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The Elusive Subject of John Ashbery's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

THE ELUSIVE SUBJECT OF JOHN ASHBERY'S POETRY

PAUL SERRALHEIRO

Although the subject of John Ashbery's poetry may be discussed and understood, its essential mode of being lies beyond reason. John Ashbery's poems communicate the mystery of truth and meaning more than literal truths and meanings. His domain could be seen to be the area where desire, dream, emotion and thought become language. Hence, a rational reading of the poetry can only scratch the surface of Ashbery's subject: the depths of Ashbery's poems exist in the reader's experience of the poem, where a recreation, an amplification, an extension of the poet's experience and something which is uniquely of the poem occurs. In this thesis I address myself to the elusive element of Ashbery's poetry which has found both admirers and detractors. I attempt to explain the poetry's power to baffle and enchant the reader in terms of language theory, surrealism, music, and painting.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in citations of Ashbery's poetry.

ST	Some Trees
TCO	The Tennis Court Oath
RM	Rivers and Mountains
DD	The Double Dream of Spring
TP	Three Poems
SP	Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror
HD	Houseboat Days
AWK	As We Know
Sh Tr	Shadow Train

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It appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be <u>difficult</u>.

-T.S.Eliot

Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.

-Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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CHAPTER I

APPROACHING ASHBERY

The main problem in reading John Ashbery's poetry is that of being able to appreciate it without being fully able to understand it, a sort of "Negative Capability" once removed. That is the first hurdle to be gotten over. A reader with expectations of finding a readily available meaning in Ashbery's poetry will indeed be deceived, and there are no excuses that need to be given to justify the poetry. One must acclimatize oneself to it, or desert it for "other centers of communication" (HD 46).

For some readers clarity could possibly appear to be something Ashbery does not yearn for, and indeed it could seem that he goes out of his way to make the meaning in his poetry unclear. However, some readers of his work, led on if by nothing more than their sense of intrigue, have persisted in reading him and have found that an immense pleasure is to be gotten from deciphering this most difficult of contemporary American poets. What one finally gains from working through Ashbery's poetry is an understanding that an Ashbery poem leads us into areas of thought and experience which may not have a discernible static meaning and mode of existence, but which are nonetheless real even though they don't fit into the systems imposed on them by the human rational impulse. Thus 'obscurity' is a

condition of Ashbery's subject which finds a correlative in his style. Seen in this way Ashbery's poetry is an accurate and clear reflection of a difficult and inherently unclear subject.

Ashbery has, throughout his career, written and spoken about his poetry in a manner that communicates a wish to be faithful to the difficulty that the understanding is continually attempting to penetrate. Therefore, Ashbery explains:

> The difficulty of my poetry isn't there for its own sake: it is meant to reflect the difficulty of living, the everchanging, minute adjustments that go on around us and which we respond to from moment to moment--the difficulty of living in passing time, which is both difficult and automatic. . . .

The problem with the poetry, then, is not in its being insignificant, but in its multifaceted significance. In other words, the poetry deals with meaning in a way that does not match the system of order we impose on reality, for it presents reality in its fullness. In its holistic approach to experience it considers the dialectical aspects of our existence and accepts the gaps as well as the concrete areas in the systems of significance which are in a sense superimpositions on reality.

Ashbery's poetry displays a fidelity to experience. It does not gloss over the black holes in our understanding, but rather allows them to exist, as well they must. The result is a poetry that is frequently impenetrable to the understanding, and one that will occasionally frustrate and annoy the reader. But the reader must get beyond his frustration. "Ashbery," wrote one critic who could not

transcend the frustration, "is an instance of the poet who, through much of his career, eliminates meaning without achieving any special intensity." And in the same article:

> Ashbery has no new meaning to deliver, no apotheosis to portend. His song of himself is resolutely committed to meandering about and proclaiming the small satisfaction of moving without significant impediment.[2]

Negative reactions of this sort to Ashbery's work are not uncommon. John Simon referred to Ashbery's work as

> a kind of non-poetry made up of sheer free association, and, I suspect, not even honest free association at that, but deliberate cultivation of the meaningless, a willed collocation of the disconnected, unspontaneous and ungrammatical. . . .[3]

and J.W. Hughes called Ashbery "the Doris Day of Modernist poetry," noting that some of his lines "have about as much life as a refrigerated plastic flower."[4]

These types of responses are inevitable since Ashbery's poetry often refuses to make sense of the incongruity of reality, or in the words from "Clepsydra" in The Double Dream of Spring, to offer "a serpentine / Gesture which hides the truth behind a congruent / Message." Sense is not always forthcoming out of experience. Often one must accept certain things which one does not understand, and in so doing one may understand, if not their nature, at least the problem inherent in understanding their nature. Ashbery's poems are utterances that reflect this, and whose truth is apparent to the reader only if he is able to accept their incongruities and the

obscurity of the mode of communication.

The elusive nature of understanding, of time and truth, of being in flux, can be said to be the pervasive themes of Ashbery's poetry. The general nature of his utterances has baffled readers who have sought to find in them the kind of specific truths poets heretofore have offered. What they have found instead has been truth whole and unsegmented, as far as it can exist in an act of language. His poetry is as fluid and often as ungraspable as the nature of his themes and, once one has grown accustomed to the mode of an Ashberian utterance, which is one that doesn't "hide the truth behind a congruent / Message," one can begin to understand it as a process, an unsequestered event:

> This, thus is a portion of the subject of this poem
> Which is in the form of falling snow:
> That is, 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 in 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, is what it is.
> But the rhythm of the series of repeated jumps, from
> abstract into positive and back to a slightly
> less diluted abstract.
>
> (RM 39)

What is available to us when we focus on segments of the process is a fraction of the truth, and to talk about truth in static terms is perhaps the only way one can talk about it, though certainly its nature always remains fluid and in constant transformation.

If Ashbery is offering us acts of language, as indeed he is,

then, no matter what is being said, the acts are irrevocable. Having opted to not "hide the truth behind a congruent message," but to offer "unformed yells, rocketings" ("Clepsydra"), Ashbery has allowed all the incongruities of a consciousness as well as its urges to form and shape those "unformed yells" in his activity as a poet. For whatever reasons, many readers of poetry have, by and large, accepted Ashbery's utterances. For this reason, if not for any other, Ashbery's poetry deserves analysis, and not only the aspect of the poetry which is accessible but also the more difficult incoherent aspect of it. A better understanding of the coherent side of Ashbery's acts of language is to be gotten from a consideration of his incoherencies and vice versa.

It will be my thesis and argument in what follows that coherency and incoherency exist as one movement in an Ashbery poem; that the vacillation between the two and through the shades that differentiate the two is the dynamic that informs the poem, the nature of what it is saying and how it is saying it; and that that movement is present in Ashbery's work from Some Trees to his most recent poems. The mind's attempt to follow that movement, or to grasp it and derive meaning from it, may be as challenging as the ongoing endeavour of finding sense and meaning in the fabric of the life we are all moving through. Meanings are hidden from us and revealed to us co-temporally. And in the same way, an Ashbery poem reveals to us its meanings and keeps them from us. Needless to say, to know certain meanings requires one's involvement in the process wherein those meanings are to be found--in this case the poem. Once that process is halted, or once one

is outside that process, one cannot understand it, nor the 'meanings' one has wanted to know. One cannot understand a language, for example, unless one enters into the field of the exchange of the particular utterances that are that language. And once one is in it, the meanings of certain utterances can never be seen as static ones existing in a vacuum, but ones that are continually modulating and being coloured by their contexts. An Ashbery poem is true to that mode of existence of meaning, and it is available to us in the same way as a language which we never quite fully know, leading us through loci of meaning we are always discovering.

Even within the universe of the understanding mind there are gaps of "so much unmeaning," which Ashbery equates with "so much being" (DD 81). These gaps, through which the forces of chaos and anarchy are apparent, are important and meaningful although there is no apparent meaning in them. Ashbery tells us in "Some Old Tires" from Shadow Train:

> there's too much to
> Be done that doesn't fit, and the parts that get
> lost
> Are the reasonable ones just because they get
> lost. . . .

Judging aspects of existence which don't fit into a rational picture of order in terms of a rational picture of order is to falsify and belittle them, reduce to common denominators--means--what is uncommon, unique and necessarily impossible to fit into an order. What "doesn't fit," what "gets lost," are as important and essential to an understanding of reality as the units out of which a picture of

order is constructed, the mysterious phonemes that make up our system of sense, like the dots on the television screen that miraculously form a picture. The gaps more than the units are what constitute an Ashbery utterance. Just because the "meaning" of the gaps is impossible to pinpoint is the reason they are part of what constitutes the true--the true being ultimately unfathomable.

That the gaps are meaningless does not imply that they are insignificant, i.e., unimportant. Ashbery's concern with what "doesn't fit," the "parts that get lost," is what prompts such critics as Boyers, Simon, and Hughes to chastise him. Other critics, however, realize that what Ashbery is presenting is a true reflection of experience. "The difficulty with Ashbery," noted Douglas Crase, "is that his poetry is . . . so accurately a picture of the world we live in. . . ."[5] "This pattern of opening and closing," Marjorie Perloff informs us, "of revelation and reveiling, of simultaneous disclosure and concealment is the structural principle of the Ashbery lyric,"[6] and Charles Altieri comments that:

> The personal voice [in Ashbery's poetry] is simultaneously trapped within and liberated by patterns of meaning which have no ground or purpose beyond the movements of dispersal and partial integrations that constitute the life of mind and the vitality and pathos of desire.[7]

It is the very stuff of life that one finds in the Ashbery poem. The Ashbery poem is not just about something; it attempts a recreation of the thing. That is why Ashbery's poems present a difficulty for the reader who expects the poem to give him, wholly digested, a vision

and analysis of certain matters. What the reader gets, and what baffles him, is a recreation process of life. Naturally the essence of the poem's utterance and the form it takes will be one and the same. The style and the content are one. This unnerves certain critics like Charles Molesworth, who writes:

> instead of a poetry of "statement" Ashbery has evolved a most tenuous, unassertive language. . . . The arbitrary continuation of the poem lies at the center of Ashbery's aesthetic, which seems a flirtation with nihilism, the fag end of an autotelic art that apothesizes symbolism's elevation of style over content.[8]

David Shapiro, on the other hand, is ecstatic about Ashbery's negative capabilities:

> Ashbery deflates our expectation of sense, of presence, by giving us again and again the playful zone of <u>deferred sense</u>. There is an icy autocratic humiliation of the reader, who expects again and again a center only to be decentered. Ashbery's abilities are thus beautifully negative, in the line of Keats's grandest remarks on the Negative Capabilities of the poet who does not reach after dogmatic certainties.

and:

> Ashbery often attempts . . . to suggest "nothing," to present a blank configuration of words in which any interpretation may be an overinterpretation, and the circumference of meaning is either seen to be zero or practically infinite.[9]

Another admiring critic, Laurence Lieberman, sees Ashbery's poetic as having its source in the unconscious world, where meaning is of another mode. In a long discussion of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," he offers these reflections:

> Ashbery is creating a medium which both exhibits by its craft and elucidates by the marvelous labyrinth of its intellectual content and dramatic structure the inexhaustibility of its dream-resources, the gorgeous fountaining of fresh images and novel ideas begotten in the poet by the cross-fertilizing of his own imagination with "dreams and inspiration."
>
> Ashbery makes forced entry into "the dreaming model's" formative chain of consciousness, exposing through his incision into the body of the dream the miraculous process of transmutation of self into bits and pieces of experience of the world. . . .[10]

Neva Lyons sees Ashbery's difficulty, what she calls his "slipperiness," as having its source in the life of the unconscious mind:

> "Slipperiness" in Ashbery is the resistance of images to submit to scrutiny and interpretation even with the aid of a poem's own internal evidence. But this very stubbornness indicates the origin and nature of these images, the dream impulse or the surrealistic flow of the imagination.[11]

Still other critics have realized that Ashbery's aesthetic is comparable to that of the Abstract Expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock or Willem deKooning.[12] And Ashbery has expressed a desire to have the same abstract qualities in his poetry that are found in music . The poem, then, is an event, not a static piece 'about' something. It demands that attention be directed to itself, not on some matter external to it of which it is merely a reflection. The Platonic objection to art is thus done away with, and the art work can exist on its own unique terms and not be judged in reference to objects or processes outside of itself, of which it is supposed to be

a reflection. Technique, therefore, becomes applied to producing, rather than reproducing, and art comes to actively challenge and change and be life rather than to passively return to it its own narcissistic reflection. At the same time, however, art becomes not only as complicated as life, but becomes an action which is indistinguishable from the action and rhythms of living. What is a poem? and what is not a poem? become questions which are impediments to experience. Ultimately all that can be experienced as a poem are verbal constructs in which the stuff of life is embodied in modulating intensities. The Ashbery poem is this type of poem in which the flow of life and consciousness is present, and wherein the "movements of dispersal and partial integrations," the "simultaneous disclosure and concealment" which characterize the dynamics of perception and understanding, are present.

CHAPTER II

"LOGIC OF STRANGE POSITION"

The Ashbery poem functions in the same way as any metaphysical phenomenon in which patterns of meaning (which are either projections of apperception or actually to be found in the phenomenon under consideration coupled with a perception and an understanding of it) can be observed. Hence, like metaphysical phenomena, it exhibits a tendency to evade the perceiving consciousness of the reader. Often the Ashbery poem exists as a kind of riddle which the reader is to decipher but whose meaning is only available after much effort. This may be because, as Charles Altieri noted:

> For Ashbery the mind stands toward its own knowing in the same condition of infinite regressiveness that Derrida shows is the dilemma inherent in trying to know about the language we use in describing our knowledge.[1]

In our attempts at interpreting the Ashbery poem we often see meaning in a disembodied sense. There are no concrete elements of an experience focused on, but rather combinations of words and metaphors which are intriguing, and often puzzling. To enter an Ashbery poem is to enter a space where concrete particulars as coordinates of communication are unstable. Also, in the words of a poem from Houseboat Days, what Ashbery's poems, early and late, tell us of

experience is "how it feels, not what it means" ("Saying It to Keep It from Happening" HD 29). The particulars that one finds in Ashbery's early poems are metaphors for "how" experience "feels" and although more concrete particulars progressively enter the poetry through Ashbery's career, the main subject remains "how it feels, not what it means."

Many of Ashbery's poems typically work with a seemingly hermetic logic; as a pastiche of the poet's memories and creative thinking (along with the fragments of the outside world that intrude into and become part of the musing); as meditations of a quasi-philosophical nature; with a syntactically demanding language, or, in the words of "Le Livre est sur la Table" (ST 74), language with a "logic / Of strange position."

Another prominent aspect of many of the poems is the unreferential use of pronouns. Ashbery has said that the personal pronouns in his work

> very often seem to be like variables in an equation. 'You' can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can 'he' and 'she' for that matter and 'we'; sometimes one has to deduce from the rest of the sentence what is being meant and my point is also that it doesn't really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem. . . .[2]

What Ashbery is talking about here is illustrated in "The Grapevine" in Some Trees (19), which offers a cross-section, as it were, of the consciousness of which pronouns and hence individual and group consciousness are a part:

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?

What is said about this consciousness through the metaphor of the grapevine (which can refer to either the perennial plant or the way of informal interpersonal communication) is that it is in a process of transference and change ("After they began to find us out we grew," "They often date from us, causing / These changes we think we are"), but the poem also states implicitly that the origins and perhaps the meaning of this consciousness is knowable intuitively ("Of who we and all they are / You all now know") and not understandable through rational inquiry ("things get darker as we move / To ask them"). If we were to ask what the nature of this consciousness is, an answer would be of the same type as exists in the poem: "You all now know."

What is being dealt with is an undefinable consciousness that transcends individuals. Of course, when there is a consciousness there is generally, except in forms of experience we may call religious or metaphysical, an object of consciousness. In Ashbery's poetry there is no object.[3] The poem deals with the metaphysical nature of perception, and transcendent being, "the soul" and "its

teachings" (ST 52), as Helen Vendler has noted:

> Ashbery . . . is a generalizing poet, allegorizing and speculating and classifying as he goes, leaving behind, except for occasional traces, the formative "world of circumstances," which, as Keats says, by the trials it imposes proves the heart, alters the nature, and forms the soul. Ashbery turns his gaze from the circumstances to the provings and alterations and schoolings that issue in identity—to the processes themselves.[4]

"The Grapevine" deals with "the processes" and tries to find the words that will suffice to express and communicate them. The poem conveys, at the same time, a sense of imponderable mystery that characterizes "the processes themselves," which involve time and change, both of which are given in experience.

As we said, except in a state of religious transcendence of phenomenological existence where consciousness is only conscious of itself, consciousness is generally not pure or ideal, i.e., it has the world as its object. Certainly, an experience of consciousness and by extension an expression of the experience must exist in some material form, although that form may have no function beyond providing a vehicle for the experience. For the poet the experience of consciousness is communicated through words whose configuration best expresses it. We can account for Ashbery's difficulty in conceding that the forms his poems take best express or communicate his particular experience of "the processes themselves." His poems are very often baffling because of their unusual verbal structures which often complicate logical interpretation. These structures, however, once accepted on their own terms, may be, if not entirely understood,

at least appreciated as expressions of an understanding of the processes of experience which is original and new and which requires new configurations of words for its expression because ordinary structures are not suited to convey it.

"I'm interested in communicating, but I feel that saying something the reader has already known is not communicating anything," Ashbery said in an interview with Richard Kostelanetz in 1976,[5] reiterating what he had said elsewhere in 1972:

> I think every poem before it's written is something unknown and the poem that isn't wouldn't be worth writing. My poetry is often criticized for a failure to communicate, but I take issue with this, my intention is to communicate and my feeling is that a poem that communicates something that's already known by the reader is not really communicating anything to him and in fact shows a lack of respect for him.[6]

If we consider these statements in terms of the rather complicated relation of language to thought,[7] and if we assume that language can determine the shape of a thought as much as the reverse, then we can say that, although not every structure[8] in an Ashbery poem is new, those which we find difficult may well be new, and may suggest linguistic-thought complexes we cannot easily grasp, at least logically. We may be sure that some of Ashbery's phrases frustrate our notions of sense and coherence and deprive us of meaning. For example let us take the opening lines of "The Way They Took" (ST 66):

> The green bars on you grew soberer
> As I petted the lock, a crank
> In my specially built shoes.

We hedged about leisure, feeling, walking
That day, that night. The day
Came up. The heads borne in peach vessels
Out of asking that afternoon droned.
You saw the look of some other people,
Huge husks of chattering boys
And girls unfathomable in lovely dresses
And remorseful and on the edge of darkness.
No firmness in that safe smile ebbing.
Tinkling sadness. The sun pissed on a rock.

In this poem deciphering the structures leads to an explication of meaning that is incomplete because of some difficult phrases. Perhaps we could say the difficult phrases are there to remind us of our mind's limitations and of the presence of alogical components that we often ignore because they don't fit into a coherent interpretation of reality. Perhaps the poem wishes to deal with alogical structures of thought and experience, along with those that are logical. The latter, naturally, allow one to gain a perspective on those which may be baffling and obtuse. We could say, judging from the last section of the poem, which appears logical, that the poem is about an ended romantic love affair, or one that somehow is impossible:

And heaven will not care,
To raise our love
In scathing hymns. So beware and
Bye now. The jewels are for luck.

From these lines we could perhaps work backward through the first section and, by seeing it in relation to the revelation of the last few lines, make some sense of it. But the opening lines still hold some mystery. "The green bars" could indicate a recent "(green") sense of imprisonment ("bars") experienced by the speaker's beloved

which became more defined ("grew soberer") with the speaker's encouragement ("As I petted the lock, a crank / In my specially built shoes"). The sense of imprisonment, which could be caused by the speaker ("the lock" is "a crank" in his "shoes"), resulted in a hesitance on the part of both parties in their further involvement in their relationship (implied in "we hedged about leisure, feeling, walking"). "The heads borne in peach vessels / Out of asking that afternoon" could be a metaphor for questions and doubts about the relationship that persisted ("droned") and that came as a prelude to the break-up or dissolution of the love affair. The "husks of chattering boys," and the "unfathomable" girls could suggest an alienation and an isolation that may be present in the relationship, and "The sun pissed on a rock" seems to be a figurative amplification of a discontent or a sadness evident in the phrases "remorseful and on the edge of darkness," "That safe smile ebbing," and "Tinkling sadness." "That is how I came nearer / To what was on my shoulder," brings to mind the expression about having a "chip" on one's shoulder, and suggests an irritability, and hence a discontent. The "you" in the poem is seen to "crave that," which seems to provoke disapproval from the speaker ("I thought how plebian all this testimony, / That you might care to crave that"), and "How they whispered / Behind the lace of their aspiring / Opinions," suggests a complicity that perhaps involves the beloved and that excludes the speaker. But, since the figures in the poem don't seem to relate to one another in the logic of linear reason, but rather in the logic of association, one is in doubt as to what the "correct" meaning of the poem may be. Although

the structures in the poem are grammatical, their denotative values are often baffling, and one experiences a sense of deprivation and uncertainty.

An analysis of meaning in Ashbery's poetry based on a linear reading that attempts to ascertain a stable and accurate meaning leads to frustration. It is the nature of Ashbery's way of meaning (since, as we shall see later, association and connotation are fundamental aspects of his use of language) to have unstable and approximate meanings that yield tentative rather than definite interpretations.[9] The shifting pronouns in the poem (e.g., the "you" appears to become part of the "they" in "they whispered behind the lace of their aspiring / Opinions," and the "I" and the "you" could be seen as metaphorically incarnated in the nouns in the phrases "chattering boys" and "girls unfathomable") also contribute to making a definitive interpretation false.

In "Le Livre est sur la Table" (ST 74), where we have a number of statements of a "logic / Of strange position," we are told that

> All beauty, resonance, integrity,
> Exist by deprivation or logic
> Of strange position. This being so,
>
> We can only imagine a world in which a woman
> Walks and wears her hair and knows
> All that she does not know. Yet we know
> What her breasts are. And we give fullness
> To the dream. The table supports the book,
> the plume leaps in the hand. But what
>
> Dismal scene is this? the old man pouting
> At a black cloud, the woman gone
> Into the house, from which the wailing starts?

We are given a series of particulars in a context whose outlines are blurred. What we know of the woman who is the central figure in this first section is "What her breasts are," which suggests we know her in a non-analytical, intimate way. She, paradoxically, "knows / All that she does not know," which suggests that her knowledge is unconscious, perhaps intuitive. Based on our knowledge of "What her breasts are," "we give fullness / To the dream," i.e., "we" consciously elaborate on 'our' own unconscious knowledge (the lines "The table supports the book, / The plume leaps in the hand" suggest that "we" do this in writing). But suddenly the scene darkens as an "old man pouting," a figure of seriousness, and apparently the antithesis of "beauty," appears, and the woman disappears, and there is "wailing."

In the light of what happens in this first section we may interpret it as stating that "beauty, resonance, integrity," represented by the woman, her breasts, the dream, exist in a dialectical relation to the "old man pouting" and the "black cloud," and the oppressive "house from which the wailing starts." "Beauty, resonance, integrity" are knowable and defined in relation to their opposites which are, arguably, part and parcel of the notion of "beauty, resonance, integrity."

But "beauty, resonance, integrity" exist only beyond analytic scrutiny. It is as the writing in the poem begins an attempt to "give fullness / To the dream," i.e., to consciously step into an unconscious area, that the scene changes from one of beauty to a "Dismal scene." A 'coding' of "beauty, resonance, integrity" results in their disappearance; an attempt to hold them results in their

dispersal. The experience of "beauty, resonance, integrity" and their opposites involves a dialectic which may be seen as an example of the larger dialectic operating in awareness and experience in general which involves non-rational and rational, conscious and unconscious elements.

In the second section of the poem the paradoxical nature of the existence of "beauty, resonance, integrity" is further illustrated. The central figure in this second section is the sea, into which the woman appears to have been metamorphosed. There are images of enclosure (the "bird-house," the men who "live in boxes," whom "The sea protects . . . like a wall," and the gods metaphorically bound in their "worship"), counterpoint to which runs the "line-drawing // Of a woman, in the shadow of the sea / Which goes on writing" (italics mine), suggesting the fluid nature of the experience of beauty as opposed to the frozen attempts to contain it. The important lines in this section seem to be "Are there / Collisions, communications on the shore // Or did all secrets vanish when / The woman left?" which seem to ask whether the meeting of the two elements (the sea, where the woman appears, and the shore where the men in boxes and the bird-house appear, representing perhaps irrational and rational, unconscious and conscious tendencies) result in some expression of a "secret," i.e., of some intuitive knowledge that transcends dialectical process and paradox. The final question, "Is the bird mentioned / In the waves' minutes or did the land advance?" asks which side wins in the on-going struggle: is the bird, a figure that is associated with the woman (both are in a "house"), swallowed by the tide and therefore

assimilated by it, or does the land, where the men "live in boxes," gain it.

This poem, despite its numerous difficulties which perhaps serve to reinforce its themes, appears to deal with an archetypal struggle of polarities in thought and experience, as a poem to be discussed later ("The Pursuit of Happiness" Sh Tr 1) also does, using the same image of the tide. Indeed, many Ashbery poems stylistically function with polarities, revealing themselves as caught between saying something and not saying it, being at once clear and not clear, engaging in, as Ashbery writes in "Soonest Mended" (DD 17), "a kind of fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal."

Although Ashbery claims that surrealism plays a minor part in his poetry it nonetheless is an important element of his style. It is present in all his work in the associative manner of the poetry's logic. The automatism implied in surrealist technique is generally not adhered to, but Ashbery's language often strikes one as having the "virtues" Breton attributes to the surrealist image, the greatest of which is

> the one that is arbitrary to the highest degree, the one that takes the longest time to translate into practical language, either because it contains an immense amount of seeming contradiction or because one of its terms is strangely concealed; or because, presenting itself as something sensational, it seems to end weakly (because it suddenly closes the angle of its compass), or because it derives from itself a ridiculous formal justification, or because it is of a hallucinatory kind, or because it very naturally gives to the abstract the mask of the concrete, or the opposite, or because it implies the negation of some elementary physical property, or because it provokes laughter.[11]

The language of contorted logic that makes up "Le Livre est sur la Table" easily fits some of the above descriptions. It takes much time and effort to "translate into practical language"; it "contains an immense amount of seeming contradiction"; "more than one of its terms is strangely concealed"; it "gives to the abstract the mask of the concrete" ;and it "implies the negation of some elementary physical property" (e.g. "The sea protects them like a wall").

In The Tennis Court Oath the principle of psychic automatism, or at least a pervasive disjunction of logical sequence, which would bring the poetry closer to strictly defined surrealist practice, seems to be at work. But another, perhaps more significant, principle at work in this volume stems from Ashbery's attempt (as he wrote in 1965, three years after the volume's appearance) to do in poetry what is achieved in music. "What I like about music," Ashbery wrote,

> is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of this 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.[12]

John Cage is a name that sometimes arises in discussions of Ashbery's work and it is profitable to examine an aspect of this composer's theory as it relates to Ashbery's work, particularly The Tennis Court Oath. In a lecture at the Julliard School of Music Cage said:

> I imagine that as contemporary music goes on changing in the way that I am changing it what will be done is to more and more completely liberate sounds from abstract ideas about them and more and more exactly to let them be physically, uniquely, themselves. This means for me: Knowing more and more not what I think a sound is, but what it actually is in all of its acoustical details and then letting this sound exist itself, changing in a changing sonorous environment.[13]

Cage suggests that sounds are just sounds. The organization of sounds into forms determined by accepted rules of usage reflects an arbitrary interpretation of acoustical reality. If we use the same reasoning in language art, words are just words; they need not be used to organize the world, though they may stand for, or point to aspects of it. They are, in essence, only "acoustic images."[14] Ashbery's words in The Tennis Court Oath demand their identity as words apart from their function in orders determined by grammar or syntax which reflect an arbitrary though widespread and deeply entrenched, semantic interpretation of reality.

In the visual arts there are several painters whom critics usually group together under the term "abstract expressionism," who expressed, in considerations of their medium, ideas elaborated by Cage, by the surrealists, and to be found in Ashbery's work. Hans Hofmann, one of these painters, has been noted to insist on the importance of "pure plastic values," and chance.[15] Jackson Pollock's famous statement, "when I am painting, I am not much aware of what is taking place, it is only after that I see what I have done," is curiously surrealist,[16] and it is echoed by Ashbery:

> I don't really know what happens when I'm writing. I don't want to give the impression that I'm in a trance taking down some lines on paper, but one's mind is suspended in a way.[17]

The belief in "pure plastic values," and in a process of creation that is spontaneous (because it is governed, to a large extent, by chance) figures prominently in Cage's theory and practice, and is as characteristic of the work of the surrealists and of the painters mentioned above, as it is of Ashbery's work, particularly in The Tennis Court Oath. Many critics, however, were not impressed with Ashbery's second volume of verse. Harold Bloom, a critic normally sympathetic to Ashbery's work, wrote:

> The Ashbery of The Tennis Court Oath may have been moved by deKooning and Kline, Webern and Cage, but he was not moved to the writing of poems. Nor can I accept the notion that this was a necessary phase in the poet's development, for who can hope to find any necessity in this calculated incoherence.[18]

Bloom may have been right suggesting that Ashbery's poetry cannot be like the painting of deKooning or Kline, or the music of Cage, because it is a creation of words, not of paint or pure sound. However, the ideas that arise from the poetry, or that one may infer from the evidence of the poetry to have been present (however unconsciously) in its creation may be similar to those that one may find in the works of the abstract expressionists, and of composers like Cage. The surfaces of the poems in The Tennis Court Oath, though often disturbingly fragmented in terms of linear logic, are however, rich in association and elusive meaning; a sort of "Grecian Urn" of

sense where poetic cognitive processes are congealed in moments of a promise of integration and profound meaning. The volume's beauty and interest lie in "pure plastic values," and not in commonplace meaning, or a crafty mirroring of a reality outside of language.

"The New Realism" (TCO 59) has an incoherent surface, and the task of interpreting possible meanings is unusually complicated:

> I have lost the beautiful dreams
> That enlisted on waking,
> Cold and waiting. That world is a war now
> The portable laugh eclipsing another place
> The warrior's bonnet holds sand.
> The blond headdress is soggy
> The ray carried your picture away
> If space could imagine a pilot
> The clouds were rags, wheat the sun
> A small dancer decorated the coverlet with gore
> A perforated fountain assumed
> That the center cravat was the right one
> The one with peach halves and violets
> And buzzing soda water
> Out of the serene
> Blackening with space.

One may be overwhelmed by the disjointedness and muddled meaning caused by the substitution of linear logic for associational logic, and although meaning may be there, one meaning is lumped with others forming a puzzling whole. One may wish to partition the meanings to gain an understanding of individual aspects of the poem, but these are as puzzling as the whole. One can explain their inter-relation only in terms of association. From the dreams that "enlisted" follow "That world is a war," "The warrior's bonnet holds sand," "space could imagine a pilot," "a small dancer decorated the coverlet with gore." From the dreams we have also the dream image "The portable laugh

eclipsing another place," and from "eclipsing" we have "The ray carried your picture away," "The clouds were rags, wheat the sun." From "gore" in "A small dancer decorated the coverlet with gore" we get "a perforated fountain" and the ensuing description of the "cravat" where there is "buzzing soda water." In this way the poem continues. The impression one gets is of a multiplicity and a very complex interrelatedness of meaning which it is not necessarily fruitful to attempt to unravel even if the metaphor is reasonably clear.

While there is an apparent chaos of meanings and ideas, there are recurring elements which give "The New Realism" a semblance of order, for instance the presence of recurring images of light, water, rock, plants, war, and the motif of "three" in "Mountain air the subject of our three conversations," "The plantation crew of three," "a table for three," the three flowers "zinnias . . . forget-me-not and dahlias," and their multiples of three, "At least sixty different varieties."

As David Shapiro remarked, in Ashbery's work "ideas [are] presented in shocking simultaneity."[19] This is especially true of a poem such as "The New Realism" in which ideas are overwhelmingly multiple. They exist in an overlapping state in the poem as they may be said to exist in reality. Furthermore, purely fantastic creations such as "portable laugh," "A perforated fountain," and elsewhere in the poem "pliant dawns / Braiding afternoons," and much of the rest of the language of the poem don't appear to function as objective correlatives of anything other than the experience of simultaneity. Words and images exist in the poem with no apparent coherent order

apart from their simultaneity. In this sense, again, they may be said to exist as colours exist in a painting by Pollock, and as sounds in the music of composers such as Cage.[20]

"Europe" (TCO 64), the longest and most fragmented poem in The Tennis Court Oath, also offers a multiplicity of meaning. What we get is a confused coherence[21] in a kind of dadaistic collage including lines and whole sections from various sources such as Esquire magazine, and a British children's story Beryl of the Biplanes,[22] and if it imparts any coherent impression it is that of dissociation and plurality, things which may be said to characterize the multi-cultural European experience which Ashbery was encountering at the time that he wrote the poem.[23] Here are four sections from the 111 section poem:

102.
dress
103.
streaming sweeping the surface.
long-handled twig-brooms
starving
wall great tress
104.
blaze aviators
out dastardly
105.

We must be a little more wary in
future, dear

The rhythm of the movement from section to section gives the impression of an advancing story line, but the substance of the poem is hardly coherent. "Poetic knowledge," Harold Bloom tells us, "is necessarily a knowledge by tropes, an experience of emotion as trope,

and an expression of knowledge and emotion by a revisionary further troping,"[24] and Marcus B. Hester in The Meaning of Poetic Metaphor says that "the poet presents us with a deliberate confusion, or rather a deliberate fusion of sign and signified, sense and sensa, language and experience."[25] If in the light of these statements we ask ourselves what knowledge, emotion, or experience Ashbery communicatas in "Europe," the answer may well be that of confusion, dissociation and alienation.[26]

It should be apparent that the wish to break accepted poetic forms and structures is also a motivating force behind poems like "Europe" and "The New Realism." The title The Tennis Court Oath, taken from an unfinished sketch by Louis David, a French painter of the period of the Revolution,[27] indicates an implied theme of revolt and a fondness for unfinished statements ("one / Is always cresting into one's present" SP 78). One critic, following structuralist lines of thought, sees this aspect of Ashbery's poetic as a rebellious attack on contemporary middle-class American values:

> Ashbery aims consistently at the glibness, deceitfulness, and vapidity of bourgeois discourse and in his poems subjects this discourse to a process of disintegration. What some may relegate in his early work to the area of language games and gratuitous surrealistic effects is an integral part of a very serious attack, through language, on basic assumptions, institutions, and modes of thought in contemporary America.[28]

Ashbery's poems in the Tennis Court Oath often offer structures which challenge efforts at interpretation and yield many possible roads to interpretation none of which can be said to lead to any

definite interpretation. To use Chomskian terms, in The Tennis Court Oath Ashbery often offers highly original and difficult "surface structures" which suggest numerous "deep structures"[29] which are interrelated but which present ultimately "A sample of the truth only" (SP 12) and not a coherent, whole truth. The same can perhaps be said of any poetic utterance, but what differentiates Ashbery's utterances is the fact that they are alternately highly artificial and difficult, and colloquial, clichéd and easy. What Ashbery is concerned with is, ultimately, irregularity in expression, or, in his words

> the irregular form--the flawed words and stubborn sounds, as Stevens said, that affect us whenever we try to say something that is important to us--more than the meaning of what we are saying at a particular moment. . . . The inaccuracies and anomalies of common speech are particularly poignant to me.[30]

Ashbery, then, approaches communication from a perspective that allows a focusing on the incoherencies that are present in the realities that are the objects of expression. Much of what propels surrealism is an interest in suspending the intervention of reason and the desire for coherence. Ashbery's poetry, besides functioning in ways that are explainable in terms of language theory and philosophy, theories of knowledge, meaning and communication, and Ashbery's desire to be as open as artists and composers are in their own work, is surrealist to the extent that it allows the incoherence in reality, "the irregular form," a place in expression, and requires that the reader suspend, in Keats' phrase, "irritable searching after knowledge."

Ashbery's poems in The Tennis Court Oath are disconnected and "acoherent,"[31] but they are also (although in a fragmented way) rich in connotation, which, Henri Lefebvre noted in Le langage et la société, is how knowledge can best be experienced.[32] The aspects of knowledge that turn up in The Tennis Court Oath are basically irrational, and the mode of expression reflects this. We can see this again in "How Much Longer Will I be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher . . .":

> Behind the steering wheel
>
> The boy took out his own forehead.
> His girlfriend's head was a green bag
> Of narcissus stems. "OK you win
> But meet me anyway at Cohen's Drug Store,
>
> In 22 minutes."

Here we may interpret the boy taking "out his own forehead" as a symbolic lobotomy allowing him to yield to impulses from non-rational parts of the mind, in this case sexual in nature, and the girlfriend's head as a "green bag / Of narcissus stems" may suggest a resistance on her part arising from a self-interest that is not being met. Interpreted thus "OK you win / But meet me anyway at Cohen's Drug Store" is uttered by the boy who is undaunted in his interest for his girlfriend. The poem contains many sexual images, and images of fertility that are related to the basic forces operating in the poem, which are those of life and death. The transcendence of these essentially opposed, but mutually dependent, forces is also a concern of the poem, implied in the word "sepulcher," which can be a tomb, or

a receptacle for valued religious relics:

> What a marvel is ancient man!
> Under the tulip roots he has figured out a way to be
> a religious animal
> And would be a mathematician. But where in unsuitable
> heaven
> Can he get the heat that will make him grow?
>
> For he needs something or will forever remain a dwarf,
> Though a perfect one, and possessing a normal-sized brain
> But he has got to be released by giants from things.
> And as the plant grows older it realizes it will never
> be a tree,
>
> Will probably always be haunted by a bee
> And cultivates stupid impressions
> So as not to become part of the dirt.

In some passages, such as those in the first and last two stanzas, the presence of contradictory elements in the "deep structures" suggests the complex nature of the poem's themes:

> How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine
> sepulcher
> Of life, my great love? Do dolphins plunge bottomward
> To find the light? Or is it rock
> That is searched? Unrelentingly? Huh. And if some day
>
> Men with orange shovels come to break open the rock
> Which encases me, what about the light that comes in
> then?
> What about the smell of the light?
> What about the moss?
> .....
>
> And it is the color of sand,
> The darkness, as it sifts through your hand
> Because what does anything mean,
>
> The ivy and the sand? That boat
> Pulled up on the shore? Am I wonder,
> Strategically, and in the light
> Of the long sepulcher that hid death and hides me?

The poem asks questions about life and death which it does not answer, although it suggests answers in its phrasing. Life is simultaneously a "great love" as it is a "sepulcher," and there is a question of which element ("Light" or "rock," "life" or "death") it is important to search. There is also some uncertainty about these elements ("Do dolphins plunge bottomward / To find the light?" "if some day // Men with orange shovels come to break open the rock / Which encases me, what about the light that comes in then?"). Finally the poem despairs of an answer ("Because what does anything mean") and closes with a variation of the opening question, secure in the knowledge that the sepulcher of life (be it tomb or altar) hides, or contains, death, and that one is nothing but the reverse of the other, and that perhaps the two are essentially one. What a poem like "How Much Longer . . ." accomodates is the apparent contradiction and incoherence that are always a part of our experience along with sense and coherence; moreover, it imparts its content in a manner that reflects its content.

In Rivers and Mountains, his next volume, Ashbery opened up his style with the use of longer lines and the less terse diction of prose, to accommodate a more ruminative meditation on the themes that he established in his first two books. In "Clepsydra" (27), for example, Ashbery wished "to do a long poem that would be a long extended argument, but would have the beauty of a single word."[33]

"Clepsydra," which is the Greek word for waterclock, is the first of Ashbery's poems to simultaneously use and parody the fluid possibilities of discursive prose. The poem's 'seamless' quality is

also an aspect of its subject matter. In the poem there is the distortion of time sequence ("We must progress toward the whole thing / About an hour ago" 28), something Ashbery has used since Some Trees, and thoughts overlap thoughts in one seemingly endless flow that suggests that they cannot be bound by sentences and lines, but flow in and out of such constructs. Consciousness, knowledge, expression, and time, the poem seems to suggest, are ongoing processes not to be segmented or stopped, and the poem's subject is "the condition / Of these moments of timeless elasticity and blindness" which are

> being joined secretly so
> That their paths would cross again and be separated
> Only to join again in a final assumption rising like
> a shout
> And be endless in the discovery of the declamatory
> Nature of the distance traveled.
>
> (29)

Consciousness, knowledge, and expression happen through time and share its qualities of change, of elasticity. The "distance traveled" by thought through language is a record of its passage through time. For thought to be recorded adequately in language the structures of the language must overlap and be '<u>seamless</u>' so that the utterance will have the long-winded aspect of a liturgical incantation, as well as the minimalistic drone of a single sound. (Ashbery achieved this in "Clepsydra," "The Skaters" <u>RM</u>, as well as in <u>Three Poems</u> and "Litany" <u>AWK</u>). Ashbery implies in "Clepsydra" that truth, which is revealed through time, exists not as a statement, but in spite of a statement, that truth exists as "Emptiness," as "a dumb cry" (29), and that the nature of discourse is to fail in its attempt at gaining that truth.

This is evident in various passages in "Clepsydra":

> A recurring whiteness like
> The face of stone pleasure, urging forward as
> Nostrils what only meant dust. But the argument,
> That is its way, has already left these behind: it
> Is, it would have you believe, the white din up ahead
> That matters: unformed yells, rocketings,
> Affected turns, and tones of voice called
> By upper shadows toward some cloud of belief
> Or its unstated circumference. But the light
> Has already gone from there too. . . .
>
> (27, 28)

> But there was no statement
> At the beginning. There was only a breathless waste,
> A dumb cry shaping everything in projected
> After-effects orphaned by playing the part intended for them.
> Though one must not forget that the nature of this
> Emptiness, these previsions,
> Was that it could only happen here, on this page held
> Too close to be legible, sprouting erasures, except that they
> Ended everything in the transparent sphere of what was
> Intended only a moment ago, spiraling further out, its
> Gesture finally dissolving in the weather.
>
> (29)

"Clepsydra" deals with consciousness and experience which unfold through time. Ashbery focuses on the process of time passing and expresses the consciousness and experience through a fluid use of language. An analysis of meaning in the poetry rarely leads to stable and accurate formulations of it. The poem's concerns are, on the linguistic level, given concrete shapes, but they retain their transparent natures and remain hard to grasp. In probing the poetry we may often feel that we are

never getting any closer to the basic
Principle operating behind it than to the distracted
Entity of a mirage.

(27)

But a mirage can be said to be real because, even though it may be but a mental phenomenon, it is nonetheless a phenomenon. Likewise, even though Ashbery's meanings often seem to us like mirages that offer few tangibles, that disappear as we approach, they nonetheless are phenomena that we experience. In Ashbery's poetry "Each moment / Of utterance is the true one; likewise none are true" (27): the meaning appears and disappears in an instant, and the poem leaves us with "these / Moments that were the truth" (28), while proceeding to other truer moments that will, in their turn, lose their truth.

CHAPTER III

"OUT OF THE DREAM"

The meaning of an Ashbery poem exists in a mode of expression which is dense, multi-layered and often difficult to penetrate rationally. We do, however, obtain some idea of what an Ashbery poem is saying, though we may not be able to articulate an understanding of all of its details. This experience is simultaneously frustrating and satisfying; it frustrates our rational need to understand, and it satisfies a deeper, non-rational understanding. In reading an Ashbery poem we may initially feel some consternation, but eventually, if we persist in confronting the poem, we become aware of the precision and fidelity with which the poem's language explores and expresses the side of experience that evades the rational mind. This is largely achieved through language structures which on the surface seem logical, but whose content is not always so.

As elsewhere in Ashbery's work, the poems in The Double Dream of Spring operate with, as Neva Lyons put it in her study of Ashbery, "a peculiar blend of dream revelation and a seemingly logical, controlled structure," but, as always, they do not embody "logical controlled arguments"; rather they reveal the other side of truth, the one we cannot name.[1]

"Decoy" (31) has the tone and diction of a "logical, controlled

argument," but its meaning remains challenging and difficult. In the poem there is a separation, an "ostracism" which is illustrated in the metaphor of the last few lines:

> Waking far apart on the bed, the two of them:
> Husband and wife
> Man and wife

In this figure there is a separation or "ostracism" in two senses. There is the separation of the husband/man from the wife as two entities defined by sex, and there is the separation of "Husband and wife" from "Man and wife" as two interpretations of a relationship between two members of the opposite sex. This metaphor seems to be an illustration of the subject being considered in the poem, which has to do with "urban chaos," "a / Descending code of values," "Financial upheaval," "regression," "corporate vandalism," "commercial disaster," i.e., signs of instability related to an "ostracism," which is both "political" and "moral."

The "ostracism" present in the first and last stanzas of the poem is related to the prominent figure in the middle stanza, which is "memory" ("pyramiding memories," "new sources of memories," "memory is profit," "foreshortened memories"). The connection between the first and second stanzas is to be found in the statement "memory is profit." The relationship between this and the last stanza exists in the sense that since there is a parallel between the separation of the man and the woman and ostracism in the "twentieth-century scheme of things" (which involves "financial upheaval," "corporate vandalism," etc.) and "memory is profit," i.e., it is related to financial matters; the

separation of the man and the woman is also related to memory. Further, we are told that "our pyramiding memories" are, in "dart ing from one pretext to the next," "Seeking in occasions new sources of memories," i.e., seeking to render time and experience ("occasions") into memories, thereby reducing experience to data and causing a separation between experience and mind, until experience "spreads out all its accumulation, delta-like, on the plain," i.e., is "profit," something congealed. "No good can come of remembering," the poem states.

The "Husband and Wife / Man and Wife" figure appears to be an illustration of the theme of separation of memory from experience which the "ostracism, both political and moral" in "the twentieth-century scheme of things" also echoes. The first line, "We hold these truths to be self-evident," taken from The Declaration of Independence, is followed, ironically, by statements relating a disorder in the social structure, and complications of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," which are probably due to the practice of "jotting memoranda" and "plotting itineraries" which are metaphors for the act of limiting the essentially spontaneous and irrational nature of experience of life to dull formulae. The argument in the poem is, however, obliquely stated, and not obvious in the least. This could be because, as Marjorie Perloff has noted, Ashbery "wants to suggest a range of experience without defining it," and to leave the reader with a "mysterious truth half-glimpsed."[2]

"French Poems" (37), a series which Ashbery wrote in French then translated to English "with the idea of avoiding customary

word-patterns and associations" (95), works in the same oblique way as "Decoy." The ideas of "number" and "mass," the one and the many are present,[3] and we are directed to ideas of unity and diversity, integrity and dissolution, and the movements between these sets of polar opposites that have their counterpart in thought as movements between understanding and confusion, clarity and obscurity, revelation and concealment. We are told that "no hope of completing the magnitude which surrounds us / Is permitted us," which we may take to mean that "completing" the "magnitude" of the diversity of what we experience in terms of a whole understanding is impossible. This hope, although it is one that "doesn't exist," is "a form of suspended birth," or "A boiling crater, form of everything that is beautiful for us," something that remains as a potential, as a kind of unrealized ideal that has all the perfection and beauty of an ideal, the "invisible light which spatters the silence / Of our everyday festivities."

Not achieving that potentiality, we are left with a "small amount of grace," and a "banality which in the last analysis is our / Most precious possession, because allowing us to / Rise above ourselves," i.e., the limitations we encounter are what make us strive to overcome them, and our repeated attempts and failures are what make "the factory of our lives" meaningful in the same way that for Sisyphus, rolling the stone up the hill only to watch it come down and to repeat the process gave meaning to his position. In Ashbery's version, the "last-minute enoblement" of "rising above ourselves" is unreliable, although in spite of our situation we "remain colossal":

> The greatest among us, counting little
> On this last-minute ennoblement, remain
> Colossal, our wide-brimmed hats representing
> All the shame of glory, shutting us up in the
> idea of number:
> The ether dividing our victories, past and future:
> teeth and blood.

The attempt-success-failure pattern we are condemned to repeat bestows on us "the shame of glory." Paradoxically, our victory is no victory at all, because it only sets up further challenges, and therein there is an implied defeat. We are "shut up in the idea of number," i.e., condemned to repeat individual acts that prevent us from "completing the magnitude" of which, potentially, we are capable. Hence we don't "rise above ourselves," but remain constricted to the mundane, time-bound coordinates of "past and future" and the struggle implied in "teeth and blood."

Of course, Ashbery suggests all this rather than stating it outrightly. The reader is left to his resources to make sense of the statements in the poem which are multi-dimensional in their meaning, and which obstinately yield interpretations. However one reads the poem one is aware that it defies an easy reading. A meaning can be pieced together by following clues that the reader feels to be important, but each reader will be struck by the difficulties the poem presents as roadblocks to facile conclusions. This may be true of the process of interpreting any poem, but the unusual and consistently present difficulties that arise on the road to ascertaining a definite meaning distinguish the Ashbery poem.

Also, Ashbery's poems contain intricate, complex ideas that are meditated on as the poem goes along. As Lyons noted, a common structural pattern in Ashbery's poetry consists of one section of a poem setting out ideas, and another section illustrating them.[4] A poem like "Decoy" exhibits this order. More often, however, the functions of statement and illustration occur through the poem simultaneously.

This is the case in "Sunrise in Suburbia" (49). A sad lyric commenting on the end of a love affair ("The passion has left his head, and the head reports"), "Sunrise" speaks of deathwishes that are stirred ("old unwillingness to continue") and some rekindling of hope ("the coming of strength out of night"), and through the poem there is the idea of the sunrise standing as an illustration of the emotions and thoughts that the speaker goes through in his comments that lead him to not only reflect on his lot, but also on the changes time brings that reduce the present to something static and past and relegated to memory:

> As we go separate ways
> That have translated the foreground of paths into
> quoted spaces.
> They are empty beyond consternation because
> These are the droppings of all our lives.

The poem ends with a statement about the importance of erotic love, and how what we earn from life and love, "our salary," is in the end sadly beyond our power to keep and hold:

> It was the holiness of the day that fed our notions
> And released them, sly breath of Eros,
> Anniversary on the woven city lament, that assures
> our arriving
> In hours, seconds, breath, watching our salary
> In the morning holocaust become one vast furnace,
> engaging all tears.

In keeping with the recurring figures of spring that run through most of Double Dream, "Sunrise" offers figures of 'beginnings' ("The tone is hard is heard / Is the coming of strength out of night," "back to the safe beginning, because it starts out / Once more," "the first dazed marks of waking / Stir on the cloud-face," etc.) wherein we witness "like a paradox, death reinforcing life," which the changing of seasons and the evolution of a day, and ultimately all change, involves.

The information in this poem is typically revealed in a multi-layered way, and we must take certain clues from the more lucid moments in the poem to gain an understanding of a theme (in "Sunrise" that of change) that is implied more than stated. Once we have a handle on those clues, the poem reveals itself rather well, though not always as easily as one would wish. Certain lines reveal meaning as recalcitrantly as a dream may be said to reveal meaning, and like a dream they must be decoded using the possible associations and interrelations suggested by the content. From these, patterns of meaning may emerge, although the lines, like dream language, will still hold their mystery.

Like the title of the volume, the title of the poem "The Double Dream of Spring" (41) is taken from a painting by Giorgio de Chirico,

and as in the painting the overall effect of the poem is dream-like in a surrealist manner, containing, as it does, figures and combinations of words whose surfaces are enigmatic:[5]

> Mixed days, the mindless years, perceived
> With half-parted lips
> The way the breath of spring creeps up on you and
> floors you.
> I had thought of all this years before
> But now it was making no sense. And the song had
> finished:
> This was the story.

The poem tells us of "the song," "the tune" (which are metaphors for time passing), and how "Footsteps" that search "the design . . . can't not have the tune that way," i.e., searching the "design" of "the tune" yields no satisfactory results and we "step down." We perceive the "tune" (time passing, change) "With half-parted lips," with intrigue, and its "design" or meaning exists beyond our rational understanding.

In "Double Dream" we witness "collisions, communications on the shore" ("Le livre est sur la table" ST 74), i.e., the coming into being of metaphors, figures at the meeting point of the conscious and the unconscious mind. Here, however, "all secrets vanish" ("Le livre") and "things get darker as we move / To ask them" ("The Grapevine" ST 19). The sense, the "design" of the "tune," like the design of the poem, evades our logical inquiry because of its dream-like mode of communication.

The music metaphor in the poem is emblematic (as we were told in "The Mythological Poet" ST 34) of something "we were not meant to

understand." In"Double Dream" the "tune," or the "song" is again beyond our grasp as we move from the shore of consciousness and board a kind of boat of dreams:

> The rowboat rocked as you stepped into it. How flat
> its bottom
> The little poles pushed away from the small waves in
> the water
> And so outward. Yet we turn
> to examine each other in the dream.

The de Chirico painting "The Double Dream of Spring" on the surface has nothing in common with Ashbery's poem except the title and the presence of a locomotive, something that appears in many of de Chirico's paintings of the early period. What Ashbery's poem does have in common with the painting is the enigmatic style. Like de Chirico's early painting, Ashbery's poetry has many layered, obscure meanings. In the painting the figures are looking away from the observer, hence the focus is inward and the painting does not make a statement, but absorbs one with the sense of enigma, an unwillingness to "make a statement" ("are we never to make a statement?" SP 16). In a similar manner the poem tells us of "mixed days," and "mindless years," leaving us with a vague sense of purpose. There is also a paradoxical dynamic of action and passivity (searching the "design," but then "stepping down") which exists in the making sense and "making no sense" that may be said to simultaneously occur in the poem and in the "song" it refers to. In the painting the figures all seem to be observing, but they are, at the same time, the observed. As in the painting the sense in the poem reveals itself but "to a point,

somewhere beyond itself" where we cannot reach it. As in a dream the sense eludes us "readying its defences again / As day comes up."

One writer has said that de Chirico's "magic is in the paint, and only secondarily in the subject."[6] The same can be said of Ashbery; it is the combinations of the words and the impressions they create that are intriguing--what is conventionally meant by the subject is secondary. Ashbery has, himself, pointed out that his interest lies not primarily in a meaning, or a subject, but in exploring "areas of consciousness"[7] through words, and that in his poems he prefers to deal with "something unknown" that is explored and communicated for the first time. Ashbery has also said that in his work

> There are no themes or subjects in the usual sense except the very broad one of an individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world of external phenomena. The work is a very complex but, I hope, clear and concrete transcript of the impressions left by these phenomena on that consciousness.[8]

Ashbery's subject--if he can be said to have one--is the process of knowing and becoming. In his poetry we relive the individual's confrontation with flux through a style that leaves the reader with a sense of intrigue, fascination and enigma, reminding him that these are at the root of experience. We are not led by the hand and told easy truths, but challenged to accept the fundamentally enigmatic meaning of phenomena.

In "Some Words" (61), Ashbery's translation from the French of a poem by Arthur Cravan, which reflects an interest in, as David Lehman

noted, "an alternative literary tradition,"[9] we are told that

> The counsels of the trees of night are best
> Better than those of the tree of knowledge,
> which corrupts us at birth.

which implies that the blurring of distinctions and the suspension of judgement and reason that one finds in dreams (which are "of night"), and in an intuitive apperception of the world are preferable to the rational division of phenomena into opposites (the knowledge of the "tree of knowledge" was of "good and evil"). The lines also suggest that a general knowledge that melds phenomena together and realizes the coherence of contradiction and disparity is truer than one that diversifies and alienates opposites from each other. "Some Words," like "Sunrise in Suburbia" and "Double Dream of Spring," also reveals Ashbery's concern with the passing of time and how, in the words of a latter poem, "Syringa" (HD 69), it is like "The way music passes, emblematic / Of life and how you cannot isolate a note of it / And say it is good or bad." Like Syringa "Some Words" says that things change through time and "it is the nature of things to be seen only once":

> When weary henceforth of wishing to gaze
> At the sinuous path of your strung-out days
> You return to the place where your stables used to tower
> You will find nothing left but fetid manure
> Your steeds beneath other horesmen will have fled
> To autumn's far country, all rusted and red.
> .....
>
> The days depart, only boredom does not retreat
> It's like a path that flies beneath one's feet
> Whose horizon shifts while as we trudge
> The dust and mud stick to us and do not budge.
>
> (62, 63)

The concern with the passing of time is, of course, present in Ashbery's work from Some Trees to Shadow Train, and will no doubt continue to be. In the opening poem of Some Trees, "Two Scenes" (9), we were told "Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is." In "The Grapevine" (ST 19) our attention was focused on the continuity of consciousness and knowledge through time. In "Clepsydra" we were told that time reveals and conceals at the same time, making truth apparent one moment and hiding it the next, leaving us with "these / Moments that were the truth." In a 1981 interview Ashbery spoke of the subject of time in his work:

> I would say that the passage of time is certainly a theme that keeps recurring in my work, and more so as I've gotten older and more time has elapsed. Although I used to think my poetry didn't have subject matter in the conventional way. It now seems to me that growing older and witnessing time is probably the subject, and is probably the subject of everything.[10]

The importance of time in Ashbery's work lies in its relation to the revelation of truth: truth is always revealed in the present and disappears if we try to make a "memory" of it, i.e., rob it of its presentness. Likewise, if we focus on the past and expect revelations of truth to be experienced in predictable ways we will only prolong a "dance of non-discovery" (RM 31), and learn nothing new about ourselves or time. To understand time, one's position in it, and the truth that one may draw from it, requires a constant challenging of urges to contain it. Ashbery remains stylistically true to his concerns by offering structures of language that challenge urges to

reduce truth to easy understandings and facile interpretations.

In a verse passage in "The New Spirit," one of the long prose poems in Three Poems, Ashbery tells us that time yields no answers, but offers an uncertainty in the form of silence which is the answer:

> Because life is short
> We must remember to keep asking it the same question
> Until the repeated question and the same silence become
> answer
> In words broken open and pressed to the mouth
> And the last silence reveal the lining
> Until at last this thing exist separately
> At all levels of the landscape and in the sky
> And in the people who timidly inhabit it
> The locked name for which is open, to dust and to no
> thoughts
> Even of dying, the fuzzy first thought that gets started
> in you and then there's no stopping it.
> It is so much debris of living, and as such cannot be
> transmitted
> Into another, usable substance, but is irreducible
> From these glares and stony silences and sharp-elbowed
> protests.
> But it is your landscape, the proof that you are there,
> To deal with or be lost in
> In which the silent changes might occur.
>
> (6, 7)

Here Ashbery speaks of "The locked name," the silence that is at the base of an intuitive knowledge of one's self and the world (it exists "At all levels of the landscape and in the sky"). This "locked name" is "irreducible" and it is one's "landscape," that in which our experience occurs, and that which is "the proof that you are there." The meaning of this "locked name" is not explored or explained. The passage does not consider its meaning. It is pervasive ("It is so much debris of living") and "irreducible;" hence its importance is taken as given. This "locked name" is experienced at the lowest stage

of conscious knowledge--it is "the lining" under or behind which is raw, unconscious knowledge. From "The locked name" comes "the fuzzy first thought" which is a semi-conscious experience of intuitive knowledge that is, however, "open . . . to no thoughts"--not analyzable.

Like this "locked name," most of the essentially metaphysical realities that are Ashbery's subject are not explained, nor indeed are they satisfactorily explainable. This has been evident since Some Trees, and it is no less evident in Three Poems, a volume in which Ashbery's attempts at outlining essentially ineffable areas of experience are given free rein in a prose form that allows it.

In Three Poems, as elsewhere, Ashbery does not explain his subject or methodically explore its meaning; rather he communicates an intuitive understanding of it, "how it feels, not what it means" (HD 29). It is true that Ashbery does this through the rational, 'meaningful' vehicle of language, but he manages to suggest an experience, a perception, or an understanding without clearly defining it, hence without divesting it of its enigma, its mystery, and without falsifying its irrational reality.

In his metaphysical concerns and in his style Ashbery could perhaps be said to share an aspect of the work of the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century--Donne, Crashaw, Marvell, etc.--wherein one finds, in Samuel Johnson's words, "a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike," and "the most heterogeneous ideas . . . yoked by violence together,"[11] although the stronger analogy would be with

André Breton's concern for bringing together "two distant realities" in the surrealist image.[12] Consider this example from "The System":

> The system was breaking down. The one who had wandered alone past so many happenings and events began to feel, backing up along the primal vein that led to his center, the beginning of a hiccup that would, if left to gather, explode the center to the extremities of life, the suburbs through which one makes one's way to there the country is.
>
> (53)

Here, the idea of a system breaking down is illustrated with the image of a "hiccup" upsetting a human organism. The explosion of the "center" of that organism is to "the extremities of life" which are likened to "the suburbs" of a city. The "extremities of life" and the "suburbs" are indeed heterogeneous ideas whose resemblance is "occult." Or consider this example:

> there was the undeniable fact of exaltation on many fronts, of a sense of holiness growing up through the many kinds of passion like a tree with branches bearing candelabra higher and higher up until they almost vanish from sight and are confused with the stars whose earthly avatars they are.
>
> (57)

Here the resemblance between the image of the tree "bearing candelabra" and "a sense of holiness" is "occult," and the ideas are "yoked by violence together."[13]

Ashbery's Three Poems may be said to be metaphysical meditations, although they don't exist within the framework of any particular religious tradition or reflect any conventional practice of meditation

as the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century may have.[14] The impression of solipsistic seclusion that one gets from Three Poems may strike one as monastic, but Ashbery's devotion is to "the insistent

now that baffles and surrounds you in itsloose-knit embrace " (TP 115), and not to a concept of absolute goodness and love ("The apotheosis never attracted you" TP 94). The attitude in "The System" toward those who "turn their gaze upward, to the stars, to the heavens," is even rather cynical:

> they see nothing of the disarray around them, their ears are closed to the cries of their fellow passengers; they can think only of themselves when all the time they believe that they are thinking of nothing but God. Yet in their innermost minds they know too that all is not well; that if it were there would not be this rigidity, with the eye and the mind focussed on a nonexistent center, a fixed point, when the common sense of even an idiot would be enough to make him realize that nothing has stopped, that we and everything around us are moving forward continually, and that we are being modified constantly by the speed at which we travel and the regions through which we pass, so that merely to think of ourselves as having arrived at some final resting place is a contradiction of fundamental logic . . .
>
> (74)

Ashbery's meditations involve attempts at exploring the multiple and overlapping meanings inherent in phenomena whose truth is always relative and never absolute. These meanings are, of course, experienced through time which "half-seriously offers with one hand the promise that it pockets with the other" (97), and whose "whole is irregular, shifting, but up to its aim of clothing, concealing yet revealing" (20). It is also through time that the self becomes clear

to itself, is lost and is found again in an endlessly repeated process of identity that is identified with time:

> time can flow into eternity leaving a huge deltalike deposit whose fan broadens and broadens and is my life, the time I am taking.
>
> (98)

Memory, as we saw in "Decoy" and see again in "The New Spirit," is a negation of "the insistent now," "the visitation" (7), where experience happens. Memories in "The New Spirit" are "irksome" (6) and "unwanted" (7), and we are told that it is through not "holding on" to experience that we understand "the manners of the unreachable," the truth of the now which is never grasped:

> It's just beginning. Now it's started to work again. The visitation, was it more or less over. No, it had not yet begun, except as a preparatory dream which seemed to have the rough texture of life, but which dwindled into starshine like all the unwanted memories. There was no holding on to it. But for that we ought to be glad, no one really needed it, yet it was not utterly worthless, it taught us the forms of this our present waking life, the manners of the unreachable.
>
> (7)

The function of memory could, however, afford one a perspective on time and an eventual transcendence of it:

> if backward looks were possible, not nostalgia but a series of carefully selected views, hieratic as icons, the difficulty would be eased and self could merge with selflessness, in a true appreciation of the tremendous volumes of eternity.

But in trying to grasp experience and contain it we understand and see, not its meaning and nature, but a protective shell, which may be

all we'll rationally know about "these multiple phenomena which are our being here" (31):

> There comes a time when what is to be revealed actually conceals itself in casting off the mask of its identity, when the identity itself is revealed as another mask, and a lesser one, antecedent to that we had come to know and accept.
>
> (8)

What we can know of reality is always foremost in Ashbery's thought, which is, as we have seen, a seeking, through meditation (or what Richard Howard called "long-winded portages"),[15] of an answer whose absence is the answer. All Ashbery quests turn up empty-handed in the final analysis,[16] though much is garnered in the process of arriving empty-handed. It is as if Ashbery were going through a process of removing the masks of reality until all there remained would be an absence. As Jean Cocteau once said, truth is naked, it doesn't excite men; rather it is the various masks surrounding truth--which help men to know what truth is or is not--that are interesting. Ashbery's poetry is, to a large extent, an unmasking, and the reader must, as in a "metaphysical" poem, be ever attentive in an effort to see meaning and truth which are fleeting and transparent, and knowable only in an illusive way via "the mask of their identity." Truth, what often turns up as the "it" in Ashbery's poetry, is "like a river which is never really there because of moving on someplace" (TP 15).

A motif that runs through Three Poems that has to do with the spiritual dimension of experience echoes the themes of "How Much

Longer . . ." in The Tennis Court Oath. Like "How Much Longer . . .," Three Poems deals with the life/death phenomenon which is a macrocosmic emblem of all contraries in Ashbery's work, such as multiplicity and singularity ("French Poems"), truth and fallacy ("Clepsydra"), consciousness and unconsciousness ("Le livre est sur la table"), knowing and not knowing ("The Grapevine"), "putting it all down" and "leaving it all out" ("The Skaters," "The New Spirit"), and is the emblem of the concealing and revealing dynamic of truth in experience--which is also a stylistic trait of Ashbery's work, reflecting his concerns. In "The New Spirit" we are told:

> It is the law to think now. To think becomes the law, the dream of young and old alike moving together where the dark masses grow confused. We must drink the confusion, sample that other, concerted, dark effort that pushes not to the light, but toward a draft of dank, clammy air. We have broken through into the meaning of the tomb.
>
> (4, 5)
>
> .....
>
> Nevertheless the winter wears on and death follows death. I've tried it, and know how the narrowing-down feeling conflicts with the feeling the life's coming to a point, not a climax but a point.
>
> (8)

Life and death, light and darkness are part of "the ball of contradictions" that brings "all down to the level" (4). They are the forces in experience which cause "the narrowing-down feeling," i.e., the limitation of experience, as well as causing the definition of experience, "the feeling of life's coming to a point." Darkness and death offer revelations through which we can interpret life and light. Through thought--a mental form of light--we break "into the meaning of

the tomb," which is both death and--as in "How Much Longer . . ."—something that contains life.

In "The System" the "influx of light," paradoxically dreaded and desired in "How Much Longer . . .," relieves the self of its limitations, offering an experience of cosmic proportions. The light is also seen as having aspects of "singleness" and "diversity"--important concerns in "French Poems," and in "The Grapevine," which presented a consciousness that was singular in essence, but diverse in experience:

> when the light of the street floods over you it will have become real at last, all traces of doubt will have been pulverized by the influx of light slowly mounting to bury those crass seamarks of egocentricity and warped self-esteem you were able to navigate by but which you no longer need now that the rudder has been swept out of your hands, and this whole surface of daylight has become one with that other remembered picture of light, when you were setting out, and which you feared would disappear because of its uniqueness, only now realizing that this singleness was the other side of the coin of its many-faceted diversity and interest, and that it may be simultaneously cherished for the former and lived in thanks to the versatility of the latter.
>
> (80)

In "The Recital" the "change from darkness to daylight" is equated with growth, a pervading theme of Three Poems, as it was of "How Much Longer . . .":

> We could not yet see very well due to the abrupt change from darkness to daylight, but we were beginning to make out things. We embarked on a series of adult relationships from which the sting and malignancy of childhood were absent, or so it seemed: no more hiding behind bushes to get a secret glimpse of the others; no more unspeakable rages of jealousy

or the suffocation of unrequited and unrealizable love.
(108)

In "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," the title poem of Ashbery's next volume, the questioning, meditating self of Three Poems is again at work, though the meditation is based on a fixed object: the "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" of the Italian Renaissance painter Francesco Mazzuoli, better known as Parmigianino. This has the effect of anchoring the poem in an external reality--something lacking in most of Ashbery's poetry--and perhaps because of this it approaches more closely the metaphysical poets' practice of framing an argument within the comparison of an object or some bit of knowledge with states of mind or feeling.

The poem contains a felicitous metaphor for Ashbery's style and the nature of the self that he attempts to explore in his work. Parmigianino's portrait in a convex mirror is said to present a "hand" which is "thrust at the viewer," but it is also "swerving easily away." The hand "advertises," but it is also said to "protect what it advertises," simultaneously giving away and keeping its secret. On the portrait's convex surface "the distance increases / Significantly," giving the impression of opening space, but ironically only "enough to make the point / That the soul is a captive." Time and time again we are informed of contrary movements in perception and expression, understanding and emotion, which are organized in the metaphor of the painting ("the chaos / Of your round mirror . . . organizes everything" 71), and the meditating self senses its freedom while realizing its limitations:

The soul establishes itself
But how far can it swim out through the eyes
And still return safely to its nest?
(68)

Not surprisingly, an acknowledgement of ambiguity and ambivalence ensues. The poem states that "The surface is what's there / And nothing can exist except what's there" (70), though on the surface "Something like living occurs, a movement / Out of the dream into its codification" (73). An expression of the self contains both a revelation of its inner dimension as well as something which is not the self, which is only the appearance, "the surface" of the self. In the painting it is the paint, in the poem it is the words which both "fence in and shore up" (69) the self, and codify the imagination, thereby giving it a shape, but also limiting its range, congealing its life. Finally, an expression and, consequently, the perception of a self are only distortions, misrepresentations of its true reality.

H.W. Janson, in his History of Art, asks about Parmigianino: "did he perhaps want to demonstrate that there is no single, 'correct' reality, that distortion is as natural as the normal appearance of things?"[17] This can also be asked about Ashbery: does he, too, believe that there is no "correct" reality? That distortion is an inevitability in expression and perception? The answer is evidently "yes":

today is uncharted,
Desolate, reluctant as any landscape
To yield what are laws of perspective. . . .
(71)

In Three Poems Ashbery had moved toward a clearer expression of the self, and he continues this in "Self-Portrait," though we see the self through a contemplation of another self contemplating itself. The portrait serves as a springboard for thoughts related to perceptions of the self and the soul:

The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
Posing in this place. It must move
As little as possible. This is what the portrait says
(69)

Ashbery swims away from the portrait, urged by his own meditative impulses, but returns to the portrait, both to confirm what he believes is there, and to be further inspired in his musing. This leads him to the realization that "the soul is not a soul, / Has no secret, is small, and it fits / Its hollow perfectly" (69) i.e., that the self, as perceived and expressed through the portrait, lacks spirit, animation, and depth. This is because the "soul" in the painting is a "stereotype" (73), and the painting does not contain life but mirrors it, and in this sense it does not reveal a true reality, but an "idea of distortion" (73). We are also told that words (Ashbery's paint) also provide only a reflection of reality and hence a distortion of it through the imagination:

> Words are only speculation
> (From the Latin speculum, mirror):
> They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
> We see only postures of the dream. . . .
>
> (69)

That words "cannot find the meaning of the music," Ashbery has been telling us all along. What they can do is mirror the "music," which in Ashbery's poetry is almost always a metaphor for the changing nature of phenomena. In Ashbery's poetry "music" is what words mirror and "englobe" (69), although in the mirroring there is always a distortion ("the way of telling . . . twisting the end result / Into a caricature of itself" (80).

In "Self-Portrait" Ashbery seriously considers the experience of art in terms of its relation to the present, where life is always lived, and attempts to claim a place for it:

> Yet the "poetic," straw-colored space
> Of the long corridor that leads back to the
> painting,
> Its darkening opposite--is this
> Some figment of "art," not to be imagined
> As real, let alone special? Hasn't it too
> its lair
> In the present we are always escaping from
> And falling back into, as the waterwheel of days
> Pursues its uneventful, even serene course?
>
> (78, 79)

The poem asks whether art shares an element of our perception of reality which involves subjectivity and objectivity, imagination and reason, truth and fallacy. The poem is also intimately concerned with the nature of reflection, both in the sense of meditation, and in the sense of creating a picture of the real. The questions involved are:

how accurate an interpretation of the real does one arrive at through thought and through art? Is there not always some degree of distortion? We are told that "Today has no margins, the event arrives / Flush with its edges, is of the same substance, / indistinguishable" (79), and that life "Follows a course wherein changes are merely / Features of the whole" (70). How then does one understand and reflect this whole which is invested with

> a vague
> Sense of something that can never be known
> Even though it seems likely that each of us
> Knows what it is and is capable of
> Communicating it to the other.
>
> (77)

while remaining true to its unsegmented mode of existence? Ashbery attempts this and partially achieves it through an ongoing movement in the poem. Sentences do not segment the sense being expressed, but allow it to flow. There is no attempt, it seems, to slow the present to a graspable, static object to be observed, or simplify what is obviously difficult. Reality of thought and perception are presented in their temporal diffuseness through the flow of the language and the multiplicity of its meanings.

Ashbery attempts to present reality as a whole (though he may be bound to fail). The flowing sentences in "Self-Portrait," Three Poems, and "Clepsydra" capture the changing, time-governed aspect of reality, while the terse, enigmatic statements of Some Trees and The Double Dream of Spring mirror the resistant nature of experience to yield truth and meaning, and the fragmented expression of The Tennis

Court Oath reminds one of the indelible presence of incoherence and the irrational. These different aspects of his style congenially embody what is being expressed; they present "its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape" (SP 73).

CHAPTER IV

"TALL SLEEPING"

The earlier aspects of Ashbery's style (terse, enigmatic statements, fragmented expression, flowing sentences), as well as the expression of essentially metaphysical or, more specifically, epistemological, concerns, are all present, in varying proportions, in Houseboat Days, As We Know, and Shadow Train. How do we know what we know? What do we know? What don't we know? These implicit questions are the fibre of his poetry, along with reflections of, and on, the diachronic nature of reality.

If Ashbery's poetry were purely philosophical, outlining rational speculation in logical structures of language, it would perhaps not be as difficult as it is. The difficulty in Ashbery's poetry arises not from the fact that the subject of the poetry is difficult, but from the fact that the poetry is a linguistic equivalent of its subject; the simultaneously rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious nature of being through time. The subject is presented in creative rather than analytical language by an active, catalytic imagination that is as much a subject as it is an expression of a subject.

In "The Explanation" (HD 14) the reader is led through a metamorphosis of consciousness--from "the conductor" to "the ruler" to a "we" to the "I" of the poem. There is also a fusion of metaphors.

The metaphor of the orchestra is united with the kitchen metaphor, then with the island metaphor (which retains in "the ruler" an element of the orchestra metaphor), and finally there is a return to the "gala" with the emergence of the "I" who claims to be "Pretending to resist, but secretly giving in" to change ("a completely new outfit and group of colors once today's / Bandage has been removed), which is a condition of time.

Time (which may be seen as synonymous with change) is an implicit theme in Ashbery's poetry, and it could be said to be the common denominator of all reality, and, hence, that by which all phenomena are interrelated. Ashbery respects to a great degree the 'correspondences' in reality[1]; he does not clearly separate one element of perception from another, but presents them with their interrelating time-governed dynamic. But, of course, time is always present and always experienced as present.[2] In "The Explanation" the present (in which what happens is a measure of time) is seen as a "gala" event, a celebration of 'correspondence' and possibility. "The luxury of now," we are told, "is that the cancelled gala has been / Put back in," i.e., that which was not going to happen is going to happen, indeed a condition of the present. The present is then filled with "The orchestra . . . starting to tune up," a simultaneous presence of numerous phenomena. Further we are told that "The tone-row of a dripping faucet is batted back and forth," and that "The conductor, a glass of water, permits all kinds / Of wacky analogies to glance off him," suggesting the presence of numerous possibilities of interrelationships among phenomena, again a condition of the present.

Events (which necessarily occur through time) are, in some measure, a definition of time; they "explain" time, as the forms of the imagination in "The Explanation" explain, or at least 'stand for' time. Any form of expression of an experience of reality is, however, a "carolling" of "Ideas from the novel of which . . . [it] is the unsuccessful / Stage adaptation," i.e., a translation of experience from one medium (being through time) to another (language).[3] The "Ideas from the novel" are superior to the "Stage adaptation," as the present is superior to its reified representation in language. "Too much" of the essence of reality "gets lost" in the translation from reality to language. The ideal would be a kind of Mallarméan silence which does not violate or misrepresent the "Ideas," but which presents "words . . . palpable, like a fruit / That is too beautiful to eat," i.e., an unattainable purity of expression.

But "down here on our level," in the mutable world of real forms where "the tedium persists / In the form of remarks exchanged by birds," the experience and the expression of "Ideas" are imperfect and impure. Unhappily, a "Stage adaptation" of the "Ideas from the novel" doesn't allow an experience of "arriving after sunset on the beach of a / Dank but extremely beautiful island to hear the speeches / Of the invisible natives, whose punishment is speech," i.e., doesn't allow an experience which transcends form. (On the "island" one cannot see "the natives" though one can hear them. The eye, often a symbol of intelligence and reason, is inoperative here "In the increasingly convincing darkness." There is no visually/rationally perceivable

form, only the slightly purer form of disembodied "speech.")

Existence without form is impossible, the poem seems to say. Our experience on the imaginary "island" is limited to "speech." This "speech" is seen to be a "punishment"; it is invested with a negative value, and it too violates silence and darkness, in other words, the absence of form, which is perhaps the absolute idea, but which, paradoxically, cannot exist. The "beautiful island" of the 'absolute' also has an "outfit and group of colors" which are mutable.

Form implies mere surface, or an inferior version of ideas. "The Explanation" seems to be saying that there is a great difficulty in translating the untranslatable, in expressing the ineffable. This is what language always reaches for and what it instantly fails to achieve due to the uncoinable quality of the essences of the real. John Koethe noted that in Ashbery's poetry

> the trouble is that the subject and its "Wooden and external representation" occupy fundamentally different positions. The latter, like the psychological ego or self, is a thing, existing in the real world of past, present, and future; whereas the subject of Ashbery's poems--what I shall call the "metaphysical subject"--seems to inhabit a durationless "now," existing in a condition of "drifting . . . toward a surface which can never be approached, / Never pierced through into the timeless energy of a present" (HD, p. 28). And what both drives and frustrates his poetry is the attempt to fuse the two positions, an attempt conducted in the full knowledge that it cannot possibly succeed. . . .[4]

The poet is not to be frustrated, however, and although he may never grasp what he is reaching for he continues to offer "a revelation that takes place perpetually,"[5] documenting, as it were, repeated attempts at absolute expression. He is aware that

expression is only a communication of an experience and not the experience itself, but at the same time the poet knows that language affords an experience in itself. Hence he may, as far as it is possible, fuse an experience of a non-linguistic nature with the experience of language. The fleeting irrational nature of all experience--which is time-bound and changing--appears to intrigue Ashbery. Hence, in his use of language Ashbery affects changes in the consciousness or point of view of the speaking voice--through shifting pronouns, frequent modulations of tone and diction, and polymorphous metaphors--that will reflect his view of experience and reality.

In the poetry that results from his concerns there appear to be no stable external reference points. Although Ashbery's concerns seem to involve that which it is least possible to express though language, language itself (because of the absence of a recognizable external subject) contains and is the subject. The poetry establishes a 'content' based on itself, and not on an area outside of itself. The language often mirrors the poem's concerns, but just as often the language seems to exist for its own sake as an autonomous entity that doesn't appear so much to "mean," as to "be," to use Archibald MacLeish's famous terms. Although we may be able to extrapolate explanations of the "Dank . . . beautiful island," and "teddy-bear throne" metaphors in "The Explanation," for example, they seem to resist a definite and uncomplicated interpretation, and the knowledge they convey seems to be beyond the power of analysis to reveal conclusively. The pleasure of Ashbery's poetry lies in what Robert Boyers criticized Ashbery for, i.e., in "moving without significant

impediment,"[6] something which Ashbery often achieves with an apparent disregard for clear meaning. This makes of Ashbery, as Richard Jackson noted,

> an analyst of discursive foundations. As such, his business is to let the 'play' of language 'transgress' traditional limitations of meaning so that he can suggest the surface associations of language that allow new objects of inquiry to appear, the possible positions from which speakers might enunciate them, the linguistic forms that tend to produce concepts, the rhetorical strategies for proliferating statements about concepts. . . .[7]

In an Ashbery poem we experience, what in another context Foucault described as

> the moment when language, arriving at its confines, overleaps itself, explodes and radically challenges itself . . . and where it remains fixed in this way at the limit of its void, speaking of itself in a second language in which the absence of a sovereign subject outlines its essential emptiness and incessantly fractures the unity of its discourse.[8]

In this way Ashbery continually moves along the fringes of meaning and pushes the borders of the mind to perceptions whose meaning may be impossible to clearly articulate. Like any good poet Ashbery says things in new ways, but what is particular about him is what Foucault refers to as "the absence of a sovereign subject." What often drives the poem onward is language embodying and even "transgressing" a subject rather than existing for it, within its limitations. We can only discern a subject in Ashbery (and then, only dimly) once we reduce the various structures of his language to common denominators. Once we do this we can begin to perceive its outlines, but it is not the subject so much as the structures that embody and

often go beyond the subject that are interesting.

In this sense Ashbery shares qualities of the French writer Raymond Roussel whom Ashbery admires because of "the utterly autonomous quality of his work." As he explained, "it seems to exist on its own level, for itself, with no connection with anything outside."[9] Like Roussel's subject Ashbery's is, perhaps, primarily language, but only in the sense that it is used as a mirror or a gauge of time, his ultimate subject. Language for Ashbery is not just an end, it is also a means to recreate the 'feel' of the experience of being through time.

In "Melodic Trains" (HD 24) the expression of the experience of being through time is, as always, through language which is as much the means as the end of the poem, calling attention to its 'surface,' which is, as we saw in "Self-Portrait," all that can be said to exist, since a subject can only be expressed and perceived through a surface where one finds emblems of thought and the imagination. The title points to the 'stream of consciousness,' or 'train of thought' that often characterizes the mode of development of an Ashbery poem. The word "Melodic" recalls Ashbery's fondness for music, and his wish to have poetry share music's "ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument though successfully to the finish, though the terms of this argument remain unknown quantities," and his interest in "the structure, the architecture of the argument, scene or story." It is the "melodic" (i.e., linear, surface structure) aspect of the language in the poem which is of primary importance. Its 'harmonic' aspect (which would be its significations, its deep structures) is secondary,

though it does offer a necessary dimension that satisfies the reader's need for tangible knowledge.

The themes of "Melodic Trains" are change, death, and the experience of being through time. The narrator of the poem offers his explanation of the journey through time in the metaphor of a train voyage. The distance travelled through time includes many changes ("Dales and gulches") but its movement is seen as linear, "as though our train were a pencil // Guided by a ruler held against a photomural of the Alps." The sensation of pleasure, as well as anxiety, are experienced through time: pleasure results from motion, and anxiety from delay, stoppages ("any stop before the final one creates / Clouds of anxiety, of sad, regretful impatience / With ourselves, our lives"), and the final cessation of the experience of time results in a combination of both pleasure and anxiety ("the last / Stop is the most anxious one of all, though it means / Getting home at last, to the pleasures and dissatisfactions of home").

The self's ontological position in time is seen to require expression. Its adequate expression, however, is not achievable through words, nor through gestures, but through an intimate, immediate mode of communication, that of being:

> If I were to get down now to stretch, take a few steps
>
> In the wearying and world-weary clouds of steam like great
> White apples, might I just through proximity and aping

Of postures and attitudes communicate this concern
of mine
To them? That their jagged attitudes correspond
to mine,

That their beefing strikes answering silver bells
within
My own chest, and that I know, as they do. . . .

The changes in phenomena are seen as "stages of the journey," and the phenomena, like a "visible chorus," are seen to be "singing about them and being them" (i.e., the changes). Phenomena 'say' something about change, as well as being that through which change is perceivable. To know "where one is" one must not "give up listening, sleeping, approaching a small / Western town that is nothing but a windmill," i.e., one must willingly experience the flux of phenomenal existence, which includes truth as well as illusions (suggested in the "windmill" figure) and dreams, and one must accept anything that one approaches through the "stages of the journey" through time.

The poem's figures reflect the flux aspect of its theme. Metaphor moves on to metaphor, and never is the poem's manner of imparting meaning less fluid than the poem's subject:

A little girl with scarlet enameled fingernails
Asks me what time it is--evidently that's a toy
wristwatch
She's wearing, for fun. And it is fun to wear
other
Odd things, like this briar pipe and tweed coat

Like date-colored sierras with the lines of seams
Sketched in and plunging now and then into
unfathomable
Valleys that can't be deduced by the shape of the
person
Sitting inside it--me, and just as our way is flat
across

Dales and gulches, as though our train were a pencil

Guided by a ruler held against a photomural of the
Alps
We both come to see distance as something unofficial
And impersonal yet not without its curious justification
Like the time of a stopped watch--right twice a day.

Both the little girl and the speaker are playing at appearances, and in this they share an aspect of time, which is manifested through phenomena--a guise of time. The little girl and the man are manifestations of time as the "scarlet enameled fingernails" and the "briar pipe and tweed coat" are manifestations of the girl's and the man's attitudes, imagination and character. Time is also the cadre in which the thought and figures in the poem are ordered and expressed. The sequences of expression in the poem follow a "melodic" (linear) progression through time that is governed not by logic but by thought processes that happen through time. The movement in the poem is, therefore, an 'organic' one.[10] In the stanzas quoted above there is no structured argument; rather there is a sequencing of ideas, similies and metaphors. The "little girl"'s asking "what time it is" does not lead to a logical consideration of time. The apparently arbitrary fact that she is wearing "a toy wristwatch . . . for fun," is what eventually, by means of association, leads to a consideration of "distance" and "time." In Ashbery's poetry language is not used to analytically explore metaphysical questions: metaphysical questions, rather, grow out of the use of language. It is not by explanation that Ashbery elaborates on his subjects, but by presentation.

"Melodic Trains" presents a consideration and a musing on time, but, of course, it can offer no certainties. It realizes that time is "vague and / Dimensionless, like oneself," that the "circle of certainty" is made up of "segment [s] of chance," and, like any fundamental aspect of reality, time is ultimately impenetrable to reason. All that one can do is observe and experience "the furniture of the air," i.e., changing phenomena. Uncertainty creates anxiety, but "Each voice" of changing phenomena "has its own / Descending scale to put one in one's place at every stage," i.e., the certainty of experience which happens in the flowing present relieves the anxiety caused by uncertainty:

> Then
> The great fury of the end can drop as the solo
> Voices tell about it, wreathing it somehow with
> an aura
>
> Of good fortune and colossal welcomes from the
> mayor and
> Citizens' committees tossing their hats into the air.

In As We Know, Ashbery's eighth volume of poetry, we see again the now familiar fluidity of Ashbery's style, along with the fidelity to the multiple dimensions of meaning in experience. Since Ashbery is dealing with the fleeting nature of phenomena through time and the complex nature of experience, he best deals with his subjects in the way that he does: with a language whose surface structures are often connected by association, and whose deep structures hold layered, often recalcitrant meanings. Usually, the meanings of the poetry are consciously understandable only after much 'decoding,' and the

meanings usually involve realities whose nature is not knowable in detail. One never clearly or definitively grasps the details of Ashbery's subjects. Each reading suggests a new understanding that dissipates quickly. Continued re-readings offer new experiences of knowledge, but each reading uncovers meanings whose nature appears to be to remain partially hidden from view. In this sense Ashbery's poetry structurally operates in the manner of dreams, whose meaning is hidden and revealed in a structure of enigmatic fable.[11]

In "Sleeping in the Corners of Our Lives" (71) this is as true as elsewhere in Ashbery's oeuvre. The particulars in the poem remain mysterious, as in a dream. There is the enigmatic "nickname" and a series of related metaphors having to do with entities that contain something and are the thing at the same time (as a name contains, in a figurative sense, what it refers to, and dream language is a codification, hence an embodiment, of the unconscious mind's meaning). We are never told what, exactly, this "nickname" is, nor what it refers to, although we can make some conjectures:

> So the days went by and the nickname caught on.
>
> It became a curiosity, but it wasn't curious.
> Afternoon leaves blew against the stale brick
> Surface. Just an old castle. Enjoy it
> While you're here.

A "nickname" is an additional name for something. It is not its true name. But all language, all signs, are "nicknames" in the sense that they are designating something, not by the thing itself, but by a sign that evokes an idea of it (a visual image, or a Saussurian

"acoustic image"). This "nickname" is not the truth itself, but a mask of truth which in communication we collectively perceive in place of the truth ("the nickname caught on"). This "nickname," this idea or image of the truth, though it may attract our interest, is a disinterested and passive entity ("It became a curiosity, but it wasn't curious"). It is simply a form ("an old castle") that embodies the truth, though it is not the truth.

Just as a "nickname" is a form that embodies the truth, so are any physical entities. And although these entities are not the truth, or life itself, it is through them that we are able to perceive, experience, understand and communicate the real. These entities which we "Enjoy . . . / While [we're] here" include our physical selves. Like the "nickname," our physical selves represent and embody something (life, the soul) and are something in themselves (they are "A great biography / That is also a good autobiography"). The form in which "one's soul" is found, and the "soul" itself, are mutable ("like a season"), and it is in the process of change that one "save[s] one's soul," i.e., transcends a bound existence. It is, likewise, in the imperceptible "interstices" of the experience of change that one can read or perceive the proportions of both the soul and the body that houses it. All this occurs in an intuitive way, however:

> This is tall sleeping
> To prepare you for the soup and the ruins
> In giving the very special songs of the first meaning,
> The ones incorporating the changes.

Our knowledge of "the first meaning," the meaning that is at the

origin of the "nickname," and that transcends the "nickname," is available through "tall sleeping," an essentially instinctive state of awareness. ("Tall suggests being erect, hence awake, while "sleeping" suggests the unconscious state. The two together suggest an aware unconsciousness, or an unconscious awareness.) The "tall sleeping" is, in a large sense, the process of life, which eventually and unavoidably leads to death ("the soup and the ruins"). This poem, then, is concerned with the essences of life and change, the spiritual and the physical dimensions of experience (which it realizes it cannot name, but only provide a "nickname" for), and life's eventual dilapidation. It states, in manner that reflects its statement, that we are "Sleeping in the Corners of Our Lives," i.e., that our understanding of our life processes is essentially dormant or unconscious, that our conscious knowledge is only a "stale brick surface" of knowledge, and that on that level we know only the "nickname" of the real, and not the real itself.

We come to consciously understand the poem's meanings through a rigorous analytical process of decoding. However, like the process of interpreting a dream, decoding the poem does not reduce its irrational language to the logical structures of our understanding. Ashbery, it seems, is trying to express a level of understanding that lies deeper than ordinary conscious experience. Although a poem such as "Sleeping in the Corners of Our Lives" can, for the most part, be explained, it is the explanation that brings the meanings of the poem to a more conscious level of experience; the poem itself stays faithful to their mode of existence.

Robert Boyers wrote that "meaning is left out of an Ashbery poem not to deprive readers of what they expect but to ensure the continuity of a quest for which ends are necessarily threatening."[12] Meaning, though it is not always readily available in an Ashbery poem is, however, not "left out." It is, rather, revealed in its true complexity. Our conscious understanding can only grasp the surface of meaning. A deeper understanding of meaning does not occur on a conscious level. Since Ashbery's poems, like the work of the abstract expressionists, like music, like much surrealist art, are largely concerned with unconscious experience, some of its content will remain unfathomable. It is not the absence of meaning that ensures "the continuity of a quest," it is rather the presence of an ultimately enigmatic meaning.

In "As We Know" (74) the Ashberian focus on the enigmatic is again evident. "All that we see is penetrated by it," we are told:

> The distant treetops with their steeples (so
> Innocent), the stair, the windows' fixed flashing--
> Pierced full of holes by the evil that is not evil,
> The romance that is not mysterious, the life that is not
> life,
> A present that is elsewhere.

We are given statements and their contradictions. The "it" appears to be contradiction, or paradox itself, which is seen to "penetrate" "All that we see." Our doing also involves "the whole fabric" of contradiction, i.e., to act is to live in contradiction:

> And further in the small capitulations
> Of the dance, you rub elbows with it,
> Finger it. The day you did it

> Was the day you had to stop, because the doing
> Involved the whole fabric, there was no other way to
> appear.

A dream-like sequence ("you slid down on your knees . . . but there was no one in the noon glare") where a sense of time is warped ("You teetered on the edge . . . As though they are coming to get you" [italics mine]), and where "precious jewels of spring water" are "soaked up" by moss, i.e., where important, vital things are unattainable, suggests perhaps the unconscious mind's limitations in grasping the vital and essentially fluid nature of experience. ("The light that was shadowed then / Was seen to be our lives"). Ashbery finally tells us that there is "so much to tell" and that all of it will probably never be told, since much of it will remain intuited, unnamed, taken as given, the "As We Know" that an Ashbery poem proceeds from.

In "Tapestry" (80) the interrelationships of art and life, seeing and the seen, vision and reality, as well as their differences are contemplated. Phenomenal reality is seen to "take precedence" over any form of subjective perception or expression, even those involving an idealization of the real. "Sight" is "blinded by sunlight," i.e., the seen is much greater in importance than, and indeed a requisite of, vision, although it is only through the experience of seeing that we are aware of its "splendor":

> It is difficult to separate the tapestry
> From the room or loom which takes precedence over it.
> For it must always be frontal and yet to one side.
>
> It insists on this picture of "history"

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

In seeing (which is an "inner" experience, as well as one "receiving phenomena") we form an "outline, or a blueprint, / Of what was just there." Vision and, by extension, an expression of vision in any form, contain both a subjective and an objective element. If we take the tapestry to be a metaphor for artistic vision and expression (the last stanza seems to suggest this possibility) we see that the "blanket" of art, in which "We are eager . . . to be wound" presents a situation wherein vision (particularly with its idealizing function) and phenomena are one. In this situation there is harmonious interpersonal intercourse, and an unfrustrated fulfillment of desires. Furthermore, words are seen in an ideal state of non-referentiality ("words go crying after themselves, leaving the dream / Upended in a puddle somewhere"). The exemplary work of art, the poem seems to suggest, is one which unites seeing and the seen, vision and reality.

Ashbery's poem "insists on this picture of 'history' / In the making," i.e., the unifying experience of the present which includes, for the poet, the act of writing and the subject of the writing. The act of writing the poem is inseparable from the poem being written ("It is difficult to separate the tapestry / From the room or loom") as much as the style is, inevitably, a result of, and a reflection, if not an embodiment, of its subject. The poem "Draws an outline, or a

blueprint, / Of what was just there," and "what was just there" often in Ashbery includes the act of writing. The act of writing is, of course, not central to the poem, but it is nonetheless inseparable from the subject. Ashbery's subject is the gestalt of the present, which includes conscious and unconscious experience and, in a less obvious and seemingly less significant way, the activity being undertaken. "Tapestry" is a poem pointing out the interdependencies of the processes of art and the work of art, and in a general sense, the processes of experience and the idealization of experience. Ashbery sees the two phenomena as one.

In the sense of presenting a vision of reality and reality, the seeing and the seen together Ashbery echoes some concerns of Charles Olson. In his essay "Human Universe" Olson wrote:

> Idealisms of any sort, like logic and like classification, intervene at just the moment they become more than the means they are, are allowed to become ways as end instead of ways to end, END, which is never more than this instant, than you on this instant, than you, figuring it out, and acting, so. If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, this instant, in action.[13]

Here as elsewhere in the essay Olson is soliciting an awareness of the gestalt of the now without intervening "logic," or attempts at "classification"; in other words, an experience of the present that does not deny its essentially non-rational nature. In the same essay Olson asks for the presentation in writing of "the going-on," not "a demonstration, a separating out, an act of classification, and so, a stopping," which renders "the going-on" "false":

> For any of us, at any instant, are juxtaposed to any experience, even an overwhelming single one, on several more planes than the arbitrary and discursive which we inherit can declare.[14]

Olson also seeks "a means of expression . . . a way which is not divisive as all the tag ends and upendings of the Greek way are." "There must be a way," he says,

> which bears in instead of away, which meets head on what goes on each split second, a way which does not--in order to define--prevent, deter, distract, and so cease the act of, discovering.[15]

Finally he says that "art is the only twin life has--its only valid metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact."[16] Ashbery, similarly, "does not seek to describe" his subjects, "but to enact" them, to present his subject in his style as much as through his style.

The dynamic qualities of Ashbery's style include polarities and contradictions which Ashbery does not seek to resolve. The subject in "The Pursuit of Happiness" (Sh Tr 1), which appears to be contradiction, is presented in the poem's tissue which itself presents contradictions. We are told that a division of reality into separate components ("twin partitions") presents a "unified façade" through which there is "no way of passing." Since this "unified façade" is impenetrable one experiences two extremes, two contraries ("the tides in the Bay of Fundy"). A penetration of the "façade" is, however, afforded by a "shadow" "who all unseen came creeping at this scale of visions." This "shadow" is "incisive" and presents a way of cutting

through the "façade" of contradictions, contradicting the poem's previous statement that the "façade" cannot be penetrated.

This "shadow" that dissolves the "façade" of contradictory surface impressions of reality is evidently an intuitive mode of perception (it cannot "be called to stand trial," i.e., it cannot be scrutinized; and it "caused the eyes to faint, the ears to ignore warnings," i.e., it triggered an internal rather than external perceptiveness). It allows for an understanding which runs deeper than the discursive one of the "tiny mice / About to adjourn the town meeting," and it is something "That every blistered tongue welcomed as the first / Drops scattered by the west wind," the tongues being perhaps "blistered," or parched from speech. This shadow is the attractive "idea . . . waiting there like a forest, not emptied" which presents a way "to get by" that does not conceive of reality as the "unified façade" of a rational perception.

Contradiction--seen as an impenetrable "façade" of reality that is, paradoxically, later penetrated--is said to be a false notion, but the poem itself presents contradictions. Ashbery forwards a criticism of the rational falsification of the basically non-rational nature of reality, but he offers a picture of a duality of perceptions: rational and intuitive, conscious and unonscious. The "shadow," though it is "welcomed as the first / Drops scattered by the west wind," also causes "the eyes to faint, the ears to ignore warnings," i.e., while presenting a refreshing intuitive knowledge, it ignores the rational and conscious aspect of experience, hence admitting a duality and contradicting an essential notion of the poem. On the

level of style Ashbery's subject appears to be the essentially irrational experience of reality, but this can only be ascertained after much rational probing of Ashbery's structures.

Ashbery has said that he is as interested in the conscious mind as in the unconscious mind,[17] and by extension in the rational and irrational experience and interpretations of the real. The fact that Ashbery may present inherent contradictions in his works testifies not that his notions of the real are inconsistent, but that he works with the "means of expression . . . which is not divisive" of which Olson speaks, and thereby presents a faithful picture of the real.

It is also important to note besides everything else that Ashbery is playing with the signification system of language. By excluding external referents from his work Ashbery allows language to stand, to a large extent, on its own legs, as it were. Language becomes a relatively closed semantic system, and interpretations become highly tenuous and dispensible secondary forms of knowledge.

"Some Old Tires" (20) says that irrationality (what "doesn't fit") is reasonable, and it presents difficult structures without including the rational ordering of phenomena ("the costly stuff of explanation" RM 39), something which Ashbery has generally left out of his poems. The initial pronoun in the poem ("This was mine, and I let it slip through my fingers") refers to an unnamed something--perhaps poetic vision, perhaps the present--which escapes the speaker's grasp. A "valor," a concerted action that is based on a system of belief that reinforces that system of belief would perhaps allow him to grasp the unnamed element of the first line, but only in an illusory way. The

"valor" could only be his "for the space of a dream instant." The speaker admits that

> there's too much to
> Be done that doesn't fit, and the parts that get lost
> Are the reasonable ones just because they got lost
> And were forced to suffer transfiguration by finding their
> way home
>
> To a forgotten spot way out in the fields.

Dodging the impulse to pin down reality the speaker and the poem defy the urge to compartmentalize and rationalize reality, to see it in terms of fixed components the mind can always grasp. By refusing to make explicit sense, and by choosing instead to let sense make itself implicitly, the poem remains faithful to the truth inherent in perception, cognition, and in the changing nature of reality. But, "Some Old Tires" tells us, "To have always had the wind for a friend is no recommendation," i.e., change and the ungraspable essences of reality may appear to offer no tangibles, the irrational and the ineffable may bring no rewards. The "signs of fatigue / And mended places," the effects of time passing, which we recognize as change (the texture of experience), and the process of deterioration that continues even after death ("what must continue / After the ring is closed on us") are its rewards. "The furniture," an enigmatic figure in the last stanza, could be a reference to thoughts, memories, emotions, i.e., the 'furniture' of the self that also is subject to time and deterioration (it "pleads no contest"). The process of time also affected the inhabitants of the past, "those who sat there before."

The figure of the tire of the title appears to be a version of the "ring" which may be seen as a symbol of "the passage from spatial to non-spatial, from temporal to non-temporal existence,"[18] and seemingly relates to the poem's concern with change, deterioration--eventuating in death--and the transcendence of a logical conception of reality. "Some Old Tires" expresses the experience of the fleeting quality of meaning, and of the ineffable (although communicable) mystery of the real. The essence of the present ("this airy and pleasant city") is one that is "continuing," and one that is seen to "slip through . . . fingers," that cannot be grasped and contained. Its elements "get lost" in the changes that take place as it progresses toward "a forgotten spot way out in the fields," an opening to numerous other possibilities in other 'versions' of the present.

Ashbery has said that, for him, the process of composing a poem is "very often . . . a question of progressing from one point to another arbitrary point," and what comes up in the process is "all kinds of junk sitting around in my mind."[19] It may be argued that every poet works from a mental scrabble; Ashbery, however, remains true, if not to the order itself, then to the experience of the order of mental phenomena.

Although Ashbery is propelled by an anti-rational-art impulse, his work is governed by conscious creative principles. These principles appear to include the treatment of language as a plastic signification system that does not have to refer to any tangible 'subjects.' A poem of Ashbery does not need to 'say' anything it can

be "concerned with language on a very plain level" ("Paradoxes and Oxymorons" Sh Tr 3), and it can question its own statements ("What's a plain level?") and provide vague answers ("It is that and other things, / Bringing a system of them into play"). In essence it can be without necessarily conveying anything specific. This is perhaps a condition of all art, as Roger Fry noted:

> In art there is, I think, an affective quality which . . . is not a mere recognition of order and inter-relation; every part, as well as the whole, becomes suffused with an emotional tone. Now . . . the emotional tone is not due to any recognizable reminiscence or suggestion of the emotional experience of life; but I sometimes wonder if it nevertheless does not get its force from arousing some very deep, very vague, and immensely generalized reminiscences. It looks as though art had got access to the substratum of all the emotional colours of life, to something which underlies all the particular and specialized emotions of actual life. It seems to derive an emotional energy from the very conditions of our existence by its revelation of an emotional significance in time and space. Or it may be that art really calls up, as it were, the residual traces left on the spirit by the different emotions of life, without, however, recalling the actual experiences, so that we get an echo of the emotion without the limitation and particular direction which it had in experience. [20]
> (Italics mine)

Ashbery leaves out the particulars of experience, but presents its essences in a manner which congenially reflects their primarily non-rational nature. Ashbery's subject is not the unconscious mind, but the irrational truth that transcends rational activity and that is at the base of it. Paradoxically, it is the irrationality of phenomena that propels the desire to grasp it rationally. The urge to understand is the urge to bring into the domain of reason elements of

apparent chaos and darkness.

Because Ashbery does not ignore (as surely he cannot) the rational component of human awareness, he works with structures of language that reflect rational cognition. But his language also contains elements that escape conscious scrutiny. His subject is irrational in nature, although he works within the framework of reason.

CHAPTER V

"A DEEPER OUTSIDE THING"

It was the purpose of this thesis to argue about Ashbery's structures, how their meaning is often hard to localize, how they conceal, as well as reveal, the mysteries of thought and perceptions, and how they encase and share elements of their ultimate subject, the fleeting nature of reality.

Ashbery's poetry can be said to have the author as part of its subject, but this, only in the sense of a depersonalized author. We do not experience details of the author's life, rather we experience some of the essences of his, and by extension, our being. Ashbery communicates the essences of experience, not the details of experience, and each reading involves the details of the reader's own experience as well as intimations of the author's,[1] although none of them are, finally, what the poem is about. The experience of recognizing a meaning in an Ashbery poem is a volatile one. The message of the Ashbery poem is that there is no definite, stable meaning, nor particular, in experience, that everything is flux.

The Ashbery poem includes the passage of time (also a dynamic factor in language),[2] and the change that ensues. Essentially, transcendental or metaphysical experiences are reproduced or mirrored in the poem. This is achieved by structures which on the surface

appear to mirror the cause and effect dynamic of phenomena, but which, on a semantic level, through means of a non-referential or, at best, a vaguely referential use of nouns and pronouns--grammatically the causes of effects--offer few tangibles.[3]

The latest published of Ashbery's poems at the time of writing, "At North Farm," shares stylistic and semantic traits of much of Ashbery's previously published poetry. Here it is in its entirety:

> Somewhere someone is travelling furiously toward
> you,
> At incredible speed, travelling day and night,
> Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents,
> through narrow passes.
> But will he know where to find you,
> Recognize you when he sees you,
> Give you the thing he has for you?
>
> Hardly anything grows here,
> Yet the granaries are bursting with meal,
> The sacks of meal piled to the rafters.
> The streams run with sweetness, fattening fish;
> Birds darken the sky. Is it enough
> That the dish of milk is set out at night,
> That we think of him sometimes,
> Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings?[4]

The most remarkable features of the poem are the obscure referentiality of the pronouns ("someone," "he," "you," "we," "him") and the vague sense of place ("Somewhere," "here," "North Farm"). This creates the impression of a transcendence of mundane particulars, of subjectivity and objectivity. The unnamed "Someone" of the first stanza covers a lot of ground, yet his destination is a non-specified "you," and we only vaguely know his purpose.

The second stanza continues the poem's equivocations, but adds to them a paradox ("Hardly anything grows here, / Yet the granaries are

bursting with meal."). The root of this paradox could be but linguistic in nature if we see understatement or irony in the phrase "Hardly anything grows here." Seen thus the paradox exists in a semiotic sense and not in a referential sense. The statement "Hardly anything grows here, / Yet the granaries are bursting with meal" can only be interpreted as a plausibly accurate representation of a reality if the "meal" is from another time or another place. The poem, however, does not provide indications for a definitive interpretation of the statement. It allows the statement's ambiguity.

With the lines "The streams run with sweetness, fattening fish; / Birds darken the sky," which appears to be a further illustration of the "Hardly anything grows here, / Yet . . ." statement, it becomes more apparent (since we may take fish and birds to be indigenous to a specific place in time) that the statement is intended as a description of a real situation. This can only make metaphorical sense; the plenty is not the result of a 'growth' or a production, but is a given. On what plane this applies, we cannot be certain.

The problem of the interpretation of the "Hardly . . . Yet" statement is, of course, centered in the adverb "Hardly." Its sense of 'scarcely' or 'almost not,' it will be noted, is a highly relative one. Thus, "Hardly anything grows here . . . Birds darken the sky" is a statement of a situation wherein the interpretation of the presence of a glut depends on the notion of what constitutes a lack. The truth of the statement is relative to an interpretation of a reality. Since we are not given a reality to contemplate, but rather the interpretation of a situation which is relative to the speaker's own

notions, the statement for us cannot make logical sense. We are struck, then, by its incongruity and its paradoxicality, and we can not prove its truth.

The "he" of the first stanza appears again in the last sentence, stirring ambiguous reactions ("mixed feelings"). The "dish of milk . . . set out at night" suggests an analogy to a cat. Perhaps "he" is a cat in the metaphorical sense that his presence is perceived (in this case) at "night," or as being outside of normal human experience (his superhuman quality was already established in the first stanza where he was said to be "travelling . . . at incredible speed . . . day and night, / Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow passes"). His presence appears to be supra-phenomenal and perhaps, we may be tempted to speculate, "he" is the miraculous cause of the situation of plenty in face of a lack. Is this "he" some personified form of <u>animus mundi</u>, the factor that animates matter, that is at its root, and to which we only pay 'side-long' respect? ("Is it enough / That the dish of milk is set out at night, / That we think of him sometimes, / Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings?")

It is clear that the main figure of the poem remains a secret agent in our understanding. The elusiveness of its identity, however, while preventing one from reaching any conclusive readings of the poem, allows the poem's meanings a wide range of possibilities. The poem's semantic suggestiveness is not limited to its surface structures, but transcends their limitations. In a very general sense, the meaning of the poem not only transcends language (as any meaning does) but transcends also the formulations of conscious

thought. One may suppose, then, that the subject of the poem is subjectlessness or the transcendence of phenomenal reality.

In "At North Farm" the knowledge of a definite subject is not central to the perception of meaning, and meaning, since one cannot clearly see it in terms of specifics, exists in linguistic structures whose truth one can neither deny nor affirm. Hence the poem's subject is ultimately enigmatic, and presents its surfaces as the only tangible reality.

In this way lies Ashbery's main function as a poet. He stresses again and again the illusory quality of language and meaning itself, and shows the essential shortcomings of rational thought in relation to experience. Reason is only a function of the human mind and not a phenomenon central to experience. It is only a part of a whole which is experience. Language, a tool as well as a shaping force of thought, is used by Ashbery to reveal both rational and non-rational aspects of experience, perception and cognition. Through his use of language Ashbery also expresses concerns with the nature of metaphysical realities such as time, change, and being.

Some critics and readers charge Ashbery with being meaningless, but others realize that he is concerned with meaning on levels other than conscious and rational and that he dissolves the borders of referentiality in language to incorporate what he referred to in "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" (Sh Tr 3) as "a deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern," or what we might call a truth that transcends reason.

The magic of Ashbery lies in the fact that he exploits the

potential of language to express the supra-rational, and the transcendent, metaphysical reality that animates, underlies and yet, paradoxically, is dependent on and knowable through the physical. (If there were no vehicle, there would be no movement. If there were no form, there would be no content.) Ashbery's achievement lies in his perspicacity in the use of language to communicate that which is not normally acknowledged but constant in communication: the combined phenomena of understanding and confusion, clarity and obscurity, reason and irrationality. Even the most rational of statements, "cogito ergo sum," for instance, has an element of the non-rational at its base. A statement such as "cogito ergo sum" is an expression, not of a rational experience, but of a rational perception and understanding (thinking) of an experience (being) which is not rational and upon which the former is based. The potential of language to express rational and non-rational experience is something which not only informs Ashbery's play of language, but is a guiding principle:

> 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 gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.
>
> It has been played once more.

Edward Sapir wrote that

> Language . . . is not and cannot be definitely localized, for it consists of a peculiar symbolic relation--physiologically an arbitrary one--

> between all possible elements of consciousness on the one hand and certain selected elements localized in the auditory, motor, and other cerebral and nervous tracts on the other.[5]

Language, as Ashbery uses it, exists not only as a symbolic expression of "elements of consciousness," but also of elements of unconsciousness. Ashbery's language, is used to communicate both conscious and unconscious experience together. The communication of the latter is achieved by a certain passive relation of conscious intent to the act of writing. Needless to say, unconscious and non-rational experiences cease to be such once they become conscious and rational, and enter the domain of reason. One part of what Ashbery communicates is unfathomable to conscious and rational scrutiny but registers in the reader in an unconscious manner. The other part of what he communicates the conscious mind can grasp. The vehicle for this twofold experience is language, which, like Ashbery's subjects, is essentially, in the final analysis, as Sapir suggests, void of precise locality. Like language, the ensemble of Ashbery's subjects and meanings are, paradoxically, "Something that can never be known / Even though it seems likely that each of us / Knows what it is and is capable of / Communicating it to the other" (SP 77).

Ashbery plays with the phenomenon of meaning itself and shows how it is simultaneously available in and absent from language, and, by extension, experience.

NOTES

Chapter I

[1] Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, "How to Be a Difficult Poet," New York Times Magazine, 23 May 1976, p. 33.

[2] Robert Boyers, "Quest Without an Object," Times Literary Supplement, 1 September 1978, p. 962.

[3] John Simon, "More Brass than Enduring," Hudson Review, Autumn 1962, pp. 457-458.

[4] J.W. Hughes, Saturday Review, 8 August 1970, p. 34.

[5] Douglas Crase, "The Prophetic Ashbery," in Beyond Amazement, ed. David Lehman, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 30.

[6] Marjorie Perloff, "Fragments of a Buried Life: John Ashbery's Dream Songs," in Beyond Amazement, p. 74.

[7] Charles Altieri, "Motives in Metaphor; John Ashbery and the Modernist Long Poem," Genre, Vol. XI, No. 4 (Winter 1978), pp. 669-670.

[8] Charles Molesworth, "'This Leaving-Out Business': The Poetry of John Ashbery," in The Fierce Embrace (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979), pp. 163-164.

[9] David Shapiro, John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 1, p. 31.

[10] Laurence Lieberman, Unassigned Frequencies: American Poetry in Review, 1964-77 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), p. 32, p. 24.

[11] Neva Lyons, The Poetry of John Ashbery (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982), p. 33.

Fred Moramarco, "John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara: The Painterly Poets," Journal of Modern Literature, Vol. 5 (1976), pp. 436-462. Marjorie Perloff, "Transparent Selves: The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara," Yearbook of English Studies, Vol. 8 (1977), pp. 71-96. Leslie Wolf, "The Brushstroke's Integrity: The Poetry of John Ashbery and the Art of Painting," in Beyond Amazement, pp. 224-254.

Chapter II

[1] Altieri, p. 662.

[2] "Craft Interview with John Ashbery," New York Quarterly, No. 9 (Winter 1972), p. 24.

[3] Cf. Boyers.

[4] Helen Vendler, "Understanding Ashbery," The New Yorker, 16 March 1981, p. 108.

5 Kostelanetz, p. 26.

6 "Craft," p. 12.

7 I avoid an exploration of the complex relation of language to thought. That there is a relation, there is little doubt. Cf. J.P.B. Allen, and Paul Van Buren, ed., Chomsky: Selected Readings (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. viii, where the editors write: "The main purpose of the research in generative linguistics is to suggest an explanatory hypothesis concerning the nature of language and ultimately of human thought. . . . A theory of language is to be regarded as a partial theory of the human mind. . . "

8 By "structure" I mean the shape of the phrase or sentence.

9 See J. Deese, The Structure of Associations in Language (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1965): p. 1, " . . . the most important property of associations is their structure--their patterns of intercorrelations.": p. 67, " . . . it can be roughly stated . . . that connotative meaning is the emotional or affective meaning of concepts while denotative meaning is their referential meaning." Ashbery's poetry involves connotation and association almost exclusively.

10 Ashbery's feelings about surrealism are ambivalent. In an interview with Paul Serralheiro (October 1983) Ashbery said: "I see much surrealist poetry most of the time as too dull. Probably because of its insistence on avoiding the conscious mind. The unconscious unleavened by the conscious is dull." However, he also said: "The idea of surrealism as being the freedom to do anything you feel like doing attracted me very early." And: "I feel my poetry tends to reflect my mind which is three-quarters unconscious and one-quarter conscious."

[10] (continued)
In 1968 he wrote that "the finest writing of the surrealists is the product of the conscious and the unconscious working hand in hand, as they have been wont to do in all ages," and that although, "like all revolutions, Surrealism substituted some new restrictions for old ones, limiting its direct effectiveness and eventually bringing about its decay as a movement," it "has influenced us in so many ways that we can hardly imagine what the world would be without it." ("Dada and Surrealism," New Republic, 158, No. 22 June 1968 , p. 35.)

[11] André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 38.

[12] Quoted in Paris Leary, and Robert Kelly, ed., A Controversy of Poets (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 523.

[13] John Cage, A Year from Monday: New Writings and Lectures (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 100.

[14] Ferdinand de Saussure, Cours de linguistique générale (Paris: Payot, 1960), p. 28. De Saussure's term "image acoustique" involves both sound and concept. A word is a sign comprised on these two elements. "The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image. The latter is not the material sound, something purely physical, but the psychological impression of the sounds, of which we are aware through our senses. . . . The linguistic sign, then, is a two-part psychic entity. . . . These two elements are intimately tied and evoke one another." Ibid., pp. 98-99 (my translation).

[15] Sam Hunter, "U.S.A.," in Art Since 1945 (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.), p. 286.

[16] Ibid., p. 289. Hunter says that Pollock's art "was powered by its own internal dynamism," and that it had "a spontaneous linear invention, which soon became the entire substance of his pictorial content," p. 290. Hunter also believes that "the American aesthetic of the accidental which is a principle at work in abstract expressionist art descends in a direct line from the Surrealists' lucky find," p. 289.

[17] Interview with Paul Serralheiro.

[18] Harold Bloom, "John Ashbery: The Charity of the Hard Moments," in Contemporary Poetry in America, ed. Robert Boyers (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 114.

[19] Shapiro, p. 43.

[20] Most of the activity in painting and music I have been refering to was happening in the 1950's and 1960's. Ashbery was concerned about poetry's retardation in relation to other arts at the time. "O'Hara and I and Kenneth Koch," Ashbery explained, "were dissatisfied with the norms of poetry at that time, which were much more conventional, conservative than those of the work of the artists and the composers we were being exposed to, and we were trying to be as free and open as they were." Interview with Paul Serralheiro.

[21] Kostelanetz called it "coherent diffuseness," p. 22.

[22] Kostelanetz, p. 22.

[23] Ashbery spent some ten years in France.

[24] Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," in Deconstruction and Criticism (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 15-16.

[25] Marcus B. Hester, The Meaning of Poetic Metaphor (Paris: Mouton and Company, 1967), p. 68.

[26] Lyons also arrives at this conclusion. She writes: "In the most fundamental way, the language of The Tennis Court Oath is the metaphor of its spiritual and emotional contents [sic] for the centrifugal force which breaks up syntax and meaning also has dissociated the poet from the world" p. 62.

[27] Shapiro, p. 54.

[28] Keith Cohen, "Ashbery's Dismantling of Bourgeois Discourse," in Beyond Amazement, p. 128.

[29] "The deep structure of a sentence is the abstract underlying form which determines the meaning of the sentence; it is present in the mind but not necessarily represented directly in the physical signal. The surface structure of a sentence is the actual organization of the physical signal into phrases of varying size, into words of various categories, with certain particles, inflections, arrangement, and so on." Chomsky, p. 2.

[30] Quoted in Kostelanetz, p. 30.

[31]Kostelanetz, p. 22. Of "Europe" he writes: "This poetry is diffuse and disconnected, to be sure. Yet, precisely in its refusal to use traditional crutches of poetic coherence, Europe can be characterized as 'acoherent,' much as certain early 20th-century music is called 'atonal.' Not unlike innovative composers, Ashbery creates original work that seems totally unfathomable on first impression, but becomes more familiar with continued contact."

[32]Henri Lefebvre, Le langage et la société (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 39. "Connotations reveal the riches of consciousness better than the philosophy of consciousness which transforms it into an ontological principle, substantiates it and consequently congeals it." (My translation).

[33]Quoted in Kostelanetz, p. 24.

Chapter III

[1]Lyons, p. 113.

[2]Perloff, "Transparent Selves," p. 183.

[3]Cf. Lyons, p. 118: " . . . the neoplatonic idea of the many and the one are fundamentally pervasive and informing forces in the poetry of the Double Dream. The poems are in essence the embodiment of Ashbery's compulsion to explore his major concerns in a variety of voices and structures. Existence in diversity is both a theme and a formal principle."

[4] Ibid., p. 28.

[5] Many titles of de Chirico's early work suggest the importance of the enigmatic: "The Enigma of a Day," "The Enigma of Fatality," "The Enigma of the Oracle," "The Enigma of an Autumn Evening," "The Enigma of the Hour." In his self-portrait (1908) de Chirico inscribed "Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est" ("And what am I to love if not the enigma?"). See J.T. Doby, The Early Chirico (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

[6] Soby, p. 53.

[7] "Craft." p. 25.

[8] Quoted in Kostelanetz, p. 33.

[9] David Lehman, "The Shield of a Greeting: The Function of Irony in John Ashbery's Poetry," in Beyond Amazement, p. 113.

[10] Mark Hillringhouse, "A Conversation with John Ashbery," New York Arts Journal No. 24, 1981, p. 5.

[11] Bertrand H. Bronson, ed., Samuel Johnson: Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), p. 470.

[12]Breton, p. 36.

[13]This also brings to mind Ashbery's "specious simile," which is "The kind that tells you less than you would know if the thing were stated flatly," Shapiro p. 17.
Another similarity between Ashbery and the metaphysical poets is suggested in Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets," in Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. W.J. Bate (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), pp. 529-534. In the work of the metaphysical poets Eliot claims (p. 530) that "we find, instead of the mere explication of the content of a comparison, a development by rapid association of thought which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader." There we also find (p. 531) that the "structure of the sentences . . . is sometimes far from simple, but this is not a vice; it is a fidelity to thought and feeling," and (p. 533) that the poets in question are "engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling." This is all equally true of Ashbery.

Yet another similarity is suggested by a comment on Donne by Helen C. White in her book The Metaphysical Poets (New York: MacMillan, 1936). She says (p. 79) that in Donne's poetry there is "a mingling of beauty with ugliness and light with darkness," and that the mystical nature of his verse is due to "precisely this mingling of the homely, not to say commonplace, and even at times hardly decent, with some of the largest and sublimest movements of the imagination of the race." This strikingly resembles what Robert Miklitsch, in "John Ashbery," Contemporary Literature, Vol. 21 No. 1 (Winter 1980), pp. 119-20, has said of Ashbery: "The characteristic Ashbery poem seems to be an intentional mixture of good and bad, wherein lines of masterful phrasing and perception are violently juxtaposed against lines of sheer doggerel and debris. . . . (Italics mine).

[14]See Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

[15]Richard Howard, "A Formal Affair," Poetry, March 1976, p. 350.

[16]Boyers, p. 962, says that the Ashbery quest is one "for which ends are necessarily threatening."

[17]H.W. Janson, History of Art (New York: Abrams. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974), p. 367.

Chapter IV

[1]I mean the notion of "correspondences" as expressed in Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondances."

[2]Cf. these lines from Eliot's "Burnt Norton":

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Eliot's concerns are oftentimes strikingly similar to Ashbery's.

[3]Here, by "language" I mean any system of signs.

[4]John Koethe, "The Metaphysical Subject of John Ashbery's Poetry," in Beyond Amazement, pp. 92-93.

[5]Lawrence Kramer, "The Wodwo Watches the Waterclock: Language in Post Modern British and American Poetry," Contemporary Literature, Summer 1977, p. 337.

[6] Boyers, p. 962.

[7] Richard Jackson, "Writing as Transgresssion: Ashbery's Archeology of the Moment: A Review Essay," Southern Humanities Review, No. 12, 1978, pp. 279-281. Jackson uses the vocabulary of Derrida and Foucault and sees Ashbery in terms of such concepts as "transgression," "archeologist," "counter-memory," arguing that "it is this French connection rather than the usual analogies to painting that best explains Ashbery's work."

[8] Quoted in Jackson, p. 279.

[9] Interview with Paul Serralheiro. Ashbery also said "I suppose my work is self-reflexive in the same way as his."

In "Re-establishing Raymond Roussel" (Portfolio and Art News Annual, No. 6, Autumn 1962, pp. 86-109) Ashbery describes Roussel's work in terms that can be applied to his own. For instance, in describing Roussel's poem "Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique," Ashbery wrote of a "tumultuous impression of reality which keeps swiping at one like the sails of a windmill," and that "the logic of the strange position of its elements is what makes the poem so beautiful. It has what Marianne Moore calls 'mysteries of construction'."

[10] See Coleridge's concept of "organic form." ". . . organic form . . . is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form." "Mechanic and Organic From." in English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), p. 500.

[11]Perloff, in Beyond Amazement, p. 67, says that in Ashbery "Dream is . . . regarded as the source of our energy, our élan, of life itself," and that Ashbery's preoccupation is "with dream structure rather than dream content. Not what one dreams but how--this is the domain of Ashbery. . . . The dream structure is the event that haunts the poet's imagination."

[12]Boyers, p. 962.

[13]Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in The New Writing in the U.S.A., ed. D. Allen, and R. Creeley (Penguin, 1967), p. 187.

[14]Ibid., p. 187.

[15]Ibid., p. 188.

[16]Ibid., p. 192.

[17]Interview with Paul Serralheiro.

[18]J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1962).

[19]Interview with Paul Serralheiro.

[20]Quoted in Herbert Read, The Meaning of Art (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), p. 64.

Chapter V

[1]Cf. Hillringhouse, p. 5: "Hillringhouse: Ted Berrigan told me he thought there were three times in a poem: the time the poet writes it, the time about which the poet is writing, and the time when the reader will read it.

Ashbery: Yes, and I think there'll even be a fourth, since the reader will be thinking about things in his own past suggested by the poem.

When I put myself in a state of mind to write . . . I remember things from years ago that are suddenly suggested by the process of writing. It opens me to all the times I have experienced or times I haven't yet experienced."

[2]Cf. de Saussure, p. 103. "The signifier, being auditory by nature, happens through time only and has the characteristics of time: a) it represents a duration, and b) this duration is measurable in one dimension only: it is a line." (My translation)

[3]In Ashbery time and, consequently, change, are expressed in tropes, but the causes of time and change—which are obviously beyond our power to know—are absent. The 'prime mover' in Ashbery is seen as unnamable and, hence, unknowable in any other way than intuitively.

[4]In The New Yorker, 9 April, 1984, p. 48.

[5]Edward Sapir, Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), p. 10.

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