and "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" and the garish doggerel of "Some Words" and "The Songs We Know Best" to his arch send-up of suburban mores in *A Nest of Ninnies* and his camp forays into theater, Ashbery's deliberate lapses of taste have featured persistently in his work. Numerous examples could also be drawn from his later period, such as his long poem, "Tuesday Evening" (1995), an Ogden Nash knock-off written in quatrains with a rhyming dictionary, or his mock-epic *Girls on the Run* (1999), inspired by the outsider art of Henry Darger. In speaking of his debts to other practitioners, acknowledgement must be made not only of canonical regulars such as Whitman, Stevens, Auden, and Bishop, but also of a more dubious pantheon featuring the Australian hoax poet Ern Malley,[5] the popular sentimentalist Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and the nineteenth-century Scottish versifier William McGonagall, renowned as "the world's worst poet."[6] The largest of

[4] Silverberg, *New York School*, 173.

[5] *The Darkling Ecliptic* was the first book Ashbery bought as a Harvard undergraduate. The "Ern Malley Hoax" perpetrators, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, explained their composition process in a newspaper editorial: "We opened books at random, choosing a word or a phrase haphazardly. We made lists of these and wove them into nonsensical sentences. We misquoted and made false allusions. We deliberately perpetrated bad verse, and selected awkward rhymes from a Ripman's Rhyming Dictionary." *Ern Malley's Poems* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1961), 8. Ashbery published two "Ern Malley Poems," titled "Potsdam" and "Aenobarbus," in a special feature with John Kinsella and John Tranter in *Jacket 17*, June 2002, http://jacketmagazine.com/17/ashb-kins.html

[6] Ashbery quotes McGonagall as early as 1966 in "The Skaters" in his reference of the "storm-fiend" (from McGonagall's "Tay Bridge Disaster"). John Tranter recounts an amusing anecdote in a 1995 interview with John Kinsella: "John Ashbery once recited to me—at the end of a rather long evening—the epic McGonagall poem about the River Tay disaster in 1879. In full, and with rolling

such debts, however, are owed to Ashbery's fellow New York School poets: Frank O'Hara, whose work is never more than a step away from the camp pratfall; James Schuyler, co-author of *A Nest of Ninnies* and virtuosic harmonizer of "bathos and loveliness";[7] and Kenneth Koch, the most serious comic poet of his generation whose "celebration of the playfully sublime"[8] in faux-epics like *Ko: or, A Season on Earth*[9] and "Fresh Air"[10] gave Ashbery a crucial precedent for his own ludic ingenuities. No history of the New York School can be told with a completely straight face.

Reading across Ashbery's oeuvre, then, it becomes apparent that a fair portion of him is indeed quite "bad." Yet, "bad" in quotation marks "isn't *bad* in any absolute sense."[11] Rather, Ashbery's "bad" writings are strategic expressions of "the good taste of bad taste" as Susan Sontag defines it in "Notes on Camp."[12] In addition to its virtues as a form of amusement, such writing enacts a knowingly botched departure from normative standards of cultural and aesthetic merit, offering a form of minority resistance to rigid majority standards that troubles the distinction between the high and the low. "Badness," in this sense, ironically subverts the

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eyes and a resolute attempt at the Scots accent: a marvelous performance." "John Kinsella Interviews John Tranter," accessed July 5, 2012, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/tranter/jtiv.html. Ashbery also mentions reading McGonagall's biography in a recent interview, "A Refutation of Common Sense," *Boston Review*, April 2011, http://www.bostonreview.net/NPM/adam_fitzgerald_john_ashbery.php.

[7] John Wilkinson conducts an acute reading of these seemingly opposed concepts in Schuyler's work. See "Jim the Jerk: Bathos and Loveliness in the Poetry of James Schuyler," in *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, ed. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010), 71-89.

[8] John Hollander, back cover blurb to *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch*, by Kenneth Koch (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

[9] Kenneth Koch, *On the Edge: Collected Longer Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 73-181.

[10] Kenneth Koch, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 122-28.

[11] Silverberg, *New York School*, 178.

[12] "The experiences of Camp are based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement. Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste." Sontag, *Against Interpretation,* 291.

theories of poetic value first advanced by I.A. Richards in the mid-1920s[13] and subsequently elaborated by the New Critical establishment that followed in his wake—theories with which Ashbery has been in dialogue since his college days.

From the outset, the New Critical project, in its various manifestations, attempted systematically to address the thorny question of literary value.[14] Despite their differences, the New Critics on both sides of the Atlantic shared a formalist tendency to view poetic value as the product of a text's resistance to yielding up a one-dimensional or "stock" meaning, such resistance being achieved through the familiar modalities of ambiguity, irony, paradox, and the like. For a working index of New Critical standards of value, we might turn to Robert Penn Warren's and Cleanth Brooks' influential handbook, *Understanding Poetry* (first issued 1938), the standard reference text in American classrooms throughout the mid-twentieth century. Warren and Brooks organize their text around close readings of hundreds

[13] For Richards, legislating between "good" and "bad" poetry offered nothing less than a means of ensuring the "orderliness"—and, by extension, the moral integrity—of the reader's mind. Richards' aim was less to deprecate the "bad" and elevate the "good" than to arrive at steadfast interpretive principles whereby distinctions may be made between the two, as the following passage reminds us: "Our traditional ideas as to the values of poetry—given us automatically if poetry is set apart from life, or if poems are introduced to us from the beginning as either good or bad, as "poetry" or "not poetry"—misrepresent the facts and raise unnecessary difficulties. It is less important to like "good" poetry and dislike "bad," than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds." I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Routledge, 2001), 334.

[14] Richards, once again, set the tenor of this debate by establishing "value" as the central issue of the project of literary criticism. Reflecting on the history of criticism, he laments in the opening pages of *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) that "[t]he central question, What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the devotion of the keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in the system of human endeavours? is left almost untouched, although with some clear view it would seem that even the most judicious critic must often lose his sense of position." Later in *Principles*, Richards defines as "valuable" anything "which satisfies an appetency or 'seeking after,'" refining this a page later to anything "which will satisfy an appetency without involving the frustration of some equal or more important appetency. . . ." *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1961), 7; 47-8. As regards the thorniness of the question of literary value, Richards concedes toward the end of *Practical Criticism* that "the more thoroughly we work out our account of the differences between good and bad poetry, the more intricate and complex the account becomes." Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 290.

of poems, most selected to illustrate the functions and virtues of particular literary tropes. They also devote some space to "bad" poetry, centering their accounts of it on the concept (coined by Richards) of the "stock response," defined as:

> The general uncritical response made on conventional or habitual grounds to a situation, subject, phrase, or word in literature. Advertisers frequently attempt to appeal to stock responses by arbitrarily associating a product with patriotism, mother love, etc. The good poet tries to provide in his work the grounds for the responses he seeks from his audience, but the bad poet, like the writer of advertising copy, merely appeals to the already established attitudes, however crude or general they may be.[15]

In other words, "bad" poetry is that which flatters readerly biases instead of challenging forth a fresh response. Throughout the handbook, Brooks and Warren stress the importance of clear, consistent imagery as a bulwark against poetic "badness," nowhere more emphatically than in their readings of sentimentality, stock response, cliché, and other flaws in poems by Joyce Kilmer, Adelaide Anne Proctor, and Sidney Lanier. True to New Critical form, they do not shy away from value judgments: "The fact that [Kilmer's "Trees"] has been popular," they write, "does not necessarily condemn it as a bad poem. But it is a bad poem."[16] According to Brooks and Warren, Kilmer's poem fails on both technical and thematic grounds, with its mechanical rhythm, its language evoking "stock responses" of pious religious sentiment, and its mixed metaphors. The poet thus "confuses his reader if the reader tries actually to *see* the images the poet uses or tries to think about their *implications*; and that is exactly what a good poet wants his readers to do, to *visualize*

[15] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), 639.
[16] Ibid., 387.

or *feel* or *hear* his images. . . ."[17] Brooks and Warren make a similar assessment of Proctor's "The Pilgrims":

> In every instance the poet has used a phrase that dulls the reader's perception of the scene rather than stimulates it. In other words, the poet has made no real attempt to visualize, or make the reader visualize, the objects. Nothing strikes the reader with the force of a new perception, and the total effect is vague.[18]

And of Lanier's "My Springs":

> These worn-out images could be given new strength only if the relationship established between them were really expressive and imaginatively justified. . . .The reader feels that the poet has arbitrarily put these things together and that they do not really represent an imaginative insight.[19]

Given the wide currency of *Understanding Poetry* in the decades after its publication in 1938, we may assume Ashbery was at least made familiar with its methods as an undergraduate. Whether or not he had the examples of Kilmer, Proctor, or Lanier in mind when he wrote his own "bad" poems, he chafed from the start of his career against the sort of critical bias implicit in Brooks's and Warren's readings of these poets—not because he would have disagreed with its judgments, but because it presumed to delimit his creative horizons.[20] Kilmer's "Trees" might be a "bad"

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[17] Ibid., 389.
[18] Ibid., 335.
[19] Ibid., 443.
[20] It should be added that Ashbery's objections were also conditioned to a significant degree by the perceived gravity and humorlessness of New Critical methods. As he explains in his introduction to the *Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*: "It is true that much of Frank's early work was not only provocative but provoking. One frequently feels that the poet is trying on various pairs of brass knuckles until he finds the one which fits comfortably. It is not just that it is often aggressive in tone—it simply doesn't care. **A poet who in the academic atmosphere of the late 1940s could begin a poem "At night Chinamen jump / On Asia with a thump" was amusing himself, another highly suspect activity.**" [emphasis mine] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, vii-viii.

poem—its images vague, its rhythm mechanical, its responses "stock"—but this does not preclude it from yielding experimental riches if handled properly.[21]

Brooks's and Warren's readings of "badness" in Kilmer, Proctor, and Lanier draw most immediately from Richards, whose early essay, "Badness in Poetry" (1924), introduced the term "stock response" to describe a common mechanism by which "bad" poems fail. For Richards, "bad" poetry is objectionable on both aesthetic and ethical grounds: in his view, a susceptibility to "stock" or pre-established emotional responses exposes a reader's moral failing to reckon with life's complexities. "Sometimes art is bad because communication is defective, the vehicle inoperative," he writes, "sometimes because the experience communicated is worthless; sometimes for both reasons."[22] In an ironic twist, Richards' decision to exemplify the communication of worthless experience in "Badness in Poetry" with Ella Wheeler Wilcox's sonnet "Friendship After Love" might very well have alerted Ashbery to her works when he was a Harvard undergraduate.[23] Twenty years later when he wrote "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," perhaps his most famous "bad" poem (discussed at length below), he was doing more than simply amusing himself; he was issuing a direct challenge to the

[21] Ellen Levy expands on this point: "Ashbery is not actually recommending a wholesale return to traditional forms of art-making, a path that when followed by his beloved de Chirico took the latter "from being one of the greatest painters of this century to a crotchety fabricator of bad pictures" (*RS* 391). Rather, he hopes to unlock what potential remains in what he terms 'an avant-garde which has become a tradition' by locating those aspects of this modernist tradition that have fallen most completely out of fashion, that have been consigned most thoroughly to the inconsequential past." *Criminal Ingenuity*, 135.

[22] Richards, *Principles*, 199.

[23] "Though Ashbery does not recall whether or not he read 'Badness in Poetry,' Richards was much read at Harvard in the 1940s and his term 'stock responses,' coined in 'Badness in Poetry,' had gained wide currency by the 1960s." Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 107.

value theories of Richards and the New Critics, which he and his peers had been resisting since the start of their careers. The challenge was not issued solely in protest of value judgments—after all, Ashbery also pokes fun at Wilcox with his outrageous poem. Rather, Ashbery parts ways with Richards, Brooks, and Warren on the question of irony, Ashbery's irony tending to be a camp extravagance with an occasional satiric bite. By contrast, New Critical accounts of poetic irony tend to highlight its importance in generating the robust polysemy—what Brooks calls the "recognition of incongruities"[24]—that is the hallmark of "good" poetry. Irony, as such, is a measure of the poet's mature capacity to fashion a "unity" from life's complexities and contradictions.[25] In this sense, New Critical irony is not only a quality inherent in poems but a skeptical readerly alignment which "good" poems successfully resist. It is a unifying force both inside and outside poems, or, as Allen Tate would say, a matter of both "intension" and "extension".[26] Tate writes in "Tension in Poetry" (1938) that "good poetry is a unity of all the meanings from the furthest extremes of intension and extension,"[27] adding that "good poetry can bear the closest literal examination of every phrase, and is its own safeguard against our

[24] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947), 209.

[25] Earlier figures like Henry James and T.S. Eliot would be the exemplars of such mature "unity." As Brooks argues in a 1966 essay on the latter: "Eliot's career is not one loose bundle of unrelated activities but possesses an essential unity. Indeed, once discovered, this unity of purpose becomes increasingly evident. Few literary men in our history have so consistently related all their activities to a coherent set of principles. And the consistency of his various writings reflects the quality of the man. In a time of disorder, Eliot moved toward a restoration of order—toward the restoration of order that poetry alone, perhaps, can give." "T.S. Eliot: Thinker and Artist," in *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*, ed. Garrick Davis (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 2008), 247.

[26] "I am using the term [tension] not as a general metaphor, but as a special one, derived from lopping the prefixes off the logical terms extension and intension. What I am saying, of course, is that the meaning of poetry is its 'tension,' the full organized body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it." Allen Tate, *The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays, 1928-1955* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1957), 64; 71.

[27] Ibid., 70.

irony."[28] Brooks links such irony with Richards's "'poetry of synthesis'. . . which does not leave out what is apparently hostile to its dominant tone, and which, because it is able to fuse the irrelevant and discordant, has come to terms with itself and is invulnerable to irony."[29] Brooks himself describes this as an "organic" effect.[30] Warren, too, makes a related claim in "Pure and Impure Poetry" (1943):

> The poet. . .proves his vision by submitting it to the fires of irony—to the drama of his structure—in the hope that the fires will refine it. In other words, the poet wishes to indicate that his vision has been earned, that it can survive reference to the complexities and contradictions of experience. And irony is one such device of reference.[31]

Reading carefully, we will notice that both Tate and Warren use irony here in two senses: the first refers to the poem's internal properties (the "drama" of its "structure"), the second to its relation to the external world (the "complexities and contradictions of experience"). The difference is subtle, and the two might be read as different sides of the same coin. But the point is that New Critical irony is a fluid concept involving the testing of a poem's integrity both by itself and by the reader. This equation might seem vague (and the New Critics are nothing if not maddeningly inconsistent on this subject), so let us consider Brooks's concrete analogy:

> Invulnerability to irony is the stability of a context in which the internal pressures balance and mutually support each other. The stability is like that

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[28] Ibid., 67.

[29] Cleanth Brooks, "Irony as a Principle of Structure," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 1043.

[30] Brooks uses the term in an idealized sense to describe the way in which a poem's heterogeneous parts might add up to a unified and self-contained whole. He explicitly links this effect to Richards in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, writing that the "net effect" of Richards' criticism has been to "emphasize the need of a more careful reading of poetry and to regard the poem as an organic thing." Brooks, *Well-Wrought Urn*, 60.

[31] Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," *The Kenyon Review* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1943): 252.

> of an arch: the very forces which are calculated to drag the stones to the ground actually provide the principles of support—a principle in which thrust and counterthrust become the means of stability.[32]

Like an arch, a "good" New Critical poem stands by virtue of the pressures and tensions of its constituent parts on each other (this is Irony #1). The reader/critic, in turn, is like an engineer who runs tests on the arch's structural integrity (this is Irony #2). Which is to say that a "good" New Critical poem is a free-standing, self-supporting artifact, its "strategy. . .diffused into the unitary effect,"[33] able to withstand and even draw strength from the skeptical reader's harshest scrutiny.

This all begs the question: given their privileging of irony, why are the New Critics so anxious about being vulnerable to it? One possible answer is that their definition of it is too slippery for the specialized theoretical work they would have it do. They use it as a transcendent value when it is in fact a neutral concept that draws its significance from its context. An offhand comment from the end of *Principles of Literary Criticism* illustrates this point. Richards asserts that

> keen and vigilant enjoyment of Miss Dell, Mr. Burroughs, Mrs. Wilcox or Mr. Hutchinson, when untouched by doubts or the joys of ironic contemplation, is likely to have as a consequence not only an acceptance of the mediocre in ordinary life, but a blurring and confusion of impulses and a very widespread loss of value.[34]

This is, of course, Richards's standard account of what happens when we like the wrong kind of writing. More interesting, though, is his throwaway suggestion that "bad" writing may somehow be recovered through "ironic contemplation."

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[32] Brooks, "Irony as a Principle," 1044.
[33] Tate, *Man of Letters*, 74.
[34] Richards, *Principles*, 216.

We should linger over this point, as it marks the dividing line between Ashbery and the New Critics. Richards's comment raises a number of questions: What happens, specifically, when our reading of "bad" authors like Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Edgar Rice Burroughs *is* touched by "doubts" and "the joys of ironic contemplation?" How does "ironic contemplation" of this sort compensate us for the aesthetic and moral failure of "bad" art, as Richards seems to suggest it might? How does this form of irony differ from the kind that promotes unity of effect? Might "ironic contemplation" of this sort, being a joy, have value in its own right?[35]

More to the point, what happens to New Critical standards of value when they themselves are submitted to parody and "ironic contemplation," as they are in Ashbery's "Variations, Calypso, and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox"? Richards does not answer these questions, but instead tacitly dismisses "the joys of ironic contemplation" by equating them with frivolous and sarcastic amusement.[36] The "joy of ironic contemplation" comes from reflecting on the humorous gap

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[35] Susan Sontag explains in "Notes on Camp" how the "pleasure" of "bad" writing endows it with its own kind of value: "The discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating. The man who insists on high and serious pleasures is depriving himself of pleasure; he continually restricts what he can enjoy; in the constant exercise of his good taste he will eventually price himself out of the market, so to speak. Here Camp taste supervenes upon good taste as a daring and witty hedonism. It makes the man of good taste cheerful, where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion.// 55. Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy." *Against Interpretation,* 291.

[36] The New Critics tend to dismiss sarcasm as a lesser, superficial form of irony. Brooks, for instance, calls it "the most obvious kind of irony." See "Irony as a Principle of Structure," 1042. It is worth noting, too, that Richards picks up the phrase "ironic contemplation" in a later chapter of *Principles*, "The Imagination," in which he writes that the difference between "the greatest kind of poetry" and "comparatively unstable poems" is that the latter "will not bear an ironical contemplation." He adds, "Irony in this sense consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses; that is why poetry which is exposed to it is not of the highest order, and why irony itself is so constantly a characteristic of poetry which is." One imagines that by "exposed to it" he means to say vulnerable to it; presumably, all poetry, "good" or "bad," could be exposed to it. Once again, we encounter a two-fold definition of irony as 1) something that "good" poetry possesses, and 2) something to which "bad" poems succumb. *Principles,* 250.

between what "bad" writers like Wilcox and McGonagall strive for and what they actually achieve, from enjoying the *unintentional* irony of their work, an effect conventionally associated with bathos. In overlooking this point, Richards misjudges the power of such contemplation of "badness" not only to amuse but also to erode the line between high and low—the theory of value—on which his entire project depends.

For Ashbery, this kind of negative irony is not a frivolous diversion but a formidable strategy which he leverages throughout his career; it is one of his most effective tools. Stated simply, Ashbery's "bad" poetry intentionally reproduces a naïve form of irony to create a kind of double ironic effect that places it beyond New Critical censure. This is a form of dramatic irony, in that it generates its effect through knowing what Wilcox, McGonagall, and the others do not know: that their poetry is "bad." The fact that Ashbery then goes on to imitate them means we must read his "bad" poetry as a sophisticated ironic gesture aimed not only at teasing "bad" poets but also at making a deeper point about the subversive power of "bad" poetry itself. It is a thumbing of the nose at the New Critics by someone who knows all their moves and would abscond from their sphere of influence. As Mark Silverberg observes, "badness" in the sense used in relation to Ashbery's poetry "has a particular, peculiar, or queer inflection" and "calls into question and destabilizes the authorizing mechanisms of high culture in the same way that drag performance destabilizes the authority of compulsory heterosexuality."[37] Ashbery's "bad" poetry is a form of playfully defiant, rather than maturely resistant, irony. Through serious

[37] Silverberg, *New York School*, 178.

play, Ashbery finds a way to stand free of prescriptive academic and social norms that would curtail his creative horizon. The following excerpt from his (almost) tongue-in-cheek interview with Kenneth Koch in 1965 captures the spirit of this position in specific relation to New Critical "ambiguity":

> J.A.: No, I was just wondering if ambiguity is really what everybody is after, but if it is the case, why?
> K.K.: People seem to be after it in different ways. Actually one tries to avoid the Cleanth Brooks kind, no? It seems an essential part of true ambiguity that it not seem ambiguous in any obvious way. Do you agree?
> J.A.: I don't know. I'm wondering why all these people want that ambiguity so much.
> K.K.: Have your speculations about ambiguity produced any results yet?
> J.A.: Only this: that ambiguity seems to be the same thing as happiness—or pleasant surprise, as you put it. (I am assuming that from the moment that life cannot be one continual orgasm, real happiness is impossible and pleasant surprise is promoted to the front rank of the emotions). Everybody wants the biggest possible assortment of available things. Happy endings are nice and tragedy is good for the soul, etc., etc.[38]

In this exchange, Ashbery and Koch manage to have it both ways, advancing a serious critique of Brooks under the guise of insouciance. Ambiguity equals happiness for Koch and Ashbery because it promises refreshingly improvisational and "surprising" experiences of art. It also means having a maximum of options at one's disposal. This "having it both ways" tactic—"fence-sitting raised to an aesthetic ideal"[39]—anchors Ashbery's ironic pose. In his acute reading of the New York School poets' "politics of taste," Mark Silverberg highlights the "achieved doubleness of Ashbery's camp," the fact that it can be read as both "ironic and

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[38] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 61. Another notable jab at the New Critics comes in "Litany": "*Therefore a new school of criticism must be developed./ First of all, the new / Criticism should take into account that it is we / Who made it, and therefore / Not be too eager to criticize us: we / Could do that for ourselves, and have done so./ Nor / Should it take itself as a fitting subject / For critical analysis, since it knows / Itself only through us, and us / Only through being part of ourselves, the bark / Of the tree of our intellect*." *Collected Poems*, 603.

[39] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 185.

straight."[40] Here we have another expression of Ashbery's will to remain "neutral" or, perhaps more accurately, "aggressively passive."[41] As in all camp productions, part of the value of this position lies in the challenge it poses to aesthetic standards that would exclude minority voices—including the "sentimental" Ella Wheeler Wilcox.[42]

Ultimately, Ashbery is not rejecting New Critical standards of value. He, like everyone else, knows a "bad" poem when he sees one. The difference, though, is that when faced with "bad" poetry, Ashbery does not try to quarantine it from the "good" but instead asks how it might be profitably integrated into a new kind of poetry whose merit rests on something other than achieving a unitary effect ("pleasant surprise" being one such alternative aim).[43] In a sense, Ashbery's "bad"

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[40] Silverberg, *New York School*, 176.

[41] I am indebted to Silverberg for his use of this phrase in relation to John Ashbery, borrowed in turn from David Bergman: "The aggressive passivity of camp has been among its most potent tools in giving gay people a voice that we ourselves could hear and then use to speak to others." David Bergman, ed., *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 107. Bergman is the editor of *Reported Sightings*, Ashbery's selected art criticism.

[42] John Shoptaw observes that Ashbery's use of "fugue" in the title of his Wilcox poem might be a veiled reference to the association of homosexuality with fugue states and schizophrenia, as outlined in studies like the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: Mental Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association Mental Hospital Service, 1952). Shoptaw points out that Richards himself refers to fugues in "Badness in Poetry: "The point is that a reader who, at a high degree of vigilance, thoroughly enters into and enjoys this class of verse [Wilcox's "Friendship After Love"], is necessarily so organised that he will fail to respond to poetry. Time and much varied experience might change him sufficiently, but by then he would no longer be able to enjoy such verse, he would no longer be the same person. A general statement such as this about the incompatibility of inexpressibly complex adjustments must naturally be incapable of strict proof. Individuals with alternating personalities and subject to fugues would have to be considered. So would the phenomena of 'mutations of regime' unaccompanied by change of vigilance if such occur." While this does not strictly condemn Richards of linking the enjoyment of sentimental poetry to schizophrenic homosexual tendencies, his psychological fustian certainly leaves one uneasy about his latent biases. Richards, *Principles*, 204-5. For an illuminating analysis of fugue states, homosexuality, and Ashbery's early work, see Michael Scharf's "*An Unendurable Age*: Notes on John Ashbery's "A Boy" from *Some Trees* (1956)," in "Style," special issue, *Almost Island* (Winter 2012), http://almostisland.com/winter_2012/special_issue_style/m_scha rf_test_page.php

[43] Once again, Sontag amplifies this point: "Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or

poems do abide by New Critical prescriptions of "goodness" in that they, too, "fuse the irrelevant and discordant" to make themselves "invulnerable to irony." The irony they deflect, though, is (ironically) that of the New Critics, who would never find positive value in a figure like Wilcox. Because we know Ashbery knows better than to write sentimental doggerel, we enjoy his *botched* sentimental doggerel (as in "Some Words" and "The Songs We Know Best") with a double degree of "ironic contemplation"—that is, with pleasure both in the bad verse itself and in the way he uses it knowingly to transgress New Critical pieties by throwing their elitist diktats back in their face.

At this point, we might consider an example from Ashbery's late work that brings together the various elements of the preceding discussion. Here is "How To Continue," the coda of *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992) and a self-described "marvel of poetry / and irony":

> Oh there once was a woman
> and she kept a shop
> selling trinkets to tourists
> not far from a dock
> who came to see what life could be
> far back on the island
>
> And it was always a party there
> always different but very nice
> New friends to give you advice
> or fall in love with you which is nice
> and each grew so perfectly from the other
> it was a marvel of poetry
> and irony
>
> And in this unsafe quarter

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the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different—a supplementary—set of standards." *Against Interpretation*, 286.

much was scary and dirty
but no one seemed to mind
very much
the parties went on from house to house
There were friends and lovers galore
all around the store
There was moonshine in winter
and starshine in summer
and everybody was happy to have discovered
what they discovered

And then one day the ship sailed away
There were no more dreamers just sleepers
in heavy attitudes on the dock
moving as if they knew how
among the trinkets and the souvenirs
the random shops of modern furniture
and a gale came and said
it is time to take all of you away
from the tops of the trees to the little houses
on little paths so startled

And when it became time to go
they none of them would leave without the other
for they said we are all one here
and if one of us goes the other will not go
and the wind whispered it to the stars
the people all got up to go
and looked back on love.[44]

The poem begins in the reassuring measure of a nursery rhyme, the initial "Oh" suggesting the onset of song. As in many other poems, Ashbery generalizes his bittersweet allegory of love and loss as widely as possible, leaving out details of person and place. The idyllic scene on the island could be interpreted in many ways, but more important than pegging down the specifics is noting the way in which Ashbery manages to wring an abstract poignancy from his half-baked adult nursery

[44] Ashbery, *Hotel Lautréamont*, 156-7

rhyme.[45] I would highlight the way in which the poem ironically pushes against its own flimsy childish form to express something serious and sad which cannot be said directly.[46] We may begin by looking at how the poem's facile elements—the rhymes (pure, slant, and internal), the repetition of certain words ("nice,"[47] "discovered," "go"), the fairy tale diction ("There was moonshine in winter / and starshine in summer")—are used to evade yet also intimate a deeper grief. Knowing Ashbery is Ashbery, we cannot simply dismiss this poem as nonsense verse or as a poor Mother Goose parody, though we cannot take it entirely seriously either. We are left with a movingly vulnerable poem that pushes through its own sentimentality and puerile formalism to arrive, miraculously, at something resembling genuine feeling. The disruptive "gale" that arrives and threatens to take everyone away "from the tops of the trees to the little houses / and on the little paths so startled" is the "real world"

[45] Though this poem has been read as an allegory of the AIDS crisis, Ashbery has insisted that he did not intend quite so narrow an interpretation for it. At the same time, he acknowledges that the poem was written "in a world of AIDS," and so this fact may be taken as an ambient influence or condition attending the poem's composition and its sense of an unhappy ending. In a *New York Times* review, Langdon Hammer writes, "Ashbery does write poems that are 'about' specific subjects in a more or less conventional way. 'How to Continue' is an elegy for gay men and the gay male culture destroyed by AIDS; it is as cleareyed and moving, as honorably sentimental, as any poem written in response to the epidemic." Hammer, "But I Digress," *New York Times*, unpaginated, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/books/review/Hammer-t.html. Of Hammer's review, Ashbery remarked, "I was a little surprised when I read it, because that really wasn't what I had been writing about. But I was however writing at the time in a world of AIDS and I realized it could be about that. Even though that wasn't what I specifically had in mind at the time and it was part of the larger subject of what I was writing about." Audio clip of John Ashbery speaking, quoted in "What If It Doesn't Make Sense: Matthew Zapruder parses a John Ashbery poem," Poetry Foundation website, accessed July 5, 2012, http://www.poetryfound ation.org/features/audioitem/1592.

[46] Warren makes a similar observation about Ransom's use of clichés in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," noting that "the fact of the clichés, rather than more original or profound observations, at the root of the poem is important; there is in the poem the contrast between the stateliness of the clichés and the shock of reality." "Pure and Impure Poetry," 238.

[47] Ashbery uses "nice" similarly in a prose reflection on his friend, the artist Joe Brainard, who died of AIDS: "Joe Brainard was one of the nicest artists I have ever known. Nice as a person and nice as an artist." Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 257.

interrupting the world of fantasy, an instance of the unnamed sublime cataclysm that haunts late Ashbery (a recurrent trope, often taking the form of a "storm"). As usual, however, the apocalypse is one the speaker can choose simply to ignore: "and when it became time to go / they none of them would leave without the other." It is in the interplay of these two forces, the island fantasy and the "gale," the singsong surface and the submerged turmoil, that the poem generates its meaning. "How to Continue" achieves its full effect only when read with "the joys of ironic contemplation." And once we have read it this way, we find it has short-circuited our ability to make a value judgment of it. Neither "good" nor "bad," it is a "marvel of poetry / and irony."

"How to Continue," like many of Ashbery's "bad" poems, dramatizes a sensibility confronting the limitations of a traditional poetic container. In addition to Mother Goose, the obvious intertexts here are the faux-naif ballads of John Crowe Ransom, W.H. Auden, and Elizabeth Bishop. What distinguishes "How to Continue" from these poems, however, is its lack of finish, its failure fully to achieve the naïve ballad or nursery rhyme forms which it imitates. The difference is one of degree, not type—Ashbery's faux-naif is simply more faux. We need only contrast this poem with "The Instruction Manual," a perfectly finished and internally consistent ironic production, to see how this is the case. "The Instruction Manual" is a pitch-perfect parody of a sentimental daydream. The pathos of "How to Continue," by contrast, lies in its inability even to resolve itself into the parodic form it approximates; it wants to be a nursery rhyme or ballad but fails to marshal sufficient energy to either end. As with many of Ashbery's "bad" poems, this one is a

botched parody. Yet, in dubbing his tale "a marvel of poetry / and irony" Ashbery places himself one step beyond Ransom, Auden, and Bishop. We know how to read the faux-naif poems of these established figures, even if they are "rough." But what do we do with Ashbery's intentionally *failed* faux-naif poems?

In this chapter, I propose to read Ashbery's "bad writing" as a continuously developing minor chord in his work which finds an especially rich form of expression in the "bad" nature poetry of his late period. In addition to extending the nature theme of this study into Ashbery's late period, my focus on "bad" nature poems helps target the discussion of a very prolific period of writing that spans a quarter century and thirteen books. This discussion begins with an extended reading of "Variations, Calypso, and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," a mid-career poem that paves the way for later developments. No single account could do justice to the immense variety—and the various forms of repetitiousness—of late Ashbery. By attending to the question of how he figures the natural world in his later work through doubly ironic or "bad" means—and how he revises his earlier work in the process—I hope to affirm the critical assumption that there *is* a "late Ashbery," without committing myself to a too-prescriptive account of what it means.

Late Ashbery's ironized recapitulations of the conventions of nature poetry—in the styles of figures ranging from John Clare to Joyce Kilmer, Robert Frost to Ella Wheeler Wilcox—in "I Saw No Need," "Tuesday Evening," "The Ice Storm," "Korean Soap Opera," and *Girls on the Run* draw from his career-long experimentation with "the good taste of bad taste." Additionally, these and other "bad" nature-themed poems are subtended by a parallel theme of environmental

catastrophism or "ecosublimity,"[48] a later expression of the "optional apocalypse" discussed in chapter two that registers the general increase in public ecological alarmism across the years of late Ashbery (the mid-1980s to the present).[49] In late Ashbery, we repeatedly encounter moments of stagey, mawkish naturalism alongside sober presentiments of natural disaster and apocalypse, a muddling of bathetic and sublime registers which critics of Ashbery's late period have yet fully to flesh out. This chapter proposes a reading of Ashbery's alternatingly artless and ominous figurations of the natural—his "camp sublime"[50]—as one of the constants of his late period.

I. Late Ashbery's Critical Reception

The comic and the bathetic were our interior.
—John Ashbery[51]

Despite a book-length study and a scattering of journal articles and reviews, significant portions of Ashbery's late output remain to be assimilated,[52] not least

[48] Lee Rozelle, *Ecosublime: Environmental Awe and Terror from the New World to Oddworld* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006).

[49] "As the 1980s began, the possibility of greenhouse warming had become prominent enough to be included for the first time in public opinion polls. A 1981 survey found that over a third of American adults claimed they had heard or read about the 'greenhouse effect.' The news had spread beyond the small minority who regularly followed scientific issues." Spencer R. Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 112. Meanwhile, in May 1985 a British scientific team announced the discovery of an ozone layer hole over Antarctica in the science journal *Nature*. J.C. Farman, B.G. Gardiner, and J.D. Shanklin, "Large losses of total ozone over Antarctica reveal seasonal ClOx/NOx interaction," *Nature* 315 (May 16, 1985): 207-10.

[50] I adapt the phrase from Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 34.

[51] John Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), 16.

[52] I would date the onset of Ashbery's "late period" somewhere between *April Galleons* (1987) and *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992). *April Galleons* occupies a transitional moment for Ashbery, if only by default: it is the last volume featured in the *Collected Poems: 1956-1987* and the first volume in *Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems*. As for the assimilation of late Ashbery, John Emil Vincent's *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books* (2007) has made the most significant initial foray into the subject to date, covering the late work up to *Your Name Here* (2000), with some closing remarks on *Chinese*

because he is still publishing regularly. Since turning sixty, he has produced thirteen books of poems, three prose collections, and several book-length French translations, and has twice exhibited collages at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Along with the challenges posed by this great productivity, the difficulty of assimilating late Ashbery has been compounded by the increasingly comic, nonsensical, and "light" tenor of his work over the past quarter century, a shift which has worked to discourage the kinds of serious critical advances routinely directed at his earlier and middle periods. "Humor is the most obvious feature of Ashbery's recent poetry," Roger Gilbert writes in one of the few journal articles on the subject.[53] More specifically, late Ashbery's humor tends to be of an anarchically surrealistic variety, seemingly calculated to block critical commentary to an even greater degree than his earlier work did. Filled with rapt, bathetic, funny, sad, distracted, short to medium-length surrealist lyrics, the late volumes (with the exceptions of *Flow Chart* and *Girls on the Run*) run the risk, at a glance, of blending into each other. At the very least,

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Whispers (2002) and *Where Shall I Wander* (2005). Vincent's queer theoretical readings of Ashbery are particularly astute, refining important work already done by John Shoptaw, Catherine Imbriglio, and others. His attentive reading of the pronoun "you" in the late work also sheds light on the nuances of Ashbery's late-period modes of address. Yet, while Vincent's readings make important in-roads to the critical account of Ashbery's gay thematics, they give too much primacy to this aspect of his work, giving short-shrift to the polysemic nature of his poetry. Moreover, Vincent's method of reading Ashbery's late period "across his books," while thought-provoking, seems over-determined. Brian Glavey offers a fair-minded account, to which I would subscribe: "Vincent makes a persuasive case that each of the books he discusses engaged in a discrete and decipherable project. Brilliant and generative as they may be, these readings at times assign what can seem like a dubious degree of intentionality to the patterns and themes they unearth. This gesture might be something of an overcorrection, a rejoinder to the common perception that Ashbery has been engaged in slapdash automatic writing, shapeless and out of control, but it does occasionally stretch credulity." Brian Glavey, "Reading Late Ashbery," *Criticism* 50, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 530.

[53] Gilbert, "Ludic Eloquence," 219. Throughout this chapter I draw widely from journalistic accounts of late Ashbery, in addition to more academic sources. This strategy is justified both by the frequently academic inflection of the journalism in question (published, quite often, in major broadsheets like the *Times Literary Supplement*, *London Review of Books*, and *New York Review of Books*) and by the fact that Ashbery's late reputation has been significantly conditioned by the interventions of such critical journalism.

much of the work seems to announce itself as not fit for close reading or serious consumption. Lines like the following proliferate:

> That his landscape could have been the one you meant,
> that it meant much to you, I never doubted,
> even at the time. How many signifiers have you?
> Good, I have two. I took my worries on the road
> for a while. When we got back little cherubs were nesting
> in the arbor, below the apple tree. We were incredulous,
> and whistled. The road came back to get them
> just as darkness was beginning.
> The comic and the bathetic were our interior.[54]

The unspecified and benighted spatial context; the sense of time and space collapsing to nothing; the indeterminate personal pronouns and supernatural beings; the mixed-register diction ("How many signifiers have you?"); and, most importantly, the general ambience of ludicrous occasion—here is the haphazard comedy of late Ashbery. This poem is aptly titled "Involuntary Description."

But while Ashbery's recent work is a mostly comic and bathetic affair, it is rifted with sadness and unease. Death, senility, the end of friendship and love, and the end of the world are common themes:

> This is how my days,
> My night are spent, in a crowded vacuum
> Overlooking last year's sinkhole. What was I about to say . . .
> Oh forget it. The weather is untenable. I'll be on my way.[55]

It is not clear, though, how seriously we are meant to take serious moments such as this one. The next lines read: "So spake an irritable urchin / to nothing in particular."[56] This sort of deflationary reframing of context, so common in late

[54] John Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander*, 16.
[55] John Ashbery, *Planisphere* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009), 99.
[56] Ibid., 99.

Ashbery, drains the authority from his putative confessional subject; this might be the poignant *cri de coeur* of an ailing octogenarian, or it might not. As Luke Carson notes, "The often bizarre and urgent comedy of Ashbery's late work repeatedly stages the failure of death to take place and refuses lyric's well-developed means of consolation and acceptance, the ways of normal mourning."[57] While the pervasive comic laxity of Ashbery's late work tends to deflect the palpable sadness of his old age, it never completely neutralizes it. Given these consistent tonal indeterminacies, which we may assume to be intentional, the question seems to be not whether Ashbery ever manages to recover from the "tragic farce"[58] of his late period, but whether he is trying to recover at all. Perhaps, in other words, we have not yet learned to appreciate the exceptionally moving *control* with which he dramatizes his failures of humor and pathos.[59]

Critics, whether praising or hostile, have tended to agree that late Ashbery is both sillier and sadder[60] than early and middle Ashbery and that there is probably too much of him.[61] "Ashbery often begins absurd and ends sad," Stephen Burt

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[57] Carson, "'Render Unto Caesura,'" 206.

[58] Simic, "Tragicomic Soup," 10-11.

[59] James Longenbach offers a good example of how we might begin to do so in his review of *Where Shall I Wander* and *Selected Prose*. Against a consensus narrative of late decline, he argues that "late Ashbery. . .is writing the most moving poems of his long career." "Poetry is Poetry," *Boston Review*, Summer 2005, http://bostonreview.net/ BR30.3/longenbach.php

[60] For many critics, late Ashbery is the superlative poet of these opposing moods. "Ashbery would be the most whimsical poet now writing were he not also the loneliest," Stephen Burt writes in his 2008 *Times Literary Supplement* review of *Notes from the Air*. *Close Calls with Nonsense* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2009), 244, reprinted from *TLS*, March, 28, 2008. Similarly, William Wootten writes in a 2004 review, "Along with the comedy, the sense of belatedness also brings moments of self-doubt and intimations of mortality. Though *Chinese Whispers* may be one of Ashbery's funniest collections, it is also one of his darkest." "So Good They Wrote It Twice," *TLS*, June 4, 2004.

[61] David Wheatley is eloquent on late Ashbery's excessiveness: "Late Ashbery is a body of work that stays with the reader, not for individual poems but for the climate of autumnal, enduringly

observes, "even the silliest turn of phrase, pursued long enough, leads him back to isolation, yearning, or mortality."[62] Later, he adds, "The poems are indeed too much like one another—one sacrifices, especially in his last few books, variety among the poems, but gets instead variety within them."[63] Striking a less generous note in a review of *Planisphere*, Michael Robbins opines that Ashbery "has been writing the same book for more than 15 years. Each new model struts gorgeously down the runway, a bit aloof, a bit silly, and the critics can't tell them apart."[64] Helen Vendler concedes in her own review of *Planisphere* that "[s]ome of [Ashbery's] games 'prove out' exhilaratingly for the reader, some are perhaps too private, some too abstruse, some too silly. . . ."[65] Even Ashbery himself has called his work since *A Wave* (1984) "maybe too funny. Maybe silly."[66]

There is a certain irony in the recent focus on Ashbery's silliness or "comic despair,"[67] as his early critics often tried to preserve his sublime or non-comic tendencies at the expense of everything else, side-lining or eliding outright his more

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insouciant mystery they summon. Or as he writes in 'Uptick': 'Too many words,/ but precious'." "Poetry in Brief," review of Planisphere, *Times Literary Supplement,* July 30, 2010.

[62] Burt, *Close Calls with Nonsense,* 240.

[63] Ibid., 246.

[64] Michael Robbins, "Remember the Yak," *London Review of Books*, September 5, 2010, 25.

[65] Helen Vendler, "John Ashbery, Toying with Words," *New York Times*, December 8, 2009.

[66] In a 2004 interview for Frieze magazine, interviewer Craig Burnett observes, "Since *A Wave* (1984) your poetry is consistently very funny." Ashbery replies, "Maybe too funny. Maybe silly." "A Kind of Musical Space: An interview with John Ashbery, *Frieze* 185 (September 2004). Ashbery had a similar exchange a year earlier in an interview Mark Ford. Ford: "Since *Flow Chart* your poems seem to have gotten funnier, and sometimes your readings are like some stand-up comic's performance," to which Ashbery replies, "Yes, I've noticed that but can't account for it. Maybe it's that over the last fifteen years I've been more influenced by James Tate than I used to be." Ford, *Ashbery in Conversation*, 65.

[67] Vendler, "Toying with Words".

strident or campy expressions of irreverence.[68] While it has always been a convention of Ashbery criticism to note his mixing of the high and the low, there has only recently been a move to read instances of the latter as something other than anomalous lapses from a postmodern sublime. Herd, for instance, draws attention to Ashbery's "democratic sublime," but is quick to add that sometimes "Ashbery's writing is explicitly not meet, felicitous and appropriate, but vulgar, comic, impolite and ludicrous," qualities which Herd detects throughout Ashbery's career and in "an increasingly high proportion of the late poetry."[69] The following section examines the "vulgar, comic, impolite, and ludicrous" strains in late Ashbery's nature poetry as they relate to his "democratic sublime."

II. Ashbery's "Democratic Sublime"

It had meant to be sublime, but hell was
what it more specifically resembled.
—John Ashbery[70]

The term "democratic" has proven to be a useful euphemism for late Ashbery's comic excesses.[71] Smacking of Whitmanian brio and inclusiveness, it vaguely suggests any number of positive cultural and artistic scruples, and makes room for

[68] Harold Bloom's comments are representative: "Ashbery has been misunderstood because of his association with the "New York School" of Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and other comedians of the spirit. . . ." *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 129.

[69] Herd, *Ashbery and American Poetry*, 22.

[70] Ashbery, *Planisphere*, 75.

[71] Labeling Ashbery "democratic," however, is nothing new, and in fact critics have taken their lead largely from Ashbery himself. Responding to a question about the postmodern dimensions of his work in an interview for *La Quinzaine littéraire*, Ashbery says, "As for postmodernity, I think I can recognize it in architecture and even in music, but I don't really see what it corresponds to in literature. My idea is to democratize all forms of expression, an idea that comes to me from afar, perhaps from Whitman's Democratic Vistas—the idea that the most demotic and elegant forms of expression deserve equally to be taken into account. It seems to me that postmodernism is a bit like that." André Bleikasten, "Entretien avec John Ashbery," *La Quinzaine littéraire* (February 1993): 7 (my translation of Ashbery's French).

the ludic, colloquial, and nonsensical without explicitly avowing them. For Mark Ford, "Ashbery's evasions might be seen as motivated by a similar desire [to Whitman's] to achieve a greater—and more democratic—intimacy by short-circuiting conventional modes of address,"[72] while for William Wootten, Ashbery's poetry "denies a single privileged reading in a way that is insistently democratic."[73] Most interesting of all are remarks by Helen Vendler and Stephen Burt, sympathetic critics who frame their comments about Ashbery's democratic dimensions within the context of older New Critical debates about good and bad taste. "What difference has it made to American poetry to have had Ashbery within its precincts for the last fifty years," Vendler asks in her 2007 review of *A Worldly Country*, titled "The Democratic Eye":

> In one sense, hardly any: any number of poets go on writing bad blank verse, bad rhymed verse, bad short lines, bad long lines. . . . And it has always been this way (witness the poets laureate of England, and the feeble best-selling women poets of the nineteenth century). . . . No one can say just what effect the work of good poets may have on others. But just as in Ashbery's lines there hover the voices of the past, so in future lines by another original poet will hover the voice of Ashbery.

Moving toward the conclusion of her review, Vendler renders final judgment on her subject:

> Ashbery has always been agreeably conscious of all that life offers beside literature, retail included. It is for that reason that his poems seem to stretch over our contemporary consciousness without strain: **nothing in ordinary life is alien to his democratic and comprehensive and indulgent eye**, nor does the omnipresence of the ordinary make him forget the equal

[72] Mark Ford, "Nothing and a Lot", review of *Can You Hear, Bird*, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 17, 1996.

[73] Wootten, "So Good."

> omnipresence, on another plane, of Satie or Fauré or Parmigianino.[74] [my emphasis]

What difference has it made to American poetry criticism to have had Ashbery within its precincts for the last fifty years? In one sense hardly any: while Vendler makes no special pleading for Ashbery's inclusivity—the part of him conscious of "retail"[75]—she completely misses the point of that portion of his work aimed at upsetting the good/bad binary that she, and the New Critics before her, would uphold. So often in Ashbery, we encounter "the ordinary" on the *same* "omnipresent plane" as the high culture of Satie, Fauré, and Parmigianino—thus, Daffy Duck delivers the lines of Milton's Satan, the characters from the Popeye cartoon speak in an elevated Elizabethan patois, and so on. By opposing Ashbery's "good" poetry to the mass of contemporary "bad" poetry—by making a value judgment of "good" and "bad" in the first place—Vendler takes her cues from I.A. Richards, using Ashbery to uphold the very values he has challenged his whole career. It is interesting to note, too, that Vendler, like Richards, uses Keats as a touchstone of "good" poetry (a caricature of Keats adorns the final page of her review).[76] She would endorse the

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[74] Helen Vendler, "The Democratic Eye," *New York Review of Books*, March 29, 2007, 22.

[75] It must be said in Vendler's defense that she does acknowledge that "Ashbery's mental inventory is a comic one" ("Toying with Words," 1), though her acknowledgment of his comedy can seem like a merely gestural tactic for recovering him to the canon: "Under Ashbery's comically up-to-date textures any number of literary threads can be seen unobtrusively glistening, tethering his poetry to that of his predecessors. . . . But in spite of Ashbery's canonical piety (quizzical as often as not), his language mostly comes from all quarters, low and high, of the twentieth century." In Vendler's account, Ashbery's comic surface conceals his more serious ties to his literary forebears. She is right to highlight the tension between Ashbery's (quizzical) "canonical piety" and his use of language "from all quarters," but she does not fully work through the implications of this tension. What happens to "canonical piety," for instance, when it comes into contact with such language, and vice versa? Ibid., 22.

[76] "Keats himself raged that it should be so," she writes, "calling upon the sun god Apollo (in his role as author of plagues) to slay all the bad poets, glad to die himself if he can see them destroyed." Vendler, "Democratic Eye," 22. Richards concludes "Badness in Poetry" with a characteristic, pro-

Keatsian strain in Ashbery without really reckoning with the "feeble bestselling woman poet of the nineteenth century" in him.[77]

Seen in this light, Vendler's ascription of "democratic" virtues to Ashbery begins to seem less a form of high praise than a deliberate misreading or evasion of those qualities of "badness" in his work which her formalist reading method cannot countenance. Such selective reading has only been encouraged by the unabated rise of Ashbery's popular reputation since the mid-1970s and the attendant critical insistence that his work may contain multitudes so long as it continues to abide by set standards of aesthetic greatness. Yet, as Ashbery has inclined more and more toward the mode of "tragic farce" it has become impossible—and undesirable—to whitewash his infelicities with democratic rhetoric. By Richards's standards much of late Ashbery would almost certainly qualify as "bad" both for its "defective communication" and for the "worthless experience" it communicates. In Ashbery's terms, however, this is precisely what it set out to do. To make him "indulgently comprehensive" might elevate him to the pantheon, but it also removes his parodic

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Keats value judgment: "Keats, by universal qualified opinion, is a more efficient poet than Wilcox, and that is the same thing as saying that his works are more valuable." Richards, *Principles*, 205-6.

[77] Incidentally, this was not the first time the New York School and "feeble bestselling women poets" were linked in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*. Ashbery touches on this subject and the question of "bad poetry" in an unpublished review of Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets* from early 1968: "Poet Jim Harrison wrote in these pages [the *New York Times Book Review*] a few weeks ago (January 28, 1968) that 'among bad poets there is a sort of "let's roll up our sleeves and get down to brass language" attitude'; by 'bad poets,' he may have meant Mr. Berrigan and his New York School ilk. . . .The *New York Review of Books* has characterized New York School poetry as 'Instant Mix, alchemic spontaneity, mud into mosaics, a form as popular right now with the New York avant garde as Sara Teasdale's posies must have been in her day." [quoting Robert Mazzocco, "A Philosophical Poet," June 3, 1965, a review of Robert Duncan and David Shapiro] **In less principled quarters, however, it has been greeted as a sign of healthy revolt against the academic stuffiness that periodically infests American poetry,** and the counterpart of advanced movements in the other arts which somehow achieved tolerance more readily than related experiments in poetry." [my emphasis] *Selected Prose*, 118.

sting. On a more basic level, it simply does not line up with what actually appears on the pages of his later books.

Stephen Burt also situates his comments within the broad context of the "good/bad taste" debate, but demurs from making value judgments about Ashbery's work. Like Ashbery, he does not choose sides in this debate but rather positions himself outside it:

> The last figure whom half the English-language poets alive thought a great model, and the other half thought incomprehensible, was probably T.S. Eliot. But Eliot, by the time he became famous, came with instruction manuals, moral directives, claims about good and bad taste and about right and wrong. Ashbery comes instead with an early, self-satirical poem titled "The Instruction Manual," and with a career-long sense that there are no wrong answers, only more or less interesting possibilities. **He is the ideal poet to preside over our antihierarchical age, a wistful, affectionate democrat with our entire word hoard at his command**, so contemporary that we may overlook his frequent (and Eliotic) returns to famous bits of the past. . . .[78] [my emphasis]

These remarks hew closer to the grain of Ashbery's preferred neutral stance toward questions of taste. Burt is right to compare Ashbery's contested preeminent status to that of Eliot before him and to suggest that Ashbery's work has always resisted the didactic and moralistic spirit of the New Criticism that presided over his formative years. To label him a "wistful, affectionate democrat," though, seems to fall short of recognizing the marginal and oppositional status—"barely tolerated, living on the margins of our technological society"[79]—with which his work so frequently identifies. In other words, he might be democratic but he is not complacently and fondly so. It boils down to one question: Is Ashbery's career-long championing of

[78] Burt, *Close Calls,* 245.
[79] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 184.

"other traditions" a magnanimous democratic move, or something more subversive?

Burt is certainly aware of Ashbery's background and deserves the benefit of the doubt here; though, his comments do beg the question as to what, precisely, is "antihierarchical" about our age and why, in any case, "wistful, affectionate democracy" would be the ideal poetic attunement to preside over it (note, too, Vendler's similar universalizing claim that Ashbery's poems "seem to stretch over our contemporary consciousness without strain"). Vendler and Burt correctly highlight Ashbery's radical inclusivity, but they do not go on to ask the more interesting question as to whether he is aware of his preeminent "democratic" status in the academic and public spheres, and if so, whether this awareness might itself be one of his recent work's ironic subtexts.[80] After all, experimental "bad" writing like Ashbery's often has an antagonistic political edge—witness the work of Charles Bernstein, which, under the sign of Ashbery, has brilliantly explored the critical potential of "bad" and "lesser" forms of writing from an oppositional stance. Part of late Ashbery is a wistful, affectionate democrat, to be sure, but another equally important part writes frankly undigestible poems with titles like "For Fuck's Sake" (*Planisphere*) and "In the Time of Pussy Willows" (*Chinese Whispers*). To label Ashbery a democrat is, finally, to even out his jagged edges.

Critics have used the term "sublime" to recover late Ashbery in much the same way as they have used "democratic." Sublimity, like democratic scope, is seen as an absolute virtue, the occasional presence of which in late Ashbery signals a

[80] As he writes, with characteristically bathetic *élan*, in "The Archipelago": "*Miserere*! Instead I am browsed on by endless students,/ clumps of them, receding to this horizon and the next one. . ." John Ashbery, *And the Stars Were Shining* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 47.

momentary recovery of his otherwise declining art. A brief sampling of quotations taken from reviews of *Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems* (2007) will help to illustrate this point. In his *New York Times* review, Langdon Hammer writes:

> *Notes from the Air* will not settle the debates about Ashbery or make the later Ashbery suddenly accessible. The poems, always difficult, got more difficult in the mid-1980s and have remained so: disjunctive and unpredictable, often zany. . . .The book's title poem starts with the type of slapstick first line Ashbery deals us from time to time, as if to mock the impulse, both his and his reader's, to look to poetry for meaning. . . .Before the poem ["Notes from the Air"] concludes, however, it climbs from the ridiculous to the sublime.[81]

Troy Jollimore takes a similar tack in his *SF Gate* review:

> The main problem with *Notes from the Air*—the thing that keeps it from being the great book one would have liked it to be—is that this tone [of dramatic monologue] is too pervasive, too consistent, particularly toward the end. . . . Still, *Notes from the Air* certainly has its pleasures. . . .There are passages that tremble on the brink of profundity, and some that drift, perhaps without meaning to, toward the sublime."[82]

Finally, in a review for *The Nation*, Ange Mlinko observes:

> "The one way Ashbery's poems may always be fruitfully read is as sheer ear candy. . . .Caution: Ear candy may segue shockingly into the sublime."[83]

Judging from these critics' comments, the drama of late Ashbery has so far played out as a struggle to touch the sublime heights which his earlier work so regularly

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[81] Hammer, "But I Digress."

[82] Troy Jollimore, "Ashbery's Anthology 'Notes from the Air' delivers, despite himself," *SF Gate*, December 2, 2007, http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/Ashbery-s-anthology-Notes-From-the-Air-3300577.php.

[83] Ange Mlinko, "Dreamlife without Angels," *The Nation*, December 17, 2007. Several related critical responses are worth noting as well: "Furthermore, a knack for reassuring bathos—mixed metaphors, vaguely inappropriate phraseology—paradoxically enables him to rise to the grand, old-fashioned metaphysical conclusions." Jeremy Noel Tod, "The Prodigal's Jumble," review of *Chinese Whispers*, *The Guardian*, February 8, 2003; "How hard does an Ashbery poem work? Very hard. Not hard. Call it the Lazy Susan Sublime." Wayne Koestenbaum, "John Ashbery's Lazy Susan," in "Poets of the New York School," special issue, Mississippi *Review* 31, no. 3 (Fall, 2003): 173-175. "So often there is the juxtaposition of the insignificant, the hardly-needing to-be mentioned along with the noting of the large, even with the sublime." Harriet Zinnes, review of *Chinese Whispers*, *Jacket* 21, February 2003.

attained: he might not be what he used to be, but he still has the old magic from time to time. Once again, though, the question is not whether late Ashbery rises to the sublime, but whether he is striving for it in the first place. And which sublime are we talking about?

Despite the superficial terms of their accounts, these critics do rightly sense a "camp sublime" governing logic in late Ashbery—what Roger Gilbert calls Ashbery's "ludic eloquence"[84] and David Wheatley, in a lighter key, his "fondness for poetry as higher muzak."[85] One of the sharpest readings of Ashbery's "camp sublime" is that of Rob Wilson, in *American Sublime: Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*. On the continuum of American sublimity from the Puritans to the contemporary "post-nuclear" moment, Wilson casts Ashbery as the postmodern successor to Whitman's and Stevens's "transcendentalist nostalgia for the natural sublime":

> With Ashbery we are in some decreative, wry, *camp sublime*, as Jameson suggested in a broader context, defining postmodernism as 'cultural dominant': a sublime made out of cultural bric-a-brac and junk, that 'hysterical sublime' of parodic mastery and camp double-coding noted by Susan Sontag in 1966."[86]

Wilson's reading follows a more general move among postmodern critics such as Jameson and Lyotard to re-imagine the natural sublime as an interpretive

[84] Gilbert defines this "camp sublime" logic in more nuanced terms than those provided by the reviewers of *Notes from the Air* quoted above: "Nearly alone among his peers, Ashbery has found a way to preserve Romantic values of eloquence and sublimity while fully opening his work to the noise of the present, its perpetual clatter of information, commerce, and ideology. In his recent poetry Ashbery keeps the lyric spark alive by nesting it in an elaborate fabric woven of everything from clichés to sight gags, artfully incorporating odd bits of language, image, and syllabification. To call this style "busy" accurately suggests the restless activity of assemblage and artifice that produces it but hardly does justice to the moving simplicity it often attains." Gilbert, "Ludic Eloquence," 223-4.

[85] "David Wheatley, "*The Cloud Corporation* by Timothy Donnelly – review," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2012.

[86] Rob Wilson, *The American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 219. Wilson's account of Ashbery's "camp sublime" only covers the early and middle periods of his career.

framework for the (numbingly, exhilaratingly) inconceivable complexities of post-industrial society, a mode sometimes labeled the "technological sublime."[87] For Wilson, Ashbery's poems form "a bric-a-brac landscape, a storage place of rapture and junk, a destabilized collage of possibility"[88] in which the natural sublime of Burke, Kant, and the romantics has given way to a "camp" or "hysterical" sublime of cultural overload. This is a persuasive claim, though it might be even more accurate to speak of Ashbery's "camp" or "hysterical" sublime as a compound affect that draws as much from Enlightenment and romantic models of the sublime as from modernist (e.g. Stevens) and postmodern ones. In typical fashion, Ashbery opts for a neutral pluralism by accommodating into his work not *the* sublime but a variety of sublimes. Ashbery's sublime, like his pastoral, is not a specific mode but a cycling among them.

Modern theory of the sublime begins in the Enlightenment with the influential accounts of Burke and Kant, which mark the first major theoretical advances since Longinus's foundational treatise, *Peri Hypsous* (*On Sublimity*, ca. 1st-century AD). Where Longinus gives a largely rhetorical definition of the sublime as an effect of elevated language, Enlightenment theorists would seek to outline a "natural" sublime, located not in language but in nature. Burke identifies the "source of the sublime" as "whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about

[87] Jameson himself proposes this term: "Yet something else does tend to emerge in the most energetic post-modernist texts, and this is the sense that beyond all thematics or content the work seems somehow to tap the networks of the reproductive process and thereby to afford us some glimpse into a postmodern or technological sublime, whose power or authenticity is documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space in emergence around us." *Postmodernism*, 37.

[88] Wilson, *American Sublime*, 221.

terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror."[89] The terrible "passion" produced by the "great or sublime in *nature,*" gives rise to a state of "astonishment," or "that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."[90] In his third *Critique*, Kant refines Burke by arguing that the sublime is not an implicit quality of certain natural phenomena but a product of "representation"— it occurs, in other words, somewhere between the natural world and the mind that perceives it. As opposed to the beautiful, defined as that which may be framed and appreciated as a bounded whole, the sublime denotes a stupefyingly unbounded totality. According to Kant, the experience of the sublime occurs in two phases: first, the viewing subject suffers a terrifying annihilation of the self in the face of a sublime prospect; then, he enjoys a euphoric expansion of the self in the dawning realization, prompted by the imagination's failure to digest the experience, of Reason's "supersensible power"[91] to conceive of that failure. This two-part process bears the moral function of bringing the subject into full awareness of his reasoning faculty, which, pushed to its limit by the irrational limitlessness of the sublime encounter, becomes aware of its own capacity to exceed presentation on an abstract plane. In other words, Reason conceives the idea of "the inconceivable," and in doing so in fact manages to delimit it. For Kant, the experience of the sublime— the fleeting presentiment of a noumenal reality beyond the phenomenal world— prompts the viewing subject to marvel at and affirm his own rational endowment.

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[89] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 36.

[90] Ibid., 53.

[91] Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), 87.

Kant's two-part "representational" account of sublime experience, crucially distinguished from that of the beautiful, remains a cornerstone of Western aesthetic theory. Its impact on Continental and British romanticism, American Transcendentalism, literary modernism, and modern critical theory would be difficult to overstate. The second half of the twentieth century saw a decisive return to sublime theory as critical theorists used Burke and Kant to launch their own reflections on the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the sublime in modernist and postmodern art. "The sublime is in fashion,"[92] Jean-Luc Nancy asserts in the opening sentence of "The Sublime Offering" (1988), writing at the crest of post-structuralism's vogue:

> What is at stake in the sublime is a suspension of art, a placing in question of art within art itself as work or as task. In the name of the sublime, or under the pressure of something that often (but not exclusively) has carried this name, art is interrogated or provoked in view of something other than art.[93]

Recent critics following in Kant's wake such as Nancy, Lyotard, Derrida, de Man, and Jameson have been less concerned with tracing the natural origins of the sublime than with using the sublime to theorize the limits of art itself (and art's self-reflexive testing of those limits). For Lyotard, the preeminent theorist of postmodern sublimity, the sublime is the "'unpresentable', the element which always militates against the possibility of any complete understanding of the world."[94] For the purposes of this chapter, the most significant account of the postmodern sublime is that of Fredric Jameson. In the first chapter of

[92] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 25.
[93] Ibid., 27.
[94] Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 366-7.

Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson outlines his concept of the "camp" or "hysterical" sublime to describe the experience whereby the world "momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density." "But," Jameson asks "is this now a terrifying or an exhilarating experience?"

> It has proved fruitful to think of such experiences in terms of what Susan Sontag, in an influential statement, isolated as 'camp.' I propose a somewhat different cross-light on it, drawing on the equally fashionable current theme of the 'sublime,' as it has been rediscovered in the works of Edmund Burke and Kant: or perhaps one might want to yoke the two notions together in the form of something like a camp or 'hysterical' sublime."[95]

Drawing from Jameson's influential critique of the postmodern sublime, Wilson observes the "decreative emptiness"[96]—a rough equivalent to what I have termed "transparency"—of Ashbery's work, the way it puts on elevated airs without delivering elevated content. What we find in Ashbery, at all stages of his career, is a productive confusion of bathetic and sublime effects, a "camp sublime" that constantly undermines or "decreates" the conditions of its own "ecstasy of always bursting forth."[97]

Wilson's reading of Ashbery is seductive, and might be pushed a bit further. While Ashbery's work offers ample evidence of the "camp sublime" aesthetic outlined by Jameson, in which hyper-mediated culture takes the place of nature as the awesome horizon of human imagination, it also maintains "the sublime" in the old sense. Due to the increasing "lightness" of his work, we have come to assume

[95] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34.
[96] Wilson, *American Sublime*, 221.
[97] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 197.

that late Ashbery is *always* "light." The natural sublime, however, has not been completely marginalized from his late period, but persists in his work in the same way that it does in society at large: as a vague, media-inflected foreboding of global environmental disaster.[98] In this sense, Ashbery's work channels what Lee Rozelle has called the "ecosublime," by which contemporary audiences are no longer only "inspired by a sublime collapse of self" in the traditional manner but "now also feel awe and terror in the face of global breakdown."[99] The disenchantment of the natural world, or even the looming prospect of "the end of nature"[100]—whether by eco-disaster, nuclear war, or some other doomsday scenario—have replaced Jamesonian "culture" as the sites *par excellence* of the contemporary sublime imaginary, a condition to which Ashbery's later poetry is well attuned.[101] Rozelle observes:

> As the possibility of reconstructing nature to its preindustrial stability becomes hopeless, the terror of nature's displacement by a numbed humankind jerks literary figures and human subjects into the ecosublime with ominous clarity.[102]

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[98] As Jonathan Bordo explains, "[T]he sublime has been released by ecological threat. . .Our experience of ecological peril, then, is not aesthetic in the classical sense. It is an ordinary, everyday happening proclaimed in the media through reports on rapid climate change or the state of the latest oil spill and oil fire, or as simulated scenes of war as 'the destruction of technological infrastructure.' It pervades the media as images which are as numbing as they are uninterpretable and banal." "Ecological Peril, Modern Technology and the Postmodern Sublime," in *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, ed. Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick (London: Routledge, 1992), 175.

[99] Rozelle, *Ecosublime*, 4. Rozelle defines "ecosublime" as follows: "From the Greek oikos, eco (which roughly means "home"), joined with the word sublime, ecosublime can be defined as the awe and terror of a heightened awareness of the ecological home." *Ecosublime*, 1.

[100] See Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor, 1989).

[101] Slavoj Žižek argues that in recent years the natural has returned to eclipse the cultural as the focus of a contemporary ecological sublime: "With the latest developments, the discontent shifts from culture to nature itself: nature is no longer 'natural,' the reliable 'dense' background of our lives; it now appears as a fragile mechanism which, at any point, can explode in a catastrophic manner." *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 435.

[102] Rozelle, *Ecosublime*, 8.

Though it would be difficult to mistake Ashbery for Gary Snyder or Mary Oliver, such a "media-enhanced ecocidal imagination"[103] makes itself felt throughout his late work. Hardly an eco-poet, Ashbery's work nonetheless attends to a core issue of eco-poetry: the way in which catastrophic human interventions in the natural world have fueled a contemporary apocalypticism.[104] It does so simply by being open, as it always has been, to "the noise of the present, its perpetual clatter of information, commerce, and ideology."[105] Rozelle's "media-enhanced ecocidal imagination" thus filters into late Ashbery in frequent, brief moments of inconceivably large-scale, sublime cataclysm—"a force erupting so violently / we can't witness any of it,"[106] as he writes in *April Galleons*. Throughout later Ashbery, we discover again and again that "the unthinkable is common knowledge now":[107]

> "Then the unthinkable happened—it all began to break up like the first wave of a retracting tide on a rock in the sea. In less than half a minute the sea had completely withdrawn, leaving a startled landscape of reefs and crowds, fierce and bristling as the water danced away from them."
>
> ⋆
>
> "We need more data re our example, earth—how it would behave in a

[103] "What occurs for American spectators as scenes of material collapse permeate the media-enhanced image bubble is [*sic*, as?] the emergence of an ecocidal imagination, a toxic second self that festers just below the ego's surface until the awe and terror of environmental destruction moves members of American commodity culture from our extended adolescence." Ibid., 8.

[104] Christine L. Oravec amplifies this point: "From Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* to Jonathan Schnell's *Fate of the Earth* and Bill McKibben's *End of Nature*, the sublime is the founding narrative—the primary trope—in the rhetoric of environmentalism." See "To Stand Outside Oneself: The Sublime in the Discourse of Natural Scenery," in *The Symbolic Earth: Discourse and Our Creation of the Environment*, eds. James G. Cantrill and Christine L. Oravec (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 73.

[105] Gilbert, "Ludic Eloquence," 224.

[106] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 821. Herd picks up on the apocalyptic themes in late Ashbery with specific reference to *And the Stars Were Shining*. I extend to the whole of late Ashbery Herd's observation that "[e]very poem in *And the Stars Were Shining* has an apocalyptic edge to it, every moment carries the potential for catastrophe." *Ashbery and American Poetry*, 217.

[107] John Ashbery, *Girls on the Run* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 12.

crisis, under pressure,
or simply on a day no one had staked out for unrest
to erupt. What season would fit its lifestyle
most naturally? Who would the observers, the control group be?"

⋆

"Now look at the damage.
You can't. It's invisible."

⋆

"Others have caught, or caused darkness, a long vent
in the original catastrophe no one has seen."

⋆

"It seemed there was something wrong with everything.
The greenhouse was ethereal and too far away."

⋆

"It had all been working so well and now,
Well, it just kind of came apart in the hand
As a change is voiced, sharp
As a fishhook in the throat, and decorative tears flowed
Past us into a basin called infinity."

⋆

"The distant passage is always sublime
and well-lit for some, a curious picture
of longing and distress for others."

⋆

". . .and violet rocks ceased chanting
about the sublime to organize later façades
of marsh gas. O it seemed subtle, whatever was hissing
like a vulture over the town. You're going to feel well,
giants of rhetoric, devastating in the now."

⋆

"I can see heaths and coasts;

in them we become magic and empty again”

⋆

“Our worst fears are realized. . .”

[…]

“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.”

⋆

“Then the wind fell of its own accord.
We went out and saw that it had actually happened.
The season stood motionless, alert. How still the drop was. . .”

[…]

“The days are so polarized. And yet time itself is off-center.”

⋆

“The weather has a choke hold on foreseeing
what happens to it.”

⋆

“I long for more weather around us,
but it’s just not going to happen till we’re in the middle
of its happening and know the results without being able to see them.
The time for passing is past and none but an idiot would think otherwise.”

⋆

“Then everything began to explode
in a geyser of impatience that crested at where the nearest cloud-scraps had been.”

⋆

“Soon the world will have moved on.”

⋆

"Some claimed the end of the world
had come, others that it was fast approaching."

⋆

"The crisis has just passed.
Uh oh, here it comes again. . ."

⋆

"Yes, a majestic crash is heading our way."

⋆

"The almost invisible blight
of the present burst in on us. . ."

⋆

". . .and the land mass teeters once more, crashing
out of gloaming onto the floor near your heels."

⋆

"Then we

all knew what the awful thing would turn out to be,
how it would stay only briskly,
leaving not much of a souvenir behind."

⋆

"It all failed. All failed somewhere."

⋆

"Oblivion scattereth her poppy. . . "

⋆

"In short all hell broke loose that afternoon."

⋆

"It's nothing more, nor less,
than a seeming apocalypse."[108]

Read outside their original contexts, these excerpts might give a false impression of Ashbery as a sententious pessimist; in fact, the horror of these excerpts is mitigated, without fail, by whatever surrounds it. These and the numerous other apocalyptic moments in the later work have been read as ciphers for everything from the AIDS crisis to the 2008 credit crisis (in the case of *Planisphere*). No doubt, linking these passages with specific crises is a profitable exercise in that it shows how Ashbery brings the "real world" into his poems under various guises. Without diminishing the merits of such readings, however, I would try to draw attention away from specific links to reflect more broadly on the "media-enhanced ecocidal imagination" with which he renders his allegories (thus, the AIDS crisis might be figured as a violent "gale" in "How to Continue"). To clarify: I am not arguing, for the most part, that Ashbery's late work is about global warming, the ozone layer hole, acid rain, or melting polar ice-caps, but rather that it channels the spirit of catastrophism that popular and mass media accounts of such issues have been generating, with increasing intensity, since the mid-1980s. It does so not to make a political or ethical

[108] "From China to Peru," *Where Shall I Wander*, 53; "The Phantom Agents," *Hotel Lautréamont*, 18; "Wolf Ridge," *Where Shall I Wander*, 36; "On the Empress's Mind," *Hotel Lautréamont*, 17; "From the Observatory," *Can You Hear, Bird* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), 49; "Vetiver," *April Galleons* (London: Paladin, 1990), 1; "Frost," *April Galleons*, 42; "Card of Thanks," *Quick Question* (New York: Ecco, 2012), 55; "William Byrd," *And the Stars Were Shining*, 39; "Spring Cries," *And the Stars Were Shining*, 4; "Poem at the New Year," *Hotel Lautréamont*, 83; "See How You Like My Shoes," *Can You Hear, Bird*, 98; "Loves Old Sweet Song," *Hotel*, 71-2; *Girls on the Run*, 43-44; "Still Life with Stranger," *Hotel Lautréamont*, 13; "Poem Beginning with a Line from *Gammer Gurton's Needle*," *Quick Question*, 48; "Laughing Gravy," *Wakefulness* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), 13; *Girls on the Run*, 30; "Attabled with the Spinning Years," *Planisphere*, 2; "Pernilla," *Planisphere*, 71; "The Burning Candle," *Planisphere*, 9; "Stress Related," *Planisphere*, 104; "Not Beyond All Conjecture," *Quick Question*, 49; "A Worldly Country," *A Worldly Country* (New York: Ecco, 2007), 1; "Penitence," *Planisphere*, 69.

point, but, as always, to approximate "the complex textures of a fully demotic spoken language." Here, as always, Ashbery simply has his ear tuned to the hum of current events.

III. Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Late Ashbery

She hovers, lonesomely, like a zeppelin, over downcast
vales and trees, a free spirit, or something
like that.
—John Ashbery[109]

The tensions, outlined above, between the bathetic and the sublime in late Ashbery are nascent in "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox" (1969), the touchstone for the rest of this chapter. Like much of late Ashbery, "Variations" is a "tragic farce" in which the silly and the sad are fully-blown, antithetical presences. As Bob Perelman argues, the bathos of "Variations" "has a self-canceling quality. Gravity is suspended; up and down—sublime and bathetic, cliché and novelty—become relative. The language can't be taken seriously and yet we do take it—seriously—or, better: we follow it with careful attention and pleasure."[110] Perelman, in fact, takes "Variations" as a showpiece of "the new bathos," a recent trend whereby intentional bathetic effects have become "a widely

[109] John Ashbery, *Chinese Whispers* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 19.

[110] Bob Perelman, "Bathos and Mind-Reading," in *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, eds. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010), 142. This essay collection fleshes out Keston Sutherland's assertion that "Every feature of language identified by Pope as bathetic is now a defining feature of our poetry." *Jacket* 15, December 2001, http://jacketmagazine.com/15/sutherland-bathos.html. The collection also includes an essay on "Bathos and Loveliness in James Schuyler" by John Wilkinson and on the bathetic pastoral of Auden's circle by Tyrus Miller. The term "bathos" originates in Longinus, who uses it in the sense of "depth" or "profundity," a complement to *hypsos* or "the elevated/sublime." Alexander Pope assigned "bathos" its modern meaning of a sudden, unintended lapse from the sublime to the ridiculous, or anti-climax, in his 1727 mock-treatise, "Peri Bathous, or The Art of Sinking in Poetry." See *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195-241.

used and applauded tonality."[111] In a similar vein, "Variations" has been interpreted as experimental camp in attentive readings by Mark Silverberg, Andrew Epstein, and John Shoptaw. Whether camp or bathos, the poem's intentional "badness" makes it a model of the double irony which I have identified as Ashbery's hallmark.

"Variations" is, among other things, a sophisticated spoof of nature poetry, most immediately the best-selling sentimental strain of Wilcox—poetry filled with ardently banal nature images ("the ocean of song," "Poesy's fair land,"[112] etc). Ashbery begins by stating his "theme," the final four lines of Wilcox's "Wishing,"

> "For the pleasures of the many
> May be ofttimes traced to one,
> As the hand that plants an acorn
> Shelters armies from the sun."

and then launches into his "variation":

> And in places where the annual rainfall is .0071 inches
> What a pleasure to lie under the tree, to sit, stand, and get up under the tree!
> *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai*
> The feeling is of never wanting to leave the tree,
> of predominantly peace and relaxation.
> Do you step out from under the shade a moment,
> it is only to return with renewed expectation, of expectation fulfilled.

We move jarringly from Wilcox in lines 1-4 to the "quasi-autistic voice" of line 5, to the "punctilious elaborator" of line 6, to the Heine quotation (from "Lyrisches Intermezzo 1") in line 7, and finally to lines 8-11, which briefly stabilize into a voice that "lightly suggest[s] a kind of nineteenth-century-German-inflected

[111] Perelman, "Bathos," 134. Perelman cites Charles Bernstein's poetry and the work of the Flarf collective as salient contemporary examples of the "new bathos." Ibid., 136.

[112] Wilcox, *Poetical Works*, 131; 141. Ashbery parodies this kind of writing again and again, notably in the closing quatrain of "A Worldly Country": "So often it happens that the time we turn around in / soon becomes the shoal our pathetic skiff will run aground in./ And just as waves are anchored to the bottom of the sea / we must reach the shallows before God cuts us free." *Worldly Country*, 1.

translationese."[113] Beyond the obvious humor in Ashbery's literalization of Wilcox's figurative oak tree, the interest of these lines lies in their parodically failed mastery of a modernist collage aesthetic. Eliot's subtle verse craft has been lost here, and Ashbery's tonal shifts crudely ape the deft abruptness of certain sections of *The Waste Land* (the key intertext here alongside Wilcox's "Wishing"). Compare Ashbery's lines to the bracing modulation in the opening lines of "The Burial of the Dead" from the ghoulish deadpan speaker of "April is the cruelest month. . ." (lines 1-7) to the voice of the assured nostalgist (Countess Marie Larisch, or whoever it/they may be), itself a fine sample of "nineteenth-century-German-inflected translationese": "In the mountains, there you feel free," and so on.[114] Ashbery's Heine quotation also recalls Eliot's own portentous German interjections in the opening section of his poem. Most notably, the Wilcoxian/Ashberyan shade-giving tree, planted in extremely arid "places where the annual rainfall is .0071 inches," rejuvenates Eliot's "dead tree" which "gives no shelter":

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
> There is shadow under this red rock,
> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock). . .[115]

In Ashbery, the shadow of Eliot's "red rock" gives way to the far more appealing, yet also hackneyed, prospect of "growing up under the shade of friendly trees, with our

[113] Perelman, "Bathos," 141.
[114] Eliot, *Complete Poems*, 61.
[115] Ibid.

brothers all around." As Ashbery expatiates on the gracious shade-giving tree for a further 29 lines, we soon realize that despite the inanity of its tone and subject matter "Variations" cannot be taken as straight parody. This fantasy under the "friendly trees" might be "mock pastoral,"[116] but it also meditates in a darker key on the loss of carefree youth. As in "How to Continue," the clichéd terms with which it does so only intensify our awareness of a submerged pathos: "But all good things must come to an end, and so one must move forward / Into the space left by one's conclusions. Is this growing old?"[117] The first part of this passage is trite, but is the second? Ambiguously poised between parody and something more serious, the final lines of the "variation" offer a skewed gloss of Eliot's clutching roots and growing branches:

> But—and this is the gist of it—what if I dreamed it all,
> The branches, the late afternoon sun,
> The trusting camaraderie, the love that watered all,
> Disappearing promptly down into the roots as it should?
> For later in the vast gloom of cities, only there you learn
> How the ideas were good only because they had to die,
> Leaving you alone and skinless, a drawing by Vesalius.
> This is what was meant, and toward which everything directs:
> That the tree should shrivel in 120-degree heat, the acorns
> Lie around on the worn earth like eyeballs, and the lead soldiers shrug and
> slink off.

[116] Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 151.

[117] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 190. Ashbery returns to this theme of the disillusionment of youth spent "beneath the trees" in the prose poem "Whatever It Is, Wherever You Are" (*A Wave*): "When we were children it seemed that adulthood would be like climbing a tree, that there would be a view from there, breathtaking because slightly more elusive. But now we can see only down, first down through the branches and further down the surprisingly steep grass patch that slopes away from the base of the tree. It certainly is a different view, but not the one we expected." Ibid., 784.

Mixing memory and desire, and muddling the tragic and the comic, this passage "suggests how far 'Variations' is from sheer parody and camp."[118] Having followed through the implications of his initial gambit (literalizing Wilcox's oak tree and the idyllic life lived beneath it), Ashbery arrives, not at a punch-line, but on the other side of his own joke, a surprisingly bleak place. Should we laugh at this wasteland, in which the shriveled Wilcoxian tree now gives no shelter? Surely there is something blackly humorous about pushing Wilcox to such an extreme, but is the humor at her expense or Ashbery's? Or ours?

As the poem progresses we seem to be traveling away from Wilcox toward Eliot, whom Ashbery is less eager to parody than to echo—compare, for instance, Eliot's "In the mountains, there you feel free" to Ashbery's "in the vast gloom of cities, only there you learn," the latter passage possibly suggesting Eliot's "Unreal city / under the brown fog of a winter dawn."[119] It is as if Ashbery were using Wilcox to get to Eliot, using the absurd variation on "Wishing" to enact a separate, deeper variation on *The Waste Land*. Stated differently, Ashbery uses Wilcox to stage a kind of sneak attack on Eliot, showing how easily his high modernist aesthetic may merge into Wilcoxian sentimentalism, and vice versa, with the proper coaxing. And yet, this is less an attack on Eliot, or Wilcox for that matter, than an attempt to unseat New Critical standards of value.

[118] Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 153.
[119] Eliot, *Complete Poems*, 62.

In the "calypso"[120] section that follows, Ashbery moves away from Eliot back toward a more extended parody of Wilcox.[121] Here are the first eight couplets of the "calypso," depicting a parodic "Grand Tour" that extends the individuation theme:

> So my youth was spent, underneath the trees
> I always moved around with perfect ease
>
> I voyaged to Paris at the age of ten
> And met many prominent literary men
>
> Gazing at the Alps was quite a sight
> I felt the tears flow forth with all their might
>
> A climb to the Acropolis meant a lot to me
> I had read the Greek philosophers you see
>
> In the Colosseum I thought my heart would burst
> Thinking of all the victims who had been there first
>
> On Mount Ararat's side I began to grow
> Remembering the Flood there, so long ago
>
> On the banks of the Ganges I stood in mud
> And watched the water light up like blood
>
> The Great Wall of China is really a thrill
> It cleaves through the air like a silver pill[122]

The youthful tourist's experiences of the world's natural and architectural wonders are laughable not because they are clichés but because they are botched clichés. Although "there is something in all this that will not elude us," as the speaker says earlier, his attempt to render these life-changing experiences descends into pure

[120] The calypso is a Caribbean musical form typically composed in rhyming couplets. While Wilcox did not write calypsos, her poems very often fit their form and moralistic narrativity.

[121] This section is partly a send-up of Wilcox's famous poem, "Art and Heart," which concludes, "And therefore I say again, though I am art's own true lover,/ That it is not art, but heart, which wins the wide world over." *Poetical Works*, 53. Ashbery writes: "This age-old truth I to thee impart / Act according to the dictates of your art // Because if you don't no one else is going to / And that person isn't likely to be you." *Collected Poems*, 191.

[122] Ibid., 190-1.

bathos—or better yet, deliciously failed bathos (the Great Wall of China "cleaving through the air like a silver pill," for instance, cannot even be read as an anti-climactic platitude because it makes no sense). With its litany of postcard scenes presented in undignified rhyming couplets, this passage achieves the double degree of irony outlined in the introduction, staging a failed imitation of Wilcox's own melodramatic craning toward romantic sublimity. "Gazing at the Alps was quite a sight / I felt the tears flow forth with all their might" is brilliantly unrecuperable, and makes as much pointed fun of Shelley's "Mont Blanc" ("Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange")[123] as it does of Wilcox. Compare the lines above to the following "sublime" passage from Wilcox's long poem, "Maurine":

> I bade farewell to home with secret joy,
> And turned my wan face eastward to the sea.
> Roy planned our route of travel: for all lands
> Were one to him. Or Egypt's burning sands,
> Or Alps of Switzerland, or stately Rome—
> All were familiar as the fields of home.
> There was a year of wand'ring to and fro,
> Like restless spirits; scaling mountain heights;
> Dwelling among the countless, rare delights
> Of lands historic; turning dusty pages,
> Stamped with the tragedies of mighty ages;
> Gazing upon the scenes of bloody acts,
> Of kings long buried—bare, unvarnished facts,
> Surpassing wildest fiction of the brain;
> Rubbing against all people, high and low,
> And by this contact feeling Self to grow
> Smaller and less important, and the vein
> Of human kindness deeper, seeing God. . .[124]

[123] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 98.
[124] Wilcox, *Poetical Works*, 385.

Such is Wilcox's experience of the sublime annihilation of "Self." Ashbery spoofs this sort of writing in the "Grand Tour" passage above and, even more egregiously, in the lines that succeed it:

> But of all the sights that were seen by me
> In the East or West, on land or sea,
> The best was the place that is spelled H-O-M-E.[125]

In artlessly imitating Wilcox, Ashbery consciously does to her what she does unwittingly to Shelley and Wordsworth. Like the "variation," the "calypso" uses the "bad" Wilcox to advance a deeper critique of a "serious" writerly tradition, in this case the Burkean/Kantian natural sublime as filtered through the romantics and on to Stevens.[126] Ashbery's aims in doing so are plain enough: by the time he composed "Variations" in 1969, an undiluted romantic sublime would have been as dubious a mode to pursue as Wilcoxian sentimentalism. Considering Ashbery's own tendency to hit the sublime high note with uncanny ease and frequency at this point in his career, he likely felt the need to balance his work with a counter-truth.[127]

The "fugue" which follows "calypso" is composed of five prose paragraphs, separated by rhyming couplet interludes. It has received less attention from critics

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[125] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 191.

[126] Stevens's "The American Sublime" perhaps offered Ashbery a model for such irreverent treatment of the sublime subject: "How does one stand / To behold the sublime,/ To confront the mockers,/ The mickey mockers / And plated pairs?" But as elsewhere in Stevens, what begins in an exotic or eccentric key ends in a quizzically meditative one: "But how does one feel? One grows used to the weather,/ The landscape and that; And the sublime comes down / To the spirit itself,// The spirit and space,/ The empty spirit / In vacant space./ What wine does one drink?/ What bread does one eat?" Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, 106-7. Rob Wilson's extended reading of this poem is especially illuminating. See *American Sublime*, 169-197.

[127] *The Double Dream of Spring* has been read as Ashbery's most sublime book; though, its sublimity is of course diluted in various ways, not least by its various one-off productions, such as "Variations," "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape," "Some Words," and "It Was Raining in the Capital." For a further consideration of this topic, see Jesse Graves, "The Single Seam in The Double Dream of Spring: John Ashbery's Natural Sublime," *The South Carolina Review* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 16-30.

than the first two sections, perhaps because it does not obviously parody anything (with the exception of the last paragraph, the "Gustavus Hertz passage"),[128] or perhaps because it is so difficult to read as a whole. The "fugue" section itself suffers from a split personality—its various paragraphs have almost nothing in common with each other, beyond their tendency to end, like the "variation," on a sour, anti-climactic note. The first paragraph begins, like the poem itself, on a twee note, "MAKE MY DREAM COME TRUE," and seems poised to carry on the knowing preciosity of the preceding "calypso." But then it quickly transitions into a nonsensical patter of voices featuring warped approximations of, among other things, a radio or TV advertisement ("And with the approach of the holidays, the present is clearly here to stay"), a real estate agent ("Three-fourths of the houses in this city are on narrow stilts, finer than a girl's wrists: it is largely a question of keeping one's feet dry, and of privacy") and concluding with a stockbroker ("But it does not follow that such issues will produce the most dynamic capital gains for you"). The equally gnomic second paragraph centers on an unnamed "incident" which "came to be not only as though it had never happened, but as though it never *could* have happened."

> Sealed into the wall of all that season's coming on. And thus, for a mere handful of people—roustabouts and degenerates, most of them—it became the only true version. Nothing else mattered. It was bread by morning and

[128] This passage is a verbatim quotation from Roy Rockwood's novel, *The City Beyond the Clouds, or Captured by the Red Dwarfs* (New York: Cupples & Leon, 1925). Bob Perelman reproduces an amusing email exchange with Ashbery: "The Gustavus Hertz passage is from 'The City Beyond the Clouds, or Captured by the Red Dwarfs', by Roy Rockwood, 1925. I just learned the author's name myself from a footnote in the forthcoming Library of America collection of my poetry. I had hitherto known only the title, having found a page from the book on a sidewalk in New York while writing the poem. Pretty bathetic, huh?" Perelman, "Bathos," 145.

> night, the dates falling listlessly from the trees—man, woman, child festering glistering in a single orb. The reply to "hello."
>
> Pink purple and blue
> The way you used to do[129]

As the paragraph ends, we find the arboreal imagery and submerged themes of individuation and disaffection surfacing once again, though greatly modified. Rather than "acorns laying on the worn earth like eyeballs," this tree "listlessly" drops dates, nourishing the grotesque image of "man, woman, child festering glistering in a single orb." The tension is then relieved by the mysterious "reply to 'hello'" and the inane couplet that follows (a fugal variation on the "calypso" theme). These recurrent couplets effect a transition between the various sections of the "fugue." As a whole, this short scene seems vaguely to recapitulate the transition from the "variation" to the "calypso"—that is, from sinking disappointment to rhyming inanity—much as the other paragraphs will do.

The next paragraph also appears to pick up on many of the poem's familiar themes, but with substantial alterations:

> The next two days passed oddly for Peter and Christine, and were among the most absorbing they had ever known. On the one hand, a vast open basin—or sea; on the other a narrow spit of land terminating in a copse, with a few broken-down out-buildings, lying here and there. It made no difference that the bey—b-e-y this time, oriental potentate—had ordained their release, there was this funny feeling that they should always be there, sustained by looks out over the ether, missing Mother and Alan and the others but really quiet, in a kind of activity that offers its own way of life, sunflower chained to the sun.

Wilcox's oak tree transforms here into a "copse" and the first person singular speaker becomes "Peter and Christine," while the general template of

[129] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 192-3.

individuation/disaffection within a bizarrely charmed landscape remains intact. The inspiring vista "over the ether" soon gives way to a vision of sublime monstrosity and cataclysm:

> Can it ever be resolved? Or are the forms of a person's thoughts controlled by inexorable laws, as in Dürer's Adam and Eve? So mutually exclusive, and so steep—Himalayas jammed side by side like New York apartment buildings. Oh the blame of it, the de-crescendo. My vice is worry. Forget it. The continual splitting up, the ear-shattering volumes of a polar ice-cap breaking up are just what you wanted. You've got it, so shut up.
>
> The crystal haze
> For days and days[130]

Once again, the episode ends with a moment of hostile "de-crescendo" immediately neutralized by the mindless tinkling of a calypso couplet. Dürer's 1504 engraving—depicting Adam and Eve beneath the Tree of Wisdom as the serpent offers Eve the forbidden fruit—provides a thematic corollary to "Variations's" presiding themes of idyllic life "beneath the trees" and subsequent disenchantment. Dürer's image presents a by-the-book sublime prospect, featuring a dense, shadowy forest presided over by a sheer mountain peak under which Adam and Eve present themselves; though, the scene's grandeur is deflated by a goat tottering on the mountain peak. Ashbery's own sublimities, the "Himalayas jammed side-by-side like New York apartment buildings" and the "ear-shattering volumes of a polar ice-cap breaking up" are less obviously deflated by what surrounds them.

The penultimate paragraph is easier to follow as linear narrative than the preceding paragraphs of the "fugue," and most obviously mirrors the events of the "variation." We follow an unidentified man as he exits the subway and wanders

[130] Ibid., 193.

around his childhood neighborhood. He eats a hamburger at a familiar place, and then remembers playing stickball in a vacant lot and the time he spent with a group of other boys, a "nice bunch of guys."

> Finally he decided to take a turn past the old grade school he'd attended as a kid. It was a rambling structure of yellow brick, now gone in seediness and shabbiness which the late-afternoon shadows mercifully softened. The gravel playground in front was choked with weeds. Large trees and shrubbery would do no harm flanking the main entrance. Time farted.
>
> The first shock rattles the cruets in their stand,
> The second rips the door from its hinges.

Wilcox's oak tree here metamorphoses into the "large trees and shrubbery" that harmlessly flank the main entrance (but why would they be expected to do harm?). Perhaps this shabby playground is the original scene "beneath the trees" about which the unnamed narrator of the "variation" waxes nostalgic. Whatever the case may be, this diminished scene of former glory is summed up and utterly deflated by the poem's harshest bathetic moment: "Time farted." The moment extends into the following (unrhyming) couplet, which registers the impact of Time's eruption as a cataclysmic event of "camp sublime" proportions, a cartoonish cyclone straight out of Looney Tunes or the Wizard of Oz:

> The first shock rattles the cruets in their stand,
> The second rips the door from its hinges.

Time's blast seems to eject us from the poem itself, landing us on the street where we find a brief passage from Roy Rockwood's fantasy novel, *The City Beyond the Clouds, or Captured by the Red Dwarfs* (1925). This passage, with which the poem concludes, also only lets us linger for a moment before expelling us:

> Weak as he was, Gustavus Hertz raised himself on his elbow. He stared wildly about him, peering fearfully into the shadowy corners of the room.
>
> I will tell you nothing! Nothing, do you hear?" he shrieked. Go away! Go away![131]

The final paragraph, a piece of found text, ends the poem like it started, with a quotation from a source of dubious literary value. We are sharply ushered out of the poem, which has reached a breaking point. Considered as a whole, "Variations" now appears as a comprehensive menagerie of "bad" styles, from the sentimentality and clichés of the "variation" to the doggerel and (failed) bathos of the "calypso", to the abortive narrative development of the "fugue" and the concluding scrap of found text that is literally a piece of trash. What would I.A. Richards or Cleanth Brooks have made of "Variations"? Having acknowledged its ironic complexities, would they have found any merit in it? Would they have laughed?

There's an obvious danger in taking "Variations" too seriously, though with the proper suspension of disbelief it can be read as a richly humorous experiment in literary value. If nothing else, it is one of Ashbery's funniest poems, offering a "pleasant surprise" on every reading. And the temptation to read it closely is in fact justified by the light it sheds on Ashbery's subsequent forays into the "bad"; in a sense, "Variations" plants many of the seeds of "bad" nature poetry which will blossom, as it were, in the late period. Trees, in particular, have been props in Ashbery's "bad" poetry for quite some time, and not only within the context of Ella Wheeler Wilcox's poetry. The following section consider how the arboreal imagery

[131] Ibid., 194.

in "Variations" reaches back to Ashbery's earliest days of writing poetry and points forward to the experiments in "badness" of his late period.

IV. Some (more) Trees

. . .and they move
Insatiably out of reach of bathos and the bad line
Into a weird ether of forgotten dismemberments.
—John Ashbery[132]

Ashbery's quarrel with New Critics begins with their cold reception of Surrealism and an instinctive awareness that they would not have cared much for him either. Given their emphasis on clear and precise images, structural unities, and a "mature" worldview, the New Critics would have taken a "dim view" of a mid-1940s fledgling poet like Ashbery who was strongly attracted to Surrealism.[133] The young Ashbery knew his tastes and proclivities would not find him favor among the powers that be, and sought refuge in an "other tradition" the dimensions of which his subsequent writing would help to map. During his high school and college years, Ashbery was taken with a number of contemporaries who blended, in his words, "metaphysical" and "surrealist" tendencies. By 1953, he himself would make his debut as a fledgling surrealist with a prose poem, "A Dream," in the "Little Anthology of the Poem in

[132] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 494.

[133] As Alexander Howard observes, the New Critics "took an unsurprisingly dim view of Surrealism." "The Life and Times of Charles Henry Ford, Blues, and the Belated Renovation of Modernism" (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2011), 154. Howard quotes as evidence the following extract from Allen Tate's essay, "The Angelic Imagination": "The obscurity of Poe's poetic diction is rather vagueness than the obscurity of complexity; it reflects his uncertain grasp of the relation of language to feeling, and of feeling to nature. But it is never that idolatrous dissolution of language from the grammar of a possible world, which results from the belief that language itself can be reality, or by incantation can create a reality: a superstition that comes down in French from Lautréamont, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé to the Surrealists, and in English to Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and Dylan Thomas." *Man of Letters*, 117.

Prose," edited by Charles Henri Ford, America's chief apostle of Surrealism.[134] These youthful enthusiasms have much to tell us about how Ashbery's early struggle with New Critical norms guided him toward a mature poetics founded on the "grand permission" which he took to be Surrealism's main bequest to posterity. The contemporary poets of whom he was enamored—most now considered minor—were not afraid to indulge in sentimentality and in the sort of vague, lush imagery that Brooks and Warren would have denigrated. Some, such as Delmore Schwartz and Randall Jarrell, were even younger members of the New Critical fold. Often, these formative influences wander into unambiguously "bad" poetic territory, if we measure "badness" by vague imagery and a lack of "mature" irony; though, we can imagine that Ashbery read such lapses as sympathetic alternatives to the intellectual brittleness of figures like Tate and early Lowell. Introducing Robert Duncan at a 1967 reading, Ashbery describes how, reading for the first time a volume of Duncan's early poems, *The Years as Catches* (1966), he was struck by its

> peculiar resonant blend of metaphysical poetry and Surrealism which was typical of much of the advanced poetry written in America in the late thirties and forties—a fine and touching moment in our poetry that has so far been little noticed by subsequent critics, and which combined elements of French and English Surrealism with American plain directness—we find it in poets like Delmore Schwartz, Paul Goodman, Jean Garrigue, the Auden of that period, Randall Jarrell, George Barker and others—a brief Renaissance flourishing in the shadow of the war, eventually to be disrupted by it as the poets became war poets and other kinds of poets. It seems from this distance a kind of golden age, when our poets who counted as poets spoke different dialects of a common poetic language.[135]

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[134] Including work by Arthur Rimbaud, Conrad Aiken, Allen Ginsberg, William Carlos Williams, James Schulyer, Franz Kafka, Oscar Wilde, Paul Goodman, and many others, the anthology appeared as a lengthy supplement in *New Directions in Poetry and Prose* 14 (New York: New Directions, 1953), 329-407.

[135] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 93.

It is surprising to consider that the 1940s, rather than a dour period administered by the New Critics, were for Ashbery a kind of golden age subsequently disrupted by the onset of World War II and the Cold War. In his 1989-90 Norton Lectures at Harvard, Ashbery once again speaks fondly of this "little noticed" period and reproduces a similar list of formative poets, adding to the mix other figures like Ruth Herschberger, Joan Murray, and Samuel Greenberg.[136] As is often the case with Ashbery's prose, he seems to be speaking about himself when he speaks of others. Incidentally, the poets he singles out were especially prone to writing dubious poems about trees. Consider these lines from Garrigue's "Forest," published in *Thirty-Six Poems and a Few Songs* (1944):

> Among the divisions of stone and fissures of branch
> Lurk the abashed resentments of the ego.
> Do not say this is pleasurable!
>
> […]
>
> Uneasy, we bellow back at the tree frogs
> And, night approaching like the entrance of a tunnel,
> We would turn back and cannot, we
> Surprise our natures; the woods lock us up

[136] "Poets who have meant a lot to me at various times are 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. . . .These are not poets of the center stage, though they have been central to me." Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 5. Worth mentioning, too, is Ashbery's "Of the 'East' River's Charms," written in homage to Samuel Greenberg (1893-1917) and published in *A Worldly Country* (2007). Ashbery alludes to Greenberg's "East River's Charms," a 16-line *aabb* quatrain poem lauding the river's "silvery tinge that sparkles aloud." In his homage, Ashbery makes affectionate reference to Greenberg's excesses and sad decline into obscurity: "Songs are sung by this counterfeit / contralto to words written down,/ and in tomorrow's haste forgotten.// So much for our sham naturalism, ego, my brother, faster of us two.// Of what? Let me then ask you,/ as tide picks up tab, river that between us grew,/ mere commentary on agile literary thoughts' / dustbin commonplaces. Yet here and there a jewel / gleamed, night's dark fantasy, over before it began./ Hail to something!" *Worldly Country*, 36. In his preface to the collected poems, Allen Tate generously characterizes Greenberg's work as "turgid and bathetic." *Poems by Samuel Greenberg* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), xiii.

In the secret crimes of our intent.[137]

And the first stanza of Joan Murray's "As the Summer Sun Comes Down into the Autumn Trees":

> As the summer sun comes down into the autumn trees,
> And we feel the hills to be drums between the knees
> Of the phlegmatic Indian depositing his thought by beat,
> As we advance under the birch and hemlock or retreat
> With our factual minds hunting the winter place,
> I think we would not forget our one brief act in space.[138]

Delmore Schwartz's "I Did Not Know The Truth of Growing Trees," another questionable production in rhyming couplets, also appeared during this period. The poem takes place "on the suburban street" where "guarded by patient trees,/ Two family houses huddled." It is supper time of a "mid-winter evening" and the speaker sees an unnamed blonde girl standing at the window looking at the snow, her "glance" hiding "hatred's hot-bed, which had sickened long ago." The sight of her makes the speaker swoon:

> And then our glances met: and I fell suddenly,
> My eyes reached to touch the bark of the nearest tree,
> My hands stretched to touch the rough and broken
> Bark to feel, again and again, an instance and a token
> Of reality's texture. The picture window showed
> How often beauty conceals the heart's diseased death-ridden toad:

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[137] Jean Garrigue, *New and Selected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 12. Introducing Garrigue for a reading [in the early 1950s?], Ashbery remarked that she was "one of the first poets I read when I was discovering poetry as a teen-ager." He goes on to describe her poetry as a blend of the "metaphysical" and the "Surrealist": "I was immediately taken with something in her which exists very little in American poetry: a dream-like quality that hovers over her work even at its most relentlessly logical and translates this logic into metaphysics. Miss Garrigue is a metaphysical poet, and our finest one. . . . Someone who would not normally care for Surrealist poetry must respond to the Surreal element in her poetry, for she makes it function for greater clarity—the sense of non-sense and the nonsense of sense reinforce each other here, and in her hands turn meaningful." Ashbery Papers, Houghton Library Collection, Harvard University, AM-6, box 31.

[138] Joan Murray, *Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 46. W.H. Auden selected Murray's collected poems for the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1947, nine years before he selected Ashbery's *Some Trees*.

How often romance is a passing dance: but the tree is true:
And this is what I did not know, although I always thought I knew how a growing tree is true.[139]

Finally, here is an excerpt from Ruth Herschberger's "Summer Mansion":

Sandwiches and movie,
The music of ports and of calls, scruff of the neck,
Warmth and confession of goodness under the tree
Where the soft sward is interrupted by the tread of
The tread of whom, what, drunken loiterer?
But the lips and the hard bark of the tree counseled.
Persons took, and the persimmon was eaten, whole,
Luscious and frost-sweetened; new corn on the cob.
The divinity of happiness if a thing apart.[140]

What is interesting about these poems, especially Schwartz's, is the way they hover between intentional and unintentional "badness." Schwartz's final line—"And this is what I did not know, although I always thought I knew how a growing tree is true"—is so unwieldy as to leave little doubt that he intended it ironically. Though, the embittered tone of the whole, the sense of a private grudge being publicly aired, militates against the strictly ironic reading, leaving the tone unsatisfyingly ambiguous. The same holds for another unfortunate line, "How often beauty conceals the heart's diseased death-ridden toad," the irony of which is smothered by the speaker's resentment, which here sours into a ludicrous metaphor. We may cherry-pick phrases from each of these poems to exemplify this kind of misjudged irony. Is Joan Murray in earnest, for example, when she writes of feeling "the hills to be drums between the knees / of the phlegmatic Indian depositing his thought by

[139] Delmore Schwartz, *What Is To Be Given: Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1976), 43. Schwartz's reverie on the healing properties of "reality's texture" echoes the final lines of a contemporaneous poem by Ruth Herschberger, "Hymn to Texture": "Texture of ozone, and lift of meadows,/ Tactual wonder of clay-toned dust,/ Give us the lesson: inanimate nature / Resolves the animate lust." *Nature and Love Poems* (New York: Eakins Press, 1969), 17.

[140] Ibid., 55.

beat"? And yet, the teetering Surrealist quality that unites these poems is likely what drew Ashbery to them in the first place. Perhaps they are a bit precious and self-regarding, but in the end they are after something other than "unity of effect," and are not afraid to fail in pursuit of it.

These "tree poems" of the 1930s and 40s bear a striking resemblance to Ashbery's own earliest poetic efforts. His poems of the mid-late 1940s, dating as far back as his late teens, repeatedly stage romantic scenes within idyllic wooded areas that are rendered with a comparable metaphysical melodrama, sometimes with loose rhymes. One of Ashbery's earliest extant poems, "Seasonal," begins: "Though we seek always the known absolute / Of all our days together, love will not occur / For us. Love is a fact / Beyond the witches' wood of facts that is / Our sorcery's domain."[141] "Seasonal" was written in 1945 and published the same year in *Poetry*, along with "Lost Cove,"[142] which begins, "Where the sun delved in trees and darkly / Faltered, we made our stopping place," and ends, "The trees / Tore our hearts back with them from the canoe,/ And their boughs bled bright with our sacrifice."[143] A series of poems published in the *Harvard Advocate* in the late 1940s also feature the doomed forest-tryst theme. Here is the second stanza of "Song from a Play," taken from the play, *Everyman,* and written in 1947 (note the final line's echo of Garrigue's "the woods lock us up"):

> What could we reply, with the green
> Ripeness falling across us, and lovers

[141] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 889.
[142] Both poems were stolen by Ashbery's roommate at Deerfield Academy, Joel Michael Symington, and falsely published under his name.
[143] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 889-90.

In vicious pursuit even through dreams
Unless death were a vital sac hidden
Under every leaf and erotic gesture,
Allowing excursions into peace, beyond
The locked joy of the moment?

In "Why We Forget Dreams" (1948), Ashbery writes:

Who expects wisdom from lightheaded birds
Moving through a forest of constant desires,
A world continually budding and fading,
Where only death flowers and is exact
And the season of love will never happen?[144]

And in "For a European Child" (composed 1948, published 1949):

Then your photograph
Will flare in the sky over this sensual wood

And no bird's mating call from bough to bough
And no loves struggle to image in each other
Their unspeakable desires, each turning, rather,
Inward for that definition, as you do now.[145]

It was at this time (November 8, 1948, to be precise) that Ashbery wrote "Some Trees," the showpiece of his eponymous first volume, which clinches in rhyming couplets the forest-tryst theme to which he had been returning for several years:

Arranging by chance

To meet as far this morning
From the world as agreeing
With it, you and I
Are suddenly what the trees try

To tell us we are:
That their merely being there
Means something; that soon
We may touch, love, explain.

[144] Ibid., 893-4.
[145] Ibid., 895.

Years later, Ashbery would deride "Some Trees" as "a conventional modern poem of that period" with "paraphrasable meaning,"[146] a comment that makes sense in light of what Garrigue, Murray, Herschberger, Schwartz, and others were writing at the time. It is a fluent, accomplished pastoral, no doubt (Richard Wilbur, in his late-twenties, praised it)[147]—eventually too fluent for Ashbery's tastes.

Reading "Variations" alongside these earliest efforts suggests there might have been more going on "beneath the trees" twenty years later in 1969 than mere horseplay and anti-New Critical satire. Self-parody being one of Ashbery's greatest strengths (consider his self-transformation from Parmigianino to Daffy Duck in the mid-1970s), "Variations" suddenly becomes much more interesting when read as autobiographical satire. When Ashbery wrote the following lines, from "I Saw No Need," in the mid-1990s, he was bringing his satire to bear on a vast number of subjects, not least of them his embryonic poetic self:

> I saw no need to paint the sky,
> to cheer the runners passing by,
> to let the lovely forest bleed.
> I saw no need.[148]

And so the poem begins, echoing the mechanical iambic tetrameter of Kilmer's "Trees" and A.E. Housman's more fluent "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now," as well as making a distant allusion to "Some Trees." The fact that we might also detect here the vigorous tetrameter quatrains of John Clare's "A Vision,"[149] one of

[146] Quoted in Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 22.
[147] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 248.
[148] Ashbery, *Can You Hear, Bird*, 57.
[149] In his Norton lecture on Clare, Ashbery writes, "There is no doubt that the "trilogy" of poems Bloom singles out for special praise—"An Invite to Eternity," "I Am," and "A Vision"—are the most sublime that Clare wrote and among the greatest poems in English, as anthologists have long

Ashbery's favorite poems, only thickens the poem's self-satiric texture. The speaker's pomposity and crankiness are comically amplified by the ungainly measure of the poem itself and its inane refrain. We might read the third line as an ironic gloss of "Lost Cove," in which "the boughs bled bright our sacrifice." Several stanzas later, Ashbery re-introduces the doomed forest-tryst theme in a radically new key, and the "bright sacrifice" in the woods suddenly becomes sexual. Note, too, the facetious gesture toward environmental catastrophism in the first line:

> I know the earth is out of whack.
> I pine for boys whose name is Jack
> who never pause to spill their seed.
> They see no need.
>
> […]
>
> I came upon a birch tree once,
> a softly swaying silver dunce
> in whose black branches mist had spread,
> and gazed and left it there for dead.
>
> I saw no need t'explain myself
> as others have concerning pelf.
> This ditty bland seduces me.
> Enough! I'll leave it by the tree,
> the idling birch.[150]

In this "seed spilling" context, the line "I came upon a birch tree once" edges toward a salacious double entendre. This would not be the first instance. In "Street Musicians," he renders the forest-tryst theme with a similarly bracing crudity: "Our question of a place of origin hangs / Like smoke: how we picnicked in pine forests,/

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recognized." *Other Traditions* The first stanza of Clare's poem: "I lost the love of heaven above,/ I spurned the lust of earth below,/ I felt the sweets of fancied love,/ and hell itself my only foe." John Clare, *Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 343.

[150] Ashbery, *Can You Hear, Bird*, 57-8.

In coves with the water always seeping up, and left / Our trash, sperm and excrement everywhere, smeared / On the landscape, to make of us what we could."[151] In "I Saw No Need," Ashbery manhandles the mystified sexual content and metaphysical locutions of his earliest poems into a "walloping doggerel."[152] This is a hilariously "bad" variation on the theme of "growing up under the shade of friendly trees, with our brothers all around," here rendered with the familiar double degree of irony common to Ashbery's "bad" poems. We take pleasure both in the delicious clumsiness of this "ditty bland" and in its satirizing of more serious poems about trees and nature, Ashbery's own youthful efforts among them.[153]

Beneath its clumsy surface, most immediately redolent of Kilmer, "I Saw No Need" is a surprisingly allusive text. The image of the "softly swaying" tree, for instance, comes from "Tall Salmacis," by the Scottish anthropologist, folklorist, and Homer translator, Andrew Lang (1844-1912).[154] The odd archaism "pelf" (money or riches, especially viewed as a corrupting influence) suggests Thoreau's poem "Great God, I Ask Thee for No Meaner Pelf," in which it is also rhymed with "myself."[155] The most obvious allusion is to Frost's "Birches," that masterpiece of the physical and spiritual complexities of "growing up under the shade of friendly trees" (and

[151] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 491. The reference to "coves" suggests Ashbery's early poem, "Lost Cove."

[152] Robert Penn Warren's formulation for Poe's "Ulalume." "Pure and Impure Poetry," 250.

[153] K. Silem Mohammad, a member of the Flarf collective, pushes this kind of satire to an extreme in his "Poems about Trees": "I have written a couple of poems about trees / poems about trees and snakes and lakes and birds / poems about nature and life in New England / I write crappy poems and eat babies / if you like poems about trees you're in for a treat." *Poetry* (July/August 2009), 322.

[154] "Were an apple tree a pine,/ Tall and slim, and softly swaying,/ Then her beauty were like thine,/ Salmacis, when boune a Maying,/ Tall as any poplar tree,/ Sweet as apple blossoms be!" Andrew Lang, *New Collected Rhymes* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1905), 73.

[155] "Great God, I ask for no meaner pelf / Than that I may not disappoint myself,/ That in my action I may soar as high / As I can now discern with this clear eye." *Collected Poems of Henry David Thoreau* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins Press, 1964), 10.

another distant intertext for Ashbery's "Variations"). Yet, Ashbery's parody of Frost is so ugly and poorly executed as to nearly miss its target completely. Compare the lines above with those of Ron Padgett, who satirizes Frost far more ruthlessly in his own "Birches":

> When I see birches
> I think of nothing
> But when I see a girl
> Throw away her hair and brains
> I think of birches and I see them
> One could do worse than see birches."[156]

Unlike the mean-spirited Padgett, Ashbery does something unexpected—and far more interesting—with his Frost parody: he botches it. In doing so, he characteristically situates himself beyond both the serious primary text and the anticipated parody of it to achieve "a marvel of irony and poetry" that allows us to enjoy it without needing to evaluate it.

The "birch" crops up again briefly in "Tuesday Evening," another ironic doggerel piece from *Can You Hear, Bird* and that volume's longest poem:

> Straight over roads, in culottes
> the marching women go. Why besmirch
> that casket, choose fleshpots
> over a stand of young birch?[157]

Ashbery composed the poem's 117 *abab* quatrains using a rhyming dictionary, generating through this formal procedure a relentlessly inane momentum that

[156] Ron Padgett, *Great Balls of Fire* (Chicago: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1969), 12.
[157] Ashbery, *Can You Hear, Bird*, 138.

parodies both Ogden Nash[158] and the expansive metaphysical reveries of Stevens's "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and "Sunday Morning." The poem wanders from subject to subject, propelled and deranged by its constraint to rhyme and populated by a screwball miscellany of exotic places ("N'Djamena," "Okefenokee," "Torquay", "the Marshalsea") flora and fauna ("grunions," "nicotianas," "racemes," "lianas"), and random objects ("hecatombs," "cockades," "cordovans," "celadons"), as well as a host of more quotidian things. It all adds up to a series of arbitrary and contiguous "microclimates"[159] in which "[w]e see one thing next to another. . .a parabola in the throes / of vomiting its formula. . . ."[160] The climate of the whole is fertile yet precarious:

> After a sudden
> Denouement, the climate again turns bland; its apostasy
>
> was too minute to register on God's barometer.
> Only an occasional letter to the *Times*
> hinted that a change might have occurred.[161]

I would like to focus on one specific passage which, in suggesting that some sort of climate change "might have occurred," offers a prime example of the generative tensions between the sublime and bathetic in late Ashbery. The passage occurs near the beginning of quatrain 78:

> Man must return to his earth,
> experience its seasons, frosts, its labyrinthine
> processes, the spectacle of continual rebirth
> in one's own time. Only then will the sunshine

[158] Worth remembering here is Nash's "Song of the Open Road," the most famous parodic take on Kilmer's "Trees": "I think that I shall never see / A billboard lovely as a tree / Indeed, unless the billboards fall / I'll never see a tree at all. *The Best of Ogden Nash* (London: Mandarin, 1985), 31.

[159] Ashbery, *Can You Hear, Bird,* 147.

[160] Ibid., 149.

[161] Ibid., 144.

each weekday lodges in its quiver expand till the vernal
equinox rounds it off, then subtracts a little more each day,
though always leaving a little, even in hyperboreal climes where eternal
ice floes fringe the latitudes. On a beautiful day in May

you might forget this, but there it is, always creeping up on you.
Permit me then for the umpteenth time to reiterate
that basking in the sun like an otter or curlew
isn't the whole story. Tomorrow may obliterate

your projects and belongings, casting a shadow longer than the equator
into your private sector, to wit, your plan to take a Hovercraft
across the lagoon and have lunch there, leaving the waiter
a handsome tip. For though your garrison be fully staffed,

the near future, like an overcrowded howdah
trumpets its imminent arrival, opens the floodgate
of a thousand teeming minor ills, spoiling the chowder
and marching society's annual gymkhana, letting in smog to asphyxiate

palms and eucalyptuses.[162]

The first quatrain reads like a passable imitation of any number of "seasonal" poems, ancient and modern: Hesiod's *Works and Days,* Virgil's *Georgics*, Thomson's *The Seasons*, perhaps even Hölderlin in one of his more didactic moments.[163] This imitation georgic persists into the second quatrain, increasingly didactic in tone and made absurd by the awkwardly phrased sunshine-as-arrows mixed metaphor. Reading on, we soon discover that "tomorrow may obliterate" this earthly "microclimate" whose natural processes have been so attentively elaborated. Yet an inelegant shift in diction and subject matter quickly averts the threat ("always creeping up on you") of a sublime catastrophe that would "cast a shadow longer than

[162] Ibid., 149-50.

[163] In fact, the opening line quotes *Psalms* 146.4: "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish." *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 721.

the equator." The menacing shadow is, in fact, cast only over "your private sector, to wit, your plan to take a Hovercraft / across the lagoon and have lunch there, leaving the waiter / a handsome tip." Every attempt the poem makes to rise above its own silliness is deflated by its need to rhyme. Though, the effect of the whole is not simply bathetic, in the Popean sense, but an ironic distancing from the poem's continuous struggle between sublime and bathetic effects. Neither is allowed to prevail, and we are left somewhere on the outside of it all. This is an instance of Perelman's "new bathos," brought about largely by the poem's formal constraints; there would be no "waiter" without the "equator," no "curlew" without "you". The "new bathetic" formula is repeated in the succeeding quatrain, in which "the near future, like an overcrowded howdah / trumpets its imminent arrival, opens the floodgate / of a thousand teeming minor ills, spoiling the chowder. . . ." Which is it to be, global catastrophe or spilled milk? The "howdah-chowder" rhyme points to the latter, but can we be sure? We can be sure that the "smog" that the "near future" lets in to "asphyxiate palms and eucalyptuses" will soon dissipate, as indeed it does in the succeeding lines: "One paddles in the backwash of the present,/ laughing at its doodles. . . ."[164] But even this does not completely alleviate the sense of looming disaster, a disaster which is ultimately the ramshackle poem itself, teetering, from the start, on the verge of collapse.

"Teetering on the verge of collapse" is, of course, a fitting cliché for this poem's effect. Such formal and thematic precariousness is one of late Ashbery's strategies for addressing "serious" issues like climate change and the ways in which

[164] Ashbery, *Can You Hear, Bird*, 150.

we imagine them away. Ashbery first uses the phrase "climatic change" in "Too Happy, Happy Tree," from *April Galleons*, a slightly earlier poem which, like "I Saw No Need," makes a comic address to a tree, though without the trappings of doggerel:

> What say we get down to business, tree
> That you are, knowing nothing like you
> As somber and reserved as the time for flight approaches.
>
> […]
> Your own image refracts
> Again and again greeting you at embarrassed moments in the silent
> History: how we were all going to be lovers
> When a climatic change occurred.

The title comes from Keats's "In Drear Nighted December,"[165] and suggests the "happy, happy boughs" of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which are also addressed in the second person and which "cannot shed / your leaves, or ever bid the Spring adieu."[166] By the mid-1980s, when Ashbery wrote "Too Happy, Happy Tree," climate science had begun to tell a darker story about nature's prospects for permanence. Ashbery uses the phrase "climatic change" again several years later in "Irresolutions on a Theme of La Rochefoucauld," from *Hotel Lautréamont*:

> . . .we all have to cooperate, or else the earth
> will get slightly out of kilter, its revolutions
> a few seconds off, enough to produce climatic changes
> in places you least think of—[167]

[165] "In drear nighted December / Too happy, happy tree / Thy branches ne'er remember / Their green felicity." John Keats, *Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 165-66. Ashbery uses the phrase "green felicity" in the first line of his poem. Ashbery concludes his "Ode to John Keats" with the image of "lurking under a weeping beech." *Can You Hear, Bird,* 81.

[166] Keats, *Major Works*, 289.

[167] Ashbery, *Hotel Lautréamont*, 67.

and in one of his most recent poems, "Recent History."[168] Is Ashbery making a serious point here about the importance of environmental stewardship? Or are passages like these simply parody? In the final section of this chapter, I conclude that they are a little bit of both.

V. Late Catastrophes: "The Ice Storm," "Korean Soap Opera," *Girls on the Run*

Each of the three poems under consideration in this section exemplifies different aspects of late Ashbery's "camp sublime." Half-satire, half-lamentation, "The Ice Storm" is an allegorical reverie on man's diminished place in the natural order, with affinities to the earlier prose poem, "For John Clare,"[169] and a subtle ear to current debates about climate change. "Korean Soap Opera," a medium-length lyric from *Hotel Lautréamont*, presents the disaffected musings of an unnamed narrator living in a post-industrial "Korea" in which the cultural and natural orders have been radically upset by rapid modernization. Finally, *Girls on the Run*, the summative achievement of Ashbery's late period, takes its inspiration from the outsider artist Henry Darger's *Realms of the Unreal*, a 15,000-page illustrated epic narrating the deeds of the "Vivian girls" as they wander across an alternatingly idyllic and apocalyptic landscape. More than any other text under discussion, *Girls on the Run* combines the themes of sublimity and bathos which I have been analyzing throughout this chapter, bringing a saccharine world of childish fancy into jarring contact with an adult world of violence and natural disaster.

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[168] "Desperate asks, how driven batty / by climate change, can we not make out a stranger's silhouette in the dooryard?" *Quick Question*, 10.

[169] This link is amplified by a reference in this poem to Clare's "native Northamptonshire."

V.1 "The Ice Storm"

But I was going to say when Truth broke in
with all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm. . .
—Robert Frost[170]

Oh, sometimes it would seem as though storms
Might wash some of it away, some
Nastiness or other one was hoping to keep
From others as well as from oneself.
—John Ashbery[171]

As the token long poem (albeit a short one by Ashbery's standards) of *April Galleons*, "The Ice Storm" bears the burden of clarifying the volume's presiding themes. And as a study in nervous anticipation, anti-climax, and unease with the natural order, it does just that. Herd observes that the titles of the poems in *April Galleons* communicate the volume's "sense of its own fragility,"[172] and I would add that this fragility often assumes a peculiarly sinister and/or environmental tenor.[173] Anti-climax is, in fact, built into "The Ice Storm's" opening sentence, a run-on from the title:

> The Ice Storm
>
> isn't really a storm of course because unlike most storms it isn't one till it's over and people go outside and say will you look at that. And by then it's of course starting to collapse.

[170] Frost, *Complete Poems*, 146.
[171] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 842.
[172] Herd, *Ashbery and American Poetry*, 205.
[173] The sinister: "Savage Menace," "Insane Decisions," "No I Don't," "Posture of Unease," "Disguised Zenith," "Amid Mounting Evidence," "Life as a Book That Has Been Put Down," "Sighs and Inhibitions," "Never to Get It Really Right," "Polite Distortions." And the environmental: "Becalmed on Strange Waters," "Frost," "The Big Cloud," "Winter Weather Advisory," "By the Flooded Canal," "Offshore Breeze," "The Ice Storm."

As the poem opens we discover that the storm has already happened. This is a common move: the "harmless storm" motif is a venerable Ashberyan institution, from the comical "storm fiend" who intermittently casts his pall over "The Skaters" (a character borrowed from William McGonagall's "Tay Bridge Disaster")[174] to the cartoonish "magnetic storm" of "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" that is "hung in the swatch of sky / Over the Fudds' garage, reducing it—drastically—/ to the aura of a plumbago-blue log cabin on / A Gadsden Purchase commemorative cover."[175] "The Ice Storm," over before it has even begun, seems to offer another example of the "harmless storm." Yet, the frozen landscape this storm leaves in its wake is different, inducing a meditation in a darker key. Here is the rest of the first paragraph:

> Diamond rubble, all galled glitter, heaps of this and that in corners and beside posts where the draft has left them—are you sure it's this you were waiting for while the storm—the real one—pressed it all into the earth to emphasize a point that melts away as fast as another idea enters the chain of them in the conversation about earth and sky and woods and how you should be good to your parents and not cheat at cards. The summer's almost over it seems to say. Did I say summer I meant to say winter it seems to say. You know when nature really has to claw like this to get her effects that something's not ripe or nice, i.e., the winter, our favorite of the seasons, the one that goes by quickest although you almost never hear anyone say, I wonder where the winter has gone. But anyone engaged in the business of swapping purity for depth will understand what I mean. So we all eyeball it, agog, for a while. And soon our attention is trapped by news from the cities, by what comes over the wireless—*heated*, and alight. How natural then to retreat into what we have been doing, trying to capture the olds songs, the idiot games whose rules have been forgotten. "Here we go looby, looby." And the exact name of the season that stings like a needle made of frozen mercury falls through the infinitesimal hole in our consciousness, to plummet hundreds of leagues into the sea and vanish in a perpetual descent toward the ocean floor, whatever and wherever that may be, and the great undersea

[174] "It must have been an awful sight,/ To witness in the dusky moonlight,/ While the Storm Fiend did laugh, and angry did bray,/ Along the Railway Bridge of the Silv'ry Tay." William McGonagall, *Poetic Gems* (Dundee: David Winter & Son, 1966), 43.

[175] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 512.

> storms and cataclysms will leave no trace on the seismographs each of us wears in the guise of a head.[176]

If this is meant as a surrealist allegory of mid-1980s environmental anxieties, then it is a brilliant one. And even if it is unintentional, it still registers a feeling of unease appropriate to that time. In either case, the passage offers a powerful diagnosis of collective malaise about a changing world. I would hazard the following paraphrase: we all see the beautiful disarray of the Earth before us—"diamond rubble, all galled glitter, heaps of this and that." It looks the same as always, yet now we are told that complex and obscure forces, which have caught us unaware, are incrementally degrading it. As we discover this process is underway we realize to our horror that it is already irreversible ("and by then it's of course starting to collapse"). Yet, confusingly, we cannot witness the catastrophic effects of climate change—the "real storm" being "pressed into the earth"—because they are invisible, incremental, and figured in the recondite language of science. Like ice covering a landscape, climate change is a ubiquitous yet transparent phenomenon. It is not (yet) palpable in our daily lives, so we might easily doubt its existence or allow our thoughts to drift from it—it is "a point that melts away as fast as another idea enters the chain of them in the conversation about earth and sky and woods." Yet even so, we know "something's not ripe or nice" and that it has to do with the seasons, the natural order, which like a threatened animal "really has to claw like this to get her effects" and which has become irregular ("The summer's almost over it seems to say. Did I

[176] Ibid., 880.

say summer I meant to say winter it seems to say").[177] The invisible magnitude of the global crisis, a sublime event, induces a state of stupefaction and astonishment, as "we all eyeball it, agog, for awhile." We receive news from distant, expert sources ("the cities") that "traps our attention": something is "*heated*, and alight," though what it is precisely is not specified. This confirms our worst suspicions. But, being helpless, it is only natural that we should pretend nothing is wrong and absolve ourselves of guilt and blame by retreating into willful naivety (the "idiot games" of childhood).[178] Thus society buries its head in the sand.

The last sentence of the paragraph clinches what comes before it in an astonishingly condensed series of images. We are aware, though we choose to imagine we are not, that something subtle and sinister has penetrated the earth's atmosphere and incited secret violent events. But we cannot give an "exact name" to the catastrophic new "season" which is upon us and which "stings like a needle made of frozen mercury" (resembling a thermometer and providing another figure for weather or climate gone awry) because it slips through the "infinitesimal hole in our consciousness."[179] This "hole" is a compound figure for both the ozone hole discovered in 1985 and our willingness to let knowledge of it pass through our

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[177] See "Not a First": "The season is stalled / And no one really knows where the next one will be." Ibid., 60.

[178] "Here We Go, Looby" is the title of a later Ashbery poem in *Your Name Here*, 56-7.

[179] "Infinitesimal" appears in a similar context in the slightly later "Still Life with Strangers." Note, too, this poem's reference to birches: "But such storms exude strange / resonance: the power of the Almighty / reduced to its infinitesimal root / hangs like the chant of bees,/ the milky drooping leaves of the birch / on a windless autumn day—// Call these phenomena or pinpoints,/ remote as the glittering trash of heaven/, yet the monstrous frame remains,/ filled up with regret, with straw,/ or on another level with the quick grace / of the singing, falling snow." Ashbery, *Hotel Lautréamont*, 13. "The glittering trash of heaven" recalls the "diamond rubble, all galled glitter" at the beginning of "The Ice Storm."

minds as negligible ("infinitesimal"). The "season's" downward passage through this "hole" to oceanic oblivion offers another compound figure for both the obscurely destructive forces raining down on the earth (UV rays?) and the way we let them slip past us (though they do so with a "sting").[180] Something big is happening somewhere, but it is out of sight, and so out of mind. We do not witness these new environmental phenomena ("great undersea storms and cataclysms"), though we are now sensitive to their existence in a disquietingly abstract way ("whatever and wherever that may be"). All the new scientific talk dazzles us but mostly goes over our heads; it is as if our minds have been replaced with faulty measurement equipment ("the seismograph each of us wears in the guise of a head") that cannot compute the data being fed into it. It is all a game of "swapping purity for depth," choosing peace of mind over truth. Something is plummeting or collapsing, but it "will leave no trace." This "big thing"[181] is an "ecosublime" event which exceeds our capacity, and willingness, to imagine it.

Such, more or less, would be my allegorical reading of the first paragraph. Even if Ashbery did not explicitly intend "The Ice Storm" as an allegory of climate change, the poem invites and rewards such a (mis)reading.[182] This is not to insist on

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[180] See "Morning Jitters": "And the storm establishes itself / As a hole in the sheet of time / And of the weariness of the world,/ And all the work that remains to be done on its surface." Ashbery, *April*, 4. This passage also recalls the "hole of truth in the green earth's rug," from "Variations, Calypso, and Fugue," as well as the final lines of "The Ice-Cream Wars," from *Houseboat Days*: "And the truth becomes a hole, something one has always known,/ A heaviness in the trees, and no one can say / Where it will come from, or how long it will stay—// A randomness, a darkness of one's own." *Collected Poems*, 529.

[181] Ibid., 819.

[182] This reading is supported by several similar passages in *April Galleons*: "Thus when appearances / Do decide to vote for reality / the atmosphere will have changed" ("Song of the Windshield Wipers"); "And then the world changed.// No one expected it would be like this." ("No Two Alike"). Ibid., 847; 838.

an "anything goes," relativist reading strategy, but rather to observe how Ashbery tunes his poems to a variety of pitches drawn from public speech—one being the rising awareness and debate about climate change in the 1980s. The "ice storm" metaphor rides on a bitter, impressionistic logic of willful evasion that lines up well with the incredulity, anger, and frustration that continue to inform public responses to man-made environmental crises. Whether or not we can classify "The Ice Storm" as eco-poetry, it attends to problems that must be central to any eco-poetic project. Offering neither answers to environmental questions nor landscape mimesis, it instead channels collective anxieties about the ways in which we currently talk, or do not talk, about disturbing ecological issues. The poem's second paragraph elaborates on these anxieties and on their deferral:

> But we know just as surely that until the actual slippage occurs, the actual moment of uncertainty by two or more of the plates or tectons that comprise the earth's crust, nobody is ever going to be moved to the point of action. You might as well call it a night, go to sleep under a bushel basket. For the probability of that moment occurring is next to nil. I mean it will probably never happen and if it does, chances are we won't be around to witness any of it.[183]

Will the "seismographs each of us wears in the guise of a head" register these earthquakes? Until we can see and feel climate change in our daily lives, this passage seems to say, "nobody is ever going to be moved to the point of action." By this point, the "ice storm" has disappeared from the text, not to return. In an ironic twist, it is as if the poem were diverting itself from "that thing of monstrous interest"[184] which it had insisted on bringing to our attention. The speaker moves on

[183] Ibid., 881.
[184] Ibid., 430.

to other subjects, making references to Aesop's fable of "The Crow and the Pebbles" (mistaking the crow for a stork) and to the "Kailyard School," a Scottish literary movement of the 1890s renowned for its sentimental, rosy-hued depictions of rural life, whose most famous member was J.M Barrie, author of *Peter Pan*. These references extend the motif of retreat into childish "idiot games" introduced in the first paragraph. Something is still not right:

> But nobody ever talks about the Kailyard School, at least not at the dinner parties I go to. . . .I want to cut out of this conversation or discourse. Why? Because it doesn't seem to be leading anywhere. Besides it could compromise me when the results become known, and by results I mean the slightest ripple that occurs as when the breeze lifts a corner of the vast torpid flag drooping at its standard, like the hairline crack in the milk white china of the sky, that indicates something is off, something less likable than the situation a few moments before has assumed its place in the preordained hierarchy of things. Something like the leaves of this plant with their veins that almost look parallel though they are radiating from their centers of course.[185]

As a vague premonition that "something is off" begins to take hold, the poem again diverts its attention to the trivial. There follows in the next two paragraphs an extended meditation on "a rose in full bloom" which the speaker finds "in the wreck of the garden" and which comes to symbolize "some real and abject notion of what a living organism ought to be." The speaker, now a bemused naturalist, ponders the meaning of the rose and what it might tell us about "our own position on the path. Will it ever be anything more than that of pebble? I wonder." Deciding that the rose "gains its distinction just by being there" for the duration of "a season not of its own naming," he is unable to extrapolate from it any clues about the meaning of his own

[185] Ibid., 881-82.

existence, as he had hoped to do. Instead, he finds himself further removed from the natural order, alone on the "narrow path" which is his lot:

> As I straightened my footsteps to accommodate the narrow path that has been chosen for me I begin to cringe at the notion that I can never be assimilated here, no, not like the rose blooming grotesquely out of season even, but must always consider the sharp edges of the slender stones set upright in the earth, to be my guide and commentator, on this path. I was talking to some of the others about it. But if it didn't matter then, it matters now, now that I begin to get my bearings in this gloom and see how I could improve on the distraught situation all around me, in the darkness and tarnished earth. Yet who will save me from myself if they can't? I can't, certainly, yet I tell myself it all seems like fun and will work out in the end.[186]

The speaker's disaffected musings shift the poem into a darker key, distantly reminiscent of the final lines of the "variation" in which the Wilcoxian tree, a hokey symbol of life, nature, and friendship, withers and becomes grotesquely emblematic of life's contingency and meanness. Yet, as usual, the "distraught situation" and desperate sense of an impending end are blithely swept away by the facile conviction that "it all seems like fun and will work out in the end." The penultimate paragraph repeats this theme, opening with a vista of "sunlit snow slip[ping] daintily down the waterway to the open sea," an image that is then conflated with a car driving through rural and suburban areas. "Only I stay here alone," the speaker says, "waiting for it to reach the point of cohesion."[187] And yet, he wonders, perhaps "there are other me's," in which case "the cohesion may have already happened." Once more, the "big thing"—here dubbed "the cohesion"—has occurred before it even began, leaving the awed spectators with the ambiguous knowledge that "the dry illumination that results. . .will not help us, it will always be as though we had

[186] Ibid., 882-3.
[187] Ibid., 883.

never happened, ornaments on a structure whose mass remains invisible or illegible." Then comes the final paragraph, which begins as a diary entry: "October 28. Three more days till November." In a now-familiar move, the soft touch humor of this redundancy diverts us from the specter of a sublimely annihilating "dry illumination" to something irrelevant and unthreatening. Soon the speaker/diarist is overtaken by a new "season" that is absurdly figured as a dress:

> I feel that this season is being pulled over my head like a dress, difficult to spot the dirt in its mauve and brick traceries. I am being taken into the country. Trees flash past. All is perhaps for the best then since I am going, and they are going with us, with us as we go.[188]

Though faced once more with an irresistible force of change, the speaker falls back on the easy assurance that "all is perhaps for the best." The inane redundancy of this assurance offers another example of the childish retreat into "idiot games" as a coping mechanism for unsavory reality. The poem's final sentence, "The afternoon lasts forever," offers a parting vision of smug stasis, the fulfillment of the fantasy of upholding a comfortable status quo in the face of oncoming darkness. But it might also be read as a monstrous vision of the end of nature.

Poised between modern jeremiad and surreal naturalistic sketch, and blending the sententious and the sentimental, "The Ice Storm" is a showpiece of late Ashbery's "camp sublime." In its artful orchestration of polyphony across registers, it brings opposing tones—the colloquial and the elevated, the minatory and the amiable, the childish and the mature—onto an equal plane without choosing between them. Its meaning is bound up in its wayward drift among these tones, a

[188] Ibid.

liberatory strategy I have associated with Ashbery's pastoralist tendency to wander away from "optional apocalypse." Even at its most harrowing moments, the poem is not afraid to deflate itself with "lesser" rhetoric (as in the offhand "whatever and wherever that may be," set amidst the plummeting and buffeting of "undersea storms and cataclysms"). The bathos of "here we go looby, looby" and other passages does not collapse the poem's sublimities, however, but qualifies them in a way congruent with the "camp sublime" mode as I have identified it in late Ashbery. Neither the bathetic nor the sublime is allowed to dominate "The Ice Storm" because, in Ashbery's view, both modes unavoidably feature in our perceptions of the natural world. The one checks the other. Perhaps the clearest illustration of the poem's "camp sublime" is to be found not in the text itself but in the physical dimensions of the limited edition chapbook published in 1987 by Hanuman Books. The miniature size (2.5" x 4"), gilded lettering on a turquoise background (suggestive of a harlequin novels or Hallmark card), and blurred cover image of a white-suited Ashbery striking a coy pose before a wooded area that looks like stage scenery, all conspire to produce an object of high camp. Even as it explores dense questions of self and world in a time of augmenting environmental catastrophe, this volume screams "bad."

V.2 "Korean Soap Opera"

Leading liot act to foriage is activity
Of Chinese philosopher here on Autumn Lake. . .
—John Ashbery[189]

. . .wait, the lotus
wants to say something: it's MADE IN JAPAN.
—John Ashbery[190]

Unusual for its adoption of a centered lyric speaker, "Korean Soap Opera" addresses contemporary debates about fossil fuels and the environmental hazards of rapid industrialization through an ironic lens of Western stereotyping of Asia. This free-verse poem tests poetic "badness" through questions of taste rather than form. Ashbery has gone down the "orientalist" road before, as in the opening lines of "On Autumn Lake": "Leading liot act to foriage is activity / Of Chinese philosopher here on Autumn Lake thoughtfully inserted in Plovince of Quebec." Or the beginning of "Theme Park Days": "Dickhead, they called him, for his name was Dong, Tram Van Dong."[191] These lines are in bad taste, of course, but they also contain transgressive value, if only because they are the sort of thing that should never be allowed into a poem. "Korean Soap Opera" flirts with a variant of this bad taste; though, its irony differs from that of "On Autumn Lake," being less a cringe-worthy parody of speech than a parade of vague caricatures of clashing "oriental" value systems that might, in fact, belong to any country: capitalism vs. communism; agrarianism vs. industrialism; segregation vs. egalitarianism; traditionalism vs.

[189] Ashbery, *Collected Poems,* 459.
[190] Ashbery, *Hotel Lautréamont*, 96.
[191] Ashbery, *Chinese Whispers*, 9. Perelman quotes this poem in his discussion of "the problem of bathos that can't be recuperated by attuned reading. This opening line is "a transgressive, possibly unsalvageable gesture." "Bathos," 145.

progress. Like other "bad" Ashbery poems, this one allows us to enjoy it by suspending our impulse to judge its infelicities.

The first two sentences introduce common soap opera topics: family strife, the generation gap, greed, jealousy, superficiality, and so on. Soon, however, the poem swerves to something much darker and weirder:

> My sister and I don't seem to get along too well anymore.
> She always has to have everything new in her house. Cherished ideals
> don't suit her teal, rust and eggshell color scheme.
> Of course, I was a buyer when she was still on the street
> peddling the Communist Youth weekly. I have a degree
> in marketing. Her boyfriend thinks I'm old-fashioned.
> Well I guess I do have an old-fashioned mentality.
>
> What kind of a mentality
> causes men to commit suicide in their air-conditioned glass boxes?
> It has been a life of adjustments. I adjusted to the postwar boom
> though it broke up my family. Some took their honor to the mountains,
> to live on wood and water. But the investment years
> wrought havoc with the landscape. Everything is modular now, even the
> trees.[192]

Our speaker, a woman perhaps in her 30s or 40s,[193] is a sensible, "old-fashioned" type with business sense and a chip on her shoulder about the younger generation's political zeal and disregard for her ideals. Rather than an offensive parody, the slight "translationese" inflection of her speech ("She always has to have everything new in her house") shades into outright banality ("I have a degree / in marketing. Her boyfriend thinks I'm old-fashioned"). The "cherished ideals," "Communist Youth weekly," and "old-fashioned mentality" are choice details that dimly suggest Cold

[192] Ibid., 78.

[193] In an April 25, 1991 reading of the poem in the "Poets Reading in the Village" series, Ashbery notes that the speaker is a woman. "John Ashbery" author page," Pennsound, University of Pennsylvania, accessed December 4, 2012, http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Ashbery.php

War-era cultural upheaval, of the sort a lightly informed "Westerner" might associate with the Cultural Revolution—the clash of a "proud and ancient civilization" with the "relentless march of progress," or something of that nature. In any event, we have the sense of a rich historical background being hastily sketched in a few broad strokes, possibly to comic effect.

In the second stanza, we learn just how difficult the embattled speaker's "old-fashioned mentality" has made it for her to keep up with the changing times. She has persevered, though some have not. Once again, the coupling of a choice selection of details ("air-conditioned glass boxes," "modular trees")[194] with faintly incongruous commonplaces ("It has been a life of adjustments. I adjusted to the postwar boom / though it broke up my family") travesties the agonized melodrama of "Korean" culture being forged anew in the crucible of the twentieth century. The speaker feels out of touch with the suffering of her people, who are oppressed by a pathological new "mentality." Yet she is also aware that this "mentality" is an acute reaction to the "postwar boom" and the disruptive "investment years" that followed:

> Some took their honor to the mountains,
> to live on wood and water. But the investment years
> wrought havoc with the landscape. Everything is modular now, even the trees.

At first glance, the imperiled "honor" and the "modular" trees of this passage might seem like the kitsch trappings of a caricatured, hyper-real Asian culture. We are demonstrably trafficking in clichés. At the same time, the speaker's cynical yet

[194] Ashbery seems to be conflating several Japanese stereotypes here, among them high suicide rates and the vogue for "cubicle hotels." The last are catacomb-like structures that provide extremely small, square-shaped modular plastic or fibre-glass sleeping spaces (resembling laundry dryers), frequently used by businessmen working late in the city.

resigned tone and her reference to the environmental impact of "the investment years" suggest some measure of sophistication and earnestness—or at least something more than straight parody. As is typical in Ashbery's "bad" poems, we find ourselves suspended between the tragic and the farcical. Because we lack the particulars of this poem (which "mountains," "postwar boom," "investment years," and "landscape" are we talking about?), we are forced into a chronically conditional reading of it. If it is parodying recent Asian history, or our perceptions of it, or both, to what end is it doing so? And if it is trying to make a serious statement about the cultural and environmental ravages of rapid industrialization, why call it a soap opera? Like "Variations," "Korean Soap Opera" leaves us uncertain as to why the high and low have been collapsed, yet amused by the result. The succeeding stanza extends the themes of the foregoing passages:

> Under the dizzying parabolas of the railroad bridge, where the thud
> of laundry mallets used to resound, the swiftly flowing
> current is like green cream, like baize unfit for fulling.
> So old are the ways,
> for lunch one might select a large smelly radish.
> In the streets, as always, there is a smell of frying fish
> no one notices. The rain cannot make up its mind.
> Other people like it other ways.[195]

Gone are the old ways, overshadowed by the "dizzying" structures of industrial modernity and stained green by toxic waste. Yet slightly embarrassing remnants of the past order ("a large smelly radish") do persist into the present, and in fact many things remain as they always have been. The "smell of frying fish" in the metropolitan streets adds another orientalist detail to the mix. Unlike the flat tone of

[195] Ashbery, *Hotel Lautréamont, 78.*

the preceding stanzas, this passage introduces some interesting prosodic effects: the *rime riche* of "ways" and the internal rhyme with "baize"; the slant rhyme of "radish" and "fish"; the thumping onomatopoeia of "under. . .thud. . .laundry. . . resound"; and the "f" alliteration in "swiftly flowing. . .unfit for fulling. . .frying fish." These effects mark the poem's entrance into a more "poetic" mode "of dreams and dreaming"[196] that will persist to the end. "Just being asleep isn't enough," the speaker asserts in the next stanza, "I must cry out against injustice in whatever position / sleep overtakes me":

> Only then will I have understood what the world
> And servants mean by self-abolishment, the key, it is said,
> To success. To stand and contemplate the sea
> Is to comprehend part of the package. What we need, therefore,
> Is market gardens bringing a sense of time with them,
> Of this time, honed to razor-sharpness.[197]

Here, as in the rest of the poem, corporate fustian ("the key to success"; "part of the package"), vaguely Eastern religiosity ("self-abolishment"), and stock naturalism ("to stand and contemplate the sea") sit queasily beside each other. A serious point is being made though: the vast, once-enchanted expanse of the natural world has been reduced to a strict instrumentality, or what Heidegger calls "standing-reserve."[198] In a time of managerial efficiency, "honed to razor-sharpness," "Nature" has become a corporate resource, a "market garden," nothing more than a mass of resources awaiting extraction and refinement through industrial processes. It is "part of the

[196] Ibid., 90.
[197] Ibid., 78-9.
[198] "Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve." Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 322.

package." The speaker didactically utters these facts by rote, as if repeating propaganda; we cannot be quite sure how she "really" feels. This passage, like the earlier one about the "investment years," elegantly condenses the complex issue of nature's modern disenchantment and exploitation. Having done so, the passage becomes difficult to assimilate into the reading of parodically rehashed Asian stereotypes which the title has predisposed us to conduct. It becomes unclear at whose expense this extended "orientalist" joke is being told, and whether, in fact, it is a joke at all. From this point on, the poem only exacerbates these uncertainties. "Yet the whole / scheme is invisible to any shareholder," we discover in the succeeding lines,

> and so the feeling
> lessens, the idea that a composite portrait
> may not be so important after all takes over like the shoulder
> of a mill-wheel, slogging patiently under water, then back
> to the zenith, where the watchword presumably is.

In other words, the "technological sublime" reality of the modern arrangement of things ("the whole scheme") is "invisible to any shareholder," with the further implication that citizens are now represented in solely market-oriented terms. It is less important to imagine a "composite portrait" of the dizzying changes under way than to put one's shoulder to the wheel and make a material contribution, even if the goal or "watchword" is uncertain. Yet even so, the havoc wrought by the "investment years" cannot be masked for long:

> In schools they teach things like plus and minus
> but not in the gorge, not in the boiling mud.
> Area residents were jolted to find what in essence

was a large swamp, pythons and all, in their communal front yard.[199]

To the poem's speaker, this is "insensate," an ambiguous word choice meaning without feeling or emotion but suggesting "nonsensical." She herself has begun to stop making sense as she enters the final phase of her bitter transmission:

> To me this is "insensate." I cannot stand the wind at my back
> making of me nothing, to be handed
> over, in turn, to this
> man, this man. For though he weathered patiently
> the name, the one that occurs to all of us, he went out
> and came in, not in the best interests of abundance;
> not, it seems, being anything but about to fall.[200]

Though she accepts the need for "market gardens" in the "razor sharp" present, she comes to reject the diminished estate of the individual within that present, in which "the rich can survive dust-storms thanks to their red-and-gold liveried postilions" and "nothing / you invent can be a plenipotentiary,/ turn itself inside-out, radiate / iron spokes at the mini-landscape." The issues she raises here of class, resource depletion and the loss of individual agency (are these lines about government seizure of privately owned farmland?) reach a climax in the final lines of the next stanza: "Who knows how much there can be / of any one thing if another stops existing? And the word you give to this / man, this man, is cold,/ fossil fuel." And so we finally arrive at the poem's "watchword." And arriving there, we realize how far we have come from the parodic reading of bad taste with which we began.

"Who knows how much there can be of any one thing if another stops existing?" Here, as in so many other places, Ashbery poses a central question of eco-

[199] Ashbery, *Hotel Lautréamont*, 79.

[200] Ibid. See "Clepsydra": ". . . and meanwhile / I am only a transparent diagram, of manners and / private words with the certainty of being about to fall." *Collected Poems*, 145.

poetics in a context utterly unrecognizable as eco-poetry. Rather than follow through the implications of this dark question, the poem ends on a note of dazed resignation in the face of the diminished state of things:

> So it all comes round
> to individual responsibility and awareness,
> that circus of dusty dramas, denuded forests, and car dealerships, a place
> where anything can and does happen, and hours and hours go by.[201]

As we have come to expect, the speaker balances banal catch-phrases ("individual responsibility and awareness") with more ambiguous elements ("that circus of dusty dramas, denuded forests, and car dealerships"), the value of which, comic or serious, is difficult to gauge. The penultimate line brilliantly sums up the poem's carnivalesque rotation among themes of environmental despoliation and grubby commerce; though, it also leaves us wondering where this "place / where anything can and does happen" might be located. Are we in "Korea" or Phoenix?

Who is the speaker of this poem? Or better yet, whose voice, or voices, is Ashbery imitating? Which world is he caricaturing? Is this poem a committed defense of environmental stewardship? If so, how can we reconcile the poem's banalities and political incorrectness to its sober reckoning with weighty socio-political and environmental issues? The provisional answer to all of these questions must be that, as a beguiling example of late Ashbery's "camp sublime," the poem contains multitudes and gives the lie to any account of the late period that would find it merely silly or sad.

[201] Ashbery, *Hotel Lautréamont*, 80.

V.3 Girls on the Run

The storm finished brewing.
—John Ashbery[202]

The stealth of the horizon nears us.
--John Ashbery[203]

The cover of *Girls on the Run* offers a pure dose of the "camp sublime." Featuring a section of a Henry Darger illustration titled "Storm Brewing," it depicts a group of children running in fear across a cartoonish pastoral landscape, away from the "majestic crash"[204] of the advancing horizon swallowed up by storm clouds and a wall of blackness. "That is going to be a cloudburst" is scrawled on a nearby rockface; one girl flees carrying what appears to be a massive strawberry; another loses her sun hat in the strong wind; a little boy in overalls reaches for the post of a tall birdhouse as he and another girl stare in awe at the sky. The "cloudburst" is on the verge of consuming farmhouses and trees in the distance. The children are stencilled from "comic strips, coloring books, and other ephemeral sources"[205] of the 1930s and 40s.

In this 55-page romp Ashbery channels the apocalyptic "adult" children's book aesthetic of Henry Darger's gargantuan multimedia project, *Realms of the Unreal*.[206] Darger, a Chicago-based outsider artist, hospital custodian, and recluse, labored on his 15,145-page mock-epic for decades, supplementing his writings with

[202] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 512.
[203] Ashbery, *Girls on the Run*, 17.
[204] Ibid., 30.
[205] From the back cover blurb of *Girls on the Run*.
[206] The full title is *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*.

hundreds of color illustrations, which Ashbery viewed extensively in several exhibitions during the 1990s.[207] *Girls on the Run* is subtitled "*after Henry Darger,*" and it is less a mimetic reproduction of Darger's texts and drawings than a loose fantasia on his themes.[208] Like Darger's *Realms*, Ashbery's poem features a series of disarticulated tableaux with some shared themes and characters that do not succeed each other in a strictly linear narrative. Both projects also court a similar kind of "bad taste" relating to child violence and sexuality, though Ashbery shuns the gruesome details in which Darger obsessively revels. Moving toward the conclusion of this chapter, I would like to ponder the affinities between Darger's radically distasteful and violent aesthetic and late Ashbery's "camp sublime," with special reference to both figures's recurrent "ecosublime" motifs.

Darger's fantasy world verges constantly on a state of chaos. John Macgregor explains that "underlying Darger's history of a world at war is a more disturbing vision, of the earth itself grown unstable, and of the laws of man, of God, and even of nature, ceasing to hold":

> Darger is drawn to cataclysm; at the heart of his dark imaginings is a planet destroyed, a nascent vision of the end of the world. . . . Ultimately, *The*

[207] Michael Leddy, "Lives and Art: John Ashbery and Henry Darger," *Jacket* 17, June 2002, http://jacketmagazine.com/17/leddy-ashb.html.

[208] Jenni Quilter draws attention to Ashbery's interest in Darger's "narrativity and aesthetics of detail," adding that Ashbery "uses metaphor as a means of collaborating with, rather than reiterating, Darger's vision by deploying tropes of narrative construction and transformation." "John Ashbery and the Question of Collaboration" (D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 2005), 70. The present reading of *Girls on the Run* is indebted throughout both to Quilter's doctoral thesis on Ashbery's collaboration with other artists and to her unpublished master's thesis on "the question of taste" in *Girls on the Run*. In this section, and throughout this chapter, I have tried to extend Quilter's project of "examin[ing] Ashbery's practise of generating poetic tension in his work by making himself indigestible or *distasteful* as a poet." "'*If I had a handle,* Laure thought.' Picking up on Ashbery and taste in *Girls on the Run*" (MPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2003), 1.

> *Realms*, and indeed all his writings, are dominated by portrayals of nature run amok, of the earth in upheaval.[209]

For Darger and Ashbery alike, the constant renewal and deferral of cataclysmic events opens up a generative creative space between the high and the low in which normative standards of taste and value may be suspended. But unlike the "infinitely dark and creepy"[210] Darger, who renders his extreme events (natural disasters as well as child strangulations and mutilations) in graphic detail, Ashbery "usually deflates the threat of apocalypse before it has been properly enacted" and "grants us the possibility of irreversible change, yet immediately parodies its effects."[211] Like Daffy Duck's "Hollywood," the world Ashbery creates for his cast of embattled children undergoes constant yet cartoonishly innocuous upheaval. In *Girls on the Run*, things are always blowing up, floating away, crashing down, and encroaching menacingly, yet the damage they cause is never permanent. In fact, there seems to be no damage at all. "[W]ith a terrifying roar the house exploded again," we read on page 27, then two lines later: "Yet girls and boys rolled / on together, the end was not in sight,/ nor was it a division yet."[212] The operative word in this passage is "again," as if the house exploding were a regular occurrence. No sooner has the black "cloudburst" rolled

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[209] John M. MacGregor, *Henry Darger: in the realms of the unreal* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), 439. Macgregor elaborates on these themes in Darger's work: "Given Darger's lifelong interest in extreme weather conditions, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that nature participates in the gigantic conflict, with vast typhoons, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, and forest fires, adding to the chaos of war. These cataclysmic events, described in endless detail over hundreds of pages, take on far greater personality than any of his characters. They erupt unannounced into his story, interrupting the evolving narrative with the irrational force and spontaneity inherent in uncontrolled nature. . . .Obsessionally complete accounts of the death and destruction resulting from war and natural catastrophe clearly represent the main themes of his monumental epic, and, indeed, all of his writings." Ibid., 93.

[210] Ashbery, *Girls on the Run*, 22.

[211] Quilter, "Picking up on taste," 48; 49.

[212] Ashbery, *Girls on the Run*, 27.

over children and landscape than it vanishes, leaving everything intact. "Inside, the twilit nest of evening,/ something was coming undone./ Dimples could feel it,/ surging over her shoulders like a wave of energy. And then—/ it was gone."[213] Quilter quotes the following passage from *Girls on the Run* to illustrate this effect:

> Willingly, the flood washed over the day
> and so much that was complicated, from the past:
> the tiny doggy door. . .[214]

As in "Tuesday Evening," the "floodgate of a thousand teeming minor ills," opened repeatedly in *Girls on the Run*, turns out to be a "tiny doggy door." Consider the following passage as well:

> Let the birds wash over them, Laure said, for what use are earmuffs
> in a snowstorm, except to call attention to distant tots
> who have strayed. And now the big Mother warms them,
> accepts them, for the nervous predicates they are. Far from the beach-fiend's
> howling, their adventure nurses itself back
> to something like health. On the fifth day it takes a little blancmange
> and stands up, only to fall back into a hammock.
> I told you it was coming, cried Dimples, but look out,
> Another big one is on the way!
> And they all ran, and got out, and that was that for that day.[215]

These lines takes us back to "The Skaters" in their use of the phrase "calling attention"[216] and reference to the "beach-fiend," perhaps a relative of McGonagall's "storm-fiend." In fact, the "children's adventure story" passages of "The Skaters," with their themes of harried escape and hyper-enthusiasm, directly presage *Girls on*

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[213] Ibid., 4.
[214] Ibid., 5.
[215] Ibid., 4-5.
[216] "It is as well to call attention / To it by exaggeration, perhaps. But calling attention / Isn't the same thing as explaining. . ." Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 152.

the Run.[217] Later, we encounter another epic flood which threatens to wash the world away, only to be reduced to an "average truth":

> It was time to come back, back into the flower-bedecked house.
> A stunning moment of certainty survived
> briefly, then it too was washed away in the rising flood,
> tortured, unambitious.
> School was over,
> not just for that day but forever and for seasons to come.
> The reason was that the truth was just average
> on the iniquity scale, and nobody wanted to get involved.[218]

Despite its comic regenerativeness, *Girls on the Run* assumes a darker tone as it progresses. The cover's black horizon seems to draw increasingly near as we approach the conclusion. "In the gathering chiaroscuro of the closing sections," Forrest Gander observes, "everything begins to explode and break."[219] On page 45 we discover that "all came undone" and "the envy of the age sweeps over us, tidying us into pits of darkness,"[220] while nine pages later "[i]t seemed then an abyss was forming,/ a new set of lagoons."[221] The poem ends on a less-than-consolatory note of apocalypse and comic recovery:

> Does this clinch anything? We were cautioned once, told not to venture
> out—
> yet I'd offer this much, this leaf, to thee.
> Somewhere, darkness churns and answers are riveting,
> taking on a fresh look, a twist. A carousel is burning.

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[217] Consider the following passage from Section II of "The Skaters," which might have been lifted directly from *Girls on the Run*: "Ribbons are flung, ribbons of cloud / And the sun seems to be coming out. But there have been so many false alarms. . . ./ No, it's happened! The storm is over. Again the weather is fine and clear./ And the voyage? It's on! Listen everybody, the ship is starting,/ I can hear its whistle's roar! We have just time enough to make it to the dock!" *Collected Poems*, 159-60.

[218] Ashbery, *Girls on the Run*, 20-21.

[219] Forrest Gander, "Often a Strange Desire," *Jacket 8*, http://jacket magazine.com/08/gand-r-ashb.html

[220] Ibid., 45.

[221] Ibid., 54.

The wide avenue smiles.[222]

Henry Darger retired in 1963 and began work on his final project, an autobiography titled *The History of My Life*. Of the 5,084 pages that would make up the completed eight-volume handwritten text, only the first 206 cover the details of Darger's life (his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood as a menial worker). The rest are devoted to minutely detailed descriptions of a massive cyclone named "Sweetie Pie" that wreaks havoc across a semi-fictional Illinois landscape.[223] While Darger's autobiography makes almost no reference to the art projects which preoccupied him for over a half-century, his graphomaniacal homage to the camp-apocalyptic "Sweetie Pie" is a fitting coda to an artistic career begun in 1910 with a description of the Easter Sunday Typhoon of April 12, 1903 (which he had witnessed as a child). Ashbery's 14-line poem, "The History of My Life," published in *Your Name Here* (2000), the volume that succeeded *Girls on the Run*, also ends with an image of a "great devouring cloud" consuming the horizon.[224] At merely sonnet length, however, the poem is sublimely dwarfed by Darger's autobiography.

[222] Ibid., 55.

[223] MacGregor, *Henry Darger,* 434.

[224] "Then a great devouring cloud // came and loitered on the horizon, drinking / it up, for what seemed like months or years." Ashbery, *Your Name Here*, 31.

CONCLUSION

I don't deny the influence, but it's less
A relation of father to son than a relation of
Moon to tide.
—Ben Lerner[1]

This thesis has examined the changing status of nature in John Ashbery's work, from his editorship at the *Harvard Crimson* to *Quick Question* (2012), his 24th full-length poetry collection. Ashberyan "nature," I have argued, is never simply "natural," but is a force field of competing vectors, subjects, and fantasies encompassing, among other things, the "transparent" naturalisms of "The New Realism" and "Clepsydra," the "philosophical pastoral" of "Evening in the Country," the "queer pastoral" of *The Vermont Notebook*, the riverine sophism of *Three Poems,* the "stuplimity" of *Flow Chart*, and the "camp sublime" of *Girls on the Run*. If nothing else, Ashbery makes good on Gertrude Stein's famous claim that "Nature is not natural, and that is natural enough."[2] Though not a nature poet or eco-poet, he emerges as a crucial poetic thinker about nature.

In many ways, the first three chapters of this thesis worry over the same problem: how Ashbery's time in France broke down and reconstructed his poetics, and how that break would ripple through his work for decades. The fourth chapter, by contrast, seeks to understand how Ashbery harnesses the power of breakdown itself in the later period of his career—and how he had been doing it all along. In asking these questions, I discover that the answer often relates to Ashbery's formal

[1] Ben Lerner, *Mean Free Path* (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2010), 25.
[2] Gertrude Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909—45* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 415.

and thematic use of the natural. Moreover, I have found that his interest in the "transparency" of marginal French artists, his migrations away from the heated political arena of the Vietnam era, and his fascination with formal dissolution are all underwritten by a simple abiding urge to "accept / everything and take nothing," as he writes in "The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers," his proto-self-portrait. Similarly, I have found that his lifelong commitment to "the good taste of bad taste" means we will never take his full measure if we read him only as a major poet with high-minded ideals. Robert Duncan gets it just right when he refers to Ashbery's "transformation of high camp (as if starting there gave the permission needed for the transcendent speech)."[3]

Ashbery divides opinion on all matters except the vastness of his influence, a topic that will someday receive the full treatment it deserves. "John Ashbery is everywhere, ramifying still," Stephen Burt writes in a recent essay,[4] and indeed it is easy to visualize Ashbery's influence as a tree of many branches spreading across generations and national borders. As Ashbery himself puts it in "Grand Galop":

> All things seem mention of themselves
> And the names which stem from them branch out to other referents.[5]

The branching out begins with the second-generation New York School poets, such as Ted Berrigan and Gerard Malanga, who re-collaged Ashbery's own collages in the 1960s.[6] And the subsequent rise of Language poetry in the 1970s and 1980s has

[3] Letter of April 1, 1975 to Robert Adamson, quoted in Lisa Jarnot, *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador from Venus: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 481.

[4] Stephen Burt, *Close Calls,* 345-6.

[5] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 436.

[6] For a fuller account of Berrigan's and Malanga's relationship with Ashbery, see Reva Wolf, *Andy Warhol, Poetry, and Gossip in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 81-123.

ensured a politically committed, theory-guided audience for Ashbery's work. Meanwhile, with the arrival of the major prizes in 1975, Ashbery's influence has gradually fed into a mainstream that tends to ignore Language poetry, which itself has matured into another of the canonical avant-gardes. Ashbery has also earned a lasting reputation abroad, notably in Britain where his voice resonates beautifully in the work of contemporary poets from Mark Ford to Oli Hazzard. And in France, his erstwhile home, he has been masterfully translated by Franck André Jamme, Olivier Brossard, and others. To put matters in perspective, Ashbery has been around long enough to influence James Tate and then be influenced by him in turn. In our "post-Language" moment, Ashbery has emerged as the *éminence grise* of the "post-avant" or "third way" poetics as codified in Cole Swensen's and David St. John's anthology, *American Hybrid* (2009). In a contemporary poet like Peter Gizzi, for instance, we find the "post-avant" Ashbery received with a generous and exuberant intelligence in books like *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* (2003) and *The Outernationale* (2007). Where Ashbery's "Clepsydra" has the beauty of a single word, Gizzi's "Etudes, Evidence, or A Working Definition of the Sun Gear" has the beauty of a single photographic moment, a "picture of thought." Where Ashbery's poem begins with its spectral lyric speaker opening his eyes and questioning the sky, Gizzi's begins with the opening of the the camera's *f*-stop:

> In a picture of thought the *f*-stop opens
> As when skylarks departing,
> It was night, wheeling clicks in the lens,
> Full, volumetric night, scribbling
> Streets, irregular gardens
> Around a sea chamber, the din
> Deployed as architecture, a ribbony neon,

Or the permanent shape of a letter.[7]

Among the most recent generation of poets, Ben Lerner has distinguished himself, as artist and critic, as one of Ashbery's most gifted disciples. Lerner's debut novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), takes its title from a poem in *The Tennis Court Oath* and is, among other things, an extended homage to the master of "immediate mediacy."[8] Ashbery's second book also serves as a crucial precedent for Lerner's most recent poetry collection, *Mean Free Path* (2010), which, like "The New Realism," atomizes its lines into stuttering semantic units that fitfully persist beyond the break. Lerner, too, projects himself into the ambiguous green space of pastoral, only to turn its "embossed symbols" and "hollow enclosures" inside-out:

> I wasn't finished. I was going to say
> Into the open, a green place when seen
> Through goggles. Virgil wrote at night
> From above. Build your own pastoral
> Out of embossed symbols, hollow enclosures
> Expand on impact in order to disrupt
> The Lady of the Lake. A magazine for men
> More tissue as they travel through
> The genre. We were happy in the cave[9]

Toward the end of 2012, just before the publication of *Quick Question*, Ashbery appeared in *Three Poets*, a collaborative chapbook with Timothy Donnelly and Geoffrey G. O'Brien, two other notable contemporary disciples. Ashbery had been reading and enjoying O'Brien's *Metropole* (2011) when I visited him in August

[7] Peter Gizzi, *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 69.
[8] Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2011), 90-91.
[9] Lerner, *Mean Free Path*, 48.

2011,[10] and has praised Donnelly's work as "the poetry of the future, here, today."[11] Here is an excerpt from "The Halls of Aspartame," Donnelly's contribution to *Three Poets*, a variation on Ashbery's "river of rivers" and "living tidal wave" rendered in the liquid prose of *Three Poems*:

> What is it about a river? It can't be the water. We're just under three-quarters water ourselves, and that's more than enough. And it can't be the constant motion of it either, I don't think, because we're always in that too, one way or the other, whether we like it or not. So that a shopping line is like a river made of rivers, the way a crowd of us is like a living tidal wave. We have never not felt this. So maybe it's similitude that lures us to the river and not difference from it. Our nearness draws us nearer, not the need for what the river possesses and we don't. Meaning to stand at its banks is to consider a fresh articulation of ourselves, a version abstracted from the bind of personhood. Alleviated of it. Like a stripped-down idea of human life. This is why the speaker's response to the river surprises us as it does. While it's customary to value human life in theory but to find oneself repulsed by actual examples of it, the speaker is seized by a *two-part repulsion*, and the torque of it has wrenched him out of orbit, and it hurtles him even further from the sun.[12]

Three Poets brings us back to Ashbery's earliest collaborations with Koch, Schuyler, and Mathews in the five volumes of *Locus Solus*, and invites comparison to his mid-career, mixed-media projects with Alex Katz and Joe Brainard. The book also brings us full-circle in our discussion of Ashbery's poetics of nature: its cover features a sidelong, blurry view of some trees.

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[10] Geoffrey G. O'Brien, *Metropole* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[11] John Ashbery, front cover blurb to *The Cloud Corporation* (London: Picador, 2010).

[12] John Ashbery, Timothy Donnelly, and Geoffrey G. O'Brien, *Three Poets* (Berkeley, CA: Minus A Press, 2012), 42.

CODA: "A Completely New Kind of Realism"

Anyway, in poems
are no ideas. No ideas in things, either. . .
—John Ashbery[1]

I think writers are always realists. I think Joyce in Finnegans Wake *is a realist. What is interesting is the question of what's real.* —Ron Silliman[2]

In September 2008, Ashbery, aged eighty-one, made his debut as a visual artist, exhibiting a selection of collages at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. It was a fitting venue for his first one-man show. Tibor de Nagy, the unofficial *alma mater* of the New York School poets, had published his first poetry collection, *Turandot and Other Poems*, exactly fifty-five years earlier. A second one-man show followed in the fall of 2011, along with a winter 2011 retrospective of the gallery's "painters and poets," with special focus on the young New York School. Since 2008, Ashbery has shared gallery space with a number of other Tibor de Nagy artist-friends, whose work has mattered deeply to him: Jane Freilicher, Nell Blaine, Larry Rivers, Fairfield Porter, Joe Brainard, Trevor Winkfield, Louisa Matthiasdottir, and Jess. Recently, the gallery also displayed the "objects and apparitions" of Elizabeth Bishop, whom Ashbery became acquainted with in the 1970s.

In the catalogue of his 2008 show, Ashbery chronicles his involvement with collage, dating back to his early discovery of work by Ernst, Cornell, Schwitters, Picasso, and Braque. He made his first collages (now lost) as an undergraduate at Harvard, and around 1958 he began incorporating collage elements into his poems,

[1] Ashbery, *And the Stars Were Shining*, 85.
[2] Stephen Ross, "An Interview with Ron Silliman," *Wave Composition* 2, September 10, 2011, http://www.wavecom position.com/article/issue-2/an-interview-with-ron-silliman-2/

The Tennis Court Oath being the most immediate (and extreme) product of these experiments. "Why do I do this?" he asks:

> More important, why did great artistic minds like Picasso, Gris, and Braque suddenly feel the urge to incorporate bits of everyday ephemera like newspaper clippings into their high-minded classical work? Well, perhaps to bring it down to earth a little and make it more realist, in a certain sense. But no doubt also to introduce life, which is a mixed-media affair, into their paintings. As one studies them, one's attention keeps shifting from the ebb and flow of angular or rounded forms to the printed texts in the newspapers, announcing perhaps a furniture sale or a crime that was the talk of Paris for a week.[3]

I would like to linger over what Ashbery means by "realist, in a certain sense." Though this comment might seems offhand in the context of the catalogue, Ashbery has been advocating a kind of "imaginative realism"[4] since at least the late 1950s. Such realism hinges on the notion that life is a "mixed-media affair" and that art, abiding by this principle, may be ambiguous, "not for its own sake but as a means of getting more content into the picture." So Ashbery argues in the 1972 review of Louisa Matthiasdottir with which I begin this study. Ten years later, he praises the "air of heightened realism" which pervades Matthiasdottir's paintings, "a kind of trompe-l'óeil that works on a mental rather than an optical level."[5] Of course, there is something suspicious about the self-described "harebrained, homegrown surrealist whose poetry defies even the rules and logic of Surrealism"[6] aligning

[3] John Ashbery, *Collages: They Knew What They Wanted* (New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 2008).

[4] He applies this phrase to the work of his friends, Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher, in his introduction to the *Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ix.

[5] John Ashbery, introduction to *Louisa Matthiasdottir: with an Introductory Text by John Ashbery* (New York: Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, 1982). Revised version reprinted in *Louisa Matthiasdottir*, ed. Jed Perl (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999), 9.

[6] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 164.

himself with any kind of realism other than the "more than real" kind. But there is a method to this madness, as his critical prose suggests.

By bringing bits and pieces of the "real world" into contact with "high-minded classicism," artists like Picasso and Braque achieve, in Ashbery's judgment, a kind of "heightened realism" based on the recognition that "all kinds of things exist." We can begin to understand Ashbery's position *vis-à-vis* realism by considering the kinds of objects he himself brings into his poems—or rather, the way in which he thinks of the poems themselves as objects. Indeed, it has been Ashbery's avowed purpose over many decades, as too few critics have noted,[7] to create "poetic objects," as he explains in his inaugural Norton lecture at Harvard:

> As I see it, my thought is both poetry and the attempt to explain that poetry; the two cannot be disentangled. . . .For me, poetry has its beginning and ending outside thought. Thought is certainly involved in the process, indeed, there are times when my work seems to me to be merely a recording of my thought processes without regard to what they are thinking about. If this is true, then I would also like to acknowledge my intention of somehow turning these processes into poetic objects, a position perhaps kin to Dr. Williams's "No ideas but in things," with the caveat that, for me, ideas are also things.[8]

While the first half of Ashbery's statement makes the familiar point that his poems are, as he says elsewhere, the "records of a thought process" in which "the process

[7] One exception to this rule is Michael Clune, who argues in a recent essay on Ashbery's later work that "Ashbery's poetic career consists of a rigorous and sustained effort to take something you have never seen before and show you what it would look like if you had seen it every day of your life. This familiarizing procedure results in the invention of a new kind of aesthetic shape and a new kind of aesthetic value." As Clune goes on to explain, "Ashbery's poems are elaborately constructed theaters where alien and unfamiliar objects appear as they would to someone who is familiar with them," adding that "Ashbery has a surrealist knack for creating otherworldly images; he uses the conventions of novelistic realism to make them take root in other worlds." Michael Clune, "What Charms Is Alien: John Ashbery's Everything," *Criticism* 50, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 447-469. While I would not take up Clune's unusual reading of "novelistic realism" in Ashbery, his essay provides an important impetus for my reading of Ashbery's object poetics and its relation to "heightened realism."

[8] Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 12.

and the thought reflect back and forth on each other,"[9] the second half might strike us as odd. Ashbery poems as "poetic objects" akin to those of Williams? In fact, Ashbery has said on numerous occasions that these are precisely what he aims to make. "I think of my poems as independent objects or little worlds which are self-referential," he told the *American Poetry Review* in 1984. The year before, he made the following exchange with the *Paris Review*:

> INTERVIEWER
>
> So for you a poem is an object in and of itself rather than a clue to some abstraction, to something other than itself?
>
> ASHBERY
>
> Yes, I would like it to be what Stevens calls a completely new set of objects. My intention is to present the reader with a pleasant surprise, not an unpleasant one, not a nonsurprise.[10]

Ashbery repeats this claim in a recent interview with the British poet-critic Michael Glover, citing again Stevens's "completely new set of objects"[11] as his aim. This particular phrase—the title of a poem from *Transport to Summer* (1947)—occurs in Ashbery's critical remarks throughout the 1960s and 70s on figures as varied as

[9] Bloom and Losada, "Craft Interview," 121.

[10] Stitt, "Art of Poetry," 192.

[11] "Roussel once said that in his work everything was invented. There was nothing that was real. I think that could be said of my work too. It has a factitious, man-made quality. Not a poetry of ideas. Not a poetry of place. Something created of and for itself. . . .I don't know why the urge to do that exists—but to create something that's outside of me, what Wallace Stevens would call **a completely new set of objects**, is always the urge that I've had when I'm writing, rather than to tell about myself and my various tragic and less tragic experiences in life. . . ." Michael Glover, "The Luscious Dependability of Chocolate Shrimps: Michael Glover in Conversation with John Ashbery," *The Bowwow Shop* 9, http://www.bowwowshop.org.uk/page5.htm, accessed 13 September 2012. [emphasis mine]

Jasper Johns, Willem de Kooning, and Patrick Henry Bruce.[12] Moreover, we can hear it echoed in a range of other statements on some of his favorite artists: Joseph Cornell's artworks result in "a completely new kind of realism" (1967); Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* and Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* are "ambitious attempts to transmit a completely new picture of reality, of that *real* reality of the poet which Antonin Artaud called "une réalité dangereuse et typique" (1957); the effect of Rodrigo Moynihan's paintings "is almost a new genre of still life, in which the objects seem aching to transcend their objectness" (1980).[13] While we must be wary of taking Ashbery's critical statements out of context, I think we are justified in taking seriously this particular claim, given the fact that he has been making it consistently, albeit in varying terms, since the late 1950s. But what does he mean by "a completely new set of objects"? And how does this relate to "heightened realism"?

To answer these questions, let us begin by attending to some of the literary-historical context. Ashbery's mention of Williams in his Norton address offers an important clue to his thinking on this subject, as Williams is one of the chief modernist proponents of what may be called "object poetics." Let me be clear:

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[12] "Whatever was locked up in his former hieratic emblems—targets, flags, numbers, monochrome surfaces—has been let out, sweeping these elements into what Wallace Stevens called **"a completely new set of objects. . . .**Johns is one of the few young painters of today whose work seems to defy critical analysis, and this is precisely a sign of its power—it can't be explained in any other terms than its own, and is therefore necessary." Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 69. "They are merely examples of how de Kooning can, when he feels like it, invent what Wallace Stevens called **"a completely new set of objects."** Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 184. "Even more than [Patrick Henry Bruce's] sophisticated manipulation of color theories, the high intractability of this parallel universe—**a "completely new set of objects,"** in Wallace Stevens' words—makes it exciting and relevant to today's color painters and to us." Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 114 (emphases mine).

[13] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings,* 16; Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 13; Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 165.

Ashbery cannot be read as an Objectivist or Williams acolyte, nor do his poems look or sound like Williams's poems. But, I would argue, Ashbery is an important re-interpreter of Williams's poetics, and his debt deserves fuller attention than it has received.[14] When, for instance, Ashbery asserts that it is Stein's special achievement in *Stanzas in Meditation* to "create a counterfeit reality more real than reality,"[15] or that Giorgio de Chirico's "language [in the novel *Hebdomeros*], like his painting, is invisible: a transparent but dense medium containing objects that are more dense than reality," or that the world of Raymond Roussel's *New Impressions of Africa* "is no longer the imaginary world but the real one," or that the poetry of Pierre Reverdy "restores to things their true name," or that Marianne Moore's "eye and ear. . .are almost magical in their power to re-create reality for us," or that Antonin Artaud possessed a "will to create nothing less than reality itself—not literature about it"—to quote just a few examples—he reveals his own most closely cherished artistic aims and draws direct inspiration from the Williams of *Spring and All* (1923) who writes, "poetry: new form dealt with as reality in itself."[16] In his *Autobiography* (first published in 1951), Williams declares:

> It is NOT to hold the mirror up to nature that the artist performs his work. It is to make, out of the imagination, something not at all a copy of nature, but

[14] Ronald Bush, one of the earliest critics to highlight this debt, perceptively links Ashbery to the Williams of his Dada phase (i.e. *Kora in Hell*). *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 179.

[15] Interestingly, Ashbery uses this phrase, the literal meaning of "surreal," in a college essay on Arthur Symons' *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry*: "The true feeling of loss of identity, as opposed to a false self-confidence, results in these brilliant waverings [in Keats' *Endymion*] between truth and sheer insanity which are often 'more real than reality' and in any case are the true offspring of the poetic sensibility." Ashbery papers, Houghton Library Collection, Harvard University, AM-6, box 31.

[16] William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions, 2011), 67.

> something quite different, a new thing, unlike any thing else in nature, a thing advanced and apart from it.[17]

"A new thing unlike any thing else in nature." A completely new set of objects. These are different aesthetic programs that rely on a common rhetoric. In contrast to Ashbery's "new realist" poetics, which emphasizes the non-symbolic and indeed "non-poetic" value of the objects in a poem, Williams's "object poetics" is grounded in an organicist program whereby "organically new works of art are 'objects' that take their place in a world of other objects." Donald Markos explains:

> The result of [Williams's] creative process is an "object"—but what exactly did Williams mean by thinking of poems as objects? Given Williams' organic poetics according to which artistic creation brings forth something new in nature, a poem that is a slavish imitation of established conventions—whether of Victorian or more recent vintage—would not be a new object, but a carbon copy. . . . On the other hand, a poem that was too formless also failed to achieve the status of "object". . . . Williams' metaphor for the organic unity of a poem, a "machine made out of words," suggests that the "object-ness" of a poem has to do with its economy, movement, and physicality, for a poem's "movement" is "intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character." [quoting *Selected Essays*, p. 256][18]

Williams clarifies his thoughts on the "object-ness" of poems in his *Autobiography*. On the topic of the Objectivist movement of the early 1930s, he writes:

> But, we argued, the poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes.
>
> […]

[17] William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 241.

[18] Donald W. Markos, *Ideas in Things: The Poems of William Carlos Williams* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994), 121-22.

> The poem being an object (like a symphony or cubist painting) it must be the purpose of the poet to make his words a new form: to invent, that is, an object consonant with his day.[19]

Williams had been moving toward this position on "objects" for decades before he published his *Autobiography* in 1951. "[I]n great works of the imagination," he bellows in *Spring and All*, "A CREATIVE FORCE IS SHOWN AT WORK MAKING OBJECTS WHICH ALONE COMPLETE SCIENCE AND ALLOW INTELLIGENCE TO SURVIVE."[20]

Whatever else they might be, these statements are declarations of independence from Eliot and, more importantly, from the Neo-Symbolist poetics which would be elevated by the New Critical establishment that followed in his wake.[21] Or at least they would have been received as such by Ashbery and his New York School peers when they were cutting their poetic teeth in the late 1940s.[22] More important than the specific meaning of terms like "imagination," "intelligence," and "reality" in these contexts is the exuberant license Williams gave

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[19] Williams, *Autobiography*, 264-65.

[20] Williams, *Spring and All*, 37.

[21] I explore the topic of the New Criticism's "neo-symbolist" dominance over mid-century American poetry in chapter one. Possible affinities between Ashbery's and Williams' "poetic objects" and New Critical prescriptions that poems be autonomous artifacts, of course, must not be overlooked. But, as I argue in chapter four, Ashbery's early engagement with the New Criticism was canny and original in its use of camp irony to play the New Criticism's own critical diktats and formulations against them. Markos clarifies Williams' relation to the New Critics: "Thus Williams' objectivist view of a poem as an object can be distinguished from the New Criticism idea of a poem as a tightly unified *thematic* structure of meanings and images. The New Critics thought of a poem's integrity as inhering in an unalterable organization of meanings, and symbolic images , whereas Objectivists. . .thought of autonomy, or object-ness, as inhering primarily in *prosodic* structures." *Ideas in Things*, 122.

[22] Perloff notes that "Williams' well-known attack on 'The Waste Land' in his *Autobiography* (a book O'Hara knew well) as the poem that 'returned us to the classroom just at the moment when. . .we were on the point of escape. . .to the essence of a new art form' reflects Eliot's position at the time the statement was made (1951) rather than the time about which it was ostensibly made (1922)." In other words, it was a handy attack on Eliot at a time when O'Hara and his peers were looking to attack him. *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (New York: George Braziller, 1997), 10.

Ashbery and O'Hara to pursue a non-allegorical style that would oppose the dense allusiveness of *The Waste Land*. Williams and Objectivism aside, the prospect of writing poems that could take on a kind of object-like facticity, unencumbered by footnotes and allegorical overtones while retaining a certain vivid mystery, strongly attracted the young New York School poets. Williams, by asserting that the imagination "creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature,"[23] offered one model of how to proceed.

But Ashbery was never more than notionally indebted to Williams's organicist "object poetics." Rather, he draws his conception of "a completely new set of objects" far more deeply from avant-garde currents surrounding the advent of Pop Art, or the "New Realism" as I have discussed in chapter one. It is important also to note that Williams was not the only twentieth-century poet to hail the object qualities of poems. Beyond the prominent examples of the imagist Pound and objectivist Zukofsky[24] (both of whom have meant very little to Ashbery), we might consider the metaphysical Stevens of "Prelude to Objects" and the cubist Stein of

[23] Williams, *Spring and All*, 91.

[24] Speaking to L.S. Dembo in 1968, Zukofsky defines the "objectivist" as "a craftsman who puts words together into an object." Quoted in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1979). In his important early statement, "An Objective" (1930, 1931), Zukofsky, speaking of the "poem as object" and of "the desire for an inclusive object," offers a more nuanced definition of the objectivist ideal as a "rested totality": "This rested totality may be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object. That is: distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, though it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such." Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 12-18. For a detailed account of Zukofsky's argument (with careful unpacking of his key terms "sincerity" and "objectification"), see Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 96-105. It perhaps goes without saying that Ashbery would never dream of elaborating his own poetic theories (if he were even given to formalizing them) in terms as abstruse as Zukofsky's.

Tender Buttons (both of whom have meant a great deal to him). There is also W.H. Auden, Ashbery's "first" and "most important influence,"[25] who was in the habit of describing the poet as "a professional maker of verbal objects."[26] There is Charles Olson, who in his influential essay, "Projective Verse" (1950), condenses his theory of "composition by field" into "a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used."[27] And there is Jack Spicer, who writes in *After Lorca* (1957) of his desire "to make poems out of real objects."[28] Both Olson's and Spicer's texts appeared in Donald Allen's anthology, *The New American Poetry* (1960), the document responsible more than any other for drawing the map of post-war experimental

[25] Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 4.

[26] Quoted in Raymond A. Sokolov, "Auden at 60," *Newsweek*, January 29, 1968, 54. Auden reiterates this position in a 1973 *New York Review of Books* 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." W.H. Auden, "The Poems of Joseph Brodsky," in *New York Review of Books* 20, no. 5 (April 5, 1973): 10.

[27] Ibid., 20. Williams quotes and endorses a large section of "Projective Verse" in his *Autobiography*. Also worth noting is Olson's introduction of the term "objectism" in the second half of his manifesto to characterize his particular take on the Pound-Williams tradition: "It is no accident that Pound and Williams both were involved variously in a movement which got called 'objectivism.' But that word was then used in some sort of a necessary quarrel, I take it, with 'subjectivism.' It is now too late to be bothered with the latter. It has excellently done itself to death, even though we are all caught in its dying. What seems to me a more valid formulation for present use is 'objectism,' a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be shaped as wood can be when a man has had his hand to it. Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption of western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may with no derogation, call objects." Charles Olson, *Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 24.

[28] "DEAR LORCA: I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste – a real lemon like a newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper. I would like the moon in my poems to be a real moon, one which could suddenly be covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with the poem—a moon utterly independent of images. The imagination pictures the real. I would like to point to the real, disclose it, to make a poem that has no sound in it but the pointing of a finger. . .Live moons, live lemons, live boys in bathing suits. The poem is a collage of the real." Jack Spicer, *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), 33-4.

American poetry. Ashbery appeared in it too, grouped with the other poets who would come to form the New York School. While I would not try to argue Ashbery out of the New York School, or into Black Mountain[29] or the San Francisco Renaissance (Olson and Spicer, like Pound and Zukofsky, have also meant little to him), I think it important to acknowledge a broader context for late-modernist "object poetics" than a strict history of Objectivism might allow. The fact remains that poets of all stripes following in the wake of the high modernist moment conceived of poems as objects, though they did so in the service of vastly differing agendas. The idea that poems can, or should, somehow take the form of objects, regardless of what this might mean in practice, is an important bequest from certain strains of modernism to subsequent practitioners, from the New Critics to the Language Poets. In sketching this brief, and necessarily limited, account of late-modernist "object poetics," my aim is not to dislodge Ashbery from the various critical contexts in which we are accustomed to finding him (the New York School, the writerly and painterly neo-avant-garde, proto-Language poetry, queer poetics, the American Sublime, postmodernism, and so on) but to throw into relief just how fluid his position within the constellation of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American poetry really is.

Ashbery himself, it should be noted, has no trouble blurring the line between apparently discrete movements such as Objectivism and Surrealism. Introducing a

[29] Though, Ashbery has made an interesting remark about his work's relation to "projective verse" in his "Craft Interview." Asked about the influence of "open field or projective verse technique" on his work, he replies: "It's nothing that I've ever codified or set up as a standard in writing poetry but I guess I certainly do it. I don't see very much relation between my poetry and what is called projective verse although it seems to me that in fact that's what I'm doing." Bloom and Losada, "Craft Interview," 125.

reading by the poet Michael Palmer in 1991, he notes Palmer's allegiance to the "tradition of the American Objectivists—Reznikoff, Oppen, Lorine Neidecker, Carl Rakosi, Zukofsky," but adds that the younger poet "approaches their program of 'no ideas but in things' with not a little help from Surrealism":

> This sounds bizarre at first—surely the leanness of Objectivisim is at opposite poles from the high-strung and full-blown conceits of the Surrealists—until we remember that Objectivisim has its eldritch side—Williams's *Kora in Hell* for one instance—while Surrealism is not just Breton's rodomontades but also Eluard's jagged, lightning-bolt lines as well.[30]

Whether or not we are prepared to agree that the Objectivist "program"—if there is such a thing—can be boiled down to Williams's famous dictum, this statement offers a telling index of Ashbery's loose regard for institutional categories. Or rather, it illustrates his willingness to reinterpret those categories along lines that best suit his purposes. Better yet, it exemplifies the fluid, motley nature of the "other tradition"—otherwise known as surrealism "in the second, open sense"—that is his proper domain.

The last phrase comes from a 1974 review of the French painter Yves Tanguy, in a passage that sheds light on Ashbery's "object poetics" and his interest in "a more integral realism":

> . . .[A]lthough Tanguy cannot be said to have had an important influence on the artists who succeeded him, he seems more than any other Surrealist painter to embody the spirit of Surrealism—not in the parochial 1920s sense of the term but in the second, open sense in which it can still be said to animate much of the most advanced art being done today. One reason for this is that the arbitrary distinction between abstract and figurative painting did not exist for Tanguy, who painted real if nonexistent objects, so that his work

[30] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 217-18.

> is in a sense a fusion of the two, always in the interests of a more integral realism.[31]

Like Louisa Matthiasdottir, who allows the three "elements" of her painting "Man in a Landscape" to "curb each other" in order to "get more content into the picture," Tanguy disregards the "arbitrary distinction" between the abstract and the figurative in the service of "a more integral realism." Significantly, this "semi-abstract" realism involves the painting of "real if nonexistent objects"—"real," one supposes, because they quite literally appear on the canvas. Before further analyzing these remarks, I would like to consider another passage taken from a review of Joseph Cornell's 1967 show at the Guggenheim Museum, which clarifies the relationship Ashbery perceives between "poetic objects" and "heightened realism." Pondering an early collage involving a clipper ship, a cabbage rose, and a spider's web, Ashbery observes that Cornell

> establishes a delicately adjusted dialogue between the narrative and the visual qualities of the work in which neither is allowed to dominate. The result is a completely new kind of realism. This, I suspect, is why Cornell's work means so much to so many different kinds of artists, including some far removed from Surrealism. Each of his works is an autonomous visual experience, with its own natural laws and its climate: the thing in its thingness; revealed, not commented on; and with its ambience intact.[32]

It is worth noting, firstly, that Ashbery's startled encounter with Cornell's work at the age of ten in a *Life* magazine piece on the Museum of Modern Art's "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrrealism" show in 1937 led to his "discovering that I was a

[31] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 27.
[32] Ibid., 16.

surrealist."[33] Cornell has remained in Ashbery's pantheon ever since. Similar to the way in which Tanguy "fuses" the abstract and the figurative in the service of a "more integral realism," Cornell negotiates a fresh dialogue "between the narrative and visual qualities" of his collage to achieve "a completely new kind of realism." The "realism" Ashbery has in mind, as we may begin to see, has to do with the "autonomy" of the art in question, its possession of "its own natural laws and its climate." Here we have "the thing in its thingness; revealed, not commented on; and with its ambience intact," presented without allegorical or symbolic overtones: an "independent object or little world which is self-referential," as Ashbery puts it to Richard Jackson. This condition of self-referential "autonomy" anchors Ashbery's conception of realism, both in painting and in poetry, as he explains to Jackson:

> But poetry, as has often been said, is made out of words; it is an affair of language. The situation is parallel with painting, for a painting does not make a "meaningful statement." I think that this is why the Impressionists were harshly criticized at first, yet their work is actually a kind of realism superior to what had been done when they began to work. The interests of realism in poetry are actually enhanced in the long run by a close involvement with language: thought created by language and creating it are the nucleus of the poem. Self-referentiality is not a sign of narcissism, but actually is a further stage of objectivity.[34]

For Ashbery, the "interests of realism in poetry" are enhanced by a poem's self-referentiality, by the degree to which it thinks aloud about its own form and content ("thought" and "language"). The product of such a "realist" practice is a "completely

[33] John Ashbery, foreword to *Joseph Cornell's Theater of the Mind: Selected Diaries, Letters, and Files*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 9. For a fuller account of Ashbery's affinities to Cornell, see Ellen Levy's *Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery, and the Struggle Between the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[34] Jackson, *Acts of Mind*, 71. In his "Craft Interview" he makes a comparable reference to "a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism." Bloom and Losada, "Craft Interview," 124.

new object" that drifts imperceptibly between the inner and the outer and does not subordinate itself to, or allow itself to be distilled into, an allegorical or symbolic meaning, even as it seems to invite them. As Ashbery says of his painter friend Fairfield Porter, such works "have no ideas in them, that is, no ideas that can be separated from the rest. They *are* idea, or consciousness, or light, or whatever. Ideas surround them, but do not and cannot extrude themselves into the being of the art."[35] By these standards, Elizabeth Bishop qualifies as a highly "realist" poet for the way she merges the inner and outer, as Ashbery explains in a 1969 review of her *Complete Poems*. In "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," for example, "[d]escription and meaning, text and ornament, subject and object, the visible world and the poet's consciousness fuse together to form a substance that is indescribable and a continuing joy, and one returns to it again and again, ravished and unsatisfied." [36] "It is this continually renewed sense of discovering the strangeness, the unreality of our reality at the very moment of becoming conscious of it as reality," Ashbery writes in a later review, "that is the great subject for Elizabeth Bishop."[37] Like Cornell's collages, Bishop's poems possesses a "quality which one can only call 'thingness,'" which points up "the way we as subjects feel about the objects, living or inert, that encircle us."[38] Ashbery calls this the "strange divided singleness of our experience," which is "not a dualistic conflict between inner and outer reality" but rather "a question of deciding how much the outer

[35] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 314.
[36] Ashbery, *Selected Prose,* 122.
[37] Ibid., 166.
[38] Ibid., 121.

reality is our reality, how far we can advance into it and still keep a toe-hold on the inner, private one."[39] And sure enough, in Bishop as in Ashbery, we can never be quite sure of the poet's worlds. In Ashbery's words: "Throughout ["Over 2,000 Illustrations. . ."], which dips freely back and forth from a steel-etched 'Holy Land' to the coast of Nova Scotia to Rome to Mexico to Marrakesh, we are never sure that the landscape we are in is the real world or the 'engravable' one."[40] It is this ambiguity, projected not for its own sake but as a means of getting more content into the poem, that is, for Ashbery, one of the major rewards of Bishop's poetry.

Ashbery began to explore these informal theories of "poetic objects" and non-allegorical representation as early as his undergraduate years. In an essay on "Nature Images in the Poetry of Vaughan and Marvell," written in the late 1940s, we find him already articulating some of the central tenets of his mature poetic practice. He begins by praising a passage from Vaughan's "The Bird"[41] which, "while it might be said to deal with nature, is entirely un-descriptive; in fact, its unreality is what gives it its peculiar vividness." Vaughan, we are told, demonstrates a "double vision of nature" (anticipating the "Double Dream of Spring"?) which is "half-realistic, half-ethereal." His "method," Ashbery writes,

> is to write about the object as if he were both within and without it; to describe it both as a physical body, with accompanying connotations, and as a spiritually conscious body, endowed with a knowledge of its Creator. Such poetry differs from allegory in its never ceasing to regard both natures of the thing at once, whereas allegory requires at least a temporary separation of the

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 170.
[41] "The turtle then in palm trees mourns / while owls and satyrs howl;/ the pleasant land to brimstone turns / and all her streams go foul." Henry Vaughan, *The Complete Poems* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1976), 261.

> object from the "meaning" in order to make its point. The former kind of poetry, while it may be more ambiguous, is far more deeply moving than the allegorical kind.[42]

Even at this early stage of his career, Ashbery was keen to point up the virtues of an "ambiguous," non-allegorical artistic practice that would fuse the inner and the outer, the figurative and the literal, into "a transparent but dense medium containing objects that are more dense than reality." Nearly twenty years later, using similar language, he would praise certain passages of Adrienne Rich's *Necessities of Life: Poems 1962-65*, in which "inner and outer reality fuse into a kind of living fabric."[43] Indeed, Ashbery often calls on the word "fuse" to describe the process whereby his favorite art assumes a condition of "heightened realism."[44] He uses it in another passage from his 1967 Cornell review:

> Cornell's work exists beyond questions of "literature" and "art" in a crystal world of its own making: archetypal and inexorable. Like de Chirico or the French poet and novelist Raymond Roussel, with whom he has much in common, Cornell discovered how to neutralize Romanesque content in such a way that it becomes the substance of his art rather than its embellishment: matter and manner fuse to form a new element. Thus we are allowed to keep all the stories that art seems to want to cut us off from, without giving up the inspiring asceticism of abstraction.[45]

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[42] John Ashbery, "Nature Images in the Poetry of Vaughan and Marvell," Ashbery papers, Houghton Library Collection, Harvard University, AM-6, box 31.

[43] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 75. He speaks of the "inner" and "outer" in comparable terms in his 1969 review of Bishop: "And her preoccupation with wildlife and civilized artifacts comes through as an exemplar of the way we as subjects feel about the objects, living or inert, that encircle us. We live in a quandary, but it is not a dualistic conflict between inner and outer reality; it is rather a question of deciding how much the outer reality is our reality, how far we can advance into it and still keep a toe-hold on the inner, private one. . .This strange divided singleness of our experience is a theme that is echoed and alluded to throughout Miss Bishop's work. . . ." Ibid., 121.

[44] To cite one other instance, from 1974: "[Esteban Vicente's] aim throughout his career seems to have been to find exact technical means for achieving just the right degree of ambiguity, that razor edge where the world and preconceived notions of it meet and fuse." *Reported Sightings*, 207-8.

[45] Ibid., 17.

Ashbery's notion of "fusion" in comments on Bishop, Cornell, Rich, Tanguy, and others signals his desire to cast the poem or painting as an object that reaches outside the conventional boundaries of its own medium to bring more content into its remit. Thus, Bishop's poems, though merely words arranged on the page, have a quality of "thingness," while Cornell's collages have "narrative" qualities.[46] Notably, many of Ashbery's favorite visual artists have been derided for the "literariness" of their work.[47] One such figure is the British artist Trevor Winkfield, who provided the cover art for *Flow Chart* (1991) and whose "crisply painted concatenations of unlikely objects" produce, in Ashbery's praising account, "a trompe-l'oeil rendering of things as yet unseen."[48] Other favorite artists whose "literary" qualities Ashbery has eagerly defended include the West Coast collagist, Jess, and the American-born expatriate to England, R.B. Kitaj (who designed the cover of *Houseboat Days*).[49] These artists are key practitioners of the "heightened realism" which Ashbery prizes. "The California Abstract Expressionists were annoyed at being called the

[46] As Ashbery writes in a 1982 review of R.B. Kitaj: "How wonderful it would be if a painter could unite the inexhaustibility of poetry with the concreteness of painting." Ibid., 307.

[47] Ellen Levy points out "the inconvenient fact that many of the visual artists with whom Ashbery himself seems to have the strongest affinity are not the most advanced, either in the Greenbergian mode of medium-focused purism, or in the Duchampian line of an ever-more-disembodied conceptualism. These artists—a pack led by de Chirico and Cornell, and including such lesser oddballs as R.B. Kitaj, Saul Steinberg, Jess, and Trevor Winkfield—all go directly against the purist grain in that they are overtly, even extravagantly, literary." Levy, *Criminal Ingenuity*, 127.

[48] As Ashbery points out, Winkfield suffered neglect for his "literary" qualities: "It is important to note the literary connection, since Winkfield's painting is, among other things, "literary," which may be one reason why his previous New York shows attracted so little attention: the last was in 1980, before the emergence of Neo-Expressionism legitimized literature and other taboos." Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 169-173.

[49] In a 1975 review of Jess, Ashbery writes: "The prejudice against "literary" painting is perhaps a typically East Coast one. In any case it is difficult for New Yorkers to conceive of art as something hybrid: there is abstraction and there is perhaps something called "information art," but an art in which equal importance is accorded to a number of unrelated components is hard for us to grasp." *Reported Sightings*, 296. Reviewing Kitaj in 1982, he writes: "Those who dismiss Kitaj for his "literary" qualities" (actually one of his major and most daring innovations) have perhaps taken this to mean that the picture has a libretto, that it is in fact a kind of illustration after all." Ibid., 307.

'drip and blob school' by one journalist," Ashbery notes in 1982, "but Jess delighted in the epithet, and one can see how it helped him articulate a realism all his own."[50] Meanwhile, Kitaj developed a "highly articulate aversion to the established art [in the US], from abstraction in its various phases to our 'new' realism."[51] In doing so, he served to remind Ashbery that "art with any serious aspirations toward realism still has to take into account the fact that reality escapes the laws of perspective and logic, and does not naturally take the form of a sonnet or a sonata."[52] In personal correspondence, Ashbery professes a special affinity to Kitaj, writing on June 25, 1975:

> I hope we'll meet again soon, somewhere. Do you think there's any way we might collaborate sometime? I have felt for a long time, before meeting you, that there is a basic similarity in the way we look at things and get them down – a way of noting the way things are purposefully fragmented.[53]

The notion of "purposeful fragmentation" stuck with Ashbery; he uses almost identical phrases—"purposely disjunct"[54] and "purposefully chaotic[55]—in his critical statements on Kitaj. "Purposeful fragmentation," in fact, aptly describes the visual aesthetic that repeatedly attracts Ashbery. The principle certainly governs Jess's famous "paste-ups": "enormous collages that are bewilderingly complex, sometimes incorporating embroidery or sections of partly assembled jigsaw puzzles laid over

[50] Ibid., 296-97.
[51] Ibid., 300.
[52] Ibid., 302.
[53] Letter from John Ashbery to R.B. Kitaj, Ashbery papers, Houghton Library Collection, Harvard University, AM-6, box 24.
[54] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 301.
[55] Ibid., 302.

each other like geological strata."[56] It also applies well to the "hellish swamp" of Kitaj's "If Not, Not," a spin-off of *The Waste Land* which Ashbery admires, featuring "a landscape not devoid of picturesqueness, but whose mountaintop in the background is crowned not with a castle but with the 'gate of death' at Birkenau-Auschwitz."[57] If Ashbery has not been as geological as Jess or as political as Kitaj, he has explored a similar aesthetic of shifting scale featuring a "polyphony of clashing styles"[58] laid "purposefully" over spectral landscapes.

We might call this effect "slightly rumpled realism," a phrase Ashbery coined in a 1986 essay on the painter Jane Freilicher. Freilicher, like the other artists discussed above, offers Ashbery a crucial precedent for the "heightened realism" which underwrites his artistic practice. As a second-generation New York School painter and stubborn adherent to figurative painting during an age of abstraction, Freilicher might seem an unlikely model for a poet committed to surrealism "in the second, open sense." Yet, as Ashbery's reviews show, she has been not only a close friend but also a key inspiration for the way her work bestows "the renewed realization that all kinds of things can and must exist side by side at any given moment, and that that is what life and creating are all about."[59]

> Her realism is far from the "magic" kind that tries to conceal the effort behind its making and pretends to have sprung full-blown onto the canvas.

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[56] "Yet despite their seductive images," Ashbery adds, "[Jess' works] are pictures that are painted objects, and they are not 'about' anything except themselves." Ibid., 297-98.

[57] Ibid., 305.

[58] In a 1986 piece on Jane Freilicher, Ashbery confides his "fondness for a polyphony of clashing styles, from highbred to demotic, in a given poem, musical composition (the "post-modern eclecticism"—unfortunate term—of David del Tredici and Robin Holloway, for instance) or picture." Ibid., 243.

[59] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 244.

> Such miracles are after all minor. Both suave *facture* and heavily worked-over passages clash profitably here, as they do in life. . . .[60]

Elsewhere, Ashbery notes the simultaneous "frumpiness" and "suaveness"[61] of Freilichers style, and praises her tendency to "oscillate in the same picture between highly finished, polished passages and others that look crude and sketchy."[62] Like Tanguy's paintings and Cornell's collages, Freilicher's work strikes a vigorous balance between its "denotative and connotative" elements:

> The swift transition from style to style is one of the most remarkable things in Freilicher's painting. The denotative and connotative jostle each other, with no fixed boundaries; a rough tangle of brushwork menaces a sleekly realistic passage. A field as minutely painted as Ruysdael would have done it leads to a cloud on the horizon which really isn't a cloud but a brushstroke. "Non-representational" painting is always lurking in the background, or the foreground for that matter, of an ostensibly straightforward account of a landscape, and of course landscape is like that: the eye deals with some of it and neglects the rest.[63]

The clouds in a Freilicher paintings may belie the photographic realist pretentions of the landscapes in which they appear. Like Kitaj, her "purposeful inconsistencies

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[60] Ibid., 242.

[61] This passage is worth quoting in full: "In *Potato Truck*, everything hinges on the truck, a tiny patch of man-made red in the distance, organizing space like Stevens' jar; but what is closest and biggest is some bushes. They are elaborated more thoroughly than anything else in the picture perhaps just because of their shapelessness and their inability to benefit very much from celebration by a poet or naturalist. So they are left in their frumpiness, looking unfinished despite the articulation lavished on them. Nature is efficient but not always neat, and the romantic depths of the painting, suavely and succinctly painted, seem to recognize the justice of this and efface themselves before its logic." John Ashbery, "Jane Freilicher at Fischbach, *Art in America*, May/June 1975, 93.

[62] John Ashbery, "Ut Pictura Poesis," *New York*, January 22, 1979, 58.

[63] The passage continues: "Other painters have made the point, but in Jane Freilicher's case the transitions are so gradual, the differences so close, that her grammar of styles can easily go unnoticed. The viewer imagines he is looking at an 'objective' account of trees or a table top without realizing that they have been dismantled and put back together again almost seamlessly. It is only on closer inspection that the oddity, the purposeful inconsistencies of tone, the fact that everything doesn't hang together quite as it should, become apparent. . . .Her purpose in ruffling the surface, in injecting not her own note but that of things, in showing up each element's poignant desire to make its own point, to put itself across, to be accepted on its own terms, is to restore the primitive calm that the world presumably had before anyone looked at it, to reinstate that higher naturalness which can only become visible with the help of a little artifice." Ashbery, "Jane Freilicher at Fischbach," 93.

of tone" help to "reinstate that higher naturalness which can only become visible with the help of a little artifice."[64] And like Cornell and Bishop, her painting

> sings a song of thingness, whether that of the swatch of nature sitting for its portrait or the paint that's helping it to become itself even as it casually poses for its own portrait.[65]

Ashbery sings that song too, in every register.

[64] Ibid., 93.
[65] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 278-9.

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