John Ashbery in the World: Space, Time and Work

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Introduction: Ashbery’s poetics of difficulty and knowing

David Herd writes: “Ever since Emerson urged the audience of 'The American Scholar' to leave the library, it has been axiomatic to American writing that the object of literary understanding is not the text but the world” (Herd 2000, p. 13). This thesis will argue that John Ashbery’s subject is indeed the contemporary world: a world of the automation of blue-collar labour, of suburbanisation, of surveillance, currency instability and the AIDS crisis. It takes as its premise the notion that Ashbery’s poetry is intimately concerned with both experiencing and representing the world, and that the world that it describes is one that the reader can recognise and understand. As a corollary, it will situate Ashbery *in the world* in a philosophical, phenomenological and ecological sense, arguing that his poetry is fundamentally engaged in trying to represent not only the contingent, subjective experience of consciousness, but also a broader, collective experience of living through time and history.

The notion that Ashbery’s poetry represents a recognisable, contemporary world, and aims to convey something meaningful about it to the reader, is simultaneously both axiomatic and counter intuitive. On the one hand, as Marjorie Perloff notes, the poet’s work possesses a Whitmanian openness to a wide range of influences that imbues his work with a sense of currency: his “language is… wholly permeated by the discourses that endlessly impinge on it” (Perloff 1998). As Ashbery himself asserts, “My idea is to democratize all forms of expression, an idea which comes to me from afar, perhaps from Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* – the idea that both the most demotic and the most elegant forms of expression equally deserve equally to be taken into account” (Shoptaw 1994, p. 1). For evidence that Ashbery had – and kept – his finger on the pulse of contemporary America, one need look no further than *Breezeway* (2015), the poet’s penultimate published collection. Written when Ashbery was in his late 80s, the collection features poems such as ‘Seven-Year-Old Auroch Likes This’, which begins with a description of the Kardashians, stars of a popular reality TV show broadcast on MTV, who he compares to “a Brooklyn family in fracture mode, vivid, energizing” (Ashbery 2015). The title of the poem, Ashbery confirmed in a 2015 interview, refers to ‘likes’ on social media. Other poems in the collection refer to current events including Hurricane Sandy, and topics such as the rivalry between NBC and CBS. However, alongside this image of Ashbery – the urbane, democratic chronicler of American experience – there persists the perception of him as a poet whose work is ethereal or surreal, to the point

of being incomprehensible or meaningless. In his review of Ashbery's *Selected Poems*, James Fenton complains that poetry is "exorbitantly demanding" while "yielding only a minimum of reward"; it is, he claims, "parsimonious with clarity, hedged about with obscurity". For Fenton, Ashbery's 'open' poetics do not democratically chronicle experience, but rather generate unintelligible noise – "a return," he claims, "to the nonsense of childhood" (Fenton 1985).

Is it possible that poetry which is so apparently reluctant to "make sense in the traditional sense of making sense" (Fenton 1985) can tell us anything about the world? The word commonly used to describe the "demanding" quality that Fenton identifies in Ashbery's work is 'difficult', an epithet which can be traced back to Richard Kostelanetz's 1976 *New York Times* profile, 'How to be a Difficult Poet'. Kostelanetz's piece opens with the confident statement that "John Ashbery's poetry is extremely difficult, if not often impenetrable; it does not 'work' or 'mean' like traditional verse, or even most contemporary poetry" (Kostelanetz 1976). Since then, the notion of 'difficulty' has become entrenched both in Ashbery scholarship, and in journalistic writing about the poet, to the extent that people who have never read an Ashbery poem would consider him to be 'difficult'. As Michael Robbins notes, "The encomiums that plastered the internet in the hours and days following John Ashbery's death… were mostly in accord: Ashbery's poetry was 'puzzling', 'enigmatic', 'impenetrable', 'difficult', 'elusive', 'obscure', 'incomprehensible', 'inscrutable', 'confounding', 'indecipherable', 'inaccessible', 'hard to grasp', 'incoherent', 'challenging', 'mysterious'" (Robbins 2018). However, in academic writing at least, Ashbery's difficulty is often present as an argumentative foil rather than as an earnest claim. While critics from Perloff to Harold Bloom have commented on the way in which Ashbery is perceived to be 'difficult' by other critics and readers, few admit to finding him difficult themselves, or argue persuasively that his work is genuinely forbidding. Vernon Shetley comes closest to claiming that Ashbery's poetry possesses a genuinely intransigent quality, but even he begins his argument by referring to the "scandal of difficulty" that characterises the "reception" to Ashbery's work – that is, he locates the perception of difficulty not in his own response to the work, but in an unspecified public's reaction to it (Shetley 1993, p. 2).

To note this tendency is not to deny that Ashbery's poetry can be, at times, bewildering and obscure; hard to read, and to understand. However, by accepting its 'difficulty' as a given, we limit the ways in which we can respond to the poet's work, and increase the risk that we will

dismiss or ignore its subtler attempts to create and convey meaning. George Steiner asks "what do we mean when we say: 'this poem, or this passage in this poem is difficult?'" (Steiner 1978, p. 263). In answering this question, he proposes four categories of difficulty. Ashbery's work, with its disjunctive syntax, inconsistent pronouns and mercurial tone, would appear to demonstrate Steiner's most profound category of difficulty, the *ontological*, in which "the contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility between poet and reader, between text and meaning… is broken". This kind of text cannot be simplified by looking up references, or by 'translating' the author's arcane diction into everyday language. Instead, the ontologically difficult text "confront[s] us with blank questions about the nature of human speech, about the status of significance, about the necessity and purpose of the construct which we have… come to perceive as a poem". Steiner, however, makes it clear that he is referring primarily to European literature when he describes this "inspired movement towards darkness" (Steiner 1978, p. 273). As Ben Hickman has comprehensively argued, English poetry was important to Ashbery, and as Stephen Ross notes, he was also undoubtedly influenced by his stay in Paris, as well as by French writers such as Reverdy, Eluard and Roussel, and "Nouveau Réaliste" artists (Hickman 2012, pp. 2–23, Ross 2017, pp. 43–45). However, this thesis will follow Bloom and Herd in seeing Ashbery as a poet who was working primarily within American cultural and literary traditions, and who was concerned with representing a specifically American experience of the world (Bloom 2004, pp. 11–28; Herd 2000). Situating Ashbery within an American tradition of exploration and innovation can help to contextualise his 'difficulty' in terms of a broader experimental milieu; as the composer John Cage – himself a source of inspiration for Ashbery – noted, "America has an intellectual climate suitable for radical experimentation" (Cage 1961, p. 73). As such, this thesis will argue against the notion that Ashbery's work is *de facto* difficult or impenetrable – or at least that its difficulty is of the socially negative kind that Steiner describes. Instead, it will adopt the position that Ashbery himself articulates in response to Kostelanetz's accusation of difficulty: "I'm interested in communicating, but I feel that saying something the reader has already known is not communicating anything" (Kostelanetz 1976). In Ashbery's poetry, lines of communication are often envisaged as malfunctioning or broken when they are being used to communicate a fixed, definitive message; in Ashbery's long poem for two voices, 'Litany', the "Columbia Tape Club [of] Terre/Haute, Indiana" ignores the speaker's letters and keeps sending tapes:

I've been

Repeatedly billed for my free tape.
I've written them several times but
Can't straighten it out…

(Ashbery 2008, p. 655)

Conversely, the poem 'Pyrography' presents us with a powerful yet enigmatic image of a communicative impulse – which is categorised as specifically American – functioning as intended even when, or perhaps precisely *because*, it has nothing definitive or urgent to say:

This is America calling:
The mirroring of state to state,
Of voice to voice on the wires,
The force of colloquial greetings like golden
Pollen sinking on the afternoon breeze.

(Ashbery 2008, p. 495)

However, regardless of whether Ashbery is categorised as a specifically American poet, critics and scholars frequently express nagging doubts as to whether the poet can be thought of as inhabiting the same reality as his readers – or as being 'of the world' at all. "There is something ethereal about Ashbery's project," Daniel Pritchard claims, articulating a refrain that has been a constant in Ashbery scholarship (Pritchard 2010). In his foreword to Ashbery's first published collection, *Some Trees* (1956), W.H. Auden claims that the poetry deals with "dreams and daydreams entirely", conveying not a recognisable, contemporary world, but "a numinous landscape inhabited by demons and strange beasts" (Ashbery 1956, p. 13). Perloff, while arguing sensitively for the importance of "indeterminacy" in Ashbery's work, and refuting Shetley's claims about Ashbery's destabilising "fragmentation and opacity" (Perloff 1998), repeatedly links his poetry to an oneiric or surreal realm of dreams and fantasy: she refers to his poems as "dream songs" which create "dream plot[s]" that the reader must decipher, and argues that although the poems are concerned with "[n]ot *what* one dreams but *how*", it is nevertheless the case that "the dream structure is the event that haunts the poet's imagination" (Perloff 1981, pp. 248–261). Perloff also repeatedly returns to the notion that the objects and landscapes we encounter in Ashbery's poems "have no external referent" and no correlate in the 'real world' (Perloff 1981, p. 9); when describing Ashbery's poetics, she quotes Baudelaire, for whom "[t]he whole visible universe is but a storehouse of

images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value" (Perloff 1981, p. 27). When comparing Ashbery's early poem 'These Lacustrine Cities' to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, she wonders: "[H]ow are we to understand cities that have no streets or buildings, no recognizable inhabitants, no traffic – indeed, cities located in a semantic field that also contains desert and mountain, swan and petal?" (Perloff 1981, p. 9). Shetley, who takes issue with several of Perloff's claims, is in agreement with her here, claiming that: "For Ashbery, representation of the world begins and ends in representation of the thoughts by which we apprehend it" (Shetley 1993, p. 120). Willard Spiegelman makes these concerns about the referential capacity of the work explicit when he states that "the ontological status of all objects outside the self is highly questionable throughout Ashbery's poetry", and, as a result, "referentiality per se barely exists" (Spiegelman 2005, p. 151).

If, as these accounts suggest, we cannot look outwards to the physical, phenomenological world to construct or verify our understanding of Ashbery's poetry, our readings of it risk being incomplete or incorrect. Indeed, the critical trope of *difficulty* is often accompanied by a suspicion that to read Ashbery's poetry is inevitably to *misr*ead or misunderstand it in some crucial way; as Pritchard notes, "It is commonly held by acolytes and detractors alike that there are only misreadings of his work" (Pritchard 2010). Bloom sees Ashbery – the "desperate disciple" of Stevens – as being fundamentally "misunderstood" due to his association with O'Hara and "other comedians of the spirit". Just as the poet's work constitutes a "misreading" of Stevens', so his own readers inevitably, and mistakenly, align him with the "random poignancies" of the New York School, rather than correctly understanding him as "ruefully and intensely Transcendental" (Bloom 2004, pp. 15–19). John Shoptaw goes further by viewing misreading as being woven into the very fabric of Ashbery's poetry, identifying in his work a "misrepresentative" poetics which "unsettles and contorts… subject matters by removing their frame of reference" (Shoptaw 1994, p. 2). Shoptaw writes about the poetry's semantic polyphony in terms that suggest it as a metaphor for American democracy: an Ashbery poem is, he writes, "an assembly of unruly, irresponsible, factional, long-winded, strange, and outspoken members" (Shoptaw 1994, p. 2). For Shoptaw, then, although Ashbery's poetry fails to represent the world 'as it is', this failure is an unavoidable, and a forgivable, one: like democracy itself, the poetry necessarily misrepresents its subject[s] due to the their sheer complexity and variousness.

However, other critics' misgivings about Ashbery's ability to represent the world suggest deeper concerns about the poet's ethics, in terms of his willingness or otherwise to communicate something meaningful to his reader – to deal with them, perhaps, on what 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' calls "a very plain level" (Ashbery 2008, p. 698). Rick Richman finds such plain dealing lacking in Ashbery's poetry: for him, "the emotions, like the images, seem to be used or false", so that a densely figurative poem like 'Pyrography' is wilfully obtuse, to the point of "mockery" (Richman 1982). Is Ashbery, critics such as Richman wonder, taking us for fools? Is he laughing not *with* us, at the diverting strangeness of a world that can contain both Popeye and Parmigianino, but rather *at* us, as we labour to make sense of poetry that ultimately means nothing, and means to communicate nothing? Shetley even discerns a quasi-schizophrenic instability in Ashbery's ventriloquism; different tones and styles are adopted and thrown off chaotically, he claims, "as if the poet were prey to a compulsive urge to impersonation." Shetley worries that Ashbery "seems possessed by th[e] voices" that echo through his poems – voices that, for Shetley, do not speak with any moral, spiritual, or even emotional authority, but rather mime "stereotypical, anonymous discourses" (Shetley 1993, p. 122).

As Shetley notes, Richard Poirier sees the 'difficult' text as placing the reader in a no-win situation; as we read, we are encouraged to "locate principles of order and structure beneath a fragmentary surface... only to have it then suggested by other elements in the text that we have been acting in a rather fussy and heavy-handed fashion, embarrassingly without aristocratic ease". As a result, Poirier complains, the 'difficult' text always finds its reader wanting: "no one *can* be the right kind of reader for books of this sort" (Shetley 1993, p. 16). Similarly, Paul Celan compared the poem to a handshake, asserting that: "Only truthful hands write true poems. I see no difference in principle between a handshake and a poem" (Williams 2009, p. 214). In Celan's formulation, the poem is a gesture of openness that extends itself outwards into the social space between the writer and the reader, cementing a bond of trust between them. In the case of Ashbery's poetry, critics such as Shetley suggest, this handshake is capriciously offered and withdrawn, the hand of the author moving ambivalently both towards and away from the reader, offering only what the poet calls in relation to Parmigianino's curving hand in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' – which refuses to relinquish the act of creation in order to display its vulnerable, private inner surface – "the shield of a greeting" (Ashbery 1977, p. 82).

Must we therefore accept that Ashbery's poetry is merely a solipsistic expression of an individual consciousness, and that any broader resonances it possesses are merely coincidental? In recent years there has been a historicising turn in Ashbery criticism that has attempted to refute this accusation by affirming the ability of the poetry to refer to the objective contemporary world. In particular, Jasper Bernes' Marxist reading of Ashbery situates the poet's work in the contemporary socio-economic context, seeing it as indexing the changing post-War status of white-collar, 'informational' labour (Bernes 2017). Similarly, Christopher Nealon situates Ashbery's work squarely in the context of what the critic sees as the "historic and economic crisis" of 20th-century capitalism, arguing that it deals with the transformation of 1970s New York from a hotbed of counter-cultural activity to a global financial hub (although he ultimately claims that Ashbery expresses a "resistance to politics" that constitutes a refusal to engage fully with his historical moment) (Nealon 2011, p. 79). Both Nealon and Bernes reject the characterisation of Ashbery's work as ethereal, incomprehensible or absurd, and instead argue for the ability of his poetry to comment – albeit, at times, indirectly – on the material and economic conditions of 20th-century America. However, both have a tendency to read Ashbery's poetry in a way that uncomplicatedly assigns meanings to it, rather than acknowledging its ambiguity, multivalency, and, to borrow Perloff's term, "indeterminacy". Nealon's dense readings, for example, often have an explicatory, didactic quality. While they are valuable for the way in which they unearth half-buried references to political activity in the poet's work, they also adopt an oddly impassive stance in relation to his language, even as they claim for it a rich and suggestive specificity. In a reading that spans two of Ashbery's poems of the 1970s, 'The Other Tradition' and 'Decoy', Nealon argues that "… the sun, no activist, 'politely [clears] its throat,' and political ideas, like the 'pumice' capital makes of all recycled postures… become 'a fuzz of dust'" (Nealon 2011, p. 79). But why, for example, is the highly specific geological term 'pumice' used to represent the decadence brought about by capital? Nealon's assertions open up avenues for interpretation that are not subsequently explored.

Helen Vendler, meanwhile, refutes the notion that Ashbery is self-reflexive or self-absorbed by embracing the metaphysical aspects of his work, claiming that far from being "socially apathetic, solipsistic, or narcissistic", his poetics "allo[w] the ethics of social life to enter the verbal space of the lyric" (Vendler 2005, p. 57). For Vendler, however, Ashbery's democratisation of the lyric has the effect of tempering, or even eliminating, the poet's ostensible 'difficulty'. Inherent in her position is the notion that once we understand and

accept the unconventional spaces of "horizontal (metonymic) intimacy" that Ashbery's poetry creates, his dense, and at times forbidding, allusiveness dissolves into an integrative mimesis, his poetry revealing itself to be "a slightly surreal, but comprehensible, narration" (Vendler 2005, p. 58). Other critics, meanwhile, deal with Ashbery's 'difficulty' by taking his more intelligible, coherent poems – such as 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and the much-anthologised 'Soonest Mended' – to be representative of his work, while categorising his more disjunctive works as outliers, mistakes or failures. Bloom, for example, while arguing that Ashbery is an "indispensable figur[e]" in American poetry (Bloom 2004, p. 19), derides *The Tennis Court Oath*, calling it a "fearful disaster" (Bloom 1973, p. 105).

Is the argumentative movement enacted by Vendler and Bloom, and, to an extent, by Bernes and Nealon, inevitable? Or is it possible to conceive of Ashbery as a poet whose work is concerned with the world, and communicates something about it to the reader, while also being difficult to understand, ambiguous, and even, at times, incomprehensible? The temptation to render Ashbery fully comprehensible when asserting that his poetry means anything at all is a strong one, and operates across several critical contexts. Hickman, for instance, quotes Ashbery's dense and disjunctive collage-poem 'Europe', which was constructed by extracting and rearranging sentences from a pulp novel, *Beryl and the Biplane* (1917), that Ashbery bought from a second-hand book stall in Paris:

> thirty-three years old the day
> of his third birthday the legs
> Lenin de Gaulle three days later
> also comparing simple

Hickman's reading of these lines concludes that: "'comparing simply', or simply comparing, is difficult for the poem" (Hickman 2012, p. 112). Hickman smoothly paraphrases Ashbery's "also comparing simple" as 'comparing simply'. However, from a reader's point of view, encountering the phrase "simply comparing" is very different from encountering the somewhat Steinian, and seemingly truncated, "also comparing simple." Is there, one might wonder on reading this phrase, a grammatical object missing at the end of the sentence? If so, what things or ideas might the speaker be categorising as "simple?" Alternatively, one might infer the presence of a colon after 'comparing' that would end the line on a declarative: 'Simple!', playfully undermining the reader's efforts to make sense of what has preceded it.

As this brief analysis illustrates, Ashbery's disruption of the conventions of grammar and syntax are instrumental to the cadence of our reading experience – they slow us down, encourage us to turn in intellectual circles, and sometimes arrest our progress altogether. To treat these disturbances in the reading experience as annoyances which must be set aside in order to grasp the 'meaning' of the poetry is to elide the richness, and the strangeness, of Ashbery's work; as Steiner argues in relation to the unparseable final lines of Stevens' 'Anecdote of the Jar', "[t]o transpose, to paraphrase into correctness, is to relinquish both the motion and the meaning… The artifact transmutes the organic into the organized, but is not of it" (Steiner 1978, p. 272).

However, just as Stevens' jar hovers uneasily between the literal and the figurative, the intransigent "artifacts" that one encounters in Ashbery's poetry are not purely linguistic; that is, they do not refer only to the play of language across the surface of the poem, but also call to mind phenomenological experiences in the objective world. Indeed, one way to cement Ashbery's position in the 'real' world, as opposed to in a fantastical alternate reality – while still engaging with the multivalent semantic textures of his work – is to acknowledge the importance of realistic and material detail in his poetry. Edward Larrissy argues persuasively that "[a]ny suggestion that Ashbery values a universal or central principle, however tentatively it may be described, has to contend with much that asserts the irreducibility of details" (Larrissy 2000, p. 76). To witness this 'irreducibility' in action, we need look no further than the poem 'And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name', from *Houseboat Days* (1977):

> There are a lot of other things of the same quality
> As those I've mentioned. Now one must
> Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed,
> Dull-sounding ones. She approached me
> About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was
> Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 519)

The unexpected transition from the vague – the "other things of the same quality" – to the portentously specific and detailed – "She approached me/About buying her desk" – suddenly and radically shifts the poem from the abstract into the concrete. The sturdy-seeming, monosyllabic "desk" that is being offered for sale by an unnamed individual is so material, so

tangible, that it seems to stand squarely and irreducibly at the centre of the poem. Indeed, its solidity is contagious, so that we are liable, for a moment, to interpret the colloquial "bananas" as referring, illogically, to a physical object. Acute in their specificity, the desk, and the imagined bananas, have the effect of anchoring the poem to phenomenological experiences in the physical world that are neither anticipated nor contextualised by the imprecise assertions that precede and follow them. The world as we experience it through these lines may be vaguely expounded and even, at times, 'dream-like', but it is also sharply and unignorably specific, and powerfully material: one is reminded, perhaps, of Wittgenstein's description of 'running up against the limits of language' or, as Perloff glosses the phrase, "the 'bumping of one's head' against the walls of one's language cave in the drive to understand one's world" (Perloff 1996, 'Introduction'). The world, as we encounter it when we read Ashbery's poetry, is something that we can bump our heads against: it is not always predictable or amenable to us, and we do not always encounter it without experiencing discomfort.

The importance of materiality in Ashbery's work would appear to situate it within an Imagist, and even Objectivist, poetic tradition. Ezra Pound, in his essay 'A Retrospect', called for "Direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective" (Pound 1968, p. 3). "No ideas but in things," declared William Carlos Williams (Williams 1995, Book 1, 'The Delineaments of the Giants'). However, when considering Ashbery's relation to 'things', a complication arises, because for him, they are not only the kind of physical, material, "concrete" objects that Williams and Pound refer to. As the poet explained when discussing his writing habits,

> I would like to acknowledge my intention of somehow turning these processes into poetic objects, a position perhaps akin to Dr. Williams's 'No ideas but in things,' but with the caveat that, for me, *ideas are also things*.
>
> (Ashbery 2000, p. 2 [italics mine])

For Ashbery, the word 'things' can refer both to solid objects, and to the free-floating, intellectual objects of one's perception or thought. His poetry deals with what the poem 'Down by the Station, Early in the Morning' refers to as "things… and the things they do"; not only objective experiences, but the subjective, perceptual phenomena they give rise to (Ashbery 2008, p. 743). However, the word 'things' often takes on an even broader meaning

for the poet, referring to nebulous sets of cultural and social mores that are difficult to pin down and almost impossible to take issue with or challenge – "the normal way things are done", as 'Self-Portrait in Convex Mirror' describes it (Ashbery 1977, p. 76). Indeed, Ashbery's use of the word 'things' encapsulates a tension between one's seemingly unmediated phenomenological experience of the world, and the overarching systems which insidiously influence it. In doing so, it gestures towards a dichotomy of scale – between the microcosmic and the global, the individual and the social, the general and the specific, the distant and the intimate. As a result, Ashbery's poetry deals both with the world of 'things' as objects, literal and figurative (a desk, some trees, the AIDS crisis, the "rasp of silk" so acutely perceived that it becomes "a base one might wish to touch once more/Before dying" (Ashbery 2008, p. 743)) and with the more nebulous and indeterminate "twentieth-century scheme of things", "an uneasiness in things", "a deeper outside thing" (Ashbery 2008, p. 195, p. 199, p. 698).

As this willingness to deal with both the macrocosmic and the microcosmic suggests, to situate Ashbery *in the world* is to argue for an all-encompassing, ecological aspect to his poetry, which posits that the subject is, by definition, immersed in, and surrounded by, their experience. Angus Fletcher posits Ashbery as a poet who is intimately concerned with his *environment*, in the broadest sense of the term, and he argues cogently that Ashbery "work[s] with and in the world" (Fletcher 2004, p. 74). However, for Fletcher, Ashbery's "environmental sensitivity" is so acute that his poems themselves *become* environments: the environment-poet, Fletcher claims, "neither writes *about* the surrounding world, thematizing it, nor analytically represents that world, but actually shapes the poem to *be* an Emersonian or esemplastic circle". Such poems "surround the reader", encouraging them to acknowledge the presence of their environment (Fletcher 2004, pp. 9–10). Although Fletcher's reading is persuasive, it does not take into account the way in which Ashbery's poems – through their radical shifts in tone and willingness to admit disjunctive elements – are as prone to disrupt the environment in which they place the reader, as they are to create or reinforce it. As a result, as Ross argues, Ashbery – with his "lack of interest in ecology" (Ross 2017, p. 34) – is an 'environmental' poet only inasmuch as he questions, camps, and deconstructs the very idea of 'nature', treating it not as a revered source of coherence or truth, but rather as a "strange art medium" (Ross 2017, p. 11) that draws our attention to the "mediated experience of all literary encounters" (Ross 2017, p. 34).

In his introduction to John Perrault's *Camouflage*, Ashbery describes Perrault's disruption of the well-worn binary between the self and its environment in terms that could equally apply to his own work:

> The 'I' is really a kind of familiar-sounding threshold that brings us immediately into contact with the unfamiliar world one step away – 'the' world. The poet is this world. He has 'camouflaged' himself to look like everything, if camouflage is the art of calling attention to things by trying to make them invisible…
>
> (Perrault 1966)

In this conception of the relationship between the self and objective reality, the "threshold" or limit of individual subjectivity is necessary in order to convey the "unfamiliar" world in all its variety. Viewed in this context, the logic of Spiegelman's pronouncement that "the ontological status of all objects outside the self is highly questionable throughout Ashbery's poetry" (Spiegelman 2005, p. 151) reveals itself to be circular. It hinges on the notion that because the objects outside the poet's self are not conveyed in a way that renders them fully understandable, they therefore cannot be thought of as being independent of the poet's self. But it is presumably precisely this ontological separation and distance from the self that makes such 'objects' fundamentally incomprehensible, unable to be grasped and taken into the self ('comprehend' derives from the Latin *comprehendere*, *com*- 'together' + *prehendere* 'grasp'). To take issue with statements like Spiegelman's is to find space within Ashbery's poetry for *otherness*, for what is not known by, and cannot be grasped or assimilated into, the individual self – for what Emmanuel Levinas sees as "a relation between self and other that does not reduce the latter to a projection of the former" (Williams 2009, p. 221). Interpreted in this way, as Ashbery noted in a 1983 interview with Richard Jackson, "self-referentiality is not a sign of narcissism, but actually is a further stage of objectivity" (Jackson 1983, p. 71) – an acknowledgement of the limits of individual subjectivity that ultimately leads to a more complete and satisfying realism. Ashbery therefore does not disrupt what Perloff calls (in relation to Stevens) the "Romantic and Symbolist dualism between the 'I' and the 'other'" (Perloff 1981, p. 20); instead, he suggests that this dualism is insurmountable, and the only way to convey it is by charting the way in which the perceiving self can point towards what is outside itself, but can never fully comprehend or assimilate it.

Ashbery's poetry therefore counters the accusation of solipsism with the claim that to exist fully in the world, and to be responsive to it, is a quasi-ethical position. As Mueller discusses (Mueller 1996, p. 561), on several occasions Ashbery uses the word 'conscience' in a way that is so semantically broad that it comes to denote something similar to 'consciousness', as in 'Poem in Three Parts', when he describes how

> The day fries with a fine conscience
> Shadows, ripples, underbrush, old cars.
>
> The conscience is to you what is known
> The unknowable gets to be known.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 443)

In French, which Ashbery spoke fluently, the word *conscience* denotes both 'consciousness' and 'conscience'. Additionally, the references to 'knowing' in 'Poem in Three Parts' suggest an awareness of the word's Latin root (*conscientia*, literally 'with-knowledge' or 'privity of knowledge'). However, Ashbery's broad use of the word – which occurs again in *Hotel Lautréamont*'s 'In My Way/On My Way' as the "ritual conscience/that bathes us, from whose dense curves we know/we shall never escape" (Ashbery 1992, p. 132) – is more than a mere multi-lingual pun.[1] To conceive of 'consciousness' as inseparable from 'conscience' suggests an awareness of the world that is poignant in its sharpness, possessing a quasi-moral power to elicit sympathetic thought. This open, active awareness perhaps corresponds to what Ashbery referred to, at the Poetry Now Symposium in March 1968, as "living in a state of alert" (Herd 2000, p. 7).

For Herd, this 'alertness' gives rise to a sense of occasion in Ashbery's poetry: "his concern", Herd argues, "is with the time, place, situation and circumstances of the poem itself" (Herd

[1] The word 'conscience' may have had a particular resonance for Ashbery due to the fact that in 1967, Louis Simpson publicly accused him of "sneering at the conscience of other poets" following Ashbery's comment that Frank O'Hara's work "does not speak out against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights… it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus a source of an annoyance for partisans of every stripe." As Herd notes, Ashbery was moved to respond to Simpson's criticism in a letter to *Nature* magazine which stated that "All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn't poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mould of a particular program" (Herd 2000, p. 93).

2000, p. 10), although Herd torques the notion of 'occasion' by allowing it to encompass a wider, historical 'moment' such as the Vietnam War (Herd 2000, pp. 93–94, 96–100). However, Ashbery's poetry does not – or does not *only* – deal with the privileged moment, occasion or event, however broadly it is defined; nor does it exclusively narrate what Thomas Gardner calls the "valveless hum of the moment itself" (Gardner 1986, p. 50). Indeed, as Ross and Spiegelman note, his poetry vacillates between attentiveness to the present moment – which broadly corresponds with Herd's notion of occasionality – and a drifting, fluid *in*attention in which the moment dissolves into a vague and unexamined swathe of time. Spiegelman sees inattentiveness and attention as respectively representing the Romantic and postmodern impulses in Ashbery's poetry (Spiegelman 2005, p. 141), and Hickman concurs, seeing the poet's "sense of situation, or 'history of the present', and aesthetic of inattention" as crucial to understanding his work (Hickman 2012, p. 8).

However, for Ashbery, inattention – both on the part of the poet and the reader – is particularly important because it represents a way of being present in the world that does not imply comprehensive knowledge or understanding of one's own experience. A poem such as 'Litany' – in which, as the poet explains, "we can't follow either [voice] without neglecting the other one" (Ashbery and Ford 2003, pp. 60–61) – illustrates the fact that "one is not obliged to take notice of every aspect of one's environment – one can't, in fact" (Stitt 1983). This begs the question of what, and how, can we know about a world that we apprehend in such a piecemeal and unpredictable way. Indeed, as Speigelman claims, "Epistemological questions are at the heart of Ashbery's oeuvre: What do we know? And how?" (Spiegelman 2005, p. 171). Spiegelman's questions would not sound out of place among Ashbery's own formulations that deal with knowing and not knowing, which often serve as titles for his collections and individual poems: 'And You Know', *As We Know*, 'The Songs We Know Best'. Indeed, the word 'know' is used insistently in Ashbery's work, giving us the sense that the poet is engaged in sounding out its meaning. However, the subjects of this exploration are not always grandly ontological; for example, the speaker of 'The Ice Storm' muses:

> The warp, the woof. (What, actually, are they? Never mind, save that for another time when the old guy's gotten a bit more soused.) Or the actual strings of words on the two pages of a book, like "I was reading this novel, I think the author was associated with the Kailyard School." What's that? Wait, though—I think I know. What I really want to know is how will this affect me, make me better in the future? Maybe make

me a better conversationalist? But nobody I know ever talks about the Kailyard School, at least not at the dinner parties I go to.

(Ashbery 2008, p. 881)

What is the difference, this passage tacitly asks us to consider, between 'thinking one knows', 'wanting to know', seeing a person one knows at a party, knowing *what* something is ("the warp, the woof"), and knowing *about* a relatively obscure topic such as the Kailyard School? Is 'to know', it wonders, synonymous with 'to recognise'? That is, does it extrapolate from what is *already* known? Or does it denote a fluid, dynamic and ongoing process of 'getting to know' that never quite reaches the condition of static and discrete 'knowledge'? One is reminded here of Ashbery's response to Richard Kostelanetz's accusation of 'difficulty': "I'm interested in communicating, but I feel that saying something the reader has *already known* is not communicating anything" [italics mine]. Ashbery's poetry, then, takes as its subject what is *not yet known* about our experience. As John Vincent reminds us, "[K]nowing isn't the only pleasure or final endpoint in reading poems" (Vincent 2007, p. 7) However, in attempting to explore what Ashbery's poetry enables us to know about the world, this thesis will argue against assertions such as that made by Shetley that Ashbery's poetry "project[s] a world that is fundamentally unknowable, beyond the power of the poet to name or describe" (Shetley 1993, p. 116). It will seek to identify what, and how, Ashbery's poetry enables us to know about the world, *even when* this world cannot be adequately or comprehensively described.

Methodology

When it comes to Ashbery's poetry, Ross argues, "traditional close reading will only get us so far" (Ross 2013, p. 7). To some extent, this is true of any poet; however, Ashbery's poetry does seem particularly resistant to the formalist, New Critical kind of close reading, in which the meaning of a poem is thought to reside in its structural properties alone. Mirroring the expansive-contractive movement that is evident both in the literal "figure 8" traced by 'The Skaters' (Ashbery 2008, p. 161) and in the subtle ebb and flow of temporal perception chronicled in *A Wave* (Ashbery 2008, pp. 733–808), Ashbery's poetry seems to draw us closer to its textured surfaces, only to deny us access to a definitive meaning which we might expect to find there. In this respect, a close reading of Ashbery's poetry – prone, as it is, to jarring shifts of perspective and linguistic slippage – can be a frustrating process which

spirals inwards, involving the reader in ever smaller nuances of syntax and allusion. Rich layers of linguistic context can undoubtedly be identified in the surfaces of Ashbery's poems, but the reader is left with the lingering suspicion that they do not coherently represent an overarching – or an underlying – meaning. Shoptaw's theory that Ashbery's poetry contains "crypt words" – alternative, unrealised meanings which are called into being by the existing words of the text – is undoubtedly fascinating, but at times takes on an iterative quality, in which the 'shadow' text that Shoptaw uncovers contains as many ambiguities, and invites as many questions, as its source. "That's quite ingenious," was Ashbery's own laconic verdict on a particular set of crypt words that were 'excavated' and presented to him by Shoptaw (Shoptaw 1994, pp. 6–8).

Additionally, the rigidly formalist practice of traditional close reading, which aims to isolate the text from its historical and its socio-political context, and from the responses of its reader, would seem unsuited to the project of this thesis, which aims to contextualise Ashbery's work with relation to phenomenological, material and historical reality. However, Joseph North's sensitive historical analysis of close reading highlights the way in which William Empson and I.A. Richards' original conceptualisation of the practice, which would later give rise to the formalism of the New Critics, was fundamentally democratic and exploratory, aiming to open the text up to interpretation rather than to deny its contiguity with the world, or with the reader (North 2013, pp. 141–157). It is this kind of reading – *close*, without being *closed* – that this thesis aims to enact.

Indeed, although reading Ashbery's poetry closely presents challenges, both in practical and in theoretical terms, to approach it from the opposite direction, and read the work solely in a broad and thematic way in order to unlock a unified, definitive meaning contained within it – to see the early poem 'Some Trees' as being 'about' a formative queer encounter, for example – fails to accommodate the work's rich textures and complex ambiguities. As Vendler argues, reading Ashbery's poems for their overarching meaning is complicated by the fact that they seem to stubbornly resist being 'about' anything (Vendler 1988, p. 227). It is therefore necessary to read Ashbery both closely and broadly at the same time, asking, as the speaker of 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' does, "What is this universe a porch of/As it veers in and out…?" (Ashbery 1977, p. 77). However, this thesis will largely avoid reading Ashbery's poetry as what Hickman, quoting Paul de Man, refers to as an 'allegor[y] of reading' (Hickman 2012, p. 17) – that is, as referring mimetically to its own movements and

structure, rather than to any external, objective reality. On reading the lines from 'Ut Pictura Poesis is Her Name' quoted in the previous section, it is indeed possible to interpret the phrase "a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed,/Dull sounding ones" as self-reflexively commenting on the way in which the poem itself moves between the general and the specific; indeed, so tight would be the curve of this self-referential arc that the 'words' it refers to are the same 'words' which are doing the referring; "[T]he carnivorous/Way of these lines is to devour their own nature," as the speaker of 'The Skaters' notes (Ashbery 2008, p. 152). It is even possible to see the reference to "buying" as reflecting the transactions the poem itself is facilitating between the vague and the specific, between what is known by the speaker of the poem and the reader's own subjectivity. However, approaching Ashbery's poetry in this way effectively closes it off to broader interpretations; regardless of the sensitivity of this kind of reading, in practice it is used to support the claim that the poetry is fundamentally solipsistic. Indeed, the critics who read Ashbery's poems self-referentially are prone to see his poetry as unable to tell us anything about the world around it: "A typical Ashbery poem attempts to focus attention on its own content… rather than on any ostensible subject matter or point," Richman claims, before arguing that the poetry's *only* possible subject is "itself – its inconclusiveness, its antinomianism, its absurd-ism, and, above all, its deep distrust of language that naively attempts statements about reality and reality's possible meaning" (Richman 1982). At times, this kind of reading seems to rob the poetry of its vibrancy by rendering it unable to comment on anything outside itself, so that Ashbery's words become "an active memorial to themselves… a gloss on their own singularity", as Richard Howard claims in his ambivalent 1970 review of *The Double Dream of Spring* (Howard 1970, p. 51). This thesis will attempt to avoid this pitfall by reading the poetry in context of a broader material and phenomenological reality to which it has the capacity to refer.

When attempting to read Ashbery's poems in this way – closely, critically, and in context – one inevitably finds oneself referring to the poet's own comments on his work, and to the events of his life. The 'world' that this thesis takes Ashbery's poetry to refer to is therefore not only a broadly drawn and impersonal historical, socio-economic, or ecological one; what follows will also trace the contours of the poet's life as it appears in, influences, and is creatively transfigured by, his poetry. Herd argues that "while the facts of Ashbery's biography – his solitary childhood (following the death of his brother) in Rochester, his Harvard education, his life in New York and his love affair in Paris – might lead one to the

poetry, they do not, on the whole, enable one to read it" (Herd 2000, p. 20), while David Lehman states that "conspicuously absent from Ashbery's poetry are the autobiographical tales and details of his life" (Lehman 1998). For his part, Ashbery has explicitly stated that: "These are not autobiographical poems, they're not confessional poems" (Shoptaw 1994, p. 1). Although this thesis does not treat Ashbery's poetry as primarily autobiographical, still less confessional, it does, at times, examine the "facts of Ashbery's biography" in order to demonstrate the poet's intimate involvement with the world around him. This approach follows that of Karin Roffman (2017), Marit Macarthur (2008), and, to an extent, Andrew Epstein (2006), all of whom are unafraid to read Ashbery's poetry in the context of the houses he lived in, the friendships that creatively sustained him, and the family members he lived with and loved, misunderstood and mourned. Additionally, despite the insistent presence of the AIDS epidemic in Ashbery's work, the significance of the poet's sexuality is still routinely elided or even denied by many critics. Even John Shoptaw, who has arguably done most to enhance Ashbery's reputation as a queer (or, as he puts it, a "homotextual") poet, is able to assert that "Ashbery leaves himself and his homosexuality out of his poetry" (Shoptaw 1994, p. 4) . This thesis will suggest ways in which we might read queerness into and through Ashbery's poetry without, as David Lehman cautions against, "reduc[ing] criticism to a form of outing" (Lehman 1998, p. 155).

However, what follows will attempt, where possible, to read Ashbery's own statements about his life and his poetry not as sources of incontrovertible fact, but rather as significant for what they can tell us – beyond their obvious subject matter – about the poet's way of thinking, and the structure of his thought. Vincent notes that in interviews and in conversation, Ashbery is "as often misleading as he is illuminating," but is also "often illuminating precisely by being misleading" (Vincent 2007, p. 80); this habitual evasiveness removes some of the temptation to use his comments to justify critical hunches.

Herd, in his own doctoral thesis on Ashbery, acknowledges his prolific output, noting that since he began his studies, more new Ashbery collections had been published than Philip Larkin completed in his whole lifetime (Herd 1996, p. 17). Overall, Ashbery published 28 full-length collections of poetry, as well as three plays, and, in collaboration with James Schuyler, a novel, *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969). He also produced numerous collages, as well as hundreds of pieces of art criticism and several lectures on both poetry and visual art. Faced with this extensive body of work, this thesis attempts to strike a balance between discussing

Ashbery's major collections – those which illustrate most cogently the arguments that drive this thesis – and those which, through their strangeness, their intractability, or their affective power, occasioned the personal and subjective acts of reading, re-reading, thinking, and feeling that led to these arguments being constructed. Among the former are *Three Poems* (1972) and *Flow Chart* (1991), along with Ashbery's best-known long poem, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' (1976). Among the latter are the exuberantly camp and intriguingly aleatory – yet habitually overlooked – *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), which Shoptaw refers to as a "wastebasket for… extraneous poetic matter" (Shoptaw 1994, p. 14), as well as the solemn and exhausted *April Galleons* (1987), which is almost universally dismissed as a minor work. The elegiac and enigmatic *A Wave* (1984) straddles both categories, and the thesis will return insistently to its multivalent central metaphor of the wave itself as a way to approach the question of how an individual subjectivity, bounded in space and time, can both disturb, and be disturbed by, the ongoing and collective currents of time, society and history.

As Vincent notes, for Ashbery the "unit of meaning" is the collection, rather than the standalone poem; additionally, he argues, "it is commonly accepted that the books after *Flow Chart* are different from those that precede it" (Vincent 2007, pp. 1–25). In attempting to provide a coherent overview of Ashbery's work, this thesis focuses predominantly on Ashbery's 'mature', mid-career collections. However, readings of the collections that this thesis does not focus on directly are present in its approach: although *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) is not discussed at length, its use of found material and collage techniques sets the stage for Ashbery's later collage works, both visual and verbal. Similarly, reading Ashbery's late collections serves to highlight an ambient quality which then becomes more evident on a re-reading of the poet's earlier work.

The idea of generalisation is important to Ashbery's work; as Ross notes, "the poems… are always melting into and out of generalized revelation" (Ross 2017, p. 69). However, it is difficult to generalise *about* Ashbery's output, even if one focuses only on his published poetry and ignores his other creative endeavours. It is a challenge to find a single theoretical position that can speak with equal authority about the austere, Audenesque *Some Trees* (1956), the expansive, quasi-philosophical *Three Poems* (1972), the mercurial, elegiac *A Wave* (1984) and the incantatory *Flow Chart* (1991). For this reason, this thesis does not attempt to impose a single, over-arching critical framework on Ashbery's oeuvre. Instead, it draws on the work of several critics, theorists and philosophers – reflecting the poet's own

diverse academic interests and sources of inspiration, from the experimental writings of Raymond Roussel to Russian Romantic composers, from John Cage to John Clare, and from Pop Art to Parmigianino. However, some theoretical touchstones will prove particularly relevant to the way of experiencing and understanding the world that Ashbery's poetry describes. The first is Heidegger, who insists that Being (*Sein*) cannot be understood as an abstract concept, but rather exists as a contextualised and immanent Being-in-the-World, or *Dasein*; as Spurr argues, "Ashbery's poetry imitates the disordered flux of impressions which coordinate our Being-in-the-World" (Spurr 1981, p. 155). Although the austere Heidegger may seem to be an unlikely counterpart to the mercurial Ashbery, parallels arise due to the way in which they challenge the apparently self-evident notion that there is both an internal, subjective world and a separate, objective world 'out there' that is distinct from one's private consciousness. This troubling of the distinction between inside and outside is, Fredric Jameson argues, a hallmark of postmodern cultural artefacts (Jameson 1991, p. 36, p. 155, p. 227). It is a concern that Ashbery returns to insistently, as he asks, in the words of the poem 'The Bungalows', "how does it feel to be outside and inside at the same time?" (Ashbery 2008, p. 224).

A second touchstone is psychoanalysis, and the theories of Freud in particular. In Freudian (and, later, in Lacanian) thought, the 'Real' is the irreducible and enigmatic residue which can never be expressed by means of the Symbolic – that is, by language. Freud's galvanising notion that the individual is, by definition, 'in the dark' about large portions of their own psyche, their motivation and experiences, provides stimulating ways of approaching the question of how Ashbery's oblique and, at times, bewildering poetry allows us to know and understand the world. As Weinert writes,

> …scientific ideas change the way we think about the world and our place in it. With his heliocentric view, Copernicus displaced humans from the physical center of the universe (1543). With his evolutionary theory, Darwin inserted humans into the organismic order of nature (1859)… Freud saw himself as completing this cycle of disparagement by destroying the belief that humans were 'masters in their own house' (1916).
>
> (Weinert 2009, p. 1)

Freud's work therefore encourages us to approach the question of how we know the world in new and unexpected ways, as well as providing a critical language through which it is possible to discuss not only what is seen, known and familiar, but also what is misunderstood or unacknowledged, unknown or strange.

This thesis will approach Ashbery's work thematically rather than chronologically, focusing on five main topics: space, time, representation, work, and waste. Chapter 1 looks in detail at *Three Poems* (1972) in order to postulate a topography of Ashbery's poetry, situating it in the vastness of the American landscape as well as mapping the ways in which it creates emotional and affective space. Chapters 2 and 4 focus on the notion of dwelling, with each chapter approaching it from a different angle. Chapter 2 examines the importance of the physical house throughout Ashbery's poetry, whereas Chapter 4 focuses on *A Wave* (1984) to explore a broader, Heideggerian notion of dwelling as taking place in and through time, as well as in space. Chapter 3 tackles the question of how we know the world through Ashbery's poetry most directly. In evaluating his work of the 1970s – particularly the long poem 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and the contemporaneous collection *The Vermont Notebook* – in the context of contemporary visual art, it argues that the poet is engaged in a sustained interrogation of the practice of representation – both of the self, and of the contemporary American world. Chapter 5 shifts emphasis to explore the importance of work and money, both in Ashbery's life and his poetry, focusing particularly on the dense, somewhat weighty and, at times, mournful *April Galleons* (1987). Chapter 6 closes the thesis by turning its attention not only to what Ashbery's poetry designates as pertinent and useful in its account of the subjective experience of living in the world, but also what it categorises as excessive, useless or degenerate – that is, as waste. Taken together, these topics – dealing both with material reality and with poetics, and with both internal and external experience – aim to illustrate the ways in which Ashbery's poetry exists within, refers to, and comments on, the contemporary world.

1. “A way of being moved and moving”: Ashbery’s poetical spaces

“[P]oetry is a kind of phenomenology,” Ashbery asserts in his 1989 lecture ‘Poetical Space’ (Ashbery 2004, p. 210). This chapter will explore the phenomenology of Ashbery’s poetry as a physical, historical and textual reality: sounding its figurative dimensions, exploring its qualities, and describing the way in which the poet and reader move through it. In particular it will investigate the kind of spaces, and the notions of spatiality, that Ashbery’s poetry invokes, asking what Ashbery’s ‘poetical spaces’ tell us, on a fundamental level, about the experience of being in the world that his poetry communicates.

As Yasmine Shamma points out, the poets of the New York School have been particularly engaged with the properties, characteristics and creative possibilities of space, from the circumscribed ambit of their urban apartments to the sprawling expanse of the city, and – as Timothy Gray argues in his discussion of the New York School’s relationship to pastoral – with the rural environments that existed beneath and beyond it (Shamma 2018, Gray 2010). As a result, as Shamma claims, their work is inescapably shaped and influenced by “New York City’s spatial constraints (and liberties)” (Shamma 2018, p. 2). Indeed, Shamma sees a concern with spatiality as a defining characteristic, arguing that New York School poetry “formally registers a sensitivity to the urban and/or built environment” (Shamma 2018, p. 10).

The preoccupation with spatiality that Shamma identifies was also indicative of a wider cultural and theoretical movement which transcended the limits of any particular school or discipline. Ashbery’s mature work was broadly contemporaneous with the ‘spatial turn’ in critical theory, led by thinkers such as Foucault, de Certeau and Lefebvre, as well as by the geographer Doreen Massey, in which hitherto unexamined distinctions between space and place were called into question, and physical spaces began to be seen as constructed entities, rather than, as Ian Davidson notes, as “container[s] waiting to be filled” (Davidson 2007, p. 4). Davidson goes on to argue that the spatial turn asks questions that are “both wide reaching and epistemological: what do we know about the world, how we know it and how do we

represent that knowing back to ourselves?" (Davidson 2007, p. 165). As he points out, the 20th century saw "space-time compression through both means of travel and new technologies" (Davidson 2007, p. 4) which resulted in a new awareness of different modes of spatiality. To put it in colloquial terms, Ashbery's poetry encompassed not only the 'space race' and the 'space age', but also the era of the 'space cadet': a period when both external and internal terrain – the physical possibilities of an expanded universe, and the unexplored vistas of the mind – were being expanded and explored. Poetic space, as David Herd notes, was also contested during this period. In the second half of the 20th century, Herd argues, "a certain kind of post-War poet" (he is referring mainly to Charles Olson) drew on Heideggerian philosophy to construct a notion of "poetry as [a] grounded, near-dwelling, or neighbourly voice" (Herd 2018, p. 11). For Herd, Ashbery's poetry – in particular, *A Double Dream of Spring* (1970) – challenges Olson's belief that American poetry could, or should, represent or 'dwell in' a particular or familiar place – either a geographical locale, like the Gloucester that Olson invokes in his Maximus Poems, or, more broadly, a stable and knowable semantic or linguistic context. Ashbery's work is, Herd argues, fundamentally aligned with *dis*placement; through its torsion of the notions of space and place, it articulates a broader refusal to 'settle' on any fixed meaning, or poetic style (Herd 2018, pp. 17–24).

What follows will explore these issues in greater depth, taking as its starting point a close reading of Ashbery's *Three Poems* (1972), a mid-career work in which the main tendencies in Ashbery's exploration of different kinds of spatiality – and the tensions between them – are cogently expressed. Primarily written in prose, *Three Poems* nonetheless constitutes one of the clearest distillations of Ashbery's poetics to be found in his oeuvre. Ron Silliman is of the opinion that it is Ashbery's "best and most important book, one that American literature is still working to fully incorporate" (Silliman 2007, p. 301). In it, we find Ashbery at both at his most Romantic and his most down-to-earth; its measured prose gestures both inwards at the emotional landscape of the subject, and outwards at the distant horizons of their perception, tracing a movement both upwards in the direction of spiritual transcendence, and down into the particulars of daily life. In order to explore *Three Poems*' images of spatiality, particularly its images of expansion, and the ways in which it imagines itself traversing space, this chapter will read Ashbery's work in the context of two very different cataloguers and inventors of American space, namely Ralph Waldo Emerson and Buckminster Fuller. Andrew Epstein has discussed the significance of Emerson to Ashbery's work at length; he

defines the former as a defacto pragmatist, and sees his influence on Ashbery as significant primarily due to the way in which highlights the latter's own pragmatic tendencies, which Chapter 4 of this thesis will discuss in more depth (Epstein 2006, pp. 60–64). It is certainly possible to read *Three Poems* as enacting a finely balanced advance towards a Romantic, Transcendental and Emersonian poetics, followed by a retreat towards a more pragmatic notion of subjectivity. However, this chapter will take both Emerson and Ashbery's pragmatism as given, in order to focus on the way in which Emerson's imagery of spaces and spatial processes can help us to understand how Ashbery describes and navigates both physical and intellectual space. Reading Ashbery through an Emersonian lens will allow us to think more effectively about his position within different American spaces – not only the vast geographical expanse of the country, but also the context and history of the American literary tradition, and the contemporary poetry scene.

Writing on the New York School poets, David Antin observes that "all their images of 'writing a poem' are a way of being moved and moving, a way of walking, running, dancing, driving" (Antin 1995, p. 74) This chapter will go on to argue that for Ashbery's poetry, "being moved and moving" denotes not only physical, but also affective, processes. By examining the position of the reader in Ashbery's poetic spaces, it will explore the way in which Ashbery enables both the poem and its reader to move through and occupy indeterminate sites that hover uncertainly between intimacy and isolation, and between community and self-sufficiency. Using Buckminster Fuller's notion of 'tensegrity' as an analogue for the structural tensions that inform Ashbery's poems, it will explore the poet's use of pronouns, arguing that his address to the reader creates an affective space that is inherently unstable and in flux, and which, as a result, alternates unpredictably between private and public. The final section will go on to argue that Ashbery frequently exercises his right to back out of, turn from, or wander distractedly away from, the negotiations his poetry engages in, and explores what significance this spatial and epistemological turning away might have in the context of his work as a whole.

In a sense, the distinction between space and place is an epistemological one; space becomes place when we come to know, or recognise, or believe certain things about it. To enquire about Ashbery's treatment of space is, then, to explore the way in which his poetry engages with the world; by exploring Ashbery's poetic spaces, we explore his ideological, philosophical, and even political ones, too.

*   *   *

Angus Fletcher describes the American poet's "grow[th] into poetic freedom" in spatial and geographical terms, as a "long and still unfinished journey outward" (Fletcher 2004, p. 1). Fletcher's claim calls to mind the quasi-mythical image of the American frontier, which swept westward across the country throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, codifying and organising the land it encountered. In 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1893), Frederick Jackson Turner describes the advance of the frontier as synonymous with American identity:

> This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.
>
> (Turner 1893)

The image of the frontier has persisted in the American imagination, and has, as a result, come to represent a more figurative expansion – creative, economic, and intellectual – into previously unknown territories, as well as an expansiveness of outlook and ambition. The poet, like the pioneer, Fletcher's formulation suggests, must restlessly expand their horizons, moving ever onwards to discover and imaginatively assimilate what lies beyond their immediate surroundings.

This poetic impetus to journey into new territories is articulated in Charles Olson's essay 'Projective Verse', which valorises a "projectile… prospective" movement in which "always, always one perception must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!" (Olson 1997, p. 240). Although the mercurial and playful poetics of the New York School were very different from those forged at Black Mountain College, one can detect an echo of the restless dynamism valorised by Olson in Frank O'Hara's numerous references to movement, such as his assertion, in 'Poem', that "my force is in mobility", and his claim, in 'Personism: A Manifesto', that

> you just go on your nerve. If someone’s chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don’t turn around and shout, ‘Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep.’
>
> (O’Hara 1995, p. 498)

Hazel Smith coins the term “hypergrace” to describe O’Hara’s mobility: it is, she says, the “ability to move discontinuously and without fear between different places, histories and sexual identities: a way of being in the post-modern world” (Smith 2000, p. 72) A comparable sense of relentless, ongoing movement through various kinds of space is also discernible in Ashbery’s poetry, particularly in his 1972 collection *Three Poems*. The form of this work – namely prose, the form of narrative, philosophy, and explicatory writing – would appear to align it with an expansive movement onwards and forwards, in temporal, epistemological, and even physical terms. As Jeremy Noel-Tod argues, “the prose poem is free… to extend across and down the page… and it is in this freedom that we can locate the distinctive feeling to which the prose poem gives form: expansiveness” (Noel-Tod 2018, ‘Introduction’). ‘The New Spirit’, the opening poem in *Three Poems*, envisages this expansiveness by imagining both its subjects and the world they inhabit as being in constant motion, “young and old alike moving together” on a “continuous pilgrimage” (Ashbery 2008, pp. 247–248).

However, the forward progression that *Three Poems* envisages is so determined that it seems to occur at all points at once; “we and everything around us are moving forward continually and… being modified by the speed at which we travel and the regions through which we pass”, the speaker of ‘The System’ asserts (Ashbery 2008, p. 295). As a result, the collection’s forward movement also takes the form of an expansion *outwards* in space. The words ‘out’ and ‘around’ echo insistently through the poem, in various configurations (*around*, *surround*, *round*, *outside*, *without*), and objects are drawn inexorably outwards into the world, as if animated by a powerful centripetal force: the addressee moves “out into the confusion” past “the traffic, the trees” which are “inside each other”, and eventually “grow[s] up” not vertically, or in terms of maturity, but rather concentrically, “around the other, posited life” (Ashbery 2008, pp. 247–252). Perception is also envisaged as moving outwards, not only in terms of the physical location of the external objects that it is aimed at, but also in the way in which it penetrates, ‘takes in’ and ultimately assimilates what it encounters, figuratively encompassing and surrounding it: “But then the eyes directing out, living into

their material and in that way somehow making more substance than before…" (Ashbery 2008, p. 251). The relentless intellectual and perceptual expansion that the poems describe is therefore envisaged as three-dimensional: a radial, or global, expansion, in which all points are moving forwards – and outwards – in space at once. In this respect the collection would appear not only to exemplify, but to exaggerate, the pioneering, prospective movement forward into uncharted space that the image of the American frontier calls to mind – and perhaps, in doing so, to reimagine it as an imperialist movement, in which influence radiates out from a central, dominant point.

The work's prose form – the form of the novel, and of the philosophical tract – would also seem to suggest that its aim is to advance doggedly towards some form of definitive knowledge, resolution, or 'truth'. The word 'prose' derives from the Latin 'prorsus', meaning 'straightforward' or 'direct'; as Noel-Tod notes, "our habitual expectation when we see a passage of prose is that it will explain, not sing… the information-giving sentence – logical, functional, linear – is the conveyor belt that carries the business of our lives" (Noel-Tod 2018, 'Introduction'). *Three Poems*' long, multi-clausal sentences do at first appear to be business-like and "information-giving", leading the reader through a series of increasingly precise assertions in the direction of a logical conclusion – an impression that is strengthened by the work's frequent references to the notion of "proof" and "proving":

> As I was going to say, this outward-hanging ledge over the pitfalls of mankind, proves that it is something you know, *not just as* the tree is aware of its bark, *but* as something left with you on consignment. *And it need not* just be, it can grow, with you though not part of you, *if* you are willing to see it as reverting back to nature *and not* as the ultimate realization of Roman engineers, a stone T-square.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, pp. 251–252 [italics mine])

Ashbery's modifiers and conjunctions – 'but', 'and', 'if', 'and not', 'not just as' – seem to be refining and steering his argument, with the result that by the end of the paragraph an "ultimate realization" has been reached. On closer examination, however, this apparently logical structure dissolves, due to the way in which no proposition within it is allowed to stand as being definitive: there is always a 'but' or a 'not' coming to call into question what has just been stated, and even the "ultimate realization" invoked at the end of the passage is negated in advance by the preceding "and not as". Having followed the speaker's somewhat

serpentine argumentative line closely, we find ourselves, at its conclusion, left without a single positive assertion to calibrate our understanding against – as Will Maclean asserts, Ashbery's prose produces the "semblance of argument", but refuses to arrive at a satisfying conclusion (Maclean 2019, p. 349). Even the apparent finality of the section break at the end of the passage above is immediately revoked: at the start of the next paragraph, the speaker picks up the theme again with a nagging question, followed by another set of modifier-laced clauses. Rather than arriving at a conclusion, the runs impatiently past it, onto a new set of assertions and revisions:

> But how does this work? And yet you see yourself growing up around the other, posited life, afraid for its inertness and afraid for yourself, intimidated and defensive. And you lacerate yourself so as to say…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 252)

As the text progresses, it begins to suspect that, despite its relentless movement, it will fail to arrive at its destination. "Today your wanderings have come full-circle", the speaker of 'The System' announces; in discursive terms, this motion is more akin to an aimless turning in circles than a decisive argumentative closure (Ashbery 2008, p. 314). "Is this really the end toward which everything was rotating?" asks the speaker incredulously. As Silliman argues, the work "literally, deliberately, goes nowhere – and does so again & again", its apparently purposeful movement gradually revealing itself to be aimless, or even perverse (Silliman 2007, p. 300). The work's apparently confident situation of itself and its subject as poised on the edge of an advancing mass of ideas, impressions and assertions – a prospective, pioneering, *avant-garde* situation – therefore dissolves, when observed, into fragmentary, self-reflexive impulses whose purposelessness undermines the notion that one can progress boldly forwards, either in time, or in physical (or epistemological) space. "The motion of the story is moving though not/getting nearer', 'The New Spirit' admits (Ashbery 2008, p. 252).

One of the literary precursors of the expansive spatiality that Ashbery invokes in *Three Poems* is, as Fletcher notes, Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Stanley Cavell, Emerson's work expresses an "onwardness" that constitutes a rejection of the notion of settling in one place (Cavell 1979, p. 176). In Emerson's philosophy, Cavell argues, "the achievement of the human requires not inhabitation and settlement but abandonment, leaving" (Cavell 2003, p. 19). In Emerson's 1841 essay 'Circles', this "onwardness", and repeated "abandonment" of

objects and ideas, occurs due to the way in which new perceptions, thoughts and ways of understanding constantly radiate from both the subject and their environment in an endless succession of epistemological circles. Emerson writes:

> THE EYE is the first circle, the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary picture is repeated without end…
>
> (Emerson 2015, p. 152)

Later in his essay, Emerson will reiterate this assertion that the processes of understanding and discovery he describes are "without end": "The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end" (Emerson 2015, p. 153). However, on reading 'Circles' closely, one can discern that although the processes Emerson describes may indeed be endless and ongoing, the perceptual and epistemological circles that he invokes are *not* open-ended. Each circle or sphere transiently reaches completion, even though it is destined to be abandoned in favour of another circle of understanding or knowledge which inscribes an even more persuasive arc. In this way, ever wider circles of understanding are drawn around the apprehending subject: "The man finishes his story, – how good! how final! how it puts a new face on all things! He fills the sky. Lo! on the other side rises also a man, and draws a circle around the circle we had just pronounced the outline of the sphere" (Emerson 2015, p. 154). Just as the eye of the observer, in apprehending the horizon, figuratively "forms" it, designating the limit of what it perceives as synonymous with the limit of what *can* be perceived, and therefore encompassing everything in its sphere, the circles that Emerson describes are – albeit for a transient moment – complete and perfect. In this respect, they have a teleological function; their aim is to describe the world in a way that is "final", includes everything, and cannot be superseded. As it happens, they always *are* superseded, but this does not diminish their ambition to understand the world definitively.

In contrast, the perceptual and epistemological expansion that Ashbery describes in *Three Poems* lacks a clear teleology. Rather than culminating in a sudden, decisive movement, akin to Emerson's triumphant 'drawing of a circle', the work's progress is envisaged as incremental but insistent, as suggested by its insistent use of verbs such as *suffuse* and *dissolve*. The process it describes is therefore less an argumentative *circle* than it is a repeating *cycle*, in which assertions and ideas are continually introduced, refined and re-

incorporated: as ‘The System’ puts it, the “story… [is] resumed and resumed over and over, that is taken up and put aside and taken up again” (Ashbery 2008, p. 316). The text lacks a definitive denouement – instead, “there is always something fading out or just coming into focus” (Ashbery 2008, p. 298). Ashbery uses the concept of *absorbency* to describe the narrative of the poem, and its argumentative movement: it represents “an absorbing puzzle”, charting “the absorption of ourselves seen from the outside”, “rapidly absorbing… outline[s] like snow filling footprints” (Ashbery 2008, p. 306, p. 300, p. 256). By emphasising its own capacity to absorb and incorporate the ideas and objects it encounters as it progresses, *Three Poems* suggests that its progression through physical and intellectual space takes place by means of assimilation, acquisition and consumption. Although we may find ourselves, to borrow the work’s own description, “riveted to its slowly unfolding expansiveness” (Ashbery 2008, p. 253), this expansion produces only the space to accommodate its own continued movement, rather than creating meaning – or affective space – for the reader, as the work itself suggests with its image of billowing clouds of smoke as “rolls of experience”, “filling space up as they create more space” (Ashbery 2008, p. 255). As a result of the poems’ ability to incorporate material, the work’s expansion results in a process whose only goal is its own continuation. In ‘Projective Verse’, Olson quotes Robert Creeley’s description of the relationship between form and content:

> FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. (Or so it got phrased by one, R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me, with this possible corollary, that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand.)
>
> (Olson 1997, p. 240)

There is, perhaps, an element of mischievousness in the way in which *Three Poems* turns Creeley’s pronouncement on its head, making its content an extension of its form, while also gesturing towards a more modernist conception of ‘pure’ (Olson’s “right”) form, that can be reached *irrespective* of content. Indeed, because the form of *Three Poems* enacts an expansion that appears potentially limitless, its content is similarly unwilling to arrive at a terminus. Impatient readers who leaf forward to the last page of ‘The New Spirit’, hoping to find the conclusion of the poem’s arguments, may find themselves disappointed with its closing sentence:

> And this is again affirmed in the stars: just their presence, mild and unquestioning, is proof that you have got to begin in the way of choosing some one of the forms of answering that question, since if they were not there the question would not exist to be answered, but only as a rhetorical question in the impassive grammar of cosmic unravelings of all kinds, to be proposed but never formulated.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 280)

The tautological conclusion reached at the end of the poem is that “you have got to begin…”. The work, citing its “proof” as being “affirmed in the stars” – structures which inexorably draw objects into their orbit – seems to curve back towards its starting point to form a circle, enclosing and justifying its own reasoning, and denying the reader not only the satisfaction of a definitive conclusion, but also, with its “rhetorical question[s]”, excluding them from its argumentative space altogether. In this way a text which appears to be driven forwards by the intellectual movement of its argumentative lines reveals itself to be ultimately concerned only with its formal continuation. To return to the image of the American frontier, one might even conclude that what results from a poetics that valorises concentric expansion is not a triumphant, organising advance – what Turner called the “line of most rapid Americanisation” (Turner 1893) – but rather a non-linear, meandering, chaotic expansion, producing the linguistic equivalent of another characteristically American advance through space: 20th-century urban sprawl.

*   *   *

The question of what characteristics American space can be said to possess, and how one might successfully occupy and navigate it, is a question that applies to Emerson’s writing, as much as it does to Ashbery’s. James von der Heydt discerns in Emerson’s work one of the earliest expressions of a geographical, cultural and political imperative that compels the American writer to negotiate between boundlessness and finitude, not only in geographical, but also in philosophical, terms (von der Heydt 2008). To be American, von der Heydt argues, is to oscillate between “the expansive self-sufficiency involved in the idea of ‘the American continent,’ on the one hand, and, on the other, the troubling insularity of the perceiving self”. In order to carve out philosophical space, the American writer must “choose either to embrace vastness, or self-consciously to stave vastness off, or, somehow, both at once” (von der Heydt 2008, p. 10). For Walt Whitman, this negotiation between the limited

and the boundless takes the form of triumphant, paradoxical assertions that what is endless can be accommodated, undiminished, within what is finite – his declaration, for example, that "I am large, I contain multitudes" (Whitman 2016, p. 180), and the affirmation, from the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, that "there can be unnumber'd Supremes, and that one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another..." (Whitman 2009, p. 103). For Emerson, von der Heydt argues, a similar impulse is expressed by an encounter with the sublime in which "impossible size replaces possible futurity as the yardstick of knowledge" (von der Heydt 2008, p. 12). *Three Poems* also memorably inquires after its own capacity to encounter and accommodate boundlessness: the collection begins with the speaker's assertion that "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" (Ashbery 2008, p. 247). The collection's opening pages continue this debate by means of sudden and unpredictable shifts in size and scale, as when the speaker's grandiose reference to "the ideal rhythm of the spheres" is followed by a metaphor that likens memory to "the face on a deflated balloon… a perversion of itself" (Ashbery 2008, pp. 248–249). After mentioning an epic, quasi-Classical "hunter's moon", the speaker wonders:

> Ever thought about the moon, how well it fits what it has to light? And those lacquer blobs and rivers of daylight, shaken out of a canister – so unmanageable, so indigestible… Well, isn't that the point?
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 250)

Ashbery's swerves between the portentousness of the slowly turning spheres and the triviality of a deflated balloon, and between the vastness of the moon and the miniaturized "lacquer blobs" of daylight, could be seen to be quintessentially Emersonian. In particular, they are reminiscent of Emerson's aphoristic assertion, in 'Circles', that "Moons are no more bounds to spiritual power than bat-balls" (Emerson 2015, p. 153). However, while Emerson's juxtaposition effects a rapid shift in physical terms, the dynamism inherent in "bat balls", which represent not only physical movement but also a more abstract, potentiated "power", is, on some level, commensurate with that encompassed within the vast, slow bulk of "moons". Emerson's "bat-balls" (even the sound of the term, with its repeated plosive 'bs', suggests a kinetic, restless quality) are therefore imagined as a powerful energetic compression of the moon, rather than a bathetic diminution of it. In contrast, Ashbery's juxtaposition of the "hunter's moon" with miniaturised, mannered "lacquer blobs" of daylight

does not suggest the direct translation of energy and power from a larger object to a smaller. Rather, it signals a radical discontinuity both of size and scale, and also of tone and style – an "unmanageable… indigestible" relationship (Ashbery 2008, p. 250). The Transcendentalist Emerson's vast moons and nimble bat balls exemplify the American self's capacity to accommodate rapid shifts in scale without a diminution of understanding or power – its ability to live both spiritually and pragmatically at once, perhaps. In contrast, Ashbery's lacquer blobs and deflated balloon – as well as the "objects placed along the top of a wall: a battery jar, a rusted pulley, shapeless wooden boxes, an open can of axle grease…" which follow the speaker's grand assertion that "we have broken through into the meaning of the tomb" (Ashbery 2008, pp. 247–248) – reduce unknowable vastness to a manufactured artefact, often one that is miniaturised or fussily circumscribed: a finite thing that can be held in the palm of the hand. Such objects have no ambition to "contain multitudes". Their specificity – the deflated state of the balloon, the now-illegible face that has been drawn on it, the tactile particularity of the open can of axel grease – precludes them from becoming representative. Not only do they signify a shift between including everything ("put[ting] it all down") and including only themselves ("leav[ing] all out"); they also tacitly (and playfully) redraw the parameters of the collection's stated ambition to "put it all down", downgrading the aim of total inclusion from a philosophical goal to a more material (and perhaps even a consumerist) one. Whereas Emerson's juxtapositions of scale describe, as von der Heydt puts it, "a powerful imagination entang[ling] helplessly with its external equivalent, a world without borders" (von der Heydt 2008, p. 1), Ashbery's affirm the fundamental incommensurability of the boundlessness of the world and the finite sphere of the American self – and suggest that the recourse of the 20th-century self, when confronted by vastness, infinity, or mystery, is to be found in relationships with decontextualised, highly individualised *things*.

An analogous tension between different scales is also evident on a broader, textual level in *Three Poems*, whose relentless onward movement results in a discontinuity between the work as a whole and its constituent parts – not the three individual prose-poems that make it up, as much as the writing itself on a microcosmic level. The chains of modifiers that characterise the collection's prose draw the reader along, making the work relatively easy – and enjoyable – to read on the level of the individual phrase, sentence and paragraph, while simultaneously making it difficult to grasp on a more discursive plane. The finely poised dramas of suspense and revelation which are enacted by the subtle turns and shifts of Ashbery's prose feel

significant as we encounter them, but as they accrue, we begin to suspect that no overarching, holistic meaning will emerge from them. Indeed, the work's endless re-evaluations of its own assertions seem to be leading us ever further into uncertainty. Noel-Tod notes that "one marker of form in the prose poem is the drawing of a verbal circle"; he is referring to what Amy Lowell described as the "spherical effect" of poetry, in which verbal patterning causes semantic or sonic elements to recur, with the result that the work ultimately forms a unified entity (Noel-Tod 2018, 'Introduction'). Rather than realising this intricately patterned harmony, which operates dialogically on the level of the individual word and the poem as a whole, *Three Poems* circles uncertainly and distractedly. As a result of its unwillingness to allow its microcosmic structural elements to represent and refine its macrocosmic ones, and vice versa, it constructs two separate discursive spaces, making sense on the level of the individual sentence, and making another, different, kind of sense on the level of the work as a whole.

Cavell notes that Emerson's circles are predicated on the validity of generalisation as a strategy by which to understand the world: "generalization is an Emersonian tone or function most fully computed in 'Circles', where the generation of new circles is associated with what we call generalizations and genesis and generations…". He sees Emerson's essay as gesturing towards its own argumentative structure when it refers to the Augustinian concept of God, whose "center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere"; that is, Emerson's generalisation is made possible by the fact that each part of the work operates in service of the greater whole (Cavell 2013, 'Chapter II'). In *Three Poems*, however, the correspondence between small and large ceases to hold – "The system was breaking down", as the second poem in the collection admits (Ashbery 2008, p. 280); as a result, it becomes impossible to view the specific, individual assertions the work makes as it progresses as being emblematic or representative of its broader concerns – that is, it becomes impossible to generalise. The speaker of 'The System' acknowledges this difficulty:

> Most people would not consider it in its details, because (a) they would argue that details, no matter how complete, can give no adequate idea of the whole, and (b), because the details can too easily become fetishes, i.e., become prized for themselves, with no notion of the whole of which they were a part, with only an idolatrous understanding of the qualities of the particular detail…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 290)

The “details” that the speaker refers to are either trivial – that is, they do not contribute to a general meaning – or they are excessively meaningful, looming disproportionately large so that they, like Freud’s fetishised objects, overshadow the whole of which they are a part. Edward Larrissy argues persuasively that “[a]ny suggestion that Ashbery values a universal or central principle, however tentatively it may be described, has to contend with much that asserts the irreducibility of details” (Larrissy 2000, p. 76). However, despite the compelling physicality of Ashbery’s details, indeterminacy and vagueness – what the later collection *A Wave* (1984) will refer to as “the tender blur of the setting” (Ashbery 2008, pp. 788–789) – are, paradoxically, equally characteristic of his work. Stephen Ross sees Ashbery’s poetry as being defined by this tension between clarity and obfuscation, detail and generalisation:

> Ashbery’s work is full of terms that produce clear and blurry effects – abstractions like ‘aspect’, ‘continuity’, ‘moment’, ‘true way’ and ‘lesson’ that do not attach to any particulars. The poems, obeying Fairfield Porter’s principle of ‘sybylline clarity’, are always melting into and out of generalized revelation.
>
> (Ross 2017, p. 69)

As Larrissy’s assertion that Ashbery’s details exist in opposition to “a universal or central principle” suggests, another way to theorise this ambivalent relationship between part and whole, specific and general, clear and vague, is in terms of *centrality*. At the centre of the circles of knowledge and perception that Emerson describes is the individual subject. His intellect, experience and understanding radiate outwards towards the edges of what can be seen and known, forming an ambit whose boundary is the horizon. As in Wallace Stevens’ poem ‘Anecdote of the Jar’, the Emersonian individual organizes the space around him, forcing what Stevens calls the “slovenly wilderness” to rearrange itself, and thereby “[taking] dominion” over it (Stevens 1954, p. 76). In *Three Poems*, however, the individual speaker, and, to an extent, the work, are situated unpredictably, sometimes within the boundaries of the expanding spheres of knowledge they describe, and sometimes outside them: there is no single dominant point or perspective around which the world is permitted to organise itself. In as much as it gestures towards a proto-Derridean ‘decentering’ of the subject, the work prefigures concerns that would preoccupy the language writers towards the end of the 1970s. In his essay ‘Trying to be Centered… on the Circumference’, published in the August 1978 issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the playwright Richard Foreman declares his intent to

situate “mentation, mental-acts… on an outside surface… not hidden away inside” (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, p. 50). Bruce Andrews, also writing in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, expands upon the importance of disrupting a “centripetal” system which concentrates meaning at the centre of a text in his essay ‘Text and Context’. For Andrews, “[l]anguage is not a monologic communication but a spatial interaction” which, if it is to avoid eliciting the “the glazed gaze of the consumer”, must take place at the margins of a literary work, allowing for the “hollowing out of lower depths of labyrinthine caves of signification” (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, pp. 33–36). Ashbery similarly suggests that the structures evoked in *Three Poems* are hollow and empty at their centres: They are “magnificent but empty structure[s]”, “hollow, empty sphere[s]”, “empty but with a rush of promise of fulfilment”, “riddled and honeycombed with vacancy” (Ashbery 2008, p. 262, p. 248, p. 257, p. 305). The structural activity that defines and supports them takes place on their edges or margins, leaving their centres unmapped or vacant.

How, then, should we conceptualise the kind of poetic space that Ashbery constructs in *Three Poems* if none of the work’s details can be considered to be ‘central’ or representative? One answer can be found in the collection’s imagery of hollow forms whose structural elements are distributed across their surface, such as spheres and globes, from the “hunter’s moon” and “ball/of contradictions, that is heavier than gravity” of ‘The New Spirit’ (Ashbery 2008, p. 250, p. 247) to the uncanny image of “a vast wetness as of sea and air combined, a single smooth, anonymous matrix without surface or depth” with which the collection’s final poem, ‘The Recital’, draws to a close (Ashbery 2008, p. 325). As *Three Poems* progresses and expands, its components, and the ideas and objects it evokes, move in relation to each other, like the face on the balloon referred to in its opening pages; rather than gesturing outwards, towards external referents, they function primarily to define, reinforce and contextualise each other. They are both dependent on the structure of which they are a part, and are what it depends on for its integrity. The terms in which Ashbery describes these structures again call to mind the concerns of language poetry. Indeed, Richard Foreman describes his own practice in terms that could be applied to the argumentative and formal movements of *Three Poems*:

> Things bleed in unexpected ways into other things…So there isn’t progression or development (19th century edifice complex: impressive what man can do) there is rather – like the electron – a ‘being potentially present’ in many places at once. Structures of potentiality, not heavy, massive edifices.

(Andrews and Bernstein 1984, p. 50)

The "structures of potentiality" that *Three Poems* invokes, such as a bubbles and balloons, spheres and matrices, owe their integrity to the tensions that ensue when separate components are held apart from, and by, each other, maintaining a tenuous overall balance regardless of their individual position. In a sphere, every element is equidistant from the centre, and can therefore be said to occupy an equally important (and equally central) position. In such a structure, as Emerson asserts in 'Circles', "every thing is medial" (Emerson 2015, p. 153).

*   *   *

The form of a hollow sphere defines a shape in space, without fully occupying it. Possessing a verticality that is devoid of content, it suggests the existence of depth, while realising it as surface. When the tensions between the individual elements in such a structure become too great, or are unexpectedly disrupted by external forces, the structure either explodes or collapses in on itself, or does both (as in Ashbery's later long poem 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: "The balloon pops, the attention/Turns dully away" (Ashbery 1977, p. 70). One analogue for this ongoing tension between coherence and disjunctiveness, surface and depth, can be found in Buckminster Fuller's principle of 'tensegrity', which was exemplified by the geodesic structures that he prototyped and built in the 1940s at Black Mountain College. Ashbery does not appear to have ever interacted with Fuller directly; however, he was certainly aware of Black Mountain College, and, as Nathan Brown explains, Fuller's ideas had become extremely popular by the 1960s, to the point of being mainstream (Keats 1991, pp. 15–18). Ashbery also refers to a "geodesic dome" in an unpublished fragment which was written during the composition of 'The Skaters'. Fuller observed that arranging spheres concentrically around a central point resulted in hexagonal arrays, and that joining these at their central point gave rise to a network of triangles. From this, he extrapolated his trademark dome, a sphere dissected into "geodesics" ('great circles'), and worked with one of his students at Black Mountain, Kenneth Snelson, to develop the theory of tensegrity, a mesh of opposing tensions which, while composed of individually unstable parts, gives rise to a high degree of overall integrity and stability (Brown 2017, pp. 108–109). The hallmark of Snelson and Fuller's tensegrity structures was that their components – hollow aluminium tubes, threaded onto thin wires – never touched. For Fuller, it was this realisation, rather than

the physical models he constructed, that was crucial in the development of his domes. "Nothing in Universe [sic] touches anything else," he wrote triumphantly:

> The Greeks misassumed that there was something called a solid… Today we know that the electron is as remote from its nucleus as is the Earth from the Moon in respect to their diameters. We know that microcosmically and macrocosmically nothing touches.
>
> (Brown 2017, p. 109)

In Fuller's completed domes the components *do* touch, but this is due to the inevitably imperfect realisation of the design, rather than the design itself. The choreographer Merce Cunningham remembers the construction of Fuller's prototype dome at Black Mountain College as an exercise in controlled failure:

> Yes, he built one of those geodesic domes, and my recollection about it is that he asked for a specific kind of material but the width was less. So he was heard very quietly to make this remark as they were trying to put it up: 'Well it won't work but we'll go right ahead and do it anyway.
>
> (Brown 2017, p. 101)

As Brown observes, Fuller's domes express

> the trace of a conviction that if the geometry is sufficiently harmonious then structural integrity will take care of itself. In other words, we might detect the shadow of an intimation that materials make no difference at all.
>
> (Brown 2017, p. 104)

For Fuller there are, in his own words, "only patterns, operative in pure principle" (Brown 2017, p. 104), to the extent that the schematics of his structures were as important to him as their realised physical forms. Similarly, in Ashbery's *Three Poems*, the structural element of argumentation, or "proving" – supersedes the details of the particular argument being conducted. As 'The New Spirit' puts it, "these become what is going on. They can join but never touch" (Ashbery 2008, p. 256). What results is something that is paradoxically both sturdy and tenuous, akin, perhaps, to what *Three Poems* self-consciously refers to as "the

whole solid but fragile mass" (Ashbery 2008, p. 257). Marjorie Perloff remarks on this structural quality, observing that Ashbery's "disjunctive metonymic relations", which contain elements of both "contiguity" and "gaps", "converge to create a peculiar surface tension" (Perloff 1981, p. 10).

Fuller's first Black Mountain dome collapsed, as he predicted it would, but his second, necklace-style dome – which laid flat on the floor until its cables were tightened – was a success, as a photograph of Fuller and his students hanging from its bars attests. Hugh Kenner writes:

> A photo shows nine men hanging from it. Their weight tended to compress the tubes, which ran vertex to vertex. Their weight also stressed the tension network. Since slacking the cables would let the whole thing collapse, and omitting the tubes would leave only a structureless net, the demonstration of tensional and compressional interplay could not have been neater.
>
> (Kenner 1974, pp. 236–237)

The image appears to show Fuller's students triumphantly demonstrating the strength of the dome, but as Kenner notes, their interaction with the structure is more complex than it initially appears, due to the way in which their weight forces its materials to act in new ways. As they hang from the structure, their weight becomes part of the mesh of tensions that prevents the dome from either collapsing, or existing as a "structureless net". They therefore *prove* the integrity of the dome both in the modern, and in the more archaic, senses of the word: they demonstrate its strength, and by doing so they test and assay it, placing its design under hitherto unexperienced stress.

The integrity of Fuller's dome provides us with another way to think about the references to "proof" and "proving" in *Three Poems*. Rather than producing the logical, scientific kind of "proof" that it is ostensibly moving towards, the text can instead be thought of as *proving* in the sense of relentlessly testing its own assertions: poking at their weak points, highlighting their inadequacies, and often revising or revoking them altogether. In turn, the reader – like Fuller and his students hanging from the bars of the dome in Black Mountain – exerts his or her own pressure on the poem, attempting to read it in a way that reveals the definitive meaning that it promises, while also appreciating its moments of lyrical beauty; trying, perhaps, to keep its relentless linguistic expansiveness semantically manageable. The ultimate cohesiveness of the work is created and maintained by this interplay of tensions: between the poetry's promise of – and its reader's appetite for – definitive meaning, and its ultimate unwillingness to endorse any assertion as definitive, or any judgment as final.

One of the most significant aspects of Fuller's domes was that they bore hardly any weight at their foundations in comparison to their span. As a result, they had the potential to be expanded in a way that was – in theory, at least – unlimited. This notion of boundless structural expansion was popularised by Fuller during the politically fraught years after the end of the Second World War, and although it would appear to contradict the United States' official post-war policy of 'containment', it reasserts and reimagines a particularly American set of ambitions, similar to those articulated by Emerson, and, more ambivalently, by Ashbery: to advance and organise, while remaining fundamentally open to novelty; and to approach, or to counter, what is vast or unlimited by way of what is detailed, structured and particular.

The architectural historian Douglas Murphy describes the experience of entering Fuller's vast geodesic dome in Montreal. Murphy writes that

> in passing through the threshold, a remarkable thing happens. Although the external world remains completely visible, all of a sudden the dome seems to vanish, its boundaries disappearing as the visitor moves inward. At the same time, the entire sky becomes marked with the grid of fine elements.… The visitor feels as though they are both inside and outside at the same time, and that there is the most featherweight of protective boundaries around them at an almost indeterminate distance.
>
> (Murphy 2016, 'Chapter 1')

This passage – which, incidentally, provides a good description of the experience of reading Ashbery's poetry – highlights the way in which Fuller's geodesic structures, with their open structure and their theoretically unlimited span, call into question the categories of inside and outside. Ashbery's poetry is often preoccupied with this distinction; in 'The Bungalows', from *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), the speaker of the poem wonders:

> How does it feel to be outside and inside at the same time,
> The delicious feeling of the air contradicting and secretly abetting
> The interior warmth?
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 224)

In this earlier poem, the endlessly expansive, finely balanced structures of *Three Poems* are not in evidence. The "perfect tri-city mesh of things" that 'The Bungalows' goes on to describe is decidedly finite, stretching only along a riverbank, and "always turning to alps and thresholds", coalescing into delimited forms (Ashbery 2008, p. 224). *Three Poems* is less preoccupied with liminality, with the idea of being situated directly on the border ("fence-sitting/Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal", as the poet wryly phrased it in 1966's 'Soonest Mended' (Ashbery 2008, p. 185)) and is – like Fuller's geodesic domes – concerned with how inherently de-spatialised notions of endlessness, boundlessness or infinity can be realised in formal terms.

* * *

There is undoubtedly a social context to *Three Poems'* imagery of enclosing spheres and vast matrices in terms of its satirisation of the late 1960s' self-consciously iconoclastic climate of liberality and permissiveness. It evokes a self-perpetuating structure, an echo chamber through which the same exhortations and critiques ("new", "the system") repeatedly reverberate until they lose their ability to surprise or inform. Additionally, its eagerness to move forward in time and space – its figurative *progressiveness*, perhaps – gradually loses momentum, repeating itself and turning in circles, in a way that suggests a disillusionment with the inability of the social movements of the preceding decade to effect meaningful change. As Shoptaw discusses, although Ashbery thought that the progressive movements of the 1960s were "generally a good thing", *Three Poems* reflects on the way in which, under "the media's absorptive gaze practically everybody (or nobody) seems avant garde" (Shoptaw 1994, pp. 149–151). However, *Three Poems*' spatial qualities also address questions of individuality, socialisation and community in a more subtle, and personal, sense. For example, the poem's structural affinities with circles and spheres calls to mind the notion of a social circle, or coterie – the sphere of relationships, and particularly friendships, within which poets live and work. As Dewey and Rifkin note, friendships between poets have the capacity to "vitaliz[e] the space between" individuals, creating "spaces of contestatory, creative exchange" (Dewey and Rifkin 2013, pp. 2–3). As a result, friendship "shapes the poem as a social site whose space, voice, and form emerge through intersubjective exchange" (Dewey and Rifkin 2013, p. 15).

Read in this context, the hollow, vacant and decentred spaces that Ashbery evokes in *Three Poems* can be seen as a commentary on the contemporary poetry scene, particularly in New York. The collection was written at a time when the close circle of artists and writers that had constituted the first generation of the New York School had become diffuse, and was evolving into a more loosely affiliated group of 'second-generation' artists and writers. One reason for this was the death of Frank O'Hara in 1966. Affectionate, witty and generous, O'Hara was geographically and temporally at the heart of the New York School. Andrew Epstein quotes Morton Feldman, who remembers how O'Hara "seemed to dance from canvas to canvas, from party to party, from poem to poem – a Fred Astaire with the whole art community as his Ginger Rogers": always in motion, always creating something, whether it was a party or a poem. Indeed, as Epstein observes, O'Hara himself was not just at the New York School's centre; he *was* its centre, its "kinetic core". He was, Epstein writes, "the sun at

the center of a unique solar system, which scattered when he vanished" (Epstein 2006, p. 90). His warm personality acted as a centripetal force which, for a relatively brief period, drew a disparate group of poets and artists together into his orbit, imbuing them with a sense of communal identity. As Edwin Denby observes,

> …it was through Frank O'Hara that the uptown poets and the downtown poets got together and eventually the West Coast too, plus the painters and Frank was at the center and joined them all together. After his death there was no center for that group.
> (Epstein 2006, p. 90)

However, although Ashbery's hollow forms and empty centres suggest grief about the loss of a nurturing social and artistic circle, they could also be seen to express a broader ambivalence about the pressure that one's sphere of influence can exert on one's individual identity and creative output. Geoff Ward describes literary coterie, – the "artists' circle" – in terms that are reminiscent of the expansive and ultimately somewhat exclusive movement that *Three Poems* enacts: it is, he claims, "a group symbol… that attempts to cheat temporality by ingesting and acknowledging certain of its powers" (Ward 1993, p. 60). Lytle Shaw highlights an unfavourable review of Frank O'Hara's *Collected Poems* by Pearl K. Bell, which discerns a deadening stasis in the poet's work as a result of its reference to a closed, somewhat insular social circle; the result, Bell claims, is a "colossally self-absorbed journal of happenings" (Shaw 2006, p. 3). Indeed, O'Hara often calls into question the integrity of the structures on which artistic coterie is based by evoking moments of uncertainty, disjunction, and isolation even during apparently convivial activity, as in 'Joe's Jacket', when an "enormous party" gives off a "disgathering light" which, as Epstein puts it, "pushes individuals away from each other, from centers and gatherings" (Epstein 2006, p. 118) – a centrifugal movement which seems to portend disintegration and dissolution, rather than cohesion and progress.

The friendship between O'Hara and Ashbery was characterised by a degree of professional rivalry, as well as being supportive and affectionate. Epstein demonstrates this through a close reading of a 1954 collaboration between the two poets – a poem that was enclosed in a letter to Kenneth Koch and his wife Janice, in which O'Hara and Ashbery wrote alternating lines, supposedly anonymously (Epstein 2006, pp. 37–40). Ashbery, however, is seized by a

“mid-poem desire to identify himself”; Epstein describes how “at the very center” of the poem, the poets write:

> Kenneth, I John am drunk but Frank is not drunk.
> Janice, explain to us all the differences between us.
>
> (Epstein 2006, p. 38)

The centre of the poem is the space in which Ashbery abandons his anonymity and implicitly declares which lines of the poem are his: because the ‘rules’ of the poem state that he and O’Hara will write alternate lines, his simple “I John” ripples backwards and forwards through the rest of the text, assigning authorship to the lines which precede and follow it. O’Hara responds in kind, by asking the poem’s intended reader to affirm “the differences between us,” as if occupying the same poetic space risks blurring the lines that demarcate their separate identities. The centre of the poem is therefore a site both of intense and productive communal activity, and of an ambivalence about such an activity’s capacity to erode the boundaries, or threaten the particularity, of the individual self. While occupying this charged central space – at the furthest remove from the liminal, marginal points of the poem, its beginning and end – the poets are compelled to choose between overt identification with, or denial of, their authorial individuality.

As Ashbery’s ambivalence about occupying the space of the poem alongside his friend suggests, movement, distance, and differentiations of space possess emotional, as well as physical, dimensions in his work. One of the elements that hold, and move, the attention of the reader through Ashbery’s poetry is the author’s pronounal address to the reader, and, as Silliman notes, “the privileged pronoun, at least in ‘The New Spirit’ and the earlier stages of this book… is *you*, a term that is decidedly slipperier than either *I* or *we*, because… it can – but doesn't have to – imply writer as well as reader” (Silliman 2007, p. 293). Indeed, as John Vincent notes, *you* is a “supremely elastic pronoun” for Ashbery (Vincent 2007, p. 5), and *Three Poems* is particularly insistent in its use of it, even breaking off to address an undefined *you* directly: “You private person”, “To you” (with “To you” also calling to mind the poem by Whitman of the same name (Whitman 2009, p. 403)). Vincent imagines Ashbery’s pronouns as “points of access”, ways in which the reader can enter the space of the poem (Vincent 2007, p. 5). As Ashbery himself explained,

> the personal pronouns of my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. 'You' can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can 'he' and 'she' for that matter… The fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is the important thing… rather than the particular person involved.
>
> (qtd. in Perloff 1981, p. 258)

Just as Ashbery's 'you' is mercurial and shifting, so the affective spaces into which it invites us are difficult to map or define. Helen Vendler argues that Ashbery's genre is that of the "intimate lyric", in which the poem "mediates" smoothly between the 'I' of the lyric speaker and the 'you' of the unknown reader. What results is a "loop of co-creation" in which "the 'I-ness' of you; the 'you-ness' of me – subtends the union of those two unlike things, 'I' and 'you'" (Vendler 2005, p. 60). However, Ben Lerner describes in more ambivalent terms the emotional experience of reading Ashbery's poetry, at times finding its appeal so powerful, its 'you' so vocative, that it seems to subsume him completely: "I first caught a glimpse of myself dissolving into the second person of a John Ashbery poem in a Barnes and Noble in Topeka, Kansas, in 1994," he remarks (Lerner 2015). Lerner experiences Ashbery as both ecstatically present, and as coolly unavailable. "Ashbery's… pronouns, particularly the *I* and the *you*, fill and empty and fill again as you read – like some sea creature or the chambers of the human heart," he notes (Lerner 2015). Elsewhere, however, he expresses an ambivalence about this profound affective connection, wondering:

> Is the Ashberian 'you' singular or plural...? Who's being hailed, me or us? Responding emotionally to a line of Ashbery's can be like waving to somebody who might have been waving to somebody behind you.
>
> (Lerner 2007, p. 373)

In Vendler's account Ashbery's 'you' is an invitation to intimacy that brings about a "union" between the poet and the reader. For Lerner, however, the reader of Ashbery's poetry is either not sure if they are being addressed, or find themselves drawn so completely into a complex system of addressing that it no longer seems to matter. Ashbery's address therefore allows the reader to occupy two distinct and complex emotional spaces: an apparent closeness or intimacy that features an element of fastidiously maintained distance, or an ecstatic, self-abnegating fusion in which one is totally absorbed into the poem – a choice which is, perhaps, akin to what Richard Foreman describes as "a 'being potentially present' in many

places at once" (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, p. 50). This potentiality is articulated in Ashbery's poem 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons', from *Shadow Train* (1981), which imagines the poem, its speaker, and its addressee at first tentatively drawing closer to, and then unexpectedly and dramatically fusing with, each other: "And the poem/Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you". Ashbery plays on the word 'miss' to represent this unpredictable shifting between linguistic and affective space: "you have it but you don't have it./You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other" (Ashbery 2008, p. 698). As soon as we start to engage emotionally with Ashbery's poetry – to *miss*, or long for, something it can provide – it seems to retreat from us, suggesting coolly that we may have 'missed the point' in mistaking its formal structure for an affective – or affectionate – one.

One might be tempted to view these manoeuvres as somewhat cold, or callous; do they, one might ask, tease the reader into pursuing an affective connection that is never freely given, and is liable to be capriciously withdrawn? In doing so, do they transform the reader into a slightly ridiculous figure – like, perhaps, the distorted, deflated face on the balloon invoked in 'The New Spirit'? It is, however, possible to view Ashbery's pronounal address as inviting his reader to occupy uncertain, shifting and unmapped spaces that are both public and private at once, fostering an inarticulable, mysterious relationship which is simultaneously both close and distant. In structural terms, Ashbery's 'poetic spaces' are sites which allow the reader and the poem to occupy positions which are both intimately near to, and impossibly distant from, the object of their attention or care – sites where the poem and its addressee can "join but never touch". As the speaker of 'The New Spirit' observes, "[t]the motion of the story is moving though not/getting nearer" (Ashbery 2008, p. 252): the poetry moves, and moves the reader, in unpredictable ways – and keeps moving, never allowing us to be completely certain about the nature of the spaces that it creates and occupies.[2] As Silliman, quoting Gertrude

[2] The constant restless movement through emotional space that Ashbery's poetry engages in – which is analogous, perhaps, to what the early poem 'Clepsydra' describes as a "bounding from air to air, a serpentine/Gesture" – can also be interpreted in the context of Ashbery's background and social class. In a 2005 interview with Larissa MacFarquhar about his early life, Ashbery describes how, as a child, his mother impressed on him the importance of not staying in one place too long. "I would be going to visit a friend and she would say, 'Don't wear out your welcome.' This is something that I've constantly thought about, and still when I visit people, I try to determine whether I'm in the process of wearing out my welcome" (MacFarquhar 2005). Ashbery's reminiscence suggests that his constant movement is a matter not only of philosophy, but also of an etiquette that is based on the assumption that one is trespassing on the space, time, and attention of others.

Stein, argues, *Three Poems* never settles… because there is… no 'there', no topic sentence, no secret centre, no monad *I* or *eye* at the work's heart" (Silliman 2007, p. 300).

These questions need not be viewed as purely formal, secular, or physical ones. It is also possible to interpret the emotional spaces, gaps and unexpected movements that Ashbery's poetry describes as an attempt to delineate the arena in which the individual self encounters the boundlessness and unknowability of the numinous, or even the divine. Ashbery was religious, and, especially in his later years, was a regular churchgoer, attending an Episcopalian church. "I think of myself as a religious person, a Christian, but I guess I'm probably what the religious right would call a 'cafeteria Christian'," he admitted, adding wryly that: "I select the parts I like and ignore the others" (MacFarquhar 2005). One might even go so far as to discern in *Three Poems*' tripartite structure – in which the three individual poems occupy equal, but qualitatively different, spaces of the work – a reference to the trichotomies that define the fundamental mysteries of the Christian faith (God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; man as body, mind and soul). One of the texts that Ashbery was reading while he wrote *Three Poems* is the anonymous 14th-century mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which describes the difficulties involved in entering into an emotional relationship with God. "Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary," the text advises, "but still go on longing after him who you love. For if you are to feel or to see him in this life, it must always be in this cloud, in this darkness" (Wolters 1961, p. 62). To know God, the text suggests, one must embrace unknowing. Similarly, to draw close to God, one must acknowledge and embrace, rather than dismiss or diminish, one's ontological distance from Him.

*   *   *

Thinking of Ashbery's poetry in terms of proximity and contiguity allows us a new perspective from which to re-evaluate and refine our previous conclusions about *Three Poems'* treatment of space. For example, on revisiting the collection's much-discussed vacillation between the high modernist ambition to 'put all in', and the more experimental impulse to 'leave all out', we might now observe that the structure of Ashbery's formulation is in itself significant, particularly the unostentatious, easily overlooked phrase that acts as a bridge between the two aesthetic options that the poet's formulation sets in opposition: "And the next thought came to me…" The concepts that Ashbery invokes are brought into contact

not by a determined and active epistemological movement forward – the movement of a pioneer or frontiersman, whose gaze is fixed on the horizon, the limit of what is visible and known – but rather by an openness to novelty, and a willingness to engage with whatever happens to present itself next. In its readiness to combine materials based on their contiguity, the formulation therefore suggests a horizontal, non-hierarchical movement through intellectual space. Indeed, in a 1994 conversation with David Herd, Ashbery describes himself, in typically urbane fashion, as a "bricoleur as far as philosophy goes" (Herd 1994). Ashbery's remark is self-effacing, but its formulation is so unusual that it invites one to wonder: what is it to be a 'philosophical bricoleur'? Indeed, the juxtaposition of these two very different concepts is itself analogous to 'bricolage' (which the OED defines as a "construction or creation from a diverse range of available things"). The weighty prose of *Three Poems* undisputedly has much in common, in terms of tone and style, with philosophical writing, as Maclean has noted (Maclean 2019, pp. 347–348). However, it has no obvious connection to bricolage, or to collage, in the way that these terms are usually understood. In spatial terms, collage relies on horizontality and proximity, rather than on a linear, logical progression towards a distant, predetermined goal. The result is, as Davidson notes, a "paratactic rather than hierarchical" relationship between its elements (Davidson 2007, p. 8). It is, as Clement Greenberg points out, founded on contingency, due to the way in which it depends on the gathering of "extraneous materials". As a result of its unexpected juxtapositions,

> every part and plane of the picture keeps changing place in relative depth with every other part and plane; and it is as if the only stable relation left among the different parts of the picture is the ambivalent and ambiguous one that each has with the surface.
>
> (Greenberg 1959)

Thinking of *Three Poems* as 'philosophical bricolage' allows us to re-envisage its apparently 'projective' movement onwards and forwards in space, shifting it from a linear, logical and organising progression to one that moves unpredictably sideways, always swerving into novelty. "There ought to be room for more things, for a spreading out, like," Ashbery writes in the earlier poem 'For John Clare', from *The Double Dream of Spring* (Ashbery 2008, p. 198). In epistemological terms, *Three Poems* partakes in just such a 'spreading out', an expansion of meaning that does not advance straightforwardly in the direction of

understanding and knowledge, in the way that philosophical writing does, but rather moves unpredictably sideways, creating space for what is new and unanticipated. In this respect, it re-imagines the archetypal American movement forwards through space as one which involves what Rona Cran, writing on collage, refers to as “the linking of disparate phenomena; democratically, arbitrarily, and even unintentionally” (Cran 2014, ‘Introduction: Catalysing Encounters’).

*   *   *

This chapter has examined the ways in which *Three Poems* moves forward and outwards, as well as the ways in which it moves horizontally and sideways. Having discussed these purposeful manoeuvres, it will conclude by exploring the ways in which the work moves aimlessly, wandering in no direction at all, and even moving backwards, a directionality that would seem to be completely at odds with its expansive, progressive drive. *Three Poems* at first asserts that turning or backing away from what lies ahead is undesirable and alien: when the speaker of ‘The New Spirit’ asserts at the start of the poem that “I exist in that safe vacuum I had managed to define from my friends’ disinterested turning away”, his stance is that of a self-sufficient pioneer who is happy to proceed – alone, if necessary – into whatever territory may lie ahead (Ashbery 2008, p. 255). However, the notion of turning, or wandering away, from this undertaking seems to haunt the work – indeed, what at first appears to be a passing dismissal of the notion of turning back or turning away becomes, as the poem progresses, a prurient fascination with it; *re-* prefixes, etymologically suggestive of repeating or going backwards, proliferate, and references to turning become more insistent until the speaker eventually seems to have talked a retrograde movement into being inevitable. “The major turn… cannot be postponed,” he eventually asserts, before describing just such a pivot:

> …our shared apprehending of the course as plotted turns it into a way, something like an old country road. We can stop, we have stopped, we are stopping now, turning to look into the fulfillment that each unconsciously exhibits to the other, without wanting to especially or knowing too much about it.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 261)

In this passage the poem’s headlong movement slows and then ceases, as the speaker somewhat incredulously declares that “we can stop, we have stopped, we are stopping now”.

Recalling, perhaps, Whitman's "backward glances over our travel'd road" (Whitman 2004b, p. 378), the movement that the poem describes as it navigates "something like an old country road" is not only a turning, but a "turning to look into" an internal sensation. In this respect it offers an interiorised alternative to the poem's dominant narrative of externally focused, outward movement.

The following extract, from the final pages of the 'The New Spirit', illustrates the way in which *Three Poems*' fluctuating movements interact with its broader themes. The passage in question begins with a paragraph in which the speaker describes, in prose, how he is "staring uncertainly into the fire as though looking for a sign, a portent, but in reality thinking of nothing at all." The poem then shifts into free verse:

> It is very early.
> The heavens only seem to be in a state of ferment.
> If one might choose to see them differently there would be
> Peace at the outer fringes
> For their reluctance is never far away
> And harmony, by the same token, is never ruled out completely.
> One can accomplish the thing quite quickly
> And turn toward the ruled outside space
> That defines our hesitations so majestically
> Though negatively.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 277)

Here, the "turn" enacted by the poetry becomes, for a brief moment, specific: as well rejecting the inevitability of boundless expansion into whatever lies ahead, it is also, the speaker reveals, a "turn toward the ruled outside space", where things are defined "negatively". As soon as this admission is made, however, the work's relentless forward motion seems to start up again with what amounts to a disavowal of the turn, and an affirmation that there is "no staying", or stopping, allowed.

> It is necessary to go forward completing
> The gesture from the beginning of life…
> …There is no staying here

Except a pause for breath on the peak
That night fences in
As though the spark might not be extinguished.

(Ashbery 2008, p. 277)

The shift from prose to verse that occurs at the start of this passage is multi-faceted. On one level, it evokes the act of slowing down, inviting the reader to relax after the relentless momentum of the preceding prose, and literally giving us the "pause for breath" that it refers to. If prose is what faces forward, perpetually hurtling straight ahead, *Three Poems* appears to suggest, verse is what stops and starts: slowing down, turning back, and even going backwards. The poetic line, which can both encapsulate a concept memorably, and also interrupt, confuse or muddy its transmission, is both self-contained and contingent, resulting in a delicate balance between movement and stasis, between what has gone before and what is expected to arrive; it offers both the promise of meaning, and an invitation to linger temporarily in the charged space that exists before meaning is arrived at. As James Longenbach observes, "we need a highly nuanced line to keep our poems from standing still" (Longenbach 2004, p. 22). While Ashbery's speaker recognises a need to "go forward", he also describes a detour, a "turn" away from definitive meaning and towards what has been discarded, forgotten or "ruled out". This term is particularly suggestive when thought of in terms of the poetic line, which takes the form of a line ruled across the page, constituting, perhaps, a boundary which has the ability both to include and exclude, to permit and forbid certain ways of apprehending reality, and to create not only positive, but also negative, semantic space.

As Christopher Nealon argues, it is also possible to interpret Ashbery's turning and wandering in a political light. Nealon sees the poet's images of turning his back and walking away as indicative of a refusal to engage with the world as it is, and as a disillusioned acknowledgement of the cultural and economic shortcomings of contemporary America: "[a]gain and again… the poet describes scenes of spectacle, pageantry, and even apocalypse, which are made harmless by the poet's turning to face the other way…" (Nealon 2011, p. 78). For Nealon, Ashbery's turning away represents a "posture of minority" with both epistemological and political implications:

> [it] encodes a wish not to be party to violence, which shades into a wish not to be responsible for it, which shades into a wish not to know about it… the poet who wanders away from the great events, from the looming catastrophes and conflicts… wants us to recognize his smallness, his 'minority'…
>
> (Nealon 2011, p. 78)

Three Poems' unwillingness to allow its different discursive spaces to interact could also be seen to represent a disinterested walking away from a moral, as well as a formal, responsibility: to abandon the metonymic relationship between the text on the level of the individual word or sentence, and on that of the work as a whole – to "wande[r] off into a private song", as 'The System' puts it (Ashbery 2008, p. 282) – is to abdicate responsibility for the task of ensuring that the reader is situated securely and stably within the text. Nealon discerns historical references to "enclosure and displacement" in Ashbery's references to wandering away, which is plausible given Ashbery's affinity for John Clare, who he describes as tracing an aimless circuit, "on his rounds again, telling us what he has just seen" (Ashbery 2000, p. 33). However, Ashbery's wanderings also have religious, and Biblical, overtones. The Parable of the Wandering Sheep (Matthew 18:10–14) asks:

> What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

The good shepherd sets off purposely to find the errant member of his flock; a shepherd who himself wanders away from his responsibilities transgresses a scared bond of duty, and also, by extension, calls into question the stability of the individual's emotional connection with higher levels of semantic and ideological authority. Ashbery's wanderings also call to mind the final lines of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which Adam and Eve leave Eden in order to enter the fallen world:

> They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld
> Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
> Waved over by that flaming brand; the gate
> With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms:

> Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon;
> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.
>
> (Milton 2005, p. 369)

In the post-lapsarian world – as, perhaps, in the postmodern American milieux in which Ashbery wrote *Three Poems* – there is no single central moral force restricting the subject's actions. As a result, Adam and Eve are free to wander, and to "choose" between wrong and right (or, as Ashbery put it, "select the parts I like and ignore the others"). With the breakdown of both central and vertical forms of authority, the subject is morally and philosophically free to explore the contiguous semantic, epistemological and physical spaces that stretch out horizontally before them.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the space that Ashbery's poems chart is therefore not only physical and emotional, but also spiritual. As a result, the poetry asks us to consider not only how we traverse our intellectual and epistemological landscape – a mental 'environment' that hovers between the literal and the figurative – but also how we are able to approach, and come close to, what is fundamentally, even ontologically, separate from us: what is unknown, or unknowable, about the world.

2. Strangely familiar: Ashbery's haunted houses

Ashbery is, Bonnie Costello asserts, "a vigorously homeless poet", an itinerant figure who moves peripatetically through a wide range of literal and poetic settings (Costello 1995, p. 62). Costello argues that the notion of *landscape* is crucial to an understanding of Ashbery's poetry; he exists, for her, out of doors, ranging through the natural world and, in the process, describing and contextualising the environments in which he finds himself. Costello is not alone in discerning in Ashbery's poetry a Whitmanian mobility, as well as a sense of movement and restlessness: Andrew Epstein notes its pragmatic, dynamic quality, based on "motion, transition, change, action, and flux" (Epstein 2006, p. 55). Additionally, as Chapter 1 discussed, a broad, topographical notion of space – a philosophical and aesthetic 'landscape' through which the individual consciousness can move – is undeniably important to Ashbery's work. However, while the image of Ashbery as a "homeless" wanderer through vast American landscapes may be faithful to the Whitmanian inclusiveness of his poetry, conveying its agnosticism with regards to register, subject matter and tone, it fails to acknowledge the strong affective pull that the notion of home exerts on his work – a pull which Costello acknowledges when she admits that Ashbery "tracks the mental journey of our search for home, though he is less than confident that such thinking is enough to summon us into dwelling" (Costello 1995, p. 63). "I really would like to know what it is you do to magnetize your poetry…" muses the "curious reader" in 'The Tomb of Stuart Merrill' (Ashbery 2008, p. 454). If Ashbery's poetry does indeed possess magnetic polarities, then dwellings are some of its most intensely, and also most ambivalently, charged loci, possessing the power both to attract and repel. This chapter will argue that despite Ashbery's mercurial 'homelessness', the notion of home – and the image of the house in particular – is crucial to understanding his work.

'The Skaters', published in *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), illustrates Ashbery's ambivalence between an itinerant 'homelessness' and a wistful yearning to find a home. "It is best to remain indoors", the speaker anxiously asserts in the opening section (Ashbery 2008, p. 151). However, the dwellings that the poem goes on to evoke are frequently "uncomfortable, unsuitable lodgings" (Ashbery 2008, p. 162), such as the studio whose "floor is being pulled apart/Like straw", or Helga's "minuscule apartment" – a "death trap", whose "floor sags, as under the weight of a grand piano" (Ashbery 2008, pp. 151–2). The intact and functional

dwellings in ‘The Skaters’, meanwhile, offer material warmth and comfort at the price of psychic, emotional or even political estrangement: the speaker’s “middle-class apartment” may be “cozy and warm”, but in it he feels “cut off from the life in the streets” (Ashbery 2008, p. 171). Ashbery’s poetry is drawn towards such dwellings – inwards, into familiar and circumscribed spaces – and pulled just as inevitably away, towards what lies beyond their thresholds.

This movement both towards and away from the comforts of a dwelling is expressed not only in imagistic or narrative terms, but also on the level of rhythm and syntax, as in the final lines of ‘Sonnet’, from Ashbery’s debut collection *Some Trees* (1956):

> Dear, be the tree that your sleep awaits
> Worms be your words, you not safe from ours.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 18)

The sense of respite and shelter suggested by the lyricism of “Dear, be the tree…” is undermined by the hints of death in the notion of “sleep” and “worms”, and the comforting repetition of the *ee* sound in “be”, “tree” and “sleep” is followed by the unwieldy final line, whose choppy meter, confusing syntax and unclear meaning make it hard to read, both on a grammatical and a mechanical level. Furthermore, Ashbery refuses to allow us to arrive at the traditional resting place of the sonnet – a rhymed iambic couplet – and ends the poem on the plaintive “ours”, half a metric foot short. The merest hint of a dwelling destabilizes the poem, causing it to veer the direction of its opposite – towards, perhaps, Costello’s “vigorously homeless” state.

In its description of this dialectical movement – both a return to a notion of home, and a departure from it – ‘The Skaters’ illustrates Ashbery’s ambivalent attitude towards the dwellings he evokes. The arcs that are traced “[a]s skaters elaborate their distances/Taking a separate line to its end” (Ashbery 2008, p. 151) to form an infinite “figure 8” (Ashbery 2008, p. 161) represent an insistent drawing towards, and withdrawing from, objects and ideas - a “continual changing back and forth” (Ashbery 2008, p. 158) that asks us to consider whether subjectivity is based on closeness *to*, or distance *from*. As these curving lines illustrate, perspective is everything; as a subject moves outwards, he will feel as if he is travelling inwards, and vice versa, as “lines… draw nearer together” and “spaces, as they recede, get

smaller" (Ashbery 2008, p. 162). A subject who moves in this indistinct, ambivalent way – unsure of their own position and direction of travel, and caught in an endless cycle of psychic expansion and contraction – will never reach the place at which the perspective lines are "said to vanish" (Ashbery 2008, p. 162); their destination is always elsewhere, their arrival at it perpetually deferred.

"[W]e are haunted by perimeters/And our lives seem to go in and out, in and out all the time," laments the speaker of 'Unusual Precautions', from Ashbery's 1981 collection *Shadow Train* (Ashbery 2008, p. 719). This chapter will discuss this vacillation not only in terms of Ashbery's broader spatial ecology of inside and outside, but also in terms of the comforting familiarity and "haunted… perimeters" of his dwellings, which both remind us of what we long to get back to, and remind us that our losses can never be fully recovered. Drawing on Freud's theories of the uncanny, it will also explore Ashbery's houses as haunted spaces, while following theorists such as Blanco and Peeren in resisting the reduction of such hauntings to the strictly theoretical. Haunted dwellings are, Blanco and Peeren claim, "not simply describable as Gothic spaces, or informed by the languages of necromancy and melancholia, but [are]... living spaces that need to be explored in their present singularity" (Blanco and Peeren 2010, p. xviii). Indeed, this chapter will argue that it is precisely the gap between a dwelling's ever-changing specificity, and its existence as an iteration of other spaces, that its uncanniness is constituted. As this suggests, dwellings have the capacity to contain and order not only space, but also time; they are vectors by which not only objects, but also traditions and ideologies, are passed down from one generation to the next. This chapter explores the ways in which the Ashberian dwelling not only evokes, and figuratively restores, the past, but also preserves it, transmitting both objects and ideas onwards through time.

What follows will trace a similar oscillatory course to that which Ashbery describes in 'The Skaters'. It begins at the Hudson House – where the poet lived, with his partner, David Kermani, from 1978 until his death in 2017, dividing his time between this upstate home and his Chelsea apartment – and reads Ashbery's restoration of the house in light of his poetic attempts to recover what is lost or unreachable. It then moves outwards, widening its perspective to include other homes, both literal and poetic, before finally circling back to revisit the Hudson House in its "present singularity" (Blanco and Peeren 2010, p. xviii). As the previous remarks suggest, dwellings are a recurring motif throughout Ashbery's poetry;

however, the collections he published in the early 1980s – *Shadow Train* (1981) and *A Wave* (1984) – were written while he was renovating the Hudson House; that is, while he was attempting to map his interiorised (and perhaps also idealised) conceptions of 'home' onto a physical dwelling for the first time. As such, they are particularly pertinent to an exploration of the concept of the home in his work. In Ashbery's earlier poetry, the notion of home is couched in knowing terms, surrounded by a forcefield of irony that prevents us from engaging with it emotionally. In 'Variations, Calypso and Fugue for Ella Wheeler Wilcox' from *The Double Dream of Spring*, the speaker playfully recites truisms about it:

> But all of the sights that were seen by me
> In the East or the West, on land or sea,
> The best was the place that is spelled H-O-M-E.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 191)

In contrast, the references to home in *A Wave* have a direct, even plaintive quality, as in 'Never Seek to Tell Thy Love':

> Many colors will take you to themselves
> But now I want someone to tell me how to get home.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 778)

References not only to attempting to go home and travelling towards it, but also to arriving there, abound in the collection, and there is a wistful lyricism in the way Ashbery uses the term, as in "It seems we were going home./The smell of blossoming privet blanketed the narrow avenue" (Ashbery 2008, p. 746). In the earlier poem, Ashbery toyed with the word 'home', literally pulling it apart into its constituent sounds –- "H-O-M-E" – but here he deploys the word with a care that almost amounts to reverence. This is indicative of a new seriousness about the subject of dwellings in these collections, and a fresh willingness to explore, assess and evaluate them. What follows incorporates both close reading and biographical material – that is to say, it not only features readings of Ashbery's poems about dwellings, but also reads his poems *as* dwellings, and analyses the features of his dwellings themselves.

* * *

In 1978, as Ashbery was writing the poems that would make up *Shadow Train* (1981) and *A Wave* (1984), he went to view a house at 39 West Court Street, Hudson, New York. He was not house-hunting in earnest – this was the first property he had arranged to look at – but he was immediately drawn to its air of "coziness and gloom" and agreed to buy it before he had set foot inside (Ash 1985). "It immediately seemed somewhat familiar," he would later recall (Ashbery and Ford 2003, pp. 63–64). The location of the house appealed to Ashbery; as he explained, "Upstate New York is where I was born and raised, and though that part of it is two hundred and fifty miles west of [where I am now], there is something familiar about the land and the cadence of people's voices that perhaps amounts to 'roots'" (*Guest Speaker: John Ashbery, The Poet's Hudson River Restoration* 1994, p. 44).

Rather than seeing the purchase of his first house as a pivotal new venture, or a step forward into maturity, Ashbery therefore describes it in terms of a return – both to upstate New York, where he grew up, and, in metaphorical terms, to the houses of his childhood. In a 1985 interview, this return is re-enacted in miniature when Ashbery describes his daily routine now that he is "happily ensconced in my gloomy Victorian villa":

> There's a kind of morning room where the sun comes in where I like to sit and read the morning papers – as you might expect. Then I go upstairs to the other living room which is more unapproachable, where you're protected from people looking in the window. I guess it satisfies my nostalgia. It was a terrible blow to me when my grandparents had to sell their house.
>
> (Ash 1985)

There is much one could discuss here about the way in which Ashbery maps emotional distance onto the interior spaces of the Hudson House – its "unapproachable" rooms, "protected from people". However, for the purposes of this chapter, it is more germane to note that when describing his current home, the poet circles back to the losses and consolations of a house that he remembers from his childhood. The last sentence in particular – "It was a terrible blow to me when my grandparents had to sell their house" – seems to rise up unprompted, with a surprising directness. Something similar happens in a later conversation with David Herd:

> When I was very small I lived with my grandparents much of the time… But when I was seven years old [my grandfather] retired and left that house, and moved to the country, to a little village where he had grown up, on the edge of Lake Ontario. My parents lived a few miles away on a farm. I always felt a great nostalgia for living in the city, and for that house in particular.
>
> (Herd 1994)

In geographical terms, the paragraph moves progressively further from Ashbery's grandparents' house: first to a village on the lake in the country, then a "few miles away" to a farm. However, we are in no doubt as to which dwelling Ashbery is talking about when he affirms his nostalgia for "that house in particular". His grandfather's house – "that house" – seems to persist as Ashbery's subject even after it has been geographically and temporally left behind.

The house that Ashbery is recalling in these interviews stood at 69 Dartmouth Street, in Rochester, New York, where the poet lived with maternal grandparents for the first seven years of his life, while his father worked on the family farm in Sodus. Ashbery moved to Rochester in order to attend a public school in the city, where his mother had also been a pupil, and which would also prove to be a formative space for the poet: Karin Roffman observes that its "dark wood paneling, transom windows, and polished oak floors made the two-story structure seem more like a school*house* than a public school" (Roffman 2017, p. 16). Indeed, the trope of the schoolhouse recurs through Ashbery's poetry, notably in the poem 'And You Know', from *Some Trees*:

> …the old schoolhouse covered with nasturtiums.
> At night, comets, shooting stars, twirling planets,
> Suns, bits of illuminated pumice, and spooks hang over the old place;
> The atmosphere is breathless.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 29)

However, it was the Rochester house that came to epitomise, for Ashbery, the qualities of home. It was, he remembers, "very quiet and warm" (MacArthur 1998, p. 196). It had a large library which his grandfather encouraged him to explore, and it was a place of physical and emotional safety, where "I didn't have to be on guard from my father's explosive temper"

(MacArthur 1998, p. 196). It was this sense of security that the "cosiness and gloom" of the Hudson property called to mind for Ashbery, who reflected that the house "so strongly reminds me of my grandparents' house [in Rochester] that I must have carried with me the desire to recreate it" (MacArthur 1998, p. 196). Just before the Rochester house was sold the 13-year-old Ashbery visited it and chose as a souvenir the parrot door knocker that hung on his grandfather's study door. He would "carry [it] with" him for many years, just as he carried with him the desire to recreate his grandparents' house, before finally fixing it to the door of his own study at 39 West Court Street. The Hudson House was, then, *familiar* to Ashbery in every sense of the word, constituting a tangible expression – and even a partial restoration – of the memories of warmth, peace and safety that were his grandparents' legacy.

*   *   *

When Ashbery describes his own Hudson House as being "familiar", he is affirming its separateness from, as well as its similarity to, the houses that it reminds him of. To be familiar is to be like something, but, by definition, not identical to it; the concept points out the ontological gap that exists between the thing being described, and the thing it is reminiscent of. *A Wave*'s 'Never Seek to Tell thy Love' addresses this in its description of the "home" that the speaker is trying to find:

> It belongs where it is going
> Not where it is. The flowers don't talk to Ida now.
> They speak only the language of flowers,
> Saying things like, How hard I tried to get here.
> It must mean I'm not here yet.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 778)

In this poem, the Victorian concept of floriography – the "language of flowers" – expresses not a set of fixed, allegorical meanings, but rather gives rise to fluid inferences: "It must mean I'm not here yet." The house that is *familiar*, calling to mind other times and other dwellings, is never completely "where it is"; instead, its location is defined in relation to other past and possible houses. It "belongs" not to a place, but rather to the process of attempting to reach what it longs for. This fraught, ambivalent approach to the object of one's desire is dramatised in *A Wave*'s opening poem, 'At North Farm':

> Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you,
> At incredible speed, traveling day and night,
> Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow passes.
> But will he know where to find you,
> Recognize you when he sees you,
> Give you the thing he has for you?
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 733)

In these lines, the space that the subject has to traverse seems to be expanding, so that we get the disconcerting sense that he may be losing ground even as he "travels furiously". Additionally, as the poem progresses, the outcome of the journey becomes increasingly dubious: the traveller, it transpires, lacks a clear idea of his destination, and may not even "recognize" the object of his desire when he sees it. 'At North Farm' suggests that the closer we get to our destination, the harder it becomes to accurately reach it; it seems paradoxically more attainable when it is further away, than as we approach it.

Even when Ashbery's speakers manage to circumvent the way in which, as the long poem 'A Wave' observes, "the mirage/Of home withdrew and regrouped a little farther off" (Ashbery 2008, p. 778), and arrive at their destination, what they find there is oddly unsatisfying:

> I was here! But it all seemed so lonesome. I was welcomed
> Without enthusiasm. My room had been kept as it was
> But the windows were closed, there was a smell of a closed room.
> [...] the lamplight
> Can never replace the sad light of early morning
> Of the day I left...
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 804)

The dwelling that the speaker arrives at is both like and unlike the one he left; it may resemble his original home, but it "can never replace" it. Confronted with this familiar yet strange dwelling, he will "never know, eventually, whether I have accomplished/My end, or merely returned" (Ashbery 2008, p. 804) – that is, whether the house he has found

successfully restores the one he lost, completing his psychological arc back to it, or simply repeats it, an uncanny replica.

A similar uncertainty about what a return to one's origins involves is discernible when Ashbery claims in an interview to have found, in the "familiar" speech and landscape of the Hudson Valley, "something… that perhaps amounts to 'roots'" (*Guest Speaker: John Ashbery, The Poet's Hudson River Restoration* 1994, p. 44). At what seems to be the climactic moment of the sentence, he introduces a note of doubt with "perhaps amounts to", and then unexpectedly encloses 'roots' in quotation marks, as if what has been arrived at has proved to be an approximation or simulacrum, rather than the thing itself. The attempt to get back to a definitive "familiar" thing has resulted in the attainment of an indeterminate "something" that is not easily quantifiable, understandable or expressible; that is, something unfamiliar and strange.

Indeed, Ashbery recognised the Hudson House's strangeness, as well as its familiarity. He remarked on its difference from the houses that he knew: "It doesn't look that much like my grandfather's house," he observed, noting that it was built "on a more modest scale" (Ashbery and Ford 2003, pp. 63–64). It was, however, "somewhat grander than the one in Diary of a Nobody – another of my favorite books" (Ash 1985). We may recall here the convoluted terms in which he details its location: "Upstate New York is where I was born and raised, and though that part of it is two hundred and fifty miles west of where I am now…" (*Guest Speaker: John Ashbery, The Poet's Hudson River Restoration* 1994, p. 44). In these descriptions, the Hudson House is described obliquely, as if reflected in the mirrors of other houses and other places: it is both *here* and *not-here*. As such, it is a site both of fulfilment and frustration, satisfying Ashbery's desire to return to the warm and safe house of his grandparents, even as it falls short of fully embodying it.

Ashbery describes this process in *Shadow Train*'s 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' by playing on the word 'miss': "You have it but you don't have it./You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other" (Ashbery 2008, p. 698). In this formulation, familiarity involves not only recognition; it also entails both melancholy – missing what we have lost – and failure – missing the mark when we try to get back to it. Ashbery's "familiar" Hudson House is haunted by other houses that he misses, in both senses of the word: the parrot knocker on his study door is a melancholic reminder not only of the existence of his grandparents' cosy

Rochester home, but also of its loss, and of the impossibility of it ever being reconstituted in its original form. As Richard Stamelman, drawing on Freud's theories of mourning and melancholy, writes, such "inventions… indicat[e] our distance from a lost object of love, and each, despite its efforts to reverse or compensate for the loss, inadequately represents and signifies that lost object" (Stamelman 1990, p. 5). In light of these observations, the "gloom" that shrouds the Hudson House begins to seem like a psychic, as well as an aesthetic, feature of the property. We may also hear, in Ashbery's description of "a kind of morning room where the sun comes in where I like to sit and read the morning papers" a faint echo of the word 'mourning'.

Indeed, the poet himself may have experienced the Hudson House as a cosy, welcoming haven, but visitors to it have discerned in it an uncanny, even ghostly quality. Roger Gilbert reports "an eerie sense of deja vu" (Gilbert 2008) on walking through its disconcertingly quiet rooms, while Micaela Morrissette experiences it as an archetypal haunted house, brimming with threat:

> Immense Persian carpets swallow the floors; your feet fumble in their designs as through a treacherous undergrowth of roots and tangling vines. The hush is suffocating; you can feel it pressed against your face. The house might be haunted, if it were not for the utter, pristine stillness of the scene. You are convinced that not even ghosts rest in these fragile seats or pass through the doorways, the frames of which are swollen with the scene that lies on the other side, pressing to intrude.
>
> (Morrissette 2008)

In his essay 'Das Unheimliche' ('The Uncanny'), Freud observes that:

> The German word *unheimlich* [uncanny] is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning "familiar," "native," "belonging to the home"; and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar.
>
> (Freud 1955, p. 220)

However, the word *heimlich* itself traces an uncanny course: in evoking qualities such as warmth, friendliness, and cosiness, it also suggests "something withdrawn from the eyes of

others, something concealed, secret…" As a result, Freud asserts, "*Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*" (Freud 1955, p. 226); the uncanny is "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 1955, p. 220). This raises the intriguing possibility that as a house becomes more *heimlich* – that is, as it becomes more familiar, resembling more accurately its inhabitant's idea of 'home' – it concurrently becomes more *unheimlich*, more uncanny, unfamiliar and unwelcoming. The homes that Ashbery's speakers are trying to get to may, therefore, be not only physically distant, but ontologically out of reach. The movement that Freud describes is, however, presumably circular: as a house becomes more *unheimlich* it will, at some point, become less welcoming, and can then drift back towards feeling more *heimlich*, and so on. As a result, the possibility arises that – as Michel de Certeau claims – "haunted places are the only ones people can live in" (de Certeau 1984, p. 108).

A Wave's eponymous long poem describes how:

> In the haunted house no quarter is given: in that respect
> It's very much business as usual. The reductive principle
> Is no longer there, or isn't enforced as much as before.
> There will be no getting away from the prospector's
> Hunch; past experience matters again; the tale will stretch on
> For miles before it is done…
> …In the end only a handshake
> Remains, something like a kiss, but fainter.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, pp. 788–789)

Ashbery's use of the military term "no quarter is given", which describes the rejection of an offer of surrender, creates a sense of urgency, and also suggests that restlessness and estrangement are possible even within the enclosed spaces (the living "quarter"[s]) of a house. However, the phrase also plays on the word 'given' as meaning 'fixed' or 'definite': in a house haunted by previous houses – one in which "past experience matters again" – no 'quarter', no room, is free from the constant process of evaluation and redefinition that must occur. What emerges from the attempt to reconcile what is familiar with what has been lost is "something like a kiss, but fainter" – nothing more than a fading trace, or an inaccurate approximation, of intimacy.

This ongoing dialectic of recognition and estrangement involves not only Ashbery's speakers, but his readers, too. In *A Wave*, for instance, individual poems are often oblique in terms of their overall meaning; however, Ashbery's population of them with the bric-a-brac of domesticity – curtains and laundry piles, "cups with broken handles" (Ashbery 2008, p. 774), the "pattern of wheat/On the spotted walls" (Ashbery 2008, p. 787) – imbues them with the affective warmth of the dwellings they invoke. Just as the Hudson House, swathed comfortingly in "a gloom one knows" (Ashbery and Ford 2003, p. 63), was immediately familiar to Ashbery, so the poet's dwellings, albeit lightly sketched, are recognisable to us as readers, calling to mind homes in which we – or our parents, or our grandparents – have lived. In this way the poems align themselves not only with houses in general, but specifically with a "familiar" – and familial – house like the one Ashbery had recently purchased.

*   *   *

In 'Purists will Object', from *A Wave*, the speaker describes how "someone sells an old house/And someone else begins to add on to his" (Ashbery 2008, p. 745), and indeed, these two types of home – the enduring, *familial* house that functions as a vector, transporting objects and emotions through time, and the *familiar*, 'haunted house' that is continually under (re)construction – recur frequently in Ashbery's poetry. However, despite the ease with which they coexist in the above formulation, *familiar* and *familial* are different propositions. To describe a dwelling as 'familiar' is ultimately to affirm its distinctness and difference from the homes that it reminds one of. Such a home seems to be flickeringly present, moving into and out of view as it converges with and diverges from the other dwellings that it calls to mind. In contrast, to see a home as 'familial' is to acknowledge its persistent, ongoing presence, and its inextricable involvement in the rhythms of its inhabitants' lives. The Hudson House "had remained unscathed since 1894," Ashbery remarked; he also noted the way in which it had "passed down through several generations, always on the female side of the family" (MacArthur 2008, p. 195) – recalling, perhaps, the Rochester house, where the poet lived with his maternal grandparents in order to attend his mother's former school (Roffman 2017, p. 16). The familial house endures, moving "down through" the lives of its occupants. One function of such houses is to preserve, and eventually to transmit, objects and possessions – the owner of the Hudson House "apparently never threw anything away,"

Ashbery observed, and the poet was happy to inherit these belongings when he bought the property (MacArthur 2008, p. 195). It is this kind of house that the prose-poem ‘Whatever it is, Wherever You Are’, from *A Wave*, refers to:

> The ebony hands of the clock always seem to mark the same hour. That is why it always seems the same, though it is of course changing constantly, subtly, as though fed by an underground stream.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 784)

The familial house ages with its inhabitants, transmuting tangible, external things into internal metaphors – and perhaps into ways of knowing and understanding the world – as its inhabitants grow and age. In this way, the literal heat and cosiness of childhood become memories of affective warmth, and the enclosing solidity of four walls becomes psychic security. In ‘A Wave’, the speaker describes sitting at “a large table in a house deep in the country” and discovering that “the grain of the wood… pushes through/The pad we are writing on and becomes part of what is written,” the physical textures of the house becoming the aesthetic textures of a poem (Ashbery 2008, pp. 792–793). Some dwellings, Ashbery suggests – whether they are “deep in the country” or a “solid … suburban home” (Ashbery 2008, p. 801) – are so insistently present that we do not just live inside them, but instead become part of them, and they of us.

The subtlety – perhaps even the insidiousness – of such a process is highlighted by the fact that even though Ashbery’s poetry powerfully evokes weathered, lived-in spaces, it contains surprisingly few overt references to them; rather, an impression of them is created by Ashbery’s mentions of peeling paintwork, crumbling brick, unsealed paving, and interiors which are plain, painted, “spotted”, “with messages/Pinned to the walls” (Ashbery 2008, p. 787). One might be tempted to describe these impressionistic vignettes as ‘glimpses’ or ‘flashes’, but this fails to acknowledge the solidity of the mental pictures they create. The dwellings that they evoke do not seem to flicker in and out of existence, spectral and ungraspable; instead, we get the sense that they are always present, even when they are not being explicitly described. To borrow one of Ashbery’s recurring metaphors – that of a weaving, or tapestry – it is as if the image of the long-standing dwelling is the warp thread of his poetry, providing indispensable structure and definition, but becoming visible only at certain inflection points. Alternatively, to use another Ashberian image, one could think of

the time-worn dwelling as being 'put into solution' in the poet's work, becoming an ambient climate in which the poetry exists, and the medium through which it travels.

As this suggests, the familiar and familial dwellings that Ashbery evokes represent different conceptions of time. In the "familiar" dwelling, and in the way of experiencing the world that it represents, the individual exists at a remove from time, moving in tandem with it, but separate from it and able to survey it in both directions as it flows past. This estrangement from time leads to flashes of recognition and familiarity, and to creative attempts to "add on to", or otherwise transform, one's current experience. Stamelman describes how "we try to overcome loss by naming it, by representing it, and by finding new forms and images through which to retell, recall, remember, and resuscitate what has disappeared" (Stamelman 1990, p. 4). However, our efforts are doomed to fail, as our approach towards the lost object we are attempting to recover traces an asymptotic course that never quite intersects with what it is aiming for. In this conception of time, in which "The past is irrevocably and irreversibly lost… that which cannot return, that which cannot again become present" (Stamelman 1990, p. 7), we can be haunted –- not only by the past, but also by the present or the future – because time is separate from us, an uncanny visitor from another ontological order.

Conversely, the other type of house that Ashbery evokes – the weathered, *familial* home that has passed down through generations – represents a notion of time that cannot be experienced from the detached vantage point of a spectator. Instead, it is an unstoppable, omnipresent force that subsumes individual lives completely. Although its inhabitants may appear to move through it, it is, in reality, moving through them, involving them in its own fabric and redefining their linear existence as just one element in a larger repeating rhythm – what the long poem 'A Wave' describes as the cyclical "business of living and dying, the orderly/Ceremonials and handling of estates" (Ashbery 2008, p. 799).

For the inhabitants of both these houses, both pitfalls and consolations exist. If, for example, we see time as existing at a remove from our material and emotional experience of the world, then everything that we experience will be irrevocably lost – and in a sense, has been lost already, having fallen into the gap that divides our mental phenomena from external reality. This position is outlined in *A Wave*'s 'Down by the Station, Early in the Morning':

> It all wears out….

…Even things do.

And the things they do. Like the rasp of silk, or a certain
Glottal stop in your voice as you are telling me how you
Didn't have time to brush your teeth but gargled with Listerine
Instead. Each is a base one might wish to touch once more
Before dying. There's the moment years ago in the station in Venice,
The dark rainy afternoon in fourth grade, and the shoes then,
Made of a dull crinkled brown leather that no longer exists.
And nothing does, until you name it, remembering, and even then
It may not have existed, or existed only as a result
Of the perceptual dysfunction you've been carrying around for years.

(Ashbery 2008, p. 743)

These lines articulate a question that Ashbery asks repeatedly, namely: what is the relationship between external "things", and the internal phenomena that they give rise to (the "things they do")? Such phenomena persist through time, with undiminished force, long after the events and objects that occasioned them have ceased to exist in any physical or tangible way. However, the mordant, quasi-diagnostic "perceptual dysfunction you've been carrying around for years" is only half the story, and Ashbery also describes how the mercurial, ungraspable existence – or even the *non*-existence – of external things makes our encounters with them all the more poignant. The speaker of *A Wave*'s 'Haibun 6' admits that it is "too late for anything but the satisfaction that lasts only just so long" but ends the poem with a lyrical declaration of allegiance to the ephemera of daily life: "I believe that the rain never drowned sweeter, more prosaic things than those we have here, now, and I believe this is going to have to be enough" (Ashbery 2008, p. 769).

This delicate intermingling of abundance and lack pervades Ashbery's work of this period, imbuing the dwellings it evokes with a sense of mourning, melancholy and loss. Giorgio Agamben writes:

> Although mourning follows a loss that has really occurred, in melancholia not only is it unclear what object has been lost, it is uncertain that one can speak of a loss at all. 'It must be admitted,' Freud writes, with a certain discomfort, 'that a loss has indeed occurred, without its being known what has been lost.'…

(Agamben 1993, p. 20)

One can, perhaps, conceptualise the difference between the familiar and the familial dwelling as the difference between the dwelling as *Object* – in the way that psychoanalysis employs the term, to denote a lost 'Thing' which can never be satisfactorily recovered – and the dwelling as *an object*, a physical, material thing. In the former case, we are aware what has been lost, but are unable ever to recover it. In the latter case, as Agamben notes, it is "uncertain that one can speak of a loss at all". The dwelling as a *thing* may be comfortingly familiar, while as *Thing* it is, as Lacan writes, "by its very nature alien… strange and even hostile on occasion" (Lacan 2016, p. 52).

As Peter Schwenger notes, these apparently opposed notions can overlap, merging and separating even as one tries to delineate them:

> For many, the familiar presence of things is a comfort… they seem to partake in our lives; they are domesticated, part of our routine and so of us. Their long association with us seems to make them custodians of our memories… Yet all this does not mean that things reveal themselves, only our investments in them. And those investments often carry with them a melancholy in the heart of comfort…
>
> (Schwenger 2005, p. 3)

This "melancholy in the heart of comfort" – a lingering dissatisfaction with the life that accretes, almost imperceptibly, around the inhabitant of the long-standing dwelling – is articulated by the speaker of Ashbery's 'The Bungalows':

> …They are the same aren't they,
> The presumed landscape and the dream of home
> Because the people are all homesick today or desperately sleeping,
> Trying to remember how those rectangular shapes
> Became so extraneous and so near
> To create a foreground of quiet knowledge
> In which youth had grown old, chanting and singing wise hymns that
> Will sign for old age
> And so lift up the past to be persuaded, and be put down again.

(Ashbery 2008, pp. 223–224)

In the “foreground of quiet knowledge” that the “rectangular shapes” of dwellings create – in, that is, the tapestry that is woven by the repetitive patterns of daily life – their inhabitant slides almost imperceptibly from youth into old age, finding themselves suddenly estranged from a past that can be lifted and just as easily “put down again”. This phrase suggests both the thing-ness of the long-standing, familial dwelling, and also the death – both figurative and literal – that awaits its inhabitant, as he or she is subsumed into the ongoing, relentless advance of time that such dwellings represent.

* * *

Just as houses have the ability to define and shape the lives that are led within them, operating as vectors by which objects and ideologies are passed down through generations, so a poem accommodates and orders the experience that it contains, and can be a means by which styles and forms are renovated and rehabilitated. “Each poet… builds some kind of house,” George Szirtes writes; he can “vaguely see” his own poetic dwelling, “a series of rooms arranged in the form of a tenement block of the kind that seems almost to sing to me in Budapest”. The purpose of this dwelling, for Szirtes, is not to provide shelter from what is uncomfortable or unfamiliar, but rather to “entice the ghost in” – to animate (or, perhaps, uncannily reanimate) the “hollow shell” of poetic form with something that is particular, individualised and otherwise inarticulable (Szirtes 2006).

Despite the breadth of Ashbery’s stylistic range – from the disjunctive collages of *The Tennis Court Oath* to the “dissolving and putting in solution” of poetic form attempted by *Three Poems*’ smoothly contoured prose – it is perhaps possible to discern the outlines of the dwelling that his poetry constitutes (Ross 2017, p. 31). One can find encouragement for such an enterprise in the opening of the early poem ‘Glazunoviana’:

> The man with the red hat
> And the polar bear, is he here too?
> The window giving on shade,
> Is that here too?

(Ashbery 2008, p. 10)

In these lines the word "here" is not used to indicate a specific place within the imaginative world of the poem; instead, it asserts a spatial quality on the part of the poem as a whole, claiming for it for it an epistemic *roominess*, a capacity to contain objects and ideas. It is this newly created poetic room that the speaker surveys: assessing its contents, testing its boundaries, and perhaps even delighting in his ability to fill it with whatever he chooses to call into being.

This section will expand on the room-like qualities of Ashbery's poetry in due course, but first it will explore its spatiality in terms of its levels or storeys. "What's a plain level?" asks the speaker of 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons', in response to his own assertion that "This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level" (Ashbery 2008, p. 698). In the final lines, he reiterates this spatial metaphor, claiming that "you exist only/To tease me into doing it, on your level..." (Ashbery 2008, p. 698). Ashbery's frequent references to stairs and storeys reinforce the impression that his poetic dwelling is set over several such levels. Stairways appear frequently in his poems, and tend to be ominous, even perilous places, such as the "staircase [which]/Became a giant hammock littered with dead leaves/And ants," of 'Litany' (Ashbery 2008, p. 627), or the "service stairs [where] the sweet corruption thrives" of 'Pyrography' (Ashbery 2008, p. 495). As this suggests, the various 'levels' in Ashbery's poetry are not smoothly connected; what takes place on one is not easily known by, or communicated to, those who remain on another, and an ascent or descent between levels occasions a shift in perspective that is epistemic as well as spatial. In 'Everyman's Library', from *Shadow Train*, the lower levels of the dwelling in which the poem is set are portrayed as being both figuratively and literally shrouded in obscurity, and the idea of going downstairs plunges the subject into darkness:

> You send someone
> Down the flight of stairs to ask after
> The true course of events and the answer always
> Comes back evasive yet polite: you have only to step down…
> Oops, the light went out.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 727)

The stairs in Ashbery's poems not only fold and distort space, but also time; it can take hours to move from an upstairs window to the front door, reinforcing the idea that the levels in his dwellings exist on different experiential planes, as in *Flow Chart* (1991):

> Someone on lead feet looked out
> the upstairs window, astonished at the loud knocking below, and then withdrew.
> Whether or not this person was actually coming downstairs to answer the door was unclear,
> at least at first, as minutes and then hours seemed literally to go by. At
> midnight the door slowly opened a crack: "Who's there?"
>
> (Ashbery 1991, pp. 111–112)

The notion of a house set over several level s which correspond to different, and perhaps irreconcilable, ways of apprehending experience recalls Freud's theories of mind, which separate the psyche into the conscious, the unconscious, and the pre-conscious mind. In Freud's theory, the existence of these different levels of consciousness mean that the subject is "not even master in his own house, but… must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind" (Freud 1920, p. 252) – like, perhaps, Ashbery's speaker, who must go "Down the flight of stairs to ask after/The true course of events". In this model, consciousness – the highest level of awareness – occupies the light-filled attic, while the subconscious dwells in the dim cellar, the architectural hierarchy mirroring that of the body, in which conscious thought happens on the uppermost level, while unconscious processes – driven by desire, or by biological imperatives – take place on lower levels, hidden from view. Gaston Bachelard follows a similar scheme when he describes his three-storey "oneiric house" as having "a cellar, a ground floor and an attic" (Bachelard 1994, p. 25); he decries the house that has "different rooms that compose living quarters jammed into one floor" as "lack[ing] one of the fundamental principles for distinguishing and classifying the values of intimacy" (Bachelard 1994, p. 27). For Bachelard, as for Freud, the levels of the house, in their categorising verticality, serve to order and classify experience.

However, while Bachelard and Freud implicitly situate their subjects on the main level of their dwellings, from where they may either descend into the psychic murk of the cellar, or ascend to the transcendental brightness of the attic, Ashbery's dwelling is unwilling to

associate physical verticality with hierarchically arranged levels of understanding or experience. For Bachelard, the cellar is the “dark entity of the house”, a “subterranean” place of “irrationality”, while “up near the roof,” he asserts, “all our thoughts are clear” (Bachelard 1994, p. 27). Conversely, in Ashbery's dwelling, basements can be wholesome and attics can be eerie or irrational, as in *A Wave*’s ‘Rain Moving In’, in which:

> The blackboard is erased in the attic
> And the wind turns up the light of the stars,
> Sinewy now.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 733)

Meanwhile, in the ‘Forgotten Sex’, from the later collection *April Galleons* (1987), the speaker refers to:

> A twice-told tale not to be told again
> Unless children one day dig up the past, in the attic
> Or under brush in the back yard: ‘What’s this?’
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 824)

What has been forgotten or repressed, is, these lines suggest, just as likely to be “dug up” in an attic as in the dirt of a back yard; the lofty position of the former does not preclude its ability to possess the “subterranean” quality that Bachelard sees as a psychic, as well as a geographic, attribute of the cellar. In Ashbery’s dwelling, it is not the height of the levels that matters; rather, it is one’s movement between them – the transfers that his steps, slopes and stairways effect – that is significant.

Freud saw staircases as representing sexuality, due to their passage-like, compressive form, stating that “steps, ladders or staircases, or, as the case may be, walking up or down them, are representations of the sexual act” (Freud 1955b, p. 368). Although one would struggle to read Ashbery’s staircases as overtly sexual symbols, one could, taking a broader view of Freud’s assertion, read them as sites of generation, transaction and relationality. Such staircases are not only present in Ashbery’s poems in imagistic terms; they are also present on a semantic and syntactical level in the form of his similes, which function as transitional spaces by which the reader is conveyed between different textual and semantic levels. In the following lines,

for example – from the poem ‘Otherwise’, which was published in *As We Know* (1979) – the similes effect shifts in both tone and phenomenological texture:

> …Swaying from landlocked clouds
> Otherwise into memories.
>
> Which can’t stand still and the progress
> Is permanent like the preordained bulk
> Of the First National Bank
>
> Like fish sauce, but agreeable.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 663)

The first simile takes us from the fragmentary “Which can’t stand still and the progress is permanent” to the image of “the First National Bank” – from a vague assertion which is lacking a clear subject, to an institution that is easily apprehendable, functioning both as a building and as an entity – an *excessive* subject, perhaps – whose “preordained bulk” anchors the poem in the reader’s experience. The first part of the phrase invites what James Longenbach refers to as a “mimetic” reading (Longenbach 1997b, p. 113) – that is, reading Ashbery’s poetry as a description of the experience of reading Ashbery’s poetry (corresponding, perhaps, to the “carnivorous/Way of these lines” that “devour their own nature” of ‘The Skaters’) (Ashbery 2008, p. 152). However, while the description of the ill-defined “memories” that “can’t stand still and the progress/is permanent” lends itself readily to the kind of meta-textual or allegorical reading that Longenbach describes, mirroring the poem’s slow yet determined forward momentum, the bulky, prosaic “First National Bank” – and the conversational tone that it ushers in – is far more resistant to it. The simile therefore marks a passage between textual levels: one which enacts an impersonal, language-focused poetics which examines its own surface, and another which is conversational, communicative, and based in lived experience. The jocular tone that the simile introduces may gently ironise what it describes, but it does not satirise it; although we have moved between levels, it would be hard to say whether we have ascended or descended.

The shift in tone that has taken place is reiterated by the poem’s final simile, “Like fish sauce, but agreeable”, which couches its sensory (and, bearing in mind the pungency of fish sauce,

almost visceral) appeal to the reader in conversational terms. However, the lack of punctuation after "the First National Bank" creates ambiguity around what this simile refers to: does it simply emphasise and restate the one that preceded it, or does it take the First National Bank as the basis for a new comparison? The latter reading, in which "progress" is like the First National Bank, which is like fish sauce, suggests a metonymic, decentralised chain of meanings with no final referent. Each new term we encounter bears a resemblance to what preceded it, but – in a way that is reminiscent of the "familiar" dwelling that Ashbery frequently evokes – it is always approaching a definitive state, but never arriving at it.

Although we still may not be able to provide a clear (or plain) answer to the speaker's question in 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' – "What's a plain level?" – we may now be able to speculate that although some levels seem 'plainer' than others, either in terms of their unadorned style or in their democratising engagement with experience, it is their connectedness to other, more or less ornate or obscure, levels that imbues them with significance. A "plain level", 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' reminds us, does not exist in isolation. It presupposes the existence of other levels; it is "that and other things/Bringing a system of them into play", a formulation that suggests contiguity and accretion as the ways in which meaning is arrived at (Ashbery 2008, p. 698). To return to Szirtes' metaphor, in this kind of poetic dwelling, staircases abound, allowing us to access many different levels, but they never deliver us to a floor that we can definitively state is the *main* one. While the dwellings of Bachelard and Freud are organised vertically and hierarchically, Ashbery's poetic dwelling expands metonymically, across a horizontal plane.

In conversation with Roffman, Ashbery recalls an incident that took place at the kindergarten in the wood-panelled schoolhouse in Rochester. He was sitting "on the second-floor landing looking down . . . and thought, 'I regret these stairs.'" As Roffman relates,

> he had no idea why the phrase came into his mind, for it was unlike anything anyone had said to him, but he liked it. He understood how *regret* was usually used, but the oddness of the phrase suddenly expressed the precise shape of his melancholy mood sitting on the steps in the afternoon light.
>
> (Roffman 2017, p. 19)

The figurative and linguistic stairways of Ashbery's poetic dwelling are passages by which the reader can pass between what is clear and what is obscure, between knowing and not-knowing, between the vaguely apprehended contours of an as-yet unarticulated experience and its "precise shape... suddenly expressed" – much as the young poet did on the schoolhouse landing.

Roffman also relates that around this time, Ashbery often heard his grandmother refer to the *vestibule* – the "tiny, tiled room… where the mail landed with a satisfying thud each day after it passed through the brass mail slot". It was, Ashbery recalled, a word he "enjoyed repeating" (Roffman 2017, p. 19). In Ashbery's poetry, such small rooms abound, both in imagistic and in formal terms. And, like the vestibule at 69 Dartmouth Street, which possessed an opening through which mail entered the house, Ashbery's rooms are often sites where the permeability and porosity of his poetic dwelling – what Carol Lipman calls the "*already* uncanny" quality of domestic space (Lipman 2016, p. 13) – is acknowledged and explored. Returning to the early poem 'Glazunoviana', we find, as we read on, that the poetic 'room' that the speaker so confidently invokes in the opening lines progressively loses its integrity, to the extent that by the end of the poem its circumscribed, enclosed quality has dissolved into ominous discontinuity: "Rivers of wings surround us and vast tribulation" (Ashbery 2008, p. 10).

As this reminds us, in order to perform its function, a room must not only be permeable enough to allow the outside in, but must also have an inner surface that is sufficiently intact to separate inside from outside when necessary. Ashbery's poetry frequently explores this inflection point between being open and closed to the outside world. "The surface is what's there,/And nothing can exist except what's there," the speaker asserts in 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror' (Ashbery 1977, p. 70). He then attempts to affirm the encapsulating integrity of the inner surface of Parmigianino's room; however, his confidence that "there are no recesses in this room" is immediately qualified with "only alcoves", and he goes on to list the room's hollows, discontinuities, and potential openings:

> There are no recesses in the room, only alcoves,
> And the window doesn't matter much, or that
> Sliver of window or mirror on the right…
>
> (Ashbery 1977, p. 70)

This long, run-on sentence finally draws to a close several lines later with the word "whole", whose homonym 'hole' seems to have been lurking beneath the description all along; the speaker's attempts to assert *wholeness* paradoxically evoke *holey-ness*, instead.

The room-like nature of Ashbery's poetry also manifests itself in his willingness to experiment with 'closed' poetic forms. The stanzas – the word derives from the Italian for 'stopping place' or 'room' – of such forms can be seen to demarcate semantic and temporal areas within his poems, in the same way that rooms organise the activities that take place inside a dwelling. As David Herd notes, form exerts a persistent pressure on Ashbery's poetry, from the double sestina which arrives unannounced to punctuate the undifferentiated outpouring of *Flow Chart*, to the ominous repetitions of 'Pantoum' from *Some Trees* and the machinations of Popeye in 'Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape', another sestina (Herd 2000, p. 14). Less obvious, but often equally elaborate, are the prosodic or stylistic conceits that Ashbery constructs for individual poems, or (in the case of *Shadow Train*, in which every poem has 16 lines, and *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992) in which each poem purports to represent a different hotel room) imposes across a whole collection.

Indeed, so persistent is the notion of the room as an organising structure that it seeps into Ashbery's poetry even when it is apparently disavowed. 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', is written in free verse, without any formal constraints; its tone is notable for its apparent 'naturalness', and it displays little of the archness, referentiality, or instability of voice which often characterise Ashbery's stanzaic verse. However, the content of the poem fixates on precisely what has been banished from its linguistic surface, namely the notion of artistic form operating as a constraining and ordering force which can "perfect and rule out the extraneous/Forever" (Ashbery 1977, p. 72). In its evocation of a "bubble-chamber" of visual perception, the "room" of "our moment of attention" (Ashbery 1977, p. 72), and the room depicted in Parmigianino's painting – an enclosed and enclosing space which "contains this flow like an hourglass/Without varying in climate or quality" (Ashbery 1977, p. 73) – it repeatedly both internalises and externalises the notion of the poem as a room, whose structure attempts to organise and shape what happens within it.

Golston describes the kind of closed or "inherited" poetic forms that Ashbery experiments with as "neither caused by nor... resembl[ing] the content that they construe... instead, they

are the products of convention, habit, and tradition" (Golston 2015, p. 19). As Ashbery's poem 'Hotel Lautréamont' – itself a villanelle – drily remarks: "Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society/working as a team. They didn't just happen. There was no guesswork" (Ashbery 1992, p. 14).

As these lines acknowledge, closed forms are based on repetition; the poet's role is not to construct them, but rather to furnish them, and in doing so to renew and rehabilitate their ability to accommodate experience. As the formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky writes, "poets are much more concerned with *arranging* images than with creating them. Images are given to poets; the ability to remember them is far more important than the ability to create them" (Shklovksy 1917). In the analogy between a poem and a house that Szirtes proposed, the stanzaic 'rooms' of the forms that Ashbery employs are therefore akin to the "plain white wall[s]" evoked in *A Wave*, against whose backdrop the "possessions we brought from the old place" must be carefully arranged (Ashbery 2008, p. 759, p. 767).

* * *

The space of the poem must strike a delicate balance between integrity and discontinuity; like the vestibule in the Dartmouth Street house, it must have the capacity to keep the outside out, but must also possess gaps or apertures through which novelty – like a bundle of mail, bearing new and personal information from the world outside – can enter. The speaker of *A Wave*'s 'Ongoing Story', when describing the experience of spending time at home, offers the following desultory injunction:

> Plan to entertain,
> To get out.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 740)

As much as renovations of time-worn poetic rooms can provide entertainment to those who frequent them, one must, Ashbery reminds us, be able to "get out" of them. This is true even in his parodic, sentimental verse, whose short, rhymed stanzas can resemble claustrophobic, airless chambers, as in the doggerel section of 'Variations, Calypso and Fugue for Ella Wheeler Wilcox':

So my youth was spent underneath the trees
I moved around with perfect ease

I voyaged to Paris at the age of ten
And met many prominent literary men…

...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.

(Ashbery 2008, pp. 190–191)

In these lines, Ashbery's chosen form, strictly applied and stringently adhered to, permits no unnecessary movements (and certainly does not encourage moving around "with perfect ease"). However, it is in the poem's very fidelity to its chosen rhyme and metric scheme and willingness to "act according to the dictates of [its] art" – in, for example, the way it makes us compress the word "voyaged" into a single, rushed syllable, or comically overstress the final word of "going to" – that it opens up space, gesturing towards the weak points and holes in the poetic rooms that it creates and hinting at what exists outside them, unable to be accommodated within their form. The speaker's tone – not in earnest, but not quite parodic; ironic, but at times affecting as well as merely affected – draws our attention not only to the way in which the "age-old truth" of form can pressure the content of a poem, contorting the latter in strange and unexpected ways, but also to the fact that dynamism and innovation is possible, even in the narrowest and least prepossessing spaces. In drawing our attention to its internal, organising structures, Ashbery's poetry therefore explores what can be accomplished within the confines of a "shoebox of an apartment" (Ashbery 2008, p. 206), while asking us to consider whether it constitutes restoration, renovation, or simply the cosmetic redecoration of time-worn spaces.

At certain points, Ashbery probes further, as in 'Canzone' from *Some Trees*:

Now a whiff of clay
Respecting clay

Or that which grows
Brings on what can.
And no one can.

The sprinkling can
Slumbered on the dock. Clay
Leaked from a can.
Normal heads can
Touch barbed-wire grass
If they can
Sing the old song of can
Waiting for a chill...

(Ashbery 2008, p. 22)

In these lines, "can" is used both as a verb as a noun, rhyming with its own homonym in order to fulfil the requirements of the canzone form – the "old song" that the poem refers to. The effect is to emphasise the materiality and contingency of the phoneme can itself. *Can* seems to leak into the poem from *canzone*, drawing our attention to the sonic and linguistic elements that constitute the poem; words, 'Canzone' suggests, are not transcendental signifiers, but rather lumpen, material things – akin, perhaps, to the "clay" the poem repeatedly refers to: the raw matter from which the poet must strain to construct an edifice. As Thomas Gardner observes when discussing *Shadow Train*, the poetry's "overregularity forces us to pause in our unblinking approach to language as if it were a simple, transparent tool" (Gardner 1999, p. 98) – that is, we must look *at* the language of the poem, rather than *through* it, as its jagged rhythms and laborious pacing draw our attention to the way in which its linguistic and formal components are being heaved effortfully into place.

Ashbery's 'Canzone' – with its gnomic pronouncements, its rhythmic lassitude and its ominous atmosphere – is very different from, say, Petrarch's mellifluous and lyrical 'Canzone 128':

O my own Italy! Though words are vain
The mortal wounds to close,
Unnumbered, that thy beauteous bosom stain,

Yet may it soothe my pain
To sigh for Tyber's woes…

(Petrarca 1879, p. 124)

This illustrates the extent to which, despite its acknowledgement of the constraints within which it operates, Ashbery's poem succeeds in renovating its form, fashioning within it – or opening it up to allow the arrival of – something novel. As Shklovsky explains, this results in "defamiliarization" – an estrangement from what has become habitual. If art is to "recover the sensation of life", he argues, what has become familiar must be made strange (Shklovsky 1917). Somewhat paradoxically, Ashbery's 'Canzone' accomplishes this renovation through repetition: a circular, iterative movement results in a forward one, not only in terms of how the individual poem itself moves towards its conclusion, but also in the sense of its engagement with, and reconstitution of, its form.

To return to Szirtes' metaphor, in this negotiation between new and old, tradition and innovation, the stanzaic rooms of Ashbery's poetry are both those of long-standing familial home, which promises to endure solidly through time, facilitating repetition and reiteration, and the "familiar" dwelling that must remain constantly under renovation, and in which "no quarter is given" (Ashbery 2008, p. 788) due to its inhabitant's desire to reconstitute the object of his desire.

The tension between the notions of creative agency conveyed by these two kinds of dwellings is expressed in *A Wave*'s 'The Songs We Know Best', whose expansive stanzas have a loose, open quality, as if the meaning of the poem is straining to move beyond its conventional, slightly hackneyed, form, rather than being strictly contained by it:

Too often when you thought you'd be showered with confetti
What they flung at you was a plate of hot spaghetti
You've put your fancy clothes and flashy gems in hock
Yet you pause before your father's door afraid to knock…

…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

(Ashbery 2008, p. 735)

There is a slippery quality to the poem's prosody, as if it can't quite settle into a sing-song rhythm, and the extra metric foot on the end of "confetti" and "spaghetti" creates a sense that it is trying to push forward while being pulled back, a process which is reiterated in semantic terms by the line "things look so different when you've got a will". "Will" rhymes uncomplicatedly with "still", and, if read as a standalone word, connotes individualism, strength of purpose and intention. However, the meaning of the line – that our possessions will eventually pass down to others after our life has ended – refers to an ongoing process whose span is broader than an individual life, thereby undermining any sense of closure – and of individual agency – that the tidy rhyme may suggest. If the meter of a poem is its medium – a conduit for its *will*, in the sense of its intention, what it leaves behind for the reader, and what it carries from the past into the future – we are given the sense in 'The Songs We Know Best' that a disturbance is passing through it.

Bachelard quotes Rilke's description of a house that "is not a building, but is quite dissolved and distributed inside me: here one room, there another, and here a bit of corridor which, however, does not connect the two rooms, but is conserved in me in fragmentary form" (Bachelard 1994, p. 57). Rilke's imaginary house – fragmentary and discontinuous, both defined and undermined by its own internal structure – constitutes an evocative and apposite description of the kind of dwelling that Ashbery's poetry invokes. However, this chapter will conclude by going one step further, and proposing a real-world, physical house as an example of what Ashbery's poetic dwelling might look like, namely the deconstructivist Santa Monica House, which was built by the architect Frank Gehry.

As Fredric Jameson discusses, in 1978 – the same year that Ashbery bought the Hudson House – Gehry purchased a "cute" Dutch colonial bungalow on a corner plot. Gehry's grandfather had been the rabbi of his local synagogue during the architect's youth, and it was this building that the bungalow called to mind for the architect. "My house (in Santa Monica) reminds me of that old building," Gehry observed, "and I frequently think of it when I'm here" (Jameson 1991, p. 121). Gehry built his new dwelling around this modest house, renovating the existing structure by wrapping it in chain-link fencing, corrugated aluminium, wood and glass, but leaving much of the original intact, to the extent that the dining and

living rooms have asphalt floors, having been built on the driveway of the original house. In some places Gehry stripped back the interior to its joists, leaving old wiring and pipework exposed; however, he retained much of the original exterior, whose pink asbestos shingles now constitute the interior walls of the 'new' house.

Like Ashbery's putative dwelling, the Santa Monica House exists across several levels, yet avoids inscribing epistemic verticality; Gehry repeatedly refers to it as a "bungalow", but also mentions an upper storey, or describes it, in somewhat vague terms, as having "one and a half storeys" (Filler 1999). Ruth Palmon notes that "the new addition was built at street level… lower than the house's first floor. This fact is not legible from the outside because the front door is at the level of the first floor. Once inside, a few stairs lead down to the new addition. From the outside, the height of the new windows seems consistent with the house elevation, but on the inside they are above eye level" (Palmon 2002, p. 59). As this convoluted layout suggests, the house's verticality is, it seems, less important to Gehry than its horizontal, concentric, or even hypotactic quality, which results from the way that the new house is literally built around the old one (as the architect describes it, the old bungalow is "packaged in this new skin") (Jameson 1991, p. 109). Gehry also notes how "the apex of the old house peeks out from within this mix of materials, giving the impression that the house is consistently under construction" (ArchDaily 2010). This provisional quality recalls the "haunted house" that Ashbery describes, where "no quarter is given" – no room is free from the evaluating eye of the "prospector", who is compelled to search for traces of a lost and longed-for dwelling (Ashbery 2008, p. 788). Gehry himself acknowledges the Santa Monica House's uncanny, haunted quality:

> We were told there were ghosts in the house... I decided they were ghosts of Cubism.... At night, because this glass [of the windows] is tipped, it mirrors the light in... So when you're sitting at this table you see all these cars going by, you see the moon in the wrong place... the moon is over there but it reflects here, and you think it's up there and you don't know where the hell you are…
>
> (Gehry Residence/Gehry Partners 2010)

The blurring of the demarcation between indoors and outdoors that Gehry's house effects is also a feature of Ashbery's poetic dwelling. The Santa Monica House, with its exposed pipes, internal casements and asphalt floors, effects "an effacement of the categories of

inside/outside, or a rearrangement of them" (Jameson 1991, p. 112) that invites its inhabitant to consider the question posed by the speaker of Ashbery's 'The Bungalows':

> How does it feel to be outside and inside at the same time,
> The delicious feeling of the air contradicting and secretly abetting
> The interior warmth?
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 224)

The concentric structure of Gehry's house multiplies and confuses its thresholds in a way that calls to mind Ashbery's early poem 'And You Know', which describes "an atmosphere of vacuum/In the old schoolhouse", from where the pupils "go out into the morning" as the teacher gazes

> into the mild December afternoon
> As his star pupil enters the classroom in that elaborate black and yellow creation.
> He is thinking of her flounces
> And is caught in them…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 30)

The poem ends with a reference to the "endless muggy night which is invading our school" (Ashbery 2008, p. 30). As Ashbery's insistent use of 'in' and 'into' suggest, everything in the poem is inside something else, or is about to go into it, and the night – which should occupy a position outside the school – is "invading". The poem calls our attention to the way in which, depending on our perspective, and our direction of travel – inwards or outwards – everything can be perceived as being both inside and outside at once. It is this liminal position – both "outside and inside at the same time" – that 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' will later invite its reader to occupy with its injunction to "look at it talking to you" (Ashbery 2008, p. 698); we stand on the threshold of the poem, able both to participate *in* it, and to look *at* it, too.

This proliferation of insides and outsides calls into question the traditional power of liminal spaces to classify spatial and epistemic positions. However, it dramatises the tension between outside and inside space, rather than eliding, dismissing or resolving it. This is evident not only in the ways in which both Gehry and Ashbery describe their dwellings – their 'insider's

perspectives' on the spaces they create – but in the way in which these assertions are complicated and called into question by external reality. Gehry asserted, for example, when constructing his house, that its "unfinished" nature was crucial because it imbued the dwelling with a "poetic" quality (Hoyt 2012). However, as time passed, his family expanded and his wealth and status grew, and circumstances forced him to extend the house in a more traditional style, rendering it much more 'finished': in 1991 he constructed "separate bedrooms for his growing sons, installed a lap pool, covered the exposed ceiling beams with tidy wood battens, and renovated the garage into a guesthouse" (Hoyt 2012). As time passes, the world outside the Santa Monica House insidiously pressures the initial "rawness" of the dwelling, gradually encroaching on it and smoothing out its idiosyncratic elements. One is reminded of Ashbery's comments to John Ash about his Chelsea apartment:

> People think it odd that I don't live in one of the more charming buildings, but I tell them I don't have to look at my building when I'm inside it.
>
> (Ash 1985)

Ashbery lightly disavows the importance of the exterior of his apartment; like Francesco in his enclosing "bubble chamber" in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', the interior of his building is "the only/Thing that [he] can see" (Ashbery 1977, p. 77); as a result, he claims, the social and aesthetic details of what lies on the other side of its walls are unimportant. However, as 'Self-Portrait...' progresses, it becomes clear that Francesco's apparently enclosed room is threatened by "The shadow of the city" which exists outside its walls, and whose unpredictability and threat of imminent violence

> injects its own
> Urgency: Rome where Francesco
> Was at work during the Sack: his inventions
> Amazed the soldiers who burst in on him;
> They decided to spare his life, but he left soon after…
>
> (Ashbery 1977, p. 75)

In the same interview, Ashbery tacitly acknowledges the external pressures, both personal and societal, that led to his living in this particular apartment:

> [Chelsea] has become an alternative to Greenwich Village as that became more and more expensive, but Chelsea was 'discovered' several years ago and it's become very difficult to find an apartment… Anyway, I was forced to move in a great hurry so I moved into this rather boring 1964 high-rise which is already falling apart.
>
> (Ash 1985)

Ashbery's claim that he "[doesn't] have to look" at what lies outside the enclosing walls of his apartment is belied by his admission that he occupies this particular apartment because of factors such as the gentrification of New York, his own financial situation, and the personal circumstances that "forced" him to "move in a great hurry". In his prefatory remarks, John Ash notes that "this interview 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" (Ash 1985). As much as the poet might 'try not to look at' the social and material realities outside the spaces he creates and occupies, they continue to interrupt – a theme that this thesis will explore in subsequent chapters.

In Gehry's house, the old and the new parts of the dwelling are structurally interdependent, and are, as he put it, constantly "in… dialogue with" each other. This notion may be useful to us when considering the thorny issue of what Ashbery's poems might be said to be *about*, an issue which has long divided his critics. James Longenbach and Robert Spurr, for example, think of Ashbery as being, fundamentally, a poet who is concerned with the properties of language; Spurr is of the opinion that "he not only writes poetry as metalanguage – a language 'about' language – but he also writes a poetic language which reflects the problems of language in an artistic way" (Spurr 1981, p. 150). Even though Spurr tries to have it both ways here by suggesting that Ashbery's language both embodies and "reflects" – gesturing both inwards and outwards – he implicitly affirms that these two positions are separate and distinct. For Helen Vendler, meanwhile, Ashbery rejects the "consoling or sanctifying concession implicitly present in transcriptive mimesis" in favour of "fostering… a climate of mutual trust between the poet and the reader", who Ashbery addresses "in tones of intimate comprehension and sympathy" (Vendler 2005, pp. 76–77). For Vendler, the obscurity and complexity of Ashbery's poetic language is, at times, an obstacle the reader must overcome or circumvent in order to reach the content – about subjectivity, art and ethics – that lies beyond it.

If we follow Spurr and Vendler in thinking of ‘being about’ as a dualistic process in which the poetry apprehends its object from a certain epistemic distance – be it horizontal or vertical, and the object either inside or outside of the poetry itself – then the task of reading, understanding and categorising Ashbery’s work is indeed fraught with difficulty. However, if we are able instead to think of ‘being about’ as a quasi-spatial quality – as, to borrow Fredric Jameson’s term, a “wrapping” (Jameson 1991, p. 101), akin to the deconstructed steel-and-glass shell that Gehry places around his “quaint bungalow” (Hoyt 2012) – we can conceptualise Ashbery’s poetry as existing in hypotactic relationship to its subject: non-identical to it, yet inseparable from it. Michael Robbins writes in his review of Ashbery’s late collection *Planisphere* (2009) that the poet’s work is “about aboutness” (Robbins 2010). This judgment does not necessarily imply that the poetry only refers solipsistically to its own movements, but rather that it approaches its subject on a horizontal, metonymic level, by sharing (or occupying) its space – by being, as ‘Paradoxes and Oxymorons’ describes, “beside you” (Ashbery 2008, p. 698). Eve Sedgwick writes on the significance of the “irreducibly spatial positionality of beside”, arguing that “there’s nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them” (Sedgwick 2003, p. 8). Thinking about Ashbery’s poetry in this way, employing the “spacious agnosticism” (Sedgwick 2003, p. 8) that Sedgwick describes, opens up space for us to apprehend it both on a linguistic and an affective level – for what it says about its own processes, as well as about the world – and thereby acknowledges the way in which – in the words of ‘The Bungalows’ – it gestures “outside and inside at the same time” (Ashbery 2008, p. 224).

Jameson asserts that the new rooms created by Gehry’s “wrapping” of his bungalow constitute

> the new postmodern space proper, which our bodies inhabit in malaise or delight, trying to shed the older habits of inside/outside categories and perceptions, still longing for the bourgeois privacy of solid walls (enclosures like the old centered bourgeois ego), yet grateful for the novelty of… our newly reconstructed environment.
>
> (Jameson 1991, p. 115)

In this formulation – as in Ashbery's poetry – 'aboutness' is significant not for the meaning it conveys, but for the nature of the epistemic space it creates. Ashbery's poetic dwelling is propositional, blurring the lines between inside and outside and offering ways of thinking about our lives within them which vary depending on how we conceptualise their ability to accommodate us. The apparent permanency and solidity of their architecture is continually being re-evaluated by, and simultaneously encouraging us to re-evaluate, the apparent ephemerality and fluidity of our own experience.

*　　　　*　　　　*

This chapter will conclude by returning to where it began: Ashbery's Hudson House at 39 West Court Street. Both "familiar" and familial, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Ashbery's grandparents' Rochester house, and functioning as a repository both for their passed-down possessions and those of its late owner, it evokes both openness and enclosure, continuity and rupture.

The house currently has an online presence, in the form of the Yale Digital Humanities project 'The Nest', which offers visitors to the site the opportunity to take a virtual tour of its rooms. The fisheye perspective through which we view the house does indeed call to mind the rounded, enclosing form of a bird's nest, but our ability to observe this form – that is, our vantage point inside it – reminds us that it is, in reality, open and permeable. Likewise, in the 2013 exhibition 'John Ashbery Collects: Poet Among Things', Ashbery's rooms are recreated, in impressionistic style, in a gallery setting, with the poet's sagging armchairs, antique rugs and delicate occasional tables set against the gallery walls, on which hang works by artists such as Joseph Cornell, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Joe Brainard and Giorgio de Chirico. The scenes create a mood of welcoming enclosure, but they are, in reality, open to the world; anyone who enters the gallery can walk right into them. The Hudson House is open to rearrangement, renovation and reconfiguration, asking us to examine, and consequently reevaluate, our ideas about the relationship between what lies inside and outside its boundaries.

The exhibition catalogue for 'John Ashbery Collects' describes in affectionate detail its eclectic decor:

> Note a few of the wonky juxtapositions of one poet's regal whimsy in action: a bottle of 'Pee Cola' (a gift from Joe Brainard) across from drinking glasses featuring Daffy Duck in the pantry. A vintage advertising sign that hangs in the kitchen proclaiming 'Take a – WHIZ Drink/A Better Beverage'. A figurine Swee'Pea leaning against a bust of Lord Byron in his TV room. Staffordshire figures of maids and dogs. A toy-soldier toothbrush-holder. VHS tapes of Jacques Rivette's classic Céline and Julie Go Boating next to Daffy! and Fritz Lang's Spiders and the six-hour silent film French classic Les Vampires.
>
> ('John Ashbery Collects: Poet Among Things', 2013)

As a result of the Hudson House's "wonky juxtapositions", valuable antique pieces share shelf-space with ephemera, and hand-drawn cartoon shorts sit alongside one of the longest films ever made. In the eclecticism and the sheer volume of ornaments, *objets d'art*, collections and souvenirs that populate the house, there is, perhaps, evidence of what Richard Stamelman calls "a quest to repossess the past". Such a quest produces "a proliferation of signs and an excess of meaning… always different, forever ephemeral… sign, surrogate and memorial for what lives no more" (Stamelman 1990, p. 10) Susan Stewart discusses the difference between the souvenir and the collection, observing that the souvenir "involves the displacement of attention into the past", whereas "in the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection's world" (Stewart 1993, p. 151). However, Ashbery's eclectic groupings differ both from the decentred "proliferation of signs" that Stamelman refers to, as well as from the collections of stones or butterflies carefully displayed in cabinets that Stewart describes. In the Hudson House, valuable collectibles – Staffordshire figurines, for instance – sit alongside objects that have a purely personal and affective significance, such as gifts from friends, or kitschy homeware. Ashbery's objects blur the categories of collection and souvenir, simultaneously asserting the importance both of "things", and the "things they do". They do not only express the sense of loss and absence that Stamelman refers to, or the vacillation between fixation on it and elision of it that Stewart describes; they are, instead, both commemorative and constructive, referring to personal histories and narratives of friendship, affectivity and community. They therefore gesture towards a notion of time that includes not only the familiar and the strange, but also the communal and the individual. Chapter 4 will explore this interplay between individual and collective conceptualisations of time in more detail.

The Hudson House was simultaneously a place of "cosy gloom" and an "eerie" haunted house; both an enclosed haven where Ashbery could remain blissfully "unapproachable", and what the poem 'Pyrography' refers to as a "stage-set" from which "the fourth wall is invariably missing", where the poet's aesthetics could be playfully performed (Ashbery 2008, p. 496). Until late in his life, even as his health declined and his eyesight failed, Ashbery continued to divide his time between the property at 39 West Court Street and his Chelsea apartment, regularly making the long journey between the two dwellings. The speaker of *A Wave*'s 'Rain Moving In' asserts that:

> The dial has been set
> And that's ominous, but all your graciousness in living
> Conspires with it, now that this is our home:
> A place to be from, and have people ask about…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 733)

Both his Hudson house and his Chelsea apartment were home to Ashbery; however, as 'Rain Moving In' reminds us, home is, for him, "a place to be *from*" – in all senses of the term. It is best appreciated from a slight but necessary distance, and as such, a return to it inevitably involves a departure from it. In feeling or being at home – that is, in a dwelling, literal or poetic, that is familiar and *heimlich* – one is always also "from home", too: both estranged by a desire for what is lost or absent – a desire that causes its object to drift further away, the more determinedly one approaches it – and simultaneously haunted by misgivings about the power of one's dwelling to imperceptibly yet inexorably shape what takes place within it. Bearing in mind this ambivalence, one might even be tempted to claim that Costello's description of Ashbery as a "vigorously homeless poet" – which this chapter took as its starting point – is indeed an apposite description, were it not for the way in which Ashbery's poetry relentlessly questions, contradicts, undermines, and exceeds it.

3. Representing the world: Art, nature, mimesis, and the American landscape in Ashbery's poetry of the 1970s

Even the casual reader of Ashbery's poetry is likely to be familiar with the mirror of 1975's Pulitzer-prize-winning collection 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', at whose "rounded reflecting surface" (Ashbery 1977, p. 74) the poet gazes as he reflects on his own capacity to represent – and, perhaps, to distort – what he perceives and experiences in the world. However, although the convex mirror at which Ashbery looks occasions a meditation on the capacities and limitations of the poet's art, the face that is reflected in it is – the "self-portrait" that it describes – is that of a visual artist, the Mannerist painter Parmigianino, from whose 1524 painting the poem takes its name. The inseparability of Ashbery's best known, and most tonally cohesive, poem of the 1970s from a work of visual art indicates the influence of art on Ashbery's work of this period. However, the relationship between Ashbery's poetry and visual culture does not begin and end with Parmigianino's mirror. Instead, it constitutes a dynamic and wide-ranging dialogue that has as much to tell us about the symbiosis between contemporary art and poetry, and the tension between representation and reality, as it does about the detailed realism of the Mannerist movement.

Indeed, Ashbery's poetry does not merely refer to visual art but rather, at certain crucial points, *depends* on it, in the sense that it would not exist in the same form without it. In an essay on the work of his friend, the painter Jane Freilicher, Ashbery relates how he not only "gravitated towards painters" but was also influenced by their practice (Ashbery 1989, p. 240). Additionally, he was a visual artist in his own right, and produced hundreds of collages throughout his life, 120 of which were displayed in 'The Construction of Fiction' exhibition at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery in 2018. He describes his reaction to an exhibition of paintings by the Belorusian artist Chaïm Soutine at MOMA in 1950:

> The fact that the sky could come crashing joyously into the grass, that trees could dance upside down and houses roll over like cats eager to have their tummies scratched was something I hadn't realised before, and I began pushing my poems around and standing my words on end.
>
> (Ashbery 1989, p. 241)

This interrelationship between the verbal and the visual is particularly pronounced the works discussed in this chapter, but also applies to earlier collections such as *The Double Dream of Spring*, which borrows its title from a de Chirico painting, and whose attunement to popular culture – in the form of references to Popeye, Olive Oyl and Happy Hooligan – Ashbery attributed to “the influence of Pop Art” (Ashbery and Ford 2003, p. 61). Similarly, Ashbery’s 1992 collection *Hotel Lautréamont* takes its title and concept from a work by Joseph Cornell, while the book-length poem *Girls on the Run* (1999) is based on the drawings of the “Vivian Girls” by the outsider artist Henry Darger.

However, the relationship of Ashbery’s poetry to visual art is not merely stylistic or superficial. As this chapter will demonstrate, his poetry – and in particular, his work of the 1970s – engages with questions about the nature of representation, and about the relationship between looking, seeing and knowing, that are analogous to those which preoccupied contemporary visual art. For example, *Three Poems* (1972) begins by considering the merits of two distinct representational strategies:

> 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.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 247)

The question of whether it is “truer” to “put it all down” or “leave all out” was one which contemporary art was also attempting to address as Ashbery wrote *Three Poems*. As Matravers notes, by the end of the 1960s, “the avant-garde was in something of a crisis” (Matravers 2007, p. 20) due to the failure of both minimalism and Pop Art to revitalise, or dislodge, a modernist aesthetics that had become “morally and cognitively exhausted”, while remaining “materially entrenched” in dominant cultural institutions (Matravers 2007, p. 22). Ashbery articulates this vacillation between an austere, essentialising minimalism and an inclusive maximalism not from the position of a disinterested observer of the art world, but with the immediacy and urgency of a practitioner; as the visual art of the period wrestles with these questions, so, too, does his poetry.

Reading Ashbery’s poetry alongside, and in the context of, the contemporary theory and practice of looking at the world opens up three main avenues of inquiry. Firstly, it encourages us to consider questions of mimesis and realism in relation to Ashbery’s work – questions

which are more readily applied to visual art than to poetry, and which may seem particularly counterintuitive in relation to apparently 'difficult' poetry that would appear to shun the task of describing the world in easily recognisable ways. Writing on Ashbery's relationship to painting, Leslie Wolf identifies in the latter art form a "gradual relinquishing of the 'object'" that he sees as analogous to the way in which "the world denoted by referential language [has] departed poetry", and discerns a similar disengagement with objective reality in the "loosened matrix of Ashbery's idiom" (Lehman 1980). By interrogating the implications of Wolf's former assertion regarding the decommodification of the art object, this chapter will challenge his latter conclusion by demonstrating that instead of retreating from "the world", Ashbery is engaged in a fundamental exploration of the capacity of poetry to represent the objective reality that exists independently of it.

Secondly, and relatedly, reading Ashbery's poetry alongside art, and alongside contemporary visual art in particular, draws our attention to the extent to which his work of the 1970s – like that of artists such as Ed Ruscha, Lewis Baltz and Stephen Shore – is engaged not only in 'representing reality' in an abstract sense, but also in representing a specifically American experience of being in, and knowing about, the world. This is true both in terms of describing a physical geography that is not easily accommodated within binaries such as urban/rural and natural/manmade that inform European literary and artistic traditions, and also in terms of chronicling a turbulent period in post-War American history that encompassed the trauma of the Vietnam War and the lingering threat of totalitarianism, as well as the discontents of Watergate. Hickman has noted that for an American poet, Ashbery was particularly engaged with European literature – not only with the English Metaphysical and Romantic poets, but also and with modernists such as Eliot (Hickman 2012). This chapter will also follow Timothy Gray in reading Ashbery's poetry through the lens of pastoral. While Gray sees pastoral as being instrumental in the creation of a "cosmopolitan retreat" in which "avant-garde poets and painters could relax, let their guard down, and be more 'natural'" (Gray 2010, p. 2), this chapter will use the notion of pastoral to contextualise the way in which philosophical concerns about 'naturalness', and about nature itself, were expressed in the contemporary milieu, both in visual art and in poetry. Specifically, it will argue that the urban/rural binary which pastoral appears to unproblematically express is a proxy for a broader and more complex debate between the natural and the artificial, the 'real' and the constructed, and between different types of knowing: a personal and subjective experience

that is seen or felt, and a rational extrapolation of what is intellectually known based on objective 'facts'.

Lastly, reading Ashbery in the context of contemporary art allows us to expand our understanding of the poet's exploration of representation so that it deals not only with poetics, and the ways in which poetry orders and shapes what it describes, but also acknowledges that literary form is just one out of the many systems – aesthetic, political, legal and social – by which individual, subjective experience is organised and communicated, in ways that can be coercive as well as consensual. To this end, this chapter will refer to the work of Foucault, whose writings on Bentham's panopticon elucidate the ways in which representation and visibility are intertwined with knowledge, power and control. Reading Ashbery in a Foucauldian light would seem at first to be an odd choice; the playful, witty poet would seem to have little in common with a theorist whose dense works delineate the coercive structures that underlie our notions of sexuality, health, and the power of the State. There are, however, parallels between Ashbery and Foucault, not least the fact that they were both interested in the experimental (and relatively obscure) French novelist Raymond Roussel: Ashbery began a doctoral thesis on Roussel while studying in France, and later wrote the postscript to Foucault's book on Roussel, *Death and the Labyrinth* (1963).

In order to explore the issues raised by Ashbery's engagement with questions of representation, it is necessary to look not only at what lies within the ambit of the poet's convex mirror, but also at what falls outside its purview – what it cannot, or will not, describe or acknowledge. *The Vermont Notebook* (1975) was published just a few weeks before Ashbery's best-known collection, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), but has largely been largely ignored or dismissed in scholarly accounts of his work. This is partly due to the work's fragmentary and disjunctive structure (as well as, perhaps, its camp quality, and its propensity for scatological references), but it is also a result of the sheer volume of critical attention directed towards the long poem 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', whose "undeniable attraction" has, Frank J. Lepkowski notes, led to it eclipsing Ashbery's other works of the same period (Lepkowski 1993, p. 251). *The Vermont Notebook* is a hybrid of the verbal and the visual, featuring illustrations by Ashbery's friend, the artist Joe Brainard, to whom one of Ashbery's own collages, *Chutes and Ladders I (for Joe Brainard)* (2008), is dedicated. As Rona Cran notes, many of the poet's collages were made 'for Joe Brainard' in a literal, as well as in an affective, sense: up until the end of his life, Brainard would collect

ephemera and send them to Ashbery with the injunction that he should make collages out of them (Cran 2019, pp. 112–113), mirroring, perhaps, the interest with self-imposed rules that underlies much of the conceptual art of this period (and which is important to *The Vermont Notebook* itself). The collection was written in early 1974 on a series of meandering bus journeys around New England – primarily New Hampshire and Connecticut, rather than Vermont. As the poet recounts, "most of it was written on a bus, which I found to be an interesting experience. Writing on a moving vehicle. Not only did my mind move, the landscape was moving as well" (Gangel 1997). Mercurial and multi-vocal, the collection is strikingly different in both tone and content from the critically lauded, Pulitzer-prize-winning 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'. The latter describes a mimesis that is all-encompassing, even excessive, in its ability to represent every aspect of a scene simultaneously and in exhaustive detail; indeed, the act of representation the poem describes has a relentless quality, to the extent that it proliferates, unable to be contained within its boundaries, with the original, 'real' convex mirror generating a representation of itself in the form of Parmigianino's painting, and the painting giving rise to another self-portrait in the form of Ashbery's poem. The poem describes this process of showing "his reflection, of which the portrait/Is the reflection, of which the portrait/Is the reflection once removed" (Ashbery 1977, p. 68).

In contrast to this representational hall of mirrors, in which an apparently successful act of mimesis is triumphantly repeated, *The Vermont Notebook* fitfully adopts and casts off a range of styles and techniques that appear to have little capacity – or ambition – to generate a realistic depiction of the world. From the systematic yet disjunctive lists of its opening pages, to the banal diary entries, collaged fragments and expansive prose-poems of its middle section, and finally the alternately mundane and apocalyptic eco-poems and epistolatory snippets with which it draws to a close – what Stephen Ross, drawing on the work of Joyelle McSweeney, refers to its "necro-pastoral" impulse (Ross 2017, p. 100) – it displays a fluid, polyphonic quality that calls attention to the gap between objective reality (or one's subjective experience of it) and the ways in which it is represented. It is, as Ellen Levy notes, a work in which "the metaphoric keeps giving way to the literal" (Levy 2011, p. 198), with this "giving way" constituting a buckling under pressure, as much as a respectful stepping aside.

In ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ Ashbery’s speaker refers, somewhat deferentially, to prominent art critics and historians such as Sydney Freedberg and Giorgio Vasari (Ashbery 1977, p. 68, p. 69, p. 74). However, the poet was himself a professional art critic for most of his working life – albeit, he admits, a “disinterested”, while not entirely “uninterested”, one (Ashbery 1989, p. xix). Indeed, Ashbery’s partner David Kermani is of the opinion that the “art reviews [... are] actually a key to understanding the poetry, because although Ashbery always refused to explain his poems, many of the things he said about other people’s work could be applied to his own” (MacFarquhar 2005). The following section will take as its starting point Ashbery’s own writings on visual art in order to contextualise and elucidate the way in which his poetry approaches questions of looking, seeing and knowing.

* * *

In 1964, while living in Paris, Ashbery reviewed an exhibition of the *Quadri specchianti* series of ‘mirror paintings’ by the Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto for the New York Herald Tribune. Pistoletto painted figures and objects directly on to highly polished, reflective steel surfaces. As a result, as Ashbery describes, “the mirror surfaces automatically pick up the rest of the room including you, who suddenly find yourself, like it or not, the subject of a Pop picture” (Ashbery 1989, p. 158). Ashbery’s pronouns, usually so loose and fluid, seem to be operating under some kind of strain here: in the slightly unwieldy construction “including you, who suddenly find yourself, like it or not”, the singular verb “find” and the singular reflexive “yourself” feel unexpected, calling our attention to the way in which the word “you” can function both as a direct address to a specific individual, and also as a grammatical placeholder that sketches out this kind of address, while acknowledging its absence or impossibility. The shifting grammar of the sentence seems to enact what it describes, charting the ambivalence with which an individual, “like it or not”, might become a “subject” – but what kind of subject, Ashbery’s review wonders, is the “you” who participates in Pistoletto’s mirror works? A grammatical subject, who looks with agency at the object they encounter, or the passive subject *of* the artwork, subjected to – and by – its “automati[c]” organising tendency?

On looking at one particular Pistoletto painting, which features “a bottle placed in the lower left corner of an unrelieved expanse of mirror”, Ashbery recalls Wallace Steven’s ‘Anecdote of the Jar’:

> I placed a jar in Tennessee
> And round it was, upon a hill
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill
>
> (Ashbery 1989, p. 159)

Like Ashbery's uncertain "you", Stevens' "round it was" hovers, for a moment, between describing the jar as an autonomous subject, and as part of its environment; until the following line clarifies its meaning, one can read "round it was" as referring either to what is situated 'round', or around, the jar, or to a property (roundness) of the jar itself. As Ashbery notes, again quoting Steven's poem, Pistoletto's painting "organizes its slovenly environment" (Ashbery 1989, p. 159); as well as being subjected to the observer's act of perception, it is an active participant in it.

The blurring of subjectivity that occurs as one looks at something is described in 'Evening in the Country', from *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), whose speaker describes the experience of gazing at a rural scene:

> Now as my questioning but admiring gaze expands
> To magnificent outposts, I am not so much at home
> With these memorabilia of vision as on a tour
> Of my remotest properties, and the eidolon
> Sinks into the effective 'being' of each thing,
> Stump or shrub, and they carry me inside
> On motionless explorations of how dense a thing can be…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 197)

As Ashbery's speaker looks at the landscape, he 'takes it in' in a way that is almost literal: his look "expands/To magnificent outposts", his gaze getting larger as it ingests what it encounters. His use of the word "properties" suggests, perhaps, the presence of physical buildings, but it also carries a secondary sense of 'personal characteristics'; in figurative terms, as the speaker looks, he explores the "remotest" parts of himself, the elements that exist on the boundary line between internal and external experience. His act of looking

therefore entails projecting part of himself outwards, towards the border between self and other. The poem invokes this outward motion only to suggest its opposite: the stumps or shrubs the speaker looks at “carry me inside”. However, there is another ambiguity here: is the speaker figuratively going inside the stumps and shrubs as he looks at them, or is he being carried deeper inside *himself* as a result of his exploration of them? When we look, the poem suggests, we participate in our environment in a way that blurs the lines between the self and what lies outside or beyond it.

The speaker of ‘Evening in the Country’ describes his experience of looking at an environment that seems to return his gaze in light-hearted, almost jovial terms. In contrast, Ashbery’s long poem ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ explores the unsettling implications of such a process. It frequently refers to turns and turning, both in its imagery (the ball of wood “made by a turner” on which Parmigianino paints, the attention that “Turns dully away” (Ashbery 1977, p. 68, p. 70) and in its sinuous movement towards its conclusions. However, as this section will argue, it also represents a significant, and even surprising, ‘turn’ in Ashbery’s exploration of what it means to look and be looked at. Its conceit is encapsulated in the image of the painter (and, by implication, the poet) gazing at an object that returns his gaze; however, this reciprocal act of looking is fraught with discomfort, uncertainty, and even psychic danger. In his review of Pistoletto’s paintings, Ashbery describes the mirror in whose corner Pistoletto has painted the solitary bottle as an “unrelieved expanse” (Ashbery 1989, p. 159): the reciprocal gaze of the mirror seems to rake over the viewer, demanding, rather than requesting, their participation. Similarly, in ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’, looking is difficult or even painful, and the speaker sees in Parmigianino’s portrait

> A combination
> Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
> In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
> The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
> Makes hot tears spurt…
>
> (Ashbery 1977, p. 69)

What the speaker finds painful to look at is the accuracy with which Parmigianino has depicted his own expression, in its almost ineffable “combination of tenderness, amusement

and regret". However, the speaker also acknowledges that the mirror distorts reality – the image within it is "glazed, embalmed, projected at a 180-degree angle" (Ashbery 1977, p. 68), to the extent that, in the words of Sydney Freedberg that are quoted in the poem, "Realism in this portrait/No longer produces an objective truth, but a *bizarria*…" (Ashbery 1977, p. 73). The poignant realism that moves the speaker to tears is created not *in spite of* these unnatural distortions, but rather *because* of the way in which the convex mirror makes the painter's image seem to incline towards the viewer:

> The soul establishes itself.
> But how far can it swim out through the eyes
> And still return safely to its nest? The surface
> Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases
> Significantly; that is, enough to make the point
> That the soul is a captive…
>
> (Ashbery 1977, p. 68)

The questions that the poem raises here are, on one level, about the politics of representation. Vasari describes Parmigianino as setting out "with great art to copy" what he sees in the mirror (Ashbery 1977, p. 68). How, Ashbery's poem invites us to consider, is this 'copying' of reality achieved? Does it demand the greatest possible fidelity to the world as one perceives it at a particular moment in time? Or does it necessitate distorting one's perceptions in order that a more profound or universal truth can be revealed? As Stephen Halliwell notes, this debate is a longstanding one, and is articulated by Goethe in his periodical *Die Propyläen*, in which he claims that there is a difference between "appearing to be true or real (*wahr scheinen*) and 'possessing an impression or appearance of truth' (*einen Schein des Wahren haben*)" (Halliwell 2002, p. 2). However, the argument in its entirety dates back to Plato, who describes Aristotle as drawing a distinction between "art" and "spectacle", with the latter involving an imitative, surface realism which, Aristotle claims, "'is less artistic" as a result of its inability to convey deeper truths about reality (Aristotle 1996, p. 22). As a work of ekphrasis, Ashbery's poem is itself engaged in both looking *at* the painting, and, in figurative terms, resembling, or looking *like* it; it takes place "*As* Parmigianino did it", its opening word metaphorically fusing time and space to affirm its affinity to what it describes (Ashbery 1977, p. 68). Lee Edelman sees the poem as dealing with "representation and misrepresentation" (Edelman 1986, p. 97), arguing that its "numerous acts of impersonation

expose an element of duplicity at [its] very core… [and] point at the same time to an anxiety about its own authenticity" (Edelman 1986, p. 99). Indeed, the word 'like' (as well as its derivate, 'unlike') echoes through the poem, as if it is attempting to calibrate its own distance from, or likeness to, the work of art that it describes.

The central conceit of Ashbery's poem – the convex mirror – nonchalantly resolves the debate that has troubled theorists of mimesis for millennia; the artist doesn't need to choose between representing reality as it is and distorting it to convey deeper truths, because the world he depicts is already (and *always already*) distorted. However, the poem seems unsatisfied with the neat answer that it proffers, and insistently looks past it, at a less easily soluble question: when represented exhaustively and looked at unflinchingly in this way, is the subject totally knowable? Does any part of what it is elude the processes of representation, systematisation and (to quote Stevens) "organization"? In this respect, Ashbery's mirror does not so much signal a democratic participation in an act of looking, as wonder restlessly whether it is possible to conceive of an alternative to being included in it. In his review of Pistoletto's mirror paintings, Ashbery writes approvingly of the way in which they "empt[y] it of meaning… at the same time hinting at another kind of meaning, beyond appearances" (Ashbery 1989, p. 159). It is for just such a hint – of something not just below, but *beyond*, appearances – that the speaker of 'Self-Portrait' combs the relentlessly informative surface of Parmigianino's painting for.

In his lecture 'Poetical Space', Ashbery quotes Eliot's description of the River Thames from the Waste Land, commenting that "the river scene as Eliot describes it is very hard to see" and "strangely out of focus". However, this does not affect the description's ability to convey something significant about the scene, which it "transform[s]… into a blurred copy that is all the more meaningful for being imprecise and out of focus – accurate in its inaccuracy" (Ashbery 2004, p. 215). Similarly, in a review of Yves Tanguy's paintings, Ashbery observes that "space and perspective are methodically distorted"; as a result, he notes approvingly, "no very accurate reading is possible" (Ashbery 1989, p. 21). Judging by the curiously intense charge that words expressing precision, definitiveness and accuracy possess in the poet's work, this concern with the *accuracy* of a work of representation is not simply a visual one. The spare, opaque poem 'The Hero', from Ashbery's first collection *Some Trees*, ends with the gnomic, unsettling couplet: "There is no end to his/Dislike, the accurate one" (Ashbery 2008, p. 11). In the same collection, the enigmatic, somewhat sinister subject of 'The

Thinnest Shadow' is described by means of adjective degrees which are suggestive of accuracy and precision but convey scant information. The subject is even imagined as being reflected in, and represented by, an instrument of measurement:

> He is sherrier
> And sherriest.
> A tall thermometer
> Reflects him best.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 21)

Meanwhile, in *The Double Dream of Spring*'s 'Definition of Blue' – a poem that might be read as an early iteration of 'Self-Portrait' were it not for the contrast between its ironically distanced, faux-intellectual tone and the calm neutrality of the later poem – the speaker describes the "accurate touch" with which "A portrait, smooth as glass, is built up out of multiple corrections/And it has no relation to the space or time in which it was lived" (Ashbery 2008, p. 212). Attempts to be accurate, to measure or to define objective reality, seem destined to fail, as the "multiple corrections" they require – each individually faithful to the world as it is perceived – add up to an erroneous or irrelevant representation, the parts ultimately refusing to cohere into a unified whole. Indeed, the word 'whole' is used insistently throughout 'Self-Portrait…', along with, perhaps, a trace of its homonym, 'hole', which is suggested by terms such as "vacuum" and "vacancy" (Ashbery 1977, p. 73, p. 77). The speaker of 'Self-Portrait' finds it painful to look directly at Parmigianino's painting because its mimetic distortion of the world is so successful in representing a deeper layer of reality that it errs back into literal imitation, or even into Aristotelian spectacle. In rendering its subject unlike reality, it has inadvertently made it *too* realistic. The "secret is too plain" (Ashbery 1977, p. 69); the painting, unable to escape the circular dynamic of *looking, looking at* and *looking like*, reveals too much.

In the context in which the poem was published, this dilemma was not merely a philosophical one. Ashbery wrote the majority of 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror' in 1973, almost three quarters of the way through a century blighted by totalitarianism, narrated by mass media, and governed by means of the collection and aggregation of information about the individual subject. More specifically, the poem was written during the second half of the Cold War, during which America attempted to neutralise the looming threat of Communism through the

policy of containment. This strategy depended, as the diplomat George F. Kennan put it in his 'Long Telegram' to the State Department, on "creat[ing]… the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problem of its internal life… and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time" (Kennan 1946). Kennan's formulation defines the nation's "internal" life as a problem that must be addressed not with a commensurate "internal" solution, but rather by means of a superficial assertion of order and cohesiveness that operates primarily on the level of superficial appearances. Rather than striving towards a genuinely harmonious society, America must create the "impression" – the likeness, or perhaps even the *spectacle* – of social and spiritual unity. This kind of spectacle is not an Aristotelian, but rather a Debordian one, in which "the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him" (Debord 2014, p. 16). During this period, a discourse of vitality and normalcy attempted to encompass all aspects of life, from aesthetics to sexuality, without being underpinned by a genuine moral concern for the wellbeing of the individual. "What is this universe the porch of/As it veers in and out, back and forth,/Refusing to surround us and still the only/Thing we can see?" asks the speaker of 'Self-Portrait' (Ashbery 1977, p. 77). In post-War America, society was both the only thing one could see, and a hollow construction which had abdicated its responsibility to contextualise and nurture the individual subject.

As well as being impossible to look away from, America was liable to direct its own piercing gaze back onto its subjects. As in the totalitarian societies whose ideology the country feared so deeply, surveillance – or the threat of it – was crucial to ensuring compliance. Beginning in the late 1950s, the FBI's monitoring and taping of domestic dissidents and anti-war activists expanded on an unprecedented scale. Hadley describes how, in 1974, the year that 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror' first appeared in print,

> Seymour Hersh of the *New York Times*… reported that CHAOS [a CIA codename] kept 10,000 CIA files on American citizens. That, it turned out, was a low estimate. Subsequent disclosures revealed that CHAOS held an index of 300,000 names, with especially extensive files on 7,200 U.S. citizens.
>
> (Hadley 2013)

At the same time, as Jasper Bernes points out, new theories of management, which included methods of organising and systematising information about the individual subject, were taking hold in the world of white-collar work, while cybernetics, a "would-be science of everything, purportedly capable of explaining the workings of a robot, an animal, a human being, and a multinational corporation alike", was exerting an influence on almost every field of public life, from economics to the arts (Bernes 2017, p. 28). The result was what Benjamin Buchloh has described as an "aesthetic of administration", in which "postwar artistic production… mimed the operating logic of late capitalism" (Buchloh 1990, p. 143).

Stephen Paul Miller reminds us of a key feature of the mirror in Parmigianino's painting: it is not an everyday mirror, which reflects what is directly in front of it. Instead, because of its convexity, it reflects everything in the room. In it, everything is represented, and although the looking subject can change their position, they cannot fundamentally change their view (Miller 1993, pp. 87–88). As a result, argues Miller, the convex mirror is akin to a panopticon – a structure in which, as Foucault writes, "[i]nspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere" (Foucault 2008, p. 2). Ashbery's mirror, Miller claims, "regiments a constant surveillance upon everything in the room" (Miller 1993, p. 101). In fact, in Miller's view, the convex mirror even "outdoes the panopticon by surveying the agent of surveillance" (Miller 1993, p. 101): it unexpectedly turns its unrelenting gaze on the only subject who is, in theory, exempt from it. Miller reads Ashbery's poem in the context of the resignation of President Richard Nixon, an event in which a culture of constant surveillance – epitomised by Nixon's obsessive taping of his conversations – turned upon its instigator, creating a destabilising moral vacuum at the centre of public life. However, the poem's evocation of an instrument of constant, unwavering surveillance also reflects the way in which what Alan Nadel calls "narratives of containment" (Nadel 1995, p. xi) wove the principles of containment into popular culture, leading to an internalised version of the ever-watchful convex mirror: individuals conducted surveillance on themselves on the State's behalf, assiduously monitoring their own thoughts and actions for signs of deviation from social norms.

This socio-cultural milieu is reflected in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror's propensity to mix the language of felt, bodily experience with the detached diction of external systems of social control. Imagery of legal or juridical processes pervades the poem; the soul, "sequestered" inside the individual, is a "captive, treated humanely" (Ashbery 1977, p. 68), while the

artist's hand "weave[s] delicate meshes/That only argue its further detention" (Ashbery 1977, p. 70). Parmigianino's gaze is "so powerful/In its restraint that one cannot look for long" (Ashbery 1977, p. 69). Sequestration, captivity, detention, and powerful restraint: alongside the language of individual subjectivity hovers the impersonal vocabulary of the State. A crime seems to have been committed, and is being prosecuted: "strewn evidence" testifies to the defiance of "sumptuary laws" (Ashbery 1977, pp. 71–73), and "conflicting statements [are] gathered" despite the "lapses of memory/Of the principal witnesses", building "the momentum of a conviction" (Ashbery 1977, pp. 77–78). The poem culminates in an interrogation:

> Since it is a metaphor
> Made to include us, we are a part of it and
> Can live in it as in fact we have done,
> Only leaving our minds bare for questioning
> We now see will not take place at random
> But in an orderly way that means to menace
> Nobody – the normal way things are done,
> Like the concentric growing up of days
> Around a life: correctly, if you think about it.
>
> (Ashbery 1977, p. 76)

The word "questioning" flickers between describing an interior process – the individual's natural openness to exploring the world – and the intrusive demands of the external systems within which they must live. The unwillingness of passive constructions like "the way things are done" and "the… growing up of days" to assign agency creates an unsettling sense that responsibility is being concealed or elided, and one might even hear in these lines the disingenuous rationality of the totalitarian State, which "means to menace/nobody"; if you're innocent, you have nothing to fear (a reassurance which the poem calls into question with its reminder that Imperial soldiers will soon "burst in on" the artist in his chamber) (Ashbery 1977, p. 75). These lines chart a re-education in which perception itself is brought to heel by the imposition of an ideological framework: "we now see", the speaker tells us, that matters are being handled "in the normal way things are done… correctly, if you think about it" (Ashbery 1977, p. 76).

In contrast to this discourse of thinking, rationality and external systems, the poem invokes a bodily subjectivity, an intuitive “knowing”, the “whispers of the word that can't be understood/But can be felt” (Ashbery 1977, p. 75). However, rather than positing embodied feeling as an alternative to rational thought, or tempering rationalist, Enlightenment ideals with Romantic, affective ones, the poem registers *thinking* and *feeling* as touchpoints of another claustrophobic system in whose circular contours the subject can be trapped, either by overlapping them too readily, or by demarcating them too assiduously. The poem emphasises the boundedness and vulnerability of the embodied subject, reminding us of its permeability – “hot tears spurt” from it (Ashbery 1977, p. 69) – and its reliance on a variety of fragile mechanisms: “nerves normal, breath normal” (Ashbery 1977, p. 76). This is not a confident, Whitmanian subject who, “amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary”, “listen[s] to all sides and filters them” (Whitman 2016, p. 17); it is a small and fragile creature, inadequate even to the task of “decoding” its “own man-size quotient” (Ashbery 1977, p. 82) and in need of the structure that external systems provide; as insubstantial as “windblown fog or sand”, it is infiltrated by the “light and dark speech” of external discourses, and rendered unrecognisable: “no part/Remains that is surely you” (Ashbery 1977, p. 71). At the end of the poem, this vessel of felt, bodily knowing disintegrates completely; “The hand holds no chalk/And each part of the whole falls off/And cannot know it knew…” (Ashbery 1977, p. 83). The body, with its delicate “nervures” (an entomological term referring to the veins of an insect’s wing, rather than a synonym for ‘nerves’) does not present a plausible alternative to the impersonal “bubble-chamber” of ideology, “tough as reptile’s eggs” (Ashbery 1977, p. 72), but rather equals it in opacity and epistemic insufficiency.

Can the “secret” that the poem repeatedly invokes, desiring both to examine and to protect it (to cover it with the “shield of a greeting”, perhaps (Ashbery 1977, p. 82)) provide an unknown or unknowable term that will interrupt the self-perpetuating representational circuits – analogous, perhaps, to the ‘circular causal’ feedback loops of cybernetics – that the speaker inscribes? The word “secret” occurs seven times in the poem, alongside numerous references to obscurity, privacy and ambiguity[3]. The enigmatic secrets that the poem evokes could be

[3] One could plausibly argue that the “secret” that the poem refers to is Ashbery’s sexuality, particularly as the work hinges on a man gazing deeply and at length at the image of another man – the “gloss on the fine/Freckled skin, lips moistened as though about to part” (Ashbery 1977, p. 82) – in a way that would not have been socially

seen to stand in bold opposition to an ideology which baldly insists that everything be visible; indeed, the speaker attempts to affirm the presence, at the core of the "round mirror which organizes everything", of something fundamentally unknowable in the form of "the polestar of your eyes which are empty,/Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing" (Ashbery 1977, p. 71).[4] However, the "perverse light" that the speaker sees in Parmigianino's eyes is predicated on its "imperative of subtlety" – if it were to be seen clearly, it would not be able to be seen at all (Ashbery 1977, p. 70). The painting, with its "enigmatic finish", by necessity only "hints at… [what] we were hoping to keep hidden" (Ashbery 1977, p. 79). The secret therefore remains secret precisely *because* it is unseen, and felt only because it is not rationally known; in this way, it reveals itself to be partaking in the very dynamics of clarity and obscurity that it initially appears to disrupt.

Does the poem constitute either a capitulation to, or an act of resistance against, the external systems that seek to observe, delineate and define the subject? The hollows and gaps that undermine the integrity of the mirror's sphere, like the "cold pockets/Of remembrance" (Ashbery 1977, p. 83) invoked in the final lines, delineate space that exists away from the mirror's organising curve; not outside it, but not fully subsumed into its ambit. As Miller puts it, "a room with a convex mirror in it has no unseen 'pockets', and does not allow for any new views, or re-visions" (Miller 1993, p. 101). However, the rooms of Ashbery's poem suggest at least the possibility, if not the realisation, of private or hidden representational spaces which stand in opposition to the imperatives of external systems.

*   *   *

While 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' agonises over the philosophical and political implications of the systematisation of experience and the role that information and data might

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permissible in any other context. Ashbery's enthusiastic references in his letters of the early 1950s to the "truly divine Parmigianino" (Roffman 2017, p. 191), and his later recollection of first encountering this "dreamlike image of the beautiful young man" (Smith 1991, p. 51) lends credence to the idea that the speaker's gaze is a queer one.

[4] Another poem published in 1975, Seamus Heaney's 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing', responds with a similarly inscrutable silence to a different politics of surveillance, both in the form of the "English journalist in search of 'views/On the Irish thing'" whose "zoom lenses, recorders and coiled leads/Litter the hotels", and the friends whose "tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks" (Heaney 1975).

play in representing, and thereby constructing, subjectivity, another work that Ashbery published in the same year, *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), seems less concerned with critiquing the assumptions of an information-based culture that with appropriating its methods. As Lucy Lippard has noted, the 1960s and 1970s saw a shift towards the use of information, data and categorisation in contemporary art and theory, as "information and systems replaced traditional formal concerns of composition, color, technique and physical presence. Systems were laid over life the way a rectangular format is laid over the seen in paintings, for focus." The hallmarks of this kind of work are, Lippard claims, "Lists, diagrams, measurements, neutral descriptions… much counting… [and] a preoccupation with repetition" (Lippard 1973, p. xv).

As an art critic, Ashbery would undoubtedly have been aware of this trend; indeed, in March 1975, he wrote a review of an exhibition of paintings (or 'Translations') by the Californian artist Jess in which he refers directly to it, stating that in the painter's collage works, "[t]here is abstraction and there is perhaps something called 'information art'" (Ashbery 1989, p. 296). This section will explore how ideas about the capacity of a work of art to contain and represent 'information' are useful in thinking about *The Vermont Notebook,* which would appear to align itself both with "abstraction" and with "information".

In the collection's opening section, which consists of lists, the variable verse lineation of 'Self-Portrait' has been superseded by a regular prose line that orders and categorises what it depicts into a paratactic, quasi-indexical form (recalling, perhaps, the grid that Rosalind Krauss sees as "near-ubiquit[ous]" in contemporary avant-garde art, notable for its "lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection… its hostility to narrative" (Krauss 1985, p. 158). *The Vermont Notebook*'s lists take as their subjects not only clearly definable topics such as newspapers ("The New York Times, The New York Daily News, The New York Post….") and community organisations ("Bridge clubs, Elks, Kiwanis, Rotary, AAA…), but also less clearly circumscribed areas of experience: "The climate, the cities, the houses, the streets, the stores, the lights, people" (Ashbery 2008, p. 341, p. 335, p. 331). Their format and structure, in which apparently similar things, people and places are grouped together, is less suggestive of a poem than of a collection of data one might find in a taxonomy, catalogue or index. Indeed, the documentary and diaristic aspect of *The Vermont Notebook* – which is unwilling to refer to itself as a finished book, preferring to invoke the unbound, informal form of the "notebook" – suggests that the gathering and documentation of information is not merely a

precursor or supplement to creating a work of art, but is a vital part of the work itself. Berger and Santone argue that the rise of documentation in art reflects the way in which, in the 1960s, "individual and collective identities came directly into conflict with oppressive state apparatuses… In this context, many artists made work that engaged with the mundane everyday, with the embodied experience of the spectator… [and] documentation was a core strategy to these ends" (Berger and Santone 2016, p. 202).

However, just as 'Self-Portrait…' pushes at the weak points in the apparently impermeable representational systems that it describes, *The Vermont Notebook* interrogates its own apparent ambition – and that of "information art", data, and systems as a whole – to organise, document and represent experience. In doing so, it insistently returns to the questions of realism, mimesis and representation, and of seeing and knowing, that preoccupy its better-known counterpart. In the theories of cybernetics that emerged in the 1950s and 60s, as Ilfeld notes, "the conceptualization of information emerged as a signal whose opposite is entropic and statistical noise" (Ilfeld 2012, p. 57). In *The Vermont Notebook*, information and noise are not opposing terms, but are rather inextricably linked, as language that purports to be factual and pragmatic seems always about to slip into meaninglessness or ambiguity.

The collection begins by both asserting and undermining the notion that objective reality can indeed be expressed within the rigid boundaries of a representational system. The sparse opening page lists three months: "October, November, December" (Ashbery 2008, p. 331). As Christopher Schmidt points out, these months are consecutive, and represent a quarter of a year; however, they do not correspond fully to either autumn or winter, refusing to align neatly with the temporal system to which they seem to refer (Schmidt 2014, p. 63). They conclude with the end of the year, gesturing, perhaps, towards the drive towards fulfilment and completion inherent in narrative form. However, this organising system is evoked only to be undermined: the list's placement, on the first page of the collection and without any preceding context, suggests both beginning and ending, without fully committing to either.

Further anomalies arise as it becomes clear that the lists' categories are not as definitive as they seem. For example: "Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, Waco, El Paso, Corpus Christi, Galveston, Amarillo, Baton Rouge." (Ashbery 2008, p. 341). The subject of this list seems to be 'cities in Texas' – up until the mention of Baton Rouge, which is in Louisiana. This final, ill-fitting item is disorienting, prompting us to wonder whether we identified the

list’s subject correctly, or if we are overlooking another property that these places have in common. Is the category of the list actually ‘Southern cities’? Or does geographical area that it is cataloguing not align with that of a specific state, in the same way that “October, November, December” describes neither autumn nor winter? Another possibility is that the system of rational categorisation invoked by the list format is faulty – too permeable, or insufficiently rigid – to the extent that the extraneous matter that it claims to exclude is making its way in undetected.

The next list reads as follows: “Norman, Enid, Tulsa.” (Ashbery 2008, p. 341). Based on the apparent subject of the preceding poem, we are likely to read “Norman” as referring to Norman, Oklahoma, a relatively well-known city. However, the next item in the list – “Enid” – is harder to interpret. Is it a proper name, and did “Norman” therefore refer to a person, rather than a place? The third item in the list, “Tulsa”, is unequivocally Oklahoman, resolving the uncertainty (and there is indeed a small city called Enid in Oklahoma). However, even when in possession of all the information it is possible to glean about this short list, the experience of reading it remains disjunctive: on a subsequent reading, the appearance of “Enid” after “Norman” persists in conjuring an image of people, rather than places. So closely do we find ourselves poring over these place names that we may temporarily overlook the fact that they have no connection to Vermont, the alleged subject of the collection.

The Vermont Notebook’s layering of representational systems onto experiences which refuse to align unproblematically with them reflects the tendency in contemporary conceptual art to impose arbitrary rules on the creation of a work, as in John Baldessari’s *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)* (1973). Some of this piece’s 36 images (one for each frame on a roll of 35mm film) are asymmetric, blurry or misaligned; in others, the balls – familiar to us as children’s toys, now being used to play a different, more conceptual game – float strikingly against a clear blue sky. As systems – such as Baldessari’s repeated throwing of the balls in the air and pressing of the camera shutter, or Ashbery’s repeated bus trips around New England – are “laid over life” (Lippard 1973, p. xv), they draw attention not only to their own contingency, but also to the epistemic inflexibility of *any* system, regardless of its unobtrusiveness, its comprehensiveness, or of the aesthetic appeal of its results.

Baldessari (1973), *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*

The literary form which *The Vermont Notebook* initially adopts – that of the list or catalogue – expresses similar tensions between order and contingency, and between inclusion and excision. Ashbery's most notable precursor in the use of the catalogue form is Whitman; Geoff Ward describes how he "draws on techniques – dangerous techniques, perhaps – made available by Whitman in his great lists" (Ward 1993, p. 85). One can, perhaps, hear echoes of Whitman's "banks, tariffs, steamships, factories, stocks, stores, real estate and personal estate" (Whitman 2016, p. 146) in Ashbery's "blacktop, service roads, parking lots, drive in deposits, libraries, roller rinks" (Ashbery 2008, p. 333), and the poet himself describes *The Vermont Notebook* in Whitmanian terms, as "a catalogue of a number of things that could be found in the State of Vermont… another 'democratic vista'" (Watkin 2001, p. 219). However, Whitman's catalogues denote not a highly ordered and compartmentalised world, but rather a radical, even transcendental, dissolution of the boundaries that separate different categories of objects and people. As Robert Kern argues, for Whitman, the catalogue represents a "radically open" form, which the poet employs "to accommodate the plenitude of a world rescued from hierarchical ordering" (Kern 1977, pp. 173–174). Lawrence Buell's assertion that "whatever intricate design [a Whitmanian] catalogue may later seem to have, it is essentially an outpouring, intended to stir up, not to settle" (Buell 1968, p. 339) highlights the propensity of the list-like form to become *excessively* open, and thereby to be overwhelmed by the material that it appears to authoritatively enumerate. Indeed, *The Vermont Notebook*'s final list – which precedes the collection's middle section of longer prose-poems and diaristic snippets – illustrates how far we have come from the austere minimalism of "October, November, December":

> Darkness, eventide, shadows, roost, perch, leaf, light, evasion, sentinel, plug, dream, mope, urchin, distress, ways, many, few, found, dreaming, unclad, season, solstice, many, before, few, undid, seam, artery, motor, before, sleep, come, mouth, asshole, behaving, foundered, sleep, reef, perfect, almost.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 351)

Rather than attempting to contain its material within a set of rules or categories, this poem gleefully opens up multiple interpretative avenues. It possesses a dream-like, associative quality, heightened by its almost musical repetitions of seemingly incidental, affect-free words ("ways", "many", "few"). It also enacts a more overt narrative movement than any other list in this section, vacillating minutely between a polymorphous disavowal of constraining structures and a subsequent retreat or reining in of such impulses: *undid/seam*, *asshole/behaving*, *perfect/almost*. Although still couched in list-like prose, it undoubtedly possess a more *poetic* quality than the other lists in the section, due partly to the way that words which, in a simple list, would refer unequivocally to objects, can also be read as verbs, imbuing constructions like "shadows, roost, perch" with a sense of semantic movement, fluidity and progression.

By the end of this first section, the collection's initial documentary or 'informational' style has therefore been almost entirely abandoned. In the list-poem above, observation of the world generates ambiguities rather than hard facts; the information that the text provides pertains not to objective reality, but rather to one's subjective and contingent experience of it – and also to the way in which the elements of the work combine and interact in depicting it. The result is not merely information, or documentation, but rather the creation of internal relationships that have the capacity to generate meanings – a network of signs that manifests not as an autonomous and indifferent system, but as a dynamic and vibrant entity. One might therefore claim that 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' appears to refer to a highly controlled and self-enclosed system, but is continually interrupted and disturbed by the world that exists outside it, while *The Vermont Notebook* purports to be about the external, objective world, but instead finds itself able only to comment on the self-contained, internal system of references that it creates and sustains.

Cran notes that Joe Brainard produced the illustrations for *The Vermont Notebook* by, as he put it in conversation with Anne Waldman, "trying to relate at certain points but in factual

ways not emotional ways" (Cran 2019, p. 109). Brainard's comment highlights the importance of relationality – and relationship – to the text. As a result, as Cran observes, "the poetry and the drawings seem to move both with and against each other" (Cran 2019, p. 109). Brainard and Ashbery's deep friendship, and their fertile artistic collaboration – which, as Cran notes, Ashbery continued for many years after Brainard's death (Cran 2019, p. 110) – provides the foundation for the collection's mingling of the verbal and the visual. The two friends worked on *The Vermont Notebook* by mail – Ashbery would send pages to Brainard, who would reply with a sheaf of illustrations, from which Ashbery would select his favourites. In Ashbery and Brainard's remote collaboration, the verbal and the visual elements of *The Vermont Notebook* were created not simultaneously, in the same place and time, but dialogically. Indeed, Cran conceptualises the relationship between the visual and the verbal in the collection as a conversation between the poet and the artist, in which "Brainard's deadpan drawings exuberantly interrupt Ashbery's prose poetry, sometimes obliquely, sometimes in reference to it, but in ceaseless interplay" (Cran 2019, p. 109).

The text's playful dialogue between the verbal and the visual is evident in the pages on which the "Darkness, eventide, shadows…" list appears; the text is on the recto, followed, on the verso, by Brainard's drawing of a seal (Ashbery 2008, pp. 351–352). This illustration could, perhaps, be seen as marking a structural 'seal' which separates this part of the book from the longer, looser and more discursive poems that follow, but the fact remains that the bright-eyed, cheerful-looking seal as it appears on the page has no obvious connection to the literal meaning of the words in the list that precedes it. However, 'sentinel', 'season', 'solstice' 'seam' and 'sleep' all contain sonic elements of 'seal'. The associative dream-logic of the poem, it seems, is contagious, and cannot be contained; indeed, it slides off the poem, contaminating the subsequent image – which itself depicts a slippery object. It is, perhaps, this slippery quality, both in relation to Brainard's art and the ongoing collaboration between the two friends, to which Ashbery alludes in choosing a Snakes and Ladders board for the backdrop of the collage that he dedicated to Brainard, *Chutes and Ladders I (for Joe Brainard)* (2008).

The interpretative leaps and slides that the reader of *The Vermont Notebook* is able – and even encouraged – to make highlight the way in which the work not only contains and represents information about the world, but also incorporates an epistemic spaciousness that depends on the very *absence* of definitive knowledge or certainty. This is directly opposed to the factual character of "informational" or documentary art, which lays out everything it knows with the implicit expectation that doing so will lead to the subject that it refers to being *known* or *understood* in some way. What is hidden or unexpressed becomes, in Ashbery's formulation, simply another aspect of the network of relationships that the work creates, and by means of which it generates meaning. Indeed, *The Vermont Notebook*'s 'facticity' – to use a word frequently applied to contemporary informational or documentary art – is complicated by its willingness to allow doubt, secrecy, and perhaps even ignorance to play constitutive roles in the way in which it represents its 'information' to the reader. Joe Brainard's illustrations frequently operate by means of negative space; images are built up by means of shading or blocking out areas of the page, so that what is being represented occupies the space where no representation has actively taken place. Benjamin Buchloh claims that "the proposal inherent in Conceptual art was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone" (Buchloh 1990, p. 107); *The Vermont Notebook* dramatises this transference of semantic responsibility over to language, and then back into visual representation… and back again. As Brainard's drawing of a blank signpost, and the large blocks of white space between Ashbery's poems playfully suggest, certain elements may have gone missing in action, lost between representational realms (Ashbery 2008, p. 366).

As the collection progresses, its initial list format is all but abandoned, although the text occasionally refers to it in a perfunctory tone – "…motion sickness is enough. (Another list here)" (Ashbery 2008, p. 369). If the first section of *The Vermont Notebook* is a data-dump of quasi-informational 'facticity', the second section is a dumping ground for the incidental or extraneous matter of consciousness. Many of these poems adopt the format of diary entries, scrapbook pages, fragmentary 'notes to self', or hastily written reminders, and their tone veers unpredictably between prosaic and philosophical, just as their subject matter oscillates between the specific and the general:

> Somewhere we have taken off from, there seems no need to return, however desperate, motion sickness is enough. (Another list here).
>
> Call Southern New England Telephone Co. […]
>
> His sideburns. Problem about them. He liked them. They made him feel good. But nobody else did…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, pp. 369–371)

The ephemeral, non-literary and diurnal formats of this section's poems align themselves with the movements of a specific body, or mind, in time, rather than attempting to synthesise disparate perceptions into an overarching, realist vision; their aim is to record, rather than to shape. They therefore invite us to look beyond the apparent binary that separates data about

the outside world from internal impressions and sense data. External references are subjugated to subjective, internal ones, as the text follows the contingent, even chaotic, movements and experiences of a single subject, rather than claiming to express universal truths.

The Vermont Notebook's ambivalence about whether it is aiming to create meaning in reference to the objective world, or relationally, in reference to its own internal organisation, suggests that this work, like 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', is also concerned with the twin processes of knowing and seeing. For example, the following list begins by evoking a literal, physical dwelling, then moves outwards from it to suggest the presence of a wider landscape:

> Front porches, back porches, side porches, door jambs, window sills, lintels, cornices, gambrel roofs, dormers, front steps, trees, magnolia, scenery, McDonalds, Carrol's, Kinney Shoe Stores.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 347)

In doing so, it moves between what is known intimately and specifically, on an experiential level – the surfaces and textures of a home – and what can be known only in generic terms: the visual, cultural and commercial textures of the broader environment. Every reader will imagine their own idiosyncratic array of "window sills" and "front steps", based on houses they have known; however, our experience of "McDonalds" is far more homogenous and less individualised (and therefore, one could even argue, more democratic). Ashbery's reference to "door jambs" again calls to mind Whitman's 'Song of Myself' ("Unscrew the locks from the doors!/Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!") (Whitman 2016, p. 81); however, while Whitman's poem sets out to bridge the gaps – or to trouble the thresholds – between the personal and the universal, and between the general and the specific, *The Vermont Notebook* is drawn to their points of contact, disjunction and friction (highlighted, perhaps, by the way that the above list moves between them by means of the amusingly vague, and descriptively inert, "scenery"). In its ongoing vacillation between the general and the specific, it draws our attention to the paradoxical circularity of these notions – the way in which, for example, its highly specific shop names, of establishments that are not known personally by the reader – "Charles & Co., Fauchon, Colette's" (Ashbery 2008, p. 337) – evoke and populate the general category of 'shop' more effectively than the more inclusive

general descriptor "the stores", which appears in another of the collection's lists (Ashbery 2008, p. 331). In the same way, perhaps, the detailed illustrations in a herbarium or a reference book such as Audubon's *Birds of America* draw on the realism of the depiction of one specific plant or bird in order to generalise this knowledge to a species as a whole; the more effectively an Audubon bird asserts its individuality and particularity, the more plausibly it exemplifies the category to which it belongs.[5] As Ashbery notes when writing on the work of Jane Freilicher,

> …the main temptation when painting from a model is to generalize. No one is ever going to believe the color of that apple, one says to oneself, therefore I'll make it more the color that apples 'really' are. … So lesser artists correct nature in a misguided attempt at heightened realism, forgetting that the real is not only what one sees but also a result of how one sees it – inattentively, inaccurately perhaps…
>
> (Ashbery 1989, p. 242)

In as much as it participates in this dialogue between the general and specific, the realistic and the inaccurate, *The Vermont Notebook* therefore moves between the same poles of knowing, seeing and feeling as 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' does, inviting us to consider the point at which our own supposed knowledge of the world shifts from experience to extrapolation. However, as the following section will argue, the object of *The Vermont Notebook*'s inquiry is not only the self, but also the representation of the spaces – specifically, the contemporary American landscapes – in which it exists, and through which it moves – an enterprise that was also crucial to contemporary visual art.

*   *   *

As Ashbery observes in his review of a 1964 exhibition of Parmigianino's drawings, Vasari describes Parmigianino as depicting his reflection "in the most natural manner imaginable" (Ashbery 1989, p. 32). Both 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and *The Vermont Notebook*

[5] The notion that 'realism' brings one paradoxically both closer to and further from a 'real' object is perhaps reminiscent of the psychoanalytic concept of the Real, which is, by definition, unreachable, inexpressible, and accessible only via the negative semantic space created by the respective failures and shortcomings of the Imaginary realm of the unconscious, and the Symbolic realm of language.

frame their explorations of representation and subjectivity in a way that foregrounds the question of what this ‘naturalness’ – both in representation, and in one’s experience of the world – might entail. This section will explore how this question is posed with regard to the spaces and landscapes that the poems inhabit: how they are represented, and how they can be understood or known. To explore this further, it is helpful to approach both ‘Self-Portrait...’ and *The Vermont Notebook* in terms of their relationship to the mode of pastoral, to which, this section will argue, they repeatedly allude. Indeed, the representational dilemma that they both enact – between a realistic mimesis generated by total fidelity to the surface appearance of reality, and a deeper realism that aims to reveal hidden truths – is also present in pastoral. Frank Kermode, when tracing the history of the mode, quotes Puttenham’s assertion that where poetry is concerned, “being artificially handled must need yeld it much more bewtie and commendation” (Kermode 1952, p. 11). In Puttenham’s description of the relationship between art and nature, Kermode notes, “Art itself is an instrument of Nature”; however, nature is also “‘the antithesis of Art’, the wild or savage as opposed to the cultivated” (Kermode 1952, p. 12. This ambiguous relationship between art and nature, and between artifice and reality, is analogous to the tensions between city and country that lie at the heart of pastoral, in which the rural landscape is presented both as the site of ‘real’, authentic and unmediated existence, and is simultaneously, and paradoxically, defined by its abstraction from the ‘real life’ – the pressing political, social and economic concerns – of the city. This tension binds the notions of *country* and *city* together, forming an insoluble equation whose parameters can shift, but whose premises never dissolve completely. Paul Alpers argues that this contradiction expresses a universal and traumatic loss of what was ‘natural’ in one’s childhood, a loss which one must subsequently seek to articulate and ultimately repair. Pastoral, he claims, deals with the painful loss or absence, rather than the fulfilling presence, of an idealised landscape (Alpers 1996, pp. 29–31). Alpers quotes Adam Parry, who observes that in pastoral works, “Nature no longer tells us what we are: it tells us what we are not but yearn to be” (Alpers 1996, p. 31) – it offers a negative form of knowledge, predicated on lack rather than presence. It is perhaps as a result of these fundamental contradictions that pastoral has persisted from its earliest expression in the *Idylls* of Theocritus into the present era, when, as Peter Monacell claims, “modern poets ask whether, in the midst of suburbanization, pastoral remains a viable mode of self-expression” (Monacell 2011, p. 124).

‘Pastoral’ is not, perhaps, a label that one would intuitively apply to ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’, which would appear to align itself primarily with the city. The poem evokes

a range of urban settings – not only Parmigianino's studio in Rome, across which falls the urgent "shadow of the city", but also the speaker's own study, and the museums where he saw the painting, first in Vienna and then in New York (which is itself, the speaker claims, a "logarithm/Of other cities") (Ashbery 1977, p. 75). Even the refined tone of the poem would appear to situate it amidst the sophistication of a town or city, rather than in the perceived simplicity of the countryside. One might even note that when Lee Edelman asserts that the 'Self-Portrait…', in its ambivalent act of ekphrasis, "becomes… a machine for the production of reproductions claiming title as 'originals'" (Edelman 1986, p. 96), he aligns the poem not merely with the poet's *urbane* wit, but also with *urban*, industrialised methods of automated production.

However, the poem also exhibits a characteristically pastoral disaffection with the city's ability to give rise to, or sustain, authentic experience. Within its urban settings, the subject yearns for movement and open space, but succeeds in locating only disconcertingly static environments that seem to crowd in on him suffocatingly, like the study which dissolves into "one neutral band that surrounds/Me on all sides, everywhere I look" (Ashbery 1977, p. 71). The city is imagined as "the gibbous/Mirrored eye of an insect" (Ashbery 1977, pp. 82–83), its intricate complexity seeming to acquire and map every iota of space available to it, leaving nothing undefined or uncharted. "Today has no margins," the speaker complains; "the event arrives/Flush with its edges…" (Ashbery 1977, p. 79). The poem suspects that the urban spaces it inhabits are narrowing or diminishing, "the city falling with its beautiful suburbs/Into space always less clear, less defined…", the museum closing down "even as the public/Is pushing through" (Ashbery 1977, pp. 78–79). As a result, the speaker is left "sandwiched/Between two adjacent moments", as if trapped between the towering buildings of an encroaching cityscape, in a narrow thoroughfare whose "windings/Lead nowhere" (Ashbery 1977, p. 77). Is an authentic representation of one's own existence possible in this environment, the poem wonders? "You can't live there," the speaker says of the museum (Ashbery 1977, p. 79); as the city's boundedness becomes apparent, its air of sophistication seems to dissipate, first into the violence that interrupts the artist in his studio, and then into degeneracy, so that one must "awake and try to begin living in what/Has now become a slum" (Ashbery 1977, p. 73). What is truly 'natural' and authentic seems unavailable to the poem; the only solution that it can suggest involves "aping naturalness", but even this

strategy transpires to be ineffective, devolving, as it becomes overwhelmed by the stasis that dogs the rest of the poem, into a "frozen gesture" (Ashbery 1977, p. 82).[6]

In contrast to the claustrophobic urban spaces of 'Self-Portrait…', *The Vermont Notebook'*s lists and poems refer to – and describe a movement through – exurban, suburban or rural landscapes. However, rather than revelling in the open spaces they encounter, the speakers instead scour their environment for traces of what is natural, authentic and 'real', searching for a site in which it is indeed possible to live authentically – for "real camp life", as one of the collection's epistolary poems playfully puts it (Ashbery 2008, p. 411). "There are great difficulties in this word 'Nature'," Frank Kermode admits in his discussion of the origins of pastoral (Kermode 1952, p. 12). Indeed, what *The Vermont Notebook*'s poems find in the landscapes they encounter is not 'Nature', or even 'real life', but rather an artificial, even kitschy, natural*ness* that knowingly acknowledges its performance of 'seeming to be natural': the opening poem of the third section, 'To the Hard Barn Road Cafeteria', refers to the "rural look of everything, even city intersections", and describes a landscape which is "countryish without looking countrified", complete with "scenery [that] looks as though it was painted on cork" (Ashbery 2008, pp. 395–397). The repetition of "looks like" and "looking" throughout the poem invites us to consider that notions such as 'rural' and 'natural', rather than representing defined qualities, are imprecise approximations, or even unexamined projections – part of one's "unrecognized custom of looking", perhaps (Ashbery 2008, p. 397). The poem plays on the ambiguity inherent in the word "country" when it describes

> the subdued glow where McDonald's, Carrol's, Arthur Treacher, Colonel Sanders and Dunkin' Donuts succeed each other at the pace of a stately gavotte. But back here even this close all is already rubble and confusion – the country, in other words.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 395)

[6] Foucault's panopticon is also a decidedly urban structure, designed to construct "what is both a counter-city, and the perfect society". The author opens his description of it with the evocation of an urban setting – a plague-stricken town – which is inescapably estranged from the rural landscape around it: there is a "prohibition to leave the town on pain of death". Due to the overbearing control and intrusive surveillance exercised by the town's authorities, this urban landscape, like that of 'Self-Portrait…', seems to narrow down and crowd in on the individual, becoming a "segmented, immobile, frozen space" (Foucault 2008, p. 1).

The passage appears to be describing an area of suburban sprawl, so its final assertion that this is "the country" is surprising, unless we read "country" as referring not to an ex-urban landscape, but to America as a nation. As Raymond Williams notes, "In English, 'country' is both a nation and a part of a 'land'; 'the country' can be the whole society or its rural area" (Williams 1975, p. 1). However, in the passage quoted above, the word never fully occupies either meaning, due to the poem's earlier use of "country" to mean 'rural'. The "country" that *The Vermont Notebook* seeks is both immanent and elusive, focal and marginal – both a picturesque "stately gavotte" and a pile of "rubble and confusion". The question that Monacell asks in relation to the geography evoked in Ashbery's earlier *Three Poems* (1972) is applicable here: "if the countryside and the nation are suburbanized to their edges, then how can the poet locate a rural retreat and avail himself of the 'center' of identity and expressivity that the pastoral mode would supply?" (Monacell 2015, p. 83).

The pastoral, and anti-pastoral, attempts of both 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and *The Vermont Notebook* to negotiate between city and country can be viewed in the context of a broader, neo-Whitmanian desire in post-War American art and literature to represent, record and categorise the American landscape. This impulse to traverse, and to define, American spaces and places is discernible in such disparate works as Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Olson's *The Maximus Poems* (1953). Monacell also detects an earlier, elegiac strand in William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* (1923) and Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930) which is, he argues, connected to the "loss of spaces that seemed to preserve the nation's pre-industrial past and agrarian character" that occurred when rural land was annexed to create residential neighbourhoods (Monacell 2011, p. 122). However, these early suburbs were centred around the streetcar tracks, and therefore still fundamentally connected to the city; as Peter O. Muller notes, in the streetcar era, cities expanded "outward along trolley routes and their parallel utility service lines" (Muller 1977, p. 4). Ashbery himself recalled "the street car suburbs, as they used to call them, the first suburbs… They were sort of co-existing with the farmland", and he remembers the trolley line running from the city of Rochester all the way out to Sodus Point, close to his parents' farm (MacArthur 2008, p. 195). However, the new suburbia that was created after 1945 had a different character; it was organized not around streetcars, but around motor vehicles, with the 1956 Interstate Highways Act providing funds to build 42,000 miles of high-speed roads. This new kind of suburbia depended on the easy availability of cars and cheap gasoline: streetcars declined in importance, as newly built freeways made it possible to site disconnected, self-contained

suburbs in previously inaccessible areas. As a result, the contextualisation of suburban spaces by both urban and rural ones that occurred in the first half of the century was lost.

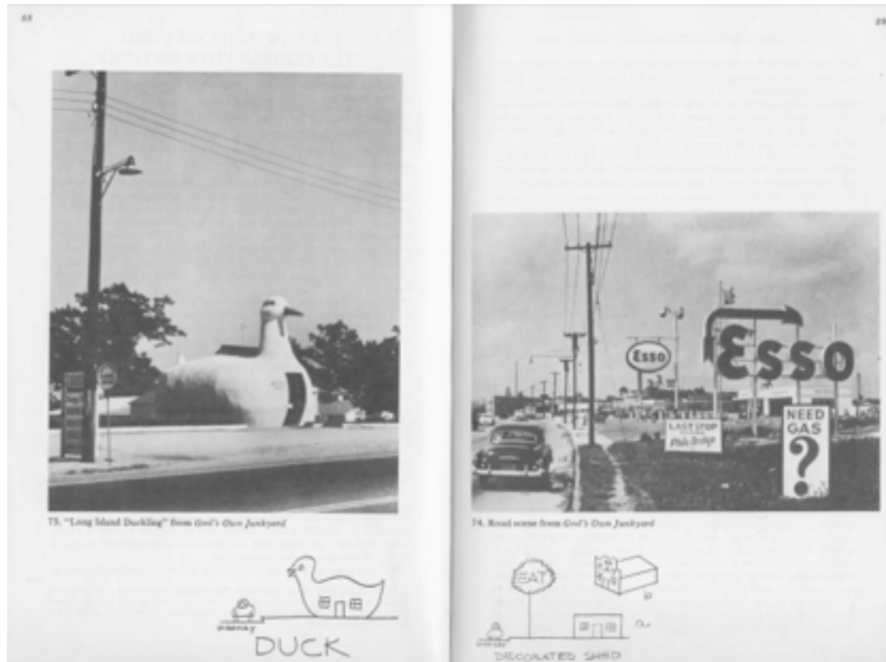
Ashbery experienced the changing American landscape first-hand as a child, when the fields around his family's farm were rapidly developed into semi-industrialised fruit farms: "the land all around the farm was bare, you could see for miles and now it's all overgrown… there were just fields then…" (MacArthur 2008, p. 151) . This sense of witnessing the pivotal moment in history when a longstanding rural landscape is modernised, and therefore irrecoverably lost, is identified by Williams as a characteristic of pastoral writing; the fact that, as Williams demonstrates, this loss is, by definition, *always* situated in the present, or the very recent past – from the *Idylls* of Theocritus onwards – does not detract from its emotional power (Williams 1975, pp. 9–12). It is important to remember that for Ashbery, the loss of the unspoilt land around the family farm was eclipsed by the far more traumatic loss of his brother Richard, whose death from childhood leukaemia took place on the farm itself, and seems to have marked the end of the poet's childhood innocence; as he told an interviewer in 1999, "my younger brother died just around the beginning of World War II… things were never as happy or romantic as they'd been, and my brother was no longer there… I think I've always been trying to get back to this mystical kingdom" (Rehak 1999). Additionally, Ashbery does not always recall the rural landscapes of his childhood in idealised terms, and in a letter to Elizabeth Bishop he referred to Sodus dismissively as "the little dump where I grew up" (MacArthur 2008, p. 22). However, as Macarthur argues, there is discernible in his poetry a "preoccupation…with his own and the larger American experience, in the twentieth century, of cheerfully leaving a rural childhood behind, expressing nostalgia for it, and, in the midst of displacements, making attempts to imagine or reconstruct a more settled life" (MacArthur 2008, p. 148).

A similar impulse to explore, represent, and even to come to terms with, a changed, and changing, landscape is discernible in American visual art of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the works of this period – like *The Vermont Notebook* itself – acknowledge the central role played by the car in the construction and experience of new American spaces by taking as their starting point a road trip. In the 1960s Ed Ruscha produced several works which drew on the experience of driving through, and of recording, documenting and categorising, urban and ex-urban American landscapes, such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963). Ruscha grew up in Oklahoma (like Joe Brainard), and the photographs that comprise *Twentysix*

Gasoline Stations were made as he drove along Route 66, travelling between his parents' home in Oklahoma City and his own residence in Los Angeles, taking in the newly transitional, ex-urban, roadside spaces of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona along the way. As Garland notes, both Ruscha's "play with the look of neutrality" (Garland 2020, p. 471), and his willingness to look in detail at subjects that had previously been considered banal or unprepossessing, influenced the later "vernacular" photography of Lewis Baltz and Stephen Shore (the term 'vernacular' refers to the everyday nature of the urban and suburban landscapes and architecture that were photographed, as much as to a democratised visual language). In 1972 – three years before *The Vermont Notebook* and 'Self-Portrait…' were published – Stephen Shore exhibited a selection of photographs, now known as 'American Surfaces', at the Light Gallery in New York. "I wanted pictures that felt as natural as speaking," is how he would later describe the impulse that led him to make these snapshot-style photographs of America's sleepy small towns, wood-panelled motels and roadside diners:

> It began as a road trip. My idea was to keep a visual diary of meals I ate, people I met, televisions I watched, motel rooms I slept in, toilets I used… and through this visual diary — a series of repeated subjects — to build a kind of cultural picture of the country at the time.
>
> (MoMA n.d.)

In the same year, the architects Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour published *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (1972), which was based on a series of road trips taken in the late 1960s by Venturi and Scott Brown, and which represented the first sustained attempt to represent and formally classify the overlooked vernacular structures of a city that had, until then, been considered a non-place – not merely devoid of architectural merit, but not even acknowledged as a site where architecture could exist at all. The work sets out a taxonomy of vernacular architecture and develops its own idiosyncratic nomenclature, its best-known distinction being between decorated sheds – utilitarian structures whose function is conveyed by means of signs – and ducks – buildings that formally embody their function (Izenour, Scott Brown and Venturi 1972, pp. 88–90).



(Izenour, Scott Brown and Venturi 1972, pp. 88–89)

Like Shore’s diaristic snapshots that are “as natural as speaking”, Ruscha’s “deadpan” photographs, and the “ducks” and “decorated sheds” of *Learning from Las Vegas*, Ashbery’s poems of this period map and categorise the experience of being in and moving through an American landscape that hovers between naturalness and artificiality, using forms that evoke – in both structural and semantic terms – a sense of restlessness, and of ongoing movement or travel. The drive to explore and record the landscape was, of course, not exclusive to American artists and writers of the twentieth century. Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ is a record of the poet’s “tramp[ing]” of his “perpetual journey” across the vast expanse of the country (Whitman 2016, p. 162); as Kern notes, the poet William Everson sees this restless motion as a quintessentially American quality, arguing that

> the western [American] writer, following the lead of the frontiersman, who, as conformism rigidified behind him was impelled into a deepening penetration of the wilderness, responded by transmuting the apotheotic quest into correspondingly elemental literary forms.
>
> (Kern 1977, p. 173)

However, by the second half of the twentieth century – which saw the rise of the freeway and the commuter suburb, the sprawling strip mall and the pristine nature reserve – the experience of being in American landscapes (or, as Izenour, Scott Brown and Venturi call them, "autoscapes" (Izenour, Scott Brown and Venturi 1972, p. 49) involved occupying both exhaustively mapped and disorientingly uncharted territory, fundamentally estranged from traditional distinctions between urban and rural, and between the natural and the constructed. This distinction has its origins in European ways of life and aesthetic traditions, and it is perhaps significant that it is in New England – and specifically in Vermont, where Ashbery went as a child when his mother was attempting to trace her German ancestry – that Ashbery searches for a 'naturalness' that will contextualise his experience (finding, as he admits ruefully in conversation with John Shoptaw, only thoroughly "Americanized" places (Shoptaw 1994, p. 14)). *The Vermont Notebook*, like the works of visual art mentioned above, can therefore be seen as both evoking and interrogating the pastoral mode in its attempts to map and define a position between the traditional poles of city and country, as well as between *the country* as a rural or ex-urban 'natural' landscape and as the (constructed, man-made) nation as a whole. Indeed, in both 'Self-Portrait…' and *The Vermont Notebook,* the position of the subject is often provisional and imprecise, uncomfortable or uneasy, and the speakers' perspectives shift uncertainly between emphasising their distance *from* traditional categories of space, and highlighting their proximity *to* them: 'Self-Portrait…' describes the "otherness" that is "tearing… creation, any creation, not just artistic creation/Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near/Peak, too close to ignore, too far/For one to intervene" (Ashbery 1977, p. 81). *The Vermont Notebook* occupies transitional areas that are similarly both near to, and far from, categories of space that are known and understood: "8mi to Danbury (Charles Ives). Can I believe that I am back on the same freeway. What startles still is the relation of the hills to the towns – their nearness" (Ashbery 2008, p. 367).
This uncertainty infects the collection's authorial perspective; the distance from which the poems regard their subject matter is prone to shift unexpectedly, zooming in and out. Each of its lists has its own uniquely calibrated capacity to contain and include; some enforce their boundaries strictly, allowing only a narrow range of material that is relevant to a particular subject, while others are more permissive, allowing in material that is only tangentially – or figuratively – related to their subject. As a result, a list about colours, which describes its subject matter in objective, universally understandable terms, follows a list of esoteric, out-of-context shop names (a play, perhaps, on the commercial sense of 'catalogue') which refer to specific establishments that one might while passing through a small town: "Paraphernalia,

Tape Measure, Dorothee Bis… Reveillon, Hector's, Nathan's, Soup Berg, Blum's, Nedick's, Fraser-Morris, Charles & Co., Fauchon, Colette's." (Ashbery 2008, p. 337). Joe Brainard's illustrations echo and restate this vacillating perspective, at times exaggerating it for comic effect, as when they convey the usually unobtrusive illusion of depth and distance that underpins the traditional picture plane by means of gestural scrawls or impatient-looking scribbles. In the illustration that accompanies 'The Fairies' Song', the cartoonish flowers that occupy the foreground transform, as they recede, into gestural, imprecise smudges which, in their suggestion of both massed, unrecognisable figures and of unreadable text, possess an almost sinister quality. This uncomfortable midground eventually resolves into a conventional background of hedgerows and trees, but it is difficult to isolate the precise point at which *near* becomes *far*; nor, it seems, is it possible to identify, recognise or represent objects that exists in this in-between category of space.

(Ashbery 2008, p. 412, p. 414)

This instability of perspective is, perhaps, indicative of what Schmidt sees as *The Vermont Notebook*'s "tension between textual sprawl and stylistic precision, between excess and ascesis" (Schmidt 2014, p. 2) – tensions that could also apply to the environments (the cities on neat grids, the sprawling suburbs that initially cluster around, then overshoot and subsume, the streetcar tracks) that Ashbery's work of this period explores. Inherent in these poems is a desire to look squarely at the 'vernacular', unprepossessing or otherwise unacknowledged aspects of American geography and architecture – the "front porches, back porches, side porches" (Ashbery 2008, p. 347), the processions of fast-food restaurants and strip malls,

"drive-in deposits, libraries, roller rinks" (Ashbery 2008, p. 333) – and, by cataloguing them, using a literary form that Homer used in *The Iliad* to enumerate the ships that sailed to Troy, to commemorate, immortalise and even elevate them.

In refusing to align itself with a neat demarcation between the urban and the rural, and in positioning itself uncertainly between what is 'natural' and what is constructed, *The Vermont Notebook* takes on an ecological dimension, especially in the 'Marco Marine Ecology Station' prose-poems of its third section, which describe how the matter generated by the kind of ex-urban spaces, and the journeys through them, that the collection has hitherto described can be salvaged and recycled into new habitats:

> At a location one mile off Marco, 57,000 old automobile tires have been wired together forming an underwater structure. At another location four and one-half miles into the Gulf, some 5,000 tons of construction debris has been piled along the bottom.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 403)

In this entirely man-made, profoundly unnatural environment, *The Vermont Notebook* finally locates the unmapped, unmediated space and distance – "off Marco", miles offshore in the vast Gulf of Mexico – that the city-dweller of 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' seemed to yearn for. On the artificial reefs of the ecology station, nature is almost *un*naturally abundant and bountiful, the fish leaping out of the water to offer themselves to the anglers who frequent the area:

> Prior to the artificial reefs, studies revealed that one fish could be caught for every two hours of fishing effort. Right now fishermen are averaging between seven and eight fish per hour, and sometimes the count goes up to 15 fish per hour.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 405)

This is reminiscent of the idyllic pastoral landscape that Virgil's enigmatic *Eclogue 4* describes when prophesying the coming of a Golden Age, in which the land will generously offer up its bounty without the need for human labour:

> Earth untilled
> Will pour the straying ivy rife, and baccaris,

> And colocasia mixing with acanthus' smile.
> She-goats unshepherded will bring home udders plumped
> With milk…
>
> (Virgil 1980, p. 57)

There are also echoes of another pastoral, and Edenic, idyll, namely Marvell's 'The Garden', where

> Ripe apples drop about my head;
> The luscious clusters of the vine
> Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
> The nectarine and curious peach
> Into my hands themselves do reach…
>
> (Marvell and Donno 1972, p. 101)

However, as Joe Brainard's accompanying drawing of a sad-looking dead goldfish, and Ashbery's ironic description of "a reference collection of marine life" reminds us, the fish that are caught on San Marco's artificial reefs are not part of a broader agricultural, economic or social ecosystem, but are rather "sport species", destined to be artificially introduced into the environment before being extracted and destroyed for leisure purposes (Ashbery 2008, pp. 404–407).

Stephen Ross acknowledges the ecological aspects of the collection, arguing that we should read *The Vermont Notebook* as a grim warning about the "pathetic scariness" of investing in the notion of "nature", that "proliferating specter of an unrecoverable ideal" (Ross 2017, p. 127). Indeed, the final third of the collection features sinister, almost gothic elements, such as the unsettling figure of the "foreign student, beyond the wire fence" whose "lips spell out the words: shale, cowturds, spread, udder, mumps" (Ashbery 2008, p. 393). Normal lines of communication have broken down entirely (making the earlier memorandum to "Call Southern New England Telephone Co." seem prescient); the static, demarcated, "foreign" realm of nature which exists "beyond the wire fence" has become a harbinger of confusion and threat. "Some days hell seems very near," admits the poem that follows the 'Marco Marine Ecology Station' section, in a reversal of the pastoral trope of nature as a *locus amoenus*, a pleasant, idyllic, or even heavenly place (Ashbery 2008, p. 413).

These poems are not polemics, lamenting the pollution of ‘Nature’ with artificial or inauthentic elements. Rather, they themselves pollute and contaminate, disrupting the notion that nature is pristine, separate and discrete, questioning the nature/art binary which admits no overlap between the natural and the constructed, and destabilising the categories by which the pastoral mode has traditionally attempted to separate ‘real’ from ‘artificial’ experience. In a similar way, as this chapter has demonstrated, Ashbery’s poetry asks us to consider the categories of ‘real’, ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ as they apply not only to representation, but also to our experience of existing within our contemporary environment.

4. “Coming home through all this”: Dwelling in and through time in *A Wave* (1981)

As Chapter 2 argued, Ashbery’s poetry charts the shifting valences of the concept of ‘home’, expressing not only a desire to draw closer to its welcoming, protective warmth, but also an ambivalence about its capacity to enclose experience, and an awareness of its propensity to become unwelcoming or uncanny. This chapter will explore a broader notion of ‘dwelling’ in Ashbery’s work in order to demonstrate the way in which his physical homes contain and contextualise the ongoing *process* of dwelling that takes place within them. Ashbery’s poetry, it will argue, treats ‘dwelling’ not only as a noun, but also as a participle; his work explores not only *where*, but also *how*, we live, situating us in spaces that have a temporal, as well as a physical, dimension. Henri Bergson, whose conception of time as a continuous, indivisible flow of moments inspired modernists such as Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf, drew a distinction between “*le dynamisme*” – the vital, dynamic quality of time – and “*le mécanique*”, the static, mechanical quality possessed by space (McMahon 2013, p. 8). In Bergson’s view, we err when we confuse space with time; the former is static and inanimate, while the latter is consistently vital and in perpetual motion, informing our continual “becoming” even when it is in the past. In contrast, this chapter will assert that in Ashbery’s poetry time possesses an inescapably spatial quality, existing inseparably from the settings in which it is experienced.

The notion that Ashbery’s poetry explores an ongoing process of ‘dwelling in time’ challenges the prevalent critical view of him as a poet who is concerned predominantly with the present moment, or with a privileged event or ‘occasion’. Willard Spiegelman writes:

> For Ashbery time seems to flow seamlessly as he ticks along through life, registering the phenomena of consciousness as they flicker through his brain. Past, present, and future are equally accessible, melting into one another…
>
> (Spiegelman 2005, p. 138)

In Spiegelman’s analysis, Ashbery’s “tick[ing] along through life” is as mechanical and automatic as the ticking of a clock, which blandly “register[s]” the passing of time without

imposing onto it any narrative shape, or urgent significance. Similarly, David Herd's categorisation of Ashbery as a poet whose work represents the "ceaseless expounding of the full complexity of its own occasion" (Herd 2000, p. 19) minimises the significance of *ongoing* time, and time conceptualised as narrative or history, to his work. For Herd, Ashbery's observations on Raymond Roussel constitute a mirror in which we can see the poet's own image of himself, as

> A poet who is … always bringing us face to face with the very latest moments in our thinking, the now where everything can and must happen, the *locus solus* where writing begins.
>
> (Herd 2000, p. 7)

If Ashbery is indeed concerned predominantly the "now", and the "latest moment", is his work unwilling – or unable – to accommodate a broader notion of time as an ongoing process that shapes and contextualises the subject in complex ways? This chapter will argue that Ashbery's work does indeed deal with time, albeit not as an abstract concept in the way that Spiegelman describes, but rather as a powerful, and somewhat enigmatic, force that is inseparable from the subject's ongoing experience, as well as from the settings and contexts in which this experience takes place. In Heidegger's philosophy, these two notions – the structure of a dwelling, and the ongoing act of dwelling that occurs inside it – are inextricably linked. As Heidegger writes:

> The Old English and High German word for 'building', *buan*, means 'to dwell'. This signifies: 'to remain, to stay in a place'… The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is *Buan*, 'dwelling' [or 'building']. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to *dwell*…
>
> (Heidegger 1971, pp. 144–145)

As Heidegger's reference to mortality suggests, this broader notion of dwelling is inextricably linked to the passing of time. Although Heidegger's famous formulation "Being and Time", which serves as the title for one of his best-known works (Heidegger 2010), suggests a neat demarcation between these two concepts, the philosopher's work as a whole argues that they are inseparable – that is, there is no *being* that is not subsumed into, and fundamentally defined by, the *time* in which it unfolds.

Although the interplay between dwelling in space and dwelling in time is discernible throughout Ashbery's work, it is articulated with particular force in his Pulitzer-prize-winning collection *A Wave* (1984). Stephen Ross sees the "antiphonal wavering" of *A Wave,* and its long eponymous poem, as constituting an important touchpoint in Ashbery's stylistic evolution. It is, he claims, the first sustained work in which Ashbery's ambition to bring about a "dissolving of the poem… putting it in a solution throughout the whole page" is successfully realised (Ross 2017, p. 76). However, *A Wave* has a historical, as well as a stylistic, significance in Ashbery's oeuvre. As Ashbery was writing the poems that would make up this collection, and renovating the Hudson House, two significant events occurred in his life, one affecting his personal physical body, and the other affecting the 'body politic' of his community: he suffered an epidural abscess that almost killed him, and the AIDS crisis began to ravage New York. As Harris (2011) notes, John Vincent suggests that it is in *April Galleons* that Ashbery addresses the trauma of AIDS directly (Harris 2011, p. 635). However, this chapter will concur with David Herd's assertion that the particularly "urgent" quality of *A Wave* is a result of the AIDS crisis, which encouraged Ashbery to reformulate "the question of coterie" so that it addresses "the question of community" (Herd 2000, p. 191). Ross, meanwhile, describes A Wave's eponymous long poem as Ashbery's "great poem of love and death written in 1982 in the midst of the AIDS crisis" (Ross 2017, p. 90). As Lee Edelman asserts, the question of "writing AIDS" is a complex one: "AIDS… resists our attempts to inscribe it as a manageable subject of writing – exceeding and eluding the medical, sociological, political, or literary discourses that variously attempt to confront or engage it" (Edelman 1994, p. 94). To evaluate Ashbery' treatment of AIDS from a political standpoint, and to situate it adequately in the canon of writing about AIDS – which ranges from the activist manifestoes of ACT UP and the Silence=Death Project to "intellectual efforts to theorize the pandemic" by Roberta McGrath and Donna Haraway (Edelman 1994, p. 95) – is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, what follows will primarily examine the way in which *A Wave* responds aesthetically, affectively and philosophically, rather than politically, to the grief and trauma of its contemporary moment.

Amidst the sadness and fear occasioned by AIDS, the notion of constructing a dwelling, and of imagining oneself continuing to live in it – "coming home through all this", as 'A Wave' puts it (Ashbery 2008, p. 803) – is an act both of mourning, and of hope. However, the collection chronicles not only the exhilaration of surviving, being *still alive*, but also the

ongoing, daily experience of living in and through time – an experience that is as likely to be mundane, repetitive or painful as it is to be joyful, transcendent or sublime. Indeed, the word 'living' occurs repeatedly in *A Wave*'s eponymous long poem, as if the speaker is trying to tease out exactly what it means. Is it the exhilarating and personal "reflexive play of our living and being lost", the diurnal rhythms of "going on living under the same myopic stars", the communal, unpredictable experience of "living with lots of people", or the abstract, impersonal "business of living and dying" (Ashbery 2008, p. 793, p. 796, p. 780, p. 799)? The poem describes the blurriness and endless deferrals that characterise in our subjective experience:

> Call it a consistent eventfulness,
> A common appreciation of the way things have of enfolding
> When your attention is distracted for a moment…
> …The scarred afternoon is unfortunate
> Perhaps, but as they come to see each other dimly
> And for the first time, an internal romance
> Of the situation rises in these human beings like sap
> And they can at last know the fun of not having it all but
> Having instead a keen appreciation of the ways in which it
> Underachieves as well as rages: an appetite,
> For want of a better word.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 802)

In these lines, meaning is refined by modifiers, with the use of *perhaps*, *and*, *but*, and *instead* creating an impression that the poem is approaching a definitive proclamation; however, no conclusion is ever reached, and the stanza ends with the anti-climactic – or even downcast – "want of a better word". As this unwillingness to arrive at a definitive endpoint suggests, the "consistent eventfulness" that *A Wave* describes is a phenomenological, rather than a novelistic, one; it conveys not merely the pivotal moments of lived experience, but also its ongoing texture.

What follows will take as its starting point an exploration of how time passes in tandem with the predictable routines of life in the spaces of a dwelling. It will then move away from the literal, physical dwelling to define a broader notion of 'dwelling space' which includes the

social, ideological and historical spaces in which the subject's experience takes place. The final section will then consider how Ashbery's poetry itself can be thought of as existing in and through time, both as a contextualising space in which meaning can be constructed and accommodated, and as a vector which – like a physical dwelling that passes down through generations – has the capacity to transfer and transmit meaning into new and unforeseen contexts.

The metaphor of the wave itself is central to the way in which *A Wave* both acknowledges loss of those affected by AIDS, and defiantly affirms the visibility, survival and persistence of a wider gay community. A wave is always followed by another; water falls as rain, drains away, and rises in a repeating cycle of which the human body's processes of assimilation and elimination are a microcosm. However, the wave also has a broader importance for Ashbery's poetics, and waves are a pervasive presence not just in this collection but throughout his poetry, both on an imagistic and a structural level. One can, for example, discern their repetitive, oscillatory movements in the arcs traced by the children who glide across the ice in 'The Skaters', from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966). Amid "waves of morning harshness" (Ashbery 2008, p. 147), the skaters "elaborate their distances/Taking a separate line to its end" (Ashbery 2008, p. 151), tracing not a linear path, but an infinitely looping "figure 8" (Ashbery 2008, p. 161) which by turns affirms both their separateness and their inseparability from each other:

> Returning to the mass, they join each other
> Blotted in an incredible mess of dark colors, and again reappearing to take the theme
> Some little distance, like fishing boats developing from the land different parabolas…
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 151)

A wave does not pierce water, transforming it in an instant; rather, its movement through it – and its involvement with it – is, as *A Wave* describes it, "an Ongoing Thing" (Ashbery 2008, p. 749), a constant process of re-evaluation and alteration that enacts a horizontal movement of approach and retreat, proximity and distance. In the same way, Ashbery does not imagine the transference of meaning as a single, penetrative act which results in a climactic moment of understanding. The final section of this chapter will read Ashbery's poetry in terms of the movements and properties of waves in order to understand the way in which the work itself exists in and through time – that is, how it constructs, organises and transfers meaning.

The chapter adopts a concentric structure, beginning inside the physical dwellings that Ashbery evokes before moving outwards into the world, and then into the setting or context created by the work itself. In doing so it aims to follow the movement of Ashbery's poetry itself as it repeatedly posits, questions and restates various notions of what the act of dwelling constitutes in a variety of environments and surroundings – a process that the poem 'The Path to the White Moon' describes as an "attempt to define/How we were being in all the surroundings" (Ashbery 2008, p. 758).

*   *   *

When the speaker of 'But What is the Reader to Make of This' asserts that "it is the personal,/Interior life that gives us something to think about" (Ashbery 2008, p. 742), he plays on the word 'interior': in *A Wave* (1981), which Ashbery wrote as he was renovating his own dwelling, and beginning to live there with his partner for the first time, the ongoing, daily experience of being alive is described as taking place within the enclosing *interiors* of a dwelling. The poems in this collection invoke the rhythms of domestic life: "short naps, keeping fit" (Ashbery 2008, p. 771), early or late dinners, "evening relaxation" (Ashbery 2008, p. 736), a ringing doorbell, piles of laundry. "We get up each morning/And go about our business as usual" (Ashbery 2008, p. 795), Ashbery's speaker explains. Amid this comforting predictability, time advances in a smooth and orderly fashion; the speaker of 'Ditto, Kiddo' refers to "Yesterday's newspapers, and those of the weeks before that spreading/Backward, away, almost in perfect order…" (Ashbery 2008, p. 759). However, as the collection's unremarkable daily experiences accrete, their details begin to seem less significant than the contextualising structure that their predictable repetitiveness provides: they are keenly felt, yet ultimately indistinct, constituting what the speaker of 'Cups with Broken Handles' refers to as the "intense, staccato repetitions/Of whatever" (Ashbery 2008, p. 774).

Angus Fletcher discerns in this aspect of Ashbery's work a "diurnal knowledge", an awareness of the way in which human experience is "so intimately linked to waves and cycles that it will often appear to be shapeless, since modernity often identifies shape with progression…" (Fletcher 2004, pp. 77–78). Indeed, words that designate and categorise periods of time possess an insistent, even incantatory quality in Ashbery's poetry of this

period. The words ‘night’ and ‘day’ each appear over 30 times in *A Wave*; ‘afternoon’ and ‘evening’ are each used over a dozen times, with ‘sleep’ and ‘wake’ close behind. At times, Ashbery’s speakers use these temporally charged words to refer to specific events and places, but more often they denote periods of time that hover indeterminately between the specific and the general. When the speakers of *A Wave* refer to “afternoons in the city”, “late summer evenings” (Ashbery 2008, p. 785) and “the sad light of early mornings” (Ashbery 2008, p. 804), they agglomerate the qualities of specific, individualised afternoons, evenings and mornings, blending them together in a way that creates the impression of a homogenous entity – “afternoons”, “evenings”, “mornings”. Taken together, these temporal terms acquire a force that exceeds each individual use to gesture towards a broader, overarching system of repetitive temporality – the ‘shapeless shape’ that Fletcher refers to.

When Ashbery’s speakers do refer to a specific period of time, it is imbued with a charge that derives from its role as part of this broader swathe of accumulated time. As the speaker of ‘But What Is the Reader to Make of This?’ puts it,

> ...the centuries begin to collapse
> Through each other, like floors in a burning building,
> Until we get to this afternoon...
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 742)

As a result, individual periods of time are portrayed as both discrete and continuous, general and specific. ‘Edition Peters, Leipzig’ describes how “for afternoon busy with blinds open… the approach to business is new/And ancient and mellow at the same time” (Ashbery 2008, p. 762). The repetitive, diurnal nature of temporal experience means that for Ashbery, “afternoon” is neither fully definitive – ‘*the* afternoon’ – or unspecific – ‘*an* afternoon’. It vacillates between standing out and blending in, between background and foreground, existing in one’s experience as both “new/And ancient” (Ashbery 2008, p. 762).

The repetition of temporal terms such as ‘afternoon’ and ‘evening’ also serves to establish them as distinct semantic entities, so that rather than merely acting as markers of a temporality that progresses independently of subjective experience, they also serve to contextualise and contain this experience. As such, they assume a spatial quality; they are portrayed as ‘areas’ of time in which one can dwell, the act of dwelling taking place in a *here*,

as well as *now.* In *A Wave*, Ashbery often imagines the experiencing subject as located *inside* the periods of time he evokes, suggesting that time possesses a figurative spaciousness. “It is a frostbitten, brittle world but once you are inside it you want to stay there always,” the speaker of Haibun observes, before ending the poem with the description of the year as “not yet abandoned but a living husk” (Ashbery 2008, p. 765). The speaker of ‘Down by the Station Early in the Morning’ describes fleeting experiences – the “rasp of silk, or a certain/Glottal stop in your voice”, before asserting that “Each is a base one might wish to touch once more/Before dying” (Ashbery 2008, p. 743). Rather than merely taking place inside a dwelling, these experiences figuratively *become* a dwelling, a “base” within which emotions are housed, contextualised, and even protected and preserved.

In this respect, Ashbery’s diurnal, domestic temporality can be thought of as constituting a *setting* – that is, a continuous, surrounding environment, a backdrop against which one’s individual experience takes place. The eco-critic Timothy Morton discusses the act of evoking a setting in terms of “a poetics of *ambience*” which “denotes a sense of circumambient, or surrounding, world” (Morton 2007, p. 33). There are obvious correspondences between Morton’s “surrounding world” (Morton 2007, p. 30) and the enclosing interiors of the dwellings that Ashbery evokes. However, the ambient environments that Morton describes are beset by contradictions. They are, he asserts, “more or less palpable, yet ethereal and subtle”; they “sugges[t] something material and physical though somewhat intangible, as if space itself had a material aspect – an idea that should not, after Einstein, appear strange” (Morton 2007, pp. 33–34).

Ashbery’s settings are, like those that Morton describes, vague yet palpable, immanent yet impossible to locate with precision, enclosing yet insubstantial. The speaker of ‘Around the Rough and Rugged Rocks…’ urges us to

> Forget what it is you’re coming out of,
> Always into something like a landscape
> Where no one has ever walked
> Because they’re too busy.

(Ashbery 2008, p. 744)

Ashbery calls our attention to the way in which a setting – like the quantum particles that Morton refers to – seems to change state, even as we try to categorise it. It is always "something like a landscape", its atmosphere perpetually hovering on the edge of our perception, but never truly "walked [in]", or experienced in full. Mark Scroggins discerns in Ashbery's poetry an ambient quality that is akin to "the state of bemused-but-not-quite-consuming attention evoked by an intricate wallpaper" (Scroggins 2017); in Scroggins' formulation, the interior of the poem is analogous to the interiors of a dwelling in its comforting, even slightly oppressive, enclosure of experience. Charles Altieri sees this indistinct, ineffable quality as a defining element of Ashbery's poetics, writing that "vagueness is a crucial feature establishing [Ashbery's] complex grasp of subjective agency" (Altieri 1992, p. 217). Indeed, the vagueness of Ashbery's interchangeable procession of days, evenings and afternoons is not so much an anomalous characteristic of the setting he evokes; rather, the vagueness *is* the setting, the medium through which our subjective experience of the poem moves.

However, although this formulation accurately describes the surrounding, enclosing and even ambient quality of Ashbery's settings, it also expresses a contradiction, because the setting against which experience takes place is itself perceived by the subject as being *part* of that experience. In the ongoing ambient environment that Ashbery describes, it is

> perpetually five o'clock
> With the colors of the bricks seeping more and more blood-like through the tan
> Of trees…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 805)

Against the backdrop of the physical dwelling, the subject experiences the world as static and unchanging, even as it perceptibly alters with the passing of time. As a result, the experience of living through time is both sharply distinct and frustratingly hazy. "The weather is perfect, the season unclear", as 'Thank You for Not Cooperating' puts it (Ashbery 2008, p. 741); one can be sure of the physical details of one's immediate surroundings, or of one's position in a broader system of temporality, but not both. Angus Fletcher observes that: "Approximating conclusions only, the environment-poem always drifts off toward the horizon, which in turn leads to another more distant horizon" (Fletcher 2004, p. 120). Ashbery goes a step further by envisaging

> A horizon in whose cursive recesses we
> May sometimes lie concealed because we are part
> Of the pattern.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 782)

Whereas in Fletcher's formulation the horizon hovers tantalisingly, and teleologically, in the distance, perpetually out of reach, Ashbery imagines the subject as being unceremoniously subsumed into it, becoming "part of the pattern".

A Wave's campy prose-poem 'Description of a Masque' illustrates the way in which this uneasy fusion with the 'environment' causes the subject's relationship to passing time to become complex and unclear. After describing a somewhat chaotic performance featuring nursery-rhyme characters and allegorical figures, the final line of the poem describes an "avalanche" which "fell and fell, and continues to fall even today" (Ashbery 2008, p. 758). These words suggest that the event that the poem has just described – the masque – is not discrete, as one might expect; the speaker is not looking back on it after it has ended, but is rather still enclosed within it, and will continue to be, as the prolonged avalanche "continues to fall even today". Indeed, as the poem draws to a close, the speaker comes to the realisation that

> the setting would go on evolving eternally, rolling its waves across our vision like an ocean, each one new yet recognizably a part of the same series, which was creation itself. Scenes from movies, plays, operas, television; decisive or little-known episodes from history… Mostly there were just moments: a street corner viewed from above, bare branches flailing the sky, a child in a doorway, a painted Pennsylvania Dutch chest, a full moon disappearing behind a dark cloud to the accompaniment of a Japanese flute, a ballerina in a frosted white dress lifted up into the light….
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 756)

In this passage the speaker invokes both a "setting", or background, of ongoing time, as well as discrete "scenes" and "moments" that are foregrounded against it. However, the description that follows blurs the lines between setting and scene: the setting is not unitary

and continuous, but is “a series” that “evolve[s]”, while the “scenes from movies, plays, operas, television” – as well as from “history” – seem to blend together. Additionally, the “moments” that the speaker lists are not truly momentary; they gesture forwards or backwards to include past, present or ongoing actions. The use of the preterite (“viewed from above”, “lifted up into the light”) suggests that the actions in question have been completed, even as the “moment” that they represent is purportedly still taking place. Meanwhile, words which appear to be past participles are used as adjectives, such as “frosted” and “painted” (which, in context, mean ‘already frosted’ and ‘already painted’). Additionally, the present participles (“bidding”, “disappearing”), and the suggestion of cyclicality inherent in the mention of the full moon, suggest that the actions being described will continue into the future, as well as having their origins in the past. The overall effect of the passage is to diffuse apparently discrete events over a swath of time, causing individual scenes to run together into something that resembles a setting; meanwhile, the setting fragments, taking on a discontinuous, scene-like quality. The scene and the setting have not fused entirely, and can still be differentiated from each other, but it has become almost impossible to identify the point at which one ends and the other begins. The character of Mania articulates this inability to distinguish an event from the atmosphere in which it takes place:

> ‘That’s what I thought,’ Mania pouted, stamping one of her feet in its platform shoe so loudly that several of the extras turned to look. ‘Atmosphere—that’s what it was all along, wasn’t it? A question of ambience, poetry, something like that.’
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 755)

The delicate balance between separateness from and fusion with one’s environment that the poem evokes is also present in the speaker’s image of the “waves” that are “rolling… across our vision” (Ashbery 2008, p. 755). A wave and the medium through which it passes interact with each other – indeed, they are defined by each other’s existence – but, in spite of their deep entanglement, they remain ontologically distinct from each other. A wave is not water; rather, it is the intangible energy that passes *through* water, disturbing it. The water, in turn, is altered by the energy that moves through it, but never transformed by it to the point that it loses its original identity. In the same way, the scenes that Ashbery describes are not overlaid on the settings that he evokes, but move through them, permeating, disturbing and momentarily fusing with them – as they themselves are permeated by a setting that will persist even after what it contextualises has come to an end.

This dyadic pairing of a medium with a force that disturbs it is applicable not only to the notion of scene and setting that Ashbery discusses in 'Description of a Masque', but also more broadly to the process of dwelling in and through time that *A Wave* explores. The physical and temporal dwellings that Ashbery evokes function as a medium through which fluid, contingent, or even chaotic individual experience can pass, altering the spaces that it moves through, and being altered by them in turn. This interaction between ongoing perceptual experience and the static, enduring spaces of a home is frequently described in literal terms, as in 'Haibun 6':

> [t]he rain… falls and falls for so long that no one can remember when it began or what weather used to be, or cares much either; they are much too busy trying to plug holes in ceilings or emptying pails and other containers and then quickly pushing them back to catch the overflow.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 768)

In these lines the speaker not only affirms the literal openness of the dwelling to what lies outside it, but also highlights the permeability that exists between the physical space and the ongoing experience of living inside it. The subjects of the poem must abandon their daily routine and devote themselves to maintaining the integrity of the structure in which they live, in order that this life may continue; as well as containing and contextualising these subjects' experiences, the dwelling inevitably influences and shapes them.

'The Path to the White Moon' explores in more detail how a home can be disrupted by elements that are separate from, and external to, it. It begins with a description of farmhouses in a landscape:

> There were little farmhouses there they
> Looked like farmhouses yes without very much land
> And trees, too many trees and a mistake
> Built into each thing rather charmingly
> But once you have seen a thing you have to move on
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 758)

This stanza's insistent repetitions ("little farmhouses"/"like farmhouses", "trees, too many trees", "each thing"/"seen a thing"), uninflected by punctuation, simultaneously breathless and flat, have a self-consciously modernist tone that is, perhaps, reminiscent of Stein's stream-of-consciousness descriptions of objects and places, such as this from the 'Rooms' section of *Tender Button*s: "… in the little space there is a tree, in some space there are no trees, in every space there is a hint of more, all this causes the decision" (Stein 1914).
In the next stanza, however, the speaker's voice moves away from this quasi-modernist diction and into a more contemporary (and more recognisably Ashberian) one, and the rhythm of the lines becomes looser:

> You have to lie in the grass
> And play with your hair, scratch yourself
> And then the space of this behaviour, the air,
> Has suddenly doubled
> And you have grown to fill the extra place
> Looking back at the small, fallen shelter that was.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 758)

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker seemed to acknowledge that he was about to relinquish an assumed style: "Once you have seen a thing you have to move on". Indeed, by the end of the second stanza, the quaint "little farmhouses" are seen, in retrospect, as "the small fallen shelter that was", the containment they offered having been abandoned or outgrown. The following stanza begins with an image of flowing water:

> If a stream winds through all this
> Alongside an abandoned knitting mill it will not
> Say where it has been.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 758)

The stream that the poem describes does not inundate the "little farmhouses" of the opening lines; instead, it winds among and past them (and, in doing so introduces, in the form of the industrial "abandoned knitting mill", a broader context that both refers to and undermines their "charming" and homely, but perhaps somewhat twee, appearance). The crucial word in the description of the stream that "winds through all this" is *through*. The water's movement

is both linear and infiltrative, moving inexorably forward, through both space and time, as well as epistemically downwards, into and through what it encounters, just as the poem moves insistently onwards, through both the narration of the events it describes, and through iterations of poetic style. “Keep track of us,” the poem’s final stanza exhorts:

> It gets to be so exciting but so big too
> And we have ways to define but not the terms
> Yet
> We know what is coming, that we are moving
> Dangerously and gracefully
> Toward the resolution of time
> Blurred but alive with many separate meanings
> Inside this conversation
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 759)

These lines have a bifurcated structure, in which a longer opening idea is prosodically echoed, and semantically qualified, by a slightly shorter second one (“It gets to be so exciting”/“But so big too”, “We know what is coming”/“that we are moving”, “dangerously”/“gracefully”). As we read, the variable rhythms at work within the lines coalesce into an over-arching dimetric rhythm that suggests a powerful movement forwards, followed by a smaller retreat – a movement that resembles that of water as waves pass through it.

A precursor to the wave-like undulations of Ashbery’s lines can be found in Wallace Stevens’ ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ (1934), which employs a similar iterative structure, calling to mind the ebb and flow of the tide:

> She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
> The water never formed to mind or voice,
> Like a body wholly body, fluttering
> Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
> Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
> That was not ours although we understood,
> Inhuman, of the veritable ocean…

(Stevens 1954, p. 128)

In Stevens' poem, although the speaker may imitate the "mimic motion" of the sea, its "inhuman" cry remains fundamentally separate from his own experience; the poem affirms the subject's distinctness from the setting, or environment, in which he exists. Indeed, the more accurate the speaker's mimicry of the repetitive ebb and flow of the tide becomes, the less the poem is able to maintain its autonomy from what it describes; as McCollough notes, its watery 's' sounds "repea[t] so conspicuously that the sound overwhelms the poem's sense" (McCollough 2002, p. 101). It therefore charts a delicate course between becoming a meaningless, purely mimetic "cry" that fuses with the surrounding environment, and dissolving – as it eventually does, with an oceanic rush of sibilance – into attempts to describe what is ineffable, the sea's "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" (Stevens 1954, p. 129). Ashbery's poem, in contrast, is not a monologue that fears being subsumed into its subject, but rather a fluid and shifting "conversation" in which what appears at first to be stable and constant – the 'medium' of the poem, perhaps – is repeatedly disturbed and altered by outside forces, which, once they have "seen a thing" and exerted their effect on it, "have to move on".

The kind of "conversation" that Ashbery describes in these lines provides us with a broader conception of the process of 'dwelling' than that with which this chapter began. Rather than constituting a discrete act that is defined by clearly demarcated physical spaces, the process of dwelling in time and in space is, Ashbery suggests in *A Wave*, ongoing, continuous and dialectical. It does not take place as a series of discrete scenes played out against the backdrop of a neutral setting; instead, it exists in fluid and shifting relationship to its surroundings, continually encountering, allowing for the presence of, or even assimilating what appears to be separate from or external to it.

Interpreted in this way, the ongoing act of dwelling can be seen as taking place not only within a physical dwelling, but within a range of different contexts. Indeed, as the following section will explore, for Ashbery, 'dwelling space' can be seen as being constituted not only by a brick-and-mortar, physical dwelling – a Victorian house, or an urban apartment – but also by more intangible categories such as a historical moment, an identity, or a community.

*   *   *

As the image of farmhouses being infiltrated by a winding stream illustrates, in *A Wave*, the permeability of the physical dwelling – its willingness to admit, or its inability to keep out, what lies outside its walls – is imagined as a literal porosity, a propensity to let in water. Floods, torrents and incessant rains irrigate the collection, drenching and drowning its speakers and seeping insistently through the walls and ceilings of their dwellings. When viewed in a holistic way, the waters of the collection coalesce into the waves referred to in its title, which are orderly and predictable to the extent that they appear to possess a decisive, almost intentional agency, like the "giant wave" of the collection's eponymous long poem that "picks itself up/Out of a calm sea and retreats again into nowhere" (Ashbery 2008, p. 800). However, for the subjects who are caught up in the relentless, inexorable flow of the collection's waters – the panicked dwellers who must bail out their house against an advancing flood, frantically "trying to plug holes in ceilings" (Ashbery 2008, p. 768) – the water's movement is experienced as a random and destructive force, surrounding and subsuming all that it encounters.

The notion that the subject's ongoing experience of living in time can change depending on whether it is conceptualised as taking place either within the physical, individual and personal spaces of a dwelling, or within the wider collective and communal social or temporal structures in which one must also dwell, was particularly pertinent when Ashbery was writing *A Wave*. In early 1981, as the poet was renovating the Hudson House, dividing his time between his Chelsea apartment and his new upstate home, the first cases of AIDS were emerging in New York. Tom Crewe, in his review of David France's *How to Survive a Plague* (2017), describes how:

> AIDS start[ed] with the deaths. With the dying. At first there was only confusion, incomprehension. Bodies that quickly became unintelligible to themselves... Men dying in the time it takes to catch and throw off a cold.
>
> (Crewe 2018)

AIDS progressed on a bewildering, accelerated timescale: as France recalls, "sexy Tommy McCarthy from the classifieds department stayed out late at an Yma Sumac concert. Friday he had a fever. Sunday he was hospitalised. Wednesday he was dead" (France 2017, Part 2, Section 1). As these accounts suggest, individual identities were suddenly and radically

displaced, becoming “unintelligible to themselves” as they were swept into a broader collective narrative.

The disorienting suddenness with which AIDS emerged had the effect of radically disrupting the boundaries between what occurred inside and outside of a dwelling, and calling into question the ability of private spaces to accommodate communal or political experiences. As Deborah Nelson observes, the distinction between public and private space was a fraught one in post-War America, due to the way in which

> the sanctity of the private sphere was generally perceived to be the most significant point of contrast between [democratic and totalitarian] regimes… either we preserved the integrity of private spaces and thus the free world, or we tolerated their penetration and took the first step towards totalitarian oppression.
>
> (Nelson 2002, p. xiii)

However, as Nelson notes, this privacy was “unevenly distributed”, with “women and homosexuals… banished to the deprivation, rather than the liberation, of privacy” (Nelson 2002, p. xiii). Sarah Schulman describes how, by the mid 1980s,

> people I knew were literally dying daily, weekly, regularly. Sometimes they left their apartments and went back to their hometowns to die because there was no medical support... I remember once seeing the cartons of a lifetime collection of playbills in a dumpster in front of a tenement and I knew that it meant another gay man had died of AIDS, his belongings dumped in the gutter.
>
> (Schulman 2013, p. 37)

Shulman’s image of personal possessions that once furnished a dwelling being unceremoniously ejected from its interior and “dumped in the gutter” suggests a violent disruption of the inside/outside binary in which the dwelling signifies privacy, safety and security. Indeed, during the AIDS crisis, once-private identities and affiliations became unavoidably public, and even political – or revealed themselves to have been always so. Any consideration of Ashbery’s dwellings must therefore include not only the literal, physical spaces in which the subject dwells, but also the social, historical and ideological contexts that

they inhabit by means of what Heidegger refers to as "thrown-ness" (Heidegger 2010, Section 38) – the unavoidable contingency that accompanies the act of dwelling in time.

In the context of the AIDS epidemic, is unsurprising that the waters and waves that infiltrate or overwhelm *A Wave*'s dwelling spaces – both literal and figurative – carry intimations of mortality and, at times, spread actual disease, as in 'Darlene's Hospital', where "the colors… slide muddy from the brush/And spew their random evocations everywhere", and lines of traffic "flo[w] like mucus" (Ashbery 2008, p. 779). The fluids that course through *A Wave* threaten the health of the body and compromise its integrity, as well as threatening to subsume it, as the rain "drown[s]" the "prosaic things" of 'Haibun 6' (Ashbery 2008, p. 769). Melancholy figures, drenched, drowned or submerged in water, haunt the collection, from the "Inaccurate dreamers of our state,/Sodden from sitting in the rain too long" of 'Darlene's Hospital' (Ashbery 2008, p. 781), to the doleful "émigrés" of the collection's final, eponymous poem, who hover "like phantasms",

> so near
> To the surface of the water you can touch them through it.
> It's they can tell you how love came and went
> And how it keeps coming and going, ever disconcerting…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 801)

The waters of *A Wave* spread and diffuse, "coming and going", just as bodily fluids can transmit disease throughout a community – and disseminate infirmity throughout an individual body. In 1982, as AIDS was ravaging New York, Ashbery developed an epidural abscess that almost killed him. He required urgent surgery which put him in a coma and resulted in a long hospital stay, a period of incapacitation, and a permanent limp. This combination of public and personal events would appear to correspond to an individual and a collective conceptualisation of the experience of living in time. However, in *A Wave* Ashbery repeatedly draws our attention to the ease with which what is discrete becomes widespread, and what is individual becomes communal: the way in which a wave of greeting – or, perhaps, a transient encounter with a stranger, involving the exchange of bodily fluids ("love… coming and going") – might draw one into the inescapable currents of a "giant wave" by which "all destinies/And incomplete destinies [are] swamped" (Ashbery 2008, p. 800). In doing so, he does not privilege a social or communal representation of experience

over an individual one. Instead, his poetry articulates and occupies both of these positions simultaneously, dwelling on, and residing in, the binary that they appear to constitute.

As a result, it is not only a physical home that can oscillate between being welcomingly familiar and uncannily strange; our conceptualisation of our experience also hovers between these poles, as we oscillate towards and away from the notion that our lives take place within structures over which we have control or agency. The final lines of 'A Wave' express this ongoing ambiguity when they assert that

> …each of us has to remain alone, conscious of each other
> Until the day when war absolves us of our differences. We'll
> Stay in touch. So they have it, all the time. But all was strange.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 808)

The speaker articulates a desire to become absorbed into a homogenous group or community, and thereby "absolve[d]… of our differences", before enacting a sudden swerve, in the last few words of the poem, to affirm that despite the apparent erasure of difference that has taken place, "all was strange".

This complex relationship between the various ways in which one's dwelling in time can be conceptualised is articulated in *A Wave* not only on a thematic, but also on a linguistic, level. The word 'someone' occurs on numerous occasions throughout the collection, often appearing several times in one line: "Someone whose face is the same as yours in the photograph but who is someone else" (Ashbery 2008, p. 785);[7] "someone will find out, someone will know" (Ashbery 2008, p. 733). *Someone* can be used generically – 'someone or other' – or it can be used to amplify the distinctiveness and importance of particular individuals, as in phrases like 'a special someone'. Ashbery uses the word in both these contexts, but he also situates its meaning in the space between them, as in 'Just Someone You Say Hi To' (Ashbery 2008, p. 775). The "someone" in question has no distinct identity – they

[7] It is also possible to discern in this line an elegiac reference to the loss of Ashbery's brother, Richard, who died of leukaemia at the age of nine. Richard's untimely death is referred to several times in the imagery of *A Wave*, not least when the title poem imagines a reunion with "a twin brother from whom you were separated at birth", and wistfully asserts that "[you] are a sibling again" (Ashbery 2008, p. 803, p. 791).

are seen at a distance, or glimpsed on the street – but they are not completely unspecific: the speaker recognises and greets them. In his momentary, personal perception of the world, they are not just someone, but *someone*. An impersonal, indifferent view of a life is momentarily juxtaposed with an individualised, bodily and ephemeral one.[8] 'A Wave' describes an encounter with an acquaintance in similarly ambiguous terms:

> In today's mainstream one mistakes him, sincerely, for someone else;
> He passed on slowly and turns a corner. One can't say
> He was gone before you knew it, yet something of that, some tepid
> Challenge that was never taken up and disappeared forever…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 802)

Although the event that these lines describe appears to be ephemeral and inconsequential, the elegiac tone invites us to read the phrase "passed on slowly" as describing not only the literal movements of a physical body, but also as confirming – and commemorating – its demise. This ambiguity is also discernible in 'A Wave's reference to "all those contacts… of which nothing can be known or written, only/That they passed this way" (Ashbery 2008, p. 800). Again, the phrase "passed this way" vacillates between being literal and allegorical – evoking the ongoing physical movements of a body, and affirming the loss of its unique and unrepeatable way of existing in, and moving through, the world. 'To pass' is, in these poems, both 'to pass by' and 'to pass away'; Ashbery's language operates across multiple contexts, referring to both physical and metaphysical processes, alternately aligning itself with and disavowing both a transient, individuated notion of experience and an ongoing, collective one. In a similar way, the collection's central metaphor, the wave, can take the form of either an ephemeral, bodily gesture – "they wave their hands and whistle/Much as human beings everywhere do", the speaker of 'They Like' reminds us (Ashbery 2008, p. 776) – or an impersonal, disembodied and repetitive force, what Ashbery's long poem 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' describes as a "wave breaking on a rock, giving up/Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape" (Ashbery 1977, p. 73). As Geoff Ward observes, it is "at once a

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[8] Cf. Simon Watney's account of living through the AIDS crisis: "Deaths began to accumulate… sudden deaths, entirely unexpected deaths… Sometimes the death of a comparative stranger is felt more deeply than that of an old flame. Names disappear, and surely few have time to honour all the anniversaries of deaths…" (Watney 2000, p. 233)

fluid moment on the verge of dissolution and (feasibly) a gesture of friendship and recognition" (Ward 1993, p. 93).

As Watney notes, Michael Lynch describes AIDS by referring to a "cit[y]" that is full of "these waves of dying friends" (Watney 2000, p. 216). In the context of the AIDS epidemic, the image of the wave itself has the ability to signify both loss and consolation. In *The Pound Era*, Hugh Kenner describes how Buckminster Fuller would demonstrate his theory of "Pattern Integrity" in his lectures by sliding a knot along a rope:

> The knot is indifferent to these transactions. The knot is neither hemp nor cotton nor nylon: is not the rope. The knot is a *patterned integrity*. The rope renders it visible.
> (Kenner 1974, p. 145)

A wave is an abstract concept until it moves through a body of water, at which point the transmission of energy that it enacts becomes visible as what Kenner calls a "patterned integrity". As Ross notes, "unlike a waving hand, we do not 'actually see' a wave of energy but instead perceive its effect on the medium through which it passes" (Ross 2017, p. 91). Similarly, a virus such as AIDS (which is, like Kenner's knot, morally "indifferent") only becomes visible when it is able to pass through a community of bodies. "I remarked to a friend, after I read Helen [Vendler's] review [of *A Wave*], that I had thought these poems were really dealing with love rather than death," Ashbery observed in a 1994 interview with David Lehman, "but sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference between them" (Lehman 1994). In the climate in which Ashbery wrote *A Wave*, love and death had indeed become inextricably intertwined.

There is, however, a reciprocal element to this process, as the wave's medium, disrupted, altered and differentiated by the energy that permeates it, also becomes increasingly visible. Susan Sontag has noted that, as well as leading to persecution and suffering, AIDS "confirms an identity and, among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community…" (Sontag 1990, p. 113). Similarly, Ashbery's own sexuality, and the presence of a wider queer community, are more visible in *A Wave* than at any other point in the poet's work. Herd sees 'Description of a Masque' – in which extravagantly costumed nursery-rhyme characters turn tricks in a Parisian dive bar – as being "more explicit than ever in its identification of and with a gay

scene" (Herd 2000, p. 194). Meanwhile, John Vincent argues *A Wave* must be read through the lens of queer culture – specifically, the activity of cruising – so that words which usually imply a deep, lasting familiarity with a particular individual are instead understood as referring to a transient encounter with a stranger. *A Wave*'s apparent love poems, Vincent claims, are engaged not in declarations of monogamy and commitment, but instead in "cruisy strategizing" (Vincent 2002, p. 10), as when the speaker of 'The Ongoing Story' addresses

> you,
> In your deliberate distinctness, whom I love and gladly
> Agree to walk blindly into the night with,
> Your realness is real to me though I would never take any of it
> Just to see how it grows. A knowledge that people live close by is,
> I think, enough. And even if only first names are ever exchanged
> The people who own them seem rock-true and marvelously self-sufficient.
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 740)

A conventional reading of this poem might interpret the speaker's intention to "love" and "walk blindly into the night" with his companion in figurative terms, as a declaration of ongoing commitment. However, Vincent reads this line as referring to "[c]ruising, walking into the night with a stranger who might only be available on a first-name basis". Indeed, Vincent goes so far as to assert that 'The Ongoing Story' is unreadable outside of this specific queer context (a claim which he introduces using the metaphor of scene and setting which recurs throughout *A Wave*): "…it is a neatly set up stage but nothing happens on it… without cruising as a thematic node, the poem does not develop past its first stanza". For Vincent, queerness is an indispensable element of the poem – the setting, perhaps, which enables its scenes to unfold – to the extent that "a reader who cannot imagine such encounters as they exist for real in gay lives, and thereby as a fantasmatic organizing principle for these meditations, cannot follow [its] arc" (Vincent 2002, p. 10).

However, it is indeed possible to read the "you" of these poems as either a partner or a one-night stand, and to read "love" as an ongoing emotional process, or as a euphemism for a sex act (or as both); the poem creates a space within which complementary, or even opposing, resonances can exist. If we accept Vincent's definition of lyric as "as a record of a single voice speaking to one person or no one" (Vincent 2002, p. xiii), sexuality is the energy that

alters and disturbs the medium – in this case, the lyric mode – through which it passes, allowing it to speak not only to one person, intimately, but to countless unidentified strangers, becoming a broad, Whitmanian address to the world at large.

Vincent's reading is, in part, made possible by the fuzziness of the temporality which *A Wave* ascribes to the process of dwelling in time, in which the "night" in "walk[ing] into the night" can be both figurative and literal, general and specific, referring to a lifetime of interchangeable nights, or to a single evening. However, queerness itself exerts an important influence on the poem too, functioning as a context, or a setting – a force that operates both inseparably with, yet discretely from, the text, moving through it, animating it, changing it (queering it, perhaps), and interfering with its stability: an ongoing wave of disruption and disturbance.

Despite the "cruisy strategizing" of 'The Ongoing Story', and the flamboyant camp of 'Description of a Masque', it is *A Wave*'s 'Haibun 6' that contains Ashbery's most memorable, and most direct, reference to his sexuality – a dedication, and a wave of recognition, to the community of which he was a part: "I'm hoping that homosexuals not yet born get to inquire about it, inspect the whole random collection as though it were a sphere" (Ashbery 2008, p. 768). In this image, the "random collection" that will pass down to future generations functions as both a wave and its medium (or, to put it another way, as both the *dwelling*, where experience resides, and the *dweller*, who lives through that experience). As an object of "inquiry" that is also a missive from the past, it brings novelty while signalling continuity. Its apparent survival, and that of its readership, also functions as an affirmation that the gay community will persist into the future – just as a wave's medium survives, remaining separate from the disruptive energy that is passing through it, and returning to its original state once the energy in question has moved on.

This is possible because the medium is not a unitary, monolithic entity, but is rather composed of numerous smaller constituent parts, just as water is composed of individual molecules. Fletcher comments on this ambivalent quality, observing that

> when wave motions are reduced sufficiently in size, as with light, they become seemingly two different things…they are now unfaithful to their undulant form to the point of divorce; they become separate particles.

(Fletcher 2004, p. 144)

In the midst of an epidemic such as the one that Ashbery was living through as he wrote *A Wave*, there is consolation in the notion that the community that is being disrupted will not only survive, but will also return, at some point, to a state of equanimity. However, to accept this comfort is to acknowledge that it applies not to the distinct individuals that make up the community – the people one knows and loves – but instead to its putative future members, who may be "not yet born". Although what is collective – the 'body politic' of a community – will persist after a wave of disturbance has passed through it, what is personal – the individual physical bodies of those who constitute the community at a particular moment in time – may be irretrievably lost. What survives the process of dwelling in time may therefore constitute a blurry and porous outline of a life, rather than a precisely differentiated and individualised identity; as 'More Pleasant Adventures' puts it,

> You forget the direction you're taking […]
> And can't tell how you got here. Then there is confusion
> Even out of happiness, like a smoke—
> The words get heavy, some topple over, you break others.
> And outlines disappear once again.
> Heck, it's anybody's story…

(Ashbery 2008, p. 744)

In exploring the way in which one's unique and unrepeatable phenomenological experience can lose its definition to the point that it becomes "anybody's story", Ashbery not only enlarges the category of 'dwelling space' to include the broader spatial, historical and even ideological milieux in which individual phenomenological experience takes place; he also emphasises the difficulties inherent in the separation of a milieu, setting or environment from the act of living that takes place within it. This is reflected in the fact that Ashbery's metaphor of the wave, when applied to the experience of living through trauma or loss, does not only envisage the individual experience of existence passing through the medium of ongoing time; it also describes a movement in the opposite direction, in which individual experience serves as the medium through which a broader, historical and collective notion of temporality passes. In the words of the speaker of 'But What is the Reader to Make of This',

“It’s not the background, we’re the background/On the outside looking out” (Ashbery 2008, p. 742).

By acknowledging this inseparability from the spaces – physical, ideological, temporal and historical – in which we dwell, we may earn a theoretical reprieve from death, whose destructive power is contained and neutralised by social and temporal systems that affirm an overarching continuity, such as “the orderly/Ceremonials and handling of estates” (Ashbery 2008, p. 799). However, Ashbery suggests, within such systems individual experience exists, and survives, only in the way a physical dwelling does: being lived in and lived through, but never fully alive.

Ashbery’s poetry does not fully resolve these tensions between the alternative ways of conceptualising our experience that it evokes; as ‘More Pleasant Adventures’ assures us, even in the wake of decisive “partings and dyings”, “no acre but will resume being disputed” (Ashbery 2008, p. 745). The tensions that *A Wave* highlights – between individual and communal interpretations of experience, between remaining separate from the ebb and flow of time, and being irrevocably subsumed into it – remain, as the scarlet banner threaded through the trees in ‘Description of a Masque’ proclaims, “an Ongoing Thing” (Ashbery 2008, p. 749).

*   *   *

When Ashbery imagines a “whole random collection” being handed down, through time, to generations “not yet born” (Ashbery 2008, p. 765), he acknowledges the act of transmission that a text can engage in: through epistemological space, from the interiorised world of the individual author to a broader, unspecific public ‘out in the world’, and through time, from the tangible specificity of the present to an undefined future. Indeed, as Ashbery’s metaphor of the wave suggests, his exploration of the ways in which the subject dwells in and through time also constitutes an exploration of *transmission* – not just in terms of the transfer of disease between individuals, or the slippery contagiousness of emotions such as love and grief between a group of individuals who form a community, but also in terms of the transference of meaning that necessarily occurs as our ongoing experience of living in the world moves through and between different contexts, spaces and settings: the individual and the communal, the personal and the public, even the ephemeral and the ongoing. This

‘meaning’ is not necessarily a discrete and fixed referent; nor does it have to be regarded as designated in advance by an author or other creator. Rather, it can possess a contingent quality, a Heideggerian “thrown-ness” (Heidegger 2010, Section 38); it is generated by the ongoing and unpredictable process of living, rather than imposed onto it. It is perhaps what the speaker of ‘When the Sun Went Down’ refers to when he describes a “refrain… desultory as birdsong” which

> seeps unrecognizably
> Into the familiar structures that lead out from here
> To the still familiar peripheries and less sure notions…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 736)

The content of this kind of meaning is difficult to separate from the form in which it occurs; it is present indistinctly, as

> ….a blur
> Of all kinds of connotations ripped from the hour and tossed
> Like jewels down a well; the answer, also,
> To the question that was on my mind but that I’ve forgotten,
> Except in the way certain things, certain nights, come together.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, pp. 736–737)

In this respect it is comparable to what Heidegger refers to as *Sinn* (meaning), which is a by-product of *Dasein*, or being in the world. Heidegger writes:

> This environmental milieu… does not consist of just things, objects, which are then conceived as meaning this and this… Living in an environment, it signifies to me everywhere and always, everything has the character of world…
>
> (Heidegger 2008, p. 58)

Charles Altieri applies an analogous notion to poetry when he writes that “Poetic traditions make their mark less by virtue of themes or doctrinal values than through the modes of relatedness whose power and scope they demonstrate” (Altieri 1999, p. 25). This section will explore the way in which Ashbery’s poetry creates figurative ‘dwelling spaces’ within whose

boundaries certain "modes of relatedness" are contained and, to an extent, preserved and transmitted, just as a physical dwelling can pass possessions, social structures and ideologies down through generations. By exploring the way in which Ashbery's poetry expresses the experience of living in and through time we can approach it, and its position within various poetic traditions, in a way that does not depend on assigning to it a particular set of interpretations or intentions, but rather acknowledges the work's own distinct mode of dwelling in and through the cultural and semantic spaces that it occupies.

Indeed, *A Wave* contains some of Ashbery's most cogent explorations of his own poetry's ways of existing in, and moving through, the world. The collection's eponymous long poem repeatedly affirms the significance of infiltration and entanglement, permeation and fusion, not least in its opening lines:

> To pass through pain and not know it,
> A car door slamming in the night.
> To emerge on an invisible terrain.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 787)

Ross sees these lines as being comparable to Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro' in terms of their crispness and compression, their "rhetorical symmetry" (Ross 2017, p. 91). However, Pound's two lines stand alone as a complete poem despite their brevity, and the ideas of emergence, fruition and completion inherent in the image of "petals on a wet black bough" (and the trace of a valedictory 'bow' in the final 'bough') coincide with the work's own cessation. Ashbery's three lines, meanwhile, evoke a similar narrative arc of movement, transition and eventual arrival, but their position, with hundreds of lines of the poem still to come, suggests that any resolution they provide at is likely to be revoked. Indeed, as Ross points out, their apparently definitive movement – an individual passing through an experience and "emerg[ing]" into a changed landscape – is reversed a few pages later, when "all of the sudden, the scene changes" and

> a new conception
> …passes through you, emerges on the other side
> And is now a distant city, with all
> The possibilities shrouded in a narrative moratorium.

(Ashbery 2008, p. 788)

Here, it is experience which passes through a person, and the implied narrative arc becomes a static "narrative moratorium", not just taking us back to where we began, but denying that forward progression is possible – and yet the poem continues. The direction in which particular objects or ideas things move, it seems, is less significant than the quality of their movement, which is oscillatory, ongoing, and relentlessly permeating. As the speaker of the poem puts it,

> the right way,
> It turns out, is the one that goes straight through the house
> And out the back. By so many systems
> As we are involved in, by just so many
> Are we set free on an ocean of language that comes to be
> Part of us, as though we would ever get away.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 791)

Ashbery's unwillingness to align his poetry unequivocally either with collective or individual experience is discernible here; we may be "set free" as we accept our role in an overarching system or a community, but such liberation erodes our individuality as the system "comes to be/Part of us", ultimately restricting our agency and limiting our ability to "ever get away". However, it is also notable that in these lines, meaning is conferred not by the house as a physical structure, but rather by its – and, by extension, our – porosity, our propensity to dissolve into and fuse with the "systems… we are involved in" as we move through them, and they through us. The poem similarly conveys meaning not in a straightforward, linear way, but rather through a series of iterative, involuting movements. As a result, this meaning is not concentrated in a single, decisive moment of epistemological revelation, but is rather distributed evenly across the workings of the text.

"[P]oetry is not a static object but a kinetic act, in which something is transferred from somebody to somebody else," Ashbery asserts in his lecture 'Poetical Space' (Ashbery 2004, p. 210). We can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the way in which Ashbery's poetry transfers meaning by comparing it to two poets who evoke similar ideas of permeability, while expressing them in very different terms, namely Ezra Pound and Charles

Olson. Although not considered to be a direct influence on Ashbery, Pound exists within what Marjorie Perloff refers to as a tradition of “indeterminacy” (Perloff 1981, pp. 155–199), of which she also considers Ashbery to be a part. Additionally, both Pound and Ashbery were avid readers and translators of French poets such as Mallarmé and Rimbaud, suggesting that the two shared not only a set of influences, but also an aesthetic sensibility. Charles Olson, meanwhile, who was heavily influenced by Pound, published his poetic manifesto, ‘Projective Verse’, in 1950, when Ashbery was writing his earliest published poems. Even though the specific milieux that Olson and Ashbery inhabited in the early fifties were very different – Ashbery was studying at Harvard, then living in New York, while Olson was the Rector of Black Mountain College in North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains – one might expect there to be at least some similarities between the two poets due to the broader, communal settings (Post-war, containment-era America, for example, or poetic coteries with a broadly avant-garde, anti-establishment bent) in which they both existed.

However, both Pound’s and Olson’s conceptions of poetry’s transference of meaning are very different from Ashbery’s. For Pound, poetic energy – whether it is understood as a “vortex”, a “patterned integrity” or a “radiant node” (Kenner 1974, p. 146) – has the ability to make latent meanings blaze forth in a single moment of harmony that transcends the bounds of time, space and culture:

> We might come to believe that the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radioactivity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying. A force rather like water when it spurts up through very bright sand and sets it in swift motion.
>
> (Pound 1968, p. 49)

Pound’s “radiant node”, like Fuller’s knot, is unfixed and mobile, able to alter its position and structure in accordance with the disparate historic, cultural and linguistic strands that the poetic image quilts together. Its significance lies in is its ability to bring into being a fleeting state of “transfusion”, where meaning is briefly able to pass freely between cultures and historical eras, as well as between poet and reader. Pound’s image of “water when it spurts up through very bright sand” illustrates this transfusion of meaning in dramatic and immediate terms; however, it describes a single, decisive moment, and does not concern itself with what happens once the initiatory force it describes has waned or moved on. What appear to be

participles suggesting continuous activity ("transfusing"; "welding"; "unifying") are better read as gerundives, describing fixed qualities of the poetic image, rather than the ongoing processes that it engages in. Pound's "energy", although undoubtedly powerful, lacks the continuous, ambient quality of Ashbery's wave-like transmissions.

The transmission of meaning that Ashbery's poetry engages in is also strikingly different from that which Olson envisages in 'Projective Verse'. "The poem itself," Olson confidently asserts, "must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge" (Olson 1997, p. 240). The Olsonian poem does not function as a medium by which energy is transmitted between contexts; instead, it concentrates meaning before releasing it a single, climactic moment of realisation. While Ashbery imagines the energy of his poetry involving itself with what it encounters, becoming momentarily indistinguishable from its surrounding environment, Olson's poetic energy resists fluidity, asserting instead the orderly, modular nature of the settings – both objective and linguistic – through which it moves. Just as the poet, poem and reader are, for Olson, separate "terms" in a quasi-mathematical equation, so language itself can be broken down into its constituent parts – discrete "particle[s]" which interact with each other in a predictable way, governed by a "syllable" that is akin to a "king" (Olson 1997, p. 241). Olson's physical universe is solidly Newtonian, rather than being beset by the uncertainties and contradictions of quantum theory (which asserts that apparently discrete particles actually behave, in some situations, like diffuse waves). Indeed, the "projective" quality that Olson valorises is not the contingent "thrown-ness" that Heidegger sees as characteristic of being-in-the-world; the subject, or poet, in Olson's formulation, is the thrower, and the poem, as Perloff notes, is "[a] projectile, a mechanism or force projected through time-space" (Perloff 1973, p. 287). In this way, Olson affirms the distinctions between foreground and background, and between setting and scene, that Ashbery's poetry calls into question.

Olson also repudiates the kind of fluid and mercurial – at times even ineffable – relationship between subject and object that Ashbery's poetry frequently affirms. 'Projective Verse', dense with imperatives and peppered with invocations of "law", "conventions" and "principle", describes an apparently spontaneous, but actually highly controlled, transfer of energy that, Olson cautions, "must be managed". The "tensions" of poetry are, he asserts, "made to hold, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem" (Olson 1997, pp. 240–244). Whereas for Ashbery, 'content' and 'context' are unstable elements that

shift and dissolve as soon as they are grasped, for Olson they are rigid categories. The 'holding' that Olson describes does not involve emotional containment (and nor does it correspond to the nurturing contextualisation of the self that is referred to contemporary psychoanalytic theory, for example in D.W. Winnicott's notion of the "holding environment" created by the mother that insulates the infant from psychological stress) (Winnicott 1987, p. 183). Rather, what Olson describes is a process of holding *back*, or holding *in*, forces that may be unruly or disruptive – an exercise in restraint and control that contains meaning within the boundaries of the poem rather than facilitating its movement into other, unknown contexts. Ashbery himself has remarked on this tendency towards order and codification, observing in conversation with John Koethe that: "It seems the fifties were stricter and more structured that the forties and thirties," unlike the twenties, which boasted "Cummings, Eliot and so on" (Shetley 1993, p. 104).

In contrast, Ashbery emphasises the ongoing nature of the transfer of meaning he describes; as long as it remains involved with its medium, it resists arriving at a single, epistemically definitive conclusion, and continues on, moving relentlessly through what it encounters. Ashbery's 'through' is, however, different to Olson's, as it is to Pound's; it is delicate and symbiotic, infiltrating and fusing with what it encounters, rather than bisecting, piercing or penetrating it. Rather than conveying fixed meanings and affirming the presence of an underlying epistemological order, it interferes relentlessly with its medium, bringing difference, disturbance and change.

In this respect, Ashbery's poetics could be seen to have less in common with either Pound's high modernism, or Olson's projective verse, than with what Andrew Epstein sees as a strand of "Emersonian Pragmatism" at work post-War American poetry (Epstein 2006, p. 53). The tendency that Epstein identifies draws on the writings of Emerson, as well as later pragmatist philosophers such as William James, to posit 'meaning' as an inherently contingent quality that is generated by the ongoing process of thinking, reasoning or experiencing. In pragmatic thought, 'meaning' is, by definition, fluid, mercurial and incomplete; as Epstein explains,

> If the world is radically open, unfinished, and plural, it means that our responses to it, our interpretations of it, need to be thought of as… being constantly in need of revision and adaptation to meet shifting circumstances and realities. Every

> explanation, statement, or action must be regarded as temporary, provisional, revisable.
>
> (Epstein 2006, p. 56)

A similar sentiment is expressed in Ashbery's earlier long poem about the passing of time, 'Clepsydra', from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966):

> Each moment
> Of utterance is the true one; likewise none are true,
> Only is the bounding from air to air, a serpentine
> Gesture which hides the truth behind a congruent
> Message, the way the air hides the sky…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 140)

The "truth" that Ashbery refers to in these lines in not a fixed and definite value that is independent of the form in which it is apprehended or conveyed; instead, it is generated by the immediacy of "each moment/Of utterance", as well as by the "bounding from air to air", the perceptual movement by which we traverse the space between these moments and advance through time.

When discussing the necessity of understanding the meaning of one's experience in this open, dynamic and fluid way, William James imagines the subject as moving in concert with the undulating movement of their perception: "We live, as it were, upon the front edge of an advancing wave-crest…" (James 1904). As Epstein notes, Emerson conveys a similar sense of contingency and flexibility using the metaphor of a dwelling, asserting that

> An angular, dogmatic house would be rent to chips and splinters, in this storm of many elements… We are golden averages, volitant stabilities, compensated or periodic errors, houses founded on the sea.
>
> (Epstein 2006, p. 56)

For Emerson, as for Ashbery, the dwelling, and the ongoing perceptual setting or context that it constitutes, must remain provisional and permeable, altering in response to ongoing subjective experience rather than resisting it or attempting to arrest its flow.

Ashbery's pragmatic emphasis on action as the source of meaning or "truth" also draws our attention to another important facet of his poetry, namely its refusal to align itself with a simple binary of surface/depth. As Kenner notes, Pound describes the way in which "latent energy is made dynamic or 'revealed' to the engineer in control, and placed at his disposal" (Kenner 1974, p. 155); the poem, in Pound's view, is a site where what is latent is realised or made explicit. For him, as for Olson, the transfer of meaning effected by poetry has the ability suddenly to liberate a "latent energy" that is present both in language, and in the objective world. This liberation, which is at times almost mystical, makes hidden correspondences visible, bringing to the fore "things present but unnoticed, or things perhaps taken for granted but never examined" (Kenner 1974, p. 155). For Olson, "composition" is therefore akin to "recognition" – like the inhabitant of Ashbery's "familiar" dwelling, the Olsonian poet is engaged in a continual process of renovation and refurbishment as he labours to reconstitute meanings that have become lost or obscured. This notion of poetic energy asserts the existence of an underlying order – oneiric or historical – which retains its authority, and its power to define and endorse meanings, even when it cannot be clearly apprehended.

Numerous critics have identified a similar surface/depth binary in Ashbery's poetry, most notably John Shoptaw, who goes so far as to claim that the concealment of potentially transgressive meanings beneath apparently orthodox linguistic surfaces is fundamental to Ashbery's poetics. Using a technique that he refers to as "cryptography", Shoptaw identifies "crypt words" which have the power to "unlock" buried meanings in Ashbery's poems (Shoptaw 1994, p. 6). These meanings are often – although not always – sexually charged, leading Shoptaw to claim that Ashbery's poetry possesses a "homotextual" quality (Shoptaw 1994, p. 4) – related, perhaps, to what Eve Sedgwick calls the "epistemology of the closet" (Sedgwick 1990) – in which the imperative to conceal or repress the poet's sexuality exerts a warping pressure on the language of the text.

Shoptaw demonstrates his use of this approach by conducting close readings of poems that he views as being 'encrypted', including *A Wave*'s 'More Pleasant Adventures':

> …In the rash of partings and dyings (the new twist),
> There's also room for breaking out of living.

> Whatever happens will be quite ingenious.
> No acre will but resume being disputed now,
> And paintings are the one thing that we never seem to run out of.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 745)

The "crypt word" which unlocks and, effectively, decodes this poem is, according to Shoptaw, 'plot'. When applied to the lines above, this crypt word allows him to discern within them "a plot twist, a grave plot, an intrigue, and a plot of land" (Shoptaw 1994, p. 8). [9] Shoptaw's approach is undeniably useful for what it tells us about Ashbery's writing process, and about the repressive social and political climate in which much of his poetry was written. However, his "cryptography" does not always produce significantly different results to those which one might arrive at via a sensitive close reading, without the need for a "crypt word". Even without reading 'More Pleasant Adventures' as if it were 'encoded', one can note the poem's vague yet insistent imagery of illness and impending loss – the ominous "rash", the "partings and dyings", and the bittersweet prospect of "breaking out of living" – in order to arrive at similar conclusions to those Shoptaw draws about the poem's references to illness, death, queerness, and the dwelling.

Additionally, Shoptaw's reading does not fully account for the *playfulness* – rather than the paranoia – that is at work when Ashbery obfuscates or conceals meanings. We can see this playful tendency at work in the following exchange between the poet and John Koethe, which took place in 1983:

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[9] Although Shoptaw mentions Freud only in passing, his reading of Ashbery has much in common with the Freudian notion of "manifest" and "latent" content, which is described in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud illustrates the concept using the example of a "political writer" who

> must beware of… censorship, and on its account he must soften and distort the expression of his opinion. he therefore moderates and disguises the expression of his opinions… he finds himself compelled either merely to refrain from certain forms of attack or speak in allusions in place of direct references; or he must conceal his objectionable statement beneath some apparently innocent disguise.
>
> (Freud 1955b, p. 167)

When applied to Ashbery's poetry, Freud's theory would appear to designate queer sexuality as the dangerous or shameful latent content which must be concealed, or disguised in acceptable, "innocent" forms, so that it is able to slip past the poet's internal censor.

> Ashbery: When I decided to write *Three Poems* […] I thought about various people whom I was in love with and my dead brother and my parents and so on.
> Koethe: Is there any discernible connection between what you wrote while thinking about these people and the people themselves?
> Ashbery: Sort of. I won't tell you what it is.
>
> (Koethe 1983)

When Ashbery refuses to 'tell', it is with a childlike archness, rather than with a sense of shame or guilt. One way to acknowledge the concealment and queering of meaning that Ashbery engages in – without reducing his artistic output to an expression of shame about his sexuality – is to draw on the notion of movement that is inherent in the pragmatism his work espouses. Thinking about his poetry in terms of the movements it effects – how it moves, and what it does – allows us to read it without needing to posit a counterpart to its concealments, a buried layer of truth that would, if we could only locate and unearth it, dispel ambiguity and bring clarity. Ashbery himself describes this method of approaching apparently 'encoded' texts in his own writing on Raymond Roussel, observing that:

> No one denies that Roussel's work is brimming with secrets; what is less certain is whether the secrets have any importance. In other words, is there some hidden, alchemical key for decoding the work, as André Breton and others have thought, or is the hidden meaning merely the answer to a childish riddle or puzzle, no more nor less meaningful than the context in which it is buried? These questions are unlikely to be resolved.
>
> (Ashbery 2000, p. 50)

If we accept, as Ashbery does as he reads Roussel, that there is no "alchemical key" that will unlock a text, and that the uncertainties it creates are therefore "unlikely to be resolved", we are free to read in a way that allows for a "childish" (or child*like*) and unstructured proliferation of meanings that does not aim to arrive at a definitive truth. Approached in this way, the misdirections and concealments that Ashbery's poetry engages in become more than a set of signposts that point towards the presence of hidden meanings; they function as the means by which meaning moves through the text, and that the text moves meaning towards the reader.

* * *

This chapter will conclude by taking another step away from the individual, personal space of the physical dwelling, and the act of dwelling within it, with which it began in order to consider the implications of Ashbery's 'porous' poetics for the position that he occupies within the broader spaces of poetic tradition. As Ross notes, *A Wave*'s fluid yet concrete form oscillates indeterminately between realism and abstraction in a way that was not only new for Ashbery, but was out of the ordinary for contemporary poetry as a whole (Ross 2017). 'Haibun 3' describes this slightly surreptitious departure from the mainstream:

> I was swimming with the water at my back, funny thing is it was real this time. I mean this time it was working. We weren't too far from shore, the guides hadn't noticed yet.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 766)

Although the speaker of 'Haibun 3' imagines himself straying from the comforting solidity of dry land, the ideas of cyclicality, circulation and repetition inherent in the images of water and waves which characterise *A Wave* reflect the way in which Ashbery's style also frequently draws on established forms and discourses. Indeed, his poetry's permeable quality – its willingness to admit external influences, at times even becoming temporarily indistinguishable from them, while still filtering them through its own distinctive aesthetic, and thereby shaping and altering them – is one of the factors that has made the critical debate about his place within poetic tradition such a vexed one. In Ashbery's poetry, Perloff observes, "almost everything sounds like a citation, sounds like something we've heard before or read somewhere – but where?" (Perloff 1998). When "the mind/Is so hospitable, taking in everything/Like boarders", in the words of 'Houseboat Days' (Ashbery 2008, p. 515), it becomes difficult to draw a clear distinction (or to maintain the 'borders') between what is new and what is borrowed – that is, to separate the background, or context, of the poetry from its own original content. This is particularly true of Ashbery's overtly collage-based works such *The Vermont Notebook* (1975) and *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), but it also applies to *A Wave*, in which a dizzying array of objects, voices, modes, and authorial positions weave in and out of each other, both contradicting and affirming each other to create heterogenous textures. As a result, critics have debated whether Ashbery's incorporative poetics should be seen as belatedly modernist, or post-modern, or

fundamentally Romantic – whether, as James Longenbach asserts, his poems not only constitute "responses to modernism" but are "unthinkable without Eliot's example" (Longenbach 1997, p. 88), or whether he is, as Harold Bloom claims, "the most legitimate of the sons of Stevens" (Bloom 2004, p. 11). For the purposes of this chapter, it suffices to acknowledge the assumptions that underlie such pronouncements in order to explore the way in which Ashbery's treatment of dwelling in space and in time calls them into question, and to highlight ways of thinking about his poetry that effectively bypass them.

Bloom, for example, sees poetic influence as operating within quasi-familial, even overtly patriarchal, systems of lineage and inheritance, populated by authoritative fathers and obedient or rebellious sons. He describes Ashbery as "a poet in the line of Emerson", and also claims that "E. A. Robinson, Frost, Stevens, and Hart Crane… seem to me the rightful inheritors of Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson" (Bloom 1975, pp. 24–26). Bloom's synecdoche, in which the poet's name stands in for their body of work, creates a brief flicker of confusion between the poet and subject and as object: if one is the "rightful inherito[r] of Emerson, Whitman and Dickinson", what is one inheriting? Not the poets themselves, presumably. But if what is being inherited does not involve the poet personally, and is instead something that moves through them, like 'Haibun 5's "courteous but dispassionate… armed messenger on his way from someplace to someplace else" (Ashbery 2008, p. 767), what is the significance of *being* Emerson, Whitman, or Dickinson (or Ashbery)? Bloom's formulations tacitly affirm the way in which, in theories of poetic influence, the oeuvre of a particular poet functions as both the dwelling and the dweller, as the setting within which a poetic tradition continues, and the scenes that constitute it – or, to put it another way, as both the medium that it travels through and the energy that disturbs, transforms and differentiates it.

A Wave's 'Whatever It Is, Wherever You Are' ponders similar questions of transmission and inheritance. After opening the poem with a description of the "cross-hatching technique which allowed our ancestors to exchange certain genetic traits for others" (Ashbery 2008, p. 784), the speaker goes on to wonder what the relationship is between such "ancestors" and their descendants:

> What did they want us to do?... To what purpose did they cross-hatch so effectively, so that the luminous surface that was underneath is transformed into another, also luminous but so shifting and so alive with suggestiveness that it is like quicksand…

> Singing the way they did, in the old time, we can sometimes see through the tissues and tracings the genetic process has laid down between us and them. The tendrils can suggest a hand, or a specific color – the yellow of the tulip, for instance – will flash for a moment in such a way that after it has been withdrawn we can be sure that there was no imagining, no auto-suggestion here, but at the same time it becomes as useless as all subtracted memories.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 784)

Rather than seeing inheritance as the passing down of a stable and fixed set of characteristics, the poem describes it in terms of ephemeral "flash[es]" of experience that "suggest a hand, or a specific color". In these random and contingent phenomenological events, what is "specific" and individual becomes visible, albeit briefly; its uniqueness is, paradoxically, conveyed by its recognisability (it is, to employ the terms explored in Chapter 2, both strange and familiar at once – or strange *because of* its familiarity). What is passed down from generation to generation is the "luminous surface" of consciousness (a broader expression, perhaps, of what Pound calls the "luminous detail" (Pound 1911) on which the interference pattern created by the subject's dwelling in the world – the disruption of the "tissues and tracings that the genetic process has laid down between us and them" – can occur. As a result of this process, the receptive surface itself is "transformed into another… so shifting and so alive with suggestiveness".[10]

Ashbery's "luminous surface" provides an alternative to the idea of the individual poet as a repository for a tradition which they must preserve (or reshape). A pragmatic concern with action and motion is again discernible here; Ashbery's description of inheritance does not take as its starting point a fixed and stable object or ideology that is passed down, but rather focuses on a constant process of change and redefinition whose meaning lies in its very movement – what 'Whatever It Is, Wherever You Are' describes as

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[10] There is also a queer dimension to 'Whatever it is, Wherever You Are's questioning of the mechanisms of reproduction and inheritance, its articulation of a willingness to remain outside of these systems ("We have always lived in this place without a name, without shame…") and its blithe affirmation of the "useless" nature of the "subtracted memories" that are the result of one's ongoing experience (calling to mind, perhaps, contemporary characterisations of queerness as degenerate due to its unwillingness to align itself with reproduction) (Ashbery 2008, pp. 784–786).

> the wind sneaking around the baseboards of a room: not the infamous "still, small voice" but an ancillary speech that is parallel to the slithering of our own doubt-fleshed imaginings, a visible soundtrack of the way we sound as we move from encouragement to despair to exasperation and back again…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 785)

In these lines the "still, small voice" – a reference to the Bible's description of God's immanence – is disavowed in favour of a more democratic "ancillary speech", suggesting a horizontal model of inheritance and transmission that blurs the distinction between what is passed down and how, or by whom, it is received. The speaker of 'A Wave' describes how:

> You thought you perceived a purpose in the game at the moment
> Another player broke one of the rules; it seemed
> A module for the wind, something in which you lose yourself
> And are not lost, and then it pleases you to play another day
> When outside conditions have changed and only the game
> Is fast, perplexed and true, as it comes to have seemed.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 791)

The game, "fast, perplexed and true", is what persists, outlasting variable or random "outside conditions"; however, Ashbery uses the word 'game' to refer not to a fixed set of rules and strictures that govern the actions of the players (analogous, perhaps, to poetic forms and traditions) but instead to denote an ongoing event or process – the game as it is being played "at [this] moment". The players, in turn, through their engagement with the game, including through their bending or breaking of its rules, can experience both oblivion and survival, as well as pleasure: it is "something in which you lose yourself/And are not lost, and then it pleases you to play another day".

In this respect Ashbery's poetry, both in its Heideggerian "thrown-ness" and contingency, and its 'throughness' and permeability, effects a turn away from traditional notions of poetic lineage and influence and towards a more spontaneous and performative model of inheritance, in which what persists is the product of one's ongoing experience of dwelling in the world – including the very process of handing down or passing on. In this respect,

Ashbery is closer to his friend and contemporary Frank O'Hara's playful and improvisatory conception of poetry – "You just go on your nerve" (O'Hara 1995, p. 498) – than he is to Bloom's archetypal "strong poet" who must "wrestle with [his] strong precursors, even to the death" or to his "vehement" Stevens (Bloom 1997, pp. 5–6), or to Longenbach's "anguished" Eliot (Longenbach 1997, p. 7).

It is therefore precisely within the uncertain and improvised space created by the ongoing movement of subjective perception and action that Ashbery's poetry finds a stable and durable dwelling space. 'Rain Moving In' offers the following advice:

> Just keep playing, mastering as you do the step
> Into disorder this one meant. Don't you see
> It's all we can do? Meanwhile, great fires
> Arise, as of haystacks aflame. The dial has been set
> And that's ominous, but all your graciousness in living
> Conspires with it, now that this is our home:
> A place to be from, and have people ask about.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 733)

Within the spaces – physical, social, ideological and poetic – that Ashbery's poetry creates, the subject must maintain a continuity between internal and external experience, while experimenting with new ways to continue what 'A Wave' refers to as the "reflexive play of our living and being lost". The result is a dynamic and fluid existence in and through time, which finds, in the process, a shifting and provisional notion of 'home'.

5. Ashbery and the matter of poetry: Work, money and materiality in *April Galleons* (1987)

Questions of work and money might appear to have little relevance to a poet as widely acclaimed, well known, and successful as John Ashbery. As Hillel Italie's obituary notes:

> Few poets were so exalted in their lifetimes. Mr. Ashbery was the first living poet to have a volume published by the Library of America dedicated exclusively to his work. His 1975 collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* was the rare winner of the book world's unofficial triple crown: the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle prize. In 2011, he was given a National Humanities Medal and credited with changing 'how we read poetry.'
>
> (Italie 2017)

To think about Ashbery's poetry as *work*, and to direct one's attention towards his employment *outside* the sphere of poetry – not only his career as an art critic, but also his stints of menial office work, and his earliest experiences of labour on the family farm – may therefore seem perverse. This is especially true due to the way in which Ashbery's poetry possesses a mercurial, whimsical quality, a *playfulness* which seems to argue against its being strongly aligned with ideas of labour (although, as Chapter 6 will go on to argue, the notion of 'business', both in financial terms and as an ongoing, active quality, a 'busy-ness', is crucial to it). The Whitmanian breadth of the poet's register – which ranges from art history to advertising, Audenesque austerity to campy forays into doggerel – would appear to preclude any reading that associates him with a certain socio-economic class. However, as the Marxist critic Christopher Nealon persuasively argues, "the workings of capitalism are a central subject matter of twentieth century American poetry in English" (Nealon 2011, p. 1). As Nealon notes, the second half of the twentieth century saw "crises and triumphs of global capitalism", from the "end of the post-World War II boom" to "the increasingly hysterical speculative bubbles of the 1980s" (Nealon 2011, p. 1). This chapter will argue that rather than existing at an ascetic remove from this ambivalent "subject matter" (Nealon 2011, p. 1) – Nealon uses the term to emphasise the materiality of the cultural artefacts he discusses –

Ashbery's poetry is inextricably bound up with questions of labour and production. By evoking various kinds of work, and the products that result from it, it invites us to consider what the work of a poet consists of: what they make, how they produce it, and what value it can be said to possess in the contemporary socio-economic milieu.

In order to begin this investigation, it is necessary to reinstate the importance of money, and of poetry as paid work, to any consideration of Ashbery's career. The image of Ashbery that predominates today – the towering literary figure, the quintessential post-modern American artist – arguably originated in Harold Bloom's essays of the 1970s and 1980s, which had the effect of inaugurating the poet into the twentieth century canon, claiming a place for him in a lineage that ran from Whitman and Emerson, and through Stevens, to the late twentieth century. However, Bloom's description of Ashbery as an "Orphic" poet, "burned by a visionary flame beyond accommodation" and working in the tradition of Transcendentalist "seers" such as Whitman and Emerson, has the effect of abstracting his life, and his poetry, from prosaic questions of money, work and class (Bloom 2004, p. 20). As a result, when Bloom asserts that "[n]o other American poet has labored quite so intensely to exorcise all the demons of discursiveness" (Bloom 2004, p. 18), we are not encouraged to consider the fact that for most of Ashbery's career, this labour took place primarily at weekends, around the demands and commitments of his other jobs. "It was sort of a hindrance to have to go to work every day… I was really only writing poetry on weekends. I was a weekend poet," Ashbery told Mark Ford (Ashbery and Ford 2003, p. 51), referring to the mid-1970s, when, as Ford notes, Bloom asserting that "no one now writing poems in the English language is likelier than Ashbery to survive the severe judgments of time" (Ford 2018).

This chapter will begin by delineating the role that work and money played in Ashbery's life, and exploring how these concerns are expressed on a broad level in his poetry. It will then shift emphasis to examine Ashbery's poetic treatment of work through a close reading of *April Galleons* (1987), arguing that in this collection the poet imagines himself performing a particular kind of labour, namely the production of discrete, quasi-material objects, which is then contrasted with a more open-ended, and notion of work as ongoing, unending labour that exhausts both the worker and the raw materials that it requires. In *April Galleons*, questions of work, money and the nature of the poet's labour are intertwined with broader concerns about the figurative materiality and 'currency' of the poem as a cultural artefact. The "galleons" that the title invokes were used to transport goods, and as such were instrumental

in the emergence of global capitalism from the 16th century onward. However, as the final section will go on to argue, the issues that the collection raises were particularly germane in the late 1980s, as monetary currencies fluctuated wildly and the products of labour became increasingly dematerialized.

David Herd, in his exploration of Ashbery's relationship to American poetry as a whole, devotes a chapter each to *A Wave* (1984), which preceded *April Galleons*, and to *Flow Chart* (1991), which followed it, but gives short shrift to the collection itself, acknowledging it only in a single dismissive paragraph which begins by asserting that "*April Galleons* doesn't add substantially to Ashbery's achievement in this period" (Herd 2000, p. 205). While Herd's assessment that "it offers no single poem… likely, in its own right, to stand the test of time" (Herd 2000, p. 205) may ultimately be an accurate one, the collection is crucial to an understanding of how Ashbery's conception of his own poetics evolves, providing a bridge between the delicate, dialectical rhythms of *As We Know* (1979), *Shadow Train* (1981) and *A Wave* (1984) and the relentless phenomenological currents of *Flow Chart* (1991). Stephen Ross is one of few critics to have written on *April Galleons* at length, and he reads the collection predominantly with reference to the contemporary ecological milieu, arguing that it should be understood as "a sustained attempt to reckon with the sublimely unimaginable crisis of climate change." For Ross, the mid-1980s marks the point at which "ecology, long excluded from Ashbery's work, erupts into it" (Ross 2017, p. 161). Although this chapter will follow Ross in arguing for the ability of Ashbery's work of the 1980s to comment on the objective world that exists outside the poems, it will diverge from his thesis by arguing that the primary importance of *April Galleons* lies not in its engagement with environmental concerns, but rather in its exploration of transactionality, as well as its concern with what the 'work' of poetry involves – and what its value, in monetary and psychic terms, might be. The collection therefore constitutes an attempt, on the part of the aging poet, both to provide an accurate *account* of his experiences, and to undertake an *accounting* process that attempts to quantify what his life's work is ultimately worth. In exploring these topics, this chapter will examine how Ashbery's work enters into implicit dialogue with that of his contemporaries, particularly the language poets, who also invite us to consider the role that work plays in poetry, and vice versa.

This chapter and the one that follows conceptualise the relationship between poetry and work in two distinct ways. This chapter treats the poem and the text in which it appears as material

‘things’. In this formulation, the poet is the ambivalent maker of what Ashbery refer to as ‘poetic objects’ – he is an artisan-like figure who works to refine his creation’s form and, in particular, to perfect its finish, while anxiously evaluating its ability to preserve and transfer value. Chapter 6, meanwhile, focuses on the notion of poetic work as ‘business’, and the systems of flow, interpenetration and exchange that this metaphor suggests. These two metaphors – the poem as a constructed object, and the poem as a flowing current of energy – invite us to consider notions of work, currency, materiality and commerce, both in relation to poetry in general, and to the life’s work of the aging Ashbery himself.

* * *

Ashbery was born into a farming family and spent most of his childhood in the village of Sodus, in rural upstate New York. “My father was a plain ordinary farmer and we were rather poor. It was during the Depression,” is how he described his background in conversation with John Ash (Ash 1985). He remained highly conscious – and even self-conscious – of these rural, working-class origins throughout his life, to the extent that he admitted avoiding giving readings because “I’m very uncomfortable with the sound of my voice… to Americans I have a kind of hayseed sound” (MacArthur 2008, p. 162). He recalled being drawn to Frank O’Hara when the pair first met at Harvard because they had both “inherited the same flat nasal twang, a hick accent so out of keeping with the roles we were trying to play that it seems to me we probably exaggerated it, later on, with the hopes of making it seem intentional” (MacArthur 2008, p. 162). The image of Ashbery and O’Hara theatrically emphasising their humble roots to defuse ridicule is reminiscent, perhaps, of the last line of the contemporary poem ‘Some Trees’ – “these accents seem their own defense” (Ashbery 2008, p. 26). However, it also encourages a nuanced understanding of Ashbery’s ‘voice’ as a complex dialogue between what has been “inherited” and what is acquired, borrowed, performed, or modified in response to the environment, rather than viewing his style as an expression of a fixed property, a poetic tradition that has passed smoothly down through a lineage of related poets.

The image of Ashbery as the sophisticated and successful New York School poet, surrounded by a coterie of artists and writers, is so persuasive – and has so thoroughly subsumed his characterisations of himself as a “hick” or a “hayseed” – that it can be surprising to learn how dependent he remained on paid work, and how intensely he worried about money, throughout

his career. There is, perhaps, an element of playfulness in the way he undercuts Peter Stitt's questions about his long career as an art critic by declaring that "I was never interested in doing art criticism at all – I'm not sure that I am even now… they paid almost nothing… Trained art historians would not write reviews for five dollars" (Stitt 1983). However, in his conversations with Mark Ford, which took place in the early 2000s, Ashbery repeatedly emphasises the role that work has played in his life and his writing. The way that the words *money*, *job* and *pay* recur in these conversations is hard to ignore. It is one thing to learn that Ashbery found himself short of cash during his time in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s – he remembers worrying about how he would pay for his flights home, and dismisses Pierre Martory's assessment that he "worked all the time, [was] always typing away at some new poem" by observing that "I was probably doing my translations and newspaper chores… I wasn't that productive as a poet then" (Ashbery and Ford 2003, p. 44). However, his concerns about money were so deeply rooted that even when he was apparently liberated from them, they continued to nag at him, as in 1972 when he was awarded a generous Guggenheim Fellowship which allowed him to postpone taking on teaching work and focus solely on writing: "Actually I had about two years off but they weren't very productive because I was worried about money" (Ashbery and Ford 2003, p. 44).

It is even more remarkable that financial considerations were influencing Ashbery's decisions as late as the 1990s, a time when he was one of America's best-known and most critically acclaimed poets. As he explains,

> I… took on the Norton Lectures, because it seemed like Harvard were offering an awful lot of money. But it turned out there was hardly any money because I had to pay the rent on an apartment there, which I thought they would pay for, and the toing and froing, and taxis… And I was terrified by the whole business.
>
> (Ashbery and Ford 2003, p. 62)

The sense of oscillatory, chaotic movement that Ashbery evokes as he imagines his paycheck being eaten away – the "toing and froing" in vehicles, the swing from "an awful lot of money" to "hardly any money" – will be important in Chapter 6, which will explore what Ashbery means when he uses phrases like "the whole business". This chapter traces the influence that Ashbery's experiences of, and ideas about, work had on his poetry – an influence that, once one begins to observe and catalogue it, starts to seem all-encompassing.

For example, numerous critics, including Macarthur and Ross, have observed that Ashbery frequently refers to fields, apples and orchards – from *A Wave*'s portentous, semi-mystical "quincunxes of apple trees" to the elegiac "moonlit apple blossoms" against which the orioles flock in *Some Trees* (1956) and the sinister "babble/Of apes in an orchard" from the polyphonic long poem 'Litany' (1979) (Ashbery 2008, p. 804, p. 19, p. 619). The fact that Ashbery spent much of his childhood on the family's fruit farm is undeniably important to an understanding of these images, and the poet's apple trees are also reminiscent of Puritan imagery of a lost Eden, whose apples hint at the future necessity of penitential labour-. However, although it may be tempting to argue that the quiet fields and blossom-laden orchards of Ashbery Farm constitute an oneiric or spiritual space where the poet's lyrical and ethical sensibilities were formed, his early diaries remind us that the landscape of the farm was – like the meadows of Theocritan and Virgilian pastoral – primarily a place of work. During the Great Depression the Ashberys relied heavily on the income from the apple harvest, and as a result, as Karen Roffman and MacArthur have noted, the whole family had to pitch in with picking and packing duties. Ashbery recalls that

> [i]n the summer I was expected to first pick cherries and then apples later on… I really hated it because it ruined every summer… I never made any money doing this. I got paid, but only as much as I picked and I wasn't very good at it, I was very slow…
>
> (MacArthur 2008, p. 154)

The sense of work getting in the way of the things that Ashbery wanted to be spending his time on persists in his early diaries, which intersperse terse phrases about his chores ("Packed apples all day"; "Arose and mowed the rest of the lawn") with news of the books on French painting that he had bought, or effusive descriptions of Rachmaninoff songs " (MacArthur 2008, p. 155). The diaries' account of selling peaches paints a vivid picture of the poet working with one eye on the clock:

> This afternoon I'm selling peaches at the fruit stand… I haven't sold many as yet. Some of the people were downright uppity so I was coldly sarcastic. Now I'm going to either read or write a short story.
>
> (MacArthur 2008, p. 155)

These diary entries suggest a clear demarcation between work – which one is compelled to do – and leisure time, in which one is free to indulge one's interests. There is, for the young Ashbery, little possibility of an overlap between the two. The question in his mind is not whether he can avoid his chores, but how soon he can perform them adequately and leave them behind. In this respect, the early diaries suggest a resignation towards work, as the following passage illustrates:

> [W]hen I was about 16, my father gave me the choice of working at a packing plant on the Sodus Fruit Farm… even though that was much harder work – we had to start around seven in the morning and work until ten at night during the season to get everything canned before it rotted – I got paid by the hour, so I ended up making some money before going back to school.
>
> (MacArthur 2008, p. 154)

The "choice" that the adolescent Ashbery faces is not whether or not to work, but in what conditions, for what rate of pay, and for which boss – his father, or the owner of the factory.

Bernes, in his Marxist study of the relationship between work and post-War art and literature, argues that Ashbery's poetry reflects a broader shift towards dematerialised, deindustrialised labour, performed by capable, managerial figures who enjoy access to vast array of data (Bernes 2017, pp. 65–66). However, as Bernes notes but does not fully expand upon, the workers in Ashbery's early collections do not always correspond neatly to the image of a white-collar manager, newly liberated from traditional hierarchies (Bernes 2017, p. 70). Indeed, the workers that we encounter in *Some Trees* (1956), *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) and *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) tend to be in blue-collar or manual professions – representative of what Bernes sees as a somewhat outdated "deskilled and purely subservient labor" (Bernes 2017, p. 71) – and are often define by their employment: "the barber at his chair", "the janitor with… the pot of flowers in one hand", "the mechanic in brown overalls", the ubiquitous and somewhat mysterious "caretaker" (Ashbery 2008, p. 33, p. 48, p. 95). Factories hum in the background of these poems, as in 'A Life Drama', from *The Tennis Court Oath*: "Factory is near/Workers near the warmth of their nights/And plectrum. Factory/Of cigar" (Ashbery 2008, p. 69). Indeed, this poem's processes – its random

repetitions, its circuitous phrasing – are suggestive of automated or mechanical, rather than managerial, work.

When the workers who we encounter in Ashbery's early collections do attain white-collar status, they tend to be diffident or subservient figures, who speak in buttoned-down, Prufrockian tones, like the speaker of 'The Skaters', who effuses in hackneyed terms about his package holiday: "I love it! This cruise can never last long enough for me.//But once more, office desks, radiators—No! That is behind me./No more dullness, only movies and love and laughter, sex and fun" (Ashbery 2008, p. 158). Later, the speaker goes on to quote a "tiresome old man" who is "telling us his life story":

> At thirty-two I came up to take my examination at the university.
> The U wax factory, it seemed, wanted a new general manager.
> I was the sole applicant for the job, but it was refused me…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 177)

Although this old man has, through work and education, attained a higher status than the generic "workers" who seemed to swarm over the "Factory/of cigar" in the earlier poem, his working life still depends on a factory – which, as if possessed of an agency of its own, capriciously rejects his attempt to enter it at a managerial level, and in so doing reminds him of his place (and his socio-economic class).

The white-collar workers in these early collections are also alienated from, yet unable to break free of, the labour that they must perform. When they are not indifferently accepting of their lot – "Now I do what must be done", the schoolmaster of 'And You Know' says resignedly (Ashbery 2008, p. 29) – Ashbery's workers are bored, or even enervated, by their employment. 'The Instruction Manual', from Ashbery's first published collection, was largely written while the poet was working at the Oxford University Press in New York, producing blurbs and press releases. The speaker of the poem, a technical writer faced with an unappealing assignment, gazes wistfully out of the window, dreaming about an escape from his responsibilities:

> I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.
> I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace,

> And envy them—they are so far away from me!
> Not one of them has to worry about getting out this manual on schedule.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, pp. 5–6)

The speaker of the poem does escape from his desk – in his imagination, at least – to explore "dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers!" (Ashbery 2008, p. 6). However, like the speaker of 'The Skaters' who enthuses about his package cruise, the technical writer of 'The Instruction Manual' does not *travel*, in the bohemian, Romantic sense; rather, his whistle-stop sightseeing tour of Guadalajara is a *holiday* – circumscribed, bookended, and fundamentally defined by the work that it provides a respite from.

As this suggests, the white-collar workers we encounter in Ashbery's early poetry often seek to escape from their labour, rather than drawing fulfilment or creative inspiration from it. Like the young Ashbery, who submitted unenthusiastically to the tedious work of packing apples, they work not out of choice, but because they are compelled to by external factors. Although their status may, in theory, be equivalent to that of the capable and confident "technical-managerial" creators of 'administrative art', who attain self-actualisation through their work, they therefore express a more traditional, and class-inflected, set of beliefs: that working is unpleasant but unavoidable, that leisure and creative pursuits are completely separate from it, and that one's employment functions as a stable denominator of one's identity. These characteristics correspond to what Marx refers to as "human labour in the abstract", or *abstract labour*. Such labour, according to Marx, is defined not by the production of a useful or necessary object (he defines this as "concrete labour"), but rather by the presence of the worker who performs it. It is therefore measured "by its duration, and labour time in its turn finds its standard in weeks, days, and hours" (Marx 1976, p. 129).

However, although the idea of work as unpleasant and onerous, dull or even enervating, pervades Ashbery's poetry, is also important to acknowledge the way in which the poet's paid employment did not merely obstruct or hinder, but also at times stimulated and nourished, his literary career, sustaining it both literally and figuratively. Bernes notes the way in which "[a]rtists and writers draw from the methods and means and techniques available to them, many of which come from the workplace, and in doing so respond to the world of work, recasting it, critiquing it, celebrating it, or constructing alternative social arrangements from it" (Bernes 2017, p. 1). Indeed, Ashbery has acknowledged that the discipline required by his

journalistic work changed how he wrote poetry, remarking that "[h]aving to be chained to a typewriter and turn out an article twice a week caused me, at one point, to wonder, 'Why can't I write poetry this way to meet my own deadlines instead of somebody else's?'" (Ashbery and Ford 2003, p. 43). This symbiotic relationship between Ashbery's poetry and art criticism was pronounced and far-reaching. In 1964, while living in Paris, Ashbery reviewed an exhibition of Parmigianino's drawings and preparatory studies at the Louvre for *The New York Herald Tribune*. Although Parmigianino's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' – which the poet had already seen in person in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum in 1959 – was not one of the works in the Louvre exhibition, Ashbery's review lingers on it thoughtfully; he quotes Vasari, refers to the artist's exile from Rome, and remarks on "the role distortion plays throughout [Parmigianino's] work, starting with the self-portrait in which the hand is larger than the head…" (Ashbery 1989, pp. 31–33). Both in content and in tone, the review – fittingly, given its subject matter – reads as a preparatory sketch for the later poem. Indeed, the poem's opening line contains an echo of it: "As Parmigianino did it, the right hand/Bigger than the head…" (Ashbery 1977, p. 68).

More broadly, Ashbery has acknowledged the way in which his job as an art critic required him to gaze at works of art attentively and at length, in the way that he does in his famous ekphrastic poem. As he explains in a 2003 conversation with high school students:

> I worked as an art critic for a long time and had to force myself to really look at something so I'd remember when I sat down to write about it what I had seen. That was a very valuable experience. One thing that's the hardest to do is give your attention to anything. By painfully forcing myself I learned a valuable lesson.
>
> (McCarron 2018)

As these examples illustrate, Ashbery often uses terms that suggest coercion, discomfort, and even subjugation or punishment when describing work: he must "painfully forc[e]" himself to look at paintings, before finding himself "chained to a typewriter" until he has "learned… a lesson". As this suggests, to approach Ashbery's writing only with reference to his poetics, rather than in the context of his broader, socio-economic milieu, is to ignore the ingrained beliefs about work and money that inform his writing – and to elide the anxieties about his background, his personal history and his relationship with work that the poet often expressed.

*　　　*　　　*

If Ashbery can be thought of as a worker – part of a broader system of cultural production – what kind of work does he perform, and what does his labour produce? Bernes argues that in the disjunctive collage-poems of *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery adopts a "technical-managerial" stance, ordering and arranging his source material – from fragments of a pulp novel to snatches of overheard speech – in a way that prefigures the data-driven, "informational" art of the 1960s and 1970s (Bernes 2017, p. 71), which developed within what Benjamin Buchloh describes as an "aesthetics of administration" (Buchloh 1990). For Bernes, "*The Tennis Court Oath* reflects the administrative language coursing through capitalist firms, a social ventriloquism through which white-collar workers simultaneously speak and are spoken for" (Bernes 2017, p. 76). As Bernes discusses, the general dematerialization of labour that occurred in American economy in the 1960s onwards resulted in a shift from the production of objects to the provision of services. Labour began to produce not a tangible 'thing', but rather an experience, an affect, or simply a set of datapoints.

However, during this period – in which labour had become increasingly detached from the production of specific things – Ashbery does not only adopt the organising role that allows him to order and collate material from a wide range of sources. Instead, he frequently envisages himself producing not data, or dematerialised information, but rather quasi-material artefacts. "I think of my poems as independent objects or little worlds", he told *American Poetry Review* in 1984, as Ross notes (Ross 2013, p. 21). In the Norton Lectures, he expands on this idea, referring to his intention of creating "poetic objects":

> Thought is certainly involved in the process; indeed, there are times when my work seems to me to be merely a recording of my thought processes without regard to what they are thinking about. If this is true, then I would like to acknowledge my intention of somehow turning these processes into poetic objects, a position perhaps akin to [William Carlos] Williams's 'No ideas but in things,' but with the caveat that, for me, ideas are also things.[11]

[11] As Stephen Ross notes, the notion of the poem as an object is richly allusive, calling to mind not only Williams, but also "the imagist Pound and objectivist Zukofsky… the metaphysical Stevens of

(Ashbery 2000, p. 2)

However, although In Ashbery's lecture, the "caveat" that "ideas are also things" is delivered with an urbane lightness, in his poetry – and particularly in his later collections – the labour by means of which mental phenomena are fashioned into objects is fraught with ambivalence, and at times marked by a sense of regret, loss, and even failure.

Indeed, even before *April Galleons*, Ashbery expresses unease about the way in which the recollection and recording of apparently homogenous, repetitive and unremarkable experiences imbues them with a quasi-material quality. As the previous chapter discussed, *A Wave* (1984) chronicles the experience of living in and through a shifting and oscillatory conceptualisation of time, one that is simultaneously both personal and collective, individualised and historical. However, even as the collection overtly affirms the fluidity of one's experience of dwelling in time and space, it also subtly hints at the calcification – the phenomenological hardening – of this experience. The countless late afternoons and long evenings that the collection evokes pile up imperceptibly, becoming first "the year – not yet abandoned but a living husk" of Haibun, then the "two years from now" of '37 Haiku', and finally the "years ago…" of 'Down by the Station, Early in the Morning' (Ashbery 2008, p. 765, p. 763, p. 743). While the subject dwells comfortably in the unchanging spaces of everyday existence, a lifetime slips by, unnoticed. As experiences move imperceptibly from *passing* to *past*, they acquire a thing-like bulk and substantiality, becoming the vaguely threatening "rocks of all the years before", or the "nights [that] stick together like pages in an old book" (Ashbery 2008, p. 739, p. 764). In this way, a subject's apparently fluid and ongoing experience becomes, in figurative terms, an object – the reassuringly solid, but somewhat bathetic, "peg on which our lives hang" (Ashbery 2008, p. 762).

The melancholy, even nostalgic, tone of *A Wave*'s references to the impermeability of the mental 'things' that we fashion from the raw material of consciousness suggests the possibility that the subject is *always already* on the outside of their experience – an

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'Prelude to Objects' and the cubist Stein of *Tender Buttons*", as well as W.H. Auden, who described the poet as a "professional maker of verbal objects", and Charles Olson, who, in 'Projective Verse', insists on the importance of "OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem…" (Ross 2017, p. 22).

experience which, by the time it is noticed or recorded, has already been transformed from a space or an environment into a thing. As experience imperceptibly calcifies, the subject changes position accordingly, moving from inside to outside, so that they are, in the words of 'A Wave', "on the outside looking out" (Ashbery 2008, p. 742) – able to apprehend past experiences, while remaining bewilderingly estranged from them.

In *April Galleons* (1987), this unease solidifies into a more pointed critique of the propensity of one's experience to calcify and harden as a result of the epistemic and artistic labour that goes into perceiving and recording it. "I know/How everything is always becoming a lot of things", claims the speaker of 'Railroad Bridge' (Ashbery 2008, p. 836), while 'October at the Window' asserts that

> One must always
> Be quite conscious of the edges of things
> And then how they meet will cease
> To be an issue…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, pp. 837–838)

A Wave articulated a desire to erase the "edges of things", asserting their inseparability precisely because of "how they meet" – the way in which they encounter, influence and permeate each other. *April Galleons* marks a retreat from this position, in as much as it asserts the discrete, separate and inaccessible nature both of the physical things, and also of the mental 'objects' – the memories and lingering traces of feeling – that experience gives rise to. In doing so, it expands on *A Wave*'s notion of being "on the outside" of one's own experience by imagining this process in concrete terms, as an encounter with a surface which delineates the outer edge of a self-contained thing. The hardness and impermeability of such a surface has the effect of sealing off the epistemic and affective content of the object in question, rendering it fundamentally, and frustratingly, inaccessible to the subject who apprehends it. The result is a sense of alienation from one's own experience, so that

> it is it, not we,
> That is our lives, the surface over which we move
> Comfortably as across a globe that gives back
> Our intuiting of it as we desired it…

(Ashbery 2008, p. 851)

While present experience encloses and contains the subject, past experience is, the collection suggests, like an object whose surface the subject can see and touch, but cannot ever fuse with or know. It is, the speaker of ‘One Coat of Paint’ suggests, a “lie” that is “stained, encrusted,/Finally gilded in some exasperating way that turns it/To a truth plus something…” (Ashbery 2008, p. 872). In addition to being unknowable, or even untrustworthy, these objects are often imagined as persisting, bathetically or even perfidiously, in lieu of the original transient experience that occasioned them. Like the “tepees on the front lawn/Of the governor’s palace” which “were cast in stone after the originals rotted away” (Ashbery 2008, p. 867), they stand as monuments to the experience that occasioned their formation, but they confirm its absence, rather than attesting to its presence. Their creation – which involves encasing fungible material in a durable outer container that is built to withstand the passing of time – also brings to mind the image of the young Ashbery working late into the night at the fruit farm “to get everything canned before it rotted”; his poetry often refers to processes of preservation, most memorably at the end of *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), when Beverly alludes to the possibility of her correspondent being

> so wrapped up in your ‘canning and freezing’ that you are either somewhere on a shelf full of preserves with a metal lid on your head or holing up with the frozen peas in your freezer compartment, from life to something else swiftly translated.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 423)

However, the surfaces of the experiential objects that Ashbery describes, while being tough and impermeable, are not, in *April Galleons*, envisaged as merely functional, like the metal of a tin can, or the thick glass of a Mason jar. Instead, they possess an ornamental quality that renders them decorative, as well as protective; they are described as being enameled, varnished, or otherwise coated, so that “a light wash of gray is on things,/A scumbling” (Ashbery 2008, p. 869). These surfaces could, on one level, be seen to represent Ashbery’s ongoing preoccupation with the structure of a physical dwelling, in as much as they refer to the care and attention that it requires (“metal… must be painted or/It will rust”, ‘October at the Window’ reminds us (Ashbery 2008, p. 837)). However, while the application of paint, enamel or whitewash can be a matter of day-to-day maintenance (or renovation), it also has an aesthetic significance, and *April Galleons* frequently refers to surfaces that have been

purposefully, laboriously (and somewhat artificially) lacquered, varnished or glossed – the "[b]urnished cherries", the "polished, square leaf", the "small gilded flowers" (Ashbery 2008, p. 860, p. 865, p. 826). These surfaces recall the decorative interior, rather than the functional exterior, of a dwelling (and particularly, perhaps, the interior of a "gloomy Victorian villa" (Ash 1985) like Ashbery's own house at 39, West Court Street). However, they also gesture to the way in which a constructed or finished artefact – material, and also cultural – delimits and reifies (or even, in the case of a text, *glosses*) experience. As a result, they suggest the way in which a surface finish or gloss on an object enforces the inaccessibility – physical, as well as epistemic – of what lies beneath it. This is expressed clearly in the poem 'No Two Alike', which begins with the abrupt injunction:

> Wait – it has some kind of finish on it. No
> Point in overreacting, since the effect
> Is, in effect, not overdone...
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 838)

As a result of "some kind of finish", it is the surface appearance of the object in question – the repeated "effect" – rather than its deeper qualities, or its *affect*, that is available to the subject. "That/Patina got on it, and was what mattered for a while", the speaker notes regretfully (Ashbery 2008, p. 839). This surface finish, or patina, was not originally part of the object in question, but once applied, it becomes inseparable from one's perception of it. As a result, both the object as it existed in its original form, and the subject's experience of it, are irretrievably altered – and perhaps even lost completely.

* * *

As well as drawing our attention to the ambivalent artefact that are formed from our experience, *April Galleons* also provides insights into the kind of work that the maker of these objects must perform. As the 'ed' suffix in words such as "enameled", "varnished" and "burnished" suggests, the smooth or shiny appearance of the surfaces that the collection describes is due to the fact that something *has been done* to them; that is, they have been worked, repeatedly and over the course of time Indeed, in *April Galleons* Ashbery emphasises the layered or stratified nature of the objects he evokes, often describing them as

being clotted with a finish that has been applied over successive episodes of work. The speaker of 'Railroad Bridge' refers to this quality when he asserts that

> Your life snowballed
> And hardened and after that there was nothing
> To do except wait for colors to leach through
> Layers of old paint...
>
> (Ashbery 2008, pp. 836–837)

The speaker of 'Letters I Did or Did Not Get', meanwhile, describes how

> everything
> At the end will be whitewashed, that is incidents
> Will glimmer through layers and layers of paint…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 842)

As well as suggesting the sealing of spontaneous experience beneath the impermeable sheen of an object's surface, these descriptions emphasise the time and labour that has gone into creating such an object, particularly in terms of producing its smooth finish.

The connection between these two concerns – the surface texture of an object, and the work that was done in order to achieve it – can be elucidated by looking closely at a particular poem in *April Galleons*, 'Finnish Rhapsody'. This poem is notable for its unusual form; drawing on the *Kalevala*, a 19th-century collection of Finnish epic poetry, it is written in hemistiches – lines made up of two halves, separated by a caesura, with the second part of the line repeating or paraphrasing the first:

> He managed the shower, coped with the small spattering drops,
> Then rubbed himself dry with a towel, wiped the living organism.
> Day extended its long promise, light swept through his refuge.
> But it was time for business, back to the old routine…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, pp. 821–822)

As these opening lines illustrate, ‘Finnish Rhapsody’ refers insistently to the routines and processes of work – not only through its metaphors (its subject “manag[es]” his shower, before it is “time for business”), but also in the way in which it seems to turn itself inside out, externalising and foregrounding the usually opaque processes of composition, selection and editing that go into the production of a literary artefact. The second halves of its lines are, in some cases, straightforward repetitions or restatements of the first halves; however, at times the tone, and even the meaning, of a phrase can change significantly as a result of these refinements in tone or diction:

> When the tall poems of the world, the towering earthbound poetic utterances
> Invade the street of our dialect, penetrate the avenue of our patois,
> Bringing fresh power and new knowledge, transporting virgin might and up-to-date enlightenment…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 823)

The echo of ‘*finish’* in ‘Finnish Rhapsody’ turns the title into an impatient command – one that the poem cannot quite bring itself to obey as it obsessively repeats its assertions, working and reworking them – but it also directs our attention again to the *finish*, or surface, of the poem, which is being worked before our eyes as we read, its words and concepts refined or polished. As ‘Finnish Rhapsody’ progresses, this process of composition and editing – the formal *work* of the poem, and of its author – gradually encroaches on its narrative content, so that we find ourselves reading not in pursuit of an overall meaning, but instead to watch as the lines are shaped before our eyes. The kind of work which the poem does in order to construct itself as a “poetic object” could therefore be said – like the adolescent Ashbery’s packing of apples and mowing of lawns, and the technical writing of the clerk in ‘The Instruction Manual’ – to align with Marx’s “human labour in the abstract”: work which is undertaken for a set amount of time, and which does not arise from a genuine need to produce a finished product.

Andrew Epstein has argued persuasively for the importance of pragmatic philosophy to Ashbery’s poetry (Epstein 2006, pp. 61–63), and on one level ‘Finnish Rhapsody’, which works at its construction in plain sight, and works out its conclusions as we read, would appear to constitute an illustration of pragmatic ideas – like, perhaps, William James’ maxim that “Truth in our ideas means their power to work” (James 2015, p. 48). This principle holds

that the truth of an assertion can be said to derive from what it *does*, both in the world, and to the subject who encounters it. 'Finnish Rhapsody', in its constant re-evaluations and restatements, also appears to demonstrate the principle of "fallibilism", which, as Epstein notes, Richard Bernstein sees as one of the five founding precepts of pragmatism, and which insists that "there is no belief or thesis – no matter how fundamental – that is not open to further interpretation and criticism" (Epstein 2006, p. 55). However, to the degree that 'Finnish Rhapsody' inscribes pragmatic principles, it also critiques them, due to the way in which its ostentatious working of its material fails to lead to a satisfying finished product, either epistemic or cultural. One could even argue that the poem's foregrounding of its own surfaces undermines its own apparent "fallibilism" by problematising the very notion of an overarching meaning; if, as 'Finnish Rhapsody' seems to suggest, everything can be perpetually reworked, a definitive statement is impossible, and the concept of 'truth' itself is called into question.

By the end of 'Finnish Rhapsody', the poem's content, and to some degree even its form, have surrendered to its process, and although the pace builds slightly in the final third, it ends on a distinctly anti-climactic note:

> …And afterwards live on, satisfied; persist, later to be a source of gratification,
> But perhaps only to oneself, haply to one's sole identity.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 824)

These final lines highlight how little narrative and semantic progress the poem has made. Indeed, it has backtracked from relatively confident assertions about an unnamed but putatively specific "he" in its opening lines, to tentative statements ("perhaps…") about a vague and general subject in its closing ones. The rapid, fussy rhythms and archaic diction of the closing phrase – "haply to one's sole identity" – preclude any sense of finality; the poem, it seems, has unceremoniously clocked off. Its work, however, remains *un*finished – perhaps to be picked up again, "afterwards", at the "later" time that it gestures towards as it draws to its slightly unsatisfying close. One might even argue that the "openness" that the poem succeeds in embodying is less the radical perceptual fluidity and agnosticism of pragmatist thought than the relentless, 24/7 openness of capitalism, and the unending work that it requires.

*   *   *

Indeed, *April Galleons* frequently refers to the wearing out, or wearing down, that occurs as a result of the work that it describes. The workers that the collection evokes are often envisaged as being physically worn out, worn down, and eventually worn away – like the speaker of 'No Two Alike', who wistfully dreams of "a place to come after long love,/And dexterity after wearing these fingers out" (Ashbery 2008, p. 839). The labour described in *April Galleons* may polish, refine and smooth the surfaces of the objects it produces, but it has the opposite effect on the individual who performs it, like the "old priest" whose face is "a maze/Of claw-prints in the snow" (Ashbery 2008, p. 819). "For ages man has labored to put his dreams in order," the speaker of 'The Big Cloud' grandly declares (Ashbery 2008, p. 856); however, other poems point out the toll that such labour takes, with the result that even the "Sandmen", the mythical bringers of dreams, now "approach on weary steps… for the millionth time" (Ashbery 2008, p. 843). This sense of exhaustion imbues *April Galleons* with an awareness of advancing age and the waning of powers, both physical and artistic, that one might describe as a sense of *lateness*.[12]

Allusions to Shakespeare's Prospero – another aging creator of dreams and illusions, who, at the end of the play, renounces his art by vowing to "drown my book" (Shakespeare 2006) – are also detectable in *April Galleons*' frequent references to books being submerged in water or sinking "to the bottom/Of the sea" (Ashbery 2008, p. 814), as well as in its description of a "once-weary enchanter" who no longer has the ability, or the desire, to command the waters:

> In the morning there were thousands of mermaids
> Expecting orders, but the once-weary enchanter
> Kept them at bay, and nothing was performed that day…

[12] It is also perhaps possible to discern in *April Galleons*'s imagery of experience being sealed into impermeable objects an acknowledgement that a poem is, by definition, 'late' to its subject. As Margaret Atwood observes in her own 'Late Poem', "Most poems are late/of course too late,/… Whatever it was has happened:/the battle, the sunny day, the moonlit/slipping into lust, the farewell kiss. The poem/washes ashore like flotsam" (Atwood 2020). Meanwhile, Geoff Ward notes the way in which "the word [is] always late for the event. Words can describe, evoke, suggest, delineate, propose, haunt – do all manner of things – except be the thing or feeling or concept to which they refer" (Ward 2010).

(Ashbery 2008, p. 863)

Not only the creation, but also the consumption, of art is envisaged as an exhausting enterprise: “having accomplished the tale of this reading there will only be about seven million more books to go,” the speaker of ‘The Ice Storm’ admits (Ashbery 2008, p. 881). The daunting “pile of required reading” that awaits him consists, however, not of literary texts, but of “obituary notices of the near-great” – “He first gained employment as a schoolmaster in his native Northamptonshire. Of his legendary wit, no trace remains’…” admits (Ashbery 2008, p. 881). As this suggests, the sense of *lateness* the collection invokes therefore pertains not only to falling behind on one’s work, or being ontologically late to the event one is attempting to describe, but also to the irrevocable *lateness* of death. As Said notes, “late style” – which arises from an awareness of impending death – involves an “increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism” (Said 2007).

However, is not only individual workers who are represented as being tired or worn out in *April Galleons*; the poems often play on the near-homonyms ‘wear’ and ‘weary’ to suggest a general wear-and-tear, as well as an erosion of edges and boundaries, that results from unrelenting contact between surfaces. “[M]asonry weathers, as moths are silently at work in blankets”, the speaker of ‘Amid Mounting Evidence’ confirms admits (Ashbery 2008, p. 840). While the tidal rhythms of *A Wave* brought not sameness but rather unending variation, the waters of *April Galleons* move laboriously, with a lassitude that erodes their banks, so that the “solemn place of confluence” is “now worn” admits (Ashbery 2008, p. 846), and even the seas to which the collection frequently refers have been exhausted by extractive labour to the extent that the “mussel gatherers/Waist-deep offshore” are “Forcing an ever-diminishing sustenance/From the sea’s floor” admits (Ashbery 2008, p. 866). This sense of exhaustion, and of raw material being worn down by repeated manipulation, is even present on a formal level in the contrast between the syntactical density of the poems in *April Galleons* – and the length and weight of the volume as a whole – and the disinterestedness that frequently creeps into their tone, as in ‘Song of the Windshield Wipers’:

> We were stranded on a beach,
> Uninspiring. The almost-full moon
> Yawned, we could see it had other places
> To be, yet was loath to depart

And we began then to climb
Just to see what it is.

(Ashbery 2008, p. 847)

Although this poem is not written in the formal hemistiches of ‘Finnish Rhapsody’, it too repeats and reworks itself, with the phoneme *strand* in “stranded” finding an immediate echo in “beach”, and the mood conveyed by “the almost full moon yawned” being reiterated without being developed in “we could see it had other places to be.” As ‘Song of the Windshield Wipers’ progresses, these repetitions become more insistent, their rhythms and diction mirroring the repetitive, mechanical workings that the poem’s title evokes:

…growing comes
To us like play, clay
Baked that day, that is to say, to be dry…

(Ashbery 2008, p. 848)

The sense of the poem turning in circles is palpable; the speaker seems able only to repeat himself, wearing away at grooves he has already made but unable to carve new ones. Elsewhere, the poems’ speakers are liable to become fixated, or stuck, on the forms or textures of certain words, like “the opal ovals” of ‘Fourth Prize’, or the “disagreements, *désagréments*” of ‘One Coat of Paint’ (Ashbery 2008, p. 859, p. 872). The speaker of ‘Fall Pageant’, meanwhile, invokes repetitive, circular structures on a broader, formal level: “I have so much to think over, and, even worse,/Write a report on, like the rondel or villanelle it is” (Ashbery 2008, p. 872).

Indeed, many of the words used to describe literary activity in the collection have a ‘re-’ prefix (*report, record, recount, reply, reckon*), and the poems frequently suggest that to speak is to repeat, or to quote, oneself. “The sensible thing is to review, always to review./In this way new steps are seen to have been already/Invented…”, ‘Polite Distortion’ advises (Ashbery 2008, p. 859); composition is imagined not as a process of creation, but rather one of repetition and “review”. “Generations of reciters told the tale”, the speaker of ‘Too Happy, Happy Tree’ observes (Ashbery 2008, p. 845), and indeed, the literary material that the poems manipulate is envisaged as being old, tired and worn – “the same old story”, the “old songs” (Ashbery 2008, p. 858, p. 880) – to the point that its originality has been exhausted.

However, although both the workers of *April Galleons* and the world in which they work are envisaged as being aging, worn and tired, the labour that they perform is not complete; the collection's workers are confronted by both "the weariness of the world,/And all the old work that remains to be done on its surface". The work that *April Galleons* calls to mind – like the ongoing labour described by 'Finnish Rhapsody' – seems likely to continue even when the worker is no longer present to perform it. Indeed, 'Bilking the Statues' imagines a worker who labours on doggedly after death, undeterred by his own demise:

> We knit these beginnings like brows, and the only
> One who ever comes to inquire about it is the elderly
> Janitor, long deceased.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 879)

*　　　　*　　　　*

The image of a worker who resolutely continues his janitorial, 'care-taking' labour (which is affective, perhaps, as well as manual) even after death could be read as representing Ashbery's own concerns about how his own life's work will continue past his death; that is, what his poetic legacy will constitute. As Herd writes, "by 1980, Ashbery was becoming consciously absorbed by the writing of younger poets," while at the same time his own "writing ha[d] hardened" and his "gestures… become reducible to a shorthand" (Herd 2000, pp. 179–181). In the cultural milieu in which Ashbery wrote *April Galleons*, the "younger poets" that Herd refers to were likely to be affiliated, to some degree, with language poetry. For his part, Ashbery publicly – although not confrontationally – disavowed any affiliation with language poetry, stating, according to Linda Reinfeld, that "he is not a language poet because he believes that language finally depends on references to meanings generated outside language" (Schultz 1995, p. 2). The language poets undoubtedly felt an affinity towards Ashbery, and the fourth issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* features an essay on his work by the poet Tim Dlugos (Dlugos 1980). However, as the blend of reverence and dismissal in Dlugos's essay suggests, the language poets viewed themselves as Ashbery's successors, rather than his acolytes. To the language poets, he was a father figure, in all senses of the term: influential, certainly, but also somewhat behind the times; perhaps even slightly uncool. In this respect, Ashbery's poetry of the 1980s can be seen as self-

deprecatingly acknowledging its status as a yardstick by which the difference between what is old and tired, and what is new and fresh, can be measured. “I expect I will be asked a question I can answer and then be handed a big prize,” the speaker of ‘The Ice Storm’ resignedly admits, before adding, “They’re working on it” (Ashbery 2008, p. 883). As a result of this cultural belatedness, as speaker of ‘Fall Pageant’ admits, “you have already read my thoughts/By the time I have them” (Ashbery 2008, p. 871). The notion that the poet’s work is continuing without his full participation or enthusiasm, as if his active, living presence were peripheral to it, suggests that he is not only doomed to be late to, or otherwise out of step with, the experience that he is attempting to convey – “*Too late!”* as the “answer… [that] bubbled out of the waves’ crenelations” in the poem ‘Morning Jitters’ urgently declares (Ashbery 2008, p. 813) – but that, to torque Roland Barthes’ famous formulation, the author is *already* dead, their legacy already overshadowing their ongoing work.

To further appreciate the distance that existed between Ashbery and the “younger poets” that Herd sees him as being preoccupied with, it is useful to compare the kind of ‘work’ that his poetry of this period engages in with that espoused by the language poets. As Charles Bernstein writes, language poetry is not “designing a garden”, but rather “making a path” (Bernstein 1986, p. 40), and the language poets consistently affirm the importance of manual work and physical labour, envisaging poetry as a “making” rather than a “designing”, an effortful pruning of semantic, and perhaps also affective, excess. It is important to note, however, that the “making” that Bernstein describes does not result in the production of a tangible commodity; indeed, “making a path” involves the removal, and possibly even the destruction, of physical matter. Similarly, Bernadette Mayer, in ‘Experiments’, advises aspiring poets to “Work your ass off to change the language & don’t ever get famous” (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, p. 83). The “work” that Mayer refers to results not in the production of a commodity, but rather in a “change”, an intangible reconfiguration in a system that is fundamentally malleable and open to reconfiguration. The *making* that the language poets engage in as they attempt to manipulate the structures and codes of economic and political system is therefore closer to the dematerialised labour that Bernes describes than it is to the artisanal, small-scale production of objects, and the repetitive manual work, that *April Galleons* evokes.

There is also a sense of energy and momentum in the language poets' description of their labour – evident in Mayer's advice to "work your ass off" – that Ashbery's poetry of this period lacks; as Herd notes, by the time of *April Galleons*, "the overwhelming urgency of *A Wave* has dissipated" (Herd 2000, p. 205), so that the speakers of these poems are not the active 'makers' that Bernstein describes, but rather passive observers of events. "I have my notebook ready," the speaker of 'Never to Get it Really Right' confirms, "and the richly falling light will transform us… into mute and privileged spectators" (Ashbery 2008, p. 864).

This sense of waning energy is unsurprising given that *April Galleons* envisages poetry as heavy, exhausting work. Whereas the language poets understand language as a dematerialised system that can be reconfigured at will, Ashbery, in *April Galleons*, imbues it with materiality and weight, evident in the way that the repetitions and reiterations of a poem like 'Finnish Rhapsody' slow its pace, giving the impression of an almost physical bulk (reflected in its uniform, blocky appearance on the page). The printed materials referred to in the collection frequently evoke a similar rugged durability, possessing a *weightiness* which is physical, as well as intellectual, from the "voluminous pack/Of correspondence" that "the postman groaned and swore under" (Ashbery 2008, p. 879) to the

> Block-letter language we must carry (and it
> Grows heavier), and place around to form the words
> No one is going to understand, let alone believe.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 851)

As this awareness of the materiality of language suggests*,* among the "edges of things" that *April Galleons* traces are the spatial and epistemic edges of the text itself as a physical object. While the speaker of *A Wave*'s 'Haibun' playfully refused to specify whether the "random collection" he imagines passing down to future generations is domestic ornament or literary artefact (Ashbery 2008, p. 765), *April Galleons* emphasises the material properties of written works, frequently reminding us that they exist primarily in the form of a book, a printed page, or ink on paper, so that 'The Ice Storm' refers to reading not prose or poetry, but "the actual strings of words on the two pages of a book" (Ashbery 2008, p. 881), while the speaker of 'Unreleased Movie' "places a finger now on one page of the book, now/On another…" (Ashbery 2008, p. 834).

One might expect this preoccupation with the materiality of the written word to result in an anxiety about the survival of literary works, an unease about their vulnerability to external forces, or doubts about the ability of their friable "strings of words" to preserve the experiences they describe. However, the texts that Ashbery evokes are built to last – at least in a physical sense. 'October at the Window' describes how

> The posthumous spyglass
> Of the author lies, alert. The works
> Of Thomas Lovell Beddoes fall open
> And are sick and alive, books of iron, and faintly gilded
> In the dim light of the early nineteenth century.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 837)

As these lines illustrate, the collection's solid and material texts possess, as a result of their very 'thingness', an uncanny quality, glowing in the dim light, falling open as if possessed of an agency of their own. These volumes, "sick and alive", persist through space and time in lieu of, or even at the expense of, the author, just as the "posthumous spyglass" remains "alert", having retained a portion of the dead author's agency – with the unexpected application of the word "posthumous" to the spyglass, rather than to its owner, emphasising the fuzziness of the boundary between the subject, and the *things* that they possess or experience. The anxiety expressed in *April Galleons* is therefore not that the text will degrade or disappear, but rather that it will *persist*, uncanny in its rugged materiality, the affects, experiences and labour that contributed to its production trapped beneath its tough, impermeable surface – all "bound into a uniform edition", as 'Dreams of Adulthood' puts it (Ashbery 2008, p. 816). As a result of its reification as an experiential 'thing', and particularly its codification in the form of a physical text, what was once malleable and mercurial becomes unyielding and permanent. Experience, when encapsulated in a physical text, therefore acquires the capacity to outlast the subject who perceived it and recorded it, becoming, in the words of 'October at the Window', the "enameled word that outlives us" (Ashbery 2008, p. 838).

The text-as-artefact may also, Ashbery's speakers worry, outlast the relevance or timeliness of its own semantic or aesthetic content, and therefore outlive the presence of a reader who is willing to revisit and reanimate it. In terms of the physical texts that feature prominently in

the collection – the material objects that constitute the output of a life in letters – this anxiety takes the form of a suspicion that they will lose their ability to convey information, and will persist in the world primarily as matter. *April Galleons* frequently speculates that the texts it refers to will remain unread, like the "[l]etters…strewn across the floor,/Singing the joyful song of how no one was ever going to read them" (Ashbery 2008, p. 857). The speaker of 'A Snowball in Hell' asserts that

> The book was a present.
> Best to throw it away, to the bottom
> Of the sea where ingenuous fish may read it
> Or not.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 814)

There is a temporal dimension to the assertion that "the book was a present"; once the *present* it describes has passed, the book persists as a bulky material object, liable to be ignored or discarded.

In keeping with the collection's strand of imagery regarding the sheen or finish on the objects it describes, the unread books that *April Galleons* evokes are imagined as hard and glossy, like "the book one has never read" of 'Winter Weather Advisory', which "keeps/Its high literacy like a pearl: no point in displaying it,/It's too eloquent, too gracious, for these times…" (Ashbery 2008, p. 861). The finish on such objects is, the collection suggests, too thickly applied, or too impermeable, to permit the original experience to escape and move towards the reader, or into the world. The delicate experiential artefact, Ashbery's *idea that is also a thing*, is therefore prone to losing its somewhat ineffable epistemic dimension and becoming *merely* a thing, liable to be overzealously preserved, fetishistically hidden away – or simply discarded and forgotten amidst an overwhelming heap of other things, becoming "any of the smaller anythings" of the poem 'Frost' (Ashbery 2008, p. 844), or the "[d]iamond rubble, all galled glitter, heaps of this and that in corners and beside posts where the draft has left them" of 'The Ice Storm' (Ashbery 2008, p. 880).[13] Once the "poetic object" has become

[13] It is apposite that 'The Ice Storm', a prose poem whose tone is reminiscent of the earlier 'Description of a Masque', was extracted from *April Galleons* and published as a standalone volume, becoming a discrete – and, as it happens, a shiny and gilded – 'thing'. As Ross notes, "the miniature size (2.5" x 4"), gilded lettering on a

a ‘thing’, its ontological status is vague and imprecise, and its previously sharp outlines are blurred; such a ‘thing’ is, as Bill Brown argues in his discussion of the distinction between “thing” and “object”, “beyond the grid of intelligibility… outside the order of objects” (Brown 2001, p. 5).

This strand of imagery is indicative of how, by the time Ashbery writes *April Galleons*, an impasse has been reached in his conception of how the work of poetry intersects with the world in which its products exist. A life devoted to literature, the collection’s language suggests, may result in the production of a formidable array of material or quasi-material artefacts which constitute a record of the labour, and of the accrued experience, that went into their production; however, these objects may be unable to transfer the experience they hold onwards. “[T]he news got lost somewhere inside. My news”, the speaker of ‘By the Flooded Canal’ wistfully remarks (Ashbery 2008, p. 877), while in ‘Dreams of Adulthood’ the speaker’s experience is envisaged as being trapped beneath the surface it is recorded on: “To have it sink finally into print, from which there is no escape/… incorporated into the record, like sand into concrete” (Ashbery 2008, p. 815).

One can also discern a tacit acknowledgement of the role of the reader in *April Galleons*’ frequent references to the shininess or glossiness of the exterior surfaces that it describes. This shininess is a perceptual, rather than a purely physical, quality; it arises from the interplay between the texture of a surface, the light that it encounters, and the position of the beholder. It is therefore inherently participatory, as when

> light falls anew
> Unevenly, on all the muttering kinship:
> Things with things, persons with objects,
> Ideas with people or ideas…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 831)

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turquoise background (suggestive of a harlequin novel or Hallmark card), and blurred cover image of a white-suited Ashbery striking a coy pose before a wooded area that looks like stage scenery, all conspire to produce an object of high camp” (Ross 2017, p. 174).

When this complex relationship between light, object and perceiver is disrupted – that is, when the reader fails to engage with, or be engaged by, the text, finding it irrelevant, unappealing or uninteresting – the result is a "choked glimmer", a dullness (like the "dull gold smear" of 'Letters I Did or Did Not Get', or the "dull and nameless" light of 'The Ice Storm' (Ashbery 2008, p. 868, p. 842, p. 883)) that is both physical and epistemic. Indeed, in *April Galleons'* preoccupation with the impermeability and glossiness of its surfaces, one might also detect a reference to Ashbery's own much-discussed 'difficulty' – the sheen of allusion, the variegation of shifting tone, that renders his own poetic surfaces texturally 'hard', in as much as they can be hard to 'get into', and to understand. "John Ashbery's poetry is extremely difficult, if not often *impenetrable*; it does not 'work' or 'mean' like traditional verse, or even most contemporary poetry," is the assertion with which Richard Kostelanetz begins his 1976 *New York Times* profile of Ashbery [italics mine] (Kostelanetz 1976). When Kostelanetz puts this charge directly to the poet in conversation, there is a hint of defensiveness in Ashbery's response: "I'm interested in communicating, but I feel that saying something the reader has already known is not communicating anything. It's a veiled insult to the reader." However, *April Galleons*' imagery of impermeable objects, and of recalcitrantly physical books into which accumulated work and experience has been deposited and is now trapped, suggests that by the late 1980s, Ashbery has begun to consider the possibility that in spite of a desire to communicate, a difficult or *avant garde* poem – like the "bottle with a note in it" that floats through the poem 'By the Flooded Canal', its content tantalisingly evident yet inaccessible (Ashbery 2008, p. 877) – can fail to find a sympathetic and receptive reader who can rescue the author from their solitude. Helen Vendler has argued that the presence of a putative reader is vital to Ashbery's work, asserting that "it is the imagined projection of colloquy that enables the Ashbery poem to be written at all" (Vendler 2005, p. 60). By the time Ashbery writes *April Galleons*, his confidence in the existence of a reader who is willing to enter into dialogue with the poem – or a poem that is able to communicate effectively with its reader – is waning.

* * *

If a poem is indeed a record, both of lived experience and of the process of its own production, *April Galleons* therefore asks us to consider what value such a record can be said to possess – especially if it is prone to fail at the task of transferring its accumulated meaning, therefore coming to exist in the world purely as a material thing. Indeed, Ashbery's poetry

often plays on the word “record”, which can refer to both an account of an experience, and a physical thing, a vinyl record – a hard and impermeable object on which a past experience is literally engraved or etched. In ‘Letters I Did or Did Not Get’, these two meanings are allowed to run together and coalesce, with one type of *record* seeming to suggest another: “There are too many of us ever/To be remembered let alone recorded/But when we think the gramophone has finished playing/It whistles…” (Ashbery 2008, p. 843). The objects – literal and figurative – that *April Galleons* evokes may constitute a record of the accumulated labour that has gone into their production, but, it wonders, are they useful, necessary, or desirable enough to find a receptive audience? “Please play this back,” the speaker of ‘A Snowball in Hell’ entreats; “All the recording/In the world won’t help unless you or someone else listens…” (Ashbery 2008, p. 814).

The final section of this chapter will argue that this question of value – what it constitutes, how it can be reckoned, and by which systems it may be transferred – is crucial to an understanding both of *April Galleons*, and, more broadly, this period in Ashbery’s work in general. This chapter has referred on several occasions to Marx’s idea of ‘abstract labour’, which is important to an understanding of the kind of work that Ashbery’s poetry evokes and engages in. Crucial to Marx’s concept is the notion that abstract labour functions as a “value-creating substance”. As he writes in *Capital*: “Human labour creates value, but is not itself value. It becomes value only in its congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object”. As discussed in the previous section, the idea of fluid and flexible experience and labour ‘congealing’ into an object is one that *April Galleons* repeatedly refers to. Indeed, the collection frequently attempts to measure and quantify the value that lies within the “poetic objects” that it creates, as it enumerates the gains and losses of a life in letters.

In ‘The Dollar Value of Poetry’, Charles Bernstein describes language writing as “an instance broken off from and hence not in service of… capitalism”. It is, he claims, “a chip of uninfected substance… an appeal to an ‘other’ world” (Andrews and Bernstein eds. 1984, pp. 138–139). In contrast, in the quasi-economic system of value and exchange that *April Gallons* invokes, all activity – including both the making and consuming of cultural or literary artefacts – is envisaged as transactional, existing primarily as a series of additions and subtractions to one’s “bottom line” (‘Finnish Rhapsody’) of energy, time, or money. Indeed, the words ‘account’ and ‘recount’ – purportedly used in a literary sense, to describe the production of an *account* of one’s experiences – recur throughout the collection, causing a

trace of the word ‘count’ to echo through it. “But we ought to go over/The books”, the speaker of ‘Bilking the Statues’ anxiously suggests (Ashbery 2008, p. 879), his formulation punningly suggesting the necessity of auditing the value of literary artefacts; indeed, the speakers of the poems engage in just such a process, weighing up past experience in order to measure what was promised against what has been delivered. In this sense, these poems constitute not only an account, but also an account*ing*, of the work and experience that has gone into producing them; a reckoning of the output of a literary career. “I like what you have given me,” the speaker of ‘The Mouse’ tells his “songs”, which he imagines as “scalloped chessmen/Of emotions or elaborate indifference”, their glossy, delicately crafted finish again serving as a record of the accumulated work – the scallop*ing* – that has gone into their production (Ashbery 2008, p. 848). Elsewhere, however, the poems’ speakers calculate the value of what has been given and what has been extracted over the span of a career in different terms, encouraging us to consider that what the songs of ‘The Mouse’ have “given” their composer is best viewed not a gift, but rather part of a transaction or exchange whose ultimate worth or value is now being reckoned. “I am not sure if all this is worth doing,/If any of it ever was”, the speaker of ‘Gorboduc’ admits (Ashbery 2008, p. 865). Indeed, beneath the collection’s overtly lyrical imagery, which frequently refers to dreams and dreaming, to the passing of the seasons and the quality of the light, we can discern a more hard-nosed language of financial calculation, so that “night *invests* the fields”, the speakers await “the *dividend* of any ripe, unhappening time” and “the *profit-taking* of spring arrive[s]” (Ashbery 2008, p. 874, p. 878, p. 884). Abstract concepts are quietly converted to monetary values, like the “[r]egret… of a very valuable, ancient kind”, and even “the commodity/Of our dreams” turns out to be “something we could sell/If we wanted to” (Ashbery 2008, p. 878, p. 827).

On occasion, Ashbery’s speakers judge what was lost to be roughly commensurate with what was gained, so that they end up with “what were we to be paid/Anyway, without a currency of comfort and bad habits/To be the standard of it” (Ashbery 2008, p. 848). At other times, there is a sense of wistfulness, regret or even resentment of past experience that is expressed both in terms of financial and emotional loss:

> And in the beginning
> So many free gifts were promised, we thought we’d have a major one
> By evening and recoup some of our losses:
> No chance.

(Ashbery 2008, p. 870)

Intertwined with the overtly lyrical language of these poems is a lexicon of thriftiness, domestic economy, and make-do-and-mend: “I go/To sales, and buy only what we need,” says the speaker of ‘By the Flooded Canal’, while ‘The Romantic Entanglement’ goes a step further by wondering, “Would the stares of the salespeople compensate us/For what we shoplifted…?” (Ashbery 2008, p. 877, p. 866) The poems also refer to the preserving, saving or holding back of both material objects and literary material, as if affirming the need to budget against future expenditure: “These wisps, I/Guess I’ll save them for a while,” muses the speaker of ‘Dreams of Adulthood’, a poem in which even the “tarmac of one season is brought in, brushed off and saved/For any other season” (Ashbery 2008, p. 816).

As this suggests, the semantic fields that Ashbery’s language evokes in connection with literary or artistic activity suggest not the high-level, dynamic managerial activity typical of ‘information’ or ‘administrative’ art, or even the rarefied craft of Objectivist poetry, but rather the more mundane, day-to-day or clerical labour involved in, say, running a small business, or even managing a home: recording incomings and outgoings, accounting for expenses, and ultimately calculating profit and loss. A sense of anxiety, insecurity or even peril often accompanies this language, and the final poem in the collection draws to a close with an image not of plenitude or abundance, or even of “losses” being “recoup[ed]”, but rather of total destitution, in the form of the “beggar-girl,/String-haired and incomprehensibly weeping” who is “all that is left of the/golden age, our/Golden age…” (Ashbery 2008, p. 885).

The tendency to weigh up experience in financial or monetary terms is not solely confined to this period in Ashbery’s work; throughout his life, from his childhood diary entries onwards, we can discern a tendency to describe an experience in terms of what it cost, or at least to include this information as pertinent. He writes in his diary that “In Rochester today I got The Overture to Tannhauser and the Venusberg Music. It cost $5.25!” and “Today I mailed $1.00 for a series of 50 French painting reproductions to The Geseles Publishing Co. Mamma don’t know yet.” (MacArthur 2008, pp. 155–156). When asked in an interview when he decided to become a poet, Ashbery recalled that while he was at Deerfield High School, “I won a prize in which you could choose different books; the only one which seemed appealing was Untermeyer's anthology, which cost five dollars, a great deal of money” (Stitt 1983). Ashbery

also often expresses a sense of transactionality – of needing to pay for, or reckon the cost of, his experiences. In a 1994 interview, when asked about the consequences of his 1982 spinal infection, he replied that: “I can't run, and I get tired if I walk a long time or stand a long time, [but] these seem a small price to pay for being alive, so I'm not really unhappy about them”' (Lehman 1994). Simply continuing to live, Ashbery suggests, exacts its toll of pain, fatigue and frustration; however, such a “price” is, at the time of reckoning, worth paying. One might even go so far as to hear echoes of the young Ashbery’s calculation between different kinds of fruit picking; both exact their price, in terms of inconvenience and physical discomfort, and the worker must weigh up the value of the compensation they offer.

Although such concerns about money, currency and value were present throughout Ashbery’s life, they may have felt particularly pertinent in the mid-to-late 1980s, after more than a decade of tumultuous fluctuations in the value of the dollar and what it could buy – a period which, as Michael Bryan notes, Jeremy Siegel describes as “the greatest failure of American macroeconomic policy in the postwar period” (Bryan 2013). The recession of the early 1980s was arguably the most severe since the Great Depression, during which the young Ashbery reluctantly packed apples and mowed lawns. In 1971, Nixon undermined the principles of the post-War Bretton Woods agreement by cancelling the convertibility of the dollar to gold, thereby rendering it a fiat currency. His subsequent policy of increasing the money supply in order to stimulate the economy resulted first in falling unemployment and a sense of prosperity and wellbeing, and then in rising inflation, so that by 1979 the annual inflation rate was 8%, and by 1980 it had reached 14%. When Reagan – who himself grew up in a low-income family in small-town Illinois, and who referred to his quarters on the upper floors of the White House as “living above the store” – came to power in 1981, inflation stood at an alarming 20%, and the economy was felt by many to be in danger of falling into uncontrolled hyperinflation. The sense that the dollar in one’s pocket – once a symbol of all that was stable in the world – was now a highly unpredictable index of value is palpable in an early TV address in which, as White and Wildavsky explain, the President “began with a litany of economic woes, dramatizing inflation by displaying first a dollar bill and then a quarter, dime, and penny to show how the dollar had shrunk to 36 cents since 1960” (White and Wildavsky 1989, p. 95).

The economic tumult of the 1970s and 1980s, which were marked by rapid cycles of inflation and recession, only accelerated the deindustrialization of labour, and the dematerialisation of

its products. As Doug Rossinow notes, the jolting shifts of these years marked a turn to an economy weighted more toward sales, finance, and other services, and less toward the production of tangible goods" (Rossinow 2015, p. 84). In such a climate, the laborious production of small-scale, intricately wrought "poetic objects" may have seemed like a wilfully archaic enterprise, one that was entirely out of step with the zeitgeist, in both aesthetic and economic terms. However, this chapter will conclude by suggesting that Ashbery's poetic objects do not simply mirror, or even critique, the various economic policies of the Reagan era that resulted in an unstable and fluctuating dollar; rather, they raise a more complex set of questions by imagining *themselves* as constituting a form of currency.

Indeed, the hard, shiny, gilded or silver objects that the collection evokes are reminiscent not only of the decorative ornaments of a home, or the finely wrought products of an artisan's labour, but also of the physical currency – that is, the coins – by which such things are acquired and exchanged. The collection's insistent repetition of the word "note" – as in 'By the Flooded Canal', which asserts that "It was all *notes* for a book that has been written, that nobody/Is ever going to read. A bottle with a *note* in it" (Ashbery 2008, p. 877)– combined with the frequent references to metals in the collection, invites us to consider that *April Galleons* imagines literary artefacts not only as durable, exchangeable objects, but also, more specifically, as analogous to banknotes and coins – that is, as currency. When 'Fall Pageant' refers to "experience", it imagines "Its clink of coin ringing/Neither true nor falsely true: an errand boy of a thing.//And we circulate…" (Ashbery 2008, p. 870).

The collection's "poetic objects" can be interpreted as attempting to dynamically reckon the value of subjective experience in a way that is analogous to currency's circulation within systems of monetary exchange. One may even hear in Ashbery's comment to Linda Reinfeld – "language finally depends on references to meanings generated outside language" – a rejection of a fully decentred notion of linguistic currency. While the 'language' of language poetry is, like fiat currency, uncoupled from any material property, Ashbery's poetry – at least at this point in his career – nostalgically refers to a time when the value of language was stable, and correlated to a fixed referent.

However, as the sense of weariness, lateness and exhaustion that pervades *April Galleons* acknowledges, at the time when the collection was written this notion of currency was, itself, no longer particularly relevant (or current); if the poem is indeed equivalent to a promissory

note or coin, it has, by this point in Ashbery's career, become one that cannot easily circulate, and cannot transfer the value it holds into a broader system. Indeed, there is a sense at the end of the collection that an impasse has been reached; however, the speaker of 'The Leopard and Lemur' raises the possibility that new poetic avenues – the "foreign accounts" – might be opened up by the adoption of a more fluid and mobile notion of "shuffling" currency:

> But if it please the god to turn back,
> To turn around, the gap would be invisibly
> Paved over and foreign accounts perhaps
> Opened, a shuffling commerce begin
> In what has been a dry stream bed until now.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 876)

Chapter 6 will explore in more detail how, in Ashbery's next collection, *Flow Chart*, and those that follow – works that, although they occur chronologically later in Ashbery's oeuvre than *April Galleons*, do not exhibit its mood of exhausted *lateness* – Ashbery's notion of poetic currency evolves into a broader notion of 'business' that serves to imbue his work with a new, and different, energy.

6. “All kinds of messes”: Ashbery’s ecology of waste

The tenth section of Ashbery’s long cut-up poem ‘Europe’, which was published in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), reads, in its entirety,

> He had mistaken his book for garbage.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 93)

Appearing in a particularly dissonant poem, in a collection whose jagged diction contrasts starkly with the Audenesque restraint of Ashbery’s first collection *Some Trees* (1956), this line introduces a theme that will recur throughout the poet’s work: waste, in both its cultural and physical incarnations. This chapter will argue that waste occupies a central role within Ashbery’s poetry, one that is crucial to the way in which the poet’s conception of subjectivity evolves, over his career, into a broad, ecological notion of the self as being both separate from, and inextricably entangled with, the world around it.

The ‘garbage book’ that Ashbery refers to in ‘Europe’ not only introduces the theme, but also sets some of the parameters of this exploration. In particular, it draws our attention to the way in which ‘garbage’, or waste, is a malleable category, which is open to re-evaluation: when we categorise an object as waste or garbage, as useless, spoiled or degenerate, we are, Ashbery’s line suggests, making a choice, conscious or otherwise – and we may be mistaken, or change our minds. The anthropologist Mary Douglas has explored the way in which the distinction between dirt and cleanliness, and, by extension, between what is considered to be waste and what is perceived as worthy or even sacred, has traditionally been constructed and maintained, arguing that the *clean/dirty* binary is an extension of the various strategies – spatial and temporal, secular and religious – by means of which we impose order on the world. Douglas writes:

> As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror... Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment.

(Douglas 1966, p. 2)

Ashbery's book that has been "mistaken… for garbage" straddles the binary between order and disorder that Douglas describes. How, it invites us to ask, should such an object be treated? Should it be valued and retained? Or must it be discarded, lest it taint or contaminate other, more wholesome material? Like the book which may or not be garbage, many of the works referred to in this chapter call into question the way in which we distinguish between what is considered waste and what is seen as worthy or valuable.

Indeed, in its fundamental indeterminacy the concept of waste has the ability to destabilise not only its own status, but that of other substances and objects, too. As Mary Douglas goes on to acknowledge,

> …we seek to create order, [but] we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.
>
> (Douglas 1966, p. 95)

What follows will explore waste in terms of its status as what is perceived to be unwholesome or excessive, while also acknowledging the intriguing "power" that such material possesses to bring about the torsion and re-evaluation of existing categories.

In some respects, this chapter and the preceding one are in dialogue with each other; their concerns overlap in ways that are at times clearly apparent, and at other times more subtle. For example, the previous chapter took as its premise the assertion that Ashbery's poetry frequently deals with work, both as a necessary condition of modern life, and as a means by which cultural artefacts are produced. This chapter expands on this idea by exploring the ways in which Ashbery's poetry – particularly in his collections of the 1970s, *Three Poems* (1972) and *The Vermont Notebook* (1975) – invites us to look *beyond* work in order to examine not only the products of labour, but also its by-products, or residues – that is, the excessive, unwanted, or otherwise exhausted commodities that result from it.

In a similar way, the topics of money, wealth, and currency that the previous chapter explored in relation to *April Galleons* (1987) are also relevant to this chapter's discussion of *Flow*

Chart (1991), which, as the final section below will discuss, treats business and commerce as complex experiential processes which hover indeterminately between the socio-economic and the physical. This shifting, uncertain demarcation between worldly, public business and the private workings of the body is not unique to Ashbery's poetry; as several theorists have observed, the notion of material wealth – and by extension, of richness or abundance – is inextricably interwoven with notions of waste, excess, and degeneracy. Freud, in his 1908 essay 'Character and Anal Erotism', observes that money is frequently linked to excrement. As he explains,

> wherever archaic modes of thought have predominated or persist – in the ancient civilizations, in myths, fairy tales, and superstitions, in unconscious thinking, in dreams and in neuroses – money is brought into the most intimate relationship with dirt.
>
> (Freud 2001, p. 174)

The association that Freud describes is also tacitly present in the language we use when we talk about money – and about waste. As Jed Rasula notes, when, for example, Henry David Thoreau writes in his journal, after spending a day perusing the shelves of the Cambridge Library, that "decayed literature makes the richest of all soils", he links the concept of "richness" – which can also refer to monetary wealth – to an abundant fecundity which is brought about by decay or decomposition of organic, or bodily, matter. (Rasula 2012, 'The Library').

As this suggests, it is possible to draw parallels between the dirt that issues from the body, and the dirt – or earth – that exists outside it. The ground that produces wholesome sustenance through the generative processes of agriculture is sustained and enriched by waste and decay – as the words "soil" (which began to be used as a noun to describe earth in the 1300s, deriving from the verb *soil*, denoting an act of pollution or defilement) and "dirt" (which comes from the old Norse *drit*, meaning excrement) tacitly remind us. "[E]very spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease," Whitman observes in 'This Compost'. "This earth", he goes on to assert,

> Renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,
> It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.

(Whitman 2004)

Whitman puns here, as he does elsewhere, on the correspondences between the physical pages of a text – which are themselves "leaves of grass", derived from the earth – and the other kinds of leaves, or *leavings*, one might encounter in nature. The "sumptuous" richness that he evokes is occasioned by the way in which the earth "accepts" and reincorporates the "leavings" – and perhaps also the droppings – of humanity. For Ashbery, such 'leavings' – both in the form of what is left behind (or deliberately left out), and in terms of the towering heaps of waste, both physical and cultural, that accumulate with the progress of time and history – represent a rich and abundant source of poetic inspiration: a literal and figurative compost heap, in which the contiguity of materials is more important than their separation and classification.

As Christopher Nealon notes when writing on Ashbery's poetry of the 1960s and 1970s, "[a]gain and again in the poems from this period, the poet describes scenes of spectacle, pageantry, and even apocalypse, which are made harmless by the poet's turning to face the other way…" For Nealon, Ashbery's "turning away" represents a "posture of minority" which has both moral and epistemological implications; it "encodes a wish not to be party to violence, which shades into a wish not to be responsible for it, which shades into a wish not to know about it" (Nealon 2011, p. 78). Nealon's argument is persuasive, and this chapter does not seek to assert that Ashbery's turning back and turning away is *not* a gesture of political refusal; it does, however, explore what *else* it might be, and why the image of turning the body so that its back faces forward might be so resonant and suggestive within the broader context of Ashbery's life and work.

As this suggests, this chapter will contextualise Ashbery's poetry's treatment of waste with reference to queerness. This approach follows that of Christopher Schmidt, who sees "waste… [as] a magnetic locus for queer identification and potential recuperation in response to… punishing hierarchies of value" (Schmidt 2014, p. 5). This is not to assume that the poetry can only be rendered intelligible in terms of the poet's sexuality; nor does it define queerness as synonymous with certain areas of the body, or specific acts. Rather, it argues that the *backing away* and *turning back* that Ashbery's poetry frequently engages in can be read not merely as a socially negative attitude, or as a defeated retreat from ideology, but also – with typically Ashberian archness – in physical terms that call attention to, and perhaps also

figuratively recuperate, areas of the body, and areas of experience, that have traditionally been categorized as wasteful, antisocial and degenerate.

This exploration will begin by looking in detail at the way in which Ashbery evokes ideas of waste, dirt and degeneracy in two of his collections of the 1970s, *Three Poems* (1972) and *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), and will end by asserting that by the time the poet writes *Flow Chart* (1991), arguably the last major long poem of his career, these ideas have evolved into a wide-ranging ecology that incorporates and reconciles both interiority and exteriority, economy and excess, the economic and the environmental. If the troubling of the inside/outside binary that Fredric Jameson sees as one of the defining features of postmodern works (Jameson 1991, p. 11) can be allegorised in terms of the individual subject, Ashbery's mature poetry, in exploring what is it to exist both as an embodied individual and as part of a wider social and environmental milieu, restates the question that is posed – in a more literal and domestic sense – by his earlier work, namely: "How does it feel to be outside and inside at the same time"? (Ashbery 2008, p. 224).

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Ashbery's 1972 collection *Three Poems* can be read, in part, as a reaction against, and an ironic commentary on, the contemporary cultural milieu. Ashbery returned to New York in 1965, having spent the past seven years in Paris, to find the hippy movement in full swing. As he recalls in conversation with Mark Ford, "there were readings everywhere… there was also drugs, and rock; these things all seemed to happen together…" (Ashbery and Ford 2003, p. 52). However, by the end of the 1960s, America's mood of optimistic 'newness' had begun to curdle; the hippy movement had dwindled, and protests against the Vietnam War were growing in intensity. As a result, Ashbery confirmed to John Shoptaw, *Three Poems*' references to newness are intended to be "slightly satirical" (Shoptaw1994, p. 137). Indeed, the poems engage in an almost automatic repetition of words such as "new", and feature insistent references to "the system" (reminiscent, perhaps, of William Burroughs's polemical references to the "the control system" and "the control machine" (Burroughs 1961, pp. 92–93)). As David Sweet observes, "The 'new'… seems in [Ashbery's] poem to evoke almost wearily both the recent, 'playful' past and a more disturbing archaic one" (Sweet 1998, p. 328).

Chapter 1 looked in detail at the imagery of *Three Poems*, in which a discourse of unchecked and untrammelled forward motion is contrasted with an intermittent, half-submerged narrative of turning away from what lies ahead, and of turning one's attention, albeit momentarily, towards the assumptions that underly such a discourse – and towards the question of what it rules in and out. This chapter will focus on the second section of *Three Poems*, 'The System', which opens with the assertion that:

> The system was breaking down. The one who had wandered alone past so many happenings and events began to feel, backing up along the primal vein that led to his center, the beginning of a hiccup that would, if left to gather, explode the center to the extremities of life, the suburbs through which one makes one's way to where the country is.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 280)

The imagery that this opening paragraph employs – of events occurring concentrically and expansively, of diffuse, spreading centres, and of a restless, pioneer-like movement outwards to "where the country is" – would appear to be consistent with that of the preceding section, 'The New Spirit'. However, the movement suggested here is more chaotic – the form that the speaker evokes is seen as exploding, rather than expanding in a controlled and sustainable way – and also more rhythmic and ongoing, as suggested by the present participle and gerunds: "happening", "backing", "beginning". While the imagery of 'The New Spirit' evoked a disembodied rationality, 'The System' begins by describing movement not only in terms of exterior objects or landscapes, but instead in terms of the body. Indeed, the metaphors employed in this opening passage are digestive and circulatory, and perhaps also excretory: the subject begins to feel a "hiccup" that is "backing up" along a "primal vein". This "backing up" enacts the disruptive and unexpected retrograde movement discussed in Chapter 1, but does so in terms that call to mind not only the movement of a body in space, but also the internal rhythms and mechanisms of that body. Indeed, one might even see 'The System' as not only *describing* the processes of a body, but *enacting* them, as if the poem itself operates like a physical system which must absorb, digest, and eventually excrete the matter that it encounters. Indeed, references to bodily processes and products abound in the poem: it refers to "transparent tissues", aches and bruises, blindness, "motes in the eye", and to the sensation of breathlessness (Ashbery 2008, p. 281, p. 293, p. 318). It also insistently

refers to cyclical processes of absorption and excretion which take place rhythmically and repeatedly, in “semi-obscurity” or in darkness (Ashbery 2008, p. 309).

The poem is open about these bodily preoccupations: “It is this “other tradition” which we propose to explore,” the speaker grandly announces, and goes on to clarify:

> I’m speaking needless to say not of written history but the oral kind that goes on in you without your having to do anything about it… [of] the other, unrelated happenings that form a kind of sequence of fantastic reflections as they succeed each other at a pace and according to an inner necessity of their own.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 282)

While ‘The New Spirit’ seemed to direct its gaze outwards, toward a receding horizon, ‘The System’ enacts an inward, backward turn in its willingness to examine the idiosyncratic “history” that “goes on in you”: a personal, subjectivised and bodily temporality that, like the sweeping historical narratives that take place in the external world, involves consumption, assimilation, creation and eventual excretion.

As well as its interest in regular, internally necessary “happenings”, the poem has a particular fascination for what it describes at various points as “obscure phenomena”, “dark accretions”, and “all kinds of messes” (Ashbery 2008. pp. 282–283, p. 297). These unspecified substances or objects seem to accumulate unbidden, as a by-product of the text’s continuation. The “residue” that the text produces is envisaged both as a “huge deltalike deposit” which arises as “time [flows] into eternity” (Ashbery 2008, p. 312), and as a “truth” which is “obstinately itself, so much so that it always seemed about to harden and shrink, to grow hard and dark and vanish into itself anxiously but stubbornly” (Ashbery 2008, p. 281).

There is undeniably a fecal quality to these “messes” and “deposits”; they form in darkness, according to a regular (or, at times, an “irregular but satisfying”) rhythm, and are brought to light effortfully, with “straining”, in “a slow burst that narrows to a final release” (Ashbery 2008, pp. 290–291). Their proliferation introduces a campy *double-entendre* into *Three Poems*’ references to backing away, reversing and turning one’s back; in ‘The System’, the text presents not only its ideological ‘backing’, or turns its back on what it describes, but also refers to the processes associated with the *back* of the body – the side that is turned away

from the social world, and the site of anal processes (and pleasures). This invites us to think in unaccustomed ways about the queerness of the seemingly somewhat uneventful *Three Poems.* One might, for example, draw parallels between the "messes" and waste products the poem invokes, and the purportedly degenerate or wasteful nature of queerness, which was traditionally perceived as being aligned with what is excluded or marginal, the 'waste matter' of society. This homophobic notion became a truism during the 'Lavender Scare' of the 1950s, when queerness was viewed as a corrosive social "contaminant" (Schmidt 2014, p. 11) which threatened to pollute and spoil not just the individual psyche, but also the integrity and security of the nation. In 1963, the sociologist Erving Goffman included "homosexuality" among his examples of "spoiled identity" – a set of personal characteristics that lead to stigmatisation, rejection and shame (Schmidt 2014, p. 14). As Lee Edelman points out, queer sexuality has also historically been associated with 'wastefulness' due to its squandering of the body's creative potential in its inability to participate in what he refers to as the "Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2004, p. 4), based around the "cult of the Child" (Edelman 2004, p. 30). In its refusal to affirm the primacy of the interests of the "Child", both real and imaginary, Edelman argues, queerness adopts, for society as a whole, the psychic position of the Freudian death drive, becoming "the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (Edelman 2004, p. 9).

There is a circularity inherent in the argument that queerness is aligned with what is excluded and degenerate, due to the way in which this notion itself has perpetuated the isolation of queer people, forcing them into marginal spaces that are likely to be unsanitary or unsafe, such as the grimy bus stations, cheap motel rooms and shadowy piers that David Wojnarowicz's subjects frequent in *The Waterfront Journals* (1997). It is therefore significant that although the obscure masses that Ashbery evokes in 'The System' have an affinity for obscurity, concealment and secrecy, the darkness in which they are shrouded has a literal, even matter-of-fact quality; it does not appear to carry a powerful emotional charge, or to articulate guilt or shame. Indeed, when the speaker expresses his desire to examine such "obscure phenomena… from a point of view like the painter's: in the round, bathed in a sufficient flow of overhead light" (Ashbery 2008, p. 282), the lighting is incidental; it may improve one's view of an object, allowing it to be seen more clearly, but it does not seem to be capable of precipitating a fundamental change in its nature. Indeed, the speaker goes as far as to state that

> the darkness that surrounds you now does not exist, because it never had any independent existence: you created it out of the spleen and torment you felt. It looks real enough to hide you from the light of the sun, but its reality is as specious as that of a mirage.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 303)

Things can, in ‘The System’, “bulge more brightly and more darkly at the same time” (Ashbery 2008, p. 311); darkness and light are not, the text implies, metaphysical or allegorical properties. As a result, a thing that currently exists in darkness — and which could be considered to be entangled with it, due to its status as “waste” or “mess” – can be illuminated without changing its quality. The messes, wastes and residues of *Three Poems* may exist *in* darkness, but they are not *of* it. In this way the text torques the category of ‘waste’, inviting us to regard it as a contextual judgment, rather than a categorical one.

In this context, it is significant that the initially tentative retrograde motion that we first encountered in the ‘The New Spirit’ is, in ‘The System’, envisaged as being so determined that it often results in involution, as in the case of the “truth” that “vanish[es] into itself anxiously but stubbornly” (Ashbery 2008, p. 281), the “conscience… feeding on itself in order to re-create itself in a shape that the next instant would destroy” (Ashbery 2008, p. 286), and the numerous objects and ideas that both absorb, and are absorbed into, each other over the course of the poem. This imagery could be seen to play on the definition of homosexuality as an “inversion”, a term commonly used by 19th-century sexologists and popularised by Freud. According to Freud, homosexuality results in part from a gender confusion stemming from “a certain arrest of sexual development” (Freud 1935) and from a failure to progress psychically beyond the anus as the primary site of pleasure. ‘The System’ delights in its own stubborn ‘arrest’ and its subsequent “backing up” into spatial, and perhaps also psychic, inversion (Ashbery 2008, p. 280).

Inasmuch as ‘The System’ enacts a ruminative, digestive poetics, in which ideas, mental events and even the poetry itself are envisaged as ‘residues’ formed by the passage of impressions through the speaker’s consciousness, it also goes some way towards rehabilitating waste, and reframing it as a product in its own right, rather than seeing it as an undesirable and unnecessary by-product of more legitimate processes. Indeed, in the speaker’s claim that “[t]he world avenges itself on those who would lose it by skipping over

the due process of elimination" (Ashbery 2008, p. 288), there is a suggestion of another Freudian process, the "return of the repressed", whereby what has been overlooked or suppressed returns in the transmuted form of "derivatives of the unconscious" (Freud 1957, pp. 152–154). If one were to read 'The System's scatology and figurative inversion as a proxy for a more openly 'queer' subject matter, one might seek evidence of this repression not only in the more straightforward movements of the preceding poem, 'The New Spirit', but also in a later work which *Three Poems* prefigures, namely Ashbery's 1976 poem 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', which was published in the Pulitzer-Prize-winning collection of the same name. This poem describes how

> This wind brings what it knows not, is
> Self-propelled, blind, has no notion
> Of itself. It is inertia that once
> Acknowledged saps all activity, secret or public:
> Whispers of the word that can't be understood
> But can be felt, a chill, a blight
> Moving outward along the capes and peninsulas
> Of your nervures and so to the archipelagoes
> And to the bathed, aired secrecy of the open sea.
> This is its negative side. Its positive side is
> Making you notice life and the stresses
> That only seemed to go away, but now,
> As this new mode questions, are seen to be
> Hastening out of style. If they are to become classics
> They must decide which side they are on.
>
> (Ashbery 1977, pp. 75–76)

These lines, with their references to positive and negative "sides", affirm the existence both of a dominant perspective, and also of its negative counterpart, which corresponds, perhaps, to what the poem previously referred to as the "backing of the looking glass" (Ashbery 1977, p. 75). This "negative side" is associated with silence, ambiguity and obscurity – with "whispers of the word that can't be understood/but can be felt" – and also with contamination, in the form of the "blight/Moving outward…". It is also characterised by a degenerate, anti-social "inertia" which, "once/acknowledged, saps all activity, secret or

public”. Conversely, the “positive side” is associated with the breezily vague process of “making you notice life” – and also, the poem’s lexis suggests, with questions of “mode” and “style”. The speaker concludes that “if they are to become classics/They must decide which side they are on”. We might understand from this that the poem has made a similar choice between aligning itself with what is hidden, obscure, or allegedly degenerate, and ‘becoming a classic’. In the final, much-anthologised version of ‘Self-Portrait’, Ashbery refers to looking at Parmigianino’s painting in the company of his former lover, the French poet Pierre Martory:

> Vienna where the painting is today, where
> I saw it with Pierre in the summer of 1959;
>
> (Ashbery 1977, p. 75)

Readers who encountered the poem on its initial publication, in *POETRY* magazine’s August 1974 issue, would, however, have read these lines as follows:

> Vienna where the painting is today, where
> I saw it in the summer of 1959;
>
> (Ashbery 1974, p. 254)

The poem’s reference to Martory constitutes one of the very few direct references to Ashbery’s sexuality in his oeuvre, so its initial redaction is significant, implying an ambivalence on the part of the poem about expressing this aspect (or “side”) of its aesthetic identity; a vacillation, perhaps, between the demands of “becoming a classic”, and of articulating “the word that can’t be understood” (a description that contains echoes of a Victorian euphemism, taken from a Lord Alfred Douglas poem: “the love that dare not speak its name”). This is not the only example of Ashbery’s sexuality being redacted from his poetry. In a 1988 interview, he describes how he removed scatological references from his first collection, *Some Trees*, based on the comments of W.H Auden, who was instrumental in the work’s publication: “[Auden] had a couple of problems with three or four poems that were in my manuscript, and asked me if I would take them out. In fact they were ones I didn’t particularly like myself, so I removed them. I think there was some sort of slightly scatological language in them that he objected to. He was quite prudish, in his way” (Tranter 1988).

In its closing pages, ‘The System’ becomes more explicit in aligning itself with various types of both physical and cultural waste, with the speaker lamenting that

> there were so many things held back, kept back, because they didn’t fit into the plot or because their tone wasn’t in keeping with the whole. So many of these things have been discarded, and they now tower on the brink of the continuity, hemming it in like dark crags above a valley stream.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 316)

The kind of waste that is referred to here has a tangible, physical presence, as well as a figurative or literary one, and encompasses not just what has been excreted (and what has been either perversely or prudishly “held back”), but also what has been carelessly discarded.

As this suggests, the ‘waste’ which *Three Poems* evokes is not simply excremental; it is also, at various points, environmental, cultural, and social. It is even, in the final lines of ‘The System’, elegiac: Frank O’Hara’s nickname for Ashbery was ‘Ashes’, and the poem’s mention, in its closing lines, of “dust and ashes” calls to mind the loss of the pair’s close, creatively fruitful friendship, the “wasted time” that “sinks into the sea” and is “swallowed up without a trace”; O’Hara died after being hit by a dune buggy while walking on the beach at night (Ashbery 2008, p. 317).

As these observations suggest, to see the ‘The System’s imagery of elimination and excretion as purely scatological, or to interpret it solely it as an indication of the text’s ‘queerness’, is to limit its scope. The poem is, its speaker explains, concerned with “history... [of] the oral kind”, in addition to being preoccupied with anal processes; it is not just elimination, but rather the whole cycle of consumption, absorption and excretion that it wishes to “examine… in the round” (Ashbery 2008, p. 282). It therefore makes sense to see ‘The System’ as exploring a broad set of ruminative processes. Reading the poem this way suggests a possible alternative reading of its opening assertion, “The system is breaking down” (Ashbery 2008, p. 280); in such a reading, “breaking down” becomes an active verb. By means of the implicit parallels ‘The System’ draws between external ideological frameworks and internal bodily processes, the poem itself ruminates on, and eventually enzymatically digests (‘breaks down’), questions about what a subject consumes, how this material is shaped or “formed”,

how it is excreted, and what the resultant "mass" or "residue" (or, perhaps, cultural artefact) constitutes.

With its ruminative, digestive poetics, in which ideas, mental events and even the poetic work itself are envisaged as "residues" formed by the passage of impressions through the speaker's consciousness, *Three Poems* also goes some way towards rehabilitating waste, and reframing it as a product in its own right. James Longenbach has argued that poetry is an inherently economical medium, claiming that

> stories become poems when they're written by someone who likes to think about a sentence for a really long time, rearranging it, troubling it, rather than writing another one. What we call form – lines, rhymes, leaps – is a way of keeping down production.
> (Longenbach 2007)

The digestive poetics of *Three Poems* – while not actively concerned with *keeping up* production – is constitutionally unable to refrain from producing tangential, extraneous, or otherwise excessive material. As a result, it invites us to consider whether it is ever possible for a poet to avoid producing waste (by, for example, diligently following Ezra Pound's exhortation to use "absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (Pound 1968, p. 3). Can the 'elimination' of verbal excess that Pound proposes override the unruly, eliminative tendencies of the medium itself? Or does poetry, by definition, engage in unnecessary production – what Schmidt calls "waste-making" (Schmidt 2014, p. 2) – both by generating superfluous meaning, and by creating cultural artefacts that are not needed and cannot be used?

If poetry does indeed produce unwanted or useless linguistic objects, one might surmise that once they have outlived their utility or meaningfulness they will, in figurative terms, end up on the scrap heap. The following section will explore in further detail what this poetic waste-pile or scrap heap might contain, and what kind of subject might be found scavenging there.

*　　　*　　　*

Ashbery's concerns about wastefulness and waste-making are reiterated in *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), the poet's collaboration with his friend, the artist Joe Brainard. This hybrid

work, by turns lyrical and scatological, was written and published contemporaneously with *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), and, as discussed in Chapter 3, could itself be seen to constitute a chaotic, unruly, and resolutely non-mimetic "backing" to the more famous work's wholesome and realistic roundedness. The playful, idiosyncratic, and somewhat capricious lists that characterize the first section of the collection both evoke and circumvent the set of representational choices which are invoked at the beginning of *Three Poems*, namely whether to approach a poetic realism by putting as much as possible into the work, or by taking as much as possible out:

> 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.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 247)

In *The Vermont Notebook*, Ashbery experiments both with "put[ting] it all down" and with "leaving all out". However, this section will argue that the work's ultimate focus settles on the latter of these two options, eschewing what is deemed worthy of inclusion in favour of that which has been left out, rejected or discarded. It therefore aligns itself with the *reincorporation* – with all the echoes of physical, bodily processes that this word suggests – of what has been designated as worthless, degenerate, or peripheral. The collection's initial preoccupation with constraints, frameworks and systems as arbiters of "put[ing] it all down" or "leav[ing] all out" leads on to an exploration of what *including* or *leaving out* involves – not only aesthetically, but also materially, as the conceptual exploration of representation that characterises the first section of the book broadens, in the second section, to a critique of literary production that is as ecological as it is philosophical. The collection therefore deals not only with processes of digestion and excretion, but also with the mental frameworks for apprehending experience, and to the secondary mechanisms — the systems of 'waste management', perhaps – that are required to process what the experiencing subject both consciously and inadvertently produces.

We can explore this further by means of a close reading of the collection's untitled prose-poem, the so-called 'dump poem'. This poem is notably different from the lists that precede it, both visually and formally. Dense and repetitively patterned, it occupies a full page, its long, sparsely punctuated paragraphs demonstrating its expansiveness (and, perhaps, its excessiveness) compared to the short, ascetic lists of the opening section. As Schmidt has

observed, the poem's insistent repetitions and iterations demonstrate the influence of Gertrude Stein on Ashbery's writing of this period:

> Jewelers say that some lie on the heights. They say that some go unnoticed long gone on the heights. Jewelers say we cannot long understand what goes on the heights. They say we are treason to understand what goes on not to understand what goes on. They say gals understand more. They say guys understand more. They say guys and gals glued to surprise partition understand more…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 353)

The poem unfolds associatively, taking its cue from the sounds of words as well as their meanings, as it slides from "jewelers" to "beavers", then to a focus on "beeches", "horses" and "cypresses"; Ellen Levy notes, somewhat disapprovingly, that each repetition of its opaque phrases makes the poem "less like a poem and more like noise" (Levy 2011, p. 160). On a syntactical level, this associative quality is akin to a peristaltic digestion, regurgitation, and subsequent re-ingestion of the sonic and semantic artefacts that text tirelessly produces – a recycling process, perhaps, but one that itself generates yet more extraneous, excessive matter. Indeed, at the end of the poem the speaker aligns himself overtly with that which is not only excessive, but unnecessary – that is, with waste:

> The book I read is the dump it is printed in dump letters… I tell the old story of the dump. I work on the story to be the old story of the dump which is never telling. If it was ever telling it would not be the dump which it is. The dump escapes the true scape of the telling and in so doing it is its own scape — the dump dumped and dumping… I condone the dump for having nothing left for me only the will to go on dumping creating it out of its evacuation. I will go to the dump. I am to be in the dump.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 353)

The waste that the speaker evokes is, on one level, cultural: the book that is "printed in dump letters", the poem's own wasted or wasteful words, which seem to always be about to topple into noise. However, because of the secondary scatological meaning of 'dump', the waste that the poem evokes includes not only material objects, but also bodily excretions. Schmidt

concurs, seeing the poem as representing an "energising evacuation" after the "anal retention" of the earlier lists (Schmidt 2014, p. 72).

Also discernible in the first part of the poem is a half-submerged narrative of queer activity and concealment which chips away at the conventional relations between "guys" and "gals"; such "treason" is reported and commented on by the normative (and perhaps slightly threatening) "jewelers". Here, as in *Three Poems*, queerness is associated with waste and degeneracy, as well as with necessary secrecy ("the real story of the dump… is never telling"). However, the dump is also potentially recuperative, constituting, as Schmidt points out, a site of scavenging, collage and reappropriation (Schmidt 2014, p. 73). Recuperation of apparently exhausted materials is possible there – the dump possesses "the will to go on dumping creating it out of its evacuation" – and decay can be transmuted into fertility, in a way that subverts prejudices about the decadent 'wastefulness' of queerness in its unwillingness, or inability, to procreate.

Ashbery's dump is also a site where the relationship between what is constructed and what is 'real' is particularly fraught, and the 'I' of the poem is particularly fragile and mercurial, at times appearing as an apparently conventional lyric subject who "lie[s] now at the cypress roots crying. Crying for my lost love…" (Ashbery 2008, p. 353), and at other times functioning as nothing more than a linguistic placeholder which is prone to be subsumed into other terms and concepts. The poem reiterates its sympathy with such evasive manoeuvres; the "real story of the dump", it claims, is "never telling". Reticence and absence — rather than the rigorous, all-inclusive mimesis of the convex mirror, which must by necessity "tell" everything – are paradoxically identified as the hallmark of the "real".

There are undoubtedly echoes of T.S. Eliot in the fragmentary yet fertile wasteland of Ashbery's landfill; however, Wallace Stevens's 'The Man on the Dump' is a more salient precursor to *The Vermont Notebook*'s dump-dweller.[14] In Stevens's poem, the speaker

[14] Other poetic precursors of Ashbery's man on the dump include the subject of Baudelaire's 'The Rag-Picker's Wine' – a denizen of a "muddy labyrinth" where "mankind swarms in stormy turbulence" who picks through the detritus of Parisian life "stagger[ing] against the walls like poets do" (Baudelaire 1954, p. 217) – and the speaker of W.B. Yeats's late poem 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', who gleans inspiration from "[a] mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,/Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,/Old iron, old bones, old rags" in the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (Yeats 1990, p. 357).

alternates between labouring to reanimate the tired tropes of Romanticism, and despairing at poetic excess in the form of recalcitrant literary styles that persist and proliferate, refusing to decompose despite their uselessness. Many of the objects encountered on Stevens's dump are, or once were, containers, either of other objects, or of experiences – the papers in which bouquets of flowers are wrapped, the "janitor's poems/Of every day", the corset designed to hold a physical body, and the exotic but vague "box/from Esthonia" (Stevens 1954, p. 201). Everything in the poem is both inside and outside something else – "the green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green/smacks like fresh water in a can"– and the dump itself is also a container, "full/of images", which exists within the overarching container of the poem itself (Stevens 1954, pp. 201–202). On a syntactical level, Stevens's repetition of the word "like" serves to draw our attention to the poetic simile's attempt to contain and encapsulate meaning in a way that itself encompasses elements of both similarity to, and difference from, what is being described. Indeed, Stevens's poem also worries about mimesis, wondering:

> …how many men have copied dew
> For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
> With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
> Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
> One grows to hate these things except on the dump.
>
> (Stevens 1954, p. 202)

The "cop[ying]" through which natural forms are incorporated into cultural ones (and thereby imbued with a style) results in the tautological "floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew" (cf. Ashbery's "the dump dumped and dumping"); Stevens's language threatens to grind to a halt, freighted by its ornamentations and having run up against the limits of its capacity to describe. As Harold Bloom observes, "what is hated in [Stevens's] *Dump* poem is our mimesis of the dew, copying it or covering ourselves with its representation" (Bloom 1980, p. 145). If the aim of poetic language is to construct a recognisable version of reality, Stevens suggests, then the highest form of expression available to the poem is simply to point at what it imitates, as it is unable ever to bridge the gap that separates language from its subject, from "what one wants to get near" (Stevens 1954, p. 202). The poem, as it tries and ultimately fails at its self-appointed task of mediating between the symbolic and the real, therefore possesses – like the empty containers that litter the dump – an excessive, useless quality.

The end of the poem, however, gestures towards an alternative kind of mimesis:

> Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
> Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
> Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
> *Invisible priest;* is it to eject, to pull
> The day to pieces and cry s*tanza my stone*?
> Where was it one first heard of the truth? The.
>
> (Stevens 1954, p. 203)

In these lines the poem toys with the notion of abandoning semantic communication altogether and becoming imitative, sensuous sound – the opaque yet evocative "blatter of grackles", the mysterious, murmured "*aptest eve*" – and thereby sidestepping the subject/object binary altogether. (Helen Vendler identifies this tendency in Stevens's work as a whole; in *On Extended Wings*, she encourages readers not to read for meaning, but to appreciate the poetry as "pure sound" (Vendler 1969, p. 188). The appearance of a nightingale in Stevens's dump poem recalls Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', in which the speaker ponders the possibility of language abandoning its descriptive function and directly miming its object: "Forlorn! The very word is like a bell…" (Keats 1978, p. 281). However, while Keats's nightingale intoxicates the poet with its mellifluous song, Steven's nightingale is a "peevish bird" whose song may "torture the ear". The Keatsian Grecian urn, another avatar of Romantic transcendence, has become the "old tin can" or "lard pail" that the speaker futilely "beats and beats" as he sits among a pile of other discarded "bottles [and] pots" (Stevens 1954, pp. 202–203). For the Romantics, the collapse of the gap between subject and object brought sublime ecstasy; for Stevens, it is figured in terms of waste, disappointment and excess.

For Stevens in 1942, as for Ashbery in 1975, the dump represents a space where such issues of representation and subjectivity can be aired, and even temporarily resolved. Susan Signe Morrison asserts that waste in literature frequently represents "historical 'garbage'", due to the way in which "[h]istory is impotent to make past events that haunt coherent linear narratives disappear. Orgies of consuming… fail to limit the production of things" (Morrison 2015, p. 11). For Wallace Stevens, this attempt to reckon with these useless quasi-material

“things”, the unassimilable legacy of the past, involves sifting through and rendering down the poetic detritus of an exhausted movement, namely Romanticism. Indeed, one might also read Ashbery’s poem as attempting to come to terms with or revivify the tropes of a foregoing movement, namely modernism, which is preoccupied with liminality, and with the boundaries of a work’s capacity to describe objective reality. In the dump, objects and concepts can hover indeterminately between states – between the material and the theoretical, the individualised and the endlessly reproducible, the organic and the constructed – allowing them to be recognised both as what the eco-critic Jane Bennett – drawing on Bruno Latour’s concept of the “actant” – describes as “existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects” (Bennett 2010, p. 4), and also as supposed precursors or constituents of meaning which messily exceed themselves, and persist as unwieldly, unparseable, inert presences: what Stevens’s poem calls “The” (Stevens 1954, p. 203).

Stevens’ ‘The Man on the Dump’ maintains an attitude of disdain towards the dump that it evokes; its speaker does not question the assumption that the objects and tropes that have ended up there are undesirable, exhausted “trash”, nor does he dispute the idea that the dump is primarily a site where what is degenerate or useless is “reject[ed]” (Stevens 1954, p. 202). He therefore maintains an ontological distance from the dump – he may find himself *on* it, but he is not *of* it. The process that Stevens describes, in which waste is assessed and organised by a subject who remains fundamentally separate from it, is aligned with psychoanalytic theories of waste, particularly those articulated by Julia Kristeva, who argues that the subject is constructed through an act of “abjection”. In order to distinguish itself from other bodies, particularly that of the mother, and assume the status of a discrete self, Kristeva argues, the subject must categorise certain objects or substances as being outside of them, or alien to them, figuratively casting them out, and designating them as being worthy of disgust or even fear (Kristeva 1982). In contrast to this process, and to the observant cataloguing that is enacted by Stevens’ speaker, the speaker of Ashbery’s poem drifts in and out of a total fusion with the dump which is, at times, ecstatic, and even sublime – it is, he declares, “my sweet inner scape self” (Ashbery 2008, p. 353). Kristeva’s subject forcefully abjects what is unwholesome or degenerate in order to construct a stable, bounded identity; Ashbery’s poem, meanwhile, describes a polymorphous subjectivity that is constructed not by the rejection of waste, but rather by the acceptance, and even the incorporation, of it.

The scavenging and recuperation that takes place on Ashbery's dump therefore eschews the task of sorting and categorising matter into that which is irrecoverable trash and that which retains some degree of worth, preferring instead to facilitate a contiguity in which materials are encouraged to interact with – and, as a result, pollute or contaminate – each other. As such, it has much in common with the "composting" which Jed Rasula sees as being central to the development of poetry, and of American poetry in particular, from the "ready mulch of chronicle" of Thoreau's notebooks and the "chemistry" of the "blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain" that Whitman describes in 'This Compost', to the "composition by field" of Charles Olson and Robert Duncan (Rasula 2012, 'That origin which is act… that riddle which is awe'). For Rasula, poetic composting involves "calling on the imagination as a resource of ecological understanding"; it brings together – in a fundamentally aleatory and contingent manner – elements both internal and external to the subject, and enables these materials to "fertilize and incubate" each other in new and unpredictable ways (Rasula 2012, 'Introduction'). In this respect it enacts a movement that differs both from the psychoanalytic "abjection" of what is degenerate or unwholesome, and also from the meticulous, even somewhat neurotic "separating and classifying" that Mary Douglas asserts as underlying our need to assign categories of cleanliness and dirt (Douglas 1966, p. 167). In its emphasis on the role of proximity and contingency in generating new meanings, the kind of composting that Rasula describes is reminiscent of the technique of collage, which, as Rona Cran notes, "is about encounters… about bringing ideas into conversation with each other" (Cran 2014, 'Introduction: Catalysing Encounters'), and which Ashbery himself frequently employs, both in *The Vermont Notebook* and elsewhere in his poetry, as well as in his later visual art.

Ashbery's 'dump poem' is envisaged as an outgrowth of its setting, and as inseparable from the waste that it evokes – it is "the old story of the dump" which is "printed in dump letters" (Ashbery 2008, p. 353). Indeed, several critics have passed a similar judgment on *The Vermont Notebook* itself, seeing the text as representing a 'dumping ground' for material that was excluded from the more conventional *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, either because it was too experimental, too camp, or too scatological. In this respect, one might say that *The Vermont Notebook* has – like the book referred to in *The Tennis Court Oath* – been "mistaken… for garbage": John Shoptaw describes the collection as a "wastebasket for all the extraneous poetic matter ruled out by its famed contemporary" (Shoptaw 1994, p. 14). The work might therefore be said to constitute what 'Self-Portrait…' refers to as the "backing of the looking glass" (Ashbery 1977, p. 75): a reticent, unreflective and resolutely non-mimetic

space. However, in the dump poem – if not in Ashbery's bibliography – the dump is not separate or *other.* It winds in and out of the speaker, the text and the reader, just as the word 'dump' hovers between being a noun and a verb, referring both to a place and to the action of depositing matter. We are not simply interested visitors to Ashbery's dump; instead, we are part of its ongoing processes of "creating" and "evacuation" – and it is part of us, too.

Just as the first section of *The Vermont Notebook* is a data-dump of quasi-systematised 'facticity', so the second section is a dumping ground for the incidental or extraneous matter of consciousness. The list-like format has been all but abandoned; however, the ephemeral, non-literary and diurnal formats of this section's poems are analogous to the lists of the first section in the way that they align themselves with the movements of a specific body (or mind) in time, rather than attempting to synthesise disparate perceptions into an overarching, realist vision – their aim is to record, rather than to shape. They therefore invite us to look beyond the apparent binary that separates data about the outside world from internal impressions and sense data. The ongoing activity of consciousness, these poems appear to suggest, produces waste in the same way that the physical body does.

Like the 'dump poem', *The Vermont Notebook*'s diaristic poems therefore make a case for the rehabilitation and creative incorporation of what appears to be extraneous or unnecessary. On an imagistic level, they repeatedly refer to cycles of consumption, digestion and excretion, as well as to growth, decay and decomposition. The 'Nov. 3' poem refers to the "shame" of "going to the bathroom", but admits that "we can't stop eating or drinking". The poem goes on to assert opaquely that:

> You know the blossoms, fed by facts, and they disappear in the night and there is a long wait for the fruit, and by then it has become a fact. You do not wait for facts. Nothing moves overnight.
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 363)

The ephemeral "blossoms" (which a few pages later become "fall flowers rotting" (Ashbery 2008, p. 367)), are "fed by facts", and develop first into "fruit" and then again into "fact", thereby implying that blossom, the fruit and the fact – with their accompanying suggestions of internal and external, organic and mechanical systems – are part of a single undifferentiated cycle by which phenomena "dro[p] into the garbage chute of the present"

(Ashbery 2008, p. 363). The point is not that garbage is a mental (or a gastro-intestinal) problem, as well as an environmental one; rather, these impressionistic poems posit consciousness as a Mobius strip, in which the external, physical, 'factual' landscape is of a piece with the internal, mental or symbolic one – with one's "sweet inner scape self".

*   *   *

Ashbery's book-length poem *Flow Chart* (1991) would appear to employ the same symbolic structure as *Three Poems* and *The Vermont Notebook*, in which the movement of the work, and of the subjective perceptions that it chronicles, are imagined in bodily – and particularly in digestive – terms. Ashbery's description of how his writing process evolved as he worked on *Flow Chart* adds weight to this interpretation. In a 1988 interview with John Tranter, he observes that

> I used to think that it wasn't good for me to write very often. I thought one a week was perhaps the maximum. Otherwise it seemed as though it was coming out diluted, or strained. However I seemed to have changed my mind about this, and am writing just about every day. And feeling okay about what I'm writing.
>
> (Tranter 1988)

The frequency and consistency of poetic production is a concern for Ashbery, who is anxious to avoid both a "strained", constipated output, and a "diluted', excessive one, and finds that he is able to settle into a daily rhythm that "feel[s] okay". The regularity and ease with which Ashbery produces *Flow Chart* also differ notably from the time-consuming, burdensome effort – the 'straining', perhaps – with which the preceding collection, *April Galleons*, envisaged literary artefacts being heaved effortfully into existence. So entangled does *Flow Chart* appear to be with the body's rhythms of ingestion, rumination and release that it incorporates and enacts them, even pausing to allow the speaker to break wind: "Excuse me while I fart. There, that's better. I actually feel relieved" (Ashbery 1991, p. 201).

Schmidt appears to agree that *Flow Chart* takes as its poetic blueprint the digestive and eliminative processes of the body, arguing that the poem "captures Ashbery's twin devotions to mess and measure, to waste-making and waste management" (Schmidt 2014, p. 21). However, even as he asserts *Flow Chart's* debt to, and affinity with, what he regards as

"excremental" literature, such as the work of Gertrude Stein, Schmidt describes Ashbery's poem in economic, rather than physical, terms, as the point at which the poet moves from "a restricted economy… toward a Bataillean general economy, in which expenditure is not governed by an economy of lack but rather of surplus" (Schmidt 2014, p. 21). This section will explore *Flow Chart*'s relationship to waste in more depth, and will outline the importance of the kind of "economy" – and ecology – that the poem proposes.

As in *April Galleons*, the language of finance, exchange and commerce is used frequently throughout the poem.[15] Its vaguely drawn subjects are insistently described as being engaged in business of some kind – they are "just quiet/people going about their business", or "associates/Go[ing] blindly about their business, some business at any rate." (Ashbery 1991, p. 14, p. 80). They "get down to business", or are "ready to talk business", or "have their business to attend to" (Ashbery 1991, p. 125, p. 171, p. 179). The word 'business' – and the related terms 'matters' and 'issues', which *Flow Chart* also repeatedly refers to – can be used both in a literal sense, to refer to the socio-economic actions of a subject in the world, and also euphemistically, to suggest internal, or hidden, physical processes, and their by-products. Indeed, as previously discussed, money, business and commerce have traditionally been linked to the body's processes of digestion and elimination, with Freud postulating that taking pleasure in accumulating or withholding money offers a way for the (heterosexual) adult to covertly indulge the interest in defecation that they were compelled to relinquish during infancy, as they moved on from the anal stage of development (Freud 2001, pp. 171–174).[16]

However, although it might be tempting to read *Flow Chart*'s imagery as gesturing towards a Freudian interest in bodily functions, and particularly in anal processes, the tone and register

[15] In this respect, Ashbery refuses to follow Adorno's precept that poetic language should construct for itself an "elevated style" by "ascetically omitting whatever would lessen the distance from the tainted language of commerce", an injunction that Schmidt understands in terms of waste and hygiene, as a "call to cleanse excess from aesthetic production, a reductionist purification of language…" (Schmidt 2014, p. 12).

[16] A Freudian reading of Ashbery's oeuvre might connect the anal or scatological preoccupations that are evident in his earlier poetry with the poet's self-confessed irregular, 'strained' output; in 'Character and Anal Erotism', Freud identifies an "anal" personality that is prone to "orderliness, parsimony and obstinacy", and to the withholding of valuable material (Freud 2001, p. 171). Now that the anal stage has been figuratively left behind in favour of a more encompassing and inclusive physicality, such argument might postulate, the work is no longer held back or obstructed, and can flow with regularity and ease.

of the poem disallows such an unequivocal interpretation. This is partly due to the way in which Ashbery's indistinct references to *business,* and the *matters* or *issues* it deals with or leads to, are curiously lacking in any kind of playful – or guilty, or shameful – *frisson*; as a result, the reader is discouraged from interpreting the term as a euphemism for matters that cannot be explicitly described or addressed. However, a difficulty arises because the kind of 'business' that is referred to in *Flow Chart* – along with its related matters and issues – cannot be said to be strictly commercial or financial, either; indeed, the term seems to lack affective and semantic content altogether, so that even though 'business' is mentioned over twenty times in the poem, we arrive at the final lines without a clear understanding of what it might entail. Rather than imbuing it with a portentous significance, or clearly explicating its meaning, Ashbery's insistent use of the word seems instead to erode its specificity, so that it comes to refer, as we read, not simply to a way of conducting business, or a particular field of business, but rather to pure activity itself – a relentless *busy-ness*, or an *ongoingness*, whose end is not the accomplishment of a particular task, but rather the perpetuation of the motion it describes. In its use of the vocabulary of business and economics, *Flow Chart* may appear to follow the example of *April Galleons*; however, whereas the earlier collection imagined value being trapped within objects, unable to move freely, *Flow Chart* describes the opposite: a world of constant, unceasing *commerce* – in the broadest sense of the word – in which currency, objects and ideas are constantly in motion, swapping places, shifting positions, and moving on or away as they are subsumed into a broader, all-encompassing flow.

In this respect the "business" that Flow Chart refers to recalls the alternative, semi-obscure "landscape" mentioned briefly in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', which is "alive with filiations, shuttlings; Business is carried on by looks, gesture,/hearsay. It is another life to the city,/The backing of the looking glass" (Ashbery 1977, p. 75). In the earlier poem, this locus of relentless, almost frenetic, movement is associated with the "backing" of the mirror, the non-mimetic, unreflective surface which is turned away from the subject, and is, as such, hidden from view. It therefore appears to align itself with that which cannot be expressed straightforwardly, face-to-face, within the everyday, normal (or, perhaps, 'straight') matrix of social relations.

In *Flow Chart*, however, the hint of *double-entendre* that terms such as "business" convey in Ashbery's earlier work – the sense that a more scatological kind of business is being playfully referred to, or that some unspoken, unspeakably queer 'business' is being

surreptitiously “carried on”, by means of fleeting glances and gestures, just out of sight – is notably absent. Similarly, the “matters” and “issues” that the poem frequently refers to hover, somewhat disinterestedly, between the literal and the metaphoric: the *matters* – and the subject matter – that the poem deals with is the matter that it generates as it progresses; the *issues* it raises are the mental and linguistic artefacts that issue from its ongoing, relentless progress.

This can be illustrated by a closer examination of the quality of the semantic and poetic flows that *Flow Chart* evokes. The speaker of the poem describes the way in which

> The groan of pebbles
> lugged back and forth by the undertow, which at first seemed temporary and
> quickly
> turned out to be eternal wasn't made to displease me, no more than were
> the hanks of pubic seaweed deposited at intervals that might well have been
> predetermined…
>
> (Ashbery 1991, p. 149)

The energetic movement that Ashbery describes in *Flow Chart* differs from, for example, the delicate, finely poised oscillations evoked in *A Wave*. It is both more insistent – a seemingly “predetermined” “lug[ing] back and forth” which is both laborious and irresistible – and more productive. It does not move inexorably onwards through its medium, leaving no trace of itself behind, as a wave does; instead, its relentless, perhaps even somewhat purposeless “back and forth” results in “deposit[s]”, made at regular intervals – the overtly physical, and perhaps somewhat distasteful, “hanks of pubic seaweed”. If one were to encounter this kind of repetitively “deposited” material in *Three Poems* or *The Vermont Notebook*, one might surmise that it would possess an excremental quality; in the pragmatic world of *April Galleons*, meanwhile, it would be more likely to refer to the movement or placement of a concrete, physical object (or, perhaps, to a deposit in one's bank account). By the time Ashbery writes *Flow Chart*, however, these two types of ‘business’ – the bodily and the socio-economic – have become inseparable, so that what is deposited by the energetic flow of the poem is not only a result of the processes of the physical body, but is also, simultaneously, part of a wider ecosystem. One's ‘business’, *Flow Chart* suggests, and the ‘matters’ and ‘issues’ that one must deal with, move porously in relation to the self, existing

both inside and outside of it simultaneously; they are both public and private, bodily and social. As such, the poem gestures towards the integration of the physical processes and systems invoked in Ashbery's earlier poetry into a broader and more encompassing ecology of the subject.

This is not to say that by the time Ashbery writes *Flow Chart*, his interest in the recycling, repurposing or composting of exhausted material into new forms has completely waned. Indeed, Nick Lolordo argues persuasively that *Flow Chart* itself is an act of salvage, involving the scavenging and recuperation of exhausted or discarded material: "Demonstrating his care for the poetic environment, Ashbery creates a world of borrowed (or stolen) words, making it new by recycling" (Lolordo 2001, p. 769). For Lolordo, the poem – with its impersonal diction and Eliotic references ("we read the thunder its own prepared statement"), ("I will show you fear in a handful of specialists")[17] – constitutes Ashbery's attempt to engage with the decaying legacy of high modernism and reconstitute it into something serviceable and current (Lolordo 2001, p. 751). Indeed, one of the most notable features of the poem is its invocation of relentlessly changing states – its charting of an unending ontological flow, in which objects and ideas endlessly crumble, collapse, condense or evaporate, and are reimagined or remade. Old car tires – which, in *The Vermont Notebook*, enjoyed a second life as a man-made, almost bathetically *un*natural 'nature preserve' (Ashbery 2008, pp. 400–401) – are, in *Flow Chart*, not merely repurposed, but are rendered down, dissolving into the "smoke from piles of old tires set alight at strategic points throughout the city" (Ashbery 1991, p. 12); in this poem, nothing can be preserved, least of all 'nature'. *Flow Chart's* recurring metaphors may be elemental – water, fire, and earth – but rather than evoking the stability and constancy of these substances, it chronicles the way in

[17] Lolordo reads the term "specialists" as a scathing reference to the "professional" literary critics – from F.R. Leavis onwards – who perpetuated the values of high modernism (Lolordo 2001, pp. 766–767); however, it is hard to ignore the medical connotations of the word, especially in the light of Ashbery's recent near-fatal spinal infection and long hospitalisation, and the ongoing ravages of the AIDS crisis. One might even detect in the title of *Flow Chart* a reference to a hospital chart, where a patient's vital signs are recorded at set intervals.

which they ceaselessly shift and transform, becoming mud and dust, ash and embers, steam and smoke.[18,19]

The sense of relentless change that the poem invokes is also reminiscent of the way in which Milton Berman describes modernity – as a simultaneously analytic and synthetic force which "pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish… in which, as Karl Marx said, 'All that is solid melts into air'" (Berman 1982, p. 15). Indeed, the clouds of smoke, fog and mist that drift through Ashbery's poem emphasise the unstable, mercurial nature of the matter that it describes, the "forms [which] begin to float away like mesmerized smoke" until "the resolution, or some resolution, occurs" (Ashbery 1991, p. 81). However, any resolution or solidification that the poem describes is temporary, prone to dissolve and reform again. As the image of burning tires suggests, the kind of ecology that the poem gestures towards is therefore environmental, without being necessarily environmentally *friendly* (although Stephen Ross notes that Ashbery's late work does also express a more straightforward concern for the environment, for example in its preoccupation with climatic disturbances, which, Ross asserts, reflects the "public ecological alarmism about climate change from the mid-1980s onward" (Ross 2017, p. 161)). Everything, *Flow Chart* suggests, is constantly being affected, polluted, and broken down by everything else. This kind of ecology must reckon not only with the stubborn persistence of matter, but also with its epistemological elusiveness – and, perhaps, with the consequent inadequacy of a subjective, human-focused way of apprehending it. This is again reminiscent of Latour's concept of the actant, which approaches the traditional subject/object distinction relationally, rather than ontologically; "covering both humans and non-humans", the actant includes "any entity that modifies another entity" (Latour 2004, p. 237).

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[18] In this respect it is similar to another, roughly contemporary, book-length poem that is preoccupied with the scavenging, salvage and recycling of waste, namely A. A. Ammons' *Garbage* (1993): "oh, yes, yes, the matter goes on,//turning into this and that, never the same thing/twice…" (Ammons 1993, p. 37).

[19] Cf. Emmanuel Levinas's concept of "exteriority": "An earth inhabited by men endowed by language is peopled by stable things. But the identity of things remains unstable… A thing exists in the midst of its wastes. When the kindling wood becomes smoke and ashes the identity of my table disappears. The wastes become indiscernible; the smoke drifts off anywhere" (Levinas 1969, pp. 139–140).

This relational way of apprehending the world is evident in *Flow Chart* not just on an imagistic level, but also in the way in which its language constantly re-evaluates and restates its own assertions: the poem lacks the almost physical sense that *Three Poems* conveys of a train of thought gathering force and momentum as it attempts to arrive a conclusion (even though this conclusion may be deflected or deferred). Instead, it possesses a palimpsestic quality, its insistent use of both semantic and spatio-temporal qualifiers (*but*, *and*, *before*, *meanwhile*, *after*) conveying a sense not that an idea is being carefully refined, but rather that it is ducking and swerving away, just beyond the reach of the language that is attempting to delineate it. As a result, the poem's long, multi-clausal lines seem to overwrite and re-write themselves – as the speaker admits,

> A sore spot in my memory undoes what I have just written
> as fast as I can write; weave, and it shall be unraveled; talk, and the listener
> response
> will take your breath away, so it is decreed. And I shall be traveling on
> a little farther to a favorite spot of mine, O you'd like it, but no one can go there.
> (Ashbery 1991, p. 60)

The poem is in constant motion, always "traveling on", but its putative destination lies always, by definition, "a little farther", and is ultimately out of reach: "no one can go there". Like the image of the horizon, the "imaginative limit" which Angus Fletcher weaves into his model of 'the environment-poem' (Fletcher 2004, p. 7), it is both immanent and inaccessible.

As is the case in a compost heap, the transmutation that *Flow Chart* describes takes place as a result of compaction and relentless pressure – the "gray moisture… squeezes down on us so hard," the speaker complains (Ashbery 1991, p. 53). However, the composting and recycling of (subject) matter that the poem describes is not envisaged as being brought about, or even observed, by an individual such as the speaker of *The Vermont Notebook*'s dump poem, Charles Baudelaire's rag-picker, or Wallace Stevens's man on the dump. "One lives thus, plucking a mean sort of living from the rubbish heaps of history," the poem asserts, but the "one" it invokes is a diffuse entity, its experience and perspective inseparable from the onward flow of the text itself (Ashbery 1991, p. 13). *Flow Chart*'s own temporality – its headlong movement through time – is therefore crucial to the way in which it generates meaning, and to the way in which it composts and recycles its material. As Lolordo observes,

Ashbery's poem "constantly contextualises the momentary, by positioning the act of writing in different schemes of time (phenomenological, personal-autobiographical, historical)…" (Lolordo 2001, p. 755). Just as each point on a chart represents a snapshot-like observation of a single moment, as well as constituting part of a broader narrative that extends backwards and forwards through time, each moment of the poem refers to the act of narration that it is partaking in, as well as gesturing, by means of its wide-ranging literary references, its mercurial register and the ventriloquism of its diction, to a shifting and dynamic cultural sphere that lies beyond its pages. In its sprawling expansion across both the mundane, embodied rhythms of everyday life, and the sweeping narratives of literary history, it therefore describes the absorption, incorporation and reconstitution not merely of matter, but also of different modes of temporality – not least among them the subjective, bodily experience of living in and through time.

Indeed, several critics, including Marjorie Perloff, have drawn comparisons between *Flow Chart* and another long, riverine poem that charts the fleeting ebbs and flows, and the sweeping diachronic currents, of time and history, namely Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850). (Perloff 1991).[20] As well as dealing with temporality, both poems also display an ambivalence towards commerce, and towards the relentless, ever-shifting currents of capital, commodities and ideas that it entails: "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers," laments the speaker of Wordsworth's poem (Wordsworth 2013, 'The World is Too Much With Us'), linking the flow of capital to the "waste" of an individual's creative potential (and perhaps also suggesting an analogy with a 'wasteful' bodily, or sexual, act, which leaves the subject 'spent' but eager to re-embark on the same libidinous circuit). Similarly, the unrelenting flow of Ashbery's poem – the *business* that it frequently refers to – has the capacity both to revitalize and to enervate. On the one hand, it has a bracing effect on those who partake in it: "in all eras bargains have been struck,/horns blown, and in some strange, silly way each of us is the stronger for it", the poem asserts; it describes how "[l]ocal businessmen bristled," as if electrified by the energetic currents that course through the work with a "dazzling quicksilver sheen" (Ashbery 1991, p. 21, p. 33). However, *Flow Chart*'s 'busy-ness' also brings a sense of deep, annihilating exhaustion: "Even one step is out of the question,/I think, now. I no longer have the energy to breathe/on the windowpane," the

[20] Ben Hickman also notes the importance of *The Prelude* to Ashbery's long poems, although he sees it as primarily influencing Ashbery's earlier poetry, in particular 'A Wave' (Hickman 2012, p. 85).

speaker complains (Ashbery 1991, p. 28). No respite from the poem's continual movement is possible, so that its subjects find themselves helplessly caught up in its inescapable momentum, wishing for the peace that stasis, or even death, would bring: "only rolling over and over like a marble/that can never stop rolling and here we are, still…/permanently eager for the end of the run" (Ashbery 1991, p. 56).[21] At the end of Wordsworth's poem, the speaker chooses to return to what Ben Hickman calls the "relatively firm foundations of monarchy, religion and childhood" (Hickman 2012, p. 91). *Flow Chart*, however, refuses any return to stable ground, preferring "the buoyancy of the spongy terrain on which we exist" (Ashbery 1991, p. 10), and aligning itself decisively with the ever-shifting, self-erasing motions of the currents that it invokes. Ashbery's earlier 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' ends with the dissolution of the unified subject into unintelligible discontinuity as "each part of the whole falls off", leaving only ghostly and disembodied "whispers out of time" (Ashbery 1977, p. 83). In contrast, *Flow Chart* describes the absorption of the very notion of an individual subject into a choral, trans-subjective, yet ultimately elusive "we", which is ecological in its inseparability from – and its propensity to be subsumed into – time and environment. Ben Lerner has referred to the "liberating, but also annihilating" experience of reading *Flow Chart* (Lerner 2007, p. 376); this erasure of the self is discernible in the poem's final lines, which refer to

> that image of ourselves as it gets
> projected on trees and vine-coated walls and vapors in the night sky: a distant
> noise of celebration, forever off-limits.
>
> (Ashbery 1991, p. 216)

Although grammatically correct, the appearance of the singular pronoun 'it', rather than the plural 'we', after "ourselves", is slightly jarring, as if the collective "selves" that are being described become, for a moment, an indeterminate, impersonal object.

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[21] Cf Marvell in 'To His Coy Mistress':

> Let us roll all our strength, and all
> Our sweetness, up into one ball…
> Thus, though we cannot make our sun
> Stand still, yet we will make him run.
>
> (Marvell 1972, p. 51)

This sense of being both an *I* and a *we* – and, as a result, perhaps, failing fully and consistently to embody either position – is reminiscent of the eco-critic Timothy Morton's description of the experience of living in the anthropocene:

> There you are, turning the ignition of your car. And it creeps up on you. You are a member of a massively distributed thing. This thing is called a *species*… I'm a person. I'm also part of an entity that is now *a geophysical force of a planetary scale.*
>
> (Morton 2018, pp. 8–9)

The fluid ecology that Ashbery espouses in *Flow Chart*, in which both the observing subject and their environment are porous and poorly differentiated, liable to fuse at any time, results in a rendering down, or composting, of the very notion of waste itself. With all elements and properties – personal, material, social and ontological – in a state of constant flux, nothing can be categorised, with any durable certainty, as being "garbage".

Conclusion: Performing "The Play of our Living"

The speaker of Ashbery's poem 'The Lonedale Operator', from *A Wave* (1984), reminisces about a movie he saw as a child, which he remembers as being set in a "living room – small, though it was supposed to be in a large house" (Ashbery 2008, p. 771). As this thesis has demonstrated, the conceptual, phenomenological, temporal and epistemic spaces that Ashbery's poems document and create are, like this "living room", both "small" and "large" – discrete and intimate, yet inextricably connected to broader, more expansive structures. As a result, Ashbery's poetry both deals with what it is to live in the world both in highly subjective and individualized terms, while inviting us to contextualise this phenomenologically variegated experience within broad social and epistemological frameworks such as community, history and time.

The Lonedale Operator (1911), the film that the speaker of Ashbery's poem is recalling, is an early D.W. Griffith short, notable for the way in which it cuts between three different narrative spaces: the "living room" that Ashbery's speaker remembers, an outdoor space in the grounds of a "large house", and the interior of a train which is travelling towards the protagonists. In this combination of static and dynamic locations, which encompass both interior and exterior space, the film's actors behave, according to Ashbery's speaker, "like people on drugs, though they aren't doing anything unusual – as a matter of fact, they are performing brilliantly." The notion of *performance* that Ashbery's 'The Lonedale Operator' refers to draws together not only the various narrative spaces that the poem refers to, but also the various thematic strands – domesticity, space, time, and sexuality – that the poet's work explores. Ashbery's poetry creates environments in which simultaneously improvised and considered performances – of our relationships, and of our personal and communal identities, and of the social, economic and ecological aspects of our lives – can take place. These ideas are particularly evident in Ashbery's use of the concept of 'play', which possesses an ambiguous charge in his poetry, evoking the knowing artificiality of a theatrical performance, the sweeping temporal continuity of a musical one, and the dynamic fluidity of a game. This emphasis on 'play' highlights the importance of camp to the performances that Ashbery's work describes, and identifying a broader *performativity* that suggests answers to the questions with which this thesis began.

*   *   *

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Ashbery's treatment of space – from the vast expanse of America, bounded only by the horizon, to the enclosing interiors of a familiar, time-worn dwelling, implies that the individual subject must accommodate both heir subjective, internal experience of the world and their knowledge about the social, economic and philosophical frameworks that shape and structure it. 'Pyrography', from *Houseboat Days* (1977), articulates this imperative when it asks:

> How are we to inhabit
> This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing,
> As in a stage-set or dollhouse, except by staying as we are,
> In lost profile, facing the stars, with dozens of as yet
> Unrealized projects, and a strict sense
> Of time running out, of evening presenting
> The tactfully folded-over bill?
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 496)

'Pyrography' was written to complement the exhibition 'America 1976: A Bicentennial'. Commissioned by the U.S. Department of the Interior, the poem wonders "how… to inhabit" the various *interiors* (of the home, of the self, and of America, both as a spatial entity and as a nation) that the individual subject inherits or creates. It formulates this central question by positing a theatrical environment, a "stageset", from which the "fourth wall is missing": the imaginary barrier that prevents the actors from acknowledging the presence of the audience has been removed, with the result that it is impossible to separate the performance from the world that exists outside it.

The experience that a theatrical performance creates is fundamentally a social and communal one: its *mise-en-scene* exists, as Mieke Bal notes, "in a form accessible for public, collective reception" (Bal 2016, '1. Exhibition as Film'). A theatrical setting, this suggests, can never be considered to constitute a fully enclosed, self-contained space, regardless of the integrity, or otherwise, of its "fourth wall". As discussed in Chapter 4, during the AIDs crisis that ravaged New York as Ashbery was writing *A Wave* (1984), political, historical or communal conceptualisations of living in and through time revealed themselves to be inextricably

intertwined with subjective, personal and bodily experience; as a result, the setting in which one's experience takes place became "not the background, we're the background,/On the outside looking out" (Ashbery 2008, p. 742).

Indeed, the stages and settings within which Ashbery's various performances take place are prone to blend and merge with the performances that take place inside them, so that the individualized specificity of an isolated scene bleeds inexorably into the generality of its setting. *A Wave*'s prose-poem 'Description of a Masque' exemplifies this complex interaction between setting and scene. The poem appears at first to constitute an extended stage direction, to the extent that its dialogue is formatted as a theatrical script. However, it is narrated in the past tense ("The persimmon velvet curtain rose swiftly to reveal a space of uncertain dimensions and perspective...") (Ashbery 2008, p. 746). In some respects, it reads as a review of a performance, but it refers to "the audience" rather than to 'me' or 'us', from a perspective that is located on stage, on the same level as the players and able to move among them, rather than down in the stalls. In the shifting and uncertain theatrical space that the poem describes – a "space of uncertain dimensions and perspective" – it is almost impossible to separate the background from the foreground, or to demarcate the setting from the action that takes place within it. As the individual subject attempts to comprehend both the personal and the historical dimensions of their existence in and through time, one's physical dwelling, and one's wider social and cultural milieu, serve as a "stageset" in which simultaneously improvised and scripted performances of day-to-day life take place. Within these quasi-theatrical spaces, as Angus Fletcher points out when discussing the "diurnal" quality of Ashbery's poetry, the ongoing experience of living from moment to moment can give rise to a stultifying familiarity that verges on stasis (Fletcher 2004, pp. 77–78). However, the infinite, inexact repetitions which constitute our phenomenological experience also have the capacity to open up improvisational spaces of possibility, and even uncertainty – both the "living room" of 'The Lonedale Operator' and the "playroom" of the poem 'Variation on a Noel' (Ashbery 2008, p. 769) – in which we can choose how we will perform the "reflexive play of our living" (Ashbery 2008, p. 793).

Ashbery's 'play' evokes not only a theatrical performance, but also a musical one, and the poet has described being drawn to the way in which music suggests logical progression without articulating a definitive meaning, or arriving at an incontrovertible conclusion. "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," he told an interviewer in 1965 (qtd. in Ross 2017, p. 75). His long poem for two voices, 'Litany', in which a male and female voice weave in and out of each other, interrupting, contradicting, and at times drowning each other out, is the clearest expression of this tendency in his work. However, as Karin Roffman discusses, his poems frequently articulate a desire to attain what Walter Pater referred to as the "condition of music" (Roffman 2021). Ashbery's succinct comment in a 2008 interview that "I envy music's ability to argue without resorting to words" suggests that this enigmatic "condition" exists before, outside of, or beyond language (Kelley 2008).

Although the pre- or supra-verbal quality of music is undoubtedly pertinent to Ashbery's poetry, its temporality – that is, the way in which it exists in and through time – is also significant. A theatrical performance is a discrete event, in which the audience's habitual experience of temporality is briefly suspended. Even in Aristotle's descriptions of temporal unity in drama, the narrative does not unfold in real time, but rather mimetically *represents* a certain span of time, compressing or elongating its action as required: tragedy, Aristotle advises, must "tr[y] so far as possible to keep within a single day, or not to exceed it by much (Aristotle 1996, p. 9). In contrast to the elastic, subjective temporality of a theatrical performance, a musical performance is a continuous, ongoing process which takes place in tandem with, and is inseparable from, the passing of time; as Ashbery himself remarks, when listening to music, "you're waiting for the next sound to happen and following it as it unwinds" ((Bouvier 2016). The result is a seamless phenomenological experience that is analogous to consciousness itself: as the poem 'Syringa' explains, "[t]he way music passes" is "emblematic/Of life and how you cannot isolate a note of it" (Ashbery 2008, p. 535). Maintaining the continuity of this kind of performance is vital: one must "[j]ust keep playing," *A Wave* advises, "mastering as you do the step/Into disorder this one meant" (Ashbery 2008, p. 733). Indeed, the musicians that we encounter in Ashbery's poems tend to be somewhat prosaic figures; the "starving musicians/Strolling players" of *Litany*, the "the musicians for Faust…about to go on strike" of *The Tennis Court Oath*, the "average violin that knows/Only forgotten showtunes" (Ashbery 2008, p. 591, p. 75, p. 491). These musicians – like the figure of the poet which Chapter 5 discerns in Ashbery's mature collections – are primarily workers, rather than artists; their skill lies not only in their musical prowess, but also in their endurance, their ability to "just keep playing".

Ashbery's conceptualisation of the world, and of the subject's experience of it, as a continuous, quasi-musical performance – what *Three Poems* describes as "a wave of music which we were, unable to grasp it as it unfolded but living it" (Ashbery 2008, p. 270) – provides insights not only into the various notions of temporality that his poetry espouses, but also into the poetry's own place in time, and in history. For example, Ashbery's work undoubtedly possesses elements of occasionality, as David Herd has argued (Herd 2000). However, Herd's overall thesis that Ashbery, like his New York School contemporaries such as Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler, is *fundamentally* an occasional poet overlooks the ongoing quality of much of his work, from his early experiments such as the catalogue of rivers in 'Into the Dusk-Charged Air' (Ashbery 2008, p. 131) to the unstoppable onrush of sensory and intellectual experience described in *Flow Chart* (1991). In its vacillation between the occasional and the ongoing, Ashbery's work expresses the tension between two apparently distinct notions of poetry. On the one hand, it evokes the Romantic idea of the poem as a spontaneous, unmediated outgrowth of intense experience – what Stevens, in 'An Ordinary Evening', describes as "the cry of its occasion" (Stevens 1954, p. 473). On the other, it gestures towards more modern, and postmodern notions of the poem as either a contingent response to a fleeting and often objectively insignificant moment – a "step into disorder" – or an ambient accompaniment to the subject's ongoing phenomenological experience – what Mark Scroggins, writing on Ashbery's late, "low-intensity" collections, characterises as "poetry as wallpaper" (Scroggins 2017). Indeed, Ashbery's poetry goes so far as to question the parameters of this debate by illustrating the way in which these two apparently distinct concepts of temporality – occasionality and ongoingness – are prone to blend and blur together, with the distinct moment always about to merge with other moments to form a undifferentiated swathe of time, the "one neutral band that surrounds/Me on all sides" of 'Self-Portrait…' (Ashbery 1977, p. 71) and the somewhat unpredictable, quasi-musical continuity of experience often acquiring an event-like specificity: "melodious tolling does go on in that awful pandemonium", *The Skaters* reminds us (Ashbery 2008, p. 148).

An analogue for Ashbery's treatment of a poem as a temporal framework can be found in the work of the composer John Cage, who treated the musical score as a 'setting' within whose temporal and conceptual spaces new possibilities might be realized. Ashbery has commented on the way in which Cage's music excited and inspired him. In his introduction to Frank O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, he describes how he and O'Hara saw a performance of Cage's *Music of Changes* in New York that left them both "tremendously impressed… that chance

elements could combine to produce so beautiful and cogent a work…" (O'Hara 1995, p. ix). When Bouvier describes an Ashbery poem as "a kind of playable score", he is referring primarily to the way in which the reader is required to participate in the construction of its meaning (Bouvier 2016). However, his comment also draws our attention to the way in which many of Ashbery's works, like those of Cage, adopt formal rules or constraints, from the traditional (the rigid verse forms of the canzone and the pantoum) to the playfully self-imposed (the 16-line poems of *Shadow Train* (1981), and the alphabetically ordered titles of 1995's *Can You Hear, Bird*?). In this respect, the form of an Ashbery poem corresponds to the musical score, and the poem itself is the performance or play that takes place as a result of it: a contingent and individualized act of interpretation that fleetingly unites novelty with tradition, and combines continuity with occasionality.

Indeed, the poet's interest in formal and conceptual constraints also suggest the possibility that an Ashbery poem is playable not only as a score, but also as a game. This suggests another importance valence of the word 'play' in Ashbery's poetry – the ludic. Geoff Ward comments on Ashbery's "indefatigable appetite for play" (Ward 1993, p. 100), and games are frequently mentioned in Ashbery's poetry, with *The Vermont Notebook* devoting one of its lists to them:

> …contract bridge, Michigan poker, rummy, solitaire, Monopoly, Sorry, Parcheesi, Scrabble, Authors, checkers, Chinese checkers, chess…
>
> (Ashbery 2008, p. 339)

Ashbery's arch inclusion of "Authors" – a card game dating back to the 1860s – acknowledges the text's own playful, ludic quality, and invites us to wonder whether the most apposite analogues for *The Vermont Notebook*'s list-poems – and, perhaps, for Ashbery's poems in general – are not the neatly ruled lines of an index, which imposes order on the objective world, but the flexible, communal and playful rules of a game. These rules – like the notions of poetic style discussed in Chapter 2 – consist of both what is inherited and what is improvised. In as much as they prohibit, or rule out, certain actions or behaviours, they are analogous to the lines which make their way across the poet's page, including and excluding certain kinds of experience, and modes of expressing it. However, just as Ashbery's settings blend into the scenes that take place within them, and his poems constitute both a score and a performance, his ludic sensibility deals not only with fixed rules, nor with the fluid 'play' that

continuously interprets them, but rather with the interaction between them – with what ‘A Wave’ calls “the game…fast, perplexed and true” (Ashbery 2008, p. 791).

* * *

As these debates suggest, and as this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, Ashbery’s poetry adopts an interrogative posture in relation to its capacity to describe experience. In doing so it adopts, performs and evaluates different ways of conceptualising and communicating the ‘real’, objective world that exists outside the boundaries of the poem. Indeed, as Chapter 3 discussed, Ashbery’s work frequently explores questions of representation, mimesis and realism. In doing so, it invites us to consider where, and by what means, an apparently simple and intuitively present, yet tantalisingly elusive, ‘real’ or ‘natural’ experience of the world might be accessed. This question applies both in relation to works of art which profess to represent ‘reality’ exactly as it is, and to the natural – and *un*natural – spaces and landscapes within which the subject’s experience takes place. Ashbery’s poetry of the 1970s surveys a variety of settings – the convex mirror of Parmigianino’s self-portrait, the sumptuous yet suffocatingly enclosed chamber of the artist himself as he awaits the arrival of the Roman soldiers, the contemporary American city and the surrounding landscapes that uneasily straddle the categories of urban and rural – and finds in them only a hackneyed, second-order approximation of naturalness that tacitly affirms its distance from what is authentic and ‘real’, even as it proclaims its total fidelity to it. By extension, attempts at artistic realism, such as Parmigianino’s attempt “With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass” (Ashbery 1977, p. 68), and also, perhaps, Ashbery’s own ekphrastic poem, are fated to produce not convincing and authentic representations of real-world experience, but uncanny simulacra: not ‘real life’, then, but, as *The Vermont Notebook* memorably describes it, “real *camp* life” (Ashbery 2008, p. 411 [italics mine]).

As this tongue-in-cheek phrase suggests, *The Vermont Notebook* – with its melancholic ‘Fairies’ Song’, its deadpan catalogue of small-town womenswear stores, and its eventual descent into feverish and scatological ‘necro-pastoral’ – is Ashbery’s most openly camp collection. However, what Herd refers to as a “deliciously camp” sensibility is discernible throughout his oeuvre (Herd 2000, p. 20). The theatrical performances that Ashbery’s poetry describes frequently possess a camp quality, not least ‘Description of a Masque’, in which leather-clad characters from nursery rhymes cavort in a Parisian dive bar (Ashbery 2008, p.

746). Additionally, as Mark Silverberg argues, camp is discernible in Ashbery's mercurial diction, which "wilfully mix[es] and confus[es] such value-laden categories as serious and humorous, high and low, avant-garde and kitsch" (Silverberg 2002, p. 287). What Silverberg describes as an "entertaining flirtation with schlock" (Silverberg 2002, p. 295) is present throughout Ashbery's work, from his playful doggerel in 'Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox' to his semi-parodic take on the coming-of-age poem in 'Soonest Mended', which veers with relish between Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and "Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile" (Ashbery 2008, p. 191, p. 184).

Esther Newton, in her seminal study of drag queens in America, defines camp parenthetically, and somewhat tersely, as "homosexual humor and taste" (Newton 1972, p. 3) . This thesis has emphasised the importance of Ashbery's queerness to an understanding of his work, and the camp sensibility that is discernible in his poetry can indeed be read, on one level, as an acknowledgment of his sexuality, and of the broader community of which he was a part. Chapter 4 argued queerness is present in his work both as a contextualising medium and as a wave-like disturbance: it both stabilises and disrupts the way in which his poetry conveys meaning. Chapter 6 proceeded to argue that Ashbery's interest in, and affinity for, that which is excessive, marginal, or otherwise stigmatised is, at least in part, an expression of an identity which, for much of the 20th century in America, was considered to be both wasteful in its inability to partake in reproduction, and waste-*like* in its perceived connection to mess, dirt and unwholesomeness.

As a result of its defiant connection to what the sociologist Erving Goffman, writing in 1963, called the "spoiled identity" of queerness (Schmidt 2014, p. 14), camp can therefore be seen to possess an inherently political dimension. For Fabio Cleto, it represents a "survivalist strategy… for the subordinated, the excluded, the unnatural, the fake" (Cleto 1999, p. 8). Indeed, the homonym 'mask' that hovers behind the theatrical term 'Masque' in the title of Ashbery's riotously camp prose-poem reminds the reader that *masking* was an inescapable part of everyday life for queer people in 20th-century America. However, as Cleto goes on to argue, camp is not *only* playful, or escapist, or politically engaged: it also possesses a broader philosophical significance due to the way in which it enacts a "queer deconstruction of the opposition between 'original' and 'copy', 'true' and 'false', 'primary' and 'secondary'" (Cleto 1999, p. 8). As a result, it reveals the way in which a subject's identity is, on a fundamental level, constructed rather than 'real'. As Susan Sontag suggests, "[t]o perceive Camp in

objects and personas is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role”. As a result, she asserts, “[i]t is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre” (Sontag 1966, p. 280).

Through its overt and unapologetic artificiality, camp therefore deconstructs the very notion of ‘naturalness’ – and, by extension, of ‘reality’ and ‘truth’. As a result, as Mattijs van de Port notes, camp not only provides solace to those whose desires are perceived by society to be ‘unnatural’, but also goes a step further in “seek[ing] to undo the naturalizations that dominate a given cultural order” (van de Port 2012, p. 865). It achieves this, van Port argues, by simultaneously challenging the Enlightenment and the Romantic assumptions that a state of being that is inherently *natural* can be located either in the external, empirical world, or in an individual’s subjective internal world, respectively (van de Port 2012, p. 864). As Chapter 6 argued, Ashbery’s poetry invites us to consider the means by which we designate objects, ideas or identities as worthy or wasteful. In a similar way, by calling into question the idea that an object, person or state can be reliably categorised as natural or authentic, it disrupts the tacit logical progression that slides seamlessly from ‘naturalness’ to ‘reality’, and finally to ‘truth’.

The concept of performativity, particularly as it is used by Judith Butler to elucidate the way in which gender is socially constructed, is useful in exploring the significance of camp in Ashbery’s poetry. For Butler, the gendered subject is engaged in constantly constituting the identity that they purport to represent. In this respect, they claim, gender is “always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed”. They go on to quote Nietzsche: “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything” (Butler 1999, p. 33). In a similar way, the experience of living in the world that Ashbery’s poetry describes – and, by extension, the poetry itself – inevitably involves a certain unnaturalness or artificiality, a knowing ‘playing of a role’, as well as a conscious adoption of a diction, form or style. However, the role that is being played is not that *of* a particular character, and no ‘real’ persona – or objective truth – can be said to exist beneath it. Instead, the role being played is subordinate to, and constantly being constructed by, the act of playing it. One might torque the Nietzschean formulation quoted by Butler to claim that in Ashbery’s poetry there is no *being* (noun) behind *being* (verb); what appears to be solid, static and intelligible disintegrates, when examined, into an elusive, fragmentary and constantly evolving process. As a result, the artificially constructed

“stageset” in which the “play of our living” is performed cannot be reliably separated from a ‘real’, authentic, or natural world that lies somewhere beyond or outside of it. Nor can the background – the site of setting and ambience – be demarcated from the foreground where the supposedly crucial and decisive action of the narrative occurs. The “play of our living” is, Ashbery’s poetry suggests, both considered and improvised: intimate and familiar to us, yet fundamentally mysterious and strange. Like the actors in ‘The Lonedale Operator’, the subject finds themselves behaving in a highly artificial way, “like people on drugs”, while simultaneously “performing brilliantly” (Ashbery 2008, p. 773); the act of “playing” collapses the distinction between what is natural and what has been artfully constructed. It is perhaps this polymorphous, open-ended “play” – knowing yet childlike, constructed yet spontaneous – which constitutes the enigmatic “play… a deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern” described in ‘Paradoxes and Oxymorons’ (Ashbery 2008, p. 698).

This leads to a modified version of one of the questions with which this thesis began: if the kind of performance that we find in Ashbery’s poetry can be said to be a *knowing* one, what – and how – does it know? Wayne Koestenbaum notes, when exploring the etymology of the word ‘queer’, that “[t]he uncertainty of the word’s meaning helps it designate incomplete knowledge” (Koestenbaum 1989, p. 21). It is certainly possible to argue that Ashbery’s poetry constitutes not only a queer articulation of the experience of living in the world, but also a broader ‘queering’ of the very notion that a subject could fully know, or accurately describe, this experience. The notion that the subject is fundamentally prohibited from knowing the ‘truth’ about their own experience echoes Freud’s theory of *Nachtraglichkeit*, or “deferred action” (Freud 1966, p. 277), which states that our knowledge of the world, and of ourselves, is constructed by means of the total repression of an ‘original’ traumatic experience, which, as a result, is rendered forever inaccessible. This process leads to what Joan Copjec refers to the “sovereign incalculability of the subject.” (Copjec 2015, ‘8. Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason’). This thesis has also referred to Heidegger at key junctures, and in this respect, as in several others, Ashbery’s poetry would appear to align with Heideggerian thought, which not only holds that “Being” as an abstract concept is inseparable from a specific and subjective experience of being-in-the-world , but also argues that, as Magrini and Schwieler put it, “Being cannot be intellectually grasped and then communicated without distortion in language” (Magrini and Schwieler 2017, p. 3). For Heidegger (particularly in his later works, after the ‘Turn’ away from Dasein in his philosophy) Being has *always already* eluded description in language: as Vallega-Neu explains, Heideggerian thought eschews “the simple

distinction between metaphysical language and non-metaphysical 'content'" which operates as if "the right meaning were *already there* and we needed only the correct words" (Vallega-Neu 2003, p. 26).

However, this thesis has sought to add the important caveat that the incompleteness of the knowledge of the world that Ashbery's poetry conveys – which corresponds, perhaps, to what critics such as Shetley and Kostelantez identify as its difficulty, what Marjorie Perloff refers to as its "indeterminacy", and what Helen Vendler perceives as an inability to be 'about' anything – is not reducible to a mere lack of data. It is not a lacuna that might be filled if only the right sources could be consulted, and the 'correct words' found to articulate the information they contain. Instead, the incompleteness that Ashbery's poetry evokes is – unlike Freud's traumatic repression, and Heidegger's insufficient language – positively constitutive of the knowledge that it conveys: it is a necessary and inescapable aspect of the variety of knowing-about-the-world that the poetry describes. To adopt this position is not to agree with Longenbach's characterisation of Ashbery's poetry as "the warped but inevitable conclusion of a debased New Critical aesthetic: the poem that does not mean, but is" (Longenbach 2007b, p. 114). Nor is it to reconstitute him as *a de facto* language poet, whose fundamental concern is the way in which language can (or cannot) convey the material realities of lived experience. Instead, it is to concur with critics such as Andrew Epstein, who discern in Ashbery's work a pragmatic, flexible quality: an Ashbery poem arrives at meaning through a dynamic and responsive process that calibrates itself by looking both inwards and outwards – at the ever-changing objective world, and at its own fluid responses to it. William James asserts that in pragmatic philosophy, "Ideas… become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience" (Legg and Hookaway 2021). Similarly, in Ashbery's poetry, 'truth' and 'reality' cease to become binding judgements about the objective world, and function instead as fluid elements in the work's own relational structure. If a poem that operates in this dynamic, iterative way can be thought of as a self-contained system, then, as *Three Poems* memorably claims, "The system [is] breaking down", in both senses of the phrase: it is assimilating what it takes in, 'breaking it down' into a digestible form, and is itself changing, disintegrating, and reforming under the influence of this external material (Ashbery 2008, p. 280).

The incompleteness that is a constituent part of Ashbery's knowledge of the world is discernible in the imagery of his poems, which frequently refer to negative space in the form

of troughs, recesses and gaps. The poet's speakers frequently run their hands over the literal and figurative surfaces they encounter and find them (oxymoronically) full of holes, from the "far recess of summer [where]/Monks are playing soccer" in 'The Picture of Little J.A…' (Ashbery 2008, p. 13) to the aerated, Fullerian structures of *Three Poems* (Ashbery 2008, pp. 247–326). However, the gaps and holes that the poetry discovers are not merely areas of weakness, insufficiency or lack; instead, they are imagined as an expansion of space, inseparable from the overall integrity, and the broader meaning, of the surfaces on which they occur. As a result, as the poem 'Ice Cream Wars' asserts, "the truth becomes a hole" (Ashbery 2008, p. 529). Indeed, Ashbery frequently employs the homonyms *whole* and *hole* in close proximity to each other, as if to illustrate the way in which semantic content and the lack of it are not opposites, but are rather complementary ways of understanding and communicating one's knowledge about, and experience of, the world.

This thesis will therefore conclude by asserting that Ashbery's poetry offers us a way to apprehend, understand, and exist in the world without having to be certain about it, or to *know* it in a way that depends on the acquisition of discrete, definitive information. The kind of knowledge of the world that his poetry conveys is no less meaningful for being provisional, no less complete for being partial, and no less pertinent for being vague. When considering these matters, one is perhaps reminded of Joe Brainard's illustration of a blank signpost, which accompanies Ashbery's "8 mi to Danbury…" prose-poem in *The Vermont Notebook*. (Ashbery 2008, p. 367). The image of the signpost is constructed of negative space, and on its representational surface, where one would expect to find a message of some kind, there is only more space. In a similar way, Ashbery's poetry simultaneously conveys and withholds its knowledge of the world (and conveys it by withholding it). In doing so, it creates the same uneasily vacillating epistemological space – hovering indeterminately between what Wallace Stevens called the 'Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Stevens 1954, p. 9) – that flickers in and out of existence on the surface of Brainard's blank sign.

Why, then, one might be tempted to ask, have a signpost at all, if one is only going to leave it blank? To which Ashbery's poetry responds: to play, and "just keep playing".

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