

John Ashbery's Humane Abstractions

Abstract

This article considers John Ashbery's articulation of space in *The Double Dream of Spring*. Ashbery's fourth volume is presented not within the trajectory of his own development, but **in the light** of Charles Olson's poetics. In recalling the prominence of Olson's spatial poetics, the article proposes a new account of Ashbery's relation to Giorgio de Chirico, from whose work he took the title of his book. What emerges from this account is a counter-poetics of space predicated, as Ashbery notes, on the fact of de Chirico's status as a displaced person, but more broadly, as he suggests, on displacement as a condition of Twentieth-Century aesthetics. Key to Ashbery's articulation of space is what he terms that 'banality which ... is our/ Most precious possession'. 'Banality', the article argues, affords a way of relating to environments which is not grounded in a sense of origin and long acquaintance but which instead takes account of dislocation. Amplifying the implications of this shift, the article moves from a Heideggerean sense of poetic space to an understanding of space informed by Arendt and Agamben. Ashbery's poetry, the article concludes, affords a means of contemplating space in which movement, not settlement, is the shaping condition.

Keywords

Ashbery, Space, Olson, Origin, Heidegger, De Chirico, Displacement, Movement, Banality, Arendt, Agamben, Ban.

1.

The focus of this essay is *The Double Dream of Spring*.¹ In the context of John Ashbery's long career it is possible to claim a particular significance for that book. Published in 1970, it was the first volume he wrote after re-settling in the United States in 1965, having lived in Paris for the best part of a decade. It was also the book in which he arrived at a kind of poem – 'Soonest Mended' is an example, but so are several others, 'Evening in the Country', say, or 'The Bungalows' – that established a way of configuring voice, narrative trajectory, human relations and cultural reference that would become recognizable as characteristically Ashberyian. It is not, though, within the context of the narrative of Ashbery's development, that I want to look at *The Double Dream of Spring*. What I want to consider instead is how, as a stand-alone work, that volume enables us to think, the kind of intellectual act it allows us, now, to engage in. To do that, it is necessary to shift the historical angle of vision just a little. I want, that is, to read *The Double Dream of Spring* through, or rather in the light of, Olson.

To a degree that has been obscured, and is quite difficult even now to recover, Olson's perspective on American poetry of the 1960s held a certain dominance. One measure of that dominance was Donald Allen's anthology, *The New American Poetry*.² Published in 1960, while Ashbery was in Paris, Allen's anthology was the defining event of the postwar poetic avant-garde. With British publication following a year later, the anthology projected a body of experimental work to new audiences in a way that no such body of work had been projected before or has been since. For reasons to do with geographical distance perhaps, but also, no doubt, for reasons of editorial taste, Ashbery's presence in the anthology was minimal. Where O'Hara was represented by 15 poems ('In

Memory of my Feelings' and 'Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births)' among them) along with a statement of poetics, Ashbery is glimpsed through 'A Boy', 'The Instruction Manual' and 'How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher ...'.³ Relative to several major careers that were clearly already under way at the moment of the anthology's publication, Ashbery's trajectory, as anticipated by Allen's selection, would have seemed far from certain.

The major figure of the anthology was Olson. This is apparent from the range and aesthetic assurance of the poems Allen presented and with which the anthology opened, among them, 'The Kingfishers', 'Maximus to himself', 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us' and 'The Distances'. More than this, in his introduction (and with reference to the statements on poetics) Allen proclaimed Olson's centrality:

Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" essay and his letter to Elaine Feinstein present the dominant new double concept: "composition by field" and the poet's "stance toward reality".⁴

Behind this double-concept, and behind the concept of 'composition by field' in particular, was the principle Olson had established as early as 1947 in *Call Me Ishmael*:

I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy...⁵

There is much to argue over in the American vision of space Olson offers in the opening sentences of his treatise on Melville (much that Olson himself at times contested), just as there is much to dispute in Allen's construction, in his anthology, of a national poetic project - and in ways both explicit and implicit some of the argument will be had here.⁶

What I want to recover at the outset, however, is simply the prominence of Olson's thinking, of his conceptual framework, in avant-garde North American poetry of the 1960s. Such prominence was subsequently underscored by Olson's headline appearances at two of the key poetic gatherings of the mid-sixties, the Vancouver Poetry conference of 1963 and the Berkeley conference of 1965; events that were followed by the publication of *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI*, the second volume of his major work, in 1968. It was a degree of influence, moreover, measurable by the urge other writers felt to differentiate themselves from his position. As James Schuyler wrote to Chester Kallman, with reference to the prominence of Black Mountain poetics in Allen's anthology, and explaining the impulse behind the upcoming New York School journal *Locus Solus*:

I and 'others' (it is a deep secret; the other is John Ashbery) are invisibly editing an anthology-magazine ... Part of its unstated objective is as a riposte at *The New American Poetry*, which has so thoroughly misrepresented so many of us – not completely, but the implications of context are rather overwhelming.⁷

In light of Olson's dominant framework, then, with its radical implications for poetic method and its complex implications for political geography, I want to propose that in *The Double Dream of Spring*, Ashbery presents what we might think of as a counter poetics of space; a counter poetics that can help us to understand the construction of space in our own, geographically fraught moment. Here is an example of Ashberyan space, sampled at length, from 'Sunrise in Suburbia':

And as day followed day the plainer meaning of it
Became a constant projected on the emigration.
The tundra seemed elaborated.

Then a permanent falling back shapes, signs the residue
As a tiny wood fence's the signature of disgust and decay
On an otherwise concerned but unmoved, specially obtruded hill:
Flatness of what remains
And modelling of what fled,
Decisions for a proper ramble into known but unimaginable, dense
Fringe expecting night,
A light wilderness of spoken words not
Unkind for all their aimlessness,
A blank chart of each day moving into the premise of difficult visibility
And which is nowhere, the urge to nowhere,
To retract that statement, sharply, within the next few minutes. (DDS, 50-51)

Taking a series of pointers from Ashbery himself, the aim of this essay is to reconstruct the narrative of twentieth-century space that this poetry calls on and enables us to understand. The contention is not that, in arriving at such a poetry, Ashbery was in any direct sense (whether reactive or otherwise) influenced by a close reading of Olson, but rather that in the Olsonian moment of the mid- to late sixties, *The Double Dream of Spring* (like Ed Dorn's *Geography* and like J.H. Prynne's *The White Stones*) offered a vision of space that in some sense meant to measure up to Olson.⁸ One way to discern the scope of that vision is through the author's notes at the end of the book. By no stretch of the imagination a surrogate statement on poetics, and certainly hardly an Eliotic consolidation of literary intent, Ashbery's notes are nonetheless subtly co-ordinated, pointing us, if we are willing to go there, toward an aesthetic of dislocation.

2.

In reconstructing Ashbery's poetics of dislocated space, one needs first to notice what the poetry declines. In so far, that is, as it articulates a poetic space, so the book implies and carries with it the image of space it refuses to inhabit. This has something, perhaps, to do with the double-ness of *The Double Dream of Spring*. The significance of *The Double Dream*, in other words, lies as much in what it declines as in what, however provisionally, it asserts, and what it refuses most categorically is an idea of settlement.

Such a refusal to settle is written into every line of the book. It is primarily apparent in what David Trotter, in *The Making of the Reader*, called Ashbery's poetics of 'spate'.⁹ What Trotter's term 'spate' points to is the speed of Ashbery's poetry, the rapidity with which, syntactically, the writing shifts from one kind of ground to another. What makes that momentum a matter of settlement is that as it advances so also the writing declines to establish a certain kind of reference. This is not to say the poetry doesn't refer; it is an aspect of its 'spate' that it refers all the time. In making its references, however, what it declines to presuppose is any particular association with the referent in question. What we encounter are environments we recognize but don't, in any strong sense, know. The measure of this is the poetry's defining lack of specificity, its habit of referring us not to things with which we (or somebody) might have special familiarity, but to things that any inhabitant of the environment might manage to name. 'Sunrise in Suburbia' registers simply tundra, rivers, mountains, roads, offering no identification beyond these rudimentary topographical categories. One could construe this as a linguistic deficiency, a failure to arrive at *le mot juste*. The point, however, is to recognise such non-specificity as a decision, a

decision that amounts to refusal. This is a poetry, in other words, whose presentation of space is not predicated on long acquaintance.

Such a rhetorical refusal of the implications of settlement, of the linguistic relation to an environment settlement implies, is coupled, in *The Double Dream of Spring*, with a running commentary on the idea of home. This is most vivid where the poetry is at its most comic, witness the manifest bathos of the coupleted section of 'Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox':

But of all the sights that were seen by me
In the East or West, on land or sea,
The best was the place that is spelled H-O-M-E

Now that once again I have achieved home
I shall forbear all further urge to roam

There is a hole of truth in the green earth's rug
Once you find it you are as snug as a bug.

(DDS, 26)

'Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape' performs a similar reduction, Ashbery's Popeye sestina refusing the allure not of home this time, but of country, as in 'my country':

He scratched

The part of his head under his hat. The apartment
Seemed to grow smaller. "But what if no pleasant
Inspiration plunge us now to the stars? *For this is my country.*"

(DDS, 47)

Excruciating as it is, this is purposeful comedy and as such carries one toward more strenuously formulated moments of *The Double Dream of Spring*. Really what's at issue, then, is not 'home' as Ella Wheeler Wilcox might have imagined it, but home as a principle of writing, a principle variously and consistently refused by *The Double Dream of Spring*. The expression of such refusal can be complicated, as in 'Definition of Blue':

In our own time, mass practices have sought to submerge the personality

By ignoring it, which has caused it to branch out in all directions

Far from the permanent tug that used to be its notion of "home."

(DDS, 53)

Here, as elsewhere, the multiple ironies of the poem's address make all straightforward identifications difficult. Whoever is speaking has a complicated thing to say such that the tone of the utterance is difficult to nail down. We can't say with any certainty what view the poem takes on the mass practices it names. What one can say is that in the face of such complications the poetry declines to take refuge in the 'notion of "home"'.

Such a refusal of what 'The Bungalows' calls the 'dream of home' – 'They are the same aren't they,/ The presumed landscape and the dream of home' – was the refusal of a prevailing narrative (DDS, 70). To give it a name, the narrative in question was the narrative of origin. To locate that word, it was in Cid Corman's *Origin* magazine ('A Quarterly for the Creative') that Olson published both early Maximus poems and such crucial statements on poetics as the letters that comprised *Human Universe*.¹⁰ It was notably in *Origin*, in other

words, that Olson worked through the double concept that by 1960 Allen took to be dominant in postwar avant-garde American poetry, through his researches in Sumerian and Mayan culture and, as his project found its focus, in his archival reconstruction of Gloucester

The strength of the Olson-Corman *Origin* project lay partly in the fact that it had an analogue in philosophy. The analogue was Heidegger, whose own account of the postwar condition was quite quickly absorbed into New American poetics. Denise Levertov's statement of poetics, 'Notes on Organic Form', for instance, though formulated in correspondence with Robert Duncan, has its most conspicuous debt to Heidegger's image of the poet: 'open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience'.¹¹ Likewise, as Peter Nicholls has documented, a reading of Heidegger was integral to George Oppen's compositional process.¹² Implicit, this is to argue, in Ashbery's refusal of the dream of home was the refusal of a well formulated and thoroughly established postwar poetics. Really to hear what is meant in Ashbery, in other words, when his poetry declines to settle, it is important also to hear the Heideggerean poetic narrative, to track the implications of the disposition Heidegger calls dwelling.

A central term in his postwar writing, Heidegger opened up the meaning of 'dwelling' in the first of the series of 'Darmstädter Gespräche' talks he gave in 1951.¹³ Speaking to the organisers's title for the season's series as a whole, 'Mensch und Raum' ('Man and Space'), and taking its departure from postwar crises in housing, 'Building Dwelling Thinking' draws on the etymological fact that in both building and thinking one has a trace of the word dwelling.¹⁴ As Heidegger notes, the modern English verb 'to dwell' retains this resonance nicely, its history including the Middle English dwellan, to 'remain in a place'. A 'dwelling' then, in both senses, is that which remains in a place, a meaning, as

Heidegger argues, that we begin to hear fully only as we dwell on language itself. As we dwell, as we really contemplate the words we are using, so language, as Heidegger argues, voices its original nearness to place.

The word for that nearness is 'locale'. To work according to the idea of a 'locale', as he proposes it, is to constitute a meaningful relation with an environment, a relation that both opens and preserves the sense of a connection to a given place. His central example, famously, is a bridge, which, as he says,

brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighbourhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream.¹⁵

It is, on the face of it, a most alluring image: the bridge, in responding to its environment as it does, draws that environment meaningfully into view. This, as he proposes it in 'Building Dwelling Thinking', is the function of art: to respond to and (in so doing) to voice or articulate particular environments. It is an aesthetic of place, of neighbourliness, of nearness, or, as he puts it, repeatedly, of locale.

To break from the Heideggerean narrative a moment, it is worth observing that 'stream and bank and land' don't work like this in *The Double Dream of Spring*; that in Ashbery environments precisely refuse to become locales. This is apparent on every page, but take the prose poem 'For John Clare', where, as the speaker puts it:

There ought to be room for more things, for a spreading out, like. Being immersed in the details of rock and field and slope – letting them come to you for once, and then meeting them halfway would be so much easier – if they took an ingenuous pride in being in one's blood. Alas, we perceive them if at all as those things that were meant

to be put aside – costumes of the supporting actors or voice trilling at the end of a narrow enclosed street. You can do nothing with them. Not even offer to pay.

(DDS, 35)

As ever, given the writing's ambiguities, its ambivalence of tone, there are many implications one might draw from a passage such as this. What can certainly be established, though, is that whereas according to Heideggerean topography one looks to experience a gathering of elements tending, as he sees it, toward a kind of meaning, in Ashbery the impulse is towards dispersal, a 'spreading out'. Details do not, in 'For John Clare', take 'an ingenuous pride in being in one's blood'; we are not advised to dwell on them, but to 'put them aside'. As the Ashbery narrative says, 'You can do nothing with them'. In this poem, as elsewhere in *The Double Dream of Spring*, the environment refuses to become a locale.

The implications of that refusal are far-reaching. Through its orientation of poetry towards intimacy and nearness, Heidegger's argument proposed a compelling counter to the intrusions of modernity. What a certain kind of postwar poet found there, accordingly, was a powerful validation: poetry as grounded, near-dwelling, or neighbourly voice. To dwell, to underline the point, is 'to remain, to stay in a place', to appreciate, linguistically not least, that 'spaces receive their essential being from locales'. The critical question, however, is: what if a person doesn't (or can't) stay in a particular place? What if, in not staying, they seek leave to operate somewhere else? What does it mean for language, in other words, if the reality of 'Mensch und Raum' in the Twentieth-Century is to be found not in the condition of the locale but rather, as history proposes, in dislocation?

One should be wary, of course, of reductions. Given the affinities observed so far, affinities discernible in postwar narratives of origin, it could be thought that I take Olson to be straightforwardly a poet of place. He is not that, as I have argued elsewhere, not least because in his reconstruction of Gloucester he offers a dynamic and complex political geography; the Gloucester of *The Maximus Poems* is a geopolitical context formed out of extensive and deeply complicated historical relations to other settings.¹⁶ Olson himself that is, not least in the kinetics he proposes in 'Projective Verse', has a far-reaching way of articulating human movement. Even so, by the early sixties the Olsonian double concept had arrived at a poetry which, in its handling of 'SPACE' had come to settle, as its principal procedure, on the articulation of the dynamics of a given locale. *The Double Dream of Spring* offers an alternative poetics. Against the background of discourses that, one way or another, emphasise origin, Ashbery arrived at a language in which dislocation was a shaping effect.

4.

Viewed historically, as poetry written in relation to the spatialised moment of Olson, what *The Double Dream of Spring* allows us to configure, in our own geographically fraught condition, is a language of space in which movement, not belonging, is the principle of articulation. To get at this formation of space we need to consider the volume's title. What that takes us to is Giorgio de Chirico, and especially to the great period of his painterly invention, the metaphysical period of 1911-1918, 'The Double Dream of Spring' (1915) being an entirely characteristic work of that moment. Ashbery's poetry is full of such allusions; it helps to get them, but it is not imperative – or is certainly not made to feel imperative – that

one does. Like the references to elements in the topography, the Ashberyan allusion does not presuppose familiarity. In the case of de Chirico, however, it is important to the poet that we know where the title of his book comes from. Exceptionally, then, he tells us, in one of the Author's Notes at the back of the book: "'The Double Dream of Spring'" is the title of a painting by Giorgio de Chirico in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York' (DDS, 95).

De Chirico mattered to Ashbery. In 1966 he reviewed the painter's novel *Hebdomeros* (a section of which he translated for *Art and Literature*) observing that the work would be 'of great interest to writers today who are trying to extend the novel form'.¹⁷ In 1967 he reviewed an exhibition called 'Space and Dream' in which de Chirico (in Ashbery's assessment) took centre stage. Writing later, in 1982, in response to a retrospective of the artist's work at the Museum of Modern Art, he confirmed his estimation of de Chirico's standing. Such was his contribution to modern art that he should be considered equal to if not more important than Picasso and Matisse. De Chirico's work, as Ashbery puts it, should be placed in a 'special elysium of its own'.¹⁸ It is a rare claim, one that distinguishes the critic as well as the artist, and what it rests on is the artist's handling of space.

Ashbery is precise and emphatic when writing about space in de Chirico. It is a subject, unmistakably, in which he has an investment. As he put it, in his review of the 'Space and Dream' show:

De Chirico's earlier metaphysical paintings are not a phenomenon isolated from the mainstream of modern art, but an attempt like Cubism to enlarge the artist's space of action by changing the rules of space. For those "days of supreme happiness" to

occur one had to discover a mechanism no longer ruled by the compass, where potentialities could become facts merely through being evoked by the artist.¹⁹

The 'days of supreme happiness' take us back to Hebdomeros, where, as de Chirico conceives it, 'the sense of north, south, east and west – all sense of direction, in fact – was lost'.²⁰ It is precisely this that Ashbery values in the painter, the fact that he conceives a space not governed by the compass, that in his extraordinary compositions he changes the rules of space. In Ashbery's de Chirico space is susceptible to re-imagining; we can think it again, 'potentialities could become facts'. In his later review, of the 1982 retrospective, Ashbery dwells less on the principle of de Chirico's reconfiguration than on the detail of the performance:

vast perspectives and strangely empty colonnades were enlivened only by an occasional tiny figure in the distance and the slightly sinister presence of a train releasing a puff of white smoke into a demented blue sky.²¹

There are the makings of an Ashbery poem in this, of many Ashbery poems: in the play of scale, in the sudden shifts from vast perspectives to tiny figures, in the empty and unexplained presence of human constructions; in the sense, conjured by the artist and then reproduced in prose by the critic, of a space that doesn't gather towards a locale. Ashbery, that is, found space configured in de Chirico in ways that he came to emulate in his poetry; an emulation that became a kind of staple, the basic topography of an Ashbery poem.

Consider this, for instance, from 'The Bungalows':

They are the same aren't they,
The presumed landscape and the dream of home

Because the people are all homesick today or desperately sleeping,
Trying to remember how these rectangular shapes
Became so extraneous and so near
To create a foreground of quiet knowledge
In which youth had grown old, chanting and singing wise hymns that
Will sign for old age
And so lift up the past to be persuaded, and be put down again.
(DDS, 70)

One could quote at greater length, or one could sample passages from many other poems: this is what space is like in Ashbery. The foreground is oddly close, the human constructions, the bungalows of the title perhaps, are strangely ‘near’ *and* ‘extraneous’, the disparate elements are held together in such a way that none can quite be said to fit. The effect is of the grammar of a de Chirico painting, according to which the elements of the composition refuse to settle, rendered in the shifting syntax of an Ashbery poem. It is for this reason he points the reader to de Chirico in his note at the end of the book: because de Chirico stands behind the poetics of space he arrives at in *The Double Dream of Spring*.

At the end of his review of the 1967 show, Ashbery stepped up the rhetoric: So one ought to approach the Knoedler show not as a collection of lovely antiques from the 1920s, but as the declaration of independence on which our present democracy (“the Republic of Dreams,” in Louis Aragon’s phrase) is based. The space of dreams – deep, shallow, open, bent, a point which has no physical dimensions or a universal breath – is the space in which we now live.²²

This is a grand statement, comparable in its dimensions to the kinds of statements by which Olson had established himself, articulating, as it does, independence, democracy, space and the republic. But if the terms are the same, and if democracy, as Ashbery has it here, depends on a way of configuring space, the form of that configuration is radically different. Whereas Olson sets himself down, positions himself, for all the scale and mobility of his vision, in a specific locale, Ashbery's de Chirico is a figure much less comfortably placed. What matters, in fact, is precisely de Chirico's anxiety:

[T]he major metaphysical masterpieces, whose arcaded squares and dreamlike spaces have been paradigms – like Kafka's fiction – of twentieth-century anxiety.²³

Here again the rhetoric is compelling: what de Chirico's presentation of space speaks to is twentieth-century anxiety; it is precisely this, to recapitulate Ashbery's earlier claim, that makes the painter the equal (at least) of Matisse and Picasso. It is an anxiety Ashbery relates directly to de Chirico's own biography:

Like Picasso, Gertrude Stein, Guillaume Apollinaire and others who played vital roles in the astonishing ferment in Paris on the eve of World War 1, de Chirico was a displaced person.²⁴

For Ashbery this is the point; not the stand alone fact that de Chirico was a displaced person, but that in the work of his great metaphysical period he formed a vision of space commensurate with that fact. De Chirico, that is, like Kafka, arrived at an artistic vision for the Twentieth Century predicated on the person who is thrown out.

5

This anxious sense of space is what de Chirico allowed Ashbery to contemplate in *The Double Dream of Spring*. The question in turn, the question posed at the beginning of this

essay, is what does the poetry of *The Double Dream of Spring* allow us to think? What, this is to ask, does Ashbery bring to de Chirico's vision? To which the answer, straightforwardly, is language. Or to be more precise: in its syntactical rendering of de Chirico's spatial grammar – his rendering of the space, as Ashbery puts it, 'in which we now live' – what the poetry of *The Double Dream of Spring* enables us to think about is what a language shaped not by belonging but by displacement can look like.

This claim takes us to a second of the 'Author's Notes' with which Ashbery concludes his book. The note relates to the short series of poems titled 'French Poems'. As Ashbery says:

I wrote the group of poems called "French Poems" in French and translated them myself into English, with the idea of avoiding customary word patterns and associations. The French version was published in the review *Tel Quel*, No.27, Autumn 1966, Paris. (DDS, 95)

It does not force the point, I think, to suggest that in this further framing note Ashbery presents a group of poems that has, in a quite literal sense, been dislocated. Before they appeared in English in *The Double Dream of Spring*, the poems in question were written in another language and published in another country. At the level of utterance there has been a displacement. The question, in so far as 'French Poems' are concerned with dislocation, is what do they tell us about that condition? What, from that point of view, do they bring to the language? The note is explicit on this point: the idea was to avoid 'customary word patterns and associations'. To arrive at such a form of expression is to configure utterances which decline the implication of near-dwelling. It is to configure a language whose sense of its relation to space is not predicated on the idea of a locale.

There are different ways we might think about this. In the rhetoric of the late sixties, the rhetoric of 'Space and Dream', we might say that the republic Ashbery glimpses in de Chirico's vision of space calls for no prior acquaintance, that it places no premium on custom and practice. Read in the light of the present moment, what the poetry of *The Double Dream of Spring* can also be seen to propose is what we can call a broken English; a version of the English language broken from its historical ground. It is this broken quality, its interest in breaking with association, that explains the poetry's steadfast refusal to be placed. It can't be placed because it declines to trade in familiar markers, but situates itself, instead, among geographically non-specific sites. Consider the closing verse paragraph of the fourth of 'French Poems':

Everything is landscape:

Perspectives of cliffs beaten by innumerable waves,

More wheat fields than you can count, forests,

With disappearing paths, stone towers

And finally and above all the great urban centers, with

Their office buildings and populations, at the center of which

We live our lives, made up of a great quantity of isolated instants

So as to be lost at the heart of a multitude of things.

(DDS, 39)

In Ashbery's 'French Poems', not different in this respect from the other poems of *The Double Dream of Spring*, the built environment resists the draw of meaning. There is not a gathering here, as Heidegger proposed, but a dispersal, 'a great quantity of isolated instants', such that 'we are lost at the heart of a multitude of things'.

It is in these lines that Ashbery's poetry of the late-60s presents its emotional burden. What, if we take our modernity seriously, are we to do about such lost-ness? Ashbery, taking a steer from de Chirico reads lostness not as loss but as displacement, where displacement is not the exception but the condition through which the Twentieth Century experiences environments. 'The Task' then, to take the title of the first poem of *The Double Dream of Spring*, a poem which itself deftly and brilliantly opens out into new geographies, is to arrive at a language which aims not to recover an imagined past but to negotiate the present. Ashbery, that is, looks to compose a language adjusted to the reality of the non-place. 'French Poems', accordingly, concludes with a truly risky proposition:

This banality which in the last analysis is our
Most precious possession, because allowing us to
Rise above ourselves, which would not be very much
Without the presence of a lot of friends and enemies, all

Willing to swear allegiance, entering thus
The factory of our lives.

(DDS, 39)

Ashbery, I want to suggest, is entirely serious in making this proposition, and in the corresponding estimation of what modernity implies. The question, therefore, is what does it mean to offer up banality as our most precious possession? One answer, I would suggest, takes us to a second and competing narrative of the postwar moment.

Ashbery's high risk word 'banality' is crucial to the poetry of *The Double Dream of Spring*; it points us to a flatness – 'the flatness of what remains' as 'Sunrise in Suburbia' has it – that is one of its defining effects. It is important, therefore, in this context, that we have an understanding of what 'banality' implies. To arrive at such understanding I want to make an un-Ashberyan, non-banal move. As the dictionary has it, the word banal means 'lacking force or originality; commonplace'. It is the first part of this definition, clearly, that constitutes the risk of 'banality'. By contrast, it is as the commonplace – that lovely idea – that 'banality' might be regarded as 'our most precious possession'. Considered etymologically (and this is the non-banal move) the word has its origin in the eighteenth century, relating to feudal service, in the sense of compulsory service, hence 'common to all'. The term entered English through French, and derives from the word 'ban', to which the dictionary definition of 'banality' refers us.

'Ban' itself is a most interesting, because deeply ambiguous term. In Feudal English it constituted a positive command, being the summoning of vassals to perform their military obligations. In this sense it reached back through old French to the Old High German word, meaning 'command'. This meaning is preserved in the term's modern legal usage, being, in English, an official proclamation or public notice. The meaning is also retained in the 'banns' by which an intended marriage is proclaimed in church. Where the word turns on itself, in its modern application, is in the sense that the proclamation of a ban is characteristically, now, a prohibition. That which is banal, in other words, in its insistence on the commonplace, points us to a meaning of the 'ban' that has become all but lost. Or rather, and to recognize the real subtlety of the term, the ban is a pronouncement applicable to all according to which some part of the whole is separated off. Following the title of the long poem with which *The Double Dream of Spring* concludes, we might think of that part of the

whole that the ban prohibits as a 'Fragment'. In which case we might notice that the first of that poem's ten-line stanzas opens with an act of closure, 'The last block is closed in April', and ends with a command:

Never mentioned in the signs of the oblong day
The saw-toothed flames and the point of other
Space not given, and yet not withdrawn
And never yet imagined: a moment's commandment.

(DDS, 78)

The ban so conceived, as making a proclamation to the whole that separates out a part, takes us to the heart of a narrative of Twentieth-Century political geography that predicates itself not on the primacy of locality, but on the fact of human movement through and across political space. The major commentator on the ban is Giorgio Agamben, for whom the ambiguity of the term constitutes the intellectual mechanism by which 'the state of exception' is produced.²⁵ The term 'state of exception' is well established, now, in contemporary thought, but to recall its designation, what it points to for Agamben are those circumstances, spatially constructed, in which the force of the law is applied but the law's accountability is suspended. The 'state of exception' is thus the political condition in which displaced persons can too often find themselves.

The larger narrative at work here, to which Agamben's examination of legal procedure and language is an important contribution, is the narrative of human displacement which, from one point of view, is the defining story of Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century political space. That narrative, as Agamben observes, was given brilliant and lasting expression by Hannah Arendt in 1957, in a chapter she included in the second edition of her study of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Entitled 'The Decline of the Nation State and

the End of the Rights of Man', what that chapter established was the necessity for a vision of political geography that acknowledged the fact of human movement. As Arendt saw it, the defining problem of the postwar period was what she called 'statelessness', 'the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history' being 'the existence of an ever-growing new people comprised of stateless persons, the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics'.²⁶ It was a phenomenon, as she argued, that defined the inadequacy of national jurisdiction:

Suddenly, there was no place on earth where migrants could go without the severest restrictions, no country where they would be assimilated, no territory where they could found a new community of their own. This, moreover, had next to nothing to do with any material problems of overpopulation; it was a problem not of space but of political organization.²⁷

To qualify Arendt's argument slightly, it *was* a problem of space. What she means here is that space in the sense of room, was not the issue; it was not, she means, because there was not sufficient room that displaced persons could not be moved from one territory to another. Statelessness precisely *was* a problem of 'space', then, in that it was the conception of space in terms of locality that prevented, or prohibited movement. What was required, as Arendt saw it (writing from the USA) in 1957, was a way of thinking that altered the rules of space.

All of which brings us back to Ashbery's de Chirico, a painter in whom elements were not drawn into familiar relation, but were allowed to exist in their strangeness, all predicated, as Ashbery saw it, on the fact that de Chirico, like the major artistic figures of his time, was a displaced person. It was this, as he argued, that constituted de Chirico's

greatness, the quality of composition that, in his eyes, made him equal if not superior to Picasso and Matisse. De Chirico, in other words, permitted a vision of the space in which, as Ashbery saw it, 'we now live'.²⁸ Which is not to argue that Ashbery addressed the politics of human movement directly, any more than de Chirico, in any simple sense, created an art of the displaced. It is to suggest, however, that in both Ashbery's poetry and de Chirico's metaphysical paintings one is given a sense of space that is cognisant of the characteristic dislocations of the twentieth century, a sense of space that, in our own geographically fraught moment we can think with and through.

The question Ashbery's recourse to 'banality' raises, is what kind of language might such a revised sense of space imply? The beginning of an answer, I want to suggest, lies in Ashbery's broken English, the English, that is, of *The Double Dream of Spring* that refuses customary word patterns and associations and which in turn permits a syntactically driven poetics of space. What that relentless syntax achieves, in its refusal of association, is a language founded on momentum, on the primacy in human existence of movement itself. From which it follows, in *The Double Dream of Spring*, that everybody is in a state of arrival, that everything is always just coming into view. At which point one might observe that, just as one finds in certain of Ashbery's contemporaries an echo of a Heideggerean sense of belonging, so in the sense of arrival that shapes Ashbery's syntax, one finds an echo of Arendt. Thus whereas in *Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt could not articulate the form of movement through space that might counter the modern sense of territory she had so accurately described there, in her subsequent work, *The Human Condition*, freed of historical constraint, she outlined a concept in which some sense of the necessary freedom

to move and arrive might be discerned. As she observes, articulating her key term, 'natality' (itself understood as a departure from sense of loss she found and rejected in Heidegger):

Labour and work, as well as action, are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers.²⁹

In her commitment to the ontological principle of natality, Arendt inscribes the virtue of the newcomer, and in the newcomer she identifies the stranger's relation to the world.

None of which is to argue that Ashbery drew explicitly on contemporary formations in philosophy in shaping his poetic. It is to argue, however, that in a moment in which Olson was a prevailing influence on American poetry, and in which Olson's spatial poetics, (however much the detail of his practice might complicate the view) was identified with a connection to place, so in *The Double Dream of Spring* Ashbery articulated a counter understanding of spatiality, one in which dislocation, displacement and movement were the defining effects. What results is a shifting series of environments characterized not by specific topographical references but by semi-abstract ones: rivers, mountains, urban centres, the sun. Such semi-abstract language, as the poetry's journeying constantly shows, is the language by which people move. In full awareness of the risk of banality, Ashbery's *Double Dream of Spring* presented a poetry of humane abstractions, a poetry of commonplaces through which, in Stevens' great phrase, persons might have the pleasure of merely circulating.³⁰

Notes

¹ John Ashbery, *The Double Dream of Spring* (New York, The Ecco Press, 1976), 50-51; hereafter referred to in the text as DDS.

² Donald Allen (ed.), *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

³ *Ibid.*, 239-69, 419-20, 271-278.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁵ Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 1

⁶ One pole of that argument is represented by Heriberto Yezep's account of Olson's visit to Mexico in *The Empire of Neo-Memory*, tr. Jen Hofer, Christian Nagler and Brian Whitener (Chain Links, 2013). Yezep's critique of what he takes to be Olson's neo-imperial poetic is contrasted by Amiel Alcalay's brilliant account of Olsonian geo-politics in *A Little History*, ed. Fred Dewey (New York, Upset Press, 2012). For a range of recent discussions of the intellectual frameworks underpinning Allen's construction of *The New American Poetry* see John Woznicki (ed.), *The New American Poetry: Fifty Years Later* (Philadelphia: Lehigh University Press, 2014)

⁷ James Schuyler, letter to Chester Kallman, 3 September, 1960, reprinted in Bill Corbett (ed.), *Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler* (New York: Turtle Point Press, 2005), 129. Schuyler included a copy of his letter to Kallman in a letter to Ashbery.

⁸ In connecting *The Double Dream of Spring* to *Geography* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1965) and *The White Stones* (Lincoln: Grossteste Press, 1969) I am clearly observing different kinds of relation to Olson. Both Dorn and Prynne evolved their understanding of the poem's grasp of space through direct encounter with Olson. While I would argue that *The Double Dream of Spring* meditates as significantly on questions of space as those two volumes, Olson stands behinds Ashbery's writing as cultural backdrop rather than interlocutor. In setting his fourth book in this context, however, I mean to recover a strain of postmodern poetics that was crucial at the moment of its composition but which has since become obscured.

⁹ David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and subjectivity in modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), 205

¹⁰ *Origin 1* (Spring 1951) begins and ends with Olson. Poems ('I, Maximus', 'Adamo Me', 'The Story of an Olson' and 'The Moon is the Number 18') are interspersed throughout with 'Letters to Vincent Ferrini' as well as the important prose statement 'The Gate and the Center'.

¹¹ Denise Levertov, 'Some Notes on Organic Form', *Poetry*, 106:6 (September 1965); reprinted in Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World: New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions Press, 1973), 8.

¹² For Nichols' detailed account of Oppen's reading of Heidegger in translation see *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), 65. As Nicholls observes, a full account of the translating of Heidegger is to be found in Miles Groth, *Translating Heidegger* (New York, Humanity Books, 2004).

¹³ The Darmstädter Gespräche' were a series of symposia held intermittently in Darmstadt from 1950 to 1975, with each season of talks going under a thematic title. Heidegger's series of talks ended with the lecture 'Poetically Man Dwells'.

¹⁴ In Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993),

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 354.

¹⁶ For an extended discussion of the dynamics of Olson's changing presentation of place, see (redacted for anonymous submission).

¹⁷ John Ashbery, 'The Decline of the Verbs', *Book Week* 4:15 (December 18, 1966), reprinted in John Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), 88-92.

¹⁸ John Ashbery, 'A De Chirico Retrospective', *Newsweek* (April 12, 1982), reprinted in John Ashbery, *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987*, ed. David Bergman (Manchester, Carcanet, 1989), 403.

¹⁹ John Ashbery, 'Space and Dream', *ArtNews* (December 1967), reprinted in Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 403.

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

²³ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 402.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Agamben, introduces his discussion of the ban as part of his extended consideration of the concept of 'bare life' in *Homo Sacer*; see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Hellerzoan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181. His discussion of the implications of the term is continued through *State of Exception*, tr. Kevin Attell (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1960), 277

²⁷ *ibid.*, 294

²⁸ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 12.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edition, intro. Margaret Canovan (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press), 9

³⁰ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 149-150.