

**FIT TO COPE WITH OUR OCCASIONS:**  
**JOHN ASHBERRY'S PLACE IN POSTWAR AMERICAN POETRY**

**BY**

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Fit to Cope with Our Occasions: John Ashbery's Place in Postwar American Poetry**

The object of this thesis is to develop terms by which Ashbery's contribution to postwar poetry can properly be evaluated. I argue that the key term to such an evaluation is 'occasion'. This term has three distinct critical functions. First, following the poet, I suggest that an Ashbery poem is occasioned by its circumstances (which is to say that events give rise to the poem, but do not determine its shape). Second, I show that Ashbery's development can be charted in terms of his widening sense of what constitutes the occasion of the poem. Third, I compare Ashbery's responses to occasions which have shaped postwar American poetry with the responses of important contemporaries.

In the introduction I describe how I arrived at the term 'occasion', and indicate its value to Ashbery criticism. Chapter One argues that Ashbery's occasional aesthetic is rooted in the collaborative milieu of the New York School. Chapter Two shows why the idea of an occasional poetry might have seemed attractive to Ashbery by setting his early writing against the work of the middle generation. In the third chapter I consider Ashbery's second volume, The Tennis Court Oath, and show how, exceptionally, it embodies a monumental notion of the occasion. Chapter four compares how Ashbery and George Oppen responded to the pressure on sixties American poets to make political pronouncements. Chapter five considers how Ashbery, Ed Dorn and Adrienne Rich responded to the increasing use of literary interviews to explain contemporary poetry to a baffled reading public. The final chapter shows how Ashbery's recent poetry strives to square his desire to write for the occasion, with the late impulse to ensure his poetic survival through influence, and considers his importance to British poets John Ash, Peter Didsbury and Denise Riley.

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**For  
Abi Cooper**

**List of Abbreviations**

ST	<u>Some Trees</u>
TCO	<u>The Tennis Court Oath</u>
RM	<u>Rivers and Mountains</u>
DDS	<u>The Double Dream of Spring</u>
TP	<u>Three Poems</u>
VN	<u>The Vermont Notebook</u>
SP	<u>Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror</u>
HD	<u>Houseboat Days</u>
AWK	<u>As We Know</u>
ShT	<u>Shadow Train</u>
W	<u>A Wave</u>
FC	<u>Flow Chart</u>
HL	<u>Hotel Lautréamont</u>
ATS	<u>And The Stars Were Shining</u>
CB	<u>Can You Hear, Bird</u>
NN	<u>A Nest of Ninnies</u>
RS	<u>Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987</u>

## **Introduction**

## **Introduction**

I started this thesis with two objectives in mind. First, I hoped to develop a critical terminology which would enable me both to appreciate the continuities in Ashbery's writing, and also to understand the considerable changes of tone and style which mark his poetry. Second, I wanted to gain a sharper sense of Ashbery's importance by comparing his work with that of significant contemporaries. Reading his poetry with the first of these objectives in mind, the term that began to suggest itself was 'occasion'. It is a word which, in one form or another, occurs frequently in Ashbery's writing. More to the point, it is a word which (so it began to seem) comes to the surface in the ways one might expect of a term which was of some significance to the poet. For a start, throughout Ashbery's career, 'occasion' occurs in poems which are in some sense or another pivotal. In 'The Instruction Manual', for instance, we encounter a man who, 'wears a moustache, which has been trimmed for/ the occasion' (ST,15). In 'Soonest Mended' we are offered 'an occasional dream, a vision' (DDS,18). In 'A Worsening Situation' we are told that it is, 'True, there are occasions/ For white uniforms and a special language' (SP,3). While in Flow Chart we are warned of

teen-age girls and male adolescents with fruited complexions and scalps,  
who were going to make it difficult for one should an occasion arise.  
(FC,17)

Ashbery can also be seen groping rather clumsily for the term in those poems where inspiration seems temporarily to have deserted him. Thus, in 'Litany', we learn that 'Some think him mean-tempered and gruff/ But actually his is an occasion for all occasions' (AWK,53). While in 'Another Chain Letter' (a title denoting weariness), he notes that 'each turned back// To his business, as is customary on such occasions' (ShT,4). It is a word which finds its way into eccentric texts as well as central ones. The

poem that occurs towards the end of the prose work The Vermont Notebook notes that, 'In a screech the occasion has disappeared, the clamor resumed like a/ climate' (VN,93). The word also crosses over into Ashbery's criticism, tending to appear when Ashbery is discussing works and writers of particular importance to him. Thus, with Hebdemeros, it is noted (approvingly), that Chirico 'invented for the occasion a new style a new kind of novel'.<sup>1</sup> And finally, it is a term which, Ashbery's revisions show, has given him pause for thought. A glance at the earlier versions of the poem 'Blue Sonata' (originally titled 'Sonatina') show that the line which, in the final version, reads, 'To utter the speech that belongs there', first read, 'To utter the speech rehearsed for that occasion', and then, 'To utter the speech that fits there', before emerging in its final version.<sup>2</sup>

It is part of the argument of this thesis, then, that the term 'occasion', and the complex phenomenon it denotes, is of considerable importance to the way Ashbery thinks about poetry. I do not propose to steal my own thunder by rehearsing this argument here. I would, however, like briefly to indicate the critical value of approaching Ashbery's poetry through the word 'occasion'. In the first place, it allows us to understand further the degree to which Ashbery's poetry is Postmodern. Accounts of Postmodern poetics invariably focus on the difference between Modernist and Postmodern poetry, and 'occasion', I think, can help us to appreciate this difference. Thus, the kind of occasion Eliot is drawn to is typified by 'Ash Wednesday'. 'Ash Wednesday' is not a poem whose language is over-burdened by attention to the particularity of the occasion. That said, Ash Wednesday is, of course, an occasion of sorts. The point about such occasions however (the solstice is another favoured by Eliot), is that they occur every year. Ash Wednesday, that is, is one of those occasions in

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<sup>1</sup> John Ashbery, 'The Decline of the Verbs', Bookweek, vol.4, no.15 (18 Dec 1966) p.5.

<sup>2</sup> John Ashbery, 'Sonatina', in 'The John Ashbery Papers', Houghton Library, Harvard University.

the calendar, which, because they seem to signify continuity (because they are ritualised) give the poet permission to disregard the circumstances of the particular day in question. Eliot seeks out those special occasions which, in effect, can be seen to transcend themselves. Arguably Yeats was rather more worldly in his choice of poetic occasion. 'Easter 1916', for instance, is clearly more concerned than 'Ash Wednesday' to focus on the particular matter in hand, on the circumstances of the Dublin uprising. There are similarities, however, between the two poems. Both are concerned with special occasions. Yeats, moreover, uses the special occasion of his poem in the same way Eliot uses Ash Wednesday, concluding by diverting his attention from 'Now' to 'time to be'.<sup>3</sup> Like Eliot, then, Yeats is attracted to an occasion which can seem to transcend itself. Stevens was the most resolutely ordinary of the Modernists, and on the face of it his poetry is not drawn to special occasions of any kind. What could be more ordinary than 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven'. Even Stevens, however, much as he might talk about reality, is not concerned to meet the pressures of the occasion. Rather this occasion (this ordinary evening) is an opportunity for the poet to meditate on things timeless, on the 'instinct for heaven' and the 'instinct for earth'.<sup>4</sup> The Modernist occasion, one might conclude, has either to be special or to be made special; the special occasions the poets are looking for being those which seem to transcend themselves.

Donald Davie has indicated how Postmodern poetry can likewise be characterised in terms of its occasions. Taking up Charles Tomlinson's suggestion that 'there is no occasion too small' for poetry, Davie finds that this belief, 'the belief that 'there is no occasion too small'

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<sup>3</sup> W.B. Yeats, Collected Poems (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1982) p.205.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace Stevens, Collected Poems (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984) p.476.

is naturally at home in a society that makes no distinction between small occasions and big ones, a society that resists any ranking of certain human and civic occasions below or above certain others.<sup>5</sup>

Such a society, Davie says, is a 'social democracy'.<sup>6</sup> One way to think about Postmodern poetry is as the poetry of social democracy, and one way therefore, following Davie, to characterise Postmodern poetry is as a poetry which thinks no occasion too small for its attentions. Davie makes it plain that he is unhappy with this state of affairs, and indeed it does raise difficult questions. For if, out of concern for democracy the Postmodern poet must attend to small occasions, then does one have to conclude, as Davie seems to think one does, that democracy (and a concern for democracy) belittles poetry? Whitman did not think so. Calling for the new democratic writers he so firmly believed America required, in Democratic Vistas, Whitman insisted that,

Our fundamental want to-day in the United States, with closest, amplest reference to present conditions, and to the future, is of a class, and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatures, far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions ...<sup>7</sup>

For Whitman, then, the poets who proved themselves fit to cope with the occasions of democracy would be of 'far higher in grade than any yet known'. Both Whitman and Davie would seem to be right: for it would seem both an important thing and a somehow belittling thing to write poetry fit for democratic occasions. And this tension, I suggest, goes to the heart of strong Postmodern poetry, and so the heart of Ashbery's poetry; Ashbery being both as democratic and as attentive to the requirements of the occasion as any contemporary poet.

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Davie, Under Briggflats: A History of Poetry in Great Britain 1960-1988 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988) pp.64,65.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65.

<sup>7</sup> Walt Whitman, The Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, Volume Two (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1948) p.210.

The two further ways in which thinking in terms of occasions helps us to appreciate significant features of Ashbery's writing can be more briefly indicated. First, the term allows one to think flexibly about the way poems relate to their circumstances. To suggest that a poem can be fit for its occasion, is to imply that the poem is related to events without suggesting that events shape the poem. Paul Goodman draws this meaning out when he suggests that an occasional poem, 'poses the enormous problem of being plausible to the actuality and yet creatively imagining something'.<sup>8</sup> In principle then, at least, it seems that the term 'occasion' might permit one to negotiate the seeming contradiction that Ashbery's poetry is both deeply concerned with the circumstances in which it finds itself, and is fundamentally committed to linguistic experiment. Ashbery, I will indicate, experiments towards poetry fit for its occasion.

Finally, the word occasion allows one to register the social, and sociable character of Ashbery's poetry. Discussing the term in 'Flow Chart', Ashbery asks,

Why then, should people swing  
toward people  
in groups, and when some collide and others keep on going, misstate the  
occasion?  
Either it's a social event or it isn't.  
(FC,89)

Poetic occasions in Ashbery, have always been social events. In the first chapter I argue that Ashbery arrived at his sense of the poetic occasion through and during his collaborations with the other poets of the New York School. Since then, I suggest, Ashbery has always listened to other voices in arriving at his sense of occasion. Ashbery's poetry is sociable (or polyphonic), it is argued, because he has a social sense of the occasion.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Goodman, 'Advance-Guard Writing 1900-1950', *The Kenyon Review*, vol. xiii, no.3 (Summer 1951), p.375.

Ashbery critics of course, have been by no means entirely unaware of Ashbery's sense of the occasion, and I indicate below those moments in the criticism when the term is used to particular effect. There has not been a systematic study of the role of the occasion in Ashbery's poetry. One critic, however, Roger Gilbert, has given explicit attention to the question of the function of the occasion in modern poetry. A brief consideration of Gilbert's approach helps clarify my own. Gilbert grounds his argument in Stevens' suggestion (in 'An Ordinary Evening') that 'The poem is the cry of its occasion'.<sup>9</sup> Developing this remark, Gilbert suggests that 'the notion of the poem as rooted in its occasion works to overcome the gap between representation and subject'.<sup>10</sup> The problem, for the poet who thinks in this way, Gilbert suggests, is that while he seems

to insist on the unmediated presence of the poem's occasion, he must nonetheless *describe* that occasion if it is to assume any recognisable presence for the reader.<sup>11</sup>

This issue of recognition certainly is a problem, but the deeper problem in Gilbert's argument lies further back, in the Romantic suggestion that the poem is somehow organically linked to its occasion. Gilbert does not want to be seen to give this Romantic notion unambiguous endorsement, since, as he puts it, 'a poem is first and foremost a text'.<sup>12</sup> At root, however, he shows himself to be quite deeply wedded to organicist thinking. This is apparent first in the fact that despite having unmasked the fictionality of Stevens' notion, he does not then reconceive the relation of the poem to the occasion. It is apparent ~~even more~~ clearly in the terms in which he gives philosophical expression to his position. One of Gilbert's philosophers, as one might expect, is Heidegger. His other is Wittgenstein, whom he makes sound like Heidegger. In trying to draw out the

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<sup>9</sup> Stevens, p.473.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Gilbert, Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) p.23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

difference between the description and the cry of the occasion, Gilbert quotes from

Philosophical Investigations:

I look at an animal and am asked: "What do you see?" I answer: 'A rabbit'. -  
I see a landscape; suddenly a rabbit runs past. I exclaim "A rabbit!".<sup>13</sup>

Gilbert comments, 'Where the first is a detached observation, the second is causally linked to the phenomenon it names'.<sup>14</sup> The key word here is 'causally', which to my mind simplifies (makes organic) the very relation between utterance and event which the term 'occasion' allows us to nuance. Thus, while I do not want to deny that there is some close relation between, in this case, the sight of the rabbit, and the speaker's exclamation, the sight of the rabbit does not cause the word 'rabbit'. To make a Wittgensteinian point, just as he said rabbit, so the speaker might equally have said, 'bunny', or 'lapin', or even perhaps 'hare'. The point being that while the utterance is closely linked to the event, it is not determined by the event. The speaker, that is, still decides what to say in response, and what he or she decides to say may or may not prove fit.

Nobody, or course, was less inclined to suppose causal relations between events or occasions, and utterances than Wittgenstein, and by ascribing such an idea to him Gilbert makes it apparent that his sense of the relation of the poem to its occasion is fundamentally unproblematic (the problems, for him, beginning later). That he can arrive at this sentiment, is a result, I would suggest, of the fact that he has been guided in his thinking about the occasion by Stevens, a poet who, as has been indicated (and for all his theorising to the contrary) is not actually alive to the demands of the occasion, and so who can himself hold an unproblematic view of the matter. Ashbery is much more alert to the demands the occasion makes on the poet, and so his sense of the relation is

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<sup>13</sup> Cited in Gilbert, p.24.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.24.

characterised both by more uncertainty and by more decisions. For a start, and to dig back to the stage before Gilbert's meditations get going, one cannot be certain, as Ashbery sees it, what constitutes the occasion, cannot be certain what its parameters are. Where, that is, does the occasion begin and end when one sits down in one's Manhattan apartment to write a poem. How much does one have to put in to the poem? What can one leave out? Secondly, Ashbery's poetry asks (and asks us) what is an appropriate response to an occasion which is, after all, a good deal more complex, in the normal course of events, than the sighting of a rabbit. Thirdly, Ashbery's poetry asks itself, what is the appropriate way, on this occasion, to involve the audience? Should, the poet, that is, represent, or indicate, or parody, or dramatise the occasion to best effect. What Ashbery indicates, in short, is that one cannot settle in advance, with the kind of clarity Gilbert seeks, the question of the poem's relation to the occasion. The poet, and in turn the audience, must always use their judgement.

It follows that in considering the function of the occasion in Ashbery's poetry, this thesis does not seek philosophical rigor, but aims instead to be historically stringent. I pursue the development of Ashbery's occasional poetic, showing how, crucially, his sense of occasion (and his sense of the problems the occasion generates) has altered from poem to poem, from volume to volume, and, as his development slows down, from period to period. Moreover, because uncertainty, and the need to cross-refer in developing a sense of the occasion, are built into the poetry, I judge Ashbery's responses to given occasions against those of significant contemporaries. In Chapter One, I trace the development of Ashbery's occasional aesthetic to his collaborations with the other poets of the New York School. In Chapter Two, I show why the idea of occasional poetry might have seemed attractive to Ashbery by setting his poetry against work of the

middle generation. In the third chapter I consider The Tennis Court Oath and show how, exceptionally, it embodies a monumental notion of the occasion. In Chapter Four I consider Ashbery's response to the pressures that shaped American poetry in the sixties, comparing him, as I do, to George Oppen. In the fifth chapter, I discuss the impact of the arrival of the interviewer on American poetry's sense of itself, and compare Ashbery's responses to those of Adrienne Rich and Ed Dorn. And in the final chapter, I consider Ashbery's attempts to ensure the survival of his poetry, and discuss the problems that arise when a democratically occasional poet becomes aware of his influence.

Ashbery is a most prolific poet. He has published as many poems since I started writing this thesis as Larkin did in his career. The consequence of this for the critic is that it becomes impossible to give equal attention to all Ashbery's books. I have offered some consideration of fourteen of his sixteen books of poetry. I do not discuss either Shadow Train or April Galleons, believing, like John Shoptaw (Ashbery's most indefatigable critic) that neither of these adds a great deal to Ashbery's achievement.<sup>15</sup> In addition I consider the novel Ashbery wrote with James Schuyler (A Nest Of Ninnies) and also give systematic attention to his criticism and to his interviews. The discussion of Ashbery's work is set alongside discussions of books and poems by Berryman, Lowell, Koch, Oppen, Rich, Dorn, John Ash, Peter Didsbury and Denise Riley. I do not endeavour to pursue every possible approach to Ashbery's poetry. Thus, while I mention influences on Ashbery as and when they are appropriate to the argument, I do not make any effort to duplicate the excellent work done on Ashbery's influences by, in particular, Bloom and Ward.<sup>16</sup> Also, while I by no means deny that Ashbery's sexuality becomes, at

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<sup>15</sup> For accounts of these books, see John Shoptaw, On The Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1994) pp.250-259, 286-300.

<sup>16</sup> For Bloom's best account of Stevens's influence on Ashbery see, Figures of Capable Imagination (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976) pp.169-208. For Ward's account of Auden's importance to

times, important to his sense of the occasion, I do not view his poetry through the lens of queer theory.<sup>17</sup> Finally, while Ashbery is one of the few poets I know who can make one laugh out loud, and while I hope to communicate something of the humour in A Nest of Ninnies, I have not paid systematic attention to Ashbery's comedy.<sup>18</sup> What I have aimed to show, by a broadly comparative approach, is that Ashbery's central place in postwar American poetry owes much to his sense of the occasion.

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Ashbery, and his insightful discussion of Bloom see Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) pp.94-105, 113-120.

<sup>17</sup> For a thoughtful account of Ashbery as gay poet see David Bergman, Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Presentation in American Literature (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1991) pp.44-63.

<sup>18</sup> For considerations of Ashbery's comedy, see Ward (whose account is alive to Ashbery's humour throughout) pp.83-134; and Nicholas Everett, 'Ashbery's Humour', PN Review 99, vol.21. no.1 (Sep-Oct 1994) pp.44-5.

## **Chapter One**

**A little announcement on this festive occasion: Ashbery and Collaboration**

### **A little announcement on this festive occasion: Ashbery and collaboration**

I want to open this consideration of Ashbery, with a discussion of his involvement in the New York School. This is, of course, a rather tricky issue, because Ashbery has tended to reject the idea that there was ever such a thing. His remarks to the interviewer from the Paris Review are characteristic:

Interviewer: Tell me about the New York School - were there meetings, perhaps classes or seminars? Did you plot to take over the literary world?

Ashbery: No. This label was foisted upon us by a man named John Bernard Myers, who ran the Tibor de Nagy Gallery and published some pamphlets of our poems.... I think the idea was that, since everybody was talking about the New York School of painting, if he created a New York School of poets then they would automatically be considered important because of the sound of the name.... I don't think we ever were a school. There are vast differences between my poetry and Koch's and O'Hara's and Schuyler's and Guest's. We were a bunch of poets who happened to know each other; we would get together and read our poems to each other and sometimes we would write collaborations.... Somebody wrote an article about the New York School a few years ago in the Times Book Review, and a woman wrote in to find out how she could enroll.<sup>1</sup>

Understandably enough Ashbery tries to have it both ways here. He wants to resist the idea that he ever belonged to a 'school' (with its connotations of discipline and uniformity), and tells his anecdote to show how inappropriate the term is. He does not want to deny, however (because it would be disloyal), that he was close to Koch, O'Hara, Schuyler and Guest. Koch also wants to have the question of the New York School both ways. Like Ashbery he is keen to point up poetic differences, suggesting that their work was 'comfortingly various'.<sup>2</sup> Equally, he certainly does not want to deny that the group was 'very, very close', and goes further than Ashbery in this respect,

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery', Paris Review, vol.25, no.90, Winter 1983, reprinted in George Plimpton (ed.) Poets at Work: The Paris Review Interviews (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989) pp.395-6.

<sup>2</sup> David Herd, 'Kenneth Koch in Conversation with David Herd', PN Review 106, vol.22, no.2 (Nov-Dec 1995), p.28.

suggesting that they were ‘involved in each other’s work’, and that, ‘We were together all the time, and we had a big influence on each other, and must have produced some kind of style...’.<sup>3</sup> Like Ashbery, however, he is quick to deny the idea that they were in any sense a poetic school, ‘because we didn’t publish any manifestoes, we didn’t have a programme’.<sup>4</sup> But if the New York poets were not a school, if they were not working to the precepts of a programme, and as they did not produce a manifesto, then in what sense were they ‘involved in each other’s work’? What, in other words, held this bunch of poets together in such a way as to allow them to be both vastly different and very close?

The answer, as Ashbery suggests, is that they collaborated. And they did so unusually frequently. Ashbery and Koch collaborated from at least the early fifties (they produced a poem called ‘The New York Times September Eighth Nineteen Fifty-One’) and worked on a number of poems together, six of which they published in a ‘Special Collaborations Issue’ of Locus Solus.<sup>5</sup> Koch and O’Hara wrote together during O’Hara’s lunch-times at the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>6</sup> And most famously, Ashbery and Schuyler composed the novel A Nest of Ninnies, initially, at least, writing alternate sentences.<sup>7</sup> A little later the poets began to work with their painter friends. In 1957 O’Hara collaborated with Larry Rivers on a series of lithographs entitled ‘Stones’, following which Koch worked with Rivers on various series (with such diverse subjects

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp.28,29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.28.

<sup>5</sup> Koch refers to this early poem in ‘A Time Zone’, One Train (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994) p23. For their six collaborations see Locus Solus II (Summer 1961), ‘Special Collaborations Issue’, pp.156-169.

<sup>6</sup> Koch gives an account of one such meeting in ‘A Time Zone’, p23.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the composition of A Nest of Ninnies see David Herd, ‘John Ashbery in Conversation with David Herd’, PN Review 99 vol.21, no.1 (Sep-Oct 1994) p.33.

as maps and women's shoes) culminating in the large painting/poem 'New York 1950-1960'.<sup>8</sup> And, changing the emphasis somewhat, Koch wrote poetry with Jane Freilicher.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to such strict examples of the form, there were a number of near collaborations. Koch and O'Hara worked simultaneously on their respective long poems 'When the Sun Tries to Go On' and 'Second Avenue', and would each day read the results of their efforts to one another on the phone. Koch's play 'George Washington Crossing the Delaware' was a response to Rivers's painting 'Washington Crossing The Delaware'. While at Ashbery's quirky request Alex Katz's illustrations to the Blacksparrow edition of his long poem 'Fragment' combined responses to the poetry and previously completed images.<sup>10</sup> The poets also collaborated with the painters in the theatre, where, as Philip Auslander notes,

Painters illustrated poets' work, poets wrote in response to paintings; poets painted, painters wrote. The theatre was a natural environment for such collaboration and cross-fertilization.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Nell Blaine designed Ashbery's play, 'The Heroes' and Alex Katz designed both Koch's 'George Washington Crossing The Delaware' and Schuyler's 'Shopping and Waiting'; while Ashbery and Bunny Lang took parts in O'Hara's 'Try, Try', and Lang and O'Hara took parts in Ashbery's 'The Compromise'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Some of Koch's poems from 'Maps' were published in a catalogue to accompany an exhibition of his collaborations with painters; see Kenneth Koch: Collaborations with Artists, intro. Paul Violi (Ipswich: Ipswich Borough Council, 1993) pp.21-25.

<sup>9</sup> See Jane Freilicher and Kenneth Koch, 'The Car', Locus Solus II, p.146.

<sup>10</sup> Herd, 'Ashbery', p.44. Ashbery, O'Hara, Koch and Schuyler were all first published in a collaborative format, by John Meyers. Ashbery's Turandot and Other Poems (New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1953) was illustrated by Jane Freilicher. Later all four were published in a series by Richard Miller and Floriano Vecchi at Tiber Press, Ashbery's The Poems (Tiber Press, New York, 1960), carrying prints by Joan Mitchell.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Auslander, The New York School Poets as Playwrights: O'Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler and the Visual Arts (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) p.2.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Heroes' is published in John Ashbery, Three Plays (Calais, Vermont: Z Press Publications, 1978; reprinted, Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 1988). Ashbery recalls that he Koch and O'Hara were working on the play 'ZZZ' just before O'Hara was killed. See David Kermani, John Ashbery: A Comprehensive Bibliography (New York: Garland Press, 1962) p.73.

To confirm this collective interest in the practice, Ashbery, Koch, Schuyler and Harry Matthews devoted the second issue of their little magazine Locus Solus to collaborations.<sup>13</sup> Sub-titled 'A Special Issue of Collaborations', Locus Solus II was in effect an anthology, collecting diverse examples of the form from 10th century Japanese exchanges to instances of the Surrealists' *cadavres exquis*, with the centre-piece being the first four chapters of A Nest of Ninnies (then unfinished). As the first, and in fact still (to my knowledge) the only anthology of collaborations, the issue was a document of some general importance.<sup>14</sup> It was also of particular significance to the New York School. The magazine was the poets' first joint publishing venture, and so represented their first effort to consolidate their tastes. This second issue, moreover, differed notably from previous issues, in that it had a single coherent concern, and in that it carried a prose 'Note on the issue': Kenneth Koch's brief, but conspicuously scholarly history of collaboration.<sup>15</sup> All of which has prompted David Shapiro to describe Locus Solus II as a 'not-too-veiled manifesto for a new pragmatic, kinetic, pluralist aesthetic'.<sup>16</sup> Shapiro's terms are not as supple as they might be - the New Yorkers, after all, chose not to write a manifesto. Geoff Ward offers a much more deft description of the collaborations issue. 'What is surprising,' he suggests,

is not only the sheer quantity of collaborative work but the degree to which the practice of collaborative writing is theorized and historicized with scholarly detail. If this was a *côterie* practice, it was one that received an immense amount of thought and labour to ready it for public consumption.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Locus Solus II (Summer 1961) Lans-en-Vercors (Isere), France.

<sup>14</sup> The anthology contains collaborative works (of one sort or another) by Ashbery; ninth-century Chinese poets; tenth-century Japanese poets; the Troubadours; Fletcher and Shakespeare; Donne and Goodyere; Cowley and Crashaw; Suckling and Waller; Chatterton; Coleridge and Southey; Marinetti, Cangiullo, Breton, Eluard, Peret, Tanguy and Char; Ern Malley; Ashbery and Schuyler; O'Hara; Ceravolo and Perreault; Krakauer; Benedikt and Gilman; Freilicher and Koch; Berkson and Elmslie; Burroughs and Corso; Corso; Ruth Krauss; Ashbery and Koch; and Harry Matthews.

<sup>15</sup> Locus Solus II, pp.193-197.

<sup>16</sup> David Shapiro, 'Art as Collaboration: Towards a Theory of Pluralist Aesthetics,' in Cynthia J. McCabe (ed.), Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1984) p.49.

<sup>17</sup> Ward, p.126.

Ward's judgement is borne out by a letter Schuyler wrote to Ashbery as the issue was being prepared. 'Part of its unstated objective,' Schuyler wrote,

is a riposte at THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY, which has so thoroughly misrepresented so many of us - not completely, but the implications of context are rather overwhelming.<sup>18</sup>

Schuyler's remarks leave little room for doubt. Collaboration was clearly in some sense crucial to the New Yorkers.

This is a thesis about Ashbery, not about the New York School. My concern in this chapter, therefore, is neither to assert stylistic similarities, nor to highlight how different Ashbery's poetry is from Koch's, O'Hara's and Schuyler's.<sup>19</sup> I open my discussion of Ashbery with a consideration of the collaborative milieu of the New York School because I firmly believe that Ashbery developed thoughts about poetry through and during his collaborations which have remained central to his writing ever since. To establish this claim I consider first the role collaboration has played in the history of experimental poetry, offering brief discussions of the two most conspicuous instances of collaboration in modern poetic history: Lyrical Ballads and The Waste Land. In the light of these discussions I then consider how, if at all, one might begin to think theoretically about collaboration. Finally, I offer a detailed account of the collaborative milieu of the New York School, and indicate how the terms that surface in that account have a bearing on Ashbery's poetry. It was through his collaborations, I argue, through the demands that collaborations make, that Ashbery developed his sense of 'occasion'.

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<sup>18</sup> James Schuyler, letter to John Ashbery 3 September, 1960, cited in Shoptaw, pp.47-48.

<sup>19</sup> For a discriminating and stimulating account of the New York School, see Ward.

### **Hurry Up Please It's Time**

Marginal as it might be to the ongoing process of textual production, collaboration has proved instrumental at strategic junctures in literary, and particularly poetic, history. The publication of Lyrical Ballads in 1798, and of The Waste Land in 1922 are the most obvious cases in point. What claims, if any, can be made about collaboration from a comparison of these two works? Putting the pragmatic case, Jack Stillinger contends that there is nothing general to be concluded from such a comparison. The object of his study of multiply authored texts is to demonstrate the 'discrepancies between the actual circumstances of [literary] production and the imagined circumstances that critics have depicted'. Accordingly all collaborations are held to be irreducibly historically specific. So while he sets out to discover 'possible parallels' between the collaborations of Eliot and Pound, and Wordsworth and Coleridge, his less than bold conclusion is that, 'I would not use the one to prove anything about the other'.<sup>20</sup>

For Wayne Koestenbaum, this is to miss the wood for the trees, the obvious point of comparison being, as he puts it, that both Lyrical Ballads and The Waste Land

were aggressive acts of literary innovation that instigated artistic movements (romanticism and modernism) with political overtones. In both cases effecting a revolution in taste required that one poet submit to another's fertilizing will.<sup>21</sup>

Koestenbaum is surely right to connect the works on this basis. It is not, however, a connection that interests him much. Introducing his study, he concedes that, 'One angle I stint is historical and Marxist'.<sup>22</sup> The conflation of 'historical and Marxist' aside, it is apparent that Koestenbaum means to pay little or no regard to the particular circumstances in which the individual works were produced. Such an approach, I will

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<sup>20</sup> Jack Stillinger, Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) pp.24,136.

<sup>21</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration (London: Routledge, 1985) p.5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

argue, cannot reveal what is most interesting about collaboration, not simply because it disregards historical differences (which it does), but rather for the kind of reason Cynthia Jaffee McCabe presents when she suggests that:

Camaraderie, friendship, mutual interests and ambition, the dynamism of nascent art movements, and proximity amid wartime or other disruptive conditions are all incentives toward the creation of collaborative works of art.<sup>23</sup>

Of interest here is McCabe's nicely underdetermined claim that 'proximity amid ... disruptive conditions' proves an incentive to collaboration, a claim which would seem to be borne out by both Lyrical Ballads and The Waste Land. Koestenbaum, I would suggest, is right, therefore, to register the shared innovative character of Lyrical Ballads and The Waste Land. But so, too, is Stillingier to insist on their historical specificity. It might well be argued, however, that it is precisely such specificity, conceived in the kind of terms McCabe presents, that makes the two collaborations comparable. For reasons central to the form, I will argue, collaborations tend to be acutely aware of the circumstances in which they are produced. This is particularly so, I will suggest, of collaborations between experimental poets, as a consideration of Lyrical Ballads and The Waste Land begins to show.

Certainly the aesthetic statements with which Wordsworth prepares the reader for Lyrical Ballads seem to confirm McCabe's sense of the 'proximity' of collaboration to 'disruptive conditions'. Writing the anonymous 'Advertisement' to the 1798 edition, Wordsworth forewarns readers 'accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers' that they may 'frequently have to struggle with feelings of

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<sup>23</sup> C.J McCabe, 'Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century: The Period Between the Wars', in McCabe (ed.) p.15.

strangeness and awkwardness'.<sup>24</sup> By way of an apology for such disruption Wordsworth asks that the poems be taken as 'experiments', the object being to ascertain 'how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'.<sup>25</sup> By their nature such experiments will not conform to what Wordsworth calls 'the most dreadful enemy to our pleasure, our own pre-established codes of decision'.<sup>26</sup> Denied this measure the poet calls upon his reader to make a much more exacting critical judgement as to whether the book 'contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents'.<sup>27</sup> Wordsworth's argument is plain. The disjunction of 'codes' from 'incidents' has necessitated a newly delineated and therefore disruptive poetry.

Disruption, of course, is not only a question of style for Wordsworth and Coleridge. Disruption, and the disruptive effect of the events through which they were living, is invariably the subject of the Lyrical Ballads. Almost without exception the characters presented have had their lives disrupted of late. 'The Female Vagrant' is a conspicuous case in point. Having left her home with her husband in order that he might find work in a 'distant town', the female vagrant and her family encounter hard times when the loom falls empty and the wheel silent.<sup>28</sup> Unable to 'heal' these industrial 'ills' the husband joins up to fight in America, taking his family with him.<sup>29</sup> As the female vagrant puts it, 'Twas a hard change, an evil time was come'; 'hard change' being her pithy term for the disruption.<sup>30</sup> My interest here, however, is not precisely in the story of

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<sup>24</sup>Wordsworth and Coleridge, Lyrical Ballads ed. R.C. Brett & A.R Jones (London: Routledge, 1991) p.7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.47.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

the ‘hard change’, but rather in the way that story altered during the course of the poem’s own history. Editors and critics have made much of the revisions Wordsworth made to ‘The Female Vagrant’, and Brett and Jones (the modern editors of Lyrical Ballads) note that De Selincourt himself ‘maintains that a comparison of the various texts throw (sic) interesting light on the development of Wordsworth’s thought’.<sup>31</sup>

Wordsworth quickly became dissatisfied with the poem, revising it for each of the 1802 and 1805 editions of Lyrical Ballads, and again in 1815. In each case, as Brett and Jones rightly point out, ‘the effect was to blunt the sharp edge of his attack on wealthy landowners, on soldiering and war, and social oppression’.<sup>32</sup>

This process of revision has an interesting relation to the collaborative history of Lyrical Ballads. Coleridge remarks that it was the tone he came to find in ‘The Female Vagrant’ that most impressed him when he first heard Wordsworth’s poetry.

I was in my twenty-fourth year, when I had the happiness of knowing Mr. Wordsworth personally, and while memory lasts, I shall hardly forget the sudden effect produced on my mind, by his recitation of a manuscript poem, which still remains unpublished, but of which the stanza and tone of style were the same as those of ‘The Female Vagrant’, as originally printed in the first volume of the Lyrical Ballads.<sup>33</sup>

Coleridge is careful to note that it is the original of ‘The Female Vagrant’ he has in mind, the tone he was first drawn to being, by implication, absent from later versions of the poem. A further indication of the poem’s importance to their poetic relationship is the prominent position it was given in the 1798 edition, being the first of Wordsworth’s longer poems. It was in the 1798 edition that Wordsworth and Coleridge were, on the face of it at least, at their most poetically compatible, their separate contributions being attributed to a single anonymous Author . This compatibility was short lived.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.275.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p274.

<sup>33</sup> S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, (London: J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd., 1949) p. 41.

Wordsworth further distanced himself from Coleridge with each new prose statement, coming finally, of course, to claim the Lyrical Ballads for his own.

To draw these strands together: it was at the point at which their collaborative impulse was at its strongest that Wordsworth was most committed to 'The Female Vagrant', and to its outspoken account of the social and economic disruption he terms 'hard change'. As the collaborative impulse dissipated, however, the same 'hard change', which had so clearly provided the occasion for the first version of the poem, began to weigh less heavily with Wordsworth, hence the fact that each new revision of the poem blunted its attack. In the case of Wordsworth and Coleridge there would seem to be a felt proximity between 'collaboration' and 'disruptive conditions', to use McCabe's terms. This proximity can be traced back to the poets' initial decision to join forces. In the preface of 1800 Wordsworth observed of Coleridge's contribution that, 'For the sake of variety and from a consciousness of my own weakness I was induced to request the assistance of a friend'.<sup>34</sup> Already Wordsworth is beginning to marginalise Coleridge, but even as he does loyalty demands that he acknowledge the value of their collaboration. Accounting for this value he hits upon an instructive phrase. He had had, he recalls, a 'consciousness of my own weakness'. Poetic collaboration is figured as a strengthening process - one associated, that is, with weakness, with marginality.

Wordsworth's prose introductions to the Lyrical Ballads are valuable accounts of the collaborative impulse. They are also inextricably documents of poetic marginality. Wordsworth and Coleridge were individually aware that the disruptive conditions, the 'hard change', through which they were living had rendered a disjunction between prevailing literary 'codes' and human 'incidents'. Each was marginalised by this

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<sup>34</sup> Wordsworth and Coleridge, p.242.

perception, and thus marginalised neither was strong enough to bring about the newly delineated poetry each knew to be necessary. Their collaboration was both an expression of weakness, and an attempt to strengthen their rhetoric. Coleridge is not the only friend Wordsworth acknowledges in the preface of 1800. ‘Several of my Friends’, he observes, ‘are anxious for the success of these poems’.<sup>35</sup> Experimental poetry always needs friends, and especially those in high places, if it is to get established. More fundamental, however, is the poetic friendship, the collaboration, within which the new rhetoric is generated and tested in the first instance. And as their editors observe, ‘at this period the two poets were daily in each other's company and in later life Wordsworth spoke of “the most unreserved intercourse between them”’.<sup>36</sup>

By inference from Lyrical Ballads, disruptive conditions might be taken to be an occasion for poetic collaboration. To spell this out: a shared marginal perception of disruption, and of the disjunction this brings about between prevailing ‘codes’ and human ‘incidents’, prompts poets to collaborate on the task of generating a more appropriate, which is to say a more timely, rhetoric. And thus occasioned the collaborative work is more than usually alive to the circumstances in which it is produced. The development of The Waste Land reaffirms this pattern.

Conscious of his own weakness Eliot took his poem to Pound, who, with a fine sense of his part in the process, set about making its rhetoric sufficiently modern to stand the test of its time. Accordingly, Eliot’s critical annotations to The Waste Land, like Wordsworth’s to Lyrical Ballads, are everywhere conscious of the debts he owes his friend. The first edition of the poem was inscribed ‘For Ezra Pound’. But as if aware that, weighed against ‘by T.S. Eliot’, ‘For Ezra Pound’ is not sufficient to acknowledge

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.xviii.

his friend's contribution, the notes to the poem carry a further recognition of its collaborative character. Indeed, Eliot practically falls over himself to disperse responsibility for the poem, declaring how 'deeply' he is 'indebted' to 'Miss Jessie L. Weston's book'.<sup>37</sup> From Ritual to Romance does perhaps aid our understanding of The Waste Land, but we understand the poem much more when we see 'the original drafts including the annotations of Ezra Pound'.<sup>38</sup> One could argue then, that by crediting Weston's book with much more than he needs to, Eliot, who was uncomfortably aware that the poem was not properly his, tries to pay his debts by proxy. In fact the friendship which generated The Waste Land is only fully acknowledged with the appearance in 1968 of the manuscripts. With this event the collaborative character of the poem is made public, and so Valerie Eliot is able finally to 'thank Mr. Ezra Pound, "a wondrous necessary man" to my husband, for his hospitality and helpfulness'.<sup>39</sup>

Valerie Eliot's tribute notwithstanding, the extent and significance of Pound's part in The Waste Land is of course disputed.<sup>40</sup> Pound wasn't in much doubt on the matter, as he made clear in a letter to Eliot:

If you must needs enquire  
 Know diligent Reader  
 That on each Occasion  
 Ezra performed the caesarian Operation.<sup>41</sup>

These lines show Pound to have had a precise sense of his part in the process. To claim to have 'performed the caesarian Operation' is not to deny that his role was to cut. By this phrase, however, Pound reminds Eliot that his cuts were incisive; to incise being to

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<sup>37</sup> T.S Eliot, The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound, ed. V.Eliot, (London: Faber and Faber, 1971) p.147.

<sup>38</sup> As Eliot told Quinn, 'the manuscript is worth preserving in its present state solely for the reason that it is the only evidence of the difference which[Pound's] criticism has made to this poem'; Eliot, p.xxiv.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxxi.

<sup>40</sup> See Stillinger, pp. 132-133.

<sup>41</sup> Letter to Eliot, 24 January 1921, cited in Lyndall Gordon, Eliot's Early Years (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p.106.

produce by cutting into a surface, and 'the caesarian Operation' being the most productive incision of all. For Lyndall Gordon, 'Pound's influence went deeper' still, 'going back rather to 1918, 1919, and 1920 when he and Eliot were engaged in a common effort to improve their poetry'.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, as with the period of 'unreserved intercourse' between Wordsworth and Coleridge prior to and during the writing of Lyrical Ballads, the effect of Eliot and Pound's 'common effort' was, for Gordon, a poetry more alive to the demands of its age. Considering Pound's work on the Lausanne draft of The Waste Land, she notes that, 'The effect of [his] last suggestions is to curtail the second half so that the cultural statement comes to dominate the poem'.<sup>43</sup> Thus just as Wordsworth felt the need to revise 'The Female Vagrant', so The Waste Land carried Eliot closer to 'social criticism', as he famously remarked, than he was later happy to admit.

Unlike 'The Female Vagrant', Eliot's Lil doesn't follow Albert to war. It is, however, seen to that she is made painfully aware of its effects:

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME  
 If you don't like it you can get on with it, I said.  
 Others can pick and choose if you can't.  
 But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.  
 You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.<sup>44</sup>

Eliot and Pound came to collaborate through the shared knowledge that, in the face of the 'hard change' they were living through, poetry had to get 'some teeth'. It could no longer afford 'to look so antique'. The Waste Land is thus unusually alert to the 'TIME' of its production, demob unhappy Lil, like both the secretary at the hands of the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.106.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.117.

<sup>44</sup> Eliot, p.139.

small house agent's clerk and 'The Female Vagrant', being manifestly a victim of her circumstances.

### **The occasion of an utterance matters seriously**

For all its historical significance, however, collaboration has been very largely neglected by criticism. Koestenbaum's and Stillinger's are, to my knowledge, the only book-length studies of the form. This neglect perhaps arises from the problems of attribution raised by collaboration, which compromise both the specificity of single author accounts, and the impersonal tone of theoretical approaches. Arguably, such problems of attribution might provoke criticism into new descriptions of literary production

Almost without exception critics treating collaboration use it to indicate the limitations of Harold Bloom's theory of poetry. Koestenbaum suggests that Bloom would read 'shared texts as documents of weak writing'.<sup>45</sup> Shapiro uses collaboration to counterpose 'an erotics of influence, a joy of influence, a harmony, and an integrated play of influence'.<sup>46</sup> For Geoff Ward, the 'implications' of collaboration, 'subvert not only Bloom's version of the canon, but all models of an *integrity* of writing'.<sup>47</sup> Plainly Bloom's aggressively individualistic account of poetic creation cannot accommodate joint productions, and not surprisingly he is eager to detach Ashbery from the New York School, arguing that 'only confusion is engendered by associating him with Koch, O'Hara, Schuyler...'.<sup>48</sup> However, in deploying collaboration against Bloom critics can tend, I think, to overstate the anti-individual character of the form, the corollary of which overstatement is a turn to the self-effacing terms of post-structuralism. Seeking to

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<sup>45</sup> Koestenbaum, p.10.

<sup>46</sup> Shapiro, 'Art as Collaboration', p.55.

<sup>47</sup> Ward, p.127.

<sup>48</sup> Harold Bloom, *Figures*, p.169.

‘establish a theory of collaboration to counteract some of the more extreme Romantic and modern versions of individual creation’, Shapiro is moved to claim that, ‘Each quotation or misquotation of the modern allusive spirit may be regarded as an act of collaboration’.<sup>49</sup> Similarly Susan Eilenberg, writing on ‘Literary Possession’, finds the study of collaboration to turn on the following questions: ‘Does voice originate in the poet who speaks it?...What does it mean when a poet treats his voice as if it belonged to somebody else, or to no one at all?’<sup>50</sup>

There is a significant sense, however, in which a post-structuralist idiom is not entirely appropriate to the collaborative situation, for, as Shapiro points out, ‘In the best collaborations...the individuals maintain their own peculiar flavors and resonances...’.<sup>51</sup> The point is, as Shapiro feels obliged to acknowledge, that in collaboration individuals do not disappear, they encounter one another. Koestenbaum similarly uses collaboration to deny theories which diagnose the death of the author - as he must given the procreative function he ascribes to the form. Speaking of the collaborations he considers, he explains that,

I apply to each the same paradigm ... that men who collaborate engage in a metaphorical sexual intercourse, and that the text they balance between them is alternately the child of their sexual union, and a shared woman.<sup>52</sup>

The announcement that ‘I apply to each the same paradigm’ tells its own story.

Collaboration, for Koestenbaum, constitutes an opportunity to exercise his version of queer theory. His use of Lyrical Ballads is typical. ‘Bringing inversion to bear on the highest poetry,’ he argues, ‘demands that we permit no sanctuary, not even iambic

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<sup>49</sup> Shapiro, ‘Art as Collaboration’, p.45.

<sup>50</sup> Susan Eilenberg, Strange Power of Speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Literary Possession (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.4.

<sup>51</sup> Shapiro, ‘Art as Collaboration’, p.53.

<sup>52</sup> Koestenbaum, p.3.

pentameter, from the pressure of sexuality'.<sup>53</sup> That Lyrical Ballads was produced collaboratively is not in itself of interest to him. Rather, he uses the fact that it was a collaboration between men to read 'even iambic pentameter' in terms of sexuality. There can be no question that a full account of collaboration would want to reflect on the character of the relationship between the writers, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of homosociality would no doubt offer a powerful means of discriminating between experimental poetic collaborations of different periods. Moreover, one would expect the concept of homosociality to illuminate differences between, say, Ashbery's collaborations with Koch, and Denise Riley's collaborations with Wendy Mulford, thereby allowing one to assess whether the avant-garde is in an important sense structured by gender.<sup>54</sup>

Koestenbaum's account, however, tends not to discriminate, but to homogenise, so denying what is most useful about queer theory. To understand gay writing, Sedgwick argues, requires not a single interpretive paradigm but,

more - more different, more complicated, more diachronically apt, more off-centred - more daring and prehensile applications of our present understanding of what it may mean for one thing to signify another.<sup>55</sup>

And it is thus, she contends, that queer theory has implications above and beyond the study of gender and sexuality. Condensing the argument, she offers the neat proposition that "'Queer" can mean something different'.<sup>56</sup> Which is to say that 'queer' registers difference. It is thus, I would argue, that queer theory might contribute to an accurate account of collaboration. Collaboration, and particularly, avant-garde collaboration inscribes difference. For the writer used to working alone, collaboration is first and

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>54</sup> See Denise Riley and Wendy Mulford, No Fee: a line or two for free (Cambridge: Street Editions, 1979).

<sup>55</sup> E.K. Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p.11.

<sup>56</sup> E.K. Sedgwick, Tendencies (London: Routledge, 1994) p.8.

foremost a markedly different setting. And for the avant-garde poet the decision to collaborate is prompted by the recognition that codes and incidents have become disjoined, making it necessary to forge a different poetic idiom. Queer theory with its highly nuanced sense of what it means to be marginalised, might have much to say about the historically marginal practice of collaboration.

For the writer used to working alone collaboration is above all a noticeably different setting. It is with a recognition of this difference that a sketch for a theory of collaboration should start. Certain suppositions follow from this recognition. One might suppose, for instance, that, as the collaboration constitutes a noticeably different setting, collaborative works might be particularly conscious of their context. To study the relation of collaborators to their setting is to discover a rich and highly nuanced sense of context. A glance at two accounts of collaboration makes the point. Speaking of a collaborative poem he wrote with, among others, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell recalls:

The first ones were pretty much jabberwocky, and so then I suggested, which was not really a Surrealist idea, that we choose some very general subject...As it happened one of those two nights, it was pouring and I had a top floor apartment on Eighth Street facing MacDougal. It was a real thunderstorm, as we were very aware, and it was pouring on the roof and ear shattering in a way, so one of the things I remember suggesting was rain. Everybody just said a sentence and then I put them in order and that was quite a beautiful poem.<sup>57</sup>

And in a typescript entitled 'Regarding the collaborative drawing by Isamu Noguchi and Arshile Gorky', Noguchi recalls:

The occasion was when Arshile Gorky and de Hirsch Margules were visiting my studio on 10th Street. We had been playing over some old drawings of mine for lack of paper improvising in our turns. Suddenly on the radio came news of Hitler's invasion of Poland. The drawing we were then dabbling on was at once seized by Gorky and completed by him. The mark[s] of his fingers were

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<sup>57</sup> Cited in McCabe, 'Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century', p.39.

impressions made by pressing his fingers into the red paste used for seals in the Orient.<sup>58</sup>

The events registered are, of course, of profoundly different orders. The accounts, however, bear certain structural similarities. In each case the location is brought to the foreground. Both Motherwell and Noguchi feel it relevant to mention the New York address at which the collaboration took place. But beyond the details of physical location it seems true to observe that the collaborative situation generates art peculiarly alive to its setting, and alive to the dynamics and the dimensions of setting. Motherwell is careful to point out that he and his group were 'very aware', and, as Noguchi observes, the occasion of Hitler's invasion of Poland made a direct impression on his collaboration with Gorky. In each case the work is a result of shared individual awareness of a public event. So collaboration is, in part at least, a gesture towards an utterance which acknowledges both the private and the public character of perception.

For reasons which seem integral to the form, then, collaborative works are peculiarly alert to their circumstances. First, the collaborators are unused to, and so are aware of, the setting. Second, in determining what the collaboration should be concerned with, the collaborators must agree on something they are collectively acquainted with, which, at that moment is very likely to be their setting, or some aspect of their setting. Thus the setting, or to use Noguchi's fuller term, the 'occasion', might be said to be instrumental in the collaboration. In both Noguchi's and Motherwell's accounts, the occasion itself is shown to have informed the collaboration. Both collaborations, that is, had, or have, a strong sense of their occasion. (Pound it will be recalled, wanted it known, 'That on each Occasion/ Ezra performed the caesarian Operation'.) A highly developed sense of occasion, I would argue, is integral to collaborative practice: hence

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.3.

the rain in Motherwell's poem, Gorky's impression of Hitler's invasion of Poland, and the sheer timeliness of Lyrical Ballads and The Waste Land.

If one were to try to formulate a theory of collaboration, one would probably want to concentrate, therefore, on the relation between the collaborative exchange and its occasion. And so one might usefully engage with the work of J.L. Austin, Austin having insisted that,

the occasion of an utterance matters seriously, and the words used are to some extent to be 'explained' by the 'context' in which they are designed to be or have actually been spoken in a linguistic interchange.<sup>59</sup>

Austin opens How to Do Things with Words by drawing a distinction between what he calls the 'constative' and the 'performative'. Unlike the constative, which is really only a statement, the performative is not held to describe or report something, and so cannot be true or false. Rather, the uttering of a performative sentence 'is, or is a part of, the doing of an action'.<sup>60</sup> Examples of the performative are 'I do', as uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony, and 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*' uttered while smashing a bottle against the bow.<sup>61</sup> The interest of Austin's approach for an account of collaboration, however, lies not so much in this initial distinction between the constative and the performative (which anyway he abandoned) but rather in the wider concerns it forces him to address. Speaking generally of the performative, he remarks that 'to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing ... it is to do it'.<sup>62</sup> My interest here is in Austin's sense of 'appropriate circumstances'.

Although initially incidental, the matter of 'appropriate circumstances' soon exceeds parenthetical limits, coming quickly to dominate Austin's thinking. 'Speaking

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<sup>59</sup> Austin, How to Do Things with Words, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) p.100.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p.5.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

generally,' Austin writes, 'it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, appropriate'.<sup>63</sup> Thus the words 'I do', uttered in a (Christian) marriage ceremony are, as he puts it, felicitous, if the utterer is 'not already married with a wife living, sane and undivorced, and so on'.<sup>64</sup> For reasons of space, we might suppose, Austin's description must be incomplete. We know what he means, surely, by 'and so on'. Responding to Austin in 'Signature Event Context', however, Derrida makes it plain it is precisely this 'and so on' that constitutes the hole in Austin's theory: a hole through which deconstruction can flood. For Derrida, this cursory gesture amounts to the tacit recognition that, 'a context is never absolutely determinable, or rather ... [that] ... its determination is never certain or saturated'.<sup>65</sup> From which he concludes that there is no 'rigorous and scientific concept of the *context*', and that 'behind a certain confusion' it can be shown to harbor 'very determined philosophical presuppositions'.<sup>66</sup>

Derrida's objection is a strong one, for while we might feel that we could list all the circumstances that make for a happy marriage ceremony, this is so precisely because it is a ceremony and so proceeds according to known conventions. To list the circumstances would be to list the conventions. Austin, however, is not unaware of this fact. He notes the difficulties that arise in the 'case of procedures which someone is initiating', and puzzles over the fact that, 'Sometimes he may "get away with it" like, in football, the man who first picked up the ball and ran'.<sup>67</sup> In such cases, Austin argues, the convention does not exist for deciding whether the circumstances make the procedure

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp.8-9.

<sup>65</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p.84.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Austin, p.30.

appropriate, and suggests that much as we might want to be guided by precedent, sometimes we have to make new law. In the final analysis, then, Austin cannot tell us what 'appropriate circumstances' should be taken to be for all, or even for most cases. (It would of course be *inappropriate* for him to do so). He expects that we will have to use our judgement. Does this mean, therefore, that the concept of context is rooted in confusion and prejudice, as Derrida claims? Avant-garde collaborative practice, I would suggest, shows that this is not the case. Avant-garde collaborators initiate a procedure, both because they must settle upon conventions that will guide their exchange (as Motherwell shows), and as they aim to establish a new poetic idiom. And sometimes, it will be noticed, they get away with it. Whether or not they get away with it is a matter of judgement; the judgement concerned being that of both the collaborators and their audience. Thus, when they come to create together, the collaborators must decide between them what kind of utterance is appropriate to the occasion of their collaboration. And, although they might not give what Derrida terms a saturated account of the context, they do, occasionally, demonstrate a clear and agreed sense of what the context is, and of what it demands. On a small scale this is marked by Motherwell's account, and by his group's collective agreement that the rain was a fit subject for the collaboration. But this shared sense of fit, I would suggest, has its homology in the sheer timeliness of Wordsworth and Coleridge's joint decision to ascertain 'how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'. In presenting Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth knew he and Coleridge were initiating a procedure, and knew therefore that they could not depend on the law of precedent to establish its felicity. Hence his appeal to the reader to judge whether the book, 'contains a natural delineation of human

passions, human characters and human incidents': to judge, that is, whether their poetic procedure was appropriate to the occasion.

In Austin's terms, the occasion of the collaborative utterance matters seriously, and the collaborators' art lies in registering and meeting the demands of that occasion. No theoretical account of the procedure, I would suggest, could finally dispel Derrida's defeatism. As a consideration of the New York School serves to indicate, however, it is precisely the challenge of meeting the occasion that poets who collaborate (and poets trained in collaboration) are eager to meet. And sometimes, in practice, they do so.

### **Poetic offerings**

In the summer of 1951, The Kenyon Review carried an article by the poet and critic Paul Goodman entitled 'Advance-Guard Writing 1900-1950', the object of which was to outline the task facing the contemporary advance-guard. Starting from a Wordsworthian premise, Goodman observed that,

Whenever the mores are outmoded, anti-instinctual, or otherwise counter to the developing powers of intelligent and sensitive persons, there will be advance-guard work.<sup>68</sup>

America in the early fifties, Goodman felt, was such a time, and his article thus called on the advance-guard to reject prevailing norms and to forge ways of writing which were not outmoded and anti-instinctual. As Goodman saw it, however, the function of the contemporary avant-garde went beyond this by now traditional, experimentalism. The most pressing problem facing postwar Americans was the 'crisis of alienation', a crisis

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Goodman, 'Advance-Guard Writing 1900-1950', The Kenyon Review vol.13,no.3 (Summer 1951), p.360.

which, as Goodman saw it, the avant-garde was to address not only by its new rhetoric, but also by, as it were, its mode of operation.<sup>69</sup> Thus,

...in our estranged society, it is objected ... intimate community is lacking. Of course! it is lacking! The point is that the advance-guard action helps create such community, starting with the artist's primary friends. The community comes to exist by having its culture; the artist makes this culture.<sup>70</sup>

For Goodman the life blood of this community was to be occasional poetry, which, after Goethe, he took to be the 'highest kind'. 'Occasional poetry' he argued,

gives the most real and detailed subject-matter, it is closest in its effect on the audience, and it poses the enormous problem of being plausible to the actuality and yet creatively imagining something, finding something unlooked-for.<sup>71</sup>

This a strong formulation, because poetry which is both plausible and imaginative surely has the best of both worlds. Equally persuasive is the way Goodman subtly extrapolates from the coterie to a wider audience; the general aim of what he called 'integrated art' being to 'heighten the everyday', to

bathe the world in such a light of imagination and criticism that the persons who are living in it without meaning or feeling, suddenly find that it is meaningful and exciting to live in it.<sup>72</sup>

Goodman was a social acquaintance of the New York School. Ashbery for one admired his poetry, describing him as one of the forties poets who became obscured by the emergence of the middle generation of Lowell and Berryman.<sup>73</sup> And O'Hara was certainly taken by the Kenyon Review article, urging Jane Freilicher in a letter of 1st August 1951,

if you haven't devoured its delicious message, rush to your nearest newsstand... It is really lucid about what's bothering us both beside sex, and it is so heartening to know that someone understands these things.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.375.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp.375-6.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.376.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.375.

<sup>73</sup> John Ashbery, Conversation with author, 17 February 1994

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Brad Gooch, City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p.187.

O'Hara, of course, worked as hard as anyone to keep his avant-garde community together, his poetic habit of naming names making everyone - everyone, that is, who knew O'Hara - feel like they belonged.<sup>75</sup> The poems, however, in which the New Yorkers really bonded, the poetic occasions when they really came together (became 'involved' as Koch puts it 'in one another's work'), were the collaborations.

In his essay, 'Collaborating with Painters', Kenneth Koch offers a general definition of the practice. 'Collaborating,' he writes, 'means you're working but not alone; or, you could say, you're with others but you get to work'.<sup>76</sup> It was, he says, recalling the New York School, a way of having 'a party and working at the same time'.<sup>77</sup> Thus, for the poet Paul Violi (who curated the exhibition of Koch's collaborations) the poets' high investment in the form should be understood to be 'the ultimate expression of the conviviality and energy that characterized the New York art world at the time'.<sup>78</sup> Certainly the poetry and the social life were difficult to separate. Legend has it that O'Hara would sit down to type a poem with the party going on at full tilt around him. Koch's poems were never quite so gregarious. In a 'A Time Zone', however, his poetic chronicle of the New York School, he shows how his own poetry was bound up with his social engagements. Recalling a 'lunch connection' with O'Hara, Koch writes,

Frank comes out of the doorway in his necktie and his coat

...

A little hard-as-a-hat poem to the day we offer

"Sky/ woof woof!/ harp"

This is repeated ten times

Each word is one line so the whole poem is thirty lines

<sup>75</sup> For an excellent discussion of O'Hara's coterie strategies, see David Trotter, The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1984) pp.155-164.

<sup>76</sup> Koch, Collaborations with Artists, p.7.

<sup>77</sup> Herd, 'Koch', p.29.

<sup>78</sup> Koch, Collaborations with Artists, p.3.

It's a poem composed in a moment  
 On the sidewalk about fifteen blocks from the Alice in Wonderland  
 Monument...<sup>79</sup>

Likewise he recalls an afternoon with Ashbery, an engagement which produced a rather more elaborate poem

Next we do a poetic compendium called The New York Times  
 September Eighth Nineteen Fifty-One both with and without rhymes  
 Our poems are like tracks setting out  
 We have little idea where we're going or what its about  
 I enjoy these compositional duets  
 Accompanied by drinking coffee and joking on Charles and Perry Streets  
 We tell each other names of writers in great secret  
 Secret but absolutely no one else cares so why keep it ...<sup>80</sup>

Koch's accounts of his collaborations with O'Hara and Ashbery make a number of now familiar moves. Like Motherwell and Noguchi, Koch clearly feels it is important to mention the New York locations ('Charles and Perry Streets') where the collaborations took place. Koch is also concerned to observe the bonds that were formed on such occasions. Thus, by the account of collaboration being presented here, it is not surprising that Ashbery and Koch should keep secrets nobody else cares about, the fact that nobody else cares being what makes the secrets important. Individually marginalised by their shared sense of the kind of art that was then necessary (and so of the kind of writers who mattered) Ashbery and Koch's secrets forge a bond between them. The real bond, however, is the collaboration itself. Connecting at lunch, O'Hara and Koch harden their connection by making a poem together. Enjoying one another's company, Koch and Ashbery merge their energies in a compositional duet. It was in their collaborations, then, that the poets became 'involved in one another's work', such involvement having a strengthening effect.

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<sup>79</sup> Koch, *One Train*, p.23.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p.27.

Poetic marginality is felt most acutely, of course, in the absence of readers, and certainly the New Yorkers were aware that nobody else was reading their work. Writing to Jane Freilicher after winning a prestigious Hopwood award in 1951, O'Hara observed that,

No publication goes with the Hopwood award, alas, and both Alfred Knopf and Herbert Weinstock of the same 'firm' told me it is next to impossible to publish poetry in our time...Anyway you could fit the people I write for into your john, all at the same time without raising an eyebrow.<sup>81</sup>

O'Hara doesn't pretend that he wouldn't have been glad of publication, but he is less disgruntled than one might imagine. He was clearly confident that his poetry was reaching those for whom it was written. Asked if he was also writing with O'Hara in mind, Ashbery observed:

Well yes and also for Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler. We would get together and show each other our poems. We had no other audience at the time.<sup>82</sup>

And for Koch, the issue of circulation bore directly on the practice of collaboration. He recalls,

our being so unrecognized and our having just about no audience but each other, so what could be better than to do works together. We couldn't think about the "market," which almost didn't exist for us, so we could rush along creating art and literature in a sort of cultural and certainly economic and critical, vacuum.<sup>83</sup>

It was because they had no audience, then, that they collaborated, the absence of readerly demand freeing them to engage in the kind of experiments that came of working together. But collaboration was more directly related even than this suggests to the absence of an audience, because as Koch points out, part of the value of the form was precisely that it gave him, 'an instantaneous perceptive audience for every move I made

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<sup>81</sup> Gooch, p.184.

<sup>82</sup> Herd, 'Ashbery', p.33.

<sup>83</sup> Koch, Collaborations with Artists, p.7.

(word I wrote); ordinarily getting a response takes longer than that'.<sup>84</sup> It is not very surprising to learn that in the absence of an audience for their poetry the New York School poets would read their work to one another. Such a short circuit is typical of avant-garde groupings, who have little choice but to be one another's readers and critics. More singular, however, is the telescoping of this practice into collaboration. If the reader can be a collaborator, the collaborator can also be a reader, affirming or questioning a line even as he responds to it. Such instantaneous criticism generates a certain pressure; a pressure to get the line right. Such pressure strengthens poetry.

It is important to understand in more detail, however, how this strengthening happens, to which end we need a sharper sense of what really attracted the New Yorkers to the form. Koch tried to specify this attraction in his afterword to Locus Solus II.

Noting that for twentieth century poets:

The strangeness of the collaborating situation, many have felt, might lead them to the unknown, or at the least, to some dazzling insights at which they could never have arrived consciously or alone.<sup>85</sup>

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is necessary to be precise here about what is it that in Koch's view made the 'collaborating situation' strange; precise about what it was he thought such a situation offered the poet. Presenting what amounts to a taxonomy of collaborations at the end of his afterword, Koch notes, that

Most of the works here included were written with the two or more poets actually together while they wrote, though some were composed by poets working with already existing texts (adding to them, like Fletcher; answering them, like Crashaw; cutting them up and rearranging their words, like Burroughs and Corso; drawing on them at regular intervals - i.e. using them as if they were other poets in the room - like Krakauer and Miss Krauss), and others by poets working with already existing languages (Chatterton's "Rowley" poems and Frank O'Hara's "Choses passagères").<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>85</sup> Locus Solus II, p.193.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.196-7.

The issue here, one might say, is in which direction one should read Koch's list. To read from the end backwards (from poets working with 'already existing languages', to poets working with 'existing texts', to poets 'actually together') would produce an intertextual reading of literary production. All texts in effect would become collaborations because all texts do, after all, refer to other texts. This is, of course, part of Koch's meaning. He does want to imply that in its broadest sense collaboration is more widespread than one might think. But that is not Koch's whole meaning, nor even his main meaning; and we are, perhaps, in danger of missing the main meaning of Koch's taxonomy if we think intertextually about it. The problem, I would suggest, is that such a way of thinking does not mark a difference between Koch's first type of collaboration and his last; and so, for instance, between A Nest of Ninnies, and 'Fantasia on "The Nut-Brown Maid"'. Thus, while there are certainly similarities between these two works, there is also the crucial difference that Ashbery was 'actually together' with Schuyler when they wrote their novel. This difference needs to be highlighted because Koch is very aware of it, indicating that the latter kind of collaboration (where the poet draws on the ur-text at regular intervals) is actually trying to recover what is most significant about the former. Krakauer and Krauss, that is, use their texts 'as if they were other poets in the room'. And this is crucial, because it is the presence of others that both Ashbery and Koch emphasise when they talk about their collaborations.

Speaking of the composition of A Nest of Ninnies, Ashbery recalls that he and Schuyler 'couldn't do it by correspondence. We attempted that, but it didn't work. We really had to be together'.<sup>87</sup> Or as he told Bill Berkson, 'it did seem to require us being

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<sup>87</sup> Herd, 'Ashbery', p.44.

together; we once did it by correspondence, but it ... sort of lacked a home-made quality'.<sup>88</sup> Koch makes a similar point about his collaborations, noting that

It's the presence of another person in the room. The kind of collaboration I like best is the kind I did with Larry Rivers. He would put something on the canvas, then I would write something on top of it ... It's like having the muse in the room with you. It's similar to the pleasure I got when collaborating with John and Frank.<sup>89</sup>

Ashbery and Koch are deliberate. Both emphasise the impact of the other's physical presence. And they emphasise it because, as far as they are concerned, it goes to the heart of the form. 'One thing,' Koch remarks, that

collaboration gives is the frequent if not constant feeling of... being led where one had no idea one was going, and finding that being there one has something interesting to say. One may get this feeling writing alone, though in collaborations it's almost a given.<sup>90</sup>

Ashbery says of his collaborations with Koch that they had no 'raison d'être other than our being in the same room together'.<sup>91</sup> And for Paul Violi this is the whole point of the form, for as he puts it the 'result' of a 'genuine collaboration' is, 'a multi-directional rebus whose subject is its own occasion and spontaneous development'.<sup>92</sup> Braided together, these reflections form a strong and coherent line of thought. Ashbery's point is that the poems he wrote with Koch were dependent not only for their execution, but for their rationale on the presence of the two poets; that the effect of the poets being in a room together thus reverberates all through their productions. Violi gives this idea concise expression when he speaks of the collaborative *occasion*. For Violi, the occasion is the situation, the time and place, the circumstances, of the poets' encounter. And like Ashbery, Violi argues that it is this occasion which provides the collaboration with its

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<sup>88</sup> Cited in Kermani, p.23

<sup>89</sup> Herd, 'Koch', p.29.

<sup>90</sup> Koch, *Collaborations with Artists*, p.7.

<sup>91</sup> Herd, 'Ashbery', p.44.

<sup>92</sup> Koch, *Collaborations with Artists*, p.4.

material. Thinking in the same vein, Koch suggests that it is because of this potential to generate - to occasion - something new that the poet turns to the collaboration. It would seem fair to conclude, then, that the New York poets came to work together, because working with another writer was a different kind of writing occasion; an occasion of which they were peculiarly aware precisely because it was different. The occasion of the collaboration itself, provides the collaboration with its material.

Plainly for Ashbery, Koch and Violi, the collaborative poem is intimately related to its occasion, and in a much more self-conscious way than was ever the case with Wordsworth and Coleridge, or Eliot and Pound. Still, though, it is not clear how one should describe that relation. One way, after Stevens, might be to suggest that the collaboration is somehow of its occasion:

the cry of its occasion,  
Part of the res itself and not about it.<sup>93</sup>

This might seem an attractive proposition, for in Goodman's terms, such a collaboration would surely be plausible to the actuality. How could it be more so? There are, however, two interlinked kinds of objection one might make to Stevens' notion. On the one hand, seductive as it is, it denies the other half of Goodman's formulation. A poem, that is could hardly be said to be 'creatively imagining something' if it was *of* its occasion, because the occasion would thus determine the poem. The second objection, as was indicated in the introduction, would concern the organic nature of Stevens' formulation. Words, one could object, just don't connect with events in the way he would like to believe. Stevens, that is, supplies a prelapsarian sense of the poem's relation to its occasion.

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<sup>93</sup> Stevens, p473.

But whatever objections one might have in principle to Stevens, in practice his is not the way the New York poets talk about the poem's relation to its occasion. They do not use the preposition 'of'. Explaining why he likes collaborating with painters, Koch remarks,

I like doing it because, for one reason, I could create something and then it would be gone. It wouldn't be published. I wouldn't have a copy of it. Of course I wouldn't like all my work to be like this, but it's sort of nice just to do something for the occasion.<sup>94</sup>

There are two ideas playing around in Koch's expression 'to do something for the occasion'. On the one hand, of course, he means poetry that does not last, that does not burden itself with the desire for permanence.<sup>95</sup> But there is, I think, another tone here. It is as if, when Koch says he means to do something *for* the occasion, that he means somehow to show his appreciation. One hears this tone much more clearly in his account of the lunch poem he wrote with O'Hara. It was a poem, it will be recalled, which was composed 'in a moment'. But it was also offered, Koch says, to the day: 'A little hard-as-a-hat poem to the day we offer'. One begins, I think, to see how the collaborative poem relates to the occasion. It is not of, but 'for' or 'to' its occasion. The poem is some kind of gift, not given the poets by the occasion (as Stevens might have had it), but given by the poets for and to the occasion.

This idea of the collaboration as gift is worth pursuing a little way. Not, I hasten to add, because the poets thought, or think of, their poems as gifts - it is not as straightforward or as settled as that. But because thinking about what is involved in giving a gift, helps in understanding how the poet has to think about the relation of the collaboration to its occasion. The poem, that is, is not a gift, but the gift can be a helpful

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<sup>94</sup> Herd, 'Koch', p.29. I discuss Koch's qualification in the final chapter of this thesis.

<sup>95</sup> I consider this meaning of occasional in Chapter Two.

metaphor for understanding the poem. And it is a metaphor, moreover, which the collaborators anthologised in Locus Solus II make uncannily frequent use of when trying to understand their situation. In ‘Tenso: Peire Vidal, pos far m’ave tenso’, a poetic debate composed by the troubadours Blacatz and Vidal (translated by Paul Blackburn in 1953), Blacatz opens with a telling question:

Peire Vidal, since I’ve to make a tenso,  
don’t take it badly if I ask you, first, why you  
have so mercenary a point of view on  
many occasions which offer you little gain,  
when in composing songs you show both wit  
and sense?<sup>96</sup>

Blacatz could hardly be more conscious of the occasion of his collaboration, which is practically propelling him into his opening utterance (‘since I’ve to make a tenso ...’). And, moreover, required by the occasion to ask a question, his question is about how properly to judge occasions. Too often, Blacatz suggests, Vidal judges occasions from a crude and inappropriately ‘mercenary point of view’, which is surprising given that when composing songs he shows both wit and sense. Naturally Vidal does not like to be called ‘mercenary’ (‘I have a fine, natural delicacy in any matter’), and to prove his sensibility is in fact poetic on all occasions, he calls on the idea of the gift. ‘Blacatz’, he protests,

I’m not built that way, I’ll walk the whole day  
long  
to reach a good inn  
and serve long to receive a lovely gift.<sup>97</sup>

‘A Letter written by Henry Goodyere and John Donne’ was not written with both poets in the room. However, Koch quotes James Zito to the effect that the poem is ‘interesting ... [because] the collaboration itself becomes the controlling conceit’.<sup>98</sup> It is

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<sup>96</sup> Locus Solus II, pp.26-27.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.27.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p.201.

in fact the controlling conceit from the beginning, though because these poets are writing to one another, not improvising on the spot, the conceit has been more elaborately coded ('Since ev'ry Tree begins to blossom now'). In this instance the poets, like O'Hara and Koch, think of their poem as some kind of offering:

As in devotions men join both their hands,  
We make ours doe one act to seal the bands,  
By which we enthrall ourselves to your commands.<sup>99</sup>

Cowley and Crashaw's 'On Hope' is not so clearly concerned with its occasion, the subject of the collaboration having been clearly marked out in advance. It does, however, soon turn to the language of gifts. Thus, while for Cowley hope is a fool's game, for Crashaw, hope is,

earth's dowry, and heaven's debt,  
The entity of things that are not yet:  
Subtlest, but surest being!<sup>100</sup>

A dowry is a gift, in the sense of a natural talent, but more usually, of course, it is a present given to a husband or a wife to mark the occasion of their marriage. Chatterton's poem, 'Onn Oure Ladies Chyrche', also turns on an occasional gift. The speaker doubts that he could ever do enough good work to reach heaven. The voice of 'Trouthe' reassures him

Quod Trouthe; as thou hast got, give almes-  
dedes soe;  
Canynges and Gaunts culde ne moe<sup>101</sup>

Ashbery and Koch's collaborations, as we will see, lack neither gifts nor occasions, nor occasional gifts; but it is worth here noting that their poem 'Gottlieb's Rainbow' is

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p.37.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp.40,39.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p.48.

particularly conscious of its unexpected boon, the poem's key phrase, the phrase the poets set themselves to repeat in every line being 'bumper bonus'. Indeed.

One could pursue this comparison of the collaboration to the gift theoretically, not least because the New Yorkers did sometimes write collaborations precisely as gifts. O'Hara and Koch wrote a sestina for Nina Castelli's birthday, and as Auslander notes, 'many of the plays are occasional pieces', hence,

'The Coronation Murder Mystery' by Ashbery, O'Hara, and Koch was written for James Schuyler on his birthday; 'Flight 115' was composed by O'Hara and Bill Berkson while on an airliner, passing a typewriter back and forth between them.<sup>102</sup>

A theoretical consideration of the collaboration as gift would start with Marcel Mauss'.

In her introduction to the most recent English translation of Mauss' essay on the gift,

Mary Douglas explicitly ties gifts to collaboration. Mauss, she suggests,

discovered a mechanism by which individual interests combine to make a social system, without engaging in market exchange .... gift complements market insofar as it operates where the latter is absent. Like the market it supplies each individual with personal incentives for collaborating in the pattern of exchanges.<sup>103</sup>

And as one would expect from an essay on gifts, Mauss is throughout extremely conscious of the occasions on which gifts are exchanged. Concluding his analysis on an optimistic note, Mauss remarks that

A considerable part of our morality and our lives themselves are still permeated with this same atmosphere of the gift, where obligation and liberty intermingle.... Things still have sentimental as well as venal value.... There still remain people and classes that keep to the morality of the former times, and we almost all observe it, at least at certain times of the year on certain occasions.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Auslander, p.50.

<sup>103</sup> Mary Douglas, 'Foreword' to Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, tr. W.D. Halls, (London: Routledge, 1990) p.xiv.

<sup>104</sup> Mauss, p.65.

Taking up Mauss' concerns, Derrida contends that the gift (and the given) is another myth of origins, and is thus riven with contradictions.<sup>105</sup> Because, that is, a gift carries the burden of reciprocity it is necessarily not a gift. Even, he suggests, if a gift does not explicitly require a counter-gift the recipient still pays in terms of gratitude. It follows for Derrida that the recipient must not recognise the gift as such. But nor, he claims, can the donor, meaning that, as Simon Jarvis puts it, 'The condition of the gift would instead be an absolute forgetting dissolving all recognition'.<sup>106</sup> These are not, however, arguments I am obliged to negotiate, because I am not suggesting that the collaboration is a gift; rather that it is helpful (and poets have found it so) to think about how the collaborative poem relates to its occasion in the way that one has to think about a gift.

Emerson's essay on 'Gifts' is pertinent here. The essay combines philosophical sophistication, with an easy manner, his point being that however far one pursues the logic of the gift, the problem, when it comes to it, remains the same. Trying to explain 'the reason of the difficulty at Christmas and New Year and other times, in bestowing gifts', Emerson notes:

the impediment lies in the choosing. If at any time it comes into my head that a present is due from me to somebody, I am puzzled what to give, until the opportunity is gone. Flowers and fruits are always fit presents; flowers, because they are a proud assertion that a ray of beauty outvalues all the utilities of the world.<sup>107</sup>

Specific as it is, Emerson's essay on 'Gifts' is ultimately an essay on judgement. The difficulty (which never goes away) of bestowing a gift at Christmas, or whenever, is knowing not just what the recipient would like, but of knowing what kind of thing is

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<sup>105</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992)

<sup>106</sup> S. Jarvis, 'Soteriology and Reciprocity', *Parataxis: modernism and modern writing* no. 5 (Winter 1993-4) p.34.

<sup>107</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: Second Series* (Being Volume III of Emerson's Complete Works) (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company 1894) p.159.

appropriate to the festival. The residual but delightful difficulty, then, is in judging what is 'fit' (to use Emerson's term) for the occasion. A gift poses exactly the challenge Goodman described, because it must be seen to be 'plausible to the actuality' (must suit the circumstances in ways that people can agree on) and because it calls on the individual to exercise his or her imagination. And more to the point, one can see from Emerson exactly why it is helpful to think of the collaboration the way one thinks of the gift; the occasion, of which both poets are acutely aware, calling on them to exercise judgement and imagination, to write a poem they can agree is fit.

#### **A little announcement on this festive occasion**

Broadly speaking, Ashbery and Koch wrote two kinds of collaboration. The first kind were those they published in Locus Solus. These are formalised pieces, proceeding according to (sometimes elaborate) rules the poets agreed between them. The second are those Koch mentions in 'A Time Zone', those which take as their starting point the newspaper of the day on which they were collaborating. Instances of this second type are to be found in Ashbery's papers at Harvard's Houghton Library. Both kinds of poem demonstrate both of the features I have taken to be characteristic of avant-garde collaborations - the desire to strengthen rhetoric, and a heightened sense of occasion- though the emphasis is slightly different in each case. The six poems published in Locus Solus ('The Young Collectors', 'Crone Rhapsody', 'The Inferno', 'Gottlieb's Rainbow', 'New Year's Eve', and 'A Servant to Servants') are all plainly experimental. The poets used the collaboration to try out all manner of styles to see which, if any, worked on paper. The opening of 'A Servants to Servants' is representative:

With a wooden lead-filled writing implement Jeeves  
wrote, "What sudden showers",  
And glass warm sunlight came flooding in the wood-framed

glass aperture that Beulah had opened  
 For Alice B. Toklas. A mucus-filled bone construct-  
 ion in the middle of her face reacted angrily to the  
 profusion of orange blossoms.<sup>108</sup>

This is crazy stuff. The important thing here, though, is the process. As Koch put it, the two poets are passing names back and forth to one another. And as they do they are working on a style, a style which will allow them to be highly Modernist (Alice B. Toklas) and campily popular (Jeeves) in the same breath. If the resultant poem is trivial, then, and one would hardly want to argue otherwise, the style of thought it helped facilitate was not unimportant to Postmodern poetry. But if they were playing at a style in these poems, Ashbery and Koch never lost sight of the occasion, and of their relation to that occasion. Mainly this makes itself felt in the obsessive mentioning of special occasions - 'A Servant to Servants' follows a mention of 'Christmas' with a line about 'confetti', with a line about 'Ganymede's valentine' - and a determination to seem generous. Hence the opening of 'The Young Collectors':

Donna gave the Tom Sawyer button to Carla.  
 The lamplight button lay sweltering on the sand.  
 Cy gave the hills and flowers button to his niece Edna.<sup>109</sup>

The Locus Solus poems foreground experiment and codify (just) the poem's sense of occasion. What we might call the 'newspaper poems' tend to do the reverse. 'New York Times, Sunday, October, 25, 1953', for instance, is divided into twenty sections, each section beginning with a headline from the newspaper in question: headlines which mentioning, for instance, Eisenhower's agricultural program, an abandoned milk strike, the eighth anniversary of the U.N., and a new import fund for Japan. The poet then, responds to the headline. The responses take all manner of forms, some humorous, some

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<sup>108</sup> Locus Solus II, p.169.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.156.

surreal, and some archly lyrical (the more interesting) managing to thread journalistic cadences through lines of high linguistic invention. Thus,

OFFICER WHO SOLVED KIDNAP QUILTS; \$300, 000 OF RANSOM  
STILL MISSING

Foreign May socked jeer curio simplicity  
As Peg wager dons ultra tie muff.<sup>110</sup>

Ashbery and Koch's newspaper poems are interesting in that they seem to indicate a wider sense of the occasion of the poem. These collaborations show something like an historical sense. Except, of course, that insofar as they respond to historical events they do so irreverently; with the same irreverence manifest in the title of O'Hara's play about Washington, 'The General Returns From One *Place* to Another'. We have come a long way, then, from Lyrical Ballads and The Waste Land, with their heavy consciousness of historical events. Interestingly, however, we have not departed from the vocabulary in which those poems were conceived, Pound, it will be recalled, marking his role in the process by the tart reminder that 'each Occasion/ Ezra performed the caesarian Operation'. The remark raises two possible questions about the term 'occasion'. Firstly, of course, we might ask, whether a single term can possibly be employed to describe works as different as, say, The Waste Land and 'New York Times, Sunday, October 25, 1953'? But secondly, and more productively, we might ask what kind of occasion is fit, in different contexts, for poetry?

For both Wordsworth and Eliot some occasions were more suitable for poetry than others, Wordsworth seeking out 'spots of time', Eliot, striving (as was observed in the introduction) after 'still points'. Ashbery, we know, believes there are no 'privileged moments', no special occasions (no Occasions, pace Pound, with a capital O). It was this

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<sup>110</sup> John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, 'New York Times, Sunday October 25, 1953', 'The John Ashbery Papers', Houghton Library, Harvard University.

sense of the occasion that underpinned Goodman's article, founded, as it was on Goethe's remark that,

The world is so great and rich, and life so full of variety, that you can never want occasions for poems. But they must all be occasional poems; that is to say, reality must give both impulse and material for their production. A particular case becomes universal and poetic by the very circumstance that is treated by a poet.<sup>111</sup>

For Goodman, then, articulating himself through Goethe, occasional poetry was to be precisely that - ad hoc, impromptu, not attendant on the special event, or the privileged moment. Only poetry occasional in this sense, Goodman held, could heighten the everyday. Ashbery, most attentive, among poets, to the 'everyday', is an occasional poet in just this sense.

But to cast Ashbery thus is provoke a further problem of terminology. There is a tension, as was observed in the introduction, between this 'everyday' sense of the occasion and the Whitman formulation that provides this thesis with its title. How could a poet whose concerns are so near at hand meet Whitman's undeniably grand requirements? Two answers suggest themselves. The first is that by his heightened sense of the everyday, and by his refusal of privileged moments, Ashbery has, as it were, democratised our sense of the occasion of poetry and that he thereby meets, in a way Whitman might not have imagined, the call for a democratic poetry. By itself, however, this does not dissolve the tension, because one senses that Whitman's call is being belittled to make it manageable. It is a tension, I would suggest, that Ashbery has shown himself acutely and increasingly aware of, and to which he has devoted considerable poetic energy. To sketch his response (and of course it can only be a sketch at this stage) I would suggest that without ever ceasing to believe that any occasion is suitable for

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<sup>111</sup> J.W. Goethe, 'Extracts from the conversations with Eckermann', in Goethe's Literary Essays: A Selection in English, ed. J.E.Springan (London: Oxford University Press, 1921) p.259.

poetry (as his prolific output testifies) his poetic development has taken the form of a growing awareness of what the occasion has to offer. This means two things: first, a much enlarged sense of what, on any given poetic occasion, is going on around him; and second, an equally enlarged sense of how many people might, potentially, be brought together by the occasional poem. The occasional poem, then, richly imagined, might cease to be a *côterie* practice, or, to put it the other way round, everyone might feel the sense of belonging that comes of being in a *côterie*. Ashbery's is not a poetry of names but a poetry of pronouns, involving readers by its generous address.

The tension identified here is one which plays through Ashbery's poetry from at least The Tennis Court Oath onwards, and it would be inappropriate to anticipate his responses at this point. It is possible, however, to define the enlargement I have indicated through his collaborations, the novel he wrote with Schuyler marking just such a process. In a crucial respect, A Nest of Ninnies is more anti-novel than novel, almost entirely lacking as it does any sense of development. The writers draw attention to this lack of development at various points, particularly (and hilariously) with respect to characterisation:

It occurred to Marshall that a change had taken place in Alice. Her former aggressive reserve had been replaced by something else, but he could not tell what. (NN, 134)

And in case, by the end, the reader has not caught on to the fact that development is not the issue here, there is no chapter thirteen, chapter twelve leading straight to the final chapter fourteen. Accordingly, it is novel which invests almost nothing in themes, and almost everything in occasions. It is, in fact, a long series of variously special and everyday occasions: cafe gatherings, lunch-breaks, dinner parties, '*giorni di festi*' (when in Rome ...), birthdays, weddings, and opening nights. And this of course testifies to its

production process, the novel emerging from a long series of collaborative occasions. But it would not be entirely true to say that this novel shows no development, because, as one gradually becomes aware what is developing is the writer's sense of what the occasion has to offer. A brief comparison of chapter one (written in the early fifties) and the final chapter (written in the late sixties) is sufficient to make the point.

Chapter one is concerned with its occasion in the narrowest possible sense. We feel this in various ways. As Ashbery recalls, the novel was started in the back of a car, as he and Schuyler were driving back to New York one afternoon from Long Island.<sup>112</sup> The novel opens in a suburban house, with Alice frustrated as she watches the highway:

“I dislike being fifty miles from a great city. I don't know how many cars pass every day and it makes me wonder.”(NN,9)

We feel the collaborative occasion also in the dialogue, as the writers, barely in character, chat away about the night before:

“Why don't you admit that you enjoy my unhappiness?”  
 “...You didn't seem so unhappy last night.”  
 “What happened last night? You certainly can't mean that a pickup supper and a rummy game would affect my spirits.” (NN,10)

Nor, in this remarkably self-conscious chapter, are the novelists simply aware of the collaborative occasion; they are intensely aware of being aware. Thus as a new character enters, the writer who introduces her introduces her also to the style of the piece:

Fabia paid her customary respects to the new surroundings, and then lapsed into the sorrowful silence which was her natural state. (NN,14)

Witty as it is throughout (with its wry observations on middle-brow habits of mind), the reader can never quite be comfortable with this first chapter of the novel. It is tangibly a c  terie piece, and though while there is much to laugh at, one feels also that one is not

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<sup>112</sup> Herd, 'Ashbery', p.33.

always getting the joke. Interestingly, however, if the reader feels slightly excluded, the writers, too, can feel slightly cut off, or at least sealed into their own immediate situation:

“It always amazes me we are near neighbours,” Marshall replied. “Alice and I tend to be people who lead somewhat isolated lives because they are self-sufficient.” (NN,14)

Chapter fourteen presents both a much enlarged, and a much more thoughtful sense of occasion. It is gala night at Alice’s restaurant. Everyone we have met throughout the novel is present, as are a few characters and extras who have been introduced especially for the event. All of them, moreover, are seen to be actively participating in the occasion, engaging in discussions as to what is and is not appropriate:

“I bet you, Fabia,” Memmo said, “Godfrey thinks like I do: how much better if all is painted in pleasant light shades of cream - but very pale, like mascarpone - and maybe just a few hanging lights, style of Charles Rennie Mackintosh.”  
 “Mackintosh!” Godfrey gagged on an olive, but managed to splutter, “that scourge.”(NN,175)

In developing their sense of occasion, it will be noticed, the writers have not lost their sense of humour. There is an important concern, however, underpinning the various aesthetic discussions which make up this final chapter, the point being that everyone is involved on and in this occasion. It is an involvement the writers are keen to emphasise.

Someone struck up “Happy Birthday”; soon all had joined in; soon it was over. The lights came on.  
 “Well!” was the consensus. (NN,172)

And ‘consensus’, as opposed to self-sufficiency, is the defining feature of this final occasion. There are many manifestations of this, but two will have to suffice to make the point. Explaining to Claire why it is that the restaurant’s decor is so appropriate, Nadia observes,

“It is just right: it is so ‘with it’ as to be invisible; one cannot see it until its time is past. More definition would crush some part of the public - make them self-conscious. As it is, all types and ages can come and rub along together....”  
 (NN,181)

This, then, is no coterie, but a most democratic gathering, everyone brought together by the same amiable aesthetic. Likewise, towards the end of the chapter:

It was decreed that the Carlsbad and Bridgewater tables be pushed together in such a manner as to accommodate all the friends at a single festive board, and to allow Mildred Kelso to converse with the hirsute youths who had so unexpectedly opened up new pathways in music appreciation.(NN,183)

Mildred Kelso, it should be pointed out, is an ageing widow, whose gramophone collection (in chapter three at any rate) includes a record of opera encores, and a compilation of 'F.D.R.'s more cogent speeches'(NN,38). And the hairy youths with whom she's rubbing along are the band, 'Abel's Antibodies', booked to enliven the gala night proceedings. Nor, the writers make clear, is this consensus just an effect of the special occasion, for as Alice points out on the final page, "It's been a wonderful gala night ... and tomorrow's another day. Or rather tonight is" (NN,191).

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that Ashbery developed ways of thinking about poetry during his collaborations which have remained central to his writing ever since. We can now appreciate the substance of those ways of thinking. Like all avant-garde poets who collaborate, Ashbery used the form to strengthen his expression. And in collaborating, as we have seen, he developed a sense of the occasion. The crucial point, however, as the last chapter of A Nest of Ninnies indicates, and as his poetry everywhere makes clear, is that in his collaborating Ashbery learned to bring both aspects of the form together. He developed, that is, an occasional rhetoric - a rhetoric fit for occasions.

**Chapter Two:  
Two Scenes**

## Two Scenes

I want now to consider why the idea of an occasional poetic might have seemed attractive to Ashbery, by setting his poetry against the work of the middle generation. Recalling his earliest association with Frank O'Hara, Ashbery offers a sharp judgement on the poetry they were writing at the time:

Later on in the more encouraging climate of New York, we could begin to be ourselves, but much of the poetry we both wrote as undergraduates now seems marred by a certain nervous preciousness, in part a reaction to the cultivated blandness around us which also impelled us to callow aesthetic pronouncements.<sup>1</sup>

Ashbery arrived in New York in the early summer of 1949.<sup>2</sup> The 'cultivated blandness' to which he feels he and O'Hara reacted (by which they were 'impelled') while at Harvard, thus refers to the poetry scene of the late forties. Ashbery has spoken of this scene in interview, remarking that it was the period when,

the kind of more dream-like, imaginative poetry of the thirties such as that of Delmore Schwartz, and even of Berryman, and Randall Jarrell of those years, were (sic) replaced by their later work and by Lowell and confessional poetry.<sup>3</sup>

A similar shift, he notes, was taking place in Britain, with some of his favourite British poets of the late thirties and forties, in particular Nicholas Moore and F.T. Prince, slipping into obscurity in the wake of the rise of Larkin.<sup>4</sup>

Writing on this same period, and focusing on the same shifts and displacements that preoccupied Ashbery, the British poet Andrew Crozier arrives at certain very helpful

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<sup>1</sup> John Ashbery, 'A Reminiscence' in Bill Berkson and Joe Le Sueuer (eds.) A Homage to Frank O'Hara (Berkeley: Creative Arts Company, 1980), pp.20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Ashbery provides an account of his arrival in New York in his review 'Jane Freilicher: Paintings 1953-85', (RS, 239-240).

<sup>3</sup> John Ashbery, Conversation with author, 17 February 1994. Ashbery makes the same point in his 'Introduction' to Pierre Martory, The Landscape Is Behind The Door (Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1994) p.xi.

<sup>4</sup> Asked who he was reading while at Harvard Ashbery replied, 'One of my favourite poets was Nicholas Moore, who was very popular for a while but then kind of disappeared. F.T. Prince was also a favourite of mine'. Herd, 'Ashbery', p.33. For an account of the disappearance of Nicholas Moore see Chapter Ten of Ian Sinclair's novel Downriver (London: Paladin, 1992).

distinctions. Crozier's object is to rehabilitate a number of British poets of the forties, including W.S. Graham, Charles Madge, Kenneth Allott, Prince, Moore and David Gascoyne. He distinguishes them from the poets grouped in Robert Conquest's New Lines anthology (by whom they were displaced) in terms of the poetic occasion. The New Lines poets, he argues, show 'a lack of intimacy with, even estrangement from, whatever it is that provokes them'.<sup>5</sup> 'Occasions, however necessary they may be to the poets, are not felt to be trustworthy'.<sup>6</sup> By which he means that,

The occasions are for the most part treated with scepticism, and the texts distort and buckle as a consequence of inner tension. Traditional forms are invoked not so much for the freedom they confer, as for support. They define the space in which the self can act with poetic authority ....<sup>7</sup>

This, he argues, is equally true of Lowell and the middle generation poets, suggesting that they 'share a discourse which operates through the personal lyric'.<sup>8</sup>

Crozier's distinctions stand up to historical scrutiny. A careful account of the emergence of the so-called middle generation of American poets - the generation of Lowell, Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz and Karl Shapiro - shows that, as they came to define themselves, they explicitly asserted that their poetry was not occasional in character. My object in this chapter, then, is to explore the extent to which Ashbery's early poetry - by which I mean Some Trees - developed in reaction to (was 'impelled' by) the work of the middle generation.<sup>9</sup> As for the middle generation, I take

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Crozier, 'Thrills and frills: poetry as figures of empirical lyricism', in Alan Sinfield (ed.) Society and Literature 1945-1970 (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1983), p.204.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.206.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.217.

<sup>9</sup> This is not of course, the first account to notice that in some sense Ashbery was writing in opposition to the middle generation. A number of critics mention the relation, see, for example: John Bayley, 'The Poetry of John Ashbery', in Selected Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.33-44; and John Koethe, 'The Metaphysical Subject in John Ashbery's Poetry', in David Lehman (ed.) Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980) pp.87-100. No critic explores the relation in any detail, and nobody has focused the relation on the term 'occasion'.

Berryman as their representative in this chapter. There are two reasons for this. First, Ashbery singles him out in interview. 'Even Berryman', he remarks, wrote the more imaginative kind of late-thirties poetry he admired when younger, making it clear both that he read the earlier Berryman, and that he particularly disliked the later - disliked it more, that is, than the later Schwartz and Jarrell. Second, there is a strong case for saying that more than any of his contemporaries (including Lowell) Berryman was typical of the middle generation. In his elegy 'For John Berryman' Lowell binds the middle generation with the observation that 'really we had the same life,/ the generic one/ our generation offered'.<sup>10</sup> This would seem to make Berryman, and his writing, no more nor less typical than the others. In his obituary for Berryman in the New York Review of Books, however, Lowell observed that, 'His taste for what he despised was infallible; but he could outrageously hero-worship living and dead, most of all writers his own age'.<sup>11</sup> Berryman's writing, critical and poetic, bears Lowell out. Until the Dream Songs at any rate (in which he was able to articulate his deepest concerns by taking on the identity of Henry), Berryman can frequently be seen to take on the style of a powerful contemporary. To a degree which, as I will show, was damaging to his writing Berryman was thus representative of his generation.

Broadly speaking, this approach to Ashbery's early poetry could be said to be reactionary: aiming to judge the extent to which his writing was formed in reaction to the work of senior poets. But this term needs refining, which is best done by outlining how the approach presented here fits with and differs from existing accounts of Some Trees. The American critic Vernon Shetley is similarly concerned to show how Ashbery's

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Lowell, Day by Day (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.27.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Lowell, 'For John Berryman', New York Review of Books April 6, 1972, pp.3-4, repr. in Harry Thomas (ed.) Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988) p.69.

writing was shaped by, and against, the literary trends and fashions of the late forties and early fifties. His emphasis, however, is on the criticism, or, more precisely, on the New Criticism.<sup>12</sup> In a suggestive account, Shetley argues that Ashbery's characteristically slippery use of pronouns constituted a response to the limiting New Critical prescription (the Brooks-Warren prescription) that poems should be read in terms of 'speaker' and 'situation'.<sup>13</sup> Without question, this account has some explanatory force, and would certainly enable a baffled reader to begin to negotiate Ashbery's pronominal play. I would suggest, however, that in focusing on the criticism of the period Shetley places the emphasis wrongly, and tends to simplify the situation.

Ashbery has consistently rebuffed interviewers' efforts to make him concede that he reads and responds to literary criticism.<sup>14</sup> This is not, of course, to deny that, in a general sense, criticism can affect the terms and circumstances in which poetry is received, thereby affecting the kind of poetry that is written. It is to contend, however, that the reading that really has an impact on young poets is the work of other poets. Ashbery has said as much. Asked, in 1982, how the poetry world strikes him today, Ashbery replied

...Once I started writing the way I do, I lost interest in following contemporary poetry and now only read it occasionally when a student ... presents me with a poem. And I don't keep up anymore the way I felt I had to when I was first writing.<sup>15</sup>

Ashbery says young poets feel they have to keep up with contemporary poetry when they are first writing, and so it is that contemporary poetry we should look to first.

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<sup>12</sup> Vernon Shetley, *After the Death of Poetry: Poets and Audience in Contemporary America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p.104.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111.

<sup>14</sup> For instance in the interview with Koethe Ashbery denies that he reads Derrida; see John Koethe, 'An Interview with John Ashbery', *SubStance* vols.37/38, nos.11.4./12.1, (1983), p.182.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.179.

It might be argued, however, that the middle generation poets were so closely involved with contemporary criticism that to read the latter is to understand the former. Thus Shetley describes a 'synergy between academic criticism and the poetry it represented'.<sup>16</sup> This makes the relation too easy and too close. First, it assumes a consensus among the critics which did not apply.<sup>17</sup> Second, it supposes a level of agreement between the criticism and the poetry which did not exist. The problem is perhaps in the term 'academic poet'. Certainly O'Hara, reviewing Koch distinguished him from so-called academic poets.<sup>18</sup> All new generations of poets, however, call the previous generation academic. Moreover, the so-called academic criticism came up with prescriptions which do and do not apply to the so-called academic poetry. Thus, Ashbery has said of the poem 'Some Trees' that it was his 'farewell to poetry as we know it - it had a paraphrasable meaning'.<sup>19</sup> Ashbery's poetry, then, takes seriously 'the heresy of paraphrase'. You can, however, paraphrase a Lowell poem. Thus, while it is clearly important to read the criticism in conjunction with the poetry to which the New York School were reacting, to read it instead of the poetry is to blur the picture.<sup>20</sup>

To suggest that we best understand the work of a young poet by reading him or her in conjunction with the poets they were reacting against would seem to be to steer towards Harold Bloom. Bloom argues that poetic history is made by poets reacting to one another, that it is 'indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make

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<sup>16</sup> Shetley, p.104.

<sup>17</sup> Jarrell, for instance was the critic everybody read, and his collections of prose Poetry and the Age and Kipling, Auden & Co. document substantial disagreements with Tate and Ransom in particular, and with New Criticism in general. Also, as James D. Bloom makes clear in his study of Berryman and Blackmur (The Stock of Available Reality [London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1984]) both writers were at odds with the institutionalising thrust of the New Criticism.

<sup>18</sup> Frank O'Hara, 'Another word on Kenneth Koch', in Standing Still and Walking in New York, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, California: Grey Fox Press, 1971), p.59.

<sup>19</sup> Dinita Smith, 'Poem Alone', New York 20 May, 1991, p.50.

<sup>20</sup> It is in part to avoid such an elision of poetry and criticism that I am speaking of the middle generation and not of the so-called academic poetry.

that history by misreading one another'.<sup>21</sup> As a number of critics have shown, Some Trees is significantly shaped by this kind of influence. Bloom himself has shown that early Ashbery bears the mark of his struggle with Stevens.<sup>22</sup> While Ward has effectively demonstrated the manner in which Ashbery 'transmuted' the English Auden.<sup>23</sup> Bloom, however, is not much interested in the poetic antagonisms that make up a literary scene. He does acknowledge that local rivalries exist, but he has no category for them, and does not read poets in their light.<sup>24</sup> To speak of literary scenes would involve Bloom in the kind of historical and geographical specificities, which, generally speaking, he reads poetry to escape. To read a young poet through his or her (senior) contemporaries is thus to steer close not to the agonistic criticism of Bloom, but rather, perhaps, to the antagonistic theory of Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>25</sup>

One has to be circumspect in bringing theory to bear on poetry. In general good poetry will make distinctions and deal in nuances which the broad brush of theory has a tendency to tar. Furthermore, theorists, more than critics, have a tendency to suppose that they are more aware of what actually happens in the creative process than is the writer. Bourdieu gives himself away on this score when, at the end of his account of the 'field of cultural production' he expresses his surprise at having come across a text by Mallarmé in which the writer shows that he understands the 'logic' of the avant-garde game he is playing, a logic Bourdieu clearly feels he himself had discovered.<sup>26</sup> This said,

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<sup>21</sup> Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.5.

<sup>22</sup> See Bloom, Figures, pp.169-208.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, pp.94-105.

<sup>24</sup> Bloom, Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) p.254.

<sup>25</sup> For other fully developed accounts of Some Trees see Lyn Keller, Re-making it New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp.42-78; and Shoptaw, pp.19-41.

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp.72-3.

there are certain features of his theory that tempt one to make some use of it here. First, he proclaims a quite supple view of the way literature relates to history, encouraging the critic to play close attention to the literary field without losing sight of the fact that that field gives a kind of diffracted expression to questions external to it.<sup>27</sup> Second, Bourdieu has quite simply done a great deal of research into the way avant-garde groupings assert themselves, textually and institutionally, when they arrive on the scene, and some of his conclusions tally with the way the New Yorkers sought to establish their distinctive character(s). Third, it is when they are ‘novices’ that poets are most likely to be played, as it were, by the cultural situation in which they find themselves.

This third point, perhaps indicates how I mean to use Bourdieu here. Ultimately his sense of the relations of the avant-garde to established poets which for him make up the literary field, or scene, is too mechanical. ‘Position-takings,’ he suggests, ‘arise quasi-mechanically - that is, almost independently of the agents’ consciousness and wills ....’<sup>28</sup> But as Ashbery himself suggests, his weakest early poems seem to have been written in straightforward reaction to, to have been ‘impelled’ by, the poetry he and O’Hara felt themselves surrounded by. In other words, while it can be helpful to bear Bourdieu in mind when accounting for the less mature poetry in Ashbery’s first volume, it is precisely when it exceeds the expectations of the theorist (which it does with impressive frequency) that Some Trees displays its author’s potential.

### **Finding an opposition**

To gain a sure sense of the degree to which Ashbery’s early poetry reacted to the literary climate in which he came of age, it is necessary to chart the emergence of certain key

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp.37-8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.59.

terms by which the middle generation poets chose to characterise their writing. And to do this requires one to reach back to the early forties when Berryman, Jarrell and co., started to publish their work. Berryman and Jarrell were first published together in 1940 in the New Directions anthology Five Young American Poets.<sup>29</sup> Each poet's selection is prefaced by a prose note on poetry, in which the poets address themselves to the situation of contemporary poetry. What emerges from these prefaces is not youthful zeal, but uncertainty, and the whole volume is characterised by a rather disorientating lack of definition. Berryman is as disorientated as anyone, opening his rather 'stiff' essay on the nature of poetry,<sup>30</sup> with the remark that:

None of the extant definitions of poetry is very useful; certainly none is adequate; and I do not propose to invent a new one. I should like to suggest what I understand the nature and the working of poetry to be by studying one of the poems in this selection.<sup>31</sup>

There is a curious play of confidence and insecurity in Berryman's expression. He has the confidence to reject out of hand all of the 'extant definitions of poetry', but he shrinks from the task of proposing a new one. He sets out, instead, to feel his way towards a conclusion along the safer route of practical criticism (he had recently returned from Cambridge where he had been taught by I.A. Richards). But nothing one could call a conclusion emerges, Berryman risking nothing more by way of definition than that

Poetry provides its readers, then, with what may be called a language of experience, an idiom, of which the unit may be an entire complicated emotion or incident. The language is not the language of prose.<sup>32</sup>

Poetry, then, is not prose.

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<sup>29</sup> Five Young American Poets, (Norfolk Connecticut: New Directions, 1940)

<sup>30</sup> Joel Conarroe, John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) p.25.

<sup>31</sup> John Berryman, 'A Note on Poetry', in Five Young American Poets, p.45.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48.

Jarrell is not noticeably any more sure of the direction poetry is taking. He provides a much clearer sense than Berryman is able to, however, of the reasons for the impasse. The problem, as he sees it, rests with Modernism. 'Modernist poetry,' he contends,

extorted its attraction because it was carrying the tendencies of romanticism to their necessary conclusions; now most of those conclusions have been arrived at; and how can the poet go any further? How can poems be written that are more violent? more disorganised? more obscure? more - the adjectives throng to me - than those that have already been written?<sup>33</sup>

In its way this is remarkably confident prose. Not only does Jarrell happily characterise a whole movement, he readily overturns the contemporary orthodoxy (propagated by Eliot and taken up by New Criticism) that Modernism corrected Romanticism. His counter-claim, which preoccupies him throughout the forties, is not developed here. Instead he levels against Modernist poets the more specific, but no less strident charge, that they have pushed the art to 'the ends of specialisation'.<sup>34</sup> Jarrell, then, has a strong enough grasp of the contemporary situation to make assured (if broad-brushed and arguable) diagnoses of the situation. It is the more striking, then, that like Berryman, he can suggest no new definition, can make no projection. He concludes:

We have reached one of those points in the historical process at which the poet has the uncomfortable illusion of choice; when he too says, 'But what was it? What am I?' ... So the poets repeat the old heartlessly, or make their guesses at the new ....<sup>35</sup>

Jarrell returned to the question of what comes after Modernism in his article 'The End of the Line', published in The Nation on 21st February 1942.<sup>36</sup> The central claim is much as

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.88.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.88.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.89. Delmore Schwartz was similarly left barely able to guess at the end of his 1941 essay, 'The Poet and Poetry', which he concludes: 'I have also spoken as if this isolation of the poet had already reached its conclusion. Whether it has or not, and whether it would be entirely desirable that it should, may be left as unanswered questions'. Delmore Schwartz, 'The Poet and the Poet', Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz, ed. Donald A. Dike and David H. Zucker (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1970) p.12.

before, though the argument is quite brilliantly developed. What makes it interesting here is that, as he concludes, Jarrell indicates that alternatives for poetry are beginning to flicker into view. Jarrell develops his continuity argument by tying the Modernist demand for novelty to the Romantic commitment to originality, contending that

Romanticism ... presupposes a constant experimentalism, the indefinite attainment of originality, generation after generation, primarily by the novel extrapolation of previously exploited processes ... All these romantic tendencies are exploited to their limits; and the movement which carries out this final exploitation is what we call modernism. Then, at last, romanticism is confronted with an impasse, a critical point, a genuinely novel situation that it can only meet successfully by contriving genuinely novel means - that is, means which are not romantic; the romantic means have already been exhausted.<sup>37</sup>

The tone is apocalyptic, but the problem Jarrell identifies is a real one; one that poets since the war, whether late-, post- or even anti-Modern have had in some way to negotiate: namely, how to keep on making it new, when novelty itself has become familiar. I argue below that Jarrell and the middle generation did come to identify the likely responses to this situation, but that having identified them they backed the wrong horse. With this article, however, those responses were only just coming into view and Jarrell sees it as his main task to compel his readers to face up to the dilemma. So he makes an announcement:

It Is The End Of The Line. Poets can go back and repeat the ride; they can settle in attractive, atavistic colonies along the railroad; they can repudiate the whole system, à la Yvor Winters, for some neo-classical donkey caravan of their own. But Modernism As We Know It - the most successful and influential body of poetry of this century - is dead.<sup>38</sup>

Criticism as forceful as this commands attention, so it is important to notice how Jarrell maps the post-Modern scene here. Repetition (which would be continuation), separatism

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<sup>36</sup> For a different consideration of this article and of some of the other materials in this section, see James E.B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry 1945-65* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) pp.1-52.

<sup>37</sup> Randall Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews 1935-1964* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1981) p.77.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

(along the lines of an artistic colony), and nostalgia (à la Yvor Winters) are all swiftly rejected. However, he is not entirely bereft of suggestions for future directions.

Repeating his claim that ‘Originality can no longer be recognised, and condemned or applauded for, its obvious experimentalism’, Jarrell suggest that what ‘the age offers to the poet’ is ‘a fairly heartless eclecticism or a fairly solitary individuality’.<sup>39</sup> This marks an important shift. In 1940 he felt that there was only an illusion of choice, and that the poet could only guess at the new. By 1942, an opposition around which poets might begin to position themselves, by which they might redefine their task was beginning to be formed.

Jarrell might be thought to have shown admirable prescience in posing ‘eclecticism’ against ‘individuality’, given their significance in Postmodern aesthetics. In fact, he found the opposition hard to uphold in practice, and was unable, when he encountered eclecticism, properly to distinguish it from experimentalism. Writing about the New Directions anthology of 1941 (which included Nicholas Moore and F.T. Prince), he opened by describing ‘a sort of encyclopaedic contradiction’, then ‘a queer mediocre hodge-podge’, and settled finally for the remark that ‘Nowadays seeing people being consciously experimental together has the brown period smell of the Masonic ceremonies in War and Peace’.<sup>40</sup> What is interesting here, then, is not yet the terms themselves, but the difficult and necessary process of arriving at an opposition.

Wordsworth’s ‘Advertisement’ and prefaces, and Pound’s manifestoes attest to the fact that strong literary movements gain much of their energy by opposing the previous generation. What the early critical writings of Jarrell, Berryman and Karl Shapiro show is that they felt no such opposition. A movement they admired had, as they

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.82.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp.84, 87.

saw it, come to a halt, and something else had to be done. But they did not feel themselves opposed to Modernism (many of the products of which they held in reverence), only after it. My suggestion then, is that if their poetry was to gain strength from opposition they had to create the opposition for themselves. Shapiro turned his mind to this problem in the conclusion to his Essay on Rime, suggesting the bleak poetic alternatives of 'ennui' and 'violence'.<sup>41</sup> But it is in Berryman's 1947 review, 'Lowell, Thomas, & Co.', that we really see how much energy was devoted to the task.

The opening paragraph of Berryman's review is worth quoting at length.

Whatever the devotion of a lesser poet, it may be put as the difference between the *occasional* and the *thematic*, between the making of a few fine poems and the conversion of a whole body of material. If the first is impressive, the second is oppressive as well, troubling, overwhelming. Now Robert Lowell seems to me not only the most powerful poet who has appeared in England or America for some years, master of a freedom in the Catholic subject without peer since Hopkins, but also in the terms of this distinction, a thematic poet.<sup>42</sup> (Berryman's italics)

In this fullest sense of the expression this is a defining moment. Berryman, like Jarrell, is engaged in the task of defining the alternatives available to the contemporary poet. The real force of the definition, however, lies in the review's rhetorical context. The majority of the review is devoted to Lord Weary's Castle, and Berryman had good reason to want to get his account right. For a start, this was the first time Berryman had reviewed Lowell, with whom he had recently become friends, and whom he had already started to hero-worship. Furthermore, Berryman had had a hand in Lord Weary's Castle. He worked on the proofs with Lowell, suggesting amendments to 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' which were eventually incorporated.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Berryman had an insider's

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<sup>41</sup> Shapiro, Essay on Rime, (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1945), p.69.

<sup>42</sup> Berryman, 'Lowell, Thomas & Co.', Partisan Review xiv, no.1 (Jan-Feb, 1947), p.73.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Matterson, Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing, (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1988), p.8.

understanding of the book, and given the rivalry that surrounded Lowell, he would have wanted to put that understanding to good use.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, on a larger literary scale, Lowell's book was the first written by the increasingly identifiable middle generation to gain real recognition (winning a Pulitzer Prize) so his reviewer friends would be concerned to consolidate the achievement.

That Berryman was fully apprised of these factors in writing his review is apparent from his opening sentence. 'In some very serious sense', he declares, 'there is no competition either on Parnassus or on the hard way up there.'<sup>45</sup> One cannot get much more lofty than 'Parnassus', and by making the allusion Berryman clearly meant to advise his reader that he had something important to say. And he did.

Compared to Jarrell's tentative attempt to establish the alternatives of 'eclecticism' and 'individuality', Berryman's assertion of the opposing terms 'occasional' and 'thematic' is controlled. He is able to acknowledge the virtues of both kinds of poem, while firmly and unambiguously aligning with the latter. This assured presentation indicates that Berryman felt he had arrived at terms that would stick. Moreover, whereas Jarrell's terms are only roughly at odds with one another, Berryman's constitute a real opposition. 'Theme' derives from the Greek for deposit, thus indicating that which endures through time and resists change (as it does more colloquially, of course, when applied to music or literature), and so it stands in direct contradiction to poetry written for and to the occasion.

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<sup>44</sup> Lowell indicates this rivalry in describing an occasion he and Jarrell visited Berryman in Princeton: 'Both poet-critics had just written definitive essay-reviews of my first book, *Lord Weary's Castle*. Earlier in the night, Berryman made the tactical mistake of complimenting Jarrell on his essay. The was accepted with a hurt, glib croak, "Oh, thanks." The flattery was not returned, not a muscle smiled.' 'For John Berryman', p.69.

<sup>45</sup> Berryman, 'Lowell, Thomas & Co.', p.73.

Lowell later described Berryman's review of Lord Weary's Castle as 'definitive' so it does seem fair to place a reasonably heavy stress on his (Berryman's) choice of terms.<sup>46</sup> But I am not proposing to hang an argument on a single felicitous antithesis. My suggestion, rather, is that as we consider the terms by which the middle generation were assessing poetry (their own and other people's) in the late forties and early fifties, a structure of judgement emerges which does seem to take its shape from a commitment to the thematic at the expense of the occasional; or, more importantly perhaps, that the terms which emerge would have suggested such a structure to Ashbery. Later in 'Lowell and others' Berryman again endeavours to establish Lowell's importance through an oppositional kind of argument. The key terms now are 'improvisation' and 'deliberate'. Of 'improvisation' he suggests that,

you can see it best, after Auden's early books, in the beautiful work done by Delmore Schwartz at the decade's end in America - to name one line of corroboration, Blackmur hung his review of In Dreams Begin Responsibilities on the word 'improvised' ... But Mr. Lowell's poetry is the most decisive testimony we have had, I think, of a new period, returning to the deliberate and the formal.<sup>47</sup>

Again the opposition is presented in a measured tone. Improvisation is not (yet) rejected out of hand (some of his best friends had improvised), but equally there is no doubt that the kind of poetry Berryman values highest is the 'deliberate' and 'formal'. Even in this review, however, a certain kind of improvisational poetry, Surrealism, is placed beyond the pale. Thus André Breton, Berryman writes, 'is an exclusive and dogmatic surrealist, that is an idiot'.<sup>48</sup> By which he claims to intend 'nothing invidious, merely that on principle he still sends his mind next door whenever he sits down to work'.<sup>49</sup> By 1948

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<sup>46</sup> Lowell, 'For John Berryman', p.3.

<sup>47</sup> Berryman, 'Lowell, Thomas & Co.', pp.79-80.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Berryman's resistance to improvisation has become for him something of an axiom. Howard Nemerov, he writes, is representative of a poetic climate in which 'technical accomplishment' has been driven 'to almost zero'.<sup>50</sup> Nor is it that he thinks Nemerov lacks talent, only that 'the author inherited from both Stevens and Auden a tradition of improvisation'.<sup>51</sup>

Berryman again asserts Lowell's value antithetically when, shortly after criticising Nemerov he turns to the British poet Henry Reed. Berryman is by no means unimpressed by Reed, suggesting that he is 'a poet whose slightest shift can contrive excitement'.<sup>52</sup> His real value in this review, however, is, again, to act as other to Lowell. Berryman is explicit:

Strategies and strategies. Confronted equally with difficult situations, Reed *relaxed* beyond relaxation and Lowell *tightened* beyond tightening. Reed breaks metre into anapaests, feminine endings, extra-syllabeled lines of all sorts, Lowell into spondees and humped smash. Lowell's work is 'difficult,' Reed's on the whole 'plain,' in extreme degrees.<sup>53</sup>

In 1940, it is worth re-iterating, it seemed to Berryman and Jarrell that the poetry scene lacked definition, that the age offered only the illusion of choice. By 1948, however, the territory has been so well defined, the schema become so well established, that even a poet who, as Berryman says of Reed, he had not read 'till the day before yesterday' falls immediately into place.<sup>54</sup> He has to be either one thing or the other, and Reed is emphatically the other, because, as Berryman suggests, using a term that will figure heavily in Ashbery's first volume, 'one's strongest sense [when reading him] is of an *accepting* poetry' (Berryman's italics).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Berryman, *Freedom*, p.301.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.302.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.307.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.308.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.307.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Jarrell, it is worth noticing, arrived at comparable judgements. Of William Carlos Williams's poems, which previously he had admired, he suggested that 'they do not give us a big, secure, formed, regularly rhythmmed world to rest in, and we fall from one homogeneity of instant occasion into another'.<sup>56</sup> While sometime later, confirming that terms of discrimination had hardened into prejudices, he demeaned himself by making the tabloid suggestion that the occasional, improvisational art of the abstract expressionists could have been produced by 'a chimpanzee'.<sup>57</sup>

Nor did the terms of Berryman's opposition only underpin negative judgements. It is worth noting that the values wrapped up in the term 'thematic' formed his standard for poetic achievement. Thus Breton's crime is that he writes poetry Berryman doubts 'will last two centuries', and of Jane Lewis he remarks that, 'it is so slight that I wonder whether even a stanza as handsome as this one will keep it in memory'.<sup>58</sup> Only the thematic poet will reach Parnassus, because by definition (as Berryman sees it), only the thematic poem will survive the ravages of time. For a poet of more occasional cast of mind, the late forties must have been, as the speaker of Ashbery's poem 'A Boy' has it, '*An unendurable age*' (Ashbery's italics).

Before proceeding to consider how the terms and values that came to the surface of middle generation critical prose took shape and found more nuanced expression in Berryman's poetry, it is necessary to say a word about Lowell. As is made dramatically clear by Berryman's review, it was the emergence of Lowell, and more precisely the publication of Lord Weary's Castle that brought structure to the hitherto more or less

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<sup>56</sup> Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age*, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1973), p.237.

<sup>57</sup> Jarrell, *Kipling*, p.287-8

<sup>58</sup> Berryman, *Freedom*, pp.294, 295.

shapeless poetry scene of the 1940s. And one can see (or rather hear) why, from the opening lines of the collection's major poem, 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket':

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket,-  
The sea was still breaking violently and night  
Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,  
When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net.<sup>59</sup>

Whether one finds it attractive or not this is remarkably accomplished writing for a young poet. The accomplishment rests in the music, the repeated 'c's', 'k's', 't's', and 'd's' generating a percussive, consonantal sound that in its sheer hardness shows a determination to endure. Moreover in this durable music Lowell implicitly claims to be giving vent to something authentically American, the consonants coming from 'Quaker', 'Nantucket', 'Madaket', and 'Atlantic', and so from the constituent elements of the settler experience. Lowell, then, emerged with his hard sound and mythology all but fully formed from the beginning, and the effect of this emergence on a scene lacking definition (lacking the oppositions by which poets might define themselves) was to provide a pole of attraction around which others might gather and galvanise.<sup>60</sup>

My interest here is not directly in Lowell, but in his effect on the poetry scene to which Ashbery reacted, and so in particular in his effect on the terms and standards by which poetry was judged in the late forties and early fifties. What distinguished Lowell for Berryman was first a determination to 'master' the craft of poetry, which, as he saw it, meant prosody; and second, 'ambition'.<sup>61</sup> Throughout his career, ambition was a theme in its own right for Berryman. 'Without first rate qualities,' he wrote in the Lowell piece, 'ambition is nothing, a personal disease; but given these qualities, the difference is

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Lowell, *Poems 1938-1949*, (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1950) p.18.

<sup>60</sup> When he revised the review for publication in *The Freedom of the Poet* Berryman re-titled it 'Lowell and Others', which serves to draw out the polarity being described.

<sup>61</sup> Berryman, *Freedom*, p291.

partly one of ambition'.<sup>62</sup> His qualities notwithstanding there can be little doubt that ambition was a personal disease with Berryman. Lowell provided Berryman his first opportunity to discourse publicly on ambition. 'I should say from the poems,' he remarked, 'that this author's ambition is limitless'.<sup>63</sup> Andrew Crozier says of Lowell and his like that, 'we are asked to trust the poet, not the poem' and on the issue of ambition it is the poet not the poem that comes into view. The ambition, that is, is not for poetry, or even for the poem, but for the poet, with the ambitious thematic poet writing not with his eye on the here and now, but on Parnassus.

For Jarrell it seemed that not only did Lowell not have his eye on his situation, but that in the effort of producing a poetry that might survive his eyes were squeezed firmly shut:

the coiling violence of its rhetoric, the harsh and stubborn intensity that accompanies all its verbs and verbals, the clustering stresses learned from accentual verse, come from a man contracting every muscle, grinding his teeth together till his shut eyes ache.<sup>64</sup>

He was the sort of writer, Jarrell observed, 'more at home in the Church Triumphant than in the Church of this world', and as a consequence was little interested in whatever it might be that characterised his situation. And the method by which such timeless, permanent poetry was to be achieved was happily acknowledged to be violence. Thus Jarrell concludes his review of Land of Unlikeness with the observation that

most of these excesses seem temporary; what is permanently excessive is an obstinacy of temperament extreme enough to seem a form of violence.<sup>65</sup>

Jarrell had suggested in 1942 that what was on offer to the poem was 'eclecticism' or 'individuality', and as he had no real feel for eclecticism it was perhaps to be expected

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.287

<sup>63</sup> Berryman, Freedom, p.287

<sup>64</sup> Jarrell, Poetry, p.191.

<sup>65</sup> Jarrell, Kipling, p.133

that the first truly forceful individual to come along would secure his support. Thus, having struggled so hard to discern the future for poetry after Modernism, Jarrell suddenly came to see it in Lowellian excess and ambition, and was clearly grateful to be able to write that 'it is essentially post- or anti-Modernist poetry, and as such is certain to be influential'.<sup>66</sup>

### **Finding a theme**

To recapitulate, the intention in this chapter is first to present the terms, and with them the structure of value, that by the late 1940s had come to shape middle generation poetry, and then, with those terms firmly in place, to consider Some Trees in their light. I would hope that as the epithets 'occasional', 'improvisational', and 'accepting' have been presented, and that as they have been shown discriminating against Nicholas Moore, André Breton and Abstract Expressionism, then something like a negative image of Ashbery and of Some Trees will have started to come in to view. However before moving to develop the argument fully I want to consider Berryman's early poetry.

Discussing Berryman's early period Conarroe emphasises 'how representative his art was at the time'.<sup>67</sup> It is thus not surprising to find that between 'Twenty Poems' (published Five Young American Poets in 1940) and Homage to Mistress Bradstreet (1953) Berryman's poetry moved from abject uncertainty, through a quite fruitful, if unsustainable, ambivalence, to an exceedingly deliberate, very clearly defined poetic stance. Charting Berryman's development through this period involves going back over now familiar ground. The exercise is instructive not only because it establishes that the evaluative terms which formulated around Lowell did in fact exert an extremely strong

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<sup>66</sup> Jarrell, Poetry, p.194.

<sup>67</sup> Conarroe, p.25.

influence on the practice of satellite poets, but also because as those terms took shape in the poetry, idiomatic subtleties and nuances developed which are important to an understanding of the scene. Moreover, the account confirms Ashbery's sense that

the kind of more dream-like, imaginative poetry of the thirties such as that of Delmore Schwartz, and even of Berryman, and Randall Jarrell of those years, were (sic) replaced by their later work and by Lowell and confessional poetry.

Berryman's earliest poetry confirms the impression he and Jarrell gave in their notes on poetry that in 1940 nothing was defined for the young poet, that all strategies were disorientatingly permissible. In 'Twenty Poems' Berryman attempts to deal with this state of affairs by writing a series of genuinely argumentative poems. In 'Sanctuary' the argument is between the force of the contingent and the capacity of the poetic will to control events. The poem opens with an ambiguous account of the moment of its own making :

Blood ran crescendo in the brain  
And time lay as a poem clear  
Falls from me now:<sup>68</sup>

As in 'The Apparition' (published in the same volume) blood and brain represent impulse and control, the poem being some combination of the two. In fact here the poet seems to want to present his creation as more an effect of impulse than intellect, the blood rushing to his head, and the poem being shown simply to 'fall from' the poet. In its turn, however, this image of creative ease is offset by the poem's form; the rhymes and half-rhymes and the regular meter (five tetrameter lines giving way to a final pentameter) indicating that actually a lot of effort went into the production.

The poem proceeds by negotiating equally well formed opposites. Prompted by the departure of a friend, its central proposition is that 'few things remain'. It has two

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<sup>68</sup> John Berryman, Collected Poems, (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p271.

responses to this thought. The second stanza notes that it is invariably the accidental not the determined that leaves an impression:

The insolent look a woman gave  
 Casually from a door one day  
 Leaves me not, on the other hand;  
 Strange stigmata to our grave,  
 Indiscriminate as the wind,  
 We carry, with our bonds they will decay.<sup>69</sup>

The poet acknowledges the impact on a life of the contingent, of that which happens 'casually', indiscriminately. Not that he quite acquiesces to it. Even here the reader is confronted with the inverted, almost twisted style which became Berryman's trademark, and which came to signify to him his capacity to impose his personality on the world. It is just such an imposition that the final stanza of the poem entertains:

Certainty shall not touch my tongue.  
 And yet I hold, I have in mind  
 That this our love will stay for us:  
 Instructed by the years, belong  
 Obdurate and anonymous  
 A sanctuary eye among the blind.<sup>70</sup>

The emphasis is clearly different here, the poet seeking to exert his will; obdurately to ensure that that which he feels is of real value, his love, will 'stay', albeit 'instructed by the years'. It is not, however, a stance in which he has much confidence, the whole stanza overshadowed by the uncertainty of the first line. 'Sanctuary', then, can settle nothing, its strategies of formal control unable to dispel the thought that actually it is that which happens casually and impulsively to which the poet should turn his attention.

For the reader schooled by the New Yorkers, Berryman's indecision can seem to have had a partially beneficial effect on his poetry. Forced to experiment with different strategies and stances, Berryman produced a surprising number of poems in the late

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.272.

thirties and early forties, which clearly show him trying hard to open his writing up to events, for instance: 'Meditation', 'The Moon and the Night and the Men', 'Parting as Descent', 'World-Telegram', and 'Winter Landscape'.<sup>71</sup> These last two were the most successful. 'World Telegram' takes its title from a newspaper, and the poem is an attempt to find a form which accommodates the range and quantity of information the newspaper presents.<sup>72</sup> Each of the first five stanzas is devoted to a front-page story. The stanzas vary in shape and length according to the amount of information the poet feels he has to communicate in order to present the gist of the story. Such irregularity constitutes a considerable exercise of freedom for Berryman, contrasting sharply with his later meticulous approach to stanzaic form. The poem, leaden at first, gradually gathers pace as the poet begins to trust his responses, with the sixth stanza simply abandoning itself to what it finds. But the poem is never as loose-limbed as it needs to be, and in the final stanza records its reluctance to go all the way:

News of one day, one afternoon, one time.  
If it were possible to take these things  
Quite seriously, I believe they might  
Curry disorder in the strongest brain,  
Immobilize the most resilient will...<sup>73</sup>

No doubt Berryman's will was always too resilient to pursue the implications of 'World Telegram' to their sublime conclusion, but the poem accepts more than it deliberates.

'Winter Landscape' is an altogether more deft performance than 'World-Telegram'. The poem is composed of a single sentence running through five un-rhymed stanzas, and is Audensque insofar as it is a response to a painting by Breughel (from

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<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, Berryman's commentators do not like his early poems. Haffenden does not discuss them at all in *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980). Joel Conarroe does consider them, but reluctantly. While Helen Vendler mentions them only fleetingly at the end of 'John Berryman: Freudian Cartoons', in *The Given and the Made* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

<sup>72</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, pp.20-21.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p.21.

which it takes its title). However, it is more delicate, fragile even, than pre-war Auden. Opening with an image of ‘The three men coming down the winter hill ... through the arrangement of the trees’, the poem goes on to regard the ‘sandy time/ To come’, when

they will be seen upon the brow  
Of that same hill: when all their company  
Will have been irrecoverably lost,

These men, this particular three in brown  
Witnessed by birds will keep the scene and say  
By their configuration with the trees,  
The small bridge, the red houses and the fire,  
What place, what time, what morning occasion

Sent them into the wood ...<sup>74</sup>

In that it is after a painting this poem does not respond directly to the situation it articulates. However, it is clearly the painter’s ability to present the whole situation that Berryman is trying to imitate here. This is apparent both in his attention to details (‘this particular three’, ‘The small bridge, the red houses and the fire’), and in his very conscious effort to find a term which shows how such details knit together. Thus he speaks of the ‘scene’, ‘the configuration’, the ‘place’ and ‘time’, finally settling on ‘occasion’ as the word which most adequately indicates the shape and extent of what in his note on poetry he refers to as the ‘entire complex incident’.<sup>75</sup> Moreover it is an admirably supple sense of occasion that Berryman learns from Breughel, the point of both the painting and poem being that the three men were out hunting the day the army came recruiting, and so, unlike their fellows, lived to tell the tale. Both works, therefore, manage to include much more than they show.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>75</sup> Berryman, ‘A Note on Poetry’, p.45.

<sup>76</sup> A discussion of the crisis of poetic confidence traced here in the writings of the middle generation must carry with it some sense of the impact of World War II. For a sense of this impact one might consider Weldon Kees, *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1993).

It would seem likely that it is poems such as 'World Telegram' and 'Winter Landscape' Ashbery has in mind when he expresses some liking for early Berryman. In Crozier's terms both poems indicate a willingness to 'trust the occasion'. However, being 'representative' of his time, Berryman lacked the confidence to commit himself to a single poetic stance. Thus while some early Berryman poems experiment with an accepting, poetry, so equally as many show him exploring the rhetoric of the counter-position. We catch sight of this counter-position first in 'The Statue'. The poem's argument does not develop much beyond the Stevens-like first stanza:

The statue, tolerant through years of weather,  
Spares the untidy Sunday through its look,  
Spares shopgirls knowledge of the fatal pallor  
Under their evening colour,  
Spares homosexuals, the crippled, the alone,  
Extravagant perception of their failure;  
Looks only, cynical, across them all  
To the delightful Avenue and its lights.<sup>77</sup>

The poet's attitude towards the statue is ambivalent. On the one hand he devotes much of the poem to the people in the park the statue is shown to overlook. On the other, he closes the poem by closing 'his eyes ... on the expensive drama' on which he feels he has 'wasted so much skill', noting that he has 'salvaged less than the intolerable statue'.<sup>78</sup>

Stephen Matterson is right, I think, when he suggests that the statue is 'intolerable' to the poet because it represents a permanence the poet knows his poem has not achieved.<sup>79</sup>

What is interesting here is how permanence and its opposite are conceived. The poem fails (will fail to endure) because it has become caught up in ordinary human situations.

The statue is shown to disregard such situations, its 'cynical' glance refusing to take in,

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<sup>77</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.4.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>79</sup> Matterson, p.30.

to accept 'homosexuals, the crippled, the alone'.<sup>80</sup> The terms cluster objectionably, poetic failure being bound to an acceptance of so-called human 'failure', a category predicated on sexual, physical, and social difference. An accepting poetic stance, then, is ascribed an ethical value, but its moral worth is argued to be at the unacceptable cost of aesthetic permanence.

It was only with part five of The Dispossessed written between 1945 and 1947 that Berryman's poetry gained sufficient definition to begin to exclude alternatives. What defined it, however, as Berryman was later able to acknowledge, was the influence of Lowell. Speaking of influence with his Paris Review interviewer, Berryman remarked:

I see the influence of Lord Weary's Castle in some of the later poems in The Dispossessed. There's no doubt about it. In the Bradstreet poem, as I seized inspiration from Augie March, I sort of seized inspiration, I think, from Lowell, rather than imitated him. I can't think, offhand ... of a single passage in the Bradstreet poem which distinctly sounds like Lowell.<sup>81</sup>

Lowell's influence on Berryman's poetry was, I would suggest, very largely damaging. It drew him towards subjects and concerns not properly his own, and, in tempting him to accentuate his own belligerent streak, led him to neglect (for almost a decade) aspects of his writing which, when he returned to them, would finally enable him to write his most characteristic work, The Dream Songs. All of this is painfully apparent in the fifth section of The Dispossessed. The poems gathered there have Lowell's persona stamped all over them. What they thus show is that, as Jarrell had anticipated, Lowell was able to provide a poetic pole from which the middle generation could gain strength not so much because he keyed into collective concerns (which he did to some extent) but more simply by virtue of being an extremely forceful poetic individual. The problem with powerful

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<sup>80</sup> Berryman, Collected Poems, p.4.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry: an interview with John Berryman', Paris Review 53, (Winter 1972), reprinted in Thomas (ed.), p.24

magnetic forces, however, is that while they give a certain shape to the field they enter, their effect can equally well be said to be distortive. The poems in the fifth part of The Dispossessed are evidence of distortion.

The first sign of Lowellian distortion is aural. The opening of 'A Winter-Piece to a Friend Away' is representative:

Your letter came. -Glutted the earth & cold  
 With rains long heavy, follows intense frost;  
           Snow howls and hides the world  
 We workt awhile to build; all the roads are lost  
 Icy spiculae float, filling strange air.<sup>82</sup>

The subject of the poem is writer's block, which is figured throughout in terms of the winter scene, and is said to thaw with the arrival of the friend's letter. It is all too clear, however, from the clipped 'g's' 'c's', 't's' and 'd's' that what has really rescued Berryman here is Lowell's consonantal music. Berryman adds alliteration of his own, through 'follows' and 'frost' and 'world/ We workt awhile', but the incorporation of these softer 'f' and 'w' sounds serves only to diminish the effect of an otherwise competent copy. It is not surprising that Berryman should have been drawn to Lowell's percussive music. Lowell meant it to have that effect. Also, however, Berryman had himself long been striving to achieve a distinctive, thickened sound, impressed, as he had been, by R.P. Blackmur's prescription that poetry should be made of a 'language/ so twisted & posed in a form/ that it not only expresses the matter in hand/ but adds to the stock of available reality'.<sup>83</sup> Strongly influenced or not, then, one might have expected Berryman to be attracted to the Lowell sound. A truer measure of Lowell's influence is Berryman's revised sense of the alternatives available to the contemporary poet. To be more precise, the fifth part of The Dispossessed is almost entirely explicable in terms of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp.61-2.

<sup>83</sup> Berryman, Collected Poems, p.179.

the opposition Berryman formulated in response to Lord Weary's Castle: the opposition, that is, between occasional and thematic poetry.

Lowell is often at his most doggedly thematic in Lord Weary's Castle when he is ostensibly dealing with occasions, as in, for instance: 'Christmas in Black Rock', 'New Year's Day', 'The First Sunday in Lent', 'Christmas Eve Under Hooker's Statue'. In each case the particular occasion, and the particularities of the occasion, are of no interest to the poet. Rather Lowell's point in mentioning such festivals is precisely, as Jarrell suggested, to assert 'the fundamental likeness of the past and present and not their disparity'.<sup>84</sup> Lowell, that is, is interested not in occasions and what they have to offer, but in Eliotic still points.<sup>85</sup> Or, to trace this genealogy back, Lowell can be seen to use occasions in the way that Lancelot Andrewes does: as a pretext for the exploration of transcendent continuities. Thus, it is precisely when his poetry was closest to an occasion that he was most concerned to emphasise its thematic character. The syntax of the second part of 'The First Sunday in Lent' promises an attentive poem, the poet noting that 'This world, this ferris wheel, is tired and strains'.<sup>86</sup> The promise is in the demonstrative, Lowell's 'This' seeming to want to hold fast to the world and the ferris wheel it picks out. As in 'New Year's Eve', however, Lowell's object is to find the universal in his particular as soon as he can. Almost before we know it wheels have become cycles have become processes of rebirth, and the ferris wheel, which the reader thought was just a ferris wheel, turns out to be a stand in for the body of Christ, in whose blood we find ourselves wallowing. Lowell, it seems, cannot mention an occasion without turning it to thematic use.

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<sup>84</sup> Jarrell, Poetry, p.192.

<sup>85</sup> See the comparison of Eliotic as opposed to Ashberian occasions in the Introduction.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p.26.

Impressed by this ability to turn occasions into themes, Berryman attempted the same thing in 'New Year's Eve', and it is in this poem that we see the distortive effect of Lowell's influence most clearly. As in his earlier poem on a social occasion 'Farewell to Miles', Berryman shows a tendency to rise above rather than to the occasion. Thus while in the earlier poem he was at pains to distance himself from the 'Inane talk on the chaise longue', here he makes snide references to a 'whiskey-listless and excessive saint/ ... expounding his position', and to 'Miss Weirs' whispering the poet 'here international fears'.<sup>87</sup> Yet for all his snootiness (born of his desperation for distinction) Berryman actually has a good (early Eliotic) ear for this kind of chatter - witness The Dream Songs - and so is inclined to linger over it longer and more attentively than Lowell ever would. But the Lowellian orthodoxy precludes such behaviour, and so Berryman strives, and fails, to find his theme. Witness the sixth stanza:

Imagine a patience in the works of love  
 Luck sometimes visits. Ages we have sighed,  
 And cleave more sternly to a music of  
 Even this sore word 'genocide'.  
 Each to his own! Clockless and thankless dream  
 And labour Makers, being what we seem.  
 Soon soon enough we turn  
 Our tools in; brownshirt Time chiefly our works will burn.<sup>88</sup>

Berryman is not comfortable with his style here. He finds it difficult to communicate anything clearly, save his determination to say something important, which is made painfully evident by his diction: 'love', 'Ages', 'cleave', "“genocide”". He does finally manage to say something intelligible and timeless, which is that 'brownshirt Time chiefly our works will burn'. But he has spent several stanzas working up to this, and in the end the most enduring statement he can manage is that little survives the ravages of time.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp.35,63.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.64.

‘New Year’s Eve’ would seem to indicate that Berryman had little talent for what, after Lowell, he called thematic poetry, and everything in the fifth section of The Dispossessed tends to confirm this suspicion. But perhaps the strongest evidence is ‘The Long Home’. The poem is unadulterated Lowell (as a comparison with ‘In Memory of Arthur Winslow’ swiftly confirms). What makes it so is not, here, the alliterative language, nor even, the determination to say something lasting, to find a theme; rather it is the theme itself. ‘The Long Home’ is a meditation on tradition conducted through a study of the upper-class struggle to sustain old-world traditions through the rules and conventions of inheritance. It thus provides a twofold illustration of the difficulty Berryman encountered in trying to write thematic poetry. In the first place, it makes it clear that he had no theme of his own, and that in imitating Lowell’s style he found himself forced to imitate Lowell’s substance. The second, deeper difficulty concerns Lowell’s relation to his theme. Introducing her collection of essays The Given and the Made Helen Vendler states that she has wanted, ‘with respect to the thematic material of each poet, to discuss some personal *donnée* which the poet could not avoid treating’.<sup>89</sup> Lowell’s personal *donnée*, Vendler suggests, was history, his family having enjoyed such continued prominence in American society. Lowell, being a Lowell, could hardly have avoided the issues of tradition and inheritance. Given his personal circumstances, he was bound at some point to give poetic consideration to the question of what is passed on from generation to generation; to the question, that is, of what endures through time. In short, Eliotic influences or not, Lowell could hardly avoid at some point in his career writing a poetry that was thematic in character. Berryman showed considerable insight in

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<sup>89</sup> Vendler, Given, p.xii.

defining Lowell's poetry as thematic. His mistake was not to notice the very personal character of this seemingly transferable strategy.

Berryman's determination to write thematic poetry found its ultimate expression in his first long poem Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. Here, if ever there was one, is a distorted poem. So obsessed had Berryman become with the need to transcend the given moment, the need to endure across time, that he wrote a poem in which he has an affair with a seventeenth century woman poet. Berryman's Bradstreet is herself the result of a strange confection; the poet priding himself on his 'scholarship', but deciding in the end to make her life 'even harder than it had been'. Thus, 'It is a historical poem, but a lot of it is invented too'. Their transhistorical liaison is not easily made convincing, and the poem comes nearest to a true expression when in the third stanza the poet asks (or states):

How do we  
linger, diminished, in our lovers' air,  
implausibly visible, to whom, a year,  
years, over interims; or not;  
to a long stranger; or not; shimmer and disappear.<sup>90</sup>

In fact, so implausible is the situation that in order to make the poem at all real Berryman had to produce a language so thickened and twisted that it would assume an almost physical presence on the tongue. And in this respect the poem could be said to achieve some success, except that in order to achieve such physicality he has to so distort the language that even Lowell finally felt obliged to ask him,

I wonder if you need so much twisting, obscurity, archaisms, strange word orders, & signs for 'and', etc?<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Berryman, Collected Poems, p.133.

<sup>91</sup> Lowell, letter to Berryman, 15 March 1959. Cited in Matterson, p.12.

It is not necessary to provide a reading of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet to establish that its surface distortions grow from its determination to find a theme.<sup>92</sup> Berryman's prose accounts of the poem's evolution suffice. Thus, in 'One Answer to a Question', Berryman recalls,

The eight-line stanza I invented here after a lifetime's study, especially of Yeats's, and in particular the one he adopted from Abraham Cowley for his elegy "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory." ... For four-and-a-half years, then, I accumulated materials and sketched, fleshing out the target or vehicle, still under the impression that seven or eight stanzas would see it done. There are fifty seven. My stupidity is traceable partly to an astuteness that made me as afraid as the next man of the ferocious commitment involved in a long poem and partly to the fact that, although I had my form and subject, I did not have my theme yet. This emerged, and under the triple impetus of events I won't identify, I got the poem off the ground and nearly died following it. The theme is hard to put shortly, but I will try.<sup>93</sup>

It is Berryman's struggle to write Bradstreet that is interesting here. Possibly he simply blocked. Actually though, just prior to starting the poem he had been writing extremely fluently, producing the 117 sonnets which make up 'Sonnets to Chris' (later published as Berryman's Sonnets) in less than a year. Clearly, then, given the right impetus (in this case an actual love affair) Berryman could hardly stop writing. What stopped him writing Bradstreet was, as he makes plain, his determination to find a theme: 'I had my form and subject, I did not have my theme yet'. Moreover, even after the event, he finds it hard to articulate: 'The theme is hard to put shortly'. That all this effort had a distortive effect is evident from a letter Berryman wrote to Tate during the composition of Bradstreet:

I feel like weeping all the time. What keeps me from weeping is partly my ecstasy and partly a daily necessity of the hardest, most calculated work I have ever done ... Lord have mercy on us and bless you.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> For a detailed, and sympathetic, account of the poem, which discusses its possible themes, see Haffenden, pp.9-33. For an intelligently hostile account see Thurley, pp.51-69.

<sup>93</sup> John Berryman, 'One Answer to a Question', in Howard Nemerov (ed.) Contemporary American Poetry (Voice of America Forum Lectures, 1965), p.126.

<sup>94</sup> Berryman, letter to Allen Tate, 6 February 1953, cited in Haffenden, p.26.

Berryman could not go on like this. It was the end of the line. And thankfully he realised it. Bradstreet out of his system, he never attempted to do such ‘calculated work’ again, turning instead to ‘Huffy Henry’ and The Dream Songs, a series, as Haffenden makes clear, not organised around a theme, but ‘constituted by multiple occasions’.<sup>95</sup> Or, as Berryman put it, when asked what ‘structural notion’ he had in mind when writing The Dream Songs,

it was what you might call open-ended. That is to say, Henry to some extent was in the situation that we are all in in actual life - namely, he didn’t know and I didn’t know what the bloody fucking hell was going to happen next.<sup>96</sup>

### **Naming of recent scenes of badness**

In presenting Berryman’s early poetry in the light of middle generation critical writing, the aim has been to provide a sketch of the literary scene in and against which Ashbery’s first volume of poetry was written. To be more precise, I have attempted to outline what Bourdieu would call the ‘spaces of original possibles’, the rhetorical alternatives available to a writer at a given moment in literary history.<sup>97</sup> For Bourdieu these ‘possibles’ constitute what he calls “the mood of the age”, or “the ‘common sense’ of an intellectual generation’.<sup>98</sup> Bourdieu’s way of thinking is of particular relevance to the American poetry scene of the late forties and early fifties. By this I mean that the alternatives (‘possibles’) available to middle generation writers were more than usually constitutive of their collective ‘common sense’, precisely because (as I have illustrated) they had had to work so hard to establish those alternatives. The practical consequence of this struggle to establish alternatives was that once they (the alternatives) were in

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>96</sup> Peter Stitt, ‘An Interview with John Berryman’, in Thomas, p.30.

<sup>97</sup> Bourdieu, p.31.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p.32.

place, individual writers held more resolutely (and more exclusively) to the rhetorical strategy they settled for than one would usually expect; hence Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. It further followed from this, I argue, that the next generation clung tighter to the neglected alternatives than would ordinarily be the case. In Bourdieu's terms, this is to suggest that 'position takings' within the late forties poetry scene arose 'quasi-mechanically'. In general I would want to resist this over-determining rhetoric. The fact is, however, that a number of the poems in Some Trees are overdetermined, 'impelled' as Ashbery himself put it, by the 'cultivated' climate in which he found himself. As in fact were contemporaneous poems of Koch and O'Hara. Thus, when impelled to defend Koch's poetry against a hostile reviewer, O'Hara took up a revealing stance:

Mr. Koch's ... technique is opposed to that Academic and often turgid development by which many young poets gain praise for their "achievement", an achievement limited usually to the mastery of one phase of Yeats<sup>99</sup>

Not all Ashbery's poems, however, were so impelled and part of my intention in the final section of this chapter is to indicate that the poems that make the volume the brilliant debut Frank O'Hara knew it to be, are precisely those that were not determined, but rather were occasioned by the poet's situation.<sup>100</sup>

Accounts of Some Trees invariably centre on 'The Mythological Poet', the poem having the air of a manifesto about it. Like all such pieces its construction is basically oppositional, the poet announcing what he is by indicating what he is not. Critics have drawn attention to this construction. Harold Bloom, for instance, suggests that the 'new music, innocent and monstrous' introduced at the end of the first part of the poem refers to Ashbery's poetry, and that this is to be understood as displacing the 'toothless

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<sup>99</sup> Frank O'Hara, 'Another Word on Kenneth Koch', in Standing Still, p.59.

<sup>100</sup> O'Hara described the book as 'the most beautiful first book to appear in America since Harmonium'. Frank O'Hara, 'Rare Modern', Poetry 89.5 (February 1957); repr. in Standing Still, p78.

murmuring' described in the first paragraph of the poem.<sup>101</sup> Mark Ford concurs, suggesting that the poem can be seen as 'an apologia for a new aesthetic,' which Ashbery, 'boldly sees as both growing out of and replacing a revered past tradition'.<sup>102</sup> It is clearly appropriate to read the poem as some kind of apologia, the poem's title making it evident that Ashbery's object is to define a new kind of poet, and both Ford and Bloom are right to emphasise the oppositional character of the poem.<sup>103</sup> But the opposition upon which 'The Mythological Poet' is founded can, perhaps, be more precisely described than either Bloom or Ford quite allows.

The poem appears to make no bones about the fact that it is oppositional. It is divided into two parts, with the first being (in the main) a description of an old music, or poetry, and the second a description of the new 'mythological poet'. For Bloom, then, the second part of the poem is meant to displace the first. Shoptaw wants to complicate this straightforward way of reading the poem's structure, suggesting that ,

it would be a mistake to concede the clear superiority (or inferiority) of this oceanic, sublime new music over the mannered murmuring of the willows, a "toothless" music Ashbery will have recourse to throughout his career'.<sup>104</sup>

It seems to me, however, that to deny the inferiority of the old music is to miss the point.

Ashbery presents it as

the toothless murmuring  
Of ancient willows, who kept their trouble  
In a stage of music. Without tumult  
Snow-capped mountains and heart-shaped  
Cathedral windows were contained  
There, until only infinity  
Remained of beauty  
(ST,34)

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<sup>101</sup> Bloom, *Figures* p.170.

<sup>102</sup> Mark Ford, *A Critical Study of the Poetry of John Ashbery*, (Unpublished Thesis, University of Oxford, 1991), p.17.

<sup>103</sup> Bourdieu suggests that 'the field of cultural production is the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer'. Bourdieu, p.42.

<sup>104</sup> Shoptaw, p.25.

It is hard to see how toothlessness can be taken as a positive attribute. With the exception of a good pair of eyes, the body part avant-garde poetry most wants to claim for itself is a healthy set of teeth. Hence the fact that the woman in Eliot's pub is so insistent that Lil (who looked so shamefully 'antique') should get herself 'some teeth ... have them all out ... get a nice set'.<sup>105</sup> 'Toothless murmuring,' then, is surely unambiguously the sound poetry makes when it has lost its bite, lost its grip on the contemporary. And certainly the poetry described here is anything but biting, dealing in the degraded terms of pastoral and early nineteenth century Romanticism. It altogether lacks the energy of the actual world - being without the tumult that is without - and is so lacking a sense of the present that it is only in infinity that it can find beauty. Moreover, just in case the reader has not realised that this is not the kind of poetry the poet is advocating, he spells it out for us:

But there is beside us, they said,  
Whom we do not sustain, the world  
Of things, that rages like a virgin  
Next to our silken thoughts. (ST,34)

This, then, is explicitly a them and us scenario, they being otherworldly and over-aestheticised, and 'we' (Ashbery, his friends, and, perhaps, his readers) are the other, unwilling and unable to 'sustain' them and their point of view.

The poetry Ashbery describes in the first part of 'The Mythological Poet' is thus quite clearly not the sort of thing he means to write. The real question is who would, or ever did, write such poetry? The answer is surely that no serious poet ever would or did. Like Wordsworth in his 'Advertisement' for Lyrical Ballads, Ashbery is setting up a false opposition. Introducing his new poetry to the reader, Wordsworth opposes it to the

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<sup>105</sup> Eliot, pp.139,138.

'gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers'.<sup>106</sup> The hope, no doubt is that any reader confronted with the choice between such poetry and that which deploys 'the real language of men', would choose the latter. The fact, however, is that Wordsworth's description is too vague to designate anything really being written, his rhetorical object being rather to try and persuade the reader that poetry is currently so degraded that Lyrical Ballads is required reading. Ashbery, I suggest, does the same in 'The Mythological Poet', presenting such toothless poetry that his own must come as welcome relief.

It follows from this, that if the first part of 'The Mythological Poet' presents no poetry that anybody really writes, then the opposition upon which Ashbery's poetry is really founded must be located elsewhere. It is located in the poem's second part:

The mythological poet, his face  
 Fabulous and fastidious, accepts  
 Beauty before it arrives. The heavenly  
 Moment in the heaviness of arrival  
 Deplores him. He is merely  
 An ornament, a kind of lewd  
 Cloud placed on the horizon. (ST,35)

Whether entirely intentionally or not, the impression given here is that the 'mythological' poetry being presented is all but completely new. There is a general sense in which it is other than the degraded poetry of part one, having a much easier relation with the world, but nothing in part one really predicts the terms and strategies Ashbery takes up in part two. However, the impression of absolute novelty only obtains because the poet neglects to outline the poetic he is actually opposing. The opposition that is actually informing Ashbery's writing, should, however, be apparent. The key term here is 'accepts'. Berryman, it will be recalled, discussed '*accepting*' poetry, opposing it to the

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<sup>106</sup> Wordsworth & Coleridge, p.7.

'*deliberate*' poetry Lowell was writing. Ashbery takes up the inferior term. Which is not to say that his writing is only a reflex. He endeavours to formulate his own new terms, suggesting that the new writing is 'mythological', and 'fabulous and fastidious'. This latter description is actually quite strong, describing a balancing of imagination and attention that has continued to characterise his poetry; although the term 'mythological' has proved less resilient, figuring (if at all) only marginally in Ashbery's mature lexicon. Either way, the salient term here is clearly 'accepts', both because it is linked to 'beauty', and because it is situated at the end of the line.

What is striking is the way Ashbery goes on to present his accepting poetry. He makes it clear that such a poet must not impose his personality on the world. Instead he is to be as incidental to the process as 'a kind of lewd/ Cloud placed on the horizon'. The poet, then is not to assert his individuality. It might be argued that such self-effacement simply goes with the 'accepting' territory, and that therefore it is only to be expected that the poet as personality should be deplored. More striking still, however, are those passages in which Ashbery shows the poet, as it were, *accepting*. The poet is located,

Close to the zoo, acquiescing  
 To dust, candy, perverts; inserted in  
 The panting forest, or openly  
 Walking in the great and sullen square  
 He has eloped with all the music  
 And does not care.(ST,35)

And so important is this particular kind of acceptance that he re-presents the circumstance:

And oh beside the roaring  
 Centurion of the lion's hunger  
 Might not child and pervert  
 Join hands, in the instant  
 Of their interest ...(ST,36)

In 'The Statue' Berryman set an accepting poetry against an enduring aesthetic, embodied in the poem by the statue itself. There, it will be recalled, the statute was held to have endured because it stood aloof from ordinary human situations, and in particular because it refused to acknowledge sexual, physical, and social difference; tolerating 'homosexuals, the crippled, the alone' only insofar as it spared them 'extravagant perception of their failure'. Ashbery's poem presents the obverse of this position. Like the Berryman poem, Ashbery explores the implications of an accepting aesthetic in a familiar public space (albeit a zoo as opposed to a park) and once in that space Ashbery establishes that the aesthetic has an ethical dimension. Ashbery, however, values the fact that an accepting poetry takes in 'dust, candy, perverts'. Nor is this a simple celebration of diversity. It is a forceful assertion of difference, both aesthetic and ethical. The 'mythological poet' is shown not only to accept but to acquiesce, and in acquiescing it is not only to homosexuality, but to the socially proscribed union of 'child and pervert', a union entered into, it will be noticed, under the statuesque figure of the 'Centurion ... lion'. Determined to differentiate himself radically from late-forties poetic orthodoxy, Ashbery shows his poetry to be extremely accepting.

It is important to clarify what is being claimed here. The intention is not to establish that Ashbery had Berryman's poem clearly in mind when he wrote 'The Mythological Poet' (although this is not entirely beyond the bounds of possibility given that he had read early Berryman, that the two poems turn on similar terms and images, and that as a young gay man Ashbery might well have reacted very strongly to the position outlined in 'The Statue'). The broader claim is rather that the relation which most informs the second part of 'The Mythological Poet' is not the contrived opposition between the new writing and some implausibly degraded poetry of the unspecified past,

but, the poet's actual opposition to the common sense of the middle generation. I am thus suggesting that there is a specific force to the key terms and images of the poem which a Bloomian account does not detect because the Bloomian poetic excludes consideration of the kind of local antagonism from which 'The Mythological Poet' derives its force.

There are more reactive poems than 'The Mythological Poet' in Some Trees. Some, 'Album Leaf' and 'A Long Novel' for example, seem not only informed by, but pre-occupied with another way, of writing. 'Album Leaf' remains a curiously resistant poem. In the main it is paratactical (sometimes surrealistically so), presenting arrangements of words the significance of which is simply the juxtaposition. Yet the remainder of the poem (almost one third) is composed of syntactically orthodox, paraphrasable sentences. Witness the first two stanzas:

The other marigolds and the cloths  
 Are crimes invented for history.  
 What can we achieve, aspiring?  
 And what, aspiring, can we achieve?

What can the rain that fell  
 All day on the grounds  
 And on the bingo tables?  
 (ST,26)

As the initial concern with 'The other' would seem to indicate, this is again an us and them situation, and as in 'The Mythological Poet' competing rhetorics are counter-posed. Here, however, the other, established rhetoric is less disguised. Thus, having opened with a disarmingly unlikely conjunction, the poem moves to parody the kind of poetry it means to displace. The parody provides a quite precise description of middle generation writing. Both Lowell and Berryman made considerable use of historical 'crimes' real and 'invented' ('At the Indian Killer's Grave' and 'Ancestor', for example)

and Berryman, as we have seen, used his Lowell review to discourse at length on the importance of ‘ambition’ (aspiration) to artistic achievement.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, the last stanza of ‘Album Leaf’ satirizes a tendency ‘To squirt false melancholy over history’ (which could serve as a damningly accurate judgement on the Bradstreet poem) pricking the loftiness of such poetry with the closing question, ‘If a bug fell from so high, would it land?’ (ST,26).

The problem with ‘Album Leaf’, however, is that the poet has devoted more energy to the parody than to his own expression. Thus, whether objectionable or not, the diction of ‘crimes’, ‘history’, aspiration, achievement and ‘melancholy’, is clear and compelling; established, in fact. By contrast, the faintly surreal combinations of ‘marigolds’, ‘cloths’, ‘bingo tables’, ‘receipts’ and ‘sweet peas’, assert little save a rather reactionary orneriness. In other words, preoccupied with what it is not, ‘Album Leaf’ tends to assert the rhetoric it is struggling to displace.

More so ‘A Long Novel’, which is so concerned with the rhetoric it means to displace that it hardly sounds like an Ashbery poem at all. Again there is mention of ‘crimes’, and again the tone is portentous. In this case, however, there is a marked absence of the sweet peas and bingo tables that made ‘Album Leaf’ an Ashbery poem, albeit a weakened one. ‘A Long Novel’ is thus instead an Ashbery version of another poet’s poem. The key word here is ‘excesses’:

What will his crimes become, now that her hands  
Have gone to sleep? He gathers deeds

In the pure air, the agent  
Of their factual excesses.  
(ST,64)

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<sup>107</sup> This also recalls O’Hara’s negative emphasis of “achievement” in his defence of Koch.

Jarrell, it will be recalled, took Lowellian excess to be a guarantee of its permanence, suggesting that while ‘most of these excesses seem temporary; what is permanently excessive is an obstinacy of temperament’. Indeed ‘A Long Novel’ sounds much more like a bad copy of a Lowell poem (and so like a late-forties Berryman poem) than it does like Ashbery. The character’s crime consists of ‘factual excesses’, but more to the point, perhaps, the whole poem is marked by rhetorical excess.<sup>108</sup> Certainly the character, ‘he’, has an excessively high opinion of himself: ‘The myrtle dries about his lavish brow’, and ‘he knew,’ we are told, that he ‘was a saint’ (ST,65). The poem is narrated in the character’s style, which is dependent for its effect on the use of meaningless superlatives: ‘He stands quieter than the day’ and ‘He is the purest air’. ‘He’, moreover, has a wearying tendency to over-read things and events, hence, ‘In the foul air/ Each snowflake seems a Piranesi’. In general, then, ‘he’ over-burdens his writing, hence the narrator’s suggestion that, ‘his words are heavy/ With their final meaning’ (ST, 64). Heavy and self-regarding, it not difficult to discern a certain kind of middle generation writing in this parody. And moreover, as the title of the piece indicates, whatever Ashbery thinks of such excessive writing, it is not, in his opinion, poetry.

In different ways, and to varying degrees, ‘The Mythological Poet’, ‘Album Leaf’ and ‘A Long Novel’ show the poet more concerned with the ‘naming of recent scenes of badness’ (as Ashbery puts in ‘The Picture of Little J.A’) than with developing his own style and stance. But reactionary as some of Ashbery’s early poetry was, it was less so than Koch’s. His lengthy poem ‘Fresh Air’ (which opens with a meeting of the ‘Poem Society’) is explicitly a ‘naming of recent scenes of badness’. Supposing, Koch asks himself,

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<sup>108</sup> As with squirting ‘false melancholy over history’, so ‘factual excesses’ might describe any number of poems by Lowell and Berryman.

one goes to the *Hudson Review*  
 With a package of matches and sets fire to the building?  
 One ends up in prison with trial subscriptions  
 To the *Partisan*, *Sewanee*, and *Kenyon Review!*<sup>109</sup>

Arguably 'Fresh Air' is in the tradition of 'The Dunciad', clearly invoked by Koch when, in his first stanza, he rails against the 'kingdom/ Of dullness' and 'the assembled mediocrities'.<sup>110</sup> However, bad as the Middle Generation scene might have seemed, it can hardly be a sufficient response simply to rubbish its periodicals, a strategy which produces a dullness of its own, and which goes to show that the poet is not so sure of his own identity that he can resist naming his other.<sup>111</sup>

However, if the young poet is prone to attend too closely to the writing he means to displace, so a failure to recognise other poetic positions can be equally damaging. The title poem of Ashbery's first volume is a case in point. 'Some Trees' is rhapsodic from the outset and swiftly moves on to propose an untroubled, organic relation between the world and the artist, the poet noting 'A silence already filled with noises,/ A canvas on which emerges// A chorus of smiles, a winter morning' (ST, 51). Almost, then, without the artist having to try, the winter morning is held to 'emerge' on to the canvas. That Ashbery can indulge such an easy view of the artistic process is partly because, as Shoptaw points out, this is a love poem, and so the poet, having discovered the bond of love, is moved to find connections everywhere.<sup>112</sup> More significant, however, is the absence, here, of antagonistic voices, the only other voices we hear in the poem being the

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<sup>109</sup> Koch, *On The Great Atlantic Rainway: Selected Poems 1950-1988* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) p.73. Tate offered Berryman the editorship of the *Sewanee Review* in 1947. See Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, p.160.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>111</sup> By naming periodicals in this way Koch confirms Bourdieu's suggestion that an avant-garde's struggle to establish its way of writing involves opposition to the 'academies, journals, magazines, galleries, publishers etc.' through which the dominant group disseminates its work; Bourdieu, p.32. 'Fresh Air', then, is an instance of 'quasi-mechanical' poetic position taking. 'Savoy' might be an example of O'Hara's more reactive poems.

<sup>112</sup> Shoptaw, p.22.

supportive 'chorus of smiles'. Written in 1948, the poem was among the earliest poems to be included in Some Trees, and feels like the work of an immature poet, one who has an insufficient grasp of other aesthetic positions to question his own easy pronouncements.<sup>113</sup> As the title poem, 'Some Trees' has attracted considerable attention. But this attention, I would suggest, is misguided, with the poem's easy organicism tending to lead critics who dwell on it to an insufficiently dialectical sense of the relation of Ashbery's language to the world.<sup>114</sup>

I would like to conclude this chapter, however, by drawing attention to four poems - 'The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers' 'Errors', 'The Instruction Manual', and 'Two Scenes' - each of which takes some account of the common sense of the middle generation, but responds to it with a subtlety hitherto not apparent: four poems, in other words, which are neither mechanical nor naive. The first of these, 'The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers', was written in 1950 and so is the earliest of the more mature poems in Some Trees.<sup>115</sup> Certainly, as with 'The Mythological Poet' (written three weeks later), 'The Picture of Little J.A.' gains much of its energy from opposition. The first part of the poem opens, vividly, with altercation between Dick and Genevieve. In the second part of the poem the poet seems to concede that his poetry hitherto has been too reactive, remarking that, 'So far is goodness a mere memory/ Or naming of recent scenes of badness' (ST, 28). And in fact to some degree it still is. Hence the description of 'Little J.A., with his 'hard stare, accepting/ Everything, taking

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<sup>113</sup> Williamson arrives at a comparable judgement on the poem. See Alan Williamson, Introspection and Contemporary Poetry (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1984) p148.

<sup>114</sup> See Richard Howard, Alone with America: Essays on the art of Poetry in the United States since 1950, (New York: Atheneum, 1980) pp.24, 36. Ashbery has distanced himself from the poem, describing it as his 'farewell to poetry as we know it - it has a paraphrasable meaning'. See Smith, Poem Alone, p.50.

<sup>115</sup> Kenneth Koch recognised this maturity, recalling in 'Time Zone', his poetic history of the New York School, that the poem made an immediate impression upon him. See Koch, One Train, p.26.

nothing' (ST, 28-9). As with 'The Mythological Poet' it is arguable, here, that Ashbery is not just taking up the neglected term of a prevailing opposition, but that he has particular poems in mind. Thus, while 'The Picture of Little J.A' advertises its relation to a particular poetic child, Theophila Cornewell, the little T.C. of Marvell's poem, there are perhaps other relations about which the poet is less inclined to be candid. For a start, in Ashbery's image of his small self 'among the blazing phlox' we perhaps catch a fleeting glimpse of Wordsworth's 'H.C., Six Years Old', 'A Young Lamb's heart among the full-grown flocks'.<sup>116</sup> The echo is surely there, and so perhaps Ashbery had made something of a study of poetic children. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility then, that he had noticed Berryman's and Lowell's recent examples of the genre (respectively 'The Ball Poem' and 'Buttercups'). Certainly two less accepting children one could hardly find. Berryman's boy, who is his younger self finds it impossible to accept the loss of his ball. Indeed, 'An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy' as the ball bounces away from him.<sup>117</sup> Lowell, on the other hand, describes how when he was left alone as a child, 'I played Napoleon in my attic cell'.<sup>118</sup> Ashbery, then, has good reason to make 'Little J.A.' 'accepting'.

Yet, there are signs in this poem that Ashbery's rhetoric, for all that it is born of an opposition, is gaining strength, and in particular here, the poet is strengthened by enlisting the support of Pasternak. The key word in the epigraph from Safe Conduct is 'spoil' (ST, 27). For the writers of the middle generation, the future was felt likely to spoil art only in the sense that with the passage of time most art would be laid waste. As the common sense had it, then, the artist had to resist time, lest it be the ruin of his work.

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<sup>116</sup> William Wordsworth, The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) p.247.

<sup>117</sup> Berryman, Collected Poems, p.11

<sup>118</sup> Lowell, Poems 1938-49, p.28.

Cleanth Brooks gave the idea important critical clarification. Brooks's stated object in The Well Wrought Urn was to work out 'what residuum if any, is left after we have referred the poem to its historical matrix'.<sup>119</sup> His interest, then, as he established in the words of an anonymous poem, was in those poets (and poems) who '[Time's] spoil of beauty can forbid'.<sup>120</sup> This was not what Pasternak meant by spoilt. Just prior to the sentence which constitutes Ashbery's epigraph, Pasternak describes Mayakovsky (whose life Safe Conduct recounts) as a man for whom, 'The novelty of the age flowed climatically through his blood'.<sup>121</sup> A Modernist to his marrow, Mayakovsky is held to have had no fear of the future, which, if it 'spoilt' him, did so only in presenting him with more occasions for poetry. The future spoilt him, then, as a parent spoils a child, and he mastered it early insofar as he learned to accept its gifts. Hence Ashbery's suggestion, in the second part of his poem, that 'time shall force a gift on each'(ST,28). And hence also his description of his young 'accepting' version of his self ('this comic version') as 'The true one' (ST,29). Which is not to say that this child is father to the man, but that insofar as the young J.A. learned acceptance early, then he prefigured the adult's aesthetic stance. In 'The Picture of Little J.A.', then, Ashbery can be seen to take up the neglected term of a prevailing opposition, but, taking strength from his adventurous reading, he is able to begin to turn that neglected term in to a poetic position of his own.

'Errors' proceeds by trying and resisting a series of connections between seemingly unrelated things and events, endeavouring to acknowledge what is going on around it without insisting on a scheme of things. There is a random factor to the poem, but generally speaking, the principle by which it develops is musical:

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<sup>119</sup> Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry (Cornwall, New York: Cornwall Press Inc., 1948), p.xi.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Boris Pasternak, Safe Conduct: an autobiography and other writings, (New York: New Directions, 1958), p.93.

All was ominous, luminous.  
 Beyond the bed's veils the white walls danced  
 Some violent compunction. Promises,  
 We thought then of your dry portals,  
 Bright cornices of eaves dropping palaces (ST,47)

These lines do not succumb to interpretation. Their significance lies in their sound.

'Promises' prompts thoughts of 'portals' and 'cornices' and 'palaces' not semantically but aurally, through the recurring consonants: the 'p's, 'r's and 's's. The whole poem, in fact is 'whispered', the sibilant consonants of that word unobtrusively providing the poem with its momentum. We find a similar effect in the second part of 'Illustration', where the sounds we hear are 'm's and 'n's ('There is so much in that moment!/ So many attitudes towards that flame'); and again in 'The Grapevine' where the dynamic sounds are the long vowels ('Of who we and all they are/ You all now know. But you know/ After they began to find us out we grew') (ST,49,19). Shoptaw has noticed what he calls the 'distinct sonic environment' of Some Trees.<sup>122</sup> But for him, it constitutes an affectation. (The 'involved consonance' of 'Popular Songs', he suggests, 'anticipates the willful music of "Two Scenes"'.)<sup>123</sup> For O'Hara, the music of Some Trees was integral to its achievement. As his review concluded: 'Faultless music, originality of perception - Mr. Ashbery has written the most beautiful first book to appear in America since Harmonium'.<sup>124</sup> O'Hara is surely right to emphasise Ashbery's music, because, as the impact of 'The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket' made clear, if the young poet wants to make his mark he must develop a distinctive, ear-catching sound. Arguably Lowell's (percussive) sound was more arresting than Ashbery's, but, as O'Hara would no doubt have noticed, Ashbery had at least achieved a sound that was distinct from Lowell's,

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<sup>122</sup> Shoptaw, p.20.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., pp.20,30.

<sup>124</sup> Frank O'Hara, 'Rare Modern', p78.

pursuing soft consonants and long vowels until they opened up another musical world. In 'Errors', then, Ashbery takes his prompt from a felt opposition, but explores his own side of the equation, and so gains a surer sense of his own poetic identity.

'The Instruction Manual' was written under the same demands as 'Errors' - the poet having to produce a poem which is distinctive but not reactionary. And it is here, perhaps, that he handles that pressure most effectively using it to forge a style and stance to which he would return. Criticism has paid the 'Instruction Manual' considerable, and increasingly productive, attention ever since Auden highlighted it in his foreword to the first edition.<sup>125</sup> For Geoff Ward, 'The openness of the Guadalajarans is a cartoon externalisation of the mind's own hospitality to creative play'.<sup>126</sup> Shoptaw, taking up the diction of the poem, suggests that 'Ashbery's "new metal" may best be analysed by isolating the various works from which it is alloyed', (ie, Rousset, Jacob, Whitman, Stevens, Bishop and Baudelaire).<sup>127</sup> Building on these valuable accounts, I want to make it explicit that 'The Instruction Manual' is exactly what it says it is: an instruction manual to the new poetry. In itself this is not, perhaps, the surprise of the poem. The surprise, rather, is that a poem so titled has not always been read this way. (Auden, for instance, was content to remark on the poem's contrast of 'real historical ... situation' and 'sacred memories of a Mexican town'.)<sup>128</sup> Actually, though, this persistent readerly oversight is a symptom of the pressure under which the poem was written.

Ashbery's task was to write an instruction manual to the new poetry which was clear enough to be understood, but which was not so open about its object that it could be dismissed as poetic propaganda. His task, one might say, was to not write 'Fresh Air'.

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<sup>125</sup> W.H.Auden, 'Foreword' to Some Trees (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956) pp.13-14.

<sup>126</sup> Ward, p.102.

<sup>127</sup> Shoptaw, pp.38-40.

<sup>128</sup> W. H. Auden, 'Foreword' to Some Trees, p13.

He achieves this by glossing the opening of the poem in a thin layer of irony. Thus, the situation of the corporate man required to produce a manual to a deadline is so clearly, and flatly realised (a technique Ashbery learned from Roussel) that the reader is thrown off guard. And the fifties reader would surely have been more thrown, both because the situation was faultlessly contemporary, and because, as Shetley points out, the New Criticism had accustomed readers to dramatic monologues, to poems presenting speakers in their situations (witness Berryman's 'Nervous Songs'). The opening passage, then, is a disarming manoeuvre, a brilliant bluff, which Auden, for one, clearly bought. It is a manoeuvre, moreover, that Ashbery has made great use of since, most notably, of course, in 'Decoy'.

Once the bluff has been revealed, however, the poem shows itself as a guide to Ashbery's poetics. We first glimpse the poet at work when he remarks, 'I fancy I see, under the press of having to write the instruction manual,/ Your public square' (ST,14). An external circumstance close to hand occasions a state of mind which is simultaneously imaginative and attentive, and which aims to grasp the public sphere. A little later, having been distracted again by persuasively detailed account of Guadalajara, we catch sight of the poet once more, when he describes the 'dapper fellow' leading the city's parade:

And he wears a moustache, which has been trimmed for  
the occasion,  
His dear one, his wife, is young and pretty; her shawl is  
rose, pink, and white.  
Her slippers are patent leather, in the American fashion,  
And she carries a fan, for she is modest, and does not want  
the crowd to see her face too often. (ST,15)

What marks the dapper fellow out for the poet is his discrete sense of occasion, 'the occasion' itself being typographically highlighted. There is something of the poet in the dapper fellow, no doubt, but his wife also demonstrates Ashberian virtues. She is wedded

to the 'patent' 'American fashion', but is also modest, self-effacing, reluctant to let the crowd to see her face too often. From the parade the poem moves, as Ward points out, to the back streets, where we meet the hospitable Mexican woman. Like her son she is happy to welcome all-comers, to the point of taking in complete strangers. After which happy encounter the reader is conducted to a vantage point and presented with a view of the whole city. At this point he is given gentle instruction. A complete account of such a space, he is advised, should include: 'the rich quarter', 'the poorer quarter', 'the market' and 'the public library', which is to say people of all kinds, their meetings and transactions, and their books.

Insofar as this poem urges a sensibility which is, in turn, fit for the occasion, modest, accepting and open, it is not hard to see that it is an instruction manual for poetry after the middle generation. But it is nothing like 'Fresh Air'. Certainly there is still a trace of the prevailing opposition in the poem's key terms, but the lexicon has clearly widened, and more to the point, the poet is increasingly able to give poetic shape to his controlling concerns. We see this in the poem's opening gambit. 'The Instruction Manual', that is, handles the pressure to be distinctive but not reactionary as well as it does precisely because the poet feeds that pressure into the poem itself: the opening depicting a hard-pressed writer at work. Ashbery, then, is not simply stating the need to write a poetry alive to its occasion; he is beginning actually to incorporate the occasion into his writing.

'Two Scenes' marks the same aesthetic advance. It is a tensely playful poem, its pleasurable tensions acted out in the title. On the one hand the title clearly describes the form of the poem, which offers descriptions of two loosely related scenes. It is almost impossible to believe, however, that a poet as playful as Ashbery would not have been

aware of the pun in his title. Thus while it names the twin parts of the poem, so equally it connotes two competing poetic scenes: the establishment and the avant-garde, perhaps. The poem itself is finely aware of both scenes, but presents them more skilfully (more to its own advantage) than 'Album Leaf'. The first part of the poem, then, is a supple and engaging attempt to give poetic form to the events and dimensions of a given occasion.<sup>129</sup> 'Every corner,' is included, and the smallest contacts (between the toy train and the table, for instance) are noticed. Equally the poem acknowledges the need to lift its head from its immediate surroundings, widening its scope by taking in 'so much news, such noise'. Unlike in 'Album Leaf', Ashbery concentrates here on developing his own expression. Even here, however, the other scene is not entirely disregarded, the easy acceptance of whatever 'destiny' might bring contrasting sharply with middle generation agonising over future prospects. The second part of the poem is slightly more tense, the poem gently distancing itself from the kind of poetry which, after Auden, had become over-burdened with rather ponderous abstract nouns ('honesty', 'history', 'authority', 'poverty'). And the final four lines present an explicit opposition, between an old man and some young cadets. But as the first part of the poem made clear, Ashbery is increasingly confident of his poetic stance, and so the cadets are 'laughing', untroubled by the presence of the old man.

By a detailed charting of the emergence of key terms I hope to have indicated, as I set out to do, the extent to which Ashbery's early poetry was formed in reaction to (was 'impelled' by) the work of the middle generation. However, my second intention was to establish that, governed as much of Some Trees was by this opposition, still Ashbery did come to exceed it in an impressive number of poems. From which it

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<sup>129</sup> One might compare the first part of 'Popular Songs' and 'Glazunoviana' on this score.

inevitably follows that at some point the argument being presented will itself be exceeded. We can see this, I think, in 'Two Scenes'. The title surely does carry the pun outlined above, and in the terms 'destiny', 'history' and 'authority' we do still catch a glimpse of Lowell, Berryman & Co. However, it is equally well argued (by Ward) that the series of abstract nouns show a preoccupation with Auden, and (by a Bloomian account) that the old man among the blue paints is Stevens (minus the guitar).<sup>130</sup> But, to pursue my argument to the end of the line, it does not seem unreasonable to say that 'Two Scenes' marks a significant transition in Ashbery's poetry, the point, perhaps, at which he can confidently leave behind the opposition from which much of his early poetry took its energy, and begin to reckon himself against more senior figures still.

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<sup>130</sup> Ward, p.99.

**Chapter Three**  
**The View from Paris: America and Americans in The Tennis Court Oath**

**The View from Paris: America and Americans in *The Tennis Court Oath***

The Tennis Court Oath is Ashbery's most controversial book.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, to all intents and purposes the book's meaning has become its controversial status in postwar American poetry. In 'How to be a difficult poet', Richard Kostelanetz told New York Times readers that in the early sixties 'Ashbery's work became a controversial issue - a litmus test that seemed to separate advanced tastes from retrograde'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, to enjoy Ashbery's second volume *meant* that one's tastes could be called advanced. More recently, Charles Bernstein has observed that

Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror received a great amount of critical attention and prizes and so on. And so it was incumbent upon so many writers in Lehman's Beyond Amazement to attack as gibberish portions of The Tennis Court Oath, almost like party doctrine...And then it becomes incumbent upon me and other people to say, "Well, that's his best book". Because for one thing it is his best book...<sup>3</sup>

Thus the fact that one party attacked Ashbery's second volume *meant* that the other party (people like Bernstein) had to declare it Ashbery's best book. It would seem that The Tennis Court Oath has come to exist not as a text to be read (in its own terms and for its own preoccupations), but rather as a sign to be deployed in mapping the territory of postwar American poetry. This would seem to be born out by the critical practice of the protagonists in the controversy. In Bloom's view the volume's proponents 'lack consciousness sufficient to feel the genuine (because necessary) heaviness of the poetic past's burden of richness'.<sup>4</sup> For Bernstein the virtue of the book is that it shows the 'framing mechanism' to be 'active'.<sup>5</sup> Bloom, then, laments the lack of a sense of tradition

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<sup>1</sup> For complementary accounts of the controversy surrounding The Tennis Court Oath see Ward, pp.110-113; and Shoptaw, pp.42-44.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, The Old Poetries and the New, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1981), p.99.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Bernstein, Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984, (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1986),p.433.

<sup>4</sup> Bloom, Figures, p.173.

<sup>5</sup> Bernstein, p.390.

and influence, while Bernstein welcomes the book's consciousness of 'the constitutive nature of conventions'.<sup>6</sup> In other words in the face of The Tennis Court Oath each critic does not so much read the text as use it as an opportunity to flex the controlling terms of their critical idiom.

Broadly speaking there are two ways criticism can now respond to this controversy. On the one hand it can be argued that critical opinion of The Tennis Court Oath has diverged as widely as it has because the book is itself effectively meaningless, and so allows a multiplicity of meanings to be imposed upon it. One can then take such meaninglessness to be either a sure sign of failure, or a measure of success (on the LANGUAGE basis that it encourages readers themselves to participate in the generation of meaning).<sup>7</sup> The alternative view of the controversy attending The Tennis Court Oath is that it is a smoke screen concealing the real purpose of the book, that 'mystery you don't want,' has 'surrounded the real' (TCO, 11). This chapter argues the latter, that Ashbery did mean to say, or rather do, something specific, and describable, in his second volume, and therefore if it failed it did so not because it lacked purpose, but because it did not manage clearly to communicate that purpose.

To make this argument, it is necessary to notice first, that for all they argue over its value, critics agree that The Tennis Court Oath is exceptional within the Ashbery corpus. For Bloom, it bears no relation to anything else Ashbery has written, nor can he 'accept the notion that [it] was a necessary phase in the poet's development'.<sup>8</sup> Equally, as Ashbery told John Ash, 'I understand that the LANGUAGE poets consider The

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.392.

<sup>7</sup> Thus Miles Champion writes that 'a relativism grounded in the language itself, and in the practice of that language, *can* demand a greater and more enabling responsiveness from the reader'. Miles Champion, 'Some Thoughts on The Tennis Court Oath', *PN Review* 99, vol. 21, no.1, (Sep-Oct 1994), p.41.

<sup>8</sup> Bloom, Figures, p.174.

Tennis Court Oath to be my only worthwhile book'.<sup>9</sup> Ashbery's impression is confirmed by Bruce Andrews in his essay 'Misrepresentation', the most developed of the LANGUAGE responses to the book. For Andrews The Tennis Court Oath 'has opened rooms, even if Ashbery's own work has not walked into them'.<sup>10</sup> One way or another, then, Ashbery's second volume is held to be an aberration.<sup>11</sup>

Here again there are, broadly speaking, two ways to move the critical debate on from this conclusion. One can resist it, arguing that The Tennis Court Oath is actually much more like Ashbery's other work than has hitherto been acknowledged. Or one can accept that The Tennis Court Oath is the aberration critics take it for, while asking, why in his second volume Ashbery should have employed poetic strategies and tones he did not use before, and has not used since? Shoptaw, who has shown a healthy determination to move the debate on, tends to argue the first of these positions. 'First impressions notwithstanding,' he suggests, 'The Tennis Court Oath is not the unqualified exception it appears to be'.<sup>12</sup> He searches out continuities, playing down, though not denying, the book's idiosyncrasies. My inclination is to place the emphasis the other way. I agree with Shoptaw that The Tennis Court Oath was important, if not perhaps necessary to Ashbery's development, and that therefore there are strategies and concerns which tie it to the rest of Ashbery's work. On balance, however, the book's differences from that other work seem much more striking than its similarities. Bloom, his followers, those contributors to Beyond Amazement and the LANGUAGE poets can hardly all be wrong

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<sup>9</sup> John Ash, 'John Ashbery in Conversation with John Ash', PN Review 46, vol.12, no.2, pp.31-34.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Andrews, 'Misrepresentation (A Text for The Tennis Court Oath of John Ashbery)', in Ron Silliman (ed.) In The American Tree (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1986) p.522.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome McGann suggests that there are in fact 'two Ashbery's to choose from', the one he favours being the Ashbery of 'the experimental projects developed from The Tennis Court Oath (1962) to Three Poems (1972)'; see McGann, Social Values and Poetic Acts: The Historical Judgement of Literary Work, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.199.

<sup>12</sup> Shoptaw, p.44.

on this score. The question, therefore, is what occasioned such a shift in Ashbery's poetry?

There is rarely an easy answer to such a question, but The Tennis Court Oath is a particularly difficult case. Ashbery has disallowed the obvious critical response by repeatedly denying in interview that Parisian culture had any direct impact upon him. While in Paris, he says, 'the intellectual climate didn't rub off on me very much', and feels that he was 'not getting any input from what was happening in France'.<sup>13</sup> More recently he has explained that, he felt 'inhibited at first by not having my own language, by not hearing it spoken around me'.<sup>14</sup> He felt, he says, 'insulated not in a good sense, for quite a long time'.<sup>15</sup>

Increasingly critics have taken notice of Ashbery's declared insulation to things Parisian, and so in trying to account for the aberrant style of The Tennis Court Oath they have been driven to interesting formulations of the relation of text to context. For Geoff Ward,

Living in France 'a place where the language was not spoken', the American Ashbery's attention was shifted away from discourse and conversation towards an awareness of the single word.<sup>16</sup>

For Ward, this 'shift was assisted not only by words' but by the musical examples of Webern and Berio, composers Ashbery heard in Paris.<sup>17</sup> Andrew Ross is more speculative. He suggests that the poems ('these lively relics') are still 'umbilically linked to their originating context'.<sup>18</sup> This context, for Ross, is the 'unconscious', and he

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<sup>13</sup> Koethe, 'An Interview with John Ashbery', p.181.

<sup>14</sup> Herd, 'Ashbery', p34.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ward, p.112.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Ross, The Failure of Modernism: Symptoms of American Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.189.

explains the ellipses and excisions of Ashbery's cut-ups and collages in terms of Freudian dreamwork, exploiting the distinction between

the way the dream is experienced ... and the "codification" of the dream itself inasmuch as it reveals the way in which the unconscious operates through the "rhetoric" of psychic communication.<sup>19</sup>

Ross thus argues that in reading The Tennis Court Oath we need to consider the words displaced in and by Ashbery's texts. Shoptaw accumulates a variety of possible explanations for Ashbery's stylistic shift, documenting his reading in contemporary French poetry, his translations of detective fiction, his contact with the Abstract Expressionists, and his relationship with the French writer Pierre Martory, to whom the book is dedicated.<sup>20</sup>

Each of these commentaries tells a certain truth about The Tennis Court Oath, and as a result it is increasingly possible for the reader to gain a critical hold on the poetry. None of them, however, sets out to account for what is one of the more striking differences between Ashbery's second volume and his first: the shift in what one could call the scope of the poet's concerns. This change of scope has been noticed. Bruce Andrews finds the 'style' of the book 'prophetic'.<sup>21</sup> Similarly Mark Ford observes that the 'reticent de-mythologising of the self' (which for him characterised Some Trees) 'gives way in this next book to a larger scale, almost epic attempt to dismantle the organic symbolist lyric'.<sup>22</sup> I would agree with Andrews and Ford that The Tennis Court Oath is 'prophetic', 'epic', that it is on a 'larger scale'. Certainly it was this large scale that impressed R.W. Flint, the most insightful of the book's early reviewers, the book prompting him to the conclusion that an Ashbery poem was to be 'philosophical, lyric,

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<sup>19</sup> Ross, p.197.

<sup>20</sup> Shoptaw, pp.45,58,65.

<sup>21</sup> Andrews, p.528.

<sup>22</sup> Ford, p.33.

visionary, confessional and historical - all at once and uniformly'.<sup>23</sup> A glance at the table of contents is sufficient to indicate what prompts such a sense of grandeur. While Some Trees presented nothing more immodest by way of titles than 'The Mythological Poet', and opened with the immaculately reserved 'Two Scenes', The Tennis Court Oath offers 'A Last World', 'The New Realism', 'Faust', 'The Ascetic Sensualists', 'Europe', 'Idaho', "'They Dream Only of America'", and, most epic of all, perhaps, 'America'. Moreover, with the exception of 'Civilisation and its Discontents' (written shortly after the publication of The Tennis Court Oath), it was not until the early seventies, when he wrote 'The One Thing That Can Save America', that Ashbery would again risk anything quite so grand-sounding, and there the effect is tempered with irony. Probably the monumental tone indicated by the titles of Ashbery's second book has gone largely unconsidered by criticism because once one starts reading the poetry one finds oneself peering at fragments, straining ones eyes to see how (or whether) the atoms of Ashbery's experimental poetry interlock. Simply put, such is the effort of concentration required to get through the more difficult poems in The Tennis Court Oath that one loses sight of the larger scale on which the volume seemed to promise to work. It is both this larger scale, and its seeming disjunction with the book's characteristic poetic practice that I hope to begin to account for in this chapter.

### **Monumental Studies of America**

When Ashbery talks or writes about his time in Paris, America invariably looms larger in his discourse than Europe. In conversation with Louis Osti, Ashbery sought to explain

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<sup>23</sup> R. W. Flint, 'Poetry Chronicle', in Partisan Review 39:2 (Spring 1962), pp.290, 291.

the 'Americanness' of his writing in terms of his expatriate period. 'Perhaps,' he suggested,

it has something to do with my having lived abroad for so long. As many expatriates, including Gertrude Stein, have pointed out, one thinks more about one's 'Americanness' when one is outside of America.<sup>24</sup>

To read Ashbery's carefully researched article on American artists in Paris ('American Sanctuary in Paris'), one is left with the impression that such expatriates think only of America. Caroline Lee, he writes, 'sums up the thought of many others and gives an acute analysis of this problem' (RS, 89). Lee is quoted at length, and concludes:

One of the questions that intrigues me is to see eventually where on the American horizon my work will sit, as I cannot identify anywhere else, despite my chosen exile (RS, 90).

Similarly, Shirley Goldfarb remarked, 'I feel intensely American, perhaps more so here than when I'm in America' (RS, 92). And it is on this intensely American note that Ashbery concludes his survey of upwards of a dozen artists abroad. 'This perhaps,' he observes,

is the real reason why younger American painters take to Europe: a feeling of wanting to keep their American-ness whole, in the surroundings in which it is most likely to flourish and take root (RS, 96-7).

'American Sanctuary in Paris' was published in 1966, just after Ashbery's return to America, and clearly provided him with an opportunity to investigate his own relation to his culture while himself in 'chosen exile'. It was not, however, only in terms of painters that Ashbery thought this relation through. The art reviews he wrote while in Paris show that for all his reading in twentieth century French poetry, he was equally preoccupied with the writings of Americans abroad: Hawthorne and James cropping up as often as Baudelaire and Sarraute. It is, however, as he indicated to Osti, through the

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<sup>24</sup> Louis Osti, 'The Craft of John Ashbery', *Confrontations* 9, (Fall 1974), p.88.

work and experience of Gertrude Stein that Ashbery has been most inclined to think about the exiled American artist's relation both to their place of exile and to their culture. Introducing a review of an exhibition of the Stein collections at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971, Ashbery offered an observation guaranteed to entice readers and critics of his own work. 'Poets,' he wrote, 'when they write about other artists always tend to write about themselves' (RS, 106). The pretext for the observation is a quotation from Stein's Life of Picasso which Ashbery wanted to turn back on the writer. For a writer as tuned to reflexivity as Ashbery, it can hardly have escaped his notice that he was himself implicated by the remark. Indeed, of all the other artists Ashbery has written about, it is when considering Stein that he has shown himself, and his writing, most clearly. (There is hardly a better short prose introduction to Ashbery's own practice and concerns than his 1957 review of Stein's Stanzas in Meditation).<sup>25</sup> As a result one is inclined to listen very carefully when Ashbery considers Stein's Paris experience:

Why Gertrude Stein...chose to anchor herself in Paris...is not entirely clear. Certainly Paris is, or was, a very agreeable city to live in, but we tend to discount mere hedonism as a motive when dealing with an artist or an intellectual. We know her feeling that America was her country and Paris her home town; that good Americans go to France when they die; but these are typical Steinian statements rather than explanations. One feels there must be a connection between her decision to install herself in Paris...and the beginning of a period that saw the birth of Three Lives and The Making of Americans...The distance from America afforded the proper focus and even the occasion for a monumental study of the making of Americans; the foreign language that surrounded her was probably also a necessary insulation for the immense effort of concentration that this book required (RS, 109).

If, as Ashbery suggests, poets writing about other artists are usually writing about themselves, then passages such as this incline one to agree with Robert Crawford that he is 'the best explainer of his own poems'.<sup>26</sup> Ashbery asks all the questions of

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<sup>25</sup> John Ashbery, 'The Impossible', Poetry 90:4 (July 1957), p.250-254.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Crawford, Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p.105.

Stein's relation to Paris that one wants to ask of his. He quizzes the 'typical Steinian statements' on the matter, clearly distinguishing them from 'explanations'. He interrogates flippant accounts of an artist's interest in a place, insisting that we take seriously their decision to distance themselves from their own culture; a decision, he suggests, that we should look to explain not in terms of their personal circumstances, but in terms of their work. This is strong (even exemplary) criticism, Ashbery acknowledging, though rejecting unambiguously, inadequate accounts of artistic behaviour. His conclusion is equally strong. Stein's 'distance from America,' Ashbery tells us, 'afforded the proper focus and even the occasion for a monumental study of the making of Americans'. This judgement, when it arrives, is delivered without qualification, and so we have no room to doubt Ashbery's authority. The authority, moreover, is not forced. It derives in part from a deep familiarity with Stein which dates back at least as early as his 1957 review. But Ashbery speaks with authority, also, of course, because he has been an artist abroad; because he knows what informs the artist's decision to stay away from his or her culture; and because he knows how separation from that culture affects one's writing. So, because poets always tend to write about themselves when they write about other artists, my argument in this chapter is that, as in Stein's case, Ashbery's distance from America afforded the occasion for a monumental study of Americans.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> This should not seem a remarkable argument. As Robert Crawford documents in *Identifying Poets*, it is a defining feature of twentieth-century poetry in particular that poets with a strong national identity have had to journey physically or rhetorically in order to establish that identity. And more specifically, as Robert von Hallberg points out, the availability of travel scholarships meant that many young American poets had the opportunity to travel to Europe, giving rise to a sub-genre he calls the 'tourist poem'. These poems, he suggest allowed American poets to write 'as social observers, yes, but also as critics of the extreme individualism of their own nation'; Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1985) p.90.

Certainly, as has been indicated, there is evidence that Ashbery was thinking of America while he was in Paris. Equally, I would suggest, there is strong evidence that at this point in his career his characteristic thinking (about the role of art and artists at least) was monumental in style. We have detected this in the titles of The Tennis Court Oath, but we find it confirmed in his art criticism of the period. His introduction to the catalogue accompanying an exhibition of 'New Realist' art is a case in point. Held at the 'Sidney Janis Gallery' in New York, the exhibition opened on October 1st, 1962, shortly after the publication of The Tennis Court Oath.<sup>28</sup> Ashbery opens the piece by describing the genealogy of the term. It is a continuation, he suggests, of the movement 'which began in the nineteenth century at the same time that machines and machine-made objects began to play such an important part in daily life' (RS,81). As such, he suggests, it represents 'an advanced stage of the struggle to determine the real nature of reality which began at the time of Flaubert' (RS,81). This is revolutionary stuff, and certainly as Ashbery then saw it, the New Realists had a quite monumental objective: to 'come to grips with the emptiness of industrialized modern life' (RS,81). It is in his concluding remarks that Ashbery's tone sounds most clearly. 'The unmanageable vastness of our experience,' he observes,

the regrettable unpredictability of our aims and tastes, have been seized on by the New Realists as the core of a continuing situation; that of man on one side and a colorful indifferent universe on the other. There is no moral to be drawn from this, and in any case the artist's work on this as on other occasions is not preaching or even mediation, but translation and exegesis, in order to show us where the balance of power lies in the yet-once-again altered scheme of things. Today it seems to repose in the objects that surround us; that is in our perceptions of them or, simply and once again, in ourselves. (RS,82-3)

As conceptions of the artist's task go, this is monumental. His or her role, Ashbery suggests, 'on this as on other occasions', is to show where 'the balance of power lies'

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<sup>28</sup> See Shoptaw, p.46.

between man and his productions, a balance which has ‘yet-once-again altered’, and which must be correctly assessed if human agency is to be recovered. The artist is at the front line of ‘our experience’, filing reports so that people might understand their place and power in a commodified world.

Nor was ‘New Realism’ the only kind of art prompting Ashbery to revolutionary epithets. Speaking of Roussel’s ‘Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique’, Ashbery notes that the text is made complete by the ‘militant banality of the 59 illustrations which Roussel commissioned of a hack painter through the intermediary of a private detective agency’.<sup>29</sup> Roussel’s ‘militancy’ seems to have been very much part of his appeal for Ashbery at this time. He gleefully describes Roussel’s plays as, ‘a “theater of cruelty” that outdid anything Artaud ever dreamed of, turning a civilized bourgeois audience into a horde of wild beasts’.<sup>30</sup> And in general, the art which interested Ashbery at this time seems to have been that which, for one reason or another, promised a monumental impact. He approves Georges Mathieu’s painting, which inscribes ‘the horror of physical torment and the abstract importance of a historical event’ (RS,143). ‘Mathieu’, he noted,

is, in fact, a public painter. His work commemorates historical events, and he frequently paints in public preferably in some historic site and surrounded by reporters and television cameras. The presence of the public, he says stimulates him. He cannot afford to ruin a painting when there is an audience, hence he rises to the occasion. (RS,144)

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<sup>29</sup> John Ashbery, ‘On Raymond Roussel’, first published as ‘Re-establishing Raymond Roussel’, in *Portfolio and ARTnews Annual* no.6 (Autumn 1962), repr. in Raymond Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, tr. by Trevor Winkfield, (New York: Sun 1977) p.54.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55. Reviewing Vuillard in 1961 Ashbery noted that ‘The “anti-bourgeois” feeling in France is as deep-rooted as the traditions of the French bourgeoisie itself’ (RS, 52). It is this feeling, above all, that Ashbery picked up from his time in France, and from his encounter with Modern French poetry. *The Tennis Court Oath* is anti-bourgeois to a degree that none of his other poetry is: to a degree guaranteed to drive the bourgeois reader away. For detailed accounts of Ashbery’s relation to bourgeois language see Keith Cohen, ‘Ashbery’s Dismantling of Bourgeois Discourse’, in Lehman (ed.), pp. 128-149, and Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry Since the Fifties* (Chicago and London: University of California Press, 1987) pp.211-235.

Two habits of mind emerge from all this. On the one hand it seems clear enough that while he was in Paris Ashbery's thinking was largely oriented towards America. On the other, it would seem that his thinking was uncharacteristically monumental in style during this period. This conjunction is, perhaps, what one would expect from any writer working at a distance. What one detects, after all, from a long range perspective, are not details and nuances, but a general outline, an overview. More precisely, though, it is what one would expect of an alert American writer reflecting on his culture at the end of the 1950s. As early as 1952 Jarrell had noted that American intellectual life had entered the age of criticism. 'The act of criticism' he noted, 'has become the representative or Archetypal act of the intellectual'.<sup>31</sup> And so it stayed throughout the fifties, critics of all kinds setting the pace by setting themselves to the difficult task of defining postwar American culture. The key books of the period, as Paul Breslin points out, were large-scale cultural critiques: David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd (1950), Vance Packard's The Hidden Persuaders (1957), C. Wright Mills' White Collar (1951), and, a little later, Herbert Marcuse's One Dimensional Man (1964).<sup>32</sup> As Norman Mailer put in the Partisan Review symposium, 'Our Country and Our Culture', 'This period smacks of healthy manifestoes'.<sup>33</sup> It was a time, that is for monumental studies of America.

There was good reason in the postwar period for studies of this kind. America's position in the world had altered dramatically. As the editorial to the 'Our Country and Our Culture' symposium observed, following the war there was a need for American artists and intellectuals to re-think their relation to both Europe and the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jarrell, Poetry, p.75.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Breslin, Psycho-Political, p.4.

<sup>33</sup> 'Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium', Partisan Review 19:3 (May-June, 1952), pp.282-326; 19:4 (July-August, 1952) pp.420-450; 19:5 (Sep-Oct, 1952) pp.562-597.

<sup>34</sup> For differing accounts of the 'Our Culture Our Country' symposium see Neil Jmonville, Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America, (Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991) pp.49-101; and James Breslin, From Modern, pp.46-51. What this fascinating

‘For more than a hundred years,’ the editorial noted, ‘America was culturally dependent on Europe’.<sup>35</sup> Following the war, however, ‘America has become the protector of Western civilisation, at least in a military and economic sense’.<sup>36</sup> As for the Soviet Union, the editorial urged the conventional case that American culture ‘must be defended against Russian totalitarianism’.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, if the war had changed American relations with the rest of the world, it had also unleashed economic energies at home that were changing the character of American society. In 1956, the white collar outnumbered the blue collar for the first time in American history, a fact which, as the historian William H. Chafe observes, was held to denote the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society.<sup>38</sup> For C. Wright Mills this transition had extensive implications. ‘In this sixth decade of the twentieth century’ he argued, ‘the structure of a new world is indeed coming in to view’.<sup>39</sup> ‘The Modern age’, he suggested, ‘is being succeeded by a post-modern period’.<sup>40</sup> As Mills saw it then, ‘our basic definitions of self and society ... are being overtaken by new realities’.<sup>41</sup> Both in terms of its relations with the rest of the world, and because of its changing domestic situation, American culture was in need of re-definition.

These two reasons for definition, outward and inward looking, were invariably at odds with one another. Broadly speaking, the problem for intellectuals and artists was whether, as Neil Jumonville, puts it, to affirm or dissent from American culture.<sup>42</sup> The

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document shows is that America and the American way of life was not simply a general and diffuse concern at this time, but was explicitly a subject for co-ordinated collective discussion.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.284.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.114

<sup>39</sup> C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.239.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.236.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Jumonville, pp.49-101. The argument between affirmers and dissenters was waged between journals, the former being broadly identified with *Partisan Review*, the latter with *Dissent*.

impulse to affirm was outward looking. American democracy was all but unanimously held to be preferable to Soviet totality. As Newton Arvin observed,

the culture we profoundly cherish is now disastrously threatened from without; and the truer this becomes, the intenser becomes the awareness of our necessary identification with it.<sup>43</sup>

The problem was that with political democracy came cultural democracy. So while intellectuals like Arvin felt moved by outside forces to cherish American culture, what that culture was most effective at producing was kitsch: 'television, radio, Hollywood movies, mass-market paper-back books ... advertising, and other mass-produced goods and art'.<sup>44</sup> For some intellectuals, such pure products of America posed as great a threat to the American way of life as did Stalinism. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, 'it will require ... the most rigorous and vital kind of criticism to save our American culture from destruction by technocratic illusions'.<sup>45</sup> And for many intellectuals, the agent of such vital and rigorous criticism, the one thing, one might say, that could save America, was avant-garde art. While noting the typical faults of the advanced artist ('pride of caste', 'a much too solemn and devotional view of the artist's vocation', 'distortions of perspective' resulting from 'aloofness') Philip Rahv voiced what was for many critics and intellectuals, an article of faith.<sup>46</sup> 'What the avant-garde actually represents historically,' he argued,

from its very beginning in the early nineteenth century, is the effort to preserve the integrity of art and the intellect amidst the conditions of alienation brought on by the major social forces of the modern era.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> 'Our Country and Our Culture', p.287.

<sup>44</sup> Jumonville, p151.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.303.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.310.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.310.

It had achieved this standing, Rahv argued, by ‘cultivating its own group norms and standards,’ and ‘by resisting the bourgeois incentives to accommodation’, so ‘making a virtue of its separateness from the mass’.<sup>48</sup>

Insofar as almost nobody read it, few collections of poetry have been more separate from the mass than The Tennis Court Oath. Few collections, also, have been quite so resistant to bourgeois accommodation, as is illustrated by ‘White Roses’ with its sharp satire on the life-style feature of the middle-brow magazine (TCO, 35). And rarely, I will argue, has a collection of poetry been predicated on such a strident sense of the social potential of art. My argument, is that the distinctive tones and attitudes, and the characteristic poetic strategies (the cut-ups and collages) of The Tennis Court Oath, find clear echoes in the debate about American culture which forged the intellectual temper of the fifties.<sup>49</sup> It is important to be clear, what kind of critical connection is being implied here. Ashbery, it is worth observing had points of social, professional, and intellectual contact with the critics. Gooch notes a literary party Ashbery threw shortly after his arrival in New York, ‘with many members of the Partisan Review crowd present’.<sup>50</sup> Ashbery’s professional contact was through art criticism. As the decade progressed the debate about American culture began to shift further from the political and into the realm of art criticism (witness Rosenberg’s The Tradition of the New (1959) and Greenberg’s Art and Culture (1961)), Ashbery having started to write art criticism in 1957.

Intellectually, the point of contact clearly concerned the inflated sense of the role of the avant-garde. It is not on such connections, however, real as they are, that the argument

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> In chapter two it was argued, in relation to Shetley, that criticism of Ashbery’s earliest poetry should gain its sense of the time not from the (New) critics, but from the poets, on the grounds that he was reading the poets very attentively then. The reverse applies here because when Ashbery was in Paris he felt ‘rather cut off from American poetry’; Osti, p.85.

<sup>50</sup> Gooch, pp.174.

of this chapter is premised. I want, rather, to imply the looser kind of connection presented by Paul Breslin - the poetry critic who has paid most attention to fifties critical theory - in The Psycho-Political Muse. 'Poets,' Breslin cautiously contends, 'like most thoughtful persons, are at least casually aware of the public debates of their times'.<sup>51</sup> 'I mean only to suggest,' he goes on, 'that comparison of the social theory and the poetry reveals that both participate in a style of thought belonging to their time and place'.<sup>52</sup>

My argument is that in both its monumental conception of the function of the avant-garde artist, and in the various disjunctions and dislocations such a conception gives rise to, The Tennis Court Oath was a text for its occasion, a claim I attempt to establish by setting the poetry alongside the cultural theory of C.Wright Mills. This is not to argue that the book was a success, and in conclusion I will propose that it did not succeed. True to its time, Ashbery's second volume inscribes a conception of what constitutes the proper occasion for poetry which is Modernist in scale. Which is to say that like The Waste Land, with which it bears such ready comparison, the book has its occasion in the state of the culture. And this, I suggest, is the problem with The Tennis Court Oath. It inscribes a sense of the poetic occasion to which Ashbery is temperamentally ill-suited and for which he was not yet poetically equipped. The Tennis Court Oath, that is, proved not to be 'The One Thing That Can Save America'; lacking the poetic modesty, the ironic control, and the supple sense of poetic occasion, that make that later poem so important.

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<sup>51</sup> Paul Breslin, Psycho-Political, p.xiii.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiv.

**'The newspaper is ruining your eyes'**

The extreme disjointedness of much of the poetry in Ashbery's second volume makes it so resistant to interpretation - so hostile, one might say, to readers - that in effect one is required to change the way one reads if one is to take anything from it at all. This demand is very much part of the point of The Tennis Court Oath, and in concluding this chapter I will argue that the failure of the book relates to the high, not to say monumental demand it makes on the reader, arousing, as it does, a mutual resistance. For the moment, however, I propose to read the book on something like its own terms, because I think that for all that it fails, it is an interesting failure; one which tells us something important about the poet's sense of occasion. So, while I will offer interpretive readings (where necessary) of the few poems in the book susceptible to interpretation, in general I propose to proceed by cataloguing those terms and images to which poems return and which, for reasons of local emphasis, or simply because they are repeated so often, seem important to the poet. What emerges is a set of pre-occupations which constitutes a conventional contemporary cultural attitude. Such a procedure is hardly alien to Ashbery criticism, which makes considerable use of the catalogue: collecting up instances of terms, images or whatever, so as to indicate a concern. And this is appropriate because collecting has always been a part of Ashbery's poetic practice, the poet gathering up whatever he happens to find around him: witness the collector's passage in 'The Skaters' (RM,34-35). Arguably, the trouble with The Tennis Court Oath is that it makes a fetish of collecting (a fetish which marks the influence of Roussel), with too many of the poems in the book amounting to little more than collections of fragments.<sup>53</sup> Discussing Ashbery's second volume, then, the critic must be

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<sup>53</sup> Ashbery discussed Roussel's collecting in 'On Raymond Roussel', p.53.

prepared, more than ever, to be an archivist, slavishly cataloguing the items in the poet's collection.<sup>54</sup>

I begin by briefly cataloguing the terms and preoccupations presented in the poem 'America'.<sup>55</sup> Its major concern would seem to be something to do with accumulation. The poem opens by noting a 'Piling upward/ the fact the stars', and a little later in the first section we learn that, 'The stones piled up - /The ribbon - books' (TCO,15). In the second section such piling up is seen to be a rather fruitless process: 'The deep/ additional/ and more and more less deep' (TCO,15). It would seem, in other words, that the more one thing is added to another, the less each becomes in itself. So, in Part Four of the poem, we find that in this 'country/ lined with snow/ only mush was served/ piling up/ the undesired stars' (TCO,18). What is being accumulated is what is undesired, and the result is a kind of pulpy 'mush'. More, in the economy of this poem, is definitely less.

Such images of accumulation dominate the poem, providing the backdrop against which other concerns and pre-occupations take shape. Presenting these in the order in which they arise, in the first section we see a political radical, out in the cold and distanced from the masses: 'The cold anarchist standing/ in his hat./ Arm along the rail/ We were parked/ Millions of us/ The accident was terrible' (TCO,15). A little later the poem begins to question the terms and ideas apparently central to the American way of

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<sup>54</sup> Other readers of *The Tennis Court Oath* have proceeded in a similar manner. See Andrews, pp.520-529; and Andrew Ross, 'Taking the Tennis Court Oath', in Susan M. Schultz (ed.) *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1995) pp.193-210.

<sup>55</sup> The suggestion underpinning this reading is that 'America' tells us something about America, or at least about Ashbery's view of it. This is in itself controversial. Fred Moramarco would not assume that 'America' tells us anything about America, because that would be to presume a point of contact between word and world which, in his view, Ashbery denies. For the moment I only want to signal awareness of this counterview which I will address, when my own account is in place. For Moramarco's argument, see 'The Lonesomeness of Words: A Reevaluation of *The Tennis Court Oath*', in Lehman (ed.), pp.150-162.

life. We hear of 'The person/ Horror - the morsels of his choice', a remark signifying a scepticism which has an echo in the poem's subsequent quizzing of 'liberty'. 'Chain,' the poet predicts, 'to fall apart in his hand/ Someday liberty/ to be of the press' (TCO, 15,19). The image of chains being broken is momentarily promising. The only freedom that ensues, however, is that of 'the press'. The poem's preoccupation with razzmatazz is perhaps related to such scrutinizing of American rhetoric, razzmatazz being the style in which the American nation celebrates itself. In the fourth section we see 'these stars in our flag we don't want/ the flag of film/ waving over the sky' (TCO, 18). It would seem to follow from this that the many stars in the poem are not the real things, but those one finds on the flag, and which, more generally, are central to the iconography of American patriotism. Similarly, all those ribbons and tassels ('Some tassels first then nothing') seem to stand metonymically for the cheerleading and parades by which Americans are encouraged to feel good about their way of life. There is plenty in this poem, however, not to feel good about. Every so often the reality of modern industrial life seems to break through the surface, and when it does the tone becomes slightly sinister. We glimpse 'the lathes around/ the stars with privilege jerks' (TCO,16). We hear 'of the arsenal/ shaded in public/ a hand put up/ lips -' (TCO,17). And, having seen millions of us parked in the first section, we find that by the final section an obstruction has been caused, as 'Cars/ blockade the streets' (TCO,19). Given all of this - the ongoing accumulation, the sceptical treatment of ideological terms, the flashes of patriotism, and the sinister images of industrial life - it would seem likely that 'America' presents the poet's view of America.

If 'America' does indeed constitute something like the poet's expatriate view of his culture, how might one classify that view? Arguably the poem provides an account of

its own attitude in the passage in Part Four which most nearly approaches conventional syntax:

And I am proud  
of these stars in our flag we don't want  
the flag of film  
waving over the sky  
toward us - citizens of some future state.  
We despair in the room, but the stars  
And night persist, knowing we don't want it  
Some tassels first  
then nothing - day  
the odor.  
(TCO,18).

In the terms of the prevailing contemporary opposition, the speaker here seems at first to be an affirmer. He admits to feeling a certain pride at the sight of the flag. As the passage develops, however, it becomes clear that this initial response is little more than a reflex. The flag, the passage goes on to argue, is something unwanted, something which, for all that it gestures towards the 'us' of the poem, actually has relevance only for 'citizens of some future state'. Thus the speaker comes to despair. He contends that 'we don't want' the flag, the tassels, and all that they stand for, on the grounds that they stand, in fact, for 'nothing' real. The speaker does not affirm the patriotic view of America, but shows himself, by his scepticism - and, of course, by his resistance to relentless accumulation and all the mush that it serves up - to be a dissenter. 'America' is a dissenting poem. In this respect, I would argue, it is typical of the poetry Ashbery wrote in the late fifties and early sixties, a claim established, I suggest, by juxtaposing the concerns of The Tennis Court Oath with the contemporary cultural commentary of C.Wright Mills.

C. Wright Mills, as Cornel West notes, was

obsessed with two basic features of postwar America: the decreasing availability of creative human powers in the populace and the stultifying socio-economic circumstances that promoted this decrease.<sup>56</sup>

These circumstances constituted for Mills a new epoch in American history. Thus, in 'Culture and Politics', published in 1959, Mills opened with a Jarrell-like announcement.

'We are at the ending,' he wrote,

of what is called The Modern Age. Just as Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy which Westerners provincially call The Dark Ages, so now The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch.<sup>57</sup>

As a result of this shift, he suggested,

our basic definitions of society and self are being overtaken by new realities. I do not mean merely that we *feel* we are in an epochal transition. I mean that too many of our explanations are derived from the great historical transition from the Medieval to the Modern Age; and that when they are generalized for use today, they become unwieldy, irrelevant, not convincing.<sup>58</sup>

This is monumental cultural criticism if ever there was any. It was grounded, however, in an analysis of the 'new realities' which has proved prescient. In 'The Cultural Apparatus', also published in 1959, Mills noted that

Nowadays in the overdeveloped society, everyday life and the mass arts; private lives and public entertainment; public affairs and the stereotypes put out about it - they reflect one another so closely that it is often impossible to distinguish image from source.<sup>59</sup>

The cause of such indistinguishability, Mills argued, was the cultural apparatus, by which he meant the media and related forms of modern communication, which had become, in his opinion, 'so decisive to experience itself', that

often men do not really believe what 'they see before their very eyes' until they have been 'informed' about it by the national broadcast, the definitive book, the close-up photograph, the official announcement.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p125.

<sup>57</sup> Mills, p.236.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p407.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Thus Mills anticipates the findings of much more recent theorists of the Postmodern condition. In a general sense, he was clearly convinced, as early as 1959, that America had entered a media age. More precisely, in identifying as the chief symptom of that media age the fact that 'it is often impossible to distinguish image from source' Mills anticipates Baudrillard's notion of the order of the simulacrum, which certainly argues the difficulty of distinguishing between 'public affairs and the stereotypes put out about it'. The difference, perhaps, between Mills and Baudrillard, lies in that phrase 'often impossible'. For Mills it was sometimes possible to distinguish the reality of everyday life, private lives and public affairs, from the (outdated) images and stereotypes put out about them, and it was in that possibility that he grounded his dissent against what he took to be the emerging cultural order.

It is both the force and the style of Mills' dissent that makes him important here. He was, in fact, the fiercest of dissenters. He was one of the few writers (Goodman was another) to contribute regularly to both of the leading dissenting journals of the period: Dwight MacDonal's Politics and Irving Howe and Lewis Coser's Dissent. He was, moreover, as Breslin points out, 'the most radical of these critics'.<sup>61</sup>

Mills is intended to play the kind of role in this chapter that Kenneth Burke plays in James Longenbach's account of Wallace Stevens.<sup>62</sup> I am not suggesting, that is, that Mills was an influence on Ashbery, either personal or intellectual - though their worlds did meet at the edges.<sup>63</sup> I am suggesting, rather, that Mills was an affinitive (because

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<sup>61</sup> Paul Breslin, Psycho-Political, p.4.

<sup>62</sup> James Longenbach, Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). My use of Mills' might also compare with the use Ashbery criticism has made of more recent theorists of the Postmodern condition, Baudrillard being the obvious example. For a deft use of Baudrillard in relation to the New York School, see Ward, pp135-176.

<sup>63</sup> Both wrote for the culture pages of the Herald Tribune; both were socially acquainted with Paul Goodman; and both were at Columbia in the early fifties, Mills using his academic position to establish himself as one of the more outspoken New York radicals, while Ashbery was studying there for his MA.

dissenting) contemporary voice, and that therefore if one juxtaposes Ashbery's poetic concerns with Mills' cultural commentary one is able more accurately to discern the extent to which the poetry constituted a response to its cultural occasion.

Top of the list of Ashbery's concerns in The Tennis Court Oath is what one might term the failing rhetoric of the public sphere. Ashbery offers a general treatment of this failure in 'White Roses':

The worst side of it all -  
 The white sunlight on the polished floor -  
 Pressed into service,  
 And then the window closed  
 And the night ends and begins again.  
 Her face goes green, her eyes are green:  
 In the dark corner playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever." I try  
     to describe for you,  
 But you will not listen, you are like the swan.

No stars are there,  
 No stripes,  
 But a blind man's cane poking, however clumsily, into the inmost  
     corners of the house.  
 Nothing can be harmed! Night and day are beginning again!  
 So put away the book,  
 The flowers you were keeping to give someone:  
 Only the white, tremendous foam of the street has any importance,  
 The new white flowers that are beginning to shoot up about now.  
 (TCO,35)

People, this poem seems to be suggesting, are getting out of touch with things and events. The opening image presents one version of such lost contact. White sunlight on a polished floor is the stuff of the glossy magazine life style feature, sunshine on floor boards being a nice addition to the ideal home. Ashbery is suspicious of the sensibility such images construct. The occupants of such homes, he implies, desire no real contact with the sun, hence the fact that their window is closed. Rather they press the sun into

service, valuing it only as it enhances the effect of the floor, and to the extent that it improves the home.<sup>64</sup> The poem clearly deplores such a middle-brow commodification of the natural world. 'White Roses', however, is not simply a high-brow satire on middle-brow aspirations. Ashbery's point about the home-owner's degraded contact with sunlight, would seem to be that it is symptomatic of a more widespread cultural condition.

This is apparent from his attitude to "The Stars and Stripes Forever". Typically Ashbery is tolerant of, even affectionate towards, such popular songs. His intention here, however, is to show that the rhetoric of stars and stripes, the rhetoric by which America likes publicly to define and describe itself, is dangerously out of touch with the facts of the case. The song declares the permanence of the stars and stripes. The poem takes the slightly curious step of insisting that no such stars and stripes exist, which is as much as to say that the song has no basis in fact. More importantly, not only is the song itself hopelessly out of touch with the facts of the case, it distracts the audience from the speaker's own attempts to describe the situation, hence 'I try/ to describe for you/ But you will not listen'. The poet's descriptions fall on deafened ears. The net result is profoundly disabling, as the Beckettian image of a blind man poking clumsily about a room serves to indicate. It is extremely difficult, the poem seems to assert, to negotiate the world when all one has by way of a guide is the inaccurate rhetoric of patriotic songs; and all the more so, when, as the poem's closing lines indicate, things are changing even as one speaks.

'White Roses' works emblematically. Anthems like 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' are themselves emblems - of the way a national group conceives of itself

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<sup>64</sup> Nabokov's Charlotte Haze was just such a magazine reading, ideal home-owner.

collectively. So by asserting that this song has no basis in reality, Ashbery indicates, in an emblematic way, that the rhetoric by which America is publicly described (in which Americans think of their culture) has become dangerously removed from reality. This danger, moreover, is realised when, in 'Two Sonnets', the government officials playing the same old songs fail to notice that blood is being spilled around them:

The iodine bottle sat in the hall  
 And out over the park where crawled roadsters  
 The apricot and purple clouds were  
 And our blood flowed down the grating  
 Of the cream-colored embassy.  
 Inside it they had a record of "The St. Louis Blues".  
 (TCO,20)

To listen to popular songs, with their falsely re-assuring, old-fashioned values, makes it difficult, one might say, to distinguish public affairs from the stereo-types put out about them; so difficult, perhaps, that one becomes blind to bloody reality.

'White Roses' and 'Two Sonnets' are general in tone, using emblems and icons to signify a widespread cultural condition. Elsewhere in The Tennis Court Oath Ashbery is more specific. The deleterious effect of newspapers is a recurring concern. In 'The New Realism' an exasperated speaker loses patience with his newspaper,

...Confound it  
 The arboretum is bursting with jasmine and lilac  
 And all I can smell here is newsprint  
 (TCO,60)

As in The Waste Land, in the world of The Tennis Court Oath there is no lack of vernal activity, the burst of 'jasmine' and 'lilac' indicating that things are changing, that there is no shortage of new life hereabouts. Registering such change, however, is a difficult task and certainly the print media does not seem to be up to the job. Here the newspaper fails to transmit the new and subtle perfumes of 'jasmine' and 'lilac', the only smell it gives off being its own. The journalistic idiom, that is, fails to communicate information about

its putative referent, serving only to get in the way of the situation it purports to present, thereby confounding the matter. Likewise in 'The Tennis Court Oath', the only thing which is said to be 'easily visible' is 'the lettering ... along the edge of the *Times*' (TCO, 11). Newsprint, in other words, does not communicate events but obscures them, and it is 'the *Times*', not the times, that is made easily visible. More explicitly in 'Europe' we are warned that, 'The newspaper is ruining your eyes'. Or as Mills might have put it, so decisive has the newspaper become to experience itself that 'often men do not really believe what "they see before their very eyes"'.<sup>65</sup>

If newspapers are, indeed, ruining people's eyes one response might be simply to do away with them. 'The Ascetic Sensualists' seems to take up this option with its image of,

The scissors, this season, old newspaper.  
The brown suit. Hunted unsuccessfully,  
To be torn down later  
The horse said.  
(TCO, 51)

Strange as this image is, it would seem to carry a certain authority, coming, as it does, from the horse's mouth. And in fact what we are surely offered here is a glimpse of the poet at work: scissors in hand engaged in his occasional practice, during this period, of cutting up texts to produce poetic collages. Ashbery cut up various kinds of text to produce The Tennis Court Oath: American magazines he bought in Paris, 'things like Esquire and Life', and pulp fiction like William Le Queux's Beryl of the Biplane and, as Shoptaw notes, 'Soundings ... a popular novel by A. Hamilton Gibbs, which Ashbery found in his parents home in Sodus'.<sup>65</sup> As Jumonville points out magazines like Esquire and 'mass-market paperback books' were paradigmatic of what dissenting fifties

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<sup>65</sup> Herd, 'Ashbery', p.34; Shoptaw, p.53.

intellectuals termed the middle-brow, or kitsch; the problem with ‘kitsch’ being for Clement Greenberg that it constituted a ‘vicarious experience’, ‘faked sensations’.<sup>66</sup> Arguably Ashbery’s procedure of cutting-up texts was, in part, an act of dissent. Certainly that is what it looks like from ‘The Ascetic Sensualists’. Mention of the scissors is followed by the temporal disjunction of ‘this’, the present ‘season’, and the ‘old newspaper’. An outdated newspaper, in other words, is shown failing to register seasonal change. It is this failure to register change, the poem indicates, that prompts the poet’s decision to mutilate the newspaper. Which leads one to the more general thought that Ashbery’s cut-ups are linked to his repeated references to the inadequacy of the media, so constituting a direct attack on those forms of public discourse which were failing to keep up with events, and which, in the process, were ruining contemporary eyes.

Cataloguing the recurrent terms and images of The Tennis Court Oath, what one finds is a preoccupation with popular idioms which have become detached from events, and which, as a consequence, serve not to register changing situations, but in fact to obscure them from view. The most important public idiom to become detached from events, however, is the language of democracy itself. The volume opens with an image of just such detachment:

What had you been thinking about  
 The face studiously bloodied  
 heaven blotted region  
 I go on loving you like water but  
 there is a terrible breath in the way all of this  
 You were not elected president, yet won the race  
 (TCO,11)

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<sup>66</sup> Jumonville, pp.151, 156. Greenberg cited by Jumonville, p.151.

As in 'Two Sonnets' blood is being spilt while people are thinking about something else. Here, however, the distracted thinking is tied to a failing democratic process; a process that is, which elected the person who did not win the race. The outcome places a considerable strain on the language of democracy. In what sense can the president be said to have been elected? The democratic idiom would seem to be surviving in spite of, rather than as a consequence of, events.

Idiom and events have become similarly detached in 'The Ascetic Sensualists':

These times, by water, the members  
 Balloting, proud stain adrift  
 Over the glass air.  
 See, you must acknowledge.  
 For big charity ball.  
 (TCO,51)

The poem observes that nowadays (in 'these times') the act of balloting has somehow come 'adrift'. It has come adrift, it would seem, in that it is no longer connected to significant objectives and decisions. Here the proud members are balloting for nothing more significant than a 'big charity ball'. Such votes, it is clear, are of little consequence. A variation on this theme is presented in 'Landscape', where a vote simply fails to register:

It decided to vote for ink (the village).  
 There was surprise at the frozen ink  
 That was brought in and possibly rotten.  
 Several new lumps were revealed  
 Near Penalty Avenue.  
 (TCO,55)

Despite the outcome of its vote, the village receives not ink but frozen ink. The democratic process, in other words, fails to deliver the electors what they wanted (just as it failed to deliver when 'You were not elected president, but won the race'). Moreover, when the frozen ink arrives (to the surprise of the electors) the suspicion arises that it is

‘possibly rotten’. Primarily, of course, it is the ink itself that is possibly rotten. The clear implication, however, is that by association the system that failed to deliver the outcome people wanted is itself also ‘rotten’, and indeed, immediately one instance of rottenness is discovered, so ‘Several new lumps were revealed’. One has to be wary, of course, of over-interpretation, but Ashbery is on familiar metaphorical territory here, and as a result the elements of the poem stand in fairly coherent relations to one another. The familiar metaphor which binds the various elements of the poem - the failing political process, a suspicion of rottenness, and the discovery of alarming lumps - is that of the cancerous body politic. The American constitution, it would seem, dependent for its well being on a healthy democracy, is beginning to break down. Here as in ‘The Ascetic Sensualists’, the vote is of little consequence. It has become disconnected, in other words, from events.

In the same way that the various public idioms of popular songs, glossy magazines, and newspapers are shown in The Tennis Court Oath to have become detached from the situations and events they purport to describe, so now it seems that the democratic idiom itself, the idiom by which America was constituted, has ceased to provide an accurate account of the way things now happen. Moreover, as when in ‘White Roses’ the playing of ‘The Stars and Stripes Forever’ did not only fail to describe the situation, but actually prevented other descriptions from being heard, so in this poem any attempt to re-describe the changing political landscape is prevented by the terms and institutions of democracy. Thus,

The bathers’ tree  
 Explained ashes. The pilot knew.  
 All over the country the rapid extension meter  
 Was thrown out of court ... the tomatoes ...  
 (TCO,55)

Here again the poet (Ashes) makes an appearance, this time promising some kind of explanation. The trouble, as far as he seems to see it, is that nationwide the 'rapid extension meter' has been thrown out of court. Such a meter is plainly a device for measuring, or registering rapid and considerable change. Poetry, one might think, is such a meter. Whatever, though, this meter stands for, its findings are not given a hearing, thrown out by the courts, institutional adjunct to the democratic mechanism. Ashbery presents a second, older kind of measuring device in the second paragraph. That device, however, the 'barometer', is now clearly obsolete:

The barometer slides slowly down the wall  
It has finished registering data.  
(TCO,55)

What this catalogue would seem to suggest is that the failure of public registers - whether patriotic, journalistic, or political - to register changed and changing facts of life is a central preoccupation in The Tennis Court Oath: and well it might be. For C. Wright Mills this failure constituted the biggest single political issue of the postwar period. In 'Liberal values in the modern world: the relevance of nineteenth century liberalism today', published in the Anvil and Student Partisan in 1952, Mills made the powerful, and staunchly dissenting argument that liberal ideas of democratic participation, are predicated on the predominance of a certain kind of community which no longer obtained. 'Many classic liberals', he argues,

especially of the Rousseauian and Jeffersonian persuasion, have assumed the predominance of rural or "small city states," in brief, of a small-scale community. Liberal discussion of the general will, and liberal notions of "public opinion" usually rest on such assumptions. We no longer live in this sort of small-scale world.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Mills, p.192.

Returning to this theme two years later, in an article entitled 'Mass Society and Liberal Education', Mills presented what he called the 'classic public of democratic theory'.<sup>68</sup> According to this theory, 'Innumerable discussion circles are knit together' and 'out of the little circles of people talking with one another, the large forces of social movements ... develop'.<sup>69</sup> For Mills this theory simply no longer applied. 'Such,' he observes,

are the images of classic democracy which are still used as the working legitimations of power in American society. You will recognize this description as a set of images out of a fairy tale; they are not adequate even as an approximate model of how this society works.<sup>70</sup>

Ashbery, it seems fair to say, had arrived at a comparable conclusion. Certainly there is a sense that the liberal idiom is working to the wrong scale in 'Landscape'. The failure, there, of the village's vote to deliver the required result is contrasted with the decision of the nation's courts to throw out the means of measuring change. What Mills calls the 'fairy tale' of 'authority by discussion' is thus sustained at the level of village politics, while in fact the real decision-making takes place elsewhere.<sup>71</sup>

There was, moreover, as Mills saw it, a general unwillingness to address the question of a changed social scale, resulting, as he put it in 'Liberal values in a modern world', in the 'detachment of liberalism from the facts of a going society'.<sup>72</sup> This detachment, he argued, was characteristic of all aspects of the American political system, liberalism being the common language of American political life. The whole political system, or more specifically, the rhetoric by which that system functioned, had come adrift from events. Or, as he put it in 'The Conservative Mood', published in 1954 in the first issue of Dissent,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.357.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp.356-357.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Thus as Morris Dickstein puts it, 'Formal democracy thrived while the real issues of the day were excluded from the domain of choice'; Dickstein, p.26.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.189.

...both [campaign liberals and campaign conservatives] use the same liberal rhetoric, largely completed before Lincoln's death, to hold matters in stalemate. Neither party has a political vocabulary - much less political policies - that are up-to-date with the events, problems and structures of modern life.<sup>73</sup>

Nor was the prevailing 'political vocabulary' failing only insofar as it could not itself provide an up-to-date account of the events and structures of modern life. More damagingly, as Mills saw it, the prevailing vocabulary functioned as 'an excellent mask for those who do not, cannot, or will not do what would have to be done to realise its ideals'.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, for Mills, as for Ashbery, the political was not the only public register to have become significantly detached from events. Writing in 1959 in 'The Decline of the Left', Mills described how, in his opinion, 'cultural workmen', by which he meant artists and intellectuals, had become 'cut off from possible publics'.<sup>75</sup> Such 'publics' as remained, he argued, were being, 'turned into masses by those businessmen or commissars who control the means of communication,' such means of communication being means, as Mills saw it, 'of mass distraction'.<sup>76</sup> The distracting effect of so-called 'mass communications' had long been a central concern in Mills' writing. In 'Leisure and the Whole man', published in the New York Herald Tribune in 1953, Mills spoke of the 'ugly clamour' of the media which had become 'so much part of the texture of our daily lives that we do not truly experience it any more'.<sup>77</sup> In one sense, he suggested, such incomplete experience was a good thing, for if people fully experienced the media's clamour, they would become 'blathering idiots'. But such immunity had a price:

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.217.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.189.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.227.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.350.

Our eyes and ears feelings and imaginations withdraw in panic lest they be shattered...By our trained inattention, we thus blunt our capacity for liberating experience as we block off those experiences that would stultify us.<sup>78</sup>

Or as Ashbery put it ‘The newspaper is ruining your eyes’.

What emerges from this juxtaposition of Ashbery’s second volume and Mills’ social criticism, is a substantial terminological convergence, which in turn seems to affirm that in The Tennis Court Oath Ashbery arrived at a conventional (if dissenting) diagnosis of the condition of American culture in the fifties. Mills produced a general description of this condition in his conclusion to ‘The Conservative Mood’. What with the obsolescence of democratic rhetoric, the distracting effect of mass communications, and the general failure of the languages of America’s public sphere to register contemporary events and structures, ‘mind and reality,’ he suggested, in *America in the fifties*, ‘are two separate realms’.<sup>79</sup> Ashbery shared this general sense of the cultural condition, which occasioned, moreover, a comparable metaphor. Thus if mind and reality seemed two separate realms in this period, then it would be true, surely, to contend, as Ashbery did in the most noticed poem of The Tennis Court Oath, that “‘They Dream Only of America’”.

“‘They Dream Only of America’” is one of the most interpreted, and misinterpreted, poems in Ashbery’s oeuvre. In important formal respects it is probably the strongest poem in The Tennis Court Oath, managing to hold within its frame a variety of striking images, which, if they do <sup>not</sup> quite cohere, nor do they collapse into a broken heap, as tends to happen elsewhere in the book. It is understandable that the poem is one of the most anthologised of the volume. But this I would suggest, is part of the reason it has been misinterpreted. The trouble with anthologies is that they sever poems from the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.220.

collection to which they belong: the collection, that is, in whose meaning they participate, and by which their own meaning is moderated. And in performing this act of severance, they tend to detach poems from their occasion. “They Dream Only of America” is significantly informed by both its relation to other poems in the collection, and by its occasion. Not that critics have simply read the poem in isolation. The problem, I would suggest, is that as an anthologised piece “They Dream Only of America” has become emblematic of The Tennis Court Oath, with the result that even those critics who deal with the whole volume have been prone to read the book through the poem, not the poem through the book. Andrew Ross and Bruce Andrews are cases in point. Ross concludes his recent essay on the book with a discussion of the poem, taking it, and so the book, to show

how and why language has nothing at all to do with unmediated expression, except when it chooses to voice parodically the fallacy of such an idea.<sup>80</sup>

Similarly Andrews, in his fragmented style, writes,

“Now he cared only about signs.” Well, not true, not even here, but he does care very deeply and seems suspicious of their instrumental value.<sup>81</sup>

It is this observation which underpins Andrews’s argument about The Tennis Court Oath. He is thus able to conclude that Ashbery’s second book shows how,

Description would be choiceless, “unintentional”. Personhood might be mere transmission ... But a critique in action of the representational capacity of language seems to reaffirm personhood, as choice itself.<sup>82</sup>

This, I would suggest, is not true, and especially not here, because, non-instrumentality, the inability to describe, has a disabling, not an enabling effect on persons.

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<sup>80</sup> Ross, ‘Taking the Tennis Court Oath’, p.209.

<sup>81</sup> Andrews, p.523.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p525.

The poem is, of course, centrally concerned with signs.<sup>83</sup> It is made up of a series of now conventional images of America: Whitman's ('To be lost among the thirteen million pillars of grass'), Twain's ('hiding from darkness in barns/ They can be grown ups now'), Chandler's ('And the murderer's ash tray is more easily'), Stevens' French-influenced version ('The lake a lilac cube'), and the Beats' ('We could drive hundreds of miles/ At night through dandelions') (TCO,13). And it is equally clear that Ashbery cares about these signs. They are, after all, his literary heritage. Arguing like a parable, however, the point of the poem is to show what happens if one comes to care too much about such signs. Thus whenever in the poem the speaker seem to be growing too fond of signs and symbols - at each point at which they seem in danger of preoccupying him - he receives a painful reminder that such fondness (such preoccupation) is inappropriate, dangerous even, as it causes one to neglect the reality of the situation. Thus just as he gets carried away with Whitman's honeyed homoerotic pastoral, so that honey '*burns the throat*' (TCO,13). Likewise just as the Kerouac-like road-trip begins to seem really attractive, so he is reminded of the reality of long car journeys: the driver's headache gets worse, and the travellers have to stop at a 'wire filling station' (TCO,13). And most painfully of all, just as the speaker, seduced by the Freudian cigar, starts thinking of the wrong kind of 'key' (of the key to the detective mystery, not the key to the door he is opening) so he stumbles and breaks his leg. It is a painful experience, one which influences his attitude to language. Fond as he is of signs and the symbolic worlds they conjure, he is reminded that language must sometimes be more matter of fact, hence his prosaic account of the incident, "I would not have broken my leg if I had not fallen/ Against the living room table...." (TCO,13). To become too attached to signs, it would

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<sup>83</sup> For other useful accounts of "They Dream Only of America" see Ward, pp105-110; and Shoptaw, pp.63-66.

seem, is to become so detached from the world of objects, that one is likely to do oneself an injury, one is likely, that is, to find oneself disabled.

Importantly, moreover, this is not, as Ashbery sees it, merely an abstractly linguistic issue. The strong implication of ““They Dream Only of America””, with its general (not to say monumental) title, is that such disabling is now tantamount to a cultural condition. This is an implication, however, which only emerges clearly if one cross-refers to other poems in the collection. This is not the only poem in The Tennis Court Oath in which people stumble awkwardly about their rooms. In ‘White Roses’, it will be recalled, Ashbery presented a blind man, cane in hand, poking precariously about a house. There the man’s clumsy manoeuvres figured the difficulty of negotiating a culture with only the inaccurate rhetoric of its popular songs as a guide. ““They Dream Only of America”” makes a structurally comparable case, and is, if anything, more general in its implications. These implications are carried by the word ‘dream’, which does not only suggest a general state of mind, but stands for the way Americans have learned, ideologically, to think about their culture. Thus, in its broadest metaphorical sense, the word implies that somehow, in America, ‘mind and reality’ have become ‘two separate realms’, with ideas about the country having no firmer grasp of the reality of the situation than does a dream. However, the dream has, of course, a more precise function in American public rhetoric, , the ‘American Dream’ being a crucial ideological construct designed to persuade Americans that anyone from anywhere can make it. Thus, like ‘The Stars and Stripes Forever’ in ‘White Roses’, so here the ‘dream’ stands emblematically for the rhetoric of American public life. Here, as before, the fact that people can dream only of America (cannot grasp the reality of their situation) is a function of the rhetoric

of public life. And the general result, as the poem's closing image figures, is a detached condition by which people are disabled.

Nor, the poem suggests, does such a condition only detach people from things. It detaches them, also, from one another, hence the painful isolation of the final line: "And I am lost without you" (TCO, 13). The line has its meaning in a sense of the relation between what Andrews calls 'instrumentality', description, and communication. In 'Misrepresentation', Andrews correctly aligns the three terms, taking both description and communication for instrumental effects of language. For him, however, description entails lack of choice, and 'humans' should therefore properly be understood to be 'miscommunicating mammals'.<sup>84</sup> But what kind of choice does a non-descriptive language afford? Ashbery's last line, I would suggest, shows us what we choose if we choose with Andrews. Unable to describe, because the available language has become obsolete, the speaker of Ashbery's last line, as Andrews predicts, is equally unable to communicate. If we can't describe how can we know if we are talking about the same thing? Andrews would find such a state of affairs liberating; unshackling people from the ties of reference and freeing them to compose themselves. But such liberation horrifies Ashbery's speaker, for whom non-communication means not the freedom of self-composition, but the disorientation of isolation. 'I am lost,' he says, 'without you', where you might be his lover, his readers, his contemporaries; anyone, that is, who might care to listen.

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<sup>84</sup> Andrews, p.524.

### **‘There is a cure’**

Arguably, of course, all that this reading of “‘They Dream Only of America’” establishes is that Ashbery is uncomfortable with a condition, with and in which Andrews is comfortable: the condition in which, as Ross puts it, ‘language has nothing at all to do with unmediated expression’. By this view what “‘They Dream Only of America’” presents is the Postmodern condition (some might even call it the human condition), with and within which one has to live whether one likes it or not.<sup>85</sup> Ashbery, I argue, does not believe this. He can, I acknowledge, seem to believe it, if one reads “‘They Dream Only of America’” as the poet’s last word on the subject. The poem, however (the second in the book) is more like his first word on the matter. What it does, I would argue, is present a cultural condition to which the poet believes, as he says in ‘Europe’ (fifth from the end and so much more like the last word), that ‘there is a cure’ (TCO,65). To understand the nature of this cure it is helpful again to juxtapose Ashbery with Mills.

For Mills intellectual and artistic activity in his time was unavoidably involved in politics. Writing in ‘The Decline of the Left’ in 1959 he suggested that

The withdrawal of intellectuals from political concerns is, in itself, a political act, but it is a pseudo withdrawal. To withdraw from politics today can only mean ‘in intent’; it cannot mean ‘in effect’. In reality ... to attempt withdrawal is to become subservient to existing authorities and to allow other men to determine the meaning of one’s own work.<sup>86</sup>

The politicization of Abstract Expressionism was a case in point. As Steve Clarke puts it, Abstract Expressionism was systematically promoted ‘as an American style for an American century: individualist, market-orientated, the antithesis of the predominantly

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<sup>85</sup> Jonathan Morse would seem to be one commentator for whom the Postmodern condition is the human condition. Providing an account of Ashbery’s use of cliché heavily influenced, as he indicates, by Baudrillard, he describes Ashbery as ‘a poet of the fallen world’. See Jonathan Morse, ‘Typical Ashbery’, in Schultz (ed.), pp.16,22.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p.231.

social realist mode of the 1930s'.<sup>87</sup> This was an exercise the New York School poets would have been aware of. An unpublished document contained in Frank O'Hara's work-file at the Museum of Modern Art, entitled 'Proposal to the Ford Foundation', makes the exercise explicit. The document makes the case for private funding for touring exhibitions of American art abroad in terms of American foreign policy. It states that,

At a...competitive level, cultural accomplishments have become recognised as essential assets whereby each nation seeks to maintain its prestige, vis-a-vis its presumed allies or potential enemies.<sup>88</sup>

More explicitly still, it presents touring American art as

an effective means of presenting certain aspects of American culture that are little known or frequently misunderstood abroad, and could also do much to correct the distorted picture of the United States that has been so harmful to our entire pattern of official and informal international relations.<sup>89</sup>

Mills, then, was no cultural paranoid. At different levels and to different degrees, in the frostiest period of the cold war artistic activity was politically implicated.

For Mills, however, 'an optimist in the American mold', the only way to respond to such politicisation of art was to turn it to radical advantage.<sup>90</sup> Arguing in 'The Decline of the Left', he presented the view that

In our present situation of the impoverished mind and lack of political will, United States intellectuals, it seems to me, have a unique opportunity to make a new beginning. If we want to, we can be independent craftsmen.<sup>91</sup>

The paradigm for such independent craftsmanship was the practice of the avant-garde.

'Opposition to established culture and politics,' Mills argued, 'often consists of scattered little groups working in small circulation magazines, dealing in unsold cultural

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<sup>87</sup> Steve Clarke, 'Civility and Servility in Ashbery and Ash', (Unpublished essay), no page numbers.

<sup>88</sup> 'Proposal to the Ford Foundation', (Unpublished document contained in Frank O'Hara's work-file, at the Museum of Modern Art)p1.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Dickstein, p.62.

<sup>91</sup> Mills, p.231.

products'.<sup>92</sup> Nor did the avant-garde's political function lie only in its practices. Their task he argued, in 'The Decline of the Left' was to 'confront the new facts of history-making of our time'. He termed this 'the politics of truth,' urging that, it was, 'in this time and in America, the only realistic politics of possible consequence'.<sup>93</sup> Dismayed by the failure of public idioms to register the changed circumstances of American society, he turned, in 'The Social Role of the Intellectual', to the artist-hero. 'The independent artist,' he argued, is among

the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of lively things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity continually to unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp us ... If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of lived experience.<sup>94</sup>

Thus the artist was charged with a serious political role, politics having become for Mills a matter of epistemology.

Ashbery, I would suggest, presents a similar picture of the artist's place and function in society in The Tennis Court Oath. Certainly artistic activity is variously shown to be inextricably involved with politics. 'Faust' turns on the staging of a new production of the opera. From the outset, however, the production is plagued, by socio-economic considerations:

If only the phantom would stop reappearing!  
Business, if you wanted to know, was punk at the opera  
(TCO,47)

And so it continues. In the third stanza we are told that 'the musicians for *Faust!* Were about to go on strike' (TCO,47). While in the fifth stanza we learn that the 'scene

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p.221.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p.235.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p.299.

painters' too are discontented, understandably 'sick of not getting paid' (TCO,47). The end of the poem records an up-turn in opera company's fortunes, at least as measured by the box office, as 'That night the opera/ Was crowded to the rafters' (TCO,47). Art, politics and economics are similarly entangled in 'Landscape'. Thus amid all the political corruption (described above), the art suppliers (if not the artists) seem generally to be profiting. It is their ink, frozen or not, that gets delivered to the village, and in the second stanza the poet notes that, 'The charcoal mines were doing well/ At 9½ per cent' (TCO, 55). The juxtaposition of artistic and socio-economic idioms is sharpest, however, in 'A Life Drama'. The poem's primary juxtaposition is of 'The factory and the palace'(TCO, 39). By nineteenth-century political logic this is a potentially revolutionary combination. Not here, for as the poem puts it (jaggedly) 'The workers - happy,/ Lost memory lost mess happy/ Opium rose'(TCO,39). If the workers, however, are no danger, art, in the shape of a piano, might be. Thus, mid-way through the poem, in a rare moment of coherence, we catch a snatch of nervous dialogue:

Going close to the bowl you said a word  
Me. You forgot the piano. It is  
The one thing that can destroy us.  
(TCO,39).

Broadly speaking all of these poems are produced by collage, and all of them, as a result, are somewhat confusing. The confusion, however, is deliberate and quite effective, the poet projecting a general impression of a situation in which the activity and discourse of art has become unavoidably involved with the discourses of politics and economics. Or as he puts it in 'A White Paper', the poet is generally aware of, 'The political contaminations// Of what he spoke' (TCO, 32)

Equally, and hardly surprisingly, given the collection's zeal for experimentalism, The Tennis Court Oath shares the contemporary faith in the power of the advanced

artist. Thus, while the book's rubble crumbles dangerously, there is invariably someone brave and well-equipped enough to perform an act of rescue, and the Poet, one suspects, is the hero every time. 'The New Realism' closes with just such a discussion, and a representative act of rescue:

Hosts of bulldozers  
 Wrecked the site, and she died laughing  
 Because only once does prosperity let you get away  
 On your doorstep she used to explain  
 How if the returning merchants in the morning hitched the rim of the van  
 In the evening one must be very quick to give them the slip.  
 The judge knocked. The zinnias  
 Had never looked better - red, yellow, and blue  
 They were, and the forget-me-knots and dahlias  
 At least sixty different varieties  
 As the shade went up  
 And the ambulance came crashing through the dust  
 Of the new day...  
 (TCO, 62)

Those in the 'van' are warned to stay ahead of the game, and in particular to stay ahead of the merchants. The merchants, it is clear, would hitch on if they could, and if they did the van, one suspects, would become a band-wagon, weighed down by money, and fame, and expectations. In fact the van does not become a bandwagon in this passage, but it does metamorphose into other kinds of vehicle, and as it does Ashbery indicates the two main functions of the avant-garde artist. The first is to smash those structures (of thought and representation) which have become obsolete, hence the hosts of bulldozers (not, note, daffodils) wrecking the site at the beginning of this passage. The second is, by its daring experiments to find a way of keeping pace with changing circumstances. Thus the bulldozer (having cleared the way for new forms) becomes an ambulance, crashing fearlessly through the dust. Cultural resuscitation is on hand, someone having arrived who is able to register the 'sixty different varieties' that suddenly appeared as the shade went up on the new day. It is in 'Landscape', however, that the Poet is ascribed his most

onerous cultural function. There, it will be recalled, the poet makes a personal appearance, called upon to explain the failure of democracy. Thus,

The bathers' tree  
Explained ashes. The pilot knew.  
All over the country the rapid extension meter  
Was thrown out of court...  
(TCO,55)

There are two familiar notions of poetic authority present in these lines. Like Eliot, then, at the end of The Waste Land, 'expert with sail and oar', his 'controlling hands' on the tiller, the poet imagines himself a pilot, navigating the culture through its difficult passage.<sup>95</sup> As Ashbery indicates, however, underpinning this Modernist faith, is an older, and still more confident notion of poetic authority, alluded to here by the presence in court of 'the rapid extension meter'. Here, then, is contemporary poetry, its flexible metrics challenging the legislature for the right to describe the world. Thus Ashbery betrays the high Romantic impulse that must underpin all avant-garde activity, his dramatic gesture enacting the Shelleyan faith, that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Perhaps the most interesting point of contact, however, to emerge from a juxtaposition of Ashbery's poetry and Mills' cultural commentary, concerns the manner in which the avant-garde was to perform its salvatory role. The Tennis Court Oath embodies the contemporary view that the role of the 'independent artist' was to 'confront the new facts of history-making of our time', and by 'fresh perception', to 'unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp us'. This is apparent in what can properly be called the optics of The Tennis Court Oath. Thus, one thing a catalogue of the collection's repeated terms

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<sup>95</sup> Eliot, p.146.

and images reveals is a preoccupation with sight. Wherever one looks people are being urged to see things clearly. In 'The Suspended Life', Julian is asked,

Do you see  
The difference between weak handshakes  
And freezing to death in a tub of ice and snow  
Called a home by some, but it lacks runners,  
Do you?  
(TCO,37)

In 'Rain', the speaker notes that 'At night,/ Curious - I'd seen this tall girl', following which sighting he has the confidence to assert that 'The facts have hinged on my reply' (TCO,30). In 'Our Youth' someone, the reader perhaps, is asked, 'Do you know it? Hasn't she/ Observed you too? Haven't you been observed to her?', questions which lead to a disquisition on seeing (TCO,41). 'The Ticket' presents a more technical kind of seeing, 'The scientific gaze', the value of which is that it is 'Automatically taking things in, that had not been spoiled, sordid' (TCO, 43). In 'The Ascetic Sensualists' the reader is urged, 'See, you must acknowledge', and later, in its closing section, pays tribute to the reader's sharpened eyes: 'You see well, the perverted things you wanted gone in a group of colored lights all lucky for you' (TCO,51,54). And, in one of the most visual moments of the book, in 'Idaho', Carol points a telegram out to Cornelia:

"See?" She pointed to the table.  
Cornelia unfolded the piece of crude blue paper that is a French telegra.  
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(TCO, 92).

Everywhere, in The Tennis Court Oath the reader (his or her eyes having been damaged, it will be recalled, by the newspaper) is urged to try and see things more clearly. And this exhortation to 'see' is not merely a rhetorical gesture, Ashbery trying his hardest with this text actually to enhance readers' vision. In 'Idaho' as in Three

Madrigals (written in 1958 but published a decade later), Ashbery makes extensive use of what Shoptaw helpfully terms ‘painterly punctuation’:

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(TCO, 91)

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
(TCO, 93)

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(TCO, 93)<sup>96</sup>

What, one might wonder is the reader to make of this? Certainly ‘He is not a man,’ as Ashbery suggests in ‘How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...’, ‘Who can read these signs ...’ (Ashbery’s ellipses) (TCO, 26). But if one can’t read them, how is one to grasp their significance? Perhaps the point is to do what one has to if one wants to quote them, which is to count them; a most taxing visual procedure. By this account the poet becomes a kind of cultural optician, his painterly punctuation encouraging the reader to look closer, to establish the facts of the case, to ‘believe what “they see before their very eyes”’.

One would not want to insist too strongly on the optician analogy. Equally, however, the painterly punctuation was not the only means by which Ashbery intended to bring the reader’s eyes directly into play. His cut-up procedure can be seen to have sought a comparable effect. This is apparent from the accounts of the period’s other significant cut-and-paste poet William S. Burroughs.<sup>97</sup> Burroughs explained in interview in 1966 that it was ‘in Paris in the summer of 1960’ that he first became interested in the possibilities of the technique.<sup>98</sup> Noting in passing that The Waste Land was the first great

<sup>96</sup> Shoptaw, p.54.

<sup>97</sup> Some of Burroughs cut-ups were published in the collaborations special issue of Locus Solus; pp.148-151.

<sup>98</sup> Conrad Knickerbocker, ‘Interview with William S. Burroughs’, in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, The Third Mind (London: John Calder, 1979), p.3.

cut-up poem' he explains the procedure explicitly in terms of its optical value. Cut-ups, he explains,

make explicit a psychosensory process that is going on all the time anyway. Somebody is reading a newspaper, and his eye follows the column in proper Aristotelian manner, one idea and a sentence at a time. But subliminally he is reading the columns on either side and is aware of the person sitting next to him ... That's a cut-up - a juxtaposition of what's happening outside and what you're thinking of ... Most people don't see what's going on around them. That's my principal message to writers: For God's sake keep your eyes open. Notice what's going on around you.<sup>99</sup>

The point of cut-ups as Burroughs saw it, was to open the reader's eyes to what was going on around them. It was, moreover, an optic for its time. In 'Cut-ups: a Project for Disastrous Success', Brion Gysin, (the self-proclaimed first cut-up poet and the writer from whom Burroughs got the idea) observes that:

Cut-ups are Machine Age Knife-magic ... Cut this page now. But copies - after all, we are in Proliferation, too - to do cut-ups and fold-ins until we can deliver the Reality Machine in commercially reasonable quantities.<sup>100</sup>

Ashbery, I would suggest, thought of the cut-up procedure in a similar way, as is confirmed by a brief visual reading of his longest cut-up poem 'Europe'. Writing to Ashbery in 1960 Frank O'Hara described 'Europe' as,

the most striking thing since *The Wasteland* (sic.), and so far I understand it about as well as Harriet Monroe understood *TW*. But I'm coming along and it is a great pleasure to find something again so intriguing, compelling and attention-demanding, and mysterious.<sup>101</sup>

The key phrase here is 'attention-demanding', the point of the poem being, as O'Hara implies, to demand of the reader a heightened attention (attention dulled by the kind of pulp-fiction 'Europe' cuts up) in order that he or she should be better equipped to face what Mills termed 'the new facts of history-making of our time'. Viewed like this the

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>100</sup> Brion Gysin, 'Cut-ups: a Project for Disastrous Success', in Burroughs and Gysin, p.51.

<sup>101</sup> Frank O'Hara, letter to John Ashbery, 7 January 1960, cited in Shoptaw, p.359.

poem can be seen to offer a kind of visual argument. Freely acknowledging, then, that any interpretation of a poem as eccentric as 'Europe' could only ever hope for plausibility at best, I would suggest the following account of the poem.<sup>102</sup>

The poem opens with an image of constructive destruction, the poet deploying 'her/ construction ball'(TCO,64). The ball is like the bulldozers in 'The New Realism', brought in to wreck outdated, and inadequate forms of representation. Such forms, the poet informs us in section seven are 'absolute, unthinking/ menace to our way of life' (TCO,64). What he means by this becomes apparent in section eight where we are presented with an uncut passage from Beryl of the Biplane, the only completely uncut passage in the poem. Such pulp fiction, the poet is indicating is a 'menace to our way of life', constituting, as has been indicated before, a degraded cultural condition. Not that this degraded condition need necessarily prove fatal, for as the poet indicates in section nine, 'there is a cure' (TCO,65). Whatever the cure is however, it will involve surgery, the poet announcing in section 12 that 'the surgeon must operate' (TCO,65). This metaphor cuts two ways. First the surgeon (who is the poet) must cut up those forms of writing which dull people's attention. Second, in collaging the materials together (with other kinds of material) and so in requiring the reader to attend to two things at once, the poet is, in effect, operating on the reader's eyes, enabling him to see things more clearly. What follows then are some forty-five sections of cutting and splicing, the reader being left to negotiate their own way around a text which seems to defy interpretation, but which involves the kind of tax on the eyes made by a jump-cut movie-sequence. Then, in section 57 we are finally given something we can read in the shape of <sup>ca</sup>fourteen-line completed poem. It is the one section in the poem that makes anything like extended

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<sup>102</sup> For other extended accounts of Europe, see Shoptaw, pp.55-63; Ford, pp.60-61; David Shapiro, John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp.70-78 .

sense, its purpose being to tell us why all the other sections don't make such sense. Thus the poet announces,

We are not loved more than now  
The newspaper is ruining your eyes.  
(TCO,74)

All that has gone before is a loving gesture, the poet risking the reader's wrath in the interest of trying to cure his or her culturally induced eye-condition. This, however, is as far as he is prepared to go by way of explanation, and there follow 57 further sections of cutting and splicing until, with section 104 we arrive at a passage which simply and concretely refuses to be read hermeneutically, and which insists on its visual status: a passage that is with four words, 'blaze', 'out', 'aviators', 'dastardly' contained within boxes the poet has actually drawn on to the page (TCO,82). The baffled reader, if they have got this far, will no doubt only be more baffled. For the reader, however, who has noticed that the point of this text is not, as it were, to read it, but to see it, to acknowledge it, and so allow it to help him see things more clearly, then this explicitly visual section will feel like something of a climax, a conclusion to the argument. He or she will realise, perhaps, that the operation has been completed, and if, in fact, it has been successful, then the reader will further understand exactly what is meant when, in the very next section (105), a voice says,

We must be a little more wary in  
future dear.  
(TCO,82)

If, in fact, the poetic operation has worked, and if we are as a result a little more wary in future, then we will, perhaps, find some way of negotiating the tricky double columns of section 107. And more to the point, perhaps, we will understand what has been achieved

when, in the final section, a voice cut (one might say liberated) from its pulp fiction environment, observes that 'Half an hour later' (the reading time, perhaps, of the poem),

Ronald recognised him.  
They suddenly saw a beam of intense, white light,  
A miniature searchlight of great brilliance,  
- pierce the darkness, skyward.

They now recognised to be a acetylene,  
a cylinder mounted  
upon a light tripod of aluminium  
with a bright reflector behind the gas jet ...  
(TCO,84)

Some readers, no doubt, will find this account of the poem implausible (any reading, after all, of a poem as outlandish as 'Europe' will always feel somewhat far-fetched). The very idea, for instance that such a fragmented poem should have the kind of argument I am suggesting, might itself seem unlikely. In fact, though, Ashbery was interested in this kind of argument by structure at this point in his career. As he said in his biographical statement for A Controversy of Poets (1965),

What I like about music is its ability of ... carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of the argument remain unknown quantities ... I would like to do this in poetry.<sup>103</sup>

Music of course, is not a visual art, but what the analogy means for poetry, I would suggest, is the kind of concrete style of arguing I have demonstrated in 'Europe's' visual impact. Or, as Ashbery told Louis Osti, 'This collection presents, in a concrete sort of way, some things that are unintelligible as well as some things that are intelligible'.<sup>104</sup>

Moreover, if Ashbery's collaged poem is making an argument, it is plausible to suggest that it is an argument to do with the way people negotiate their media world. Thus, as he said of Marianne Moore's early collages, 'they were a necessary lesson in how to live

<sup>103</sup> Paris Leary and Robert Kelly (eds.) A Controversy of Poets (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1965), p.523.

<sup>104</sup> Osti, p.95

in our world of “media”, how to deal with the unwanted information that constantly accumulates around us’.<sup>105</sup> It is also worth observing (in the interests of plausibility) that at least one of Ashbery’s contemporaries read the poem in these terms. R.W. Flint told his readers that

this extreme disjointedness proves to have a tonal unity in no way dependent on meter or even cadence conventionally understood, but rather on a cadence of feeling-sight ....<sup>106</sup>

However, perhaps the final argument for a visual account of ‘Europe’ is supplied by the version of the poem published in A Controversy of Poets. There the poem is laid out differently, reformatted to suit the narrow pages of the anthology. Spaces between lines are closed up. The section numbers are placed not above the sections, but stand unobtrusively in the margins - not breaking the poem up, but allowing it to run on smoothly. And when we get to section 104, we find just four free-floating words. The lines have been taken out, as if somehow they didn’t matter. What this text shows us, however, is that decisively they did matter. Anthologised, ‘Europe’ has a very different look, and a very different feel. And as a consequence it has a very different meaning.

## Conclusion

The problem, however, is that if readers were wary of anything as a result of reading The Tennis Court Oath, it was of reading more Ashbery, and precisely because it distanced him from readers Ashbery has tended in interview to distance himself from his second book. He does not, however, feel that the book had no value, as emerged from an interesting exchange with Osti:

Interviewer: Do you ... fear that these poems are ineffective, simply because they are not understood, or misunderstood?

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<sup>105</sup> Ashbery, ‘Jerboas, Pelicans and Peewees’, Bookweek, vol.iv, no.8 (30 October, 1966), p.8.

<sup>106</sup> Flint, p.290.

Ashbery: Yes, I'd say that was probably true of many of the poems in The Tennis Court Oath .... This collection presents, in a sort of concrete way, something that is unintelligible as well as somethings that are intelligible. And this was the dilemma of understanding that I was actually trying to duplicate, or rather, reproduce in the poems. I suppose if the majority of readers don't get anything out of a poem then it is ineffective.... If this happens, then I have undoubtedly failed.<sup>107</sup>

As Ashbery tells it, then, in the instrumental terms of intelligibility and effectiveness, The Tennis Court Oath failed because it failed to communicate. In fact, I would suggest, Ashbery's communicative failure was twofold, those who value the book (Andrews, for example) tending to misrepresent it, and those to whom it was addressed (the American reading public) rejecting it out of hand. In both cases, I would suggest, the breakdown in communication arose from Ashbery's unusually maladroit relation to the poetic occasion.

The Tennis Court Oath, I have argued, is not as Andrews suggests, 'a critique in action of the representational capacity of language', nor does it put 'the reign of description in the dock'.<sup>108</sup> It is, rather, a critique of a particular language that had become (in a particular way at a particular time) unrepresentative, and which was therefore failing to describe contemporary reality. And indeed far from denying the representational capacity of language, the book is grounded in the old-fashioned avant-garde faith that new forms of language will enable new ways of seeing. Andrews, then, has come to read The Tennis Court Oath as something like its opposite.<sup>109</sup> Ashbery, however, is partly to blame for the misrepresentation of his text. The problem was that having dismantled a language he felt was failing to make contact with changing circumstances, Ashbery's alternative to that language was unconvincing; or, to be more

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<sup>107</sup> Osti, p.95.

<sup>108</sup> Andrews, p.525.

<sup>109</sup> Likewise, recent proponents of the cut-up form have lost sight of its original optical function. Thus, noting no contradiction between his account of the form and Burroughs's earlier observations, Gérard-Georges Lemaire suggests that the poems 'can be considered as the matrix of the great treatise of deconstruction they were working on'; Lemaire, '23 Stitches Taken' in, Burroughs and Gysin, p.18.

precise, the way he figured the proper relation of language to events was unconvincing. As a trope for the way language encounters the world 'seeing' is superficially attractive, suggesting that language is somehow at one with perception. However, as a model of the way language works, the notion of permanent immediate contact is no more persuasive than the idea of permanent detachment; not the least problem being that as a trope 'seeing' carries with it a dimension of language it wants implicitly to deny. A poetics of seeing is thus ripe for deconstruction.<sup>110</sup> The term 'occasion' enables the poet to mediate between these poles of permanent immediate contact, and permanent detachment; between a model which shows language to be dependent on events, and a model which shows it to be free from events. However, a poetic utterance can be taken to meet its occasion only if it manages to be appropriate to it, a condition the poet can only finally be said to have achieved if he finds a form of expression which others also party to the occasion find convincing. The truly occasional poem, then, is both in touch with events, and calls upon the poet to exercise all the resources of language.

The problem with The Tennis Court Oath, was that for all that its chief concern was to re-establish some degree of contact between language and events, Ashbery himself (insulated, as he says he was by the language barrier from his Paris environment) had become largely out of touch with events. As a result his sense of what it might mean for language to be in contact with events is idealised. Having very convincingly dismantled a language which he felt had become out of touch, Ashbery proposed in its stead an unconvincing model of the way contact might be re-established. It is not

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<sup>110</sup> Ward provides a most useful discussion of the inadequacies of a poetics of seeing; Ward p55. For an enthusiastic history of American poetics of seeing see Carole Anne Taylor, A Poetics of Seeing: The Implications of Visual Form in Modern Poetry (New York and London: Garland Publishing inc., 1985).

surprising, then, that poets of a deconstructive disposition should have found Ashbery's critique of language more resonant than his efforts to renew it.

Not that The Tennis Court Oath was in no sense an occasional book, its occasion being, in the style of The Waste Land, the state of American culture. Even on this larger scale, however, Ashbery's sense of the occasion proved unusually maladroit. As I have indicated, Ashbery's sense of the occasion is typically collaborative. He takes account of other voices, other impressions, and forms his utterance in collaboration with them. In Paris, however, he had no collaborator. He showed his poems to his close friend Pierre Martory, but as he says, 'He [Martory] wasn't used to modern American poetry', and so they didn't have 'any common roots'.<sup>111</sup> He would also send poems back to O'Hara, Koch, and Schuyler, for criticism, but 'I never seemed to get enough'.<sup>112</sup> Koch and O'Hara, he notes, praised the poems, but, from a distance, Ashbery was never 'sure whether they were doing that just because we were pals'.<sup>113</sup> His only collaborative relationship, then, was the one he enjoyed with the texts he was cutting up - the pulp fiction and the middle-brow magazines - cut-ups being, as Koch made clear in his note on the collaborations issue of Locus Solus, a form of collaboration.<sup>114</sup> Any serious artist, one suspects, who collaborated towards a sense of their culture with the middle-brow magazines of the period would soon develop a certain hostility towards that culture. And The Tennis Court Oath is nothing if not hostile: rebarbative in style, often explicitly offensive to some reader-like other ('I detest you!'), merciless towards the middle-brow, and cruelly satirical (in such poems as 'This Suspended Life', and 'Night') of the Americans and their way of life (TCO,50). Such avant-garde hostility, it is claimed, is

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<sup>111</sup> Herd, 'Ashbery', p.34.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Koch, Locus Solus II, pp.196-7.

born of affection. Thus as Paul Goodman saw it, in 'Advance-garde writing, 1900-1950', the advanced artist's relation to his audience should be one of 'loving and hostile aggression', their duty being to shock the reader out of outmoded mores.<sup>115</sup> Buoyed by an inflated sense of the avant-garde's role, and jaundiced by over-exposure to middle-brow culture, Ashbery took it upon himself in The Tennis Court Oath to shock his readers out of their cultural habits, and into new ways of seeing.

The trouble was (and as Ashbery was unable properly to register from Paris) American readers did not take kindly to such hostility, and, if the reviews are anything to go by, they were certainly not ready to be told by an expatriate avant-garde poet that their habits needed changing. Thus, while some reviewers simply rejected the book as poetic 'wreckage', many detected, and disliked, the high-minded tone.<sup>116</sup> John Simon found the book 'arrogant', and Paul Carroll felt 'annoyed' because the poetry made him 'feel stupid'.<sup>117</sup> While others, like Mona van Duyn, detected the poet's monumental intention, but simply refused to play ball.

If a state of continuous exasperation, a continuous frustration of expectation, a continuous titillation of the imagination are sufficient response to a series of thirty-one poems, then these have been successful. But to be satisfied with such a response I must change my notion of poetry.<sup>118</sup>

Duyn knew well enough that the point of The Tennis Court Oath was to make her change her habits. She did not, however, share the view that her cultural habits needed changing. She did not, that is, share the poet's sense of their occasion.

Distanced from American and from Americans, The Tennis Court Oath embodies a Modernist sensibility: monumental in scale and disdainful in tone. With Rivers and

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<sup>115</sup> Goodman, p.378

<sup>116</sup> Samuel French Morse, 'A Baker's Dozen', The Virginia Quarterly 38:2, (Winter 1962), p.330.

<sup>117</sup> John Simon, 'More Brass Than Enduring', The Hudson Review, vol.15, no.3 (Autumn 1962), p.457; Paul Carroll, The Poem In Its Skin (Chicago: Big Table Publishing Company, 1968), p.6.

<sup>118</sup> Mona van Duyn, 'Ways to Meaning', Poetry 100:6, September 1962, p.394.

Mountains, The Double Dream of Spring, and, very interestingly, with the critical prose he wrote through the sixties, Ashbery set out to recover his intimacy with the occasion.

**Chapter Four**  
**Experimenting in Public: Ashbery and Oppen in the sixties**

### Experimenting in Public: Ashbery and Oppen in the 1960s

American poetry of the 1960s was motivated by conflicting impulses. The first was the impulse to experiment. As the poet-critic Paul Carroll observed in 1968, his generation of poets

was on the high, happy adventure of creating and innovating a complex of new ways in which to view our common condition - an adventure which in its abundance, freshness and originality is, in my opinion, as interesting as any since the Olympians of 1917.<sup>1</sup>

The second impulse was the impulse to declare. Almost without exception American poets opposed their country's involvement in Vietnam, and many felt the need to declare that opposition. On refusing a \$5,000 grant from the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities awarded to his The Sixties Press, Robert Bly declared,

Since the Administration is maiming an entire nation ... it is insensitive, even indecent, for that Administration to come forward with money for poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Broadly speaking, then, American poets writing in the 1960s felt the need to experiment with new forms of expression, and a pressure to express themselves clearly and without misunderstanding. The result was a conflict of interests which few serious poets felt able to disregard, and the specific intention of this chapter is to judge Ashbery's response to that conflict.

In the context of the thesis as a whole, the more general objective of the chapter is to consider how Ashbery's sense of the occasion developed during his negotiation of this conflict of poetic interests. What emerges from this consideration is that Ashbery's efforts to take account of the divergent demands facing sixties American poets actually took the form of very careful thinking about the occasion - about what kinds of occasion should give rise to poetry, and about how the poet should position himself (and his

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Carroll, *The Poem In Its Skin* (Chicago: Big Table Publishing Company, 1968) p.230.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Carroll, pp.258-9.

audience) in relation to the occasion of the poem. This might seem a rather abstracted way of treating very pressing questions. In fact, though, the conflict of interests motivating artists in the sixties is helpfully mapped by two kinds of artistic occasion, each in its way characteristic of the decade's sensibility.

The first is the art event known as the Happening. As Susan Sontag saw it in 1962, the Happening was a conceptual art form whose function was to be understood in relation to recent art history. Happenings 'register,' she suggested,

a protest against the museum conception of art - the idea that the job of the artist is to make things to be preserved and cherished.<sup>3</sup>

And that Happenings had this significance resulted, as Sontag saw it, from their occasional character:

Once dismantled after a given performance or a series of performances, it is never revived, never performed again. In part, this has to do with the deliberately occasional materials which go into Happenings - paper, wooden crates, tin cans, burlap sacks, foods, walls painted for the occasion - materials which are often literally consumed, or destroyed, in the course of the performance.<sup>4</sup>

The Happening was an experimental art form which emerged from a dissatisfaction with prevailing notions of art; and in a highly conceptual way it was an art form 'for the occasion', its significance lying in the fact that it would not outlast its performance. The second kind of artistic occasion characteristic of the sixties was the protest reading. Cary Nelson recalls that,

Hearing Ginsberg read "Wichita Vortex Sutra" during the war was exhilarating. In a large audience the declaration of the war's end was collectively purgative.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Happenings: an art of radical juxtaposition', in *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994) p.268.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p.267.

<sup>5</sup> Cary Nelson, *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1981) p.15.

Such exhilaration, he observes, is not easily recovered. Ginsberg's 'Pentagon Exorcism', he suggests, is

essentially an unmodulated chant that is hardly a poem at all, retains none of the drama of its most appropriate public occasion - the 1967 march on the Pentagon.<sup>6</sup>

In one important respect, Ginsberg's anti-war poetry was like the Happening, being written for occasions which it tended not to outlast, and both kinds of art were thus in some sense occasional. As will become apparent, however, they differed substantially, in their approach to and use of the occasion.

Ashbery's sense of the poetic occasion developed substantially during the sixties - much in line with the difference between the conceptual sense of the occasion embodied by the Happening, and the collective sense pre-supposed by the reading. And this development, I argue, constituted his response to the conflicting demands facing the sixties poet. I attempt to estimate whether, in the event, this response was adequate - or whether, in fact, any response to such conflicting demands could have been adequate - by comparing Ashbery with George Oppen, a poet who felt the tension between the need to experiment and the need to declare as acutely as any. As elsewhere in the thesis the comparison starts with prose and ends with poetry. In the first section I attempt to gain a clear sense of the conflicting demands on the sixties poet through a consideration of contemporary and retrospective critical accounts of the period. In the second I begin to gauge how Ashbery and Oppen responded to the conflict through their non-poetic writings of the period. Finally, I intersperse accounts of Ashbery's Rivers and Mountains and The Double Dream of Spring with a discussion of Oppen's Of Being Numerous,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.16.

assessing, as I do, the degree to which each poet was able to balance the impulse to experiment with the pressure to declare.

### **Sense or Sensibility?**

As Susan Sontag saw it, the role of the contemporary artist was to develop the 'new sensibility' required by America's rapidly changing culture. In critical terms, questions of sensibility were, for Sontag, issues of style: the argument being that style 'embodies an epistemological decision'.<sup>7</sup> It followed that in the essays collected in Against Interpretation Sontag should develop an aesthetic position which radically privileged questions of style over questions of content. Her thinking was far-reaching, and consequently Against Interpretation is aware of the possible shortcomings of such a strong commitment to stylistic experiment. What Sontag could not anticipate was quite how serious those shortcomings would soon appear. Against Interpretation was written between 1962 and 1965 (and published in 1966), before, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, and so before writers began to feel the pressure to declare.

The title essay of Sontag's book calls on her fellow critics to throw off 'means of defending and justifying art' which have become 'insensitive to contemporary needs and practice'. In particular she poses herself against those critics who read art for its content.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever it may have been in the past, the idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism.<sup>9</sup>

The trouble, as Sontag saw it, with reading works of art for their content, is that the surface of the work is disregarded, when in fact, in the contemporary climate, it was

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<sup>7</sup> Sontag, 'On Style', p.35.

<sup>8</sup> Sontag, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

precisely on the surface of the work that critics should be concentrating their attention.<sup>10</sup>

The point was that,

All the conditions of modern life ... conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed.

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.<sup>11</sup>

The argument that the function of art was to rehabilitate the senses had its origin in the cultural criticism of the fifties. Sontag's contribution to this argument was to tie it strongly to the question of style. Style, she suggested, both constituted the artist's sense of their relation to the world, and, in the demands it made on the audience, fostered a heightened attention to things. In sum what this meant for criticism was that, 'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'.<sup>12</sup>

'Against Interpretation' was a polemic, designed to seduce readers into a new way of thinking. 'On Style', written a year later (1965) is a more balanced piece, Sontag making some acknowledgement of the possible side-effects of an erotics of art. 'The great task,' she contended, remaining to critical theory, was to examine 'the formal function of subject-matter'.<sup>13</sup> Until this function was properly explored, she suggested, it was 'inevitable that critics will go on treating works of art as "statements"'.<sup>14</sup> 'To treat works of art in this fashion,' she suggests,

is not wholly irrelevant. But it is obviously putting art to use - for such purposes as inquiring into the history of ideas, diagnosing contemporary culture, or creating social solidarity.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

To use art, one might feel, to create social solidarity would not be such a bad thing.

Sontag, however, is so persuaded of the need to displace hermeneutics with erotics that anything that smacks of a statement must be excluded from her project, and to prove the viability of this position she turns the terms of her argument to the Nazi-implicated artist Leni Riefenstahl. 'To call Leni Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will* and *The Olympiad* master pieces,' she argues,

is not to gloss over Nazi propaganda with aesthetic lenience. The Nazi propaganda is there. But something else is there, too, which we reject at our loss. Because they project the complex movements of intelligence and grace and sensuousness ... we find ourselves - to be sure, rather uncomfortably - seeing "Hitler" and not Hitler, the "1936 Olympics" and not the 1936 Olympics. Through Riefenstahl's genius as a film maker, the "content" has - let us even assume, against her intentions - come to play a purely formal role.<sup>16</sup>

What Riefenstahl's films surely really indicate is not that content can become form, but that in certain situations form can become content; that the film's 'grace and sensuousness' serve an explicitly propagandistic role. Sontag cannot see this because she has so radically eliminated considerations of content from her thinking about art. Having pursued an experimental aesthetic as far as she has (driven, it must be remembered, by real cultural changes which really did require a new sensibility) Sontag arrives at a position whereby she can deal with political questions only very 'uncomfortably'.

Few commentators dealt with the competing pressures on sixties artists without some discomfort. The sensation is ameliorated somewhat if one draws out the more directly social implications of formal decisions. Sontag notices these implications in 'Notes on "Camp"' when she observes that 'Wilde formulated an important element of the camp sensibility - the equivalence of all objects'. In so doing, she suggests, he was

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp.25-6.

‘anticipating the democratic esprit of camp’.<sup>17</sup> True to her central position however, Sontag is much more concerned to use camp as evidence that

To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized - or at least apolitical.<sup>18</sup>

Against Interpretation is an important document, providing, as it does, extremely clear theoretical articulation of one of the impulses motivating sixties poets. Sontag was right to characterize art as an ‘instrument for modifying and educating sensibility’, and that such art must be ‘in principle, experimental’.<sup>19</sup> And there was truth also in her claim that such art is ‘notably apolitical and undidactic, or, rather, infra-didactic’.<sup>20</sup> What dates her argument is the sanguinity with which she made the claim.

Writing in 1968 about what he called the ‘generation of 1962’ Paul Carroll could not afford to be so sanguine. He agreed with Sontag that experimentalism was the order of the day, believing, as we have seen, that his generation of poets was ‘creating and innovating a complex of new ways in which to view our common condition’. Given the circumstances, however, Carroll could not admit, even if he thought it, that such poetry was therefore ‘apolitical and undidactic’. Arguing that previous generations had excluded politics on the grounds that it was not ‘pure’ enough for poetry he contends that

Nothing could be more alien to this attitude than the exploration of political convictions, prejudices and indignations by many of the new poets.<sup>21</sup>

Carroll’s claim is not unsubtle, his suggestion that the present generation *explores* political questions, sitting nicely with an experimental poetic. Nice as Carroll’s

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.289.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.277

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.301.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Carroll, p.237

description is however, it cannot gloss the fact that, as he readily admits, 'Not all of the political poetry of this generation ... is particularly good'.<sup>22</sup>

Carroll practices here what was an entirely typical contemporary manoeuvre, calling on the one hand for politically-committed poetry, and acknowledging on the other that most, if not all, of the poetry which announced its political commitment was, in fact, not poetry. And how could it be, poetry worthy of the name in the sixties generally being held to be that which was uncertain enough (of itself and its world) to experiment with new ways of seeing? But if this argument is easy enough to make now, it was not at the time and the critical pressure was on to find a way of speaking about poetry which could somehow articulate both impulses. Carroll's effort centred on the idea of impurity.

The present generation's incorporation of the 'the impure' Carroll felt, was 'an innovation of the first order in the art of American poetry'.<sup>23</sup> He introduced the idea, as was noticed, with reference to his generation's willingness to discuss things political, but he explores it in detail in a discussion of Ginsberg. Speaking of Ginsberg's 'Message', he suggests that the impurity lies 'in the lack of organic function or justification' of the poem's images.<sup>24</sup> Ginsberg's images, he suggests, 'are simply there'.<sup>25</sup> What Carroll means to denote in speaking of the impure elements of a Ginsberg poem is the way the poet simply names things and places, for no other reason than to incorporate them into the poem. Making a Sontag-like argument, Carroll suggests that the function of these elements is to 'open unexpected doors previously locked and allow more reality than ever to enter the poem'.<sup>26</sup> It would seem that the idea of impurity might allow the poet both to help develop a new sensibility and to declare his political opinions. Actually,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.255

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.248.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.255.

though, Carroll's resolution succeeds only at the level of the signifier. The point about the impure images in Ginsberg's poem is that they stand on their 'own two or three feet', that, as he says, they 'lack', and so implicitly deny the need for, 'justification'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, they do not require, and in fact refute, interpretation. So, if politics is, as Carroll suggests, an impure element in the poem, it must be a different kind of impure element, because to speak politically is necessarily to invoke notions of justice and justification, notions that formal impurity seems intended to deny.

Probably no poet was seen to feel the pressure to declare against the war in Vietnam more than Robert Bly. Certainly no poet was more willing to pressure other poets into making such a declaration. Berryman recalled a telephone conversation with Bly in interview,

And he said, "Do you mean you're not willing to read against the war?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well, I'm appalled." And I said, "Well, be appalled!" and hung up. I'm completely against the war - I hate everything about it. But I don't believe in works of art being used as examples.<sup>28</sup>

For all his practical willingness to aggravate, however, Bly's theoretical intention, like Carroll's, was to find a way of mediating the conflicting pressures on the contemporary poet. In 'On Political Poetry', published in The Nation in 1967, he trod an uncertain line between aggravation and mediation. Poets interested in politics, he argued, divided roughly into two groups:

the first group - we might take Lowell and Wilbur as examples - are occasionally brave in public statements, and their poetry has not the slightest political energy. Poets in the second group fill their poems with political language but act like clowns.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.251

<sup>28</sup> John Plotz et al., 'An Interview with John Berryman', in Thomas (ed.), p.11

<sup>29</sup> Robert Bly, 'On Political Poetry', The Nation, April 24, 1967, p.522.

Bly names Corso as an example of the second group, and part of the interest of his article lies in his willingness to name names. The pressure on American poets to declare was not simply an abstract one. Bly, for one, was making it directly felt. He was hardly more successful than Carroll, however, in squaring this pressure with other demands on the contemporary poet. Thus, trying to show that his own 'deep-image' approach could function in the way Carroll hoped 'impurity' would, Bly observed,

Those poets who try to write political poems, without having developed any inwardness, have embarked on an impossible task. Paradoxically what is needed to write true poems about the outward world is inwardness.<sup>30</sup>

To all intents and purposes Bly here practices the same contemporary manoeuvre as Carroll, calling for political poetry, only then to remark that most of what goes under that banner disqualifies as poetry. Nor does he seem anymore able than Carroll to settle the problem. It is paradoxical indeed, not to say downright contradictory, that outward poems must be inward looking, and Bly's article offers nothing which might resolve the contradiction.

Poets and poet-critics experienced the conflict generated by the felt need to experiment and the felt pressure to declare differently. Carroll, it seems to me, in his enthusiasm for the poetry of his generation, was unaware that there was a conflict, though his argument everywhere testifies to it. Bly was more aware, though was determined to circumvent the problem. Berryman seems to have seen the conflict clearly enough, choosing to subordinate political pressures to aesthetic demands. It was not, however, a choice about which he could be sanguine. Having asserted to his interviewer that he did not feel art should be used as an example, he promptly qualified the remark with the observation that, 'I would like to write political poems but aside from 'Formal

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p.522.

Elegy,' I've never been moved to do so'.<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Koch, on the other hand, a highly experimental and deeply unpolitical poet by temperament, felt that the two impulses had to be resolvable; though in practice, as he has observed in interview, he found that they were not. Asked about 'The Pleasures of Peace', his poem about Vietnam, Koch gives an admirably forensic account of the problem:

I had never written a political poem before and I wanted to see what I could do. I was involved a little bit in the peace movement.... I would march on marches, and give poetry readings against war - that didn't do much good. You know I signed all sorts of petitions and wrote things, and I thought, well this is crazy, I am very involved in this, I hate this war, and what am I writing love poems for, I want to write about this. It took me three years to write that poem and the parts that were about the war actually kept sort of being rejected by the poem, in the way that an artificial heart might be. I didn't seem to have a talent to do that, and it ended up being a poem about the peace movement, and the pleasures of peace.<sup>32</sup>

Koch's account, and his precise metaphor, take us to the core of the problem. Trained in the ways of the avant-garde, and as committed as any to stylistic experiment, Koch had never written a political poem before. But such was the pressure to declare generated by Vietnam that even he felt the need for some such utterance. His poetry, however, could not adapt to this new requirement, and the parts about the war were rejected, as he says, 'like an artificial heart'. It is a metaphor which tells us much about the American poetic body in the sixties.<sup>33</sup>

Critics writing about sixties American poetry with the benefit of hindsight have been no more able to resolve its contradictory impulses. They have, however, been able to see the contradiction with increasing clarity. Morris Dickstein opens his account of sixties American culture (Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties) with a

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas (ed.), p.11

<sup>32</sup> Herd, 'Koch', p.30.

<sup>33</sup> For a representative sample of Vietnam war poetry, see Walter Lowenfels (ed.), Where Is Vietnam (New York: Doubleday, 1967). For a thorough discussion of the poetry see, James F. Mersman, Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War (Lawrence University Press, 1974).

discussion of 'Allen Ginsberg and the Sixties'. Dickstein thus registers the degree to which poetry (of all the arts) was ascribed a public role, and takes Ginsberg to be 'the richest possible emblem of the whole period'.<sup>34</sup> As Dickstein tells it, however, even Ginsberg was unable play this role satisfactorily. Ginsberg, he suggests, 'seemed to have become entirely a public figure', but

It was not as a poet, it seemed, that he lent his magnetic spiritual presence to so many of the most obscene and solemn moments of the 1960s ... rather, he was the elder statesman ... a live link with the germinal protest culture of the fifties.<sup>35</sup>

The poet, it seems, cannot continue to be a poet once he has entered the public sphere, or at least, cannot continue to be called a poet in that sphere. He must, instead, be a 'statesman', the public sphere, in this day and age, belonging to the politicians. But if Dickstein feels that Ginsberg lost something by going public, he feels that those who did not attempt to lost something also. Discussing Charles Wright's The Branch Will Not Break, he observes that, 'The self-accusing serenity ... is purchased at the expense of all volitional intensity and personal hope'.<sup>36</sup> He acknowledges that Wright's 'mood of resignation makes small epiphanies possible' but feels in general that his is 'a poetry of failure which also courts failure as poetry'.<sup>37</sup> By Dickstein's account, and for all his manifest affection for Ginsberg, American poetry failed (in) the sixties - one way or another.

Cary Nelson's account of the period is more alive than Dickstein's to the full force of the conflict facing the poets. Noting that until the early sixties American poets

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<sup>34</sup> Dickstein, p.10.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.6

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

had managed to pursue their aesthetic projects somehow untouched by their sense of the culture's limitations, he proceeds to observe that,

The public life of the period ... made aesthetic detachment increasingly untenable and current events began to threaten their belief in what poetry could accomplish.<sup>38</sup>

According to Nelson, then, the sixties generated a double bind for poets, compelling them to engage with events in a way they were unused to, but showing them, simultaneously, that their engagement was inconsequential - witness Koch's remarks on readings. It was a double bind, moreover, which went deeper than a general feeling of impotence. The presiding impulse, Nelson suggests, of postwar poetry, was thrown into doubt:

As these poets move steadily toward more radically open, even dismantled, forms, their work fulfills the need repeatedly articulated in American poetry and prose for a democratically responsive and inclusive aesthetic, while largely undermining its potential for affirmation.<sup>39</sup>

Nelson's strong formulation brings the conflict being presented here into sharp focus, indicating, as it does, the deep irony of the sixties poet's position. As he sees it, the new sensibility to which the stylistic experiments of the sixties were dedicated was a 'democratically ... inclusive' sensibility. However, what the sixties demonstrated, as far as Nelson is concerned, is that having arrived at a form appropriate to that sensibility, poets were then unable, when it mattered, to affirm the principle underpinning the form. The way Nelson tells it, the impulse to experiment and the pressure to declare were not only at odds in a general sense, but forced the poets into self-contradiction. Impressive as Nelson's formulation is, however, stating the problem is not, ultimately, the difficult thing. The difficult thing, for both poet and critic, is judging how to respond to it.

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<sup>38</sup> Nelson, p.ix.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.xv.

The thrust of Nelson's account is that by arriving at such a contradiction, sixties American poets failed, and his tendency is to emphasise their 'essential powerlessness in American life'.<sup>40</sup> The only way out of the conflict as Nelson describes it is to subordinate one impulse to the other, to press for affirmative rather than experimental poetry, for sense rather than sensibility. Charles Altieri offers a preferable, if more taxing response. Altieri has articulated the conflict facing the sixties poet as clearly as anyone. For him, however, such a conflict implies not the need to subordinate one impulse to another, but the need, rather, to think dialectically. Thus, as Altieri sees it,

No matter how acute one's sensibility, no matter how attentive one is to numinous energies, it is impossible to write public poetry or make poetry speak meaningfully about pressing social concerns without a return to some notion of cultural models preserving ethical ideals or images of best selves.<sup>41</sup>

The crucial advantage of Altieri's criticism is that he makes the difficulty he presents the starting point, the impulse even, for subsequent poetic projects. Speaking of Denise Levertov, he notes that her work,

defines both the values and the limits of the Heraclitean desire to recover the familiar, and in so doing it makes the reader feel once again the need to reinvent Plato ... learning to live with the contradictory claims of Heraclitus and Plato has become the burden of poetry in the seventies.<sup>42</sup>

Altieri is more directly concerned with questions of sensibility and epistemology than Nelson, hence 'Heraclitus' and 'Plato', but the underlying issue is the same because as Altieri sees it Postmodern (as opposed to Modern) sensibility is grounded in 'democratic and protestant priorities'.<sup>43</sup> For Altieri, however, the claims of Heraclitus and Plato are equally pressing, and the contradiction they produce becomes the burden of Postmodern poetry. As Altieri would seem to see it, the public events of the sixties issued the test by

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.1.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Altieri, *Enlarging The Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), p.20.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.49

which the emerging Postmodern poetry (and the sensibility it sought to embody) would have subsequently, and continually, to prove itself. Talk of failure, therefore, is not appropriate. Talk of new challenges is.

But whether one inclines toward Nelson or Altieri, it is clear from the richness of their debate that the conflicting impulses facing American poets in the sixties have been of lasting importance to the art. It is thus surprising that Ashbery's name should have figured so little in accounts of the period.<sup>44</sup> Possibly this has its origin in Harold Bloom's initial presentation of Ashbery. Bloom's feeling for the sixties is made manifest in two remarks he makes in *The Anxiety of Influence*: his suggestion that Milton came to reduce Satan to 'a mere rebel ... another wearisome ancestor of student non-students, the perpetual New Left'; and his admission that, in his criticism, 'we neglect content and search for individuality of tone in a new poet'.<sup>45</sup> Bloom, it is not difficult to surmise, had no time for poetry which felt the need to declare. And, in a Sontag-like manoeuvre, he frees himself from the task of considering such work by announcing that poetry is a matter not of content but style ('tone'). Style, for Bloom, is a question of influence - a poet finding his own style through a conflict with a strong precursor - and the ultimate contemporary stylist, as he then saw it, was the Stevens-like Ashbery of 'Fragment'. On his first major critical outing, then, Ashbery was not only detached from the conflicts motivating sixties American poetry, but was enlisted to demonstrate that the conflict was bogus, that it had nothing, actually, to do with poetry. Only recently have critics begun to re-evaluate the notion that Ashbery sailed through the sixties, serenely untouched by conflicts which, as far as one can judge, affected almost every other contemporary poet

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<sup>44</sup> Nelson does not mention him, and in *Enlarging the Temple* Altieri describes him as seeking 'freedom from referential demands', thereby making him immune to the pressures of the here and now (whether conceived epistemologically or historically; Altieri, p.165.

<sup>45</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety*, pp.122, 150.

of note. Shoptaw, certainly, has changed the balance, writing one of his best chapters on The Double Dream of Spring.<sup>46</sup> As is his tendency, however, he only really shows how the poetry was buffeted by raw contingencies - by particular biographical and historical facts. He is not concerned to show how such data convert into substantial poetic concerns (how they combine to inform the poetic occasion) and so is not concerned to situate Ashbery in the important critical debate that has emerged from the conflicts of the sixties. Shetley has done a little more of this, arguing that during this period Ashbery's poetry was shaped by a desire to find a position and an audience between the New Critical establishment, and 'their opposite numbers in the counter-culture'.<sup>47</sup> But if he is more successful in gaining a general view of the period, Shetley is not sufficiently intimate with Ashbery's writing really to appreciate the shifts that period occasioned. My object in the rest of this chapter, is both to show that Ashbery's poetry changed importantly in response to the conflicting pressures I have outlined, and to suggest that, if it does not resolve it, an occasional poetic can be seen to cast that conflict in a helpful new light.

### **Intimate and Declarative?**

In order to establish how appropriate Ashbery's response was to the conflicting demands facing the American poet writing in the sixties, I compare the poetry and prose he wrote during that period with the contemporaneous work of George Oppen. Born in 1908, Oppen first came to prominence as a member of the 'Objectivist' group, under whose auspices he published his first collection, Discrete Series, in 1934. Soon after he entered on a prolonged period of poetic silence. This silence was prompted by his sense of the

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<sup>46</sup> Shoptaw, pp.100-124.

<sup>47</sup> Shetley, p.109.

deepening political crisis of the late-thirties, and his feeling that politics then held a more pressing claim on his time than poetry. He joined the Communist Party in 1935, and because of this affiliation, found himself subject, in the late forties, to the attentions of the McCarthy committee. As a result he moved to Mexico in 1950, not returning (to New York) until 1960.<sup>48</sup> He did not break his poetic silence until 1958. Oppen's value to an account of sixties American poetry relates in part to this period of silence. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis puts it,

The artesian reemergence of a number of 'Objectivist' writers after ...long hiatuses has been characterised as a 'third phase Objectivism'; their presence has the capacity to drastically alter our picture of American poetry and poetics.<sup>49</sup>

This is particularly true of Oppen. To state the case in general terms, Oppen brings the sensibility of a Modernist avant-garde to bear on the sixties, a sensibility trained, as he wrote in 1966, to 'get at the crucial moments right on top of the thing...to let one's hand be forced by what is MOST CENTRAL, and by nothing else'.<sup>50</sup> The reason, then, that Oppen can enhance our picture of American poetry and poetics in the sixties, is that he can be relied upon to discern what was most central to the period. Moreover, his rhetorical energy preserved by his silence, he was primed to respond to contemporary

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<sup>48</sup> In the past fifteen years Oppen has deservedly attracted a good deal of impressive criticism. The best is gathered in two collections of essays: Burton Hatlen (ed.) *George Oppen: Man and Poet* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1981); and Peter Dent (ed.) *Not Comforts/But Vision: Essays on the Poetry of George Oppen* (Budleigh Salterton, Devon: Interim Press, 1985). For an insightful discussion of *Discrete Series* see R.G. Hampson, "'Native in native time': Time in the Early Poetry of George Oppen", in Dent (ed.), pp.84-100. Rachel Blau DuPlessis provides an admirably lucid account of Oppen's objectivism, and his relation to Pound in 'Objectivist Poetics and Political Vision: A Study of Oppen and Pound', Hatlen (ed.), pp.123-148. For discussion of Oppen's political activity and his period of poetic silence see: Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel, 'Poetry and Politics: A Conversation with George and Mary Oppen', in Hatlen (ed.), pp.23-50; and Eric Mottram, 'The Political Responsibilities of the Poet: George Oppen', Hatlen (ed.), pp.149-167.

<sup>49</sup> George Oppen, *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990) p.ix.

<sup>50</sup> Oppen, *Selected Letters*, p.144.

pressures, and he does in fact bring a uniquely angled and clarifying attention to the period.<sup>51</sup>

But if Oppen's value to an account of sixties poetry relates in part to his silence, it relates also to his period of exile. Thus, while (unlike the other remaining Objectivists) his capacity to concentrate on the matter in hand had been undimmed by the effort of producing an oeuvre, so equally his observation was jarred into focus by the experience of returning to his native land. And it is in this important respect that Oppen offers a point of comparison with Ashbery. Ashbery himself entered sixties America after a period of exile, finally leaving Paris for New York in 1965.<sup>52</sup> The two poets would seem to have experienced a similar reaction to the fashions and trends that characterised the period. For Donald Davie, Oppen's value lay in his earnest resistance to the 'psychological and/or mythopoeic':

Not for him, for instance, the harking back to a pre-industrial economy, which is the stock-in-trade of the American poets currently most popular with the American public.<sup>53</sup>

While, for Eric Mottram, Oppen's value is rooted in his resistance to 'traditional salvations', in the fact that he 'refuses fashionable Buddhism, the drug cult, the so-called politics of "rock," and any authoritarian junk masquerading as panacea'.<sup>54</sup> Ashbery, it will be recalled, approved a similar refusal in Frank O'Hara in 1966, whose poetry, he wrote, resists the temptation, to 'advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society'.<sup>55</sup> Given their disagreement on other matters (a disagreement very much grounded in their differing reactions to the sixties) one is tempted to feel that if both

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<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of the function of Objectivism in sixties American poetry see Ron Silliman, 'Third Phase Objectivism,' *Paideuma*, 10.1 (Spring 1981), pp.85-9.

<sup>52</sup> Ashbery returned to America in December 1964 for his father's funeral. He returned to Paris in January 1965, finally leaving for good in the summer of 1965.

<sup>53</sup> Donald Davie, 'Notes on George Oppen's *Seascape: Needle's Eye*', in Hatlen (ed.), p.407.

<sup>54</sup> Mottram, p.167.

<sup>55</sup> John Ashbery, 'Frank O'Hara's question', *Book Week*, vol. IV, no.3, Sep.25 1966, p.6.

Davie and Mottram say this of Oppen then it must be true. Ashbery's remarks on O'Hara, on the other hand, have generally been taken to characterise his own feeling at the time. Thus, Ashbery and Oppen would seem to have arrived at a similar view of sixties poetic conventions (of the fondness for myths and the weakness for panaceas) and seem to have shared a common sense of the culture from which such poetry emerged.

In comparing Ashbery and Oppen, I want to start with their non-poetic writings of the period. In the sixties, I would suggest, both Ashbery and Oppen made particular, and self-conscious use of such writings - reviews and essays in Ashbery's case, correspondence in Oppen's - to develop strategies and attitudes which they needed to work into their poetry. That such poetic thinking spilled out into their non-poetic writing is a further interesting symptom, of the considerable demands facing the sixties poet.

Oppen announced his intention to begin a purposeful correspondence in a letter to his sister in January 1962. 'It is necessary,' he told her, 'to begin to talk. I mean to be part of a conversation among honest people'.<sup>56</sup> This conversation, which developed, through the sixties, into a truly prolific correspondence, was, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis observes, 'crucial to the composition process of a number of Oppen's works'.<sup>57</sup> His letters articulate the gamut of his concerns. He writes at length, and with understanding, about 'THE news'. He argues contemporary aesthetic questions. He also engages in detailed discussion of poetry, other people's and, more commonly, his own. Often, in his letters, he is to be found defending or amending single lines in the light of comments from, among others, Charles Tomlinson, William Bronk and Cid Corman. Moreover, between the letters and the poetry there is a considered continuity of expression. Where necessary he quotes his poetry in correspondence, and not infrequently his poems will

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<sup>56</sup> Oppen, *Selected Letters*, p.55.

<sup>57</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Introduction' to Oppen, *Selected Letters*, p.vii.

use phrases made in letters. And, with their permission correspondents' expressions are incorporated into the poetry. As DuPlessis points out, Oppen's poetry is to a significant degree, 'interactive'.<sup>58</sup>

Oppen's correspondence was a self-consciously collaborative exercise, a conversation among honest people through which he was able to gain a strengthened sense both of what was really going on, and of what kind of poetic utterance was appropriate in such circumstances. But this was not the only sense in which Oppen's correspondence was of value to his poetry. There was something about the tone of a letter which Oppen wanted to reproduce poetically.<sup>59</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis catches this tone when she suggests that letters 'are both intimate and declarative - a curious mixture of semiprivate and semipublic utterance'.<sup>60</sup> Given the demands facing the sixties poet, an utterance which could be both 'intimate and declarative' would seem to be precisely what the occasion called for. Oppen, I argue, was acutely aware of this, and so in part used his letters to develop a way of being both 'intimate and declarative' which he might incorporate into his poetry.

Oppen's letters from the end of the fifties and early sixties show him preoccupied with the need to experiment, with the need to find a new form. And then 'there is the problem of form', he told his sister (June Oppen Degnan) in January 1959:

I'm not sure haven't just a habit of form, rather than a conviction. The form of the old poems that I wrote. And it chokes on this sort of content. I've managed --but I think I do need a new form, a new tone.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Oppen notes that 'To C.T.' was 'Written originally in a letter to Charles Tomlinson who, in his reply suggested this division into lines of verse. The poem is, therefore, a collaboration'. Oppen, Collected Poems (London: Fulcrum Press, 1972), p.97.

<sup>60</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Introduction' to Oppen, Selected Letters, p.vii .

<sup>61</sup> Oppen, Selected Letters, p.19.

If this need to experiment seemed to Oppen in 1959 to be a purely personal matter, by 1962 it had assumed a general significance. Writing to his sister again, in January 1962, Oppen ventured the belief that

people are terrified. Those who aren't will be. Someone said to me the other day 'Change the axioms.' And that was a writer of high school science text books.<sup>62</sup>

What Oppen means when he notes this impulse to change, is much the same kind of thing that Sontag described when she noted the need for artists to experiment towards a new sensibility. Thus, Oppen continues his letter with the qualification that such change had to be rendered

without inventing imaginary geometries. There is nothing in which I am less interested than in imaginary geometries.

And NOT 'derangement of the senses' which ends in mere prose poem artiness ---We HAVE only our sight.<sup>63</sup>

As a poet Oppen feels called upon (quite literally in this case, by the high-school teacher) to change the axioms, not in the interests of 'artiness', but because people need a new way of seeing. As he put it May 1963,

what is forming among artists sensitive to their own times is a metaphysical concern. [Metaphysics: a language that talks about physical fact.]<sup>64</sup>

By late 1963, however, Oppen had begun to find this commitment to purely aesthetic questions more difficult to sustain. Writing two days after Kennedy's assassination, Oppen notes, 'There is at least in everyone's mind -- I suppose I mean the intellectuals -- that something very violent is going on'.<sup>65</sup> Against this background he recalls a recent conversation with LeRoi Jones:

The war-games of the Beats and Academics look a little silly--with the vandals outside, I told him. And we agreed.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.55.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.56.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.84.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.96.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid..

Oppen is referring to the battle of the anthologies. In the early sixties, as Dickstein puts it, 'More than literary form was at stake,' in this battle, 'at issue was the direction of our consciousness and culture'.<sup>67</sup> Given this, it is significant that by 1963 the 'war-games of the Beats and Academics' should have begun to seem silly to Oppen. Clearly other demands (not yet clearly perceived perhaps) beside the formal questions of consciousness and sensibility, were beginning to press on his thinking.

By 1965, and with the escalation of the war in Vietnam, non-formal demands had become, for Oppen, unavoidable. He was not at all sure, however, how to meet them, his prose from this period vacillating between the pressures of the declarative and the consolations of the intimate. 'It is,' he told his sister, 'horrifyingly--impossible to attempt a stand of moral indignation, or to talk of atrocity'.<sup>68</sup> To which enforced silence he could only react by reducing the scale. 'Possible,' he suggested, 'for individuals who know each other and love each other to make a decent life. And that's as far as we've got'.<sup>69</sup> Horrified, but unable in any adequate way to declare his indignation, Oppen, felt, as he told Steve Schneider, that one could no longer 'restore the possibility of talking of ethics and morality -- Such words become nonsense'.<sup>70</sup> He would not, he declared 'talk of ethics again'.<sup>71</sup> In itself, however, this was no solution. Such was the pressure to declare that the act of writing a poetry which had no ethical register began to seem hopelessly irrelevant. Writing to his niece he confessed, 'I'm finding it difficult to write poetry--An eerie feeling writing poetry with the war going on. I don't know if I can'.<sup>72</sup> The

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<sup>67</sup> Dickstein, p.8.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.112.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.,p.113.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.114

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.,p.114.

consequence, a year on, was a most uneasy compromise. Writing to his sister in 1966, he observed,

I think we must decide to live thru' this -- the napalm and the rest. Easy enough to throw oneself away with horror but I don't suppose that's really what we want to do. To manage to live with it, to live thru' it, if we get to, without however deceiving oneself. To speak calmly and carefully of hell.<sup>73</sup>

With this passage, Oppen finds some kind of uneasy equilibrium. Having proposed, in his letters, to himself and his correspondents, the possibilities both of renouncing ethical statements, and of renouncing poetry, he finds that he can do without neither. Here he achieves a form of expression which is somehow intimate with his experience (he speaks calmly and carefully), but somehow also ethical (he declares his subject to be 'hell'). It was, however, in another kind of conversation, his interview with L.S. Dembo, that Oppen's efforts in his letters to establish an utterance both declarative and intimate can really be seen to have paid off. Speaking with Dembo, Oppen could not have been more explicit on the question of political poetry. 'If you decide to do something politically,' he suggests,

you do something that has political efficacy. And if you decide to write poetry, then you write poetry, not something that you hope, or deceive yourself into believing, can save people who are suffering.<sup>74</sup>

But in reaching this decision, Oppen has not altogether closed off the declarative mode. Elaborating on the 'Objectivist' principle that, 'there is a moment, an actual time, when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from these moments of conviction', Oppen describes, how

one says what he thinks is true, not because he would like it to be true, still less because he thinks it would be good for the reader. I'm just reporting my experiences in life, including the one that when they drop enough jellied gasoline on children, you can't stand it anymore.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.130.

<sup>74</sup> L.S. Dembo, 'The "Objectivist" Poet: Four Interviews', *Contemporary Literature*, vol.10, no.2, p.174.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp.161, 165.

There is some sophistry involved here. The word 'experience' has been stretched to turn an 'is' into an 'ought'. That said, Oppen has come close to meeting the pressure to declare, without compromising the fidelity to experience which makes his poetry experimental. Ultimately, then, Oppen negotiates the competing pressures on the sixties poet to experiment and to declare, by pressing on the objectivist principle which continues to guide his work through the sixties.

The prose Ashbery wrote during the sixties - the reviews of Chirico, Bishop, and Rich, his article on 'Frank O'Hara's Question', and his lecture to the Yale Art School - is amongst the most impressive (and most cited) he has ever written. He seems self-consciously to be working things out, and the writing gains from the tension such an effort produces. In 'The Decline of the Verbs', his review of Chirico's Hebdemeros, one detects a certain nervousness around the idea of the occasion. Chirico, he notes,

invented for the occasion a new style and a new kind of novel which he was not to use again, but which could be of great interest to writers today who are trying to extend the novel form.<sup>76</sup>

A little later he observes that,

Like Nietzsche and Chirico, Hebdemeros is sometimes forced to speak in "a language that on any other occasion would have brought upon his shoulders not only the sarcasm of the crowd, which often is necessary to far-reaching minds, but also the sarcasm of the elite ...".<sup>77</sup>

Two anxieties about art produced 'for the occasion' would seem to surface here. The first concerns the durability of such art. In noting that in Hebdemeros Chirico experimented with a style he did not return to, Ashbery anticipates the question why anybody else should be interested in the style (and the novel) if the writer himself had no

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<sup>76</sup> John Ashbery, 'The Decline of the Verbs', Bookweek vol.4.no.15, Dec 18 1966, p.5.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

further use for it. He addresses his answer to contemporary experimental novelists, suggesting not that they might imitate Chirico, but that in their own efforts to invent a style for the occasion they might learn from his. Ashbery's second anxiety relates to the impulse to experiment. Hebdemeros, he notes, is sometimes forced to speak in a way that 'on any other occasion' would have induced the sarcasm of both the crowd and the elite. Art produced for the occasion owes its first commitment to the requirements of the occasion, and if that results in a language difficult to understand then so be it. As Sontag says, 'having one's sensorium challenged or stretched hurts'.<sup>78</sup> Except that Ashbery does not want to be quite so bold as Sontag. He wants to explain to both the crowd and the elite that Hebdemeros, Chirico, Nietzsche, and all those others, in fact, who sometimes adopt a difficult style, are 'forced' into it. And even then, one feels, he is not, himself, quite convinced.

Ashbery, it would seem, is becoming aware of the possibility that writing for the occasion remains in a significant sense incomplete if it does not communicate, if the writer does not speak to those who participate in the same occasion, or same kinds of occasion. He addresses this issue in, 'Tradition and Talent', a review of new books by Philip Booth, Adrienne Rich and Stanley Moss. Using Booth to define his own stance on contemporary aesthetic questions, Ashbery suggests he is an 'archetype of the conservative manner', too unwilling 'to experiment, to take risks, to believe that there can be other valuables than the established canon'.<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, though, for all his conservative manner, Booth's central failure, as Ashbery sees it, is a failure to observe the requirements of decorum. Noting that when reading Booth 'we hear a lot about people and places we do not know,' Ashbery suggests that,

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<sup>78</sup> Sontag, p.303.

<sup>79</sup> John Ashbery, 'Tradition and Talent', *Bookweek*, vol.3, no.52, 4 Sep 1966, p.2.

Booth is here flaunting (sic) one of the primordial rules of social conduct by discoursing at length on topics with which his hearers are not familiar. Most of us, unfortunately, cannot gauge the rightness of 'white as/ Machia after/ the hayrake rain' and after a while our attention begins to wander.<sup>80</sup>

Ashbery one might feel, is having it all ways in this review. On the one hand he argues that poets should experiment, should be prepared to produce art for the occasion (even where that means alienating crowd and elite alike). On the other, he is suggesting that poets should observe the rules of social conduct. On the face of it there is a tension here. It is a tension Ashbery has the resources to resolve, collaboration affording him a model for art which both experiments and does the decorous thing of establishing what people (the collaborators) have in common. At this stage, however, in 1966, he does not seem quite in control of his resources. He wants to observe both senses of the occasion, but in neither his critical prose, nor his poetry is he yet quite able to do so. All he can really do with this tension is point to another poet he felt had gone some way toward resolving it. Thus, reviewing Marianne Moore's Tell Me, Tell Me! Ashbery observed that

The subject of poetry for Miss Moore is any subject in which she might be interested. No more is necessary to establish a neutral ground where reader and writer may meet and the latter begin operations. This means remaining apparently intent on her animal or vegetable subject ... and only incidentally producing those blinding flashes of poetry that are the reward for our attentiveness.<sup>81</sup>

Still, though, as Ashbery formulates her practice, Moore does not quite resolve the tension he has unearthed, for in her eagerness to establish common ground, Moore can tend to neutralise the occasion of the poem. She is only 'apparently intent on her animal or vegetable subject'. Which is not necessarily to make a criticism of Moore, but is rather to suggest that Ashbery himself is as yet still working towards a satisfactory formulation of the poem's relation to the occasion.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.. Ashbery has confirmed by e-mail that he meant 'flouting', not 'flaunting'.

<sup>81</sup> John Ashbery, 'Jerboas, Pelicans and Peewee Peese', Bookweek, vol.iv., no.8, 30 October 1966, p1.

Thus far, Ashbery's sixties prose has shown him preoccupied with the need to experiment, with questions of form and style. In this respect, in 1966, he was just about abreast of contemporary thinking. Against Interpretation was published in 1966 and the impulse to experiment was still strong. Oppen, however, had begun to feel the pressure to declare, a pressure Ashbery acknowledged in his article 'Frank O'Hara's question'. But committed as he was to an experimental aesthetic, and still re-acclimatising to the American scene, Ashbery did not respond to this pressure as deftly as he might have done, and the article finds him somewhat out of touch. The 'issue', for Ashbery, is O'Hara's neglect, which he attributes to the debilitating polarisation of the sixties American poetry scene. "Too hip for the squares and too square for the hips," O'Hara, Ashbery suggests, had occupied a 'category of oblivion which increasingly threatens any artist who dares to take his own way'.<sup>82</sup> Ashbery's discussion moves from the particular instance of Frank O'Hara to the general case of 'any artist', and it is very much as another artist 'daring to take his own way' that Ashbery responds to the pressure of the literary moment. O'Hara's poetry, he announces,

has no program and therefore cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak out against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic age: in a word, it does not attack the establishment.<sup>83</sup>

Much of this is unobjectionable, Ashbery, sharing Oppen's suspicion of the contemporary weakness for panaceas. The clause about Viet Nam, however, is slightly, but tellingly, ill-judged. The problem is that Ashbery seems a bit blithe, unalive to the pressure to declare that many poets were feeling, even if, like O'Hara (or Oppen, or Berryman) they decided that declarative poetry could have no purpose. The way Ashbery

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

presents it, O'Hara felt no counter pressure, experienced no difficulty in not writing about the war.

Louis Simpson picked up on Ashbery's remark seven months later in an article in The Nation. Simpson's article, a wide-ranging evaluation of the state of contemporary American poetry, managed both to be pertinent and to display all the confusions of its moment. The confusion emerges at the point at which he tries to develop a critical idiom able to cope with the poetry (and pressures) of his moment. American poets, he notes were joined in 'one common enterprise of poetry readings or protests against the war in Vietnam'. This he thought was good, even though, like most other commentators who broached the issue, he thought the poetry was bad. Speaking of the war he suggests that

The occasion has not produced much good poetry - occasions hardly ever do - but it may serve to change the poet profoundly, so that in the future their poems will be political in the way that really counts - that is by altering the angle of vision. Political poetry need not be about a political occasion; it may be about a butterfly.<sup>84</sup>

Simpson is trying to negotiate both of the pressures facing the contemporary poet. He is clearly of the opinion that most current political poetry (poetry about the war) is bad. Such, however, was the pressure on poets to declare that he could hardly be heard to say this, and avoids saying it by two rather dubious manoeuvres. In the first place he argues that the trouble with poetry about politics is that it is not political in the way poetry should be. Really political poetry, he argues, changes the angle of vision. Which is to say that really good poetry is by definition political. This is a neat move, but it succeeds only by denying the term 'political' the specific force which makes it controversial in the first place. The second way Simpson finds of not being seen to condemn poetry declaring against the war, is to position himself against a poet who can be construed as doing just

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

that: hence his outburst against Ashbery. Noting that Ashbery had ‘complimented’

O’Hara on ‘not having written poetry about the war,’ he remarked that

it was not amusing to see a poet sneering at the conscience of other poets. Some people seem able to protest only against an act of protest by others.<sup>85</sup>

Ashbery did compliment O’Hara on not having written poetry about the war, but he did not sneer at the conscience of those who did. Simpson’s response to Ashbery’s article was thus unjustified. That said, if Simpson made more of Ashbery’s remark than he should have, he would not have been able to make anything of it if Ashbery’s expression had been more sensitive.<sup>86</sup>

Ashbery replied to Simpson’s ‘unjust attack’ with a letter to The Nation in which he made it quite clear that he was against the war (reluctantly listing various kinds of protest he has been involved in).<sup>87</sup> He stands quite firm, however, on the question of declarative poetry. ‘All poetry,’ he writes,

is against war and in favour of life, or else it isn’t poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action.<sup>88</sup>

The first clause, with its hippy-like affirmation of ‘life’ shows that still Ashbery has no convincing language in which he can discuss these things. But this is because, like Oppen, he believes that poetry and protest are two different ‘forms of action’, the definition of poetry being that it is free to find its own form, that it cannot be forced into a mould. But what is really striking about Ashbery’s spat with Simpson is that there was, in fact, little or no disagreement between them. Both thought political poetry was bad, and both thought that the real task of poetry was to change the angle of vision. The

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<sup>85</sup> Louis Simpson, ‘Dead Horses and Live Issues’, The Nation, April 24, 1967, p.521.

<sup>86</sup> I do not quite agree with Shoptaw when he says that ‘Simpson badly misinterpreted Ashbery’s tribute to his friend as an insult to “anti-war” poets’; Shoptaw, p.101.

<sup>87</sup> John Ashbery, letter to the editor, The Nation, May 29, 1967, p.692.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

difference was that Ashbery, like Oppen, but unlike Simpson, was prepared to acknowledge that for a poet to write such poetry did not constitute a political gesture.

But there is more important common ground between Ashbery and Simpson on the question of what kind of occasion the sixties poet could appropriately concern themselves with. The occasion of the war had not produced much good poetry (as Simpson observed) because it was a monumental occasion, the kind of occasion, as has been indicated, for which contemporary poets had no language; or rather, for which they had chosen not to develop a language. But this did not mean, as Simpson suggested, that occasions always produce bad poetry. The point was rather that Postmodern poetry embodied a different sense of what could properly constitute an occasion for poetry. The event of seeing a butterfly, in other words (to use Simpson's example) could occasion a good contemporary poem. Such an occasion would permit poetic intimacy. Taking place at a distance, the war could only produce generalities. The question by the late sixties, however, as Ashbery, I think, was acutely aware, was whether, in the face of the war, and the pressure to declare, poets could remain entirely comfortable with this modest sense of the occasion.

Ashbery's lecture to the Yale Art School ('The Invisible Avant-Garde') given in 1968, differs both in tone and in its sense of the occasion, from the pieces considered thus far.<sup>89</sup> The difference in tone is most apparent in his discussion of the contemporary protest culture. 'Protests against the mediocre values of our society,' he notes,

such as the hippie movement seem to imply that one's way out is to join a parallel society whose stereo-typed manners, language, speech and dress are only the reverse images of the one it is trying to reject. We feel in America that we have to join something, that our lives are directionless unless we are part of a group, a clan.... Is there nothing then between the extremes of Levittown and

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<sup>89</sup> For other considerations of the importance of this lecture to Ashbery's poetry, see Trotter, pp.150-151, and Shetley, p.106.

Haight-Ashbury, between an avant-garde which has become a tradition and a tradition which is no longer one?(RS,393)

Ashbery's concerns are much the same as in the O'Hara piece, but he articulates himself with more tact. He is still not comfortable with the protest climate, but he no longer rejects it out of hand. Rather, his discomfort takes the form of a question. In that way he does not alienate his audience, but draws them into his area of concern. There is a change of tone also in Ashbery's consideration of experimental art. While he notes that in the 1950s, 'To experiment,' was to feel that one was on 'some outermost brink', experiment, in the sixties, had become acceptable, conventional even, and so in itself could no longer provide an uncomplicated impulse for art (RS, 390). And with this questioning of experimentalism goes an easier relationship with the public: 'If people like what I do am I to assume that what I do is bad, since public opinion has always begun by rejecting what is original and new'(RS, 393) Finally, the difference in Ashbery's tone is evident at the level of the individual sentence. Speaking, again, about artistic experiment in the fifties, he notes that if one did so, 'one was taking one's life - one's life as an artist - into one's hands' (RS, 390). The sub-clause places artistic activity in its proper contemporary perspective.

These changes of tone are subtle but significant. To be sure this is a lecture about the avant-garde. But in the present climate, with experimentalism being a matter of life-style as much as art, and (paradoxically) with that life-style connoting a stand on contemporary issues which has gained the moral high ground, a public lecture on the state of the avant-garde must be carefully handled. And tonally, at least, Ashbery shows that he has found ways of handling the pressures on his utterance. It is in the way he handles the occasion of the lecture, however, that one detects the most significant shift in Ashbery's thinking. As a guest-lecturer Ashbery has been given the opportunity to

declare his opinions on a question of pressing concern and extensive ramifications. But he does not make a declaration; quite the opposite. 'The fact that I a poet,' he opens,

was invited by the Yale Art School to talk about the avant-garde, in one of the a series of lectures under this general heading, is in itself such an eloquent characterization of the avant-garde today that no further comment seems necessary. (RS,389)

Far from using the occasion to make a declaration, the occasion, Ashbery suggests, speaks for itself. He does, of course, continue to speak, because he has been contracted to do so, and because in fact that occasion will not be complete if he is not speaking. But he plainly feels, and in some sense is right to feel, that nothing he can say can alter the fundamental force of his utterance. Here, then, in the ideal speech situation of a lecture (ideal because everybody involved knows the parameters of the occasion) Ashbery seems to risk the Stevens-like thought that his utterance is 'the cry of its occasion'. What matters more however is the way Ashbery introduces this thought. His opening gambit is curious, intriguing even, and the point of Ashbery's intrigue is to invite his audience themselves to reflect on the occasion, to work out for themselves why it is so that their presence combined with the poet's is so eloquent that no further characterization is necessary. He calls on his audience to reflect on the occasion in which they too are participating, to which they too contribute, and the significance of which they too are more than capable of grasping. Ashbery, in other words, sets out to use the occasion not as an opportunity to lecture his audience - they do not need a poet telling them what to think - but to draw their attention to the occasion itself, and so to draw their attention to what they have in common.

### The logic of your situation

For Charles Molesworth, 'The Skaters' 'is a nervous tour de force, a paean to solipsism and an anguished cry against its imprisonments'.<sup>90</sup> Harold Bloom thinks likewise of Rivers and Mountains, judging 'Clepsydra' to be a 'beautiful failure' because 'its solipsism ... is too perfect'.<sup>91</sup> Both critics are partly right. Rivers and Mountains is a very lonely book. But their shared error is to codify this loneliness into a style of thought ('solipsism') that the poet can in some sense be taken to be proposing (however reluctantly). Ashbery himself has described what he was doing when writing Rivers and Mountains in a review of his friend, the artist Jane Freilicher. Striking a personal note, he compares Freilicher's development to his own. 'After the early period of absorbing influences from the art and other things going on around one,' Ashbery observes, there comes a period '... when one locks the door in order to sort out what one has and to make of it what one can' (RM, 241). The reason Ashbery seems sealed off, then, in his third book, is that he was: such a controlled environment ('the middle class apartment' of 'The Skaters') necessary for the difficult procedure of turning the poetic materials he had already gathered into a form of expression recognisably his own. If such a period of experimentation is necessary, however, it can also be contradictory. For the poet, that is, who experiments, not for the pleasure of experiment, but to find a poetic form which will bring their poetry into closer contact with things and people, such a period carries with it the painful realisation that by their day to day practice they cut themselves off from that with which they would be intimate. We feel this rub in the title of Ashbery's book, its categorical nouns, and conspicuously central connective signifying a self-consciously

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<sup>90</sup> Charles Molesworth, "'This Leaving-Out Business": The Poetry of John Ashbery', The Fierce Embrace (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p.166.

<sup>91</sup> Bloom, Figures, p.178

detached language; while the kinds of thing these nouns would denote - rivers and mountains - indicate a yearning for contact with the natural world. Rivers and Mountains, that is, was a very difficult book for Ashbery to write, the loneliness it projects marking not a philosophical position, but a necessary (though contradictory) condition of its writing.

What this contradictory condition means in the terms of this thesis is that while Ashbery was experimenting with ways of writing which would enable him to meet the requirements of differing poetic occasions, little or nothing was actually changing. Sealed off from the things going on around him, the occasion of the poem is always the same; always the poet himself experimenting. What results rhetorically is a preoccupation with abstract states (thinking, planning, dreaming), a verbal inwardness, and, in the most effective poems, a fantastically inventive capacity for metaphorical development. The preoccupation with abstraction is apparent from the start of the book:

These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing  
 Into something forgetful, although angry with history.  
 They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible,  
                   for instance,  
 Though this is only one example. (RM,9)

There are two threads running through this passage.<sup>92</sup> First, there is an Audenesque strangeness to the 'lacustrine cities' and the 'loathing', neither of which is explained, but both of which are vivid enough to keep the reader interested.<sup>93</sup> Second there is a concern with the discourses of abstract thought, hence the notion that something might be 'the product of an idea', and the discursive locutions 'for instance', and 'one example'. Both

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<sup>92</sup> For an extended close reading of this poem see David Rigsbee, 'Against Monuments: A Reading of Ashbery's "These Lacustrine Cities"', in Lehman (ed.) pp.209-223. For other interesting considerations see Alan Williamson, Introspection and Contemporary Poetry (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), p.138; and Norman Finkelstein, The Utopian Moment in Contemporary Poetry, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1988), pp.56-58.

<sup>93</sup> Marjorie Perloff discusses the partly Audenesque character of Rivers and Mountains in The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1983), pp.252-254 .

threads run right through the poem. The feeling of strangeness persists through the combination of the 'tower', the 'swans and tapering branches/ Burning', the 'beacons', the 'monument', the 'rainbow of tears' and that eerily disembodied voice that continually interjects to tell 'you' what to do. The poem's fundamental abstraction is apparent in the suggestions that 'you are left with an idea of yourself', that 'we have all-inclusive plans for you', that 'you are nursing some private project', and that there is such a thing as 'the logic/ Of your situation'(RM, 9). The main point, in fact, of 'These Lacustrine Cities' is to present the logic of the poet's situation in the book. It is a book in which he is necessarily somewhat abstracted, and much of it will find him thinking aloud, trying ideas, playing creative games, nursing private projects. In order, however, that such reflexive processes do not become too dry for the reader's taste, he dresses them in a rich and sometimes sinister imagery. He thus makes his experiments compelling reading.

Not that the reader is the only one whose interest must be kept up. The poet too, engaged in his highly solitary pursuit, is liable to flag, and sometimes he admits as much. In 'Last Month', for instance, the fact that the occasion is always the same is clearly getting him down:

No changes of support - only  
Patches of grey, here where sunlight fell.(RM,13)

Nor, in this poem, is he coping very well with the solitude required to write it. 'The house,' as he says, 'seems heavier/ Now that they have gone away'(RM, 13). To get himself going, he tries to remind himself why he endures all this, noting that 'The academy of the future is/ Opening its doors' for him. Even this is not sufficient motivation, however, because all the academy seems to offer today is the prospect of more 'chairs piled high with books and papers' (RM,13). And because he is in this dispirited mood, the poet reflects directly on the contradictory position in which he finds

himself. 'In his book,' he remarks, 'there was a picture of treason only/ And in the garden, cries and colors'(RM,13). The poet, in other words, betrays himself, going inside to experiment, when outside in the garden there are those cries and colours he wants so much to be in touch with.

In general, however, in Rivers and Mountains, the poet is absorbed enough by both his experiments, and by his concomitant efforts to make them intriguing. The title poem is an impressive case in point. The poem's object, as is apparent from its opening sentence, is to develop a more fluid syntax so that when he does finally turn his attention again to 'the things going on around him' he will be able, somehow, to take more in at any one time. Reminiscent of the long sentence that introduces 'The Game of Chess' section of The Waste Land, Ashbery's opening utterance twists through a series of disparate thoughts and images, not making them cohere as such, but, by its continuous energy indicating that they are not exactly unrelated either. It is the same syntactic energy which will allow Ashbery to embrace the bizarre series of objects which introduce 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood'. For all this movement, Ashbery does not lose sight of the 'logic of his situation' in 'Rivers and Mountains', and of the fact that, in the absence of any environmental changes, things (for him) are basically static. The momentum of the opening sentence is thus sharply checked by the observation that,

The bird flew over and  
Sat - there was nothing else to do. (RM,10)

In this case, however, the fact that there is nothing else to do does not make the poet long for the garden, but prompts him, instead, to greater acts of linguistic invention. Still he is concerned with his loneliness, and still he yearns for company, but in his present mood such concerns are occasions for rhetorical invention. Isolation is presented as 'these moonless nights spent as on a raft/ In the seclusion of a melody heard', and 'the

collective places' where he might actually meet someone are wonderfully various: 'Fisheries and oyster beds', 'Seminaries of instruction', 'the major tax assessment area' (RM,10-11). But the real mark of Ashbery's invention in this poem is the way he makes his experimental mode attractive. Thus, the process of preparing to write a more responsive poetry becomes the plot of a military thriller, poetic planning becoming battle strategy in the third part of the poem, as the poet notes, reflexively, that,

Your plan was to separate the enemy into two groups  
With the razor-edged mountains between.(RM,11)

The poem most obviously starved of occasions for poetry (hence the emptiness of the title) is 'Civilisation and its Discontents'. So much so, in fact, that it is almost unable to get going at all; and once it is going the poet can only sustain the poem by turning to the language of the poem itself for its occasions. Unable to find anything in his environment to get his poem started, the thought seems to occur that getting started itself could be the poem's concern:

A people chained to aurora  
I alone disarming you

Millions of facts of distributed light.

Helping myself with some big boxes  
Up the steps, then turning to no neighbourhood ...  
(RM,14)

What these strange opening lines recount is the poem's own difficult emergence. Unable to get started, the poet thinks of the dawn and of 'aurora' (goddess of starting). Because 'Aurora' is a construct which mythologises a natural phenomenon, the poet is reminded of his purpose in this book: to find poetic ways of bringing people closer to events and to one another. So, announcing that he alone can disarm people of those old-fashioned ways of thinking that have distanced them from their world, he reminds the reader that

'aurora' is nothing more than 'Millions of facts of distributed light'. But having reached this positivistic dead end rather early in the poem, the poet has to start again. This time, though, he has a format to help him. So, having first got started with an image of starting, he makes his new start with an image of a new start - describing himself moving house. In showing himself moving in, moreover, he describes 'Helping myself with some big boxes/ Up the steps'(RM,14). It is an image of enforced self-sufficiency, deriving both from the loneliness of the opening lines, and the initial sense that, cut-off as he is, the poet has to find occasions for his poetry in his own practice: he must help himself. The poem continues in this manner, each time it grinds to a halt finding the occasion for a new utterance in an old one. In the second full stanza of the poem, 'aurora' prompts thoughts of miracles; which reminds the poet that some people are taken in by such talk. Then taking in prompts thoughts of hospitality; which reminds the poet (again) that he is lonely, ('Now I never see you much anymore'); which lingering expression gives rise to thoughts about the stupidity of nostalgia. And so it goes on.

By the end of the poem, however, the very discontents that gave rise to such a reflexive procedure return to haunt it:

No heaviness in the upland pastures. Nothing  
 In the forest. Only life under the huge trees  
 Like a coat that has grown too big, moving far away,  
 Cutting swamps for men like lapdogs, holding its own,  
 Performing once again, for you and for me.  
 (RM,15)

At first glance this seems an optimistic ending, 'you and ... me' joined (after all that solitude) by the shared spectacle of some performance. No substantial contact has been made, however, as is apparent if one traces the process by which the poet arrived at the term 'performing'. The word is the last of a long line of present participles: 'disarming', 'helping', 'turning', 'rushing', 'leading', 'coming', 'planning', 'harping', 'beginning',

‘shooting’; and, in the closing sentence, ‘moving’, ‘cutting’, and ‘holding’. These verbs tell us how the poem works. Starved of occasions, the poem has to make itself happen, and as each expression gives rise to a new one, so it continues to do so. The poem happens, that is, as we read it, in the continuous present. And once it has happened it has happened; nothing is left to be cherished or preserved, because as each new expression consumes the one that went before, so the poem disappears into its own momentum, able to do no more than keep itself going. ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’, that is, is a self-consuming artefact, a verbal performance, or, to put it in contemporary terms, a Happening. And, like a Happening it is a temporarily absorbing, but finally dissatisfying experience. It came from nowhere, and it leaves us with nothing at the end. It can be said to be occasional, but only in the most conceptual way. It is an ingenious but discontented testament to the isolation of the experimental poet.<sup>94</sup>

By its commitment to experiment Rivers and Mountains is a work of its moment, and it is able to sustain that commitment partly because its cultural moment seemed to call for experimental art. (How else could a work as vaporous as ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’ acquire a title of such import?) It is a collection, moreover, which shows both the virtues and deficiencies of such abstraction. ‘Clepsydra’, for instance, was plainly an important move towards a more fluid poetry, but by its necessary relentlessness it is exhausting reading.<sup>95</sup> But the point is that Ashbery was aware (sometimes painfully so) of both virtues and deficiencies, and nowhere more obviously so

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<sup>94</sup> For extended discussions of the idea of verbal performance in Ashbery, see Marguerite S. Murphy’s Bakhtinian account of Three Poems in A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English From Wilde to Ashbery (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992) pp.168-198; and James McCorkle’s deconstructive reading of Ashbery in The Still Performance (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp.46-86.

<sup>95</sup> Lynn Keller offers an insightful reading of ‘Clepsydra’; Keller, p.62.

than in 'The Skaters'.<sup>96</sup> For reasons of space I am unable to dwell on the 'The Skaters', and rather unfairly want to use it to show the deficiencies of the experimental position - although in doing so I am not articulating anything of which the poem is unaware. As in every other poem in the collection the occasion is the poet's own experimental isolation. By this stage, however, the poet has become both astonishingly intimate with his own loneliness, and fantastically resourceful in representing it. The intimacy is evident from the outset:

These decibels  
Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound  
Into which being enters, and is apart.  
(RM,34)

Only a poet who has developed massive powers of concentration through hours of solitude could possibly be so intimate with his environment as to analyse sounds down to their decibels, and then to feel those decibels as a kind of flagellation. If Ashbery had been seeking a language fit to be intimate with its occasions he has surely, by this point, developed it. By the same token, the brilliantly extended island metaphor by which Ashbery presents his isolation in the third section of the poem shows a facility for language which could only be gained by intensely close (and undistracted) attention to words and the way they work. But precisely because it achieves such intimacy and demonstrates such facility, 'The Skaters' confirms that the period of isolation can now come to an end. So it is that as the island metaphor concludes the poet turns his attention again to the things going on around him. And as he does the contradictions of experimentalism surface immediately. He 'feels cut off from the life in the streets' (RM, 56). He has no language to deal with news of a major world event, his response to which

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<sup>96</sup> For extended considerations of 'The Skaters' see Ford, pp.100-112; Shoptaw, pp.89-99; and Bonnie Costello, 'John Ashbery's Landscapes', in Schultz (ed.), pp.64-6.

is blithe: 'A revolution/ in Argentina! Think of it! Bullets flying through/ the air ... We go on sipping coffee, thinking dark or transparent/ thoughts ...'(RM,57).<sup>97</sup> And generally speaking he finds himself in a very problematic relation to people and the things they do:

Nope, the motley spectacle  
offers no charms whatsoever for me -  
And yet - and yet I feel myself caught up in its coils -  
Its defectuous movement is that of my reasoning powers -  
The main point has already changed, but the masses continue  
to tread the water  
Of backward opinion, living out their mandate as though nothing  
had happened. (RM,57)

The period of necessary isolation has ended, and, as he knows, Ashbery now faces a new set of problems; problems he will have to deal with in his next book, The Double Dream of Spring. How to make a language grown intimate with its occasions take satisfactory account of the pressures caused by distant events? How to reconcile a sensibility tuned to the vibrations of contemporary life with the backward opinions of the people around him? These would have been exacting problems at any time. Contemporary events, as we have seen, made them all the more so. They were problems Oppen also had to deal with, and I will consider his response first.

### **It is difficult now to speak of poetry**

Like Ashbery, Oppen undertook a period of intense and undistracted formal experimentation in the early sixties. The book that resulted, the self-consciously titled The Materials, was published in 1962, and caused Oppen the same kind of torment Ashbery occasionally evinces in Rivers and Mountains ('I am desperate right now to get this behind me and get on').<sup>98</sup> But having got his period of isolation behind him earlier

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<sup>97</sup> Geoff Ward presents an exacting discussion of this passage; pp.141-143

<sup>98</sup> Oppen, Selected Letters, p.53.

than Ashbery, he was, by the mid-sixties, fully engaged with the problems Ashbery anticipates at the end of 'The Skaters'. His most important work from this period, and probably the most important of his career, is the forty-part poetic series 'Of Being Numerous'. The precise degree to which 'Of Being Numerous' is further on than 'The Skaters' in its thinking about experimentalism is evident from the metaphors the poets have in common.

For Ashbery, then, the next move, having shut himself away, is to get back to the streets:

We step out into the street, not realizing that the street is different,  
And so it shall be all our lives; only, from this moment on, nothing  
will ever be the same again.  
(RM, 57)

As his mixture of present and future tenses indicates, Ashbery is on a threshold here. He is about to step out into the street. Oppen, as he makes clear in section three of 'Of Being Numerous', is already out there:

We encounter them. Actually  
A populace flows  
Thru' the city.

This is a language, therefore, of New York.<sup>99</sup>

As with Ashbery, one of the objects of Oppen's experiments has been to develop a more fluid expression. However, unlike Ashbery in 'Clepsydra' and 'The Thousand Islands', Oppen is dealing here not with the concept of flow, but is trying to bring his formulations to bear on an actual flow, on the flow of people as they move past him on the pavements of New York. Ashbery is just about to come out of exile. Oppen is already the flâneur.

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<sup>99</sup> Oppen, Collected Poems, p.102.

Not that Oppen has forgotten his period of isolation. But while the ceaseless flow of people can sharpen the attractions of the island life, Oppen has no intention of going back.

### Crusoe

We say was  
'Rescued'.  
So we have chosen.

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Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck  
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning  
Of being numerous.<sup>100</sup>

Oppen knows the irony of the word 'rescued'.<sup>101</sup> Crusoe, after all had become self-sufficient, only to be forced once more to negotiate society and its crowds. But if he finds such self-sufficiency notionally attractive, Oppen knows that it is not now viable. So, while Ashbery was readying himself to come out of 'professional exile' in 'The Skaters', Oppen, has already 'chosen the meaning/ Of being numerous', and for all that it leaves him 'obsessed, bewildered' knows he cannot reverse his decision.

As with Ashbery, (who by the end of Rivers and Mountains had developed a language sensitive to 'decibels') the object of Oppen's experiments was to develop a poetic form capable of intimacy with the smallest occurrences. In the beautiful poem 'Psalm' (in This In Which) Oppen names this objective as his credo, the poem closing with an article of faith,

The small nouns  
Crying faith

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p.103.

<sup>101</sup> For an extended discussion of this passage, see Finkelstein, pp.36-37.

In this in which the wild deer  
Startle, and stare out.<sup>102</sup>

It is through the small nouns and the demonstratives, through the deictic capacities of language, that Oppen sought contact with the world. It is a Postmodern faith he shares with Ashbery, and he articulates it again on occasion in 'Of Being Numerous'. He watches his daughter,

Behind their house, behind the back porch  
Are the little woods.  
She walks into them sometimes  
And awaits the birds and the deer.<sup>103</sup>

However, having developed this language of intimacy, certain unavoidable questions begin to press on Oppen as soon as he tries actually to use it in the world. He allows Rachel Blau DuPlessis (with whom he was corresponding at the time) to put the first, quoting from her letter to him:

'Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one's  
distance from Them, the people, does not also  
increase'<sup>104</sup>

The second is whether the intimacy poetry seems to require does not make poetry irrelevant when events taking place at a distance seem to press their claim so much more heavily on the individual consciousness, and seem to call not for accuracy but for outrage. Thus, speaking of Vietnam he notes

A plume of smoke, visible at a distance  
In which people burn.<sup>105</sup>

There is no question that as he negotiates these questions Oppen sustains an almost unbearable honesty.<sup>106</sup> His form of response is, in both cases, dialectical. Thus on

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<sup>102</sup> Oppen, *Collected Poems*, p.60.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p.105.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111.

<sup>106</sup> Jeremy Hooker discusses this honesty in, 'Seeing the World: The Poetry of George Oppen', Dent (ed.), p.40

his distance from the people he notes first, that because, these days, people are  
 ‘shoppers,/ Choosers, judges’ and because, as a result, their life ‘loses/ solidity, loses  
 extent’, then

one may honourably keep

His distance  
 If he can.<sup>107</sup>

Only, in the next section to recall those he fought alongside in the Second World War,  
 and to deplore his own elitism:

How forget that? How talk  
 Distantly of ‘The People’<sup>108</sup>

Likewise, his first response to the question posed his poetry by Vietnam, is to make a  
 declaration:

Now in the helicopters the casual will  
 Is atrocious

Inanity in high places,  
 If it is true we must do these things  
 We must cut our throats.<sup>109</sup>

In a poem which finds its faith in the small nouns, such a big statement jars most  
 uncomfortably. But if a poem, by its own definition, cannot make such a statement at  
 such a time then is the poem itself not rendered irrelevant. Oppen allows the possibility,  
 observing that ‘It is difficult now to speak of poetry -’, and confirming the point by  
 pondering the question in the poem’s one prose passage.

Oppen does not find answers to the questions he is so impressively willing to  
 pose his poem, and nor could one properly expect him to. These are questions of the  
 highest order of difficulty for contemporary poetry, and form, as Altieri points out, the

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<sup>107</sup> Oppen, *Collected Poems*, p.108.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111.

aesthetic problem American poetry took forward from the sixties. The question one can ask of Oppen is whether he finds a poetic form which makes the pressures he identifies less intolerable. The form Oppen finds, and which he holds to throughout the poem, is the form of the dialectic. Almost without variation throughout the poem, a thesis is offered by one section to be followed immediately in the next section by an antithesis, as if one cannot now propose any idea without immediately coming up against its opposite. At no stage, however, and for all his stated concern with the philosophical and social implications of fluidity, does one way of speaking or thinking flow into and inform another. There is no question that Oppen addressed the questions facing the contemporary poet as stringently as anyone, and given that his life had been divided between poetic and political vanguards, it is probable that he felt the competing demands to experiment and declare more acutely than most. The question The Double Dream of Spring allows us to ask, however, is whether such a non-synthesizing dialectic was, in the end the most appropriate kind of response; or whether, in some way, the poet should have risked trying to have it both ways.

### **An occasional dream**

Ashbery described the kind of poetry he thought possible in the late sixties in 'Soonest Mended', suggesting that,

no longer  
 May we make the necessary arrangements, simple as they are.  
 Our star was brighter perhaps when it had water in it.  
 Now there is no question even of that, but only  
 Of holding on to the hard earth so as not to get thrown off,  
 With an occasional dream, a vision ...  
 (DDS,17-18)

Poised between 'the hard earth' and 'a vision', 'an occasional dream' is a precariously exact description of the poetry Ashbery hoped to write in The Double Dream of Spring: a poetry both grounded and free to respond, a poetry both real and imaginatively strong. That Ashbery could aspire to, and, moreover, achieve, such a contradictory (but of course desirable) poetic state, testifies to the strength of his sense of 'occasion'. An 'occasional dream' (the double dream of the title) is poetry both of and for its occasion; poetry which has its occasion in events, but which, because occasioned and not caused, is free to imagine its response to those events. It is poetry, as critics have indicated, of the very highest order.<sup>110</sup>

I have indicated above what constituted the occasion of The Double Dream of Spring: the conflicting impulses to experiment and declare; the competing pressures to be both intimate and distant; a failure to recognise points of agreement; and an inability to affirm democratic commitments. Ashbery's response to that occasion (as it took shape in his prose) has also been indicated: his resistance to the 'joining' mentality and his sense of unity in shared occasions; his deep-seated reluctance to declare; his twin, but separate commitments to the action of protest and the action of poetry; his troubled sense of the need to register both intimate and distant events; and his sense of separation from those whose sensibility he would alter. All this, I suggest, is going on around Ashbery whenever he sits down to write in the late sixties. Almost everywhere one looks in The Double Dream of Spring, one finds the same pressures, the same oppositions, with the poet trying, every time he writes, to find a form of utterance which might meet the

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<sup>110</sup> There have been many stimulating discussions of the poetry of The Double Dream of Spring. See, especially, Harold Bloom, Figures, p.185; Steven Connor, 'Points of Departure: Deconstruction and John Ashbery's 'Sortes Vergilianae'', in Anthony Easthope and John O. Thompson (eds.), Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) pp.5-18; John Hollander, 'Soonest Mended', in Harold Bloom (ed.) Modern Critical Views: John Ashbery (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985) pp207-216; Shetley, p113-124.

demands the occasion presents. He does not succeed every time, of course, sometimes striking false notes as he tries to bring dissonant impulses together. But this is real experimental poetry, and so, as he knows, it is only by striking false notes, that Ashbery can hit the true.

‘The Task’, the first poem in the collection, takes up where ‘The Skaters’ left off,

They are preparing to begin again:  
Problems, new pennant up the flagpole  
In a predicated romance. (DDS,13)

Ashbery, it will be recalled, emerged from his period of experimental isolation to face a series of pressing new aesthetic ‘problems’: a feeling that he was cut-off from life in the street, a sense of his difference from the out-dated masses, and a creeping awareness that distant events had somehow also to be registered. He addresses each of these problems in turn in ‘The Task’. He is ready, once again, to breath the polluted air of the street, for ‘linear acting into that time/ In whose corrosive mass he first discovered how to breathe’. (DDS,13). He gestures a form of address by which he might both keep his distance from and identify with the public:

Just look at the filth you’ve made,  
See what you’ve done.  
Yet if these are regrets they stir only lightly ... (DDS,13)

And he formulates the intention both to widen the scope of his utterance, and to preserve its intimacy:

I plan to stay here a little while  
For these are moments only, moments of insight,  
And there are reaches to be attained ... (DDS, 13)

The Double Dream of Spring, that is, aims at an utterance both insightful and far-reaching.

'Evening in the Country' attempts such an utterance. Half-way through, the poem points beyond its immediate circumstances and into the distance at 'ten thousand helmeted footsoldiers,/ A Spanish armada stretching to the horizon, all/ Absolutely motionless until the hour to strike...' (DDS, 33). As it waits to strike this armada plainly weighs a good deal more heavily on the poet's consciousness than did the revolution in Argentina. Still, though, he refuses to allow such events to dominate his thinking:

But I think there is not too much to be said or done  
And that these things eventually take care of themselves... (DDS,33)

There was no 'but' in 'The Skaters', no real sense of counter-pressures. Still though, one may feel that the tone is somewhat complacent in the face of such a potentially catastrophic scenario. And one might feel similarly unsettled by the poet's decision to

pass over this to the real  
Subject of our concern, and that is  
Have you begun to be in the context you feel...(DDS,34)

It is not the real subject of Ashbery's concern that is unsettling here, but the way that, as he puts it, he passes over distant events to get to it. Of course some such manoeuvre is necessary if the poet is to get to his real concern at all, but the awkwardness arises because the poet does not make it clear here how awkward he himself feels. At any rate, Ashbery's primary concern, in Sontag's terms, is with questions of sensibility, with the need to find forms of expression which accustom people to the context in which they find themselves, and as the first person plural indicates, it is a concern he feels his fellow poets ought to share. He re-iterates this resolve in 'The Bungalows', where, faced with the alternatives, he chooses:

Rather decaying art, genius, inspiration to hold to  
An impossible "calque" of reality, than  
"The new school of the trivial, rising up on the field of battle,  
Something of the sludge and leaf-mold," and life  
Goes trickling out through the holes, like water through a sieve,  
All in one direction. (DDS,71)

Ashbery's word trivial is contentious and risky. Does he not trivialise the battle by his description of the poetry it gives rise to? And is his own poetry, his 'decaying art', not trivial by comparison with such poetry? Ashbery's argument, of course, is the reverse, that it is the poetry of the battle-field itself which trivialises, trivialising experiences it cannot hope to understand. He cannot prove this point of course, and so the word 'trivial' reverberates around the lines threatening to implicate both, and in fact, all forms of poetry. But the strength of the passage is that by allowing this reverberation, it raises the whole issue, in all its moral complexity, and in doing allows the reader to judge.

In The Double Dream of Spring, then, Ashbery strives to formulate an utterance which is aware of events happening at distance. Still, though, and for all this widening awareness, Ashbery remains persuaded, as he indicates in both 'Evening in the Country' and 'The Bungalows', of the need for poetic experiment. Indeed, in terms of the sheer diversity of its forms The Double Dream of Spring is one of Ashbery's most experimental books, containing as it does: Audenesque black doggerel, Stevensian lectures, a sestina, the dizains of 'Fragment', prose-poems, quatrains, rhyming couplets, poems translated from French, poems originally written in French to be translated into English, and long-limbed and short-lined free-verse. It is experimental in the way that The Orators is experimental, a book which, given the pressures under which it was written, may well have served as a model for Ashbery. Yet if it is manifestly committed to experiment, The Double Dream of Spring is by no means unaware of the pressure to declare, as is apparent from the most formally various sequence in the book, 'Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme by Ella Wheeler Wilcox'. Moving from free-verse, to rhyming-couplets (with the occasional triplet) to prose interspersed with lines of verse the poem closes with an outright refusal to declare:

Weak as he was, Gustavus Hertz raised himself on his elbow. He stared wildly about him, peering fearfully into the shadowy corners of the room.

“I will tell you nothing! Nothing, do you hear?” he shrieked. “Go away! Go away!” (DDS,29)

‘John Clare’, a poem which experiments with prose, ends on a similarly resistant note:

So their comment is: “No comment.” Meanwhile the whole history of probabilities is coming to life, starting in the upper left-hand corner, like a sail. (DDS,36)

But hostile and belligerent as these experimental poems become when faced with the pressure to declare themselves, The Double Dream of Spring is by no means a straightforwardly non-declarative book. And if anything, the point of Hertz’s hysterical reaction would seem to be to dramatize the difficulty experimental poetry has in making statements, a difficulty which Ashbery seems concerned at several points in the collection, to try to overcome.

‘Variations, Calypso and Fugue’ seems itself to know that experimental poetry cannot be complacently opposed to the need to declare. The speaker of the couplets, who, it must be conceded, is not a good poet, offers fellow poets some words of wisdom:

This age-old truth I to thee impart  
Act according to the dictates of your art

Because if you don’t no-one else is going to  
And that person isn’t likely to be you.  
(DDS,26)

One cannot suppose that Ashbery disapproves of this bad poet’s impulse to instruct his or her contemporaries. Certainly he would not have disapproved of the sentiment, for as he wrote in his letter to The Nation, his article on O’Hara had not been “sneering at the consciences of other poets” but praising Frank O’Hara for giving a unique voice to his

own conscience'.<sup>111</sup> Agreeing as he does, then, with the bad poet's sentiments in 'Variations, Calypso, and Fugue', Ashbery would seem to acknowledge that experimental poetry must sometimes make declarations, if only to affirm its own democratic values.

The Double Dream of Spring is thus not unaware of the pressure to declare, and on various occasions it does itself make declarations, if only to hear what they sound like in poetry. The most obvious instance of this is 'Decoy' with its initial borrowing from the American Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident:  
That ostracism, both political and moral, has  
Its place in the twentieth-century scheme of things;  
That urban chaos is the problem we have been seeing into and seeing  
into ...  
(DDS, 31)

Various critics have attempted to unravel the irony of these lines, in the hope, largely, of aligning the poet for or against the opinions presented.<sup>112</sup> But tuned as he is to irony, Ashbery's point is surely that the opening line renders itself redundant. If these truths are indeed self-evident, then why declare them. And one feels the force of this as one reads on, because if one agrees that political and moral ostracism has become part of the scheme of things then one agrees, and the speaker will only be confirming what one already knows. Not, of course, that such confirmation is in itself a bad thing. Ashbery, after all, opened his lecture to the Yale Art School, precisely by indicating what in fact everybody in the room knew to be the case. The point, however, is that he indicated rather than declared shared knowledge, thus encouraging his audience to recognise their

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<sup>111</sup> Ashbery, letter to the editor, The Nation, May 29, 1967, p.692.

<sup>112</sup> See, for instance, Cohen, pp.135-138.

common ground for themselves. The orator's error in 'Decoy' is to misjudge his occasion; to miss the opportunity to generate common feeling.

Supple as Ashbery's handling of the pressure to declare can be, it is a great strength of The Double Dream of Spring that the pressure never goes away, that the implicit moral issue is not made to disappear. In 'The Hod Carrier', a severely reflexive poem, the speaker poses to himself the tough question,

Are these floorboards, to be stared at  
In moments of guilt, as wallpaper can stream away and yet

You cannot declare it? (DDS, 58)

While in 'An Outing', a poem which closes by repeating the word 'Denmark' (so taking on all the virtues and vices of the indecisive temperament), the speaker seems first convinced, then uncertain, that his pose is acceptable:

"My activity is as random as the wind.  
Why should I insist? The visitor is free to go,  
Or to stay as, as he chooses."  
...  
"I don't know whether I should apply or nothing."  
"I think you shd make yr decision."  
(DDS,60)

That 'shd' and 'yr', foreign to Ashbery, mark the presence of another poet's voice in his text, of Corso's, say, or Ginsberg's; the voice, at any rate, of a committed poet. A collaborative poet by temperament, Ashbery here represents another response to the occasion, thereby making his own more complete.

Much, however, as he is inclined to make voices collaborate towards a shared perspective in The Double Dream of Spring, the occasion demands that he represents discord, and in general the book is characterised by squabbles and arguments. In 'Plainness in Diversity' (the title itself signifying similarity in difference) the speaker despairs of reconciling the 'Silly girls your heads full of boys':

Not on our planet is the destiny  
That can make you one.  
(DDS, 16)

Similarly, in 'Sortes Vergilianae', we hear of,

Words spoken in the heat of passion, that might have been retracted  
in good time,  
All good intentions, all that was arguable. These are stilled now, as  
the embrace in the hollow of its flux  
And can never be revived except as perverse notations on an in-  
disputable state of things ... (DDS, 74)

Likewise in 'Clouds', we learn that,

The old ideals had been cast aside and people were restless for the new,  
  
In a wholly different mass, so there was no joining,  
Only separate blocks of achievement and opinion  
With no relation to the conducive ether  
Which surrounded everything like the clear idea of a ruler. (DDS, 67)

In each of these poems we witness a disagreement which is, in fact, more or less baseless, but which, in providing people with positions to take up, and groupings to join, prevents them from seeing what in fact they have in common. 'Joining', that is, as Ashbery makes clear in 'Clouds', actually prevents people from joining.

The idea of joining has always been important to Ashbery. As O'Hara observed he is a poet who seeks to marry all the world. And it is, finally, the act of joining which underlies Ashbery's key poetic strategies in The Double Dream of Spring. Faced with the same conflicts and disagreements Ashbery presents here, Oppen's response, as we have seen, was to shuttle dialectically from one impulse to another. Rarely, if ever, however, did he attempt to meet both impulses at the same time, with the result that 'Of Being Numerous' falls, finally, between two stools, all but paralysed by his even-handed approach. The only alternative, perhaps, to falling between stools, is, as Ashbery suggests in The Double Dream of Spring, to sit on the fence. Sitting on the fence, of

course, is not generally thought an admirable thing to do, suggestive, as it is, of weakness of mind. But as Ashbery makes clear in his short poem 'The Chateau Hardware', the advantage of the fence is that it is where separate areas ('blocks of opinion') join, and so to sit on it is perhaps to facilitate some kind of reconciliation. 'The Chateau Hardware' - title and all - would seem to achieve something like reconciliation.

The little birds

Used to collect along the fence.  
It was the great "as though", the how the day went,  
The excursions of the police  
As I pursued my bodily functions, wanting  
Neither fire nor water,  
Vibrating to the distant pinch  
And turning out the way I am, turning out to greet you. (DDS,73)

Sat on the fence, so the poet would claim, he does indeed manage to reconcile impulses. Thus, this poem is intimate insofar as it is attentive to bodily functions, and yet it is far-reaching in that it is 'vibrating to the distant pinch'. This is easy to say, of course, in an *ars poetica*, but Ashbery experiments towards, and does actually achieve something like this reconciliation in The Double Dream of Spring. He is by no means successful every time, of course, and he is always liable to sound either grandiose, or complacent, purist or vulgar, opaque or transparent. Occasionally, however, he gets it more or less right, and what makes The Double Dream of Spring great is the frequency with which he does, witness: 'The Task', 'Decoy', 'The Double Dream of Spring', 'Definition of Blue', 'Clouds', 'The Bungalows'; and (though slightly less so) 'Sunrise in Suburbia', 'Parergon' and 'Sortes Vergilianae'. The poem in which he gets it most right however is 'Soonest Mended'.

Moving at pace, but almost never putting a foot wrong, 'Soonest Mended' charts a breathtaking course through the competing impulses of sixties poetry.<sup>113</sup> It opens by resisting an impulse - the impulse to think that, because the likes of Ginsberg had become such popular public figures, poetry was therefore central. Ashbery knows different, presenting the poet as a marginal figure; a figure who, recalling Oppen's expression, is always 'rescued' from the brink of destruction (DDS, 17). What marginalised the sixties poet, what made him (paradoxically) in need of rescue, was his radical sensibility, his willingness to experiment with ways of seeing the world. But if this is a dangerous impulse it is also a crucial one, and so Ashbery promptly succumbs to it, steering close to the brink of intelligibility with his surreal combining of Ingres and the cartoon character Happy Hooligan. To rescue himself, the poet turns to domestic concerns, a Marianne Moore-like neutral ground on which he and the reader can meet. But even as he mentions such concerns another impulse begins to make itself felt:

thoughts in a mind  
 With room enough to spare for our little problems (so they began to  
 to seem),  
 Our daily quandary about food and the rent and bills to be paid?  
 (DDS,17)

Thus, just as the poet is reminding the reader that for all his experimental sensibility he has room to spare for the 'daily quandary', so he is in turn reminded that in the present climate such problems inevitably seem 'little'. Which is not to say that he wants to forego such little concerns. He wants, rather, somehow to reconcile the intimacy such concerns allow, with an awareness of the distant events by which they are belittled. Hence,

a robin flies across  
 The upper corner of the window, you brush your hair away

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<sup>113</sup> 'Soonest Mended' has attracted some very helpful criticism. Particularly insightful are, Bloom, *Figures*, pp.185-7; Hollander, in Bloom (ed.), pp.207-215; Shoptaw, pp.105-107; J.D. McClatchy, *White Paper: On American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) pp.51-54; and Stephen Paul Miller, 'Periodizing Ashbery and His Influence', in Schultz (ed.), pp.150-152.

And cannot quite see, or a wound will flash  
 Against the sweet faces of the others, something like:  
 This is what you wanted to hear, so why  
 Did you think of listening to something else?  
 (DDS, 18)

Intimacy and distance are beautifully handled here; that which is intimate (the hair) being brushed away, while that which is distant (the wounded faces of the others) is brought close by the felt word 'sweet'. The poet himself thinks this is 'something like', and he is surely right. Conflicting impulses have been brought, not forced, together. Neither perception makes the other seem false.

And the poem is in general a bringing together of competing impulses. Voices holding different opinions find a measure of agreement,

Better, you said, to stay cowering  
 Like this in the early lessons, since the promise of learning  
 Is a delusion, and I agreed, adding that  
 Tomorrow would alter the sense of what already had been learned,  
 That the learning process is extended in this way ... (DDS, 19)

While a seemingly passive poetry becomes a form of action, that

learning to accept  
 The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out,  
 For this is action, this not being sure, this careless  
 Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow ...  
 (DDS, 19)

And crucially to the success of the poem, the poet brings together different senses of the occasion. We glimpse the poet at his desk, a robin flying across the window, and we see him also in his climate, the climate that fostered his sentences. We even see him leaving a stadium after some grand occasion (a protest reading perhaps) on which 'they' were the players, while 'we who had struggled at the game/ Were merely spectators' (DDS, 18).

Ashbery, as we have seen, is not a stadium poet, and does not agree with the division of spectators and players. Hence his lecture to the Yale Art School, an occasion to declare

which he used instead to indicate to the audience their participation in the event. Poems can be occasions for declarations. Ashbery, however, does not use them thus, and nowhere more obviously so than here; the least said after all, the soonest mended. Rather, as in the Yale lecture, the poet indicates the occasion in which his readers have a part. 'For this,' then, 'is action', the demonstrative pointing to the poem of course, to its experimental procedures and its willingness to join. But the demonstrative also points the readers beyond the poem, to 'this' in which they are all participating, to the occasion they all have in common. For this, for its occasion, 'Soonest Mended' is poetic action worthy of the name.

**Chapter Five**  
**The Arrival of the Interviewer**

### The Arrival of the Interviewer

Ashbery: Isn't that true of all of us? We want to communicate and we hate the idea of being forced to. I think it's something that should be noticed ....

Poulin: Can we get back, then, to the central question of what it is you're communicating. My feeling is that in the middle of the difficulty of your poetry there is a very personal element, disguised by this difficulty.

Ashbery: Is that all? I don't see quite what you mean by a very personal element.<sup>1</sup>

#### Something

Ought to be written about how this affects

You when you write poetry:

The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind

Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire  
to communicate

Something between breaths, if only for the sake

Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you

For other centers of communication, so that understanding

May begin, and in doing so be undone.

(HD, 45-46)

The interviewer first entered Ashbery's environment in the person of Bill Berkson, who, in 1970 arrived, at the Art News offices to conduct an interview (eventually unpublished) under the auspices of The Paris Review.<sup>2</sup> Since then he or she has never stopped coming, Ashbery having given scores of interviews over the past twenty-six years, for a bewildering array of small magazines, academic journals, newspapers, and radio broadcasts. More even than the emergence of the critic, I will argue, the arrival of the interviewer can be seen to have had an impact on Ashbery's poetry: on its form, on its tone, on its sense of itself, and, crucially, on its sense of occasion. And indeed, if one thinks about it, this is very much what one would expect. Ashbery is famously a poet so sensitive to his writing environment that the ringing of the phone can divert the progress of a poem.<sup>3</sup> How much more affected, in a general sense, is this poet likely to be when

<sup>1</sup> A. Poulin Jr., 'The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery', in The Michigan Quarterly Review, 20:3, (Summer 1981), pp. 250-251. The interview took place in 1972, when Ashbery appeared at the Brockport Writers Forum.

<sup>2</sup> Berkson's is the first interview mentioned by Kermani; Kermani, p183

<sup>3</sup> Witness 'The Wine': 'The telephone was involved in it' (AWK, 100).

the reader - for that after all is what the interviewer, whether poet, critic, journalist, or graduate student, really is - suddenly starts showing up in his sitting room? The very reader, moreover, whose existence had for so long seemed seriously in doubt. It is the repercussions of this encounter I want to consider in this chapter.

To begin to understand these repercussions, it is necessary briefly to consider the poetry Ashbery wrote just before the interviewer arrived. As was indicated in the previous chapter, the contradictory pressures facing American poetry in the sixties pushed the art to, and beyond, its limits; a state of affairs Ashbery responded to by doing some of his thinking about poetry in prose. So it is perhaps not surprising, that in 1969 Ashbery should have merged the two activities by writing a prose poem. Three Poems opens by turning over the problems Ashbery was left with at the end of the decade. 'The New Spirit' starts by re-addressing the question Ashbery first addressed in 'The Skaters':

I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.  
(TP,3)

Nor is it only the decade's aesthetic problems that exercise Ashbery in 'The New Spirit'. The moral questions, also, are plainly on his mind. He records 'awkwardness around what were necessary topics of discussion,' and confirms this awkwardness a little later, confessing,

I can only say that the wind of the change as it has happened has numbed me to the point where the false way and the true way are confounded ... (TP,12,17).

Gradually, with the freedom prose allows to formulate and re-formulate the problem, Ashbery recovers his confidence; and each time he returns to verse (as he does periodically in 'The New Spirit') one senses the beneficial effects of working things through in prose. On page 33, we hear that, 'Little by little/ You are the mascot of that

time'. While by page 40, Ashbery has become so convinced of his way (or ways) that he feels able to measure himself against Eliot:

But this was the way we had chosen,  
The way that leads to understanding.

There are no periodic returns to verse in 'The System', as if Ashbery had become intoxicated by the advantages of prose. Indeed 'The System' is one of the most self-confident pieces he has ever written, as is apparent from the opening declarative sentence: 'The system was breaking down' (TP,53). Ashbery's expression remains convincing throughout 'The System'. The idioms which so divided poetry in the sixties have come together: 'this whatever-it-is is always projecting itself on us, escalating its troops, prying open the shut gates of our sensibility...' (TP,79). And the sense of occasion compels: 'everything around me is waiting just for me to get up and say the word'; 'it is still up to you to seize the occasion' (TP,94,97). Everything, in fact, tends to the magnificent passage with which 'The System' concludes:

It seems truly impossible, but invariably at this point we are walking together along a street in some well-known city. The allegory is ended, its coils absorbed into the past, and this afternoon is as wide as an ocean. It is the time we have now, and all our wasted time sinks into the sea and is swallowed up without a trace. The past is dust and ashes, and this incommensurably wide way leads to the pragmatic and kinetic future. (TP,106)

If Ashbery measured himself against Eliot in 'The New Spirit', the comparison here is with Joyce. For as when at the end of The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Stephen Dedalus goes forth 'to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience', the close of 'The System' communicates the poet's supreme confidence that he has found a form of expression strong enough to face the future.<sup>4</sup> Ashbery, it seems, is ready to write his Ulysses. But there, I suggest, is the rub. Three Poems did prove the

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<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (London: Paladin Books, 1988) p.257.

preface to some extraordinarily accomplished poetry, most notably the extended works ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ and ‘Fantasia on “The Nut Brown Maid”’. In a crucial respect, however (to pursue the comparison), these works differ from Ulysses. The difference being that whereas Ulysses constitutes an undeniable sophistication of the Joycean aesthetic, one index of which is the increased difficulty it presents the reader, Ashbery’s two long poems (dazzling as they are) are not marked by an unambiguous commitment to aesthetic development. Both strive simultaneously to make that aesthetic more intelligible. The result is poetry which, depending on one’s point of view, is either diminished, because compromised, or more valuable, because more inclusive. But however one reads the outcome, the difference between Joyce’s kind of development and Ashbery’s can be understood, I argue, in terms of the arrival of the interviewer, and in terms of the emergence of the kind of readership that arrival signified.<sup>5</sup>

The question that dominated Ashbery’s early interviews, was the question of difficulty. The interview with A. Poulin Jnr. (from which this chapter takes its epigraph) provides a case in point, while the most prominent interview of the period, Richard Kostelanetz’s profile of Ashbery for the New York Times Magazine, took difficulty as its theme (entitled, as it was, ‘How to be a Difficult Poet’). What this raised more forcefully than ever, unavoidably so in fact, was the question of communication. While it had always concerned Ashbery that his poetry had few takers, the reader’s very absence had meant that his or her reactions could not press heavily on his consciousness: ‘I thought

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<sup>5</sup> Space does not allow me to pursue the transitional function of Three Poems as far as I would like. ‘The Recital’ does not carry Ashbery further than ‘The System’. It is a poem in limbo, as it makes clear in its opening phrase: ‘All right. The Problem is that there is no new problem’ (TP, 107). Indeed, it is throughout a poem looking for a problem, the old problems having been solved by ‘The System’. That problem arrived, I argue, in the shape of the interviewer. The place of Three Poems in American poetry has received extended treatment. See Stephen Fredman, Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Marguerite S. Murphy, A Tradition of Subversion in English from Wilde to Ashbery (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).

I'd just forget about the reader and write for myself. Not that I *wanted* to forget about the reader, but he left me no alternative'.<sup>6</sup> This state of affairs alters radically when the reader, in the form of the interviewer (who, moreover, is almost always a relatively specialist reader) starts telling the poet just how difficult he finds his writing. One way or another, the poet has to take account of this voice. Ashbery does so in interview, where the readerly voice begins to intertwine with his own:

My poetry is often criticized for a failure to communicate, but I take issue with 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.<sup>7</sup>

But more importantly, told persistently of his difficulty, Ashbery begins to take account of the baffled reader in his poetry:

What is writing?  
Well, in my case, its getting down on paper  
Not thoughts exactly, but ideas, maybe:  
Ideas about thoughts. (SP, 50)

The dominant impulse in Ashbery's poetry throughout the seventies, was the impulse to communicate. We feel this impulse, I argue, in everything he wrote during that period: in Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, Houseboat Days, As We Know, and, by default, in The Vermont Notebook. It was an impulse, I argue, born of the encounter with the interviewer.

I begin this consideration of the impact of the literary interview on Ashbery's poetry with a history of the form, paying particular attention to the interview boom of the early seventies. I then consider Ashbery's own experience of the interview, and show how thinking about Ashbery as interviewee meshes with other critical approaches to his

<sup>6</sup> Gerrit Henry, 'In Progress', The Spectator 31 July, 1979, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Bloom and Robert Losada, 'Craft Interview with John Ashbery', New York Quarterly, no.9, (Winter 1972), p.12.

relation with the reader. Finally, I gauge Ashbery's various poetic responses to the problems raised by the interview, by comparing the poetry he wrote in the seventies with the contemporaneous work of Adrienne Rich and Ed Dorn, two poets also on the verge of their masterworks. Both Rich and Dorn became explicitly concerned in this period with the problem of communicating with the contemporary reader. Both deployed extra-poetic devices in order to get through: Rich turning to prose, and Dorn publishing a book of interviews.<sup>8</sup> In Rich, as in Ashbery, the difficulty of communicating comes to the surface of the poetry, witness the opening exchange of section four of 'Natural Resources':

*Can you imagine,*

the interviewer asked, *a world of men?*  
(He thought he was joking.) *If so, then,*

*a world where men are absent?*  
Absently, wearily, I answered: Yes.<sup>9</sup>

And in very different, but equally significant ways, both Rich and Dorn produced poetry in this period which was distorted by a seeming break in communications: Rich sacrificing the complexities of Leaflets to write an available, but rather flat line; while in books III and IIII of Gunslinger, Dorn came increasingly to imitate the Poet's difficulty in making himself heard. The general point is that, just as the poets of Ashbery's generation reached the height of their powers, so the readers' reports, with their message of incomprehension, began to come in. Ashbery's generation - arguably not less

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<sup>8</sup> Rich, Of Woman Born (New York: Norton, 1976), and On Lies, Secrets and Silence (New York: Norton, 1979); Dorn Interviews (Bolinas, California: Four Seasons Foundation, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Adrienne Rich, The Fact of a Doorframe, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984) p.258. In one guise or another the reader's voice is increasingly audible in poetry of this period. To take British examples, one might consider Larkin's 'Posterity', which gives a whole poem to 'Jake Balokowsky', and Roy Fisher's 'Paraphrases', which answers readers questions. See Philip Larkin, Collected Poems (London: The Marvell Press & Faber and Faber, 1990) p.170; and Roy Fisher, Poems 1955-1987 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.130.

understood than previous generations, but equally arguably much more aware of their communicative failure - thus had little choice (save the anti-democratic choice of high mindedness) but to reflect on their procedures. Ashbery I will argue, carried off this reflexive gesture more successfully than his contemporaries; at least cost (but not at no cost) to his verse. He produced the finest poetry of a period in which poetry became enmeshed in its mediations. The newest of these mediations was the literary interview, a democratic critical form which promised reader and writer access to one another, but which too often only served to amplify the break in communication.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Literary Interview**

The interview is a modern, and an American invention. Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, conducted the first, interviewing Brigham Young leader of the Mormon Church in Salt Lake City in 1859.<sup>11</sup> Initially resisted in the old country, W.T. Stead of the Pall Mall Gazette was the first British editor to recognise its virtues. Not the least of these was its cheapness, allowing editors, as it did, to publish a celebrity's words without the cost of the commission fee. As a consequence, it emerged in the 1890s as a mainstay of journalistic enquiry. However, as Christopher Silvester explains, the interview was not simply cheap copy, its ascendancy signifying a 'revolution in the perception of public figures'.<sup>12</sup> For W.T. Stead it was, 'the most interesting method of extracting the ideas of the few for the instruction and entertainment of the many which has yet been devised by man'.<sup>13</sup> Or, as Silvester puts it, it gave an emergent mass

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<sup>10</sup> I am not arguing that criticism and reviews did not shape Ashbery's poetry, rather that the impact of the interview, which has not been considered before, was all the more immediate. For an account of Ashbery's poetic responses to the criticism, see Shoptaw, pp.192-224.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Silvester, 'Introduction' to, Silvester (ed.), The Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Viking, 1993) p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Silvester, p.8.

audience the ‘illusion ... of intimacy with celebrities and those who are the witnesses of momentous events’.<sup>14</sup> This ‘illusion of intimacy’, the promise of contact with a figure from whom we are separated (a separation which is actually re-enforced by the fact of the interview), remains the form’s chief charm, and its abiding danger.

From its inception this supremely modern form of communication (as Denis O’Brien describes it) was turned on writers.<sup>15</sup> Hardy was probably the first major poet to be interviewed. Kipling, who was a fairly frequent interviewee, complained that the practice was ‘an offence against my person ... cowardly and vile’, although he had himself interviewed Twain.<sup>16</sup> Wells referred to ‘the interviewing ordeal’, although he conducted perhaps the most famous of all interviews involving a writer, with Stalin in 1934. Such ambivalence to the interview - a professed dislike of its intrusion and a willingness to submit to, and sometimes even to make use of, its processes - is a constant in the form’s history. But it was not until the appearance of The Paris Review in 1953, that the interview began to be used systematically as a means of understanding the writer’s art. Here again, as Malcolm Cowley observes, the initial spur was economic, the magazine’s young editors unable to pay for the contributions of the famous authors on which circulation depended.<sup>17</sup> In an important respect, however, the editors of The Paris Review elevated the interview form. Having transcribed and arranged the writer’s replies, they would send a draft to the author for approval, inviting whatever changes he or she thought fit. Thus, as Cowley makes clear, the interview ceased to be a means of trapping the writer ‘into making scandalous remarks about sex, politics, and God’, and

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<sup>14</sup> Silvester, p.8.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Silvester, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Silvester, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> See Malcolm Cowley, introduction to Cowley (ed.) Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, first series, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex & New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 5.

became instead an opportunity for the author to present a considered, even a crafted image of him- or herself to the reading public.<sup>18</sup>

Introducing his anthology of interviews, American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work, Joe David Bellamy notes that he first became aware of what he calls ‘the interview swell’ in 1970.<sup>19</sup> Certainly the interview achieved a new status in 1972, with the appearance of Vort, the first magazine (to my knowledge) dedicated exclusively to the form.<sup>20</sup> Among the more telling interviews to appear in the early issues of Vort was one with Ted Berrigan. Speaking to the magazine’s editor, Barry Alpert, Berrigan explained that he considered the interview ‘a form, just like the sonnet is a form’, and observed that he had written interviews ‘with Ron Padgett, John Cage, and John Ashbery ... where I made up everything that they’re going to say’.<sup>21</sup> And further to emphasise the emergence of the interview as a form in its own right, Alpert opened ironically, taking his questions from a copy of the New York Quarterly guidelines for interviews. This proves to be an excessively self-conscious procedure, but the point at which it begins to parody itself marks an important moment in the history of any form.<sup>22</sup>

Yet for all the increasing critical dependence on it, very little has been written reflecting on the interview: on its proper object, on the critical assumptions it inscribes, or, most importantly, on its impact on writing. The most fully developed discussion has taken place through the introductions to the Writers at Work series of selections from The Paris Review interviews. Three distinct areas of concern arise from the continuing, and extremely telling discussion that emerges from these introductions: the relation of

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>19</sup> Joe David Bellamy, ‘Introduction’ to American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p.x.

<sup>20</sup> There have been others since. See, for instance, Bomb magazine, published by New Art Publications.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Ratcliffe and Leslie Scalapino (eds.), Talking in Tranquillity: Interviews with Ted Berrigan (Bolin and Oakland, California: Avenue B & O Books, 1991), p.31.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

biography to text; the status of the self-image generated through the interview; and the contemporary state of the writer-audience relationship.<sup>23</sup>

Alfred Kazin is the first commentator to consider how the interview phenomenon might be beginning to bear upon the deeper pre-occupations of contemporary literary thought. Noting, in 1967, that ‘the “personal” is more and more the theme, the occasion, the dilemma of contemporary literature’, he warns that the following interviews reveal both ‘the eloquence and the danger of the personal mode’.<sup>24</sup> The danger, Kazin felt, was that because it attends to the personal character of literature it thus fosters the cult of the authorial personality, and so rather than providing easier access to the poetry, diverts attention from it. The interview, he suggests,

is due someone currently important...is our way of understanding his fame. It is not wisdom that we are trying to understand; it is exceptionality.<sup>25</sup>

By this account, the proliferation of literary interviews marks not an increased interest in writing, but in the fact of being a writer, which is just another version of being a celebrity. So while it might seem to constitute a point of contact between writer and public, the interview, as Kazin sees it, actually marks a break down of communication. Furthermore, not only does the interview not guarantee closer contact with the writing, it cannot be relied upon to provide a clear sense of the writer either. Flattered by the very process of the interview, the writer ‘visibly expands to fill the truth about himself’.<sup>26</sup> What the interview presents is not the person who writes but the legend, in which the very occasion of the interview encourages the writer to believe. Thus, by virtue of its

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<sup>23</sup> See in particular, the introductions by Malcolm Cowley, Van Wwyck Brooks, Alfred Kazin, Wifred Sheed, Francine du Plessix Gray, and Donald Hall.

<sup>24</sup> Alfred Kazin, ‘Introduction’ to George Plimpton (ed.) *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, third series, 1967) p.xv.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.viii.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.ix.

form - which can be understood to be essentially asymmetrical, marking out an individual from the many - the interview tends to generate not truth but myth.

Writing some nine years later, Wilfred Sheed is in substantial agreement with Kazin, suggesting that interviewed writers present 'the fair copies of themselves'.<sup>27</sup> Viewing the form through a Postmodern frame, however, Sheed is more inclined to celebrate such fictionality. Writers, he argues, 'will not slip, unless intentionally. For these people are masters of disguise, of controlled performance'.<sup>28</sup> In the ideal case, 'writers are free to invent not only themselves but their way of presenting themselves'.<sup>29</sup> The task for the interviewer is to 'collaborate' in the presentation.<sup>30</sup> Sheed is aware, though, that the interview is prone to generate much lower grade fictions. Too often dominated by what the interviewer wants to know, not what the speaker wants to say, most literary interviews, he suggests, are not art but 'cultural packaging'.<sup>31</sup> It is this sense of the interview that informs Francine du Plessix Gray's view of contemporary exposure. Giving Kazin's discussion of 'celebrity' a sophisticated twist, she observes that, while it seems to make writers more special, the interview actually diminishes them. Sounding like Fredric Jameson, she argues that 'in the past half century we', meaning the American public,

have swung from the traditional custom of letting artists famish in their garrets to the current fashion of force-feeding them into stardom for consumption in media and salon.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Wilfred Sheed, 'Introduction' to George Plimpton (ed.), Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, fourth series (Harmondsworth, Middlesex & New York: Penguin, 1976), p.x.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.xiv

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Francine du Plessix Gray, 'Introduction' to George Plimpton (ed.) Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, fifth series (Harmondsworth, Middlesex & New York: Penguin, 1983), p.xi.

She warns artists to guard against ‘the seductive immediacy’ of the interview, which, she argues, tends to contaminate, rather than to alleviate ‘their traditional solitude’.<sup>33</sup> Du Plessix Gray’s fight, however, is primarily with ‘the contemporary media (TV, glossies)’, and she is prepared to acknowledge that the interview can, on occasion, be redeemed. Thus, of The Paris Review interviews, she notes, ‘They have ... evolved the only technique of intimacy between author and audience that I know of which is fairly sure to leave artist’s energies undiminished’.<sup>34</sup> The difference being that the good interview (by which she means the rewritten interview), is not an adversarial occasion but a collaboration, a ‘hybrid’, as she puts it, ‘of portrait and self-portrait’.<sup>35</sup>

What emerges from these conflicting introductory remarks is a strictly double-edged form of communication: one which seems to promise the writer contact with a wider audience, but which in another sense confirms that communications have broken down. Yet for all its dangers, and for all the contradictions it implies, in the best interviews, as Donald Hall notes, ‘the questioner is a version of ourselves; dressed in the costume of the common reader’.<sup>36</sup> Ambivalent as they might be, then, to the interview procedure (and Ashbery is at best ambivalent) poets must think very carefully before they decline to meet such a figure.

### **Ashbery and the interview**

The literary interview, then, is a sufficiently significant and problematic recent innovation to warrant consideration. More even than the growth of criticism (with which the writer has always lived) it marks and contributes to the changing relation of writer to reading

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.xi,xii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Donald Hall, introduction to George Plimpton (ed.) Poets at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex and New York: 1989), p.xiv.

public in the Postmodern period. Equally, Ashbery criticism in particular needs to reflect on the function of the interview. This is partly so, simply because Ashbery has given so many interviews it would be surprising if the encounters had not altered his sense of the act of writing. More specifically, although he has expressed his dislike for a form which so often throws him on to the defensive, it has proved instrumental in the dissemination of his work.<sup>37</sup> In 1965 he and Kenneth Koch chose to explain themselves in a kind of mutual interview (John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch: A Conversation).<sup>38</sup> While in Michael Palmer's collection, Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics, Ashbery is the only poet among twenty or so not to contribute a prose statement, but to be represented by an interview. Ashbery has also consistently used interviews to release information about the sources particular poems make use of but do not disclose.<sup>39</sup> He thus uses interviews the way Heaney, for instance, uses critical prose. More significant is the function of the interview in Ashbery criticism. The only two book-length studies of his work, those by Shapiro and Shoptaw, both make extensive, and somewhat problematic, use of interviews with the poet. Shapiro detects no tension between his research methods and his introductory claim that 'The poet does not speak, but constantly is involved in that mute science of...grammatology'.<sup>40</sup> Shoptaw, on the other hand, claims authority for his key critical term 'cryptography' because it emerges from an interview with the poet.

'Building,' he writes

on Ashbery's nonce word, I will use the terms "crypt word" and "crypt phrase" for words displaced by, but still recoverable in, the final poetic text ....<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ashbery told David Kermani (in interview), 'I don't like being interviewed at all. Bill Berkson interviewed me for The Paris Review and I didn't want it to be published. It wasn't published'; Kermani, p. 183.

<sup>38</sup> John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch (A Conversation) (Tucson, Arizona: Interview Press, 1965).

<sup>39</sup> We know from his conversations with Shapiro that 'Europe' uses 'Beryl the Bi-plane', from the Kostelanetz profile that 'The Skaters' uses 'Three Hundred Things A Bright Boy Can Do', and from the interview with Ash that Pater's Plato and Platonism is the source for lines in 'Houseboat Days'.

<sup>40</sup> Shapiro, p. 1

<sup>41</sup> Shoptaw, p. 6.

'Cryptography', he claims, 'is the missing center of his method of composition'.<sup>42</sup> But , Shoptaw is on dangerous ground because the term 'crypt word' is not really Ashbery's at all, but his interviewer's. Opening the interview in question, Richard Jackson offers the speculative remark that, 'There is a certain kind of cryptology inherent in your poems'.<sup>43</sup>

Dissatisfied with Ashbery's initial response he, presses the point again a little later:

POETRY MISCELLANY: ...It's curious, too, that you have so many mentions of marginal places in the poems ... places that situate the poem as an event as well as provide setting.

JOHN ASHBERY: I never thought of that before. In fact, I just wrote a poem this morning in which I used the word "borders" but changed it to "boarders". The original word literally had a marginal existence and isn't spoken, is perhaps what you might call a crypt word. I think this happens often, though, with other poets; Kenneth Koch told me once about a creative misprint he had made on the typewriter when "singing" came out as "sinning".<sup>44</sup>

Restored to its occasion, 'crypt word' does not seem in any real sense Ashbery's 'nonce word' but Jackson's, and it is clear, also, that while Ashbery recognises the phenomenon he does not think it is especially relevant to his work.

Two issues emerge from the use Shapiro and Shoptaw make of interviews. In the first place, and straightforwardly, the interview clearly has to be treated with care. Its implications for the question of authority must be acknowledged. Also the nature of the occasion must be taken into account. Interviewers, after all, of any experience, know how to put words into people's mouths. In the second place, it is important to ponder the more general implications of the fact that both Shapiro and Shoptaw are heavily reliant on the form. What, we need to ask, does it tell us about Ashbery's poetry, that the two most extended critiques of his work are based on his own explanations and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Jackson, 'The Imminence of a Revelation' in Jackson (ed.) Acts of Mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1983) p.69.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.70.

amplifications? For if it really does require such authorial amplification, then is the critic not obliged to consider the possibility that the work just does not communicate. It is a question, I argue, made all the more pressing because Ashbery himself asked it of (and in) his poetry throughout the seventies, hence his increasing use of the self-explanatory mode.<sup>45</sup>

It could be argued that if, as I claim, Ashbery turned to a self-explanatory mode in this period of his career, it marks an earlier failure to secure an audience with whom he could communicate clearly. David Trotter makes this case very forcefully. He argues that having failed to identify a readership, Ashbery was taken on by an institutional audience which secured his passage (as Ashbery himself famously put it) 'from unacceptability to acceptance without an intervening period of appreciation' (RS, 390). Such groups, as Trotter observes, are

identified not so much by their response to a particular rhetoric as by their enrolment at the academy and by the degree of their loyalty to one or another of the critical discourses available there.<sup>46</sup>

A poet with such an audience is likely to be more argued about than read, as Ashbery himself is all too aware:

It seems to me that the poetry gets lost in all the controversy that surrounds it. I feel often that people on both sides are much more familiar with the myth that has grown up about my work than they are with the work itself.<sup>47</sup>

But if his poetry has become a kind of shibboleth it could be said to be a problem of Ashbery's own making. Had he not left himself vulnerable to non-reading institutional readers he would not have needed to be explaining himself at this important phase in his career. Vernon Shetley, who is rightly respectful of Trotter's argument, but who is more

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<sup>45</sup> Arguably, of course, to ask the questions Ashbery asks of his own poetry is only to compound the problem which emerges from the critical use of the interview. The point, I think, is to acknowledge these vexed issues, and to begin to try to sort them out.

<sup>46</sup> Trotter, p.151.

<sup>47</sup> Stitt, pp. 411-2.

sympathetic to Ashbery, offers a different inflection on his predicament. He emphasises Ashbery's stated desire for 'as many people as possible to appreciate my poetry', and contends that like Bishop and Merrill, Ashbery wanted 'to find audiences that could be addressed in terms outside those that defined the conflict between the academics, and the antiacademics'.<sup>48</sup> Hollow as it can sound, Ashbery's desire for 'as many people as possible to appreciate my poetry' is seriously meant. Arguably, it is in part a reaction to O'Hara's strategies, for as he wondered in interview, 'What is someone who doesn't know who Norman and Jean-Paul and Joan are going to think of this?'<sup>49</sup> Still, it is not enough to note that Ashbery is motivated by a desire not to exclude readers, because it could be contested that this constitutes an unhelpfully naive assessment of the potential audience for poetry; and that poetry which does not choose at some point to exclude somebody will end up having to explain itself, again and again, to everybody. The counter-argument (the one subscribed to in this chapter) is that by always seeking to include, and so reach, as many people as possible, Ashbery has sustained the possibility of demanding democratic poetry.<sup>50</sup>

Reading Ashbery's interviews back to back one understands quite clearly how the presence of the interviewer might have an effect on his poetry. Having agreed to an interview - having agreed to a dialogue with a reader - Ashbery is time and again confronted with the question of his difficulty. A few examples serve to indicate how heavily this recurring question might weigh on a poet's consciousness. The interview

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<sup>48</sup> Piotr Sommer, 'An Interview in Warsaw', in Michael Palmer (ed.), *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1983), p.300; Shetley, p.17.

<sup>49</sup> Sommer, p.307.

<sup>50</sup> Any discussion of Ashbery's relation to the reader must acknowledge Bonnie Costello's article on the subject ('John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader', *Contemporary Literature* vol.23, no.4 (Fall 1982), pp.493-514). Costello was the first critic to notice the presence of the reader in Ashbery. Concerned as she is, however, with the 'idea' of the reader she can give no account of why Ashbery becomes more conscious of the reader at certain points in his career.

with Poulin, conducted in November 1972, sets the tone. Poulin notes a number of baffled, and annoyed reactions to 'Leaving the Atocha Station' and then asks, 'What is it about your poetry that produces these reactions in readers?''<sup>51</sup> Ashbery concedes that the poem is one of his most baffling, but, tries at some length, to shed light on it, only to find the 'difficulty' question thrown back at him:

Poulin: Everyone speaks about the difficulty of your poetry and it seems to me that any discussion of your work must center around what is, or what seems to be, the core of your poem, of your poetry, of your work.

Ashbery: I don't know what that core is. Maybe it would help if you explained exactly what you mean by 'difficulty.'

Poulin: The difficulty of language, for one, of syntax. Reading one of your poems, one is not prepared for the kinds of juxtapositions that occur in many of the poems.

Ashbery: I don't think one is prepared for juxtapositions in general, is one?''<sup>52</sup>

This is not a successful exchange. What else would a poem center around, if not the core, and as Ashbery observes, it is hard to prepare for juxtapositions. Poulin's fumbblings betray a certain nervousness. But what becomes clear, as the interview progresses, is that Poulin is nervous largely because he is not, himself, terribly familiar with the poetry. He is, however, familiar with the criticism. He refers several times to Paul Carroll's essay, and in the space of a short interview manages to include the views of David Shapiro, Richard Howard, and Stephen Koch, plus those of a number of unnamed critics. When he does speak directly to the poetry his questions are not characterised by insight. The Poulin interview dramatises an acute failure of communication, with communication being, Ashbery insists, his objective.<sup>53</sup> And Poulin, it should be noticed, is very much the kind of reader fostered by an interview culture: interested to know the poet, but reluctant

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<sup>51</sup> Poulin, p. 244.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.246.

<sup>53</sup> See the epigraph to this chapter.

really to read the poetry. It might be objected that there have always been readers more interested in poets than poetry. The poet, however, has not always met them.

Interviewing Ashbery at his Chelsea apartment in 1976 for the New York Times Magazine, Kostelanetz similarly forces the poet to face his difficulty. What, he wants to know, does Ashbery feel when 'readers tell him ... that they were unable to "understand" his poetry?'<sup>54</sup> Ashbery's response to this line of questioning is to insist on the communicative drive of his work: 'I'm interested in communicating, but I feel that saying something the reader has already known is not communicating anything.'<sup>55</sup> This remark becomes his interview refrain, sung out with increasing vehemence in all the interviews he gives through the seventies and eighties. Indeed by the time he is interviewed by Ross Labrie for the American Poetry Review in 1982, the refrain has become so familiar that the interviewers themselves are singing it. Labrie notes,

the number of times the matter of obscurity has been brought up in connection with your poems. Of course you have rejoined consistently that you didn't mean to be obscure, that you were obviously trying to communicate to others. When you look back over your poems, are you ever surprised by what appears there?<sup>56</sup>

It will be apparent that if it has no other effect, Ashbery's on-going encounter with the interviewer forces the issue of difficulty to the front of the poet's consciousness. But, as Ashbery comes to realise, the interview itself has an impact on, or rather, impacts, the problem of difficulty. Firstly, interviews with poets reproduce themselves. The easiest way for interviewers to prepare is by reading previous interviews, and as early as 1977 Ashbery's interviewers are beginning to refer to previous interviews.<sup>57</sup> Thus, 'difficulty' gets established as a stock question, so becoming the frame through which readers are

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<sup>54</sup> Kostelanetz, p.108.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.103.

<sup>56</sup> Ross Labrie, 'John Ashbery: An Interview with Ross Labrie', American Poetry Review, 13.3 (May-June, 1984), p.30.

<sup>57</sup> See Sue Gangel, 'Interview with John Ashbery', in Bellamy (ed.), pp9-20.

advised to read him. Secondly, as Alfred Kazin had warned would happen, the Ashbery interview, ostensibly an opportunity to improve communications, comes actually to distract the reader from the main task. Ashbery complained to John Tranter, 'It seems that people will do almost anything rather than read a poem and try and come to terms with it, you know.'<sup>58</sup>

The interview, as Ashbery sees it, is symptomatic of a wider and growing reluctance to read poetry. Whenever possible therefore, Ashbery will always bring the interview back to the issue at hand, back to the poetry. This is apparent, in a general sense, in his response to the recurring question of the a-political character of his poetry. As he told Nick Kimberly, in a typical reply,

I have one political poem I pull out when the occasion calls for it! I don't think poetry causes people to behave in a proper way - although in a larger way it can. Reading Keats or Donne makes me want to behave politically, personally, sexually in ways that will make me feel part of a world that is improving.<sup>59</sup>

He is similarly uncompromising when dealing with the question of the poet's other responsibilities. He does not believe, he tells his Paris Review interviewer, that

it's narcissistic to spend time wallowing in your writing when you could be out helping in the world's work. Writers should write, and poets especially spend altogether too much time at other tasks such as teaching.<sup>60</sup>

His intention is clearest, however, when, as in the New York Quarterly interview, he uses poetry to explain comments he makes in the interview, thus asserting both that the poetry speaks for itself, and that it speaks more clearly than its mediations.<sup>61</sup> Ashbery is clear. At a time when people will do almost anything, including read an interview, rather than read a poem and try to come to terms with it, the poet's responsibility is to his art.

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<sup>58</sup> John Tranter, 'An Interview with John Ashbery', Scripta, vol.4, no.1, p. 94.

<sup>59</sup> Nick Kimberly, 'Interview with John Ashbery', City Limits, 16 May 1986, p.29.

<sup>60</sup> Stitt, p.412.

<sup>61</sup> Bloom and Losada, pp.29, 33.

In general, interviews with Ashbery fall short of du Plessix Gray's ideal sense of the form. They are rarely works of art because they are rarely a 'hybrid of portrait and self-portrait'. They can be congenial enough affairs, as with Gangel, Tranter, and Labrie. Although equally often they are fractious, as with Poulin, Koethe and most recently Caroline Blyth.<sup>62</sup> And more often than not they are marked by some form of communicative failure. Sometimes the interviewer speaks in an idiom the poet is reluctant to do business with: Koethe and Jackson make this mistake. And increasingly often, Ashbery can be heard rehearsing answers he has given many times before, and so paying less attention than he might to the particulars of the question.<sup>63</sup> The interviews are sometimes, as I have pointed out above, informative, but few acquaint us more closely with the poetry. In fact only twice, I would suggest, do interviews with Ashbery seem

the only technique of intimacy between author and audience ... fairly sure to leave the artist's energies undiminished, and their manna untainted.<sup>64</sup>

The first of these was the New York Quarterly interview. Clearly already intimate with his poetry, Janet Bloom and Robert Losada offer the poet openings rather than ask him questions. Ashbery, in turn, seems re-assured by the detailed knowledge of his work they display. Bloom and Losada are also cunning, as Sheed suggests they have to be. Witness how, by their self-negating question (a kind of double bluff) they draw Ashbery into a rare statement of overall purpose:

NYQ: You don't have any Shelleyesque notion, do you, of individual poems

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<sup>62</sup> Koethe, 'An Interview with John Ashbery', pp.178-186. Caroline Blythe, 'Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with John Ashbery', *Oxford Poetry*, vol.vi, no.2, 1992, pp.56-62. I have experienced both kinds of Ashbery interview. The first time I interviewed him (at his apartment in February 1994) the occasion was far from ideal. He had flown in from Paris the night before and was flying to the West Coast the next day. It was, then, typically generous of him to grant the interview. However, the combination of his jet-lag and my nervousness produced a rather stilted conversation. I interviewed him a second time over the phone in February 1996, and this was a much more relaxed exchange. I had met him twice more before this second interview, and that, I think, partly explains the easier conversation.

<sup>63</sup> The most obvious example of this is Ashbery's answer to Piotr Sommer on the question of the New York School, which opens, 'In the beginning there was Kenneth Koch...'. Sommer, p.297.

<sup>64</sup> Gray, p. xiii.

being part of one great, grand poem?

JA: Oh, I suppose so, sure I do. I don't know as I'd use the word grand, but maybe great.<sup>65</sup>

It is only in the interview with John Ash, however, that Ashbery's aesthetic is allowed to emerge undiminished. Indeed, so deftly is that aesthetic presented here that the Ash interview might be held to be one of Ashbery's most effective collaborations. The interview is throughout characterised by intimacy. The conversation dwells for some time on the late nineteenth and twentieth century music Ashbery's poetry might be likened to, Ash showing a deep familiarity with composers ('Franz Schmidt, Busoni, Szymanowski, Stenhammer, and Sorabji for example') he knows Ashbery feels close to.<sup>66</sup> The two are comfortable with one another's conversation, each happy for the other, on occasion, to complete his sentence. And Ashbery complements Ash on his expression:

Ash: ...The poems have a kind of improvisatory architecture.

Ashbery: Yes, I think that's a rather beautiful formulation, architecture being so non-improvisatory.<sup>67</sup>

What really emerges, however, is Ash's intimacy with Ashbery's poetic. This is apparent from his preamble. 'The interview,' Ash tells us,

took place in John Ashbery's apartment in Chelsea. It was repeatedly interrupted by the sound of sirens rising from 9th Avenue and a ringing telephone. Chelsea is located north of Greenwich Village on the west side of Manhattan. Ashbery's apartment looks out towards the Hudson River and the heights of New Jersey. To one side of the view is a seminary with a very English-looking Gothic belfry, on the other is the massive red brick bulk of London Terrace, a complex of apartments constructed in vaguely Byzantine-Romanesque style, surmounted by strange pavilions concealing water tanks. Shortly before the interview began this entire panorama had been set alight by one of the gaudiest sunsets I have ever seen.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Bloom and Losada, p. 28.

<sup>66</sup> Ash, 'John Ashbery in conversation with John Ash', p.32. Ash had corresponded with Ashbery for some years, their initial point of contact being contemporary music, and by the time of the interview Ash was living near Ashbery in Chelsea. One reading of this interview, then, would have it as an assertion, on Ash's part, of his closeness to the master. Clarke reads it thus (no page references given).

<sup>67</sup> Ash, p.34.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.

This is Ash's account of the occasion of the interview. It is a shrewd piece of prose. Ash is telling us what we need to know in order to appreciate the exchange that follows. In presenting the circumstances he does, however, it is equally clear that he means to outline and affirm Ashbery's sense of the occasion of an utterance. As with an Ashbery poem, we are to understand that the interview was interrupted by the sound of sirens and telephones. And also like an Ashbery poem, the weather is held to have a bearing, the sunset, we can suppose, affecting the speakers' moods. This might suggest, as less effective Ashbery poems sometimes suggest, that to really understand what was said, you had to be there. But Ash knows Ashbery too well to let this impression stand, hence the care with which he maps Chelsea. Thus, while location is held to be important to the exchange, Ash makes it clear that the exchange is aimed at people unfamiliar with New York. The occasion informs the exchange, but precisely because it does, it is therefore part of the speaker's task to communicate the occasion to the audience. Finally, however, Ash indicates that Ashbery's sensibility is not the only one at work here, that the interview is the collaborative product of both speakers' sense of the occasion. Hence the reference to the 'Byzantine-Romanesque style'. This marks Ash's way of looking at things, an interest in Byzantium, being the pre-occupation which most distinguishes his poetry (from Ashbery's).<sup>69</sup>

The interview itself twice gives way to passages of poetry, the first from 'Houseboat Days', and the second from 'The One Thing That Can Save America'. The manner in which the passages appear is telling. Unlike in the New York Quarterly interview Ashbery does not himself cite the passages by way of clarification. Rather here, the preceding exchange ends and then we have the poetry. Moreover, it is not a colon

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<sup>69</sup> See John Ash, 'Empire of the Sensuous', The Village Voice, October 26, 1990, pp.51-54.

but a full-stop that marks the end of the spoken passages. It is thus clear that while the poetry bears some relation to the circumstances which were the subject of the exchange, it is not meant to seem that it flows seamlessly from them. Poetry, we might infer, is informed but not determined by its occasion.

It is in the first of these exchanges that Ashbery mentions Walter Pater for the first time, and in particular Plato and Platonism. For the reader who follows it up this reference presents such a beguiling and instructive complex of associations and implications that it might be said to transform the interview into a form of art. If there is a theorist loose and lyrical enough to give prose expression to Ashbery's aesthetic it is Pater, and turning to Plato and Platonism, one soon encounters his 'historical method', which, if it is ever so slightly more deterministic than Ashbery might choose, still in its account of the relation of intellectual works to their occasion it manages a poise and flexibility which Ashbery rightly reckons to be Ashberian.<sup>70</sup> Through the deliberately understated reference to Pater, then, Ashbery's aesthetic shows itself. It is not, however, diminished by the showing. What the successful interview exchange minimally requires, as Ash shows, is a shared sense of the occasion. This is also what emerges from John Searle's account of conversation, which is the closest thing I know to a theory of the interview, and which merits a brief glance.

The question Searle hopes to answer is whether or not it is possible to have an account, 'that gave the constitutive rules for conversations in a way that we have constitutive rules of speech acts'.<sup>71</sup> Unlike the kind of speech acts Austin considered, which create a strictly limited number of appropriate responses, conversations, to

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<sup>70</sup> Walter Pater, Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1893), p.1.

<sup>71</sup> John Searle, (On) Searle On Conversation, (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 1992), p.7.

paraphrase Searle, are made up as the speakers go along, so the range of relevant responses is almost always beyond analysis. A seemingly wild digression, for instance, can be intended as a new departure and so still be relevant in the sense that it is designed to continue the conversation. One general observation he does want to make, however, concerns the 'role background plays in determining conversational relevance'.<sup>72</sup> To indicate the extent to which background informs conversation he cites the following exchange from a television interview:

First speaker: I think you know the question I'm going to ask you. What's the answer?

Second speaker: We'll have to wait and see.

First speaker: Would you like to?

Second speaker: It all depends.<sup>73</sup>

As Searle notes, this exchange is practically unintelligible. Until, that is, one knows that the interviewer is Robin Day, the interviewee Ted Heath, that the interview took place just after Mrs. Thatcher's victory in the 1979 election, and that the question on everybody's lips was whether Heath, who had of course lost his job to Thatcher in 1975, would serve in a Thatcher cabinet. As Searle points out, this exchange, with its 'minimal explicit semantic content' is 'informative even satisfying to the participants and the audience'.<sup>74</sup> What the exchange confirms in the present context is that as with the collaboration, the lecture, and indeed the poem, the interview works when speaker and audience share a sense of the occasion. But as Ash's preface to his interview indicates, it is the speakers' task to make the occasion available to the audience.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.26.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Searle, p.27.

<sup>74</sup> Searle, p.29.

### Visitors and conversations

It is apparent from developments in the surface of his poetry, that the continuing presence of the interviewer in his environment weighed heavily on Ashbery's consciousness through the seventies. Increasingly the poetry is full of visiting strangers. 'As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat', the first poem in Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, opens with somebody about to arrive:

Waiting for someone to come. Harsh words are spoken,  
As the sun yellows the green of the maple tree ....

So this was all, but obscurely  
I felt the stirrings of the new breath in the pages  
Which all winter long had smelled like an old catalogue.  
New sentences were starting up.  
(SP,1: Ashbery's ellipsis)

Three Poems, it will be recalled, ended with a poem in search of a problem. With this first poem of Self-Portrait it would seem that the problem has arrived, the visitor with his harsh words giving rise to new sentences. 'Worsening Situation', the second poem of the collection, recalls another visitor with harsh words

One day a man called while I was out  
And left this message: "You got the whole thing wrong  
From start to finish. Luckily, there's still time  
To correct the situation, but you must act fast.  
See me at your earliest convenience...."  
(SP,3)

The visits continue into Houseboat Days, where they are plainly beginning to get on the poet's nerves. In 'The Wrong Kind of Insurance', for instance, (a title denoting unwanted callers), the poet complains 'of too many/ Comings and goings, visitors at all hours' (HD, 50). While in 'Friends', one such visitor interrupts an otherwise intimate conversation:

Afterwards I see that we are three.  
Someone had entered the room while I was discussing my  
money problems. (HD,52)

As We Know is no less full of visitors, and still they bring discouraging news. By this stage, however, the poet seems to have found ways of dealing with them. In 'Haunted Landscape', he affects indifference:

A man you have never seen enters the  
room  
He tells you that it is time to go, but that you may stay,  
  
If you wish. You reply that it is one and the same to you.  
(AWK,81)

While in 'Litany', a poem that goes on at considerable length, he resolves to play the visitors at their own game:

They are anxious to be done with us,  
For the interview to be over, and we,  
We have just begun.  
(AWK,9)

With the increase in visitors comes an increase in dialogue. It would be hard to miss the increasingly conversational character of Ashbery's poetry in the seventies, poem after poem breaking into spoken exchanges. As Altieri puts it, during this period, 'Ashbery constructs a thinking self that absorbs dialogue into its condition'.<sup>75</sup> Of particular interest here are the large number of poetic dialogues which ask or answer, the kind of question an interviewer might put. 'Ode to Bill' replies to the most rudimentary of these:

What is writing?  
Well, in my case, it's getting down on paper  
Not thoughts exactly, but ideas, maybe:  
Ideas about thoughts. (SP,50)

While 'The Tomb of Stuart Merrill' absorbs one of those unctuous platitudes by which interviewers curry favour with their subjects:

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<sup>75</sup> Charles Altieri, Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.139.

“I really would like to know what it is you do to ‘magnetize’ your poetry, where the curious reader, always a bit puzzled, comes back for a clearer insight.”  
(SP,38)

‘Variant’ opens with the poet’s response to that most common of interview questions, ‘What gets you started in writing a poem?’ Answering Peter Stitt’s version of this question Ashbery observed that, ‘I often put in things that I have overheard people say, on the street for instance. Suddenly something fixes itself in the flow that is going on around one and seems to have significance’.<sup>76</sup> ‘Variant’ offers a comparable response:

Sometimes a word will start it, like  
Hands and feet, sun and gloves. The way  
Is fraught with danger, you say, and I  
Notice the word ”fraught” ...  
(HD,4)

This is not such a hard question to answer. ‘And Others Vaguer Presences’ tackles a tougher one:

It is argued that these structures address themselves  
To exclusively aesthetic concerns, like windmills  
On a vast plain. To which it is answered  
That there are no other questions than these,  
Half squashed in mud, emerging out of the moment  
We all live, learning to like it. No sonnet  
On this furthest strip of land ...  
(HD,48)

Ashbery contends that the poet’s task is to enable ‘us’ to learn to live with, our moment, which we will only be able to do if the structures through which we address it are appropriate. Such forms (which are the poet’s business) must somehow emerge ‘out of the moment’ itself, hence the fact that ‘the sonnet’ no longer applies. Which, again, is more or less how he has put it in interview, telling Bloom and Losada that his only criterion for form was, whatever ‘seems suitable at the moment’.<sup>77</sup> The exchange in ‘Statuary’ is rather more brusque, speaker and interlocutor disagreeing on fundamentals:

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<sup>76</sup> Stitt, p.408.

<sup>77</sup> Bloom and Losada, p.27.

You tell me I missed the most interesting part  
 But I think I found the most interesting part ....  
 (AWK,76)

This is not a dialogue that is going to get very far, and in fact as the poem ends it is plain that the exchange has stuck at a familiar point, the poet characterized (or ironically characterizing himself) as

Lacking only the expertise to  
 "Make a statement."  
 (AWK,76)

These exchanges constitute a significant development in the surface of Ashbery's poetry. Ashbery is, in effect, staging interviews, and as he does, he re-emphasises the point he tried to make again and again in the interviews themselves: that poetry is more important than its mediations, and that those mediations cannot be allowed to replace the primary activity of reading the poem. More importantly, though, this surface concern is symptomatic of deeper structural changes taking place in Ashbery's poetry of the period, changes which can in turn be understood in terms of the arrival of the interviewer. In particular I want to concentrate here on the increasing use of the explanatory mode; an increasingly troubled sense of the power and responsibility of the poet; and a concern with the possibility (and possibilities) of dialogue.

### **Trying to Explain**

Told repeatedly in interview that his poetry was failing to communicate, Ashbery devoted considerable energy in the seventies to making himself understood. A number of poems ('And *Ut Pictura Poesis* is her name', 'The Explanation', and 'What is poetry') make explanation their explicit concern. Many more poems of the period, if not quite so centrally explanatory, slip in and out of an explanatory mode. The frequency with which

this happens constitutes an important shift in Ashbery's poetry, and as this shift occurs, so, importantly, his sense of occasion alters. More and more, Ashbery's object is both to meet the demands of the occasion, and to make it plain that he is doing so, with the result that the poetry's occasional character is made increasingly explicit. 'Worsening Situation' explains how different occasions make different demands, the present occasion, by implication, requiring clarity:

True, there are occasions  
For white uniforms and a special language  
Kept secret from the others.  
(SP,3)

'Loving Mad Tom' offers a tender definition of the relation of the utterance to the occasion:

Best to leave it there  
And quickly tiptoe out. The music ended anyway. The  
occasions  
In your arms went along with it and seemed  
To supply the necessary sense.  
(HD,16)

While 'Litany' several times insists on the importance of the occasion, for instance:

Some think him mean-tempered and gruff  
But actually his is an occasion for all occasions.  
(AWK,53)

More to the point, perhaps, given the bafflement the interviews had communicated, this was, as Ashbery understood as clearly as any contemporary, an occasion for self-explanation. It was this sense of the occasion that prompted 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,' Ashbery's prize-winning poem being far and away his most concerted attempt to explain himself. Commentators are agreed, of course, that 'Self-Portrait' is Ashbery's most accessible work. Accordingly it has attracted huge critical attention, and has

spawned a number of insightful and exacting readings.<sup>78</sup> Among the most instructive are those which do not only take note (or advantage) of the poem's accessibility, but explore the meaning of that accessibility. Laurence Lieberman, for instance, suggests that of Twentieth Century poets, only Marianne Moore, 'recognizing to her surprize ... how unmanageable her gourmet sensibility had grown to most reader's intellectual palates' had taken such 'strenuous measures as Ashbery to render her obscurities clear'.<sup>79</sup> Robert Miklitsch finds the poem 'more realized in terms of the reader'.<sup>80</sup> Bonnie Costello, considering the poem in terms of Ashbery's relation to Parmigianino, goes still further than Miklitsch, suggesting that 'here Ashbery himself has been reader'.<sup>81</sup> While in a very telling observation, James Heffernan suggests that the meaning of the poem lies in Ashbery's

state of mind as viewer of a painted reflection, reader of art historical commentary on it, one-way interviewer of Parmigianino, and skeptical observer of his own mobile self.<sup>82</sup>

As the critics tell it, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' is a fit poem for a poetic occasion structured by the interview. Made aware that his tastes have become too refined, Ashbery goes over to the reader's position in order to try to explain how his poetry should be read. Indeed such is his desire to explain himself, the critics suggest, that he almost ceases to be a poet, becoming, instead either a reader (in Costello's words) or an interviewer (in Heffernan's). What I think has not been sufficiently considered is the cost

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<sup>78</sup> One would want to draw particular attention to the following accounts: David Kalstone, *Five Temperaments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.170-199; Bloom, 'The Breaking of Form', in Bloom (ed.), pp.115-126; Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, pp.81-90; Costello, 'John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader', pp.493-514; Keller, pp.64-66; and Ward, pp.156-165.

<sup>79</sup> Laurence Lieberman, *Unassigned Frequencies: American Poetry in Review, 1964-1977*, (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p.3.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Miklitsch, 'John Ashbery', *Contemporary Literature*, vol.21, no.1 (Winter 1980), p.118.

<sup>81</sup> Costello, 'John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader', p.507.

<sup>82</sup> James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphraisis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.184.

of such a manoeuvre. Ashbery himself had long before noted the cost of explanation, observing in 'The Skaters' that,

calling attention  
 Isn't the same thing as explaining, and as I said I am not ready  
 To line phrases with the costly stuff of explanation, and shall not,  
 Will not do so for the moment.  
 (RM,39)

The occasion, as we have seen, now called for explanation. As Ashbery anticipated, however, such explanation proved costly. I do not propose to offer another extended close reading of 'Self-Portrait' (not least because the sheer quantity of such readings is one index of the problems the poem has produced) but rather to consider its cost, an accounting which in turn measures the extent of the difficulties the interviewer poses the poet.

It does first need to be established, however, that most, if not all, of the tones and strategies which distinguish 'Self-Portrait' within the Ashbery corpus tend towards an explanatory mode. Most obvious is the poem's seemingly clearly defined subject which, as Stephen Paul Miller observes, helps in large part 'to account for its popularity'.<sup>83</sup> Not that the poem is straightforwardly about Parmigianino, but the fact that Ashbery allows it to seem so is a gesture towards an estranged audience. Then there is the poem's staged use of criticism and history - formal languages of explanation. More, even than their substance, it is the manner in which Ashbery introduces his lengthy quotations from Vasari and Freedberg that is significant: 'according to Vasari ...', 'Sydney Freedberg in his/ *Parmigianino* says of it ...' (SP,69,73). Entirely out of character, this style is explicitly essayistic. The reader is being conditioned to expect the explanatory mode. Still more conspicuously explanatory are those moments early in the poem when Ashbery

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<sup>83</sup> Miller, p.158.

glosses particular terms. ‘Speculation,’ he tells us, is ‘From the Latin *speculum*, mirror’, and weather, he notes, ‘in French is/ *Le temps*, the word for time’ (SP, 69,70). Now conventional within the repertoire of the Postmodern poet, this was a new and striking gesture on Ashbery’s part.<sup>84</sup> It is a gesture one can understand in terms of the reader; or rather, one which is best understood in the reader’s terms. Thus, in glossing his words this way, Ashbery explains a poetic resource (the use of etymologies) which Eliot, for instance, made mysterious, and to which a poet more firmly in the Eliot tradition, like Geoffrey Hill, ascribes near magical powers. By contrast, Ashbery’s gloss affords the non-specialist reader (the kind introduced to him through interviews) an insight into one of the ways poets create their effects.<sup>85</sup> The workings of the poem are similarly exposed at the beginning of the sixth, and final paragraph of the poem, when Ashbery notes that,

The locking into place is “death itself,”  
As Berg said of a phrase in Mahler’s Ninth;  
Or, to quote Imogen in *Cymbeline*, “There cannot  
Be a pinch in death more sharp than this”... (SP,76)

Ordinarily in an Ashbery poem the seams would hardly show, with Berg and Imogen making themselves heard only insofar as their voices differed from those around them. By labouring the quotes Ashbery explains that his poetry works by allusion.

Throughout the poem, then, Ashbery makes uncharacteristically explicit use of languages and strategies of explanation. His object in doing so is both to make the reader feel comfortable within the poem, and to ready him or her for a series of statements in which the poet means to explain his own procedures. At various points we are told how we are to think about Ashbery’s poetry. We are told, for instance, that it is as

A perverse light whose

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<sup>84</sup> Consider, for instance, the way Paul Muldoon glosses his Gaelic terms.

<sup>85</sup> For differing accounts of Ashbery’s etymological glosses, see, Anita Sokolsky, “A Commission That Never Materialized”: Narcissism and Lucidity in Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”, in Bloom (ed.), p.239; and Shoptaw, p.176.

Imperative of subtlety dooms in advance its  
 Conceit to light up: unimportant but meant. (SP,70)

The role the poet's environment plays in the poem is explained at length in the passage beginning: 'The Shadow of the city injects its own/ Urgency ...'(SP,75). And in a passage which not only tells us how the poetry works, but tells us that we are being told, we are informed that,

*This* thing, the mute, undivided present,  
 Has the justification of logic, which  
 In this instance isn't a bad thing  
 Or wouldn't be, if the way of telling  
 Didn't somehow intrude, twisting the end result  
 Into a caricature of itself. This always  
 Happens, as in the game where  
 A whispered phrase passed around the room  
 Ends up as something completely different.  
 It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike  
 What the artist intended. (SP,80)

Alerting poets to the danger of the interview form, Francine du Plessix Gray cited Valery: "Hide your Gods," Paul Valery warns us, "men must hide their true gods with great care".<sup>86</sup> A considered response to the pressures of its occasion, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' attempts the almost impossible manoeuvre of explaining Ashbery's poetry to readers who don't understand it, without, in the process, explaining it away. He endeavours, in Valery's terms, to somehow show his gods while keeping them hidden. Or, as Ashbery puts it at the beginning of his poem, he means to do it,

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand  
 Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer  
 And swerving easily away, as though to protect  
 What it advertises. (SP,68)

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<sup>86</sup> Gray, p.xii.

To so advertise the way his poetry works, the poet, as we have seen, has to explain himself in the reader's terms. The question is, can the poet go over to the reader's terms without incurring cost to his own?

There are three significant ways we can feel the cost of the effort of going over to the reader's terms. The first is inside the poem itself. Thus, while Ashbery's explanations are driven by the admirably democratic urge to reach more readers, such explanations tend to rob practised readers of the relative autonomy which is one of the great pleasures of reading Ashbery. Such readers do not want to be told that speculation derives from speculation, they want to find it out for themselves. Thus while 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' undoubtedly reached more readers, selling well over 20,000 copies since sweeping the American poetry awards in 1976, it simultaneously incurred a cost in readerly autonomy.<sup>87</sup>

The second way in which the cost of 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' can be registered is in another Ashbery work of the period. In the sixties, it will be recalled, Ashbery steadfastly resisted the pressure to declare, choosing instead the more collaborative option of trying to indicate the occasion of the poem. One would thus expect, that the effort of explaining himself in 'Self-Portrait' would produce some kind of reaction: witness The Vermont Notebook, which, as Shoptaw points out, 'looks like a wastebasket for all the extraneous matter ruled out by its famed contemporary'.<sup>88</sup> This metaphor is helpful, but tends rather to understate the achievement of The Vermont Notebook which as Ward points out, managed to be both Steinian and Whitmanesque at the same time, and thus allowed the poet to exercise those linguistic facilities which he

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<sup>87</sup> von Hallberg, p.15

<sup>88</sup> Shoptaw, p.14.

was elsewhere having to keep in check.<sup>89</sup> The book practically precludes explanation by its mode of operation, Ashbery writing while travelling on buses around New England. By their nature, works written in transit can invariably do little more than point things out, the thing having passed before the writer has time to pass comment. Tired of the costly stuff of explanation, Ashbery is happy, in The Vermont Notebook, to follow through the other half of his 'Skaters' formulation, passage after passage content just to be 'drawing attention to things':

Front porches, back porches, side porches, door jambs, window  
sills, lintels, cornices, gambrel roofs, dormers, front steps,  
clapboards, trees, magnolia, scenery, McDonald's, Carrol's,  
Kinney Shoe Stores. (VN, 25)

Ultimately, though, perhaps the best way to gauge the cost Ashbery incurred by going over to the reader in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', is to consider what readers themselves have done with the poem. The point of going over to the reader's terms, is that the reader in turn will come over to the poet's. Nothing, however, guarantees that this will be the case, and in practice it has not happened. The reader, I would suggest, has snubbed the poet's bargain. This is apparent from the number of readings of 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' which, far from using the poem as a point of entry into the rest of the oeuvre, make little or no reference to other Ashbery poems. Mary E. Eichbauer devotes almost all the Ashbery half of her comparative study of Ashbery and René Char to 'Self-Portrait'.<sup>90</sup> Laurence Lieberman (for all his insights) became so immersed in the poem that he could hardly bring himself to mention any other, the result being a 58 page close-reading of 'Self-Portrait'. Likewise John Erwin finds

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<sup>89</sup> Ward, pp.85-87. Ward's is the best account of what he rightly reckons to be an 'underrated text'.

<sup>90</sup> Mary E. Eichbauer, Poetry's Self-Portrait: The Visual Arts as Mirror and Muse in René Char and John Ashbery (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1992) pp.86-120.

his comparison of Ashbery with Ammons on the basis of a reading of 'Self-Portrait'.<sup>91</sup> And indeed not only have readers not used Ashbery's poem as route into his work, but often as not have used it to affirm their own terminology. Lee Edelman (who barely mentions any other Ashbery poem) deduces that, 'His text ... effectively shores up its identity by thematizing its deconstruction'.<sup>92</sup> For Richard Stamelman the evidence of the poem confirms Ashbery as 'a poet of demystifications, differences, and ... deconstructions'.<sup>93</sup> While for Anita Sokolsky, Ashbery's reflexivity constitutes a 'thoroughly Lacanian formulation'.<sup>94</sup>

With 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' Ashbery attempted both to protect and advertise his poetic. It was an almost impossible manoeuvre requiring him simultaneously to be both poet and reader, or (as Heffernan implies), both interviewee and interviewer:

Whose curved hand controls,  
 Francesco, the turning seasons and the thoughts  
 That peel off and fly away at breathless speeds  
 Like the last stubborn leaves ripped  
 From wet branches?  
 (SP,71)

The occasion called for such a balance to be struck, and in striking it Ashbery achieved a remarkable poetic poise - advertising his product without selling it short. Still, though, the poem had its costs, which we need to consider if we are to appreciate its achievement.

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<sup>91</sup> John W. Erwin, 'The Reader is the Medium: Ashbery and Ammons Ensphered' Contemporary Literature, vol.21, no.4 (1980), pp588-610.

<sup>92</sup> Lee Edelman, 'The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', Twentieth Century Literature vol.32, no.1 (Spring 1986), p.113.

<sup>93</sup> Richard Stamelman, 'Critical Reflections: Poetry and Art Criticism in Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', New Literary History, vol.15, no.3, (Spring 1984), pp.607-30.

<sup>94</sup> Sokolsky, p.244.

## Questions of power

If the interviews are to be believed, the most pressing question for the poet writing during the period of the interview well concerned the uncertainty of his or her role in contemporary society. 'Road Testing The Language', the extended interview Ed Dorn gave to Stephen Fredman in 1977, opens:

Stephen Fredman: What kind of use do you see for poets in present American society?...

Edward Dorn: ... I think the function of the poet in present-day America ... would be to stay as removed as possible from all permanent associations with power.<sup>95</sup>

Likewise 'The Flint Interview' Dorn gave in 1978 starts:

Harold Tuckett: What are a poet's responsibilities to society?

Edward Dorn: Well, I think the poet's responsibilities to society are the same as any other citizen's. The responsibilities he would have beyond that would be to his craft in particular.<sup>96</sup>

Fredman and Tuckett had good contemporary reasons to open with this question.

Indeed, the question of responsibility, and of what the poet's proper responsibilities were, was the perhaps the most pressing issue of the period for the poets of Ashbery's generation. Pressing enough, for Ashbery make a poem of it witness the start of 'Figures in a Landscape':

What added note, what responsibility  
Do you bring? Inserted around us like birdcalls  
With an insistent fall.  
(AWK, 75)

What the question of responsibility raises for Dorn is the related, and still more vexed problem of the poet's power (or powerlessness) in contemporary society. Dorn's anxiety

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<sup>95</sup> Edward Dorn, *Interviews* ed. Donald Allen, (Bolin, California: Four Seasons Foundation, 1980), p.65

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.107.

over the question of power was entirely topical, and a consideration of the circumstances which made it so leads us to some of the most challenging poetry of the period.

Various circumstances made the question of power pressing for the poets of Ashbery's generation. For a start, the most important among them were visibly reaching the height of their powers. Like Ashbery, Rich (with 'Diving Into the Wreck' and 'Transcendental Etudes') and Dorn (with Gunslinger), both completed their most important works during this period. At the same time, there was a discernible expectation in the air that Ashbery's generation should produce a body of poetry powerful enough, in Robert von Hallberg's terms, to re-establish the centre of American poetry.<sup>97</sup> With Berryman having committed suicide, and Lowell's powers plainly waning, there existed a vacuum at the heart of American poetry which some poem, and poet, had to fill, or be made to fill. It was this situation Robert Pinsky addressed himself to in The Situation of Poetry, a study which amounted to a blue-print for the next central poet.<sup>98</sup> David Kalstone's Five Temperaments, published in 1977, was equally clearly looking for the new centre, moving, as it did, from studies of Bishop and Lowell, to a comparative evaluation of Merrill, Rich and Ashbery. Laurence Lieberman's review of 'Self-Portrait' articulated the same concern, Lieberman identifying Ashbery as one of 'a dwindling handful of spokesmen who can accurately elucidate the special quarrels of today's artist with the culture'.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, as Richard Kostelanetz saw it, this was an auspicious moment for a poetic generation to accede to power. Noting that there were probably 'twice as many practising serious poets in the United States' as there had been a decade previous, and that publishers were showing an increasing interest in poetry, 'Poetry', he

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<sup>97</sup> von Hallberg, p.9.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Pinsky, The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978) p.vii.

<sup>99</sup> Lieberman, pp3-28.

announced triumphantly, 'has become the principal American literary form supplanting fiction in the chariot of artistic leadership'.<sup>100</sup>

The interview boom was itself confirmation of the belief that poets, and Ashbery's generation of poets in particular, had arrived at a position of some power. Interviewers, after all, do not bother with the powerless. In fact, however, as we have seen, the experience of the interview did anything but confirm the poet's sense of their own power, serving rather, to bring home the fact that a break in communication had occurred between poet and audience. A complex and contradictory situation resulted. More confident than ever of their writing, and carrying the sense of responsibility that comes with poetic seniority, the poets of Ashbery's generation were also acutely aware of the seeming inability of their art to communicate effectively with readers beyond a literary in-group. Far from acceding to a position of power Ashbery's generation found themselves powerless to communicate. Or as Ashbery put it,

I live with this paradox: on the one hand, I am an important poet, read by younger writers, and on the other hand, nobody understands me. I am often asked to account for this state of affairs, but I can't.<sup>101</sup>

One possible response to this state of affairs was simply to accept that poetry had become a marginal art, and to try to derive a kind of shamanistic power from that position of marginality. What inevitably results from this is a kind of literary exclusion zone, as the poet settles increasingly for the small group of readers he already knows. Thus, asked about his readers, Dorn observed, 'I know almost exactly how many they are, and I even know a large percentage of them personally. And by statistical extension I know them all'.<sup>102</sup> Neither Ashbery, nor Rich was quite so ready to consign poetry to the

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<sup>100</sup> Kostelanetz, pp.6, 5.

<sup>101</sup> Stitt, p.399.

<sup>102</sup> Dorn, *Interviews*, p.66

cultural margins. Which is not to say, either, that they subscribed to an inflated sense of the poet's position. Rather, they sought to articulate their lack of power in a way that might make it culturally significant. This undoubtedly precarious manoeuvre produced two of the most important poems of the period: Rich's 'Transcendental Etudes' and Ashbery's 'The One Thing That Can Save America'.

The titles themselves, of these two poems, signify serious ambivalence on the question of poetic power. The cool rigour of *etude* tends to undermine the poetic impulse towards the transcendent. While the cartoonic idiom of Ashbery's expression seems to ridicule poetry's most Promethean aspirations. Yet, difficult as they are to uphold, neither poet is prepared simply to relinquish these higher ambitions. Rich's title allows the possibility that poetry can achieve transcendence through a restrained approach to the world. While Ashbery retains (even as he mocks) the faith that poetry might save America. Both poets, in other words, belittle poetry's most grandiose claims in order to found further claims on the process of belittling. Part of the strength of each poem lies in the timely and controlled appeal it makes to Whitman. Both poems arrive at a Whitmanesque locale. The second stanza of Rich's poem finds her standing in the

dooryard,  
my nerves singing the immense  
fragility of all this sweetness.<sup>103</sup>

While Ashbery's poem, which opens with a gentle parody of Whitman, finally winds up

in cool yards,  
In quiet small houses in the country,  
Our country, in fenced areas, in cool shady streets. (SP,45)

By their locations, their dooryards and cool yards, both poets recall the Whitman of 'When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd'. It is a shared allusion which tells us much

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<sup>103</sup> Rich, Fact of a Doorframe, pp.264-265.

about the state of the contemporary poetic mind. The occasion of Whitman's poem is Lincoln's funeral. It is an occasion which prompts the poet to a rare consideration of the powerlessness of his vocation. It is an understandable loss of confidence. For a start, Whitman probably never came closer to the body politic, and so to real, worldly power than when he placed his sprig of lilac on Lincoln's coffin. More generally, this being the funeral of a man he loved, Whitman cannot avoid the realisation that, here at least, he is 'powerless', 'helpless' to make a difference.<sup>104</sup> And crucially, Whitman expresses this powerlessness by uncharacteristically limiting his sphere of influence to 'the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings'.<sup>105</sup> By siting their poems in the American yard, Rich and Ashbery thus articulate conflicting impulses. On the one hand, whenever an American poet alludes to Whitman, however ironically, it is Whitman's magisterial tones that sound most clearly. One feels a rush of rhetorical power, and almost despite itself the poetic utterance seems important again. Thus, Rich and Ashbery re-affirm, or at least, allow the re-affirmation of, the importance of the American poet. Yet their shared allusion is to the least confident, most limited, Whitman. Both poets thus signal an awareness that the power of contemporary American poetry must somehow be located in its limits.<sup>106</sup>

'Transcendental Etude' has a sharp sense of what the poet can and cannot do.<sup>107</sup>

The poem's argument has three phases. In the first Rich sets out to figure her

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<sup>104</sup> Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry & Selected Prose and Letters* ed. Emory Holloway (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1938), p.300.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> The issue of poetic power is not, of course, the only way to discuss either Rich's or Ashbery's relation to Whitman. Thus, Craig Werner reads 'Transcendental Etudes' as a feminist resistance to Whitmanesque assertions of masculine power; *Adrienne Rich: The Poet and her Critics* (Chicago and London: American Library Association, 1988), p.91. David Bergman reads Ashbery's allusions to Whitman in terms of homosexuality, suggesting that Ashbery gains strength through identifying with a strong gay ancestor; Bergman, pp.44-63.

<sup>107</sup> For other considerations of Rich's poem see, McClatchy, pp.13-19; and Claire Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp.175-9.

powerlessness. Passing some young deer on the road she anticipates their violent death at the hands of hunters, noting by her tense that she is unable to prevent it ('they'll be fair game').<sup>108</sup> She sees poverty in Vermont, and is unable to alleviate it ('Still it persists').<sup>109</sup> And she can only sit on a fence and watch as a bulldozer carves up the landscape. Her impotence thus firmly established, Rich proceeds in the second phase of the poem to explore the possibility that in fact there is strength, or if not strength then value at least, in the act of renouncing power. It is an appropriate response to what she terms the 'masculine will to mastery'.<sup>110</sup> Such a renunciation of power, she suggests, has considerable implications for poetry. She has grown to 'mistrust/ theatricality' and argues accordingly that poetry must be 'cleansed/ of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments'.<sup>111</sup> This renunciation of poetic power is tied to the other aspect of Rich's project in this book. She dreams, as her title says, of a common language, and poetry, she supposes, which is cleansed of its more elaborate procedures, is more likely to communicate to more people. A compelling logic emerges, for it would seem that by renouncing linguistic power, Rich restores to the poet the power to communicate. In practice this position is less compelling, because by denying herself the 'theatrical' aspects of language she comes (in poems like 'Natural Resources', 'Power', and 'Hunger') to write a dull, dogmatically prosaic line. If she manages to communicate, too often it is because to all intents and purposes she has ceased to write poetry.

This is not so, however, in 'Transcendental Etude', the last phase of which shows us what, at its best, a powerless poetry (her 'whole new poetry beginning here') might look like.

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<sup>108</sup> Rich, p.264.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.265.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.269.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., pp.266, 267.

Vision begins to happen in such a life  
 as if a woman quietly walked away  
 from the argument and jargon in a room  
 and sitting down in the kitchen, began turning in her lap  
 bits of yarn, calico, velvet scraps,  
 laying them out absently on the scrubbed boards  
 in the lamplight, with small rainbow-colored shells  
 sent in cotton-wool from somewhere far away,  
 and skeins of milkweed from the nearest meadow ....<sup>112</sup>

This is strictly limited poetry. With the exception of the mildly exotic shells, the woman restricts herself to what she finds. And what she finds she has no desire to master. She is seen, rather, 'laying them out absently'. The poet, likewise, proceeds absently, not imposing any order on her materials, suggesting nothing by way of relations save adjacency and parataxis. And to confirm the limitations, the passage takes place in the kitchen. Even the door-yard now seems too expansive. And yet, for all these self-imposed restrictions the passage has a power of sorts, the catalogue's repetitive motion finding a rhythm of its own; the poem gathering strength as it gathers its materials. It is questionable, perhaps, whether 'vision happens in such life'. There is no doubt, though, that Rich has found strength in limitation, achieving here at least a common language of considerable poetic interest.

'The One Thing That Can Save America' registers all the same pressures as 'Transcendental Etudes'. In responding to them, however, and for all the virtues of Rich's poem, Ashbery formulates an utterance discernibly more appropriate to the occasion. We feel this in the different structures through which the poem's articulate themselves. Working in three phases, Rich's poem reproduces the tripartite structure of the Romantic Ode. In doing so it also reproduces the style of thought cultivated in, say, 'Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey'. Rich's poem is a recollection in

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.268.

tranquillity, the poet working out for herself, in isolation, the kind of poetry she needs to write. It is however, the isolation of the poet that is at issue here, a fact Ashbery takes into account by the tone and structure of his poem. 'The One Thing That Can Save America' is a significantly interrogative poem, the poem asking itself (or being asked) questions throughout. More interestingly, Ashbery's poem has a four-part, not a three-part structure, the parts, broadly speaking, divided into question ('Is anything central?'), response ('These are connected to my version of America'), follow up question ('Where then are the private turns of event ...?'), follow-up response ('It is the lumps and trials/ That tell us') (SP, 44-45). Which is not to suggest that 'The One Thing That Can Save America' is one of the staged interviews remarked on earlier. Rather, that it registers by its form the fact that hard questions are now being asked of poetry. The poem asks itself these hard questions: whether anything can now be said to be central? whether readers can be expected to listen to the quirky things that happen to the poet? and how, if at all, any individual (and any individual poet) might come to be exemplary? Most importantly of all, however, by its interrogative tone and dialogical structure Ashbery acknowledges that the poet must now listen to what other people are saying.

As in 'Transcendental Etudes', however, Ashbery's chief concern in 'The One Thing That Can Save America' is to locate the source of the contemporary poet's power. It is as he tries to answer this question that Ashbery engages with Whitman. Asked if anything is central, Ashbery responds with a Whitmanesque sweep across America. The regions he mentions, however ('Urban forests, rustic plantations, knee-high hills'), are all oxymoronic, and so have confusion at their heart. He does come to identify 'places of known civic pride', but they add up to 'civil obscurity'. There is nowhere, then, no centre, from where the poet might speak for America. Denied the kind of centrality

Whitman assumed for himself (and from which he derived his power) Ashbery returns to what has always been the source ('the juice' as he puts it) of his own poetic power - the immediate occasion of the poem. In the second stanza he recalls how this morning 'I walked out of your room/ After breakfast...' (SP, 44). This does have an energizing effect on the poet. He is 'seized...again' by the 'cool downtown shadow/ In this morning' (SP, 44). It is no longer sufficient, however, for Ashbery to return to the original sources of his poetic power, because as the interviews had established, such occasional poetry was not getting through. Ashbery acknowledges the problem in the third stanza of the poem:

I know that I braid too much on my own  
 Snapped-off perceptions of things as they come to me.  
 They are private and always will be.  
 (SP,44)

But what, the poem wonders, is the alternative? For if nothing and nowhere is central, then how can anyone presume to do otherwise than speak directly from their own experience. How can anyone do more than articulate 'the quirky things that happen to me ...?' (SP,45). It is this question Ashbery endeavours to answer in the final lines of his poem:

The message was wise, and seemingly  
 Dictated a long time ago.  
 Its truth is timeless, but its time has still  
 Not arrived, telling of danger, and the mostly limited  
 Steps that can be taken against danger  
 Now and in the future, in cool yards,  
 In quiet small houses in the country,  
 Our country, in fenced areas, in cool shady streets.  
 (SP,45)

What Ashbery imagines here is a poetry which is 'mostly', but not entirely 'limited'. Thus while he restricts itself to 'cool yards' and 'small houses in the country', it is of such spaces, he dares to suggest, that America is made. Which in terms of poetic practice

means that it is precisely by restricting himself to his own back yard, and precisely by noticing the quirky things that happen to him, that the poet can hope to be exemplary. Quirky things, after all, happen to everyone. 'Quiet small houses in the country' thus become 'Our country', and Ashbery achieves Whitman's scope without sacrificing his sense of occasion. It is a sublime move.<sup>113</sup>

### **Nostalgia for the present**

Ashbery's poetry, it has been observed, became increasingly dialogical through the 1970s. He gave this interest in dialogue explicit formal expression in the two long poems he wrote towards the end of the decade: in the conversation between 'He' and 'She' which constitutes 'Fantasia on "The Nut-Brown Maid"', and in the two columns, or voices, which make up 'Litany'.<sup>114</sup> Of these two, 'Fantasia on "The Nut-Brown Maid"' is much the more successful. 'Litany' is a rather weary piece. Ashbery, it seems, had grown tired of the attentions and expectations that had for some time now accompanied his poetry. He had certainly grown weary of the presence of the interviewers, whom he felt were, 'anxious to be done with us,/ For the interview to be over' (AWK,9). He seems tired, also, of the responsibility which came with the role of major poet, and hopes, now, that roles might be reversed:

But why you  
May ask do I want someone to take care of me  
So much? (AWK,60)

Because 'now,' as he says, 'I am tired'(AWK,60). The whole poem, in fact, seems rather tired; tired, indeed, of the effort of communicating. The two columns wander on more or

<sup>113</sup> Two contemporary critics, Lieberman and Kalstone both spoke of Ashbery's sense of occasion. See, Lieberman, p21 and Kalstone, p200. For a good later reading see, Keller, p73

<sup>114</sup> Prior to this Ashbery had written only a handful of explicitly dialogical poems: 'Eclogue', 'A Boy', and, arguably, 'Meditations of a Parrot' from Some Trees; 'Rain' (in which two lovers correspond) from The Tennis Court Oath; and 'An Outing' from The Double Dream of Spring.

less independently of one another, and the task of bringing them together is left to the reader. Arguably this is a collaborative gesture. It seems to me, however, that in 'Litany' Ashbery asks too much of the reader, failing, in effect, to fulfil his side of the bargain. The end of the poem concedes as much, the voice of the second column describing the trouble he is having making contact with a mail-order company:

I've written them several times but  
 Can't straighten it out - would you  
 Try?  
 (AWK,68)

Responsibility for establishing communication is thus passed to the reader. Ashbery himself was never sure of the poem, describing it as 'an experiment that didn't really work'.<sup>115</sup> In principle, he says, he likes the idea that people should have to concentrate on two voices simultaneously. As he acknowledges, however, 'I don't, and can't really expect anybody else to'.<sup>116</sup>

By comparison, 'Fantasia on "The Nut-Brown Maid"' is, in imprint ways, one of the most rigorous poems Ashbery has written. It has clearly been carefully conceived, the title making it clear that the poet turned to the anthologies in search of a means by which he might fashion the dialogical impulse into a work of art. Moreover, it was in this poem above all, that Ashbery really faced up to the hard questions being asked of contemporary poetry. Like the later books of Dorn's *Gunslinger*, 'Fantasia on "The Nut-Brown Maid"' is an extended meditation on the poet's ability to make himself heard in contemporary America. A comparison of these two works - both of which make

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<sup>115</sup> Tranter, p.100.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. For useful considerations of 'Litany' see Costello, 'John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader', pp.493-514; and Denis Donoghue, *Reading America: Essays on American Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp.302-319

strategic use of nostalgia - serves to draw out the value of Ashbery's commitment to dialogue.

The interlocutors of Ashbery's poem - 'He' and 'She' - have considerable difficulty sustaining a conversation: sometimes talking at cross purposes, sometimes getting lost in the other's idiom. Just occasionally, however, they do swerve towards something like a mid-point. Ashbery draws attention to such occasions. Thus, at the divide between the sixth and seventh stanzas:

SHE

It's in the public domain.

HE

But you will take comfort in it again.(HD,75)

At this point, the speakers are clearly talking to one another, a harmonious exchange the poet celebrates by rhyming across the stanza divide, the only time he does so in the poem. The voices are similarly engaged at the divide between the eighth and ninth stanzas, 'She' remarking on the hills you 'Coasted down before like mirror writing', to which 'He' responds,

And when the flourish under the signature  
A miniature beehive with a large bee on it, was  
Finished, you chose a view of distant factories,  
Tall smokestacks, anything.  
(HD,76)

Here again, 'He' has clearly been listening to 'She', his chiasmic rhyming of 'signature' and 'miniature' taking up her remark about mirror-writing. In general, however, there is a marked absence of harmony in 'Fantasia', because in general the interlocutors do not listen carefully enough to what the other has to say. And significantly, this image of inattentive conversations seems to have its source in a series of unhappy encounters with visiting strangers.

Stanza 20 provides a case in point. In stanza 18 it had been observed that ‘A stranger came to the door and then the change was real/ until it went away’ (HD,80). It seems to be this same stranger ‘She’ is talking to at the opening of stanza twenty-two:

No, but I dug these out of bureau drawers for you,  
Told you which ones meant a lot to me,  
Which ones I was frankly dubious about, and  
Which were destined to blow away.  
Who are we to suffer after this?  
(HD,82)

‘She’ has clearly gone out of her way to help this visitor, digging things out of drawers, indicating what in her opinion will and will not survive. She knows, however, that she will have to do the same thing again soon, will have to suffer some other visitor. And sure enough, visitors do show up with alarming regularity in this poem. Thus, in thirteen,

double trouble  
Arrives, Beppo and Zeppo confront one  
Out of a hurricane of colored dots, twin  
Windshield wipers dealing the accessories:  
Woe, wrack, wet - probably another kingdom.  
(HD, 78)

Ashbery, one suspects, has been reading Pope, ‘Beppo and Zeppo’ recalling the ridiculous names by which Pope referred to (and dealt with) his unwanted visitors. And Pope, of course, knew all about visiting strangers, ‘An Epistle to Arbuthnot’ venting the poet’s spleen at the those poetasters who dogged his every move. Pope’s sobriquets (‘Bavius’ and ‘Buffo’ for instance) concealed real individuals. ‘Beppo and Zeppo’ might be individuals or types. It is worth noting, though, that as Cowley observed in his Writers at Work introduction, ‘interviewers,’ like the FBI, ‘usually worked in pairs’.<sup>117</sup>

But if, like Pope’s epistle, ‘Fantasia on “The Nut-Brown Maid”’ is in part Ashbery’s way of dealing with troublesome visitors, it is also critically aware of the

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<sup>117</sup> Cowley, p.4.

wider implications of their presence. This is apparent from the encounter described in stanza twenty-eight:

It was arriving now, the eyes thick  
 With their black music, the wooden misquotable side  
 Thrust forward. Tell about the affair she'd had  
 With Bennett Palmer, the Minnesota highwayman,  
 Back when she was staying at Lake Geneva, Wisc.,  
 In the early forties. That paynim'd  
 Go to any lengths to shut her up, now,  
 Now that the time of truth telling from tall towers  
 Had come.  
 (HD,85-6)

His eyes 'thick/ With their black music', this visitor is plainly ill-intentioned, and accordingly, 'She' does not risk a friendly gesture, offering, instead, her 'wooden misquotable side'. She hardly need worry about misquotation, however, because this visitor is not at all interested in what she has to say. Indeed he would go to any lengths to shut her up. What is particularly interesting here, however, is the word Ashbery uses to describe this visitor. On the one hand, of course, he is a paynim (a pagan or heathen) because he is only interested in 'She's' sex-life. But more importantly, I think, the visitor is a paynim because he is not interested in having a civilised conversation; is not interested, in fact, in having a conversation at all. The fact that Ashbery chooses the archaic word 'paynim' to describe this visitor (whom, by the word 'misquotable' he fairly clearly identifies as an interviewer), indicates that he has given the situation careful thought. Moreover, because it is a word which will send most people to the dictionary, it is plain also that he wants the reader to focus on the implications of the term. And this, is because, as Ashbery sees it at least, a good deal is at stake here. The implication, I suggest, is that a society whose citizens do not want to make conversation, and more specifically, perhaps, a society which does not (or does not know how to) listen to its

poets, is, by definition, uncivilised. Or as Ashbery puts it in stanza nine, 'The period of civilities is long past' (HD,76).

'Fantasia on "A Nut-Brown Maid"' embodies two responses to this realisation.

The first, understandably, is despair. In stanza 25 Ashbery faces up to the contemporary poet's deepest fear, noting that his 'career devoted to life, to improving the minds and the welfare of others' is, in reality,

a common thing like these, and less profitable than any hobby or sideline that is a source of retirement income, such as an antique stall, pecan harvest or root-beer stand. In short, although the broad outlines of your intentions are a credit to you, what fills them up isn't. You are like someone whose face was photographed in a crowd scene once and then gradually retreated from people's memories, and from life as well. (HD,84)

If nobody is listening, and if he can make no lasting impression on people's thinking, then how can the poet claim to be acting in the interests of others. And would not the art to which he has dedicated his life be better described, therefore, as a hobby rather than a vocation? It is a chilling proposition, and not one, finally, that the poet is prepared to accept. His second, more constructive response, to the thought that the period of civilities is passed is to try to present the reader with images of productive dialogue, and it is to this end that the poem makes its controlled use of nostalgia. Much of Ashbery's poetry of this period is marked by nostalgia.<sup>118</sup> In 'The Other Tradition' Ashbery presents an environment so full of utterances of all kinds that it is quite impossible to hold a civilized conversation; a situation which prompts him to nostalgic thoughts of the high period of the New York School, when he and his fellow poets guaranteed one another a hearing, when

each of the  
Troubadours had something to say about how charity

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<sup>118</sup> For a thorough examination of Ashbery's use of nostalgia, see, Mutlu Konuk Basing, Politics and Form in Postmodern American Poetry: O'Hara, Bishop, Ashbery, and Merrill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.110-155.

Had run its race and won...'  
(HD,2)

The beautiful poem 'Tapestry' generalizes this nostalgic impulse, offering readers the tapestry's image of 'citizens' who 'hold sweet commerce with one another' (AWK, 90).<sup>119</sup> It is in 'Fantasia on "The Nut-Brown Maid"', however, that Ashbery makes his most productive use of nostalgia. For as the reader finds out if they consult the anonymous sixteenth century ballad Ashbery's poem is based on (and which, in effect it advertises) what the ur-poem represents is a period before civilities (and civilized conversation) were dead. The nut-brown maid and her suitor resolve their differences by talking them through. Which is what Ashbery, in turn, invites his reader to do:

What was all the manner  
Between them, let us discuss ...  
(HD, 73)

Ashbery thus presents an image of effective conversation; a model for a more intimate discursive community.

Geoff Ward finds a comparable nostalgia for a more intimate discursive community in Ed Dorn's writing. He notes that Dorn has written with 'wistful pleasure about eighteenth century-English writing' and detects a 'nostalgia for what this poet has perhaps not enjoyed so far, except at Black Mountain and in the late sixties' a nostalgia, that is, 'for a place where writing mattered'.<sup>120</sup> And in one sense, of course, Gunslinger does present a community of sorts. 'Gunslinger', 'I', 'Poet', 'Everything', 'Lil', and 'Claude the Horse' are an unlikely grouping. But, by the end at least, they are a tight one. And Dorn himself has spoken of the poem as 'a multiple conversation between half-

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<sup>119</sup> For an close reading of these two poems, see Bloom, 'Measuring the Canon', in Bloom (ed.), pp.217-232.

<sup>120</sup> Ward, 'Edward Dorn', in Clive Bloom and Brian Doherty (eds.) American Poetry: The Modernist Ideal (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1995), p.225.

a-dozen people'.<sup>121</sup> Theirs is a strange kind of intimacy, however, and a strange kind of conversation. Certainly they listen closely to what one another has to say. So closely in fact, that that they pick up on all the quirks and unforeseen significations of each other's utterances. Nor is this kind of communication (if one can call it that) incidental, for as von Hallberg explains, the action of the poem is driven by linguistic accidents.<sup>122</sup> It is a poem driven by misunderstandings, each speaker speaking his own language, and taking from the others' utterances only what their own rhetoric allows them to pick up. One could argue, of course, that what Dorn offers in Gunslinger is the best kind of community we could hope for in a society divided by jargons and dialects, and that by comparison Ashbery's turn to a sixteenth century ballad is nostalgic in the weakest sense. It seems, to me, however, that Dorn's failure to conceive anything like a viable model of communication testifies to a much deeper nostalgia in his own poetry, a nostalgia which predates, and so precludes civility.

Gunslinger, of course, can seem a most unnostalgic poem. Dorn is as likely to cast into the future as he is to look back, witness the fact that the messianic 'Zlinger' comes finally to talk the language of science fiction. There is an important, Romantic, sense, however, in which the avant-garde impulse which carries Dorn to that frontier where the present meets the future is itself born of nostalgia. This, I think, is the force of von Hallberg's suggestion that, 'Dorn wants the poem to occupy "*the Very beginning of logic*"', 'the dark area, prior to all intentions'.<sup>123</sup> It is Dorn's hope, according to von Hallberg, that 'Slinger's puns, paradoxes, palindromes, and gags lead there, for that way lies beyond description'.<sup>124</sup> As von Hallberg sees it Dorn's poem is driven by a desire to

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<sup>121</sup> Dorn, Interviews, p.99.

<sup>122</sup> von Hallberg, pp.216-223.

<sup>123</sup> von Hallberg, pp.221,223.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p.223.

achieve a raw contact with the world, the kind of contact he imagines was once possible, prior to the advent of language. And it is not hard to see how such a desire might propel a poet towards the future, for, in theory at least, if he gets there early enough he might be in position to make unmediated contact with it, so replicating that moment of grace, prior to all intentions.

We feel this same kind of nostalgia in the way Dorn talks about politics. Explaining his interest in eighteenth century history in interview, Dorn observed that

most of the issues raised in legislation and in the infinite splintering of small expressions of greed called “special interests” can be clarified and stabilized in terms of one’s understanding of the late eighteenth century, and that’s because the last, say, quarter of the eighteenth century gave birth to his nation.<sup>125</sup>

Dorn wants to trace American history back to its origins, to the moment before the legislators took control. The interview was conducted after the completion of Gunslinger, but one finds similar sentiments articulated in the ‘Prolegomenon’ to book four of the poem:

there is a civil scar  
so cosmetic, one can’t see it.

A superimposition, drawn up  
like the ultimate property  
of the ego, an invisible claim  
to a scratchy indultum  
from which smoke pours forth.<sup>126</sup>

Dorn is nostalgic not for a period of civilities long past, but rather for a period prior to civility altogether, the civil, as he sees it, being a scar, a superimposition which prevents immediate contact with the world.

Speaking of Dorn’s early writing, Ward suggests that it is difficult to see what,

legislative function might be restored to an art form so driven towards the margins by choice as well as lack of audience.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Dorn, Interviews, p.112.

<sup>126</sup> Dorn, Gunslinger, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989) p.146

This, I think, is absolutely right. The interest here, however, of Dorn's drive to the margins, is that it can ultimately be seen to be founded on an anti-social sense of the poetic occasion. Dorn turned to the language of the occasion when reviewing Robert Creeley's 'Pieces'. Trying to explain the meaning of Creeley's term pieces, he suggests that 'marbles in an inscribed circle are pieces of the game', and that the game, and so the poem, are over when 'one has all the marbles of that occasion'.<sup>128</sup> Nobody, he goes on, 'writes like Creeley ... That is the art of perception. The art of poetry is the same thing as the art of perception'.<sup>129</sup> As Dorn sees it, the poet's task is to render his perception of the occasion as accurately as possible. Which is, in part how Ashbery would see it. The difference is that for Ashbery, occasions are social events, which while they need to be rendered accurately, they equally need to be rendered in terms other people (readers) can understand. That he thinks of the occasion this way dates back, as we have seen, to the collaborative milieu of the New York School. With the arrival of the interviewer and the news that his poetry was not getting through, the need to communicate his sense of the occasion came to seem increasingly important. Thus, where Gunslinger offers misunderstandings, 'Fantasia on "The Nut-Brown Maid"' offers dialogue. Both poets have very serious things to say about the role of the poet in contemporary America. But by his 'dreams of decorum that take into account any wisecracks made at their expense', Ashbery manages to sustain the hope that demanding poetry can be a public discourse (HD,88).

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<sup>127</sup> Ward, 'Edward Dorn', p223.

<sup>128</sup> Dorn, Views, (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1980) p.120.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p.122.

**Chapter Six**  
**Enduring Occasions: Ashbery's Poetic Legacy**

### Enduring Occasions: Ashbery's Poetic Legacy

If, as I have argued, the shape and value of Ashbery's poetry owes much to its evolving sense of occasion, the question must eventually arise, 'How will the poetry endure?'

How, in other words, can poetry devoted to its occasion survive the passing of that occasion? It is a question Ashbery himself has pondered. Contemplating the future for his poetry in Flow Chart, Ashbery considers the possibility that

the misunderstanding could only grow, so that it seems  
desolation and solitude were the point we had set out for, the times of mirth  
forgotten now, recorded in disappearing ink that doesn't outlast winter  
and its holidays, its occasions.  
(FC,104)

Poetry written for the occasion, that is, is all too likely to disappear with the passing of that occasion. If this is worrying at the best of times, it is very likely to become even more so as the poet approaches death. Most poets, of course, worry about how their work will fare after they have died. The particular anxiety for a poet like Ashbery - who, having always looked to meet the demands of the occasion, has continually eschewed the seductions of poetic permanence - is that there remains nothing in his work of lasting interest. One response to this dilemma would be, in later life, to weaken, and perhaps even to break the relation of the poetry to occasions. Kenneth Koch, I think, has tended towards this response. Speaking in a recent interview about his collaborations with painters, he noted,

I like doing it because, for one reason, I could create something and then it would be gone.... Of course, I wouldn't like all my work to be like this, but its sort of nice just to do something for the occasion.<sup>1</sup>

Koch's qualification is the sign of a poet increasingly aware that his poetry is liable to fade with the time in which it was written. His insistence that he wouldn't want all of his

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<sup>1</sup> Herd, 'Koch', p.29.

work 'to be like this' is, in effect, an appeal to the reader (particularly the future reader) to continue to read the poetry. Understandable as Koch's response is, it has not been Ashbery's. Indeed, Ashbery's poetry has if anything grown more insistently occasional. On the opening page of Flow Chart (a poem which can hardly go five pages without mentioning the word 'occasion') the poet observes:

We know life is so busy,  
but a larger activity shrouds it, and this is something  
we can never feel, except occasionally, in small signs  
put up to warn us and as soon expunged, in part  
or wholly.  
(FC,3)

Or, as he reminds us, and himself, mid-way through the poem:

“Whatever things men are doing shall germ  
the motley subject of my page.”  
(FC, 105)

Concerned as he is, then, that his poetry should survive, Ashbery has nonetheless remained faithful to his occasional poetic. His late poetry, as a result, is marked by troubling, and significant tensions.<sup>2</sup>

The surest way for a poet to guarantee that his writing will endure (that it will continue to be read) is by his influence. If his influence on future poets is significant then future readers will have cause, whatever their perception of the value of his work, to go back to him. Ever since A Wave, Ashbery has given considerable thought to the matter of his influence. As critics have observed, A Wave is marked by a sharp change of tone and emphasis. Observing that much of the book was written after Ashbery nearly died of a spinal infection, Ward notes that 'the collection as a whole is perfused as never before

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<sup>2</sup> One appreciates these tensions if one reflects that (as was described in Chapter One) Ashbery's occasional poetic was to a significant degree forged in reaction to the poetry of the middle generation, with its heavy emphasis on the need for poetry to endure.

with black jokes, *memento mori* admonitions and autumnal rumination'.<sup>3</sup> Speaking of 'Hotel Lautréamont', Stephen Meyer suggests that, 'Like so much of Ashbery's work of the last decade ... this poem is a "dump" or lament at approaching death'.<sup>4</sup> While for Fred Moramarco, the poetry Ashbery has written since *A Wave*, has been increasingly 'involved in ruminating about ... what sort of legacy he will leave for posterity'.<sup>5</sup>

Ashbery's chief response, as Moramarco suggests, to the tension caused by the desire both to write for and survive his occasions, has been to ponder the legacy he will leave for poetry; to consider, that is, his influence. But thinking about influence does not dissolve the tensions in Ashbery's late poetry, for if he is committed to an occasional poetic, he is concerned also, as has been indicated in the last two chapters, to sustain a democratic poetic. The desire to influence does not sit easily with a democratic poetic. It is with a consideration of the difficult questions raised by Ashbery's influence that I conclude this thesis.

I open the discussion by outlining the contradictions which emerge from existing critical accounts of Ashbery's influence on contemporary poetry. I then examine Ashbery's own vexed poetic attempts to determine his likely influence. Finally, I consider how younger poets have tried to negotiate Ashbery's influence, focusing the discussion on three British poets: John Ash, Peter Didsbury and Denise Riley. There are a number of reasons for considering British poets at this point in the thesis. In the first place, a discussion of Ashbery's place in postwar American poetry would be incomplete if it did not at some stage consider his role in transatlantic poetic relations. As Geoff Ward indicates, British-American poetic relations have been significant to both poetries 'since

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<sup>3</sup> Ward, *Statutes*, p.92

<sup>4</sup> Steven Meyer, 'Ashbery: Poet for all Seasons', *Raritan*, vol.15, no.2 (Fall 1995), p.147

<sup>5</sup> Fred Moramarco, 'Coming Full Circle: John Ashbery's Later Poetry', in Schultz (ed.), p.38.

Walt Whitman severed the second from the first'.<sup>6</sup> And one way or another, such transatlantic relations have been increasingly important since the war. In part this has been a question of influence, British poets and poet-critics like Prynne, Tomlinson, Mottram and Davie working hard to ensure that major American poets received a hearing in Britain. Ward describes a 'transatlantic shuttle in poetry around the mid-point of the 1960s'.<sup>7</sup> Partly also it has been a question, in some quarters, of reaction; Davie noting that among 'reactionaries, no one ... is so blameable as the late Philip Larkin'.<sup>8</sup> Equally (and oppositely) the current state of transatlantic poetic relations has generated a certain chauvinism in some American circles. Thus, as J.D. McClatchy is proud to point out, 'The balance of poetic power during this century tipped decisively toward America'.<sup>9</sup> One way or another, then, the poetics of America and Britain have been decisively related since the war. And, Ashbery, of course, has played an important role in that relationship. For a critic like John Bayley, Ashbery is a dislikable presence in British poetry precisely because he stands so readily for all things American: 'He avoids definition as America does, in the 'No Way of Knowing' which is one of his titles'.<sup>10</sup> The second reason for considering transatlantic poetic relations in this context, relates directly to the question of how Ashbery's occasional poetic might survive. Thus, the very fact that Ashbery can be seen to have had a positive influence on important poets in another culture, would seem to indicate that his poetry can outlast its occasions in a significant sense. At its most healthy, I suggest, Ashbery's influence is valuable precisely insofar as it enables other poets to cope with their own occasions. A consideration of his

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<sup>6</sup> Ward, *Statutes*, p.84.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Davie, *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain, 1960-1988* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), p.256

<sup>9</sup> McClatchy, p.7.

<sup>10</sup> Bayley, p.43.

influence on British poets can thus be particularly instructive. Indeed, what I think emerges fairly clearly from a comparison of Ash, Didsbury and Riley is that while Ash has had a most interesting relationship to Ashbery (not least because, as I indicate, the influence has not only been one-way), he ultimately represents a less healthy case of Ashbery's influence than the other two because, having gone over to New York, he became exclusively concerned with Ashbery's occasions, rather than his own. In this sense, then, Britain is an important place to look if one is to determine how successfully Ashbery's poetry might endure. If the future, like the past, is another country, then it is another country we need to look towards if we are to determine how Ashbery's poetry will outlast its occasions.

Ashbery's influence on American poetry has been carefully considered.<sup>11</sup> His contribution to transatlantic poetic relations has received less attention.<sup>12</sup> Introducing a recent issue of *PN Review* devoted to Ashbery's work, Michael Schmidt noted that, 'In England there are writers and readers who take pleasure and fruitful indirection from Ashbery'.<sup>13</sup> What a consideration of such writers indicates, I suggest, is that it will increasingly be Ashbery who keeps American poetry alive in Britain, thus serving both traditions.

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<sup>11</sup> See Ward, *Statutes*, pp.177-186; and Shetley, pp.165-192. Susan Schultz's recent collection of essays *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry* reprints the articles gathered in the *Verse* special issue 'John Ashbery's influence on Contemporary Poetry', and publishes a number of new discussions. I refer to several of these below.

<sup>12</sup> For discussions of Ashbery's influence on British poetry see, Ward *Statutes*, pp.186-189; Ian Gregson, 'Epigraphs for Epigones', *Bête Noire* 4 (Winter 1987), pp.99-94; and (generally) *PN Review* 99, vol.21, no.1 (Sep-Oct. 1994), 'Ashbery in Britain: A Supplement'.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Schmidt, 'Editorial', *PN Review* 99.

### Influential concerns

Discussing what he calls, 'The anxiety of affluence', John Gery asks some searching questions of Ashbery's influence:

How does the younger poet take into account the wealth of Ashbery's expansive voice, the many levels and the levelling of diction, the multiplicitous yet complicitous layers of irony, and the ... utterly diffuse humour - and then begin to turn what is found there into anything resembling meaning? In other words what, if any, is the *wrong* way to write a poem after the "affluence" of Ashbery?<sup>14</sup>

Gery's answers, however, are rather less impressive than his questions. His suggestion is that poets have chosen to 'dip into Ashbery's aesthetic as it suits their own purposes', with the result that,

the idiosyncrasies of Ashbery's poetry have created, so far, not a "school of followers" (a phrase which would suggest a rigorous discipline, an identifiable similarity in style, and shared goals), but rather, a menagerie or zoo of post-Ashberians.<sup>15</sup>

Gery is happy with this state of affairs, suggesting that the 'multiplicitous guidance' Ashbery affords younger poets illustrates the 'postmodern power of his art'.<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, Susan M. Schultz takes it as

a mark of Ashbery's pervasive presence that so many of those he included in The Best American Poetry 1988, which reprinted the hundred poems of that year that Ashbery most liked, sound like him, or - that is - like one of him'.<sup>17</sup>

Where Gery and Schultz find 'multiplicity' other commentators find uniformity.

For Anthony Howell, all Ashbery's 'acolytes'

sound hopelessly like him. And because they are not prepared to admit this palpable limitation, it is unlikely that their work will stand the test of time. A philosophical perception, like some mathematical formula, may *prove* true forever; but in poetry it only *sounds* true when first stated - repetition falsifies it by turning its expression into cliché.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> John Gery, 'The Anxiety of Affluence: Poets After Ashbery', Verse vol.8, no.1 ( Spring 1991) p.28.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp.29,28.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>17</sup> Susan M. Schultz, 'John Ashbery's Influence on Contemporary Poetry: Introduction', Verse 8:1, p..3.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Howell, 'Ashbery in Perspective', PN Review 99, p.56.

Peter Porter suggests that a number of poets might make the confession, “I first read John Ashbery in 1980, since when I have written none other”<sup>19</sup>. Which is more or less the substance of John Koethe’s discussion of what he calls Ashbery’s ‘diffuse’ influence. For Koethe, Ashbery’s poetry has been largely responsible for ‘remodelling ... the “generic” poem of the age’ - the poem, that is, which ‘the literary culture regards as stereotypical, and that young poets ... try ... to emulate’.<sup>20</sup> If there has been little enough agreement as to what makes Ashbery’s poetry valuable, there would seem to be still less consensus on the question of his influence: Gery and Schultz suggesting that Ashbery’s followers all sound different from one another (though not necessarily from him), and Howell, Porter and Koethe, claiming that they all sound the same.

Not surprisingly a discussion of Ashbery’s influence reproduces problems and dilemmas which attach to other aspects of his project. Thus, just as the absence of a homogeneous readership might be traced to the poetry’s refusal to practice techniques of selection, so the problem of his influence can be said to be internal to his poetic. John Pilling goes some way to making this case when he suggests that it would once have seemed most unlikely that Ashbery et al. would have achieved any kind of sway.

Discussing the group practices of the New York School, he judges that,

In the face of a manifest gregariousness which in no way impugned each poet’s individualism - and with virtually every kind of eccentricity welcomed with open arms - there was never likely to be widespread emulation or rather: any influence upon others, whether benign or malign, could always be offset by some other “otherness” co-existing with a momentarily dominant line of descent.<sup>21</sup>

The way Pilling describes it, the New York School poetic was in effect designed to stymie emulation, as if influence were in and of itself undesirable. Nor does this seem an

<sup>19</sup> Peter Porter, ‘The Messiness of Life’, *PN Review* 99, p.77.

<sup>20</sup> John Koethe, ‘The Absence of a Noble Presence’, *Verse* 8:1, pp. 23, 24.

<sup>21</sup> John Pilling, ‘Secret Sorcery: Early Ashbery’, *PN Review* 99, p.38.

unreasonable suggestion, if one considers the way influence has been used in twentieth century poetry. Yeats is perhaps the prime case of an influential twentieth century poet. His poetry makes a virtue of forms of control, and so it is quite consistent that he should seek to influence. Making no bones about the matter, the third part of 'The Tower' opens,

It is time that I wrote my will;  
I choose upstanding men  
That climb the streams until  
The fountain leap, and at dawn  
Drop their cast at the side  
Of dripping stone; I declare  
They shall inherit my pride....<sup>22</sup>

Yeats presents a most forceful poetic self, choosing, climbing, declaring; and most of all controlling its inheritance. And it is easy to see how such control becomes influence. Young poets looking to poetry to master the world's contingencies will find declarations of this sort very seductive indeed, and will want to write likewise. Accordingly Yeats' influence on postwar poetry is clearly delineated: Lowell, Berryman, and a younger American poet like Dave Smith, guaranteeing his inheritance by their continued interest in a poetics of control.

Ashbery differs on every count. His is clearly not a poetry of control, and as he indicates in 'The Songs We Know Best', he is suspicious of seduction:

Someday I'll look you up when we're both old and gray  
And talk about those times we had so far away  
How much it mattered then and how it matters still  
Only things look so different when you've got a will

It's true that out of this misunderstanding could end  
And men would greet each other like they'd found a friend  
With lots of friends around there's no one to entice  
And don't you think seduction isn't very nice?  
(W,4)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Yeats, p.222

In its own way 'The Songs We Know Best' is a fine poem. Opening with an image of 'a breeze that's pointed from beyond the tomb', it is clear that, like 'The Tower', it is a poem about posterity.<sup>24</sup> But unlike Yeats, Ashbery seems to have no readily available language in which to tackle the issue. Consider how foreign the word 'will' (the term by which an individual projects into the future) looks in an Ashbery poem. Ashbery has never been a wilful poet, but now he has to concede that he has discovered a will: a will, at least, to survive. Things look different as a consequence. However, as the poem makes clear, the way he has always done things still matters. Thus, just as he has never sought to exercise control, he states his reluctance now to start practising techniques of poetic seduction.

This refusal to seduce is an ethical position, the focus of which is the term 'friend'. The poet, it is apparent, places great store by friendship. He likes to think, in a general sense, that that is how people will come to greet each other, and so, holding to this line, he treats those who surround him - many of whom increasingly are young poets - not as epigones, or even ephebes, but as friends. And, as a rule, you don't seduce your friends. Which is to say that friendship is not a controlling relationship, but rather, if it is to work at all, a meeting of equals. Moreover, to prove that he really doesn't approve of seduction, Ashbery here produces some of the most unsexy poetry he has ever written, his stumbling rhythms and banal rhyming only likely to attract those who get off on the geeky.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Monroe also takes this poem to be paradigmatically Postmodern, comparing its use of cliché to Eliot's. See, 'Idiom and Cliché in T.S. Eliot and John Ashbery,' *Contemporary Literature* vol.31, no.1 (1989), pp.17-36.

<sup>24</sup> 'About', because this is one of Ashbery's more recuperable poems.

<sup>25</sup> Of course it could be argued that by his geeky pose Ashbery is just playing hard to get, which in itself can be a most seductive gesture. Still though, it is not likely to attract those male archetypes, 'the upstanding men', to whom Yeats makes his appeal.

Pilling, it seems, is right to indicate that the New York School poetic set out to stymie emulation. The exercise of poetic control implicit in influence runs counter to the open, egalitarian spirit in which Ashbery and friends approached poetry; an approach in part forged (as was discussed in Chapter Two) in reaction to the controlling poetry of Lowell and the middle generation. Pilling is probably also close to the truth when he suggests that, the strategy for achieving such an uninfluential poetry was to open the poetry to such a wide range of materials and inspirations that no single tone or style could easily be taken to represent the New Yorkers. Egalitarianism, however, can carry a high cost, which Ashbery weighs, in 'The Songs We Know Best', in the line 'It's true that out of this misunderstanding could end'. The line is ambiguous. On the one hand the poet clearly entertains the possibility (the hope) that a poetics of friendship might help to bring about an end to misunderstanding. On the other, he is aware that misunderstanding could all too easily result from a poetry which refuses to exercise influence.

Misunderstanding, it would seem, has resulted. The 'eccentricities' Pilling claims were allowed into the poetry to prevent influence, have become, as far as Gery is concerned at least, the very stuff of Ashbery's influence. They are the 'idiosyncrasies' which have created 'a menagerie or zoo of post-Ashberians'. This should not be cause for unambiguous celebration. While the Yeats-Lowell line of descent is strong and clear, one way or another Ashbery's influence seems in danger of diminishing his achievement and weakening his poetic position. Thus, on the one hand, if all his followers sound the same as him, then quite against the spirit of the poetry Ashbery's influence generates orthodoxy. Moreover, as Howell argues, the poetic perceptions which seem true in the first place will come to sound 'clichéd', with the result that (and as has perhaps already begun to happen) Ashbery's poetry becomes tarnished by the failure of its imitations. If,

on the other hand, all his followers sound different from him - as different say as Bernstein and Berrigan - his presence is diffused, and, if one might say so, defused. Which takes us back to Gery's suggestion that Ashbery's influence marks the Postmodern power of his poetry. I would argue the contrary, that when we come to the question of Postmodern poetry and influence, what we arrive at is a built-in weakness. In other words, the egalitarian character of Ashbery's poetic makes it difficult for him to pass the poetic on. But it does have to be passed on, the difficulty has to be overcome. Like the poet says at the end of 'And Forgetting':

I'm sure they'll think we're ready now.  
 We aren't, you know. An icebox grew there once.  
 Hand me the chatter and I'll fill the plate with cookies,  
 for they can, they must, be passed.  
 (HL,5)

### **Figures of Influence**

For poets of Ashbery's generation there is no getting away from the problem of influence. Asked by his Paris Review interviewer whether there were 'older living poets whom you visited, learned from, or studied with as a young writer', Ashbery makes it clear that such contact is a quite recent phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> 'Things,' he notes,

were different then - young poets simply didn't send their poems to older ones with requests for advice and criticism and "suggestions for publication" ... Everyone is bolder now. This leads to a sad situation (and I've often discussed this with poets of my generation like Kinnell and Merwin) of having a tremendous pile of unanswered correspondence about poetry - Kinnell calls it his "guilt pile" - from poets who want help and should receive it.... I feel sad because I would like to help ... People think they've gotten to know you through your poetry and can address you familiarly (I get lots of "Dear John" letters from strangers) and that in itself is a tremendous reward, a satisfaction - if only we could attend to everybody!<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Stitt, p.393.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.394.

Ashbery shows how relations have changed between the young poet and his or her seniors. Following in part, no doubt, from the presence of poets on creative writing programs, the young poet feels that the established poet is accessible. From which it would follow that, as established poets increasingly find themselves called on to advise and criticise, so the question of influence gains a new focus. Thus, while major poets have always felt compelled, eventually, to address the question of their legacy, Ashbery's pile of 'unanswered correspondence' from young poets brings the issue home to him with particular force.<sup>28</sup> It should be clear that he is not unambiguously comfortable with this intrusion. On the one hand, he formulates the sentiments we encountered in 'The Songs We Know Best'. He clearly is regarded as a kind of friend by his correspondents, many of whom are young poets. He feels this to be a considerable reward for his effort, and he expresses the desire to communicate with 'everybody' on such familiar terms. This friendliness is the dominant note in his reply. But there is, perhaps, something presumptuous about the young poet soliciting advice from a senior, as Ashbery quietly indicates. 'Everyone,' he notes, 'is bolder now', and the repeated request for "“suggestions for publication”" has stuck in his mind. Like other concerns which enter physically into his writing environment, the issue of influence becomes the subject of careful, and troubled, poetic scrutiny. This scrutiny begins in A Wave.

A Wave is characterised throughout by a concern with what might come after.<sup>29</sup>

This is apparent at the surface of the poetry by an attention to after-effects of all kinds,

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<sup>28</sup> The 'guilt-pile' perhaps has a bearing on James Breslin's suggestion (made in 1984) that, 'Our contemporary poets are being preserved - perhaps to a degree unprecedented by any earlier generation - and they have also reached the point in their careers when they are expressing anxiety about *how* they will be preserved'; James Breslin, From Modern to Contemporary, p.251.

<sup>29</sup> For interesting discussions of A Wave, see S.P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe, 'John Ashbery and the Articulation of the Social', diacritics 17, no.2 (Summer 1987), pp.37-63; Shoptaw, pp.260-285; and Ward pp.165-171; and Christopher Middleton, 'Review of A Wave,' in New York Times Book Review, 17 June 1984, reprinted in PN Review 99 pp.41-2. All offer strong discussions of the title poem. I concentrate on the collection's shorter poems, which have received less attention.

however trivial. The pantoum 'Variation On A Noel' turns on the suggestion that, 'Our Emancipation should be great and steady/ As crossword puzzles done in this room, this after-effect'(W,45). 'Destiny Waltz' opens with the optimistic, if banal, assertion that, 'Everyone has some work to be done/ And after that they may have some fun' (W,60). 'After', in fact, becomes one of the volume's keywords, the poet mentioning it over and over, as if by doing so he might diminish its implications. 'Thank You For Not Cooperating' takes a more direct approach to the central concern, wondering 'how shall we, people/ All unused to each other and to our own business, explain/ It to the shore if it is given to us/ To circulate there "in the near future" ...?' (W,12). In 'Haibun' the poet turns his thoughts to 'homosexuals not yet born' hoping that they will 'get to inquire about it, inspect the whole random collection as though it were a sphere' (W,39). And invariably such anxious glances towards the future come to focus on the afterlife of the poetry. The opening of 'Around The Rough And Rugged Rocks The Ragged Rascal Rudely Ran' is explicit:

I think a lot about it  
 Think quite a lot about it -  
 The omnipresent possibility of being interrupted  
 While what I stand for is still almost a bare canvas:  
 A few trceries that may be fibres, perhaps  
 Not even these but shadows, hallucinations....  
 (W, 15)

Ashbery, that is, is preoccupied with the thought that what he stands for 'is still almost a bare canvas'. The substance of his inheritance is unclear, a 'few trceries that may be fibres, perhaps'. Were he to die now, he feels, his poetry would be most unlikely to survive his passing. One way he affects to ensure against this eventuality is apparent in the title, the alliteration making use of features of the language which will outlast him (might make his poem rugged). But the title is faintly ridiculous. Ashbery has no

confidence that such linguistic effects will ensure the after-life of his poetry. His followers, however, might, and so a number of poems in 'A Wave' attend to their increasing presence.

In part, as he suggested to Stitt, Ashbery attends to his followers because he cannot get away from them. Hence Mania's entrance in 'Description of a Masque'. Mania, a lady of impressive bearing and unquestionable authority, emerges from her grotto to chastise 'the corps de ballet of hobos' hanging around outside:

"you who oppress even my dreams, where a perverse order should rein but where I find instead traces of the lunacy that besets my waking hours, are accomplices in all this, comical and ineffectual though you pretend to be...."  
(W,22)

Oppressive, intrusive, and seemingly complicit in some crime against Mania, these hobos are later named as 'followers'. Making her an offer she can't refuse, 'Stranger' tells 'Mania':

Come with me, and I will take you into the presence of one at whose court beauty and irrationality reign alternately, and never tread on each other's toes as do your unsightly followers [more whispering and gesturing among the hobos], where your own pronounced contours may flourish and be judged for what they are worth ... (W, 23)

Followers can clearly be troublesome, both getting in each others way and, worse still, obscuring the image of the central figure.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere in the collection the poet takes a more charitable view, and in general in A Wave 'followers' do not appear the unambiguously difficult creatures 'Mania' suggests. That said, there is always a certain tension in the air when followers are around. Witness the duet in 'Thank You For Not Cooperating':

Two lovers are singing  
Separately, from the same rooftop: "*Leave your change behind,*  
Leave your clothes, and go. It is time now.

<sup>30</sup> Still, though, they are less troublesome than 'the three insane interviewers/ Each with his astrolabe and question,' who turn up in 'Edition Peters, Leipzig' (W, 36).

It was time before too, but now it is really time.  
 You will never have enjoyed storms so much  
 As on these hot sticky evenings that are more like August  
 Than September. Stay. A fake wind wills you to go  
 And out there on the stormy river witness buses bound for Connecticut,  
 And tree-business, and all that we think about when we stop thinking.  
 The weather is perfect, the season unclear. Weep for your going  
 But also expect to meet me in the near future, when I shall disclose  
 New further adventures, and that you shall continue to think of me.”  
 (W,12)

The two singers clearly have much in common. They have chosen to view the street below from the same vantage point, and, as the poem says, they are in some sense lovers. But they are not in harmony. Indeed, the duet seems to be something of a battle. It is clear from the tone, and the italics of the opening statement, that the first voice is asserting its identity. One discerns the impatience of a confident ephebe convinced that his mentor has had his day, and should now shuffle off, although not without leaving his innovations (his '*change*'). This, however, is the mentor's poem, and so the ephebe's voice soon ceases to be quite so distinct. The 'you' of the third sentence begins to sound reflexive, and the sentiment has changed. 'You' is no longer being urged to leave, but is rather now telling himself that actually it is worth sticking around, and that indeed it is not as late as it had seemed: 'more like August/ Than September'. Having thus recovered himself, the mentor sings the next two sentences with all his former confidence. There is no getting away from it, however, the ephebe is here to stay, and so the final sentence is shaped by both voices: the ephebe weeping, partly disingenuously perhaps, for the going of the mentor, and the mentor insisting that he has more to 'disclose', and that he will thus continue to be present in people's thoughts.

'Thank You For Not Cooperating' is unquestionably more accommodating of the follower figure than 'Description Of A Masque'. Ashbery is beginning to find a way of incorporating the presence of those who claim to come after him, which is to say that he

is beginning to find a poetic form for influence. But as Harold Bloom has told us (although not with the perspective of the mentor in mind) finding a form for influence is not an easy task.<sup>31</sup> Neither mentor nor epigone quite knows what they want from the relationship. Each is grateful for the other's presence, but each wants, in their own way to assert their independence. Thus Ashbery's duet can never quite come right, characterised as it inevitably is by the uneasy play of similarity and difference. Accordingly, the second paragraph of the poem shows the ephebe to be unsought, welcomed, resisted and endured, in equal measure. The poem insists that 'we' 'never tried to impress anybody', but hopes in the same breath, 'To circulate there "in the near future"' (W,12). Ashbery, it would seem, is as confused on the issue of his influence as are his commentators.

One way of giving form to influence is to allow the ephebe a poem of his own. Ashbery does this, I suggest, with 'Staffage', the poet receiving a memo, from a self-appointed poetic delegate:

Sir, I am one of a new breed  
Of inquisitive pest in love with the idea  
Of our integrity ...  
(W, 47)

We know about such letters. Kinnel calls them his "guilt pile". In this one, the correspondent is predictably uncertain as to what he wants from his senior:

we sit and compete  
With you, on your own time.  
We want only to be recognized for what we are ...  
(W,47)

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<sup>31</sup> Almost all of Bloom's criticism is concerned with influence, of course. His thinking is probably best represented in The Anxiety of Influence where he first expounded his ideas, and Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism.

As Ashbery presents it, the ephebes, like ‘lovers ... singing/ Separately, from the same rooftop’, both compete with their mentor on and for his own ground, and want to be recognized in their own right. This is a difficult bargain to strike, made only more complex by the fact that Ashbery, too, is uncertain of his position. His own voice mingling with his correspondent’s, the poet writes, ‘I’m still too young/ To be overlooked, yet not old enough to qualify/ For full attention’ (W,47). Pesky as they are, Ashbery, clearly feels he cannot ignore young poets, feeling, as he said in his interview, that they do deserve help. And ultimately, here, Ashbery is highly respectful of the young poet, allowing him that measure of independence that makes him an equal. The letter closes,

Half of me I give  
 To do with as you wish - scold, ignore, forget for awhile.  
 The other half I keep, and shall feel  
 Fully rewarded if you pass by this offer  
 Without recognizing it ...  
 (W,47)

This is sympathetic writing. Ashbery acknowledges that when the ephebe writes to his elder, he only half hopes for guidance. He is equally hopeful that the elder poet will not feel able to guide him, that he will not be recognized as a follower.<sup>32</sup> Thus, he will have achieved some measure of poetic independence, which is its own reward, and which is the only real grounds for friendship, poetic or otherwise. That Ashbery allows the ephebe this measure of dignity is indicative of his sense of right poetic influence. Auden did not recognise his influence on Some Trees, a misrecognition Ashbery was not unhappy about, believing as he does that, ‘The more you like a poet, the less you ought to write

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<sup>32</sup> Thus, John Ash told David Kennedy, ‘I owe John alot but on the other hand by the time I got to John I’d already been reading alot of the poets he was influenced by ...’, David Kennedy, ‘John Ash talking with David Kennedy’, Verse vol.11.no.1, p.41.



Ashbery's anxieties for the future of his poetry are given supple expression here. He would like to write words as lasting as the marriage vows. But, to be a writer like him, to be always addressing the central question (whatever that happens to be at the time) means that the poem is unlikely to last for all time, only 'for all this time'; expiring as soon as the time of the question has passed. If, however, younger poets heed his advice, if they can be encouraged also to write for 'this time', to write for the occasion, then just possibly his example will continue to be important.

Reviewing Flow Chart Andrew Lawson detected a poet in crisis:

This sense of crisis (and Flow Chart is in every sense a "crisis poem") results in a more urgent, didactic tone ... than Ashbery has been prepared to risk in the past.<sup>34</sup>

There is much to disagree with in Lawson's intelligently hostile review, but his central impression is right, Flow Chart is characterized by a sense of crisis. Written four years after the publication of A Wave, it articulates all the anxieties one finds in the earlier volume, only now they are that much more pressing. One feels this heightened anxiety at every level of the poem. The surface of Ashbery's language is marked by what one might call a desperate punning. In the opening section of the poem, the poet remarks,

How cold the afterthought that takes us out of time  
for a few moments (just as we were beginning to go with the fragile  
penchants mother-love taught us) and transports us to a stepping-stone  
far out at sea.  
(FC,4)

Intensifying an effect he developed in A Wave, Ashbery's 'afterthought' strives both to face up to and play down the prospect of oblivion. The poem is full of such punning, the poet striving to find a language which both articulates his terror and enables him to live

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew Lawson, 'Review of John Ashbery, Flow Chart, and Stephen Roeder, Passing Duration', Fragmente: a magazine of contemporary poetics no.4 (Autumn/ Winter 1991), p.104.

with it. And as was indicated above, such plays on language are themselves desperate strategies for poetic survival, turning, as they do, on features of words which will endure.<sup>35</sup>

One feels the anxiety also in the poem's sense of occasion. From first to last Ashbery's poem is acutely aware of its occasional character. Occasioned, as Shoptaw reports, by the death of his mother, Ashbery finished the poem, as he always projected to, on his 61<sup>st</sup> birthday. And like Three Poems, Flow Chart was occasional in practice, consisting of daily (almost diary-like) entries.<sup>36</sup> But if this is an occasional poem, it is a strange one, running, as it does, to over 200 pages. A poetic monument to an anti-monumental poetic, Flow Chart is an occasional epic - an unlikely, and desperate, genre. This anxiety for his occasional poetic is apparent also in the way Ashbery handles the word. Ashbery really does want us to get the point now, and so one can hardly read five pages of the poem without finding a mention of the term. And often one does not have to wait that long. Thus, on page 25 we are told

Listening is a patented device whose manifold uses have scarcely begun to be explored  
that one should practice on as many occasions as are deemed profitable. Bore your friends,  
wine them, show them a grand time: other, more auspicious occasions are sure to be evoked ....

Only to be reminded on page 26 that we should

accept the occasional invitation  
but also slog on unshod, solitary, except for casual greetings from even more casual acquaintances.

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<sup>35</sup> This never amounts to a Lowellian thickening of language, but, as it tends that way, so one gains a sense of the pressure on Ashbery's poetic.

<sup>36</sup> Shoptaw's account of the poem is extremely valuable on questions of production; Shoptaw, pp.301-341

Nowhere, however, is the poet's anxiety more apparent than in his efforts to imagine a sustainable relationship with his poetic followers.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout the poem, Ashbery addresses the intractable problem of his poetic legacy, by casting himself, or someone who sounds like him, in a variety of influential roles. Speakers are invariably to be found *in loco parentis*, as in the second part of book one:

these, at any rate, are my children, she intoned,  
of whom I divest myself so as to fit into the notch  
of infinity as defined by a long arc of crows returning to the distant  
coppice.  
(FC, 9)<sup>38</sup>

The reader has been prepared for this image by the preceding passage. The narrator has spoken, discouragingly, of interference, and astrological sway, and has designated an area of activity ('a forlorn park' that 'stood before us') out of bounds (FC,9). He is thus clearly thinking hard about the propriety of influence, and more to the point, perhaps, he is inviting the reader to do likewise. The parent figure affords an ambiguous solution of sorts. She is, and is not, the kind of mother who lives through her children. She does not invest in them. Rather she divests herself of them. Yet in doing so hopes that she will live on, the arc of her fledglings as they leave the nest tracing all the way back to her.

Always prominent in Ashbery's poetry, children are central to Flow Chart.<sup>39</sup> Thus, in book three, part one, they are shown to dominate the narrator's life. They give him something to talk about ('Meanwhile I haven't told you what the kids said/ about the

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<sup>37</sup> This, of course, is only one possible route through a vast poem which is only just beginning to be opened up by criticism. For other accounts of the poem see especially, Helen Vendler, 'A Steely Glitter Chasing Shadows', New Yorker, 3 August, 1992, pp.73-76; Shoptaw, pp.301-341; Keith Silver, 'Flow Chart', PN Review 99, pp.42-3; and Fred Moramarco, 'Coming Full Circle: John Ashbery's Later Poetry', in Schultz (ed.), pp.38-59.

<sup>38</sup> For ease of reference, I call the six, large numbered sections of the poem books, and the subsections (divided by the double 's' symbol) parts.

<sup>39</sup> In Some Trees, for instance, children figure significantly in: 'A Boy', 'The Picture of Little J.A.', 'Grand Abacus', 'The Mythological Poet', 'The Young Son', and 'The Pied Piper'.

airplane'), and worry about, ('The bigger children had fits'), and generally he finds them a sustaining presence,

There was a bad day too at school, but you see this  
no longer concerns me, I am kind of semi-retired now, and don't wish to go  
pushing people  
or putting on airs. Some of the young people came to stay. It was lovely, then.  
(FC,92-3)

A teacher rather than a parent here, the speaker is still determined not to interfere too closely in the lives of his charges. He is delighted when young people visit and stay of their own accord, such gestures (so the pun would indicate) serving to sustain him through his 'semi-retirement'. He will not, however, push them to do so.

Richard Francis has admired the self-restraint of Ashbery's late poetry, noting how in the title poem of And The Stars Were Shining,

'the 'you' - friend, lover, reader perhaps - is released, is allowed to become autonomous, is acknowledged as an 'other', 'diffident, indifferent', *in* the world.<sup>40</sup>

Not everyone finds Ashbery quite so diffident. Discussing Flow Chart, Keith Silver suggests that 'Ashbery behaves here like a sort of inverted bully'.<sup>41</sup> Silver argues that Ashbery, like Whitman, is an imperialist, the difference being that Whitman's imperialism is honest, because

while Whitman wished to become empowered or exalted through absorbing the world, Ashbery's imperialism operates in reverse, investing everything with its own insignificance.<sup>42</sup>

This is rather wilful criticism, but it is not without foundations in the poem. Certainly many of Ashbery's influential figures have a tendency to dominate. Thus, when,

The last recognizable mentor left; it was up to the remains of his flock to  
reconstitute  
but left to their own devices many fled the comparative safety of the coop for

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Francis, 'Weather and Turtles in John Ashbery's Recent Poetry', PN Review 99, p.47.

<sup>41</sup> Silver, p.43.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

used-

car lots, car washes, drive-in banks, in order so to speak to get their heads  
together.

I was the only one of my squadron to count them as they left in single file ....  
(FC,59)

Here again, images of similarity and difference play uneasily against one another, with the poet finding it difficult to adjudicate. 'Left to their own devices' the members of the 'flock' do not huddle together, but stray and disperse, finding 'car lots, car-washes, drive-in banks'. They seem momentarily to achieve some kind of unity of purpose, because, as the speaker notes, they aim 'so to speak to get their heads together'.

Actually though, the new age idiom (made suspect by the laboured caveat) signifies an absence of community, indicating instead the fragmentation that comes of self-indulgent soul-searching. The problem for the open poetic, however, is that it has no consistent means of preventing such fragmentation, and so in an effort to counter the slackness of the new age idiom, the poet resorts to an alien image of totalitarian discipline - the squadron departing in single file.

This bludgeoning, unattractive military idiom is followed by a still more forceful expression of influence over the page, the poet observing

all the kids, and people who came over: now salted  
in their time, and we try to break out of ours, I guess and still the animals  
stampede toward  
headquarters.  
(FC,60)

It is the sense of convergence that is important here, because if one dominant movement in Flow Chart traces the departure of birds from the nest, equally and oppositely forceful are a series of images which locate the poet at some kind of gravitational centre, commanding all the influence such a position implies. In book four, part four, the poet announces,

I see I am as ever

a terminus of sorts, that is, lots of people arrive in me and switch directions  
but no  
one moves on any farther  
(FC,127)

Ashbery's favoured metaphor for this centrality is imperial. We catch a glimpse of the poet at court in the peroration which closes book four: 'Well I see I've/ not overstayed my welcome, that on the contrary quite a few people are waiting/ in the anteroom to shake my hand' (FC,102). But this is not a role he is ever comfortable with, and so having held court he notes, hesitatingly, that, 'with this reassurance, nothing ever/ quite seems/ complete again' (FC,102). The poet is similarly awkwardly imperious in 'Weather and Turtles', the long middle stanza of which, Francis takes to show 'a Spielberg of the poetic art, or an old master, perhaps, directing his apprentices'.<sup>43</sup> The poem closes with the observation, 'It's the old dumb-show thing now./ I see, I read, I nap'(ATS,36). These are muffled imperial cadences, the poet having achieved some kind of influence, but by his activity implying that he never sought it.<sup>44</sup>

Nor is empire the most forceful expression of influence in Flow Chart, the poet sometimes seeming to strain to effect his own apotheosis. As early as book one, part one, Ashbery figures himself as some kind of divine: 'it's just possible that the god's claims/ fly out the windows as soon as they are opened ... Yet I am always the first to know/ how he feels'(FC,6). While in book two, part three, he seems actually to identify himself with God:

My child,  
you must do as you wish; to do otherwise would insult God's rule, and you do  
care for Him, don't you? Only give no thought to the morrow -

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<sup>43</sup> Francis, p.46.

<sup>44</sup> One could pursue this comparison of poetic influence and empire to ask such influence as Ashbery has over British poetry is an effect of American political dominance. Donald Davie conceived the relation of the two poetries in just such terms in Thomas Hardy and British Poetry. 'What is it,' he asked, 'but a reflection of the changed relationship of the English-speaking partners in other fields - in politics, economics?'; Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1973), p184.

it will presently arrive and take care of itself, you'll see. Meanwhile, if a new hat might seem appropriate, then why not?  
(FC,61)

Which leads one to wonder whether in some sly, or not so sly way, Ashbery, like Yeats, actually plays God in his late poetry. The answer is not, as one might expect, entirely clear cut. There are moments in Flow Chart when Ashbery does seem to pass discrete judgement on the ways his followers are developing what they find in his poetry. In book two, part two, for instance, the poet observes

I told you his name was Max you were the one who thought otherwise and well  
it's just as well as the gunwale unkisses faster the tires nailed to the dock  
of departure and all our plans and ammo were scuttled, at the threshold  
of this adamantite resort where two  
can lie but no more, reprisals splash into the night. It must surely have come  
from over there, those dried grasses.  
(FC,57-8)

The syntax of 'gunwale unkisses faster the tires nailed to the dock' generates a rebarbative surface reminiscent of LANGUAGE writing, and 'our plans and ammo' refer the reader back to the prevailing imagery of The Tennis Court Oath and Rivers and Mountains, to which volumes LANGUAGE poetry has acknowledged its debt. And if LANGUAGE poetry is being alluded to here, then it does not seem to meet with the poet's approval, being obliquely characterised as private, aggressive and arid.

Much more often than not in Flow Chart, Ashbery's self-restraint is beyond reproach. In the penultimate part of book two, a visiting ephebe asks the poet for advice:

"How would it be if I said it this way,  
or would so-and-so's way be better, easy on the adjectives?" And if I told you  
this was your life, not some short story for a contest, how would you react?  
Chances are you'd tell me to buzz off and continue writing ...  
(FC,81)

The poet explicitly declines the opportunity to shape another's poem. It is, as he realises, a risky gesture. The ephebe is likely to be offended by the senior poet's reluctance to

guide him, and is likely, as a result, to take his allegiance elsewhere - to a more wilful poet, perhaps. But Ashbery's occasional poetic dictates that he cannot do otherwise. It is principled self-restraint carried to the verge of self-defeat.

### **The Ongoing Story**

Oscillating between imperialism and non-intervention, Ashbery is clearly uncertain on the question of influence. Does this mean that, unlike the poetry of the Yeatsian tradition, Ashbery's has no way of passing itself on, contains no language in which to transact its legacy? Are we obliged to conclude with Gery, that there is 'no *wrong* way to write a poem after the "affluence" of Ashbery'?<sup>45</sup> It seems to me that this conclusion is overhasty, and that Ashbery's influence can be conceived in a way which is true to both its occasional and its democratic impulses. There are two ways one might think of Ashbery's influence through the term occasion. First, one could suggest that Ashbery has become an occasion for younger poets. Michael Schmidt seems to have this in mind when he suggests that there are writers who take 'fruitful indirection from Ashbery'. The second way to think about Ashbery's influence in these terms is to suggest that what his poetry passes on, to those younger poets who read it most attentively, is precisely its sense of occasion. Two personal accounts of Ashbery's influence, by Peter Robinson and Donald Revell, seem to confirm this.

Opening his contribution to the PN Review special issue on Ashbery's work, Robinson refers to Ashbery's review of a de Chirico retrospective. In the review Ashbery recalls glancing out of the window of the New York gallery on to the street below, where he finds just the sort of 'subtle dislocations of everyday life that are at the heart of

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<sup>45</sup> Gery, p.28.

de Chirico's art'.<sup>46</sup> Robinson thinks this glance is significant, describing it as, 'an arbitrary confrontation, an occasion when meaning starts to stir'.<sup>47</sup> This use of the word 'occasion' is itself by no means arbitrary. It is key to Robinson's account of Ashbery, and, more interestingly here, it underwrites his sense of the debt he owes Ashbery. Remarking on Ashbery's commitment to poetic uniqueness, Robinson concludes:

And what is this uniqueness for? To send us back towards the 'exquisite and terrible scene' where, sometimes, 'there are ice-cream parlours to go to/ And the pavement is a nice, bluish slate-gray', where 'People laugh a lot' and, grateful to John Ashbery for his gift, it would be good to reply in the words of that poem's title, 'Thank You for Not Co-operating'(sic).<sup>48</sup>

Donald Revell's account of Ashbery's influence on his poetry works along similar lines. Like Robinson, he is careful to draw attention to the occasional character of Ashbery's poetry, remarking how,

when I remember my first reading of almost any Ashbery piece, I remember my own situation at the time intermingled with the figures and gestures of the poem.<sup>49</sup>

And as with Robinson, it is this occasional observation which underpins Revell's account of Ashbery's influence. What Ashbery (who 'is the most enabling poet that I know') has taught Revell is that

I *must* waste words, lots of them, trying them against and upon one another ... in order to find not the true ones, but the ones that seem true at the time ....<sup>50</sup>

Whatever the comparison with Yeats suggested, and for all his own anxieties on the subject, it would seem from these accounts that Ashbery's poetry does contain a language by which to transact its legacy. Where Yeats sought to impose his will on the future, Ashbery offers a gift to future poets; that gift being the sense of occasion. At his

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<sup>46</sup> Cited in Peter Robinson, 'As My Way Is: John Ashbery's Gift', *PN Review* 99, p.49.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.50

<sup>49</sup> Donald Revell, 'Purists Will Object: Some Meditations on Influence', *Verse* 8.1, p17.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.20.

most optimistic moments Ashbery thinks of his influence in this way, as for instance, at the end of 'Introduction', where he encourages younger poets to write 'for better or for worse, for all this time' (W, 34). In the final section of this chapter I want to explore the influence Ashbery has had on John Ash, Peter Didsbury and Denise Riley, and in so doing to consider how, in practice, some poets make use of Ashbery's sense of occasion.

The relation of John Ash's poetry to Ashbery's is problematic.<sup>51</sup> It was argued above that Ash's interview with Ashbery presented the latter's poetic with such craft that it could be said to be one of Ashbery's most successful collaborations. The fact that Ash could conduct such an interview indicates his familiarity with Ashbery. This might seem to be a good thing. He clearly understands Ashbery's poetry, and so would seem to be in a strong position to judge how to handle its influence. But while one plainly cannot learn from Ashbery's writing unless one gets close to it, 'familiarity' goes significantly against the grain of his poetry. Ashbery's poetry, unlike O'Hara's, is not primarily for those already familiar with the poet, its characteristically inclusive address being to the stranger.<sup>52</sup> Familiarity with Ashbery must thus be carefully handled if the follower's poetry is not to offend against the spirit of the original. So while he was in a good position to interview him, Ash, Ashbery's Chelsea neighbour since 1984, is not perhaps best placed to develop his influence.

Ash was productively unhappy in England. His low regard for the 'Martians' (whom he satirises effectively in 'Easy Journeys to Other Planets') forced him to read beyond the English mainstream.<sup>53</sup> The result was a restive, bohemian tone designed to

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<sup>51</sup> For other discussions of Ashbery's influence on Ash see, Gregson, 'Epigraphs for Epigones', pp.89-94; and Gery, 'Ashbery's Menagerie and the anxiety of affluence', in Schultz (ed.), pp.136-138.

<sup>52</sup> As Ashbery indicates in his interview with Stitt, he feels particularly rewarded when, through his poetry, he establishes friendly relations with strangers.

<sup>53</sup> John Ash, *The Branching Stairs*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1984), p.128.

offset the dominant parochialism. Equally, however, Ash's English poetry has a strong sense of place. 'The Didsbury Elegies' are impressive civic poems, Ash using a careful reading of Roy Fisher to negotiate his native Manchester.<sup>54</sup> Ashbery was a significant early influence. It is his cadences we hear echoed most frequently, and Ash's capacity to incorporate other poetic voices is itself learned from Ashbery.<sup>55</sup> The occasions, however, were Ash's own, and so his poetry stood at a safe distance from the mentor's.

On his arrival in New York Ash quickly became intoxicated by his proximity to the New York School. Talking with Andrew McAllister he recalls,

the first night I ever had here I went straight from the airport to a fabulous party at the French consulate on Fifth Avenue, and I thought Hey I like this. It was a party given for a group of visiting French poets and John Ashbery had been reading with them at the Museum of Modern Art that evening and I was to be staying with him so I joined him there. At the same party I met Kenneth Koch and Harry  
Mañhews...<sup>56</sup>

This same sense of intoxication is apparent in the poetry. 'In Rainy Country', the first poem of The Burnt Pages, the poet again recalls being whisked off by the New York literatti:

You had crossed the ocean. Now  
you stepped from the avenue into the rotunda  
and smiled toward the statue of a woman. Wine was poured  
at the top of the curving stairs and the mirrors  
were filled with the faces of those who justified  
all your waiting, messengers from another life.<sup>57</sup>

A marginalised figure on the English poetry scene, Ash is suddenly near, if not at, the centre of things, and feeling vindicated by this proximity (it 'justified/ all your waiting'), he proceeded to proclaim it in his first New York collection Disbelief. The point is made

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.26.

<sup>55</sup> See, 'Glowing Embers', 'Three Musicians', 'Four Poems', 'Street Musicians', and 'A Letter from the Dwarf'.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew McAllister, 'John Ash: An Interview with Andrew McAllister', Bete Noire 8/9, (Autumn-Spring 90), p.9.

<sup>57</sup> John Ash, The Burnt Pages, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p.3.

in the dedications, Ash dedicating poems to, among others, David Kermani (Ashbery's partner), Douglas Crase (New York poet, and friend of Ashbery), Eugene Richie (Ashbery's amanuensis), and Harry Mathews (co-editor of Locus Solus). This is a rather dubious display of intimacy. To those who do not know these names, the sense is of being excluded from some coterie. And to those who do, such names act as an assertion of strength. How, the poet challenges, can such well connected poetry not be good?

There is no doubting that Ash had become extremely close to Ashbery. This proximity is made interestingly apparent by the emergence of Ash-like idioms and preoccupations in Ashbery's poetry of the period. It is consistent with Ashbery's sense of his relation to his ephebes that he should borrow from them. If, as he suggests in 'The Songs We Know Best', he wants to think of younger poets not as followers to be impressed, but as friends and equals, then it follows that some kind of poetic reciprocity should operate between them. Ashbery has said of Mark Ford, 'He is somebody whose poetry I read when I am trying to put myself in the mood for writing poetry'.<sup>58</sup> Ford, then, becomes part of Ashbery's poetic occasion, and so it will hardly be surprising if elements of Ford's work start to show up in the poetry. Ash's poetry can be seen, for a while at least, to have helped to spur Ashbery's writing in the same sort of way. This is most apparent in Hotel Lautréamont.

Hotel Lautréamont gathers the short poems Ashbery wrote while at work on Flow Chart. It is not one of Ashbery's most engaging collections, lacking either a prevailing idiom, or a distinctive rhetorical posture. The only consistent concern, in fact, is the poet's sense that his poetry has become barren; this, coupled with a discontented seeking

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<sup>58</sup> Herd, 'Ashbery', p.36.

after new impetus. The opening of 'The Departed Lustre' presents the poet's barren state:

Oh I am oh so  
oh so  
Something is slightly wrong here,  
a summer cold

*but I don't know what they're up to whether they're up to something  
else because*  
(HL, 99)

This is most unlike Ashbery. The abrupt, unimaginative opening communicates an unfamiliar lassitude, a sensation explained by the italicised wail (trailing off into nothingness) of the fifth and sixth lines. All his life a poet of the contemporary, Ashbery suddenly feels that he does not know what people are up to. The effect is devastating, hence the rare note of aggression in the poem's closing lines: 'There is so much to praise,/ to hate,/ one is grateful for the patterns, the obscure, plain faces,/ The capital "T" in "The." (HL, 100). The interest here is in Ashbery's attempts to slough off his lassitude, to get back in touch.

The opening lines of the first poem of the collection indicate one of the ways he means to do this:

Dear ghost, what shelter  
in the noonday crowd? I'm going to write  
an hour, then read  
what someone else has written.  
(HL,3)<sup>59</sup>

That Ash was someone Ashbery read is evident from a series of new developments in the surface of the latter's poetry. A sporadic historical specificity is one such. Ash is much less suspicious of history than Ashbery, and he likes the jarring effect a specific historical reference can have in an otherwise contemporary poem. 'The House Comes to Rest in

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<sup>59</sup> In case we miss this intention, the same four lines are printed on the cover of the Carcanet edition.

its Garden' observes that 'The whole house/ was ordered in 1912 from *Sears and Roebuck...*'<sup>60</sup> This kind of detail rubs off on Ashbery, so for the first time we notice remarks like, 'they too, were conscious of having/ known it, written on the flyleaf of a book presented as a gift// at Christmas 1882' (HL,12) Ash does not make controlled metaphorical use of history like Lowell. But he does enjoy historical investigation and his poetry sometimes has a researched feel to it.<sup>61</sup> This comes through partly in a kind of knowingly arch costume-drama-like accuracy, as in 'The Death of Mozart', but also in a series of prose poems that parody gently the notion and language of research, for instance 'The Lecture', or 'The Banks of the Ohio'. Ashbery takes note of the interest. 'Hotel Lautreamont' opens

Research has shown that ballads were produced by all society  
working as a team. They didn't just happen. There was no guesswork.  
The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it.  
We see the results in works as diverse as "Windsor Forest" and "The Wife of  
Usher's Well".  
(HL,14)<sup>62</sup>

In 'Thank You For Not Cooperating' Ashbery presented the relation of the mentor to the ephebe as a play of similarity and difference. In 'Hotel Lautréamont' we feel that play in practice. The poem's diction recalls Ash, but not straightforwardly so, because hearing talk of research in an Ashbery poem we are reminded that Ash's 'essay' poems owe something to The Double Dream of Spring, with its ironic use of lecturese and sixties academic theory. Ash's poems are not simply derivative, they are a clear development. Here, however, the mentor gets his own back, Ashbery appropriating the research idiom

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<sup>60</sup> John Ash, *Disbelief*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987) p.19.

<sup>61</sup> Ash is to publish a history of Byzantium.

<sup>62</sup> For an excellent account of Ashbery's interest in the ballad form see Stephen Meyer, 'Ashbery: Poet for all Seasons', *Raritan* vol.15, no.2 (Fall 1995), pp.144-161.

by incorporating it into a quite brilliantly extended pantoum. By this virtuoso performance, Ashbery reclaims his idiom, and reasserts his presence.

But Ashbery's relationship to Ash goes beyond stylistic borrowings. Newly arrived, as Ash was, in New York, there are signs in Ashbery's poetry that the British poet helped him see his environment anew. Ash is more 'a poet of place' than Ashbery is, and is much more clearly motivated by 'social deprivation'.<sup>63</sup> His early New York poems carry images of Manhattan's poverty, as in 'Unwilling Suspension':

This is not The Good Place  
and it assuredly is. In the evening  
the sun make it a glory  
and deep in fissures, under fire-escapes,  
are people who go hungry.<sup>64</sup>

We have never encountered this kind of image in Ashbery, but we do begin to in this period. The second stanza of 'Cop and Sweater', for instance, opens with the observation:

Now those homeless hirsutes we call men  
are on our backs, there is no breath out of the kingdom.  
(HL,22)

And in Flow Chart Ashbery writes,

Each year the summer dwindles noticeably, but  
the Reagan  
administration insists we cannot go to heaven without drinking caustic soda on  
the floor  
of Death Valley as long as others pay their rent and have somewhere to go  
without thinking...  
(FC,175-6)<sup>65</sup>

The point here is not that Ashbery has never before noticed New York poverty, but rather that it has never struck him as the kind of concern his poetry could accommodate.

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<sup>63</sup> Gregson, p.53.

<sup>64</sup> Ash, *Disbelief*, p.10.

<sup>65</sup> Shoptaw comments on this image; Shoptaw, p.338.

But Ash writes his kind of poetry, and accommodates 'social deprivation' very effectively. Probably his most notable achievement is to have found a way of incorporating political comment in the provisional frame of Postmodern writing.

It is arguable also that Ash (among others) enabled Ashbery to write differently about homosexuality. Of late his poetry has become more explicitly gay. One reason for this shift is presented in a number of poems in Hotel Lautréamont which show the poet variously energised by contact with a younger gay scene. In 'It Must Be Sophisticated' the poet, looking for inspiration ('And who would help you now?') notes that 'The fashionable present keeps queening it/ over the slightly dishonorable past' (HL,151). The poet is a little resentful here, conceding that gay men of his generation have perhaps been 'slightly dishonorable' in tending to keep quiet about their sexuality, but still wanting to resist the fashionably assertive 'queening'. In 'Musica Reservata', however, the poet is visited by a group of young gay friends, and feels quite liberated as a result:

He and all the others go home.  
The walls of this room are like Mykonos, and sure enough,  
green plumes toss in the breeze outside  
that underscores the stillness of this place  
we never quite have or want. Yet it's wonderful, this  
*being*  
(HL,24)

So wonderful that the poet begins to dream of 'A group of boys ... singing my poetry'.

Ash is perhaps one of those Ashbery has in mind when he speaks of the fashion for 'queening it'. His poetry, as in 'The Wonderful Tangerines', certainly enjoys an archness of tone: "My dear I must tell you/ about the cutlery.../ The concerto was a wild success/ but still the supper was a shambles"<sup>66</sup> But Ash would resist Ashbery's rather defensive term, having a sharper sense of the politics of such labelling. Asked about the

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<sup>66</sup> Disbelief, p.32.

description 'camp' by Andrew McAllister, Ash points out 'that effusions of style are not a homosexual prerogative'.<sup>67</sup> Ash does not deny that effusiveness is one means the gay poet has of asserting his difference, but insists that such effusiveness is primarily an assertion of difference, not of sexuality. Ash widens the implications of the style journalistically reduced to 'camp' (and which Ashbery reduces to 'queening') allowing it signify all kinds of heterodoxy. And Ash's strong sense of the politics of gay descriptions is matched by a clear-headed view of the real politics of gay lives. Consider 'Men, Women and Children' his well-judged protest against public policy on AIDS:

and it seems some quiet, backwoods drama  
of upright pianos and reticent avowals is involved...  
but the spectacle, with all its noise and patent  
absurdity is "in our blood," and as the march continues  
we meet friends and strangers with flashing smiles:  
there is a band and the singing is defiant  
but with a tendency to break up into laughter  
as a wave shatters into diamonds ...<sup>68</sup>

This is, as it says, defiant, but not sentimentally so, and like Ash's images of urban poverty, its force lies in the change of tone, shimmering provisionality momentarily substituted by the directness the occasion demands. Both Hotel Lautréamont and And The Stars Were Shining include comparable poems, which, if they remain more oblique than 'Men, Women and Children', nonetheless offer a discernible gay politics. 'A Hole In Your Sock' is the angriest, and succeeds by the same kind of sustained flatness we hear in Ash:

A man walks at a city  
as though veering off somewhere.  
They extended arms, touch hands.  
This is how it is done, every day.

My phone is tapped.  
I wish to call the police.

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<sup>67</sup> Andrew McAllister, p.16.

<sup>68</sup> Disbelief, p.47.

Not, not obviously, part of the  
 “proceedings,”  
 the message takes control smoothly.<sup>69</sup>  
 (HL, 144)

The claim being made here is that Ash’s poetry enabled Ashbery to articulate his sexuality differently. This claim must be qualified in three significant ways. First, it needs to be clearly stated that Ash was first able to begin to articulate his own difference, sexual and aesthetic, through imitation of the Ashbery style. Second, Ash was not, of course, the only younger gay poet Ashbery was reading, and perhaps learning from at this time. Introducing Gerrit Henry’s collection The Mirrored Clubs of Hell, Ashbery writes admiringly of the way Henry’s poetry deals with, ‘life in New York City and the price its transitory pleasures exact’, with ‘God, and Death, AIDS’.<sup>70</sup> The third qualification concerns AIDS. It might well be argued that, given his strong sense of occasion, Ashbery would have any way come to write a more explicitly gay poetry after the emergence of AIDS. Here, however, as elsewhere, Ashbery’s sense of the occasion, and of what the occasion requires, is significantly collaborative. From the mid-eighties onwards it was indisputable that, for the gay poet writing in New York, AIDS constituted an occasion for poetic thought. However, having for so long kept explicit discussions of sexuality from his poetry, Ashbery was not well-placed to judge what the appropriate poetic response would be. On this occasion he collaborated with his epebes.

As their interview suggested Ash’s relation to Ashbery can reasonably be figured in terms of collaboration, and this tells us something very interesting about Ashbery’s egalitarian approach to those who come after him. Ash is thus in some respects a very significant follower. But if they collaborated, the poetic relationship did not prove equal,

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Strange Things Happen At Night’ is a good instance of a more gentle gay political poem (ATS, 27).

<sup>70</sup> John Ashbery, ‘Introduction’ to The Mirrored Clubs of Hell, Poems by Gerrit Henry, (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1991), pxiii.

for as reviewers have pointed out, and as does not need rehearsing here, Ash's poetry came to sound too like Ashbery.<sup>71</sup> In becoming familiar enough to collaborate, Ash, in Disbelief, at least, lost sight of the difference between variation and imitation. Thus, as James Keery suggests, in a number of poems ('The Other Great Composers', 'Epigraphs for Epigones', and 'October in the Capital'), Ash practically plagiarises Ashbery. In The Burnt Pages (1991) Ash is much more concerned to emphasise the non-Ashberian aspects of his writing, and as he does he begins to recover himself. The resulting autonomy, however, is strained. Writing in Ashbery's back yard, Ash has to travel considerable imaginative distances to distinguish himself. The Burnt Pages tours Yemen, Egypt and Naples, investigates the ancient Byzantine and Visigothic empires, and revisits 'The Rainy Country' the poet left behind. Having become as close as he has to Ashbery, Ash now has to struggle to find his own occasions for poetry.

Peter Didsbury has been careful to keep his own occasions firmly in view. Eschewing literary centres of any kind, he returned to Hull after university, and has lived there ever since. Didsbury's development of Ashbery is not unrelated to this distance from the centre. Reviewing Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror in 1978, Didsbury made the then surprising claim (for a British reader at least) that Ashbery 'tells us clearly enough what his concerns are', to prove which point he quoted the third stanza of 'The One Thing That Can Save America'.<sup>72</sup> As was argued in the previous chapter, 'The One Thing That Can Save America' is among Ashbery's finest attempts to communicate his aesthetic, the poet holding fast to his sense of occasion, but suggesting also that by that sense of occasion he can be taken to be representative. The poem thus works hard to

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<sup>71</sup> See James Keery, 'Ashbery Speaks Without Moving His Lips: The Poetry of John Ash, in The North 8, 1990 (no page numbers given); and Nicholas Everett, 'Laughter and Tears', The Times Literary Supplement, 7 February, 1992, p.27.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Didsbury, 'Review of John Ashbery Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', in Poetry Review vol.68, no.1 (April 1978) pp.62-7.

transfer the occasional aesthetic, and so not surprisingly it has proved important to poets trying to transact Ashbery's legacy. Ash spliced it into his interview with Ashbery; Sujata Bhatt cites it in 'Skinnydipping in History' (her poem 'for John Ashbery'); and Denise Riley calls subtly on its cadences in 'Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else'.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps because he understood this poem's message so clearly, Didsbury has kept his distance from Ashbery ever since, discussing him in neither interviews, nor critical prose. The result of this strategy is that Ashbery's impact on Didsbury's poetry has been all the more telling.

This is nowhere more apparent than in That Old-Time Religion. Here, as before, there is no question that Ashbery has had an influence. In 'The Cartoon Version' the 'fertile *ennui*' of the County Council archaeologist clearly recalls the bored employee productively dreaming of Guadalajara in 'The Instruction Manual'.<sup>74</sup> 'Letter to an Editor', a poetic reply to a request for a poem, is Ashberian in its manner of drawing the institutional framework of the poem into the poem itself.<sup>75</sup> 'The Devil on Holiday', brilliantly combines a parody of Milton's cosmic geometry with a disjunctive sense of humour learned from 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood'.<sup>76</sup> The real indication of Ashbery's importance to Didsbury, however, is to be found in the way the latter takes words to relate to events. This relation is made most evident in Didsbury's suitably bizarre *ars poetica*, 'The Coffin Factory'. The poem opens:

I work next door to a coffin factory.  
 Offcuts of veneer get blown from its yard  
 by playful zephyrs, then proceed to slither around  
 in the gutters and dusty grass  
 of our semi-industrial suburb.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> See Sujatta Bhatt, PN Review 99, p.76; Denise Riley, Mop Mop Georgette (Cambridge: Reality Street Editions, 1993), pp.27-9.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Didsbury, That Old-Time Religion, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 1994) p.32.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p.29.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p.35.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p.33.

This scene set, the speaker proceeds to narrate the event which is the substance of the poem, telling how, ‘Only last week a two-metre strip of the stuff/ molested my ankles...’.<sup>78</sup> From this point on the poem becomes steadily more inventive. ‘Molested’ by the veneer, the speaker describes how he made ‘a hero-leap’ across the canal to avoid it.<sup>79</sup> This fanciful, but not entirely implausible description prompts a further rhetorical flight. Noting that lots of things offer to help him ‘narrate this event/ (dogs, serpents, land-adapted conger eels and so on)’, the speaker finally decides to make use of the ‘dragon-banners/ which Ammianus describes as having been borne/ by the household troops of the Emperor Constantius’.<sup>80</sup> Recalling Ammianus’ description of the ‘dragon-banners’, the speaker notes:

Their gaping mouths were so constructed, he tells,  
as to hiss and roar in the breeze occasioned  
by each horse’s momentum, *so I can’t help thinking*  
that if some of them had escaped from their jewelled shafts  
and gained the ground that day, learning to live and breed there  
and become a part of the European fauna,  
then it might have been one of their offspring that attacked me,  
sixteen hundred years later,  
just beyond the gates of the coffin factory.<sup>81</sup>

One might expect Ammianus (whom Didsbury is quoting here) to use the word ‘caused’ to describe the connection between the horses’ momentum, and the breeze which gives rise to the hissing and roaring of the banners. Occasioned, though, is more apt, preserving the relation between the events, but avoiding the implication that the breeze was intended, or that the horse’s momentum was the only factor in its coming to pass. As the poem makes clear, the value of ‘occasioned’, is its delicacy. It loosens, but does

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

not untie the connection between events. And it is this agreeable looseness that the poet comments upon with his typographically heightened expression, '*so I can't help thinking*'. The italics draw attention to themselves, and as they do so it becomes clear that Didsbury's conjunction is not quite what it seems. This is not the 'so' of causation, but the 'so' of analogy. The poet, that is, can't help thinking occasionally, as the poem itself confirms. A strip of veneer blowing against the speaker's legs prompting a run of images which are by no means determined by the event, but which are not unrelated to it either. Didsbury's poetry, is thus occasional in the same important sense that Ashbery's is: affirming a relation between utterances and events, which neither reduces utterances to effects, nor renders them entirely arbitrary.

Didsbury's poetry, moreover, is fit for its own occasions. Whereas Ash transported himself to the environment that prompts Ashbery's writing, Didsbury has stayed put, physically and poetically. Thus, if 'The Cartoon Version' is like 'The Instruction Manual', the County Council environment makes the poem distinctively Didsbury's. Similarly, 'At North Villa' is Ashbery-like in that it is a poem about interruptions, but it investigates the effect of the interruptions on an Edwardian gentleman, thereby addressing itself to the English sensibility.<sup>82</sup> 'The Seventeenth of June' is Ashberian in its poetic economy, willingly wasting words in the hope that some might prove appropriate. But the specific objective is to

find some words about English coastal parishes,  
each with its beacon, spire, gallows,  
ragstone tower or en-hillocked elm as landfall,  
to be battered towards by crumster, cog and barque  
though stillicidous arras or wrist-wraithing bone-racking sea-roke.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p.44.

But perhaps the crucial difference between the way Didsbury and Ash have developed Ashbery's influence, concerns the question of communication. Wrapped up, as he is, in the networks of the inner-circle, critics have detected a lack of respect for the reader in Ash's poetry. Keery is struck by his, 'patrician outlook ... [This] camp disdain is his own, and he's welcome to it'.<sup>84</sup> By contrast Didsbury's poetry is marked by an Ashberian sense of the need to communicate. 'Line with Atoll and Idol' strikes just the kind of balance Ashbery aims for:

As if were being drawn a thin black line  
in the air a dozen feet above the sea.

As if it travelled parallel with Ocean,  
but Ocean lay calm in an everywhere shallow bed,  
devoid of ornament,  
and never did wave snap hungrily up at the sky.

And as if the part of the line which moved  
(for always these things are hard to comprehend)  
made headway toward a coast.<sup>85</sup>

We know we are being presented with something new here. The strange image of a line being drawn above the ocean does not meet with our experience. The curiously tightened syntax queers our expectations. Yet for one reason or another, these unfamiliar lines do not make us feel out of place. The overwhelming sense of movement partly explains this. Almost before we have time to think, we are on a journey, swept along with the line making headway toward the coast. Partly, also, of course, we do not feel out of place because a voice reassures that 'always these things are hard to comprehend'. But mostly the absence of disorientation is an effect of Didsbury's rhythmical control. Thus, by the time the abstract refrain sounds for the third time we feel we already have the poet's measure, that we can trust his adventurous sentences. Didsbury's achievement, here and

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<sup>84</sup> Keery, (no page numbers given).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. pp.45,6

elsewhere, shows that it is possible to make it new and stay in contact with the reader. And as Ashbery has shown, it is on the success of this precarious manoeuvre that occasional communication depends.

Denise Riley is more of a coterie poet than Didsbury, and as she has described in interview, her initial contact with Ashbery was through the 'networks' of the Cambridge School. Explaining that she read the *New Yorkers* from about 1970 onwards, she notes that there were

... links of friendship and an exchange of books. Ashbery somehow made a loop which caught up with some of the European loops of reading - over to Apollinaire, and some of the more recent French poets; there was also an important circuit which ran through painting.<sup>86</sup>

'Links of friendship' have remained crucial to Riley's work, not least because, with the exception of *Dry Air* (published by Virago) her poetry has appeared in small press imprints and little magazines, many of which (as she implies in the acknowledgements to *Mop Mop Georgette*) are edited by 'friends'.<sup>87</sup> Yet for all the importance of such networks, it is largely in Riley's characteristic styles of address that one detects Ashbery's importance to her work.

Difficult as her poetry is, Riley goes to great lengths to catch the reader's attention, to give him or her something to hold on to. One strategy, recalling Ashbery is simply to engage the reader in conversation. This is particularly evident in *Mop Mop Georgette*. In 'A Shortened Set' the poet several times pauses to check that the reader is still with her: 'Are you alright I ask out there/ straining into the dusk to hear'.<sup>88</sup> And such enquiries are

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<sup>86</sup> Romana Huk, 'Denise Riley in Conversation with Romana Huk', *PN Review* 103, vol.21, no.5 (May-June 1995) p.17.

<sup>87</sup> Riley, p.72.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

not merely rhetorical. Riley really does want a dialogue. So, having asked after the reader's well-being she encourages her to reciprocate:

Am I alright you don't ask me.  
Oh probably, and in the heart  
of this light on hills it is for me  
alone to speak.<sup>89</sup>

Such an exchange is Ashberian in tone, although Ashbery is rarely quite so direct. While never losing sight of the writerly strategy it is, Riley is more prepared than Ashbery to risk pathos in endeavouring to attract readerly attention. This is not at all to suggest that Riley is confessional. She thinks of biographical material in very much the way Ashbery does, suggesting that she tries to

use bits of personal life relatively *impersonally*, by taking snippets which could be from *any* life marked by needs and disappointments and longings ...<sup>90</sup>

Speaking to Poulin about his use of biographical materials Ashbery made much the same point, observing that what he aimed at was 'a general, all-purpose experience - like those stretch socks that fit all sizes'.<sup>91</sup> Where Riley differs from Ashbery is in her greater readiness to emphasise those impersonal bits of personal life which are marked by 'disappointments and longings'. Her appeal in 'Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else' is tonally closer to Ashbery:

No, what

I really mean to say instead is, come back  
won't you, just all of you come back, and give  
me one more go at doing it all again but doing it

far better this time round.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>90</sup> Huk, p.17.

<sup>91</sup> Poulin, p.251.

<sup>92</sup> Riley, p28.

The address here is ever so slightly more melodramatic. The inversion ‘come back/ won’t you’, and the superfluous qualifier ‘just’, in ‘just all of you’, achieve the kind of arch expression of emotion by which Ashbery holds himself back while seeming to open himself up. ‘Shantung’ offers a form of address straight out of the Ashbery phrase book: ‘Come on everybody. Especially you girls./ Each day I think of something about dying./ Does everybody? do they think too, I mean?’<sup>93</sup>

Equally engaging is Riley’s use of contemporary songs. Mop Mop Georgette quotes all manner of popular lyricists, from Marvin Gaye to Neil Sedaka. There is a supple linguistic point being made here, which Clair Wills draws out effectively when she suggests that, ‘The relationship between ‘public’ and ‘private’ lyric, the ways they are articulated together in order to ‘express’ personal meanings seems crucial here.’<sup>94</sup>

Ashbery, who has been incorporating snatches of popular songs since he wrote ‘Popular Songs’ in the early fifties, uses them in part for this kind of reason; as a tribute to the expressive powers of common language. For Ashbery, however, as for Riley, the point of such songs is largely their availability. In the appealingly titled ‘Lure, 1963’ Riley’s use of the phrase, ‘Oh yes I’m the great pretender’, is designed to accommodate readers quite as much as it is intended to make a knowing comment on the constructed self.<sup>95</sup> Indeed in this respect Riley is the more accommodating poet, providing Eliotic source-notes for those of her readers alienated by references to popular culture.

Riley’s determination to make the surface of her work appealing is rooted in her sense of the poetic occasion. Her poem ‘What Else’ compares with Didsbury’s ‘Coffin Factory’, in that its chief concern is to relate how a poem comes into being:

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p.32.

<sup>94</sup> Clair Wills, ‘Contemporary Women’s Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice’, Critical Quarterly, vol.36, no.3 (Autumn 1994), p.46.

<sup>95</sup> Riley, p.30.

It will rush in from a great way off  
to put its mouth to my straining ears.  
This time I'll know it as death, I'll cup  
my hands round its conviction.

It will come sobbing in my ears  
calling my names to me over and over.  
I'll think, and try to keep my eyes  
wide open as if swimming underwater.

But I don't know how at the time  
I'll conduct myself on that forest floor  
where I will be quite alone. So  
somebody here, hurry, take part in life.<sup>96</sup>

Riley's sense of the occasion of the poem differs from Didsury's. 'What Else' opens not with playful zephyrs, but with a 'clean historical wind', which has 'cut/ the forest, torn it to streaming ribbons', and which in the course of the poem is said to be pressing, rushing and sobbing.<sup>97</sup> The occasion in Riley's poetry is much more insistent. So insistent, in fact, that for a moment she seems to be articulating the Stevensian idea that the poem is the cry of its occasion, Riley noting that it will 'come sobbing in my ears/ calling my names to me over and over'. The poetic occasion seems almost to have a voice of its own. That, in fact, her sense of the occasion is more like Ashbery's than Stevens' is apparent as Riley considers how, on the occasion of the poem, she will respond: 'But I don't how at the time/ I'll conduct myself on that forest floor'. The occasion, that is, does not cause the poem, but calls on the poet to conduct herself in an appropriate manner. Equally Ashberian is Riley's determination not simply to communicate the occasion, but to communicate the desirability of occasional thinking. The poem closes by noting that when it comes to it she alone must judge what her response will be. But she is not alone insofar as others must also make such judgements:

So

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p.37

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

somebody here, hurry, take part in life.

Still, though, Riley's sense of the poetic occasion seems rather more insistent than Ashbery's. This insistence relates, perhaps, to her interest in Abstract Expressionism. It was partly, she says, his position in an 'important circuit that ran through painting' that made Ashbery useful to Riley, and she admits to envying, 'the brilliance and broad canvas of American abstract expressionists paintings, and the hopelessness of replicating that in words'.<sup>98</sup> Not that this hopelessness stops her from trying. 'So Is It?' is a desperate effort to turn the occasion into words by a series of Pollock-like verbal gestures:

Some. I walk into a light hot wood. Inside it all  
exhales, a sulky wind gets up, slings a sad mass  
at the back of eyes lowered for chattering dusk,  
fingers dried ochres in rough air brushed rustling  
to cream hoops, strokes powdery blues tacked on  
to black wire.<sup>99</sup>

'So Is It?', (like 'Stair Spirit' with which the collection closes), carries both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Abstract Expressionist experiment. There is something admirable, heroic even, in its desire for immediacy. However, in striving for such close contact with the occasion, it loses sight of the need to stay in touch with the reader. Unlike Didsbury's 'Line with Atoll and Idol', 'So Is It?' innovates at the cost of communication. This is not typical.

'A Shortened Set' is more characteristic:

The slap of recognition that you know.  
Your feelings, I mean mine are common to us all:  
that puts you square between relief and boredom  
under the standoffish sky.  
In this I'm not unique, I'm just  
the only one who thinks I'm not, maybe.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Huk, p.20.

<sup>99</sup> Riley, p.52.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. pp.17-18.

As this emphasis on the unique makes clear, Riley, knows that above all an occasional poetic requires the poet to be faithful to her own occasions. English, urban, maternal and politically committed, Riley's poetry, for all its affinities with Ashbery, could never be mistaken for his. But like Ashbery, Riley knows too that the pressures of the unique must be weighed against the demands of the common; that occasions must be social events.

What I have hoped to indicate by this consideration of Ash, Didsbury and Riley is both that (contra Gery) some ways of writing poetry after Ashbery can be shown to be more appropriate than others, and that, crucially, and for all his anxieties, Ashbery's poetry does contain a language with which to transact its legacy. Both Didsbury and Riley are occasional poets, and both understand the need to communicate their sense of occasion. Both also, for all his importance to their work, are significantly different from Ashbery, concerned as they are with their own occasions. What these two British poets indicate, therefore, is first, that is possible for a democratic poetic to be passed on in a way which both preserves, and is faithful to its value; and second that by its influence at least, Ashbery's poetry is very likely to survive the passing of its occasions. Early in his career, when American poetry was dominated by the themes of the middle generation, Ashbery took strength from British poets, like Nicholas Moore and F.T.Prince, whose poetry, as Andrew Crozier observed, was characterized by its commitment to the occasion. Insofar as he has proved enabling to Didsbury and Riley at a time when British poetry is dominated by followers of Larkin, it might well be thought that Ashbery has repaid the favour.

## **Conclusion**

## Conclusion

This thesis has shown that by giving careful consideration to the idea of the occasion, it is possible to trace important continuities in Ashbery's writing. Ashbery's sense of the occasion has been shown to underpin his collaborations, his reaction to the middle generation, his early experimentalism, his response to the pressures facing American poets in the sixties, his handling of the interviewer, and his influence. By way of conclusion, a brief glance at two important moments in Ashbery's writing, one in Three Poems and one in Flow Chart, will serve finally to underline the centrality of the occasion to his thought.

Three Poems has a special significance for Ashbery. Speaking of the book in interview, he has described it as a

deliberate exercise in writing, not about but off of my feelings about various people who'd been very important to me in my life.<sup>1</sup>

And perhaps because of this personal investment, Ashbery names 'The System' as one of his favourites among his own works.<sup>2</sup> The passage in question here, occurs towards the end of 'The System'. It comes after some careful scene setting. Injecting a note of suspense into his prose, Ashbery begins to alert the reader to the possibility that something of importance is about to be said. Enticing questions are posed: "What is he going to do *this* time?"; "What am I going to say?" (TP, 95). And the strong hint is given that some term or idea crucial to the poetry is about to be revealed:

the word that everything hinged on is buried back there; by mutual consent neither of you examined it when it was pronounced and rushed to its final resting place. It is doing the organising, the guidelines radiate from its control....(TP, 95)

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<sup>1</sup> Sommer, p.303.

<sup>2</sup> Tranter, p.100.

One might read something into 'mutual consent', given the role collaboration has been taken to play in the development of Ashbery's occasional poetic, but one doesn't need to, because two pages further on, the poet informs us that

The day is not far advanced: it still half-seriously offers with one hand the promise that it pockets with the other, and it is still up to you to seize the occasion, jump into the fray, not be ruled by its cruel if only human whims. The person sitting opposite you who asked you a question is still waiting for the answer; he has not yet found your hesitation unusual, but it is up to you to grasp it with both hands, wrenching from it the web of connections to rub off the grime that has obscured its brilliance so as to restore it to him, that pause which is the answer you have both been expecting. (TP,97)

If we are being presented with the word 'on which everything hinged', with the word from which 'the guidelines radiate', then given its centrality to this passage, one might well think that that word is 'occasion'. Certainly Ashbery is very careful to present his own social, even collaborative sense of occasion. The 'occasion', that is, 'offers' itself to two people sitting opposite one another, one of whom is waiting for a response, waiting for the web of connections in which both are involved to be once again made clear. So, having intimated that some crucial term is about to be made explicit, Ashbery makes a very considered presentation of his sense of 'occasion'.

Flow Chart is likewise of particular significance to Ashbery, written, as it was, after the death of his Mother, and finished on his 61st birthday. By its sheer size, moreover, it is clearly intended as some kind of summation, a monument, as was indicated in the previous chapter, to an anti-monumental poetic. Here again, the passage in question (which occurs mid-way through the book) follows some elaborate scene setting. On page 111, Ashbery arrives at 'the cutest darn haunted house you ever saw'. The passage that ensues is parodic at first, the poet caricaturing the suspense narratives of the gothic novel or the B-feature horror movie. Gradually, though, having advertised his intentions by this elaborate conceit, Ashbery injects a note of real suspense. A tense

exchange at the door, (“Who’s there?” Who wants to know’) is followed by a tantalizing offer:

I may let you in on my age-old secret, which, of  
course,  
isn’t mine. I’m only one of a group of seven or eight people who are in on it,  
until then.  
(FC,112)

Which in turn is followed a few lines further on by the observation that

Surely there must come a time toward the end when an old man gets up  
and says what needs to be said?  
(FC,112)

And that time, it seems, has come because at the beginning of the next page a judge gets up to make an announcement:

There is no truth, saith the judge, and one is obliged to concur  
if by truth one means that an occasion has been fitted to an event, and it all  
about just so. If, however, one accepts a broader definition along the lines of  
something being more or less appropriate to its time and place, then, by gosh,  
pretty darn sure of having to own up to the fact that, yes, it does exist  
here and there, if only in the gaudy hues of the diaphanous wings  
of some passing insect. That is enough, however, to send the scribes back to  
their  
tablets.  
I don’t know where this one came in - but wait,  
it is of myself I speak, and I do know!  
(FC, 113)

This reads like a credo, the speaker asserting that, after all, he does think truth exists.

Grounded in a broad definition of the ‘occasion’, the truth, for this speaker is that which is ‘more or less appropriate to its time and place’, more or less appropriate to its occasion. One can never be entirely sure, of course, whether an Ashbery speaker represents the poet. Here though, one can be ‘pretty darn sure’, because, as he wants to make absolutely clear, ‘it is of myself I speak, and I do know!’. And what he knows, as is

worth re-emphasising, is that he does believe in truth, if, by truth one means an utterance which is more or less appropriate to its occasion.

Possibly Ashbery will never again articulate himself quite as clearly as he does in this passage at the heart of Flow Chart. But one way, or another, he has continued to tell the reader what he believes. Can You Hear, Bird contains a poem called 'My Philosophy of Life', which if it smiles at the idea of a philosophy, is plainly concerned to articulate the poet's way of thinking:

I wouldn't be preachy,  
or worry about children and old people, except  
in the general way prescribed by our clockwork universe.  
Instead I'd sort of let things be what they are  
while injecting them with the serum of the new moral climate  
I thought I'd stumbled into, as a stranger  
accidentally presses against a panel and a bookcase slides back,  
revealing a winding staircase with greenish light  
somewhere down below, and he automatically steps inside  
and the bookcase slides shut, as is customary on such occasions. (CB, 73)

The conceit is the same as in Flow Chart, the false bookcase of the haunted house sliding back to discover that somewhere down below is the word 'occasions'; a word as the imagery makes clear, which is still 'radiating guidelines'. What this thesis shows, and what these passages confirm, is that Ashbery's sense of occasion is central to his poetry. And more or less appropriate to his time and place, it his sense of occasion that makes Ashbery central.

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