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John Ashbery and English Poetry: A Study of Reading

Ben Hickman

University of Kent



2009

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the relationship of John Ashbery's work with English poetry, and in doing so posits that Ashbery's style of reading, and his unique reading of English poetry specifically, is at the root of his originality in postwar American verse. First, I suggest that Ashbery's reading, and subsequently his writing are occasioned by their situation, a term I offer as more apt to describe Ashbery than the now commonplace critical rhetoric of 'experience' that he has inherited. Secondly, I show how this situation is conditioned by Ashbery's aesthetic of inattention, a poetic strategy by which Ashbery opposes his reading to that of T. S. Eliot and that of his early contemporaries like Robert Lowell. In this, Ashbery represents a reading that emphasises accident, occasion and indeterminacy — that is, elements 'outside' the New Critical text. Through this, one sees Ashbery's history of the present, a poetic in which the present-tense situation of reception is revealed, and in which the past text serves as a resource rather than a source. I finally suggest an analogy between Ashbery as a reader and Ashbery's conception of his own readers: that is, I describe how Ashbery's generosity as a writer — in the shape of indeterminacy, a resistance to self-authority and a sense of occasion — is inextricably linked to his generosity, inattention and situatedness as a reader. With these ideas, I also attempt to move Ashbery's work away from the concepts of influence that have been central to the American construction of his poetry, and to resist the Americanisation of Ashbery that has occurred since his emergence, distorting his achievement by positioning him outside of the English (and indeed European) traditions that are manifestly central to his work. In the broadest terms, however, this thesis offers, within the framework of Ashbery's mode of reading, an account of the emergence of Ashbery's style.

In the introduction I describe how I arrived at the various terms listed above, and indicate their value to Ashbery criticism generally. Chapter One then surveys Ashbery's reading of the metaphysical poetry of John Donne and Andrew Marvell, discussing Ashbery's investment in metaphysical metaphor and paradox against the backdrop of the prevalent Middle Generation reading of metaphysical verse. Chapter Two considers Ashbery's engagement with John Clare in the light of his reading of Clare's narratological descriptive mode and of romantic immanent aesthetics. The third chapter continues the focus of the second, this time analysing Ashbery's very different relationship with Wordsworth, considering Wordsworth as a poet of Ashbery's later career, and indeed as a part of a reaction to the dangers of Ashbery's earlier Clarean poetic. Chapter Four interrogates Ashbery's relationship with Eliot, and frames a discussion of their various styles of reading with an analysis of their allusive methods. The final chapter brings the thesis full circle, showing how Ashbery's reading of Auden, 'the first and most important' according to Ashbery himself, is precisely this: a reading of a poet which, as the central determinant of Ashbery's authorial relationship with the reader, frames Ashbery's reading of all other poets.

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For Katie Willis

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ABBREVIATIONS

For detailed citations, see bibliography.

AG: April Galleons, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988 [1987].

AWK: As We Know, Manchester: Carcanet, 1981 [1979].

CB: Can You Hear, Bird, Manchester: Carcanet, 1996.

DDS: The Double Dream of Spring, New York: Ecco Press, 1976 [1970].

FC: Flow Chart, Manchester: Carcanet, 1991.

HL: Hotel Lautréamont, Manchester: Carcanet, 1992.

HB: Houseboat Days, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999 [1977].

NN: A Nest of Ninnies (with James Schuyler), New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1997 [1969].

OT: Other Traditions: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000.

RM: Rivers and Mountains, New York: Ecco Press, 1977 [1966].

RS: Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987, New York: Knopf, 1989.

SeLP: Selected Poems, Manchester: Carcanet, 1986 [1985].

ShTr: Shadow Train, New York: Viking, 1981.

SP: Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, Manchester: Carcanet, 1977 [1975].

SPr: Selected Prose, Manchester: Carcanet, 2004.

SS: And the Stars Were Shining, Manchester: Carcanet, 1994.

ST: Some Trees, New York: Corinth Books, 1970 [1956].

TCO: The Tennis-Court Oath, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 1977 [1962].

TP: Three Poems, New York: Viking, 1972.

W: A Wave, Manchester: Carcanet, 1984.

VN: The Vermont Notebook, Vermont: Z Press, 2001 [1975].

Introduction

In 1975, John Ashbery, who had by this time been writing poetry for over thirty years, published a poem called ‘Tenth Symphony’ in his most famous volume, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. It spoke with unease of Anglo-American, and Anglo-Ashberyan, poetic relations:

There is some connexion
(I like the way the English spell it
They’re so clever about some things
Probably smarter than we are
Although there is supposed to be something
We have that they don’t—don’t ask me
What it is. And please don’t talk of openness.
I would pick Francis Thompson over Bret Harte
Any day, if I had to)
Among this. It connects up. (*SP*, 46-7)

Ashbery’s anxieties about the supposed ‘something / We have that they don’t’ are only exacerbated by considerations of what that distinction may be — here taking the shape of celebrity all-American pioneer Bret Harte, whose particularly American ‘something’ Ashbery later characterised as being ‘loud-mouthed... in boots and a cowboy hat.’¹

Ashbery’s critics, on the other hand, have traditionally been less uncertain of their national cultural heritage, and of Ashbery as a distinctly *American* poet:

Ashbery turned to French poetry as a deliberate evasion of continuities... The ‘central’ kind of poet he is fated to become [is] in the line of Emerson, Whitman, Stevens... (Harold Bloom)

if mention of the French tradition always comes up in any discussion of Ashbery, nonetheless his Americanism remains obvious and inescapable, as Wallace Stevens’

1 Piotr Sommer, ‘John Ashbery in Warsaw’ (interview), *Quarto*, 17 (May 1981), p. 15. The phrase, ‘something we have that they don’t’ is in fact used as the title of a collection of essays on UK-US poetic relationships; see Mark Ford and Steve Clark (eds.), *Something We Have That They Don’t: British and American Poetic Relations Since 1925*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004; Ford, *Something* in subsequent footnotes. All op. cit. footnotes will use this method of abbreviation.

does. Ashbery only occasionally reproduces the formal restraint, sensuousness, and lucidity of characteristically French art; more often his work exhibits the sincerity, distrust of artifice, and studies the awkwardness we associate with achievement in the American grain. (Alfred Corn)

No poet since Whitman has tapped into so many distinctly American voices... (Susan Schultz)

Ashbery is an American poet, always putting into his poems our parades and contests and shaded streets. He sometimes sounds like Charles Ives in his irrepressible Americana... Ashbery retells both life and loss with American comic pragmatism... [He re-enunciates] timeless, representative truths in an American vernacular... Ashbery's deep literary dependencies escape cliché by the pure Americanness of his diction... Ashbery's gift from American plainness is his strongest weapon... (Helen Vendler)²

It is puzzling to read Ashbery after being led to expect poetry that 'sounds like Charles Ives in [its] irrepressible Americana'. This exaggerated Americanism has, however, been a major project in the critical construction of Ashbery: Bloom, Vendler and Schultz (the editor of the most recent collection of essays on Ashbery, *The Tribe of John*) are among his most influential commentators. One of the initial intentions of this thesis is to rescue the cosmopolitan Ashbery from such patriotic commentary. These readings not only Americanise Ashbery, but also, more generally, distort the compelling engagement with the art of the past we witness throughout his career.

Ashbery, as the 'major', 'most important' or 'greatest living' poet in the language has, since such labels have been applied, been a battleground for warring interpretative approaches. Indeed, Ashbery of all American poets has found himself a most coveted property for any number of competing theories, queer, deconstructive, ecological or otherwise. These in the main, however, have come and gone. Partly because of the distance between them and 'Theory', partly because of the fame of their promoters, it is the two main 'all-American' Ashberys — the romantic and the avant-garde — that have continued to hold the field, and to define Ashbery's poetry beforehand for many encountering it for the first time. The blurb of Ashbery's *Selected Poems*, for example, defining Ashbery simultaneously as both 'successor to Wallace Stevens' and 'the *eminence grise* of postmodernism', shows

² Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination*, New York: Seabury Press, 1975: pp. 130, 206; Alfred Corn, 'A Magma of Interiors', in *John Ashbery*, ed. Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House, 1985, p. 85; Susan Schultz, introduction to *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Susan Schultz, Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1995; Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics*, London: Harvard UP, 1998, pp. 225, 253, 257.

the signs of this critical influence. The two versions of Ashbery are not equally persuasive, but they do converge on some crucial issues regarding Ashbery's poetic; and both result in a distortion of Ashbery's achievement.

It is of course Bloom who argues the link between romanticism and a distinctly American literature most vigorously, and this is an argument in which Ashbery plays a major part. That 'The Persistence of Romanticism' (the title of Bloom's epilogue to *The Anxiety of Influence*) extends to Ashbery can be seen in any of Bloom's various celebrations of the poet. In *Figures of Capable Imagination*, for example, discussed under the heading of 'The New Transcendentalism', Ashbery is lauded for his 'gorgeous solipsism', his 'rapt meditation', and as 'essentially a ruminative poet... knowing always that what counts is the mythology of self'.³ In addition to this, Bloom christens Ashbery 'most legitimate of the sons of Stevens'.⁴ The two descriptions are linked because Bloom discusses Ashbery 'with the broadest sense of a High Romantic tradition' in mind — that is, one with Emerson at its head, and Whitman and Stevens ('or the American Wordsworth') following close behind.⁵ Ashbery's 'direct descent from Stevens' has been the single most important idea behind the mainstream critical picture of Ashbery, and it is often against this assumption that this thesis argues.⁶ But the more indirect descents from Emerson and Whitman are equally key to understanding Bloom's Ashbery. It is ultimately the whole 'American Counter-Sublime, in which Ashbery, like Stevens, is so extraordinarily at home' because, after Emerson, there is no other form of romanticism available: 'the Wordsworthian light of all our day turns out to be: self-reliance.'⁷ America is the end to which all Bloom's talk of romanticism, belatedness, anxiety and influence has been leading: 'America is the Evening Land... and in this late tradition all reading (and writing) is heavily shadowed by the past.'⁸ When Bloom promotes romanticism it is with the assumption that its true inheritors, with

3 Bloom, *Figures*, pp. 135, 189, 196.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

5 Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, New York: Oxford UP, 1975: p. 205.

6 A sample of the many discussions of Ashbery's debt to Stevens should include: Harold Bloom, 'Apophrades or the Return of the Dead', in *The Anxiety of Influence*, London: Oxford UP, 1997, pp. 143-6; Lynn Keller, "'Thinkers Without Final Thoughts': John Ashbery's Evolving Debt to Wallace Stevens", *ELH* 41:9 (1982), pp. 235-61; David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: an introduction to the poetry*, Columbia UP, 1979; Charles Berger, *Forms of Farewell: the late poetry of Wallace Stevens*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp. 187-8; John Irwin, 'The Reader is the Medium: Ashbery and Ammons Enspired', *Contemporary Literature*, 21:4 (Autumn 1980), pp. 588-610.

7 Bloom, *Figures*, p. 205, and *Agon*, p. 14.

8 Harold Bloom, 'Harold Bloom on Poetry', *New Republic*, 29 November 1975, p. 24.

the possible exception of Robert Browning, are American, part of an 'American Sublime' or 'American religion'. Bloom's faint praise for Victorian poets, his distaste for Pound and Auden, and for almost all contemporary British poetry are all part of a dissatisfaction that such poetry has shirked the romantic burden.

Finally, Bloom's argument is a reaction to a once-competing perception of Ashbery in which he has actually read a lot of French poetry, and proving this as 'critical nonsense' is undoubtedly one of Bloom's primary aims in his early discussions of Ashbery.⁹ Bloom's reading is in fact a deliberate narrowing of Ashbery's sense of poetic tradition. It's a wonder, in fact, that Bloom continues to write on Ashbery after *The Anxiety of Influence*, since he is always making the same claim: in *Influence*, Ashbery is juxtaposed with Stevens, in *Figures of Capable Imagination* he is read 'in the line of Emerson, Whitman and Stevens', in *Agon* it is again the 'Gnomic Tradition' of Whitman and Emerson that is at stake, and in *A Map of Misreading*, a short discussion of Ashbery follows a very long discussion of Emerson. In fact, claiming that Ashbery is 'most himself when most ruefully and intensely Transcendental', Bloom implies Ashbery's transcendence of any encounter with a past not consistent with the Emersonian strain, whose own initial transcendence of history generally constitutes its very influence on the present.¹⁰

Helen Vendler's commentary on contemporary American poetry is distinguishable from Bloom's partly in that it is even more fanatical. How else are we to describe statements like these, from the introduction to her *Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*:

This anthology of American poetry will be able to extend its charm only to those who genuinely know the American language — by now a language separate.

The mixed poverty and riches of the United States have brought into being a poetry that differs from that of England... In America — an enormous wilderness only recently settled, educationally and ethnically diverse... poetry was bound to be diffuse, heterogeneous...

The reality our poets have found... is, first and foremost, the American climate and landscape... The second reality is the American language... third, American political ideals as they adjust to political reality...

9 Bloom, *Figures*, p. 130.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

[Ashbery's] sensibility — degage, knowledgeable, self-mocking, lyrical — is as recognisably American in one way as Lowell's... is in another.¹¹

The absurd exaggeration of a nationally specific English language (from a critic who has felt equipped to write at length about English and Irish poetry), the hypocrisy of an 'only recently settled' America so 'diverse' as to allow Vendler to include three non-white poets in her anthology, the patriotic celebration of inequality and injustice — all, in this bizarre late flowering of McCarthyism, this relentless surveillance of poets for their 'Americanness', fail to describe any American poetry, but fail to describe Ashbery most of all.

Vendler's jingoism is particularly intriguing when it speaks of Ashbery. Like Bloom's sister-volume, a collection of essays on contemporary American poets revealingly entitled *Contemporary Poets*, whose introduction divides its poets into various 'strains' of 'Whitmanian innovation', Vendler's anthology sets out a genealogy. A reader's first question about her anthology would probably regard the appearance of Stevens' 1915 'Sunday Morning' in a collection of *contemporary* verse. The answer to this is that Stevens is a kind of 'base' for recent American verse. So it's the same old story when it comes to Ashbery:

Ashbery... is a generalising poet, allegorizing and speculating and classifying as he goes, leaving behind, except for occasional traces, the formative 'world of circumstances'... Ashbery turns his gaze from the circumstances to the provings and alterations and schoolings that issue in identity — to the processes themselves.¹²

As we can guess, we are in a 'Keatsian, Stevensian context' here, Ashbery's model being Stevens and his 'thinkers without final thoughts'.¹³ The proof of the lineage is again in the romanticism, which is manifest throughout Vendler's reading: 'Every poem is unique, recording a unique interval of consciousness'; 'Ashbery, like Coleridge, who found all life an interruption of what was going on in his mind, lives in the "chronic reverie" of the natural contemplative'.¹⁴ Even though in some cases the poetry may be English, it is inevitably a narrow conception of English poetry because it must be put to use as proof of Ashbery's Americanness.¹⁵ Again, the aim

11 Helen Vendler, *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1985, pp. 1, 9, 13, 14.

12 Vendler, *Music*, p. 225.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 230, 232.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

is to limit the ways Ashbery's poetry can be read by limiting the poetry Ashbery is perceived to have read.

Marjorie Perloff, the third and final critic I wish to look at here, offers an alternative to these readings. Unlike Bloom and Vendler, whom she often takes to task, Perloff attends to crucial aspects of Ashbery's work like its form and avant-garde situation. We do not find in Perloff the kind of ludicrous explications of Ashbery's stylistics we find in a critic like Vendler, for whom 'the endless beginnings in Ashbery, the changes of scenery, the shifting of characters' are not signs of an avant-garde project of disjunction, but rather 'ally him to our most volatile poets — the Shakespeare of the sonnets, the Herbert of the "The Temple", the Keats of the letters, the Shelley of "Epipsychidion"'.¹⁶ In defining Ashbery's avant-gardism, however, Perloff also has another project in mind, of proving Ashbery's postmodernism. Perloff's version of Ashbery is in fact combative of all readings of the American poet, challenging not just romantic or transcendental readings of Ashbery, but also interpretations of him as a late modernist, a label which, for Perloff, is not quite avant-garde enough (I will examine this debate more closely in the chapter on Ashbery and Eliot). Perloff, in fact, tries to clear even more ground than Bloom in her account of Ashbery, by removing from his supposed heritage all but the most prophetically avant-garde poets of the past, and positioning him at the front of her breakthrough narrative of postmodernism. Ashbery, once the hermetic late romantic, is now the subversive avant-garde iconoclast whose poetry, in contradistinction even to *The Waste Land*, typifies a 'refusal to "mean" in conventional ways' or 'conform to a coherent pattern'.¹⁷ If Perloff rejects an Ashberyan romanticism, she also deems such a wide range of poetry to be 'romantic', including Auden's early work and *The Waste Land*, that virtually all notion of the past in Ashbery is removed. Perloff's point is of course that postmodernism represents a genuine break from the art of the past, modernist as well as romantic, but the result is an avant-garde Ashbery so overstated, of such unimaginable destructive power, that we barely recognise him. As a poet who places reading at the centre of his poetic procedure, Ashbery does not, as Perloff suggests,

16 Ibid., p. 189. Perloff, indeed, quite rightly points out: 'Why is Ashbery's *Three Poems* written in prose, not verse? One would never know, reading Bloom on Ashbery.' (Marjorie Perloff, 'Visionary Company', *Boston Review*, 23:3 (Summer 1998), accessed at <http://bostonreview.net/BR23.3/perloff.html>)

17 Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 11.

rebuild poetry from the bottom up like Rimbaud or John Cage (other subjects of her ‘Poetics of Indeterminacy’) after clearing away the obliterated debris of high modernism and romanticism’s traditionalist monuments. Again, the distortion is a result of an Americanism that needs Ashbery to represent it. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, for example, claims to be a pan-Western tradition, beginning with Rimbaud, but contains in its lineage only one other non-American.¹⁸ It does not make sense to group Ashbery with truly Coleridgean poets like A. R. Ammons or Charles Wright, for he is not a detached poet of the contemplative; but equally Ashbery cannot be considered the Language poet of Perloff’s American avant-garde, for neither is he a political nor even an antagonistic one.

Ashbery’s own account of his work refutes the main claim of all this criticism:

I’ve always read English poetry much more than American poetry, and I feel that English poetry is more important to my work than American.¹⁹

Despite the ‘irrepressible Americana’ or ‘achievement in the American grain’ of the Bloom-Vendler school of Ashbery criticism, the poet himself laments that, in Britain,

Americans, if they’re going to be accepted as writers, have to act ‘like Americans’. They have to be loud-mouthed, oratorical. That might be why Whitman was very widely accepted, and they loved Bret Harte, whom nobody reads anymore, just because he came to England and walked around in boots and a cowboy hat. *This* is an American, so we can, you know, we can understand this, because the Americans are a bunch of Yahoos.²⁰

Ashbery could equally be speaking of his compatriots here. Similarly, in Ashbery’s letters we find not a patriotic pride, but a sense of satisfaction in his ignorance of certain American traditions as a sign of European sophistication — in 1984, for example, in a letter to the English poet John Ash, Ashbery writes: ‘Presently I’m reading *Huckleberry Finn* for the *first* time (I was a snobbish child and read only English or French lit); it’s actually quite good.’²¹ As Ashbery notes more precisely, some readers expect him ‘to be certifiably American and I don’t think my poetry

18 Being Samuel Beckett. In addition, Perloff’s most recent book, *John Cage: Composed in America*, contains the phrase ‘peculiarly American’ six times.

19 Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford*, London: Between the Lines, 2003, p. 53.

20 Sommer, p. 15.

21 Letter to John Ash, 12 March 1984, in Houghton archive.

is... [it is] influenced by English poetry.’²² Partly, then, my purpose here is to examine this last claim.

Charles Olson, subsequent to reading the same canonical texts of American university syllabi of the thirties and forties that Ashbery did at Harvard, devoted his time to Herman Melville, and indeed studied ‘American Civilization’ as a PhD candidate. Olson, that is, chooses fairly early on to ‘become an American’. Ashbery makes quite a different decision from similar circumstances. Just as he is not drawn towards Olson’s intense commitment to individual writers, so Ashbery’s authors of choice are different: it is not Melville, Pound and William Carlos Williams that Ashbery chooses to read, but a diverse, and bizarrely English, bunch. In poetry, there are seventeenth-century figures like Matthew Prior, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Traherne and Andrew Marvell, contemporaries like Nicholas Moore, F. T. Prince and W. H. Auden, and general oddballs like Thomas Lovell Beddoes, John Clare and Edith Sitwell. With regards to Ashbery’s tastes in fiction — which give us a suspicion that he is just as interested in English manners as he is in English literature — a list would include Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green (whom Ashbery wrote his M.A. thesis on), Shropshire novelist Mary Webb, Ronald Firbank, Ivy-Compton Burnett and Mary Butts. Other poets of the time — be they followers of Leavis or Eliot, Confessional, Black Mountain, Beat or whatever — are simply not reading in this manner.

One aim in this study is to broaden the scope of discussion about Ashbery’s work from its usual narrow transcendental or avant-garde boundaries. As Ashbery notes in an interview, ‘there are so many different kinds of me for people to choose’.²³ While the insistence on a certain kind of romanticism or experimentalism has failed to account for this variety in Ashbery’s work, it has led to all critical commonplaces regarding it: that Ashbery’s is a poetry of process, that it is solipsistic, only concerned with consciousness, that it is defined by the influence of Stevens and not by a reading of the ludic and sociable Auden, by transcendental or ‘major’ figures like Emerson, Whitman and Stein, rather than minor poets like John Clare or pre-romantics like Andrew Marvell. All are assumptions I will challenge.

22 David Herd, ‘John Ashbery “In Conversation”’, *PN Review*, 21:1 (September-October 1996), p. 36.

23 Unpublished interview with the author, June 2008.

For there is something more important at stake here, too, in that Ashbery redefines the way we think about a major, avant-garde poet's relationship to artistic tradition generally. All the poets I will be reading alongside Ashbery in this study reveal something about Ashbery that Bloom, Vendler and Perloff miss: the *style* of his reading. By style I mean something similar to a 'way', but also something different. Eliot, for example, with his 'historical sense', has a *way* of reading, and gives critical guidelines on how to achieve it; for Ashbery, however, reading is inseparable from writing, and finds expression in a much more idiosyncratic sense that makes no such claims to authority or universalism, also focusing on questions of style in poetry rather than its epochal thematic significance. It is this style of reading, therefore, that forms the background against which Ashbery's work should be read. Insofar as my aims are descriptive, I offer within the framework of this style of reading an account of the emergence of Ashbery's poetic style. Within this, the aim is to describe Ashbery's uniqueness in American poetry as lying in his originality as a reader of past traditions in English poetry. In the central claim of this thesis, *Ashbery is stylistically original because of an original style of reading of English poetry*. This reading style comes out of English poetry in the first place; it is not simply that Ashbery has a reading habit that attaches itself to English poetry, but that he discovers and evolves this style out of an engagement with the most important figures of his early poetic apprenticeship, like Marvell, Donne, and, most importantly, Auden. More on this later: the key point for now is that Ashbery, in his long career, has developed a poetic within a new approach toward reading itself, an approach which has overturned the Eliotic paradigms that Ashbery has reacted against from the beginning of his career.

Clearly, ground has been made outside of the influence of Bloom and company in accurate descriptions of Ashbery. Mark Ford, for example, has demonstrated the importance of French poetry to Ashbery; David Herd has given the breadth and content of Ashbery's reading its proper importance, as has John Shoptaw's authoritative study of Ashbery, *On the Outside Looking Out*; Geoff Ward has discussed Ashbery's relationship with the under-discussed writers of the Ashbery canon like Auden and Henry James; Angus Fletcher has begun to suggest the

centrality of Clare to Ashbery's work.²⁴ All have been useful contributions to the emerging refutation of Bloom, Vendler and Perloff which has also been occurring in a number of other areas in recent years.²⁵ These will, of course, be useful as the thesis progresses. At this point, though, I wish to briefly take a step back and consider the possible application of more abstract accounts of reading — namely, theories of influence, intertextuality and reader-response.

Influence, in one way or another, has been *the* issue in post-war poetry and poetic theory. Chauvinist cultural politics aside, Bloom is, in an important sense, correct: Ashbery does have a deep and fascinating relationship with the poetry of the past. However, Bloom's theory of influence itself is, in fact, an even bigger problem than his politics when applied to a poet like Ashbery. That romanticism is at the centre of Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence is admitted often enough by Bloom himself.²⁶ But again it is a romanticism of the mystical sort: for though attempts have been made to suggest the essential similarity of the concepts of influence and intertextuality, in Bloom's case such an identification is belied by the fundamental feature of his system: its anti-textuality. At the beginning of *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom describes the function of criticism by this metaphor: 'As wine in a jar, if it is to keep, so is the Torah, contained within the outer garment. Such a garment is constituent of many stories; but we, we are required to pierce the garment.'²⁷ We may feel like we've relapsed into Platonic theories of language here, but for Bloom, since the impersonality of language after structuralism threatens his personality cult of influence, there is a necessity to posit the subject of his analysis as something thus unidentifiable. As he says, 'a poet's consciousness of a competing poet is itself a text'.²⁸ Influence is not found in words, and is therefore not intertextual, but rather intersubjective: 'A poetic "text", as I interpret it, is not a gathering of signs on a

24 See 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: Rodopi, 2000, pp. 9-28; David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000; John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, Harvard: Harvard UP, 1995; Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993.

25 Oddly, the decline of Language poetry has mirrored the weakening influence of one of its loudest opponents, Harold Bloom.

26 Bloom identifies his theory with Coleridge (see *Anxiety*, p. 27) and, more enthusiastically, with Wordsworth (see *Map*, p. 95).

27 *Map*, p. 3.

28 *Ibid.* p. 165.

page, but a psychic battlefield'.²⁹ This 'psychic battlefield' is unclear, of course, and literary criticism should probably avoid suggesting a poem is "obscured" by its own verbal imagery'.³⁰ But Bloom's replacement of the textual with the psychic is particularly problematic when talking about Ashbery, who more than any major twentieth-century poet problematizes the idea of authorship so central to Bloom's whole schema. 'I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity': this oft-quoted statement of Ashbery's early career has surely been a good starting point for many accounts of Ashbery's uniqueness in American poetry.³¹ In addition to this, Bloom's expressionism and ahistoricism lead to the disregard of 'extrinsic' material that Ashbery makes so intrinsic to the writing of poetry, as I am about to demonstrate. That is, because Bloom's concern as a critic is with '*the poet in a poet*, or the aboriginal poetic self', his project in talking about Ashbery is not only to bypass the poetry's textual surface but also to disregard the *situation* of the writing — a situation which is, from the New York and Paris avant-garde milieus of the very early work to the very situational aesthetics of 'The Skaters' and 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', crucial to understanding Ashbery.³² It is not necessary to revert to the pre-Bloom, more textual-based studies of influence by hunting after sources or sound patterns, but there is a need to select an approach appropriate to Ashbery's poetic, which Bloom's individualistic apparatus is not.

There is a need to find, then, a language of reading that is different from Bloom's. Intertextuality is one major example of a theory that does things rather differently, and can be suggestive when thinking about Ashbery. Here is Julia Kristeva:

[The] three dimensions or coordinates of dialogue are writing subject, addressee, and exterior texts... The addressee, however, is included within a book's discursive universe only as discourse itself. He thus fuses with this other discourse, this other book, in relation to which the writer has written his own text. Hence the horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and the vertical axis (text-context) coincide...³³

29 Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: revisionism from Blake to Stevens*, London: Yale UP, 1976, p. 2.

30 Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1971, p. 453. Bloom is speaking here of Keats's 'To Autumn'.

31 Janet Bloom and Robert Losada, 'Craft Interview with John Ashbery', in *The Craft of Poetry*, ed. William Packard, New York: Doubleday, 1974, p. 123-4.

32 Bloom, *Anxiety*, p. 11.

33 Julia Kristeva, 'The Bounded Text', *Desire in Language*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, Guildford: Columbia UP, 1980, p. 66.

One strength of intertextuality for discussions of Ashbery is that, at its foundations, from Barthes' 'Death of the Author' to Kristeva's attack on the author as 'a transcendence', it constructs a theory of reading in which the author is no longer the centre of consideration.³⁴ As Barthes says, 'the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading... by joining them in a single signifying practice'.³⁵ Ashbery is very much writing in the context of this author-crisis — he was in Paris when Barthes and Kristeva were constructing these ideas; he knew Foucault personally.³⁶ As subsequent chapters will show, the relationship of the reader and the poem, based on similar assumptions about authority, is precisely what is at stake in Ashbery's work. Indeed, one of central claims of this thesis is that Ashbery's relinquishing of his own claims to authority allows him to read other poets in a way that rejects their intentional and historical or 'objective' meanings.

The plurality intertextuality invites into interpretation as a result of this debasement of the author, in which the final meaning personified by the author is replaced by a multiplicity of texts and readers, Barthes terms 'dissemination'.³⁷ The text, says Barthes, is not simply plural because it has several meanings for its several readers, but 'the very plural of meaning'.³⁸ However, while both 'the reader' and 'plurality' have been terms appropriately but vaguely applied to Ashbery's poetic, this causes a problem. For 'dissemination' does not simply remove the author from the scene of writing: it also abstracts him from the situation and context of text and reader. At the end of 'The Death of the Author', Barthes famously writes: 'the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all the citations out of which writing is made... the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that *someone*'.³⁹ Unlike the situationism

34 See Kristeva, pp. 36-63.

35 Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, p. 62.

36 Ashbery leaves Paris for New York in 1965. Barthes' 'Death of the Author' appeared in 1967, while *Le Degré Zéro de L'écriture* was first published in 1953; the two Kristeva works quoted were worked on by her in the early- to mid-60s and first published as 'Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman', *Critique*, 23 (April 1967), pp. 438-65, and 'Le Texte clos', *Langages*, 12 (1968), pp. 103-25, being later collected in a book of essays called *Séméiotikè: recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, 1969.

37 Barthes, 'Work to Text', p. 59.

38 Ibid., p. 61.

39 Barthes, 'Death of the Author', *The Rustle of Language*, p. 54.

of Ashbery's reading that I will try to prove, and on which I shall elaborate shortly, Barthes's reader is a theoretical abstraction.

The further issue is that this 'dissemination' is opposed to the 'willed', with the writer 'no more than a text rereading itself'.⁴⁰ This inevitably brings up problems of agency, as Language poetry has found in its own appropriation of post-structuralism. If we take, for example, Michael Baxandall's appealing rejection of traditional concepts of influence on the grounds of their determinism, it is not clear what intertextuality does differently:

'Influence' is a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the inferential beholder will wish to take into account. If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than Y did something to X. But in consideration of good pictures and painters the second is always the more lively reality. It is very strange that a term with such an incongruous astral background has come to play such a role, because it is right against the real energy of the lexicon. If we think of Y rather than X as the agent, the vocabulary is much richer and more attractively diversified: draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse to, adapt, misunderstand, refer to, pick up, take on, engage with, react to, quote, differentiate oneself from, assimilate oneself to, assimilate, align oneself with, copy, address, paraphrase, absorb, make a variation on, revive, continue, remodel, ape, emulate, travesty, parody, extract from, distort, attend to... everyone will be able to think of others. Most of these relations just cannot be stated the other way round — in terms of X acting on Y rather than Y acting on X. To think in terms of influence blunts thought by impoverishing the means of differentiation.⁴¹

This problem of 'who is the agent and who the patient' created by influence studies is simply elided by intertextuality. That is, intertextuality supplies a contextual background, a web of texts, in an abstract and infinite sense that seems to preclude, or at least makes unnecessary, any analysis of a particular reading and its concrete situation. Intertextuality posits a reader-as-function (Barthes' 'passably empty subject') rather than a historically situated human being, making it difficult to elicit an individual, living reader-as-writer from the theory.⁴² The question of agency is important for us because the following thesis will in part be an account of authority in Ashbery, and one that seeks to avoid equally both the romantic individualism of Bloom and Vendler associated with theories of influence, and the problems of

40 Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', *Desire in Language*, p. 86.

41 Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: on the historical explanation of pictures*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1985, pp. 58-59.

42 Barthes, 'Work to Text', p. 60.

agency that critics and poets associated with Language poetry, post-structuralism and intertextuality have failed to square; both are rooted firmly in the ground of the infinite rather than the specific.

Reader-response criticism, finally, does offer an empirical account of the reading process, as it makes the link explicitly between experience (a crucial term in Ashbery's poetic) and meaning. As Stanley Fish writes: 'the reader's activities are at the centre of attention, where they are regarded not as leading to meaning but as *having* meaning.'⁴³ The nature of 'the reader's activities' are as follows:

The concept is simply the rigorous and disinterested asking of the question, what does this word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter, novel, play poem, *do?*; and the execution involves *an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time...* The basis of the method is a consideration of the temporal flow of the reading experience, and it is assumed that the reader responds in terms of that flow and not to the whole utterance.⁴⁴

Reading is a temporal flow. There are many shortcomings in the theory of reader-response, but for the purposes of this thesis there is one that is crucial. For Fish and other reader-response theorists like Wolfgang Iser and Norman Holland, the reading experience is essentially uninteruptable: the reader resembles *A Clockwork Orange's* Humble Narrator, strapped in with eyes fixed on the cinema screen. Anything 'outside' the text is not reading: 'to consult dictionaries, grammars, and histories is to assume that meanings can be specified independently of the activity of reading.'⁴⁵ While, generally, this incorrectly assumes that readers make no attempt to interpret, never go back and reread, think about history, politics or anything not manifest in 'the temporal flow of the reading experience', Fish perhaps outlines some distinctive features of Ashbery's reading style — his desultory, ahistorical tendencies. But in another sense, Ashbery's work is intensely contextual and searching. This is the sense of the present situation. Ashbery's readings of past art are fundamentally context-laden, as in the retrospective reevaluation of Parmigianino's painting in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' or, from the same volume, his beautiful, distracted reading of Marvell in 'As One Put Drunk Into the Packet-Boat'. It is what distinguishes 'The Skaters', listening out for its present

43 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, London : Harvard UP, 1980, p. 158.

44 Stanley Fish, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', *New Literary History* 2:1 (Autumn 1970), p. 126-7. His italics.

45 Fish, *Is There a Text*, p. 152.

situation while attending to its esoteric intertextual strategies, from the historico-narrative attention of *The Waste Land*. Ashbery, in this, highlights the shortcoming of reader-response that Fish would be least likely to concede: its idealism, in which the reader picks up every word uniformly and, though not with any interpretive energy or initiative, at least with perfect attention.⁴⁶

I have begun to differentiate Ashbery from three major theories of reading with a number of terms yet to be specified: situation, attention, and agency. Taking the last of these first, there is a need to address something that none of the theories as I have elaborated them can offer: an account of *why* Ashbery reads.

The vitality of the New York School was how it read. As many critics have noted, one distinctive thing about these poets was the sheer range of their literary tastes. While Ashbery was reading Edith Sitwell, F. T. Prince and Elizabeth Bowen, O'Hara was immersing himself in Russian literature, Auden, Apollinaire and William Carlos Williams; Kenneth Koch was, as Ashbery recalls, 'fascinated with Renaissance epics' and 'in constant dialogue with English poetry, particularly Byron and Shelley'; and James Schuyler, in addition to his predilection for minor nature writers like Dorothy Wordsworth and John Clare, 'liked nineteenth-century novels, especially Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sir Walter Scott'.⁴⁷ If anything defines this group of poets, it is what they are reading. The climate of personal and artistic definition through reading is revealed in two letters Ashbery wrote in the summer of 1950, one month apart from each other, to his painter-friend, Jane Freilicher:

I'm reading *The White Devil* by Webster, a rather charming novel by Mary Webb called "Armor Wherein He Trusted"... I'm also reading the poems of Prior, whom Kenneth would love, I'm sure — he writes in a *very* familiar style, rather like Auden in *Letters from Iceland*. And Edith Sitwell: I love her early stuff more and more, but certainly can't take a long poem called *Gold Coast Customs*, which she considers her *Waste Land*; it is easily the most intolerable poem ever written... I still have to finish D. H. Lawrence (groan)... Here's a comforting little poem from Nicholas Moore... It sounds as though he wrote it to Kenneth Koch about John Ashbery...

46 In Iser's work this is, revealingly, expressed as an involuntary and total immersion in illusion; see Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3:2 (Winter 1972), pp. 279-99.

47 Ben Hickman, 'Out of the Ferment', interview with Ashbery, *Poetry Review*, 98:4 (Winter 2008/9), p. 82.

I did read *Portrait of the Artist* which I thought an untold bore... since working I've read some Greek plays in modern transl. — Agamemnon, Prometheus Bound and the Trojan Women. I adore Richard Lattimore's translations... For my birthday I got the poems of G. M. Hopkins whose deleterious influence is to be noticed in the Madrigal I'm sending you... P.S. Do read Bk III of Paterson — the prose especially is divine.⁴⁸

A busy (and largely English) summer by anybody's standards. In contrast to the impressive literary range of Eliot or Pound, the texts above have very little connection to each other, and no attempt is made to suggest any. Such reading is far from any sort of academic preparation for Michaelmas; the comments are never content- or concept-based, but always pure, exaggerated, even camp, value-judgements: 'rather charming', 'I love', 'the most intolerable', 'comforting little poem', 'untold bore', 'I adore', 'the prose especially is divine'. This, in part, explains Ashbery's career-spanning resistance to literary criticism.

Eliot's own revolutionary revaluation of reading is the standard against which Ashbery rebels. Somewhat later in his career, in 1968, when the New York School was known as such, Ashbery noted of the group that 'our program was the absence of any program', adding: 'I guess it amounts to not planning the poem in advance but letting it take its own way: of living in a state of alert and being ready to change your mind if the occasion seems to require it.'⁴⁹ Eliot, on the other hand, the leading figure for many of Ashbery's contemporaries, invents the reading program. Not only is there the construction of a monolithic canon of Western literature, but also a manipulation of this literature's perceived interconnections, to highlight this or that deterioration of modern culture. As Ashbery notes unenthusiastically: 'Eliot couldn't evoke a gasworks without feeling obliged to call the whole history of human thought into play' (*RS*, 82).

Ashbery's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures of 1989-90, *Other Traditions*, show Ashbery's deviation from such a model. Unlike Eliot's criticism, always organised under Eliot's self-made 'historical sense', Ashbery's lectures eschew any attempt at an ordered program. A description of David Schubert is typical: 'none of this quite adds up, and, in the way of a Schubert poem, it shouldn't: what we are left with is a bouquet of many layered, splintered meanings, to be clasped but never fully understood' (*OT*, 134). Ashbery does not see adding up as his business — indeed,

48 Letters dated August 8, 1950 and July 6, 1950, in the Freilicher archive at the Houghton.

49 Quoted in David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000, p. 7.

for the most part in the lectures, *meaning* is not even a consideration. Take this, for example, on John Wheelwright: ‘where I cannot finally grasp his meaning, which is much of the time, I remain convinced by the extraordinary power of his language as it flashes by on its way from somewhere to somewhere else’ (72). James Joyce likes Ibsen’s work, so he learns Norwegian to read it in the original; Robert Lowell, following Eliot, in *History* gives an account of the world through the literature he admires, or pays extended and vigorous homage to it in *Imitations*; Charles Olson, following Pound’s own reading practices, reads Pound with an intensity which aspires to the total absorption of Pound’s aesthetic ideas. For Ashbery, what he calls ‘meaning’, he says, ‘doesn’t matter’ (113). By meaning, of course, Ashbery does not mean the significance of the work *per se*, but rather its unification and reduction; it is the immediate meaning that ‘has already satisfied [him]’, rather than a retrospective distillation of it; it is meaning in the present rather than as a considered, stable entity, ‘the extraordinary power of... language as it flashes by on its way from somewhere to somewhere else’ (72). This explains Ashbery’s remarkable habit of rarely re-reading even the work he enjoys: ‘I don’t read the poets I was influenced by when I was young anymore, because I’d already read them’.⁵⁰ We certainly would not, then, go to Ashbery for an ‘interpretation’ of a text.

A ‘program’ that is ‘the absence of any program’ is a program all the same, however. So just what is driving Ashbery to read and write poetry at all? Ashbery discusses his reading habits in a recent interview:

When I read a poem I don’t read it first for understanding. I quoted Gertrude Stein recently, when she says, ‘You have enjoyed it and therefore you have understood it.’ I can tell when I’m enjoying it, and then if I’ve enjoyed it I might go back and read it for the sense that has to be there, I guess, for me to have enjoyed it...⁵¹

This, emphasising pleasure as the priority and understanding as a subsequent guesswork, should be the starting point of an analysis of Ashbery’s reading. In it, Ashbery goes not only against the grain of modernist, indeed most avant-garde orthodoxy, but against an entire strain of thought that argues against pleasure in art. Leavis and Bloom in lit. crit., Kant, Shelley and Bloom in romanticism, Adorno and Althusser in leftist cultural theory — all are figures Ashbery might have in mind

⁵⁰ Unpublished interview with the author, May 2008.

⁵¹ Ibid. The Stein quotation is actually speaking of her own work, and the exact words are, ‘If you enjoy it you understand it’, which occur in a radio interview.

when he notes in a review of Pierre Bonnard that ‘Pleasure — undiluted essence of pleasure — is a suspect commodity in modern art’ (*RS*, 54). Under Leavis’s proscription of art lacking ‘moral seriousness’, Bloom’s dismissal of the New York School as a rabble of mere ‘comedians of the spirit’ that Ashbery somehow transcended, romanticism’s privileging of a painful sublime over a pleasant picturesque, and Adorno’s famous proclamation that ‘there can be no lyric poetry after Auschwitz’, the twentieth century has found itself writing and reading as if pleasure were a taboo, a contamination by triviality of the monumental educational role that art must play in modern culture.⁵² Ashbery, as will become evident, rejects this.

The modern rejection of pleasure is not without reason, of course, particularly for critics on the left. Adorno’s memorable statement, written against of backdrop of fascism, is a critique of apoliticism. The problem with Adorno’s critique, however, is that it assumes apolitical art is synonymous with apolitical society, when quite the opposite has come to seem increasingly true. All the critics above are interested in maintaining an exalted moral and political power in poetry by suggesting that enjoying works of art is irresponsible; but what is truly irresponsible is a political poetry, like that of Language poetry most recently, that seeks an over-ambitious revolution in language while leaving practical politics to a later date. Art clearly has a social responsibility, but to overemphasise the power of it has been historically to underestimate the power of actual social organisation and agitation. Ashbery, on the other hand, speaks highly of Auden’s famous statement, ‘Poetry makes nothing happen’.⁵³ In the context of the twentieth century, only an academic could think otherwise. Poetry is not action, and cannot singlehandedly take on the state, or even the status quo. It is not, we should note, that Ashbery has no language for suffering, or offers no challenge to authority, but simply that his aesthetics of reading and writing always, implicitly and often explicitly, acknowledge the basis in pleasure of these things — that there is no art without pleasure. Ashbery is by no means solitary in such an approach — Barthes’ ‘pleasure of the text’, play in Derrida’s philosophy, and Susan Sontag’s ‘erotics of literature’ are all part of Ashbery’s Parisian and

52 See F. R. Leavis, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, in *The Great Tradition*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1948; Bloom, introduction to *Ashbery*, p. 6; Theodore Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, in *Prisms*. tr. Samuel and Shierry Weber, Boston: MIT Press, 1997, p. 34.

53 W. H. Auden, ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, London: Faber and Faber, 1991. p. 248.

American avant-garde contexts — but to note it is important: it is part of Ashbery's strength as a reader.⁵⁴ So is Ashbery then simply a modern-day aesthete?

Walter Pater, to whom Ashbery has often alluded in poems, and whom he often resembles in the style of his art and literary criticism, had already laid out a seminal 'program that is the absence of any program' that the aesthete in Ashbery would no doubt approve of. 'What is this song or picture,' Pater asks in 1873, in his Preface to *The Renaissance*, 'to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? And if so, what degree of pleasure?'⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, this is the question that preoccupies Ashbery throughout *Other Traditions*. The key to pleasure for Pater, however, is abstraction. Pater's readings intentionally occur in historical vacuums; we get from him neither an idea of the historical context in which the work was produced, nor of the situation in which it is being viewed or read. Since every work of art is 'valuable' only insofar as 'the property each has of affecting one with a special, a unique, impression of pleasure', Pater seeks 'to disengage this virtue from the commoner elements with which it may be found in combination... casting off all debris, and leaving us only what the heat of the imagination has wholly fused and transformed'.⁵⁶

For us in the modern world, with its conflicting claims, its entangled interests, distracted by so many sorrows, so many preoccupations, so bewildering an experience, the problem of unity with ourselves, in blitheness and repose, is far harder than it was for the Greek within the simple terms of antique life. Yet, not less than ever, the intellect demands completeness, centrality.⁵⁷

Though Pater heralds a new period in aesthetic *attitudes*, his ideas here build on the foundations of the earliest philosophical aesthetics, most notably on the thought of David Hume, who writes in 1757:

[To] try the force of any beauty or deformity... we must choose the proper time and place, and bring the fancy to a suitable situation and disposition. A perfect serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object; if any of these circumstances be wanting, our experiment will be fallacious, and we shall be unable to judge of the catholic and universal beauty.⁵⁸

54 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1966, p. 14.

55 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998, p. xxix.

56 *Ibid.*, pp. xxx-xxxi.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

58 David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in *Aesthetics: a critical anthology*, ed. George Dickie and R. J. Sclafani, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977, 592-606, p. 596.

For Hume, the idea of finding a universal ‘Standard of Taste’ is a difficult but only seemingly impossible task; seemingly, because bogged about by resolvable disagreements on matters of fact. Like Addison before him and Pater after, Hume sees the crucial condition for resolving such disagreements, and the task of aesthetic perception, as an *unimpeded* view of the object. What Hume means by ‘situation’, therefore, is the absence of situation, a generalised and ideal abyss in which the connection between object and perceiver is not interfered with: ‘*particular* incidents and situations occur which either throw a false light on the objects, or hinder the true from conveying to the imagination the proper sentiment and perception.’⁵⁹

It is precisely Hume’s ‘particulars’ and Pater’s ‘bewildering experience’ that Ashbery invites into his work. Though, like Pater, Ashbery’s aestheticism leads him to privilege music as the art form to which all others aspire, he does so with a very different stress. Complementary to his oft-quoted comments on music and poetry, there is a less cited sentiment that is just as revealing about his work:

I feel I could express myself best in music. What I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of this argument remain unknown quantities.⁶⁰

A person might understand [my poems] better in readings because he is forced to listen to them in real time. He can’t go back and try to make sense of this line or that, as he could if he were reading it in a book: if something sounds odd he must simply accept it and continue to listen, letting his mind catch on one phrase or another. And if he finds himself suddenly jolting back to attention after a minute or two of wondering whether he remembered to lock his apartment, or whether a crack in the ceiling looks more like a fried egg or France, or whether he should have a hamburger for dinner, he must accept that he has missed a bit of the poem, there is no retrieving it, and just enjoy what is left without worrying too much about how it all fits together.⁶¹

Unlike Pater’s idealism, Ashbery’s thinking about the reception of art invites the external ‘debris’ into life, into aesthetic experience as part of that experience. It is this that is discussed in Ashbery’s most famous poem, ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’. Indeed, it extends to the intertextual itself: ‘when I discovered [other poets]

59 Ibid., p. 597.

60 Quoted in Richard Howard, *Alone with America: essays on the art of poetry in the United States since 1950*, New York: Atheneum, 1980, pp. 36-7.

61 Larissa MacFarquhar, ‘Present Waking Life: Becoming John Ashbery’, *New Yorker* (November 7, 2005): p. 94. (Note that MacFarquhar is paraphrasing Ashbery here.)

in my work I was happy to welcome them. It was nice that they dropped by'.⁶² Though the historicism of the work of art is frequently abstracted or simply ignored by Ashbery, the present-tense *situation of its reception* is always visibly present.

Notions of autonomous aesthetic experience which posit an artwork that stands out from its surroundings as an immediate presence automatically focusing our attention have of course been subject to a number of other critiques (though reader-response's allegiance to this autonomous aesthetics should be obvious by now). The most forceful critics of this essentially romantic aesthetics, however, have tended to take rather a different tack than Ashbery. Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, denies aesthetic immediacy on the grounds that aesthetic experience should 'include understanding'. Aesthetics therefore for Gadamer 'should be absorbed into hermeneutics' (this resembles Barthes's later questioning of the distinction between meaning and pleasure).⁶³ That is, we should make allowances for the potential errors of immediate reactions, and recognise that aesthetic reception is a social and historical event and that our reactions are shaped by a whole network of artistic and non-artistic phenomena.

Ashbery's resistance to the mainstream theory of aesthetic experience, and its rejection of pleasure, makes a somewhat different emphasis, and it is here that Ashbery's thinking about art as more than simply an aesthetic of taste emerges. It is not 'meaning' which preoccupies Ashbery, as we have seen in some of his readings already, but rather the *situation* of writing. Roughly speaking, we may wish to see this in terms of J. L. Austin's distinction between the locutionary utterance ('vocables with a more-or-less definite sense and reference') and illocutionary force (the use of a speech-act which relies on convention and context).⁶⁴ That is, one can say that Ashbery's interest lies in the context-text relation of the illocutionary force, in which one and the same locutionary utterance can take on a range of meanings in different situations. This is clear in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror':

The balloon pops, the attention
Turns dully away. Clouds
In the puddle stir up into sawtoothed fragments.

62 Quoted in Aidan Wasley, 'The Gay Apprentice: Ashbery, Auden, and the Portrait of the Artist as Young Critic', *Contemporary Literature*, 43:4 (Winter 2002), p. 691.

63 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York: Crossroad, 1982, pp. 90, 146. For Barthes's suggestions on a possible 'pleasure of meaning' see *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

64 See J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980, Ch. 8-11, pp. 94-147.

I think of the friends
 Who came to see me, of what yesterday
 Was like. A peculiar slant
 Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model
 In the silence of the studio as he considers
 Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.
 How many people came and stayed a certain time,
 Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you
 Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
 Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
 Remains that is surely you. Those voices in the dusk
 Have told you all and still the tale goes on
 In the form of memories deposited in irregular
 Clumps of crystals. Whose curved hand controls,
 Francesco, the turning seasons and the thoughts
 That peel off and fly away at breathless speeds
 Like the last stubborn leaves ripped
 From wet branches? I see in this only the chaos
 Of your round mirror which organizes everything
 Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,
 Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing.
 I feel the carousel starting slowly
 And going faster and faster: desk, papers, books,
 Photographs of friends, the window and the trees
 Merging in one neutral band that surrounds
 Me on all sides, everywhere I look.
 And I cannot explain the action of leveling,
 Why it should all boil down to one
 Uniform substance, a magma of interiors. (*SP*, 70-1)

Distinct from the ‘uniform substance’ of Pater or Hume or, say, the New Criticism we see Ashbery frequently rejecting, the reception of the artwork here is clearly determined by a specific situation, and with a whole host of particulars and impeding phenomena. Ashbery’s interest in this situation is not the historical contextualisation we might find in scholarly work or in other, very different major reader-poets like Charles Olson or Geoffrey Hill. The situation in Ashbery’s cultural context, like pleasure, represents something of an aesthetic taboo because it has nothing whatsoever do with the text in question: here Parmigianino’s painting is ousted by the ‘friends / Who came to see me, of what yesterday / Was like... until no part / Remains that is surely you’. Except that for Ashbery it has everything to do with it. The work of art for Ashbery can only occupy one site, by definition also many: ‘our moment of attention’ (*SP*, 69).

This is also evident in Ashbery’s first major long poem, ‘The Skaters’, published in 1966, which I shall later read alongside Eliot’s work. Halfway into the poem,

amid the carnivalesque intertextuality, and after a foray into a Robinson Crusoe mode, there is a sudden positioning of such allusive play:

In reality of course the middle-class apartment I live in is nothing like a desert island.
Cozy and warm it is, with a good library and record collection.
Yet I feel cut off from life in the streets. (*RM*, 56)

It is this kind of situation that is captured on the cover of Ashbery's 1985 *Selected Poems* in a painting by Larry Rivers: the text of Ashbery's 1976 poem 'Pyrography' floats in the background of a portrait of Ashbery, who sits at his typewriter in a comfortable chair in his apartment, with slippers on and books scattered around. This is all very different from Vendler's Ashbery who 'turns his gaze from the circumstances'.

'Self-Portrait' and 'The Skaters' both, in effect, attempt to communicate what Foucault has termed a 'history of the present': a 'historical awareness of our present circumstance' in which 'the dark, but firm web of our experience' becomes visible insofar as 'history serves to show how that-which-is has not always been'.⁶⁵ Clearly, Foucault's context is different from Ashbery's; the present in *Discipline and Punish* is formed of modern prison revolts and the contemporary subversion of penal assumptions. But Ashbery's work shows a structural similarity: as we have seen, the meaning of 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' is learned, in Foucault's words, 'not so much from history as from the present'.⁶⁶ Ashbery's cast of mind is constantly revealed in such terms: 'The effect of Clare's poetry, on me at least, is always the same — that of re-inserting me in my present, of re-establishing "now"' (*OT*, 19). We will see examples of such re-insertions: by Clare himself, by Wordsworth, and by Auden.

This 'presence' is very different from the 'situation' of Abstract Expressionism's 'tradition of the new', to which Ashbery's work has too often been compared. Harold Rosenberg said that 'each situation has its own exclusive key' for Abstract Expressionist art, and is 'the result of a specific encounter'.⁶⁷ Abstract

65 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Random House, 1977, pp. 30-31; *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 209; *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York, 1973, p. 199; *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, p. 206.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

67 Harold Rosenberg, *Tradition of the New*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1962, p. 19.

Expressionism's conception of the situation, with its emphasis on the primal event is based on an assumption than Ashbery would not allow. This assumption is that the work takes place, is *made*, in the present; that the final work of art is simultaneous with its situation of making (hence the dead bees and broken glass, the accidents, the rhythmic painterly style of Pollock's canvases). Because of its roots in certain kinds of surrealism and primitivism, situations in Abstract Expressionism are always ahistorical, occasions of the psyche rather than of society. 'I am nature,' remarked Pollock. Rosenberg's 'specific encounter', being 'exclusive', can find no 'conventional' (to use Austin's term) ground on which to be communicated. Indeed, for Rosenberg, this is the very source of Abstract Expressionism's dramatic power.

Ashbery's situation can more usefully be seen as a 'conventional' site, and one in which, as will be explained, communication is a crucial dilemma rather than simply an absence to be exploited. Here I turn to a follower of both Austin and Foucault who has described the situation incisively in this regard. It may seem strange to take a political theorist and historian of ideas to explain a poet whom I will in many ways typify as apolitical, but it is not so much Quentin Skinner's theory of the (philosophical) idea that is of interest as his radical conception of tradition. In this conception, Skinner differs from Eliot and Gadamer, Pater and Bloom. Like Foucault, Skinner believes that history should 'show how that-which-is has not always been'. To illustrate this, Skinner critiques a certain procedure of interpretation as promoting a 'mythology of coherence', whereby exegetes explain works by 'unveiling' their alleged inner unity and consistency.⁶⁸ Skinner's principle criticism of this process is that the reader comes with 'set' ideas of what the work should be, that it should deal with all the timeless philosophical problems or face the charge of inconsistency, that it must 'contribute' to a set of essential, trans-historical ideas or face the charge of irrelevance.⁶⁹ And since the assumption here is that such problems and ideas exist in a material and historical vacuum, they must therefore be encompassed by an abstract interpretative method — here, as we may have guessed, one that 'insists on the autonomy of the *text*'.⁷⁰

We do not need to think hard to realise that Quentin's 'mythology of coherence' is exactly the rubric of Eliot's anthropological 'historical sense', into the service of

68 Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988, pp. 39-43.

69 *Ibid.*, pp. 50-56.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 29. Skinner's italics.

which a whole range of texts are put in *The Waste Land*; that it is the purpose of Pater's blurring of historical periods in to one 'active principle'; and that it informs Bloom, following Eliot and Pater, and his epoch of 'belatedness'. Each critic here is concerned with aesthetic and textual abstraction, and a subsequent lumping together of periods of hundreds of years under the same idea or problem, be it sensibility, the liberation of the human spirit or the anxiety of influence. Ashbery, on the other hand, is not interested in 'ideas' in this sense. He, rather, brings the work of the past 'up-to-date' not by a naïve cultural imperialism that appropriates works of the past for the sentiments of the present, but by placing the past in the present in which it is read by default, and by putting this reading and the present that informs it in relief. This is what is meant by a 'history of the present': Ashbery's aim is specifically to relativise the present as opposed to privileging it as some Hegelian triumph of the Absolute. The work of the past is viewed as 'present' not insofar as it is 'relevant' to our own time, or has 'contributed' to ideas still current and important, but insofar as it reveals, in the very nature in which we respond to it, something about the present moment in which this reading or response takes place.⁷¹ Ashbery, unlike Eliot, Pater and Bloom, is not interested in constructing a timeless canon of works because any such idea of timelessness is alien to his poetic of the current situation.

Let us describe this in another way. Skinner's alternative to 'set' interpretation is that we recognise our own historical situation thus: 'We must classify in order to understand, and we can only classify the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar... this must result in a history of philosophy conceived in terms of our own philosophical criteria and interests'.⁷² That is, a new ideology or poetic style, or any challenge to conventional thinking, takes on legitimacy only by grounding the change in an appeal to other, unrelated conventions, which it must in turn reinforce. Unlike Eliot and theorists of intertextuality, Skinner gives an account of discourse that is not simply the coordination of a multitude of texts, but a series of active relations between present author and past text. The metaphor is that of the new text building on an old text (in turn built on an older text, and so on). In engaging in it, Ashbery's procedure differs from influence in that, unlike Bloom's most generous 'revisionary ratio', *tessara*, in which a poet 'read[s] the parent poem as to retain its terms but

71 This should certainly be distinguished from Paul de Man's conception of the 'performative' in his writing on romanticism, which is difficult to distinguish from traditional conceptions of Romantic irony. (Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*: Columbia UP, 1984).

72 Skinner, *Meaning*, pp. 31, 292 (the latter is the footnote to the former).

mean them in another sense',⁷³ Ashbery is not concerned with manipulating the same terms — the old Eliotic nothing-new-under-the-sun conservatism — but rather with paying homage to certain elements of a poem or poet while diverging in ways quite unrelated to the original text. This is the case in Ashbery's prose poem, 'For John Clare':

Kind of empty in the way it sees everything, the earth gets to its feet and salutes the sky. More of a success at it this time than most others it is. The feeling that the sky might be in the back of someone's mind. Then there is no telling how many there are. They grace everything — bush and tree — to take the roisterer's mind off his caroling — so it's like a smooth switch back. To what was aired in their previous conniption fit. There is so much to be seen everywhere that it's like not getting used to it, only there is so much it never feels new, never any different. (*DDS*, 37)

As we will observe in the chapter on Clare and Ashbery, the rhetoric of immediacy here is Clare's; the language, style and subject matter are not. The immediacy is in fact Clare, 're-inserting [Ashbery] in [his] present.' The specific presentness of the text comes both out of and in contrast to an earlier poem.

In Foucault, history is something retroactively founded on the present, rather than a matter of first events evolving. Art becomes a matter of reading back, of affecting the past, as we saw Michael Baxandall try to stress, rather than being affected by it, as in Bloom's theory of influence.⁷⁴ The text in Ashbery is likewise a resource rather than a source. The idea of a 'history of the present' is a reversal, then, of the traditional idea of historical evolution, as an account of Ashbery's reading should be a reversal of the fundamental limitation of agency in influence studies (and indeed intertextuality and reader-response), where the past acts on the present rather than the present representing the past.

So how exactly does Ashbery go about writing his 'history of the present'? Which is to ask, how does Ashbery's poetry get written out of his reading? 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and 'For John Clare' have given some clues in that they imply a reading grounded in phenomena unrelated to the text itself. But what do we mean by

⁷³ Bloom, *Anxiety*, p. 14.

⁷⁴ I include Bloom's theory of 'Agon' or poetic struggle in this judgement, as it is, in the subtitle of that book, 'a theory of revisionism' — that is, a theory in which the past text has the originary priority. See Harold Bloom, *Agon: towards a theory of revisionism*, New York: Oxford UP, 1983.

this? I propose to address these questions here by provisionally positing an ‘aesthetic of inattention’ in Ashbery’s work.

If there is something distinctly American about Ashbery’s work, it is found in pragmatism rather than mysticism. John Dewey’s suggestion that we speak of aesthetic experience not simply as experience but ‘*an* experience’ is suggestive here. Dewey speaks of ‘recovering the continuity of aesthetic experience with the normal processes of living’ in his monumental *Art as Experience* (1934).⁷⁵ What this means for my purposes is typified by William James’s tiny but wonderful discussion of ‘Inattention’ in *Principles of Psychology*:

We do not notice the ticking of the clock, the noise of the city streets, or the roaring of the brook near the house; and even the din of a foundry or factory will not mingle with the thoughts of its workers, if they have been there long enough... The pressure of our clothes and shoes, the beating of our hearts and arteries, our breathing, certain steadfast bodily pains, habitual odors, tastes in the mouth, etc., are examples from other senses, of the same lapse into unconsciousness of any too unchanging content...⁷⁶

James’s contention is that inattention is always going on. James also, however, has a moral point: the unattended phenomena, he says, ‘have formed connections in the mind which it is now difficult to break; they are constituents of processes which it is hard to arrest’. The implications of James’ thought would seem to be clear for avant-garde art: that its role is to attend to things that occur in life but go unnoticed, to transform and ‘trace’, by a kind of *ostranenie*, ‘the habits of inattention’ to ‘their genesis’.⁷⁷ This is, indeed, the conclusion Perloff draws in her book on Frank O’Hara, speaking of the ‘defamiliarization’ inherent in ‘the aesthetic of attention’ of Ashbery’s friend.⁷⁸

Ashbery, as I have been suggesting, operates along similar lines. Why not simply call this ‘attention’, then? Let us look at this in reference to one more poem, one of Ashbery’s earliest, ‘The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers’ (*ST*, 27-9). Here are the first few lines:

*He was spoilt from childhood by the
future, which he mastered rather early*

75 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York: Perigree Books, 1980, p. 10.

76 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1, London: Constable, 1890, p. 455.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 456.

78 See Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters*, New York: George Braziller, 1977, pp. 1-30.

and apparently without great difficulty.
BORIS PASTERNAK

I

Darkness falls like a wet sponge
And Dick gives Genevieve a swift punch
In the pajamas. "Aroint thee, witch."
Her tongue from previous ecstasy
Releases thoughts like little hats.

"He clap'd me first during the eclipse.
Afterwards I noted his manner
Much altered. But he sending
At that time certain handsome jewels
I durst not seem to take offence." (ST, 27)

Beginning with a poem seemingly straightforwardly referencing a Marvell poem of a similar title, 'Little J. A.' loses track of its source, referring within half a dozen lines to figures as divergent from Marvell as Boris Pasternak, James Joyce, Thomas Nashe, Daniel Defoe, Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Ashbery's distractions here form an intertextuality that rivals even Eliot in volume. Swift punches in the pajamas aside, where Frank O'Hara's accumulations are witness statements on rapidly changing reality, Ashbery seems to be in a static physical state. The result is that there is nothing to be called *attention* here at all. One can hardly be said to 'notice' the totally contingent workings of the mind; no *object* is being defamiliarized here, for there are no objects; there is nothing familiar.⁷⁹ If one does so at all, one attends to inattention itself.⁸⁰

Ashbery, then, follows James in claiming a certain radical mimeticism for such observations. But rather than inverting the slumbering inattentive, Ashbery embraces it, foregrounds it, making *it* the subject of his work, rather than any revelation of previously unnoticed phenomena. Ashbery writes in an art review of 1986:

Lesser artists correct nature in a misguided attempt at heightened realism, forgetting that the real is not only what one sees but also a result of how one sees it –

79 Ashbery says in an interview later in his career that, 'A poem for me is very much a question of the relation between elements that are sort of given to one, or which one chooses arbitrarily when one starts to write a poem and which doesn't require any other justification' ('The Craft of John Ashbery', interview with Louis Osti, *Confrontations*, 9:3 (1974), p. 87.)

80 The one work that has dealt with this issue is Andrew DuBois's *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (University of Alabama Press, 2006). Unfortunately, though, this study simply sends Ashbery back to orthodox Surrealism in its psychologising of the issue and evasion of specifically textual questions, reading Ashberyan attention as it does in relation to things like therapy and senility.

inattentively, inaccurately perhaps, but nevertheless that is how it is coming through to us, and to deny this is to deny the life of the picture. (RS, 242)

‘Mixed Feelings’ (SP, 42-3), from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, is an example of this complex arrangement. Musing on some ‘girls lounging around / An old fighter bomber, circa 1942’ in an old photograph, amid the ‘pleasant smell of frying sausages’ and other things which ‘attack the sense’, the poet imagines the impossibility of describing the changed ‘fabric of our society’ (42). He then pictures meeting these ‘Ruths, Lindas, Pats and Sheilas’ in our new, confusing world:

I wonder
How they got that way, but am not going to
Waste any more time thinking about them.
I have already forgotten them
Until some day in the not too distant future
When we meet possibly in the lounge of a modern airport,
They looking as astonishingly young and fresh as when the picture was made
But full of contradictory ideas, stupid ones as well as
Worthwhile ones, but all flooding the surface of our minds
As we babble about the sky and the weather and the forests of change. (43)

The fact that the poet only imagines this scene as a result of distraction is what makes this climactic anti-climax to the poem: in trying not to think of ‘them’ he is inevitably drawn to doing so. The syntax builds us up for a series of resolutions (‘until some day x, then x’, ‘when we meet, x happens’), but we are left with nothing but the ‘contradictory ideas’ of the world that the girls are part of as much as the modern airport — ‘stupid ones as well as / Worthwhile ones’ and ‘babble about the sky’, rather than a neat refocusing of reality, ‘flooding the surface of our minds’.

What was once a subject of inattention is not now attended to or delineated, but is rather brought to light on its own terms, at what the poem calls ‘the extreme point of legibility’ (42). Ashbery does not illuminate the objects of inattention, but rather expresses inattention itself in an attempt to bring *it* into focus. Inattention, with its accompanying inaccuracy and unreliability, as the above passage suggests, is what leads the proliferation of paradox in Ashbery’s work, to its centrifugality — indeed to its very intertextuality, as demonstrated above in ‘Little J. A.’. In his very early work, Ashbery invents a rhetoric of the accident to explain situations like this. This rhetoric never disappears, but gradually, a poetic of chance develops from the extreme automatism of *The Tennis Court Oath* into a distinctive aesthetic of

inattention. It is the expression of inattention that is *creative* about Ashbery's reading. Ashbery's comments on environment, on situation, that is, hold good for both his own poetry and his reading of other work:

You're surrounded by different elements of a work and it doesn't really matter whether you're focussing on one of them or none of them at any particular moment, but you're getting a kind of indirect refraction from the situation that you're in... it will be doing its job if its audience is intermittently aware of it while thinking about other things at the same time.⁸¹

It is for these reasons that Ashbery is drawn toward the poets he is, poets of what I will call an 'immersive' tradition like Marvell, Wordsworth and Clare, or of a libertine esotericism like Auden's.

'Audience' — or simply the reader — brings us full circle. In *Other Traditions*, Ashbery notes: 'the ideal situation for the poet is to have the reader speak the poem, and how nice it would be for everybody if that could be the case.'⁸² It is this parallelism of Ashbery reading and us reading Ashbery, of the situation being mirrored in some way, that seems of primary interest for the poet. To quote John Dewey again:

to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced.⁸³

'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' is the exemplary poem in this regard, but the procedure is present throughout Ashbery's work. It is this simple pragmatism, rather than any mystical force of influence or infinite presence of intertextuality that informs Ashbery's work, and it is for this reason that Ashbery's reading can be so illuminating of his writing. For Ashbery's account of his ideal, inattentive reader is, it turns out, a description of himself as a reader. As mentioned, Ashbery's own freedom as a reader is premised on his generosity as a writer. Larissa MacFarquhar reports:

81 MacFarquhar, p. 92.

82 John Ashbery, recording of 'Schubert's Unfinished', Lamont Library, Harvard.

83 Dewey, p. 54.

...if something sounds odd he must simply accept it and continue to listen, letting his mind catch on one phrase or another. And if he finds himself suddenly jolting back to attention after a minute or two of wondering whether he remembered to lock his apartment, or whether a crack in the ceiling looks more like a fried egg or France, or whether he should have a hamburger for dinner, he must accept that he has missed a bit of the poem, there is no retrieving it, and just enjoy what is left without worrying too much about how it all fits together.

When [Ashbery] sits down with a book of poems by somebody else he goes through it quickly. He forms a first impression of a poem almost at once, and if he isn't grabbed by it he'll flip ahead and read something else. But if he is caught up he'll keep going, still reading quite fast, not making any attempt to understand what's going on but feeling that on some other level something is clicking between him and the poem, something is working.⁸⁴

Like the speech-act which depends on the participation of others present, the Ashbery poem is rooted in situations that always contain an implicit reader. The precise nature of this reader is something I will discuss more fully later, but one can say for now that the inattention of Ashbery's whole practice inevitably leads to an arresting frequency of gaps and ambiguities — not to mention outright paradoxes and disjunctions — that the reader is forced to look to in the course of reading any Ashbery poem. The poets Ashbery reads allow such an authorial generosity, and such inattentive indulgence in the surrounding thing of the present situation.

This thesis, then, attempts to map Ashbery's reading both in form and content while, within this, describing the more general aspects of Ashbery's work (his metaphoric, descriptive, symbolic and allusive modes). The chapters march chronologically in terms of English poets, but the argument itself is circular in structure. That is, I start with the metaphysical poets, at the beginning historically but also in terms of their initial appearance in Ashbery's career as I see it, and chart this relationship up to Ashbery's late career. Subsequent chapters progress forward in terms of this career, broadly mirroring Ashbery's engagement, or his first encounter with the respective poets, until coming full-circle, analysing two relationships which develop and contextualise the earlier discussions: an account of Ashbery's engagement with modernism with reference to Eliot, and a final, career-spanning survey of his reading of W. H. Auden.

84 MacFarquhar, p. 92.

My first chapter focuses on Ashbery's early writing, then, chiefly surveying his engagement with the metaphysical conceit and the related use of paradox. Chapter two addresses the importance of Clare for Ashbery, drawing parallels and distinction between Clare's description and rhetoric of immediacy and Ashbery's work of the 1970s. Chapter three is on Wordsworth's presence in Ashbery's seminal 1984 long poem, 'A Wave'; here the analysis continues the discussion previously framed by Clare, and interrogates Ashbery's relationship with symbolism. There is then a return, based on Ashbery's comment that 'I didn't really get a feeling for the poetry of the past until I had discovered modern poetry',⁸⁵ as the fourth chapter, on T. S. Eliot, seeks to review the general thesis of reading so far in relation to Eliotic allusion and tradition; here I cover a range of texts going back to *The Tennis Court Oath*. The final chapter, on Auden, focuses on elements of style, and here I argue retroactively that Ashbery's engagement with Auden is crucial in determining and explaining his reading of all poetry.⁸⁶

According to the problems raised by this introduction, the chapters will also investigate a number of thematic issues and critical impasses surrounding Ashbery's work. These investigations will take the form of an examination of the devices which Ashbery is perceived to have arrived at through his engagement with each poet. Paradox, then, is discussed primarily in terms of Ashbery's reading of metaphor and conceit in Marvell and Donne; the problems inherent in Ashbery's temporal mimeticism are addressed in a discussion of Clarean description and narrative in Chapter Two; agency, solipsism and politics comes to the fore in Chapter Three within a consideration of Wordsworth and symbol; Chapter Four considers some of the permissive aspects of Ashbery's reading *per se* by surveying his intertextual strategies alongside those of Eliot; authority, and all these things in one way or another, are explored in a discussion of Auden's effect on Ashbery's disjunctive technique. Some of the cruxes of Ashbery's poetic, then, are seen in his readings of English poets, and it is worth emphasising that in presenting these poets — Marvell, Donne, Wordsworth, Clare, Eliot and Auden — the thesis knowingly presents *Ashbery's* version of each. Where there is idiosyncratic or unconventional reading

85 Peter Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery' (interview), *Paris Review*, 90 (Winter 1983), p. 41.

86 The inclusion of both Eliot and Auden in a study of Ashbery and *English* poetry does not, perhaps, require any justification, though it should be pointed out that the Auden surveyed here is 'The English Auden', and that Eliot is considered, in his own terms, as a poet operating centrally within the English tradition.

going on, which is for the most part, this is pointed out; but my purpose here is not to present two poets and draw parallels, it is rather to see the older English poets through the eyes of the living American one. The particular moments in which the strategy of this thesis seems most justified — where a link is established between Ashbery's use of metaphor and his use of paradox, where the strange nature of Ashbery as a descriptive or landscape poet is specified, where the precise coordination of writing and reading and of reader and writer is identified — are, usually, where Ashbery's reading is at its most unique and original.

CHAPTER ONE

'From the Latin, speculum, mirror': metaphor and paradox in Ashbery, Donne and Marvell

In his university years, Ashbery was writing poems like this (from the *Harvard Advocate*):

Love's ideal kingdom has but room for one
Though big in time as earth is far from sun.
Fenced out from two, eternity's borders may
Be circumscribed by one in half a day.

Trees once erect now droop; the sick façade
Of autumn fronts the dusty boulevard.
Shrubs quaintly bloom and burn; it is God's will.
But God describes an arc while love stands still.

Love's law goes round as dumb as rock in space.
Our static love still wears an April face
But marks its fixity, as through a mask
The imp of God speaks, granting what we asked.¹

Such metaphysical lyrics, discussing 'the universe' in the medium of extended metaphors, form the bulk of Ashbery's juvenilia from his undergraduate years at Harvard. That Ashbery was thus influenced is hardly surprising: the likes of Donne, Marvell and Vaughan, after Eliot's efforts in the 1920s and 30s, were influencing everyone in post-war American poetry from Robert Lowell to Allen Ginsberg.² The metaphysical poets were, thanks to the New Critics, back in fashion academically: Donne, for example, was on three different courses for Ashbery's Harvard degree, and while most areas of 'the Canon' had to be condensed under large headings like 'Sixteenth Century Poetry' or 'Nineteenth Century Fiction', 'Donne and his School'

1 Ashbery, 'Undergraduate Stanzas', Ashbery archive, Houghton Library, Harvard, dated 1947.

2 For accounts of this, see especially Marjorie Perloff, 'Poètes Maudits of the Genteel Tradition: Lowell and Berryman', in *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Steven Axelrod and Helen Deese, London: Cambridge UP, 1989; and Paul Portuges, 'The Poetics of Vision', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Lewis Hyde, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1984, pp. 131-140.

had a course of their own (or, more accurately, two — Ashbery having already taken English 130b, ‘Metaphysical Poets: Donne to Marvell’ in his junior year). Critics like Eliot and Cleanth Brooks were required reading. Emerging from three centuries outside the literary establishment, the strain of seventeenth-century verse loosely termed ‘metaphysical’ was now reborn as an epoch-making artistic tendency rivalling the Augustan and romantic in importance.

Ashbery recalls in an interview some time after the event that, despite studying ‘the usual curriculum’, which at Harvard amounted to the entire English Canon, it was the metaphysicals that he was ‘particularly attracted to’.³ Yet, as with all Ashbery’s readings, this attraction is inspired by particulars rather than the all-encompassing ‘sensibility’ valued by Eliot. The principal imitations in the juvenile poems, for instance, are of the metaphysical conceit, of complex, extended and paradoxical metaphor (the lyric above takes its lead from the elaborate metaphors of Andrew Marvell’s ‘The Definition of Love’). Another poem of Ashbery’s youth, called ‘A Sermon’, takes the circuitous argumentation-by-metaphor beyond perhaps even its Donnean conclusion: ‘Your fate and history / Meet in geometry / And in radiant law dissolve.’⁴ The distinctive metaphysical use of metaphor is what interests Ashbery in these early years. As an undergraduate essay of the period evidences, it is features like the ‘method of connotation’, ‘avoidance of genuine imagery’ and use of what he calls ‘parallel simile’ that first catch Ashbery’s eye in metaphysical poetry.⁵ Indeed, such observations predict what Auden would term Ashbery’s ‘strange juxtapositions of imagery’ in his preface to Ashbery’s first collection, *Some Trees*.⁶

The far-fetched metaphor is certainly a concern of the so-called New York School generally. Frank O’Hara’s description of Ashbery ‘always marrying the whole world’, or Bill Berkson’s outrageous ‘pools of smoke that smell ridiculously like someone’s raised eyebrow in a cyclone’ encapsulate in their few words a good deal of the New York School aesthetic.⁷ A link could also be made to the

3 Stitt, p. 42.

4 See John Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford, New York: Library of America, 2008, pp. 890-1. Poem originally published in *Harvard Advocate*.

5 Ashbery, ‘Nature Imagery in the Poetry of Marvell and Vaughan’, Ashbery archive (box AM-6), Houghton Library, Harvard.

6 W. H. Auden, Foreword to *Some Trees*, Yale Series of Younger Poets 52, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956, p. 16.

7 Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen, New York: Knopf, 1971, p. 266; Bill Berkson, ‘All You Want’, in *Poems, 1960-1961*, New York: Tibor de Nagy Editions, 1961.

consciously diverse source-material of these poets and Donne's astronomical imagery or Marvell's poetic geometry, be it visible in poems about Daffy Duck, sixteenth-century mannerist painters, Popeye, or the ancient art of making decisions based on a passage from Virgil selected at random. It is crucial to distinguish this engagement with metaphysical poetry from the reading represented by the well-wrought, cerebral poetry of the Middle Generation. Eliot and the New Critical proselytes responsible for the revaluation of seventeenth-century poetry are also the aesthetic fathers of this post-war establishment poetry; Ashbery therefore not only has the poetry of 'the Donne School' in front of him in this period, but also an example of its application to contemporary poetry.

W. D. Snodgrass recollects his reception of the work of the metaphysicals:

in school, we had been taught to write a very difficult and very intellectual poem. We tried to achieve the obscure and dense texture of the French Symbolists... but by using methods similar to those of the very intellectual and conscious poets of the English Renaissance, especially the metaphysical poets.⁸

By 'methods' here Snodgrass refers to the formal. Insofar as Lowell's work, according to John Berryman, represents 'a new period, returning to the deliberate and the formal', Middle Generation verse is influenced not by the unruly correspondences of metaphysical poetry or its conceited paradoxical argumentation, but by its metrical achievements (Donne's in 'Mr. Edwards and the Spider', Marvell's in *Near the Ocean*), or by lessons learned from the textual structure of Donnean metaphor. The terms of I. A. Richard's delineation of metaphor, which there will be occasion to discuss shortly, are used by Berryman himself to explain this type of use of metaphysical verse in his *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*: 'The eight-line stanza I invented here after a lifetime's study, especially of Yeats's, and in particular the one adopted from Abraham Cowley for his elegy 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory'... For four-and-a-half years, then, I accumulated materials and sketched, fleshing out the target or vehicle.'⁹

In Ashbery, I will argue, we witness a very different engagement with one of the principal cultural and poetic materials of the 1950s and after. The purpose here is to

⁸ W. D. Snodgrass, *In Radical Pursuit*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975, p. 42.

⁹ John Berryman, 'One answer to a question', in *Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Howard Nemerov, Voice of America Forum Letters, 1965, p. 126; quoted in Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, p. 34.

analyse Ashbery's reading of what we may broadly if unfashionably call the metaphysical conceit, and to observe what Ashbery, in a reading of this device, has to say about the broader functions of metaphor to persuade, represent, suggest correspondences, speculate, and reevaluate. In this, the chapter will present three aspects of Ashbery's work in light of the metaphysical strategies which form their background: paradox, thinking and communication.

1. *Paradoxes, problems and 'lost words'*

The traditional account of the metaphysical conceit tells a story of ornamental Elizabethan metaphor giving way, due to a revived post-Elizabethan interest in rhetoric and aesthetics generally, to a full-blown 'poetic of correspondences', in one historian's words, in which metaphor is freed from its subservience to Aristotelian 'ornamentation' to enact directly 'the hidden resemblances between things'.¹⁰ Metaphor, according to this history, is transformed from an optional beautification of ideas into a major function of argumentation itself; the conceit is not a sensual titivation of rhetoric, but a device in rhetoric proper for the communication of ideas. This account, then, emphasises simultaneously the conceit's break from the past, but also, because it still considers the device as essentially synthetic, its continuity. Insofar as they judge the conceit as a question of traditional metaphor differing only in extent, the most influential critics have agreed to this continuity. Eliot describes the device as 'extended, detailed, interminable simile', while Rosemund Tuve's monumental *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* distinguishes the two species of metaphor only as 'differences between extended pursuit of a simply logical parallel and extended pursuit of a likeness by basing it on several logical parallels'.¹¹

An important upshot of this conception has been to continue wedding the conceit to rhetoric. Until recently, twentieth-century criticism has been intent on discussing the metaphysicals as, following J. B. Leishman's description of Donne,

10 J. A. Mazzeo, 'A Critique of Some Modern Theories of Metaphysical Poetry', in *Seventeenth Century English Poetry: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. William Keast, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 63.

11 T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, London: Faber, 1993, p. 133; Rosemund Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947, p. 294.

‘argumentative poets’. This seems partly true: the structure of Donne and Donnean poems do have a certain line of reasoning. It is not, however, commensurate with suggesting, as Helen Gardner does, that the conceit is ‘used to persuade, or to define, or to prove a point’.¹² For what is the point of this poem by Donne?

The Paradox

No lover saith, I love, nor any other
Can judge a perfect lover;
He thinks that else none can, nor will agree
That any loves but he:
I cannot say I loved, for who can say
He was killed yesterday?
Love with excess of heat, more young than old,
Death kills with too much cold;
We die but once, and who love last did die,
He that saith twice, doth lie:
For though he seem to move, and stir a while,
It doth the sense beguile.
Such life is like the light which bideth yet
When the light’s life is set,
Or like the heat, which fire in solid matter
Leaves behind, two hours after.
Once I loved and died; and am now become
Mine epitaph and tomb.
Here dead men speak their last, and so do I;
Love slain, lo, here I lie.¹³

Far from the ‘telescoping of images and multiple and multiplied associations’ Eliot identified in Donne, ‘The Paradox’ represents a proliferation of multiplicity.¹⁴ Donne’s self-destructive poem from the *Songs and Sonnets* seems, indeed, to be the antithesis of argument, culminating only, by its circular and impossible liar paradox, in endless contradiction.

Because of the pressure to see the work of Donne and his contemporaries, following Eliot, as hard-headed cerebral poets of ‘sensibility’, there is a tendency in New Criticism to explain the contradictory and anarchic elements of their poetry away. Cleanth Brooks’s 1947 *The Well-Wrought Urn*, for example, the New Critical handbook of Ashbery’s time at Harvard, championed poetic paradox — ‘The language of poetry is the language of paradox’ — as William Empson’s famous

12 Helen Gardner, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, in *Seventeenth Century English Poetry: Modern Essays in Criticism*, in Keast, p. 56.

13 John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 73.

14 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode, London: Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 243.

study had ambiguity. In this, Brooks appears to place his analysis outside the common perception of metaphysical poetry as argumentative in nature.¹⁵ In fact, however, he ends up placing metaphysical poetry even more firmly within this conception. Paradox, it turns out, is simply a kind of ‘logic of poetry’, and therefore another form of New Critical closure. It is used, according to Brooks, ‘to gain a compression and a precision’, and may even be considered ‘rational rather than divinely irrational’.¹⁶ The device in Brooks’ thesis is always an exacting element to a poem or figure. Therefore, speaking of Donne’s ‘The Canonisation’ he suggests that ‘the poet has actually built before our eyes within the song the “pretty room” with which he says the lovers can be content. The poem itself is the well-wrought urn which can hold the lovers’ ashes’.¹⁷ In this, we find ourselves disturbingly close to stereotypes of Elizabethan metaphor-as-sugar-coating.

Such accounts form the context of Ashbery’s engagement with metaphysical poetry, whether in a Harvard classroom or in the general cultural climate that was exulting the above qualities. Before I go on to look at Ashbery’s first major poem coming out of his own reading, it is worth giving some background regarding how Donne and Marvell actually stand in relation to these influential descriptions of metaphysical verse. Firstly, then, I want to consider how metaphysical argumentation manifests itself, and secondly its relation to ideas of reason.

Metaphysical poems contain a lot of words like ‘so’, ‘then’, ‘but’, and ‘yet’, which have given the illusion that the poetry is built on some sort of formal logic. This is an illusion one may be able to get away with in a poet of religious conviction like George Herbert, but it is unable to describe two of the seventeenth century’s most doubting and ruminative writers, Donne and Marvell, poets who will be the subject of this chapter.

In Donne, we see two kinds of argumentation. The first is the combative send-up of formal reasoning evident in ‘The Paradox’: a deliberate disintegration of argumentative strategies to prove either nothing or the ironically counter-intuitive. Donne’s prose vignettes, the *Paradoxes and Problems*, also show this approach at work:

15 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, London: Dennis Dobson, 1944: p. 3.

16 Ibid., pp. 3, 9.

17 Ibid., p. 16.

Shal [Nature] be *guide* to all *Creatures*, which is her selfe one? Or if she also have a *guide*, shall any *Creature* have a better guide than wee? The affections of *lust* and *anger*, yea even to *erre is naturall*; shall we follow these? Can shee be a good *guide* to us, which hath corrupted not us onely but her selfe? Was not the *first man*, by the desire of *knowledge*, corrupted even in the *whitest integrity* of *Nature*?¹⁸

The second method in Donne makes use of conventional argumentative strategies, but mixes the aims of them in such a way as to suggest a certain contingency in reasoning. This is shown in any number of Donne poems with emotional depth, from the more serious love poems to the pained religious meditations and sonnets. An early poem, 'A Fever', shows the structure of this argumentation nicely. Here Donne, at his lover's bedside, speculates on the possible significance and outcomes of her fever, but the argument in the poem is, finally, the poet's with himself:

But yet thou canst not die, I know;
To leave this world behind, is death,
But when thou from this world wilt go,
The whole world vapours with thy breath.

Or if, when thou, the world's soul, go'st,
It stay, 'tis but thy carcase then,
The fairest woman, but thy ghost,
But corrupt worms, the worthiest men.

Oh wrangling schools, that search what fire
Shall burn this world, had none the wit
Unto this knowledge to aspire,
That this her fever might be it?

And yet she cannot waste by this,
Nor long endure this torturing wrong,
For much corruption needful is
To fuel such a fever long.

These burning fits but meteors be,
Whose matter in thee is soon spent.
Thy beauty, and all parts, which are thee,
Are unchangeable firmament.¹⁹

Rather than persuading, the poem presents the tenderness of worry and the very problems of self-justification as the poet goes back and forth between variously

18 John Donne, 'That Nature is Our Worst Guide', *Selected Prose*, ed. Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy, Oxford: Clarendon, 1967, p. 13.

19 Donne, *Poems*, pp. 57-8.

comforting possibilities (comforting insofar as the conceits they allow are so). In this, there is a fretting and constant self-reflection, as if the argument cannot progress because of the obsession with its own workings and implications. Indeed, the ‘point’ of the poem is to affect, by this rough waywardness, a kind of rhetoric of immediacy and argumentative improvisation.

Donne’s arguments are of oscillating, wavering and, taken together, contradictory significance. Be it between Catholicism and Anglicanism, faith and reason, between love and misogyny, desire and despair, Donne’s major achievement is to make an art out of uneven thought itself, not from its distillation into consistent reasoning. John Carey notes that Donne’s poems ‘are, because of [their] cross-currents, virtually impossible to see clearly; they will not stay still’.²⁰ The agony of Donne’s oscillating convictions and fragmented arguments is the result of what might be called, when read through Ashbery, ‘inattention’ — of a restless intellect, of a mind unable, or unwilling, to concentrate. In prayer, Donne notes,

I neglect God and his Angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the ratling of a Coach, for the whining of a doore... I finde that I had forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of to morrows dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer.²¹

Donne’s arguments are at the mercy of such distractions because they are so tied up with the person thinking, and his contingency on time, emotion, desire and misjudgement. ‘As he speaks, we think he thinks,’ as Donne’s terms it in one of his favourite sophisms.²²

Marvell is undoubtedly a follower of Donne in this respect, as in many others. As the ‘Horatian Ode’ to Cromwell illustrates most notoriously, a central argument or even sentiment in Marvell’s work is often virtually unidentifiable. Consider the end of the Donnean ‘Dialogue Between the Soul and Body’, written around 1650:

Soul. What magic could me thus confine
Within another’s grief to pine?
Where, whatsoever it complain,

20 John Carey, *John Donne: life, mind and art*, London: Faber and Faber, 1983, p. 45.

21 Sermon no. 80, preached at the funeral of Sir William Cokayne, December 12, 1626. In *John Donne’s Sermons on the Psalms and Gospels*, ed. Evelyn Mary Spearing Simpson, University of California Press, 1963, p. 25.

22 Cited in Joan Webber, *Contrary Music*, Madison: 1963, p. 27.

I feel, that cannot feel, the pain;
And all my care itself employs,
That to preserve which me destroys;
Constrained not only to endure
Diseases, but, what's worse, the cure;
And, ready oft the port to gain,
Am shipwrecked into health again.

Body. But Physic yet could never reach
The maladies thou me dost teach;
Whom first the cramp of hope does tear,
And then the palsy shakes of fear;
The pestilence of love does heat,
Or hatred's hidden ulcer eat;
Joy's cheerful madness does perplex,
Or sorrow's other madness vex;
Which knowledge forces me to know,
And memory will not forego;
What but a soul could have the wit
To build me up for sin so fit?
So architects do square and hew
Green trees that in the forest grew.²³

The argument is ostensibly along dialectic lines, but progresses only into further quandaries about the inextricable nature of the two elements (it is hard to believe that some critics have read the poem as representing the 'absolute division' of the body and soul).²⁴ Questions and logical constructions abound, but the conversation is merely a collection of invective conceits, often paradoxical, in which each element enacts the drama of conflicting relations with the other. Nothing is resolved or established about these relations except that they are highly problematical, and the method seems to fit Dr. Johnson's famous judgement of metaphysical verse as a poetry in which 'the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together' rather than the Marvell of 'tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace' the twentieth century has often described.²⁵

All these poems bring us to the major issue at stake in Donne and Marvell: the issue of reason. We have seen Brooks' logic of paradox, but the interest in metaphysical paradox for Ashbery and his contemporaries is in its deconstruction of logic by its reappraisal of metaphor. The interest, of course, comes out of what is occurring in the beginnings of the postmodern era in the shape of the likes of

23 Andrew Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, pp. 103-4.

24 See, for example, Maren-Sofie Rostvig, 'The Happy Man: Studies in the Metamorphoses of a Classical Ideal', Oslo: Norwegian Universities Press, 1962, p.76.

25 Samuel Johnson, *Lives*, in *Works*, vol. 9 London: 1972, p. 20; T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays: New Edition*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950, p. 252.

Adorno, Derrida, Lacan and others — that is, a fundamental reconsideration of concepts of reason and truth, couched in a new theory of metaphor.²⁶ ‘It was the great as though,’ (*DDS*, 73) writes Ashbery of his age in 1970. Derrida is the default representative of postmodern thought, and his comments are clear enough: ‘The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of metaphors and metonymies,’ he says.²⁷ And yet for Derrida, meaning is not to be seen as simply ‘a matter of inverting the literal meaning and the figurative meaning but of determining the literal meaning of writing as metaphoricity itself’.²⁸ The implications of this conception of metaphor for what Derrida calls the ideal of ‘univocity’ are well-known: whether termed play, *différance*, or arche-writing, the principal point is that metaphoricity radically destabilises all fixed and ‘logical’ formulations in language.²⁹

For Donne and Marvell, a similar transformation of the concept of reason and truth is occurring; embodied in such poets is what one book on the subject calls a *Paradoxia Epidemica*.³⁰ In Donne’s case, the formal logic of scholasticism, once the orthodoxy of Europe in the shape of works like Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, was beginning to be challenged by the fervent irrationality of Calvinism, accompanied by a renaissance of classical sceptics. In opposition to the Aristotelian confidence of Thomist strains of thought that emphasised the complementarities of reason and faith, of the world and human comprehension, these writers insisted on God’s transcendence of an ultimately feeble human reason, on the inability of any ‘humane discourse of Reason’ to grasp truth, and on the necessary contingency of human judgement.³¹ It is no surprise that Donne, an apostate of Catholicism, is to be found encouraging us to ‘doubt wisely’ or mourning his ‘riddling, perplexed, labyrinthical soule’. Donne, in this context, as ‘A Fever’ shows, adopts a scepticism which allows arguments, conceits and statements to change according to whatever

26 See Jacques Lacan, ‘The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious’, in *Yale French Studies*, 36/37 (1966); Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming, London: Allen Lane, 1973, especially pp. 131-5. For Derrida see below.

27 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 79.

28 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, London: John Hopkins UP, 1998, p. 15.

29 Jacques Derrida, ‘White Mythology’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester, 1982, 207-71, p. 246.

30 Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxica Epidemica: the Renaissance Tradition of Paradox*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966.

31 Agrippa, quoted by Carey, *Donne*, p. 219.

mood his mercurial temperament takes. This is not to say, along with James Smith in *Scrutiny*, that ‘Donne does not take seriously the propositions he quotes’, or that ‘value depends on the pursuit rather than the attainment of truth’, for this would mean no pursuit at all.³² Donne’s use of the findings of a supposedly objective science, are no doubt usefully seen as citations or ‘quotes’ rather than convicted justifications of sentiment — but Donne is still *searching*, and doing so very seriously, even desperately at times, for an argument that will fit. In the terms of the great theorist of metaphor, I. A. Richards, the ‘vehicle’, or metaphor itself, takes priority over — comes *before* — the ‘tenor’, the preconceived meaning or target the metaphor might be trying to effect. In addition to, and often alongside, the destructive playfulness of poems like ‘The Paradox’ there is a *drama* of thought and reason occurring in Donne’s poetry, enacted through the medium of metaphor and paradox.

Though for Marvell the context of what Dryden called metaphysical poetry’s ‘nice speculations of philosophy’ has reached a more advanced stage, his treatment and use of paradox remains Donnean in essence.³³ By now rationalism has found systematic expression in Cartesian idealism and Baconian empiricism, and therefore Marvell’s engagement with reason is on much more secular ground. His ‘Dialogue’ above, for instance, is not so much concerned with matters of salvation or faith in its consideration of the soul, but rather engages with, and inverts, Descartes’s epistemological logic of mind and body. Similarly, the scientific positivism of Francis Bacon’s idea of the mind as ‘mirror or glass, capable of the image of the universal world’ was finding expression in Marvell’s time in political works such as Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* or in religious tracts like Samuel Parker’s, the object of Marvell’s animosity in his most famous prose work.³⁴ As the ‘Dialogue’ and Marvell’s ode on Cromwell illustrate most brilliantly, against this backdrop Marvell is constantly weary of the political dangers of overdetermination, and sees a potential for absolutism in this new, confident epistemology. Like Donne, Marvell is always attempting to elide divisions and the mutually exclusive: the body politic is so ‘double-heart[ed]’, in the words of the ‘Dialogue’, because of its very strain for absolute separation and distinction. Marvell’s point is often, as, most famously, in

32 James Smith, ‘On Metaphysical Poetry’, *Scrutiny*, 2 (1934): p. 236.

33 Quoted in Keast, p. 50.

34 Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, Basil Montagu, A. Hart, 1852, Book 1, p. 163. The Marvell work alluded to here is *The Rehearsal Transposed*.

'The Garden' and 'To His Coy Mistress', that contrariety can be rendered relatively painless by the mere acceptance of paradox and complexity. The 'precision' Cleanth Brooks sees in such poems is very much the opposite of Marvell's intention: 'So architects do square and hew, / Green trees that in the forest grew'.

So just how does Ashbery's poetry engage with the aspects of metaphysical poetry so far enumerated? The single most important poem of Ashbery's early career is 'The Picture of Little J. A. In a Prospect of Flowers'. Here are the final two sections:

II

So far is goodness a mere memory
Or naming of recent scenes of badness
That even these lives, children,
You may pass through to be blessed,
So fair does each invent his virtue.

And coming from a white world, music
Will sparkle at the lips of many who are
Beloved. Then these, as dirty handmaidens
To some transparent witch, will dream
Of a white hero's subtle wooing,
And time shall force a gift on each.

That beggar to whom you gave no cent
Striped the night with his strange descant.

III

Yet I cannot escape the picture
Of my small self in that bank of flowers:
My head among the blazing phlox
Seemed a pale and gigantic fungus.
I had a hard stare, accepting

Everything, taking nothing,
As though the rolled-up future might stink
As loud as stood the sick moment
The shutter clicked. Though I was wrong,
Still, as the loveliest feelings

Must soon find words, and these, yes,
Displace them, so I am not wrong
In calling this comic version of myself
The true one. For as change is horror,
Virtue is really stubbornness

And only in the light of lost words
Can we imagine our rewards. (*ST*, 28-9)

Ashbery's model for this poem is Marvell's 'The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers', which on first reading appears to be a typical mid-seventeenth lyric, elegant and light in the manner of Marvell's Cavalier friends like Richard Lovelace. Analysis, however, will show otherwise. Here, then, is Marvell's poem in its entirety:

I
See with what simplicity
This nymph begins her golden days!
In the green grass she loves to lie,
And there with her fair aspect tames
The wilder flowers, and gives them names:
But only with the roses plays;
 And them does tell
What colour best becomes them, and what smell.

II
Who can foretell for what high cause
This Darling of the Gods was born!
Yet this is she whose chaster laws
The wanton Love shall one day fear,
And, under her command severe,
See his bow broke and ensigns torn.
 Happy, who can
Appease this virtuous enemy of man!

III
O then let me in time compound,
And parley with those conquering eyes;
Ere they have tried their force to wound,
Ere, with their glancing wheels, they drive
In triumph over hearts that strive,
And them that yield but more despise.
 Let me be laid,
Where I may see thy glories from some shade.

IV
Mean time, whilst every verdant thing
Itself does at thy beauty charm,
Reform the errors of the spring;
Make that the tulips may have share
Of sweetness, seeing they are fair;
And Roses of their thorns disarm:
 But most procure
That Violets may a longer age endure.

V
But O young beauty of the woods,
Whom nature courts with fruits and flowers,
Gather the flowers, but spare the buds;
Lest Flora angry at thy crime,

To kill her infants in their prime,
Do quickly make the example yours;
 And, ere we see,
Nip in the blossom all our hopes and thee.³⁵

We have, then, in Ashbery's 'Little J. A.' a reading of a specific poem.

Let us begin with the Marvell. The contradictions in terms that dominate Marvell's 'virtuous enemy of man' are a symptom of the poet-voyeur's ambivalence toward her. For T. C. is at once tamer of wildness and destroyer of tame 'hearts that strive', at once innocent youth and (sexually) experienced potentiality, art and nature, life and death. Though Marvell's poem appears to develop an argument culminating in a 'moral', the turns in the line of reasoning are spontaneous and isolated (hence the tonal shifts and the note of surprise in many of the stanza-openings). 'But' may be a sober method of contention, 'But O' is not; and as in Donne, this ending seems more decided by the suggestion and attraction of its 'vehicle' — the metaphor of the girl as flower — than its basis in logical reality.

The source of Marvell's ambivalence and anxieties is the poem's theme of the relation of virtue to time, which is accordingly the vocabulary Ashbery uses in his poem. The 'mere memory / Or naming of recent scenes of badness', how 'each invent[s] his virtue' through life, how 'time shall force a gift on each', how 'the loveliest feelings / Must soon find words, and these, yes, / Displace them', that 'Virtue is really stubbornness' and how 'only in the light of lost words / Can we imagine our rewards' — all speculate on Marvell's theme. But what is the 'overall' point? It is hard to see at first. In essence, though, it is similar to Marvell's: in the picture of youthfulness is the 'stink' of the 'pale' corpse of a 'rolled-up future'. The child's convergence with nature is a convergence with death; what Ashbery has 'a hard stare accepting' is change and mutability, and the anxiety of the poem is how to accept this. This is found in the correspondences of language and life: even words themselves have a tendency to be 'displace[d]', and 'only in the light of lost words / Can we imagine our rewards'. The most important thing, though, about Ashbery's enigmatic argument is its very difficulty, the effect of the trouble one has in reading and comprehending a line of reasoning based on 'lost words'. That is, the statements on the displacement and flux of words are mirrored in a use of them that emphasises

35 Marvell, *Complete Poems*, pp. 63-4.

their instability, changeability and inconsistency. In this, the *method* of the poem as well as any theme is based on a reading of Marvell.

Another poem from *Some Trees*, 'The Grapevine', with its compendious mixture of Audenesque mood music and metaphysical illogic takes the paradoxical possibilities of knotted and slippery description to an extreme:

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

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

Though, so tall up there
In young air. But things get darker as we move
To ask them: Whom must we get to know
To die, so you live and we know? (*ST*, 19)

As I will demonstrate later in this thesis, there is a fundamental link between the lessons of form and manner Ashbery learns from Auden and the paradoxical poetic he reads into metaphysical poetry. Here, paradox is enacted at the level of syntax — that is, the poem itself is the representative or metaphor of paradoxical experience. As we shall see, the aesthetics of mimetic form Ashbery perceives in Auden permit many of his experiments with paradox.

This is all very different from, for instance, Robert Lowell's use of metaphysical conceit and paradox. Here is a stanza from Lowell's 'The First Sunday in Lent'.

This world, this ferris wheel, is tired and strains
Its townsman's humorous and bulging eye,
As he ascends and lurches from his seat
And dangles by a shoe-string overhead
To tell the racing world that it must die.
Who can remember what his father said?
The little wheel is turning on the great
In the white water of Christ's blood. The red
Eagle of Ares swings along the lanes.³⁶

36 Robert Lowell, *Poems 1938-1949*, London: Faber and Faber, 1950, p.26.

Here, in the formal resemblance of the extended metaphor to metaphysical conceit there is an imitation of seventeenth-century lyric on a superficial level. There is an opening scenario, a question, and a conclusive statement; the paradoxical relationship of the world and its various circles conforms to Brooks' conception of paradox. There is a 'precision' in the well-wrought image of the townsman hanging by a thread from the world to admonish it, for the point of the tableau is that he himself is part of that forgetful racing: 'Who can remember what his father said?'

Ashbery's poetry, on the other hand, as in 'Little J. A.', avoids this essentially static conception of metaphysical metaphor. To expand on this let us take one more example. One of Ashbery's first long poems, 'Clepsydra', from his 1966 volume *Rivers and Mountains*, shows the importance of his reading of Donne and Marvell beyond his earliest work. The 'tree of contradictions' (*TP*, 63) we see in 'The Grapevine' is here multiplied over a long period of poetic daydreaming. In essence, 'Clepsydra' is a poem concerned with what it terms 'becoming complicated' (*RM*, 30) — that is, both how things become complicated, and how becoming itself is complicated. As the 'lost words' of 'Little J. A.' require, the poet of 'Clepsydra' constantly finds himself repositioning the poem's argument in the light of 'absence', 'preparing to continue the dialogue into / Those mysterious and near regions that are / Precisely the time of its being furthered' (28). The poem predicts the more celebrated long poem from the collection, 'The Skaters', in which 'the carnivorous / Way of these lines is to devour their own nature / Leaving nothing but a bitter impression of absence' (39). It is argument, however, rather than impression, that is the term to consider in relation to 'Clepsydra', for despite its anti-philosophical posturing it is an abstract, philosophical kind of poem. 'I am more interested in the movement among ideas than the ideas themselves,' Ashbery has said.³⁷ Though 'argument', according to the poem, is always 'leav[ing] behind' (28), it is nonetheless by argument that the poem progresses, and with argumentative method that it thematically contends. 'Philosophy,' Ashbery says, 'hasn't directly influenced my poetry but the process of philosophic inquiry certainly has.'³⁸ Ashbery's almost prejudicial attitude toward philosophy is well-known, but the ambivalences produced by this conceptual double-standard are often overlooked.

37 Stitt, pp. 44-5.

38 *Craft* interview, p. 121.

The paradoxical nature of 'philosophical process' is laid out in the first few lines of the poem:

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 at this very moment... (27)

However, this sceptical assertion itself stands in paradoxical relation to the rest of the poem, which is constantly questioning general formulation, however much such formulation emphasises the priority of the 'moment'. An 'assurance' which 'goes a long way toward conditioning / Whatever result' (29) is, the poem suggests, one of the great dangers of thinking:

there would come a moment when
Acts no longer sufficed and the calm
Of this true progression hardened into shreds
Of another kind of calm, returning to the conclusion, its premises
Undertaken before any formal agreement had been reached, hence
A writ that was the shadow of the colossal reason behind all this
Like a second, rigid body behind the one you know is yours. (30)

These anxieties about method, about a false solidification of living thought, tell us a great deal about Ashbery's relationship with philosophy. Clearly, such anxieties are a symptom of Ashbery's aesthetic of the present situation. But to return to the specific question of reason, it is clear that Ashbery's long poems simultaneously advance anti-philosophical sentiments while using a partly philosophical method. After 'Clepsydra', from the extended delineation of the pseudo-categories of 'the frontal' and 'the latent' in *Three Poems* to the troubling of subjectivity in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and beyond, Ashbery's extended meditations seem to have this peculiar anti-rationalistic bent in common.

In 'Litany' we get 'antithesis chirping / to antithesis' (*AWK*, 8) in an allusion to the double-columned 'antimonies' of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Because of the nature of these meditations, it is Kant's antimonies that are most helpful in allowing us to understand Ashbery's paradox. Like Donne and Marvell's problematization of rationalism, Kant's critique of pure reason lies in the admission of the contradiction

it necessarily produces. These are the ‘wholly natural antithetic’ of the antimonies.³⁹ Resembling the elements of Donne’s ‘The Paradox’, ‘These sophisticated assertions thus open up a dialectical battlefield, where each party will keep the upper hand as long as it is allowed to attack’.⁴⁰ While Kant is confident such contradictions can be overcome, it is crucial that the solution lies outside the reach of ‘pure reason’, involving rather being ‘attentive to the moments involved in determining [an argument’s] principles’.⁴¹ The influence of this on Hegel and Marxian dialectics is obvious, but it is also precisely what Ashbery frets over in ‘Clepsydra’. Adorno tells us:

In this critique of what might be called the pre-established answer in philosophy Kant describes very incisively and elegantly a danger that philosophy frequently succumbs to when it attempts to function as an apologia... This is the danger of the *thema probandum*, that is to say, the danger that the argument may in reality have been determined in advance, in the sense that you know in advance how it will end, what will emerge and indeed what ought to emerge... It is undoubtedly the case that the interminable boredom aroused by much philosophy... may stem from the fact that you often know in advance how the argument will end.⁴²

The foregrounding of this ‘danger’ is already, though, what is at stake in metaphysical poetry over a century before Kant. The work of Donne and Marvell is always using paradox ‘attentive to the moments’ of argumentation to subvert formally logical or systematic discourse. Paradox with them is the rhetoric that gives the impression that things have not been determined in advance.

The speculative ‘coming and going’ (*RM*, 29) of ‘Clepsydra’ comes from the poem’s central metaphor of the water-clock. This symbol, and the subsequent poem, is perhaps best explained by a statement Ashbery makes in 1966, just after ‘Clepsydra’ was written: ‘Ambiguity supposes an eventual resolution of itself, whereas certitude implies further ambiguity.’⁴³ In the *process* of the poem, that is, the ‘coming and going’ of varying certitude and ambiguity taken as an experience over time is revealed as ‘endless in the discovery’ (28). And so, if Ashberyan paradox differs from Lowell’s, it is also to be distinguished from Whitman’s, which

39 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn, New York: Dover, 2003, p. 460.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 468.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 469.

42 Theodor Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rolf Tiedemann and Rodney Livingstone, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001, pp. 60-1.

43 *John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch (A Conversation)*, Tucson, Arizona: The Interview Press, 1966: p. 13.

is ever-present and inclusive rather than contingent, erratic and divisive: 'Do I contradict myself? / Very well then.... I contradict myself; I am large.... I contain multitudes'.⁴⁴

That the relation between paradox and metaphor forms a major part of Ashbery's poetic has been noted by many a good critic of his work, even though its reliance on a reading of Donne and his followers has been overlooked. Vernon Shetley applies the language of Richards to Ashbery:

Ashbery's practice of metaphor seems deliberately to call into question the priority of the actual to the metaphors it generates. Frequently, his metaphors involve tenor-vehicle mismatches so extreme as to suggest that the metaphor's job of communicating information about the thing it modifies has been all but abandoned... [Ashberyan metaphor] is at the farthest possible remove from the metaphysical conceit, whose revival was one of the striking stylistic features of the work of Lowell and other mainstream practitioners of the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁵

Shetley here, sold by the New Critical version of the metaphysical conceit, assumes that the Middle Generation's crystallised, static and precise metaphor is what it consists in. What Shetley describes, in fact, is Ashbery's reading of metaphysical poetry. Metaphor is what causes the 'becoming complicated', that complicates becoming, but is at the same time the language in which becoming, in which time and thinking, are conducted.

If Ashbery notes being 'quite puzzled by my work too, along with a lot of other people', it is because of the free rein metaphor is allowed to have in it.⁴⁶ The paradoxes and inconsistencies dramatized in 'Clepsydra' are the result of a speculative poetic which throws out metaphors and experiments with them as it goes, some being more helpful than others. This is what Charles Altieri describes in a book on 1970s American poetry:

The New Critics emphasized how poetry works as a nondiscursive alternative to the simplicities of argument. Now our most interesting poets, especially David Antin and John Ashbery, can reverse those priorities: Nondiscursiveness sits within the very heart of argument because poetic conventions can be manipulated to focus attention on the overdetermination latent in all our discursive practices and habits of thought. We can even learn to take pleasure in this excess of signification and the strange interpretive romances it can attract us to. Attention to overdetermination

44 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1973: p. 88.

45 Vernon Shetley, *After the Death of Poetry: poet and audience in contemporary America*, London: Duke UP, 1993, pp. 120-1.

46 Unpublished interview with Charles Altieri, 1981: manuscript in Houghton Archive, Harvard.

produces speculative instruments guiding us in turning thought's desire for closure against itself...⁴⁷

Against the well-wrought urns of the New Critical 'logic of poetry' that dominated the poetic climate he grew up in, Ashbery attends to and enacts the problems of metaphorical signification itself. 'Ashbery constructs a thinking self that absorbs dialogue into its own condition,' in Altieri's words.⁴⁸ What has been said above is of the *shape* this speculation takes. We have seen, that is, as in metaphysical poetry, Ashbery's paradoxical form of argumentation in which 'knowledge of the whole is impossible', and where all presumptions of unchanging reality are set aside in a drama of thinking through. The *nature* of this argumentation, of the oppositions Ashbery's speculative metaphors throw up, is what I will turn to now.

2. 'Speculum, *mirror*': '*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*'

'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' is at once Ashbery's most accessibly argumentative poem and his most ambivalent and paradoxical. The much-anthologised poem, written in 1973, has come to seem both the supreme example of Ashbery's work and a traditionally organised anomaly in a career of experimentalism. Either way, the poem is crucial to Ashbery's development and reception: in the story often told, Ashbery could never be the same after the poem and the prestigious awards and attention it received from a public once ignorant of his work. Because of the success of 'Self-Portrait', however, there has been a tendency in the proliferation of commentary on it to read the poem outside of Ashbery's work as a whole. Furthermore, Ashbery's poem, quite accidentally, coincides with the rise to prominence of deconstruction in the US academy. Both aspects have led to certain distortive assumptions about the poem. Through an analysis of these assumptions, and a reading of the poem as a reading of the metaphysical conceit, a fresh interpretation of 'Self-Portrait' will be offered here.

47 Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984, p. 26.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

In *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Ashbery is concerned with mannerism.⁴⁹ ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ itself is a poem where, in the words of one critic, ‘Francesco’s argument is also Ashbery’s, which is the argument of mannerism’.⁵⁰ The particularly Donnean argumentative mode we shall see in ‘Self-Portrait’ comes, then, from the example Ashbery chooses to hang his meditations on: a painting from early sixteenth-century Italy — the situation from where, that is to say, the metaphysical conceit is considered to have originated.⁵¹ Just as links between metaphysical poetry and Parmigianino’s use of perspective are often made, so in Ashbery’s poem, Parmigianino’s mannerist *conchetto* of the convex mirror and ‘*bizarria*’ of perspective (*SP*, 73) suggest themselves as forerunners to the extravagancies of metaphysical representation.⁵² That the ‘perverse light’ of the convex-mirror portrait is called a ‘conceit’ (70) by Ashbery is no coincidence. Ashbery himself finds in Parmigianino ‘a precursor of de Chirico’, a painter he labels ‘metaphysical’.⁵³

One of Ashbery’s adjectives for Parmigianino’s painting is ‘unlikely’ (69). Donne has his own characteristically unlikely self-portraits in convex mirrors in a number of poems, such as ‘Witchcraft by a Picture’:

I fixe mine eye on thine, and there
Pitty my picture burning in thine eye,

49 Of the many poems dealing with the period in *Self-Portrait*, ‘As You Came from the Holy Land’ takes the title of Walter Raleigh’s ballad; ‘De Imagine Mundi’ meditates on that great philosophical problem of sixteenth-century metaphysical thought, the one and the many; ‘As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat’ takes a line from Marvell. For discussions of Ashbery and mannerism see: John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, Harvard: Harvard UP, 1995, pp. 174-191; Douglas Crase, ‘The Prophetic Ashbery’, in *John Ashbery*, ed. Bloom, pp. 195-205; David Lehman, introduction to *Beyond Amazement*, London: Cornell UP, 1980, pp. 15-29.

50 William Watkin, *In the Process of Poetry: the New York school and the avant-garde*, London: Associated University Presses, 2001, p. 191.

51 See William Keast (ed.), *Seventeenth Century English Poetry: modern essays in criticism*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981. Mario Praz argues that it ‘is to poetry what the illusory perspective is to art’, in Keast, p. 67.

52 For a general discussion of such connections, see L. E. Semler, *The English Mannerist Poets and the Visual Arts*, London: Associated University Presses, 1998. For Marvell and mannerism particularly, see Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style*, New York: Doubleday, 1955, p. 119: ‘Marvell’s sharp but sustained attack [upon conventional Renaissance poetic formulas] is like the loose and surprising adjustment and counter-adjustment of figure to figure in Parmigianino’s paintings, with their evidence of subjective stress... [which] relies upon an involved energy, not a closed design... are always momentary and undependable’. For Donne and mannerism see Martin Elsky, ‘John Donne’s “La Corona”: Spatiality and Mannerist Painting’, *Modern Language Studies*, 13:2 (Spring 1983), pp. 3-11. Parmigianino’s proclivity for the ‘poetic conceit’ in painting has long been noted by commentators (from Christina Neilson’s catalogue to *Parmigianino’s Antea: A Beautiful Artifice* at the Frick, New York, February 2008).

53 John Ashbery, article on Parmigianino in *New York Herald Tribune*, October 20, 1964, p. 31; and ‘Metaphysical Overtones’, *New York*, February 11, 1980.

My picture drown'd in a transparent teare,
When I looke lower I espie...⁵⁴

The point is not that Ashbery's poem is modelled on this poem (it is modelled on Parmigianino's painting), but that the possibilities of mirror-play that are so explored by Donne and his associates show a continuation of the perceptual mind-games of Parmigianino's mannerism, and that Ashbery bears a relationship to — offers a *reading* of — both. The poetry that helps Ashbery write about Parmigianino's painting, that is, is metaphysical poetry. One of the metaphysical lyrics Ashbery wrote at Deerfield Academy in the mid-1940s, proves as much in its prediction of 'Self-Portrait':

Always the left hand flickers, falls to right;
The eyes groping at mirrors
Strike the sought self, opaque and firm,
Safe in its frame. A sweet disorder
Arranges mirrors, and the tensile gaze
Turns inward, calls the turning love.

Let our dual sight
See not so clearly, and turning, take daylight.
And before mirrors long unvisited
Avoid the milk white and translucent face
That stays there, that we know not how to name.⁵⁵

The echoes, or rather imitations, of Marvell's 'The Definition of Love', a number of Donne lyrics and Vaughan's 'They Are All Gone Into the World of Light' are clear. Equally, though, the argumentative tenor of the lines would not sound out of place in the later great poem Ashbery came to write.

Like 'Clepsydra', 'Self-Portrait' is a poem in which paradoxes and problems abound by dint of metaphoric flux, 'changing everything / Slightly and profoundly' (SP, 81). What is unique about 'Self-Portrait' is that such associations and reflections are themselves explicitly meditated on — are, in other words, the subject of the poem. The painting itself, says Ashbery, is 'really a superficial quality of the poem'.⁵⁶ What I will argue is that the poem deepens beyond this superficiality. For the painting is primarily treated as, and called, a 'metaphor' subsequent to being identified as a 'conceit'. 'As', the poem's first word, places both poem and painting

54 Donne, *Complete English Poems*, p. 42.

55 Quoted in Shoptaw, p. 178.

56 John Tranter, 'John Ashbery in Conversation', *Scripsi*, 4:1 (1986), p. 94.

in the metaphorical realm. If Paul Ricoeur is right in suggesting that ‘metaphor is the trope of resemblance *par excellence*’, then it is Parmigianino’s mirror-play, as a metaphor for metaphor itself, that is the foundational metaphor of the litany of conflicts in the poem.⁵⁷ ‘The surprise, the tension, are in the concept / Rather than its realization’ (74), the poem says — and, in addition to the dynamic metaphors of ‘Little J. A.’ and ‘Clepsydra’, ‘Self-Portrait’ offers an exhaustive meditation on the tensions of the process of metaphorical realisation. Ashbery’s reflexive poem, then, uses the metaphor of metaphor to explore the same issues that are at stake in the metaphor-heavy speculations of metaphysical verse: the nature of thinking and speculation, questions about how argumentation works and how metaphor relates to its communication.

William Watkin, in his book *In the Process of Poetry*, focuses on the visual appearance of Parmigianino, finding in the poem

a deconstructive motility based on the confrontation of the theme of the poem with the contradictory demands of the body proper. The ‘theme’ of the poem is the poet (painter) as subject, the ‘form’ is mannerism, and it is this central contradiction that sets off the deconstructive play of the poem.⁵⁸

Like most deconstructive readings of Ashbery’s poem, Watkins’s assumes that ‘Self-Portrait’ is itself deconstructive of Parmigianino’s painting. For Watkin this lies in how the poem ‘openly privileges the metonymic over the metaphoric’.⁵⁹ This is a case often made, usually based in the poem’s apparent emphasis on surface and the spatial. Watkin finds evidence for his ‘metonymic shift’ in ‘the primary motif of the hand’ which, he says, ‘deals directly with the tropic effects of actual proximity (head-eye-mouth-hand) rather than us[ing] metaphor to carry over into other associative realms — Orpheus to poet, painter to poet, poet to subject’.⁶⁰ The ‘dissolution of every metaphoric necessary into the horizontal displacements of a metonymic contingency’, in the words of another commentator, is usually then linked to two things: a) the avant-garde; and b) the ‘random’ or ‘indeterminate’.⁶¹ While it is true that some sort of conflict between the metaphoric and the metonymic

57 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, London: Routledge, 1978: p. 173.

58 Watkin, *Process*, p. 187.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 189, 188.

61 Lee Edelman, ‘The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32:1 (Spring 1986), p. 104.

is at stake in 'Self-Portrait', it is not clear why the metaphoric should be the bad guy of order, necessity and hierarchy compared to democratic and contingent metonymy, or that Ashbery presents such a situation. Furthermore, 'associative realms' are where the poem most obviously operates throughout.

To begin with, then, there are more interesting ways of looking at metaphor than as simply the transcendental impulse of Western metaphysics — ways, indeed, that Ashbery is trying to stress in 'Self-Portrait'. For a start, the primary motif of 'Self-Portrait' is the mirror, and not anything else. One thing the emphasis on metonymy in 'Self-Portrait' stresses is the fundamental *synthesis* of metaphor. The conflicting similarities and dissimilarities occurring in the mirror-play between Ashbery's poem and Parmigianino's portrait, however, suggest something quite different. According to Paul Ricoeur, 'to see *the like* is to see the same in spite of, and through, the differences. The tension between sameness and difference characterizes the logical structure of likeness'.⁶² This logical structure is suggested by Ashbery in the very first line of the poem, in fact, which has 'the right hand' thrust at the viewer when it is actually the painter's left hand that we see. There has also been a failure to recognise the link between mirror-play and metaphor. According to Chinese linguist Wu Kuang-ming, whom I will return to, 'Metaphor serves as a mirror... metaphor becomes (chameleon-like) and reflects (mirror-like) anyone looking into it'.⁶³ Rather than a static vertical signifier, metaphor moves and becomes, which is why Ashbery makes the apparently paradoxical link between speculation and mirroring: 'The words are only speculation / (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror)' (69). Just as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing or experience in terms of another', so Ashbery's commentary on Parmigianino's painting emphasises the experiential process of understanding as he looks at a literally static but metaphorically mobile object.⁶⁴

The term metaphor is etymologically from the Greek *μεταφορά*, to ferry or carry across, to transfer. Hence, in Richards' paradigmatic vocabulary, the vehicle transports literal meaning to the target meaning of the tenor. Ashbery's poem, likewise, employs a number of conveyance figures as metaphors of metaphor. The poem begins with concerns about Parmigianino's 'recurring wave of arrival': 'The

62 Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, p. 148.

63 Wu Kuang-ming, *On Metaphoring: a cultural hermeneutic*, Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2001, p. 16.

64 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 5.

soul establishes itself. / But how far can it swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest?' (68). The opening of the poem, thematizing ideas of imprisonment and detention, introduces the key to many of the subsequent conflicts in the poem: namely, what Ashbery calls 'The distance between us' (71). Though Parmigianino's is a 'metaphor / Made to include us' (76), because 'the soul is... kept / In suspension' and 'has to stay where it is' (68-9), the poem initially 'Remains a frozen gesture of welcome' (82), and no transfer of knowledge is effected. When this cannot be overcome there is a breach, usually presented as communication breakdown: 'an invitation / Never mailed, the "it was all a dream" / Syndrome' (82).

This postal metaphor for metaphor is present in the first poem of the collection, based on Marvell's tale of would-be Poet Laureate Tom May's drunken death, 'translated' on a mail-boat to the other side:

As one put drunk into the Packet-boat,
Tom May was hurry'd hence and did not know't.
But was amaz'd on the Elysian side,
And with an Eye uncertain, gazing wide,
Could not determine in what place he was.⁶⁵

Ashbery's poem, 'As one put drunk into the Packet-boat' (*SP*, 1-2), after which the collection was originally entitled, moves this idea of death-ferrying and postal delivery into a realm of mirror-play which can elucidate 'Self-Portrait' itself. 'A look of glass stops you / And you walk on shaken: was I the perceived?', asks the beginning of the poem's second stanza, and finds a clear answer:

The great, formal affair was beginning, orchestrated,
Its colors concentrated in a glance, a ballade
That takes in the whole world, now, but lightly,
Still lightly, but with wide authority and tact. (1)

As a poem anxious about communication and reception, 'As One Put Drunk Into the Packet-Boat' is appropriately based on Marvell's dead and perverse transport. What threatens communication in Ashbery's poem is the 'formal affair', an unmoving 'authority' that, in a devious double-meaning, 'takes in the whole world'.

This gives an indication of what eventually overcomes the 'frozen gesture' of 'Self-Portrait': the return to the root of metaphor as a dynamic and unfixed trope,

65 Marvell, 'Tom May's Death', *Complete Poems*, pp. 58-60.

‘alive with filiations, shuttlings’ (75). It is metaphor’s movement, and the deeper vitality of Parmigianino’s portrait specifically, that allow Ashbery to avoid a defeatist conclusion about argumentation and communication. Now, as metaphor is allowed a more fluid reign over the art work, instead of experiencing ‘frozen gesture’, the viewer’s thoughts are allowed to ‘peel off and fly away at breathless speeds’ (71). ‘The Skaters’, written around the time that Ashbery penned a short article on Parmigianino for the *New York Herald Tribune*, sows the seeds of what will become the crucial definition of ‘Self-Portrait’: ‘so much energy in those bubbles. A wise man could contemplate his face in them / With impunity’ (*RM*, 49-50). The convex bubble drifts, and drifts in a speculation whose aimlessness eliminates considerations of the static ‘target image’. As one critic notes, Ashbery’s is a ‘mobile account of the... speculative transactions lyric poetry engages in’.⁶⁶ In ‘Self-Portrait’, there is a movement from a ‘Glazed, embalmed’ image of metonymical surfaces to one of metaphorical depth revealing ‘another life... stocked there / In recesses no one knew of’ (*SP*, 75).

It is by metonymy that art, in the words of the poem, ‘Follows a course wherein changes are merely / Features of the whole’ (70). The absorption of change into a unity is, in Ashbery’s poem, a feature of metonym, not metaphor. Unpredictability, on the other hand, emerges when these ‘monuments of unageing intellect’ are elided in favour of a reading of Parmigianino’s painting as a ‘restless... conceit’. ‘Though only exercise or tactic’, such speculative instruments, according to the poem, ‘carr[y] / The momentum of a conviction that had been building’ (76-77). When ‘issued from hazards’ (73), the static subject of the poem becomes a metamorphic mirror of the thinking, reading mind under the sway of fluid and uneven metaphor. The constantly changing metaphors for Parmigianino’s painting itself emphasise this.⁶⁷

The first half of ‘Self-Portrait’, roughly the first four stanzas (68-75), observes the superficial elements of the painting, as Parmigianino’s ‘eyes proclaim / That everything is surface’ (70). The ‘skin’ of this surface, however, ‘as tough as / Reptile eggs’ (72), is precisely what explains the sense of impermeable imprisonment that dominates the poem’s opening. Something is inside these eggs, however, which is

66 Anita Sokolsky, ‘A Commission That Never Materialised’, in *John Ashbery*, ed. Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House, 1985: p. 234. My italics.

67 The painting is variously referred to as ‘balloon’ (70), ‘globe’ (70, 76) ‘ping-pong ball secure on its jet of water’ (70), ‘puddle’ (70), ‘carousel’ (71) ‘silver blur’ (72) ‘circle of [Parmigianino’s] intentions’ (72), ‘reptile eggs’ (72), ‘hourglass’ (72), snow-globe (74), ‘looking glass’ (75), ‘birdcage’ (77), ‘easel’ (78), ‘crystal ball’ (81) and ‘the gibbous / Mirrored eye of an insect’ (82-3).

born in the second half of the poem, roughly its final two stanzas (75-83). Here, things have begun to enter the commentary from the painting's *background*: 'the shadow of the city' (75), the 'universe... veer[ing] in and out' (77), 'the long corridor' (78). At this point, the surface of Parmigianino's ball becomes increasingly porous to interpretations of a paradoxical 'visible core' (70) — interpretations unrelated to the painting's superficial elements:

On the surface of it
There seems to be no special reason why that light
Should be focused by love, or why
The city falling with its beautiful suburbs
Into space always less clear, less defined,
Should read as the support of its progress,
The easel upon which the drama unfolded
To its own satisfaction and to the end
Of our dreaming, as we had never imagined
It would end, in worn daylight with the painted
Promise showing through as a gage, a bond. (78)

The 'recesses' of 'Self-Portrait' are not nooks of deep, hidden, psychic meaning waiting to be uncovered by interpretative profundity, but are rather the 'beautiful suburbs' of its environment. Parmigianino's environment is metaphorical not insofar as it is 'deep' but in that it is a symbol of the situatedness of artistic reception:

The balloon pops, the attention
Turns dully away. Clouds
In the puddle stir up into sawtoothed fragments.
I think of the friends
Who came to see me, of what yesterday
Was like. A peculiar slant
Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model
In the silence of the studio as he considers
Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.
How many people came and stayed a certain time,
Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you
Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
Remains that is surely you. (70-1)

As the 'attention turns dully away' in unrelated thoughts of friends and what yesterday was like, we recreate the environment of Parmigianino's studio in our own situation.

Ashbery criticism has been reluctant to view metaphor — because stereotypically linked to the idea of an artwork's 'deep hidden meaning' — as central to Ashbery's

poem, and instead emphasises the poem's consideration of surface. Ashbery, however, identifies surface, in his early reading of Parmigianino in the poem, with 'mirror games' (80) — with, that is, a circularity that ultimately assert the art work's autonomy from anything outside of it. This theoretical impasse is overcome not simply by metaphor, however, but by a consideration of what 'falls off' in the process of inattention:

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. (83)

The 'visible core' of meaning is precisely what falls off; the *situation* is at once what is hidden and potentially forgotten, yet always visible. That is, the significance of 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' is not in its privileging of surface or metonymy, but in its account of the meaning of an art work as the situation of its reception. In this, it is Parmigianino's centrifugal painting that is the metaphor of situation informing Ashbery's inattentive interpretative approach.

There is a clear genealogy between these 'whispers out of time' and the 'lost words' of 'Little J. A.' — Parmigianino, like Little J. A., is described as 'accepting everything' (71). In 'Self-Portrait', however, there is also evidence of a development of Ashbery's early engagement with metaphysical poetry. Metaphor in the later poem is ultimately the counterpart of anarchic, superficial mirror-play, however much it is inseparable from it. Rather than simply exploiting the vehicular possibilities of the 'lost words' of metaphor, 'Self-Portrait' is a conscious discussion of such characteristics. Wu refers to the power and novelty of metaphor being in its 'illusion of *seeming* irrationality'; Ashbery's poem builds upon its initial surprise and delight in the otherness and irrationality of Parmigianino's logical '*bizarria*', finally, with 'the various conflicting statements gathered' (78), to form a picture of a meaning for the present in which otherness and irrationality are in some sense tamed and accepted. The painting is 'a metaphor / Made to include us', after all. It is the very nature of *exchange* in what is 'ferried across' by metaphor, of interpretation, that becomes the focus of Ashbery's work after 'Self-Portrait'. The constant return to issues of gesture, welcome, 'the reflex / To hide something' (69), of 'authority', 'our moment of attention' (69), of 'invitation' (82), are part of this new focus. There is

still a sense of a ‘recurrent wave of arrival’ in the poem, because Ashbery’s attention is, as usual, constantly departing from its ostensible subject. Now, though, this is, because of the nature of Ashbery’s meditation on metaphor, part of a thematization of reading and communication — of the movements of metaphorical significance between artist and viewer — itself.

3. ‘The poem is you’

Ashbery’s reading of metaphysical poetry does not end with ‘Self-Portrait’. The situation of that poem, the truism that ‘Ashbery’s theme invites us to participate in his poem as an experience, as he experiences the painting’ merely indicates an adaptation or more radical reading of such poetry.⁶⁸ ‘And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name’, another poem about painting, in Ashbery’s next collection, continues the application of Ashbery’s early concern with ‘lost words’ to specific questions of communication as it seeks ‘other centers of communication, so that understanding / May begin, and in doing so be undone’ (*HD*, 46).

In *Houseboat Days*, published a year after Ashbery earned his laurels with the ‘Triple Crown’ of American literary culture, questions of a poet’s relationship with his readership take on an extra urgency. ‘Wet Casements’ continues Ashbery’s preoccupation with the mirror:

The concept is interesting: to see, as though reflected
In streaming windowpanes, the look of others through
Their own eyes. (28)

This time, though, the model is literary: Donne’s poem, ‘A Valediction: of my Name in the Window’.

My name engraved herein,
Doth contribute my firmness to the glass,
Which, ever since that charm, hath been
As hard, as that which graved it, was;
Thine eye will give it price enough to mock

68 Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: an essay on prosody*: Princeton UP, 1980, p. 168.

The diamonds of either rock.

'Tis much that glass should be
As all confessing, and through-shine as I,
'Tis more, that it shows thee to thee,
And clear reflects thee to thine eye.
But all such rules, love's magic can undo,
Here you see me, and I am you.⁶⁹

Ashbery's speculative opening seems to be in dialogue with Donne's love poem in its distancing of concept from author — we almost hear 'Donne's concept is interesting'.⁷⁰ Ashbery's short poem takes the paradox of Donne's 'Here you see me, and I am you' as a starting-point for his own consideration of interpretation. A couple of years later, Ashbery can be found writing to Harold Bloom about his essay on Ashbery, 'The Breaking of Form': 'It is difficult and perhaps even a little frightening to confront one's own gaze in a mirror in which one knows that one's own reality is going to be, for better or worse, at last constituted'.⁷¹ The way in which 'others' comments' can be 'overlaid' onto the writer's 'transparent face' is clearly a source of anxiety in the poem.

As noted earlier, the interest here is 'in the concept rather than its realisation', and it is important that a textual variation of Ashbery's opening, found in the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of the collection but not subsequently, has 'The conception is interesting'. What is key about the mirror of 'Wet Casements' is its fluidity, its 'streaming windowpanes'. It is the *movement* of the concept — its 'conception' — that makes it 'interesting'. Elaine Scarry, a theorist of cognitive poetics, in her book on literary imagery, *Dreaming by the Book*, has suggested that Ashbery's effectiveness is due to his ability to evoke the reader's own everyday perceptual operations.⁷² What 'Wet Casements' offers is just such an 'epistemological snapshot of the processes'. In this it complicates the writer-reader relationship at the same time it tries to talk about it: it is finally 'not the person addressed' who 'carried' the poem around in his wallet but someone who 'overheard' it. If Donald Davidson is right, and 'Metaphor is the dreamwork of language', as the daydreaming of 'Clepsydra' and 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'

69 Donne, *Poems*, p. 87.

70 'The Skaters' can be found 'scratching in dust a name on the mirror' (*RM*, 40); see also 'Rain' (*TCO*, 28-31): 'The shadow of a hand / soft on the lock / staring wax / scraped with a pin, reflection of the face' (30).

71 John Ashbery, letter to Harold Bloom, 18 November 1979, in Houghton Archive, Harvard.

72 See Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2001, pp. 39-49.

certainly seems to suggest, then it is equally true that ‘like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator’.⁷³ Such is the speculative situation of ‘Wet Casements’ also; the paradoxical nature of its ‘concept’ is an expression of what Wu calls the tendency of ‘metaphor’s “incoherence” to slacken relations among things, giving room for our free participation’.⁷⁴

‘Wet Casements’ is a dramatic attempt to transcend the flux of other people’s multitudinous and unpredictable ‘correct impressions’: ‘I shall at last see my complete face / Reflected not in the water but in the worn stone floor of my bridge. // I shall keep to myself. / I shall not repeat others’ comments about me.’ This attempt, however, is merely a part, and an anxious symptom, of the process of conception, and one that the reader is wary of as a viable answer to the poem’s conflicts. For the poem does not keep to itself, and explicitly sees its reflection in ‘others’ comments’, in the streaming window rather than the static, burnished bridge. Like Donne’s poem, Ashbery’s conclusion is a dramatically ironic one of desperate relinquishment brought on by the frustrations of open-ended metaphor:

But glass, and lines must be
No means our firm substantial love to keep;
Near death inflicts this lethargy,
And this I murmur in my sleep;
Impute this idle talk, to that I go,
For dying men talk often so.⁷⁵

‘Wet Casements’, that is, represents a reading of Donne’s poem which draws out of the love poem’s metaphorical vehicle a metaphor for use in an analysis of poet-reader relations. As a speculation upon Donne’s ‘interesting’ idea, it also follows the nature of Donne’s meandering and self-contradictory ruminations, while exploring the implications and intricacies of Donne’s ‘concept’ in a new but linked context.

Ashbery writes a number of such poems in *Houseboat Days*.⁷⁶ The thematization of the reader and reading becomes ever-present in Ashbery’s volumes of the 1980s and 90s — indeed, there is a book dedicated to this subject in Ashbery’s later work.⁷⁷

73 Donald Davidson, ‘What Metaphors Mean’, *Critical Inquiry*, 5:1, (Autumn, 1978), p. 31.

74 Wu, p. 53.

75 Donne, *Poems*, p. 89.

76 The best of which are ‘Street Musicians’, ‘The Other Tradition’, ‘And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name’ and ‘What Is Poetry’ (*HB*, 1, 2-3, 45-6, 47).

77 John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You: his later books*, London: University of Georgia Press, 2007.

One of Ashbery's most popular and enduring poems in this vein comes in his 1981 volume, *Shadow Train*. 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons', originally *Shadow Train*'s title poem until Ashbery decided it would be too much of a mouthful for a reader to ask for in a bookshop, is 'talking to you':

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

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

A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,
As in the division of grace these long August days
Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know it
It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.

It has been played once more. I think you exist only
To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there.
Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem
Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you. (*ShTr*, 3)

The poem applies similar notions of looking and being looked at as 'Wet Casements', and a communicative impasse is again a source of frustration. It is 'concerned with language' insofar as it is worried about it, about the possibility of a 'plain level', of straight-forward communication. Despite the direct address to the reader, 'You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other'. Again, the reason for this seems to be a question of flux: you 'tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there, / Or have adopted a different attitude.' Nevertheless, it is in this tension that the poem finds its connection with the reader, for immediately afterward, 'the poem / Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you'.

Though the title recalls Donne's *Paradoxes and Problems*, the reading here is of a poem that seems ever-present in Ashbery's mind, Marvell's 'Definition of Love'. Marvell's poem, 'begotten by Despair / Upon Impossibility', has a geometrical opposition identical to Ashbery's:

And yet I quickly might arrive
Where my extended soul is fixed,
But Fate does iron wedges drive,

And always crowds itself betwixt.

For Fate with jealous eye does see
Two perfect loves, nor lets them close,
Their union would her ruin be,
And her tyrannic power depose.

And therefore her decrees of steel
Us as the distant Poles have placed
(Though Love's whole world on us doth wheel)
Not by themselves to be embraced,

Unless the giddy heaven fall
And earth some new convulsion tear;
And, us to join, the world should all
Be cramped into a planisphere.

As lines (so loves) oblique may well
Themselves in every angle greet:
But ours so truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet.⁷⁸

'Paradoxes and Oxymorons', a love poem of sorts, brings the same 'system... into play'. The paradox of its title is Marvell's: the metaphor of parallelism, present in the very syntax — 'You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other'. Like the Fate in 'The Definition of Love' which 'always crowds itself betwixt', between reader and poem in Ashbery's lyric is 'the steam and chatter of typewriters'. Ashbery's answer to the existence of 'two perfect loves', however, is not to assert that they 'can never meet', but that one must be subsumed into the other. 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' demonstrates itself to be readerly property by its very rehearsal of tensions: by its inability to properly assert the relationship between poem and reader, Ashbery part-relinquishes a hold on the poem, ensuring it remains 'open-ended' and 'on your level'.

Bloom has written of a kind of revision that 'read[s] the parent poem as to retain its terms but mean them in another sense'.⁷⁹ Bloom's description is suggestive, though amid the vocabulary of swerves, purgation and antithesis of his study of influence, something seems left out if we try to describe Ashbery by it. But if we speak of 'terms' in a textual rather than a mythic sense there begins to emerge as a metaphor for Ashbery's resourcefulness a term his reading settles on itself — that is,

78 Marvell, *Poems*, pp. 49-50.

79 Bloom, *Anxiety*, p. 14. This 'revisionary ratio' Bloom calls 'tessara'.

Ashbery's reading of metaphysical poetry is best seen as a *reflection*.⁸⁰ The metaphor of reflection is a local issue here — one specific to Ashbery's reading of Donne and Marvell, and specific to the trope of metaphor. It is, however, significant as a metaphor for the kind of reading Ashbery does throughout his career, and of his engagement with all kinds of different poets: a reading of past poetry, and a writing out of it, in which the reader, as the writer's reflection, is the poet's equal in the aesthetic coordinates ('on your level'). This aspect of Ashbery will become more evident in a subsequent analysis of Ashbery's relationship with Eliot, but it is naturally present already — given both the nature of Eliot's influence on modern poetry and the constitution of his Western Canon — in Ashbery's reading of metaphysical verse.

That this method of reflection is suggested by the very terms or metaphors of metaphysical poetry is, in a sense, the point: Ashbery is a willing participant in the rhetoric of the poetry he admires, and his engagement is therefore consciously an immanent affair in which 'accepting everything' seems to be the first condition. 'I'm going to write / an hour, then read / what someone else has written', Ashbery says in the opening poem of *Hotel Lautréamont* ('Light Turnouts', 3), to then point out that there is 'no mansion for this to happen in'. Ashbery's reading of metaphysical poetry is part of the situation in which it takes place. Just like the face and rain in the background of Ashbery's readerly reflections in 'Wet Casements', the poet can only respond to the past, to 'what someone else has written', by also taking into account the various wandering reflections of the poet on his present situation. It is this that accounts for a reading of metaphysical metaphor that is in essence a reading of paradox. Ashbery's reading takes place not in a still mansion for silent study, but at the mercy of inattention. Reading's 'room, our moment of attention' brings with it all the problems of 'lost words', 'becoming complicated' and 'whispers out of time'.

80 Perhaps the neatest embodiment of this is Ashbery's inversion of Donne's famous poem in a piece from *Hotel Lautréamont* entitled, 'A Mourning Forbidding Valediction' (*HL*, 114-5)

CHAPTER TWO

'The music of all present': Ashbery's description and the presence of John Clare

In November 1989 Ashbery began his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard.¹ The title of his series was *Other Traditions*, and his first subject the nineteenth-century peasant poet, John Clare. This first lecture, however, reveals that the series will not be an academic exercise. Ashbery's reason for speaking on what he does is to give an idea of 'the impetuses behind' his poetry; it is 'the poetry I notice when I write, that is behind my own poetry' (*OT*, 4). Despite this apology, however, and Ashbery's claims to have written the talks in the taxi on the way to the hall, the lectures for the most part attempt to speak the language of criticism. The problem, at least as far as Clare is concerned, is that Ashbery speaks it too well: Clare's poems 'capture the rhythms of nature, its vagaries and messiness... like that 'instant intimacy' for which we Americans are so notorious... We are far from emotion recollected in tranquillity' (*OT*, 15-16). Bookseller Ned Drury, Clare's first promoter, had been saying much the same almost two-hundred years earlier: 'all he writes is the birth of the moment, and therefore is rough and unpolished'.² Generally the argument Ashbery advances has been a staple of critical notions (and simplifications) of Clare ever since his first appearance.

There is, however, in Ashbery's lecture, and in his reading of Clare generally, a conspicuous absence. Ashbery, that is, curiously shows no interest in Clare's subject matter. Ashbery is one of many contemporary poets who admire Clare. And yet he is different from Clare's other admirers. Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney and James Fenton, for instance, though interested in concepts of Clare's 'immediacy', locate such evaluations in an analysis of cultural issues completely absent from Ashbery's criticism, with all these poets placing particular stress on aspects like Clare's use of dialect and his local landscape. Fenton, the poet who cried 'tears of boredom' over Ashbery's *Selected*

1 Ashbery delivered the first lecture, on Clare, on 6 November 1989.

2 Quoted in Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: a biography*, London: Picador, 2003, p. 126

Poems, for his part, is concerned with botanical issues like whether Clare's use of the word 'pellitory' is to be taken as *Parietaria judaica*, reeds or *Iris pseudacorus*.³ Ashbery's criticism of Clare is so apparently without substance because, unlike Fenton, Paulin or Heaney, the 'subject' aspect of Clare's work is of negligible interest to Ashbery — he is not there for the bird's nests or the flora of Northamptonshire. Therefore when Ashbery praises Clare for 'captur[ing] the rhythms of nature', it is not the rhythms of nature he is interested in but the form of the capture. This is why the poets Ashbery discusses in the Norton lectures are important to him less for what they say about the world, and more for what they can do for him as a poet, and what they say about poetry itself. Clare, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Laura Riding, Wheelwright and Schubert are discussed because they are 'jump-start' poets for Ashbery, 'poets I have at some period turned to when I really needed to be reminded yet again of what poetry is' (*OT*, 5).

Paulin's reading is a heavily particularised one:

Reading Clare, we need to attend constantly to the variations of tone, emphasis, language, and cadence in his verse. The 'unwelcome din' of a flying beetle against 'the cowboys dinner tin', the 'silver slimy' snail trails, the water pudges, are all set against the predictable rhetoric of 'balmy dew', 'soft and ushering sounds', 'fairy visions'. This deployment of abrasive or dissonant sounds is a constant feature of Clare's verse, and it shows the textures he seeks out.⁴

The analysis here is focused primarily on particular words, and performs critically with them something in the manner of William Empson, whose *Structure of Complex Words* Paulin appeals to in this essay. 'To "soodle" down a lane is more than to walk it, it is to linger, dawdle, saunter, take the whole place and atmosphere in, and the word also resonates with another favourite, "sloomy", which means "slow, dreamy".' That is to say, Paulin on Clare is a more-or-less conventional exercise in New Critical close reading.

This said, it is easy to see which of Ashbery's and Paulin's is the more original and interesting as criticism. Ashbery's reading of Clare, or that part of it which is illuminating, does not consist in the analytical at all. Turning to the poetry of Paulin and Ashbery for a different expression of their experience of Clare allows a different perspective. To take two beginnings, here is Ashbery's 1969 prose poem, 'For John Clare', and Paulin's 'The Writing Lark', a kind of letter to Clare, published in 1998:

3 James Fenton, 'Getting Clare Clear', *The New York Review of Books*, 51:15 (October 7, 2004).

4 Tom Paulin (ed.), *John Clare: Major Works*, London: Oxford UP, 2004, p. xxv.

Kind of empty in the way it sees everything, the earth gets to its feet and salutes the sky. More of a success at it this time than most others it is. The feeling that the sky might be in the back of someone's mind. Then there is no telling how many there are. They grace everything — bush and tree — to take the roisterer's mind off his caroling — so it's like a smooth switch back. To what was aired in their previous conniption fit. (*DDS*, 35)

Dear Mr Clare
Dear John Clare
I'll start with *pudge*
— pudge not budge
pudge
because pudge is a smashed puddle
A muddy puddle on a track
Or a whole clatter
Scattered like broken plates
— shiny plates
on scoggy scroggy marshland
— each pudge
is like piss cupped in a cow-clap
so I imagine a boot...⁵

Paulin the poet takes as his subject the same thing as Paulin the critic. There is not only a celebration of Clare's 'complex words', but also an attempt to imitate their 'physicality'. Paulin in the main, though, achieves an imitative quality with the easy omission of punctuation as much as anything else, and true to Clare's language as it may be, it is not really to be confused with poetry. What Ashbery's poem does differently is what needs demonstrating.

To do this, let us look at Ashbery's poem in the context of conventional dedicational poetry generally. Here is Adrienne Rich's 1964 poem for Emily Dickinson:

'half-cracked' to Higginson, living,
afterward famous in garbled versions,
your hoard of dazzling scraps a battlefield,
now your old snood

mothballed at Harvard
and you in your variorum monument
equivocal to the end —
who are you?

Gardening the day-lily,
wiping the wine-glass stems,
your thought pulsed on behind
a forehead battered paper-thin,

you, woman, masculine
in single-mindedness,
for whom the word was more
than a symptom —

⁵ Tom Paulin, 'The Writing Lark', *John Clare Society Journal*, 17 (1998): pp. 5-15.

a condition of being.⁶

Rich's poem is a recreation of Dickinson the woman. The form here is biographical, with details like Higginson, Harvard, and the poet's gardening at its centre. While 'masculine in single-mindedness', Rich's Dickinson is constructed in a vocabulary quite foreign to her poetry.

Ashbery's poem, on the other hand, like Paulin's, is exclusively about Clare the poet. Unlike Paulin's, though, it doesn't go *back* to Clare's work, but comes *out* of it. That is, it creates itself only after becoming immersed in the whole Clarean style and aesthetic rather than positioning itself as a retrospective of his language. Therefore the poem's colloquialisms are, though inspired by Clare, obviously American: 'kind of empty', 'conniption fit', 'a spreading out, like', 'tryin' to tell us somethin'', 'dumb bird'. Equally, while Ashbery avoids the unpunctuated prose so distinctive in Clare's work, this work is evidently there, for Ashbery avoids it only by over- and mis-punctuating (the beginning above contains half a dozen subordinate fragments).⁷ The effect is Clarean in that it affects a spontaneous rethink — the full stop is in place but that's not going to stop Ashbery adding to the impression.

'For John Clare' offers a digest of Ashbery's reading of Clare — in Quintilian's classical terms, a *liquefaction* of the Clarean mode as Ashbery sees or remembers it; the pulp; what intertextual criticism might call 'an *Aufhebung* of the dialectic between our own present text and its "originating" model'.⁸ The style of Ashbery's reading of Clare means little is said of the specific subject-matter of birds or local flora, because Clare's achievement is always *abstracted* by Ashbery in this way. To be sure, external phenomena like the 'sky' are notably 'in the back of someone's [Ashbery's] mind'. But this is not to say Clare becomes hollowed in Ashbery's hands. The passage continues:

Kind of empty in the way it sees everything, the earth gets to its feet and salutes the sky. More of a success at it this time than most others it is. The feeling that the sky might be in the back of someone's mind. Then there is no telling how many there are. They grace everything — bush and tree — to take the roisterer's mind off his caroling — so it's like a smooth switch back. To what was aired in their previous conniption fit. There is so much to be seen everywhere that it's like not getting used to it, only there is so much it never feels new, never any different. You are standing looking at that building and you cannot take it all in, certain details are already hazy and the mind boggles. What

6 Adrienne Rich, 'I Am in Danger – Sir –', *Necessities of Life: Poems 1962-1965*, New York: Norton, 1966, p. 33.

7 Ashbery recalls later that it was Clare's journals were the impetus behind his resumption of prose poetry. (See Shoptaw, p. 129.)

8 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, X.I.19, p.13; *Intertextuality: Theories and Practice*, ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990, p. 7.

will it all be like in five years' time when you try to remember? Will there have been boards in between the grass part and the edge of the street? (*DDS*, 35)

Ashbery's suggestion, in his lecture, that 'experiencing is the same as telling' for Clare (*OT*, 18) seems to be taken literally here. We are told how 'the earth gets to its feet' simultaneously with the poet doing so (or the poem, awakening into its beginning). The 'mind boggles', as it frequently does in Ashbery's work, in the meditation on the sublime ('you cannot take it all in'), but inverts Edmund Burke's emphasis on largeness and darkness toward what Ashbery, as I will show, finds compelling in Clare: detail. This is linked to the 'music of all present' idea of the poem, for, paradoxically, 'Certain details are *already* hazy' because of both the level of detail and Clare's insatiable eye for detail ('there is so much'), as well as a subsequent impossibility of 'getting used to it'. It is detail, or descriptiveness itself, which causes the mind to boggle rather than the 'building' to which it belongs.

In comparison to Rich's "'I Am in Danger — Sir —'", 'For John Clare' comes out in favour of its subject not simply by a process of objective admiration, but by becoming part, in language and poetic, of its subject. The specific presentness of the text comes both out of and in contrast to the work of the earlier poet, and the poem foregrounds its reading. Rather than exalting Clare from a distance as Paulin does, Ashbery becomes 'immersed in the details', the rhetoric of the Clarean mode. The result is indeed to change the American dedicational poem. Take Robert Creeley's 1979 poem, 'Thinking of Yeats', which follows the same method of lyrical digestion:

Thinking of Yeats

Break down
'innocence' —
tell truth,

be *small*
in world's
wilderness.⁹

Like 'For John Clare', the poem is not just 'thinking of Yeats', but presenting *the* thinking of Yeats. Again the poem's strength is that it is the poet's distinctive own, transcribing a Yeatsian mode into a minimalist, Creeleyan one. In both Ashbery and Creeley, influence has been absorbed, but remains visible.

9 Robert Creeley, *So There: poems 1976-1983*, New York: New Directions, 1998, p. 131.

‘For John Clare’ takes as its subject problems of perception. ‘The mind boggles’; there are too many ‘details’ and not enough time. Ashbery’s figure of the photograph goes into more depth on this:

...they are already gone, gone far into the future, into the night of time. If we could look at a photograph of it and say there they are, they never really stopped but there they are.

The presence of a ‘couple... stopping to look in that window’ here is nebulous for various reasons. The fact that they are already gone, in Ashbery’s beautiful phrase, ‘into the night of time’, outside of the present is contrasted to the misleading freezing of time that the photograph fraudulently effects. They never stopped, but there they are, still, in the photo. The photographic is what Ashberyan description seeks to avoid. Rather, just as he embeds his poem in the style of Clare, so he as a poet becomes ‘immersed’, like Clare, ‘in the details of rock and field and slope’, and the changing nature of such things. The ‘mind boggles’ because that is its role in perception for Ashbery, one of immersion, ‘letting [things] come to you for once’. Ashbery’s poetry, like Clare’s, is about the phenomenological issues at stake in perception: what ‘not getting used to it’ means; what it is to be ‘forced to notice’, to ‘try to remember’ in the midst of writing and experiencing, seeing and describing.

‘There is so much to be said, and on the surface of it very little gets said,’ writes Ashbery. This neglect of the surface of things is a problem of attention — not a lack of it though, but rather its concentration: ‘Alas, we perceive [details] as those things that were meant to be put aside — costumes of supporting actors’. This focus, this attention is what leads us to miss what is happening *now*. There is never the recognition of a thing until it is over, until it is passed into the ‘night of time’ like the photograph. We are too likely to be killing time, ‘waiting for something to be over until [we] are forced to notice it’. Clare is one of the great noticers at all times; a poet of ‘the music of all present’, with ‘the whole scene... fixed in [his] mind’. His effect on Ashbery is like the ‘so much’ that is to be seen everywhere, ‘never any different’. As Ashbery says in his lecture, ‘the effect of Clare’s poetry, on me at least is always the same — that of reinserting me in my present, of re-establishing “now”’ (*OT*, 19).

The Clare valued by Ashbery, then, is not the natural historian or the bird-watcher *per se*, but a different kind of watcher (and, in a sense, a different kind of historian) of time passing. Clare’s descriptive attentiveness, so devoted to ‘the surface of things’, is for Ashbery, as I will demonstrate, synonymous with a radical *nowness*, an attentiveness to the present and things in the process of becoming. So how and why, one

may ask, does Ashbery have such a different Clare to other poets? One can begin by establishing the similar aesthetics of immanence Ashbery and Clare develop — that is, by establishing their poetical positioning and predisposition.

1. *Re-establishing 'now'*

Charles Altieri begins his 1979 study of sixties American poetry, *Enlarging the Temple*, with an analysis of the ‘philosophical assumptions that underlie the stylistic experiments of the poets of the sixties self-consciously revolting against the poetics of high modernism’.¹⁰ These assumptions are structured along two lines of development that originate in romanticism: Wordsworthian ‘immanent’ and Coleridgean ‘symbolist’ modes of poetic thought. For Altieri, these two originally congenial aesthetics have, since the demise of certain central romantic concepts, diverged from each other to form distinct and, in the context of the move from Confessional poetry toward postmodernism, opposing poetics. The important one for postmodern poets is the Wordsworthian poetic of immanence where, Altieri says,

the logic of poetry need not depend on formal structures seen as interpretive patterns. When poets conceive of their work as presenting the action of disclosure rather than of creating order, the formal elements work somewhat differently. In a poetic of immanence, aesthetic elements have primarily epistemological rather than interpretive functions.¹¹

In a symbolist poetic, on the other hand, ‘what matters is not what there is in immediate experience but what the mind can make of it... transform[ing] the flux of human experience into coherent perceptual and axiological structures’.¹² Wordsworth’s poetic can, then, be distinguished from Coleridgean harmonising by its belief in an ‘inscrutable workmanship’ in the world and a faith that merely *being in it* and ‘worthy of [one]self’ is already enough to ‘reconcile / Discordant elements’. What postmodernism attempts, according to Altieri, is a renovation of this immanent aesthetic, in reaction to the high symbolism of the later Eliot, Lowell and the Confessionals, and a return to ‘the

10 Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the temple: new directions in American poetry during the 1960s*, Lewisburg: Buchnell University Press, 1980, p. 29.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

insistence that the moment immediately and intensely experienced can restore one to harmony with the world and provide ethical and psychological renewal.’¹³

To head this return to an immanent aesthetic, Altieri describes something he calls ‘radical presence’. Adapting Derrida’s ideas of presence, in which an illusion is fostered by the privileging of speech as nearer to its signified (and therefore nearer *being present*), Altieri identifies a presence that knows its limits. That is, Altieri suggests that in 1960s American poetry presence functions as a desire, and American poets knowingly imagine presence, rather than believing in it as a metaphysical actuality. For O’Hara, therefore, Altieri suggests that the very sterility and superficiality of experience is what allows for ‘play’ and imaginative response — indeed, Robert Creeley and W. S. Merwin are seen to imagine presence in terms of absence. What creates a tension in postmodernism’s romantic ancestry, therefore, is the religious foundation of romantic ‘immanent value’:

Where humanist cultural ideals were, some form of immediate contact with natural energies must be restored. But this restoration cannot follow even the example of romantic nature poetry, for romantic views of a purposive and numinous force immanent in nature are derived from a renewal and reinterpretation of Christianity. Now the challenge is to imagine non-Christian sources of immanent value.¹⁴

The additional problem here is how we imagine such value without relinquishing meaning. The critical representation of Ashbery that simply characterises his work as being as confused and disparate as immanent experience itself frequently runs this risk, whereby readers of such commentary end up with poems, as Roger Gilbert characterises it, ‘like Lewis Carroll’s map drawn on a scale of one to one’.¹⁵

The ‘source of immanent value’ usually listed by critics for Ashbery is Emerson (extending to Whitman and Stevens). ‘Since Emerson, it has been one of the primary suppositions of American poets that all of experience constitutes a form of poetry. Nothing more clearly distinguishes American poetry from its European counterparts than this insistent redefinition of the immanent in the phenomenal world,’ notes one commentator.¹⁶ The principal reason for this perception lies, justifiably enough, in Emerson’s thought. Emerson’s ideas of the commerce between man and nature, in which ‘all mean egotism vanishes’, clearly in some sense prescribe many of the hallmarks of the Ashberyan mode (unassertive identity, self-contradiction, immersion in

13 Ibid., p. 78.

14 Ibid., p. 79.

15 Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: representation and experience in modern American poetry*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991, p. 6.

16 Ibid., pp. 4-5.

environment). However, it is significant that Emersonian poetics leads to poetries where egotism does anything but vanish — those of Whitman, Pound, and Ginsberg, for example. One could hardly claim that egotism vanishes in any of Emerson's work either.

There are however, contemporary poets working in this aesthetic whom we may consider to be rather more diffident: Heaney, James Schuyler, or Ashbery himself. That is, poets interested in John Clare. Clare, unlike Emerson and other romantic poets, seems to set a different 'example of romantic nature poetry', and of an immanent poetic than that which we find in Altieri. Because Emerson's immanence is theoretical, his 'transparent eyeball' is rather too apparent for its own good; Clare, on the other hand, is a genuine practitioner, from whom no poetics emerges outside the poetry. The letter from John Taylor, Clare's publisher, to Clare, urging Clare to 'Speak of the Appearances of Nature... more philosophically' is famous because it expresses the genuine newness of Clare's avoidance of abstract sentiment.¹⁷ It is to Clare my discussion now turns.

John Barrell's seminal work on Clare, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, makes several helpful observations for my purposes. Barrell makes a crucial point about Clare's philosophical position in approaching landscape when he notes the absence of any *a priori* conception of it. Clare makes no connection between an abstract, presumed structure of landscape and the landscape at hand.¹⁸ As far as theories of composition and the picturesque go for Clare, 'Those truths are fled and left behind / A real world and doubting mind'.¹⁹ This exaggerates the situation no doubt, but while, as critics like Donald Davie have proved, Clare is equally at home in a Claudian-Thomsonian tradition as in a romantic one, it is important to note the implicit departure Clare makes from both, according to Barrell.

James Thomson and his imitators are involved in tableaux, almost always at a distance, trying to capture nature in a single *coup d'oeil*. Given this painterly bias, they are always mapping an observed scene onto an ideal one, seeking a 'correct' composition. For Clare, on the other hand, as Barrell points out, 'pleasure is not in the design, and the active control over a landscape, but in the multiplicity and the particularity of images in the landscape, which he cannot control and before which he is

17 Letter to Clare, 4 March 1826, quoted in Mark Storey (ed.), *John Clare: The Critical Heritage*, London: 1973, p. 263.

18 John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: an approach to the poetry of John Clare*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972, p. 161.

19 John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. E. Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, London: Oxford UP, 1964, p. 21.

passive'.²⁰ These qualities are most visible in one of Clare's most haunting poems, a sonnet upon a mouse's nest:

I found a ball of grass among the hay
And proged it as I passed and went away
And when I looked I fancied something stirred
And turned agen and hoped to catch the bird
When out an old mouse bolted in the wheat
With all her young ones hanging at her teats
She looked so odd and so grotesque to me
I ran and wondered what the thing could be
And pushed the knapweed bunches where I stood
When the mouse hurried from the crawling brood
The young ones squeaked and when I went away
She found her nest again among the hay
The water oer the pebbles scarce could run
And broad old cesspools glittered in the sun²¹

There is none of Thomson's focus and scope here, and the poem does trouble singular perspective, the main departure Barrell sees Clare's work taking from Thomson.²² Perspective 'flitting' (one of Clare's favourite words) is a hallmark of Clare's style; he has an almost morbid fear of distant objects because of the stillness they impose on vision. But the real problem of focus is less an issue of idiosyncratic perspective than it is of simple attention. Even in the fourteen lines of a sonnet, Clare is unable to keep his eye on the object at hand. Having begun a poem about a mouse's nest, the poem ends with a complete non sequitur: 'The water oer the pebbles scarce could run / And broad old cesspools glittered in the sun'. Though these last two lines have been read in terms of an Eliotic 'objective correlative', expressing some kind of dejection at maternal desertion, it seems to me that there is a much simpler explanation. Clare looks away. Thematic decorum is abandoned — if a glittering cesspool catches Clare's eye and attention before his fourteen lines are up, then this is the image that ends the poem. Clare is predisposed to be open to all subject matter; like the mouse, he abandons the 'crawling brood', 'bolting' his focus elsewhere.

This inattention is important for distancing Clare from mainstream romanticism as well. Resisting 'interpretive patterns', the poem is purely the work of 'disclosure' that Altieri speaks of. Clare's immersion is categorically not in his subject, however: he looks up from the mouse's nest, and the poem abandons it in those final two lines. The immersion for Clare is in observation itself rather than the present phenomena *per se*.

20 Barrell, p. 188.

21 John Clare, *Poems of middle period. 1822-1837*, vol. 5, edited by Eric Robinson, David Powell, Oxford: Clarendon, 1996, p. 246.

22 Barrell, p. 171.

This is what explains John Middleton Murry's curious but suggestive comment that Clare's vision does not 'pass beyond itself'.²³ It is also what we saw Ashbery suggest in 'For John Clare', where details are hazy because of their sheer abundance, and the sheer power of Clare's eye for detail.

Clare's poetic in 'The Mouse's Nest' precludes meditation. 'Here is Clare on his rounds again, telling us what he has just seen but neglecting to mention why he thinks it ought to interest us or even him,' says Ashbery of the poem. In the discussion of the nest, Clare elects, as in all his descriptions, for a deadpan realism. The description, though, is contingent on the movements of a mouse and, finally, on an unrelated and unpredictable event of glittering water. Clare's physical involvement in the scene precludes his involvement reflectively. To define Clare's position in relation to Coleridge's in a poem like 'Frost at Midnight', one can say that Clare's perceptual rhetoric of passivity and uncontrol, even in a sonnet, is in opposition to Coleridge's detachment from the outside world and the time his meditative mode freezes. Coleridge meditates on abstract themes at the midnight hour from the still silence of his sitting room — that is, in phenomena degree zero. Not required to keep up with a changing landscape making constant demands on the attention like Clare, Coleridge is able to abstract an atemporal space for his musings. As Coleridge says, 'all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead'.²⁴ Clare's poetic on the other hand is reflexive rather than reflective, as he notes: 'An image to the mind is brought / Where happiness enjoys / An easy thoughtlessness of thought / & meets excess of joys'.²⁵

In many ways Clare's method is symptomatic of a wider drive for authentic observation and experience in art in the romantic period. To an extent, Clare is another romantic landscape artist abandoning the studio to paint *in situ*. The effect is specific, however, as Ashbery explains in his lecture:

The sudden, surprising lack of distance between poet and reader is in proportion to the lack of distance between the poet and the poem; he is the shortest distance between poem and reader. We are far from emotion recollected in tranquillity or even from the gently shaping music of Keats' grasshopper sonnet. Clare's poems are dispatches from the front. 'I found the poems in the fields / And only wrote them down.' (*OT*, 17)

This is, one feels, the kind of poetry Ashbery himself aspires to. Clare's closeness for Ashbery here is temporal as well as spatial; 'sudden', 'surprising' and contrasted to

23 John Middleton Murry, *John Clare and Other Studies*, London: Peter Nevill, 1950: pp. 19-20.

24 S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 1, ed. George Watson, London: J. M. Dent, 1975, p. 304.

25 'Pastoral Poesy', *Poems of middle period, 1822-1837*, vol. 3, edited by Eric Robinson, David Powell, Oxford: Clarendon, 1996, pp. 581-4.

Wordsworth's poetry of recollection. The reader-writer-poem closeness is best explained by the claim Ashbery makes that 'Clare grabs hold of you — no, he doesn't grab hold of you, he is already there, talking to you before you've arrived on the scene' (*OT*, 16). As a reader, you're already too late — but that's what makes it interesting. Take these lines from Clare:

'Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur
Woo-it woo-it' — could this be her
'Tee-rew Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew
Chew-rit chew-rit' — and never new
'Will-will will-will grig-grig grig-grig...' ²⁶

This is Clare impersonating birdsong in rhymed tetrameter. Its introduction into the long poem, 'The Progress of Rhyme', is quite as unexpected as it looks here, and as unexpected as sudden birdsong itself. It is Clare's fullest, but by no means his only, elimination of poet-poem-reader distances.

Clare says poetry should present 'a landscape heard and felt and seen', a manifold of sense impressions, but sometimes, as above, *simply* those sense impressions. It is not, then, a product of the synthesising imagination of Coleridge via Kant, for whom the 'manifold' is an instance of the unknowable:

for information to be of any use to us, we must organize the information. This organization is provided by acts of synthesis. By synthesis, in its most general sense, I understand the act of putting different representations together, and of grasping what is manifold in them in one knowledge.²⁷

Meditation is resisted in Clare's work because of the attempt to get at a simultaneity of writing and happening; the passing of time is affected as, and sometimes quite literally *is*, co-existent with the passage of the poem. *Presence* in his poetry, therefore, receives the temporal emphasis it should. Clare's is a radical rhetoric of immersion and presence that removes the undesirable symbolist notions of preparation and organisation required from the Christian foundations Altieri identifies in romanticism, to Kant's synthesising categories, down to Eliot's reading lists. As Ashbery says, 'Clare makes this rapid transfer believable, since for him experiencing is the same as telling' (*OT*, 18).

In Ashbery's work, too, 'everything drops in before getting sorted out' (*TP*, 12). Turning again to *The Double Dream of Spring*, it is clear that Ashbery's most pastoral volume, like Clare's work, in closing down boundaries between poet, poem and reader,

26 *Ibid.*, p. 500.

27 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A78/B103.

This is no problem for Clare though, who, as one critic pertinently puts it, ‘prefers two birds in the bush to any number in the hand’.³⁰ For again here, it is not the bird itself that is primarily of interest to Clare, but rather the unfolding story of its partial discovery, the thrill of the chase. As John Barrell says, the point for Clare ‘is not so much to describe a landscape, or even to *describe* each place, as to suggest what it is like to be in each place’.³¹

‘The Double Dream of Spring’, likewise, expends no energy in conventional descriptions of spring or dreams. Indeed, its focus appears to be problems of description generally: ‘Caught, lost in millions of tree-analogies / Being the furthest step one might find.’ While the landscape itself is unmistakably Di Chirican, ‘locomotives’ and all, the perceptual rhetoric is Clare’s. Therefore the immersion in the details of the ‘mixed days’ (mixed up as well as variable), while generalizing in a way that Clare would never allow, is, like Clare’s bird nests and heath phenomena, something that removes Ashbery from any possibility of a deep contemplation of them. The unsatisfactory vagueness of the poem’s generality is in fact a symptom of its Clarean immediacy. Indeed, before the poem is allowed to come to anything like a conclusion it is abruptly ended, like ‘Mouse’s Nest’, by a phenomenon that, it seems, must end it: ‘day comes up’ (*DDS*, 42).

What is evident at this stage is a contrast between the two poets as well. Clare’s mode seems to be a good deal simpler than Ashbery’s, not to mention more concrete. These are issues that need to be addressed, but it is clear for now that Ashbery finds in Clare a model of poetic immanence without the usual accompanying theological ideas — an aesthetic of presence, that is, without what Ashbery calls in a poem about Wordsworth, ‘metaphysical reasons’ (*AWK*, 91). Clare’s work is always physical rather than metaphysical. What Clare offers is not a poetry that questions such quasi-theological ideas as, say, Stevens does contemplatively in ‘Sunday Morning’, but one that simply gets on with it, with no inclination to even countenance ideas on such abstract and meditational levels. The situation is a version of Ashbery’s ideas about O’Hara’s work: ‘it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist... all his poems are all about him and the people and images who wheel through his

29 *Ibid.*, p. 459.

30 Hugh Haughton, ‘Progress and Rhyme’, *John Clare in Context*, ed. Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips and Geoffrey Summerfield, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994, p. 58.

31 Barrell, p. 166.

consciousness, and they seek no further justification'.³² The precise nature of Ashbery's Clarean mode, and how it avoids becoming a version of Lewis Carroll's map, is what I will now seek to identify.

2. *The music of all present*

So far I have been looking at the aesthetic assumptions underlying the influence of Clare upon Ashbery, but in order to see more tangibly what Clare means for Ashbery, it is necessary to return to the main subject of this study: Ashbery's style. I have, then, been observing perception, but to develop this and see its real significance I will now begin to look at the Clarean expression of perception: description.

Like Ashbery's improvisational mode, Clare's poetic eschews preconception. In describing things, Clare attempts to avoid relating the world as it is 'now' to a world of ideas, to an over-categorized conception of the world. In Clare's work, each scene, when described, is told anew; and it is this kind of telling that Clare favours, rather than the expression, however powerful, of a principle or prescribed system of thought. Description is clearly at work in this latter category, whether it be Coleridge's 'The Nightingale', Shelley's 'To a Skylark' or Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', but they are not descriptive in the sense that Clare is. A descriptive poem in Clare is, when read through Ashbery, *purely* descriptive; description in these poems is an end in itself; it is neither auxiliary, contextual nor symbolic, but always descriptive *per se*.

We can broadly make a correspondence, particularly in the context of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poetry, between the immanent-symbolist dichotomy and the opposed poetics of ideas and description. Symbolism, especially in Coleridge, is of the former persuasion, whereas an immanent aesthetic finds the possibilities of the latter more congenial. Partly this distinction lies in their respective conceptions of time. For the hypostatizing Coleridge, the world, as world of ideas, is timeless — hence his Hegelian view of history, changing only insofar as it reveals itself according to a predetermined and idealised course. Like Platonic Ideas, Coleridge's are unchanging and unchangeable, and in direct conflict with an artistic world of represented things at a second remove from Ideas. Coleridge, as Shelley would more radically, attempted to

32 John Ashbery, 'Frank O'Hara's Question', *Book Week* (25 September 1966), p. 23.

solve this problem by investing in an aesthetic that increasingly eschews *things* altogether, leapfrogging them and thereby placing art directly into the realm of Ideas.

In Clare's descriptive aesthetic the case is different. Comparing Clare's work to Constable, Ashbery comments, 'the point is that there is no point' (*OT*, 23). Clare's subject matter mostly gives the impression of being arbitrary — justified, often explicitly, by the simplest sentiment of all: 'I love to see...'. This is what John Barrell refers to when he suggests that Clare 'is concerned with one place, Helpston, not as it is typical of other places, but as it is individual; and individual not because it was different, but because it was the only place he knew'.³³ Clare's poetry seeks no predetermination outside the necessity of concrete reality. However, it is not just in this that Clare's work represents a radical departure from Symbolist and Neoclassical modes. I have shown, briefly, the importance of time in 'Mouse's Nest' in comparison to 'Frost at Midnight', but it is necessary now to look more precisely at the determining role description plays in this.

The nature of description is a central question for Clare because the descriptive poetry he writes is contemporaneous with both the rise and crisis of description in European literature generally. Description under romanticism is not the job of poetry, at least not for its own sake, in the sense of reproducing objects. What most significantly happens in the work of Thomson and his followers throughout Europe is that description loses a *purpose* — that is, a purpose outside itself — and thereby loses its unifying element. Description, in its widest sense, up until the early eighteenth century is always auxiliary to another end: the guide, the encyclopaedia, geographical description for military use or the catalogue. In *The Seasons*, however, description becomes, or claims to become, exclusively representational.

The post-Claudian backlash of the mid-nineteenth century, headed by G. E. Lessing's *Laocoön* (1776) is double-edged — its criticism of descriptive poetry under the banner of its representational shortcomings acts as a symbol of wider objections to poetry's assumed function under such an aesthetic. So for Lessing, because the purpose of art is illusion, any long descriptive passages are undesirable mainly because they take longer to read than it would take to look at the object. Lessing finds a self-evidence in description, whereby it already occurs naturally (signifier and signified are identical) but fails to keep up the illusion in another sense (the sense of time). And so for Lessing

33 Barrell, p. 120.

descriptive *art* presents, mimetically but ultimately superfluously, something which I can look out of my window to see.³⁴

The eighteenth century's *ut pictura poesis* debate generally echoes into romanticism in the thought of Edmund Burke, Coleridge and George Henry Lewes.³⁵ Burke states most explicitly the anxieties about Claudian description. He introduces Kant's call for art to provide an 'understanding' supplementary to, but compensating for, the loss of the thing-in-itself. Burke that is, demands that poetry 'affect rather by sympathy than imitation; to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves'.³⁶ What Burke attempts in the *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is the inclusion of description into a poetic, but only insofar as it serves another purpose — in this case, to give us an account of an inner state. Burke replaces a poetic of mere description for one where description is again *secondary*, required to arouse 'strong and lively feelings'.

We yield to sympathy what we refuse to description. The truth is, all verbal description, merely as naked description, though never so exact, conveys so poor and insufficient an idea of the thing described, that it could scarcely have the smallest effect, if the speaker did not call in to his aid those modes of speech that mark a strong and lively feeling in himself.³⁷

Broadly speaking, description introduces three dangerous elements to literature: 1) specialist vocabulary and, with it, the idea of vocation; 2) the possibility of chaos and infinite duration, the result of the absence of an externally imposed unity (as Surrealism realised); and 3) an opening up of subject matter, but with this a risk of pointlessness (anything can be subject to a description). This is not to suggest that Clare read Lessing and Burke — he did, though, feel the pressure of the new anti-descriptive aesthetic even so. His publisher's urging him to write 'more philosophically' or Keats's suggestion that his 'Images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular sentiment', are echoed constantly by close friends and critics alike. The Burkean view of description is what Clare wrote against, and Ashbery's reading of Clare is equally caught up in this debate: 'The landscape has dull stretches, patches of

34 See G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, trans. Robert Phillimore, London: Routledge, 1874.

35 Lewes criticises poetry that is merely 'an animated catalogue of things' ('Hegel's Philosophy of Art', *British and Foreign Review*, vol. 13 [1842]); predictably there is Coleridge: 'all is so dutchified . . . that the reader naturally asks why words, and not painting, are used?' (Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1930: II, 134). Notably, Wordsworth's criticisms on the issue tend to be equally of painting.

36 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), ed. Adam Phillips, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 157.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

repetition' (*OT*, 11), says Ashbery, but this is explained, and ultimately counteracted, by Clare's very poetic philosophy: 'the point is there is no point'.

So how do we account for Clare's kind of description? And what is so radically original about it?³⁸ Conventional modern ideas of descriptive *technique* can be summed up in Paul Valéry's conception:

The invasion of Literature by *description* was parallel to that of painting by *landscape*. A *description* is composed of sentences whose order one can generally *reverse*: I can describe this room by a series of clauses whose order is not important.³⁹

The allusion to an 'invasion' here is not to Claudian landscape poetry (though it would apply to this too), but rather to the proliferation of description in realist fiction. We can see how such description fits Valéry's idea. Take Flaubert, for example, in a description contemporaneous with some of Clare's:

He had his hair cut in bangs, like a cantor in the village church, and he had a gentle, timid look. He wasn't broad in the shoulders, but his jacket with its black buttons seemed tight under the arms; and through the vents of his cuffs we could see red wrists that were clearly accustomed to being covered. His yellowish breeches were hiked up by his suspenders, and from them emerged a pair of blue-stockinged legs. He wore heavy shoes, hobnailed and badly shined.⁴⁰

The details here are reversible and static, as Valéry's conception demands, and ordered to a logic that is arbitrarily spatial (it runs from top to bottom). Though it shares the Clarean trope of precision, Flaubert's description differs from Clare's work fundamentally. For in Clare, in spite of the landscape subject matter, scenes are such that any pictorial rendering is quickly seen to be impossible.

This much is clear in 'Emmonsails Heath in Winter':

38 Angus Fletcher's *A New Theory for American Poetry* (London: Harvard UP, 2004) discusses Clare in relation to American poetry specifically. Fletcher discusses description by trying to reconcile it with transcendence (the transcendence he sees in Whitman and Ashbery), through an adaptation of the Husserlian term 'immanent transcendence'. Fletcher becomes in this, though, as prone to idealising — and as at odds with Clare — as Coleridge, because of a heavy reliance on the idea that descriptions of experience can be immediate, so long as the poetry is good enough, to the extent that it is able to transcend epistemology's conventional areas of 'privileged access' such as pain, impressions, to access a 'direct, non-inferential contacting of immediate reality', later equated by Fletcher into a Platonic contact with 'higher things'. For example, he sees description as a reaction to the Augustan couplet, saying 'nature itself does not write in couplets' (when equally, it seems, nature does not write in iambic pentameter or sonnets). In overlooking the mediation of description, Fletcher in fact follows the descriptive theories of Lessing and Burke (who differ from him only in terms of seeing this immediacy as somehow below poetry). What is distinctive about Clare, in comparison to Burke, Coleridge, Emerson and Whitman, however, is his denial of Kantian-romantic conceptions of transcendence, and a constant reflexive focus on the very act of description as a mediating force.

39 Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, Paris: Gallimard, 1977, pp. 1219-20 (his italics).

40 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller, New York: Modern Library, 1957, p.4.

I love to see the old heaths withered brake
 Mingle its crimped leaves with furze and ling
 While the old Heron from the lonely lake
 Starts slow and flaps his melancholly wing
 And oddling crow in idle motions swing
 On the half rotten ash trees topmost twig
 Beside whose trunk the gipsey makes his bed
 Up flies the bouncing wood cock from the brig
 Where a black quagmire quakes beneath the tread
 The field fare chatters in the whistling thorn
 And for the awe round fields and closen rove
 And coy bumbarrels twenty in a drove
 Flit down the hedgerows in the frozen plain
 And hang on little twigs and start again⁴¹

It is useful to read this typical Clare poem against John Barrell's influential ideas about Clare. Barrell uses this poem to demonstrate Clare's 'poetic of disorder' and the importance of 'simultaneity' to it.⁴² Barrell reads the poem, therefore, as a shaggy-dog of 'simultaneous impressions', in which only a 'loose sense of connectedness' is found, and where 'the images in their particularity' form the essential part of the poem.

First of all, then, there is the question of a 'loose sense of connectedness'. Barrell later refers to Clare's final works as 'so lacking in connection that they could be arranged in any order', and would appear, therefore, to follow Valery's ideas. Barrell indeed sees Clare in the painterly terms of Valery; the 'I love to see' that begins the poem is seen in terms of creating a blank canvas upon which Clare can compose what he wants. This is not entirely different in the end from the *coup d'oeil* of Thomson, where an admittedly very different simultaneity is present — that is, that which is inherent in stasis. The disconnection that Barrell sees, though, seems mistaken. For the poem is in fact radically connected: the brake 'mingles' with the furze, the heron sympathises with the 'lonely lake' with his own 'melancholly wing', the gypsy is physically linked to the crow via the tree that draws Clare's attention to him, there is a 'drove' of filially connected bumbarrels, and so on.

Linked to this is the problem of simultaneity. The fact that things like the crow and the gypsy are connected in such a way that the perception of the one *causes* the perception of the other evidently precludes any idea of them being perceived at the same time. These things are not separate for Clare, or 'images in their particularity' — the syntax tells us as much. It is not that Clare loves to see this and this and this in a parataxis of impressions, but rather that he loves to see them in precisely this order: 'I

41 John Clare, *Poems of middle period, 1822-1837*, vol. 4, edited by Eric Robinson, David Powell, Oxford: Clarendon, 1996, p. 286.

42 Barrell, pp. 152-5.

love to see this mingle with this while this is happening and then up flies the woodcock and then the field fare chatters, and the bumblebees hang on twigs and then start flying again'. This is what Heaney refers to when noting 'the inexorable one-thing-after-anotherness of the world' present in the Clare poem.⁴³ Clare looks here and there rather than everywhere, or rather *here and then there*. The movement should be seen as a narrative of perception. As *Blackwood's Magazine* discerned, Clare presents 'a series of images all naturally arising, as it were, out of each other'.⁴⁴ This narrative can be causal (as in the crow and the gypsy) or simply a subplot related to the wider story of Clare's wandering, as in the bumblebees.

Rather than giving us disorder, Clare, when read through Ashbery, connects and orders his perceptions in a way that makes them in some sense narratological. The important thing about establishing a *narrative* connectivity here is that it both avoids Lewis Carroll's map and can be differentiated from a Coleridgean harmonizing order.

When John Barrell talks about a 'poetic of disorder' he alights upon the major danger of a description as self-determining as Clare's. Description, unlike narrative, tends two complementary ways: to the chaotic and, with it, to boredom. It is this danger that Jeffrey Kittay observes when he suggests, 'it is upon narrative which description is to depend, it is narrative which is called upon to hold and control it.'⁴⁵ This is what we see to an extent in 'Emmonsails Heath in Winter'; like telling a story, description here is an end in itself.

Clare's guide in this matter is, as we might expect, something close to home. The ballad is the main influence on the simplicity and clarity of Clare's style, as many critics have noted. 'Poetry for the young Clare embodied two central features: it began both as story and as sound,' that is, as balladry, as Tim Chilcott points out in an excellent discussion of the issue.⁴⁶ Clare's illiterate mother, as Clare also later would, had a collection of ballads, while his father could apparently recite over a hundred by heart. Clare's early work is most indebted to folk and ballad traditions; for example, there is 'Dolly's Mistake':

Ere the sun o'er the hills round and red gan a peeping
 To beckon the chaps to their ploughs
 Too thinking and restless all night to be sleeping

43 Seamus Heaney, 'John Clare: a bi-centenary lecture', *John Clare in Context*, ed. Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips and Geoffrey Summerfield, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994, p. 137

44 Qtd. in Storey, *Clare*, p. 229.

45 Jeffrey Kittay 'Descriptive Limits', *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), p. 225.

46 John Chilcott, '*A Real World & Doubting Mind*': a critical study of the poetry of John Clare, Hull UP, 1985. See also George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, Sinclair Brown, 1983: pp. 84-88.

I brushd off to milking my cows
To get my jobs forward and eager preparing
To be off in time for the wake
When yielding so freely a kiss for a fairing
I made a most shocking mistake

Young Ralph met me early and off we were steering
I cuddled me close to his side
The neighbours while passing my fondness kept jeering
Young Ralphs timely suited they cried
But he bid me mind not their evil pretensions
Fools mun says he talk for talks sake
And kissing me Doll if you've any prehensions
Let me tell you my wench you mistake⁴⁷

This is simple enough, but looking ahead to Clare's first volume one can see emerging from it the descriptive mode that would mark Clare's mature work. In 'Rural Evening', narrative is both thematically and stylistically linked with description and the landscape:

The beckoning lover nodd the maids away
At a distance many an hour employs
In jealous whisperings oer their amorous joys
As children round their teasing sports prolong
To twirl the top or bounce the hoop along
Or progg the hous'd bee from the cotters wall
While at the parish cottage walld wi dirt
Were all the cumber grounds of life resort
From the low door that bows two props between
Some feeble tottering dame surveys the scene
By them reminded of the long lost day
When she her self was young and went to play
And turning to the painful scenes agen
The mournfull changes she has met since then
Her aching heart the contrast moves so keen
Een sighs a wish that life had never been⁴⁸

The descriptive balladry of Thomas Hardy certainly learns a lot from Clare in passages like these — and it is significant that Clare also had plans to write a novel early on in his career. For the determining force in this descriptive passage is not, as Burke would have wanted, an underlying expression of Clare's innermost feelings, but a more immediate pleasure in getting everything down, or at least remembering and composing it, as it *happens* as a narrative, one thing after another.

Clare's mature work focuses on the presentation of miniature anecdotes. 'The Badger' and 'The Fox' are famous examples, but even poems purely descriptive in their

47 Quoted in Storey, p. 54.

48 John Clare, *The early poems of John Clare, 1804-1822*, vol. 2, edited by Eric Robinson and David Powell, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, p. 641.

aims, where ‘nothing happens’ in any conventional sense that the ballad would recognise, are unmistakably narrations:

Hares at Play

The birds are gone to bed the cows are still
And sheep lie panting on each old mole hill
And underneath the willows grey-green bough
Like toil a resting — lies the fallow plough
The timid hares throw daylight's fears away
On the lanes road to dust and dance and play
Then dabble in the grain by nought deterred
To lick the dewfall from the barleys beard
Then out they sturt again and round the hill
Like happy thoughts — dance — squat — and loiter still
Till milking maidens in the early morn
Gingle their yokes and sturt them in the corn
Through well known beaten paths each nimbling hare
Sturts quick as fear — and seeks its hidden lair⁴⁹

The time framework here, as in so much of Clare's poetry as we shall see, is the day: the narrative progresses insofar as it nears its end, the coming of a new morning. After a brief tableau setting the poem's starting time, the poem narrates the habits of the hare over the course of the night. The narration takes its cue from ballad conventions: it is a strictly sequential, third-person and, by virtue of its heavy rhyming, musical story. Most interesting, however, is how the story pressures and transforms its description, or its own telling. Because Clare is forced to relate a period of time in the sonnet, the details become of necessity *sketchy*. This sketchiness effects an impression of Clare trying to keep up: ‘dance — squat — and loiter still’.

Gerard Genette has claimed the distinction between description and narrative to be ‘one of the major characteristics of our literary consciousness’.⁵⁰ But we may also appeal here to Michel Beaujour's distinction between two types of description. Beaujour discusses the essential difference between descriptive tableau (often seen as the *only* type of description) and description of a more dynamic type:

while gardens are static and made up of simultaneous events, the *working* of a mechanism is motion, transfer of energy, a chain of causes and effects. In short, one would expect the description of a *garden* to be quite a different linguistic procedure from relating *how a lawn mower* (or a *gardener*) works.⁵¹

49 John Clare, *Poems of middle period. 1822-1837*, vol. 4, edited by Eric Robinson, David Powell, Oxford: Clarendon, 1996, p. 233.

50 Quoted in Kittay, p. 225.

51 Michel Beaujour, ‘Some Paradoxes of Description’, *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), p. 28.

'Hares at Play', albeit beautifully and ambiguously, is a natural historian's account of the nocturnal behaviour of hares (the beauty lying precisely in its presentation as a story). But the poem is also a mechanical account of this phenomenon. It is not a description of a landscape *per se* (if it were, the style of the first four lines would continue for the whole poem) but rather a description of how hares *work* — or, at least, how they play. Clare merges narrative with description, not in the conventional sense of combining atmosphere with action (which rather keeps them separate) but in what is essentially a form of *chronography*, a description of time. 'Hares at Play' is as much an account of Clare's experience of the night and its mechanics as it is about what a hare 'is' in the natural historian's terms.

Thomson's picturesque landscapes, Coleridge's 'fixed and dead' objects, Lessing's anxieties about the 'physical object com[ing] into collision with the consecutiveness of speech', and William Whewell's extension of natural history's 'discovery of fixed characters' to all 'good description' all form the context of Clare's writing.⁵² What should be observed, though, is that this fixed character of things is not simply something that Clare fails to see. Rather, it is a gesture of defiance on his part to deny such fixity — in the shape of enclosure, of taxonomy and punctuation (both of which required an education he neither possessed nor desired), of bourgeois, urban conceptions of ideal (but constructed) landscape. A poem called 'The Trespass' is illustrative of Clare's whole landscaping aesthetic, for Clare is always trespassing the picturesque landscape, the enclosed land masquerading as natural landscape; always invading the apparently natural, static appearances of 'nature' with the dynamic actions of birds, the plot of land with a story and personality; and constantly encroaching on the idealised prospect with narrative accounts of hard labour and exploitation. This is what Clare meant by 'dirty reality'. Thomson represents landscapes from a distance, the natural historian seeks exhaustive information and Coleridge steps back into a meditational sphere of frozen time. For Clare, on the other hand, both distance and attention are paralysing, affecting his ability to move, to change angles, to *observe other things* and to observe new things happening. He is much happier relating his *adventures* in discovery, physical or perceptual — the search, the finding, the closing in, the surprise.

It is precisely these aspects of Clare's work that Ashbery highlights in his lecture. For Ashbery, Clare 'is primarily an instrument of telling'. Clare's poems are 'dispatches

52 Lessing, p. 74; Whewell cited in John Arthos, *The Language of Natural Description in Eighteenth-century Poetry*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1949, p. 45.

from the front’, and it is this immanent position of telling that forces Clare to go onwards, to experience and account for time’s eventfulness. In analysing the Clarean mechanics Ashbery utilises, it is useful to begin with Ashbery’s own discussion of the description-narrative dynamic. This is found in *Self-Portrait*’s ‘Scheherazade’.

Fish live in the wells. The leaves,
A concerned green, are scrawled on the light. Bad
Bindweed and rank ragweed somehow forget to flourish here.
An inexhaustible wardrobe has been placed at the disposal
Of each new occurrence. It can be itself now.
Day is almost reluctant to decline
And slowing down opens out new avenues
That don’t infringe on space but are living here with us.
Other dreams came and left while the bank
Of coloured verbs and adjectives was shrinking from the light... (*SP*, 9)

This extended *description* opens a poem one would expect, since it is named after the narrator of the *One-Thousand-and-One Nights*, to be about storytelling. The description, though, does not build up a scene; rather, ‘each’ thing constitutes a ‘new occurrence’. As in Clare, though, it is less the objects themselves that are of interest to Ashbery, but rather the inexhaustible ‘wardrobe’ (‘word-robe’) of ‘coloured verbs and adjectives’ — that is, an immersion in a descriptive language that emphasises action (verbs) as well as illustration (adjectives). The descriptions themselves do not picture a scene but rather represent things that ‘came and left’, that come and go. Description takes the place of more conventional storytelling because for Ashbery description and narrative are only separated artificially by overly-categorising modes of thought. The two are actually inextricable: ‘all efforts to wriggle free / Involved him further, inexorably, since all / Existed there to be told’. It is this linking of description and narration determining the immanent poetic of description, the poet’s involvement in the telling, that is central to Ashbery’s work.

There is a common explanation of Ashbery’s immanent poetic that has become *the* commonplace of Ashbery criticism. This is typified by an emphasis on the importance of ‘process’ in Ashbery’s work, as in Helen Vendler’s conception of Ashbery as ‘recording a unique interval of consciousness’, turning his gaze to ‘the provings and alterations and schoolings that issue in identity — to the processes themselves’.⁵³ As another critic suggests, by ‘inscribing a multiplicity of temporal forms, Ashbery’s

53 Vendler, *Music*, p. 232.

poetry inscribes the multidimensionality of human reality'.⁵⁴ This is not illuminating of Ashbery's work. Such unhelpfulness is partly a result of Ashbery's self-representations, where early on in his career he was constantly drawn to this idea of his work as an 'individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world of external phenomena... a very complex but, I hope, clear and concrete transcription of the impressions left by these phenomena on the consciousness.'⁵⁵ All such explanations, apart from being untrue about Ashbery's work, bring us back to Lewis Carroll's map drawn on a scale of one to one.

The real argument of process in Ashbery's work relates outside itself, and specifically to narration, as in Ashbery's observations on Gertrude Stein:

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... But it is usually not events which interest Miss Stein, rather it is their 'way of happening' ...⁵⁶

This is because for Ashbery, the concern is more precise than a vague 'multidimensionality of human reality':

The passage of time is becoming more and more *the* subject of my poetry.⁵⁷

This is a crucial statement, and needs to be discussed at some length. Before going on to time, however, it is necessary first to look in more depth at the particular descriptive mode that may accommodate '*the* subject' of Ashbery's poetry.

Jeremy Stick of *Newsday* provides a unique account of Ashberyan journalistic description on the back cover of Ashbery's collection of art criticism, *Reported Sightings*: 'Ashbery describes beautifully, but his description also functions as inquiry or retelling: in describing an image, he recounts the process of its making.' Description of an object is simultaneously an account of process. By the time of *The Double Dream of Spring* and 'For John Clare', this has become the role of Ashberyan description; it increasingly, that is, attempts to be descriptive of time passing. Many poems in that volume, such as 'Evening in the Country', 'Summer' and 'Spring Day' are exemplary in this respect. If 'Scheherazade' talks of rather than expressing the melting of narration into description, 'Evening in the Country' enacts it:

54 Mary E. Eichbauer, *Poetry's Self-Portrait: the visual arts as mirror and ruse in René Char and John Ashbery*, New York: Peter Lang, 1992, p. 118.

55 James Vinson (ed.), *Contemporary Poets*, New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 36.

56 John Ashbery, 'The Impossible', *Poetry*, 90:4 (June 1957), p. 251.

57 *Craft* interview, p. 122.

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.
 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
 Turmoil that is to be our route. (DDS, 33)

‘Evening in the Country’, like many poems of this period, depicts a movement from day to night, night to day. ‘Space is a coffin’ indeed, for Ashbery, without the ‘process’, the ‘growing in that knowledge’, the narrative movement of a ‘route’. In this, Ashbery partakes of a wider postmodern reappraisal of description, as typified by Robbe-Grillet: ‘the whole interest of description [is] not the thing described, but in the very movement of the description’.⁵⁸ The interest of ‘Evening in the Country’ is in its movement from a static and ironically idealised description of the day (‘I am still completely happy’) to the realisation and ultimate acceptance of the dynamism and ‘turmoil’ of life. It is expressed in the transformation of the tone in the poem from general musing to the direct address of the immediate present. In the latter, Ashbery’s writing is akin to the situationism of Clare’s poems: ‘Have you begun to be in the context you feel...?’; ‘I see you eager in your wishing it the way / We may join it, if it passes close enough’; ‘We may perhaps remain here, cautious yet free’ (34). The poem is one of process insofar as it registers a sentimental change, but it does much more than this. The poem registers and improvises process by a *detailing*, and by a basic *narrative* logic of scene, crisis and resolution (beginning, middle and end). The details of the poem are a long way from being ‘reversible’ as Valéry would have them because the poem is the *story of the details* of an evening in the country.

Ashbery, though, is as much a poet of ideas as he is of things — that is, strangely not much of a poet of either. Just as Ashbery’s Clarean immanent poetic overlooks the concretion of Clare’s work, equally, his Stevensian abstraction emphatically eschews

58 Quoted in Philip Hamon, ‘Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive’, *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), pp. 1-26.

any notion of ‘ideas’ in the sense Stevens would recognise. Ashbery is not out writing poems about badgers and robins’ nests, but no more is he ‘explaining metaphysics to the nation’ (in Byron’s description of Coleridge) or writing notes toward a supreme fiction. Description, or Ashbery’s rhetoric of perception generally, is why. As one critic has suggested, ‘Ashbery never explains, but he always describes or details’.⁵⁹ Mary Kinzie has observed a ‘patent refusal’ of ‘relevant detail’ in Ashbery, noting that ‘deceptively concrete details... are not incorporations of the real but signals of something else’.⁶⁰ The details of ‘Evening in the Country’ are not presented as reproductions of *present* objects any more than they communicate an identifiable idea. What I want to explore is the sense in which Ashbery, through a reading of Clare, is interested in a kind of middle way here, by constructing a poetic of time.

Let us turn, then, to one of Ashbery’s finest lyrics, 1979’s ‘Haunted Landscape’ (*AWK*, 80-2). Like many of Ashbery’s earlier poems — one thinks of “‘They Dream Only of America’” or ‘Rivers and Mountains’ — ‘Haunted Landscape’ takes up the convention of a mystery narrative:

Something brought them here. It was an outcropping of peace
In the blurred afternoon slope on which so many picnickers
Had left no trace. The hikers then always passed through
And greeted you silently. And down in one corner

Where the sweet william grew and a few other cheap plants
The rhythm became strained, extenuated, as it petered out
Among pots and watering cans and a trowel. There were no
People but everywhere signs of their recent audible passage. (80)

Rather than focusing on the meaning of these ‘signs’, ‘Haunted Landscape’ is interested in what the sign generally means for that which *The Double-Dream of Spring* calls the ‘lightness / that passing time evokes’ (*DDS*, 13). The poem continues:

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...

59 Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 24.

60 Mary Kinzie, ‘Irreference: The Poetic Diction of John Ashbery, Part I: Styles of Avoidance’, *Modern Philology*, 84:3 (February 1987), pp. 268-9.

The sign is not simply a symbol, but a ‘trace’ of something lost, the ‘great sense of what had been cast off / Along the way’, and a symptom of time’s passing, or ‘the petty ordering of our days’. It is this ordering that forms the poem’s mysterious ‘legend’: from our ‘grow[ing] happy’ to ‘old age or stupidity’. The poem is not the conventional stuff of legend, however, as its narrative interruptions indicate:

How could that picture come crashing off the wall when no one was in the room?

At least the glass isn’t broken. I like the way the stars
Are painted in this one, and those which are painted out.
The door is opening. A man you have never seen enters the room
He tells you that it is time to go, but that you may stay,

If you wish. You reply that it is all the same to you. (81)

This typically Clarean manoeuvre of interrupting the past with the immediate present, of past folklore lurching into the contemporary moment, a move central to many of Clare’s bird poems,⁶¹ turns the legend into a story that somehow catches up with the present, and to which we are then catching up. In fact, the poem is more a chronicle that extends to its own writing than a ‘landscape’. It is a description of the temporal relation between past and present, of the past haunting the present as it happens, that the poem attempts. In concluding lines that could be an account of any one of Clare’s nature poems, Ashbery writes, ‘Time and the land are inseparable, // Linked forever’ (82).

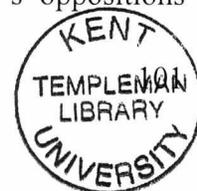
Ashbery’s transitions between description and narration, between space and time, however, are part of a coordination in which these dichotomies are less stable generally than in Clare. Clare is always interested in representing things not ‘as they are’ but always ‘as they seem’, so in a sense the stability of *things* is never a concern for him, and admittedly, ‘Certaintys at a loss’ often in his verse. This said, the storytelling technique Clare derives from the ballad is, ultimately, formally simple. Ashbery’s storytelling, on the other hand, problematizes appearances and apparently stable representations. The farm, the poem’s inaugural event and location is unexpectedly ‘uprooted to make way / For the new plains and mountains’, which is to be ‘extinguished’ in turn by the ocean. Place itself is displaced in the poem’s narrative. Ashbery, in another Clarean transition, imagines that the story ‘turns into us’, both confronting and becoming. The confusion of such elements in Ashbery, however, takes place in an avant-garde situation quite alien to Clare. The point is that Ashbery

61 Of which ‘The Nightingales Nest’ above and ‘Ravens Nest’ are very different but nonetheless exemplary instances.

transplants Clare into this aesthetic milieu, where disjunction and disorder are a major expression of the reaction to the symboliste contemplative. As I have noted from the start, Ashbery is not concerned with manipulating the same terms as the poems his readings are built upon, but with diverging from the original text, in a way which allows that text to remain nonetheless visible. It is Clare's uncertainty, his radical immanence and relatively disordered poetic which means that, for Ashbery, Clare avoids some of the pitfalls of a quasi-religious, meditative Wordsworthian romanticism — that is, a romanticism at once unavoidable and at odds with Ashbery's avant-garde poetics. 'Haunted Landscape' ends by focusing on its own 'telling' and 'performances', concluding that 'We'll probably never know'. In fact, then, in Ashbery narrative is utilised at the same time it, and causality itself, is questioned: 'you asked why they called it a "miracle" // Since nothing ever happened. That, of course, was the miracle'. The ultimate paradox of the poem is that, though one can see 'time and the land are identical', one reaches this conclusion none the wiser as to what either are in themselves. Indeed, the poem's point is that it is because of their inextricable linkage that one will never know. It is a poem of loss at the same time it is a poem of recalling, of non-story and story: 'you remembered you forgot.'

Ashbery, then, has an immanent, descriptive-narrative poetic that clarifies ideas of him as a 'poet of process'. Immersion is qualified and elucidated by this, for it is not just the poet among 'things' or 'the world' with Clare and Ashbery, but rather the poet lodged in the 'one-thing-after-anotherness' of it. With a refusal to isolate experience and contemplate it ideally comes the inability to pause in its workings, and an imperative to chart those workings while describing their component parts: this is the narrative-descriptive mode. Ultimately, Clare and Ashbery are remarkable for their escape of the dichotomy of ideas and things. For Ashbery, after Pound and William Carlos Williams, this is no slight issue. Usually, descriptive poetry leads to a reversal of the Augustan aesthetic: rather than ideas being 'express'd', to use Pope's terms, description becomes, as in Burke, a basis and prerequisite for forms of ideality; this is also Williams' 'No ideas but in things', the imagist Pound's 'intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time', and Eliot's 'objective correlative'. In Clare's best work, ideas are peripheral altogether. For Ashbery, on the other hand, things seem to disappear while description remains.

It is Ashbery's departure from Clare in this sense that I now wish to take up. Ashbery's use of the Clarean mode helps him to avoid a meditational poetic, but equally clear, when the two poets are analysed side-by-side, are Ashbery's oppositions to



Clarean subject matter. Clare's poems, wherever their attention is, provide a vivid account of living in a particular place where one sees particular things, be it a mouse's nest, hares, or Emmonsails Heath in winter; an account in which explorations of the nature of time and perception are a determining force, but never the motivating aim. Place is the end in Clare's descriptive aesthetic. Ashbery's Clarean descriptions, on the other hand, as I have been suggesting, are utilised toward another end: describing perception happening, and describing time in a more abstract sense.

3. Three Poems

Three Poems is the culmination of Ashbery's early work. The main problem in discussing this multilayered volume is that its influences are so many: different critics variously suggest the importance of Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, Blaise Pascal, Gertrude Stein, French prose poetry, with Ashbery himself citing Clare's natural history prose and Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Meditation* (cases might also be made for T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett). Ultimately, one must allow that the work contains a multitude of voices. Indeed, this very fact forms part of Ashbery's expression of the Clarean mode. On the face of it, Ashbery's 1972 volume seems a most unClarean work. *Three Poems* is radically abstract and ungrounded — to all appearances lacking any phenomena. Because of its fundamentally meditational disposition, its contemplative abstraction, *Three Poems* clearly presents a challenge to a reading of Ashbery as a poet of immanence. But this is why the work is central: what I want to argue about it is that we see a perceptual immersion that occurs, paradoxically, in *contemplation itself*. The poem is exemplary of Ashbery in that it presents a contemplative poetic that is not philosophical, and, most importantly, a poetry that can be meditational without relinquishing immanence.

Against the 'clear and concrete transcription of the impressions left by... phenomena on consciousness' we saw Ashbery claim for his work earlier, he offers a different, though evidently linked, account of the aims of *Three Poems*:

the idea of it [was] the poetic form would be dissolved, in solution, and therefore create a much more — I hate to say environmental because it's a bad word — but more of a surrounding thing like the way one's consciousness is surrounded by one's thoughts.⁶²

62 *Craft* interview, p. 126.

The poem is to be 'like the way one's consciousness is surrounded by one's thoughts' — in other words, it is to present consciousness immersed in its own machinations. Accordingly, the 'things' of the poem are 'thoughts'.

It is important to distinguish firstly, though, between Ashbery's 'thoughts' and the argumentative contemplative of Coleridge, or the ruminating meditations of Emerson. This is easily done by looking at any passage from *Three Poems*:

It seemed, just for a moment, that a new point had now been reached. It was not the time for digressions yet it made them inevitable, like a curtain at the end of an act. It brought you to a pass where turning back was unthinkable, and where further progress was possible only after it had been discussed at length, but which also outlawed discussion. Life became a pregnant silence, but it was understood that the silence was to lead nowhere. It became impossible to breathe in this constricted atmosphere. (*TP*, 62-3)

In this send-up of conventional Cartesian argumentation, nothing is worked out; rather, new points of argumentation are seen 'just for a moment', before 'digressions' inconveniently crowd in. The content here is more akin to a story than the progression of a conventional contemplation: the poem's movements are strangely physical rather than mental, as well as constantly moving forward. The reason for this is that Ashbery, unlike the Coleridgean thinker, is unable to stop time for his meditational convenience: 'the one thing you want is to pause so as to puzzle all this out, but that is impossible' (86). Paradoxically, 'It makes sense to stand there, passing' (4), because 'we and everything around us are moving forward continually' (74). Ashbery's objective in *Three Poems*, therefore, rather than detachment or objectivity, is 'keeping myself attached' (14). It is this that makes Ashbery's poems, like Clare's, 'dispatches from the front' (*OT*, 17). For Ashbery, 'moments of awareness have to be continuous if they are to exist at all'; and 'the truth' is always 'mov[ing] on' (*TP*, 14). The poem is aimless in every sense of the word: 'How will all turn out? What will the end be? But these are questions of an ignorant novice which you have forgotten about already' (86).

These are exactly the qualities Ashbery admires in Clare's work: 'Unlike Wordsworth's exalted rambles in *The Prelude*, [in Clare] there is no indication that all this is leading up to something' (*OT*, 17). Indeed, useful analogies can be drawn between more exalted work and one of Clare's long poems. To take Clare's *The Shepherd's Calendar*, one can see some of its distinctive features, by, again, considering it in the Thomson landscape tradition of *The Seasons*. Here are the beginnings of winter side-by-side:

Withering and keen the winter comes
 While comfort flies to close shut rooms
 And sees the snow in feathers pass
 Winnowing by the window glass
 And unfelt tempests howl and beat
 Above his head in corner seat
 And musing oer the changing scene
 Farmers behind the tavern screen
 Sit — or wi elbow idly prest
 On hob reclines the corners guest

See, Winter comes to rule the varied year,
 Sullen and sad, with all his rising train —
 Vapours, and clouds, and storms. Be these my theme;
 These, that exhalt the soul to solemn thought,
 And heavenly musing. Welcome, kindred
 glooms!
 Congenial horrors, hail! With frequent foot,
 Pleased have I, in my cheerful morn of life,
 When nursed by careless solitude I lived
 And sung of Nature with unceasing joy,
 Pleased have I wandered through your rough
 domain;
 Trod the pure-virgin-snows, myself as pure.⁶³

It is obvious that Clare's poem gets going straight away with an abruptness completely absent from Thomson's. But the real contrast here is in the concrete and swift precision of Clare versus the static, generalising rhetoric of Thomson, and in the complete absence of ideas in Clare's beginning compared to the theme of 'purity' for which Thomson's entire introduction is a vehicle. Echoing Ashbery's ideas of the 'constricted atmosphere' of meditation is Mark Storey, who suggests that 'rather than impose a pattern on [nature], Clare lets one emerge'.⁶⁴ The 'changing scene' of Clare's opening is the dominant note of all the episodes in the book.

What is unique about Clare's poem is its vision of pastoral in the present tense. For the pastoral traditionally suggests timelessness: it is always spring, the lovers always young, and the world always ahistorical. Clare's poem, though, gives equal space to each time of year — and therefore to the varying degrees of happiness, fruitfulness and labour they bring. Constant reference is also made to a historical past. Everything is moving in *The Shepherd's Calendar*. Even the winter's frozen brooks are only in 'chill delay' rather than complete stasis. Indeed, it is in this time of frost that time is most keenly felt. It passes slowly; there is simply no work to be done, and yet motion remains at the centre of everything:

The thresher first thro darkness deep
 Awakes the mornings winter sleep
 Scaring the owlet from her play
 Long before she dreams of day
 That blinks above head on the snow
 Watching the mice that squeaks below
 And foddering boys sojourn again
 By rhyme hung hedge and plain

63 John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. E. Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, London: Oxford UP, 1964, p. 1; James Thomson, *The Seasons and The Castle of Indolence*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1972, p. 129.

64 Deacon, p. 107.

Shuffling thro the sinking snows
Blowing his fingers as he goes
The where the stock in bellowings horse
Call for their meal in dreary close⁶⁵

The narrative nature of this list comes from the trait observed earlier, of images coming out of each other. The way Clare uses couplets means that each description is constrained and quickly displaced by the next one; the verse is continually moving on. Ashbery, who indeed characterises Clare's verse as 'rhyme without reason' (*OT*, 17) notes that 'the run-on couplets' are 'vivid in the sense they give of a self-proliferating world whose accumulation of particulars is finally as convincing as that of "The House that Jack Built"' (20).

Because of the meditational medium of *Three Poems*, however, this dynamic structuring means that, unlike in Clare's concrete and linear narratives, conceptual repetition and contradiction proliferate across the three prose poems that make up the collection. As Ashbery notes in an interview, *Three Poems* is 'a series of contradictions, one after the other'.⁶⁶ Looking at the poem as a whole, contradiction seems to be the very method of 'argument', a kind of dialectic gone wrong where, for example, even the poem's central panegyric — which seems broadly to be about focusing on the present moment — 'falls on the ear like "special pleading"' because, as Ashbery identifies, as a quasi-consistent idea, it involves forethought and is therefore at 'risk of predicting it[self]' (24). Whereas the poet, battling to occupy a place in the 'continuous present', must remember that the 'question... has to be rethought each second' (61). And so the work constantly struggles to reconcile itself with (and even to remember) what has gone before. It is this which leads one critic to identify 'the unforeknowable movement of [Ashbery's] prose'.⁶⁷

The immersion in meditation, then, is an immersion in time. Objective or comprehensive argumentation fails because Ashbery's work goes ironically 'past the ideal rhythm of the spheres' (6) and becomes engulfed back in the course of subjective time. Importantly, though, this is the time of writing: 'He types like mad, composing as fast as he can type, which is fast. He barely thinks about what he's doing,' narrates Larrissa MacFarquhar of Ashbery's composition of the poems (Clare's output suggests

65 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

66 Piotr Sommer, 'An Interview in Warsaw', in *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, ed. Michael Palmer, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1983, p. 304.

67 Margueritte Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: the prose poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*, Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1992, p. 172.

that he must have been doing the same). *Three Poems* is, therefore, a work concerned with elucidating the *moment* of contemplation rather than arriving at its end:

It is with some playfulness that we actually sit down to the business of mastering the many pauses and the abrupt, sharp accretions of regular being in the clotted sphere of today's activities. As though this were just any old day. There is no need for setting out, to advertise one's destination. All the facts are here and it remains only to use them in the right combinations, but that building will be the size of today, the rooms habitable and leading into one another in a lasting sequence, eternal and of the greatest timeliness.

It is all that. But there was time for others, that were to have got under way, sequences that now can exist only in memory, for there were other times for them. Yet they really existed. For example a jagged kind of mood that comes at the end of the day... (53-4)

There is no need 'to advertise one's destination' or for 'setting out' a purpose. As the work says elsewhere, 'the situation in which you find yourself... is always a new one and cannot be decoded with reference to an existing corpus of moral principles' (114). It is the 'mastering of pauses', the 'sphere of today's activities' and the 'facts [that] are here' that matter. Not that this is the end of it: for there is always 'time for others', for other arguments, just as there are 'other times'. As Ashbery significantly says in the Clare lecture, speaking of his own poetry, 'ideas are also things' (*OT*, 2). And so the economy of the Kantian manifold becomes transformed in *Three Poems* from phenomena into thought and composition itself, into a manifold of reflexivity: 'suddenly you realize that you have been talking for a long time without listening to yourself' (95). 'Everything drops in before getting sorted out' (*TP*, 12). In this sense, the economy of Ashbery's anti-meditational meditational aesthetic, caught up in the 'the saw-toothed anomalies of time itself' (9), builds on his broader poetics of inattention outlined in the introduction: both are, in Ashbery's description of Stein, 'a way of happening'.⁶⁸

The phenomenal details that do enter *Three Poems* are figurative but crucial:

Even now the sun is dropping below the horizon; a few moments ago it was still light enough to read but now it is no more, the printed characters swarm over the page to create an impressionistic blur. (66)

It is the manifold of time and the contemplation taking place in time — the consciousness or unconsciousness of time passing — that forms the poem's central metaphor. It is this specifically that forms the work's 'environment', its 'surrounding thing'. The 'open, moist, impregnable order of the day — kind, generous and protective

⁶⁸ The phrase originally occurs in Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'.

— surrounds you’ (9). The whole volume, indeed, can be read as a register of thoughts occurring in a day, from morning to night. Ashbery cites the day as the ‘microcosm of man’s life’, and the human subject is compared to the mayfly: ‘how could we know, any more than those insects whose life-span is a single day?’ (66). The work ends:

As I thought about these things dusk began to invade my room. Soon the outlines of things began to grow blurred and I continued to think along well-rehearsed lines like something out of the past. Was there really nothing new under the sun? (116)

The Ecclesiastes allusion here takes on a dryly literal meaning, then: have I learned anything new today? Ashbery commented in an interview just after the composition of *Three Poems* that his poems

are setting out to characterise the bunch of circumstances that they’re growing out of and a day might be said to be the basis for a poem, that one sits down to write a poem on a particular day and that’s the beginning of the poem — the fabric of it — and afternoon and night are further aspects of day that moves on.⁶⁹

Three Poems relates the story of the day amid an immersion in it. Within this narrative of everyday living is where one should locate the work’s meditational tensions. The work’s decision to ‘put it all down’ (3) is at one with the poem’s immanent aesthetic of not being ‘selective in one’s choices’ but rather ‘let[ting] them be inflicted on and off you’ (9). ‘The rejected chapters’, therefore, ‘have taken over [the] meandering stream of our narration’ (104) in *Three Poems*, and the trappings of argumentation abandoned, because of the nature of ‘the business of day-to-day living’. Life in *Three Poems* is, as Ashbery concludes in ‘The System’, simply ‘the plot that the number of your days concocts’ (105).

The volume after *Three Poems*, *The Vermont Notebook*, continues this argument, using the day as a unit in its structure rather than as its whole schema. In the ‘Nov. 3.’ entry of the book, the Kantian manifold is seen directly in relation to ‘the present’:

There isn’t much to control any more. You know the blossoms, fed by facts, and they disappear in the night and there is a long wait for the fruit, and by then it has become a fact. You do not wait for facts. Nothing moves at night. So you are resisting, foretelling, and the casual amenities like a nice chair or dish are overlooked, dropping into the endless garbage chute of the present. Have a nice day. (VN, 41)

⁶⁹ *Craft* interview, p. 120.

Equally, ‘the endless garbage chute of the present’ in *Three Poems* ‘do[es] not wait for facts’. Or as one of Ashbery’s greatest lines on this subject, from ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’, has it: ‘Tomorrow is easy. Today is uncharted.’

The present moment, or temporal immediacy, in Ashbery’s work, then, is figured in terms of contemplation because Ashbery finds an immersion in thought itself in the same way that Clare finds immediacy in his natural surroundings. The two converge, however, in this privileging of the present moment. ‘The music of all present’ is what is important to both poets, whether it be the sound of bird twittering or the machinery of thought. And this is ultimately where we must locate the influence of Clare on Ashbery’s work — in his inattention to any end or final vision in a poem, which is a heightened attention to what it is to be in the world and to its time passing.

CHAPTER THREE

Landscapepeople: Ashbery and Wordsworthian Landscape

To be always articulating these preludes, there seems to be no
Sense in it..
— ‘A Wave’

The above discussion of Ashbery's reading of John Clare leaves problems unaccounted for and gaps to be filled. This is not surprising; after all, Ashbery's work is not identical to Clare's, and we should not seek to explain away all the challenges of Ashbery's work by reference to one 'precursor'. Ashbery's influences are multiple (and not constant). However, though progress has hopefully been made on accounts of Ashbery's style that speak vaguely of a 'multidimensionality of human reality', the issue within such statements, of Ashbery's supposed solipsism, is yet to be fully resolved. The reasons for this lie partly in Clare's work, which, as I have argued, is distinguished from mainstream romanticism by its focus on perceptivity itself, and therefore often, especially in light of Ashbery's readings of it, shows a poet *alone* in the world. Part of the purpose, then, of discussing Ashbery's reading of Wordsworth, the modern 'social' poet *par excellence*, is to give Ashbery a fair run against the various charges (and celebrations) of a supposed solipsism.

Firstly, however, the move away from Clare, and increasing engagement with mainstream romanticism we witness in Ashbery's later career must be accounted for. Writing landscape poems for the US Department of the Interior, as Ashbery did with 'Pyrography' in 1976, makes it clear that, at a certain point, Ashbery no longer shared a marginal position with Clare in the way he did when associated with the avant-garde in the fifties and sixties. Ashbery's major poems of his later career — 'Pyrography', 'Litany' and 'A Wave', for example — seem his least Clarean. The landscapes of these poems particularly have little in common with Clare's; 'the

sudden, surprising lack of distance' and limited horizon of Clare's work has been replaced by sweeping panoramas of American cultural life.

There are two reasons for this shift. First, there is Ashbery's often-mentioned sudden and accidental entrance into the cultural and academic mainstream around 1976 with the laurels bestowed on *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.¹ This is correctly, if repeatedly, seen as marking a turning point in Ashbery's career. I shall be concerned here, however, specifically with the anxieties of political conscience this change of circumstances inspires. Associated with an avant-garde, in the fifties and sixties Ashbery's poetry carried with it a politics almost by default: though oblique references to actual events pepper all these early collections, there is ultimately an unproblematic decision here not to attempt the kind of political *content* poets around him, from the Beats to Robert Lowell and Denise Levertov, had made central to their work. *Form*, as Language poets have appreciated, is what makes Ashbery's early work politically interesting. As Ashbery becomes more famous, however, there emerges an anxiety to reinstate a social relevance that has diminished for Ashbery as a result of his absorption into the mainstream. This usually takes the form of an expression of guilt:

Not everyone can afford the luxury of
Just being not alive, but being at the center,
The perfumed, patterned centre.

(*'Fantasia on The Nut-Brown Maid'*, *HD*, 78)

Sometimes
I think we are being punished for the over-abundance
Of things...

(*'Litany'*, *AWK*, 32)

unfurled on the political front...
The subtle hegemony
Of guilt that loops you together. (41)

In the occupied countries,
You are raised to the statute of a god, no one
Questions your work, its validity, all
Are eager to support it, to give of themselves. (46)

¹ See pp. 58-9 above.

Specifically, as will become apparent, Ashbery aestheticises an anxiety that his own new-found authority and acceptance is analogous to a global American imperialism. That is, he worries that his work, in becoming part of a dominant culture, has also, as 'Litany' has it, 'turned out to be mass-produced' (67) for the 'the blind empathy of a homeland' (15).

There are of course political changes that occur as Ashbery emerges in the late seventies and early eighties as America's 'most important poet'. In 1984's *A Wave*, the concerns above come to a decisive head. If 'Litany' makes statements of conscience as part of a broader act of contemplation, 'A Wave' is a poem, in its focus and intensity, of nothing *but* statements of conscience. Composition of 'A Wave' begins in November 1982 — that is, nearly two years into Ronald Reagan's first presidential term (John Shoptaw places the poem's genesis at the beginning of Reagan and Carter's campaigning) — and is worked on for the next year.² The writing of the poem, then, occurs in the wake of what political science would call a realigning election, and amidst drastic changes to US domestic and foreign policy. Reagan's 'supply-side economics' meant, most visibly, an effective end of trade unions, the biggest tax cuts of the century (Reagan's outline of which was televised), and massive increases in inequality with a continuing recession and high unemployment. Meanwhile, the Reagan administration became notorious overseas for an aggressive foreign policy, invading or illegally supporting anti-Communist forces throughout Central and Latin America and heightening Cold War tensions with a massive military build-up (the most famous offshoot of which was the Strategic Defense Initiative, or 'Star Wars'). In most of this, however, the conflicts of the Reagan years were fought, as many historians of the period note, on the ground of political rhetoric.³ Whether the enemy was the 'L-word' (liberalism) or the 'Evil Empire', ideologies are at stake in the period in rhetorical terms. In the words of Stephen Paul Miller, in a cultural history of the seventies that is also, acrobatically, a study of Ashbery's poetry,

2 Shoptaw, p. 275. This is also, of course, shortly after Ashbery nearly dies of a spinal infection. I do not attempt a full historical reading of 'A Wave' itself, though understanding the poem's motivations in the political context in which it so evidently operates is essential to any discussion of this period of Ashbery's career.

3 See especially Robert L. Scott, 'Cold War and Rhetoric: conceptually and critically', and Robert L. Ivie, 'Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention of Cold War "Idealists"', both in *Cold War Rhetoric*, ed. Martin Medhurst, Robert L. Scott, Philip Wander, Michigan: MSU Press, 1997, pp. 1-18 and 103-30. See also Eric Hobsbawm, 'Cold War' in *Age of Extremes: the short twentieth century, 1914-1991*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997, pp. 225-56.

the forever young and vital conservatism of Ronald Reagan [means that] suddenly, conservatism is ‘happening’... In the eighties, there is a wish simply, with a sixties power of suggestion appropriated by the sunny ideology of Reaganism, to will this wall of pre-sixties credences in to place. The real, as a total field, is commodified, with more self-consciousness than in the sixties.⁴

It is this climate, above all, that necessitates Ashbery’s move away from his reading of an isolated Clare towards a more unavoidably social poetry — that is, poetry social in content as well as in the pre-eminently social form of Ashbery’s intertextual poetic. ‘A Wave’, I will argue, is a crisis poem inspired by this period, modelled on that seminal modern crisis of political indecision, Wordsworth’s Revolutionary books of *The Prelude*.

The well-rehearsed debate about Ashbery’s relationship to romanticism, then, becomes important here. I have been discussing Clare as distinguished from romanticism insofar as he is distinguished him from Kant, and suggesting that Ashbery’s use of Clare is, in some respects, an attempt to avoid certain romantic assumptions. Clearly, however, not all of Ashbery’s work does avoid romantic ideas; the aim of this chapter will be to look into this.

The leading advocate of the ‘late Romantic’ Ashbery is, of course, Harold Bloom. In *Figures of Capable Imagination*, discussing Ashbery under the heading of ‘The New Transcendentalism’, Bloom has no problem with what he calls Ashbery’s ‘gorgeous solipsism’. Ashbery is to be lauded principally for his ‘quietness’ and ‘rapt meditation’, and is, for Bloom, ‘essentially a ruminative poet... knowing always that what counts is the mythology of self’, ‘join[ing] the Wordsworthian “enchantment of self with self”’.⁵ Bloom’s influential Chelsea House collection of essays on Ashbery takes a similar line. Most of the essays — especially those by Helen Vendler and Douglas Crase — may disagree with the *type* of emphasis Bloom puts on representations of self, but this is because the poet, not the argument has changed. Instead of Bloom’s Wordsworth representing Stevens, ‘the American Wordsworth’, we are given Keats, whose negative capability and ideas of ‘Soul-making’ are seen to encompass and explain Ashbery’s difficulty (which is analogous to Keats’s ‘uncertainties, mysteries, doubts’), his work’s pronominal

4 Stephen Paul Miller, *Seventies Now: culture as surveillance*, London: Duke UP, 1999, p. 137.

5 From, respectively, *Figures of Capable Imagination*, pp. 135, 189, 196, 130, and *John Ashbery*, p. 120.

problems (it's like Keats' loss of identity), and the whole issue of improvisation, time, and process:

One way to learn the schedule is to go along with it; in retrospect it is easier to see what it was. If this sounds too spineless, think of it as a version of Keats' negative capability.⁶

Still sounds a bit spineless. Keats gets 24 references in the index (a contemporary like O'Hara gets only six, Clare precisely zero), as well as underlying whole chapters in the collection. The problem with such a reliance is that it explains Ashbery in entirely *negative* terms. Keats is used in the essays as a standard in which any unusual elements can be subsumed, rather than as a figure Ashbery is in any dialogue with. Keats is used to *explain away* Ashbery's originality rather than to offer an account of it. Ultimately, as Bloom no doubt appreciated, Keats simply offers a more theoretical version of the Stevensian Ashbery. However, the choices of these 'fathers' of Ashbery — Wordsworth, Keats, Emerson, or Stevens — at least *point* to elements in his work which need addressing: questions of identity and the nature of time.

Returning to Bloom's argument, and sifting out its cultural politics and fanaticism for Stevens, can be helpful here. It is Bloom's Francophobia, which apparently knows no bounds, that is the motive behind his stress on Ashbery's romanticism. To counter the 'critical nonsense' of reading Ashbery in relation to French poetry, romanticism mediates in the Emerson-Whitman-Stevens parentage Bloom gives Ashbery, and is a way for Bloom to position Ashbery in 'the Native Strain' or 'American Sublime'. Overlooking this, though, one can see the good sense in Bloom's positioning at times:

[in] Ashbery's two spiritual temptations... the first temptation will be productive of a rhetoric that puts it all in, and so must try to revitalise cliché. The second temptation is gratified by ellipsis, thus leaving it all out... The road through to poetry for Stevens was a middle path of invention that he called 'discovery,' the finding rather than the imposition of order... [Ashbery] is at his best when he is neither re-vitalising proverbial wisdom nor barely evading ellipsis, but when he dares to write most directly in the idiom of Stevens.⁷

6 Crase, 'Prophetic Ashbery', p. 130. For other discussions along these lines in Bloom's collection, see *John Ashbery*, pp. 130-34, 179-94, 195-204.

7 Bloom, *Figures*, p. 172.

Here, then, is precisely the immanent-symbolist dichotomy that Altieri suggests; but what is appealing is Bloom's suggestion of a third way. The previous chapter adapted and skewed Altieri's distinction; romanticism itself must now be addressed in an effort to go beyond it. My own third way will attempt to see how romantic poetry is central to Ashbery's poetic of process, but also how this doesn't need to take the form of the usual commonplaces about Ashbery's work like 'rapt meditation' or an enmeshment in 'experience'. Unfortunately, this is exactly what all the critics here, including Bloom, suggest. That is, I will look at Ashbery's reading of romanticism in terms of a complex engagement with both symbolist and immanentist aesthetics.

1. *'All of a sudden the scene changes: it's another idea'*

The previous chapter looked at the way in which physical phenomena in Clare's poetic are displaced by an environment of ideas in Ashbery. It is now necessary to explore the formation and articulation of these ideas in more detail. The subsequent discussion will look firstly at *how* Ashbery symbolises, secondly at the content of these symbols, and thirdly at the implications of both. In these aspects there is significant overlap. That is, the account of symbolism *per se* will be used as a route to implications only artificially separated from it.

Recently, critics have begun to read Ashbery as a landscape poet.⁸ Though these readers agree that landscape in Ashbery's poetry does not generally function as a straightforward representation of place, as it does, say, in Clare, there is again a split between two ways of reading. On the conventional side there is Bonnie Costello, for whom 'Consciousness of landscape has become, for [Ashbery], indistinguishable

8 See: Bonnie Costello, 'Landscapepeople', in *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Susan Schultz, Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1995, pp. 60-80; Willard Speigelman, 'John Ashbery's Haunted Landscapes', in *How Poets See the World*, Oxford University Press, 2005; Edward Larrissy, "'Is Anything Central?': Ashbery and the Idea of a Centre", *Poetry and the Sense of Panic: critical essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery*, ed. Lionel Kelly, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000, p. 75-86; Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture 1945-80*, London: Harvard UP, 1985; Andrew Ross, 'The Alcatraz Effect: Belief and Postmodernity', *SubStance*, 13:1 (1984), pp. 71-84; Kevin Clark 'Privileging the Symbol: John Ashbery's *A Wave*', *Papers on Language and Literature* 26:2 (Spring 1990), pp. 271-280.

from consciousness *as* landscape... consciousness becomes itself the landscape'.⁹ One of the most convincing lines against this tired account has been that pursued by Robert von Hallberg and, more recently, by Edward Larrissy: Ashbery's symbolism of centres. Von Hallberg's work on Ashbery takes two points of reference: 'centres' and 'margins'. Placing Ashbery in the context of systems analysis, indeed as a 'systems analysis writer', von Hallberg suggests that Ashbery seeks 'to single out purely relational isomorphisms that are abstracted from content'.¹⁰ The advantage of this approach is that it addresses the problems of context and subject in Ashbery's work while relating it to the outside world: 'what appears disordered is in fact complexly ordered, and... the conflicts inherent in economic, political, and social activity can be reduced by the proper coordination of competing factors'. There are poems that clearly suggest such a principle, offering little encouragement for the searcher of 'consciousness *as* landscape':

These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing
Into something forgetful, although 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. (*RM*, 9)

The symbolism here is indeed 'purely relational': lacustrine referring to the scattered flatness it implies in opposition to the central and immovable tower, or the single, authoritarian idea.

'A Wave' contains similar metaphors of landscape representing political situations. Here, however, problems emerge with a structuralist account:

As with rocks at low tide, a mixed surface is revealed,
More detritus. Still, it is better this way
Than to have to live through a sequence of events acknowledged
In advance in order to get to a primitive statement. And the mind
Is the beach on which the rocks pop up, just a neutral
Support for them in their indignity. They explain
The trials of our age, cleansing it of toxic
Side-effects as it passes through their system.

⁹ Costello, p. 174.

¹⁰ von Hallberg, p. 54.

Reality. Explained. And for seconds
We live in the same body, are a sibling again.

I think all games and disciplines are contained here,
Painting, as they go, dots and asterisks that
We force into meanings that don't concern us
And so leave us behind. But there are no fractions, the world is an integer
Like us, and like us it can neither stand wholly apart nor disappear.
When one is young it seems like a very strange and safe place.
But now that I have changed it feels merely odd, cold
And full of interest. (*W*, 70-1)

The assumption of static signification in the spatial metaphors that von Hallberg and other critics make in order to describe Ashbery does not explain the movement that has clearly, somehow or another, occurred within the 'mixed surface' of these two symbolic scenes. The first verse-paragraph, with its sisters of the lacustrine tower — rocks that 'pop up' — seems keen on emphasising the ideological 'cleansing' that occurs courtesy of 'their system', whereas the second suggests that we simply read too much into these things, into 'meanings that don't concern us', and that this landscape, that has just menacingly 'explain[ed] / The trials of our age', is now merely 'odd' and 'full of interest'. There is clearly more at stake in 'A Wave' than even the most complex structural arrangements. But what? One can refer to Wordsworth for help with this.

There are obvious similarities between the landscapes of 'A Wave' and *The Prelude*. Ashbery's 1979 poem, 'The Preludes' (*AWK*, 91), already implies this in Ashbery's 'digest' of his reading — or, as the title implies, readings — of Wordsworth's epic. In addition here to the continuity Ashbery observes between Wordsworth and Clare in the centrality of an immanent 'presence that explains', there is an emphasis now on the panoramic landscape, as Ashbery creates his own Helvellyn from an imaginary height:

You could step up
Into the little balloon carriage and be conducted
To the core of bland festival light.
And you mustn't forget to sleep there.

Over near somewhere else is the problem
Of the difficulty. They weave together like dancers
And no one knows anything about the problem any more
Only the problem, like the outline
Of a housewife closing her door in the face of a traveling salesman
Throbs on the air for some time after.

Perhaps for a long time after that.

Wordsworth claims in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that ‘the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous’.¹¹ The radically metaphorical nature of romanticism generally is expressed in such statements: the imagination is to make *meaning* out of landscape, even if that means transforming it. Literally, then, many of the landscapes of Wordsworth’s work, like ‘A Wave’, make reference less to a real place than they do to ideas — or often in Wordsworth’s case, ideals:

Nowhere (or is it fancy?) can be found
The one sensation that is here; ’tis here,
Here as it found its way into my heart
In childhood, here as it abides by day,
By night, here only; or in chosen minds
That take it with them hence, where’er they go.
–’Tis, but I cannot name it, ’tis the sense
Of majesty, and beauty, and repose,
A blended holiness of earth and sky,
Something that makes this individual Spot,
This small abiding-place of many men
A termination and a last retreat,
A Centre, come from whereso’er you will,
A Whole without dependence or defect,
Made for itself and happy in itself,
Perfect Contentment, Unity entire.
(‘Home at Grasmere’, 155-70)

In *The Prelude*, with the opening of Book Eight, the ‘Retrospect’ of ‘Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind’, such a landscape is played out in some detail:

What sounds are those, Helvellyn, which are heard
Up to thy summit, through the depth of air
Ascending, as if distance had the power
To make the sounds more audible? What crowd
Is yon, assembled in the gay green field?
...
From far, with basket, slung upon her arm,
Of hawker’s wares — books, pictures, combs and pins —
Some aged woman finds her way again,
Year after year a punctual visitant!
...
But one is here, the loveliest of them all,
Some sweet lass of the valley, looking out

11 William Wordsworth, *Prose Works I*, ed. W.J.B Owen and J.W. Smyser, Oxford, 1974, p. 150.

For gains, and who that sees her would not buy?
 Fruits of her father's orchard, apples, pears,
 (On that day only to such office stooping)
 She carries in her basket, and walks round
 Among the crowd, half pleased with, half ashamed
 Of her new calling, blushing restlessly.
 (Book 8: 1-5, 28-31, 37-43)¹²

Ashbery's critics have noted his 'peculiar sense of distance', and something similar holds for Wordsworth here.¹³ Though the scene is only dimly made out to begin with, Wordsworth's panorama comes to encompass all kinds of description: of age, personal histories, emotional states and even the smallest of objects. Spectator *ab extra* Wordsworth may be, in Coleridge's designation, but to see pins and embarrassment from a height of a kilometre is surely little short of superhuman. These figures are not, then, to be seen as observed objects, but rather as part of a symbolic economy. The old woman is the figure of the permanence of the instinct for community, the young 'lass' of a world uncorrupted by metropolitan economic relations. Its presentation as a possible world is merely Wordsworth's attempt to show the viability of such a 'visionary mountain republic'.¹⁴

It is scenes such as this that have led commentators on Wordsworth's symbolism, such as Richard Bourke, to suggest that 'We are not in the midst of an engagement in which the poet "half creates", but one where the immediate evidence of the senses is dispensed with altogether. We get a thoroughgoing transfiguration of it'.¹⁵ Paul de Man, slightly differently, suggests that Wordsworth 'possesses the kind of double vision that allows him to see landscapes as objects, as well as entrance gates to a world lying beyond visible nature'.¹⁶ In both cases a connection is being made between Wordsworth's narrative of growth into self-awareness (the love of nature leading to love of mankind) and Wordsworth's symbolism. In essence, the metaphorical functions in Wordsworth as a way to transcend the Lockean sensationalism always equated with (alongside capitalist-industrial materialism) 'the hour / Of thoughtless youth' that finds no interest in Nature 'unborrowed from the

12 All line references to *The Prelude* are that of the 1805 version, as in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: a parallel text*, ed. J. C. Maxwell, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.

13 Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984: p. 118.

14 Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the environmental tradition*, London: Routledge, 1991: p. 68.

15 Richard Bourke, *Romantic Discourse and Political Modernity: Wordsworth, the intellectual and cultural critique*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993: p. 104.

16 Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, Columbia UP, 1984: p. 132.

eye'. Nature can be exalted in maturity, then, because its original symbolic potential (a potential for social meaning) is recognised. This is a movement one may, indeed, see as analogous to Ashbery's move away from a solipsistic Clare toward a more social, Wordsworthian poetic.

Such, then, is part of the motivation behind Wordsworth's symbolic landscapes. As for the nature of that symbolism, it is useful to return to the distinction made in the last chapter between the aesthetic of immanence and the symbolist poetic of Coleridge. In Altieri's schema, it is Wordsworth that plays Clare's part. Wordsworth's work, however, clearly has a symbolic aspect. It is important to consider the significance of this.

Coleridge's theory of symbolism is perhaps the major peculiarity of his whole aesthetic system.¹⁷ 'A symbol', says Coleridge,

always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.¹⁸

Here, symbol *seems* to be confused with metonym or synecdoche. The key to Coleridge's resolution of this apparent contradiction lies in his conception of symbolism as process, 'the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal'. Poetry presents the 'Natur-geist' just as Nature presents God in the pantheistic Coleridge's philosophy. Just as 'Nature is God's Art', Coleridge declares, poetry is Nature's Art. Symbolism for Coleridge, therefore, both *represents* the spirit of Nature, and *mirrors analogically* the process of creation itself. Hence, because the process of symbolism (the creation of the symbol or, in Coleridge's terms, the work of the Imagination) duplicates the creative relationship between God and Nature, in addition to simply signifying Nature (the conventional symbolic function), the symbol is part of what it represents.

The obvious consequence of Coleridge's theory is to make symbolism an essentially dramatic device. It is in essence the equivalent of Rousseau's 'I see giants' metaphor discussed by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*:

¹⁷ See, particularly, Mary Rahme, 'Coleridge's Concept of Symbolism', *Studies in English Literature*, 9:4 (Autumn 1969), pp. 619-632.

¹⁸ Quoted in Rahme, p. 621.

if I say, 'I see giants' that false designation will be a literal expression of my fear. For in fact I see giants and there is a sure truth there, that of a sensible cogito, analogous to what Descartes analyzes...

Nevertheless, what we interpret as a literal expression in the perception and designation of giants, remains a metaphor that is preceded by nothing either in experience or in language... no literal meaning precedes it. No rhetor watches over it.¹⁹

Derrida calls this the 'savage metaphor'. In it, as in Coleridge, metaphor refers to its own expression; in a reversal of 'normal' metaphor, it is intentional in the epistemological but not the aesthetic sense. For Derrida this is the very definition of romanticism, the beginning of a fissure in metaphysics continued most significantly in Hegel. It is marked by both an *involuntary* structure of meaning (one that of course allows Derrida to perform his deconstructive reading of Rousseau in the first place), and within this — which we must bear in mind at all points in this chapter — an inescapable logic of *aporia*. At the centre of Derrida's reading of Rousseau, that is to say, is irony. The Rousseau quotation Derrida uses as an epigraph to *On Grammatology* sums this up: 'Perhaps his system is false; but developing it, he has painted himself truly'.

Thus, a symbol's reference can be vague, as in the passage quoted from 'Home at Grasmere', whose 'one sensation' is never clarified, but can express in its creation an inner state — in this case, a discomfort and confusion with one's argument. It is part of what it represents. Or, more vividly in *The Prelude*, in the midst of confusion, truth appears:

beyond
The reach of common indications, lost
Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
The story of the man, and who he was.
My mind did at this spectacle turn round
As with the might of waters, and it seemed
To me that this label was a type,
Or emblem, of the utmost that we know,
Both of ourselves and of the universe... (7: 607-19)

19 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976, p. 276.

The difference between Coleridge and Wordsworth in terms of symbolic *practice* is best expressed by Coleridge himself, who says,

it was Mr. Wordsworth's purpose to consider the poetry, and from different effects to conclude diversity in kind; while it is my object to investigate the seminal principle, and then from the kind to deduce the degree. My friend has drawn a masterly sketch of the branches with their *poetic* fruitage. I wish to add the trunk and even the roots, as far as they left themselves above ground and are visible to the naked eye of our common consciousness.²⁰

Coleridge claims to discover the foundations ('metaphysical reasons') of poetry, while Wordsworth expresses these ideas poetically. That is, we are given by Coleridge — accurately, one is inclined to believe — a characterisation of differences of presentation: Coleridge himself claiming an objective, necessary ground for his ideas, and Wordsworth dramatising the *effects* of them. In Wordsworth's words, the difference is that Coleridge is happier 'to sit in judgement than to feel' (11: 137). Wordsworth in fact, then, registers the self-consciousness of process to a greater degree than Coleridge. For Wordsworth, anxieties about one's humanity and morality are constantly inspiring and accompanying self-scrutiny. In this sense, 'the wild waste' (7: 76) of London, for example, with the confusion and meaninglessness of its images, and the 'emblem' of emptiness, signifies the inadequacy of Wordsworth's poetic vision at this point. A lesson is learned from this, though, in the very process and endurance Wordsworth's must go through; the lesson is, appropriately, about suffering. This is why it is immediately followed by the 'Retrospect: Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind'.

The symbol which represents itself, which signifies the state of the mind creating it, has many other examples in the poem: the restless landscaping of the introduction, which discusses the impossibility of beginning the poem, the boat-stealing scene with its inexplicable Sublime, the disappointing anticlimax of crossing the Alps. None, however, are more extraordinary than the extended crises of conscience in Wordsworth's engagement with the French Revolution. In its constant vacillating (*wavering*) between support for various, often conflicting, ideological positions associated with the Revolution, the second of Wordsworth's 'Residence in France' books is English poetry's great dialectic of landscape. *The Prelude's* final

20 S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. 1, ed. George Watson, London: J. M. Dent, 1975, p. 52.

'restoration', as the title of the following books calls it, is the only possible resolution of an incessant rhythm of metaphorical political landscapes that are made, doubted, refuted, withdrawn and provisionally replaced to be doubted again in turn.

Wordsworth, the revolutionary 'patriot' (9: 124) of Book Nine, by the later stages of the Revolution discussed in Book Ten witnesses convulsions of a less elevating sort. In the 'desolation and dismay' following Louis XVI's execution, and the subsequent 'terror', however, Wordsworth keeps faith: 'Yet did I grieve, nor only grieved, but thought / Of opposition and of remedies' (129-30), he says, and such counter-arguments are offered. The constant rhythm of the narrative, a wavering back and forth between belief and faithlessness, hope and fear, begins to assert itself as Britain declares war:

No shock
Given to my moral nature had I known
Down to that very moment; neither lapse
Nor turn of sentiment that might be named
A revolution, save at this one time;
All else was progress on that self-same path
On which, with a diversity of pace,
I had been travelling; this a stride at once
Into another region. True it is,
'Twas not concealed with what ungracious eyes
Our native rulers from the very first
Had looked upon regenerated France,
Nor had I doubted that this day would come.
But in such contemplation I had thought
Of general interests only beyond this
Had never once foretasted the event.
Now had I other business for I felt
The ravage of this most unnatural strife
In my own heart; there lay it like a weight
At enmity with all the tenderest springs
Of my enjoyments. I, who with the breeze
Had played, a green leaf on the blessed tree
Of my beloved country; nor had wished
For happier fortune than to wither there,
Now from my pleasant station was cut off
And tossed about in whirlwinds. (234-59)

Political and topographical 'country' are so interlinked here as to be interdependent; and Wordsworth's political reality is only available through such an economy, a promenade along the 'progress on that self-same path' to 'another region'. Wordsworth, that is, progresses through his crisis only insofar as he traverses the path of his own metaphors. In Wordsworth, as Geoffrey Hartman states, 'setting is

understood to contain the writer in the act of writing: the poet in the grip of what he feels and sees'.²¹ The subject of this part of *The Prelude* is not so much the French Revolution, Enlightenment ideals or English anti-Jacobinism, but rather the vacillating movement between these competing arguments itself — that is, the subjective condition of *wavering*.

The best instance of this is when Wordsworth learns of Robespierre's death, of which he hears while in the Lake District. Here, as Wordsworth moves closer to a resolution of conflicting rhetorics and landscapes, metaphor reaches a final pitch of savagery. The 'small village' in the Lake District Wordsworth returns to, with its 'far-secluded privacy', 'smooth sands', 'distant prospects' and 'mountain tops, / In one inseparable glory clad' (473-80), represents everything Wordsworth yearns for that the French Revolution cannot give. The burial ground of an old schoolmaster is then contrasted with the killing fields of France, and a 'Romish Chapel' set explicitly at a distance from the French *mêlée*:

Not far from this still ruin all the plain
Was spotted with a variegated crowd
Of coaches, wains, and travellers, horse and foot,
Wading beneath the conduct of their guide
In loose procession through the shallow stream
Of inland water; the great sea meanwhile
Was at a safe distance, far retired. I paused,
Unwilling to proceed, the scene appeared
So gay and cheerful, when a traveller
Chancing to pass, I carelessly inquired
If any new were stirring; he replied
In the familiar language of the day
That, *Robespierre was dead* — nor was a doubt,
On further question, left within my mind
But that the tidings were substantial truth;
That he and his supporters all were fallen. (524-39; Wordsworth's italics)

The anxiousness of this symbolic landscape to keep 'the great sea' of Revolutionary France 'at a safe distance' is the savage metaphor here. The self-consciousness of the process of the scene's significance then manifests itself: 'Unwilling to proceed, the scene appeared / So gay and cheerful'. Wordsworth knows the peace he has found in the acceptance of failure will be obliterated by new hope at Robespierre's death. And

21 Geoffrey Hartman, 'Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry', *Beyond Formalism: literary essays 1958-70*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1970: p. 222.

so it is: these ‘tidings’ bring the ‘sea’ back, as the appealing ‘smooth sands’ of the scene’s opening are now ‘beat with thundering hoofs’:

In wantonness of heart, a joyous crew
Of schoolboys hastening to their distant home
Along the margin of the moonlight sea —
We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand. (564-7)

Predictably thereafter, the cycle begins again, with renewed enthusiasm for the utopian landscape and new disappointment at its impossibility.

As the record of ‘the growth of a poet’s mind’, *The Prelude* presents its symbolism, and all its acts of imagination as *part of* and *representative of* a human development. The process by which childhood’s ‘quiet stream of self-forgetfulness’ (4: 294) has become the poet ‘dipped / Into the turmoil’ (9: 338-9), and the subsequent detailing of that ‘turmoil’, of what Wordsworth terms the mind at war with itself (11: 74), is a question of the constant scrutiny and revision of metaphorical adequacy, and the dramatisation of this wavering.

Even without dwelling on the imagery which *The Prelude* and ‘A Wave’ obviously share, the connections between the two poems are striking. ‘A Wave’, as Helen Vendler, rightly suggests, is ‘Ashbery’s *Prelude*’.²² This, however, means something quite specific for Vendler, as has become apparent — a poetry ‘recording a unique interval of consciousness’ that turns from ‘circumstances to the provings and alterations and schoolings that issue in identity’. Vendler, and a number of Ashbery’s other commentators, most notably Bloom, in observing the function of process in Ashbery’s work, base their assumptions on Northrop Frye’s idea of a ‘poetic of process’, whereby the poet is most significantly, in a phrase Bloom echoes when speaking of Ashbery, ‘in a state of rapt self-communion’.²³ That is, the poet is always seen in terms of immanent solipsism. This is not to say that this is entirely untrue of Wordsworth or Ashbery — the Revolutionary passages above glean a good deal of their pathos from their ‘rapt’, all-consuming privacy. Clearly, though, ‘self transformation’ of ‘self-communion’ does not tell the whole story here. Wordsworth equally addresses social ideas and political ideology, as I will investigate. Most

22 Vendler, *Music*, p. 259.

23 Northrop Frye, ‘Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility’, *ELH*, 23:2. (June 1956), p. 151.

importantly, though, such a view of Ashbery or Wordsworth contains no account of the nature of metaphor which both poets so obviously foreground.

Ashbery has commented on the role of landscape in his poems:

‘Landscape’ means different things at different times in my poetry, depending on the context. Sometimes it merely means ‘landscape’ — a natural scene or setting. At other times it could mean a portion of the world — with its people, objects, ideas — that is visible or present to me at a given moment... At other times it could be merely an abstract field of possibilities, a potentiality which the poem sets out to explore.²⁴

One would be hard pushed to find a poem of Ashbery’s that represents ‘a natural scene or setting’; more usual in Ashbery is landscape in the final two senses here, which are frequently combined — landscape, that is, used to mean ‘people, objects, ideas’ in the context of ‘a potentiality which the poem sets out to explore’. Consider the excerpt from ‘A Wave’ quoted earlier. There, the poetry demonstrates responsiveness to its own metaphorising: ‘We force’ the landscape ‘into meanings that don’t concern us’. In the language of Chapter One, vehicle does not simply take precedence over tenor — rather, self-consciousness of a metaphor’s overall construction becomes paramount. The affinities between *The Prelude*’s ‘array of mighty waves’ (VI: 459) and the wavering rhythm of Ashbery’s long poem are most visible on the grounds of this responsiveness (‘Response being, by its very nature, romantic, / The very urge to romanticism. The precise itch’ [AG, 72]). Fluid topographical awareness is the process ‘A Wave’ both is and undergoes:

Moving on we approached the top
Of the thing, only it was dark and no one could see,
Only somebody said it was a miracle we had gotten past the
Previous phase, now faced with each other’s conflicting
Wishes and the hope for a certain peace, so this would be
Our box and we would stay in it for as long
As we found it comfortable, for the broken desires
Inside were as nothing to the steeply shelving terrain outside,
And morning would arrange everything. So my first impulse
Came, stayed awhile, and left, leaving behind
Nothing of itself, no whisper. The days now move
From left to right and back across the stage and no one
Notices anything unusual. Meanwhile I have turned back
Into that dream of rubble that was the city of our starting out.
No one advised me; the great tenuous clouds of the desert
Sky visit it and they barely touch, so pleasing in the

24 Jun’ichiro Takachi, ‘Something Different and New – Questions to John Ashbery’, *The Rising Generation*, 13:6 (September 1, 1989), p. 12.

Immense solitude are the tracks of those who wander and continue
On their route, certain that day will end soon and that night will then fall.

But behind what looks like heaps of slag the peril
Consists in explaining everything too evenly. (*W*, 73-4)

In a long poem, Ashbery says, 'one's mind changes during the course of the writing; the changes are reflected in the poem, give it a diversity it wouldn't otherwise have'.²⁵ Though most of the movements of 'A Wave' are slower and more drawn out than the rapid wavering that occurs here, this passage is typical. The constant attention to 'phases', or how the 'days now move', is an attention to the revisions and re-revisions of the landscape itself. The 'steeply shelving terrain outside', 'one's first impulse', is overcome by recourse to the 'immense solitude' of 'that dream of rubble... the desert' which is, in turn, rightly criticised for 'explaining everything too evenly'.

Like Derrida's savage metaphor, these landscapes have no 'real' referent. As their pliability suggests, like *The Prelude*, they are rather part of a 'set[ting] out to explore'. Christopher Middleton is apposite in suggesting that, in 'A Wave', 'Metaphors... crystallise as they expand perceptions in any given sequence of variables, and they are key moments in the timing of the vocal changes'.²⁶ In 'A Wave', indeed, even crystallisation is an expansion. It is this expansion that differentiates Ashbery's later poem from those earlier epics of vocal change from 'The Skaters' to 'Litany'. If vehicle takes precedence over tenor in 'A Wave', there is also a dramatisation of this priority, and of the gap between the two — a rhetoric of the involuntary which entails, as it did not in Ashbery's early work, a retrospect of its preceding metaphors. What is dramatised is the *delay* in the poet's own interpretation of symbol:

So the voluminous past
Accepts, recycles our claims to present consideration
And the urban landscape is once again untroubled, smooth
As wax. As soon as the oddity is flushed out
It becomes monumental and anxious once again, looking
Down on our lives as from a baroque pinnacle and not the
Mosquito that was here twenty minutes ago.
The past absconds
With our fortunes just as we were rounding a major

25 *Craft* interview, p. 116.

26 Christopher Middleton, 'A Wave (1984)', *PN Review*, 21:1 (September-October 1994), pp. 41-2.

Bend in the swollen river; not to see ahead
Becomes the only predicament when what
Might be sunken there is mentioned only
In crabbed allusions but will be back tomorrow.

It takes only a minute revision, and see—the thing
Is there in all its interested variegatedness,
With prospects and walks curling away, never to be followed,
A civilised concern, a never being alone. (78)

The problem Ashbery encounters, a problem Wordsworth eventually resolves in his own poem, is that all interpretations of symbols can only be offered in the form of more symbols, whose meaning is equally unforeseeable, 'never to be followed'. The poem, that is, fails to resolve itself into anything beyond its 'abstract field of possibilities'. This is what Marjorie Perloff would call Ashberyan indeterminacy. But it seems that there is a determinable subject in the passage above: is it not simply *about* 'we', about us? The landscapes also have clear referents: that the 'untroubled, smooth' landscape becomes 'monumental and anxious', echoing 'These Lacustrine Cities' is, it seems, due to an 'interested' rather than interesting tampering with the past. The point is, rather, to adapt Perloff's term, that the possibilities here are not allowed to *terminate*, which is precisely what the passage thematizes (it is part of what it represents): 'it takes only a minute revision'.

The question remains, then: how are we to describe this type of symbolism? Wordsworth and Ashbery can first be distinguished from poets usually considered to have 'a symbolism'. Blake, Yeats, Stevens: all these poets have a 'system'. They have created a symbolic economy; something has crystallised. For all his talk of 'thinkers without final thoughts', Stevens at least has *materials* that are stable: blue, green, the sun, the sea. Certainly, like Ashbery, these poets claim no special privilege for the symbolic systems, which they still see as constructs — hence their ability to displace old symbolic systems. The rupturing of the relation between vehicle and tenor in Ashbery, consequently, can also be seen as nothing new in this context. René Wellek's characterisation of 'symbolism', makes these correspondences clear, but also hints at a distinction between the two types of symbolism:

in symbolist poetry the image becomes 'thing'. The relation of tenor and vehicle in the metaphor is reversed. The utterance is divorced, we may add, from the situation: time and place, history and society are played down. The inner world, *la durée*, in the Bergsonian sense, is represented or often merely hinted at as 'it,' the thing or the

person hidden. One could say that the grammatical predicate has become the subject...²⁷

The inner world as mere 'thing' echoes Paul Verlaine's early description of Baudelaire as 'unmoved mover'.²⁸ In 'A Wave', however, for all talk of Ashbery's not having 'a very strong sense of his own identity', what is explored is the self.²⁹ At the centre of the poem, like *The Prelude*, is 'time and place, history and society' as they affect a poet anything but 'divorced... from the situation'. In Blake, Yeats and Stevens, in different ways, this is not the case. 'A Wave' and the Revolutionary books of *The Prelude* compulsively relate symbols to their immediate situation at the cost of the symbols ever being persuasive, or indeed ever being spoken with conviction. It is the absence of crystallisation, or crystallisation as expansion or 'vocal change' — the interminable relations of vehicle and tenor — that dramatises this. The subject, consequently, is not simply another 'grammatical predicate', as it surely is in Stevens, but, by dint of the savage metaphor, the ultimate subject (what the poem is finally about). The 'I', the poet, is the final destination of all tenors, the ultimate meaning of all symbolic vehicles. It is, indeed, the only constant of 'A Wave'. In reaction to the limitations of an aesthetics of immanence, this is a type of poetry that incessantly attempts to *mediate* between the 'received opinions' of discourse and itself. It is the specific relation between political situation and self that must now be analysed.

2. 'One's own received opinions'

Joan Dayan summarises 'A Wave' as 'Ashbery's most startling chronicle of what it is like to think thought through and thereby write a poem that remembers itself'.³⁰ Incomplete as this sounds, in a sense the current discussion is yet to go beyond it. Given the historical foundation I have placed under the poem, combined with the

27 René Wellek, 'The Term and Concept of Symbolism in Literary History', *New Literary History*, 1:2 (Winter 1970), p. 264.

28 See William York, *Forces in British Poetry 1885-1946*, New York: Knopf, 1947, p. 227.

29 *Craft* interview, p. 123-4.

30 Joan Dayan, 'Finding What Will Suffice: John Ashbery's *A Wave*', *Modern Language Notes*, 100:5 (December 1985), p. 1045.

manifestly political nature of its metaphors, there are more important things at stake in 'A Wave' than 'what it is like to think thought through' or the dialectical rhythm of metaphor. Ashbery's symbolism has been abstracted so far here, overlooking the content of his, and Wordsworth's symbols. We must now look past *how* they mean to *what*.

What Ashbery's poem gives expression to, above any kind of 'chronicle' of thought, is a challenge to such presuppositions as Dayan's regarding the nature of thought in the first place.

for the tender blur
Of the setting to mean something words must be ejected bodily,
A certain crispness be avoided in favour of a density
Of strutted opinion doomed to wilt into oblivion: not too linear
Nor yet too puffed and remote. Then the advantage of
Sinking in oneself, crashing through the skylight of one's own
Received opinions redirects the maze, setting up significant
Erections of its own at chosen corners, like gibbets,
And through this the mesmerizing plan of the landscape becomes,
At last, apparent. (*W*, 69-70)

If the self is going to be the concern of this section, the first thing to make clear is Ashbery's insistence in 'A Wave' that thought is more than simply a matter of mental processes. What is emphasised throughout the poem is the paradoxical otherness of 'one's own received opinions'. In 'A Wave', that is, in a way that conflicts with the assumptions critics usually make about his work, Ashbery socialises thought. The 'opinions' Ashbery gives expression to in the poem are a matter of, in the words of *Three Poems*, 'let[ting] them be inflicted on and off you' (*TP*, 9). One's own, but received from elsewhere; 'thoughts', but informed by whole ideologies. Rather than 'thinking thought through' (that is, thinking) as Dayan suggests, and almost every other critic of Ashbery implies, Ashbery is thinking *about* thought, which, it turns out, we should think of less as a private chronicle and more as a series of unwieldy and external forces in operation. And unlike the happily immersed, Clarean poetry of *Three Poems*, going deeper into ideas and conceptualisation ('sinking in oneself, crashing through') in 'A Wave' is primarily troublesome. The poet is forced to 'set up significant / Erections of its own at chosen corners' to make 'the mesmerizing plan of landscape... apparent'. That is, by

attempting to escape the immanentist dangers of vulnerability and confusion, Ashbery attempts to make ‘significan[ce]’ by way of a more symbolist poetry.

There is irony here, however. In the smooth, cleansed and ironed-out landscapes we have witnessed, for Ashbery there still is something suspect about ‘redirect[ing] the maze’. An *attempt* at disinterested significance is therefore staged in ‘A Wave’. What is actually given expression in the poem is the tension between our two poetics: the crisis consequent on a poem that attempts a broadly symbolist approach but that also wishes to emphasise the otherness of thought, subjectivity’s immersion in ‘outside’ discourse. If ‘A Wave’ is a crisis of political conscience, it is represented in precisely this helplessness of being implicated in the discourse of ‘strutted opinion’. In essence, ‘A Wave’ represents a stage of crisis in the Clarean poetic of *Three Poems* and other earlier works.

To illuminate this crisis, let us turn again to Wordsworth. If Reaganomics was an intrusive *rhetorical* battlefield, then the French Revolution was — and is in *The Prelude* — in the words of historian George Armstrong Kelly, ‘*par excellence*, a sequence of political action represented by styles or traditions of political rhetoric’.³¹ Other historians have similarly noted how Revolutionary violence was first and foremost a verbal phenomenon.³² In the context of this rhetoric, Alan Liu interprets Wordsworth’s defence mechanism in the Revolutionary books:

a historically alienated nature makes possible the new, individual authority of the self by ‘quoting’ collective allusion according to process exactly like Bloom’s *apophrades*: as if collective allusion were really *an allusion to the poet himself*.³³

As if, that is, individual authority were ‘one’s own received opinions’. Wordsworth’s authority in such passages, as I have suggested, until it is resolved at the end of *The Prelude*, seems to be dramatically undermined by such a process. As Raymond Williams brilliantly points out, speaking of the London scenes:

Wordsworth saw strangeness, a loss of connection, not at first in social but in perceptual ways: a failure of identity in the crowd of others which worked back to a

31 George Armstrong Kelly, *Victims, Authority and Terror: The Parallel Deaths of d’Orleans, Custine, Bailly, and Malesherbes*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1982, p. 4.

32 See Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People*, Oxford 1970, pp. 49-52, 77-8, 87-88, 246-9; *Reactions to the French Revolution*, London 1972; and Francios Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elbork Forster, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 38-9, 48, 50. Cobb specifically delineates the phenomenon as ‘opinion’.

33 Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989, p. 384.

loss of identity in the self, and then, in these ways, a loss of society itself, its overcoming and replacement by a procession of images.³⁴

It is the displacement of social cohesion by a series of conflicting political metaphors ('a procession of images') that enforces this double bind: a loss of society and of one's own identity — a theme in the foreground throughout *The Prelude*.

How, then, are the 'movements' of Wordsworth's crisis of conscience to be interpreted? James K. Chandler, in his major study of Wordsworth's politics, *Wordsworth's Second Nature*, looks at the movements from 'autonomy' to 'terrible self-doubt' in the poem's beginning.³⁵ The opening 'glad preamble' shows 'the earth... all before' (1: 15) a Wordsworth 'free, enfranchised and at large' (9), and looking forward to writing his ambitious poem. It is precisely this being at liberty to 'fix [his] habitation where [he] will', however, that causes Wordsworth's writing block. Because there is no habitation in such a freedom, the project 'seems to lack / Foundation, and withal appears shadowy / And unsubstantial' (226-28), and the poem seems to be mere 'phantoms of conceit, / That had been floating about' (130-1). At this point Wordsworth rescues the poem by returning to childhood, asking as the famous question 'Was it for this?' and initiating a life story — or as he apostrophises to Coleridge, 'Invigorating thoughts from former years / [To] fix the wavering balance of my mind' (649-50).

Chandler sees in this the movement of *The Prelude*'s narrative in miniature, and suggests that the ideological dynamic of the reflections on the French Revolution be read in the same way. The freedom of Revolutionary ideology is characterised throughout Books Nine and Ten by French rationalism, 'the philosophy / That promised to abstract the hopes of man / Out of his own feelings' (10: 807-9). 'Reason', though, is finally seen as an alienation from, and the destruction of, all 'foundational' institutions (monarchy, religion, even tradition), as it disintegrates in the poem into a desperate spiritual investment in mathematics where the imagination takes temporary refuge. The return to childhood habits is representative of a return to past modes of thinking in a broader sense. It is no accident that Wordsworth's resolution of a return to Nature occurs at the same time as the Revolution's new ideas are being refuted by the past:

34 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1973: p. 150.

35 James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: a study of the poetry and politics*, London: Chicago UP, 1984, 192. Chandler's argument probably builds upon de Man's discussion of the poem's rhythms in *Rhetoric of Romanticism*, pp. 50-9.

Tempting region that
For zeal to enter and refresh herself,
Where passions had the privilege to work
And never hear the sound of their own names
...

What delight!
How glorious!— in self-knowledge and self-rule
To look through the frailty of the world,
And, with a resolute mastery shaking off
The accidents of nature, time and place,
That make up the weak being of the past...

(10: 811-14, 819-24)

Nature's self, by human love
Assisted, through the weary labyrinth
Conducted me again to open day,
Revived the feeling of my earlier life,
Gave me that strength and knowledge full of peace,
Enlarged, and never more to be disturbed,
Which through all the steps of our degeneracy,
All degradation of this age, hath still
Upheld me...

(10: 921-29)

By abandoning foundations, the French Revolution troubles Wordsworth's individuality in a fundamental way. The French Revolution, that is, results in a loss of identity to ideological symbols and rhetoric, which is only restored by a proven individualism, rooted in a particular place but, most crucially, seen as *personally created* in contrast to the Revolutionary arguments about individual 'liberté', which take place in a political and social sphere. Wordsworth, for Chandler, naturalises England; and Nature for Wordsworth, as for Rousseau, is the end of metaphor, rhetoric and duplicity — that is, an end to wavering, and a reinstatement of the strong foundation where the self is constantly in the presence of truth.³⁶

Landscapes, then, are representations of ideological positions, and Wordsworth uses them to persuade himself as much as the reader. Dramatic irony is so crucial here because it undercuts both episodes above: in the 'glad preamble' we know by the weight of the book in our hands that the writer's block is overcome; and in the Revolutionary books we are constantly reminded by Wordsworth that this is all being told by an individual no longer in such a crisis. We are invited to infer that

36 Cf. Rousseau, 'Oh man... behold your history... not in books written by your fellow-creatures, who are liars, but in nature, which never lies.' (*Discourse*, p. 176, quoted in *Of Grammatology*, p. 133.)

Book Ten's circular argumentation, its habit of refuting every one of its arguments, must be resolved by something outside ideologies associated with the Revolution for the poem to exist (the poem's opening, chronologically in the future, is not subject to such a crisis). The point about the irony in Ashbery's reading of Wordsworth is that it is central to the poetry of *failure* that *The Prelude* spectacularly is. Irony subsumes and undermines all symbols, which always therefore disappoint. This situation is possible because the final resolution represents itself as having no metaphors in its argument, as it instead recognises the priority and last word of Nature.

'A Wave' begins with an ironically ideal landscape similar to *The Prelude*'s opening scene:

To pass through pain and not know it.
A car door slamming in the night.
To emerge on an invisible terrain. (*W*, 68)

This ideal is subsequently presented as the culprit for 'how our landscape came to be as it is today'. That is, the tendency to value that which 'passes through you, emerges on the other side', or the immanent, is seen throughout the poem as a false idealisation that leads to a conception of a world, as the opening naively has it, 'Partially out of focus, some of it too near, the middle distance / A haven of serenity and unreachable'. The Bloom school of Ashbery criticism, as S. P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe's extended review of 'A Wave' and Bloom's essay collection on Ashbery puts it, appropriates Ashbery's work through 'an unsystematic though influential individualist idealism' with which 'A Wave' is particularly incompatible.³⁷ In contrast to the mystical individualism of Bloom's romanticism or the 'Soul-making' creativity of Vendler's, it is the very different matter of 'one's own received opinions', and being 'at the centre of a moan that did not issue from me' (80) that forms the poem's romanticism. Ashbery's account of landscape, that is, attempts to go beyond an invisible, ideal terrain, and account for interference: 'It takes only a minute revision, and see — the thing / Is there in all its interested variegatedness, / With prospects and walks curling away, never to be followed' (78). It is this emphasis on recognising the landscape's 'interested' meaning, or its vested interest, that calls for the process-conscious symbolism outlined above.

37 S. P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe, 'John Ashbery and the Articulation of the Social', *diacritics* (Summer 1987), pp. 38, 37.

‘[N]one stand with you as you mope and thrash your way through time’ (68), writes Ashbery. In contrast to the limitations of this straightforwardly ‘immanent’ position which invests in solitary passive receptivity and focuses its attentions on immediate surroundings, ‘received opinions’ that, in ‘setting up significant / Erections of its own at chosen corners’, can transcend the immediate and reveal social meaning. The ‘landscape’ becomes ‘at last, apparent’. The tempting ‘invisible terrain’ that ‘passes through you, emerges on the other side’ is rejected for a visible, *significant* landscape seen from a distance:

those moving forward toward us from the other end of the bridge
Are defending, not welcoming us to, the place of power,
A hill ringed with low, ridgelike fortifications.
Somebody better prepared crosses over, he or she will get the same
Cold reception. (74)

‘Our story is no longer alone’ (69). As argued in the last chapter, however, what is termed ‘immersion’ was an equally socialised phenomenon: Ashbery finding value in abstract cultural discourse rather than birds’ nests. What ‘A Wave’ does differently is to continually herald this movement in a constant attention to one’s symbolism. *Three Poems* freewheels; ‘A Wave’ frets and reviews itself (it is, unsurprisingly, Ashbery’s most revised poem).³⁸ The result of this is simple but crucial: in opposition to the multiple voices of Ashbery’s intertextual early poetry, from the radical bricolage of ‘Europe’ to *Three Poems*’ carnival of voices, ‘A Wave’ is marked by the continuity of a single voice. A mixture of rhetorics, arguments, symbolisms and clichés all make up an undoubted heteroglossia in ‘A Wave’, but it is a heteroglossia that has both become openly and self-consciously mediated and expressed by an audible self-presence. ‘A Wave’, that is, has ceased to be fundamentally intertextual. Just as Locke, Milton, Rousseau, Godwin, Kant, Burke and Coleridge are all submerged and muted presences in Wordsworth’s own independent imagination in *Nature*, Ashbery, as we will see, ‘do the police’ in one voice only.

Specifically, in *Three Poems*, as in ‘The Skaters’, Ashbery revels in being knocked about by the poem’s various sources, delighting in going from philosophical registers to journalese, from Christian folk spirituals to Sir Thomas

38 See Shoptaw, pp. 143-151.

Browne. 'A Wave' faces a different situation, and does not enjoy the crowding of political duplicity and ideological rhetoric: 'By so many systems / As we are involved in, by just so many / Are we set free on an ocean of language that comes to be / Part of us, as though we could ever get away' (71). What Ashbery's poem seems to do, therefore, in a similar way to *The Prelude*, is to work within a poetic of individual failure. In fact, Ashbery's conclusion makes use of the same concept as Wordsworth's: the ideal of human love. Promising early on in the poem, 'I am prepared to deal with this / While putting together notes related to the question of love / For the many' (73), the poem goes on to do exactly that.³⁹ "'A Wave'... is really a love poem,' states Ashbery.⁴⁰ In the midst of this extended discussion, the poem's main allusive passage scrutinises this utopian concept of love by relating itself to Wordsworth:

To be always articulating these preludes, there seems to be no
Sense in it, if it is going to be perpetually five o'clock
With the colours of the bricks seeping more and more bloodlike through the tan
Of trees, and then only to blacken. But it says more
About us. When they finally come
With much laborious jangling of keys to unlock your cell
You can tell them yourself what it is,

39 For example:

love that at last oozes through the seams
In the cement, suppurates, subsumes
All the other business of living and dying, the orderly
Ceremonials and handling of estates...
... and we wonder whether we too are gone,
Buried in our love,
The love that defined us for a little while...
... And so it is the only way
That love determines us... (80-1)

we'll hear of
Other names, and know we don't want them, but that love
Was somehow given to them by mistake,
Not utterly lost. (82)

Love is after all for the privileged. (83)

The love that comes after will be richly satisfying,
Like rain on the desert, bringing unimaginable diplomacy into being... (84)

And that that game-plan and the love we have been given for nothing
In particular should coincide — no it is not yet time to think these things.
In vain would one try to peel off that love from the object it fits
So nicely, now, remembering it will have to be some day. (88)

40 Tranter, p. 102.

Who you are, and how you happened to turn out this way,
And how they made you, for better or for worse, what you are now,
And how you seem to be, neither humble nor proud, *frei aber einsam*.

And should anyone question the viability of this process,
You can point to the accessible result. Not like the great victory
That tirelessly sweeps over mankind again and again...
... but the slow polishing
Of the tiny cage big enough to hold all the dispiritedness,
Contempt and incorrect conclusions based on false premises... (86-7)

Here, Ashbery points to the same drawback Wordsworth himself identifies in the introduction to *The Prelude*: 'free but alone'. Despite the manifest failure of this utopian vision, it is seen to be the best, or even the only, available route 'for the greater good / Of history'.

Most critics who have politicised Ashbery have done so along these lines. Norman Finkelstein's survey of American poetry's utopian visions, *The Utopian Moment*, suggests that Ashbery, unlike other figures he discusses, talks of political frustration rather than encouraging political action. Ashbery and O'Hara, he writes, 'never really challenge bourgeois modes of discourse... they imply and sometimes openly declare that a vision of or even a desire for perfection has been stifled in them'.⁴¹ Keith Cohen's 'Ashbery's Dismantling of Bourgeois Discourse', from Lehman's *Beyond Amazement* collection of essays, though it sees Ashbery attacking 'the glibness, deceitfulness, and vapidness of bourgeois discourse', ultimately lauds Ashbery's non-committal voice: 'Ashbery always makes us aware that there is a subject speaking, collective or individual... It is not monopoly capitalism, but, rather, as in ventriloquism, a subject using that voice, speaking that ideology, as though it were his own.' Ashbery likewise suggests that the dialectical movement of symbolism in 'A Wave', which is always the vehicle of failure, is enough in itself:

perhaps it's too late for anything like the overhaul
That seemed called for, earlier, but whose initiative
Was it after all? I mean I don't mind staying here
A little longer, sitting quietly under a tree, if all this
Is going to clear up by itself anyway.

There is no indication this will happen,
But I don't mind. I feel at peace with the part of myself

41 Norman Finkelstein, *The Utopian Moment in Contemporary American Poetry*, London: Associated University Presses, 1993: p. 49.

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 into nowhere
Barely muttering. (88-9)

There is irony here, and like all the movements of the poem, the argument is eventually disputed anyway. What I want to argue, though, is that this easygoing side of Ashbery, a hallmark of his later poetry, is increasingly employed outside of the dialectical structure that foils any suggestions of indifference.

The easiest way to interrogate all this is to look at the poem's ending, *as ending*. Continuing from the excerpt above, the poem concludes:

Always, a few errands
Summon us periodically from the room of our forethought
And that is a good thing. And such attentiveness
Besides! Almost more than anybody could bring to anything,
But we managed it, and with a good grace, too. Nobody
Is going to hold *that* against us. But since you bring up the question
I will say I am not unhappy to place myself entirely
At your disposal temporarily. Much that had drained out of living
Returns, in those moments, mounting the little capillaries
Of polite questions and seeming concern. I want it back.

And though that other question that I asked and can't
Remember any more is going to move still farther upward, casting
Its shadow enormously over where I remain, I can't see it.
Enough to know that I shall have answered for myself soon,
Be led away for further questioning and later returned
To the amazingly quiet room in which all my life has been spent.
It comes and goes; the walls, like veils, are never the same.
Yet the thirst remains identical, always to be entertained
And marveled at. And it is finally we who break it off,
Speed the departing guest, lest any question remain
Unasked, and thereby unanswered. Please, it almost
Seems to say, take me with you, I'm old enough. Exactly.
And so each of us has to remain alone, conscious of each other
Until the day when war absolves us of our differences. We'll
Stay in touch. So they have it, all the time. But all was strange. (89)

It is easy to read the conclusion of 'A Wave' as going against the grain of Wordsworth's 'Conclusion', against any restoration of imagination. As we have witnessed, Wordsworth's resolution and restoration reside predominantly in the discovery that Nature transcends symbolism and therefore political rhetoric. Ashbery, clearly, offers no such solution to the problems of his poem. The ending above seems, mainly, to continue the wavering of meaning that marks the rest of the

poem. Still 'that other question... comes and goes'. The note here is one of goodbye, of a necessary cut-off point rather than an ending: 'the thirst remains' and there will be 'further questioning', but we have to 'break it off' some time. Words like 'though', 'yet' and 'but' are still the major determining elements here. Even the final line, inverting what has apparently been the poet's gesture of goodbye, continues the conflict to the end — 'So they have it, all the time' — while the 'concluding' words posit anything but a resolution: 'all was strange'.

But is this really the absence of an ending? The final words are certainly non-committal, but they do conclude insofar as they sum up. This is simply a *type* of conclusion. What wins out in the end is the continuation of the poem itself. That is, the conclusion resolves none of the poem's contradictions but transcends them by referring to something external to them. It is simply that in Ashbery's case, rather than a quasi-religious connection with Nature, this external force is a certain *style*. It is tempting to suggest that nothing establishes itself in 'A Wave', but not strictly true. For in that ending we in fact have a resolution in what one might call 'typical Ashbery': the elliptical, strangely beautiful non-concluding conclusion.⁴² The poem escapes the crisis of opinion by taking refuge in this style. If the symbol is part of what it represents, then *style* is part of the content, and in this case, the only conclusion, the final affirmation. The style of 'A Wave' is monologic, especially in comparison to Ashbery's polyphonic earlier long poems, and if it is hard to imagine a Wordsworthian epiphany of self in the poem, it is not difficult to sense the dominance of that mode of writing which would later become known as 'late Ashbery'. Politics is ultimately elided in favour of stylistics: 'A Wave' aestheticises political failure to the point that, in the later work, the aesthetic engulfs it. The emphasis on continuation in Ashbery's ending is prophetic (and all the more so in Ashbery's first *Selected Poems*, which 'A Wave' concludes) of the subsequent continuation and ultimate carrying out of this monologic style in Ashbery's next volumes, as we will now have opportunity to see.

42 Cf. Jonathan Morse, 'Typical Ashbery', in *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Susan Schultz, Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1995, pp. 15-25.

3. 'Becalmed on strange waters': after 'A Wave'

'A Wave' is possibly Ashbery's greatest long poem. The adjective that seems to best describe it is *exemplary*. In its use of the symbolic 'example', in its political engagement serving as a paradigm for the ordinary American, Ashbery's poem aims always at a representative quality. These three aspects and their various points of overlap are hopefully now apparent. In the preceding argument, however, a number of unsubstantiated claims have been made about the poem as well. My aim here finally is to explain these conclusions by reading the poem in what is, I think, its most significant context: the work that comes after it.

A few final words on 'A Wave' itself are necessary first. Firstly, it must be said that, though the poem represents a reading of the past, of Wordsworth, 'A Wave' gains much of its effects of urgency and pathos from the fact that no poem like it had ever been written before.⁴³ Ashbery himself had just written *Shadow Train*, and his most recent long poems had been 'Fantasia on *The Nut-Brown Maid*' and the wonderfully desultory 'Litany'. The dramatic power of 'A Wave', in comparison to these works, is unmistakable. In the intensity of its symbolic energy and self-scrutiny, the poem constantly refers us back to the historical moment of its production, in spite of the generality of its imagery. Neither *Houseboat Days*, *As We Know* or *Shadow Train* do this so intensively, nor indeed do they attempt to. 'A

43 For comparison with Ashbery's transformation of Wordsworthian epic, there is some poor Wordsworthian fare in Derek Walcott's 1973 *Another Life*:

Afternoon light ripened the valley,
rifling smoke climbed from small labourers' houses,
and I dissolved into a trance.
I was seized by a pity more profound
than my young body could bear, I climbed
with the labouring smoke,
I drowned in labouring breakers of bright cloud,
then uncontrollably I began to weep,
inwardly, without tears, with a serene extinction
of all sense; I felt compelled to kneel,
I wept for nothing and for everything.
I wept for the earth of the hill under my knees,
for the grass, the pebbles, for the cooking smoke
above the labourers' houses like a cry...

(*Collected Poems 1948-1984*, London: Faber, 1992: p. 184.)

The crux of Walcott's long poem clearly, in a way that 'A Wave' does not, appropriates wholesale the entirety of Wordsworth's rhetoric, if not his whole vocabulary — of expression, of empathy, of childhood, of inwardness, of distance, of meditation, of labourers — all of which seem faintly ridiculous in a postcolonial poem of the 1970s.

Wave', though, is not political activism, or even politically committed. It is tempting to read the poem as an example of Adorno's vision of art as the mirror and exposé of culture's own contradictions, as a Beckettian romp through American, capitalist terrain.⁴⁴ The romantic irony I have placed at the centre of 'A Wave', though, is not merely the *failure* of the poet in the face of a crisis of conscience, but is also his triumph. For Wordsworth, the imagination in Nature is the consolation for the failure of the French Revolution; for Ashbery, poetic style, tone and voice become consistent in the very unresolved, pseudo-dialectical play of rhetoric the poem effects. Ashbery settles not, like *The Prelude*, into a consolation in Nature, but, when viewed in the context of the volumes following *A Wave*, into a crystallisation of this inconclusive style, which of course implies its own acceptance of conflict.

April Galleons, published in 1987, occupies a unique position in Ashbery's career. One closes Ashbery's 1985 *Selected Poems* on 'A Wave' and begins the 2007 *Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems* with 'Vetiver', the first poem of *April Galleons*. In retrospect, the book clearly documents a key moment in the story of Ashbery's changing relationship with the avant-garde. *April Galleons* was published in the same year as Charles Bernstein's *The Sophist*, Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* and a year after Ron Silliman's groundbreaking collection of theory from Language poets, *In the American Tree*. Despite the heavy influence Ashbery exerted on all three books, there can be no doubt that his new book was operating in a different sphere. It is in the context of such work that the politics of 'late Ashbery' is most visible. As I have been arguing, Ashbery's subjecthood is such in 'A Wave' that the poem is forced to be radically representational; the poem describes, dramatises, and relies for its beauty on an individual failure. Language poetry, on the other hand, attempts to deconstruct what it perceives to be the bourgeois subject, and to go beyond representational aesthetics. Language poetry seems to recognise that the danger of being a representative bourgeois liberal citizen in the time of Reagan is a recipe not only for inaction, but also for a celebration of individual marginalisation that risks aestheticizing the political system it agonizes over. The mode of 'A Wave', with its anxious revisions of ideological positions, gives the poem a breadth, indeed a diligence, making these dangers vivid. The problem for Ashbery afterwards is that, in building on its stylistic achievements, a foundation emerges that undermines the

44 See Theodore Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, Boston: MIT Press, 1997, pp. 19-34.

restless rethinking, the absence of a stable standpoint, that makes 'A Wave' so original.

April Galleons introduces to Ashbery's work a surprising continuation. This is the paradoxical division we feel between the 1985 *Selected Poems* and the 2008 *Selected Later Poems*. Certain poems from *April Galleons* are so much in the style of 'A Wave' that they read like outtakes. Take, for example, the title poem:

Something *was* burning. And besides,
At the far end of the room a discredited waltz
Was alive and reciting tales of the conquerors
And their lilies — is all of life thus
A tepid housewarming? And where do the scraps
Of meaning come from? Obviously,
It was time to be off, in another
Direction, towards marshlands and cold, scrolled
Names of cities that sound as though they existed,
But never had. I could see the scow
Like a nail file pointed at the pleasures
Of the great open sea, that it would stop for me,
That you and I should sample the disjointedness
Of a far-from-level deck, and then return, some day,
Through the torn orange veils of an early evening
That will know our names only in a different
Pronunciation, and then, and only then,
Might the profit-taking of spring arrive
In due course, as one says, with the gesture
Of a bird taking off for some presumably
Better location, though not major, perhaps... (AG, 95)

Even John Shoptaw, who is not unsympathetic to *April Galleons*, sees the volume as part of Ashbery's 'wave-phase'.⁴⁵ In the collection, however, by virtue of its very continuation of the 'Wave' mode, Ashbery's poetry has visibly ceased to waver, to restlessly revise itself, and seems to have settled on a style that feels in some way conclusive. And because the form of 'A Wave' has so solidified or been re-used, the sense of a new, contemporary situation begins to get lost in Ashbery's later work. With the loss of the dynamic intensity of wavering from the style, some poems in *April Galleons* become simply obtuse. In the light of John Shoptaw's readings of the many socio-political references in the volume, for instance — he reads poems variously as responses to homeless voting rights in 1984, individuals involved in the Iran-Contra scandal and 'congressionally assisted media fabrications' — we must surely ask ourselves whether the poems can really be said to make such references,

45 Shoptaw, p. 295.

or to engage with political issues, if it takes comprehensive biographical research to uncover them.⁴⁶

What Shoptaw does not consider is that Ashbery, at this stage, in settling into certain aspects of *A Wave*'s manner, is now working toward quite different, apolitical ends. We see this in some of the poems in the collection that appear to be in dialogue with 'A Wave'. 'Becalmed on Strange Waters' (*AG*, 57), as its title implies, both continues the earlier poem whilst exploring the possibility that its issues have been resolved:

In the presence of both, each mistook
The other's sincerity for an elaborate plot.
And perhaps something like that did occur — who knows?

Here, the conflicts of argumentation and symbolism in 'A Wave' are implied to have been misguided, and are dismissed. 'We smile at these' squabbles now, writes Ashbery,

Thinking them matter for a child's euphuistic
Tale of what goes on in the morning,
After everyone but the cat has left. But can you
See otherwise? O ecstatic
Receiver of what's there to be received,
How we belabor thee, how much better
To wait and to prepare our waiting
For the grand rush, the mass of detail
Still compacted in the excitement that lies ahead,
Like a Japanese paper flower.

The writer is indeed 'becalmed' here. His previous urgency is parodied as child's play, something now to be almost enjoyed, 'compacted in the excitement that lies ahead'. The calmness is also embodied, in contrast to the dramatic presence of 'A Wave', in a decision to 'wait and prepare our waiting'. For Ashbery, *April Galleons* is partly a matter of relinquishing certain aspects of the adopted aesthetic of 'A Wave'.

To explore this, it is worth returning to Ashbery's Wordsworthian poetics of failure. To do this, it is necessary to digress slightly and consider one of the best studies of Ashbery's poetry in Laura Quinney's *The Poetics of Disappointment*,

46 See Shoptaw, pp. 286-300.

which reads Ashbery specifically in relation to Wordsworth. Quinney's 'poetics' is defined, in opposition to other versions of romanticism (particularly that of Hartman and Bloom), as an aesthetic of failure without consolation. Unlike melancholy or disillusionment, disappointment is above all an emotion that is comfortless. 'Ashbery does not address,' Quinney writes,

creative or hopeful versions of romanticism. He is preoccupied with the psychological theme of Wordsworth's crisis lyrics, namely, the failure of 'genial spirits', or the experience of ontological disappointment. In this bleak version of romanticism, disappointment remains unrepaired by a therapeutic resolution; there is no restored contact with the transcendent, nor any true accommodation to its loss.⁴⁷

The lack of 'therapeutic resolution' is important here, and it is clear how Quinney's poetic applies to 'A Wave'. The poem of disappointment generally, in fact, 'most pointedly meets with no resolution'.⁴⁸ According to Quinney, when Ashbery is involved in such a wavering of intent (which she describes, speaking of 'Self-Portrait', as 'disappointment' and 'its subtle repudiation'), he 'does not congratulate himself on growing wiser or throwing off an illusion. On the contrary, he pays homage to his earlier self, which, in spite of being deluded, was bolder and in some way more admirable'.⁴⁹

Quinney defines disappointment in opposition to 'disillusionment'. Disappointment is the 'deeper', more profound and universal state of being 'so thoroughly demoralized as to have lost even his capacity for disillusionment...for disillusionment still harbors some degree of pride and a respect for the intellect'.⁵⁰ Clearly, however, following Quinney on this point involves creating a strange narrative in this context: volumes like *Three Poems* become volumes of disappointment, *April Galleons* a work of disillusionment. What is most interesting about Quinney's argument, however, is its basis in a discussion of time:

To cease to believe in the destiny of the self empties time of its teleological promise... However, rather than being liberated from time, the disappointed subject thrust into a temporal void feels himself to be surrounded by nothing but time, in effect, to be drowning in time. Without the promise of evolution, time is pared down

47 Laura Quinney, *The Poetics of Disappointment: Wordsworth to Ashbery*, London: UP of Virginia, 1999, p. 137. 'Genial spirits' is in fact, via Milton, a phrase of Coleridge's (from 'Dejection: an Ode').

48 Ibid., p. x.

49 Ibid., p. 142.

50 Ibid., p. x.

to an iterative stutter, proceeding rather than progressing, creating in one moment what it dissolves in the next... The disappointed subject... is in flux as time is in flux and therefore, cannot hope to attain a masterly, general and permanent perspective.⁵¹

There is no need, then, to believe that Ashbery's earlier work is more disappointed; one can simply say that it is more embracing of this absence of perspective and more impermanent in style. The later work, by contrast, has gained just such a generality and permanence, and has to an extent been prescribed, both by earlier successes, not least in 'A Wave', and by Ashbery's now crystallised perception of those terms as the aim of poetry. That is, 'A Wave' is both continued and discontinued in *April Galleons*. In 'A Wave' there is no consolation, but also no consolidation, no settling into anything; *April Galleons*, on the other hand, presents the continuation of this style, but also a settling, a becalming of it whereby it is no longer subject to the incessant questioning and reflection of political anxiety.

'Start[ing] in the middle' is now the stylistic basis for poems, not a condition of political and intellectual crisis:

Let's start in the middle, as usual. Ever since I burnt my mouth
I talk two ways, first as reluctant explainer, then as someone offstage
In a dream, hushing those who might wake you from this dream,
Imperfectly got up as a lutanist. (*AG*, 27)

There is very much a sense of the 'as usual' about Ashbery's later work. This style goes largely unchanged for the next twenty years. Ashbery's poetry of time in *April Galleons*, *Flow Chart* (Ashbery's most straightforwardly 'Wordsworthian' work) and *Hotel Lautréamont* takes comfort in itself: helping us to understand and cope with indeterminacy and temporal uncertainty in life by simply mirroring it comes to be seen as *the* consolation of poetry. Difficulty, once associated with an avant-garde poetics of antagonism, is now reassuring: floating through the indeterminate layers of these later poems can help us accept the indeterminacy of experience. In a development of the pained complexity of 'A Wave', Ashbery responds to inconsistency and conflict in 'April Galleons' by more conservatively inviting us to accept, even revel, in it — to 'sample the disjointedness / Of a far-from-level deck'. 'For ages,' another poem in volume resignedly asserts, 'man has labored to put his

51 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

dreams in order. Look at the result' (*AG*, 58). 'A Wave' is perhaps such a failed, tortured attempt at order; Ashbery's later poetry, on the other hand, in accepting its failures, does not so much labour as, in the analogy invited by Ashbery's book-length poem, *Flow Chart*, go with the flow.

Though the politics of this approach become increasingly antithetical to contemporary movements in the American avant-garde, there are still rewards for readers of Ashbery's admittedly prolific output from the last twenty years. *And the Stars Were Shining* is Ashbery's most important late volume, and the beauty of its long title poem almost justifies any crystallisation of form. The strange religious elements of Ashbery's 1994 collection are perhaps the surest sign that his work has moved away from its earlier avant-gardism. 'And the Stars Were Shining', though overshadowed by the longer 1991 poem, *Flow Chart*, is a key poem in Ashbery's career because it is the most open about, and demonstratively conscious of, its consolatory function. There is no room here to attempt a full account of the work, but its beginning is exemplary:

It was the solstice, and it was jumping on you like a friendly dog.
The stars were still out in the field,
and the child prostitutes plied their trade,
the only happy ones, having learned how unhappiness sticks
and will not risk being traded in for a song or a balloon.
Christmas decorations were getting crumpled in offices
by staffers slumped at their video terminals,
and dismay articulated otherness in orphan asylums
where the coffee percolates eternally, and God is not light
but God, as mysterious to Himself as we are to Him.

Say that on some other day garlands disbanded
in the fresh feel of some sea air,
that curious gulls coasted from great distances
to make sure nothing was getting more than its share
of pebbles, and the leaky faucet suddenly stopped dripping:
It was day, after all. One of those things like a length of sleep
like a woman's stocking, that you lay flat
and it becomes a unit of your life and — this is where it
gets complicated — of so many others' lives as well
that there is no point in trying to make out, even less read,
the superimposed scripts in which the changes of the decades
were rung, endlessly, like invading kelp, and
whatever it takes to be a simp is likely not what saved you
in time to get here, changing buses twice, and after,
when they sent you to your corner to lick
your wounds you found you liked licking
so much you added it to your repertory of insane gestures,

confident that sleep would punish those outside
even as it rescued you from the puzzle of the dance,
some old fire, thought extinguished, that now
blazes in the stove, and in an instant we realize we are free
to go and return indefinitely. (SS, 76)

Ashbery's earlier work is rarely as moving as 'And the Stars Were Shining', or the other archetypal poem of this kind, the justly admired 'A Driftwood Altar' (HL, 81-2). Here, having learned 'learned how unhappiness sticks', Ashbery has set aside the interpretation and reading so central to his poetic in *Three Poems*, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and 'A Wave', to focus on the solace of representing the experience of failure, however unclear: 'it becomes a unit of your life and — this is where it / gets complicated — of so many others' lives as well / that there is no point in trying to make out, even less read, / the superimposed script'.

The transition from 'early' to 'late' Ashbery is one of the most visible and important developments in Ashbery's career, but also one of the least talked about.⁵² The move away from *The Tennis Court Oath*, from 'leaving it all out' to 'putting it all in', the changes occurring after Ashbery's entrance into the literary mainstream with *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* — these are important developments no doubt, but it is possible to see Ashbery's engagement with Wordsworth in 'A Wave' as affecting a far greater period. Ashbery, in his own idiosyncratic way for sure, becomes a Wordsworthian poet in these years. Like all poets in old age, Ashbery settles down. Particularly, in its linked concerns with failure and consolation, Ashbery's work has settled on a privileged form, just as Wordsworth's imagination settles on the final priority of nature. Though one cannot expect Ashbery to be constantly reinventing language, it is important to note that, in this, something is undoubtedly lost, too. Paul Breslin has spoken of the loss of the sense of occasion in Ashbery's work, 'since all occasions are really only one occasion of consciousness meditating on its own frustrations'.⁵³ This describes perfectly the nature of Ashbery's continuation of 'A Wave' and its poetic. The *situation*, that is, is generalised — that is to say, disappears — in later Ashbery, and, as a consequence, so does Ashbery's distinctive style of reading and intertextuality. As in *The Prelude*, where all social voices are submerged to the priority of Nature in the process of that

52 Even the rare accounts of Ashbery's work after 'A Wave' do not give an account of the genesis of its style. See especially Vincent, *Ashbery and You*.

53 Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American poetry since the fifties*, London: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 216.

poem's failure and consolation, so Ashbery's later poetry, in a move initiated by 'A Wave', rather than reading it, appropriates most 'superimposed script' to one voice, to what is now stereotyped as the 'Ashberyan mode'. The results are sometimes moving, and often, not insignificantly, more 'personal', and perhaps more appropriate to the poetry of old age. But they are unlikely to be the results in which Ashbery's influence on American poetry will be ultimately most felt.

CHAPTER FOUR

'General Delivery': T. S. Eliot, Ashbery's allusion and the reader

In an interview for a British magazine in 1994, Ashbery said of his poetry, 'I understand how it would puzzle and mystify readers. Especially readers who had neglected to read the modernist poets of this century'.¹ The contention of this chapter will be that understanding readers and readerly understanding mark the concerns of Ashbery's engagement with modernism. At about the time of Ashbery's comment, however, it was readers who had read the modernist poets of the century, and who were reading Ashbery's work in relation to them, that were generating the most controversy about his work.

A decade before Ashbery's reflection, Marjorie Perloff introduced her influential mapping of a twentieth-century counter-tradition to symbolism, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, by opposing Eliot and Ashbery. For Perloff, twentieth-century poetry is marked by two distinct traditions: the 'Symbolist mode' of 'the "High Modernism" of Yeats and Eliot and Auden, Stevens and Frost and Crane, and their Symbolist heirs like Lowell and Berryman', and 'the poetics of indeterminacy' of the likes of Pound, the Objectivists, Samuel Beckett, O'Hara, Ashbery and John Cage. In a discussion of Ashbery's 'These Lacustrine Cities' and *The Waste Land*, the distinction that emerges for Perloff is between Ashbery's 'refusal to "mean" in conventional ways', and *The Waste Land*'s 'perfectly coherent symbolic structure'.² The difference of 'These Lacustrine Cities' lies, for Perloff, in its 'block[ing] all attempts to rationalize its imagery, to make it conform to a coherent pattern' — a rationalisation which, by contrast, Eliot's poem exemplifies.³

1 Herd, 'Ashbery in Conversation', p. 36.

2 Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*: Princeton University Press, 1981: pp. 34, 13.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

It is a distinction that James Longenbach, an Eliot scholar, takes Perloff to task on. His 1997 essay, 'Ashbery and the Individual Talent', challenges Perloff's 'breakthrough narrative' of postmodernism:

[Perloff] concludes that in *The Waste Land* 'there is, after all, a coherent core of relational images'... One could as easily say that Ashbery's poems, however dysfunctional, contain a core of relational images (think of 'The Skaters')... [E]ven if Ashbery's poems seem (to those who accept postmodernism's progressive narratives) more 'advanced' than those of Eliot or Stevens — more open to demotic language, more accommodating to popular culture, more suspicious of the lyric's unified voice — the poems are nonetheless unthinkable without their modernist forbears.⁴

Longenbach has rightly moved the discussion into the area in which Ashbery's debt to Eliot is most obvious: allusion. Vernon Shetley, in his study of post-war American verse, *After the Death of Poetry*, makes the same move:

If Eliot's external references may be said to create, from an initial perception of fragmentation, a sense of a whole, a world whose relations to the poet are known and measurable, Ashbery's have just the opposite effect; they project a world that is fundamentally unknowable, beyond the power of the poet to name or describe.⁵

Perloff's reply to Longenbach and Shetley, 'Normalizing John Ashbery', takes up the same ground:

Take one index to the difference between Ashbery and Eliot: the use of citation. In Eliot's case, we know (or can find out) where the citations come from; we can assess the degree of irony in the poet's use of Nerval's 'Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie' or in 'The Game of Chess's' version of Ovid's tale of Philomela. But in Ashbery's poetry, it is usually impossible to identify the citation, and, even when we do, such identification doesn't necessarily help us to understand the poem... Indeed, in Ashbery, almost everything *sounds* like a citation, sounds like something we've heard before or read somewhere—but where? And that is of course one of the main features of Ashbery's poetic: living at a moment when one's language is so wholly permeated by the discourses that endlessly impinge on it, a Keatsian image complex, or even an Eliotic distinction between citation and invention... is felt to be no longer possible.⁶

Perloff's positioning of Ashbery and Eliot is now tied up in an argument about allusion. Whatever the conflicting arguments, Ashbery's allusive methods seem to lie at the heart of his poetry's relation to the past. Eliot, however, is in one way or

4 James Longenbach, 'Ashbery and the Individual Talent', *American Literary History*, 9:1 (Spring 1997), pp. 105-6.

5 Shetley, p. 116.

6 All quotes from this essay from <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/perloff02.html>

another a significant part of any post-war American poet's past. So who analyses the Eliot-Ashbery relationship correctly?

Perloff is plain wrong on a number of counts. It is not 'usually impossible to identify the citation' in Ashbery. Nor does Eliot "'mean" in conventional ways' or within a 'perfectly coherent symbolic structure'. Furthermore, Perloff's claims about 'the index to the difference' in 'the use of citation' are only possible within a discourse Eliot more-or-less invents: before him, people were not talking about 'the use of citation' as a significant index to style or anything else. Ashbery's work — and its unique relationship with the past — is not possible without Eliot. Ashbery is right to say that a full understanding of his work is impossible without 'the modernist poets of this century'. For all this, though, Perloff is surely correct to stress a departure. Ashbery begins writing within 'the rules for modern American poetry that had been gradually drawn up from Pound and Eliot down to the academic establishment of the 1940s' (*SPr*, 129), as he describes it, and this, as is well-known, was not something that inspired him as a poet. There is a clear sense in which Ashbery's allusive method is both a conscious reaction to the poetics of Eliot's 'mythical method' and an attempt to transform the ideas of tradition, authority and impersonality Eliot embeds in it. One would, indeed, 'never... mistake an Ashbery poem for an Eliot one'.

This does not preclude the importance of Eliot for any discussion of Ashbery, however — one would never mistake Robert Lowell for Eliot either, after all. Ashbery's relationship with Eliot, whatever it is, inevitably defines Ashbery as a contemporary poet. In Ashbery there is a reaction to Eliotic monuments, but this, given Eliot's ubiquity in the mind of the avant-garde, is a reaction in which Eliot's presence is always felt. And yet, we read Eliot differently after Ashbery. Ashbery has both transformed the Eliot of Lowell and New Criticism, and, over the years, represented a distinct alternative to Eliot's pedagogical authority-figure as the English language's major living poet. Charles Altieri has suggested that Eliot is 'an emblem for the modernist anxieties that Ashbery hopes to transform'; and yet, he says, 'when we look at how Ashbery goes about developing lyrical values... we find a remarkably positive embodiment of Eliotic stances'.⁷ Unlike Marvell or Clare,

⁷ Charles Altieri, 'Eliot's Impact on Twentieth Century Anglo-American Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. A. David Moody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: pp. 203-4.

Eliot's poetic has a troubling proximity to Ashbery's work, with troubling elements in need of working out. It is in charting the development of this working out, of Ashbery's transformation of Eliotic aesthetics, in its different stages, that Ashbery's alignment with modernism becomes clear. Likewise, it is in a consideration of that quintessential modernist artistic strategy, allusion, that such developments and transformations become visible. Just as Ashbery is an original artist because of an original style of reading of English poetry, so the expression of this reading finds an important component in the art of allusion.

1. *'Fragmented brilliance': Ashbery's early waste lands*

To an extent Perloff's comparison is irrelevant, because her Eliot is simply not Ashbery's:

Eliot's and subsequent fragmentations in poetry have shown us how to deal with fragments: by leaving them as they are, at most intuiting a meaning from their proximity to each other, but in general leaving it at that. (RS, 42)

Faced with an altered reality, Eliot reacts as though in a stupor. Despite all his craft and scholarship, *The Waste Land* achieves its effect as a collage of hallucinatory, random fragments, 'shored against my ruin.' [sic] Their contiguity is all their meaning, and it is implied that from now on meaning will take into account the randomness and discontinuity of modern experience, that indeed meaning cannot be truthfully defined as anything else. (RS, 301-2)

Ashbery's emphasis is squarely on the 'fragmentations' and 'discontinuity' of Eliot's poetry. These, then, should be the starting point of this discussion.

Here are some fragments from section one of *The Waste Land*, 'The Burial of the Dead':

I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

...

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say...

...

'You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago;

‘They called me the hyacinth girl.’
 —Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead...
 ...
 Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
 One must be so careful these days.
 ...
 There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: ‘Stetson!
 ‘You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!’⁸

Who, or what, is the ‘I’ here? Who speaks? If Ashbery is notorious for his shifting pronouns, it seems Eliot should be so equally. The first-person pronoun here performs none of its conventional function of presenting a unified consciousness — indeed it has no consciousness of its own. Its appearance and workings are merely the result of other texts, from Baudelaire to Dante to Webster and much else in between. In these ‘fragments shored against [Eliot’s] ruins’, connection is no longer a matter of temporal, tonal or even syntactic continuity, but of something quite different.

Ashbery notes that Eliot’s ‘fragmented brilliance’ is ‘a question of arcane scholarly reference’ (*SPr*, 85), and Eliot’s early poetry bears this connection between fragmentation and allusion out. In defence of her description of Eliot’s ‘perfectly coherent symbolic structure’, which she revealingly discusses independently of allusion, Perloff writes:

No one would argue, for instance, that brown is Eliot’s color for spiritual renewal—that to be ‘under the brown fog’ is a good thing... Eliot’s context is so carefully established that when we come to the line ‘Burning burning burning burning’ we can be certain... that the reference is not to food burning on the kitchen stove.⁹

The interpretation is not particularly ambitious, or illuminating of the poem, but it is easy to render even it problematic by viewing any allusive passage from *The Waste Land*. There is the ending, for example:

I sat upon the shore
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1963*, London: Faber and Faber, 1963, p. 55.

⁹ Perloff, *Indeterminacy*, p. 15.

Shall I at least set my lands in order?
 London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
 Shantih shantih shantih¹⁰

The concentrated arrangement of both complementary and contesting fragments enacts the well-rehearsed problems of meaning in the poem. The various references are well documented, but a mere outline of them is illustrative, even resisting particular interpretations. Firstly, there is the question of the completion of the Grail quest, which is here incomplete and anticlimactic as the Fisher King — with whom the 'I' of the poem is identified at this point — sits before the still 'arid' land. This is followed by a decidedly climactic moment of destruction which also brings with it the weight of the nursery rhyme, its various motifs of 'washing away' and a 'fair lady' who is 'locked up' in a reference to the practice of burying a dead virgin under the bridge to ensure its strength (and also possibly to Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine — which will occur three lines later). The lines from Dante are a reference to another poet in turn, namely Daniel Artaud, who 'hid himself in the fire that purifies' on Mount Purgatory, which unexpectedly returns us to 'The Fire Sermon' of section three (which is, both in the section and in the Buddhist sermon from which it takes its name, far from a purifying force). We are then returned to the myth of Philomel in the form of the *Pervigilium Veneris*, and simultaneously directed to Whitman's elegy for Lincoln, 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' ('O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?') and Tennyson's 'The Princess' — as well as to the myth of Osiris, *The Golden Bough's* chapters on which Eliot pays homage to in the 'Notes'. The allusion to Nerval and the Prince of Aquitaine in the abandoned tower relates back to both the London Bridge nursery rhyme and of course the Grail legend. The final allusions to Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* are perhaps the strangest of all: 'Why then Ile fit you' specifically points to the moment at which Hieronymo, agreeing to write a play for the court, decides to avenge his son's recent murder — a situation whose relevance is unclear. In the subtitle of the play that Eliot then uses there is a problem of fragmentation in the source text itself — present also

10 Eliot, *Collected Poems*, p. 79.

in the Grail legend, the myth of Philomel, and even the nursery rhyme — as we do not know, for textual reasons, the conditions under which Hieronymo went mad the first time. Interfering further with this already less-than-clear constellation of texts is the ambiguity of Eliot's notes. The final Sanskrit fragments are noted, unhelpfully, for their untranslatability: on 'Shantih', Eliot tells us in the original notes, "The Peace which passeth understanding" is a feeble translation of the content of this word'.

Whatever the meaning of this collection of fragments, there is nothing definitively 'established' about the context. Perloff's criticism of Eliot is a result of her preference for an absence of synthetic and symbolic meaning generally (in Stein, Williams, Oppen, Cage). But just because Eliot's symbolism is elaborate does not mean it is incompatible with Ashbery. As Grover Smith says in his companion to Eliot's sources, there is a 'danger' in Eliot, 'lest multiplied allusions, adventitious or not, should defeat meaning'.¹¹ *The Waste Land* overflows in meaning, and as the allusions rack up, as here, it explodes in it. This is Eliot's indeterminacy. Cleanth Brooks's New Critical eye was quick to notice the 'very definite relation to the general theme of the poem' of Eliot's ending; but what is most clear about *The Waste Land*'s network of intertextuality in retrospect, is that little can be rationalised into anything like a 'general theme' at all, however much, as I will go onto show, there is an important cultural project at the centre of it.¹²

The emergence of such an Eliotic procedure in Ashbery's work is seen in his first long poem, 'Europe', of 1962's *The Tennis Court Oath*. Frank O'Hara referred to the poem as 'the most striking thing since The Wasteland [sic]'.¹³ The comparison is no coincidence: 'Europe' models itself on *The Waste Land*. Most obviously, Ashbery follows Eliot in the adoption of a central, structuring source text. As Eliot built his poem around Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, Ashbery takes William LeQueue's 1917 World War One children's detective story, *Beryl of the Biplane*.¹⁴ There is, though, clearly a departure from Eliot already here: while Eliot takes

11 Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: a study in sources and meaning*, London: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 79.

12 The reasons for this misrepresentation are not all that complex, having roots in an eagerness to equate Eliot's aesthetics with his personal social conservatism; a habit prevalent among sympathetic and unsympathetic critics alike.

13 Frank O'Hara, letter to Ashbery, 7 Jan 1960.

14 William LeQueue, *Beryl of the Biplane: Being the Romance of an Air Woman of Today*, London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1917.

academic anthropology for the basic fabric of his symbolism, Ashbery has ‘cannibalised a book for teenage girls... found in a bookstall’.¹⁵ Ashbery surely has a distinction between himself and Eliot in mind with such an explanation. The familiar Ashberyan rhetoric of the accident is exaggerated here, but there is something crucial in the distinction, which seems to support Perloff’s contention that ‘identification [of citations] doesn’t necessarily help us to understand the poem’. There is a difference in the use of source text that makes Ashbery’s story satisfactory: knowledge of the Grail legend is crucial to understanding *The Waste Land* in a way acquaintance with *Beryl of the Biplane* is not for reading ‘Europe’.

Let us begin with similarity, however. Eliot’s work represents a breakthrough in the history of allusion. After *The Waste Land*, allusion is no longer clarifying or illustrative, as it had been in Milton or Wordsworth, but is the very driving force of the poem, creating a complex and fragmented symbolic structure. In ‘Europe’, Ashbery takes this further by simply lifting whole sections of LeQueux’s novel and placing them in his poem, sometimes entirely without interference. New York poet Clark Coolidge recalled his reaction to Ashbery’s extension of Eliotic fragmentation: ‘I thought, wow, he’s doing something with almost nothing!’¹⁶ What, though, is Ashbery doing with ‘almost nothing’?

Ashbery recalls that ‘Europe’ was ‘an attempt to shuffle the cards before dealing them again’.¹⁷ As far as content is concerned, then, Ashbery suggests that ‘Europe’ is merely a random rearrangement. Juxtaposing the two texts, this seems true:

‘The Hornet’ had been tampered with, one of the steel bolts having been replaced with one of wood!

‘This is the work of the enemy!’ remarked Ronnie thoughtfully. ‘They cannot obtain sight of the silencer, therefore there has been a dastardly plot to kill both of us. We must be a little more wary in future, dear.’ (*Beryl*, 61)

blue smoke?
It was as though
She had
the river
above the water

The steel bolts
having been replaced
by a painting of
one of wood!
Ronnie, thoughtfully

of the silencer

15 John Tranter, ‘John Ashbery in conversation with John Tranter, New York City, May 1988’, *Jacket 2*, <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html>.

16 Coolidge in an unpublished interview with Ginsberg.

17 Osti, ‘Craft of John Ashbery’, p. 94.

plot to kill both of us, dear.
(*TCO*, 82-3)

Ashbery's poetry looks like wreckage of the novel's prose. Rather than simply reproducing LeQueux's sentences for what they mean, Ashbery dismembers his source text in a way that reads as an attempt to reproduce the effect of reading sentences amid the 'randomness and discontinuity of modern experience'. There is the taking of a paradoxical 'construction ball' (64) to *Beryl*. However, this disjunctive transformation itself resists reading, particularly if a reader is unaware of the operation of a source text. John Shoptaw notes that 'LeQueux's work is put through the shredder in "Europe" not merely in Ashbery's defence against being read, but in own resistance to what he reads'.¹⁸

It is surely Eliot that Ashbery has in mind in his recollection of *The Tennis Court Oath*:

one of the things I liked about modern poetry when I first began to read it was that it was *hard to understand*, so I thought, 'Well, I'm just writing in the modern tradition'. But then I discovered that my poetry was a little *too hard*, and that I had overstepped the bounds of the tradition.¹⁹

For an allegedly avant-garde writer, Ashbery is surprisingly accommodating of his unsympathetic audience's tastes — a fact I will explore in the next chapter. At the time, however, Ashbery was still blithely overstepping the mark. It is perhaps because LeQueux's story is contemporaneous with *The Waste Land* that Ashbery's is often an Eliotic, 'modern' vocabulary of ruin:

dying for they do not
the hole no crow can
and finally the day of thirst
in the air.
whistles carbon dioxide. Cold
pavement grew. The powerful machine
The tractor around edge
the listless children. Good night
staining the naughty air
with marvellous rings. You are going there.
Weeps. The wreath not decorating.
The kids pile over the ample funeral hill. (70)

18 Shoptaw, p. 63.

19 Hickman, 'Ferment', p. 80.

The allusions to Eliot — ‘dying / with a little patience’, the thirsty rock-landscape of ‘What the Thunder Said’, Ophelia’s ‘Good night sweet ladies’ of ‘A Game of Chess’ — are important for establishing the poetry’s roots in Eliot. Nevertheless, as many critics have agreed, Ashbery oversteps even Eliot’s disjunctive mark. Why?

Ashbery said of ‘Europe’ at the time: ‘I have been attempting to keep meaningfulness up to the pace of the randomness. I don’t feel I’ve succeeded in doing this in poems like “Europe”.’²⁰ The *bricolage* of ‘Europe’ reveals a heavy dependence on the source text. It is no accident on Ashbery’s part that, living in Europe at the time, his source is a novel concerned with World War One, a period that marks the beginning of the end of European imperialism: the fact coincides with a major concern of the poem, that ‘the map of Europe / shrinks’ (74). Ashbery may have ‘found’ the book in a bookstall, but he nonetheless *chose* to use it, and this fact should not be forgotten, for all Ashbery’s rhetoric of accidentalism. What Ashbery tries to imply in the poem, though, is that poetry should be all accident if we are to imitate the ‘randomness’ of the world authentically. The lesson Ashbery apparently learned from Eliot at the time, writing a year after the publication of ‘Europe’ in 1963, of ‘how to deal with fragments: by leaving them as they are’, is the methodological rhetoric the poem employs throughout: ‘The editor realized / its gradual abandonment / a kind of block where other men come down’ (65), ‘the book is replaced on the shelf / By an unseen hand’ (74), ‘Is not a images / to “arrange”’ (77), ‘powerless creating images’ (81), ‘I don’t understand wreckage’ (83). ‘Eliot reacts as though in a stupor’, says Ashbery; and so, writing in what he considered at the time ‘the modern tradition’, he attempts the same in his own intertextual ‘wave of nausea’ (64).

Eliot does not react in a stupor, though. He reacts with calculation and a great deal of symbolic manipulation, as will become apparent. Though Ashbery would remain the ‘compulsory *collagiste*’ he terms himself in a letter of 1975, the particular nature of the compulsion in *The Tennis Court Oath* is ultimately a dead-end for him.²¹ The compulsion of ‘Europe’ and many other poems in the collection is presented as natural abandonment, as if the poet or individual is simply helpless amidst the fragmentation of the modern world. In at least one sense, Ashbery’s poem is ‘too difficult’, because it is too extreme an account of how the mind absorbs even

²⁰ *Craft* interview, p. 121.

²¹ John Ashbery, letter to Robert Nye, 14. Nov 1975, in Houghton Library, Harvard.

the most manifold heteroglossia. Indeed, as the selection of *Beryl* as source-text suggests, such an account is disingenuous.

Ashbery learns from the experience of writing 'Europe'. Rejecting the automatism of the poem, he notes:

the poem 'Europe'... is one that's no longer very close to me. At the time I was baffled as to what to do in poetry; I wasn't satisfied with the way my work was going and I felt it was time to just clear my head by writing whatever came into it and that's very much the case in that poem.²²

'Europe' is useful to Ashbery in that his misreading of Eliot in the poem paves the way for the compelling transformation that the mature Ashbery will carry out by rejecting the synthetic, pedagogical drive behind Eliotic intertextuality. It is, however, far from Ashbery's final word on the matter, nor is it the poetic mode that would transform American poetry.

2. *Points of view*

To read Eliot exclusively in terms of fragmentation and indeterminacy is clearly only part of the story. But it is Ashbery's story in these early years, and the nature of Ashbery's different poetical outlook is discernible in what it leaves out — the way in which he partially (in both senses) reads Eliot.

Ashbery's Eliot is emphatically the Eliot of *The Waste Land*. Robert Lowell and other middle generation poets found Eliot predominantly in the *Four Quartets* and his criticism, and Eliot is a less radical figure for it. Lowell goes through Eliot to *Lord Weary's Castle*, Ashbery to 'Europe'. Donald Davie, with other 'Movement' poets, also read Eliot the critic over Eliot the poet:

the effigy was not of Eliot the poet, but of Eliot the author of those influential essays, 'The Metaphysical Poets', 'Andrew Marvell' and 'Homage to John Dryden'... The proof is in the poems of mine [which had] nothing to do with Eliot's practice as a poet, but had everything to do with what he was taken to have recommended in theory... And so the poems that I wrote at that time were painstakingly structured on the extended comparisons and the farfetched hyperbolic conceits of John Donne's

²² *Craft* interview, p. 83.

‘The Good-morrow’ or Marvell’s ‘To his Coy Mistress’... I thought that since John Donne had a valuably unified sensibility... a sort of duty was laid upon me to regain it in my poems, and help others to regain it.²³

Ashbery’s reading of Eliot, by comparison, does not demonstrate any adherence to Eliot’s literary or cultural criticism at all.²⁴ *The Waste Land* invites such a reading of Eliot as Ashbery’s in a way that *Four Quartets* or Eliot’s critical work does not. It is possible to learn from this partial reading, however, merely by observing it.

Ashbery, in emphasising the fragmentation and ruptured contiguity of Eliot’s allusions, broadly takes formal directives from Eliot to imitate a certain epistemological outlook. Ashbery, that is, reads Eliot as a poet willing to ‘take into account the randomness and discontinuity of modern experience’. Underlying Ashbery’s reading of Eliot, however, is the highly suspect interpretation that such fragments are of necessity ‘hallucinatory’ and that ‘Eliot reacts as though in a stupor’. Clearly, *The Waste Land* is a moment of high symbolism as well as of disjunction. Eliot’s fragments are consciously and painstakingly arranged (just as Joyce’s were); to adapt a phrase of Eliot’s, the fragmentation is very much the point. As he says in the preface to his translation of St. John Perse’s *Waste Land*esque *Anabase*,

any obscurity in the poem, on first readings, is due to the suppression... of explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence, or to the love of cryptogram. The justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression of barbaric civilisation.²⁵

Modernist fragmentation is, then, intentional (due to conscious ‘suppression’), and is not synonymous with incoherence because it in fact produces a ‘sequence of images’ tailored and ‘concentrated’ to make ‘one intense impression’.

Eliot’s attempt to sequence such apparent fragments is in accord with what he terms, in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, ‘the historical sense’, a decisive concept in his poetic. Under its auspices, modern poetry is to be conceived ‘as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written’, with ‘a feeling [for] the

23 Donald Davie, ‘Eliot in One Poet’s Life’, in *The Waste Land in Different Voices*, ed. A. D. Moody, London: E. Arnold, 1974, p. 223.

24 Though, of course, Eliot’s critical influence is felt by Ashbery in less direct ways. See pp. 39-42.

25 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode, London: Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 77.

whole of the literature of Europe from Homer'.²⁶ Unlike the unconsciousness implicit in Ashbery's version of the hallucinating Eliot, but also unlike traditional concepts of tradition, the historical sense 'cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour'. *The Waste Land* possesses such 'feeling', and the accompanying 'great labour', in abundance. Gregory Jay, along with many other commentators, refers to 'the literary museum of *The Waste Land*'; and the poem is, among other things, an act of literary history.²⁷ Rather than simply 'intuiting' fragmentation or hallucinating as Ashbery suggests and as 'Europe' enacts, *The Waste Land* is the embodiment of all Eliot's theories of impersonality — a means to escape the confines of individual perception, as Richard Drain points out:

its technique of cross-cutting from the immediate scene to a range of different cultures acts like a ceaseless attempt to transcend its own subjectivity: by taking bearings at all points of the compass, it seems to promise an objective and impersonal assessment of where we are.²⁸

The Waste Land is a highly symbolic exercise, but not in the vein of Coleridge or Hegel, as Perloff seems to suggest. Michael Levenson makes a key distinction when he observes that the poem 'develops not by resolving conflicts but by enlarging contexts, by establishing relations between contexts, by situating motifs within an increasingly elaborate set of cultural parallels — by widening'.²⁹ *The Waste Land* is heavily structural (which is why it becomes such a monument for New Criticism), but it is not harmonising. It rather widens and elaborates — in Drain's words, it takes 'bearings at all points of the compass'.

Eliot's poetics, and its divergence from Ashbery's Eliot, is seen best in his 1916 Harvard thesis on F. H. Bradley:

the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or lesser extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them.³⁰

26 Ibid., pp. 40, 38.

27 Gregory S. Jay, *T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History*, London: Louisiana State UP, 1983, p. 54.

28 Richard Drain, 'The Waste Land: the Prison and the Key', in *The Waste Land in Different Voices*, p. 30.

29 Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: a study of English literary doctrine 1908-1922*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986, p. 201.

30 T. S. Eliot *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, London: Faber and Faber, 1964, pp. 147-8.

Such statements, stressing the need for multiplicity and order simultaneously, are typical of Eliot's philosophical outlook, and are at the centre of *The Waste Land's* technique. Unlike Ashbery's suggestion of Eliot's 'randomness', the 'task of unifying' is central here.

The limits and incompatibility of 'ordinary' knowledge in Bradley are, for Eliot, present in his 'finite centres'. These are the immanent, immediate, individual experiences, which exist prior to rationality and are ultimately incommunicable, existing exclusively *privately*. It is a reality, but one incomplete and even 'mad' in Bradley's system. Eliot's critique of this aspect of Bradley's system surfaces in *The Waste Land*, where an extract from Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* in the 'Notes' refers to lines in the poem about perceptual imprisonment and human isolation:

My external sensations are no less private to my self than are my thoughts and feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it... In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul. (Eliot's ellipses)

—

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.³¹

It is *dayadhvam* here, sympathy, that Eliot suggests is impossible for Bradley's 'finite centres'. Bradley's solution to the limitations of finite centres is the concept of 'the Absolute': if finite centres precede rational thought, the Absolute transcends it, and is where the finite centres harmonise. Eliot's poetic, not least its theory of impersonality, invests heavily in this kind of repudiation of immanent, subjective experience.

Rejecting Bradley's Absolute, however, Eliot instead posits a theory that would have a profound effect on his poetry — a theory of 'points of view'.³²

31 Eliot, *Collected Poems*, pp. 86, 79.

32 Eliot writes: 'Pretending to be something which makes finite centres cohere, [the Absolute] turns out to be merely the assertion that they do' (*Bradley*, p. 202). See Michael Levenson, *Genealogy*, for a detailed account of this idea in Eliot's early career, to which the above description is indebted.

[The self] passes from one point of view to another... so that the reality of an object does not lie in the object itself, but in the extent of the relations which the object possesses without significant falsification of itself... Whatever is gathered together in consciousness [is] real or unreal only in relation.³³

Rather than employing a vague metaphysical transcendence, Eliot avoids the limitations of immanent knowledge by *organisation* — by arranging the various ‘finite centres’, and finding in this arrangement a transcendence or *Gestalt* of their limitations. Meaning itself is therefore a product ‘of various presentations to various viewpoints’.³⁴ It is in this light, then, that one can read the multiple voices of *The Waste Land*. It is the concept of ‘points of view’ that implies the ‘historical sense’, which should be understood as a tool for amassing, coordinating and unifying an entire literary history of points of view — indeed, it is what makes literary history possible. If, in *The Waste Land*, ‘viewpoints’ are perhaps a little too ‘jarring and incompatible’, this was a fault Eliot felt, and something he set to work on fixing, not least, as I will demonstrate, in the ‘Notes’ to the poem.

These ‘points of view’ position allusion somewhere between reading and writing. Eliot’s best known metaphor on the nature of creative writing occurs in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. ‘To define [the] process of depersonalisation and its relation to the sense of tradition,’ Eliot invites us to consider ‘a bit of finely filiated platinum... introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide’. ‘Depersonalisation’ is not to be equated with a surrender of self, but rather a reservation of it. The good poet is ultimately distinguished by his detachment:

the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It [tradition, or sulphur dioxide] may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates...³⁵

If Eliot’s dispute with romanticism is usually on the grounds of ‘personality’, it is because he perceived the romantic conception of it to be an idealised originality which positioned itself outside of tradition and history (Keats’s Adam who ‘awoke and found it truth’). Eliot’s own achievement is the acknowledgement and constant enactment of the artist’s debt to the past, and of the relativity of writing: ‘No poet, no

33 Eliot, *Bradley*, pp. 91, 126.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

35 Eliot, *Selected Prose*, pp. 40, 41.

artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone... you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead'.³⁶ This is clearly informed by the epistemological emphasis on relativity implicit in the 'points of view'.³⁷

As for tradition's relation to the individual talent generally, there is a further structural principle that guides Eliot. In his theorising about reading there are always two stages,

two attitudes both of which are necessary and right to adopt in considering the work of any poet... [First we] understand the rules of his own game, adopt his own point of view... [Second] we measure him by outside standard, most pertinently by the standards of language and of something called Poetry, in our own language and in the language of European literature.³⁸

The first stage here is what Eliot later calls 'saturation', or 'a kind of inundation, of invasion in the undeveloped personality' of the reader by 'the stronger personality of the poet'.³⁹ The more extreme effects of this 'attitude' can only be overcome by more reading; and the influence that it is allowed to wield is in correlation to the immaturity of the reader.⁴⁰ The 'personal saturation' or 'inundation' is an essential force for reading, but, like the subjective limitations of the finite centre, in need of correction. This is the role of the second stage of reading: the employment of the historical sense. At this stage, conversely, 'our critical faculties remain awake'; 'we cease to identify ourselves with the poet' and make a 'deliberate attempt to grapple' with him.⁴¹ Unlike the immediate and unconscious 'inundation', the historical sense, as we have seen, 'cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour'.

This theory of reading, of course, has wide implications for Eliot's critical project. As he says in 1933, using a slightly different vocabulary, 'a tradition without intelligence is not worth having... it must largely be, or many of the elements in it

36 Ibid., p. 38.

37 The provenance of the *term* for Eliot is undoubtedly from Henry James, whom Eliot obsessively quoted. See 'A Prediction in Regard to Three English Authors', *Vanity Fair* 21 (Feb. 1924), p. 29. For the James root, see his Preface to *What Maisie Knew*.

38 T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, London: Faber and Faber, 1957, p. 145.

39 T. S. Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern*, London: Faber and Faber, 1936, p. 102.

40 'At this period, the poem, or the poetry of a single poet invades the youthful consciousness and assumes complete possession for a time. We do not really see it as something with an existence outside ourselves... The frequent result is an outburst of scribbling which we call imitation... It is not the deliberate choice of a poet to mimic, but writing under a kind of daemonic possession by one poet.' (T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, London: Faber and Faber, 1968, p. 34)

41 Ibid., pp. 34-5.

must be, unconscious; where as the maintenance of *orthodoxy* is a matter which calls for the exercise of our conscious intelligence'. It is crucial that there are two stages observed in reading: immersion and critique. 'Surely,' Eliot asks, 'the great poet is, among other things, one who not only restores a tradition which has been in abeyance, but who in his poetry re-twines as many straying strands of tradition as possible'.⁴² Clearly, none of this is present in Ashbery's reading of *Beryl of the Biplane*, or indeed Eliot, in 'Europe'.

Ashbery unenthusiastically notes the historical sense at work in Eliot's poetry: 'Eliot couldn't evoke a gasworks without feeling obliged to call the whole history of human thought into play' (*RS*, 82). This distaste for unified history continues the distinction between Ashbery and Eliot that Ashbery unconsciously draws in 'Europe'. As the statement suggests, Ashbery sees the act of writing as a very different exercise for the poet. The contrast of Ashbery's reading style with Eliot's is happily enacted in Ashbery's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, *Other Traditions*, delivered in 1989-90, 67 years after Eliot had done the same, collecting his talks under the more ambitious title, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*.

Unlike Eliot's lectures, which have titles like 'The Age of Dryden' and 'The Modern Mind', Ashbery's talks eschew any attempt at historical survey. More peculiar, however, is the fact that there is little interpretation beyond the immediate at all in Ashbery's readings. As observed in the introduction, descriptions like this of David Schubert are typical: 'none of this quite adds up, and, in the way of a Schubert poem, it shouldn't: what we are left with is a bouquet of many layered, splintered meanings, to be clasped but never fully understood' (*OT*, 134). Ashbery does not make adding up his business. Indeed, for the most part, the meaning of works is not even a consideration. Take this on John Wheelwright:

where I cannot finally grasp his meaning, which is much of the time, I remain convinced by the extraordinary power of his language as it flashes by on its way from somewhere to somewhere else... In short, he is a poet from whom one takes a great deal on faith... (72)

Similarly, in Ashbery's 'analyses' of individual poems, close reading is only ever used to show up its inadequacy for poetry, as a reading of a Laura Riding poem illustrates: 'that may be her meaning; to me, it doesn't matter because the

42 Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 85.

overwhelmingly spare and beautiful language has already satisfied me' (113). Ashbery is apparently satisfied by the original 'inundation'; overwhelmed, saturated. His approach is encapsulated in a comment from a 1983 piece on Schubert's work: 'Analyze it and it falls apart, or at any rate the analysis does' (*SPr*, 177).

Ashbery's criticism, as noted before, is uncritical.⁴³ As has been demonstrated with Clare, in both his 'critical' reading in the lectures and his more interesting reading in 'For John Clare', Ashbery has no interest whatsoever in making a 'deliberate attempt to grapple' with the Northamptonshire poet in Eliot's sense. 'For John Clare', like the *Other Traditions* lecture on Clare, is absorbed in its subject, making no attempt at the distancing Eliot's historical sense demands. We are not obliged to accept Eliot's terms, however. Though Ashbery's vocabulary for reading resembles Eliot's 'saturation', this is not to say that Ashbery's is some sort of immersive, unthinking absorption, though Ashbery himself may wish to present it as such. Though his attitude is a conscious refutation of Eliotic reading on his part, Ashbery's lack of concern for meaning could easily be seen as a *resistance* to the poetry he admires, and an attempt to retain a distance from it in another sense. Charles Olson, for example, is obsessed with Pound's *intentions* — and compared to Ashbery's style of reading, Olson's is the immersive, 'saturated' one. It is the same old 'shield of a greeting' from Ashbery.

This is important to note, but there is nonetheless a fundamentally unEliotic conception of reader and poet in Ashbery, and it remains linked to the idea of 'historical sense'. Ashbery's is a *rhetoric* of reading, which exaggerates and which we should be wary of, but there is truth in his description, and it is constantly borne out in his poetry. Ashbery, after all, beyond the policy statements above really does not, in his criticism or poetry, his readings or allusions, apply to poetry anything that might be termed a 'critical faculty'.

Eliot and Olson, that is, feel a responsibility as readers, but that responsibility is the responsibility of the *writer*. It is the duty of the poet to read poetry in a way that is different from other people: a duty to mine the past and present it properly. The poetry of Eliot, Pound, and Olson is an aspect of this pedagogical exercise; the poems of all three contain teachings on the European Canon. Ashbery's may be an extreme example of a 'common reader', but he is certainly closer to it than Eliot or

43 See pp. 73-4 above.

Olson, and though his criticism is no doubt the poorer for it, it is nonetheless liberating for readers to see such a reading process enacted in poetry. Ashbery claims no authority over the poems he presents; he indeed interprets less even than the casual listener in the lecture hall would be inclined to. Ashbery has enthusiasm for the poets he speaks of, but no one is really given any directives as to why, and less to what the importance of this might be to Western culture. But what is the significance of this distinction? Before describing Ashbery's readerly achievements in positive terms, we need to briefly backtrack, and observe the specifics of Eliot's historical sense. That is: what does Eliot end up sensing by this faculty?

Eliot's literary history is based upon a narrative — a grand narrative, even — of 'sensibility'. As far as English literature goes, after the ideal 'Christian society' found around the time of Lancelot Andrewes, the Metaphysical poets remain distinguished by a 'unified sensibility' which continues until Milton comes along, at which point there is a 'dissociation of sensibility' which the romantics exacerbate, the Victorians display melancholy symptoms of, and modernists like Eliot are forced to inherit. Such a narrative posits a golden age; it is, one critic puts it, 'the story of Eden applied to the secular history of literature'.⁴⁴ What Ashbery chooses to ignore in *The Waste Land* is not merely its crucial 'historical sense', but also this quest for the Holy Grail of origin.

As an act of literary history, *The Waste Land* is in accordance with all Eliot's other such acts. All the structural sources for the poem — the Grail quest, the fertility myths taken from *The Golden Bough*, the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Tarot cards, the Buddhist Fire Sermon and St. Augustine, the Sanskrit fragments — are connected, if by nothing else, by their age.⁴⁵ The mythical method is built on this epochal distancing, 'manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity' in Eliot's words.⁴⁶ Eliot's reliance on Frazer in *The Waste Land* is therefore revealing: the anthropology of which *The Golden Bough* is an example

44 Edward Lobb, *T. S. Eliot and the Romantic Critical Tradition*, London: Routledge, 1981, p. 5.

45 Michael Levenson's observations on Eliot's revisions are compelling in this connection:

For the heading of the second section, he replaced the Jamesian 'In the Cage' with 'A Game of Chess' derived from Middleton. He changed the poem's title from Dickens' 'He Do the Police in Different Voices' to the present title with its allusion to pre-Christian nature cults... Pound had complained that the quotation from Conrad [for the epigraph] was not 'weighty enough.' Eliot, after some hesitation, agreed. But it is not clear why Petronius should be any weightier. He is certainly more *distant*... (*Genealogy*, 203; Levenson's italics.)

46 T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', in *Selected*, p. 177.

consciously offered modernity a glimpse of the truth with its presentation of irrational, universal and primitive meaning apparently unobscured by a deteriorating civilisation.⁴⁷ Such mythologizing is of course dominant in modernism, from Eliot's dialect of the tribe to Wyndham Lewis's primitive 'art-instinct', from the 'bushman' artists of Pound to Lawrence's 'belief in blood'. But at the heart of Eliot's metaphysic of history is the 'greater panorama' offered by manipulating and organising this revelatory past. As he puts it:

The maxim, Return to the Sources, is a good one. More intelligibly put, it is that the poet should know everything that has been accomplished in poetry (accomplished not merely produced) since its beginnings – in order to know what he is doing himself. He should be aware of all the metamorphoses of poetry that illustrate the stratifications of history that cover savagery.⁴⁸

In *The Waste Land's* panorama, 'everything that has been accomplished in poetry' is utilised to access something primitive and originating. Eliot uses history to remove it — to '[un]cover savagery'.

After the initial 'saturation', Eliot obtains a tradition by 'conscious effort' and 'great labour', but after this second stage there is surely a third which Eliot does not mention: a *programmatically* reading practice. As his criticism bears out, Eliot always reads with reference to the version of literary history that his critical faculty has worked out beforehand. After the initial, seminal essay of Eliot's career, 'The Metaphysical Poets', subsequent essays on Marvell, Milton, Dryden, and anyone else, are written in accordance with its prescribing narrative. Eliot's reading, in its emphasis on the remote and its organising fervour, is a *pursuit*, in the Leavisite sense, for origin in which the historical sense is the key to Truth.

All this is not to devalue Eliot's concept of tradition. Eliot's concept is robust, and, as my ambivalent reading of *The Waste Land* indicates, a potentially historicising instrument for the interpretation and making of art. The assumptions

47 Frazer's vocabulary is revealing: 'The position of the anthropologist to-day resembles in some sort the position of classical scholars at the revival of learning. To these men the *rediscovery* of ancient literature came like a *revelation*, disclosing to their wondering eyes a splendid *vision* of the antique world, such as the cloistered scholar of the Middle Ages never dreamed of under the gloomy shadow of the minster and within the sound of its solemn bells. To us moderns a still wider vista is vouchsafed, a greater panorama is unrolled by the study which aims at *bringing home to us the faith and the practice, the hopes and ideals*, not of two highly gifted races only, but of *all mankind...*' (my italics). James Frazer, 'Preface to the Third Edition', *The Golden Bough*, New York: Macmillan, 1935, p. xxv.

48 T. S. Eliot, 'War-Paint and Feathers', *Athenaeum* (October 17, 1919), p. 1036.

and implications of Ashbery's reading are very different from this 'Return to the Sources', but it seems particularly to Eliot's credit if one considers Ashbery in purely negative terms in relation to it. This would accord with the common line taken with Ashbery's work — that it doesn't have a concept of tradition, has no truck in anything theoretical, does not seek to work on a cultural or social level, is just written and the less said about it the better. Even if Ashbery's work is limited in ambition on Eliot's terms, Ashbery's thinking and the implications of his poetic practice — if we wish to maintain that poetry has a relation to culture and society — are still equally in possession of *content*, just as the apolitical is in possession of a politics. As 'Europe' illustrates above, a composition method based on accident is a method nonetheless.

We have seen, then, a lack of ambition in Ashbery's critical writings. Outside of this *critical* modesty, however, there is ambition of another kind. It is in his poetry that Ashbery most seriously betrays and effects such ambitions. 'The Picture of Little J.A.' and 'For John Clare' are both, in effect, what Paul de Man calls 'allegories of reading', and tell us far more about Ashbery's reading practices (and about reading generally) than his criticism.⁴⁹ It is clear how under Eliot's prescriptions — emphasising detachment in the poet, the importance of positioning any poem in 'the mind of Europe' and of a 'higher' point of view in any consideration of tradition — a poem like 'For John Clare' would be impossible. What this means though, is still not entirely clear; it is at this point that it is necessary to make a deeper examination of Ashbery's allusion.

3. 'Better to steal than borrow': the case of 'The Skaters'

The fragmentation of *The Waste Land* is, in part, a tool for anthologising — for critically organising a 'tradition'. But equally important is Eliot's eagerness to impart this tradition to a public, and how such selection and coordination are part of a political program. In the words of one critic, 'the new tradition was designed to cure

49 See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1982.

the ills of modern life'.⁵⁰ To 'maintain orthodoxy', Eliot's anthologizing in *The Waste Land* centres around irony. This irony is twofold: a literary-political satire in which an allusion parodies its source, and a broader cultural one in which a given context stands in ironic counterpoint to sources. The first is finally sparser in the poem because Pound removes much of the literary satire from Eliot's initial drafts — the original parody of the heroic couplets of Pope (whom Eliot accused of having no soul) being one example. On the other hand, the second aspect is prominent throughout. 'A Game of Chess', for instance, manipulates its sources primarily by contrasting the imagined and bygone images of Cleopatra or Dido and the women in the historical present of the pub scene. The context (the actual setting) emerges as having been the London pub all along, which comes to seem all the more impoverished as a scene of romantic or even civilised life when juxtaposed with the heroic splendour of ancient heroines. At the same time, of course, this is Eliot promoting Shakespeare and Virgil, whose language is the cause of the contrast.

Eliot is well aware of the importance of this second species of allusion. Speaking of 'The Bible as Scripture and Literature', his advice on allusion is simple:

your purposes must be consciously and *pointedly* diverse from those of the author, and the contrast is very much the point; you cannot take it merely because it is a good phrase or a lovely image.⁵¹

The responsibility for the poet is, then, to *oppose* allusions to his situation: 'the contrast is very much the point'. As Eliot later says, and as his use of Shakespeare's Cleopatra illustrates, 'authors are really only helping us when we can see, and allow for, their differences from ourselves'.⁵² 'One of the surest of tests', says Eliot,

is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest.⁵³

50 Jay, *Poetics*, p. 41.

51 T. S. Eliot, 'The Bible as Scripture and as Literature', lecture, King's Chapel, Boston (December 1932). The typescript is in the Houghton Library, Harvard.

52 Eliot, *Essays Ancient*, p. 104.

53 Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 153.

Again here, the emphasis is on contrast. Hence ‘authors remote in time’, as we have seen, are particularly favoured. This famous statement from ‘Philip Massinger’ is of additional interest with respect to Ashbery, however. Ashbery writes of his friend, the French poet Pierre Martory, in 1990:

His dreams, his pessimistic resumes of childhood that are suddenly lanced by a joke, his surreal loves, his strangely lit landscapes with their inquisitive birds and disquieting flora, are fertile influences for me, though I hope I haven’t stolen anything — well, better to steal than borrow, as Eliot more or less said. (*SPr*, 240)

‘Better to steal than borrow’. What should be observed about this deference to Eliot, with his words clear in our mind, is that Eliot says nothing of the sort. Better to steal than imitate, certainly, but best of all to be ‘unique’ and ‘utterly different’ from your source. Stealing *per se* for Eliot is little more than plagiarism, and therefore specifically warned against: ‘you cannot take it merely because it is a good phrase or a lovely image’. Ashbery’s misreading is symptomatic of the appropriation of Eliotic allusion already seen in his ‘cannibalising’ tendencies in ‘Europe’. ‘Europe’, though, remains a collage, and though in it Ashbery’s allusive disposition emerges, the poem does not, in the performance, compete, or indeed attempt to compete, with Eliot’s poetic. For something that does compete, we need to turn to Ashbery’s next long poem, ‘The Skaters’.

David Lehman’s generalisations about Ashbery and Eliotic tradition are apposite:

where Eliot evokes the past to dramatize the imaginative poverty of the historical present, Ashbery’s larcenies are accompanied by forgetfulness; where Eliot’s sense of tradition is applied as a corrective to the modern world, Ashbery’s gladhanded ‘other tradition’ furnishes him with so much raw material, no strings attached, nothing to acknowledge or be faithful to.⁵⁴

It is indeed Ashbery’s ‘larceny’ that begins to differentiate him from Eliot. This is where *Beryl of the Biplane* differs from Eliot’s sources: Ashbery’s use of *Beryl* is allusion without acknowledgement (that is, theft without Eliot’s serious qualifications; ‘cannibalising’). Contrast is not ‘the point’, because the poem offers no grounds for contrast, and no attempt is made to ‘cure the ills of modern life’ by putting LeQueux forward for inclusion in the Canon. Lehman encapsulates what I have been hinting at thus far, but his observations are simplistic, and very much part

54 Lehman, *Beyond Amazement*, p. 113.

of the stereotypical Ashbery. It is necessary to go beyond the usual picture of Ashberyan gladhanded, no-strings-attached forgetfulness.

Eliot, as Lehman rightly says, dramatizes the past to parody the present. His allusions, to this end, are often of the order of disembodied voices speaking from the past. The dramatic nature of Eliot's poetry is well documented, and has become increasingly so in the attempts since the 1970s to romanticize him by the likes of Anthony David Moody, Gregory Jay, and of course Harold Bloom.⁵⁵ In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', for example, the dramatic monologue form makes the poem's brilliance possible: the distance it simulates between poet and persona is crucial to the poem's freedom of pathetic expression and sexual confession. The connection between successful allusion and '*personae*', or even 'our antimasks', is often made by Eliot.⁵⁶ The roles Eliot assumes in *The Waste Land*, be they Tiresias, Augustine or Dante, are also of this nature, ironically *distanced* from (contrasted with) himself and the 'modern life' that forms and surrounds him.

The manifold allusions of 'The Skaters', on the other hand, have no roots in drama or irony. There is, on the contrary, a rhetoric of presence regarding allusion and discourse, established in the poem's very first lines:

These decibels
Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound
Into which being enters and is apart. (*RM*, 34)

It is the sound of various vocabularies — 'these decibels' — rather than a parody or ironic citation that Ashbery claims to register. Eliot boasts of making 'innuendos... at the expense of Milton, Keats, Shelley'.⁵⁷ By contrast, I will argue, Ashbery does not even make allusions at all in Eliot's sense, for there is none of the knowingness

55 See A. D. Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994; Harold Bloom, *T. S. Eliot (Bloom's Critical Views)*, New York: Chelsea House, 1985; Gregory S. Jay, *Poetics of Literary History*; and also, Lobb, *Eliot and the Romantic Critical Tradition*.

56 For example, Matthew Arnold's poem, 'Heine's Grave', says Eliot,

is good poetry for the same reason that it is good criticism: because Heine is one of the *personae*, the masks, behind which Arnold is able to go through his performance... Sometimes a critic may choose an author to criticise, a role to assume, as far as possible the antithesis of himself, a personality which has actualised all that has been suppressed in himself; we can sometimes arrive at a very satisfactory intimacy with our antimasks. (*Use*, p. 112.)

57 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot, vol. 1, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988, p. 460.

of innuendo, no references at anybody's expense. Texts are not manipulated, mentioned or used; they are, rather, *listened to*.

Before going on to examples of this listening, it is important to note that Ashbery, prior to embarking himself on his intertextual voyage, lays out the central conflict of this strategy at the poem's beginning. 'Apart' but also 'a part' of the 'entity of sound', its flagellation makes for 'masses of inertia':

True, melodious tolling does go in that awful pandemonium,
Certain resonances are not utterly displeasing to the terrified eardrum.
Some paroxysms are dinning of tambourine, other suggest piano room or organ loft
For the most dissonant night charms us, even after death. This, after all, may be
happiness: tuba notes awash on the great flood, ruptures of xylophone,
violins, limpets, grace-notes, the musical instrument called serpent, viola de
gambas, aeolian harps, clavicles, pinball machines, electric drills, *que sais-je
encore!*

The performance has rapidly reached your ear; silent and tear-stained, in the post-mortem shock, you stand listening, awash... (35)

The problem, then, is one of passivity. The danger of Ashbery's listening is that 'Colors slip away from and chide us. The human mind / Cannot retain anything except perhaps the dismal two-note theme / Of some sodden "dump" or lament' (34). If Eliot is a too-active, overbearing participant in his tradition, an intertextuality that is simply 'awash' in its various discourses can hardly be said to offer a viable alternative. Ashbery is aware of the competition, and terms this impulse to 'stand listening, awash' the myth of 'invisible writing', using Eliot's catalyst metaphor to explain the concept:

But how luminous the fountain! Its sparks seem to aspire to reach the sky!
And so much energy in those bubbles. A wise man could contemplate his face in them
With impunity, but fools would surely do better not to approach too close
Because any intense physical activity like that implies danger for the unwary and the
uneducated. Great balls of fire!
In my day we used to make 'fire designs,' using a saturated solution of nitrate of
potash.
Then we used to take a smooth stick, and using the solution as ink, draw with it on
sheets of white tissue paper. Once it was thoroughly dry, the writing would be
invisible.
By means of a spark from a smoldering match ignite the potassium nitrate at any part
of the drawing,
First laying the paper on a plate or tray in a darkened room.
The fire will smolder along the line of the invisible drawing until the design is
complete. (49-50)

Acknowledging the intertextual nature of writing, its Babel 'aspir[ing] to reach the sky', Ashbery is nonetheless insistent on the creative powers of the fire as distinct from the lamely absorptive nature of the tissue paper: 'It is a scene worthy of the poet's pen; yet it is the fire demon / Who has created it, throwing it up on the dubious surface of a phosphorescent fountain / For all the world like a poet' (51).

It is in this sense that 'The Skaters' represents a profound development from the quasi-automatism of 'Europe'. So what is the nature of the 'listening' Ashbery goes on to do in the poem? In 'The Skaters' snatches of lines are heard in time rather than strategic allusions made or parody coolly affected. The discourses and memories surrounding the poem are constantly felt to 'Clamber to join in the awakening / To take a further role in my determination' (49). The textual world determines Ashbery's poetic self rather than the other way around. Rather than orchestrated, as in Eliot, or random, as in stereotypes of Ashbery based on Fredric Jameson's characterisation of postmodern pastiche, Ashbery's allusions are more usefully seen, initially, as associative. Speculating on the relationship of death and eternity in 'The Skaters', Ashbery is reminded of a figure of parallel lines, and one poem in particular. 'How strange that the narrow perspective lines / Always seem to meet, although parallel' (36), Ashbery writes, basing his metaphor on Marvell's 'Definition of Love':

As lines (so loves) oblique may well
Themselves in every angle greet:
But ours so truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet.⁵⁸

The meaning of Marvell's lines are in opposition to Ashbery's, and undermine them. Unlike in Eliot, though, the contrast is not the point; it merely heightens our impression of the nature of such snatches of poems as resonances rather than symbolic rationalisations.

Here is another allusion-rich passage:

The west wind grazes my cheek, the droplets come pattering down;
What matter now whether I wake or sleep?
The west wind grazes my cheek, the droplets come pattering down;
A vast design shows in the meadow's parched and trampled grasses.
Actually a game of 'fox and geese' has been played there, but the real reality,

58 Marvell, *Collected Poems*, p. 50.

Beyond truer imaginings, is that it is a mystical sign full of a certain significance,
Burning, sealing its way into my consciousness. (54)

In order, then: Shelley, Keats, Shelley again, Yeats ('vast design'), Stevens ('beyond truer imaginings'), Wordsworth ('sealing its way into my consciousness'), with the odd peppering from Ashbery's 'source' for the poem, the children's manual, *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do*. Why this arrangement? The architecture of the poem seems to be based whimsically on the children's book, following Ashbery's conception of a poem as 'a question of the relation between elements that are sort of given to one, or which one chooses arbitrarily when one starts to write a poem and which doesn't require any other justification'.⁵⁹ This text is hardly felicitous for explaining the meaning of these lines, however. The literary associations are where, so to speak, the poem gets serious. At these the poet first seems to pause, re-imbibing the sound of the Shelley allusion. Is the Keats reference then a dead-end? It certainly reads like a non-sequitur initially. Similarly, after the west wind and rain of Shelley we get some incompatible 'parched' grass. And here we see how the Keats reference — 'Do I wake or sleep?' — does have a resonance, and in fact explains the very centrifugality of the passage: for the final allusion, to Wordsworth's 'a slumber did my spirit seal' reveals the situation of the lines: the dream. Ashbery does not seem to make a point about romantic sensibility or imaginative dreaming, however — or, rather, his point is simply that romantics are simply very good at it, and very memorable when they describe it. The poem terms the figures it alludes to as simply 'Masters of eloquence', writers whose power lies in aurality, and writers who, as these passages show, are markedly different from Eliot's 'representatives of eastern and western asceticism', the likes of which form his citations.⁶⁰

The post- or even anti-Eliot bent of this approach is usefully articulated in comments by one of Ashbery's critics, Merle Brown, who in his essay 'Poetic Listening' comes out firmly in favour of the later poet:

Poets do not listen to themselves in their poems in an interpretive or hermeneutical way, although interpretation may be going on in a subsidiary manner within their distinctively poetic listening. The critic who substitutes his listening for the poetic listening of a poem blanks out its very life and inaugurates that long desiccating

59 Osti, 'Craft of John Ashbery', p. 87.

60 Eliot, *Collected Poems*, p. 84.

process of interpretation, that centrifugal spiral of allegorism away from the poem into vacuousness. Poetic listening, in contrast, is centripetal; it is a constant, living swathing of the expressiveness of the poem and is the source of the air that allows the poem to breathe. Poetic listening is the inner form of a poem.⁶¹

Eliot allegorises, Ashbery listens. And the listening, though it is ‘the inner form’ — the organising principle — of the poem, is nonetheless a principle embodied in an unorganised and fragmentary group of allusions based on the contingency of resonance. Its function is much more its local meaning than the overall effect it has in conjunction with all other allusions. As Ashbery suggests in his misreading of Eliot, we deal with fragments ‘by leaving them as they are’. When Ashbery speaks of his ‘fondness for a polyphony of clashing styles, from highbred to demotic, in a given poem’ (*RS*, 243), therefore — and ‘The Skaters’ has plenty of clashing styles, from crackerbarrel journalism to David Hume, from children’s books to Arthur Rimbaud — this is realised in his own poetry not as the Eliotic game of chess, as the clash-dichotomy, but as the natural result of a poetry that attempts to imitate the presence of past literature, rather than the pastness of the present. Ashbery’s is an intertextuality of rhythm rather than unity.

Ashbery has no concept of artistic genealogy; time operates in Ashbery as contemporaneity. With this, we are returned to the ideas of attention laid out in the introduction: Ashbery, that is, represents a ‘history of the present’ rather than Eliot’s history of Western civilisation. Rather than organising the past from on high with a ‘historical sense’ to reveal its inner workings, Ashbery uses the trope of inattention to allow the past to represent a picture of the mind in its present situation. In ‘The Skaters’, and its foundational metaphor of listening, Ashbery conceives of the present itself as rhythmic. In opposition to Eliot’s ideal of static aesthetic reception where if we ‘understand it the first time, then... it can’t be much good’, Ashbery describes his ‘poem / Which is in the form of falling snow’ thus:⁶²

...the individual flakes are not essential to the importance of the whole’s
becoming so much of a truism
That their importance is again called into question, to be denied further out, and again
and again like this.
Hence, neither the importance of the individual flake,
Nor the importance of the whole impression of the storm, if it has any, it is what it is,

61 Merle Brown, ‘Poetic Listening’, *New Literary History*, 10:1 (Autumn 1978), p. 132.

62 T. S. Eliot, *New York Post*, September 22, 1963.

But the rhythm of the series of repeated jumps, from abstract to positive and back to a slightly diluted abstract. (199)

This denies unity, and yet it is not simply the 'fragmented brilliance' of 'Europe'. And even less is it Lehman's 'forgetfulness' — memory plays a tangible part in every allusion made, indeed its tangible presence is one of the things that distinguishes Ashbery from Eliot. The long poem for Ashbery is a 'collection', as the poem terms it, in which listening, and rehearing, are collected.

'The articles we'd collect' (34) are of course the enactment of Ashbery's famous 'putting it all in' aesthetic, which is first named as such in 'The Skaters'. Ashbery's collection method, however, is not of the 'comprehensive' nature that Eliot demands,⁶³ nor is its aim to act as a receptacle of tradition or create an overall symbolic economy. 'The Skaters' contains allusions to Andrew Marvell, Daniel Defoe, David Hume, John Keats, J. W. M. Turner, Arthur Rimbaud, children's books and folk ballads, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera *Le Prophète* and Jerry Lee Lewis, to name a few, but nothing connects these allusions in the way Ovid, Dante, and Frazer are connected in *The Waste Land*.⁶⁴ In Ashbery's intertextuality of listening, it is the *act* of accumulation that is important. As 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood' tells us a decade later, 'to be ambling on's / The tradition more than the safe-keeping of it' (*HD*, 34). Ashbery's remarks on the importance of music to him are revealing here:

What I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of the argument remain unknown quantities. What remains is the structure, the architecture of the argument, scene or story. I would like to do this in poetry... But actually this is only a part of what I want to do, and I am not even sure I want to do it. I often change my mind about my poetry. I would prefer not to think I had any special aims in mind...⁶⁵

It is not so much the allusions themselves that matter to Ashbery, but rather the musical 'architecture' they can represent. By this, Ashbery does not solve all the problems of allusion. Rather, as in his discussions of Beddoes, Wheelwright et al

63 Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 65.

64 The New York School generally had a tendency toward such variety. *Locus Solus*, the magazine Ashbery and other New Yorkers published in the early sixties, clearly placed an emphasis on arbitrary collecting rather than selecting in the traditional manner of a *New Criterion*. It contained, among other things, the Troubadours, Abraham Cowley, Beat poets, ninth-century Chinese and fifteenth-century Japanese poetry, Dwight Eisenhower, Sir John Suckling, Robert Southey and the Italian Futurists.

65 Quoted in Howard, *Alone*, pp. 29-30. Quotation originally from 1964.

seen above, Ashbery takes a 'great deal on faith' — he hopes his allusions can be 'convincing' though they remain 'unknown quantities', and the basis of this faith is in Ashbery's confidence in himself as a listener. As Ashbery later says: 'I stupidly hope there'll be a kind of buzz given off by these references that readers will enjoy'.⁶⁶

The importance of this musical architecture to Ashberyan allusion is obvious from 'The Skaters' onwards. It is no accident that Ashbery often lights upon the word 'echo' in describing his allusive habits, linking the idea again to listening and aurality:

There are a lot of echoes in my work... of the poetry of the past which I feel very close to in certain ways. I don't want to simply repeat this language but to stretch and expand it, much in the same way, I guess, as Stravinsky did in his neoclassical music, where he used music by Pergolesi and Tchaikovsky...⁶⁷

Stretching and expanding, distinct enough from both banal repetition and Eliotic contrast, are apt terms for continuing the 'echo' metaphor, and expanding Ashbery's conception of reading generally as the echo of its situation. In *Three Poems*, another breakthrough work, Ashbery's 'idea', he says, 'was to allow all kinds of prose "voices" to have their say in what I hoped would be poetry'.⁶⁸ The resonances of the various voices are seen as determining the poem, not the other way around; however stretched by Ashbery's situation and forms of attention, the aim is to have the voices somehow 'have their say'. This architecture cannot claim to be unintentional, random or unconscious, but it can be distinguished from Eliot in being unplanned and unschematic. In the case of 'The Skaters', the 'terms of the argument' are rhythmic — they are styles, voices and allusions which, under the interpretive rubric of *The Waste Land*, are indeed 'unknown quantities'.

This brings us to a crucial distinction between Eliotic and Ashberyan obscurity, and the more fundamental conflict of aims in Eliotic and Ashberyan allusion. The architecture of 'The Skaters' is unknown by the reader:

What I originally intended to do in 'The Skaters' was to use the titles of the sections from that book [*Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do*] as titles—at the head of

66 Hickman, p. 83.

67 Ross Labrie, 'John Ashbery: An Interview by Ross Labrie', *The American Poetry Review*, May/June 1984, p. 32.

68 *Ibid.*, p.31.

each section. I began it that way actually, with a list of titles... but then I found that the poem was a lot more mysterious if I removed the scaffolding of titles.⁶⁹

Ashbery 'hides' his source for very different motives than Eliot has for providing notes in medieval Italian. Ashbery expresses a hope that the reader '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', and he is right to suggest that in his work the level of reference is less demanding.⁷⁰ His allusions to Shelley and Keats are in no sense as *particularly* important as Eliot's to Dante or Spenser, as we have seen. This is because, unlike Eliot, whose way of reading is programmatic, Ashbery insists that he is with us in the act of interpretation: 'I begin with unrelated phrases and notations that later on I hope get resolved in the course of the poem as it begins to define itself more clearly for me.'⁷¹

The importance of this motivation lies in its contrast with Eliot. Let us return to the crucial issue of reference and readerly knowledge. Here is an example of Eliot's thinking on the reception of allusion:

In one of my early poems ['Cousin Nancy'] I used, without quotation marks, the line 'the army of unalterable law' from a poem by George Meredith, and this critic accused me of having shamelessly plagiarised, pinched, pilfered that line. Whereas, of course, the whole point was that the reader should recognise where it came from and contrast it with the meaning of my own poem.⁷²

As usual, the contrast is very much the point. The desire to locate a readership by allusive gestures is by no means unique to Eliot. Even on the Left, Cecil Day Lewis expressed a desire to find a readership in a 'tiny, isolated unit with which communication is possible, with whom he can take a certain number of things for granted'.⁷³ Eliot's modernism, however, has pedagogical aims in addition to attempting to isolate a readership. This is in accord with the cultural programme of F. R. Leavis: 'if literary culture is to be saved it must be by conscious effort; by

69 In David Kermani, *John Ashbery: a comprehensive bibliography*, New York: Garland, 1976, pp. 80-1.

70 *Craft* interview, p. 123.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 118-9.

72 *The Bed Post: a miscellany of the Yorkshire Post*, ed. Kenneth Young, Midlothian: Macdonald, 1962, pp. 43-4.

73 Cecil Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1934, p.37.

education carefully designed to meet the exigencies of the time — the lapse of tradition, the cultural chaos and the hostility of the environment'.⁷⁴

Eliot's own method of 'conscious effort' in 1922 is the most memorable of all modernist cultural statements: the 'Notes' to *The Waste Land*. Eliot reminisced uneasily about them in later life:

The notes to *The Waste Land*! I had at first intended only to put down all the references for my quotations, with a view to spiking the guns of critics of my earlier poems who had accused me of plagiarism. Then, when it came time to print *The Waste Land* as a little book... it was discovered that the poem was inconveniently short, so I set to work to expand the notes, in order to provide a few more pages of printed matter, with the result that they became the remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship that is still on view today. I have sometimes thought of getting rid of these notes; but now they can never be unstuck... I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.⁷⁵

Admitting and dismissing that the search for origins plays a central part to the poem, Eliot distances himself from the notes. The notes are, however, consistent with the aim of the whole poem to antagonise. Robert Graves and Laura Riding were in no doubt as to where this left any kind of public readership: 'the modernist poet, left without any public but the highly trained literary connoisseur, does not hesitate to embody in his poems remote literary references which are unintelligible to the wider public and directly antagonise it.'⁷⁶ (If Ashbery has also found himself accused of academic pitching, it is generally not on grounds of erudition.) Eliot's antagonism is directed toward a large section of humanity — Riding and Graves are right to call it 'the public' — and antagonises it on a sensitive issue: education.

Eliot's notes consequently have a pointed pedagogical objective. Eliot praised Pound's poems for requiring in the reader 'a willingness to be trained', and their collaborative relationship doubtless has its roots in shared instructional ambitions.⁷⁷ The tutorial tone of some of the pointers Eliot gives to the reader in *The Waste Land* is clear enough: 'What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem'; 'The

74 F. R. Leavis, *How to Teach Reading: a primer for Ezra Pound*, Cambridge: G. Frazer, The Minority Press, 1932, p. 4.

75 T.S. Eliot, 'The Frontiers of Criticism,' in *On Poetry and Poets*, London: Faber and Faber, 1957, pp. 109-10.

76 Robert Graves and Laura Riding, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, New York: Doubleday, 1928: p. 258. Graves was equally unimpressed with Auden for very different reasons, however: 'Auden is a fraud: that is to say, a synthetic poet, plagiarizing in a curiously wholesale way... He gets hold of some good piece of work by someone which is not too well known, and vulgarises it.' (Quoted in Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, London: Vintage, 2003, p. 76).

77 Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 150.

collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not accidental'.⁷⁸ It doesn't end there, though. The most striking antagonism in the notes, and something Eliot also favours in the poem proper, is the use of foreign languages. This is the case especially the Ovid note (a scholarly language), but also in many other instances (the Hesse, Baudelaire and Dante, for example). It is probably this that William Carlos Williams had in mind when he claimed that Eliot had 'returned us to the classroom' — that is, not inasmuch as his poem was educational itself, but in that his work sent the reader off to develop a comprehensive scholarly knowledge before he could understand the poem.⁷⁹ As an antagonistic exercise of authority, the 'Notes' are a nod from Eliot to his ideal reader, and are part of a cruel-to-be-kind instruction. Pound himself, who had recently 'ordered the public... to take note of some certain poems', ludicrously suggested that the poem's obscurities were reducible to the four Sanskrit words.⁸⁰ He is correct only if one's Greek, Latin, German, French and medieval Italian are up to scratch, complementing a working knowledge of the Grail legend, Ovid, Dante and Elizabethan drama. The reason Pound sees no problem in the allusions is that he, enough of the time, 'gets' them; but it is difficult to imagine what a reader with no knowledge of Shakespeare or Ovid would take away from 'A Game of Chess'.

As Graves and Riding realised, Eliot's immediate pedagogical objective is as much discouragement as it is encouragement. The reader in fact becomes a symbol of the 'modern life' that reactionary modernists felt so anxious about. The incoherence of a note in another language is symbolic of the woeful inadequacy of any kind of 'common reader' by comparison with the ideal reader that Eliot's notes set up. There is a mode of address — a radical alternative to which Ashbery finds in Auden — which is intended to alienate the unschooled reader in *The Waste Land*. Indeed, to a large extent the poem is only fragmentary insofar as the loss of 'unified sensibility' is expressed in the reader's lack of educational wherewithal which the poem, and the notes particularly, are involved in exposing. The fragmentation is

78 Eliot, *Collected Poems*, p. 84. Pound, of course, does a similar thing in *Cathay*'s 'The Jewel Stair's Grievance': 'Note.—Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, there fore he has no excuse on account of the weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but soaks her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.'

79 William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography*, New York: Random House, 1951, p. 174.

80 Letter from Ezra Pound to Amy Lowell, August 1 1914, *Letters*, p. 38; see also Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot*, London: Methuen, 1974, p. 151.

symbolic of society's lack of knowledge of the 'civilisation' that goes into the poem. It may be Eliot's intention 'that the reader should recognise' his allusions, but his teaching in the notes is necessary for this recognition, and in this, recognition becomes divorced from communication, something most of Eliot's notes consciously avoid.

At the beginning of Ashbery's career in the 1940s, there were still critics like Northrop Frye to be found emphasising, in the shadow of poets like Eliot, Yeats and Pound, the necessity of 'the properly instructed reader'.⁸¹ In his own comments on poetry, however, Ashbery tells us that no such instruction is necessary. A journalist reports Ashbery's response to a question by a young woman at a reading in 2005:

'Not all of us in this room are poetry students,' she said. 'There are some of us who are fiction writers, and so I feel bad about the elementary nature of my question. I understand fiction, the way you can get absorbed in a book and get lost in a character, but I was wondering if you could help me to read poetry, because I find it very hard to get into and I was wondering if you might help me out.'

'Well, first of all you really don't have to if you don't want to,' he told her gently. The students laughed. 'As Marianne Moore says, I too dislike it; there are other things more important than all this fiddle. But if you're liking it enough to pick it up and go ahead, maybe one thing would be to forget yourself while you're reading it and not think that in order to appreciate it you have to have read a book about it. That's the way I read. And if you're not liking it put it aside, which I also do.'⁸²

Such an assertive rejection of discipline and aesthetic authority is liberating for readers and writers of poetry, particularly if viewed in the context of the academic, disciplined Middle Generation poets still dominant at the time of 'The Skaters'. Don't try to think too much, Ashbery advises, and if you still don't like reading it, put it aside. Ashbery also makes his own recommendation, however: You really don't have to if you don't want to, but, as a suggestion, Marianne Moore is very good on all of this. In a word, it is useful to view Ashbery, unlike Eliot, as encouraging.

Moore in fact should be, for Ashbery, the ideal example for an allusive practice that does not search for origin, that is accommodating of sources, that does not discourage reading (aspects of Moore's aesthetic that Eliot himself was sensitive

81 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957, p. 102.

82 MacFarquhar, p. 94.

to).⁸³ And Moore is important to Ashbery's work — though in terms of allusion, because Eliot dominates the field, it is Eliot that Ashbery's intertextuality feels forced to work around and distinguish itself from. Unsurprisingly, then, 'The Skaters' has its own nod to Eliot's notes, which significantly fabricates its citations, literally offering, in Eliot's own description of Marianne Moore, 'no encouragement whatever to the researcher of origins': 'Viz. "Rigg's Farm, near Aysgarth, Wensleydale," or the "Sketch at Norton"'; 'cf. Jeremy Taylor'. The 'researcher', Ashbery knows, is to be distinguished from the 'reader'. Ashbery offers instead a very different, and on the whole more heartening form of encouragement. In an enthusiasm for the opposite of origin, discussing the last word ('foehn') of his collaborative 1969 novel with James Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies*, Ashbery says: 'I liked the idea that people, if they bothered to, would have to open a dictionary to find out what the last word in the novel meant. They'd be closing one book and opening another.'⁸⁴ And hopefully, given that the definition will only be more words, opening another, and so on. This is an open, proliferating reference rather than one that homes in on originating ideas. The reference to 'foehn' is more forceful as *gesture* to open-endedness and intertextuality than as containing any kind of symbolic significance for his and Schuyler's novel specifically. To be sure, in this openness Ashbery does not solve all of the theoretical dilemmas and paradoxes associated with allusion.⁸⁵ All Ashbery's flexible poetic can do is mirror his own conception and

83 Eliot says: 'As for Miss Marianne Moore *her* notes to poems are always pertinent, curious, conclusive, delightful and give no encouragement whatever to the researcher of origins.' ('The Frontiers of Criticism,' pp. 109-10).

84 Stitt, p. 37.

85 There are of course conflicts within such a relaxed approach to allusion. That is, Ashbery is prone to getting it wrong. This reflection on a recent poem is typical of Ashbery:

It's something I think in principle one should avoid, but that brings up the whole question of what references are you going to have in your poem to have people understand them; how are you going to figure out what exactly is in the reader's brains? Will something resonate for the ideal reader whoever he or she is? It's a very vexed question of course, and one can only deal with each individual case. What you mention is something actually that put me off Pound's *Cantos* very much – I've never really been able to enjoy those. And I tend to say that one shouldn't put arcane references in one's poems, and yet I realise that I do, all the time. Particularly, there's a poem called 'Pavane pour Helen Twelvetrees', which was in one of my recent collections. First of all, hardly anybody knows who Helen Twelvetrees is – not even most movie buffs. She was a very minor actress of early talkies; and the poem alludes to scenes from a 1931 movie with her in it called *Her Man* that I saw at the *Cinémathèque* in Paris. Then I discovered from reading the film historian David Thomson that this is a 'lost film'. Although I saw it in the fifties, the *Cinémathèque's* housekeeping practices were very sloppy, and it could well have been lost since then. So nobody knows about it, and nobody reading the poem now could see this movie. Well how could I have done this? Because I really want people to get what I'm writing about! But I don't have the answer. I stupidly

reception of allusion and of poetry generally (no doubt Ashbery's use of 'foehn' is itself inspired by a dictionary definition). It is, again, ultimately a question of accepting a 'great deal on faith'.

Is Ashbery less radical than Eliot, then? David Trotter suggests that *Four Quartets*, the Middle Generation's more palatable because more conservative version of Eliot, was written 'for those who aimed to come to rest in a poetry that would realise poetically what they already believed, and so confirm their identity as Christians *and* as readers.'⁸⁶ Does Ashbery, like Lowell, take a populist option in his reading of Eliot? If we take 'radical' to be synonymous with 'elitist', as many of Eliot's later followers like J. H. Prynne have, then clearly Ashbery comes off as postmodernism's poet of the *laissez-faire* and status quo platitudes. But if we consider the New York avant-garde in the context of an elitism whose modernist monuments had become increasingly authoritative and respectable in the 1950s and 60s, then Ashbery emerges rather differently. In placing the reader at the centre of the poem Ashbery enforces a crucial break with Eliot that in turn represents a radical break with the author-centric poetic of the last two hundred years. For Eliot simply shifts the paradigm of the poet from inspired genius to erudite scholar, remaining a romantic teacher of mankind in a new, professional sense of the word. Authority remains at the centre of Eliot's intertextuality.

As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, authority for Ashbery is happily undermined by what Leavis laments as the 'hostility of environment', the distracting (and for Leavis therefore bad) interference of the situation. While for most modernists environment is to be resisted and separated from the 'truly' meaningful experience of abstracted Tradition, for Ashbery the situation is to be embraced, attended and listened to. It is tempting to read this inauthoritative, liberal indeterminacy as apathy, and in Ashbery's least impressive poetry it sometimes is, but Ashbery's best work has ambitions of its own. What Ashbery promotes is a method of reading, not a reading list, not interpretations or a set of essential themes. Ashbery stresses the importance of not abstracting poetry from one's situation. Though 'fascinated' by attempts at 'correcting the whole mismanaged mess',

hope there'll be a kind of buzz given off by these references that readers will enjoy even though they won't be getting it. (Hickman, p. 83)

86 David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: language and subjectivity in modern American, English and Irish poetry*, London: Macmillan, 1984, p. 126.

Ashbery knows that he personally can ‘be of no help’ to us in such an enterprise (40). As a poet, Ashbery places himself not as Pound’s ‘antennae of the race’, but, regarding other texts, in a position to be equated with the reader of his poem. Unlike Eliot’s responses to art, which are that of the *scholar* (as, in a less radical way, are Lowell’s), Ashbery’s are much closer to what we might call, by contradistinction, the *reader*. Whereas Eliot’s allusive practice relies on the fact that no one else reads like him, Ashbery’s poetry attempts a universalism that imitates a situation of everyday reading, and is flexible to the demands of the quotidian implicit in this situation. Ashbery enacts how reading can be done. As in that revealing change of heart for the title of his Norton lectures from ‘The Other Tradition’ to ‘Other Traditions’, Ashbery puts forward a tradition that attempts to be, in the term of ‘The Skaters’, a ‘General Delivery’ (41).

It is tempting to suggest that Ashbery’s departure from Eliot depends on his relative obscurity as a poet in these early years. Eliot, to an extent, assumes a position of authority in his poetry because he has already found one in criticism; Ashbery can do what he likes. But in the late seventies when Ashbery, as is often noted, assumes the kind of pre-eminence and audience in English-language poetry that Eliot held up until his death, there is none of the accompanying pedagogical authority, and Ashbery’s work in this period shows more continuity with ‘The Skaters’ than with Eliot. In *Houseboat Days*, for example, Ashbery’s 1977 collection published after *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, we see similar intertextual strategies. There is no time to go into this fully here, but in the musically inspired, and later musically inspiring, poem on the myth of Orpheus, ‘Syringa’,⁸⁷ with the historical present of ‘Daffy Duck in Hollywood’, in which Milton’s Satan is superimposed onto the ‘comings and goings’ (32) of the cartoon character,⁸⁸ in the send-up of pedagogical poetic aims in ‘Variant’, there is no break in Ashbery’s divergence from Eliot. When Ashbery selects an obscure fifteenth-century ballad for

87 ‘I have no “Poetic Theory.” The reason I wrote a poem about Orpheus was that as I was preparing to sit down and write some poetry I slipt a record on my turntable which happened to be Monteverdi’s ‘Orfeo’, and I thought, well, why not? A hackneyed subject, no doubt, but perhaps as good as any other.’ (Undated letter to Robert Stevens, Houghton Library, Harvard.) Ashbery’s poem was also put to music by Elliott Carter shortly after its publication.

88 ‘I went to a program of animated cartoons at a museum in New York a year or so ago at the same time I was reading *Paradise Lost*. There was a Daffy Duck cartoon in which you see the pencil of the cartoonist sort of adding extra limbs and erasing the head and various parts... and I somehow subconsciously associated this with the idea of God in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, who always seemed to me very comically conspicuous in his absence... So I seemed to have somehow associated Satan with Daffy Duck.’ (Quoted in Shoptaw, p. 203.)

its ‘tripping urgency of repartee’ as the basis of his long poem, ‘Fantasia on “The Nut-Brown Maid”’, it is intertextuality based on matters of tone once again.⁸⁹ ‘What I am writing to say is, the timing, not / The contents, is what matters,’ (85) Ashbery says in the poem. As in ‘Self-Portrait’ and ‘The Skaters’, in these poems allusion is all surface, and all reader-centric. While ‘others, patient murderers’ have sabotaged poetry with their ‘ambiguities of “the deep”’, Ashbery himself claims that ‘To learn more / Isn’t my way’, and that meaning is rather ‘in the public domain’ (75). Like the ‘HE’ and ‘SHE’ of ‘Fantasia’ ‘Thinking about each other’, a preoccupation with communication still marks Ashbery’s use of allusion well into his later career. In ‘Loving Mad Tom’, for example, a poem from *Houseboat Days* about and alluding to Eliot, this preoccupation at once makes allowances for the Elder Statesman and respectfully signals Ashbery’s departure from him:

...sometimes
Out of a pure, unintentional song, the meaning
Stammered nonetheless, and your zeal could see
To the opposite shore... (16)

Alluding to *Four Quartets*’s ‘way of putting it’, Ashbery refers to ‘a way of getting here’. This seems to sum up Ashbery’s compromise with Eliot: the means of a radically allusive poetic used toward very different ends. Embryonically in the oversimplified accidentalism of ‘Europe’ and more fully in the developed and compelling contingency of rhythm in ‘The Skaters’, the content of Ashbery’s transformation of Eliotic allusive strategies manifests itself as a move away from organization and antagonism and toward a listening whose contemporaneity always has the reader in mind. Eliot somehow ‘unintentionally’ contributes to this allusive practice, but just as importantly, his pedagogical ‘zeal’ is noted by Ashbery, who stands on the significantly ‘opposite’ shore.

89 Letter to R. B. Kitaj, December 7, 1976.

CHAPTER FIVE

The first and most important influence: Ashbery and W. H. Auden

As Ashbery's candidate for the twentieth century's greatest poet in the language, W. H. Auden's influence on post-war English, American, and indeed all world poetry in English has been immense. This side of the Atlantic, far beyond his immediate though crucial importance as leader of 'the Auden circle' and to thirties English poetry generally, Auden has been a central post-war figure not only for important poets like Ted Hughes, Thomas Kinsella and Seamus Heaney, but for whole movements in British poetry (one thinks particularly of The Movement). A list of American poets under Auden's influence, on the other hand, could be a who's-who in post-war American poetry, and would at the least include Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Robert Duncan, Elizabeth Bishop, Karl Shapiro, Allen Ginsberg, James Merrill, James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara and, of course, Ashbery himself. If we add to this Auden's profound influence on Nobel Prize winners Joseph Brodsky and Derek Walcott, it is perhaps surprising, even scandalous, that the sense of the huge shadow Auden casts over modern poetry has been lost in recent years. Ashbery responds accordingly to a question in a 1983 interview:

Interviewer: Why is it always Auden?

Ashbery: It's odd to be asked today what I saw in Auden. Forty years ago when I first began to read modern poetry no one would have asked — he was *the* modern poet. Stevens was a curiosity, Pound probably a monstrosity, William Carlos Williams — who hadn't yet published his best poetry — an 'imagist.' Eliot and Yeats were too hallowed and anointed to count.¹

¹ Stitt, p. 38.

Unlike with other writers this thesis has surveyed, Ashbery's relationship with Auden is a close and direct one. Ashbery knew Auden; he wrote his undergraduate thesis on him; *Some Trees*, Ashbery's first collection, was chosen by Auden for the Yale Younger Poets series in 1956. Ashbery is constantly at pains to assert his sense that the older poet has not just been important to him, but *the* influence on his work.

I particularly admired Auden, whom I would say was the first big influence on my work, more so than Stevens.²

...W. H. Auden, chronologically the first and therefore the most important influence. (*OT*, 4)

I think [Auden] played a much more important role in my formation as a poet than other poets I have been associated with, such as Stevens.³

...it was Auden who ultimately became for me *the* modern poet, the one I hoped most to emulate. (Robert Frost Medal speech, *SPr*, 247)

Despite this, none of Ashbery's three big-name critics (Bloom, Vendler and Perloff) discuss Auden's influence on Ashbery, and there is just one essay attending to the issue, published only recently.⁴ 'Once,' notes Ashbery, 'when I pointed out to him that he sort of ignored Auden's effect on me, Harold [Bloom] told me, "Nonsense, darling. You only *think* you were influenced by Auden. But it's Stevens who made you who you are".'⁵ The project of establishing Wallace Stevens as the greatest poet of the twentieth century has been central to this revisionist exclusion of Auden. If for Bloom and others it is Stevens who is *the* modern poet, it is also Auden (who, for Bloom, has two strikes against him: he is not American and his best work is politically engaged) who is the century's most overrated poet. Perloff's question, 'Stevens/Pound: whose era?' has been similarly influential in marginalising Auden (while Language poetry generally knows of no twentieth-century tradition which can include Auden).⁶

2 Stitt, p. 37.

3 Herd, 'Ashbery in Conversation', pp. 32-33.

4 Aidan Wasley, 'The Gay Apprentice: Ashbery, Auden, and the Portrait of the Artist as Young Critic', *Contemporary Literature*, 43:4 (Winter 2002), pp. 667-708. In Britain, Geoff Ward, has also written at some length on the Auden connection in his *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1993, pp. 94-113.

5 Wasley, p. 668.

6 In fact, even in the earliest terms of Ashbery reception, as a New York avant-garde artist in the fifties, the contemporary American culture industry can simply find no place for Auden. If Ashbery was a poet writing in Britain the issue of Auden's influence would not even be questioned, but since a whole project for an *American* art is in full flight (as Serge Guilbaut maps out in *How New York Stole*

Ashbery's undergraduate thesis on Auden, written in 1949, however, tells its own story.⁷ In it, Ashbery makes it clear that Auden is, for him, the era's greatest living poet. The thesis also introduces some of the particulars of Ashbery's reading of Auden. Significantly entitled 'The Poetic Medium of W. H. Auden', Ashbery's discussion and evaluation of Auden is based entirely at the level of communicative medium, of Auden's manner and style. Indeed, the pervasive argument of the essay is that style in Auden cannot be detached from content:

It is often said that we read so-called 'intellectual' poetry for its style rather than its content... Such a false division between form and content presupposes two boxes, one of which contains old, hashed-over ideas which everyone assimilated years ago, and from which the poet takes whatever he needs to 'stuff' his poem; and the other, brand-new, unthought-of ideas, to which the philosopher resorts when seeking inspiration. But there are no new ideas, any more than there are any old ones; there are merely old and new ways of looking at the world... a poet with a brilliant style and no ideas is as inconceivable as a didactic poem... [Auden] could never be expected to have created a style which is an article, useless and decorative, to be left around to clutter up the meaning of a poem.

No ideas but in style. Speaking of Auden's early charade, *Paid on Both Sides*, Ashbery suggests that in 'appropriat[ing] the irrationality and disjointedness of the sagas', Auden has reflected a modern 'inability to think consecutively'; the charade's 'obscurity', for Ashbery, is more 'an asset than a liability, since it adds to the general sense of futility and the unreason of the action'. Claims for the mimesis of form, something familiar in Ashbery's poetics, will be one focus of this chapter.

In the Harvard thesis, all the interest Ashbery takes in Auden's work is premised on this concern with style. There is Auden's diction and colloquialisms, and his 'overwhelming... tendency to give the abstract "a local habitation and a name"'; his 'vast, hygienic self-consciousness' and reader-consciousness, or 'his intense awareness of exactly what the average reader takes for granted'; his 'many styles' and polyphony, and so on. These are all things that should not be overlooked in Ashbery's own work, though for critics under the influence of Bloom and Vendler, Ashbery may as well be writing Miltonic blank verse. A reader of such criticism, which covers most of the early and most influential thought on Ashbery, would be totally unaware of a writer whose immense formal experimental achievements and

the Idea of Modern Art) and the space for old-world figures, including Eliot, diminishes, it is almost inevitable that Auden should be struck from the historical record of post-war American culture.

⁷ The Harvard thesis is at the Houghton Library with the rest of Houghton's Ashbery archive (box AM-6).

distinctive style has changed the course of American poetry. Since no two poets have made *manner* more central to achievement than Auden and Ashbery, this resistance to any discussion of Auden's influence on Ashbery has been, above all else, the cause of a fundamental misreading of Ashbery's poetry, and indeed therefore of post-war American poetry generally.

What follows then is a further account of Ashbery's style. Thus far, this has been the subject of this thesis generally, but with Ashbery's reading of Auden the case is slightly different. Unique and idiosyncratic as always, Ashbery's reading of Auden is revealing of him as a reader. But more than this, it is Auden that permits Ashbery's reading of English poetry generally; and even more fundamentally, it is Auden that is the formative figure in making Ashbery *a reader*. The things I will discuss under this heading of style — manner, performance and tone — will in fact show how Ashbery becomes a reader through reading Auden; how it is the particular manner, address and voice of Ashbery's Auden that allows the reading of English poetry so central to Ashbery's achievement, and so profound an expression of writing poetry in the wake of reading it.

1. '*A silence already filled with noises*'

Ashbery begins reading Auden in 1944, at the age of seventeen, on the advice of a family friend: 'She was the only person I knew who'd read any poetry and she told me I should read a lot of Auden's poetry, so I did and I found myself seeming to understand it and became mad about it'.⁸ This follows Ashbery's insistence that Auden was 'the first', but it also reveals a number of things about this first love. It is evident, for instance, both from these comments and the poetry, that Ashbery begins reading Auden outside both a concept of modernism and of canonicity (he distinguishes Auden from the 'anointed' Eliot and Yeats, and the 'monstrous' Pound). In the narrative Ashbery outlines here, Auden could have been the most obscure figure for all Ashbery knew (or cared), and the relationship was one conducted largely outside of literary history. This reading is par for the course with

⁸ Wasley, p. 668.

most seventeen-year-olds, but with Ashbery it is carried through to his undergraduate days at Harvard, where the daunting course reading lists constitute nothing less than 'The English Canon'. Even later for Ashbery, the relationship is still best summed up as a 'crush':

Auden was the first modern poet I read [and] after a while I was completely smitten with his work and tended to write like him. I think he played a much more important role in my formation as a poet than other poets I have been associated with, such as Stevens, who I didn't read for a while... I think it is always the first literary crush that is the important one.⁹

Auden captivates Ashbery. As Ashbery recalls of their first meeting, as with most crushes, it was hard for the younger poet to rationalise his reaction: 'It was very hard to talk to him since he already knew everything. I once said to Kenneth Koch, "What are you supposed to say to Auden?"' And he said that about the only thing there was to say was "I'm glad you're alive."¹⁰

Ashbery's first collection ends up not only being written out of Auden but also *for* the older poet who was judging the competition, eventually selecting *Some Trees* for the prize. The presence of Auden in this collection is so palpable that it seems superfluous to demonstrate it. There are two types of Auden poem in the collection that should be distinguished, however.

'I guess it was just a desire to emulate that started me writing poetry,' Ashbery speculates in later career.¹¹ It is indeed emulation that forms the first kind of Auden poem in *Some Trees*. Here are poems that now seem like anomalies in Ashbery's oeuvre; poems that deal with 'An unendurable age' (*ST*, 21) — that is, those that take on the classic Auden theme of adolescence:

She has descended part way!
Now father cut me down with tears.
Plant me far in my mother's image
To do cold work of books and stones. ('Eclogue', 13)

I'll do what the raids suggest,
Dad, and that other livid window,
But the tide pushes an awful lot of monsters
And I think it's my true fate. ('A Boy', 20)

9 Herd, 'Ashbery in Conversation', pp. 32-33.

10 Stitt, p. 38.

11 Stitt, p. 33.

That is how I came nearer
To what was on my shoulder. One day you were lunching
With a friend's mother; I thought how plebeian all this testimony
That you might care to crave that, somehow
Before I would decide. ('The Way They Took', 66)

The Freudian architecture here, so evidently inspired by Auden, is something unfamiliar to readers of later Ashbery. This is not simply a question of subject matter, however. Often the mode of its communication is based on Auden's early use of mysterious telegraphese and treacherous syntax, his insertions of unrelated clauses and fragmented landscape elements to get an effect of intrigue and foreboding:

VI [from Poems]

Nor was that final, for about that time
Gannets blown over northward, going home,
Surprised the secrecy beneath the skin.

'Wonderful was that cross and I full of sin.
Approaching, utterly generous, came one
For years expected, born only for me.'

Returned from that dishonest country, we
Awake, yet tasting the delicious lie:
And boys and girls, equal to be, are different still.

No, these bones shall live, while daffodil
And saxophone have something to recall
Of Adam's brow and the wounded heel.¹²

Even the disjunctiveness of *The Tennis Court Oath* can be seen as a means to effect and foreground this atmosphere; Ashbery's 1962 collection no doubt exaggerates Auden's comparatively modest disjunctions, but nonetheless achieves similar results. The abbreviated diary form of 'The Ascetic Sensualists', for instance, seems typical of what the collection as a whole lifts directly from Auden's 1932 work, *The Orators*, a book I shall look at in more detail later:

FOURTH FUNERAL

So we sabotaged the car
The rangers loved. Not to protect
Is to give all, we found
Under the tropical night.

12 W. H. Auden, *The English Auden: poems, essays and dramatic writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson, London: Faber, 1977, p. 24.

The weeds, miserable, and yet, topmast,
The performance is worth knives.

We shall not call you
On that. Panorama. Over the flue garage
The sky was blue fudge.
The sky was white as flour—the sky
Like some baker's apron. Or the margarine
Of an April day. Pig. The sea. Ancient smoke.

FIFTH FUNERAL

After the New Year
The tide changed.
Green thorns flushed in from the New England coasts and swamps,
All kinds of things
To make you think. Oh heart
You need these things, leaves and nubile weeds,
I guess, ever present.
They changed the time
And we were supposed to back an hour earlier. (*TCO*, 52-3)

In this we are moving closer to a more lasting appropriation, which brings us to the second type of Auden poem we find in Ashbery's early work.

A number of the best poems from both *Some Trees* and *The Tennis Court Oath* utilise the disjunctive elisions of Auden's work to other ends, as they begin to both focus on and abstract Auden's style. This can be seen in one of Ashbery's shortest poems, 'The Grapevine' (*ST*, 19). 'The Grapevine', again heavily reliant on the example of Auden, builds on the 'coded' poems of unsolvable mystery in the early Auden, exemplified in the poem later called 'The Secret Agent'. Here are the two pieces together:

Control of the passes was, he saw, the key
To this new district, but who would get it?
He, the trained spy, had walked into the trap
For a bogus guide, seduced with the old tricks.

At Green hearth was a fine site for a dam
And easy power, had they pushed the rail
Some stations nearer. They ignored his wires:
The bridges were unbuilt and trouble coming.
The street music seemed gracious now to one
For weeks up in the desert. Woken by water
Running away in the dark, he often had
Reproached the night for a companion
Dreamed of already. They would shoot, of course,
Parting easily who were never joined.¹³

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

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

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

13 *English Auden*, p. 25.

In addition to the atmosphere of intrigue, 'The Grapevine' illustrates a number of other continuations of Auden. First of all, both poems thematize and formalize communication. 'The Secret Agent' not only questions the very notion of agency, it also troubles address generally: who, we ask, is speaking here? And who is being spoken to? Who is the 'one'? Who 'ignored his wires', 'were never joined'? Ashbery's poem exaggerates this tendency toward the ambiguity of agents. In his poem, all pronouns are subject to a profound confusion by dint of a speaker, in the words of *Some Trees*' opening poem, 'not of singular authority' (9). In Ashbery's compendious case of Chinese whispers we get the feeling the pronouns have somehow been changed, but by whom? The ambiguities are rife: after they found us we grew, yet *they* die thinking us the causes of their acts; they also simultaneously date from us and cause what we think we are; while the 'you' knows 'all' about them, the 'we' is seemingly in the dark about everything: the truth of some still at the piano, how to die, whom they must get to know, and what 'we know' in the intransitive sense; and finally, they ('we') can only 'think' of who they are, while the 'you' knows (yet the we knows that the you knows). Here, foreboding has taken a specific form: that of the 'secret'. Where in other poems the sexual 'secret' ultimately stands revealed, in 'The Grapevine' meaning is intentionally held back.

Ashbery's perception of a paradoxical 'awareness of impenetrable mystery, which persists throughout [Auden's] poetry' is revealing here. Meaning is not under surveillance by the poet; rather, in another Ashbery 'shield of a greeting', the poet invites interpretations that he cannot refute. Indeed, his reticence is allowed to mean itself; Edward Mendelson's point about the early Auden is one Ashbery certainly follows: 'the absence of a clue is the clue itself. The poems' central subject is their own failure to be part of any larger interpretative frame'.¹⁴ Like 'The Secret Agent', then, the thematization of intrigue in 'The Grapevine' is primarily a formal performance of that intrigue (the genre of detective fiction that Auden often utilises will become important later). It is in fact an entirely new communicative medium that Auden opens up in his spy poems, and one which Ashbery will later realise and develop in more important poems than 'The Grapevine'.

¹⁴ Edward Mendelson, *The Early Auden*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1983, p. 10.

It is when the unsaid is allowed to perform the very possibility of poetry, rather than simply enacting its potential for problems, that we see Ashbery's most fruitful development of Auden. In this, Ashbery both follows and diverges from Auden who, in his 'English' incarnation at least, is always concerned with communication breakdown. Here is a poem Auden wrote in 1927 and later called 'The Letter', and Ashbery's title poem from *Some Trees*, one of Ashbery's very first published poems, written in 1948:

From the very first coming down
 Into a new valley with a frown
 Because of the sun and a lost way,
 You certainly remain: to-day
 I, crouching behind a sheep-pen, heard
 Travel across a sudden bird,
 Cry out against the storm, and found
 The year's arc a completed round
 And love's worn circuit re-begun,
 Endless with no dissenting turn.
 Shall see, shall pass, as we have seen
 The swallow on the tile, Spring's green
 Preliminary shiver, passed
 A solitary truck, the last
 Of shunting in the Autumn. But now,
 To interrupt the homely brow,
 Thought warmed to evening through and through
 Your letter comes, speaking as you,
 Speaking of much but not to come.

Nor speech is close nor fingers numb
 If love not seldom has received
 An unjust answer, was deceived.
 I, decent with the seasons, move
 Different or with a different love,
 Nor question overmuch the nod,
 The stone smile of this country god
 That never was more reticent,
 Always afraid to say more than it meant.¹⁵

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.

These are amazing: each
 Joining a neighbor, as though speech
 Were a still performance.
 Arranging by chance

And glad not to have invented
 Some comeliness, we are surrounded:
 A silence already filled with noises,
 A canvas on which emerges

A chorus of smiles, a winter morning.
 Placed in a puzzling light, and moving,
 Our days put on such reticence
 These accents seem their own defense.

(*ST*, 37)

The poems' common ground, besides the identical rhyme scheme, lies in what they hold back: the specific romantic situation, the sex and sexuality of the parties involved, the long-term implications of the events, and so on. Auden's poem, 'reticent, / Always afraid to say more than it meant', affects by what it doesn't say. The consolation of the 'country god', and finally the poem, comes from its tactful reticence, its pliability that allows a favourable interpretation for the poet. That is,

¹⁵ *English Auden*, p. 25.

the landscape, in its very lack of self-imposed meaning, can be freely interpreted as empathising with the pained ‘close’ speech and ‘numb[ness]’ of a speaker now happily ‘decent with the seasons’.

This reticence is echoed in ‘Some Trees’.¹⁶ In Ashbery’s poem, the fact that we are ‘suddenly what the trees try // To tell us we are’ (with the lover doubling as reader in both poems) means that the very presentation here, the ‘still performance’, is sufficient: ‘These accents seem their own defense’. With a speaker ‘glad not to have invented / Such comeliness’, the poem attempts to recreate the feeling of a reluctance to interfere in the event of love. Indeed, even the reticence itself goes unspecified as ‘*such* reticence’. Like the ‘stone smile’ of Auden’s poem, or the ‘shield of a greeting’ of ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’, ‘Some Trees’ makes an invitation that is attractive because of its very reticence. The self-limiting authorship of both poems, and their simultaneity of the unspoken and the invitational, creates the paradoxical situation ‘Some Trees’ describes, ‘A [writerly] silence already filled with [readerly] noises’. In both poems, we are ultimately party to a reticence of intention: not ‘question[ing] overmuch the nod’, both poets are constrained to present to readers an interpretation that the scene simply ‘mean[s] *something*’.

This stylistic breakthrough (and ‘Some Trees’ is a breakthrough poem for Ashbery) has far-reaching effects that clearly go beyond the usual, limited conception of ‘style’ that Ashbery criticises in his thesis. Ashbery’s reading is in contrast to Auden’s most visible American influence on the formalism of James Merrill and his followers. Merrill’s Auden is the ‘father of forms’, while Richard Howard and J. D. McClatchy speak of ‘detaching’ from Auden his ‘poetical practice’ and the ‘technical’ — ‘the occasional stanza scheme, a model for handling syllabics, that sort of thing’.¹⁷ Ashbery’s concern for style, on the other hand, has little to do with metrics. Merrill’s ‘WHA’ figure in *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1976-82) gives guidance on the right meter for heavenly voices, speculating on the significance of the nine-line stanza, and even when speaking of the poet’s societal role, he does so in deft Popean rhyming couplets, offering above all a lesson in technical pastiche. Auden’s role in formalism is not significantly different from the

16 And, two decades later, in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*’s ‘As One Put Drunk Into the Packet-Boat’, where Ashbery concludes the collection’s opening poem thus: ‘The summer demands and takes away too much, / But night, the reserved, the reticent, gives more than it takes’ (SP, 2).

17 James Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, New York: Knopf, 1993, p. 135; *The W.H. Auden Society Newsletter 19: After Auden*, <http://www.audensociety.org/19newsletter.html>

lessons in *craft* Middle Generation poets took from Eliot and the writers he had recommended. Ashbery's reading, even at this early stage, says something different about Auden. As in all Ashbery's readings, both form and content are paradoxically elided in favour of something somehow akin to both: manner.

What this discussion has begun to observe, then, is the central issue of authority in Ashbery's work. In these early poems one sees how Ashbery begins to develop a wholly new poetic at the centre of which is an Audenesque paradigm of poetic authority. Specifically, as I will demonstrate, Auden's influence here is found in terms of address, manner and a particular reticent 'temperament', from which Howard and company feel it necessary to abstract formal lessons. It is this particular emphasis built into Ashbery's reading of Auden that will allow us to identify, at a more precise level, the effect of Auden on the development of Ashbery's tone and voice.

2. 'Turning out to greet you'

Recently, critics of Ashbery have found themselves in search of a term to replace the essentially modernist concept of 'difficulty' on which to found descriptions of his work. The most widespread and successful of these terms is that of 'reticence', at which a number of commentators seem to have arrived independently, and which has been used most notably in John Shoptaw's book, *On the Outside Looking Out*. Perhaps the most systematic articulation of this tendency is in an essay that discusses precisely Auden's relationship with Ashbery, Aidan Wasley's 'The Gay Apprentice'. Wasley suggests that Ashbery

construes the relationship between poet and reader as a romantic, even erotic one... poetry serves as an expression of longing in the face of loss, and as a space of hopeful exchange in a world of alienation and isolation... [Ashbery's] poems reach out hopefully to the reader, like a lover yearning for an ideal partner, even as those poems acknowledge and enact the difficulty, if not impossibility, of that ambition. The difficulty of an Ashbery poem, with all its evasions, revisions, and misrepresentations... is the difficulty of the wounded, and therefore guarded, lover whose desire for the beloved manifests itself in a reticence that is also a challenge.¹⁸

18 Wasley, p. 671.

Reticence has been useful in discussions of Ashbery because, unlike difficulty, it implies the dialogue so important to Ashbery's originality. However, as here, the word has also been taken in an essentially 'confessional' sense that seems not to apply to Ashbery's work and does little to distance it from other American poetry of the forties and fifties. It has, that is, largely in the terms above, been applied in discussions of homosexuality in Ashbery's work.¹⁹ Broadly in this, reticence is the reticence of the gay man trying simultaneously to express and conceal his sexuality (this is also the premise of John Shoptaw's conception of Ashbery's 'misrepresentative poetics').

This has led to a narrow conception of reticence quite different from the one we have begun to witness, and the opposite of Ashbery's more inclusive intentions:

Well, if my poetry is oblique, it's because I want to slant it at as wide an audience as possible, odd as it may come out in practice. Therefore, if I'm writing a love poem it won't talk about specifics but just about the general feeling which anybody might conceivably be able to share.²⁰

Withholding specifics is not the romantic irony that explicators of Ashbery's homotextuality want to claim — not, that is, still another case of artistic *expression* — but rather a form of openness that begins to trouble, by 'slant[ing]', the very aesthetic concepts of inside and out, of self-expression and readerly response.

I suggest that we replace concepts of Ashbery's poetry as inspiring an interpretive zeal analogous to the intimacy of love with a related, but ultimately opposite, notion of *good manners*.

Interviewer: Do you like to tease or play games with the reader?

Ashbery: I guess it depends on what you mean by 'tease'. It's all right if it's done affectionately, though how can this be with someone you don't know? I would like

19 For discussions of Ashbery's homoerotic poetic see, Harold Beaver, 'The Dandy at Play', *Parnassus*, 9:2 (1981), pp. 54-61; David Bergman, 'Choosing Our Fathers: Gender and Identity in Whitman, Ashbery, and Richard Howard', *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*, Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1991, pp. 44-63; Lee Edelman, 'The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32 (1986), pp. 95-114; Thomas E. Yingling, *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990; Catherine Imbiglio, "'Our days put on such reticence": The Rhetoric of the Closet in John Ashbery's *Some Trees*', *Contemporary Literature*, 36:2 (1995), pp. 249-288; Wasley; and Shoptaw.

20 Interview with John Tranter. See johntranter.com/interviewer/ashb85.shtml

to please the reader, and think that surprise has to be an element of this, and that may necessitate a certain amount of teasing. To shock the reader is something else again. That has to be handled with great care if you're not going to alienate and hurt him, and I'm firmly against that, just as I disapprove of people who dress with that in mind — dye their hair blue and stick safety pins through their noses and so on. The message here seems to be merely aggression — 'hey you can't be part of my strangeness' sort of thing. At the same time I try to dress in a way that is just slightly off, so the spectator, if he notices, will feel slightly bemused but not excluded, remembering his own imperfect mode of dress.²¹

This is probably the most bizarre, but also the most revealing thing Ashbery has ever said in an interview. Though the idea of 'teas[ing] affectionately' seems to give credence to critics tempted to sexualise the relationship between reader and writer in Ashbery's work, Ashbery's overall point here is something quite different. What Ashbery says pertains to the purely Platonic: 'care', inclusion, non-aggression, an effort to please — in essence, because the affectionate attitude is always towards 'someone you don't know', it is best said with good manners.²²

There is something unique about the *polite* avant-garde figure Ashbery so fundamentally is. I like Geoff Ward's suggestion that Ashbery is 'probably the least likely person in the world to grow an Old Testament beard and appear on stage playing primitive instruments', but this is only one of many avant-garde positions that Ashbery rejects.²³ However, the achievement of this good-mannered poetry is not simply a matter of abiding by conventions. The strange metaphor is one of *dress*; and the desire to dress without affront but nonetheless 'slightly off' — or 'slant' — is significant. The word dress has its origin in the Latin *directus*, 'making straight'. Ashbery's poetry tries to avoid giving directions; its *address* ('guide [towards straightness]'), that is, must seek to be both inclusive but also reticent, teasing but not shocking, leaving the reader 'bemused but not excluded'. As a form of dress, Ashbery implies, a poetic style is something that explicitly identifies with the reader's own 'imperfect mode'; it should be unconventional, 'slightly off' only as a means to engage with the reader. 'A poem that communicates something that's already known to a reader is not really communicating anything to him, and in fact

21 Stitt, p. 36.

22 Ashbery often equates this concept specifically with *Englishness*: 'Tact, courtesy, good taste, honesty, craftsmanship — these are some of the qualities traditionally associated with the British. Americans swoon over English good manners, not noticing that they can be an effective coverup for rudeness. The French grudgingly admire "le fair-play anglais." And there you have the problem of English art in general.' ('Puttin' on the Brits', review of *British Art Now* at the Guggenheim, *New York* (February, 1980), pp. 50-52.)

23 Ward, p. 89.

shows a lack of respect,' Ashbery notes elsewhere; 'It's a veiled insult to the reader.'²⁴

The issue, then, is at heart one of authority. That Ashbery finds an example in Auden of the authority implied above is easily seen. Ashbery in fact opens his Harvard thesis on Auden with a quotation from *The Sea and the Mirror* that seems to encapsulate the whole problem: 'O what authority gives / Existence its surprise?' The thesis goes on to marvel at Auden's 'intense awareness of exactly what the average reader takes for granted and what appears to him as novel'. The self-limiting, 'slightly off', inclusive but reticent address is present early on in the poems above. To be more specific about this, though, it is necessary look at just what Auden's manner of address is.

'Auden does not fit. Auden is no gentleman. Auden does not write, or exist, by any of the codes': so wrote Geoffrey Grigson in the 1937 double number of *New Verse* that devoted itself to the 'Vin Audenaire'.²⁵ Despite Auden's not following the codes, Grigson is one of many early fans of Auden's work, and it is initially perplexing to think about how an ungentlemanly, unfitting, in Ashbery's words 'slightly off' writing can charm. Firstly, it is not an accidental rudeness or a literary blunder on Auden's part that forces Grigson to his description. Rather, questions of manner are central to Auden's writing and his thinking about writing: Auden's poetry is uniquely a conscious *poetry of address*. Superficially, a high level of questioning, needling, imperatives — of, that is, direct speech — is one of Auden's calling-cards. Even in the section titles of the two works this discussion will concentrate on, *The Orators* and *The Sea and the Mirror*, there can be no doubt as to the central stylistic concern: '[Public] Address', 'Argument', 'Statement', 'Letter', 'Journal', 'Odes', 'The STAGE MANAGER to the Critics', 'Prospero to Ariel', 'The Supporting Cast, Sotto Voce', 'Caliban to the Audience', 'ARIEL to Caliban. Echo by the PROMPTER'. Exploring and enacting questions of authority and artistic address in the shape of oratory and stagecraft, these two works, unsurprisingly, make up Ashbery's favourite Auden.²⁶

24 Quoted in Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, p. 168.

25 Geoffrey Grigson, 'Auden as a Monster', *New Verse*, 26-7 (1937), p. 13.

26 *The Orators* is probably the first because Ashbery remembers having got it out at a library before he bought the *Collected* in 1945, where he read most of Auden's work, including *The Sea and the Mirror* (interview with author). See Wasley, p. 681.

One can see Auden's address in more detail in two of his early pieces, poems XXII and XXIII of *Poems*: 'Will you turn a deaf ear' (later called 'The Questioner Who Sits So Sly') and 'Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all' (later 'Petition'). Both poems enter into immediate dialogue with an explicitly identified reader, and yet, the style of address in these poems is far from conversational. Here is the beginning of 'Will you turn a deaf ear':

Will you turn a deaf ear
To what they said on the shore,
Interrogate their poises
In their rich houses;

Of stork-legged heaven-reachers
Of the compulsory touchers
The sensitive amusers
And masked amazers?

Yet wear no ruffian badge
Nor lie behind the hedge
Waiting with bombs of conspiracy
In arm-pit secrecy;

Carry no talisman
For germ or the abrupt pain
Needing no concrete shelter
Nor porcelain filter.

Will you wheel death anywhere
In his invalid chair,
With no affectionate instant
But his attendant?²⁷

Questioning, the poem immediately imposes itself on the reader: 'Will you turn a deaf ear' to *me*, the speaker seems to ask implicitly, and with an air of the interrogative himself. The question in Auden's early work is common (nearly half the openings in *Poems* begin with either a question or an imperative), but who is this speaker? And how far is our response properly invited to these questions? The first two questions seem to be rhetorical insofar as they repeat a call to action, and yet the third and fourth, and certainly the fifth undermine this urgency with the irony projected onto this action, with its ruffian badges, lying behind hedges and wheeling death around in his invalid chair. In addition to their marching and hurried delivery — their bombarding quality — all the questions seem to preclude response by their

²⁷ *English Auden*, p. 35.

heavily rhetorical element. The speaker eventually answers his own questions, but again with sly irony: ‘A neutralising peace / And an average disgrace / Are honour to discover / For later other’. It is probably the poem’s later title that gives the lie to the poem; we are invited, that is, to ‘interrogate’ what is said *by the speaker*, the competing but ultimately colluding ‘poises’ of an apparently inclusive address. There is a ‘neutralising’ here insofar as no one rhetorical argument wins out due to the ‘sly’ questioner’s unreliability, but this is far from a ‘neutralising peace’. The poem invites the reader to question questioning itself, the armchair politics of the rhetorician as distinguished from the actual man of action. It suggests we should indeed ‘turn a deaf ear’ to what is said from the safety of the shore. Paradoxically, it is the false dialogue the questioner conducts that invites the reader to enter into a dialogue with the poem.

‘Sir, no man’s enemy’ is another poem apparently demanding a direct response. Here is the poem in its entirety:

Sir, no man’s enemy, forgiving all
 But will his negative inversion, be prodigal:
 Send to us power and light, a sovereign touch
 Curing the intolerable neural itch,
 The exhaustion of weaning, the liar’s quinsy,
 And the distortions of ingrown virginity.
 Prohibit sharply the rehearsed response
 And gradually correct the coward’s stance;
 Cover in time with beams those in retreat
 That, spotted, they turn though the reverse were great;
 Publish each healer that in city lives
 Or country houses at the end of drives;
 Harrow the house of the dead; look shining at
 New styles of architecture, a change of heart.²⁸

Again, it is how the addressee considers himself addressed that determines the meaning of the poem. As both prayer (the ‘Sir’ is an echo of Hopkins in this sense) and imperative (‘be prodigal’, ‘prohibit’, ‘correct’), the poem implicates the reader of the poem in a world-transforming action previously only attributable to a god. Hence the significance attached to Auden’s ‘a change of heart’: it is, in fact, in personal action that universal action takes place. As a result, the pronouns overlap, with the ‘sir’ being part of the ‘us’ in ‘send to us’, the ‘rehearsed response’ the reader’s, and the ‘coward’s stance’ one’s own. The poem, that is, explores the

²⁸ *English Auden*, p. 36.

interdependency of individuals while emphasising the potential power of individual agency through an address to the reader that includes, potentially, the all-powerful everyone. The invocation, then, is indeed to *be* an enemy to, and to be *unforgiving* of ‘ingrown virginity’, ‘the rehearsed response’ and ‘the coward’s stance’. As in ‘The Questioner Who Sits So Sly’ and much of Auden’s early work, despite the poem’s opening, the relationship between poet and addressee here is very much premised on the presence of an ‘enemy’.

If we take an Ashbery poem, similar in manner, we can nonetheless see a fundamental difference in Ashbery’s vocatives. This is ‘The Recent Past’ from Ashbery’s third collection, *Rivers and Mountains*:

Perhaps we ought to feel with more imagination.
As today the sky 70 degrees above zero with lines falling
The way September moves a lace curtain to be near a pear,
The oddest device can’t be usual. And that is where
The pejorative sense of fear moves axles. In the stars
There is no longer any peace, empties like a cup of coffee
Between the blinding rain that interviews.

You were my quintuplets when I decided to leave you
Opening a picture book the pictures were all of grass
Slowly the book was on fire, you the reader
Sitting with specs full of smoke exclaimed
How it was a rhyme for “brick” or “redder.”
The next chapter told all about a brook.
You were beginning to see the relation when a tidal wave
Arrived with sinking ships that spelled out “Aladdin.”
I thought about the Arab boy in his cave
But the thoughts came faster than advice.
If you knew that snow was a still toboggan in space
The print could rhyme with “fallen star.” (*RM*, 23)

As in Auden’s two poems, the reader is directly identified here *as reader* as well as forming the poem’s theme. Like Auden’s work, with its concern with turning deaf ears and ‘the rehearsed response’, Ashbery’s poem invites us to consider both the method of address and the terms of our reception. The opening line, ‘Perhaps we ought to feel with more imagination’, for instance, considers both. The detective puzzle from the earlier poems remains, but here it has taken an aspect that more specifically concerns reading, as in the omitted but crucial rhymes for ‘brick’ and ‘redder’ (probably ‘book’ and ‘reader’). Unlike Auden’s poems, ‘The Recent Past’ does not enter into any kind of antagonism with the reader in this interaction. The

address is affectionate: 'You were my quintuplets when I decided to leave you.' Indeed, the poem is positively apologetic: 'The Recent Past' is rightly seen as Ashbery's commentary on the failure of *The Tennis Court Oath's* disjunctive address, as the poet now asks to be excused for its 'oddest device[s]' in which the 'sense of fear moves axles'. The 'sense of fear' is something Auden, on the other hand, positively makes his business. Despite the politically motivated aspects of Auden's manner of reader-address, in Ashbery 'thoughts c[o]me faster than advice', and this concern with the mind and 'imagination', and the *phenomenological* reception of these 'lines falling', seems to make the focus of interpretation specifically literary compared to the important ideological issues included in Auden's warning against 'rehearsed response'.

I will return to the specific politics of this shortly. What is clear immediately from Ashbery's poem, though, is that, despite becoming *the* avant-garde figure to emerge from the sixties after *The Tennis Court Oath*, the relationship between reader and writer for Ashbery has no enemy in its coordinates. It is tempting to read Ashbery as a political poet, to radicalise him as Language Poetry does, but to do this is to seriously overlook the distinctive feature of Ashbery as an avant-garde poet, indeed as a controversial poet, which lies in an open and generous politeness. Nonetheless, it is the political, English Auden that Ashbery goes for, and Auden's sense of authorship and manner continues to be the model for Ashbery's forms of address. This is possible because Ashbery finds a way of reading Auden's early work while eschewing its politics.

Auden's sense of authorship is undoubtedly informed by his more general sense of authority and individualism — that is, by his early reading of Marx. Auden's understanding of the way in which literary texts and human subjects are constructed by ideological discourse is crucial to the originality of his early work. Throughout this work, and despite its political commitment, Auden is aware of the dangers of an exclusively didactic poetry claiming an unmediated or autonomous authority.²⁹ A literary text's meaning, Auden says, 'is the outcome of a dialogue between the words of a poem and the response of whoever is listening to them. Not only is every poem unique, but its significance is unique for each person who responds to it'. Propaganda, on the other hand, attempts no such dialogue but simply to persuade of

29 Ashbery himself, in his thesis on Auden, describes 'didactic poetry' as 'inconceivable'.

its own will.³⁰ It is this distinction that *The Orators*, one of Ashbery's favourite works, and probably the first Auden book Ashbery read, brilliantly and comprehensively subjects to scrutiny.³¹

In *The Orators* questions of address need to be considered throughout. This is clear immediately after the book's prologue, in 'Address for a Prize Day':

All of you must have found out what a great help it is, before starting on a job of work, to have some sort of scheme or plan in your mind beforehand. Some of the senior boys, I expect, will have heard of the great Italian poet Dante, who wrote that very difficult but wonderful poem, *The Divine Comedy*... Now this afternoon I want, if I may, to take these three divisions [of sinners] and apply them to ourselves. In this way, I hope, you will be able to understand better what I am driving at.³²

This kind of oratorical irony (here at the expense of Eliot) is audibly echoed in Ashbery's own poems of public address — for example, 1970's 'Definition of Blue': 'The rise of capitalism parallels the advance of romanticism / And the individual is dominant until the close of the nineteenth century. In our own time, mass practices have sought to submerge the personality...' (*DDS*, 53). However, it is not satire or even irony that makes either Auden's or Ashbery's work distinctive, but rather the problem of identifying these elements. Central to *The Orators*'s exploration of authority are questions of interpretation. As the opening paragraph of 'Address for a Prize-Day' asks: 'What does it mean? What does it mean? Not what does it mean to them, there, then. What does it mean to us, here now? It's a facer, isn't it boys? But we've all got to answer it'.³³ A sense of the manifold possible significances of the fragments that make up *The Orators* is at the centre of the reading experience, if nothing else is.

The speakers of *The Orators*, then, take interpretation very seriously. But to their considerations must be added the reader's own need to interpret the orators themselves as friend or enemy — an interpretation that will decide the meaning of their speech. As in actual political rhetoric, such interpretation is not easy in *The Orators*. It is, therefore, the problems of communication with the reader that are dramatised by Auden's radical approach in the work. One critic of Auden suggests that 'he is the kind of poet who needs first to have conceived of an audience for a

30 W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds*, New York: Random House, 1968, pp. 130-1.

31 See Wasley, p. 681.

32 *English Auden*, p. 62.

33 *English Auden*, p. 61.

poem, in order then to write, as he does, with one eye upon that audience'.³⁴ *The Orators*, however, seems to react to a period in which, as has been frequently documented, the very idea of preconceived audiences for poetry has become problematic.³⁵ The crucial question from 'Address for a Prize Day' is 'What sort of people are we living with now?'.³⁶ It is this situation that Richard Hoggart considers in Auden:

To the writer who is also a moralist... most people have lost the habit of listening, indeed the ability to listen... So somehow the writer... has to evolve understandable signals... In all this we find reasons for the varied and surprising tones of voice in Auden's early verse. He wants to find and speak positively to the audience... But he is far from clear as to whom he is addressing himself... The dubious relationship to his audience... largely account[s] for the inconsistency of his attack.³⁷

It is by a limitation of authority, absent in other political writers like Yeats or Pound, that Auden is able to position the politics of *The Orators* and 'find and speak positively to the audience'. Auden not only introduces a multiplicity of speakers in *The Orators*, but entirely blurs the relationship of each with any central voice.

If there is one thing one can say about the 'enemy' in *The Orators*, it is that he assumes a position of authority: 'He means what *he* says'.

Three kinds of enemy speech — I mean — quite frankly — speaking as a scientist, etc.

Three signs of an enemy letter — underlining — parentheses in brackets — careful obliteration of cancelled expressions.³⁸

Auden in *The Orators*, on the other hand, in Stan Smith's words, 'confronts the reader with its own problematic textuality'. 'The reader,' says Smith, 'has to beware here, for we in turn may be trapped into the closure of the enemy, seeking an assured and confident reading from the text.'³⁹ It is in opposition to the enemy 'meaning' of frankness, authority, professionalism, emphasis, parenthesis, careful selection and revision that *The Orators* works. If Auden is antagonistic to his readers, it is by

34 Frederick Buell, *W. H. Auden as a Social Poet*, Cornell UP, 1973, p. 6.

35 For a historical discussion of this breakdown, see David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: language and subjectivity in modern American, English and Irish poetry*, London: Macmillan, 1984.

36 *English Auden*, p. 61.

37 Richard Hoggart, *Auden: an introductory essay*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1951, pp. 37-8.

38 *English Auden*, pp. 78, 81.

39 Stan Smith, *W. H. Auden*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985, pp. 56, 63.

‘speaking as a scientist’ that one genuinely *excludes* them. In the words of one of Auden’s orators, ‘Practical jokes consist in upsetting these associations. They are in every sense contradictory and public’.⁴⁰ Auden’s is an attempt to ‘initiate’ the reader, with all this word implies — that is, a simultaneously violent and inclusive gesture.

By this, then, we are returned to Grigson’s comments about Auden not playing by the ‘codes’. In the slightly exaggerating description of a recent book on Auden, ‘*The Orators...* not only uses the rules of literary discourse in very extreme ways but actually eliminates them... It plays a precarious role as a reader-controlling device by denying authority to itself as well as to the reader’.⁴¹ Auden’s is a world where subjects have no power, where they are atomised and isolated by external forces; and yet, for Auden, ‘since art by its nature is a shared, a catholic, activity, he is the first to feel the consequences of a lack of common beliefs, and the first to seek a common basis for human unity’.⁴² What, though, is this new ‘basis’ in *The Orators*?

The most important ‘understandable signal’, to use Hoggart’s term, employed to the end of necessitating interpretation at an immediate level, is the list. Randall Jarrell had noted Auden’s ‘constant parataxis’ in 1941 in his own famous list of Auden’s ‘tough magical effects’ (of which there are another 25), and that the list is the primary unit of *The Orators* is elicited in even the most unlikely areas, as with the ‘Journal of an Airman’, in apparently introductory material:⁴³

A system organises itself, if interaction is undisturbed. Organisation owes nothing to the surveyor. It is in no sense pre-arranged. The surveyor provides just news.

The effect of the enemy is to introduce inert velocities into the system (called by him laws or habits) interfering with organisation. These can only be removed by friction (war). Hence the enemy’s interest in peace societies.

Nothing shows the power of the enemy more than that while the fact that a state of tension seeks to relieve itself seems to us perfectly obvious, an orderly arrangement, the natural result of such an effort, is inexplicable to us without introducing first causes and purposive ends.

The second law of thermodynamics — self-care or minding one’s own business.⁴⁴

40 *English Auden*, p. 78.

41 Rainer Emig, *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000, p. 53.

42 Cited in Hoggart, p. 45.

43 Randall Jarrell, ‘Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in the Poetry of W. H. Auden’, in *No Other Book*, New York: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 196.

44 *English Auden*, p. 73.

All the hallmarks of Ashbery's later style are here: the passive voice, the contrasting short and front-weighted, long sentences, the unspecified pronouns, and, most importantly, the list.

In addition to the general 'constant parataxis' of all Auden's sections in the book, there are many straightforward, everyday lists in *The Orators*: there is a prayer that details whom deliverance is to be 'from' and 'for', two sections that catalogue random attributes of people ('One has prominent eyes... One is obeyed by dogs... One can do cart wheels before theatre queues', etc.); there are lists for use, '*The Airman's Alphabet*', for example, or his '*Of the Enemy*' which lists 'Three kinds' of various enemy giveaways; there are shopping lists for weaponry, to-do lists; there is even a run-off of the 'Sedburgh School XV' rugby line-up of 1927.⁴⁵ These catalogues are a law unto themselves in the book. We can see the specific properties of Auden's parataxis in some lists introduced towards the end of the Airman's journal (and, it is implied, his life):

Fourth Day.

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

Fifth Day.

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

24th.

Four days. What's the use of counting them now?

25th.

Why, the words in my dream under Uncle's picture, 'I have crossed it'. To have been told the secret that will save everything and not to have listened; and now less than three days in which to prepare myself. My whole life as been mistaken, progressively more and more complicated, instead of finally simple.⁴⁶

Auden's most recent biographer states that 'Auden suggests rather than specifies; his reader is forced to inductions and suppositions which leave the widest margins of meaning'.⁴⁷ This list takes the distinction between 'showing' and 'telling' to a ridiculous extreme. Unlike in Whitman's epic lists, the reader is forced to interpret Auden's, to make them meaningful. The Auden list is operative as such insofar as all

45 For each of these lists see, respectively: *English Auden*, pp. 66-8, 69-71, 79-81, 81-2, 94, 84, 96-98

46 *English Auden*, p. 93.

47 Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, London: Vintage, 2003, p. 80.

elements contain an equal significance (thematic as well as grammatical). The effect is not only bombardment (which is undoubtedly crucial to *The Orators*), but also a felt absence of the interpretive closure that hypotaxis effects. It is in *proliferation* that Auden's lists operate; hence, contrary to the usual dénouement of literary works, the Airman's story at its end is seen to have been 'progressively more and more complicated, instead of finally simple'. Finally, as bombardment suggests, parataxis becomes a performance; in the case of the 'Journal of an Airman', the narrative of rushed diary entries amidst the machinations of war finds its urgent, maddened and distracted atmosphere naturally represented in the list.

In locating the significance for Ashbery of Auden's paratactical poetic, we must first point something out by way of digression. That is: it is the parataxis of Auden that explains Ashbery's reading of Clare. We may recall one critic's apt generalisation that 'Ashbery never explains, but he always describes or details'.⁴⁸ This is precisely the function served by the list, and it is in parataxis that Ashbery is able to construct what we have identified with regard to Clare — that is, narration that is fundamentally descriptive.

Undoubtedly the fullest theorization of parataxis in recent times is Ron Silliman's influential Language-poetry manifesto, profoundly influenced by Ashbery's writing, *The New Sentence*. The new sentence, for Silliman, is new not because it is original itself, but insofar as it is positioned alongside other sentences to which it has little or no semantic connection. The aim of the New Sentence is to avoid narrative in favour of parataxis.⁴⁹ Bob Perelman, however, in his essay 'Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice', makes some crucial qualifications of Silliman's position: 'Silliman's sentence is not a fully formed narrative; but it is, in an adjectival sense, *narrative*... Silliman sees the cobwebs of the reified narrative being swept. But I want to emphasise that continual possibilities of renarrativization are offered alongside such denarrativisation.'⁵⁰ For Perelman, narrative can only be 'theoretically repressed' in a paratactic poetic; in practice, the narrative is transformed by parataxis, from a conventional narrative (of one's life, say) to a narrative of one in the act of 'writing'. The fidelity of this to the concerns of narrative, temporality and the present, and description in the above chapter on Clare,

48 Speigelman, p. 24. See p. 99 above.

49 See Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence*, New York: Roof Books, 1987.

50 Bob Perelman, 'Parataxis and Narrative: the New Sentence in Theory and Practice', *American Literature*, 65:2 (Summer 1994), p. 317.

is easily discerned (Clare is, of course, in his own more gentle way, a prodigious lister himself). It is by avoiding of the hypotaxis of conventional argumentation or, conversely, the various semantic levels of 'scenic' interpretation by seventies American poets like William Stafford, that Ashbery is able to construct a narrative rhetoric of 'the present':

Whatever your eye alights on this morning is yours:
Dotted rhythms of colors as they fade to the color,
A grey agate, translucent and firm, with nothing
Beyond its purifying reach. It's all there.
These are things offered to your participation.

These pebbles in a row are the seasons.
This is a house in which you may wish to live.
There are more than any of us to choose from
But each must live its own time.

And with the urging of the year each hastens onward separately
In strange sensations of emptiness, anguish, romantic
Outbursts, visions and wraiths. One meeting
Cancels another. "The seven-league boot
Gliding hither and thither of its own accord"
Salutes these forms for what they now are:

Fables that time invents
To explain its passing. They entertain
The very young and the very old, and not
One's standing up in them to shoulder
Task and vision, vision in the form of a task
So that the present seems like yesterday
And yesterday the place where we left off a little while ago.
(*'Years of Indiscretion'*, *DDS*, 46)

The situation here is the same as in the poems juxtaposed with Clare's work, but what is particularly highlighted is how that relationship can only take place within a reading of Auden. This is why, despite its reliance on Clare's work, Ashbery quite clearly *sounds* different from Clare. The example of Auden forms what one might call an intermediary, allowing an avant-garde poetry that makes use of John Clare (a rare thing) through the formal medium of the list. In both cases, one thing follows another.

To return to the list *per se*, however, Ashbery's inheritance from Auden is most significant in what it elides. Ashbery's lists are related to Auden's mostly in their barefacedness: 'Suede, tweed, cotton, silk, jersey, whipcord, cavalry twill, melton,

moire, nylon, net, challis, cordovan, maxi, midi, scarf, shoes, zipper, cuff, button' (VN, 27) being a typical example. Like 'Years of Indiscretion', the lists of *The Vermont Notebook*, taken together as a list of lists, as sets within a set, like the diary medium of 'Journal of an Airman', again give a sense of time passing. In Ashbery's book, as we turn page after page, we feel the lists being composed, whether out of boredom, leisure or both (Vermont suggests a holiday, though Ashbery actually wrote the lists on various buses in New England).

In this page-turning, however, lies the difference between Ashbery and Auden. The lists of *The Vermont Notebook*, like those of *The Orators*, are wonderful, but unlike Auden's, they are also a wonderfully easy reading experience. *The Vermont Notebook* is a radically invitational book — the medium of its early pages seems to strive toward a rhetoric in which the poet seems absent — but it does not operate at all like *The Orators*. Rather, easy on the interpretive faculties, and like the day-dreaming effect so prevalent in Ashbery's two previous volumes, *Three Poems* and *The Double Dream of Spring*, *The Vermont Notebook* is more like raw material for us to 'Wish away' (33), in the text's own words.

The trees have their galoshes, the little boxes where the newspaper is delivered...
Bang on the air went the sparrow. Little Johnny ran in the house. The man in the hall. The red spider against the pane. How dark the furniture is his brain ticked off against the strangeness of invented circumstances. This was no way. Tomorrow breathed. There is an island called today you can wish it away it is a blob of tear plopped simply awful on the grass. Wish away. (33)

This is in clear contrast to the anarchic urgency of Auden's *Airman*. In place of the potentially duplicitous items of Auden's treacherous records, Ashbery offers up for interpretation a catalogue of totally abstracted and for the most part static items for his own meditation, and therefore items for our interpretation of that meditation.

Ashbery comments on the book that, 'at one point I was trying to think of every poets' name that I could think of. And then just names of people that I had met or had heard about — society figures'.⁵¹ As in Perelman's description of parataxis, what is presented most vividly in Ashbery's lists is the mind in the act of making them, and it is the *mind thinking*, as Ashbery is always so keen to point out, that is of paramount importance here. 'Most of it was written on a bus, which I found to be an interesting experience. Writing on a moving vehicle. Not only did my mind move,

51 Unpublished interview with the author, 2008.

the landscape was moving as well,' he recalls later.⁵² If this thinking is expressed in a parataxis of random elements, it is both because this is how Ashbery views his mind thinking in a consumerist, multimedia, hyperinformational world, and how he reads Auden's parataxis — that is, as imitative form. Just as Ashbery feels that the 'irrationality and disjointedness' of Auden's 'Paid on Both Sides' 'adds to the general sense of futility and unreason' of its characters, the impression one gets from Ashbery's own Audenesque lists is that he reads the paratactical poetry of *The Orators* as an attempt to imitate formally the various disjointed, schizophrenic and confused mental lives of characters living in 'the modern world'. This is by no means absent from the 'Journal of an Airman' or other parts of *The Orators*, it is rather the importance Ashbery attaches to this aspect (and doesn't attach to other, more political aspects) that is key.

Geoff Ward has spoken of Ashbery's reader-consciousness in terms apposite to *The Vermont Notebook*: 'not only does he not mind where the poem is headed, but he is quite happy to turn around from the steering wheel in order to chat with us on the back seat... at its best, [Ashbery's work has] a kind of generosity that allows the reader a genuinely creative role.'⁵³ Charles Altieri similarly refers to 'a dialectic of call and response' in Ashbery.⁵⁴ The reader is invited to the site of thinking as much as the writer, but it is necessary to look back at Auden's very different aims, and decide, as the post-Language avant-garde has also recently felt obliged, just how desirable and sufficient this is as the major aim of poetry. Auden, as I have discussed, has more on his plate than allowing his reader something to contribute to the meaning of a text, though this is undoubtedly both laudable and present in *The Orators*. Alongside its radically indeterminate surface, *The Orators* makes palpable the dangers of a free-for-all in political rhetoric; the Fascist, after all, is in a stronger rhetorical position if 'He means what *he* says', and this is a danger Auden's book is always attentive to. Ashbery's good driving-seat manners, prepared to 'turn around from the steering wheel to chat with us on the back seat', on the other hand, as Ward's metaphor suggests, are potentially dangerous in their excess. Maybe Ashbery thinks he's writing at a time with no possibility of encountering political disasters like those Auden faced in the thirties. It is a luxury *The Orators* cannot afford.

52 Sue Gangel, 'John Ashbery', *American Poets Observed: Poets on their Work*, ed. Joe Bellamy, Urbana, Illinois UP, 1988, p. 15.

53 Ward, *Statutes*, p. 100.

54 Altieri, *Art*, p. 210.

3. 'Not words but sounds out of time'

There is more than parataxis to Auden's and Ashbery's style. The list does, however, introduce the major concern of Ashbery's reading of Auden — the reading of Auden's style, tone and address as a *performance*. In Ashbery's poetry form not only discloses meaning, but attempts to enact it semantically. More simply, Ashbery produces, out of Auden's example, an aesthetic of imitative form. It is this fact that accounts for the political problems of all Ashbery's work, but also its immense stylistic possibilities. In this, there are a number of more technical issues that need to be considered. First, though, there is a need to deal with the most obvious similarity between Ashbery and Auden: how their poetry *sounds*.

Ashbery is a tone. Beyond well-rehearsed generalisations about this tone, however, an analysis of the noise Ashbery's voice makes has not taken place in the criticism of his work (perhaps because Ashbery is such a 'literary' writer whose sophistication needs to be distanced from his voicy contemporaries — Beats like Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti). The readings of Ashbery that have been attentive to questions of form in his work, readings usually associated with Language poetry, have been principally visual accounts. We need to give the various aural terms associated with Ashbery's work — tone, rhetoric, register, conversation, disjunction — a concrete basis. This, however, is far from a matter of metrics. The radically performative mode is precisely what distinguishes Ashbery's Auden from the readings of the likes of Richard Howard and James Merrill which, as we have seen, are primarily lessons in versification. There is a pressing need to analyse Ashbery's prosody, but this is not found in metrical feet or rhyme schemes, but rather in the less exclusively poetic area of syntax. It is necessary to explore this area now.

'Rivers and Mountains', the title-poem of Ashbery's 1966 collection, places syntax at the centre of its operations. Coupled with its secrecy is the treacherous syntax through which reader is forced to wade:

On the secret map the assassins
Cloistered, the Moon River was marked
Near the eighteen peaks and the city
Of humiliation and defeat—wan ending
Of the trail among dry papery leaves

Gray-brown quills like thoughts
In the melodious but vast mass of today's
Writing through fields and swamps
Marked, on the map, with little bunches of weeds. (*RM*, 10)

The poem is influenced by Auden in conventional ways, with its visual perspective based on Auden's panoramic 'hawk vision' poems, from 'Paysage Moralise', a poem Ashbery rewrites again and again (not least in 'These Lacustrine Cities', the first poem of *Rivers and Mountains*), to a number of landscape vignettes and sestinas in *The Orators*.⁵⁵ However, the poem's principal interest lies not in its thematic or visual elements, but rather in its odd method of delivering these things. Probably the exemplary poem for Ashbery here is Auden's 'Detective Story' of 1936:

For who is ever quite without his landscape,
The straggling village street, the house in trees,
All near the church, or else the gloomy town house,
The one with the Corinthian pillars, or
The tiny workmanlike flat: in any case
A home, the centre where the three or four things
That happen to a man do happen?⁵⁶

Like Auden's poem, Ashbery's opens, grammatically *in medias res*, with a long sentence in which the reader is forced to retain in mind the opening clause and build-up of items while awaiting the sentence's completion. In both poems, the syntax imitates the common subject. That is, both accumulations of objects syntactically lead the reader to await an unknown dénouement that will reveal the significance of a currently enigmatic set of landscape elements: the process is all the more mysterious in Ashbery's opening, because such a dénouement never arrives. Indeed, both openings here employ the rhetorical trope of aposiopesis to enact a layer of secrecy below the surface of what is actually uttered, deferring the resolution of the sentence both grammatically and thematically in order to continue with the accumulation of disembodied landscape items.

The other form of punctuation in Ashbery's poem, the line breaks, is best seen in an incredible passage from the middle of the poem:

So going around cities

55 Auden's term refers to Thomas Hardy; see 'A Literary Transference', *Southern Review*, Summer 1940, p. 83.

56 *English Auden*, p. 204.

To get to other places you found
 It all on paper but the land
 Was made of paper processed
 To look like ferns, mud or other
 Whose sea unrolled its magic
 Distances and then rolled them up
 Its secret was only a pocket
 After all but some corners are darker
 Than these moonless nights spent as on a raft
 In the seclusion of a melody heard
 As though through trees
 And you can never ignite their touch
 Long but there were homes
 Flung far out near the asperities
 Of a sharp, rocky pinnacle
 And other collective places
 Shadows of vineyards whose wine
 Tasted of the forest floor
 Fisheries and oyster beds
 Tides under the pole
 Seminaries of instruction, public
 Places for electric light
 And the major tax assessment area
 Wrinkled on the plan
 Of election to public office
 Sixty-two years old bath and breakfast
 The formal traffic, shadows
 To make it not worth joining
 After the ox had pulled away the cart. (10-11)

One sentence, with so many clauses, but not an end-stopped line in sight — indeed, only four units of punctuation from beginning to end. This unusual punctuation and lineation are not, however, a result of Ashbery's so-called 'disjunction'. The poem no doubt comes out of the experiments of *The Tennis Court Oath*, but there is actually not much inherently ungrammatical about the lines: but for a few line endings that elide conventional punctuation, most of the syntactic flow is the result of the passage's interminable (but grammatically sound) post-modifiers. But what does the sentence do as a result? The syntax of the passage monotonises the verse into an eerie deadpan by reducing the number of stressed syllables; injects an element of breathlessness into the lines by the sheer length of the sentence and a strict economising with punctuation (the repetition of the *s* and *sh* sounds complement this by enforcing a whisper into some lines); and, linked to this, speeds up the reading with its short lines and continued enjambment, adding a sense of hurry and, given the sentence's length and meanderings, desperation. Which is to say, the poem performs its meaning.

‘Rivers and Mountains’ is probably the most comprehensive and interesting of Ashbery’s adaptations of Auden’s early poems because it shows that ‘Ashbery’s rhythmic control over our process of reading engages the essence of his meaning’, in the words of one prosodist.⁵⁷ Ashbery’s form, while imitative of its content, is nonetheless highly crafted, and not the fast-and-easy mimesis that so many of Ashbery’s critics, along with Ashbery himself, claim: ‘the movement of experience is what I’m trying to get down... the experience of experience... a generalised transcript of what’s really going on in our minds all day long’.⁵⁸ However, in the context of Ashbery’s *oeuvre*, ‘Rivers and Mountains’ must still broadly be categorised with the early imitations of *Some Trees* and *The Tennis Court Oath*. ‘Rivers and Mountains’, like its sister-poem ‘These Lacustrine Cities’, retains a symbolic economy still important to its final meaning, though with a semantic syntax that works in harmony with it. What Ashbery’s later poems do is give the syntactic the central position.

Much has been written on the influence of Auden’s prose work, ‘Caliban to the Audience’ from *The Sea and the Mirror*, on Ashbery’s *Three Poems*, and it is here that the beginnings of the development of the syntactic poetic that will mark Ashbery’s later style emerge. Ashbery says that the poems in the collection previous to *Three Poems*, *The Double Dream of Spring*, ‘had gotten to a tightness and strictness that bothered me, and I began to feel that I’d have to start moving in some other direction because I had become too narrow’.⁵⁹ There is nothing strict about the syntax of *Three Poems* or its 1944 predecessor. Here is a sentence from each:

Our unfortunate dramatist, therefore, is placed in the unseemly predicament of having to give all his passion, all his skill, all his time to the task of “doing” life—consciously to give anything less than all would be a gross betrayal of his gift and an unpardonable presumption—as if it lay in *his* power to solve this dilemma—yet of having at the same time to hope that some unforeseen mishap will intervene to ruin his effect, without, however, obliterating your disappointment, the expectation aroused by him that there was an effect to ruin, that, if the smiling interest never did arrive, it must, through no fault of its own, have got stuck somewhere; that, exhausted, ravenous, delayed by fog, mobbed and mauled by a thousand irrelevancies, it has nevertheless, not forgotten its promise but is still trying desperately to get a connection.⁶⁰

57 Hartman, *Free Verse*, p. 166.

58 A. Poulin Junior, ‘The experience of experience: a conversation with John Ashbery’, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 22:3 (Summer 1981), p. 245.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

60 W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, London: Faber and Faber, 1991, pp. 442-3.

Here it is that our sensuality can save us *in extremis*: the atmosphere of the day that event took place, the way the trees and the buildings looked, what we said to the person to the person who was both the bearer and fellow recipient of that message and what that person replied, words that were not words but sounds out of time, taken out of any external context in which their content would be recognizable—these facts have entered our consciousness once and for all, have spread through us even into our pores like a marvellous antidote to the cup that the next moment had already prepared and which, whether hemlock or nectar, could only have proved fatal because accomplished only in time, that is in a preordained succession of moments which must carry us far from here, far from this impassive but real moment of understanding which may be the only one we shall ever know, even if it is merely the first of an implied infinite series. (*TP*, 76)

It is not surprising that Ashbery considers Caliban's speech 'the most brilliant Auden has ever done' and 'the closest to perfection he has ever attained': the syntax of Auden's prose here is so evident in Ashbery's verse as well as his prose poetry as to make 'Caliban to the Audience' stylistically one of the most important texts of Ashbery's career. Here a diffuse rather than a deviant grammar is utilised by Ashbery; following Auden, his sentence is long and labyrinthine, but ultimately adheres to the conventions of the English language. In practical terms, however, both sentences are extremely difficult to read, and much more to understand. The syntax is such that its front-weighted, run-on, digressive, revisionary nature paradoxically has both a conversational quality and communicative difficulty. This difficulty, however, is limited to the way we conventionally read poems. A large part of what *Three Poems* begins to explore is the relationship between reading and (in)attention. Readers of *Three Poems*, if they wish to get through the volume, must adapt reading habits; rather than pinpointing the 'sense' of these sentences, which is possible but laborious, one must attend to their process and the individual, minor conclusions (in most cases in subordinate clauses) this process and syntax forces one to make on the way.

This is by no means the whole story of *Three Poems*, whose many-layered and many-voiced poetry, also premised on a reading of Auden, raises a range of questions about Ashbery's work. It seems, however, to be the aspect of the poem Ashbery elects to continue into his later poetry, though to different ends. Jody Norton, in an excellent essay on Ashbery, notes:

Over and over in Ashbery's poetry, self-knowledge as constituted by a series of reflective glimpses, cinematic in their framed brevity, but lacking any governing

directorial intention, gives rise to a sense of subjectivity as structural process, or syntax.⁶¹

It is this focus on subjective matters that distinguishes Ashbery's rewriting of *Three Poems* in the wake of 'A Wave', which is to say, *Flow Chart* (1991). Or, rather, what distinguishes *Flow Chart* is its focus on one subjective matter: what it is to write. Rather than a mimesis of experience itself, however vague this concept may be, form and syntax in Ashbery's later work become further abstracted and narrowed for Ashbery, whose purpose now is to offer, in his own words, 'a kind of mimesis of how experience comes to me' — that is, to offer an account of writing.⁶²

Lines from the beginning of *Flow Chart* are illustrative:

I think it was at that moment he
knowingly and in my own best interests took back from me
the slow-flowing idea of flight, now
too firmly channeled, its omnipresent reminders etched
too deeply into my forehead, its crass grievances and greetings
a class apart from wonders every man feels,
whether alone in bed, or with a lover, or beached
with the shells on some atoll (and if solitude
swallows us up betimes, it is only later that
the idea of its permanence sifts in view, yea
later and perhaps only occasionally, and only much later
stands from dawn to dusk, just as the plaintive sound
of the harp of the waves is always there as a backdrop
to conversation and conversion, even when
most forgotten) and cannot make sense of them, but he knows
the familiar, unmistakable thing, and that gives him courage
as day expires and evening marshals its hosts, in preparation
for the long night to come. (*FC*, 4)

Attention here, far more than in *Three Poems*, is stretched to breaking point and then beyond, and from here further still, given the length of the book. One cannot possibly retain in mind the beginning of the main clause of the sentence for a full eighteen lines of complex syntax: the parenthesis is long, and in the manner of Raymond Roussel, contains parentheses of its own, as well as an accumulation of qualifiers; and as we think we have arrived at a logical end to the sentence, another 'and' appears and extends it yet further. The sentencing is so hard even to follow, let

61 Jody Norton, "'Whispers Out of Time': the syntax of being in the poetry of John Ashbery", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 41:3 (Fall 1995), p. 282.

62 Quote from booklet of John Ashbery, *The Voice of the Poet*, ed. J. D. McClatchey, New York: Random House Audio, p. 45.

alone make sense of, that a reading of the poem is inevitably forced back on the experience of syntax or tone which necessarily takes centre stage.

That is, the reader is forced, far more radically than in Ashbery's earlier work, to surrender to inattention. As in *Three Poems*, there is an intentional aimlessness to the sentences of *Flow Chart*. In *Three Poems*, however, aimlessness did not mean a lack of focus: the difficulty of that volume is down to its incessant pursuit of its ideas. *Flow Chart*, on the other hand, intentionally has no ideas; rather, it banks on the ability of its syntax to somehow mean. There is not only no possibility of gleaning a sense of the 'overall' meaning of its lines, but sometimes even the picking up of passing details must be abandoned, a reading practice usually so central to Ashbery's long poems.

The poem is primarily a matter of tonal flow:

And as gravel sinks slowly with the aquifer's depletion, those
not in the know will begin to stir in their sleep; it will gradually dawn on them
(in dreams of "cheese, toasted mostly") how the ingenious theory was flawed;
indeed
it was flaws that produced the dazzling quicksilver sheen that attracted
so many to it for so long. If that's the case, why tarry on rutted goat-paths
from whence even the nearest foothills are shrouded, by mists, from view? The
animals
are incredible; there's even a dog named Bruce. One can retool the context, but
slowly,
slowly, and of course there is no positive guarantee of a successful outcome; one
should think of it as a virtuoso spinning-song whose relentless *roulades* promise
minor
disturbances among the cobwebbed rafters but perhaps nothing much to weave
one-armed nightshirts with for the wild swans, your brothers: only
try to forget the slow upward
path to perfectness and let its mirror-image
come to install its truly sensitive surface within you, during the night
of deft dreams and bad brushes with dolor. Fear of the dark causes it,
but by then to have been around and been of it will have carried over into lunch.
Do you think there's some connection between this and that which happened
before?
Perhaps not. Perhaps there is none, but the Patagonians will like it, all 499,500 of
'em. (33)

What purpose do items like the 'aquifer's depletion', the 'cheese, toasted mostly', 'rutted goat-paths', 'a dog named Bruce', lunch, the Patagonians ('all 499,500 of 'em') serve? One would be hard-pushed to discover any kind of symbolic economy to this grouping; on the whole, images in *Flow Chart* are either arbitrary or clichéd. Meaning is a matter of tonal shifts. The movement here seems to be as follows. The

first two lines' assonance and alliteration make a slow, low sound ('slowly... those... know'; 'sinks slowly... stir in their sleep') conducive to a sense of the ominous. This is quickly dissipated, however, by the more stuttering syntax of the next two-and-a-half lines, which is subsequently more explanatory, as well as detached, given its clichés (and quotation marks). The question then represents a rhetorical turn which involves the previously detached author, apparently realising his involvement ('If that's the case'). Thence comes a move from the conditional to the declarative present tense, with the concrete details assuaging any possible fear or mystery present in the beginning of this first sentence ('a dog named Bruce' bringing a particular sense of the innocuous). The next sentence begins by returning to a sense of urgency and refuting the previous trivial details, with again a slowness ('slowly, / slowly'); the syntax becomes difficult again, but this time because of its interminability, the sentence's qualifiers and extensions, which bring a sense of desperation, engaging the writer more than he initially wished to let on. 'Fear of the dark causes it' begins to offer a resolution and explanation of what's been going on, but does so only tonally, as 'it' is unspecified (it only *sounds* like a conclusion). After this mood of conclusiveness, the penultimate sentence offers a question (of all things), and a vague one at that, whose answers are only tentative: 'Perhaps not'. This inconclusiveness is then assuaged, with a shade of stoical irony, by the bizarre enumeration of Patagonians — an assuagement whose grounds the reader is not privy to but nonetheless senses in the tone.

Ashbery says later in his career, 'on the whole I feel that poetry is going on all the time inside, an underground stream. One can let down one's bucket and bring the poem back up'.⁶³ Another analogy Ashbery makes, this time with television, points toward Raymond Williams's ideas of flow in that medium: 'I think I can plug into poetry whenever I want to, and it will come out much the same way at any given time. I don't do it that often. It's like that television set over there. I don't watch television much, but occasionally I turn it on and, sure enough, something is going on, and that's that for that moment.'⁶⁴ It is not the details themselves that are of interest in this 'underground stream', but simply that the stream is flowing. Autobiography is no doubt present in the details, if one has the time to disembowel the poem, but, as Ashbery would claim, it is merely exemplary material, a token of

63 Stitt, p. 51.

64 Gangel, p. 19.

what he himself happens to have in his mind. As he says, *Flow Chart* is written 'during the course of thinking about my past', not about that past.⁶⁵

That Ashbery perceives thinking here as an aural activity should be clear enough. What the passage above presents is a movement of tone, even a sort of playing with sounds. The odd details and images throughout *Flow Chart*, then, exist not primarily as signifiers in the semantic sense, but as a means of achieving the tone Ashbery wants; words are no longer used primarily for their meaning but in as far as they affect a general mood. To put it another way, it is the opposite of what Pound meant in his Imagist manifesto to use 'no superfluous words'.⁶⁶ Or to put it Ashbery's way, 'Excuse me while I fart. There, that's better. I actually feel relieved' (201). What seems like difficulty of syntax, then, is in fact a liberation from such concerns as understanding. Like the writer, the reader is invited to go with flow. That is, the poetry is premised exclusively on inattention.

In this, however, *Flow Chart* occupies dangerous ground. What we have in Ashbery's poetry, by way of Auden, is a syntax that restricts attempts to resolve the various elements of the world, including paradoxes, into a unity, as in the Middle Generation's well-wrought urns. Ashbery's is fundamentally a rhapsodic poetry, which is why his art seems especially at home in the long poem. It is Ashbery's insistence on poetry's responsibility to mirror attention that accounts for the brilliant proliferation of paradox that emerges in his engagement with metaphysical poetry, and to some extent his reading of all poetry. The question *Flow Chart* begs, however, is whether anything can be 'read' in its process of abstract flow at all.

Flow Chart, the most radical incarnation of Ashbery's syntactic poetry, represents the poetic conclusion of all Ashbery's insistences, in the late seventies and eighties, that the role of his poetry is phenomenological mimeticism. As such comments proliferate in Ashbery's interviews, and are coming to be endlessly read back to him (*Flow Chart* is Ashbery's most sustained engagement with an academic establishment increasingly mediating between him and his reading public), their implications emerge increasingly as a focus, even as a program in the work of the 1990s and beyond. In fact, Auden gets increasingly lost in this new focus Ashbery's work seems to have on itself and the criticism it gives rise to. In the emergence of

65 Dinitia Smith, 'Poem Alone', *New York*, 20: May 1991, p. 48.

66 Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', in *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot, Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1954, p. 4.

syntax as the major marker of Ashbery's late style, other key aspects of Auden's early poetic get seemingly left behind. The oneric but interrogative mode of *The Double Dream of Spring* and *Three Poems*, the essayistic explorations of 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and 'Litany', the symbolic argumentation of 'A Wave' — all require an attention that is demanding but ultimately engaging, in that it is an attention that *addresses* the reader. The syntax of *Flow Chart*, by contrast, is a singularly *inner* affair — as Ashbery claims, it is a 'transcription of the impressions left by... phenomena on the consciousness.'⁶⁷ The dangers of this approach are obvious. Yvor Winters's warning about 'The Fallacy of Imitative Form' is old-fashioned, and no doubt the kind of aesthetic Ashbery was setting out against in early career. Winters's essay serves to remind us, though, that the artist must communicate — that it is not enough to simply 'experience':

To say that a poet is justified in employing a disintegrating form in order to express a feeling of disintegration, is merely a sophistical justification for bad poetry... In fact, all feeling, if one gives oneself (that is, one's form) up to it, is a way of disintegration; poetic form is by definition a means to arrest the disintegration and order the feeling; and in so far as any poetry tends toward the formless, it fails to be expressive of anything.⁶⁸

One can experience experience whenever one likes, and does not need an Ashbery poem to do so. So what does *Flow Chart* offer?

A fluid portrait of a mind thinking is the aim of Ashbery's later poetry; within this, the key element is that it doesn't think *of* anything (it is written 'not because of any intrinsic importance the feeling might have').⁶⁹ In this sense, *Flow Chart* is an abstraction of experience and thought that aspires to universalism — an extended exercise in Ashbery's 'one size fits all' aims of early career.⁷⁰ Additionally, the poem supplements the democratic impulse of this kind of representation by constructing the poem in such a way (in terms of tone and syntax) as to make the poem universally accessible. And in this *Flow Chart* offers an enjoyment all its own to the reader of poetry; the uniqueness of its musicality is at once liberating and sensuously pleasurable. Indeed, taking the poem on its own terms, *Flow Chart* is

67 James Vinson (ed.), *Contemporary Poets*, New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 36.

68 Yvor Winters, 'Primitivism And Decadence: a study of American experimental poetry', *In Defense of Reason*, Ohio: Swallow Press, 1987, p. 92.

69 Poulin, p. 245.

70 This phrase occurs in a number of interviews, being first applied to 'Soonest Mendeed' (*DDS*, 18-9). For the comment applied to the time of *Flow Chart*, however, see Tranter.

restful — a positive upshot of Ashbery's move away from direct engagement with the reader. Undoubtedly, in these aims the poem is to be applauded.

The 'experience of experience' in Ashbery is not universal, however. It is specifically the experience of a semi-retired intellectual, and more generally of a privileged white American male at leisure. Indeed, at worst, it is the experience of what it is like to write a really long poem on a MacArthur Fellowship.⁷¹ This is the immediate result of Ashbery's move away from the Audenesque concern with the reader. As his new emphasis on writing suggests, not only has Ashbery moved away from the varied focus of his early 'crush' on Auden and subsequent poets, but, in these later years, he seems also to have moved away from the idiosyncratic reading of English, French and American poetry that had made so much of his earlier work compelling. In essence, Ashbery is now reading himself:

...the poetry that I mostly read now is by contemporary, mostly young poets, a lot of them influenced by me I have to admit, which is not the reason that I read them; the reason that I read them is that they seem in many cases to be trying to shake off this influence, stumbling on something new which I want to follow myself.⁷²

To be sure, Ashbery's later work has its virtues, and also its moments of brilliance.⁷³ There is a sense in this period, however, that for Ashbery the serious work has already been done, and that the poetry of the nineties and beyond is (as Ashbery's comments on his imitators here suggest) a question of now continuing and exploiting its achievements. Undoubtedly, as the number of imitators of Ashbery's poetry suggests, there is much scope for work here. It is also not surprising that Ashbery, into his sixties as he writes *Flow Chart*, has settled into, and consolidated, a poetic persona and voice distinctly his own. This voice is still unique, and its possibilities still stand out as inspirational to American poetry. It has, though, perhaps inevitably, developed a distance from the poetry of the past: Auden fades away from Ashbery's tone and address, Clare from his phenomenology, the metaphysicals from his distinctive epistemology. Because the sense of Ashbery's reading diminishes in this period, so his work comes to seem, if not less powerful, then certainly more conventional. And it is this work that perhaps allows us to see the importance of

71 Ashbery held a MacArthur between 1985 and 1990.

72 Unpublished interview with the author, May 2008.

73 For by far the most persuasive account of these, see Stephen Burt, 'John Ashbery, a poet for our times', *Times Literary Supplement* (March 26, 2008), pp. 55-63.

reading to Ashbery's originality, and to his immense stylistic contribution to American poetry.

Auden, then, not only explains a good deal of Ashbery's poetry, but also Ashbery's reading of other figures which in turn help us to understand his work. Ashbery reads Auden, but also reads other poets in the light of this reading of Auden. The central and most important achievement of Ashbery's poetry, which is stylistic, begins with his engagement with Auden. In its communicative strategies, its fragmentation, its parataxis, its syntax — that is, in all that has been noted as unique in Ashbery — Ashbery's work was exemplified by a poetry that at once existed outside a too-monumental modernism and the conservative American poetry of the forties and fifties. From *Some Trees* to *Three Poems*, from *The Vermont Notebook* to *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Ashbery's best work is unthinkable without such texts as *The Orators* and *The Sea and the Mirror*; and Ashbery's poetry in these volumes will be a major component in histories of post-war American poetry. In its scope and variety, the sheer stylistic possibilities it brought to subsequent poetry, Ashbery's work in these years is major by any measure. But it contains more than this, for Ashbery's work, following that of Eliot, Lowell and indeed Auden, is also testament to a unique reading of the past; and as a cultural figure with a reading practice that is a wholly new phenomenon in American literature, Ashbery has been and will continue to be indispensable to American poetry.

Conclusion: 'Is anything central?'

In the main, the American culture industry, creating an Ashbery in its own image, has consistently cast Ashbery as the outsider — the Whitmanian dreamer, the anti-academic maverick, the avant-garde iconoclast, the marginalised homosexual, John Shoptaw's 'misrepresentative' poet 'on the outside looking out'. What has been missing from such accounts is any identification of what is central to Ashbery's work.

Even before the fame *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* brought, Ashbery had been in the middle of a visual art scene in 1950s New York that would change the world balance of power in artistic authority; he had known the great modern poet of the time, Auden, from the beginning of his career; he had, in Europe, been mixing with the likes of Michel Foucault, Samuel Beckett, Raymond Queneau, Francis Bacon and Marcel Duchamp. Ashbery may often express bemusement at his own pre-eminence in American poetry, but given his situation at the centre of the western art world in these early years, perhaps such a pre-eminence is not so surprising after all. In particular, though, Ashbery is a poet who has surrounded himself with poetic traditions. Reading Ashbery's letters at Harvard's Houghton Library, facts begin to emerge through the tired, crystallised version of Ashbery the American academic establishment has constructed. In the constant talk of reading in these letters, the ubiquitous quotation from recently read books, the self-definition through reading, the fundamental centrality of reading to Ashbery's work begins to become clear. It is this specific situatedness that most criticism on Ashbery has ignored; as if simply recourse to vague terms like 'experience', or 'meaninglessness', is enough to explain his significance in American poetry.

In this thesis, by applying the concepts of the situation, inattention and the history of the present, and reading Ashbery as a reader, it has been possible to trace important continuities in his writing. In proving that Ashbery's reading and writing are occasioned by his situation, and that this situation is accessed within an aesthetic of inattention, it has been possible not only to distinguish Ashbery from the New

Critical poetics of Eliot and Ashbery's early Middle Generation contemporaries, but also to put forward a description of Ashbery in which he actually *competes* with the aesthetics of these influential figures. Rather than describing the usual *laissez-faire* poet of nihilism or cliché, that is, it has been shown that Ashbery's work is in possession of a cultural content just as much as Eliot's or Lowell's. One finds this content partly in what I have termed Ashbery's history of the present: a style of reading, and a writing of reading, in which the present-tense situation of reception is revealed, and in which the past text is a contemporary resource rather than an Eliotic originary source. Within this, it has become clear that Ashbery's style of reading is interested primarily in matters of style as opposed to both historical content and metrical craft. The central finding of this thesis, however, has been in the combination of these elements. The manner of the centrality of reading to Ashbery's poetic project — that is, its pointedly centrifugal bent, its emphasis on inattention and the accidental — means that reading is at the centre of Ashbery's engagement with the past in a way that explains the presence of the reader at the centre of his poetry.

Ashbery's engagement with *English* poetry specifically is part, perhaps, as Ashbery puts it, of 'a fascination with all great English poetry of the past which I think almost any American poet has'.¹ This fascination, however, both of 'almost any American poet' and of Ashbery himself, as the poet seems to be constantly pointing out, has been ignored, distorting both Ashbery's work particularly and the way American poetry happens generally. 'I've always read English poetry much more than American poetry, and I feel that English poetry is more important to my work than American,' Ashbery notes.² This is not the only point, however: Ashbery is fundamentally a world writer — his favourite writers range from John Clare to St. John Perse, from Hölderlin to Pasternak, from Roussel to Elizabeth Bishop. And one of the upshots of this thesis has been, at least, to broaden the terms on which Ashbery is discussed from its usual Keats-Stevens lineage or the avant-garde context which has elided Ashbery's reading almost entirely.

Equally importantly, it has been possible to offer a description of Ashbery's work generally within the framework of his reading of English poetry. First and

1 Letter to Piotr Sommer, 7 January 1981, Houghton Library, Harvard.

2 Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford*, London: Between the Lines, 2003, p. 53.

foremost, as few commentaries on Ashbery do, I have offered here an account of the emergence of Ashbery's style. The knotty but crucial question of Ashbery's changing relationship with romanticism has also been addressed, as has his positioning regarding modernism; the nature of Ashbery's avant-gardism has been discussed; there have been descriptions of abstract but important aspects of Ashbery's poetic, like his conception of authority, the ideas of difficulty and reticence, and the nature of his disjunction. I have furthermore specified a number of concepts rightly recognised as central to Ashbery's poetry, but usually expressed in only approximate terms. Ashbery's poetic of time, for example, is specified as the result of his Clarean narratological description; the prevalence of paradox in Ashbery's work as a consequence of his interest in metaphysical metaphor; his readerly aesthetic as a particular feature of his reading of Auden.

I would like to end with one of the first poems Ashbery published. The first 'Sonnet' of *Some Trees* (37) hides itself in that volume with its unassuming, undescriptive title shared with another poem (68), but the piece nonetheless articulates the central poetic concerns of Ashbery's whole career:

Each servant stamps the reader with a look.
After many years he has been brought nothing.
The servant's frown is the reader's patience.
The servant goes to bed.
The patience rambles on
Musing on the library's lofty holes.

His pain is the servant's alive.
It pushes to the top stain of the wall
Its tree-top's head of excitement:
Baskets, birds, beetles, spools.
The light walls collapse next day.
Traffic is the reader's pictured face.
Dear, be the tree your sleep awaits;
Worms be your words, you not safe from ours.

Ashbery, from the start, has a keen sense of the reader's part in the creation of meaning, and the author is significantly termed a 'servant'. For many years the reader has indeed 'been brought nothing', but Ashbery's reader-centric poetry will, over the next half-century, attempt to change this. 'The patience rambles on' in Ashbery's inattentive reading and poetry, musing between the lines, on the situation, 'on the library's lofty holes'. Finally, authority is reduced to a duty to the reader:

'Traffic is the reader's pictured face.' The poem is a self-professedly minor work, but in a way this is consistent with the content of Ashbery's aesthetic: Ashbery shows no ambition in terms of authority, but shows us that this is not commensurate with a lack of ambition generally; rather, the content of Ashbery's poetic is in the freedom itself allowed to the reader in his situation; 'the library's lofty holes' rather than its lofty statements.

Ashbery is now the first living poet to have published a *Collected Poems*, or at least the first half of one, under the imprint of the Library of America; a *Selected Later Poems* is now available; and it seems increasingly now that Ashbery's poetry is inviting final judgements. I suggest that this judgement should base itself on reading, the central aspect of Ashbery's career, and the aspect that makes Ashbery central.

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