JOHN ASHBERY'S ESSAYISM: POETRY CLOSE TO PHILOSOPHY

by

MARY KAY BOYD

(Under the Direction of Adam Parkes)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation reads John Ashbery's poetry in the context of essayism and skeptical, pragmatic, and phenomenological philosophy. Essayism stems from Montaigne's method for testing ideas without requiring final resolution and occurs in a variety of genres to explore possibilities with the skeptical doubt that the whole of anything can be seen; ideas are presented as a succession of experiments. Essayism considers philosophical concerns with "deliberate uncertainty," assaying them by means of digression and interrogation. Ashbery adopts this essayistic attitude of inquiry in order to pursue his "broad" subject of "an individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world of external phenomena." His poetry continually probes existence as a dynamic relationship between a being and its world; this view evokes the phenomenological ontology of Heidegger, who defines existence as "being-in-the-world." Ashbery's poetry also suggests William James's pragmatism, which looks toward real-world consequences rather than abstract principles, and James's "stream of consciousness," which takes into account the vague fringes of consciousness. I discuss the beginnings of Ashbery's essayism in his early poetry, but focus primarily on his long works, each of which adopts a different form to answer the "major question that revolves

around you, your being here." The forms of *Three Poems*, *Flow Chart*, and *Girls on the Run* are meditative prose, autobiography, and narrative, respectively. Ashbery thereby addresses the same question from changing perspectives to attain a more complete view of his subject. Calling himself "a *bricoleur* as far as philosophy goes," he reads philosophy that considers the contingent nature of experience and does not rely primarily on theoretical systematism; thus, the tentative method of essayism provides a complementary mode for the expression of his thought. I approach Ashbery's poetry from two angles: *how* essayism's philosophical inquiry motivates his poetry and *what* it uncovers. As a pragmatist, Ashbery asks ontological questions to help him determine, provisionally, his place among the phenomena in his experience. As a poet, Ashbery enlivens this process and his ideas with his unique language, style, and wit; he not only seeks to widen his circle of consciousness, but also acknowledges life's dimly felt, incomprehensible mysteries.

INDEX WORDS: Essayism, Skepticism, Phenomenological Ontology, Pragmatism, Meditation, Prose, Autobiography, Narrative, Consciousness, *Bricoleur*, American Poetry, Contemporary Poetry

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MARY KAY BOYD

B.A., The University of Georgia, 1964

M.A., Florida Atlantic University, 1990

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MARY KAY BOYD

Major Professor: Adam Parkes

Committee: Kristin Boudreau
                     Carl Rapp
                     Aidan Wasley

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

With love and gratitude for everything they've done, been, and are for me over the course of my life, I dedicate this dissertation to everyone in my family—my parents, aunts and uncles, husband, brothers and sister, daughter, nephews, cousins, in-laws—particularly to my husband Ed, who honors my passion for my work at the same time as he holds our life together with the fundamental necessities of dinner and laughter; to my daughter Sarah, who is the essential philosopher-poet and grounding reality in my life; to my sister Bette McIntire, who keeps her generous ears and fine mind open in our ongoing, lifelong conversation; and to my brother Bob Giles, whose Ashberyan approach to life remains an inspiration for me, not only in this project but in all ways.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AG	*April Galleons*
AWK	*As We Know*
CYHB	*Can You Hear, Bird*
DDS	*The Double Dream of Spring*
FC	*Flow Chart*
GR	*Girls on the Run*
HD	*Houseboat Days*
NN	*A Nest of Ninnies*
RM	*Rivers and Mountains*
RS	*Reported Sightings*
SP	*Selected Prose*
SPCM	*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*
ST	*Some Trees*
TCO	*The Tennis Court Oath*
TP	*Three Poems*
WSIW	*Where Shall I Wander*
WC	*A Worldly County*

INTRODUCTION

An interviewer once asked John Ashbery whether he thought of himself as a philosophical poet and whether he read much in philosophy. "No," he replied (Labrie 31). This terse denial underscores Ashbery's well-known lack of interest in discussing his poetry's possible connection with philosophy. He may have believed such a categorization would limit the scope of his poetry in readers' eyes, or he may have wanted to dissociate himself from the common perception of philosophy as abstract theory unconnected to real-life concerns.

Regardless of his reason, his preference for keeping philosophy out of the discussion of his poetry was consistent with, though perhaps not driven by, the aims of New Criticism, which was losing its position of dominance in the United States due to the rise of literary theory.[1] Despite his rejection of the label, "philosophical poet," Ashbery's poetry addresses such central philosophical subjects as time, truth, the encounter of consciousness with the phenomena in experience, and the interaction between thought and language. Further, his denial that he read "much in philosophy" left open the possibility that in his wide range of reading he had been reading some. Twenty years later, in 2002, another interviewer asked a more specific question: "Did you read philosophy ever?" and Ashbery elaborated:

> I read philosophy that is close to poetry: Plato, Epictetus, Montaigne,
> Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, William James. Wittgenstein a little. Not
> Spinoza, Hume, or Kant. [. . .] I could never figure out how you are

supposed to know when you have a clear and distinct idea of something,

and I still can't. (Ford 60)

Ashbery thus presents the most important distinguishing characteristic of "philosophy that is close to poetry," according to his conception of poetry, but he indirectly defines it with a negative: it is *not* the philosophy of the Cartesian tradition that seeks "clear and distinct" ideas. René Descartes, whom many consider the father of modern philosophy, declared the first rule in his "method of obtaining knowledge" to be "never accept anything as true unless I recognized it to be evidently such: that is, [. . .] include nothing in my conclusions unless it presented itself so clearly and distinctly to my mind that there was no occasion to doubt it" (Descartes 11-12). Ashbery cannot "figure out" philosophers who share in Cartesian rationalism's goal of certainty; he prefers to read more skeptical philosophers who engage with unclear and indistinct ideas to attain a clearer understanding of them, but realize they cannot know whether their resultant comprehension of them is absolutely (completely and without doubt) clear or correct. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "philosophy" as the study or pursuit of wisdom or knowledge; as a particular system of beliefs relating to the general scheme of existence and the universe; and as an outlook or worldview. Philosophy close to poetry would engage in the pursuit of ideas, but would avoid premature capitulation to conclusive systematism or restrictive worldviews.

Essayism: Philosophy Close to Poetry—Poetry Close to Philosophy

To avoid such systematism and restriction, the philosophers in Ashbery's reading list do not rely on the formal argument of the treatise, but turn more often to less structured forms such as dialogue, lecture, aphorism, letter, journal, and essay. They tend to prize question over resolution and employ provisional over definitive statements; they value conclusion primarily as a springboard for further inquiry. This approach to writing as discovery rather than exposition is sometimes termed "essayistic," an adjectival or modal extension of the essay genre; this distinction is explained by Alastair Fowler: "[T]he terms for kinds, perhaps in keeping with their obvious external embodiment, can always be put in noun form ('epigram'; 'epic'), whereas modal terms tend to be adjectival. [. . .] The terms for modes are obviously applied more widely. [. . .] Modes have always an incomplete repertoire, a selection only of the corresponding kind's features" (106-07).

In his 1947 essay "Uber den Essay und seine Prosa," Max Bense explains essayistic writing, stressing its experimental and phenomenological way of thinking that sets it apart from logical deduction and induction:

> Thus the essay distinguishes itself from a scientific treatise. He writes essayistically who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, who questions it, feels it, tests it, thoroughly reflects on it, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind's eye collects what he sees, and puts into words what the object allows to be seen under the conditions established in the course of writing.

(quoted in Adorno 104-105)

Essayistic writing, also known as essayism, establishes "different angles" from which to test or assay a thought by taking advantage of the "antigeneric" tendency of the essay, which "possesses no definitive mode of procedure" (Harrison 3). Essayism benefits from the flexibility this tendency offers in two ways. On one hand, it is not limited to essays but can be incorporated in any genre, including philosophy and poetry, by adopting the essay's traits: "more digressive than systematic, more interrogative than declarative, more descriptive than explanatory—[. . .] an act undertaken in deliberate uncertainty" (Harrison 3). And on the other hand, it encourages the integration of elements from a variety of genres into a work in order to change the writer's perspective.

If Ashbery reads philosophy that is close to poetry, he also writes poetry close to philosophy. In another interview, he repeated his denial of a link between his poetry and philosophy but acknowledged that he follows certain philosophical methods: "Philosophy hasn't directly influenced my poetry but the process of philosophical inquiry certainly has; again, sitting down to somehow elucidate a lot of almost invisible currents and knocking them into some sort of shape is very much my way of doing but as for specific philosophical concepts I don't think they play any role in my work" ("Craft Interview" 22). Ashbery's explanation suggests that his poetry is driven by empirical inquiry, not preconceived concepts, as he seeks "some sort of shape," not "the shape," for the vague perceptions of experience. In his review of the artist Jane Freilicher's work, he says he admires the "tentative" quality of her paintings and "probably prefers" the method of those artists "who accept the *tentative*, the whatever happens along," rather than that of "those who organize and premeditate" (RS 240, 244, italics added). Ashbery defines being "tentative" in a phenomenological sense as taking nothing for granted, letting

"things, finally, be," adopting an "'OK, but let's see what else there is' attitude" (242-

43). Ashbery's use of the word "tentative" indirectly connects his preferred attitude

toward art with the method of essayism: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun

"tentative" as "an essay" and defines an "essay" as "a first tentative effort." Ashbery

makes productive use of the essayistic mode's tentative and antigeneric tendencies: he

sets up his poems as exploratory fields in which to test his major concerns, and he

incorporates elements from other genres, such as meditation, autobiography, and

narrative, that provide him different vantage points.

In his analysis of philosophical style, Berel Lang proposes an "'interaction'

model" wherein a writer, "in choosing a form or structure for philosophical discourse, is,

in that act, also shaping the substance or content which the form then—very loosely

speaking now—will be 'of.' The form in other words is an ingredient of philosophical

content" (18, original italics). Likewise, Ashbery likely develops his poetic discourse in

an essayistic form because it is the most advantageous structure not only to accommodate

but also to extend the full range of his ultimate concern. He describes his subject in

phenomenological terms:

> There are no themes or subjects in the usual sense, except the very broad
>
> one of an individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world
>
> of external phenomena. The work is a very complex, but, I hope, *clear*
>
> and concrete transcript of the impressions left by these phenomena on that
>
> consciousness. (Friedman 33, italics added)

Consciousness paradoxically *seems* to be fundamentally understood yet remains difficult

to define. Roger Scruton concludes that "it is fair to say [the puzzle of consciousness] is

one of the most important questions to which modern philosophy is addressed" (489-90).

Ashbery investigates consciousness, not as an isolated and definable entity, but both as

the knowledge gained from introspection and as an individual confrontation with

phenomena in a particular world—it has an inner and outer aspect, which must be

considered together. In this view, consciousness is tied to perception of phenomena

encountered in experience and in time, which requires Ashbery's ongoing endeavor to

interpret that phenomena. In "The New Spirit," the poem's speaker calls for attention to

"the major question that revolves around you, your being here. [. . .] You have got to

begin in the way of choosing some one of the forms of answering that question" (TP 51).

Answering the major question of being presupposes a consciousness able to perceive,

interact with, interpret, and respond to the phenomena in its experience. Therefore,

Ashbery conducts this investigation through his poetry, not by meditating on the abstract

notion of being, but by noticing the more concrete perceptions of his consciousness; the

poetic transcription of these observations, in turn and ironically, widens understanding of

the more abstract, fundamental question of being. Ashbery takes a tentative approach to

this task, although in describing the goals of his work, he uses the term "clear," a word he

disparages in his remarks on "clear and distinct" ideas in philosophy. However, in his

poetry, he hopes for clarity in transcribing impressions as they appear to him, not for

clarity in forming concepts that eliminate all doubt.

Ashbery makes this point another way when he describes poets as "necessarily

inaccurate transcribers of the life that is always on the point of coming into being"

("Second Presentations" 10). The unending search for increased clarity in language is

also a search for increased clarity in thought. William Gass asserts that language is

thought: "To see the world through words means more than merely grasping it through gossipacious talk or amiable description. Language, unlike any other medium, I think, is the very instrument and organ of the mind. It is not the representation of thought, as Plato believed, and hence only an inadequate copy; but it is thought itself" (35-36). Therefore, in Gass's view, the difficulty of accurately expressing thought in language equals the difficulty of accurate thinking itself. And, therein, lays the necessity of a provisional, essayistic method for transcribing the inconclusive interactions of a consciousness with the phenomena of its world: it accepts the impossibility of absolute clarity in either language or thought; but, in the face of that realization, it inches toward increased clarity in both.

The Development of Essayism

The genre of essay and the mode of essayism have long been associated with philosophy because they are apt forms for weighing, testing, exploring and revising ideas. The essay's development in a philosophical sense must begin with Montaigne, the first to call his work an "essay"; Montaigne's essays hark back to the essayistic dialogues of Plato and, at the same time, prefigure the essayistic modes of twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy. Though the essayistic mode emerges from the Montaignian informal essay, it has undergone a number of different applications and critical analyses before breaking through generic boundaries to appear in Ashbery's poetic, philosophical essayism.

Montaigne (1533-92) introduces the term "essay" in describing his short works to highlight his intention of testing rather than exhausting his subjects. With his *Essais,* he

transforms ancient skepticism, which abandoned inquiry because of a belief that nothing could be known, into a modern skepticism, which retains "an openness to what is possible" despite not knowing everything (Hartle 184,193). In determining that knowledge of the world is gained through the senses, Montaigne deduces "we no longer know what things are in truth; for nothing comes to us except falsified and altered by our senses. [. . .] The uncertainty of our senses makes everything they produce uncertain" (454); thus, uncertainty is a matter of perception. He does not deny truths might exist, he simply doubts he can know them; or if he does know them, he will not know with certainty that he knows. With a belief in action (as opposed to the ancients' submission to imperturbability and abandonment of inquiry [Hartle 184]), Montaigne elects to write essays in a continuing response to his motto: "What do I know?" (393).

The essay, as Montaigne construes it, not only allows for expression of epistemological skepticism but also for self-scrutiny within a skeptical framework. Donald M. Frame writes that for Mongaigne "the *Essais* were not a genre, but [. . .] a succession of probings, trials, or samplings, of the self" (72). They are not autobiographical in the sense that they relate specific experiences, but they record the movement of Montaigne's thought on the various subjects that come his way. Throughout the writing of his essays, he revises his own purposes for writing them, redefines his intended audience, and, most important, accepts contradiction regarding himself:

> If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways. All contradictions may be found in me by some twist and in some fashion. [. . .] I have nothing to say about myself absolutely,

simply, and solidly, without confusion and without mixture, or in one

word. *Distinguo* is the most universal member of my logic. (242)

To be reductive would be to ignore life's variety, which he welcomes, as it appears in the

world and in himself. "The world is nothing but variety and dissimilarity" (244), and so

are the people in it: "We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition

that each bit, each moment, plays its own game. And there is as much difference

between us and ourselves as between us and others" (244). Therefore, Montaigne adopts

the same skepticism toward self-knowledge as he does toward knowledge of others and

the world. His self-investigation will necessarily be incomplete and ongoing: "There is

no end to our researches; our end is in the other world" (817). His model is Socrates,

who "is always asking questions and stirring up discussion, never concluding, never

satisfying" (377).

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) establishes the English form of the expository essay

in his *Essays*, a title perhaps inspired by Montaigne. Bacon's essays tend toward a more

aphoristic style than Montaigne's informal, conversational style, and they follow a

stricter argumentative structure than Montaigne's essays, which often digress or change

direction. Nevertheless, his essays, anticipated by Montaigne's, are associated with "the

spirit of free enquiry and experimentalism, [. . .] which, together with the philosophies of

Locke, Berkeley, and Hume especially, launch the English tradition of essays" in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Obaldia 36-37). John A. McCarthy believes that in

their differences, Montaigne and Bacon complement rather than oppose each other:

Montaigne and Bacon can be viewed as integral perspectives. The one

proceeds intuitively, deductively, the other rationally and inductively

toward the same goal: a tentative, holistic apprehension of

humankind and its world. [. . .] Both were skeptics, both sought free

expression of their personal views, both rejected rigid rationalistic

systems. Both endeavored to instill in their audiences a willingness to be

open to other views. (43)

The essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Walter Pater (1839-1894),

important modern heirs of Montaigne, continue his dialectical skepticism. Harold Bloom

notes that "the Plato of Walter Pater is Montaigne's Plato, [. . .] a skeptical evader of

systems, including his supposed own," and he points to a comparison with "Emerson's

Plato (also influenced by Montaigne)" (*Figures of Capable Imagination* 43). According

to Emerson, a "defect" in Plato's writings is that "there is an interval; and to cohesion,

contact is necessary" and "in the second place, he has not a system" ("Plato" 438), both

qualities that Emerson and Pater, in the wake of Montaigne, emulate.

Emerson pays direct tribute to Montaigne as "the frankest and honestest of all

writers" (*Selected Essays* 289) and follows his forebear's essayistic method in his own

lectures and essays: "I neither affirm nor deny. I stand here to try the case. I am here to

consider, σκεπτε ιν, to consider how it is" (285). He calls himself a poet, which he

defines as a thinker whose "speech is thunder, [whose] thought is law" (216):

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a

thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it

has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The

thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of

genesis the thought is prior to the form. (207)

Emerson's belief that passionate thought determines poetic form separates the skillful from the inspired poet; the world needs to hear the "true" poet's views of the world. In this sense, Emerson seems to advocate a poetry that is close to philosophy; and he asserts that spirited thought will direct its own expression and form. Additionally, he connects the philosopher with poetic thought, which transcends genres in a tentative manner in order to grasp life's flux: "So the philosopher avails himself of the drama, the epic, the novel, & becomes a poet; for these complex forms allow of the utterance of his knowledge of life by *indirections* as well in the didactic way, & can therefore express the fluxional quantities & values which the thesis or dissertation could never give" (*Emerson in His Journals* 217, original italics).

Pater wrote explicitly about Montaigne in connection with Plato. He argues for the contemporaneous significance of Montaigne's essayistic method, which combines flexibility with intellectual rigor and relates "forms of composition [. . . to] the intellectual conditions of different ages" (156):[2]

> Necessities of literary form, determined directly by matter [. . . correspond to] essentially different ways in which the human mind relates itself to truth. [. . .] If the treatise, with its ambitious array of premiss and conclusion, is the natural out-put of scholastic all-sufficiency; so, the form of the essay [. . .] provided [Montaigne] with precisely the literary form necessary to a mind for which truth itself is but a possibility, realisable not as general conclusion, but rather as the elusive effect of a particular personal experience. (157)

Pater's case for the essay as the "strictly appropriate form of our modern philosophic literature" (156) finds its strongest example in Plato. Pater considers the Platonic Dialogue as "essentially an essay" (157-58) with "the tentative character of dialectic, of question and answer as the method of discovery" (169). "This essentially informal, this un-methodical method" (166) does not seek conclusion: "Place, then, must be left to the last in any legitimate dialectic process for possible after-thoughts" (170). Pater asserts that Plato's uncertain dialectic method provides the most effective means for getting closer to certain knowledge: "What Plato presents to his readers is [. . .] a paradox, or a reconciliation of opposed tendencies: on one side, the largest possible demand for infallible certainty in knowledge, [. . .] yet, on the other side, the utmost possible inexactness, or contingency, in the method by which actually he proposes to attain it" (169). Pater defines Plato's "dialectic method" in another way, as "this continuous discourse with one's self" (166). Because of Montaigne's tentative method for seeking knowledge in "endless conversations [. . .] with himself, with the living, with the dead, which his Essays do but reflect," Pater deems him the "typical Platonist or sceptic [and] therefore also the typical essayist" who "does but commence the modern world" (174).

Critics did not begin to discuss the essay form in theoretical terms until the twentieth century. Three critics most clearly present both the potential contributions of the essay to philosophical thought and the expansion of the essay into other genres as essayism: Georg Lukács (1885-1971), Robert Musil (1880-1942), and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969). In 1910, Lukács wrote the first major essay on the subject, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay." In an extension of Pater's discussion of Plato's paradox, Lukács develops Plato's opposing strands of the ideal of certainty and the reality of

contingency by considering the essay as an art form that acts as "a mere precursor," that only gestures toward "the great aesthetic [. . .] the system of values yet to be found." Lukács appreciates the essay for its "fragmentariness against the petty completeness of scientific exactitude or impressionistic freshness" and for its essential "process of judging" rather than its "verdict." In its incompleteness, the essay provides the necessary "penultimate step" toward the unattainable system that would satisfy the soul's "longing for value and form, for measure and order and purpose" (16-18).

One of the earliest, if not the earliest, applications of the adjectival term "essayistic" as a way of thinking appears in the Austrian essayist and novelist Musil's circa 1914 essay, "On the Essay." He discusses "the constant movement of essayistic thought" which "proceeds from facts" to find "no total solution, but only a series of particular ones." Like Lukács before him, Musil locates essayistic thought between objective epistemology and subjective life and art; it is concerned with "the reshaping of what is human" (*Precision and Soul* 48-51). Musil takes a different perspective on essayism in the novel, *The Man without Qualities*, which he began writing in 1924 and where he sets aside the essay form to put his philosophic argument in novelistic motion. His protagonist Ulrich grapples with the question of how to live in a culture that seems to have lost its bearing. He rejects systematic thought, choosing the term "essayism" to describe the attitude most consistent with his nature and his times. Through Ulrich, Musil defines the "between" nature of essayism as a way of being that must include both intellect and feeling:

> An essay is not a provisional or incidental expression. [. . .] An essay is
>
> rather the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man's inner life in a

its own fallibility and provisional nature" (104). Nevertheless, it is not without its

particular form of logic; with a twist on Pater's term, "un-methodical method," Adorno

argues for the essay's efficacy in its "conceptual organization; [which] "proceeds, so to

speak, methodically unmethodically" (101). It coheres with a tension between the static

elements in "a constructed juxtaposition" employing coordination not subordination and

with a dynamic manner of presenting those elements that determines itself as it

progresses (109).

Since the writing of these seminal works on the genre of the essay and the mode

of essayism, a proliferation of studies on the essay have located examples of essayism in

a variety of philosophical and literary works.[4] Nevertheless, the common, current

conception of the essay is usually not that of a provisional approach for investigating

philosophical questions, but is either the focused argument of the expository essay or the

informal, personal essay.

Ashbery, too, seems to consider the essay as focused exposition rather than

tentative exploration. In several public statements, Ashbery rejects a connection between

his poetry and the essay or an essayistic approach: "Not in many years have I sat down to

write a poem dealing with a particular subject and treating it formally in a kind of essay.

My poetry [. . .] has an exploratory quality and I don't have it all mapped out before I sit

down to write" ("Craft Interview" 17). In another interview, Ashbery equates the essay

with ekphrasis:

> What makes ["Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"] seem more accessible is
>
> an essayistic thrust, but if one sat down and analyzed it closely, it would
>
> seem as disjunct and fragmented as "Europe." It's really not about the

Parmagianino [sic] painting, which is a pretext for a lot of reflections and

asides. [. . .] Many of my poems [. . .] tend to spread out from a core idea.

(Kostelanetz 108)

Recently, he repeated this objection in an interview with Larissa MacFarquhar, who

wrote that Ashbery finds the "essayistic structure [of 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror]

alien to the rest of his work" (96).

Ashbery appears to be denying that his poetry contains structured argument as

found in the typical Baconian expository essay; but his description of his probing,

unmapped writing process actually aligns his poetry with the spirit and method of

Montaigne's essayistic process. In attributing an "essayistic thrust" to "Self-Portrait in a

Convex Mirror," Ashbery considers "essayistic" as descriptive of "thrust," which

connotes a more forcible, direct statement of a principle theme than is found in

Montaigne's essayistic probing—again, Ashbery is speaking in terms of the expository

essay rather than the more tentative essayistic mode in which I believe he writes. Rather

than explicitly explaining a work of art as an essay would, "Self-Portrait in a Convex

Mirror" begins with an explanation of the painter's methods but quickly moves to the

thoughts the painting prompts in him, thus using Parmigianino's painting as only "a

pretext for a lot of reflections and asides which are [. . .] tenuously connected" to it

(Kostelanetz 108). In a paradoxical defense of his intended strategy and a criticism of the

commonly accepted reading of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Ashbery says that a

casual reading makes it seem unified or "accessible," but a close analysis shows it to be

"disjunct" and not transparent. The meaning of "close reading" becomes, for Ashbery, a

reading that reveals the complexities underlying initially clear apprehensions, thus

making his text less accessible and unified than it first seems. Though he seems to disparage the essayistic mode, Ashbery actually disparages the method of the formal essay and defends the essayistic mode as the more appropriate way of looking at his poem. In this justification for his method that seems to progress illogically through tenuous connections, Ashbery puts himself in the tradition of those thinkers who find a logic in the essay form, a logic that does not insist on closure yet does not proceed on whim. He follows Montaigne in testing ideas, Emerson in allowing thought to determine form, Pater in continuing to question with a dialectic discourse, Lukács in looking at "process" rather than "verdict," Musil in combining intellect with feeling, and Adorno in uncovering what lies below the superficially apparent.

Ashbery as *Bricoleur*

In another way, Ashbery indirectly and unwittingly establishes an essayistic connection when he calls himself a *bricoleur*. In a 1994 interview, eight years before he listed some of the philosophers he read and explained why he read them, Ashbery repeated his 1982 denial of a philosophical connection by saying that his poetry could not be appropriately described as having a philosophical mood. He expanded on his objection to philosophy: "I took a beginning course in philosophy and did miserably in it. I've never been able to understand the language of philosophy. The professor was always stressing the importance of a clear and distinct idea, and I never could determine what that was" (Herd, "John Ashbery in Conversation" 35). But then he admitted to a possible connection, saying, "I suppose I'm a kind of bricoleur as far as philosophy goes" (35). In this statement, he did not explicitly explain how a bricoleur circumvents the

language of philosophy, but in a 2002 interview, he provides more illuminating detail regarding his definition of *bricoleur.* When asked whether he was tempted to read literary theory, he answered exactly as he did to the similar question about philosophy: "No" (Ford 60). However, later in the same interview, when asked about improvisation, not theory, he turned to theory in citing Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French structuralist, who first used the term *bricoleur.* Ashbery was asked about "putting together a poem with bits and pieces that happen to be lying around," and he responded: "Was it Lévi-Strauss who said the world could be divided into 'ingénieurs et bricoleurs'? It's in *Tristes Tropiques,* I think," although he probably knows the discussion took place in Lévi-Strauss's *La Pensée Sauvage.* He adds with more conviction, "According to this definition, I'm certainly one of those *bricoleurs*, someone who patches things together any old way rather than starting out with a concept and developing it" (Ford 66). Ashbery's dislike for "the language of philosophy" can be understood as a dislike for developing ideas through concepts; as a *bricoleur*, he prefers to develop ideas through empirical observation.

Ashbery's claim of "any old way" may sound disingenuous, but his definition of *bricoleur* suggests several implications for his poetry. The first is essayistic. The testing of ideas as they come without following or developing a system conforms to Montaigne's essayistic method: "I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me. And I never plan to develop them completely" (219). Lévi-Strauss's definition of *bricoleur* strengthens the connection: "The 'bricoleur' is still someone who [. . .] uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. [. . .] The rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand'" (16-17). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines

"devious" in one sense as having a "wandering or straying course" whereas "craft" can refer to "ability in planning."   The *bricoleur*'s willingness to stray off course, a willingness also fundamental to essayisim, guards against the rational control of preconceived notions and encourages unexpected results; a new structure, or work, comes into being by using, or looking at different aspects of, what is already available within the existing structure. Ashbery welcomes, even looks for, ways to stray from the expected:

> I have no adventures, the adventurous one began,
>
> Except for my hearing, which as you know, can be undependable.
>
> Sometimes staying in the house can be bad. But then, returning,
>
> To find some vine that has licked out over an eave
>
> Like an unruly eyebrow, something that wasn't there
>
> Moments ago, can stop you in your tracks. (AG 20)

A second implication of using the term *bricoleur* is philosophical and theoretical while also displaying essayistic tendencies. Ashbery says that as a *bricoleur*, he does not start with or develop concepts, which suggests an analogy with Lévi-Strauss's distinction between the *bricoleur* and the engineer: "the engineer works by means of concepts and the 'bricoleur' by means of signs" (20). That is, the *bricoleur* works within the culture and questions existing objects in the environment to see what they signify, whereas the engineer or scientist tries to go beyond the culture with the formation of new concepts. Ashbery might be considered a *bricoleur* in that he looks to immediate experience and purposely avoids the formation of principles or concepts that would be an abstract systematism of his endeavors. He questions from within the culture and does not attempt to "make his way out of and go beyond" it, as the engineer does.

Jacques Derrida examines Lévi-Strauss's opposition by showing how "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique," which might happen in two "manners": (1) that of the engineer who questions origins, the "history of [a culture's] concepts," which "is probably the most daring way of making the beginnings of a step outside of philosophy" or (2) that of the *bricoleur* who conserves "all those old concepts, while at the same time exposing here and there their limits, treating them as tools which can still be of use" (254). Derrida's analysis collapses this distinction: "If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*" (255). Derrida further asserts the engineer would not have the ability to construct his own discourse, so "the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*" (256). In place of the impossible totalizing structure with center and origin, Derrida points to the "concept of *freeplay*, [. . .] that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble" (260 original italics).

Derrida presented this critique of structuralism and presentation of his deconstructive analysis in 1966 at a conference at the Johns Hopkins University, "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy." European and American scholars participated in this open symposium, which purposefully entertained many different disciplines and viewpoints. It marked a turning point where the dominance of the American New Criticism of the mid-twentieth century was displaced by an international, interdisciplinary approach to literature; generic distinctions between philosophy and literature, for example, were breaking down. Ashbery's limited but increasing acknowledgement of philosophical elements in his

poetry corresponds with this change toward inclusion of other disciplines in the critical climate in the United States. Presumably he intends philosophic implications when he calls himself a *bricoleur*: his poetry freely uses other texts, both philosophic and literary; it plays with the discourse of extant culture in order to question and possibly reinvigorate it.

Ashbery uses *bricolage* not only to question culture but to piece together his own provisional philosophy: a philosophy that offers a pragmatic way to live in an uncertain world, conforms to his skeptical belief that he can attain absolute knowledge, and provides a phenomenological method for pursuing answers to his ontological questions. Ashbery distrusts systems and inherited concepts and principles, so he does not align himself with any one philosophy or set of principles; and he accepts contradiction, change, and insecurity. As a *bricoleur*, he can pick various elements from particular philosophers who seem to make sense in his world, but he does not feel compelled to make a coherent or permanent system with these elements. Many critics note Ashbery's frequent allusions to other poets; he also frequently alludes to and builds on the thought of compatible philosophers. His essayistic poetry is a means of sorting through these ideas by testing them in the medium of his art. Even Ashbery's repeated denials that his poetry is connected with philosophy or theory intimates an essayistic form of resistance to system and a concerted effort to maintain an open stance toward new possibilities for enlarging the scope of his poetry.

Although many philosophers, including all of those in his reading list, can profitably be discussed in connection with Ashbery's poetry, I will focus on, but not limit myself to, a few that figure most prominently: Michel de Montaigne, whose skeptical

essayistic procedure and informal style set the foundation for testing ideas from a philosophical though personal perspective; William James (1842-1910), one of the few philosophers named in Ashbery's poetry, whose pragmatic American philosophy, psychology of consciousness and experience, and lively, everyday writing style correspond to Ashbery's experiential approach and conversational style; and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who is not mentioned in Ashbery's reading list but whose ontological "question of being" and phenomenological method echo throughout Ashbery's poetry.[5] Ashbery not only discriminatingly crosses philosophical boundaries but he also freely mixes American and Continental philosophical ideas. This essayistic procedure removes boundaries that would restrict his thought to a particular system or heritage. Being an "un-methodical method," essayism provides a flexible, yet reasonable, philosophical base on which he can place himself within the unending flux and incongruities of everyday life: "Here I am then, continuing but ever beginning / my perennial voyage" (RM 44).

Ashbery's Critical Context

This relational tactic of looking at Ashbery's essayistic style and his affinities with Montaigne, James, and Heidegger subsumes various prevailing critical stances. Some critics disparage his poetry as incomprehensible.[6] However, most critics who evaluate Ashbery's poetry acknowledge the poetry's significance along with its difficulty but ignore the possibility of an overarching meaning. The predominant critical approaches to Ashbery's poetry have focused on his style and technique or on his position in the poetic tradition. Marjorie Perloff, who puts Ashbery's poetry in the

context of abstract experimentalism, interprets his "mysteries of construction," not by attempting to demystify them but by examining how Ashbery creates them; to do so, she follows the "interesting clues" offered by his discontinuous language, elusive images, and indeterminate structures that lead to "any number of possible interpretations"—but no overall meaning (*Poetics of Indeterminacy* 260-61).[7] While Perloff identifies Ashbery as one of the poets of "indeterminacy," Harold Bloom concerns himself primarily with Ashbery's position in the American Transcendentalist tradition of Emerson, Whitman, and Stevens. Reading Ashbery's poetry as "a desperate quest for freedom from the burden of poetic influence" (*John Ashbery: Modern Critical Views* 7), Bloom lavishly praises him as one of the "strongest" of the contemporary "strong American poets [. . . who] give their American readers the best of pragmatic aids in the self-reliance of a psychic self-defense" (*Agon* 288). Helen Vendler, like Bloom, calls Ashbery "an American poet," but notes that Ashbery's poetry contains subject-matter in "the Western lyric tradition [. . .] from Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Stevens, Eliot; his poems are about love, or time or age," although she believes he is "least himself" when he sounds like Stevens and Eliot ("Understanding Ashbery" 192, 185).

These three critics open the door to Ashbery's philosophical essayism, but they all stop short of crossing the threshold. Perloff implies Wittgenstein's essayism in her book, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, when she notes that Wittgenstein's interrogation is "a process which is of necessity tentative" (9). She even describes Wittgenstein's "own conclusions [as] never being more than tentative, open, and to-be-revised" (21). However, Perloff does not relate his philosophical ideas or methods to Ashbery's poetry and mentions Ashbery briefly only to say that he resembles Wittgenstein in a matter of style with his

"indeterminacy of pronouns [. . .] to encode all overt references to sexual identity" (91).

Bloom takes a more philosophical stance in his reading of Ashbery than Perloff does and

emphasizes Ashbery's place in the American pragmatic tradition, but he does not include

readings of the poems to show how Ashbery implements the pragmatic method and in

what specific ways Ashbery draws on American pragmatic philosophers.

Vendler comes close to discussing Ashbery's essayism when she notes a turn

from his experimental early poetry to a "conversational" tone, even finding but not

expanding on the influence of the essay on Ashbery's poetry: "The familiar letter,

sometimes the familiar *essay* are his models now" ("Understanding Ashbery" 185, italics

added). Vendler evokes Keats when she discusses his and Ashbery's concern for the

vague, almost unnoticed, but constant stream of thought which leads to "the recording of

successive truths" (181). She picks up on Keats's essayistic influence and William

James's psychological sense of the vague, the "stream of consciousness," and pragmatic

view of truth; but she does not make a further connection of these points to all of

Ashbery's poetry as a whole. Vendler again skirts the philosophic form of essayism

when she discusses Pope's *Essay* asserting that "if Pope in his day had wanted to be

considered a philosopher, he would not have written the *Essay* in verse. [. . .] It is not so

much ideas that Pope is after as the representation of his own more vivid form of

thinking. [. . .] Living thought has to be quick and mobile, ever darting to extremes and

polarities, but resting in none of them" (*Poets Thinking* 12, 27). In this reading, Pope's

poem could be called an example of essayistic thinking. Vendler explains that she

chooses not to discuss the philosophical aspect of "poets who seem especially

'philosophical' because to discuss their relation to thinking [. . .] would require

distinguishing the nature of ruminative meditations in verse from ruminative meditations in prose" (8).

To investigate this distinction would be illuminating, however, particularly in Ashbery's poetry, which pressures the prose/poetry distinction. His experiments with genre and mode change his viewpoint and keep his meditations in motion, "since there is / No common vantage point, no point of view / Like the 'I' in a novel" (SPCM 56). The essayistic mode encourages the blurring of genre and mode between poetry and prose, between poetry and philosophy; thus, it becomes an important key to reading Ashbery's poetry, particularly his longer poems. Critics often seem willing to take Ashbery at his word that he is, as he remarked in an interview, "more interested in the movement among ideas than in the ideas themselves" (Stitt 200), so they turn to his technique and ignore an in-depth look at his ideas. Essayism, as a philosophical, aesthetic, and literary choice, unites the movement among ideas with the ideas themselves; a full understanding requires attention to both. Essayism becomes Ashbery's means of investigating what he describes to an interviewer as his "broad [subject] of an individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world of external phenomena" (Friedman 33).

It is in his longer poems that Ashbery creates the space necessary for the essayistic working-out process of this broad subject.[8] This study, therefore, focuses on *Three Poems* (1972)*, Flow Chart* (1991)*,* and *Girls on the Run* (1999) to show how Ashbery investigates—pragmatically, skeptically, and phenomenologically—"the major question that revolves around you, your being here" (TP 51). Before looking at the long poems, I consider several poems that provide a philosophical foundation and a helpful background for the essayism found in the longer poems. In Chapter One, I look at "My

Philosophy of Life," Ashbery's most philosophically explicit poem, which introduces, even though it is written mid-career, many of his fundamental philosophical beliefs that have been present from the beginning. In little more than two pages, he addresses the various philosophies that he, as a *bricoleur*, incorporates in his own philosophy of life. In Chapter Two, I examine several significant, early, short poems in which Ashbery begins his ongoing exploration of the relationship between consciousness and the world. Particularly in "Clepsydra," Ashbery employs the discourse of formal argument in an early move away from the more personal lyric form.

In the succeeding three chapters, I discuss the development of Ashbery's essayism and philosophical thought in his longer poems, highlighting their affinity with Montaigne, James, and Heidegger; I also discuss Ashbery's appropriation of various genres. Heidegger explains that the response to the question of being changes with time, history, and circumstance; Ashbery shows that it changes, too, with shifts in perspective. Ashbery's essayistic approach continually tests and probes the question of being when he poses it at different stages of his career and purposefully adapts the characteristics of certain genres in his poems in order to reframe the question. In Chapter Three, I show how *Three Poems* addresses Ashbery's ongoing subject from the perspective of a meditative prose poem, in which he creates an inner dialogue among his own various voices; I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of genre form as a theoretical basis for Ashbery's use of prose and dialogue. In Chapter Four, I look at "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," which, in its reflections on the problems of self-representation, acts as a precursor to *Flow Chart*. I then discuss *Flow Chart* as an autobiographical poem, investigating the ways in which Ashbery draws on and strays from traditional

autobiographical expectations as he reaches back into memory in order to better understand the present. In Chapter Five, I discuss *Girls on the Run* as a narrative poem with named characters in which Ashbery almost, but not quite, disappears from a plot that does not coalesce. At the end of *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery's questions have evolved but have not been resolved. Ashbery essayistically considers the relationship of consciousness to the world over the span of his career to date, but the subject remains an open question for Ashbery and reader alike.[9] As McCarthy puts it, "[t]rue essayism reflects a multiplicity of perspectives presented in an engaging form designed to awaken and maintain reader interest even after the piece of writing has been 'completed.' In this latter sense, even when the essay is finished, it is not complete" (58). My study concludes with an Epilogue summarizing Ashbery's essayism as a wandering pilgrimage and briefly considering poems published since *Girls on the Run*, which continue to investigate his "major question."

Philosophy close to poetry and poetry close to philosophy—they are close but what separates them? Lang finds that while "a common thread of meaning" can be expressed in any form or genre, nuances created by techniques such as authorial point-of-view and figurative language set the tone of the message and determine to a large degree what kind of information will be included and how it will be received. This total design, he argues, is such an integral part of the form that it cannot be translated from one form to another:

> The crucial philosophical question in respect to the individual works that constitute philosophical genres is whether the *full* design of a work in a particular genre can be realized in its translation into an alternate genre—

and here, it seems clear, that as between *some* genres, the answer to this

question is a straightforward "No." (39, original italics)

Lang looks primarily at philosophical genres in prose. An even more impossible task

would be to attempt translation between the various genres of philosophic prose and

philosophic poetry, but the task is unnecessary. The porous barriers separating prose and

poetry allow aspects of philosophy and poetry to leak into and enrich each other; at the

same time, philosophy and poetry retain their recognizable identities, wherein one can

illuminate, without replacing, the other. Ashbery's poetry stands alone and can be

appreciated without reading his entire body of work or compatible philosophers, but

reading the poems with an awareness of their interconnectedness and of what

philosophers have written concerning similar ideas extends the understanding of both his

poetry and the ideas themselves. Looking at the "common thread" of ideas on which

Ashbery ruminates, seeing how they develop within his work, and considering the ideas

in their wider context, including the philosophers' prose forms, language, and styles of

expression, allow for a greater comprehension of the "full design" of Ashbery's poetry.

CHAPTER ONE

ASHBERY AS ESSAYISTIC *BRICOLEUR* IN "MY PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE"

In 1994, the same year he first called himself "a kind of bricoleur as far as philosophy goes," Ashbery read his poem, "My Philosophy of Life," at the New School University. He was finally ready not only to acknowledge a limited connection of his poetry with philosophy, but, even more important, to openly address this connection in a poem which traces the formulation of this connection. From his earliest poetry, Ashbery had addressed philosophical concerns; now he was prepared to draw direct attention to how and why he had made the choices that continued to determine his philosophical outlook. Although one should not confuse the speaker of the poem with the signified Ashbery, certain aspects of the thought process expressed in the poem can be considered as choices by Ashbery to the extent they are born out in the rest of his poetry. Lévi-Strauss explains that "the 'bricoleur' [. . .] 'speaks' not only *with* things [. . .] but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. The 'bricoleur' may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it" (21, original italics). Ashbery's choice of what philosophical concerns to contemplate and of the angle from which he will contemplate them becomes "an account of his personality and life" as the choices are repeated poem after poem by their various speakers; certainly, in "My Philosophy of Life," Ashbery's speaker enacts the process of choosing a philosophical approach that

will be most useful in conducting his life and, most likely for Ashbery himself, in writing

his poetry.

In this poem, Ashbery no longer denies his poetry's connection with philosophy

but purposefully draws attention to it in the poem's title. Although Ashbery could intend

the title to be interpreted as ironic, which would create some distance from philosophy, or

as humorous, which might belittle its serious intention, it most likely should be

interpreted at face value with an awareness that humor, itself, has an important place in

his philosophy.[1] By connecting philosophy to himself and his life, he intimates he will

investigate what he means by the concept of "philosophy"; because the poem shows the

evolution of his thought, it illustrates his essayism as a method of thinking. The poem

foregrounds the method of the *bricoleur* as it draws on the thought of a coterie of

philosophers who define philosophy by connecting it to experience but in different ways;

except for James, whom he mentions in the poem, he does not imply any degree of

influence by these philosophers even though his language and perspective allude to them.

"My Philosophy of Life" begins with the speaker's assumption that he knows

what a philosophy of life is, but he quickly recognizes that he is simply adopting an

inherited concept and must figure out a definition that works in his experience. The

poem works in the Montaignian essayistic tradition of following his thoughts as they

work their way from a dim perception to a clearer, but not definitive, conception of a

philosophy of life. It draws on James's pragmatism as the speaker recognizes that

philosophy's truth for him depends on whether it helps him to conduct his life. Finally,

the speaker alludes to Heidegger's phenomenological approach in casting aside his

predetermined conceptions and letting his experience be, letting it reveal what his

philosophy of life has been all along. The overall concern of the poem is to follow the

slowly dawning consciousness of the speaker's thought as it interacts with his reality; the

poem is a transcription of that recognition.

Philosophical Essayism

Ashbery defines himself to an interviewer as "certainly one of the *bricoleurs,*

someone who patches things together any old way rather than starting out with a concept

and developing it" (Ford 66). In another statement, he also denies the use of

"philosophical concepts":

> Philosophy hasn't directly influenced my poetry but the process of
>
> philosophical inquiry certainly has; again, sitting down to somehow
>
> elucidate a lot of almost invisible currents and knocking them into some
>
> sort of shape is very much my way of doing but as for specific
>
> philosophical concepts I don't think they play any role in my work.
>
> <div align="right">("Craft Interview" 22)</div>

Ashbery tempers his rejection of "philosophical concepts" by conceding the influence of

philosophy as "philosophical inquiry," which is a concept of philosophy that helps him

make sense of existence. Additionally, in "My Philosophy of Life," the speaker examines

philosophy as a concept; before he can determine his philosophy, he must determine what

philosophy means to him. As is often the case when applying Ashbery's statements to

his work, the inconsistency disappears in an examination of the various definitions of his

terms. One view of concepts is to think of them as hard-and-fast building blocks for the

formation of unchanging principles, which might, then, contribute to the formulation of a

systematic philosophy. In a rejection of this view, Henri Bergson explains how existing

concepts can limit thought or the creation of "new concepts"; reliance on a "habitual

method of thought" prevents one from "satisfactorily getting the real into the ready-made

garments of our ready-made concepts" (*Creative Evolution* 48). One's thinking would be

led by concepts existing outside the experience itself, thus blocking new or contradictory

information provided by changing experience. Ashbery has implied that he does not trust

existing philosophical concepts to make sense of his perceptions nor does he intend to

form concepts based on his perceptions; knocking perceptions "into some sort of shape"

entails getting closer to understanding them without a preconceived notion of what that

shape will be and without fixating them.

Another view of concepts is to consider them as unstable elements subject to

redefinition, which might consequently *alter* one's thinking or *be altered by* one's

thinking. Based on their common experience, individuals within cultures form shared

concepts, or ideas, that address their societal issues; these concepts create a shared

understanding allowing people within a culture to communicate. In later generations,

people can either accept these inherited concepts without reflection or question them in

view of changing cultural experience. If Ashbery's "almost invisible currents" are those

unacknowledged, cultural concepts, then his "knocking them into some sort of shape"

would be a matter of bringing them to light for questioning. In this sense, Ashbery, in his

frequently noted concern with popular culture, would conform to Levi-Strauss's

definition of the *bricoleur* as one who engages with the culture's concepts in order to

examine them. Concepts do not play a role for Ashbery in the first sense of accepting

them as "ready-made" building blocks, but they do in the second sense of questioning

them for redefinition. "My Philosophy of Life" demonstrates how Ashbery uses concepts to invigorate rather than negatively influence his work.

Concepts are expressed through language. A concept is a "constituent of a thought (or 'proposition') rather in the way that a word is a constituent of a sentence that typically expresses a thought" (Rey 135). The speaker in the poem "My Philosophy of Life" examines his inherited view of what philosophy entails and discards it in favor of a new way of thinking about philosophy that more properly reflects his experience. Concepts play a role in how one thinks and subsequently expresses thought; attention paid to concepts is attention paid to language. Through essayism, one is inquiring into the expression of thought through language and the formation of concepts.

Montaigne's Skeptical Essayism

"My Philosophy of Life" and Ashbery's body of work demonstrate his essayistic thinking in the tradition of Montaigne's skeptical essayism. The essay form accommodates Montaigne's changing perceptions or his skepticism:

> In the tests that I make of it here, I use every sort of occasion. If it is a subject I do not understand at all, even on that I essay my judgment. [. . .] I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me. And I never plan to develop them completely. For I do not see the whole of anything; nor do those who promise to show it to us. [. . .] I am not bound to make something of them or to adhere to them myself without varying when I please and giving myself up to doubt and uncertainty and my ruling quality, which is ignorance. (219)

"My Philosophy of Life" begins with such a chance occasion, and the speaker proceeds

in an essayistic manner to more fully understand the subject that has presented itself:

> Just when I thought there wasn't room enough
>
> for another thought in my head, I had this great idea—
>
> call it a philosophy of life, if you will. Briefly,
>
> it involved living the way philosophers live,
>
> according to a set of principles. OK, but which ones?
>
> That was the hardest part, I admit [. . .]. (CYHB 73)

Is the poem's speaker suggesting that he will define an overarching philosophy that he

lives by? He seems to intend to do so; however, he instantly recognizes that his "great

idea" is not new but depends on those who laid the groundwork for such thinking, a

recognition to which he will return. He begins his investigation with an ambiguous

question: "OK, but which ones?" Is he considering a choice among the sets of principles

already propounded by his predecessors? Or is he asking which philosophers to

investigate so he can live the way they did? Or, more likely, does he not even know

precisely what he is asking? Because he does not yet know what he thinks a philosophy

of life would be, he cannot address the issue more precisely. The speaker says that

determining an answer is not easy: "That was the hardest part, I admit."

When reading this poem at The New School University, Ashbery laughed along

with the audience at this serious joke (Reading of "My Philosophy of Life"). The

question of what principles to live by seems obvious and easy to answer; yet in truth its

answer is too often thoughtlessly taken for granted by people who assume they know the

answer but would probably have a hard time, as Ashbery's speaker does, putting it in

words. He looks for an answer to his question by assuming the widely accepted, traditional view of philosophy as the formulation of principles. He runs through some of his thoughts that might make up his "new attitude," which is a "general" plan in which "everything [. . .] would be affected, or more precisely, inflected" (73). He changes the general term, "affect," which is to produce a response, into the more particular term, "inflect," which is to turn from a direct course; and at that moment, his own thoughts begin to be inflected by his associations. He first considers a system that considers people as categories and that he can apply "in the general way prescribed by our clockwork universe" (73). But, as he considers how he "stumbled into" his "new moral climate," he pictures it in an elaborate and particular simile, which is in stark contrast to his "new attitude." The simile is interrupted by a Proustian "fragrance,"[2] inspiring specific memories of "cushions" and "his uncle's Boston bull terrier." He thinks his thinking is getting him nowhere, "not a single idea emerges from it" (73); but this digression toward concreteness, instigated by a simile, causes him to vaguely "remember something William James / wrote," which apparently has subconsciously affected him though its importance to him only now begins to become clear. Whatever it is that he remembers comes back to him with sufficient force to re-direct his mind to consider how he really views philosophy as opposed to what he has blindly assumed.

At this point in the poem, the speaker has not discussed his philosophy; he has only shown his mind working by association to understand a vague idea and question that have unexpectedly occurred to him. Montaigne often begins in the same manner ("I am prone to begin without a plan; the first remark brings on the second" [186]) because his purpose is to present the investigation, not the resolved thought: "I put forward formless

and unresolved notions, as do those who publish doubtful questions to debate in the schools, not to establish the truth but to seek it" (229). Montaigne compares the organization of his material to poetry: "My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a side-long glance. [. . .] I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols" (761). Ashbery's speaker's understanding grows clearer as it is inflected by the suggestion of each image, memory, simile, or change in tone. Like Montaigne, Ashbery does not interrupt to explain these shifts; and, in this poem, he does not employ a prescribed poetic form.

In the final lines of the poem, Ashbery's conversational and humorous tone seals the entire poem without being conclusive. He has not fully defined his speaker's "philosophy of life" but is leaving room for the next "great idea":

> Still, there's a lot of fun to be had in the gaps between ideas.
>
> That's what they're made for! Now I want you to go out there
>
> and enjoy yourself, and yes, enjoy your philosophy of life, too.
>
> They don't come along every day. Look out! There's a big one . . .
>
> (CYHB 75, original ellipses)

These lines could almost make one think Ashbery had been joking all along. When he read the poem to the New York audience, he read "look out!" as though he really saw "a big one" at that very moment. He offers his reader the opportunity to laugh at and disregard any serious intent in the poem or, on the other hand, to consider the poem an earnest effort toward defining "philosophy" and "life." Ashbery overtly encourages the reader not only to laugh at his jokes (for example, the spectator who needs to "be flushed out" is mentioned a few lines after describing the "weary pilgrims" on "public toilets")

but, more specifically, to laugh at what he says.[3]   Montaigne deprecates himself frequently throughout his essays; he refuses to take himself so seriously that he cannot be laughed at: "Our own peculiar condition is that we are as fit to be laughed at as able to laugh" (221).

In writing about Ashbery as a prophetic poet, Douglas Crase says that Ashbery "dresses" his wish to reach his audience "in any number of disguises—ironic or even slapstick. [. . .] The poetry audience laughs at the joke, but the regularity with which Ashbery returns to the device makes me believe that, though he too is laughing, he is hopefully serious about the prophecy's having arrived" (32). The ability to look unflinchingly at one's self and one's situation yet laugh is an important element in Montaigne's essays and Ashbery's poetry. After all, according to Montaigne, "what we hate we take seriously" (221). And, then, laughing is also a form of coping. Clearly, Ashbery's philosophy will not be pedantic, didactic, or humorless; it will not be allowed a grim, privileged status isolated from worldly activities and criticism. On the contrary, the "gaps between" his various thoughts about life are the places where his philosophy engages itself in the action and enjoyment of life. In Montaigne's last essay, he says he receives pleasure from meditating "on any satisfaction. [. . .] I bring my soul into it, not to implicate herself, but to enjoy herself, not to lose herself but to find herself" (854).   In addition to humor, again in the manner of Montaigne, Ashbery makes enjoyment a necessary element in both thought and life.

James's Pragmatism

"My Philosophy of Life" resembles Montaigne's essays in its essayistic structure and its light tone in addressing serious subjects; Ashbery, as *bricoleur*, also draws on James's pragmatism to provide the turning point in the speaker's thinking about philosophy. Ashbery highlights the importance of James by naming him and providing a rare overt clue to a source for his own thinking. James defines the pragmatist as one who, like the empiricist, "turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power." But he differs from the empiricist in that he does not "stand for any special result" and looks upon his philosophy as "method only" (*Pragmatism* 31). Ashbery's speaker is trying to contemplate a general philosophical view but is having trouble staying with abstractions; to think of James at that moment is a "stumbling-into" situation, in which he wisely follows his train of thought not knowing where it will take him.

Despite naming James, the poem's speaker distances himself by shifting to second person and by denying having read James's book:

> But then you remember something William James
>
> wrote in some book of his you never read—it was fine, it had the fineness,
>
> the powder of life dusted over it, by chance, of course, yet still looking
>
> for evidence of fingerprints. Someone had handled it
>
> even before he formulated it, though the thought was his and his alone.

> (CYHB 73-74)

The speaker denies reading James's book, just as Ashbery sometimes denies reading the works of writers whom some people see as influences; however, he acknowledges in an interview that he has read James (Ford 60). In this case, Ashbery apparently wishes to make sure the reader is aware of the allusion; and despite the speaker's disavowal, the poem indicates his familiarity with *Pragmatism* and, perhaps, also indicates a sense that James's pragmatism transcends his book to be part of the air, the dust, that literate Americans breathe. By denying what he mentions, he recognizes the historical and collaborative nature of thought but avoids subordinating his thought to that of James, which might tempt the reader to attribute too much weight to James and not read the poem on its own terms. He cannot deny that his thought has the "fingerprints" of James just as James's thought has the "fingerprints" of someone else, but both James and he nevertheless create their own thought through their re-vision. James's concept of truth illuminates the necessity of alluding to those thinkers who came before:

> Truth is made largely out of previous truths. Men's beliefs at any time are so much experience *funded.* But the beliefs are themselves parts of the sum total of the world's experience, and become matter, therefore, for the next day's funding operations. So far as reality means experienceable reality, both it and the truths men gain about it are everlastingly in process of mutation. (*Pragmatism* 107, original italics)

Ashbery and Montaigne with their numerous direct or indirect references to their forbears substantiate James's contention. Further, all three writers often refer back to previous poems or essays in their own body of work to continue and rework their earlier insights.

Ashbery picks up on two of James's words that will help him in reconsidering his concept of what philosophy should be. He draws on variant definitions and connotations of the words "fine" and "dust," which call attention to early sections of James's *Pragmatism.*[4] James castigates traditional philosophy for its "re*fine*ment" of "real life" that eliminates life's impurities and contradictions, which makes it an "intellectualist" philosophy, "a monument of artificiality" (*Pragmatism* 18, italics added). Ashbery uses "fine" in two ways that play against James's "refinement." He suggests that James's writing is not a pejorative example of "refinement"; instead, first, it is "fine" in being superior writing, and, second, it has the exactness or "fineness [. . .] of life"—not the unreality of abstraction. James uses the term "dust" to apply paradoxically both to such refined philosophy and to his down-to-earth pragmatism. On one hand, he sees philosophy as worthless detritus, saying that "practical men shak[e] philosophy's dust off their feet" (18). On the other hand, he speaks approvingly of dust's earthy nature when he rejects an abstract, "idealistic pantheism" that is "spurning the dust and reared upon pure logic. It keeps no connexion whatever with concreteness" (39-40). "Dust" becomes "dirt" when he describes "this real world of sweat and dirt," which requires human beings to seek help in coping with "the dust of [. . .] human trials" (40). James says that the pragmatist "turns toward concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power" (31). Ashbery builds on pragmatism's sense of "action" or "practice" by using "dust" as a verb and changing "dust" to "powder": James "dusted" or marked his ideas with life's powder/power. With his appropriation of James's "fine" and "dust," Ashbery distinguishes his pragmatic, earthy philosophy from the traditional, intellectualist philosophy.

Ashbery shifts to a new scenario that addresses the speaker's and pragmatism's problem with principles. It begins with a third usage of "fine" as meaning "all right":

> It's fine, in summer, to visit the seashore.
>
> [. . . . .]
>
>   Nearby
>
> are the public toilets where weary pilgrims have carved
>
> their names and addresses, and perhaps messages as well,
>
> messages to the world, as they sat
>
> and thought about what they'd do after using the toilet
>
> and washing their hands at the sink, prior to stepping out
>
> into the open again. Had they been coaxed in by principles,
>
> and were their words philosophy, of however crude a sort?
>
> I confess I can move no farther along this train of thought—
>
> something's blocking it. Something I'm
>
> not big enough to see over. Or maybe I'm frankly scared.
>
> What was the matter with how I acted before? (CYHB 74)

James sees "the pragmatic method" as an "attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (*Pragmatism* 32). Ashbery's speaker is first blocked in his thinking when he is trying to formulate abstract principles. Now he tries again, but his thought is blocked a second time when he attempts not only to attribute philosophical principles to every act, even writing in public toilets, but also to find philosophical meaning in all types of language, even bathroom graffiti. Just as James turns away from a search for

origins and turns toward an investigation of consequences in order to find ideas that are "helpful in life's practical struggles" (42), Ashbery's speaker turns away from pondering abstract questions that remove him from the actual life of these "pilgrims." He wonders, is he not smart enough to think philosophically? But on the other hand, what was the matter with the way he used to think? As the poem continues, the speaker, like James's pragmatist, turns away from "fixed principles" that appear to resolve questions and aligns himself with a use of language that continues the "quest" within "the stream of [. . .] experience" (31-2), including his own past thought and experience.

The distinction between principle and concept, particularly from James's standpoint, is helpful for comprehending Ashbery's essayistic and philosophical practices. Concept is an "equivocal" term that philosophically "remains useful, precisely because of its ambiguity. [. . .] It is a broad classification of prevailing theories into substantival and functional versions of the three main patterns of explanation [nominalistic, mentalistic, and realistic], focused, respectively on words, thoughts, and things" (Heath 177-178). Shared concepts are necessary for mutual understanding between members of a culture in that they are "intrinsic to the recognition of anything as belonging to an objective, common world" (179). A principle, in Kant's view, is an *a priori* judgment that applies concepts (Kenny 176). In other words, a principle is the sentence, while a concept is the word (172). Principles are generally understood as universal, unchanging truths from which further truths can be derived; however, concepts may differ between cultures and are subject to change or supersession. Indeed, according to Gaston Bachelard, "*when a concept changes its meaning* [. . .] *it is most meaningful*" (54, original italics). Bachelard recalls that "Einstein's reflections upon the fundamental

concepts of physics, his questioning of obvious ideas, his complexification of what appeared to be simple" resulted in his theory of relativity. Einstein did not simply accept existing concepts that seemed to be "clear and simple," but he tested them in experience. Bachelard also cites Heisenberg, who "insists upon operational definition of [. . .] simple notions. [. . .] Experimentation is thus intimately involved in the definition of what is. Any definition is an experiment; any definition of a concept is functional" (45-47). The etymology of "concept" is "to put together"; concepts are formed by putting perceptions together—what one perceives is put into words, which, as Ashbery notes, is a "necessarily inaccurate" transcript ("Second Presentation" 10). If concepts are considered to be truths tantamount to principles, which are fundamental truths essential to forming systems of thought, then they have the potential to influence the thought of people who do not question what seems to be self-evident. The answer to the dilemma that Ashbery's speaker discovers is to suspect all words at the basic level of concept and avoid converting them into principles and systems.

James's assertion that "*true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify*" (*Pragmatism* 69, original italics) is consistent with Bachelard's belief that a concept must be verified by experimentation in actual practice. However, James would not agree that concepts could be changed; he believes that "conceptions are unchangeable" and may only "stay" or "cease to be" as a result of "new knowledge" (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 464, 467). Either way, concepts are not considered to be static, timeless truths; furthermore, James does not consider all principles to be timeless either. Although he titles his work on psychology, *The Principles of Psychology*, and although he acknowledges that under certain circumstances "there is [. . .] a large body of

a priori or intuitively necessary truths" (2: 677), he nevertheless believes that even principles that are true are abstract and therefore "absolutely insignificant until you handle them pragmatically" (*Pragmatism* 109). According to James, rationalism denies "that either reality itself or truth itself is mutable." It "reverts to 'principles,' and thinks that when an abstraction once is named, we own an oracular truth" (108). In *The Will to Believe*, he confirms his particular "attitude" of "*empiricism,*" which is "contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience" (xix).

Traditional philosophy, unlike James's pragmatism, generally considers principles to be fundamental laws from which further truths derive; Ashbery, like James, avoids either forming or relying on such principles. While "My Philosophy of Life" interrogates the accepted understanding of familiar concepts and even considers "philosophy" itself to be an arguable concept, Ashbery avoids the philosophical arguments over terms by eschewing such terms. Instead, Ashbery relies solely on presenting the phenomena to dramatize concepts as they appear in particular situations. Ashbery seems of the same mind as James, who writes, "the overwhelming and portentous character ascribed to universal conceptions is surprising, [. . .] the things of worth are all concretes and singulars" (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 479). General "things" acquire worth or value only when they are named as particular phenomena.

The speaker in "My Philosophy of Life" rather easily gives up trying to develop a philosophy based on abstract principles. He looks at himself in his actual situation and turns toward practical action that will alleviate, not complicate, life's stresses:

> But maybe I can come up with a compromise—I'll let
>
> things be what they are, sort of. In the autumn I'll put up jellies
>
> and preserves, against the winter cold and futility,
>
> and that will be a human thing, and intelligent as well. (CYHB 74)

This action does not unequivocally point to or enact pragmatism; in fact, it almost suggests a utilitarian view. James, sounding like a *bricoleur* himself, notes that pragmatism "harmonizes with many ancient philosophic tendencies. It agrees with nominalism, for instance, in always appealing to particulars; with utilitarianism in emphasizing practical aspects; with positivism in its disdain for verbal solutions, useless questions, and metaphysical abstractions" (*Pragmatism* 32). Pragmatism, as James presents it, mediates between empiricism and rationalism because neither one completely satisfies what a person wants and needs: "You find empiricism with inhumanism and irreligion; or else you find a rationalistic philosophy that indeed may call itself religious, but that keeps out of all definite touch with concrete facts and joys and sorrows" (17). Therefore, James takes certain aspects of an empirical philosophy such as utilitarianism that agree with his conceptions and rejects those aspects that do not. Some of James's vague and metaphorical language leads to a common misunderstanding of pragmatism; many people believe that pragmatism is subjective and relative, that it supports whatever a person wants.[5] Ashbery's example might seem to support this oversimplification of James's pragmatism, except that the poem implies that to "put up jellies / and preserves" can be verified as an effective action (James insists that pragmatically true actions can be verified) because it protects "against the winter cold and futility." The words "jellies" and "winter cold" are specific; "preserves" is ambiguous in its obvious sense of canned

fruit and in its suggestion of preservation, and "futility" (with its embedded "utility") is

an abstract term that throws the common sense of the action into question. To preserve

against futility is to keep intact or maintain against uselessness. Does Ashbery mean the

futility of life itself?—or the futility of thinking or writing? Perhaps "the human thing" is

not simply a humane action but is more significantly the natural inclination to persevere

even when the outcome of such action is not clear. Ashbery does not develop this

intimation into a full-fledged conclusion; he does not have sufficient pragmatic

verification in this poem to say more. For the time being, and maybe for all mortal time,

the question remains a mystery. Ashbery does not feel compelled to hazard an answer.

Heidegger's Phenomenological Ontology

Ashbery, the philosophical *bricoleur*, uses the essayistic method to work toward

clarity and the pragmatic method to evaluate existing conceptions of truths; he also

follows a phenomenological method with interesting parallels to Heidegger's

phenomenology in order to investigate the ontological question of being, a question that

is fundamental in all of Ashbery's poetry. [6] In "My Philosophy of Life," Ashbery's

speaker twice mentions the desire to "let things be." With his interest in popular culture,

Ashbery would undoubtedly relish a reader's association with the Beatles' "Let It Be,"

but his use of the term is closer to Heidegger's phenomenological method that lets "what

shows itself be seen from itself," just as it is, not as one would have it be (30); in other

words, one must let being reveal itself as it is; it must "let things be." When he is still

cogitating on principles, Ashbery's speaker allows that with "my new attitude, I wouldn't

be preachy, / [. . .] Instead I'd sort of let things be what they are" (CYHB 73). Later,

when the recollection of "public toilets where weary pilgrims have carved / their names and addresses, and perhaps messages as well" causes him to wonder about abstract principles, he is blocked from further thought about his new philosophy. Is he incapable of such high-level thought? Was he wrong when he saw nothing more than people sitting on toilets writing graffiti on walls? Acknowledging his blocked thought forces him to change his direction of thought; he makes the important decision to choose a philosophy that considers his real world. He ignores the drive to impose meaning and rephrases his original statement with a phenomenological slant: "I'll let / things be what they are, sort of" (74). The vague, speculative conditional, "I'd sort of let," becomes the more definite, simple future tense, "I'll let." The meaning of "let things be what they are" dramatically changes as it is ruptured by the linebreak and the modifier "sort of" shifts position. The connection between the speaker and the "things" is broken. "Sort of," which originally modifies the verb "let," becomes an afterthought modifying the subject complement, "what they are." The controlling variable is changed from *what he does* to *what is*. The injunction to "let things be" is difficult to follow, but as the poem progresses, the speaker becomes clearer about what he means by "let things be what they are." He would not be "injecting them with the serum of the new moral climate" of his philosophy, as he first considered, but would be engaging himself with beings, including himself, as they are.

According to Heidegger, "to let beings be" is to refrain from imposing oneself on them but it is not "neglect or indifference. [. . .] To let be is to engage oneself with beings [. . .] in order that they might reveal themselves with respect to what and how they are" ("On the Essence of Truth" 127-128). A problem arises in that what "things [. . .] are" may not be clear, or as Heidegger puts it, "the *being* of beings [. . .] can be covered up"

(*Being and Time* 31, original italics). Covering up often occurs as a result of absorption with the world in its "everydayness" and "the they," which distract a being and obscure what can be discovered (107-122). Ashbery's speaker admits the impact that others have on him in both what they say and what importance he gives to their opinions regarding himself: "I won't be embarrassed by my friends' dumb remarks, / or even my own." He acknowledges the reciprocity between a person and his world with others; one affects the other with expectations and demands: "this thing works both ways, you know. You can't always / be worrying about others and keeping track of yourself / at the same time." According to Heidegger, an undue obsession with "the they," which in turn allows others to determine one's thinking about one's self, tempts one to impose one's self on others and thus inhibits both one's self and others. Earlier in the poem, the speaker reflects on what his new attitude would be like: "I wouldn't be preachy, / or worry about children and old people." He first envisions a philosophy that would avoid a pontificating, sentimental approach; but as the poem closes in on the "way" he really thinks, the generalized category of "children and old people" like "the wedding of two people you don't know" are disregarded in favor of specific experience. His first instinct to avoid making assumptions based on generalizations or unknown abstractions is confirmed. Furthermore, he does not want to be officious or so caught up in his world of other beings that he does not know his own self. Dogmatism and immersion in the world are two forms of concealedness of being, and both lead to a distortion of being. According to Heidegger, "Being covered up is the counterconcept to 'phenomenon.'" Additionally, "phenomenology is the way of access to [. . .] what is to become the theme of ontology,"

which is the unconcealedness of being or as Heidegger puts it, "what demands to become a phenomenon in a distinctive sense, in terms of its most proper content" (31).

The ontological question of being, which is the "fundamental question" for philosophy to address according to Heidegger (1-3), is only hinted at in this poem; but the poem does receive its impetus from an initiating question: "OK, but which ones?" The question is imprecise because it involves determining a way of living, which is often taken for granted and, therefore, accepted without question. Though Ashbery's speaker does not know exactly how to go about answering the question, or even precisely what question to ask, he has a "dark foreknowledge of what it would be like." In the same vein, Heidegger writes of the need to "first of all to work out adequately the *formulation of the question*" (3, original italics), which "questioning," he says, "needs prior guidance from what it seeks" (4). It relies on an "indefiniteness of the understanding of being that is always already available"; in other words, in order to ask the question, one must already have an "average and vague understanding" that necessarily precedes a "developed concept" (4). This "vague understanding of being can be permeated by traditional theories and opinions about being in such a way that these theories, as the sources of the prevailing understanding, remain hidden" (4). Ashbery's speaker must first discover the theories, principles, and definitions underlying his present, unquestioned understanding of a "philosophy of life" so that he can question them and move forward to determine his own beliefs.

Heidegger even begins his study with the fundamental question, "the question of Being" (1). He asserts that phenomenology is an interrogative method in which being is uncovered or allowed to be seen; being thereby reveals what has hitherto been

unquestioned and, thus, guides its own questioning and interpretation (30-33). In a

lecture entitled "Poetical Space," Ashbery describes the phenomenological nature of

poetry: "poetry is a kind of phenomenology ('a branch of science dealing with the

descriptions and classifications of phenomena, according to Webster's dictionary')"

(SP 210). Because what the poet sees is not always what is anticipated, the results can

be surprising and sometimes necessarily imprecise. For example, Ashbery cites the river

scene from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which he calls "accurate in its inaccuracy" (215):

> [T]he semicoherent daubs laid down over Eliot's Thames are of more
>
> value to us, for they point a way in which our own inexpert and falsifying
>
> accounts of the truth can eventually ring true, describing and classifying
>
> all the more searchingly even as they seem to abdicate this task. "You too
>
> can be a phenomenologist," he seems to be saying, "if only you'll abandon
>
> the task, let it work through you, let the river carry you where it wants to
>
> rather than trying to immobilize it." (216)

Ashbery, like Heidegger, is expanding the notion of inquiry beyond merely asking

questions when he shows how Eliot phenomenologically questions the being of the river

by heeding it. Heidegger explains: "Regarding, understanding and grasping, choosing,

and gaining access to, are constitutive attitudes of inquiry" (*Being and Time* 5). In order

to set up a receptive space for such inquiry, poets must forgo natural inclinations to

"generalize" by basing their poetry on what they expect to see rather than on what they

actually see. When writing about his friend, the artist Jane Freilicher, Ashbery notes that

"lesser artists correct nature in a misguided attempt at heightened realism." He admires

Freilicher whose "long career has been one attempt to correct this misguided, even

blasphemous, state of affairs; to let things, finally, be" (RS 242). In this tentative

approach, which recognizes a relationship between subject and object, Ashbery seems to

concur with Heidegger's conclusion that "*ontology is possible only as phenomenology*"

(*Being and Time* 31, original italics).

In "My Philosophy of Life," Ashbery's speaker attains a clearer perception of his

philosophy for leading his life. Like Montaigne, James, and Heidegger, he tries to grasp

the phenomena in his environment without the distortion of fixed concepts or other

preconceptions that block free movement of his perceptions to his mind and then to

transcription in his poems. For both the philosophers and Ashbery, an essayistic method

of transcribing those perceptions is the most natural and effective way to write them

down, yet keep them in motion at the same time. Although "My Philosophy of Life" is

the first of his poems to cope directly and explicitly with what philosophy has to do with

one's life, Ashbery has been wrestling with the subject of a consciousness confronting its

environment from his very first published poems. In part, "My Philosophy of Life" helps

to explain his earlier denials of a philosophic connection; if his perception of philosophy

was that it required unchanging, abstract principles as he believed at the beginning of the

poem, then philosophy would have nothing to do with his life. By recognizing another

conception of philosophy that could contain the contingency and variety in experience,

improve his life as he lives it, and is itself subject to revision, he is able to allow it openly

into his poetry. Returning to Ashbery's early poems with this understanding of his

concept of a philosophy of life illuminates their important role for him in beginning the

exploration that he will continue throughout his poetry.

CHAPTER TWO

ESSAYISM IN ASHBERY'S EARLY POETRY

Ashbery published "My Philosophy of Life" in 1995, thirty-nine years after publishing his first book of poems. The poem enacts the speaker's thought process as he works out his essayistic philosophy of life; it also demonstrates Ashbery's way of thinking in much of his poetry as he develops the subjects introduced in his first published poems. As a *bricoleur*, he has been questioning existing, ready-made concepts in order to become more conscious of them; taking what he can use from various, like-minded philosophies to clarify his thinking; and forging a philosophical viewpoint that is relevant both to himself and to his readers. Ashbery's subject, as he stated in 1970, is to present "an individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world of external phenomena." He hopes that his poetry will be a "clear and concrete transcript of the impressions left by these phenomena on that consciousness" (Friedman 33). Poetry that is a transcript of consciousness as it is constantly bombarded with phenomena requires an essayistic approach as the most efficacious way to address a subject, which, by its nature, cannot be definitively identified or concluded.

Ashbery's essayism skeptically recognizes that impressions and beliefs may change and be supplanted by subsequent impressions and beliefs, it pragmatically tests the truth of ideas according to their ability to connect satisfactorily with experience, and it phenomenologically looks at and interprets phenomena as they reveal themselves to him and not as he has previously perceived them to be. With a provisional approach that

employs these basic philosophical elements, Ashbery's earliest poems begin his ongoing investigation of two issues that it works out both within individual poems and among the poems in the body of poetry: the knotty ontological problem of understanding the relationship between consciousness and phenomena and what that relationship means to a person's understanding of his or her existence; and the linguistic problem of recording impressions clearly and truthfully despite his awareness that poets are "necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life that is always on the point of coming into being" ("Second Presentation" 10).

Three early poems particularly illustrate the early development of Ashbery's essayism: "Some Trees," "Two Scenes," and "Clepsydra." Ashbery introduces his philosophical questions in "Some Trees" and "Two Scenes" in his first published book, *Some Trees* (1956). These two short poems do not have the luxury of sufficient space to show how their thought develops within the individual poems, but they do address the subject of the perception of phenomena including one's self. The poems interact with each other as though one speaker is mulling over the topic by approaching it from different angles in the two poems. The poems begin what will be an ongoing discussion of perception of a self as it exists in its world; "Some Trees" leads to a deepening of insights in "Two Scenes." "Clepsydra," a longer poem from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), further complicates the subject and language of the many poems written between it and the first poems; occupying seven pages, the single-stanza poem gives itself sufficient space to follow the speaker's evolving thought as he considers the various ways time affects the truth of his perceptions of phenomena and himself. Also, "Clepsydra" is long enough to include an essayistic structure within itself; it builds on the issues of

perception introduced in "Some Trees" and "Two Scenes," but adds the issue of truth as it relates both to phenomena in the external world and internal perception of one's self. The poem ends without resolution, but it is an important turning point in Ashbery's work as it widens the scope of the subject and points toward even longer poems, particularly the meditative essayism of *Three Poems*.

"Some Trees"

Ashbery wrote "Some Trees" in 1948, thus making it the earliest poem in *Some Trees*. Though he now calls it "a conventional modern poem of that period, my farewell to poetry as we know it—it had a paraphrasable meaning" (Smith 50), it provides the volume with its title, and, most important, it begins Ashbery's career-long ruminations on consciousness as it draws on several Heideggerian ideas. The speaker in "Some Trees" begins by saying of the trees: "These are amazing." The poem then elaborates on why the trees fill him with a sense of wonder.

> [. . .] you and I
>
> Are suddenly what the trees try
>
> To tell us we are:
>
> That their merely being there
>
> Means something [. . .]. (ST 51)

In five four-line rhyming stanzas, the speaker describes and interprets his encounter with the environment, which is likely the paraphrasable element that Ashbery subsequently discards.

The poem evokes Heidegger in a number of ways. When the speaker recognizes

that the trees "mean something," whatever it might be, by "merely being there" in the

world, he evokes Heidegger's definition of existence as being-in-the-world: the trees, the

speaker, and his companion are defined by their existence in their world—nothing more

is necessary. But two key words, "puzzling" and "reticence," enhance an understanding

of the relationship with the environment that further implicates Heidegger's thought:

> [. . .] we are surrounded:
>
> A silence already filled with noises,
>
> A canvas on which emerges
>
> A chorus of smiles, a winter morning.
>
> Placed in a *puzzling* light, and moving,
>
> Our days put on such *reticence*
>
> These accents seem their own defense. (51, italics added)

A "puzzling light" is one that is difficult to understand; it causes one to question what

would normally be taken for granted; according to Ashbery, not taking anything for

granted, including one's self, defines the tentative art he admires (RS 242). One of his

poetry's purposes, then, would be to put everyday phenomena and thoughts into a

"puzzling light" to counter the world's activity, which threatens to muffle an awareness

of self. It also provides a necessary distance to counter one's very closeness to one's self,

which makes questioning seem unnecessary; the self-evident nature of being suggests

comprehension and suppresses mystery.

At the beginning of *Being and Time*, Heidegger addresses the problem of

questioning when he notes that "being" is not questioned in part because it "is the self-

evident concept"; however, precisely because being appears to be understood without question demonstrates "the fundamental necessity" of repeatedly questioning it (3). Although Heidegger is proposing the need for a questioning of being in the larger sense of being, human beings, in the particular, also question their own being. Often, such questionings are prompted by something in the environment or self that "puzzles," or causes people to break out of their normal, everyday mode of thinking, and causes them to recognize the need to question.

When the speaker of Ashbery's poem and his companion are absorbed with the activities of their world, they are not able to differentiate themselves as separate beings, and they see themselves, as Heidegger puts it, "in terms of that world by its reflected light" (18). But when they put their "days" and themselves "in a puzzling light," they are able to separate themselves from the noise and distractions of their surroundings; they can then regain what Heidegger terms their "own leadership in questioning and choosing" (18). However, they are not separating themselves from the world itself; they still exist in the world and are still "moving" in time. Seeing the trees standing next to each other, "as far this morning / From the world as agreeing / With it," the speaker sees himself, too, as a being, separate and yet a part of the world. Finding himself "[p]laced in a puzzling light," he becomes aware that he should not take his being for granted but should question his place in his world. "Thus," Heidegger writes, "to work out the question of being means to make a being—one who questions—transparent in its being" (6).

A second Heideggerian element, "reticence," contributes to the speaker's being able to separate himself from his surroundings in order to see himself as a being, just as the trees do. The trees stand "as though speech / Were a still performance." They "say"

by "merely being there." The "silence" is "filled with noises," the silent noises of "a chorus of smiles, a winter morning" (ST 51). The resulting "reticence" allows the quiet "accents" to speak for themselves. Heidegger considers "reticence" to be an important "mode of discourse" for understanding "being":

> In talking with one another the person who is silent can "let something be understood," that is, he can develop an understanding more authentically than the person who never runs out of words. [. . .] As a mode of discourse, reticence articulates the intelligibility of Da-sein so primordially that it gives rise to a genuine potentiality for hearing and to a being-with-one-another that is transparent. (*Being and Time* 154)

With an attitude of reticence, the speaker is able to question his own being in his world with "some trees" and with his companion—both separately and together. The trees are "amazing" in the true sense of the word: They fill him with wonder by helping him attain a comprehension that acknowledges mystery without attempting to demystify it.

"Two Scenes"

Ashbery signals the significance of "Two Scenes" by placing it at the beginning of his book *Some Trees*, even though it was written five years after the poem, "Some Trees." "Two Scenes" appears to be a response to the earlier poem, and, as such, it is the first indication of an essayistic structure in Ashbery's poetry. While "Some Trees" focuses primarily on the Heideggerian, ontological question of being, "Two Scenes" serves as the harbinger of Ashbery's essayism because it introduces some important elements of Montaigne's literary and philosophical skepticism: it concerns a perception

of self as continually changing and realizes that certainty is impossible. "Some Trees" recognizes that the mere presence of phenomena in the environment quietly establishes meaning, and "Two Scenes" extends the earlier perception of the influence of the environment to include other people and busy activities.

The poem begins: "We see us as we truly behave:" (ST 9). This short line has three major implications. First, it announces his subject in a deceptively direct, declarative sentence, which sounds like a self-evident principle, linking perceptions of each other to outward behavior. But the sentence quickly unravels.

Second, the opening line introduces Ashbery's indeterminate pronouns that begin the opening sentence's unraveling. All of Montaigne's essays and most of Ashbery's poems are written in an ambiguous first person. Montaigne's "I" in the essay at first seems to be an intended equivalence with himself; he begins his essays with a defining prefatory statement including his purpose of recording his perception of himself: "Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book" (2). He later discusses his artistic handling of this "matter" or "figure," revealing his "I" and the "Montaigne" persona in the essays to be a construct: "In modeling this figure upon myself, I have had to fashion and compose myself so often to bring myself out, that the model itself has to some extent grown firm and taken shape" (504). He compares the form of his essays with his own changing shape: he says, "this bundle of so many disparate pieces is being composed in this manner: [. . .] I want [. . .] to be able to trace the course of my mutations" (574), and he composes a form that will accommodate them. Montaigne addresses himself to a "we" rather than a "you," although he notes that he writes to a changing audience: "relatives and friends" (2); himself, "what I write here [. . .] is not a lesson for others, but for me"

(272); a selected few for a short time, "I write my book for few men and for few years" (751); and finally, the "world": he submits his "privacy" to "publicity" in considering that "each man bears the entire form of man's estate" (611). Montaigne's "I" and "we," then, do not refer to fixed, specific entities.

Like Montaigne, Ashbery writes for self-knowledge; in an interview, he says, "I write [. . .] to realize, more, where I am" (Gangel 13), but unlike Montaigne, he does not present himself as his stated subject, and he uses a greater number of more ambiguous pronouns. "Two Scenes" begins with an undefined "we" rather than "I," giving it a general, not a specific, concern with perception of self. The pronouns have functions other than standing in for specific people or objects. For example, the opening line in "Two Scenes" declares that people, including himself and those around him, perhaps even the reader, understand themselves and others by observing the behavior or actions of themselves and others. The thought is not particularly new; however, Ashbery's pronouns disturb its familiarity. After reading the phrase, "*We* see us as *we* truly behave," the reader might go back to the first "we" to wonder if "they" would not fit more naturally since people usually see themselves through the eyes of others. Or another question might be why Ashbery would not write "We see *ourselves* as we truly behave" rather than "We see *us* as we truly behave" (ST 9, italics added). With the former, he would have filled out the line's pentameter for a smoother line with no particular emphasis. "Us" instead of "ourselves" forces a stop after "us," which breaks the line into two thoughts to be digested separately. The pronominal pause allows time to consider the role of perception and the resistant power of language, as a self is considered both as the subject "we" and the object "us. It also accentuates the ambiguity of "truly"

in the second clause. "Truly" could imply *actual* versus *stated* behavior; or it could be tacitly and ironically drawing attention to the epistemological difficulty, as argued by Montaigne, of knowing through perception, "the uncertainty of our senses makes everything they produce uncertain" (454)—actual behavior is often considered to be true and becomes the basis of judgment even though it may not be accurately, or "truly," seen and known.

Third, the opening line sets up an essayistic structure by creating the basis for a dialogue both within the subsequent lines of the poem and with future poems. The line does not end with a period, but with a colon, thus establishing that everything in the rest of the sentence elaborates on it. It, thus, inaugurates the grounds of its own ironic subversion, making itself available for skeptical rewriting. Based on Ashbery's continual reworking of the perceptual questions arising from this statement, one could conceivably extend the reach of the colon at the end of this first line to say that the poetry following in this volume, or even in all of his work, meditates in some way on the problems inherent in consciousness. Additionally, "We see us as we truly behave" indirectly acknowledges Montaigne by echoing his phrase: "Every movement reveals us" (219). Montaigne connects movement not only with physical action but even more with thought leading to self-knowledge; although his statement initially seems clear, as did Ashbery's, it is not a matter of mere passive observation: "It is a thorny undertaking, and more so than it seems, to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind" (273). Questioning obvious, well-ingrained thoughts often provides the most fruitful impetus for further thought.

An example of this movement between ideas occurs between the seemingly straightforward opening statement in "Two Scenes" and the less explicit images that follow. The images immediately complicate the simplicity of the opening line by describing the amount of information and number of experiences and opportunities coming at the speaker "from every corner" with "much news, such noise." This noise, unlike the silent, still noises of "Some Trees," depicts an active, various world, expressed predominantly in end-stopped lines to highlight the separate nature of each action:

> We see us as we truly behave:
>
> From every corner comes a distinctive offering.
>
> The train comes bearing joy;
>
> The sparks it strikes illuminate the table.
>
> Destiny guides the water-pilot, and it is destiny.
>
> For long we hadn't heard so much news, such noise.
>
> The day was warm and pleasant.
>
> "We see you in your hair,
>
> Air resting around the tips of mountains." (ST 9)

Multiple stimuli disturb the unity of clear perception. The poem goes back and forth between one and many, between the singular and the general. It begins with the plural "we" and continues with experiences from "every corner." The first stanza suddenly drops its frantic pace when it settles on "the day" and ends by narrowing its focus to "you": "We see us" in the first line becomes "we see you" and the general "as we truly behave" becomes the more particular "in your hair."

The second stanza continues the conflict between the one and the many, but it complicates the first stanza: The first stanza moved from the many to the one, and the second stanza merges them to make them almost indistinguishable; in this stanza the lines are predominantly run-on lines indicating the interrelationship of the activities:

> A fine rain anoints the canal machinery.
>
> This is perhaps a day of general honesty
>
> Without example in the world's history
>
> Though the fumes are not of a singular authority
>
> And indeed are dry as poverty.
>
> Terrific units are on an old man
>
> In the blue shadow of some paint cans
>
> As laughing cadets say, "In the evening
>
> Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is." (ST 9)

In the second and third lines, both the singular and the general appear in the same image; the particular day's uniqueness is paradoxically caused by a "general," or common and universal, "honesty." The hope for such an uncommon day of common honesty endures despite evidence to the contrary: "the fumes are not of a singular authority," or the results of such a day do not wield exceptional, one-of-a-kind, creative influence. Moreover, the first five lines' end-rhyming, rhythmical, abstract terms call attention to themselves and distract, just as a stimulus overload distracts, from the reader's ability to extract a singular meaning. Ashbery frequently uses abstractions in his poetry; in this poem, they seem to be the speaker's failed attempt to establish a tone of importance and avoid the more difficult task of expressing actual experience that could be accomplished only through

concrete words. The use of abstractions demonstrates that simply using a word such as "authority" does not establish it. Though end-word rhymes and linear rhythmic patterns could create a welcome sense of unity for the reader, they now disturb the poem's movement and further emphasize the confusion. The lumbering near-rhymes draw attention to the abstractions in almost comic fashion—further undermining the authority; the linear rhythm is not constant, but the pattern and number of stressed and unstressed syllables jarringly change with each line and decrease from five stresses in the first lines to three in the last—the fifth line enacts itself as it virtually peters out even in vocabulary: "And indeed are dry as poverty." The sixth and seventh lines return to customary versification with traditional rhyme and rhythm as if to point out that the "old man" with his "paint cans" should be attended to; the "laughing cadets" break up the brief interlude of normalcy.

The final four-line sentence places two images next to each other that may or may not connect. The first image associates "units," which denote single quantities, with one "old man," who may be an artist eclipsed by his own materials, "in the blue shadow of some paint cans," and who may be standing by the second image of a group of "laughing cadets." The "as" in the phrase "As laughing cadets say" is ambiguous. It could pertain to the artist in shadows as, or while, the cadets laugh. Or it could attach to the cadets, meaning "as cadets say." Or it could be both. Could any of these cadets, who are in training, be willing to leave the group to take up the old man's singular work despite knowing the impossibility of obtaining final answers? Is the desired "singular authority," or influence, to come from such an artist, or author, as the old man or from the group of cadets? Is "singular authority" even possible? Unlike "Some Trees," which interprets

itself, this poem does not try to answer the questions it poses; it simply places scenes within the two stanzas to draw out the implications of the first line.

The title "Two Scenes" with its two stanzas suggests that one scene will be discussed in each stanza. Instead the two scenes are intermingled in both stanzas: one scene depicts the singular, one depicts the general, and sometimes the two scenes intertwine. The poem's paratactic structure presents images of obstacles separating one's self and others from the onslaught of everyday information with "much news, such noise" arriving without attendant explanations or connections. With this confusion of singular with multiple, Ashbery reflects a major concern of James. James considers the one versus the many to be "the most central of all philosophic problems. [. . .] If you know whether a man is a decided monist or a decided pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions than if you give him any other name ending in *ist*" (*Pragmatism* 64, original italics). As a pragmatist, James falls on the side of pluralism but refuses to be absolute in either direction; instead he admits that "some day [. . .] total union [. . .] may turn out to be the most acceptable of all hypotheses. Meanwhile the opposite hypothesis, of a world imperfectly unified still, and perhaps always to remain so, must be sincerely entertained" (79). "Two Scenes" seems to imply this same conclusion with the recognition that while singularity, or "a schedule," is an ideal, it cannot be attained while living in, what James terms, the "stream of experience" (73).

In his posing of the problem between one and many, Ashbery also includes allusions to Heidegger when he describes the everyday world with its "much news, such noise." Heidegger sets the one against the many as he considers "being" in terms of the everyday world with others. Being, the one, exists and defines itself in this world of the

many. Heidegger's word "Da-sein" (literally defined as "there-being") does not mean a human being as a particular person; it denotes being, which is human and which "always understands itself in terms of its existence, in terms of its possibility to be itself or not to be itself. [. . .] *Being in a world* belongs essentially to Da-sein" (*Being and Time* 10-11, original italics). Therefore, Heidegger determines that his study of being must "pursue everyday being-in-the-world, [. . .] the *surrounding world*" (62, original italics). By necessity, "Da-sein in its everydayness is in a world in general" (107), in which it understands itself. At the same time, however, "in this familiarity Da-sein can lose itself in what it encounters within the world and be numbed by it" (71). Ashbery, too, implies that while the action is stimulating and "the day was warm and pleasant" (does the past tense separate this day from the present-tense day described in the second stanza?), the many can overwhelm the one. In future poems, Ashbery will return to the Heideggerian dilemma that while "being-in-the-world" defines human beings, it also distracts them from self-knowledge.

One line, exactly halfway through the first stanza, stands out without evident reference to the other lines: "Destiny guides the water-pilot, and it is destiny." Does "it" refer to "destiny" or to "the water pilot"? Either way, the line is a tautology. If "it" is "destiny," then destiny is destiny; if "it" is "the water pilot," then the water pilot is destiny, which guides destiny. James and Heidegger shed light on different implications suggested by this enigmatic statement, but they both stress the necessity of selection or choice. First, Ashbery's metaphor of 'water-pilot' suggests that destiny is worked out in the fluid medium that James calls "the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life" (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 239). This metaphor of a continuous

"teeming multiplicity of objects and relations" (224) requires selection in order to act: "Out of what is in itself an indistinguishable, swarming *continuum*, devoid of distinction or emphasis, our senses make for us, by attending to this motion and ignoring that, a world full of contrasts, of sharp accents, of abrupt changes, of picturesque light and shade" (284-85, original italics). Second, additional light is shed on the relationship between destiny and the water-pilot by Heidegger's account of how a human being's destiny is bound up in its world: a human being is defined by its existence in a particular world "in such a way that it can understand itself as bound up in its 'destiny' with the being of those beings which it encounters within its own world" (*Being and Time* 52). Beings are thrown, or born, without choice, into a time and a world, or their "there" (127), which they often accept without reflection. A being is "entangled in a tradition which it more or less explicitly grasps. This tradition deprives Da-sein of its own leadership in questioning and choosing" (18). Insofar as its past and its beginnings are concerned, a being is not completely free but it can make choices for the future based on its given history and its present world—its "tradition" and "the world in which it is" (18). Ashbery's cryptic line does not spell out the complications of destiny overtly in a Heideggerian sense, but it could be so interpreted: Destiny guides a water-pilot, which pilot is in turn a guide who leads itself over a difficult, fluid, erratic course. In other words, this pilot, initially guided by a given history, guides its future life under the constraints of its past and its present world, thus creating its destiny despite its limited freedom.

Finally, the poem reflects a Montaignian, skeptical trust that one can live with possibility rather than certainty: "As laughing cadets say, 'In the evening / Everything has

a schedule, if you can find out what it is.'" Montaigne says that in his writing of essays he "is always in apprenticeship and on trial" (611). Ashbery will later say in "Soonest Mended" that because what has been learned is always altered, "None of us ever graduates from college" (DDS 10). Cadets, as people in training, can be compared to Montaigne's apprentice and the undergraduate in "Soonest Mended": They could despair at knowing that certainty, or completion of training, will always lie just beyond their reach, but instead they are skeptics and accept the "knowledge of [their] ignorance" (Montaigne 368); thus, the cadets choose to laugh. They believe in the existence of such a schedule but do not believe they will find it. However, having the schedule is not their concern; their concern is to make worthwhile choices among the "distinctive offering[s]" that come their way. Ashbery, as a "laughing cadet," accepts this condition by living and writing with a tentative, skeptical approach toward transitory truths. The stillness of "Some Trees," in which the speaker reaches an epiphany of sorts about what he learns from trees, differs from the bustling activity of "Two Scenes," which ends inconclusively. But Ashbery does not evaluate in "Two Scenes," he simply presents, and this poem is only the beginning of the inquiry. He will have more to say about the meeting of a consciousness with the variety and busyness of experience.

Of Ashbery's many poems in his first four volumes, any number (such as "The Picture of Little JA in a Prospect of Flowers" [ST 29] and "Soonest Mended" [DDS 17]) could be read as examples of his fascination with consciousness and its relationship with the world. However, "Some Trees" and "Two Scenes" are the poems that open his first volume to begin what would become an ongoing discussion among his various poems as he continues essayistically to test previous perceptions and to search for new standpoints

from which to view them. Ashbery describes his goals for experimentation in works that he wrote after publishing *Some Trees* and did not initially intend to publish: "I wondered what I was going to do, because I felt I couldn't go on writing the kinds of things I had done. [. . .] I tried all kinds of experiments—breaking up phrases, isolating words." However, the poems were published as *Tennis Court Oath*, a volume "made up largely of sketches and experiments." He says that after this second book, "I hoped to go back to writing what I considered to be the more intelligible vein of my first book, having had the experience, meanwhile, of experimenting with language" (Gangel 9). "Clepsydra" epitomizes the poetry of that return to his original style but with a difference.

"Clepsydra"

With "Clepsydra," Ashbery's essayism and experiments in genre first coincide. The poem marks the fullest expression to that time of Ashbery's essayism by complicating issues discussed in preceding poems, introducing thoughts that will be further developed in subsequent poems, and, most important, adopting a Montaignian essayistic structure in a performative argument showing a mind attempting to work out a complex problem. Additionally, "Clepsydra" evokes Heidegger and James as Ashbery contemplates consciousness in a more explicitly philosophical and theoretical manner than in the earlier poems: it looks at the difficulty of attributing truth to perception, even to the perception of one's self; and it considers the interrelationship of truth and time. "Two Scenes," "Some Trees," and "Clepsydra" almost seem to talk with each other in an ongoing conversation about the perception of self, forming what could be read as a continuous, expanding rumination by a single speaker. In "Some Trees," he sees himself

as being meaningful, just as the trees are, "by merely being there." In "Two Scenes," the speaker tries to see himself and others through observable behavior despite the world's clamor. In "Clepsydra," the speaker investigates the problem more theoretically by removing himself, for the most part, as an entity, focusing instead on the issues of truth and time until he sees that he is, after all, talking about himself.

"Clepsydra" experiments with genre as it abandons any similarity to lyric poetry[1] and adopts the language of legal or philosophical argument, although it quickly subsumes the argumentative under the essayistic structure. "Some Trees" and "Two Scenes" rely primarily on images to bear their meaning; in "Clepsydra," Ashbery still depends on images, but they serve to support his more explicitly presented thought process. The language often suggests logical argument (e.g., "the reason why," "the undeduced result," "the basic principle," even "the argument [. . .] / it would have you believe," and so on).[2] Indeed, the poem *does* argue that time's quick movement, moment to moment, affects truth, or the perception of truth, including one's perception of self. But it subverts the formal argumentative structure, which typically begins either with a premise leading to a conclusion or with a position supported by logical assertions and evidence. Instead, beginning with an incomplete question, the poem moves in a methodically unmethodical, essayistic fashion as it gropes toward stages of insight without reaching a definitive answer—a necessary outcome since conclusiveness would effectively rebut the poem's insight that truth changes in time.

The question itself even changes over the course of the poem as the speaker comes closer to realizing what affects his view of truth. However, the poem's intimation that it is struggling to become a cohesive argument illustrates that although argument's

clear-cut conclusiveness is generally impossible to attain, attempts to do so continue due to a desire for the palliative effect of form: one hopes to make sense out of and subdue disorder by finding explanatory, logical terms to create a "congruent / Message." But such a message, though usually initially trusted, often achieves its tidy appearance by ignoring or glossing over unruly aspects that do not fit; and it is, therefore, unreliable as a bearer of truth. Meanwhile, though one distrusts and wants "to abolish confusion," it contains potential in its ambiguities and contradictions for increasingly higher levels of understanding, which nevertheless do not become static truth but remain subject to further questions and entanglement. "Clepsydra" enacts the speaker's argument with himself; the suggestion of argument (even resistance to rational forms of argument) provides an essayistic field wherein a consciousness can clarify its perceptions of its world. In this sense, the poem argues for essayism; its unmethodical method provides a form to handle contingency by seeking increased understanding rather than conclusive answers, thus recalling the Latin origin of argument: *argutāre* meaning "to clarify."

.   "Clepsydra" not only enacts an essayistic argumentative form, it actively follows the movement of a mind as it mulls over the philosophical nature of truth, its relationship with time, and its effect on self-perception. It shows how such thinking intersects with a person's real life as Ashbery contextualizes the philosophical questions in more personal concrete interrelationships and provides a sense of the feeling, as he says, of time passing (Kostelanetz 101). The first twenty-three lines of "Clepsydra" demonstrate the movement of the speaker's thought as he attempts to clarify initial, fuzzy half-thoughts that only slowly reveal a connection with truth, time, and self:

Hasn't the sky? Returned from moving the other

Authority recently dropped, wrested as much of

That severe sunshine as you need now on the way

You go. The reason why it happened only since

You woke up is letting the steam disappear

From those clouds when the landscape all around

Is hilly sites that will have to be reckoned

Into the total for there to be more air; that is,

More fitness read into the undeduced result than land.

This means never getting any closer to the basic

Principle operating behind it than to the distracted

Entity of a mirage. The half-meant, half-perceived

Motions of fronds out of idle depths that are

Summer. And expansion into little draughts.

The reply wakens easily, darting from

Untruth to willed moment, scarcely called into being

Before it swells, the way a waterfall

Drums at different levels. Each moment

Of utterance is the true one; likewise none are true,

Only is the bounding from air to air, a serpentine

Gesture which hides the truth behind a congruent

Message, the way air hides the sky, is in fact,

Tearing it limb from limb this very moment. (RM 27)

Ashbery follows Montaigne's essayistic method within the poem by engaging with an unexpected, inexplicable question and following its accompanying images of motion and change in a rapid back-and-forth movement without pressing for explanation of ambiguities, thus allowing its meaning to unfold. The poem also engages earlier poems; "Authority" recalls the unexplained nonexistent "singular authority" of the day's "fumes" in "Two Scenes." "Authority" is ambiguous in "Clepsydra": the "author" embedded within the phrase, "authority recently dropped," could be a creator whose influence has been "dropped," which is consistent with "Two Scenes," or could be the originator who "dropped" the instigating question to set the poem's direction. The speaker's environment is no longer communicating "as though speech / Were a still performance" to say "their merely being there / Means something" (ST 51) as in "Some Trees"; the landscape is now undecipherable, devious, and even violent, requiring the speaker's active participation in order to wrest any possible meaning.

In another ambiguity, the pronouns, which were consistent in "Some Trees" and ambiguous in "Two Scenes," play a more central role in establishing the opening lines' confusion. Not only is the landscape indefinable, so are the people. The speaker addresses "you": is "you" another person whose question the speaker takes up, or is "you" the speaker who distances himself from his own question by using "you" instead of "I," or is "you" a general term used as an alternative to "one," or is "you" the reader? For the moment, all options remain open while the opening question stimulates the speaker to find a rational meaning and context to make sense of his situation.

Suddenly the speaker's thinking takes shape, and he makes what seems to be a clear, straightforward, logical statement: "This means never getting any closer to the

basic / Principle operating behind it than to the distracted / Entity of a mirage." Of course, as is typical in Ashbery's poetry, the antecedents to the nonspecific pronouns "this" and "it" immediately complicate the clarity of the statement and move the reader back to the beginning of the poem. "This" could refer to everyday activities, "the way / You go," in one's landscape or world, which continually demand re-interpretation; however, since these re-interpretations or reckonings have an "undeduced result," they are consequences without traceable cause. Further, what "it" is the "basic / Principle operating behind"? Does "it" have the same unspecified antecedent as the "it happened" of the fourth line? If so, "it" could be whatever happens to one in the course of a day.

The search for antecedents in the poem, just like the search for causes among the landscapes and happenings of one's world, aggravates a reader who wants clear transition between cause and effect and who is not willing to keep moving with a trust more information will arrive. A reader must ask questions raised by the poem, such as the possibilities for pronoun antecedents, in order to grasp the sense of the knots in the speaker's thinking; and the reader should speculate on possible answers, but these assumptions should be held lightly with a readiness to revise them as new information warrants. In this way, the poem recreates the frustration of trying to make sense out of new encounters with explanations that might not hold, thereby demonstrating James's pragmatic view of the instability of truths: "we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood" (*Pragmatism* 110,107). The poem enacts this process as the speaker begins to question his own replies to his questions; he moves quickly from question to realization to new question and so on.

Ashbery's speaker distinguishes two stages in his early thought. First, he locates himself in the uncomfortable liminal zone between a dimly perceived but as yet unrealized perception of a question: "the half-meant, half- perceived / Motions of fronds out of the idle depths." Second, to establish a coherency and reduce his anxiety, he quickly forms an answer: "The reply wakens easily, darting from / Untruth to willed moment." When he then recognizes truth's instability and inaccessibility, he is able to incorporate his first answer, which he considered at the time to be true, into the new insight that both truth and untruth travel together as integral parts of the thought process: "Each moment / Of utterance is the true one: likewise none are true." Heidegger expresses a similar thought that both "truth and untruth are, *in essence*, *not* irrelevant to one another but rather belong together" ("On the Essence of Truth" 130, original italics). He uses the term "errancy" for the tendency of most people to prefer the known to the unknown: "Man's flight from the mystery toward what is readily available, onward from one current thing to the next, passing the mystery by—this is *erring*" (135, original italics).[3] Heidegger defines "mystery" as "the concealing of what is concealed" (132-133), so to err is to run from the mystery, to run from what is concealed toward what is "readily available" (135). On the other hand, "freedom is intrinsically the resolutely open bearing that does not close up in itself" (133). Ashbery's speaker is able to extract a value from his inability to present truth in a "congruent / Message" that purports to express truth, in the same way as Heidegger sees possibility in errancy. He explains that man "is always astray in errancy"; however, this very condition of errancy not only leads man astray but "contributes to a possibility that man is capable of drawing up from his ek-sistence [exposure to disclosedness of being]—the possibility that, by experiencing

errancy itself and by not mistaking the mystery of Da-sein, he *not* let himself be led astray" (136, original italics). By recognizing the error or untruth in what he considered a "congruent message," the speaker is free to move forward. The poem's argument is slowly developing into an investigation into how the speaker gradually acquires knowledge in time and in both truth and untruth.

With its "serpentine," ambiguous sentences forcing the speaker and the reader to re-evaluate what has already been spoken or read and its frequent repetitions of key words (e.g., "moment," "true"/"truth," "air," "hides," and so on), "Clepsydra" itself takes on a performative character that demonstrates the circular movement of thought away from and toward truth.[4] The message wherein all points seem to coincide is achieved at the expense of truth; instead, such a message conceals truth, which is actually being torn apart as it moves in time and which is undergoing analytical separation not synthetic fusion.[5] Many myths, including those of Osiris and Pentheus, describe the act of dismemberment, tearing to pieces, or tearing limb from limb as a symbol of the creation of multiplicity from unity (Cirlot 83). In the poem, the truth is dismembering the unity of a "congruent / Message": "tearing it limb from limb" as a creative act to distinguish true from untrue elements. However, Ashbery's own comments on "Clepsydra" seem to counter the need for "tearing" with a desire for the feeling of unity:

> [I remember] feeling for the first time a strong unity in a particular poem. After my analytic period, I wanted to get into a synthetic period. I wanted to write a new kind of poetry after my dismembering of language. Wouldn't it be nice, I said to myself, to do a long poem that would be a long extended argument, but would have the beauty of a single word.

"Clepsydra" is really a meditation on how time feels as it is passing. The

title means a water clock as used in ancient Greece and China. There are a

lot of images of water in that poem. It's all of a piece, like a stream.

(Kostelanetz 101)

But the poem is unified only in a special sense. To show "how time feels as it is

passing," Ashbery puts it in a context where it interacts with a feeling subject (the "you"

in the poem) and where it affects some concern ("truth") of that subject in such a way as

to inspire the feeling of time's passing in the reader. In so doing, Ashbery paradoxically

creates an extended, synthetic argument to illustrate the analytic nature of truth as it

breaks apart in time. The *unity of the poem* resides in its circling around the idea of truth

as it appears in time with an increasing understanding of its effect on one's perception of

self, but the poem's subject remains the investigation of the *disunity of truth* as it is

hidden by congruity or changes in time and as it distorts one's perception of self.[6]

Ashbery's comparison of the unity of "Clepsydra" to a "stream" recalls James's

influential "*stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life*" (*Principles of

Psychology* 1: 239, original italics); despite its many turns, James argues, thought is

continuous. In "Clepsydra," the stream becomes a waterfall, as Ashbery compares the

development of a new thought to a rhythmical cascade moving at varying rates: "scarcely

called into being / Before it swells, the way a waterfall / Drums at different levels."

James calls the rhythm in thought an alternation between "the 'substantive parts' and [. .

.] 'transitive parts,' of the stream of consciousness" (243). One is more aware of the

"substantive" parts, those having substance, but the "transitive" or rapid, connecting

parts, though more difficult to capture, should also be considered in the "one protracted

consciousness, one unbroken stream (243-8). Ashbery, paradoxically, omits explanatory

transitions and connectors from the language of his swiftly moving poetry; but he aims to

show both the substantive point and the transitive "how," by which thought moves from

point to point. Because the "transitive parts" of thought are less obvious and more

difficult to capture, the linguistic connectors are not likely to represent them accurately—

linguistic connectors are determined by the substantive parts and serve simply to make

them sensible. By including "transitive" thought but excluding linguistic connectors,

Ashbery corrects what James calls "the great blunder," or "the failure to register [the

transitive parts of thought's stream], and the undue emphasizing of the more substantive

parts of the stream" (244). Though Ashbery is interested more in recovering the

"bounding from air to air" than in highlighting the "message," he recognizes that both are

part of the "waterfall." "Clepsydra" will attempt to keep pace with "moments of

utterance" by following their "transitive," "bounding from air to air"; it will not slow

down to emphasize the "substantive" "message" by imposing connective transitions or

defined subjects that might distort the nature of the transitive *and* substantive thought it

seeks to follow.

　　　　"Clepsydra" picks up and amplifies the point made in "Two Scenes" and "Some

Trees" that worldly activity overwhelms conscious awareness. The poem's speaker

ramps up the earlier description of "much news, such noise":

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　But the argument,

　　　　　That is its way, has already left these behind: it

　　　　　Is, it would have you believe, the white din up ahead

　　　　　That matters: unformed yells, rocketings,

> Affected turns, and tones of voice called
>
> By upper shadows toward some cloud of belief
>
> Or its unstated circumference. (RM 27-28)

"These" in the second quoted line could refer to "the pieces" of "truth" as it is torn "limb from limb." Once expressed, the argument leaves truth behind; its meaning is determined in its reception. The "white din" of the receiving world takes over with its vaguely understood but loudly exclaimed "cloud of belief"—possibly an ironic allusion to *The Cloud of Unknowing*.[7] This mystical work connects thought to a conception of self that underscores aspects of Heidegger's concept of "being-in-the-world" even though its unknown author, a fourteenth-century monk, expresses himself in religious language. He describes a "cloud of unknowing" that cannot be dissipated but that both separates and connects him with the unknowable mystery of God (34, 69, 221-222). However, he admonishes his readers to know themselves: "Labor and sweat, therefore, in every way that you can, seeking to obtain for yourself a true knowledge and feeling of yourself as you are" (94). In order to conduct the necessary contemplation in such seeking, one must put a "cloud of forgetting" between oneself and the distractions of the world (70); one can then return to the world not knowing the secrets of the mystery but prepared to work toward what one wishes to be (243). The monk's contemplative project is similar to Heidegger's assertion that inauthentic human beings, who are caught up in the world's distractions, have a choice in whether or not to face their "potentiality-of-being." A being is normally "lost in the 'they,'" so it must "bring itself back from the they [. . .] so that it becomes *authentic* being-one's-self. [. . . I]t must first *find* itself. In order to find *itself* at all, it must be 'shown' to itself in its possible authenticity. In terms of its *possibility*, Da-

sein *is* already a potentiality-for-being-its-self, but it needs to have this potentiality attested" (*Being and Time* 248, original italics). Ashbery turns the "cloud of unknowing," which leads to an authentic self, into the "cloud of belief," which represents a misplaced trust in public discourse to determine what is true; the latter cloud has lost the monk's sense of what is to be gained by mystery, the "cloud of unknowing."

Once the speaker has set up the theoretical issues of time as they affect truth and thought, the argument considers how they affect the way one lives. The poem looks at various ways people cope with the feeling of instability caused by the effect of time on the constancy of truth. Some will turn to a constructed logical harmony, "seeking peace of a sort," which sometimes too quickly forces disruptive untruths into palatable, comfortable truths:

> Casting colored paddles against the welter
>
> Of a future of disunion just to abolish confusion
>
> And permit level walks into the gaze of its standing
>
> Around admiringly, it was then, that it was these
>
> Moments that were the truth, although each tapered
>
> Into the distant surrounding night. But
>
> Wasn't it their blindness, instead, and wasn't this
>
> The fact of being so turned in on each other that
>
> Neither would ever see his way clear again? It
>
> Did not stagger the imagination so long as it stayed
>
> This way. (RM 28)

"To abolish confusion" often requires one to disregard that which confuses. James writes, "[T]he greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths. Truths have once for all this desperate instinct of self-preservation and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them" (*Pragmatism* 43). To solidify his point, Ashbery revives two clichés. In "see his way clear again," the word "way" is almost lost in this now relatively meaningless phrase, but the word appears fifteen times in the poem so it deserves a closer look. It has many definitions including numerous contemporary colloquial uses; the metaphor of "way" suggests choice (a possible course of action), motion (a thoroughfare for getting from one place to another), ontological categorization (a characteristic mode of being), and how something is done (a manner or method of accomplishing). The person who cannot "see his way clear again," has his clear vision of the desirable "way" obstructed by misplaced focus and "blindness"; but in the phrase, "so long as it stayed / This way," the acceptance of an existing "way" restricts the imagination. Ashbery uses "way" in these passages as both effect and cause, passive and active, respectively. What way one chooses depends on the way one chooses to see or think; whether one will follow an imposed view or let imagination play with what appears becomes critical. In his discussion on the education of children, Montaigne stresses the need to transmit the creative ability to absorb or assimilate a way rather than the rote ability to memorize facts: "He must imbibe their *ways* of thinking, not learn their precepts" (111, italics added). But, as Ashbery points out, the way must be purposefully chosen not simply inherited.

The second cliché, "stagger the imagination," usually means that something is unreasonably and wildly beyond the imagination's comprehension. But for Ashbery, the

imagination *should* be staggered, the imagination thrives on being staggered. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, definitions of "stagger" include (1) "to totter or reel," (2) "to shake, unsettle," and (3) "to arrange in zig-zag order, or in positions alternately on the one side and the other of a median line." Therefore, manipulations that "stay" the zigzags of thinking prevent the imagination from wandering along more creative paths. Montaigne, too, sees the benefit of staggering; he says his process in writing his essays is to "let my thoughts run on" but in a particularly nonlinear way: "My conceptions and my judgment move only by groping, *staggering*, stumbling, and blundering" (107, italics added). Of course, such staggering and blundering work to uncover new thought.

In beginning to answer the question, would anyone "ever see his way clear again?" and in showing the role of imagination in living with the volatility of life, Ashbery's argument turns to the problems or hindrances in choosing a "way clear." First, he considers the nature of "previsions," those foresights that form a basic understanding from which one operates, that foreknowledge so ingrained that it is taken for granted as truth. Heidegger calls this type of knowledge "a self-evident concept" (*Being and Time* 3), "*average and vague understanding*" (4, original italics), and a "pre-ontological understanding of being" (12); he considers such presuppositions essential in order to be able to ask the clarifying questions (4). James anticipates Heidegger's presuppositions but he calls them each person's philosophy (a use of the word "philosophy" that Heidegger surely would not approve), which "determines the perspective" taken toward his or her world. However, James adds, "the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less *dumb sense* of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling

the total push and pressure of the cosmos" (*Pragmatism* 9, italics added). Ashbery

echoes James's language when he writes that these "previsions," which remain

permanent though undergoing constant change, did not begin as and do not exist as

"statement" but as "A *dumb cry* shaping everything in projected / After-effects" (RM 29,

italics added). However, Ashbery explains, they are not meant to be immobilized by

being taken for granted or "orphaned by playing the part intended for them." James's

thought on one's philosophy looks forward to Ashbery's "My Philosophy of Life," in

which he realizes both the importance of attempting to figure it out and the necessity of

keeping it in flux. Previsions must be erasable; perhaps a function of the poem is to be

like the "invisible fountain [that] continually destroys and refreshes the previsions":

> [. . .] one must not forget that the nature of this
>
> Emptiness, these previsions,
>
> Was that it could only happen here, on this page held
>
> Too close to be legible, sprouting erasures, except that they
>
> Ended everything in the transparent sphere of what was
>
> Intended only a moment ago, spiraling further out, its
>
> Gesture finally dissolving in the weather. (RM 29)

The poem then would serve as a counteragent to the powerful influence and authority of

preconceived notions or accepted truths by providing a space in which such concepts

could be seen anew:

> There where the tiny figures halt as darkness comes on,
>
> Beside some loud torrent in an empty yet personal
>
> Landscape, which has the further advantage of being

What surrounds without insisting, the very breath so

Honorably offered, and accepted in the same spirit. (29)

The "loud torrent" recalls both the "waterfall" and the "white din"; the poem offers the "empty. . . / Landscape" in which to meet the intersecting, connecting moments in the "stream of thought" despite the competing noise of the world and the "substantive parts" of the stream.

The second hindrance to finding a "way clear" has to do with memory. The poem's speaker remembers the pleasurable feeling accompanying memories of narrowly viewed, specific moments "Like standing at the edge of a harbor early on a summer morning" (30); they can be remembered but not retained intact. Rather than "turning to dust," these moments maintain themselves in memory by "becoming complicated," by being associated with other aspects of life. But, paradoxically, destiny, or "the colossal reason behind all this," has "reduced that other world, / The round one of the telescope, to a kind of very fine powder or dust / So small that space could not remember it" (30). Moments remain in memory through connection with other moments; but, at the same time, destiny, which stands behind "all this," reduces specific, worldly memory to "fine powder or dust." These lines foreshadow the words "fine," "powder," and "dust" with which Ashbery will recall James's pragmatism in "My Philosophy of Life": "the fineness, / the powder of life dusted over it" (CYHB 73-74). In "Clepsydra," Ashbery uses the words to point to James's discussion of how memory is altered: he asserts that people being of "mortal dust" often suffer alterations of memory either by loss due to age or by "false recollection"—in the former instance, "the person's *me* shrinks" and in the latter, "the false memories [. . .] distort the consciousness of the me" (*Principles of*

Psychology 1: 373-74, original italics). Ashbery explains the mutation of the self by

connecting conscious memory and forgotten "dust" with an exploration of the word "all."

Destiny, or "colossal reason" lies behind "all this," which all contains everything

including conscious memory and forgotten "dust." In two pages, Ashbery repeats the

word "all" seven times and the common, throw-away phrase "after all" three times; it

means in view of all circumstances, and, to Ashbery, it is a phrase "important for

understanding the almost / Exaggerated strictness of the condition" (RM 30). "All"

includes everything remembered, left out, or reduced by the telescopic vision that seeks

to establish its own condition. But, as James asserts, before long "the fiction expels the

reality from memory and reigns in its stead alone" (1: 374), and a person misinterprets

the "all," which he or she has assembled. The poem's speaker asks, "hadn't the point /

Of *all* this new construction been to provide / A protected medium for the exchanges

each felt of such vital / concern [. . .]?" So why does the speaker feel "there was

something / Not quite good or correct about the way / Things were looking recently"

(RM 31, italics added)? It is because at some level, he occasionally remembers the

feelings associated with the original moment and finds that fabricated or unacknowledged

memory of one's past is more than an unsatisfactory "way" to seek "well-being"; it

actually forestalls further insight about one's self, it prevents the staggering of

imagination: "The past is yours, to keep invisible if you wish / But also to make absurd

elaborations with / And in this way prolong your dance of non-discovery" (31). Memory

is altered for self-protection but results in a distortion of truth that diminishes self-

development.

At this point in his argument, the speaker is compelled to see himself and consider himself in terms of memory and truth. He moves from the second person, "your acts" of protection against the invasion of self-discovery, to first-person plural, "memorable successions of events / We shall be ever afterwards tempted to dwell," to first-person singular, "I am." For the first time in the poem, the speaker presents himself in the first person as the "author" of these thoughts; the argument becomes personal:

<blockquote>

I am

Not speaking of a partially successful attempt to be

Opposite; anybody at all can read that page, it has only

To be thrust in front of him. I mean now something much broader,

The sum total of all the private aspects that can ever

Become legible in what is outside [. . .].

[. . . . .]

I see myself in this totality, and meanwhile

I am only a transparent diagram, of manners and

Private words with the certainty of being about to fall. (31)

</blockquote>

He does not claim he is not a participant in the thinking and behavior that wants to protect itself from threatening chaos, where "acts / Are sentinels against this quiet / invasion." To separate himself in opposition to such thinking would be just another easy, common, defensive, deceptive reaction. Instead, he begins to perceive of himself as an "I," which is a product of both his cultural environment, including its common responses, and his own thought, including his fears. The speaker again considers how he sees himself, a question addressed earlier in "Some Trees" and "Two Scenes." Though the

speaker sees himself more theoretically in "Clepsydra" than he did in the earlier poems, he sees himself personally in this passage with four sentences or clauses begin with "I": "I am," "I mean," "I see," and "I am."

The poem's speaker finally understands his own being in terms of the "totality" of the world in which he lives; his being is subject to his culture, his thoughts, his memory, and his proclivity to being caught up in the world: "I am only a transparent diagram, of manners and / Private words with the certainty of being about to fall." Recognizing himself in this moment as "transparent" evokes Heidegger's assertion, at the beginning of his questioning into being, that "to work out the question of being means to make a being—one who questions—transparent in its being" (*Being and Time* 6). This clarity, or transparency, of a being's existence is achieved by seeing itself (as opposed to losing itself) in its "entanglement in the world" and in its "historicity," its past or tradition (17-18). Additionally, although he sees himself as a "totality," he realizes he is only a "transparent diagram, of manners and / Private words," which recalls James's statement that although a "central part of the Self is *felt*" (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 298, original italics), he cannot find such a centrality when he considers particulars. For example, James says, "In reasoning, I find that I am apt to have a kind of vaguely localized diagram in my mind, with the various fractional objects of the thought disposed at particular points thereof" (300-01). So James concludes that in his own case at least, "*the 'Self of selves,' when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head*" (301, original italics).

Transparency means visibility and accessibility of information and a diagram is defined as a design that explains relationships between parts rather than represents exact

appearances, so Ashbery's speaker apparently sees himself as an interpreter of the disparate elements that coincide in his being. But he sees himself "with the certainty of being about to fall." Heidegger's view on the self's "entanglement" in the world is instructive in the sense of falling: "As an authentic potentiality for being a self, a human being has initially always already fallen away from itself and fallen prey to the 'world.'" Although, "falling prey" to or being "entangled" with the world is part of the "everydayness" of being (*Being and Time* 164), a human being is able at times and through concern (Heidegger's term is "care") for its own being to "extricate" itself from the noise of the world in order to address "its authentic potentiality-of-being" (296-7). Therefore, in the moment that Ashbery's speaker sees himself in his "totality," he knows, nevertheless, that he "will fall" or return to the everyday state of being entangled in the world; maintaining a permanent disentanglement from one's world would be impossible, even undesirable. In his last reference to himself in the first-person, the speaker acknowledges his debt to another with his own version of Frost's "path":

> And even this crumb of life I also owe to you
>
> [. . . . .]
>
> In this way any direction taken was the right one,
>
> Leading first to you, and through you to
>
> Myself that is beyond you and which is the same thing as space. (RM 32)

Ashbery's speaker again takes a Heideggerian approach to gaining access to himself. Heidegger asserts that "*authentically being-in-the-world*" takes place along with taking care of the things in its world and with a "concerned being-with with the others" (*Being and Time* 274, original italics). A human being sees its "existence" determining its

"place," its "being-in-the-world," or its "reality" as the "situation" in which its own being

can be disclosed (275-6). Ashbery, too, describes a spatial path in which he locates

himself and his place in the world through those in his world.

As if to enact the brevity of momentary insights, the speaker does not stay in first-

person singular but continues his exploration in the general first-person plural, third

person, and the ambiguous second person. The poem ends with his ruminations on living

in a world where time does not allow an unvarying view either of truths or even of self.

Though he sometimes thinks he sees constancy, he does not:

> It seemed he had been repeating the same stupid phrase
>
> Over and over throughout his life; meanwhile
>
> Infant destinies had suavely matured; there was
>
> To be a meeting or collection of them that very evening. (RM 32)

James uses the term "collection" in reference to "past thoughts or selves" that inspire a

"warmth" or "intimacy" with the present self; they seem "continuous with each other, and

the most recent ones of them continuous with the Self of the present moment." Thus, one

has a sense of continuity with one's "stream of selves." James says that "infant years"

are not part of this collection because they are not remembered, only anecdotes about

them are (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 332-35). Ashbery's speaker picks up on James's

"collection" and "infant" as he extends the collection to include guiding concepts or

"infant destinies [that] had suavely matured." He thinks he has been "repeating the same

stupid phrase," but, while the core subject of the phrase may be unchanged, its context

has been developing and expanding so that its metaphorical morning infancy matures by

the evening's meeting of the collection of selves and thoughts, which has likewise

changed. At this point, the speaker does not reveal the "stupid phrase"; however, it apparently is an overriding thought or question occupying and influencing him "over and over throughout his life," which he will more completely consider in *Three Poems*. He does, though, repeat numerous key words (such as "sky," "time," "lightness," invisible," etc.) so that the poem develops a sense that it is continually turning back on itself as it presses forward.

The speaker considers how he tries to protect himself by ignoring change that might disturb his happiness and by asking for "an invariable balance of / Contentment to hold everything in place." He faces the reality that not only does such contentment not exist, it is perhaps not even to be desired. The possibility for finding truth in one's past lies not in bringing memories, unchanged, into the present, but in looking back at them as changed by the present: "looking back at / What they might have become." Contentment balances; truth divides:

> [. . .] they
>
> Might just once have been the truth that, invisible
>
> Still surrounds us like the air and is the dividing force
>
> Between our slightest steps and the notes taken on them.
>
> It is because everything is relative
>
> That we shall never see in the sphere of pure wisdom and
>
> Entertainment much more than groping shadows of an incomplete
>
> Former existence. (RM 32)

Truth divides, and the speaker looks at ways truth has divided. Even the speaker's notes, this poem, are imperfect transcriptions of actions and memories. To explain this thought,

Ashbery throws in a cliché, which, as always, deserves a second look: "everything is relative" commonly means that ethical truths vary with individuals, groups, and situations; but relative also refers to an antecedent term and a mutual relationship. Because everything refers back to something else and he suffers from "stunted memories," wisdom will always be "incomplete" rather than "pure." Furthermore, obvious barriers have been created to hide truth: the "transparent guardians you / Invented for what there was to hide."

Even so, the speaker cannot convey the consequences of the situation directly; he resorts to a double negative: "It is not a question, then, / Of having not lived in vain" (33). It *is* a question of having lived in vain, and he returns to and elaborates on his first expression of how he saw himself in "Two Scenes" in order to face this question. In "Two Scenes" he perceived that "We see us as we truly behave" (ST 9), which he modifies in "Clepsydra": "What is meant is that this distant / Image of you, the way you really are, is the test / Of how you see yourself" (RM 33). "We see us" becomes "you see yourself." Earlier in the poem, the speaker had asked, "why not examine the distance?" (32), and he now does so by examining the distance at it relates to himself. He sees himself in his "collection," in the various selves from his past that make up the self of the present. Metaphorically, the day will unsettle the previous evening's "meetings or collections," so morning, or awakening, is a brief moment of feeling intact or complete:

> [. . .] moving in the shadow of
>
> Your single and twin existence, waking in intact
>
> Appreciation of it, while morning is still and before the body
>
> Is changed by the faces of evening. (33)

Ashbery describes temporality with the framework of morning, day, and night to show

time passing and altering one's perception of self. A "twin existence" suggests

Heidegger's definition of a human being's existence in terms of ecstatic (defined as

stepping outside itself) temporality: "*Temporality is the primordial 'outside of itself' in

and for itself*" (*Being and Time* 302, original italics). A human being moves back and

forth within a horizon of future, past, and present: "With factical Da-sein, a potentiality-

of-being is always projected in the horizon of the future, 'already being' is disclosed in

the horizon of the having-been, and what is taken care of is discovered in the horizon of

the present" (334). The human being that moves beyond itself and that questions and

interprets itself, thus lives in a "single and twin existence"; Ashbery, too, relates this self-

understanding to being's existence in time; the speaker in "Clepsydra" must appropriate

and appreciate his "stunted memories" as he wakes up to his present and prepares for the

changes of the evening.

In "Clepsydra," Ashbery carefully records a consciousness taking up the

complicated issue of truth, not just in the truth of statements or propositions but also in

the truths of beliefs as they are formed by perceptions of a self interacting in its world.

Putting these issues in the form of an essayistic argument presented in one long stanza[8]

allows Ashbery space in which to explore an unbroken train of thought. It starts with

general ideas on truth but steadily moves toward more specific considerations of its

impact on an individual consciousness. With an extended essayistic structure that

emulates Montaigne's attempt "to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind,

to penetrate the opaque depths of its innermost folds" (273) and a quasi-argumentative

approach to comprehending the practical meaning of such philosophical terms as "truth,"

"time," and "perception of self," "Clepsydra" foreshadows Ashbery's experiments in genre and meditations on consciousness, which take a radical turn with the prose of *Three Poems.*[9]

CHAPTER THREE

***THREE POEMS*: POETRY AS MEDITATIVE PROSE**

In 1984, Ashbery told an interviewer that he considered *Three Poems* (1972) to be one of his favorite works because of its "kind of discourse that's almost like a landscape that one can get lost in and explore and find new things all the time, an environment which I feel one can plunge into and live in enjoyably" (Labrie 31). By likening the poems' discourse to "a landscape" to "explore," he draws attention to the connection of the spatial and essayistic elements in his poetry's language: the poems provide sufficient room for him to test his perceptions.[1]

Language is Ashbery's vehicle for creating a landscape in which he can wander and become lost; in comparing his discourse to landscape, he recognizes discourse as movement over a path or course. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the etymology of "discourse" to the Latin *discursus*: "running to and fro, conversation." An obsolete meaning is "onward course; process or succession of time, events, actions, etc."; a current definition is "communication of thought by speech"; and the prevailing sense is "a spoken or written treatment of a subject, in which it is handled or discussed at length." All of these senses pertain in *Three Poems*. Ashbery himself considers his poetry an onward movement in space and in time: "It's getting from one place to another. You have a few points that you connect up, and the poem seems very much to deal with getting from one place to another, from one *moment* to another" (Sommer 313, original italics). In order to develop the many implications of this thought fully, as a single train

of thought, Ashbery composed *Three Poems* as long poems with long sentences and

paragraphs, predominantly in discursive, conversational prose. The volume's first two

poems, "The New Spirit" and "The System," his longest poems up to that time, show the

tentative way that thought develops with its surprising, unpredictable turns. According to

Ashbery's assessment at the time of writing *Three Poems*, long poems necessarily

incorporate changing thought:

> [In] long [poems] like the ones I've done lately I only work perhaps an
>
> hour at a time [. . .] and it's something of course quite different from a
>
> poem written all at once because one's mind changes during the course of
>
> the writing; these changes are reflected in the poem, give it a diversity that
>
> the other wouldn't have. ("Craft Interview" 16-17)

The poem's speaker sets up an essayistic environment that can accommodate this change

by beginning "The New Spirit" with questions, which he must then work out in the

course of the poem. He reflects on the ramifications of his questions by repeating certain

critical words to find variances in meaning and application, by testing his thoughts in

various voices, and by presenting his thoughts tentatively rather than attempting to

control them for a premeditated outcome.

Ashbery's essayism tests his ideas not only by employing a discourse that gives

him sufficient space but also by experimenting with poetic form and genre. By changing

the way in which he looks at and verbally presents a subject, he puts himself in a different

place and subjects himself to different constraints. However, Ashbery uses different

genres or forms, not in order to follow particular, established rules, but to bend or

combine them for his purposes. He does so in ways that seem to exemplify modern genre

theory as René Wellek and Austin Warren have described it: "modern genre theory is, clearly, descriptive. It doesn't limit the number of possible kinds and doesn't prescribe rules to authors. It supposes that traditional kinds may be 'mixed' and produce a new kind" (234-35).[2] Ashbery has always demonstrated his interest in poetic form, even titling many of his early poems by their particular form, such as "Sonnet," "Canzone," and "Eclogue" and expanding the scope of his poetry to include extraliterary modes, such as "The Instruction Manual," "The Grapevine," and "Popular Songs."

In *Three Poems*, Ashbery makes his boldest move to date by seeming to abandon lyric poetry altogether in favor of poetry in the form of meditative prose. Louis L. Martz calls "meditative poetry" a mixed genre that does not indicate a specific form but "designates a process of the mind" (*Poetry of Meditation* xxiii, 324), which may or may not represent a religious point of view. Ashbery adapts some of the organizational practices of self-examination developed in traditional meditative literature.

Mikhail Bakhtin's studies of genre, prose, and the novel are particularly appropriate to read in connection with *Three Poems* in many respects. Bakhtin's phenomenological analyses derive from observation of genre and prose as they are actually used rather than from abstract, theoretical deduction. Even though Bakhtin develops complex literary theories, he favors an open-ended, unfinalizable model, which coincides in many ways with essayism: "We do not pretend to completeness or precision in our theoretical formulations and definitions."[3] He realizes that his theories encourage future discussion and prompt new ideas: "Such work will in its further development eventually supplement, and perhaps substantially correct, the [ideas] offered by us here" (*Dialogic Imagination* 85). Bakhtin's theoretical works exemplify essayism by

continually reconfiguring his ideas on prose, voice, dialogue, the novel, and genre

beginning with his earliest essays collected in *Art and Answerability* and continuing to

his last essays in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. In his last recorded entry in

1974, he explains his approach in terms of the inconclusive nature of dialogue in the

communication between an individual with other beings or even with different aspects of

one's self:

> There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the
>
> dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless
>
> future). Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past
>
> centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all—they will
>
> always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future
>
> development of the dialogue. (*Speech Genres* 170, original italics)

In a similar, provisional manner, Ashbery's discourse creates a new essayistic

environment in *Three Poems* in three important ways: the choice of prose as a poetic

mode, discourse as the metaphor of "landscape that one can get lost in," and the change

in authorial viewpoint provided by the meditative process. These dramatic departures

from the modes of his previous poetry enable Ashbery to pursue the subject that has

interested him from the start but from a new perspective. In *Three Poems*, he continues

with his ongoing work of transcribing, in the manner of a *bricoleur*, the impressions on

an individual consciousness as it interacts with a world of external phenomena (Friedman

33). First, with Ashbery's use of prose to access his various internal voices, *Three Poems*

explores the boundary between prose and poetry, which is raised in a different but

illuminating way by Mikhail Bakhtin. Second, with his metaphor of landscape, Ashbery

implicates the thought of William James who views consciousness as a field. Third, with

a loose meditative structure, Ashbery organizes the general direction of his thought on

"the major question that revolves around you, your being here" (TP 51) in such a way

that suggests Heidegger's contention that the fundamental question to be answered is "the

question of being" as it is defined by being-in-the world (*Being and Time* 1, 10). The

expansive landscape in *Three Poems* provides the necessary space and time for the

poems' speaker to lose himself and find his way again in response to that question.

Prose as a Form of Poetry

To create an essayistic environment that allows him to test his ideas outside of his

usual sphere, Ashbery turns to prose, but only so he can show that prose can be poetry.

Ashbery tells an interviewer in 1971 why prose appeals to him:

> [S]uddenly the idea of [prose] occurred to me as something new in which
>
> the arbitrary divisions of poetry into lines would get abolished. One
>
> wouldn't have to have these interfering and scanning the processes of
>
> one's thought as one was writing; the poetic form would be dissolved, in
>
> solution, and therefore create a much more—I hate to say environmental
>
> because it's a bad word—but more of a surrounding thing like the way
>
> one's consciousness is surrounded by one's thoughts.

("Craft Interview" 27)

Before *Three Poems,* Ashbery experimented with several prose poems; one of the earliest

is "The Young Son" in *Some Trees* (1956), which remains close to the conventional form

of prose poetry as exemplified most particularly in the French prose poem: it is short,

suggests narrative, and employs descriptive poetic prose. With *Three Poems*, Ashbery abandons these traditional elements: "There's something very self-consciously poetic about French prose poetry which I wanted to avoid and which I guess is what I found disappointing in my earlier prose poems" (27-28). He attempts to plumb the advantages of prose for poetry without distorting the prose to make it poetic.

Ashbery habitually deflects questions about theoretical differences between poetry and prose; even though the poems in *Three Poems* are written primarily in prose, he sees no need to emphasize the poems' prose-like qualities. For him, the prose of everyday life does not need to be distinguished as a superimposed element because it naturally belongs in poetry; however, he recognizes the special capacity of prose for introducing multiple "voices":

> I'm not sure that any special ideas about the difference between prose and poetry arose from working on *Three Poems*. My idea in writing it was to allow all kinds of prose "voices" to have their say in what I hoped would be poetry—so that at times it sounds like journalism or letter writing or philosophy, both Cracker-barrel and Platonic, and so on. I guess I was trying to "democratize" language. (Labrie 31)

Ashbery's "I guess" undercuts his noble aim of democratizing language, and the voices in *Three Poems* are more his own various voices than the voices of the world; but he clearly intends, nonetheless, to remove restrictions in voice and thought by writing in prose. Ashbery's attempt to "'democratize' language" recalls, though in a more tentative and limited manner, William Carlos Williams' stirring, encompassing call for an American verse, which must be "free to include all temperaments, all phases of our environment,

physical as well as spiritual, mental and moral. It must be truly democratic, truly free for all" (2).

For Ashbery to transcribe, as clearly and accurately as possible, the confrontation of a consciousness with the phenomena in its world, he must acknowledge the plurality of his North American world by including the many prosaic languages he uses or encounters; he cannot limit himself to the "self-consciously poetic." Consequently, his poetry often grants equal status to many types of language, but, even when he includes the prosaic, his aim remains to write poems. Indeed, the term "prose poem" would be redundant for Ashbery; he believes, simply, that "poetry includes anything and everything" (Gangel 10).

In the same essay in which he calls for democratic poetry, Williams also questions the need for subgenres of poetry; like Ashbery, he would not make a distinction such as prose poetry: "There is only poetry. Either it is good art or bad art. Why make subdivisions that have only partial and superficial significances? It simply distracts from the truth" (2-3). Williams suggests that truth will be found in "unity of form," in form that is "in conformity with the content"; but, ultimately, he cannot define this unity of form because it, like truth, cannot be subject to rigid classifications. It is the "deeper, more inclusive forms" that interest Williams: forms that evolve through interaction with content, that include rather than exclude, that are free and democratic—but that defy definition (3). Ashbery makes the distinction that he comes closest to truth in "prosaic language" because "we are most ourselves when we are talking, and we talk in a very irregular and antiliterary way" (Stitt 201). While he rejects the "rhetorical falseness" found in much of existing prose poetry, he calls attention in *Three Poems* to the "pathos

and liveliness of ordinary human communication [which] is poetry to me" (201).[4]

Neither Williams nor Ashbery expects poetry to attain a form that defines truth but they

both attempt to come closer to truth by opening form to the life, time, and environment in

which it is created.

Ashbery's argument for the inclusion of ordinary speech in his poetry points to

interesting similarities and dissimilarities with Bakhtin's theories of genre, which derive

from language as it is spoken but deny poetry's capacity to contain a diversity of voices.

For Bakhtin, genres are dynamic entities occurring in every sphere of life, not fixed sets

of rules reserved only for rhetorical or literary writing, and he includes both oral and

written forms in what he terms "speech genres": "Each sphere in which language is used

develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances" (*Speech Genres* 60, original

italics). Genres, in this sense, are more than classifications; they exert, according to

Bakhtin, a certain level of influence on how one sees or expresses oneself in particular

spheres of existence. Bakhtin writes, "And when the speaker's speech plan with all its

individuality and subjectivity is applied and adapted to a chosen genre, it is shaped and

developed within a certain generic form" (78).[5]

Ashbery chooses prose for *Three Poems* to let "'voices' [. . .] have their say" and

to "'democratize' language." Bakhtin distinguishes between the "say" of prose voices

and the contextual differences in "language." First, Bakhtin defines the "say" of various

voices as "polyphony": "a *plurality of independent and unmerged voices and*

consciousnesses [. . .] *with equal rights and each with its own world*" (*Problems of*

Dostoevsky's Poetics 6, original italics). He refers to Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels in

which dialogues are open-ended and each character seeks words to express his or her

"point of view on the world" (39). Further, Bakhtin allows, "dialogic relationships"

occur not only among individuals but also among the voices within one's self: they "are

also possible toward one's own utterance as a whole, toward its separate parts and toward

an individual word within it, if we somehow detach ourselves from them, speak with an

inner reservation, if we observe a certain distance from them, as if limiting our own

authorship or dividing it in two" (184). The meditation in *Three Poems* develops from

this sense of internal dialogue, not from dialogue among others in one's world. Ashbery

establishes the speaker's detachment from the utterances of his various voices, in part, by

keeping pronouns in flux, not allowing them to settle into recognizable identities. The

speaker creates an inner polyphonic dialogue by what seems to be a willful change in

viewpoint, sometimes being "I," sometimes being "you"; "you" might also be the

audience or another person; "we" might be the speaker and others in his world or the

speaker and the reader; and "you" or "we" might refer to earlier selves. Ashbery has

noted that "the fact of addressing someone, myself, or someone else, is what's the

important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. [. . .]

I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this

again helps to produce a kind of *polyphony* in my poetry which I again feel is a means

toward greater naturalism ("Craft Interview" 24-25, italics added). Ashbery thus

relinquishes a dominant, monologic, authorial position in order to grant dialogic,

independent status to various voices, particularly to his own inner voices.[6]

　　　According to Bakhtin, one finds one's own voice by seeing how it both merges

with and separates from other voices within a designated field. In his discussion of a

novel's hero, he elaborates:

> All that matters is the choice, the resolution of the question "Who am I"
>
> and "With whom am I?" To find one's own voice and to orient it among
>
> other voices, to combine it with some and to oppose it to others, to
>
> separate one's voice from another voice with which it has inseparably
>
> merged—these are the tasks that the heroes solve in the course of the
>
> novel. And this determines the hero's discourse. It must find itself, reveal
>
> itself among other words, within an intense field of interorientations.
>
> (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 239)

Three Poems is the polyphonic meditation of a single speaker who argues within himself

by responding to his various conflicting, inner voices; he wants to complicate his thought

by investigating, not resolving, his voices' contradictions in order to access previously

unthought possibilities; only then can he attempt to order it and move forward. He insists

on confronting the place "where the dark masses grow confused," so he can find a

"profile in the massed days ahead" (TP 4), or, as Bakhtin would say, so he can find his

own discourse.

Second, in addition to the "say" of polyphonic voices, Ashbery aims to

"democratize language" by including the various forms of language found in philosophy,

journalism, letter writing, and presumably many other relevant genres that enter into

social, political, economic, and other ideological discourse. Bakhtin uses the term

"heteroglossia" for this "social diversity of speech types" in language (*Dialogic

Imagination* 263). He argues that the speech of everyday life is best captured in prose,

particularly the prose of novels, in which the "distinguishing feature" is the "diversity of

voices and heteroglossia" (300). In fact, the "prose consciousness feels cramped when it

is confined to only *one* out of a multitude of heteroglot languages, for one linguistic timbre is inadequate to it" (324, original italics). Ashbery began experimenting with some of these different languages in the collagistic "Europe"; and he subsequently sought the unity and "the beauty of a single word" in "Clepsydra" (Kostelanetz 101), where he found that truth could be obscured by a "congruent message." In *Three Poems*, Ashbery employs many languages as he did in "Europe" in order to extend and expand the questions suggested by "Clepsydra." Consequently, *Three Poems* seems more diffuse than "Clepsydra" because of its different, everyday languages, but it finds its insights by looking into rather than avoiding the "confusion" of these languages. Bakhtin does not deny that such languages, which he terms "extraliterary social dialects," are included in poetry, but he says that they do "not lie on the *same* plane with the real language of the work" (*Dialogic Imagination* 287, original italics). However, *Three Poems* does not have an apparent "real language of the work"; its various poetic and prosaic languages *do* lie on the same plane. Ashbery mixes them without comment or transition and has his speaker deliver them in an unvarying, undifferentiated tone, thus ironically drawing attention to the number of heteroglot languages used by one person by de-emphasizing them. They cannot be mistaken as the voices of others.

Ashbery attempts to dissolve boundaries separating poetry and prose by including his various prose voices and languages in his poetry; in this way, he retains a prose/poetry distinction by prioritizing poetry and considering prose as one of its many forms. Bakhtin, on the other hand, clearly distinguishes between poetry and prose, finding poetry incapable of accessing heteroglot languages or polyphonic voices because "the unity of the language system and the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet's individuality

[. . .] are indispensable prerequisites" for poetry, unlike the novel, which requires "the internal stratification of language [. . .], its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it" (264). *Three Poems* effectively rebuts this distinction: the poems incorporate the stratifications in the everyday language, or heteroglossia, of prose that Bakhtin contends cannot be included in the poetic genre.[7]

Just as one must "find one's own voice" by distinguishing it from the many voices in one's experience, one must also choose the most effective languages from the numerous languages in one's experience. Bakhtin connects choice with language on the grounds that every individual relies on a number of different languages to negotiate various situations: "consciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of *having to choose a language.* With each literary-verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself within it, it chooses, in other words, a 'language'" (295, original italics). Ashbery begins "The New Spirit" with the problem of choosing a language of inclusion or exclusion for the writing of that poem. He ends the poem with another choice of linguistic form presented as an imperative: He poses "the major question that revolves around you, your being here. [. . .] You have got to begin in the way of choosing some one of the forms of answering that question" (TP 51). For Ashbery, as with Bakhtin, the choice of language must be continually faced because it is so entwined with the changing phenomena in one's existence that it can never be finally determined. Bakhtin maintains that "language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the

word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (*Dialogic Imagination*

293). Ashbery intentionally muddles this borderline with his confusion of pronouns and

with his attempts to keep pace with the welter of impressions constantly impinging on

consciousness: "there is always something fading out or just coming into focus, and this

whatever-it-is is always projecting itself on us" (TP 79). Ashbery does not want to rush

to a premature explanation of what he does not yet see clearly, but as he stays in this

liminal state, welcoming and transcribing his puzzling impressions, they gradually form

brief moments of clarity or certainty that move on but contribute to a sense of a "new

arrangement" (TP 86): "that singular isolated moment that has now slipped so far into

the past that it seems a mere spark. You cannot do without it and you cannot have it"

(84). For Bakhtin, the dialogic novel is a place that brings "different languages in contact

with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means

of another. [. . .] The novel demands a broadening and deepening of the language

horizon, a sharpening in our perception of socio-linguistic differentiations" (*Dialogic

Imagination* 361, 366). For Ashbery, poetry creates a landscape that provides the

exploratory space of essayism in which he can test and assay his own contradictory

voices. His dialogic voices and heteroglot languages "come together," as Bakhtin puts it,

to "consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance" (360). In this fertile terrain,

Ashbery advances his primary purpose of expanding consciousness through the

interrelationship of self and other.

The Metaphor of Landscape for the Expansion of Consciousness

Landscape works as a metaphor for the discourse of *Three Poems* in two ways: for the movement of thought in consciousness from edge to center and for the confusion one faces in an environment where everything seems to merge, with "no profile" (4). First, considering *Three Poems* as a landscape or an extended, open surface where consciousness, even semi-consciousness, confronts the world evokes James's "field of consciousness," which is made up of a "centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious more" (*Pluralistic Universe* 761). It is a dynamic field in continual flux; James describes the field's three parts, emphasizing that they blend into each other without boundaries: the center contains what can be named and identified at a particular time, and its "margins" hold what is only dimly sensed but has potential to be "more" and displace the known center. "Each part functions distinctly [. . .], and yet the whole is somehow felt as one pulse of our life,—not conceived so, but felt so" (762). James's spatial description of the interaction between the conscious center and its progressively less conscious margins explains Ashbery's feeling that "perhaps" his moving to a new place is "where I had been but without being fully conscious" (Gangel 13). Throughout his poetry, Ashbery tends toward peripheries such as edges, margins, sidepaths, alleys, and balconies; the marginal, or the half-known, attracts his attention. Many writers, including Ashbery, explain that they write to find out what they do *not* know, but he also says, "I write [. . .] to find out what I know" (Smith 52). His poems provide a space in which the center is not expected to hold but is continually subject to change through the inclusion of information moving into conscious awareness.

Ashbery explores peripheries of consciousness by getting lost in them; to be lost is to go astray, to allow his thought to wander beyond what he knows he knows (or thinks he knows) into entanglements where he can find what he did not know he knew. Montaigne also sees the benefit of becoming lost in order to get in touch with what lies beyond current awareness: he refers to Plutarch who saw in poetry and philosophy "the human understanding losing its way in trying to sound and examine all things to the utmost" (417). Moreover, like James, Montaigne sees the unstable nature of what is assumed to be known because, as he says, "all things produced by our own reason and ability, the true as well as the false, are subject to uncertainty and debate" (414). Although, one could say that everyone is lost to a degree in that full certainty or knowledge cannot be attained, one can become lost by passively giving up pretence of certainty or by actively creating, as Ashbery does, new, unfamiliar spaces in which to stray even further from one's secure territory.

In "The New Spirit," the speaker sees the "multitudes" who mindlessly "plunge past toward some unknown destination" (TP 44). They are lost in a third sense—they choose to distract themselves with activity to simulate certainty and avoid knowing they are lost; like everyone, they ultimately head toward the unknown destination of death, but choose not to face it or the other uncertainties inherent in life. They rush onward, ignoring whatever threatens their collective desire for security and thus do not participate in life as it is: "the human will, terrible in its destructive surging that threatens to completely annihilate the life which it so ebulliently manifests" (44). They are like Heidegger's "they" who divert others or themselves from responsibility for authentic being (*Being and Time* 118-22). Ashbery's speaker separates himself from them as he

places himself "a little shaken up on the edge of the sidewalk." Edge, in this sense,

designates not the edge of consciousness's center, but the outer reaches of worldly

activity. Despite being disturbed, he knows the importance of this edge for his purposes:

"One stays like this on the edge of the throng, trying to think these things out" (TP 44);

simply by being in their midst, he would be distracted from his own thoughts, which tend

toward facing the causes of his anxiety rather than repressing them like "the they." But

Ashbery then returns to the edge, in its sense of being the margin of consciousness, to

describe with apocalyptic imagery the unsettled feeling that arises from entering the

territory of the fringe, which shades into the subconscious: "this perilous position on the

edge of the flood, looking down awestruck into the coiling waters" (44). The reward is

that these "coiling waters" of the subconscious have the possibility to disrupt and expand

the center, to "sometimes strike out and ensnare a parcel of land that had seemed secure"

(44-45). Even though "the renewal of life poses terrible problems, no matter how

fortunate in the context" (45), Ashbery's speaker finds the process enjoyable: it is "a

strange kind of happiness within the limitations [. . .], a limited but infinitely free space"

(27). One can work within the limitations of one's history and one's present time and

place by remaining open to possibilities: "the way is narrow but it is not hard, it seems

almost to propel or push one along. One gets the narrowness into one's seeing, which

also seems an inducement to moving forward into what one has already caught a glimpse

of and which quickly becomes vision" (27). A part of the vague fringe becomes clearer

as it moves into the known center.

The second way Ashbery uses the metaphor of landscape for discourse is to

describe the confusion one faces when interacting with the phenomena in the

environment. While he begins by seeing undifferentiated "mountains whose tops are

hidden in cloud" (TP 4), he aims to distinguish among the particulars in the confusion so

he can specify, so he can "climb a mountain, [where] these things will stand forth in a

relief all their own" (9). Ashbery presents this confusion in a language of polarization

that creates a space in which he can test it. He presents a number of critical polarities in

the opening words of "The New Spirit":

> 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.
>
>   clean-washed sea
>
>   The flowers were.
>
> These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon
>
> comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself. It is
>
> you who made this, therefore you are true.   But the truth has passed on
>
>   to divide all. (3)

What seems to be a simple choice is not. The rest of the poem struggles with the many

complex issues touched on in these few lines: active and passive thought; inclusion and

exclusion as forms of prosaic and poetic writing; choice as it interacts with exclusion and

truth; and truth as a divider, as a creator of polarities. These subjects correlate with and

influence each other as the poem develops; they move together and separate as they lead

the discourse in its erratic, essayistic path through a landscape of confusion toward "this

knowledge [which] is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress

itself upon you, the forms of your inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand. For it is certain that you will rise from the bench a new person" (80).

The first polarization is between the active and passive voices; the active voice instigates a responsive, passive chain of thought. "The New Spirit" begins in the active voice, "I thought," followed by the passive voice, "And next the thought came to me." Ashbery's speaker thus sets the meditative process in motion with an active step that leaves itself open to further thought in two ways: first, it considers its initial idea as only "one way," not *the* way; second, it implicitly asks whether he "could put it all down." Later in the poem, he explicitly states that first steps significantly affect the process: "For starting out, even just a very few steps, completely changes the nature of the journey as it was when it lay intact and folded. That first step ignites the endless cycle of rising and falling" (35). The initial action not only changes the environment in which it takes place, it prompts a response; in the second sentence of the poem, the response in the passive voice suggests "another [. . .] way," adds the criterion of truth, and offers examples. It proposes exclusion; but the form of the suggestion builds, paradoxically, on the short, active, first thought to enlarge, not reduce, the scope of the argument and complicate, not simplify, its concerns. Additionally, it creates a polarity, which gives the speaker in-between space; now, "there is room to move around in it, which is all that matters" (42). Ashbery's speaker has set up the in-between field, which he can now explore.

Ashbery's connection of active and passive thought recalls Heidegger. In the first two chapters of *Being and Time*, Heidegger prepares for his investigation into being by discussing, first, actions such as questioning, choosing, and interpreting, and, second, the phenomenological method of uncovering to let being reveal itself as it is. In this sense,

the passive is another form of taking action. Robert R. Magliola defines phenomenology, in general, as "the epistemological theory of mutual implication" for which "knowledge is the grasp of an object that is simultaneously gripping us" (17). In particular, Heidegger's ontological phenomenology is a method of investigation in which a being actively interprets its own being through the phenomena that passively reveal themselves (*Being and Time* 18, 24-25). Ashbery exemplifies this sense of mutual implication. "The New Spirit" shows how one's consciousness actively creates and maintains an open attitude and, at the same time, passively remains receptive to the possibilities for a "gradual, growing belief in the importance of the universe as it came through to us to keep us going" (TP 17). The difficulty in such thinking lies in choosing to listen for a response, either from within one's self or from the outside environment; one must suppress the natural inclination to direct thought and more immediately speak and act, thus repressing the response.

A second polarization occurs when the opening lines of "The New Spirit" express the poet's dilemma of whether to include or exclude "all," which choice is usually interpreted as a matter of the appropriate poetic form for this particular poem.[8] The speaker contemplates the merits of the two forms by wondering which would be the truer way, which would help him most accurately transcribe his experience. Ashbery uses this polarity to frame the discussion, but as it proceeds, the poem circumvents the logical fallacy inherent in the either-or choice. The polarity serves its purpose, not only by creating in-between space in which he can move, but also by destroying the idea of poetry as a defined "kind" of writing: it does not limit itself to a form or genre but it both includes and excludes. Ashbery writes "The New Spirit" primarily in prose with short

lyrics scattered throughout, but he does not presume himself able to "put it all down." He

asserts, instead, that one cannot include everything but must choose to be selective, by

choosing not what to take or keep but what to discard, by either actively discarding some

things or passively allowing them to be discarded:

> At that point, one must, yes, be selective, but not selective in one's choices
>
> if you see what I mean. Not choose this or that because it pleases, merely
>
> to assume the idea of choosing, so that some things can be left behind. It
>
> doesn't matter which ones. I could tell you about some of the things I've
>
> discarded but that wouldn't help you because you must choose your own,
>
> or rather not choose them but let them be inflicted on and off you. This is
>
> the point of the narrowing-down process. (TP 8-9)

The critical word, "point," changes meaning in the course of this paragraph. "Point," a

discrete location in space and time, marks a decisive point, a specific position reached at

various stages in the course of a life. However, the "point," or essence, of the

"narrowing-down process" that one reaches at these decisive moments, or points, is to

determine what "things" among everything do not belong in one's life: "Only then will

the point of not having everything become apparent, and it will flash on you with such

dexterity and such terribleness that you will wonder how you lived before" (9).

Heidegger elaborates on the effects of not choosing: one is "taken along by the no one,

without choice, and thus gets caught up in inauthenticity" (*Being and Time* 248).

However, by tending to what one cares about for one's own being and letting the rest go,

one is "*choosing to make this choice*—deciding for a potentiality-of-being, and making

this decision from one's own self" (248, original italics). Ashbery compares the process

of selectivity to traversing land, to approaching the top of a mountain: "And gradually, as the air gets thinner as you climb a mountain, these things will stand forth in a relief all their own—the look of belonging" (TP 9).

In a third polarity, Ashbery not only relates choice to selection in the "narrowing process," but he also relates choice to truth as a divider. The speaker in "The New Spirit" is looking for the "truer way" to transcribe experience. Ashbery began his investigation in "Clepsydra" into the nature of truth as it is affected by time; the poem's speaker recognizes "the truth that, invisible, / Still surrounds us like the air and is the dividing force / Between our slightest steps and the notes taken on them" (RM 32). He develops this remark as he begins "The New Spirit": "But the truth has passed on / to divide all" (TP 3). Ashbery exploits lineation in these two lines. By leaving three blank spaces between the lines and moving the second line almost to the right margin, he creates an ambiguous space. On one hand, he does not divide the thought but includes the blank lines as part of the thought to show the time in which truth passes and divides. On the other hand, the blank lines show the nothing in which "something soon comes to stand," one of truth's ways of dividing. Truth divides all, whether it is the "all" that the speaker would include or the "all" that the speaker would leave out. The speaker in "The New Spirit" accepts the hard-won, skeptical insight gained in "Clepsydra": "That we shall never see in the sphere of pure wisdom" (RM 32), and he now looks only for the "truer" way for a consciousness to use language in order to communicate its experience and interact with its world. Though moments of truth might be glimpsed, truth and untruth remain entangled: "There was no getting around it, the Moon had triumphed easily once again, [. . .] the moon, who places everything in a false and *puzzling light* from which a

fraction of the truth is not altogether absent, for the moon does illuminate, though erratically" (TP 46, italics added). The "puzzling light" recalls "Some Trees," where it suggests an opportunity to question what might have been taken for granted; the puzzling light in *Three Poems*, however, intimates the opportunity to glean some truth from what appears to be false. It demonstrates the "erratic" road to truth and foreshadows the important role "erratic" will play in "The System." "Clepsydra" relates the interrelationship of truth and untruth to time: "Each moment / Of utterance is the true one: likewise none are true" (RM 27); "The New Spirit" takes the further position that truth is disguised by an apparent falseness. The speaker has come "to the point where the false way and the true way are confounded, where there is no way or rather where everything is a way, none more suitable nor more accurate than the last, oblivion rapidly absorbing their outline like snow filling footprints" (TP 17). The task for "The New Spirit" is to find the "truer" way despite the concealment and distortion caused by "the saw-toothed anomalies of time itself" (9).

However, the poem addresses its task tentatively and indirectly. Ashbery's first line refers to an indefinite "it": "I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way" (3), but the "it" has no antecedent or subsequent definition. According to Ashbery, *Three Poems* "was starting out to be about love, then becoming it, and finally there's a kind of resolution, or an attempt at a resolution, at the end of all the contradictions which in fact implies that the work is a series of contradictions, one after the other" (Sommer 304). However, the "it," whether it was initially love, as Ashbery suggests or a "love affair and its collapse," as David Shapiro maintains (134), is not the specific focus, which is why Ashbery leaves "it" ambiguous. The process of thinking as one's consciousness

interacts with its world is Ashbery's focus, not the explication of one particular

experience. The vague pronouns appearing throughout the poems serve to promote a

dialogic relationship; they are not meant to set up a specific situation that would distract

from the significance of question and choice. Even if Ashbery's dilemma over form or

his personal situation at the time of writing the poem did initially instigate the poem, he

uses it in order to address the larger, more encompassing issue that has intrigued him

from his first poems and will continue to engage him in future poems. In "The Recital,"

toward the end of *Three Poems*, Ashbery writes: "Then this new problem is the same

one, and that is the problem. [. . .] We are forced to recognize that we are still living in

the same old state of affairs and that it never really went away even when it seemed to"

(110). Early in "The New Spirit," Ashbery sees the necessity for asking a question that

can never be conclusively answered about oneself in one's world: "Because life is short /

We must remember to keep asking it the same question" (6). He does not disclose the

question because he cannot articulate it at this time. But by the end of the poem, he

discovers it to be "the major question that revolves around you, your being here" (51). In

an odd formulation, he does not ask the question but presents it as a statement. This

question and the manner in which Ashbery states it reverberates with Heidegger's

reference to "the fundamental necessity of repeating the question of the meaning of

'being'" (*Being and Time* 3), defined as being-in-the-world. Heidegger posits "regarding,

understanding and grasping, choosing, and gaining access to" as "attitudes of inquiry"

that are "modes of being" (5-6); the human being, who can question and choose, can even

choose whether or not to question and choose. Ashbery insists we *must* continually ask

the question; and he thus begins "The New Spirit" with a choice that he must, as

Heidegger puts it, begin "to work out" (6) in the ensuing pages of *Three Poems*.

Ashbery's question of whether to "put it all down" or "to leave all out," then, is a

question of genre in the sense of finding the most fruitful form for discussing an

unresolved issue, but the question carries greater implications than just how to describe

"it." The discourse he chooses constitutes many voices and languages, and they help

shape his understanding. Heidegger says that "understanding harbors in itself the

possibility of interpretation, that is, the appropriation of what is understood" about one's

being; it is capable of being articulated in discourse (*Being and Time* 150). To stimulate

the interpretive and articulative processes, "The New Spirit" presents a number of

contradictions or polarities in addition to the two opposite forms for writing his poem.

Just the first three pages include variations on such opposites as inclusion/exclusion,

passive/active, waking/sleeping, standing/passing, I/you, calm/confusion, past/future,

young/old, light/dark, inside/outside, past/future, now/memory, profile/mass,

thinking/pronouncing, and near/far. At first the speaker's problem appears to be to

distinguish "the truer way" between inclusion and exclusion, the choice seems to hinge

on truth as a function of language. But once the speaker recognizes the impossibility of

determining truth by choosing between two polarities, he abandons the question of how

to tell "it" and contemplates his own mental environment finding a welter of additional

contradictions. He collapses the time/space distinction and sees his landscape as a

bewilderment with "no profile in the massed days ahead" (TP 4). Where the speaker in

"Clepsydra" recognizes that to "abolish confusion" would distort the truth, the speaker in

"The New Spirit" further sees "young and old alike moving together where the dark

masses grow confused." And he insists that one must not turn away but must take it in:

"We must drink the confusion, sample that other, concerted, dark effort that pushes not to

the light, but toward a draft of dank, clammy air. We have broken through into the

meaning of the tomb. But the act is still proposed, before us / it needs pronouncing" (4-

5). As Ashbery explains in "Clepsydra," evading or glossing over confusion, which is a

fusion wherein elements are no longer distinct, might destroy access to certain truths.

This point underscores Ashbery's complaint about "clear and distinct ideas." Confusion

abolishes distinctions and outlines but it also contains unknown truths; conversely, clear

and distinct ideas in the form of definite outlines and profiles conceal not only confusion

but also unknown truths. Confusion is not meant to be a permanent state, but it must be

entered into and explored—one must be willing to be lost in it in order to find a way,

knowing that way is not a permanent state either. Confusion will return.

The speaker carries that thought a step further in "The New Spirit": when

confusion is taken in and allowed to exist without being conformed into an artificial

clarity, it contains the potential for radical insight. The speaker arrives at "the meaning

of the tomb." In a Heideggerian sense, when one understands that meaning, one

anticipates the indefinite certainty of death (*Being and Time* 245), which is not the same

as knowing the meaning of life or understanding the mystery of death. To face mortality,

just as to face that one is thrown into a particular existence at birth, frees one from

illusion and allows one to make choices for a future way of being while life *stretches*

along between birth and death" (342, original italics). In the first pages of "The New

Spirit," the speaker recognizes the importance of confronting life's confusions and

distractions to break through to this awareness; but this recognition denotes the beginning

of understanding, not a conclusive epiphany. Knowing the "meaning of the tomb" means

facing one's ultimate destiny; it is not a static knowledge or truth one possesses. "The act

is still proposed"; it requires the further work of "pronouncing," or expressing outwardly

what has been realized, in order to uncover and live with its implications. Ashbery

pronounces by putting his developing thought into words through the process of

meditation; it begins with an unarticulated perception, explores the vague edges in the

landscape of his consciousness, and moves toward a more profound comprehension of his

present place in his world.

Meditative Essayism

Phenomenology, meditation, and essayism reinforce each other in *Three Poems*.

Heidegger asserts that "this confrontation that *understands, interprets*, and articulates, at

the same time takes apart what has been put together." What is understood in terms of

something else must be separated through interpretation to be seen for itself (*Being and

Time* 149, original italics). Heidegger is speaking of his phenomenological method for

uncovering being, but the speaker in *Three Poems* adapts the method for his meditation;

he focuses his thoughts so he can find himself in the landscape of his discourse, in which

he has become lost. He attempts to expand his consciousness by gaining access to the

unarticulated knowledge contained in the vague fringes of what James terms "the field of

consciousness" (*Pluralistic Universe* 761). The meditative order of his thinking parallels

Heidegger's phenomenological structure: he begins with a general perception of his

confusion, confronts it by assaying its possibilities, and, finally, is able to pronounce

what he has realized. With pronouncement, meditation attempts to attain what Heidegger

calls in his phenomenological structure, "the appropriation of what is understood" (150); it aims to increase one's understanding by putting it into one's own voice and language, by making it relevant in one's own life. The speaker's phenomenological meditation synchronizes in many ways with Ashbery's essayism: they are both methods that test ideas by following digressions to see where they lead, plumb perceptions to reveal previously unrecognized implications, clarify thought by gradually recognizing distinctions, and encourage ideas that might be suppressed by beliefs that seem patently obvious. On the other hand, while this form of meditation adopts the mode of essayism, essayism is not necessarily the same as meditation. Essayism does not follow any particular perspective or format; however, meditation offers its unique angle to the essayism in *Three Poems* by introducing a religious perspective and the notion of a "practice," or a prescribed format, specifically designed to promote unanticipated insights.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines meditation as "the action or practice of profound spiritual or religious reflection or contemplation"; specifically, it is "a variety of private devotional exercise consisting of the continuous application of the mind to the contemplation of a particular religious text, truth, mystery, or object"; and generally it is "continuous thought or musing upon one subject or series of subjects; (a period of) serious and sustained reflection or mental contemplation." Louis L. Martz describes the meditative process in terms of self-discovery: it "consists of an interior drama, in which a man projects a self upon a mental stage, and there comes to understand that self in the light of a divine presence" (Introduction xxxi). Ashbery's meditation in *Three Poems* continuously contemplates, by a circuitous route, the mystery of being and the best way

to question it. From his first poems, Ashbery has recognized that unfathomable truths lie beyond the reach of normal reason, yet an awareness of their nonpresence remains a necessary part of ordinary life. Though not knowing may produce anxiety, the elusive nature of truth can also be enjoyed: "As laughing cadets say, 'In the evening / Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is'" (ST 9). Suggesting that full knowledge or complete certainty lies beyond human existence implies a connection between mystery and the sacred: all that is not known is not sacred, but what is sacred will retain an element of mystery. In *Three Poems*, perhaps because meditation evokes a religious practice, Ashbery makes this connection more explicit by increasing his use of religious language, particularly where his understanding is most unclear at the beginning of his meditation: just one page of "The New Spirit" includes "the meaning of the tomb," "penance," and "the continual pilgrimage" (TP 5).[9] *Three Poems* is not an overtly religious poem; however, Ashbery portrays the sacred as part of secular existence, not as a separate realm or subject. Its presence weaves in and out of the speaker's language, along with his other everyday languages.

Many poets have followed meditative practices in their poetry; however, Ashbery bypasses the option of the poetic subgenre of meditation exemplified by the poems of Thomas Traherne, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, and T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Instead, Ashbery composes his meditative poems in prose, and he cites the importance of reading several prose works prior to writing *Three Poems*: Traherne's religious reflections in *Centuries*, W. H. Auden's dramatic soliloquy in "Caliban to the Audience," and Giorgio de Chirico's surrealist novel *Hebdomeros*.[10]

These works not only foreshadow stylistic choices in sentence structure and word choice, but also suggest the interconnection of the religious and the secular.

Ashbery acknowledges his appreciation of Traherne when he was reading his work along with other "mystical" writers at the suggestion of his therapist, shortly before beginning *Three Poems* (Sommer 303). Despite Traherne's being a seventeenth-century Anglican chaplain and metaphysical poet, his prose is more concerned with enjoyment of the world than are the works of many religious writers of his time. Just as Ashbery begins with one's place in the world and finds sacred elements within it, Traherne begins with religious contemplation that leads him to the world; both Ashbery and Traherne realize the interconnectedness, the inability to separate one from the other. Traherne venerates the "common, but invisible" wisdom of the ancients with its "unspeakable mysteries," and he also attaches value to the world with its "common things," pragmatically "measured by their serviceableness" (139). Like Ashbery who discovers himself through others, "through you to myself" (RM 32), Traherne learns about himself spiritually through others within his world: "And as in many mirrors we are so many other selves, so are we spiritually multiplied when we meet ourselves more sweetly, and live again in other persons" (89).

A second source cited by Ashbery as a predecessor to *Three Poems* is Auden's "Caliban to the Audience" (Ford 56). Auden's work is not as explicitly religious as Traherne's, but it indirectly addresses the interconnection of the sacred and the secular, as Ashbery will in *Three Poems*. Ashbery, however, does not mention the similarity of this mutual connection; instead he points to Auden's writing style as an influence: "Although one that I didn't become aware of until after I'd finished writing them, as is so often the

case, was Auden's parody of late [Henry] James, 'Caliban to the Audience,' which concludes *The Sea and the Mirror*" (Ford 56). Auden uses two writing styles, both of which appear in *Three Poems*. In the first nine pages of his speech, Caliban identifies himself as an echo to the audience and speaks in the first person plural; he adopts a Jamesian tone with an abstract diction; and he speaks in long sentences that have numerous interrupters, appositives, and expletives that begin, digress, and begin again, finally ending with thoughts that have traveled a great distance from the beginning subject. But when Caliban speaks for himself, he speaks in the first-person singular, using specific, colloquial language with lively imagery, though still working through his thoughts in long, wandering sentences. The poem is a continuous musing on the opposition of Caliban and Ariel; Auden comments on this opposition in his criticism of *The Tempest*: "Over against Caliban, the embodiment of the natural, stands the invisible spirit of imagination, Ariel" (61). Though Caliban meditates on "just how the artistic contraption works" (36), the poem also has religious undertones in its conclusion that the sacred "Word" can be found in the secular world: "[W]e can positively envisage Mercy; it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours" (52).

A third prose source that Ashbery cites as a source for *Three Poems* is *Hebdomeros* by de Chirico (Kostelanetz 103), which, as Ashbery will do, uses landscape as space for transformation. This work demonstrates a third type of meditation in the form of a third-person surrealist narration of experiences that contribute to and reflect the hero's gradual understanding of himself. Again, as in both Traherne's and Auden's works, the hero learns about himself through his involvement in the world. In his

introduction to a recent translation of the novel, Ashbery describes the novel, not as a

story, but as a series of settings that gradually define its hero: "The novel has no story,

though it reads as if it did. Its sole character is Hebdomeros, a kind of 'metaphysician'

who evolves through various landscapes and situations" ("The Decline of the Verbs" x).

De Chirico creates a strange landscape "in which the hero feels strangely at home" (xi),

just as Ashbery creates a landscape through discourse wherein he can enjoy being lost.

Hebdomeros, Ashbery observes, has a "Socratic strain [. . .], is uncommitted"; Ashbery's

tentative artist, who remains open to experience and does not approach it with a

preconceived theory, bears a resemblance to Hebdomeros: "His theories of life varied

according to the sum of his experiences" (x). Ashbery also admires the "hypnotic

quality" of de Chirico's "incredible prose style":

> His long run-on sentences, stitched together with semicolons, allow a
>
> cinematic freedom of narration; the setting and the cast of characters
>
> frequently change in mid-clause. In this fluid medium, trivial images or
>
> details can suddenly congeal and take on a greater specific gravity. [. . .]
>
> What gives *Hebdomeros* a semblance of plot and structure is the masterful
>
> way in which leitmotifs are introduced, dropped and reintroduced where
>
> one least expects them. [. . .] But they unfold in such a way that one is
>
> seldom conscious of a repetition, only of a shifting, orchestrated texture.
>
> (xi)

De Chirico, a painter, left familiar ground to invent, as Ashbery puts it, "a new style and

a new kind of novel" (x). In *Three Poems*, Ashbery creates a new kind of poem;

following a cleric's religious meditations, a poet's prose poem, and a painter's novel,

Ashbery adapts their prose techniques to contribute to his exploratory essayism with a digressive, fluid style and to blur the restrictive boundaries between poetry and prose and between the religious and the secular.[11]

Ashbery's speaker in *Three Poems* sketches the plan that he will follow in the poems' meditation; though the volume includes three poems, they can be read as a series that forms one meditation. The particular elements in meditative practice vary considerably but typically comprise three general sequences: the introductory step of identifying the subject, the major step of the meditation itself on that subject, and the concluding step of speaking and listening in colloquy. It was first developed for religious purposes in the twelfth century, was codified in the sixteenth century by St. Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*, and subsequently has been adapted in a number of different forms by both religious and secular writers (Martz, *Poetry of Meditation* (25-27, 47). Martz attributes the "enormous popularity of methodical meditation" to its focus and discipline of "the powers that a man already possessed, both his innate powers and his acquired modes of logical analysis and rhetorical development" (39). Ashbery's use of the meditative process loosely follows the outlined method, but this observance could result from either his readings of meditations or his innate understanding of the similar phenomenological method of working through a particular situation. The point remains that he does introduce the religious element of meditation through his language.

"The New Spirit"

The introductory step identifies the subject wherein "one must also use the image-forming faculty to provide a concrete and vivid setting for a meditation on invisible

things," a directive important for the poet (28).   The meditations of "The New Spirit"

will move the speaker from his purported, vague intent of structuring this poem by

inclusion or exclusion to his real purpose of trying to find a "profile in the massed days

ahead" (TP 4). The meditator then petitions for what he wishes to achieve: "Not only is

the end foreseen, but the specific progress of the meditation toward this end is carefully

charted and practiced beforehand" (Martz, *Poetry of Meditation* 33). Ashbery's speaker

in "Clepsydra" has already seen that to seek clarity means to look into, not avoid, those

contradictions that cause confusion. The speaker in "The New Spirit" even more

explicitly discovers that he must move to "where the dark masses grow confused" in

order eventually to attain understanding: "We must drink the confusion, sample that

other, concerted, dark effort that pushes not to the light, but toward a draft of dank,

clammy air" (TP 4-5). And, thus, he foresees the end: "We have broken through into the

meaning of the tomb."

The poem's speaker then begins the major work of his meditation, in which he

refines an initial perception to enable his active engagement (Martz, *Poetry of Meditation*

34). He first names the subject that he apprehends: "We have broken through into the

meaning of the tomb. But the act is still proposed before us, it needs pronouncing" (TP

5). He sees that naming the tomb as a source of meaning does not constitute

understanding; "meaning" is a vague word for the mystery of the tomb. Because naming

does not constitute a pragmatic understanding in the context of his world, he must

discover how he can act on the meaning that the name proposes. In order to act, he must

be able to pronounce, or put into words, what he apprehends.

"The New Spirit" and much of "The System" consist of the poems' speaker pronouncing, or assaying, his thoughts. It articulates the speaker's growing understanding of what he can learn from the tomb, not by meditating directly on it, but by beginning with his present place; he must work through his present confusion in order to break through to what he does not yet comprehend. He begins by considering how he actively influences and is passively influenced by his environment or sphere: "To formulate oneself around this hollow, empty sphere . . . To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out" (TP 5, original ellipses). Spirit, from the Latin *spiritus*, or breath, provides the necessary interaction with one's world. "The cold, exernal factors are inside us at last, growing in us for our improvement." The new spirit or breath "is shaped in the new merging" of inner and outer; what is taken in grows through its "new merging" with "what was there before," and as it is "shoved out," articulated, or pronounced, it helps one "to formulate oneself around this hollow, empty sphere" (5).

As the speaker continues to articulate the "slowly unfolding expansiveness" in this "shapeless modest tale," he must trust in the "progress to be born" (12), that he will eventually come to a degree of understanding. As if to exemplify the circuitous path his thoughts often take as they attempt to move forward, the poem avoids regular form: it employs both short and long prose paragraphs, which are interrupted occasionally with short lyrics; its sentences vary in length but tend to be long with numerous clauses that overload and redirect the sentence. Its tone is quiet, almost monotone, so it resembles "a mass" of words with "no profile" that often seem to run together, thus illustrating the way the speaker's thinking wanders into entanglements and patiently works at them by attending to their gradually evolving implications. It frequently lapses into vocabulary

from literary and extraliterary sources though slips them in so smoothly they go almost unnoticed. It borrows vocabulary from sources including religion, business, farming, architecture, journalism, academia, narrative, philosophy, science, history, astrology, the circus, biography, and mathematics; it borrows from writers including Auden, Eliot, Pater, Roussel, and even Ashbery's own earlier poems. The poem thus becomes a landscape that connects with the many levels of everyday life, yet the various vocabularies and sources all seem at one with the speaker. They are not separate voices coming from the outside but have been taken in from the outside to form part of his being, further complicating but activating his thought.

"The New Spirit" ends with the arrival of a final passive thought that continues the originating thoughts on form: "One day, the thought occurred to him" that the "previous forms of life he had taken" are just "stages in a progression whose end is still unseen and unimaginable. They had not merely served their purpose but were the purpose" (50): chosen ways to live with their viable purpose for their time. The speaker then has what sounds like an epiphany, albeit a short-lived one. "It dawned on him all of a sudden that there was another way" other than the extremes: the "Tower of Babel," or putting it all in through the efforts of man to shut out terror, and its opposite "the desert and drooping above it the constellations that [. . .] presided impassively," or leaving all out by turning away from life and toward what lies beyond (50). The speaker sees, instead, that this ending is another beginning, "that a new journey would have to be undertaken, perhaps not the last but certainly an unavoidable one." He must still choose, but instead of adopting an extreme stance that negates other options, he will fall into "an ambience of relaxed understanding," in which he can address what lies closest to himself:

his being. The "major question that revolves around you, your being here" does not

demand a conclusive answer; it demands only a beginning step: "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." The insistence that "you

have got to" is weaker and vaguer than "you must"; moreover, the verb is followed by

five buffering phrases: "to begin," "in the way," "of choosing," "some one of the forms,"

and "of answering that question." The imperative is to choose a form or forms for

answering rather than to answer the question. The presiding stars impart an undefined,

mysterious influence as they echo the trees in "Some Trees," which "mean something" by

"their merely being there" (ST 51). The question of being "revolves around you," but its

very closeness creates distance because it is assumed to be understood without question.

In a similar vein, Heidegger discusses the "self-evident concept" of being that enters into

"every relation to beings and in every relation to oneself"; it remains incomprehensible

despite its apparent comprehensibility, so the question must be repeatedly asked (*Being

and Time* 3).

The presence of other beings, including mundane trees and mysterious stars,

provide proof that being must be investigated. "Proof" most commonly means something

that establishes validity, but it also can be a witness; the condition of having successfully

stood a test, invulnerability; or an instrument used in testing: all of these meanings bear

on the issue. The presence of the stars affirms the need for the choice of "some one of

the forms" for answering the question of "being here."   The oxymoronic "some one of

the forms" either acknowledges that the one form chosen need not remain the form

chosen for every answer or it indicates a loose designation of "one"; it also carries the

overtone of "someone," a subliminal reference to choosing someone who remains subliminal. Choosing the forms for answering the question precedes and makes possible the asking of the question and the formulation of the answer, "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" (TP 51), which recalls the establishment of the meditative form at the beginning of the poem: "But the act is still proposed, before us, it needs pronouncing. To formulate oneself [. . .]" (5). Of course, the antecedent for "they," in "if they were not there," is ambiguous; it might not be only the forms but also the stars, or perhaps even the earlier trees, whose "presence" affirms the need for choosing a form. Allowing for the many possibilities in the sentence conveys the essential interrelated nature of form, metaphysical mystery, and one's surrounding world—they all bear on the way one might most profitably address the question of being.

So the poem's initial question about choice of form extends far beyond the form for this poem; it is a question of form that must be addressed before the question of being can be fully engaged. Because being changes in time, the question must be continually asked, but the form or way in which the question can be answered also must change. If the form for answering were not to change, the question would have no viable place in which to be answered; it would be "rhetorical," lifelessly expressed in an "impassive grammar," and "proposed but never formulated." "Proposed" is "to set forth as an aim or intent" and "formulated" is "to set forth in a definite and systematic statement." This last phrase of the poem, then, is unclear in its context in that Ashbery's essayistic mode

resists systematism. Ashbery's speaker in *Three Poems* subjects his thoughts to further questioning, which prevents their encapsulation in a closed system.

Questioning one's own thoughts works as an effective essayistic device, as developed by Montaigne (377), to prevent thoughts from becoming rigid; it tests ideas and opens them to further insights. Heidegger, like Ashbery, elaborates on the necessity and primacy of formulation, although he relates it directly to forming initial questions in order to get at the basic question itself: "Thus to retrieve the question of being means first of all to work out adequately the *formulation* of the question" (*Being and Time* 3, original italics). Ashbery, instead, meditates on the ways of answering the question by creating different environments in which to ask them, thus leading to his experiments in poetic form and genre. Is Ashbery using "formulation" simply to mean the use of a form? Or, does he intend it to suggest a need for system, but not as a closed, all-inclusive system but in a special sense that he will define? By ending "The New Spirit" with the word "formulated," with its ambiguous intimation of system, Ashbery abstains from a tidy close, demonstrates his reluctance to leave confusion too quickly, and points directly to the "The System," which will continue the formulation.

"The System"

The title of "The System" makes explicit the implication of "formulated"; but without apparent transition, the poem shifts the focus of the meditation from the choice of a form to the collapsing system that holds a body and, by extension, one's world, together:

> 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. (TP 53)

A system organizes individual parts into a unified whole, and a breakdown separates
those parts either to make them inoperative or to reassemble them in a different way. The
third-person "one," who will interchange in the poem with first- and second-person "we,"
"I," and "you," identifies a slight irregularity in the system as the beginning of a major
shift that, if allowed, would move from the center to the suburbs and then the country.

This tripartite terrain that evokes James's "field of consciousness" (*Pluralistic
Universe* 761) marks the site for the important shift in thinking that the speaker seeks;
though it first appears with an ominous sense of foreboding, it signals the beginning of a
release of previously held truths to make room for truths more applicable to current
reality. James explains the change in or displacement of conscious thoughts in the center
with the gradual infiltration of information from the fringe and subconscious "more,"
whereas Ashbery describes the gradual build-up of a volatile force that could eventually
burst the existing boundaries of the center so that it incorporates what he terms the
suburbs and the even more distant country. Either way, whether the fringe gradually
encroaches or the center suddenly incorporates it at the end of a slow process, the center
of consciousness changes. In "The New Spirit," Ashbery clearly expresses his inclination
to venture into the edges of consciousness; in fact, the speaker's insights begin when "the
mind's suburbs" are "suddenly infected with the new spirit" (TP 28), thus initiating the

change that will slowly make its way as a "hiccup" to the center of the speaker's

consciousness. Therefore, this symptomatic hiccup presages what could be a fortunate

shift or expansion of consciousness. The transition between the two poems now emerges:

"The New Spirit" concludes by recognizing that one must "begin in the way of choosing

some one of the forms of answering that question" of "your being here." "The System"

begins by clearing away the limitations of the ingrained system to allow for a fresh

formulation in which to begin choosing. The poem takes the meditative approach of

proposing its subject, apprehending the situation through memory, and testing different

approaches by articulating them.

　　　The speaker announces that he is beginning a response to the demand made at the

end of "The New Spirit," which is to choose a form for answering the question of being:

"It is with some playfulness that we actually sit down to the business of mastering the

many pauses and the abrupt, sharp accretions of regular being in the clotted sphere of

today's activities" (54). Choosing the form will not be a theoretical matter, but will

resemble James's pragmatic approach "in the usual business of life" (*Pragmatism* 100).

With the "ambience of relaxed understanding" (TP 51) that he looked forward to at the

end of "The New Spirit," the speaker admits he does not know his outcome, saying, in

effect, that he will advance essayistically, following what comes about without

predetermination: "There is no need for setting out, to advertise one's destination" (54).

　　　The meditative process often connects memory with the naming of what one

apprehends. Ashbery's speaker turns to memories of a time when truth "really knew

what it was" and knowledge, thoughts, and language coincided: "you knew what you

were supposed to know. The words formed from it and the sentences formed from them

were dry and clear, as though made of wood" (55). However, his plan now is not to explore this lucid, cohesive sense of life but rather, in a spirit of recovery, to investigate the history of its parallel unacknowledged "residue, a kind of fiction." He calls it the "other tradition": "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" (56). He recalls the sequence of the love generation, "this cosmic welter of attractions" (58); the self-help platitudes disseminated by those who "took over and dictated to the obscurer masses that follow in the wake of the discoverers" (59); the apocalyptic thinking of "those who assumed that they had reached the end of an elaborate but basically simple progression, the logical last step of history" (62); and, finally, those individuals who silently sought self-renewal in the present with "a great sense of each one's going about his business [. . .] with the rest of the world as a painted backdrop to his own monodrama of becoming of which he was the lone impassioned spectator" (63-64).

The history comes to an end with a sermon-like request "on this Sunday," to "pause for a moment to take note of where we are" at the beginning of the year and to figure out how to face the rest of the year (65). To do so, the speaker considers that of the "three methods: reason, sense, or a knowing combination of both," "only the first has some slim chance of succeeding through sheer perversity, which is possibly the only way to succeed at all" (68). However, for reason to succeed through perversity is a contradiction in terms in that "perversity" means "wrongheadedness, unreasonable." Rejecting his three alternatives, the speaker decides on "the erratic approach": the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "erratic" as "prone to wandering"; it is, of course, the

approach of *Three Poems*, and it suggests the essayism of Montaigne, who distrusts reason because it "always goes its way, even though crooked, lame, and broken-hipped, and with falsehood as with truth. Thus it is not easy to discover its miscalculation and irregularity" (425). He also distrusts the senses "since our condition accommodates things to itself and transforms them to itself, we no longer know what things are in truth; for nothing comes to us except falsified and altered by our senses" (453-54), but he proudly admits he is prone to wandering: "My style and my mind alike go roaming" (761), "I have never succeeded in keeping some part of me from always wandering" (848).

With this somewhat hazy reckoning, the poem's speaker launches into an extended, erratic train of thought to articulate how new information enters consciousness. The subsequent section demonstrates the process of essayism; how one thought leads to another. Once again, as in the first lines of "The New Spirit," he begins with an ostensible subject that allows him to write into his true concern. He briefly considers two extremes for approaching life: "the great careers," which is "to think of these people as separate entities, each with his development and aim to be achieved" (TP 70); and the "'life-as-ritual' concept," which "is by definition something impersonal" that moves in accordance with some social custom or protocol without looking back or within. He moves on to "two kinds of happiness": "the frontal and the latent." The frontal is immediate, a "sudden balm" (71), while the latent is delayed, "the vessel has not yet been fully prepared to receive it" (73). But as the speaker confidently begins to disparage the latent-type of people who "are awaiting the sign of their felicity without hope," his argument begins to turn on itself. He repeatedly changes the direction of his thought by

beginning a number of clauses with "yet," and he eventually finds similarities in his own thinking with that of those dullards who do not recognize their ignorance.

This knot in the speaker's thinking works itself out in a fourteen-page paragraph (73-86) in which he determines that "what does matter is our growing sense of certainty, whether deduced by the intellect or the sensual intelligence (this is immaterial)" (78). However, he immediately proposes further questions: How is it to be used and to what end? He leads into his answer with the image of a day: "The answer is in our morning waking" (78); the day is a favorite image used in "Two Scenes" (ST 9), at the end of "Clepsydra" (RM 33) and earlier in "The System" as "a microcosm of man's life" (TP 66). That the speaker uses day and life interchangeably becomes clear as he immediately shifts from morning to birth in the subsequent line. He expresses the answer in a twenty-nine line epic simile that begins with a babe's innocent blankness immediately followed by a Wordsworthian exception: "For just as we begin our lives as mere babes with the imprint of nothing in our heads, except lingering traces of a previous existence [. . .]" (78). He soon sees additional "other notions" that impose themselves on infant minds:

> There is always something fading out or just coming into focus, and this whatever-it-is is always projecting itself on us escalating its troops, prying open the shut gates of our sensibility and pouring in to augment its forces that have begun to take over our naked consciousness and driving away those shreds of another consciousness. (79)

Metaphors of battle replace the image of the innocent beginning of life; the numerous impressions impinging on consciousness conflict with innate knowledge, but "for a moment, between the fleeing and pursuing armies there is almost a moment of peace, of

purity in which what we are meant to perceive could almost take shape in the empty air, if only there were time enough." The moment flees, and the simile has roamed so far from its initial subject that the speaker interrupts himself to begin it again, but he revises the opening image from a babe at birth to an adult beginning a day with vague perceptions of assurance threatened by blankness: "just, I say, as we begin each day in this state of threatened blankness which is wiped away so soon, but which leaves certain illegible traces" (79).

The speaker's willingness to follow and amend his wandering thoughts as they access those thoughts that lie "on the borders of our field of perception" offers its reward at the end of the simile: "So we must learn to recognize it as the form—the only one—in which such fragments of the true learning as we are destined to receive will be vouchsafed to us, if at all" (79). "Our morning waking" with its vague recollection of dim outlines and "illegible traces" is "the form" that "true learning" takes, but, paradoxically, inattention or not-understanding is what must be "examined as signs of life in which part of the whole truth lies buried":

> And as the discourse continues and you think you are not getting anything out of it, as you yawn and rub your eyes and pick your nose or scratch your head, or nudge your neighbor on the hard wooden bench, this knowledge is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress itself upon you, the forms of your inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand. For it is certain that you will rise from the bench a new person. (80)

Again, Ashbery is describing a meditative process. In his commentary on the fourteenth century mystical work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the psychologist Ira Progoff describes the shift of energy taking place during meditation: "The control of thoughts and other psychic contents together with the withdrawal of the mental energy invested in the world" results in "an attrition of consciousness as a whole," which leads to "a lowering of the mental level, with a corresponding intensification of psychic activity at the subliminal depths of the personality" (28-29).

The initial questions that led to the extended simile in "The System" now collapse into one:

> So I think that the question of how we are going to use the reality of our revelation, as well as to what end, has now been resolved. First of all we see that these two aspects of our question are actually one and the same, that there is only one aspect as well as only one question, that to wonder how is the same as beginning to know why. For no choice is possible.

(TP 80-81)

These two questions, just like the two options posed at the beginning of "The New Spirit" instigate the essayistic thought process: figuring out "how" exposes one to the complexities of "what" and "why," thus changing the nature of the original questions. In a similar manner, the latent kind of happiness is seen as "merely a fleshed-out, realized version of that ideal first kind, and more to be prized because its now ripe contours enfold both the promise and the shame of our human state"; but the "idealistic concept" is valued, too, because it started the train of thought and "got us started along this path" (81). And, therefore, "the difficulty of living with the unfolding of the year is erased,"

but the speaker moves too quickly in thinking all problems are resolved; the clarity dissolves: "it was a *new arrangement* that existed and was on the point of working. And now it is all the same; any miracles, if there ever are any again, will be partial ones" (85, original italics).

The speaker is thrown back into life and is getting closer to discovering how his meditation can turn to effective action, the last point in the major step of the meditative process. Philosophic thought is of no use if it does not connect with life; the poem's speaker adopts a pragmatic attitude toward his recent experience and insight: "What did matter now was getting down to business, or back to the business of day-to-day living with all the tiresome mechanical problems that this implies. And it was just here that philosophy broke down completely and was of no use" (87). Ashbery's language echoes James, who often uses business terms, e.g., "the usual business of life" and "truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system" (*Pragmatism* 100), and their attitudes toward philosophy also concur. James disparages traditional philosophy: "You find empiricism with inhumanism and irreligion; or else you find a rationalistic philosophy that indeed may call itself religious, but that keeps out of all definite touch with concrete facts and joys and sorrows" (17). He calls instead for a pragmatic approach that connects with life: "The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one" (30). The poem's speaker begins to consider the pragmatic concern of the fruits of his meditation and how they affect his real situation. His worry that he cannot recall everything and does not know everything brings him to the pragmatic view that the resultant effects on living, not the original pronouncements, are

to be valued: "it is best then that the buried word remain buried for we were intended to appreciate only its fruits and not the secret principle activating them—to know this would be to know too much. Meanwhile it is possible to know just enough, and this is all we were supposed to know, toward which we have been straining all our lives" (TP 95). To strain is to strive vigorously, which evokes the meditative process; it constantly attends to following its original subject as it moves to a new understanding with which the person can act and live. It also evokes Montaigne's skeptical view that "there cannot be first principles for men, unless the Divinity has revealed them" (404). The speaker realizes he is "viewing it all from a different angle, perhaps no more nor less accurate than the previous one, but in any case a necessary one no doubt for the in-the-round effect to be achieved" (TP 93). Just as the speaker sees his life situation from a new angle, Ashbery sees his viewpoint change in the angle provided by the meditative genre.

In the classic meditative process, the meditation concludes "when the soul thus reformed is lifted up to speak with God in colloquy and to hear God speak to man in turn"; or the meditator may address and be responded to by his or her self or soul. The colloquy might be asking for a favor, exhorting or blaming one's self, or seeking counsel (Martz, *Poetry of Meditation* 36-37).

The poem's speaker begins his colloquy in another epic simile, wherein he addresses his soul by describing it ironically as a lost dog, "puzzled, ashamed, ready to slink back into his inner confusion at the first brush with the outside world, so your aspirations, my soul, on this busy thoroughfare that is the great highway of life" (TP 91). Of course, Ashbery seeks the opportunity to be lost, values confusion, and finds no shame in a tentative approach. What might seem to be an admission of guilt is only an

expression of what the attitude might seem to some others who will not understand. The lost dog metaphorically refers not only to the speaker's soul but also to himself as a poet who observes and seeks understanding: "And there is no use trying to tell them that the touching melancholy of your stare is the product not of self-pity but of a lucid attempt to find out just where you stand in the fast-moving stream of traffic that flows endlessly from horizon to horizon like a dark river" (92).

At this point, after the poem's speaker addresses himself as a lost dog, he repeats the words, "Whatever was, is, and must be," but understands them differently: "Their meaning is the same, only you have changed: you are viewing it all from a different angle. [. . .] We see it all now. The thing that our actions have accomplished, and its results for us" (93). He began by breaking through to "the meaning of the tomb"; he now accepts it as what must be, but the future cannot be known or worried about to the extent that it diminishes the present: "with the last act still in the dim future, so that we can't tell yet whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, all we know is that it is crammed with action and the substance of life" (93). Like Traherne, whose meditations always return to the world and for whom heaven is a part of the world, Ashbery's speaker now sees his world anew:

> But that is the wonder of it: that you have returned not to the supernatural glow of heaven but to the ordinary daylight you knew so well before it passed from your view, and which continues to enrich you as it steeps you and your ageless chattels of mind, imagination, timid first love and quiet acceptance of experience in its revitalizing tide. (97)

The poem's speaker waits; with his new understanding, he has reached the end of his present meditation and is ready for a response. He calls again on the surrounding

witnesses of earthly trees and heavenly, starry skies, to the earth as well as the heavens:

"And those eyes as well as the trees and skies that surround you are full of apprehension,

waiting for this word that must come from you and that you have not in you. 'What am I

going to say?'" (95). Finally, he gets a response:

> [. . .] one day the unmistakable dry but deep accent is heard: "You waited
>
> too long. And now you are going to be rewarded by my attention. Make
>
> no mistake: it will probably seem to you as though nothing has changed;
>
> nothing will show in the outward details of your life and each night you
>
> will creep tired and enraged into bed. Know however that I am listening.
>
> From now on the invisible bounty of my concern will be there to keep you
>
> company, and as you mature it will unlock more of the same space for you
>
> so that eventually all your territory will have become rightfully yours
>
> again." (99)

Ashbery does not identify the source of the response—it could be God; it could be the

speaker's soul or one of his inner voices. But whatever it is, it reassures Ashbery's

speaker that it will always be listening and will "unlock more of the same space" (99); it

is a response that supports Ashbery's essayism: more will be learned from continuing to

ask the same questions.

The poem's speaker sees that his "wanderings have come full circle" (100),

causing him to reconsider his ideas on oneness and plurality; now he can "invoke the idea

of oneness only this time if possible on a higher plane, in order for the similarities in your

various lives to cancel each other out and the differences to remain" (101). His views are

similar to James's, who comes to a "manyness-in-oneness," in which "every bit of us at

every moment is part and parcel of a wider self" (*Pluralistic Universe* 763); "things are

'with' one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over

everything. The word 'and' trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes.

'Ever not quite' has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at

attaining all-inclusiveness" (776). Ashbery's speaker describes the "and" as the

"experiences that somehow don't fit in, [. . .] the misfit pieces that were never meant to

go into it but at best to stay on the sidelines so as to point up how everything else

belonged together" (TP 103-04).

This view of a pragmatic pluralism helps explain Ashbery's use of system as an

open system. According to general system theory, "a system is open when there is a set

of entities which does not belong to the system but influences or is influenced by its

state." Further, "if a system is regarded as open, the state of the system and that of the

environment influence each other: the system interacts with its environment. Hence

there are relations between the system and the environment whereby at least one entity in

the system influences the state of an entity in the environment or vice versa" (Kramer and

de Smit 33-34). Ashbery's system, despite its erratic method, accomplishes his goal of

articulating thought that leads to "the secret growing that has taken over" (TP 88). "The

System" ends by leaving the system open; it simply shows the way: "this

incommensurably wide way leads to the pragmatic and kinetic future" (106). The

speaker has broken through the darkness, through the "draft of dank, clammy air," to the

"meaning of the tomb," which revitalizes the present.

"The Recital"

A meditation would usually close with the colloquy, but Ashbery's meditative process must consider the implication of ending the meditation. "The Recital" acts as a coda to the first two poems; it appears to be a concluding summary but has its own interest that defers conclusion. Its first words suggest that the speaker is admitting to a challenger that the issue is not as complicated as perhaps he had made it: "All right. The problem is that there is no new problem" (107). His tone is subdued; perhaps he is experiencing a letdown after the intense period of meditative revelation or is wearing down with "the progress of any day, good or bad, [that] brings with it all kinds of difficulties that should have been foreseen but never are, so that it finally seems as though they are what stifles it" (107). He adopts a straightforward, less poetic vocabulary, reduces the imagery, and shortens the sentences and paragraphs; but he continues to write into his subject, and, of course, the summary leads to new thoughts—and a new problem. About a third of the way into the poem, he revises the first sentence: "All right. Then this new problem is the same one, and that is the problem: that our apathy can always renew itself, drawing energy from the circumstances that fill our lives" (110). The unusual description of apathy as energetic renewal suggests its strength in everyday life and the consequent difficulty of resisting it. The speaker's problem is that he must fend off apathy and avoid the temptation to rest with hard-won insights; he must be receptive to "the situation in which you find yourself, which is always a new one that cannot be decoded with reference to an existing corpus of moral principles, but there is even a doubt as to our own existence" (114). Ashbery hereby links situation with existence, which evokes Heidegger's assertion that beings can transform their existence by acting in

situations. If beings are receptive to each "Situation" as unique, they are open to its

possibilities for finding "authentic truth" in their existence; but if they simply reactively

respond to the "general situation," they deny themselves those possibilities (*Being and

Time* 275-76).

At the end of "The Recital," the speaker of the poem continues to recite, or "to

think along well-rehearsed lines like something out of the past," until he wonders whether

there is "nothing new under the sun" (an overt allusion to Ecclesiastes) or whether the

"novelty" is "the ability to take up these tattered enigmas again and play with them until

something like a solution emerged from them, only to grow dim at once and face like an

ignis fatuus (TP 116). He eventually concludes that "certain new elements had been

incorporated" though they are already fading, "so perfect was their assimilation" (118).

Now, the meditation as a spectacle, or a means of seeing, continues its work "in a new

key" (116), and it returns the meditation to the world, where it ends without conclusion:

> The performance had ended, the audience streamed out; the applause still
>
> echoed in the empty hall. But the idea of the spectacle as something to be
>
> acted out and absorbed still hung in the air long after the last spectator had
>
> gone home to sleep. (118)

The implication is that its import will be "acted out and absorbed" in two ways: in the

speaker's life and in Ashbery's subsequent poems. *Three Poems* illustrates the way

moments of transformation look to the past in order to move forward, and it draws on

preceding poems at the same time as it points toward future poems, most immediately

toward "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" and *Flow Chart*.

In *Flow Chart*, his next long poem, Ashbery continues his exploration of the interaction of consciousness with phenomena, but he returns to verse, though it is verse that retains many of the prosaic elements of *Three Poems*. The most distinctive change in *Flow Chart* is in its experiment with autobiography to provide a change in genre and viewpoint. *Flow Chart* continues the project of its precedessors as it simultaneously moves forward in a new direction; it both circles around and spreads out from his central concerns of perception and reflection. Ashbery describes this twofold process in "Fantasia on 'The Nut-Brown Maid,'" a poem published in 1977, after *Three Poems* but before *Flow Chart*: "I want to fly but keep / My morality, motley as it is, just by / Encouraging these branching diversions around an axis" (HD 74). This approach to living remains open to the diverse, incongruous, and unexpected elements in whatever he encounters, what Pater terms a "centrifugal [. . .] tendency [. . .] flying from the centre" (91). Just as Pater acknowledges the counteractive role of the "centripetal tendency," which considers and links together individual "things as they really are" (93), Ashbery's expansive essayism also remains grounded by his ongoing phenomenological focus on the Heideggerian "major question that revolves around you, your being here" (TP 51). With a Montaignian skepticism, Ashbery recognizes that although the investigation into this question will remain inconclusive, the circular, yet outward, movement that reveals the question's disparate implications enables an inner expansion of consciousness, and with this limited information, the speaker realizes he must make his own imperfect and tentative "mark":

Each of us circles

Around some simple but vital missing piece of information,

And, at the end, as now, finding no substitute,

Writes his own mark grotesquely with a stick in snow,

The signature of many connected seconds of indecision. (HD 85)

The question continually "revolves" around him at the same time as he "circles" around the answer that surrounds, yet evades, him. Ashbery describes the writing process in these same terms: "I sort of see it as a series of overlapping circles and spirals. We're constantly taking two steps forward and one step backward" (Jackson 75). Ashbery continues his circuitous search by taking what has been revealed in the inner, meditative dialogue of *Three Poems* and building on it in his exploration of the problems inherent in self-representation in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," a poem that provides a fruitful segue to the autobiographical entries of *Flow Chart.*

CHAPTER FOUR

***FLOW CHART* AS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POETRY**

In *Flow Chart* (1991), Ashbery "charts the internal ebb and flow of a life

perceived—perhaps even lived—through the somehow sacred act of self-reflection."

This description on the book jacket of *Flow* Chart, attributed in part to Ashbery,[1]

succinctly illustrates the evolutionary development of his poetry. The "act of self-

reflection" implies a continuation of the examination of self begun in previous poems,

most specifically, the meditative *Three Poems* and ekphrastic "Self-Portrait in a Convex

Mirror." That self-reflection is "somehow sacred" continues the implication in *Three*

Poems that religious and secular activities intermingle, but it extends the thought by

specifically pointing to a vaguely suggested sacred element in the act of looking at one's

self. The description also reveals a change: that Ashbery "charts the internal ebb and

flow of a life" ambiguously suggests a new, more consciously autobiographical approach

than found in earlier poems at the same time as it dissociates itself from autobiography by

referring to "a life" instead of "Ashbery's life." This description of *Flow Chart*, with two

of his favorite qualifiers, "perhaps" and "somehow," illustrates Ashbery's essayism, a

tentative method of implicating his poems with each other, yet looking at his ongoing

subject from a slightly different angle in each poem. Both *Three Poems* and *Flow Chart*

aim to come closer to answering "the major question that revolves around you, your

being here" (TP 51), but they employ different forms in which to answer that question.

Ashbery's form of meditation in *Three Poems* adopts the techniques of essayism to face

confusion, letting it clarify itself through following trains of thought that allow previously

unrecognized thought to become apparent. In the autobiographical *Flow Chart*, Ashbery

adopts the techniques of essayism to look more to his own life with its memories and

unresolved issues to follow trains of thought as the mood of the present interacts with

memories that continue to affect the present.

Although many of Ashbery's poems include details intimating that he might be

referring to his own life, a number of critics point particularly to *Flow Chart* as one of his

most autobiographical poems.[2] The poem encourages this reading with lines such as "but

wait, / it is of myself I speak, and I do know!" (113), "Life, read my life" (121), "Besides,

I had begun working on something like / my autobiography" (135), and "everybody knew

me and I had only to walk through a hole / for it to become named as a piece of the life I

was hoping to publish" (162). However, even in these cases, the first-person pronouns

cannot be definitively assigned to Ashbery. To muddy the separation between himself

and the speakers in his poems, Ashbery presents the unidentified speakers in his poems

using the first-person "I" in an unvarying voice. On one hand, this strategy tempts

readers to consider him consubstantial with the speakers: John Koethe comments on the

sound of Ashbery's poems resembling the "characteristic 'twang'" heard in his actual

conversation (89). On the other hand, as Koethe notes, Ashbery's frequent pronoun-

shifts distance him, the poet, as "a particular personality" from the speaker: "it seems a

matter of indifference whether the subject is referred to as 'I,' 'You,' 'he,' 'she,' 'it' or

'we'" (89-90). In 1994, Ashbery admitted to a level of confusion on his own part, saying

to an interviewer that in some poems he seems to be speaking for himself, although he

does not set out to do so: "I don't sit down and think, now I'm going to write an 'I' and

really mean me. It's only, well, sometimes a long time afterwards that I sense that I was

talking of myself rather than through a persona" (Herd, "John Ashbery in Conversation"

35).

Ashbery prefers to keep all questions, including that of autobiography, open in

Flow Chart: "Am I disingenuous? Maybe, / but the case hasn't been proved" (72).

Ashbery seems to enjoy thwarting the expectation of his being disingenuous by

suggesting that he may not be and should be taken at his word. Indeed, Ashbery often

leaves room for interpretation in his equivocal statements, as he did when he denied a

link between his poetry and philosophy but intended only a certain definition of

philosophy. A similar instance occurred when an interviewer asked him in 1977 how his

poetry describes his life, and he responded as he usually does when asked to link his

poetry with a defining characteristic—he distanced himself from it: "My own biography

doesn't come into my poetry very much. [. . .] My own autobiography has never

interested me very much. Whenever I try to think about it, I seem to draw a complete

blank. There is the title of a Japanese film by Osu: 'I was born, but . . .' That's how I

feel about it" (Gangel 8, original ellipses). However, as usual, one must enjoy the joke

and then look beyond it —this time at Ashbery's definition of autobiography.

Though the term "autobiography" appears to speak for itself as *autos-bios-*

graphē, or writing about one's own life, critics do not agree on either its definition or its

generic status. Ashbery's response disparages autobiography by referring to its

commonly accepted sense of being a personal history of events, and he is quick to disown

a connection with such a dull prospect. This view of autobiography's purpose is

supported by some critics; James M. Cox, for example, defines autobiography as history:

I want to hold to the definition I believe we all know: a narrative of a

person's life written by himself. [. . .] It is not the story but the history of a

life, for it is history and not fiction. [. . .] Both history and fiction are at

base narratives, the distinction being that one narrative is based on fact,

 the other on invention. The one tells a story of what did happen, the other

of what didn't; the one can be corroborated by public and private record,

the other has to protect itself against the possibility of being taken literally.

(254)

According to Cox, Ashbery would be considered a writer of fiction, not autobiography.

Flow Chart abounds with references to histories, stories, accounts, and records, but

includes little, if any, specific information that can be substantiated by outside sources or

taken literally by readers.

William L. Howarth takes a broader view than Cox; he sees autobiography as a

way of looking at one's self and defines it with a metaphor: "An *autobiography* is a *self-*

portrait" (364, original italics). He describes a number of autobiographical strategies,

one of which is "the *poetic* act of continuing self-study." Howarth says that for "poetic

autobiographers, [. . .] the important element is uncertainty—they ask themselves no

consistent questions, find no clear answers, and so continue to revise their self-portraits.

Unable to take an overview, they create a series of tentative pictures, each more

inconclusive than the last." They "can also draw only tentative, experimental self-

portraits" (377, original italics).[3] Whether one looks at autobiography as confirmable

history or poetic self-portraiture, the author must organize and address the material

according to his or her perspective or purposes in writing. Even the meaning of factual

data can be interpreted and presented in a number of ways that color its significance, ways that might be determined by the writer's current situation. One, then, could say that a person's overall narrative in an autobiography based on recoverable facts might also, to a degree, be described with Howarth's descriptors of "tentative," "inconclusive," and "experimental." With this view, essayism, as a way of looking at one's material, would be relevant in autobiography, regardless of its definition. It highlights the author's recognition that composition affects subject and encourages an attitude that remains open to art as a series rather than a finished product. In recognizing the inconclusive tendencies of the autobiographical narrative, the autobiographer is more able to follow the development of ideas in time, and, paradoxically, come closer to "what did happen."

Gordon O. Taylor defines autobiography in another way that connects it with essayism. Finding autobiographical writing "in a range of works resistant to the traditional observances of *any* genre, let alone those of autobiography," he prefers "the adjectival to the nominal—autobiographi*cal* to autobiography" (xv, original italics). This view bears a similarity to the distinction between essayistic writing and the essay: the adjectival mode of autobiographical or essayistic forms relieves the writer of the burdens or expectations implied in the nominal genres of autobiography and essay. Autobiographical and essayistic forms pertain to Ashbery's poetry because, as a *bricoleur*, he can adopt only those principles of the genre that fit his content and purposes, but he does not have to conform to them. Essayism and autobiography inevitably converge on each other because each tends to break down or dissolve generic boundaries, or the very concepts of a fixed genre.

Ashbery began writing in his elusive quasi-autobiographical manner at the same time as critical interest began to be paid to autobiography. James Olney points out that despite autobiographical writing's long history[4]—albeit under the title of memoir, confession, or reminiscence—theoretical and critical attention began only recently with Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Misch, and most particularly, Georges Gusdorf (7). In his 1956 article, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," Gusdorf asserts that in writing autobiography, "one must [. . .] give up the pretence of objectivity, abandoning a sort of false scientific attitude that would judge a work by the precision of its detail" (42); instead, he affirms autobiography's "artistic value" as "a projection from the interior realm into exterior space where in becoming incarnated it achieves consciousness of itself" (43-44). Olney, concurring with Gusdorf, believes this shift from "*bios* to *autos*— from the life to the self*" (19) means that autobiographers can no longer take a "perfectly neutral" stand toward the "autos," but must consider its "philosophical, psychological, literary, or historical implications" (20).[5] Olney does not go as far as some "structuralist, poststructuralist, and deconstructionist critics" who claim that, because "the text takes on a life of its own, [. . .] the self, then, is a fiction and so is the life" and that autobiography itself, therefore, is at an end (22-23). But Olney does believe that many disciplines are now realizing the effect of an author's presence in his or her writing and that although writing autobiography does not create a fictional self, it does play a role in the creation of the writer's self:

> Historiographers have come to recognize and to insist that the *autos* of the
>
> historian is and must be present in the writing of history;
>
> phenomenologists and existentialists have joined hands with depth

psychologists in stressing an idea of a self that defines itself from moment
to moment amid the buzz and confusion of the external world and as a
security *against* that outside whirl. The study of how autobiographers
have done this—how they discovered, asserted, created a self in the
process of writing it out—requires the reader or the student of
autobiography to participate fully in the process, so that the created self
becomes, at one remove, almost as much the reader's as the author's.

(23-24, original italics)

Ashbery's poetry aligns itself with Olney's description of an autobiographer's
work in three ways. First, Ashbery takes an interdisciplinary approach to self- definition,
including Heidegger's phenomenological investigations into being as it exists in the
world and James's pragmatic view of self in a real world with psychological
investigations into the "stream of experience." Second, Ashbery's poetry attempts to
define, or place, the self as it exists in an often incomprehensible world; indeed, the self
cannot be defined in isolation. Charles Altieri notes that Ashbery "never lets the active
self and its context become entirely separate realms. Self and context continually
interpenetrate" (129). In "The System," Ashbery describes the poet's "stare" as "a lucid
attempt to find out just where you stand in the fast-moving stream of traffic that flows
endlessly from horizon to horizon like a dark river" (TP 92). Ashbery's goal is to
communicate this attempt to clarify where he stands for himself and for others, who must
define themselves in the same way:

I try to communicate—make clear, interpret—things which seem
mysterious. And what doesn't? Just look at what's going on around you

at this moment. The difficulty of my poetry isn't there for its own sake; it

is meant to reflect the "difficulty" of living, the ever-changing minute

adjustments that go on around us and which we respond to from moment

to moment—the difficulty of living in passing time, which is both difficult

and automatic, since we all somehow manage it. (Kostelanetz 107-8)

Finally, Ashbery seeks the reader's participation. In his poetry, he consistently

refers to a person's need for others: In *Flow Chart*, he writes, "These adventures had

passed through my head while I was alone / and I thought I was having them. But you

need an audience / for them to reach the third dimension" (184). And he needs others as

he forms his perception of himself: "None of it matters / except what I am as I am to

others" (184). In this way, he redirects the autobiographical tendency of reinventing

one's own life, a focus congruent with Western individualism, toward a new focus on

one's interaction with, and development through, others. According to Gusdorf,

autobiographical writing in recent centuries is found only in individualistic Western

cultures and not in the many other collectivistic cultures (29).[6] Ashbery does not assume

the collectivism of Eastern cultures that places the needs of the group over those of the

individual; but he nevertheless undercuts the popular American image of the solitary

individual who succeeds on his or her own at the same time as he retains a belief in

individuality. In this regard, Karl J. Weintraub makes an important distinction between

individualism and individuality: individualism results from a society's belief in the

individual's right to act freely, and individuality is an individual's pursuit of autonomy.

Weintraub notes the complication that individualism does not necessarily mean that every

person in that society will choose individuality; however, "individuality is possible only

in a society permitting the individual full freedom for self-definition, a society committed to individualism." Even in societies that promote individualism, such as the United States, some people see society "as the constant threat to a true self desiring to express itself in its uniqueness and honest spontaneity." Weintraub asserts that this "alleged antagonism of society and 'the self-true-to-itself' does harm to society *and* the individual" (840, original italics). Ashbery often suggests that understanding of one's self cannot occur without considering others in one's social context; as he puts it in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," in order to see one's self as clearly as possible, "in the end it is what is outside him / that matters, to him" (SP 81).

Rather than writing directly about his own experiences, Ashbery structures many of his poems to be what he says about "Soonest Mended": "my 'one size fits all confessional poem,' which is about my youth and maturing but also about anybody else's. [. . .] It talks about my past, what it's led up to and my life, where I am now" (J. Murphy 25). In order for Ashbery to recreate what might be anyone's personal experience, he abstracts the general elements from specific events in his own life;[7] he then transforms them in his poetry, but often in concrete language. For example, the following passage in *Flow Chart* begins with a particular scene, familiar to many readers and perhaps imaginatively recreated from actual conversations Ashbery has had, though likely not over a back fence; it generally summarizes those conversations in a specific manner:

It's still possible to chat with one's neighbor over

the back fence, but the quality of life has been imperceptibly diminished

by too much arguing over the status of life today—that is, how is it felt

subtly

in one's veins, how does it differ from before, how is it that one day we

think we see it

and the next day it seems gone, gone forever? Yet we do go on living—

how does

that work? (FC 129-30)

The mixture of specific and general, concrete and abstract, provides a recognizable

situation, exemplifying the question of "how" that motivates Ashbery's poetry. *Flow

Chart* attempts to address the unacknowledged question that subsists at "the matrix / of

our everyday thoughts and fantasies, our wonderment / at how we got from there to here"

(5). Ashbery's speaker asks the question another way in "Pyrography": "How are we to

inhabit / This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing [. . .]?" (HD 9).

"How does / that work?" is a question looking for the reason that, despite everything, "we

do go on living." The reason lies within the subconscious, revealing its presence only in

the incomplete information found in specific experiences; Ashbery wishes to investigate

this "how" to bring it more into his consciousness. Of course, the only consciousness to

which Ashbery has access is his own; to this extent, he meets the most basic criterion of

autobiography, the author and the subject coincide. However, he either underplays,

disguises, or distorts the particular historical events of his life in order to universalize his

subject of consciousness without suggesting they set a paradigm.[8]

Ashbery approaches the question of "how" in many of his early poems: "how

does that work?"; "our wonderment at how we got from there to here"; and "how are we

to inhabit this space?"; but the most immediate forerunner of *Flow Chart* is "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." It presents the issue of "how" as a matter of fact, not a question: "This otherness, this / 'Not-being-us' is all there is to look at / In the mirror, though no one can say / How it came to be this way" (81). "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror" continues in the prosaic language begun in *Three Poems* in order to answer the question of "how," which is the first step toward answering the question of "your being here." But the speaker in the poem explicitly changes his viewpoint from the inner meditative dialogue in *Three Poems* to that of a fellow artist working out the problems of self-representation. This concern will later become more personal, leading to the autobiographical recollections of *Flow Chart.* With both "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" and *Flow Chart*, Ashbery, through his process of essayism, circles around the same question from different angles to pursue his continuing ontological subject, but with a new "form of answering that question" (TP 51).

"Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" as Autobiographical Forerunner

Shortly before he denied an interest in autobiography, Ashbery published *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). The book's title refers both to Parmigianino's sixteenth-century (circa 1524) painting of the same name, in which the artist paints his self-portrait by copying his reflection as seen through a convex mirror, and to Ashbery's poem with the same title, which reflects on his own aesthetic as seen through Parmigianino's portrait. Several years before writing the poem, in his review of the artist's exhibition of drawings at the Louvre, Ashbery explained his interest in Parmigianino's use of distortion as it affects perception: "When one remembers the

important role distortion plays throughout his work, starting with the self-portrait in which the hand is larger than the head, it is possible to see in Parmigianino an ancestor of Picasso and other artists of today" (RS 33). Ashbery is also fascinated with Parmigianino's meticulous procedures, even incorporating in the poem direct quotations from art criticism detailing the artist's methods. Parmigianino purposely distorted his image by looking at it through a convex mirror, thus altering the dimension of his hand in relation to his head; additionally, he arranged the mirror so it captured only his image within its boundaries. He then, according to the commentary as quoted in the poem, "'set himself / With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass,'" and he saw only the image he set himself up to see with no outside intrusions, as though the glass made the choice: "the glass chose to reflect only what he saw" (SPCM 68).

Parmigianino's reflection prompts Ashbery's consideration of the difficulties in representing "self"—both the artist's and his own: "My guide in these matters is your self" (SPCM 71). The self-portrait of Parmigianino, with its "soul" that "has to stay where it is" but is "longing to be free," communicates its secret to Ashbery: "The soul is not a soul":

> It is life englobed.
>
> One would like to stick one's hand
>
> Out of the globe, but its dimension,
>
> What carries it, will not allow it. (SPCM 69)

Ashbery sees what Parmigianino did not: The artist deliberately distorted his image by looking at it through a convex mirror but unintentionally further distorted the image by englobing and isolating it; by abstracting it from its world, he embalmed it and deprived

it of motion, the "carousel" (71) of life. Despite his efforts to manage and reproduce the

distortion and his perception of his own image, he could not control or successfully

accomplish what he wished: "to perfect and rule out the extraneous / Forever" (72). The

people and events surrounding him in his life affected him both as artist and subject even

though he excluded them from the reflection:

> How many people came and stayed a certain time,
>
> Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you
>
> Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
>
> Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
>
> Remains that is surely you. (71)

Ashbery says this "locking into place is 'death itself'" (76) and calls it Parmigianino's

"Life-obstructing task" (80). The artist ignored the "flow" (73) of life contained in his

artist's studio, perhaps in the belief either that he could see himself more perfectly

without "The strewn evidence" and "The small accidents and pleasures / Of the day" (71)

or that the self, as a concept, was defined only by its essence and would be distorted by

what lay outside it. But Ashbery assumes Parmigianino "must have realized" when he

looked at "the smooth, perhaps even bland (but so / enigmatic) finish" that he did not

achieve what he "wanted so desperately / To see come into being." Artists only imagine

they have "a say in the matter" (80) when in reality the artistic process itself, with its

dynamic connection to life, distorts the life it represents. Essayism is an attempt to

include the extraneous and the distortions, to give them a say in artistic expression.

Ashbery notes that he, like Parmigianino, cannot capture what he observes or

experiences; he takes an essayistic stance by acknowledging that the present would seem

to be clear and capable of representation "if the way of telling / didn't somehow intrude, twisting the end result / into a caricature of itself" (80).

Ashbery is fascinated not simply with reproducing a likeness of what he imperfectly perceives but, more important, with following the lead of perceptual and artistic distortions, with seeking the truer knowledge obtained through the other. He wants to find what Parmigianino missed:

<blockquote>
Is there anything

To be serious about beyond this otherness,

That gets included in the most ordinary

Forms of daily activity, changing everything

Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter

Of 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? This otherness, this

"Not-being-us" is all there is to look at

In the mirror, though no one can say

How it came to be this way. (81)
</blockquote>

For Ashbery, the self-portrait of Parmigianino is "this otherness"; it connects Ashbery with an artist from another time with a different aesthetic sensibility, but it nonetheless contributes to Ashbery's understanding of himself both as an artist and as an observer of art. In his tribute to Elizabeth Bishop, one year following the publication of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Ashbery returned to this subject and addressed the

value of art as "the one thing that is useful for us: our coming to know ourselves as the

necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life that is always on the point of coming into

being" ("Second Presentation" 10). Art, in Ashbery's sense, attempts to catch the self

"coming into being" but recognizes the usefulness, despite the impossibility, of this task,

so it will not correct distortion but will follow its lead. Even with, or perhaps because of,

art's inescapable tendency to distortion in representation, art considered as essayism

provides the occasion to expand one's consciousness and to locate one's self by

following one's movement in time to another place:

> In the present we are always escaping from
>
> And falling back into, as the waterwheel of days
>
> Pursues its uneventful, even serene course?
>
> I think it is trying to say it is today
>
> And we must get out of it even as the public
>
> Is pushing through the museum now so as to
>
> Be out by closing time. You can't live there. (SPCM 78-79)

One cannot stay in the present; to attempt to do so by circumscribing the self as

Parmigianino did or ignoring the revelations from "this otherness" constricts life.

Did Parmigianino intend this message, or does Ashbery interpret the portrait

based on a contemporary sensibility that even further distorts the portrait? Ashbery

cannot know with certainty; nevertheless, perhaps from "the principle that makes works

of art so unlike / What the artist intended" (80), he sees the portrait as "The diagram still

sketched on the wind, / Chosen, meant for me and materialized / In the disguising

radiance of my room" (82). For Ashbery, the ephemeral message of the self-portrait has

the effect of a diagram, which usually is a concrete, visual expression of an abstract relationship among parts. Despite this diagram's transitory nature, or perhaps because of it, the portrait as diagram enables him to better understand himself as he tentatively works through the questions of self-representation in his poetry. The diagram in "Self-Portrait" comes from an outside source, while in "Clepsydra," the poem's speaker sees himself as a diagram and source for discovery: "I am only a transparent diagram, of manners and / Private words" (RM 31). Ashbery again refers to a diagram in the third line of *Flow Chart*: "I ask the diagram"; the poem's speaker questions an undescribed diagram about the meaning of an unspecified feeling, but the unstated answer apparently is that he must construct his own diagram, he must chart his own progress as he moves through the succeeding days. Thus he begins his new autobiographic journey of discovery that was not begun by Parmigianino but was affected by him. Ashbery considers his place in a long line of artists who have pursued similar questions; he says, "I don't think of my poetry as coming from nowhere. It extends the tradition" (Kostelanetz 95). Parmigianino speaks to him through the self-portrait, and Ashbery responds with his poem, his version of what constitutes a self-portrait with both its planned and unexpected distortions.

Following this contemplation on artistic self-representation in which he recognizes the distortions of self that result when the activities and distractions of everyday life are not included, Ashbery turns to a new mode of self-portrait in *Flow Chart*. He records the development of his thought by charting the progression of his inner speculation, memory, and moods that are affected by the phenomena of the outside world, which he does not explicitly describe. In this poem, Ashbery seeks to pursue the

answer to the question of "how we got from there to here" (FC 5). As a philosophical

bricoleur, he follows a Montaignian essayism by charting his thoughts and memories on a

daily basis, letting them reveal their connections phenomenologically; he elicits James's

"stream of consciousness" to describe the interaction of memories with present

experience, thus widening his consciousness; and he evokes Heidegger's discussion of

the role of the uncanny in calling a person to his or her authentic being. In his skeptical

version of autobiographical writing, Ashbery does not impose a unifying whole that

imparts a meaning to his experience, but lets the "chart" speak for itself as a provisional

record that enables a pragmatic transition into the future.

Autobiographical Essayism

More than previous poems, *Flow Chart* presents the physical act of writing as a

form of self-discovery. It applies the method of essayism to expand the notion of

autobiography; it plays with language by considering the many forms and vocabularies

with which one can organize and transcribe one's interactions with one's world; and as a

result, the poem's speaker finds at the end that "I'm more someone else, taking dictation /

from on high, in a purgatory of words, but I still think I shall be the same person when I

get up / to leave" (FC 216). By following the lead of language and putting his thoughts

in material form, he locates himself within his present experience, but that transitory

insight enables him only to leave and to move to a new place—and for Ashbery, that

movement is precisely the point.

Ashbery describes the form of *Flow Chart* as "a kind of continuum, a diary, even

though it's not in the form of a diary. It's the result of what I had to say on certain days

over a period of six months" (Smith 48).[9] By considering *Flow Chart* as a continuum

and a diary, Ashbery takes advantage of autobiographical elements without professing to

write an autobiography. A continuum, or chart, highlights the capacity of items to form a

natural rather than a constructed whole, one made up of a series of elements recorded as

they are observed and sometimes varying only by minute degrees. According to the

Oxford English Dictionary, diary is from the Latin *diāri-um*, meaning daily allowance,

which is formed from *die-s*, day. A diary is not typically considered autobiography in

that a diary is primarily a log of events and thoughts that impinge on one's consciousness

during a given day; its defining quality of immediacy removes the writer's obligation to

select or order these events through the lens of distant retrospect. Its unsystematic

structure is precisely what would appeal to Ashbery; it encourages his preferred, tentative

approach that welcomes the unexpected when recounting the phenomena (including

thoughts or memories) observed in a day. He trusts that by recording them, he will catch

glimpses of a connecting pattern in his life, even if he may never see it completely.

Ashbery's diary, of course, differs from the usual, open-ended diary in that he wrote it

over a determined period of time, and because it is written as a poem for publication, it is

in a more elaborate form than the more random, private diary.

Considering a diary as a personal chart is not new. Perry Miller and Thomas H.

Johnson report that diaries played an important role in Puritan America for charting one's

daily condition. Because every person underwent his or her own spiritual journey, it was

necessary for every person "to keep a full medical chart upon our own pulse and

temperature" in order "to view himself with the complete objectivity demanded for

accurate diagnosis of his spiritual health or sickness. [. . .] It is probable that almost

every literate Puritan kept some sort of journal" (461). The diaries and journals of John

Quincey Adams, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Henry Adams and many others have

evolved from this Puritan tradition (461). Ashbery takes up the notion of a diary as chart,

and though he abandons any idea of objectivity or diagnosis, he seems to retain a sense or

hope that this chart will reveal helpful information.

In the quasi-diary format of *Flow Chart*, Ashbery gives more prominence than in

previous poems to the interplay between memory and current thought. It suggests

interesting implications for the fluctuating images of selfhood as they appear in self-

portraiture given that it sets one unspecified day beside the next, presenting each day's

mood and concern without connective explanation. Because it does not have the unified

tone and steady, though erratic, progression that is found in *Three Poems* and "Self-

Portrait in a Convex Mirror," it more overtly denies the possibility of an essence of self.

Nevertheless, the poem eventually coalesces because *Flow Chart* charts, as its title

promises, those experiences that the speaker chooses to include in the daily entries;

eventually, they form a provisional whole, sufficient, at least, to move forward. *Three

Poem*'s speaker points out that to choose by "the narrowing-down process" is to be

selective so that "things will stand forth in a relief all their own" (TP 9), but it is not a

purposeful choice of what to put in. Thus, when Ashbery chooses what to include in the

diary, he is, in effect, choosing what to leave out so that what he does present will "stand

forth." Choosing, for Ashbery, is not intentional as much as receptive; in *Flow Chart*,

after describing the experience of conducting library research to prove an abstract theory,

he notes the greater importance of paying attention to the elusive messages contained in

the concrete phenomena that come before him, messages that may not reveal themselves

immediately: "But when you do really need to know the essential / nature of a thing, recognize it by its texture only, the cup by the handle, the gas / from its sudden volatility, you'll be glad you / wasted so much time in youth jotting down seemingly unrelated random characteristics of things" (FC 94-95).

Additionally, autobiographical writing connects memory with the present to intensify the relationship between consciousness and experience, which presents particularly useful possibilities for Ashbery in his efforts to transcribe the phenomena of experience. Gusdorf writes that "autobiography is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it. [. . .] The passage from immediate experience to consciousness in memory, which effects a sort of repetition of that experience, also serves to modify its significance" (38). In *Flow Chart*, Ashbery acknowledges the opportunity for purposeful manipulation of memory in autobiography: "Save that alibi / for your autobiography" (181). *Flow Chart* attempts to recognize autobiography's revisionary possibilities, not to make excuses for the past or sanitize it, but, as Gusdorf suggests, to better understand its truths. The poem combines memory with what is at hand in, or the *bricolage* of, his present experience so that the "repetition" of the earlier experience modifies its significance as it becomes part of the present and affects the future. Ashbery describes this process of recollection in *Flow Chart*'s summary of its own autobiographical nature:

> And the river threaded its way as best it could through sharp obstacles and
>> was sometimes not there
> and was triumphal for a few moments at the end. I put my youth and
>> middle age into it,

and what else? Whatever happened to be around, at a given moment, for

that is the best

we have; no one can refuse it, and, by the same token, everyone must

accept it,

for it is like a kind of music that comes in sideways and afterwards you

aren't sure

if you heard it or not, but its effects will be noticed later on, perhaps in

people you never heard of, who migrated to other parts of the country

and established families and businesses there. Yet sometimes too it'd

seem like a moraine,

filled with rocks and bloom, a mammoth postscript

to whatever you thought your life had been before. (96-97)

Ashbery's speaker thinks back on his life's passage, noting that though he was often not

conscious of many experiences as they happened, their accumulation would sometimes

reveal their significance later. Part of the autobiographical impulse is to append this

"mammoth postscript" to one's remembered experiences and, thus, learn more about

one's self.

In using the river as an image for the connection of thought and consciousness of

experience, Ashbery recalls James's "stream of thought, of consciousness, or of

subjective life" (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 239). Although James is not discussing the

autobiographical process, his analysis bears on it in its connection of consciousness,

thought, experience, self, and memory. For James, thought cannot be separated from

consciousness of thought: thought is "part of a personal consciousness," "always

changing," "continuous," engaged with "objects independent of itself," and selective (225). Because consciousness of one's life appears to be a "common whole [. . .] the natural name for it is *myself*, *I*, or *me*" (238, original italics); he notes that, therefore, "a 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which [consciousness] is most naturally described" (239). Within this subjective stream, a person's objective experiences are intuitively known to exist but knowledge of the self must be worked out in thought: "This [subjective] *condition* of the experience is not one of the *things experienced* at the moment; this knowing is not immediately *known*. It is only known in subsequent reflection" (304, original italics). James adopts the phrase of E. R. Clay to describe this moment, the present that occurs between the past and future: "the *specious* present" (609, original italics). It is "the *present* moment of time" where "one of the most baffling experiences occurs. Where is it, this present? It has melted in our grasp, fled ere we could touch it, gone in the instant of becoming. [. . .] It is only as entering into the living and moving organization of a much wider tract of time that the strict present is apprehended at all" (608, original italics). The periods of time that can be apprehended, that is "minutes, hours, and days—have to be symbolically conceived" and are usually sensed by hearing, often in a "rhythmic form" (611). James suggests "the *attention* which we lend to an experience is proportional to its vivid or interesting character" (670, original italics); therefore, what items do not "properly enter into my experience" are those that "have no *interest* for me" (402, original italics).

Ashbery, too, implies that to lose interest and to stop listening to the "music" of the sensed duration of time potentially prevents one from awareness of experience: "At no time did the music seem remotely interesting. You must always keep listening,

though, / otherwise you might miss out on something" (FC 97). And the "something" missed will be, as James writes, the registering of "*a state of mind* [. . .] *endured for a certain length of time*" and its subsequent recollection. Memory presupposes attention, and memory is important in self-awareness: "All the intellectual value for us of a state of mind depends on our after-memory of it. [. . .] Only then does it *count* for us. So that *the EFFECTIVE consciousness we have of our states is the after-consciousness*; and the more of this there is, the more influence does the original state have, and the more permanent a factor is it of our world" (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 644, original italics and capitalization). In *Flow Chart*, the speaker not only records memories that pop into his present consciousness, but he recollects each day's primary thoughts, which are sometimes stimulated by those distant memories, thus establishing his after-consciousness of both distant and recent memories.

This explanation of what *Flow Chart* accomplishes with its charting of the "stream of consciousness" does not appear until approximately halfway through the poem; the speaker has to work toward this recognition in a process of clarifying initially fuzzy thoughts. The poem begins in a state of uncertainty as do many of Ashbery's poems: "Clepsydra" with an unclear question, *Three Poems* with an unresolved dilemma on form, and *Flow Chart* with the speaker questioning himself about his feelings. As he begins to keep his diary or "chart," he does not know whether it anticipates an active, physical sensation of pain or a passive, empty sensation of absence; he does recognize, however, a vague, anxious awareness of "something" that only rarely enters his consciousness. James assigns a cognitive role to sensations in their instigation of further thought: "Sensations, then, first make us acquainted with innumerable things, and then

are replaced by thoughts which know the same things in altogether other ways. [. . .] Sensations are *first* things in the way of consciousness." Furthermore, sensations accompanying new realities are the only way "consciousness directly *encounters* [. . .] a reality outside itself." One must feel these realities in order "to make human knowledge of these matters real" (*Principles of Psychology* 2: 5-7, original italics). *Flow Chart*'s speaker recognizes such sensations as signs that have an important message for him:

> We know life is so busy,
>
> but a larger activity shrouds it, and this is something
>
> we can never feel, except occasionally, in small signs
>
> put up to warn us and as soon expunged, in part
>
> or wholly. (FC 3)

Ashbery begins his project of daily writing in a spirit of essayism: he is not sure where it will lead him. He only intuits "a larger activity," hidden beneath the busyness of life, that he seeks to unshroud by remaining receptive and alert to elusive "signs" that momentarily appear. James explains the necessity for attention to certain phenomena in one's experience because although "millions of items of the outward order are present" to one's senses, they remain part of a "gray chaotic indiscriminateness" unless "selective interest" causes one to notice and then attend to specific items (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 402-3). By preparing a flow chart or poetic record of what interests him, *Flow Chart*'s speaker enables himself to focus attention on what has remained vaguely on the periphery of his consciousness; he can then come closer to noticing those "signs" that point to "a larger activity."

Heidegger's Call of Conscience through a Memory

Feeling and sensing, knowing and reasoning—*Flow Chart* begins with the

interplay between these functions that helps the speaker understand his experience.

Ashbery follows a process similar to the one begun in the opening pages of *Three Poems*;

he slowly progresses by circling around these polarities. Toward the end of the first

section of the poem, Ashbery's speaker "feels" one of the "small signs put up to warn

us." The sign has particular implications suggesting Heidegger's call of conscience that

interrupt one's daily preoccupations and provide the opportunity, if heeded, to lead one to

increased self-knowledge. Ashbery precedes the description of the sign by announcing

its importance to his overall project: "Without further ado bring on the subject of these /

negotiations" (FC 33). He acknowledges the impediments, including resistance, to

perceiving the subject: "A pity, since no one has seen it recently. Others crowded the

opening, hoping / to catch a glimpse, but the majority saw the occluded expatriate ragtag

representation and / decided to not even try. To this day no one knows the shape or heft

of the thing" (34). The sign is roused by the speaker's recollection of his "biological

father," who "posited" him in a particular, historical existence. Heidegger uses the term

"historicity" for this fateful situation, an elemental fact of existence that one must

consider when interpreting, or attempting to understand, one's self. He says that one is

"thrown" into, that is born into, a particular existence, and one grows up with an inherited

past, including one's tradition and culture, within which one understands one's present

and interprets one's self. However, Heidegger goes on to say, one can become

"entangled" in a tradition that covers up the value of historicity by making it seem self-

evident and, thus, deprives it of its ability to give one "leadership in questioning and

choosing." One no longer sees the necessity of inquiring into one's own being in light of one's given past (*Being and Time* 17-19). One must make choices within the limits of one's historical tradition, but the ability to question and choose is not apparent if the customs of tradition are simply accepted as the norm.

In *Flow Chart*, the speaker argues with his father—perhaps a metaphor for arguing with a tradition that expects obedience.[10] He suggests that the resulting thirty-year estrangement ends, at least on his father's part, with the father's dismissive laughter; however, although the speaker manages to submerge his unsettledness to attain a family peace, he continues to think about his inability to separate himself from this tradition and thereby to make his own choices:

> Besides it's quite quiet and confusing at home, thank you
>
> very much. Yet I was still hung up on his idea of me, I thought I was
>
> > becoming that person
>
> I didn't even know or want to know very much about, and all of my
>
> déjà-vus were ones that could have occurred to him. (FC 35)

In describing "home" as "quiet" and "confusing," Ashbery upsets normal expectations. The "quiet" atmosphere, instead of being calm and pleasant, serves to cover up the speaker's ongoing disturbed relationship with his tradition and/or father, thus eliminating any chance to settle it. Its being "confusing" does not simply provoke anxiety, but also keeps the troubling issue from total suppression; confusion thus provides opportunity for resolution and self-discovery, as Ashbery has pointed out in *Three Poems*. However, the speaker quickly turns away from uneasy thoughts about his ambiguous identity with his

father, ignores the ambiguous implications of a "quiet and confusing" home, and returns

to the protection of his superficial, established, and comforting routine:

> Still, life is reasonably absorbing
>
> and there's a lot of nice people around. Most days are well fed
>
> and relaxing, and one can improve one's mind a little
>
> by going out to a film or having a chat with that special friend, and before
>
> you know it it's time to brush your teeth and go to bed. (35)

Absorption, according to Heidegger, can be a means of discovery and understanding of

one's self if one is attentively "taking care of things in the work world nearest to us"

(*Being and Time* 67, 207). However, absorption can also be a distracting involvement

with everyday activities, what Heidegger calls an "entangled absorption in the 'world'"

that prevents one from becoming "individuated" (176).

The speaker's description of life as "absorbing," so thoroughly engrossing that its

underlying, potentially fruitful, confusion can be ignored, evokes Freud's discussion of

"the uncanny" that bears on Heidegger's discussion of "not-being-at-home."[11] In 1919,

Sigmund Freud published his article, "The 'Uncanny,'" in which he cites the shades of

meaning of *heimlich*, or homelike, including "one which is identical with its opposite,

unheimlich": "the word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas,

which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that

which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of

sight" (129). For Freud, "*das Unheimliche,* [. . .] the uncanny," arouses a vague anxiety,

which is familiar because it recurs yet is estranged because it is repressed (148); it is an

"involuntary repetition which [. . .] forces upon us the idea of something fateful and

unescapable" (144). Freud believes that "the better orientated in his environment a

person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to

the objects and events in it" (124). Heidegger also refers to "*unheimlich*," translated as

"uncanny," but, unlike Freud, he sees it as a desired, primary condition that allows one to

retrieve a more authentic mode of being (*Being and Time* 176). In a 1925 university

lecture, Heidegger describes the indefinite, uncanny feeling of *angst*, or dread, in which

"one no longer feels at home in his most familiar environment. [. . .] Being-in-the-world

is totally transformed into a 'not at home' purely and simply" (*History of the Concept of

Time* 289).[12] In 1927, Heidegger refines this discussion by asserting that this feeling of

"*not-being-at-home*"" is "*the more primordial phenomenon*," while the "tranquillized,

familiar being-in-the-world" is a means of running away from one's self (*Being and Time*

177). It is in this sense that one can understand Ashbery's definition of the "quiet" state

as the cover-up of unresolved conflict and the "confused" state as the possibility for

resolution of that conflict   .

　　　　When Ashbery's speaker recollects the unresolved conflict with his father that has

remained dormant as he goes about his daily life, he is momentarily taken out of his

normal routine that hides his anxiety over his identity. He is thrown back, not to the

relationship with his father, but to the more fundamental, indefinite feeling of not being at

home that he can express only in images:

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Why then, does that feeling

　　　　　　of emptiness keep turning up like a stranger you've seen dozens of times,

　　　　　　　　out-of-focus

　　　　　　usually, standing toward the rear of the bus or fishing for coins at the

newsstand? (FC 35)

The "feeling of emptiness" anticipated in the fourth line of the poem turns up as a strange

yet familiar feeling of *angst*; pictured as a silent stranger at a bus or newsstand, it

detaches the speaker from his comfortable existence at home. Heidegger says that *angst*

arises from the sense that "everything at hand and objectively present absolutely has

nothing more to 'say' to us. Beings in the surrounding world are no longer relevant. The

world in which I exist has sunk into insignificance." Beings can only grasp "at the

nothingness of the world" (*Being and Time* 315). Ashbery's speaker associates this

sudden feeling of *angst* with the passing of time toward the nothingness and

incomprehensibility of death:

I'm

sure it's all coincidence, but it

does have a way of rattling things, like a constant draft through the house,

rustling papers, riveting one's eye on the clock. So what's

to feel nervous about? We all know that we have to live for a certain time
and then

unfortunately we must die, and after that no one is sure what happens.

Accounts vary. (FC 35)

Likewise, Heidegger equates the inevitability of death with this uncanny feeling of

unsettledness: "Being-toward death is essentially *Angst*" (*Being and Time* 245).

Heidegger contends that *angst*, a feeling of the emptiness or "insignificance" of one's

daily life, is a call to "retrieve" one's existence, it "reveals the possibility of an authentic

potentiality-of-being" (315). With a recognition that a choice must be made in spite of

one's historicity and in the face of death, one is then able to make choices for one's own future existence (351); the anticipation of death allows a person to be "in passionate anxious **freedom toward death** which is free of the illusions" provided by the everyday activities that cover up this anxiety (245, original bold emphasis). This feeling of unsettledness summons a being to determine its "situation," which Heidegger defines as "position" with "spatial significance" (276); to determine one's place with knowledge that one initially is thrown, without choice, into a particular historical and cultural existence and that one will eventually die means that one must necessarily live with the angst of a freedom with limitations (350-51). The important act for authentic being is to remain resolute in wishing to conduct life with an awareness of its historicity and finitude (316); to do so, one must listen and attend to the calls from within one's being that call it away from the "noise" of everyday life in which "it *fails to hear* its own self" (250, original italics). Heidegger cautions that "*Angst* about death must not be confused with a fear of one's demise"; it is a "fundamental attunement" of one's life in its historicity and "being-toward-the-end" (232-33).

Heidegger finds that human beings cope with *angst* in three ways: they can choose to face it, deny it, and/or cover it up with activity (*Being and Time* 40). According to Heidegger, although facing one's *angst* allows for authentic being, a being cannot stay permanently in the authentic mode but must "initially and for the most part" live in the distractions of "average everydayness" (41). As such, after momentarily facing his anxiety over living in the face of death, Ashbery's speaker quickly and rationally replaces it with more comforting thoughts about death that assuage his *angst*:

<pre>
                                                                    But we

        most of us feel we'll be made comfortable for much of the time after that,

                and get credit

        for the (admittedly) few nice things we did, and no one is going to make

                too much

        of a fuss over those we'd rather draw the curtain over, and besides, we

                can't see

        much that was wrong in them, there are two sides to every question.
</pre>

<div align="right">(FC 35)</div>

In this state of denial, he numbers himself among those people (including, perhaps, his

father) who organize their lives around certainty in an attempt to avoid facing the

uncertainty, not of death itself, but of how to live with the prospect of no longer existing:

<pre>
                        Yet the facts

        fascinate one, we become one of those persons who are only satisfied with

                thoroughly

        reliable information—the truth, if there ever could be such a thing. (35)
</pre>

Ashbery's preference for a tentative, skeptical approach to the possibility of attaining a

lasting truth opposes the attitude that protects itself by demanding certainty. With the

speaker's fascination with certainty, he seems to be putting himself in his father's place,

further indicating that his identity remains confused, at this point, with his father or

tradition. Nevertheless, after fleetingly reflecting on these conflicting thoughts about his

fundamental fears, he concludes this passage with the recognition that denying them has a

pejorative effect on his self-understanding:

> O so much God to police everything and still be left over to flatter one's
>
> harmless idiosyncrasies, the things that make us *us*, which is precisely
>
> what is fading like paint on a sign, no matter how much one pretends it's
>
> > the same
>
> as yesterday. And children talk to us—*that*, surely, must be a plus?
>
> <div align="right">(35, original italics)</div>

The poem's speaker equates religion with enforcement and judgment, which, through

tradition and one's conscience, takes over one's relinquished responsibility for making

choices for one's self, determines acceptable ways of being, enforces compliance, and

dispenses punishment or forgiveness allowing one to move on comfortably with life.

This view defines being as an innate essence rather than as an ongoing, dynamic

relationship with experience and, thus, seeks to maintain the status quo. "The things that

make us *us*" complicates this initial view of acquiescence: the phrase lies ambiguously

between two thoughts and pertains to both of them. The phrase initially justifies the

acceptance of one's "idiosyncrasies" with the flattering thought that they make up our

essence and are "the things that make us *us*." However, just as the poem's speaker

expresses this thought, he realizes that this blind acceptance and conformity actually

inhibit choice in one's potential of being, that acquiescence causes the authentic "things

that make us *us*" to disappear gradually. One who hopes to stay the same for the sake of

security and relief from *angst* is, in reality, changing without choice. The pivotal point

where one thought provokes its opposite becomes apparent only if the thinker is willing

to pay attention to a viewpoint that does not conform to previously held thoughts. This

sequence demonstrates the value of essayistic thought, which overcomes the tendency to cling to one's current way of thinking by purposely looking for diversions in a train of thought and, therefore, opening up one's thought to unexpected insights. Heidegger does not address the religious implications of blind acceptance, but he begins *Being and Time* by describing the being who is "entangled" in a tradition that "deprives" that being "of its own leadership in questioning and choosing" (18).

Ashbery ends the stanza with a flippant, playful comment that first appears to lessen the impact of the immediately preceding insight: "And children talk to us—*that*, surely, must be a plus?" But this offhand postscript lends itself to many interpretations that belie its casual tone. Much like the speaker's father's dismissive laughter, it could be a defensive reaction to fleeting, but jarring, thoughts that require more time and further thought before they can be integrated with experience. The speaker could be shrugging off this uneasiness by falling back on the easy platitude of being in touch with childhood, or he could be expressing a sincere hope that his capacity to avoid entrenchment in the habits of serious adulthood, or tradition, is a good sign, one that will stop the "fading." Finally, he could be referring to poems as his children that continue to "talk" through him despite his fears of diminishment;[13] perhaps these poems are the positive result of heeding and interpreting "that feeling of emptiness" as a warning sign that "the things that make us *us*" is "fading." Any one or all of these interpretations could apply. If it is intended to put distance between the speaker and his unsettling insights, he is demonstrating Heidegger's belief that one seeks distractions to avoid the *angst* of facing uncertainty; but if it is interpreted as a promising sign of a more longstanding understanding of what can be learned through one's unsettledness, it supports

Heidegger's contention that authentic being is possible through a resolute anticipation of "being-toward-death" (*Being and Time* 283). Because even an authentic being cannot avoid falling into the distractions of the world at times, both interpretations are pertinent at different times.

This sequence also demonstrates the development of Ashbery's essayism through language; it begins with a childhood memory that unexpectedly bursts in on the speaker's consciousness, includes major words, or one of their variants, that he will mull over throughout the rest of the poem—words such as "know"/"not know," "truth," "home," "emptiness," "death," and "matter"; and it includes words that belong to categories that will recur, such as "accounts" for references to record-keeping and "police" for references to the law. Until the speaker more fully understands what this incident and its attendant images mean to him, he will sort through future images looking for relevant connections. This activity of letting one's thoughts come as they will over a period of time is a particularly important effect of the diary; it allows space and time for those thoughts and memories that have lurked in the subconscious to move slowly into consciousness.

This central passage with the father and the stranger serves a number of purposes. It recounts the awakening of the speaker to an underlying issue that he must attend to, and it introduces the motifs with which the speaker will work out the situation's implications. Heidegger uses the term "resoluteness" for this process that Ashbery's speaker is taking up: in attending to the "call of conscience," the human being "is taken back fully to its naked uncanniness and benumbed by it. But this numbness not only *takes* [it] back from its *"worldly"* possibilities, but at the same time *gives* it the

possibility of an *authentic* potentiality-of-being" (*Being and Time* 252, 316, original italics). The poem's speaker has faced *angst* in a revealing experience, forcing him to consider the reality or immanence of death. He could choose to pretend the experience never happened or cover it over with busy activities. Instead, he "resolutely" returns to it in his world and records subsequent thoughts and memories in his diary to hold on to his anxiety and hope to learn what it has to teach him. Heidegger, interestingly, uses James's term in saying that the defining event and one's facing it occur "in the 'stream of experience'" (316); however, Heidegger is not known to have read James's writings, and he uses the phrase in a more general manner.

Seven themes introduced in this pivotal passage cannot be suppressed and will return to the speaker's consciousness in succeeding diary entries as they try to upset the center of the speaker's consciousness. The first theme recalls James's pragmatic view of truths as opposed to Truth, and the next six themes evoke Heidegger's definition of human being by its existence in its world. The first theme is the interaction of what the poem's speaker knows and does not know with shifting *truths*; he is not even sure about the relationship between his identity and his father's: "And as they marginally edge each other, new and good truths and others, older / and not so good, begin to appear along the bicycle-trail of their itinerary / through space, here on earth" (41).

The second theme is that of *choice*. Although the speaker does not use the word "choice" in the incident with his father, he chooses to pay attention to "that feeling of emptiness," a feeling that is often ignored. In a subsequent stanza, he will note that "one *must* pick and choose" (38, original italics). The third theme is the role of one's *inherited past* in creating one's present existence: "Nobody asked me whether I wanted to be born

here, / whether I liked it here, but that's hardly an excuse for cobbling a palace of

mendacious *rêves* / into something like existence" (151). The fourth theme is the

uncanny nature of *home* as a place of comfort that disguises a feeling of unsettledness:

"So it is always a relief to come back / to the beloved home with its misted windows, its

teakettle, its worn places on the ceiling, / for better or worse, to the end where battle will

be joined" (115), where one is "a squatter in one's own house" (43). The fifth theme is

the difficulty and necessity of integrating *death* with one's existence: "The older we

grow, the more unused to the idea of dying— / and I'm sorry I brought the subject up—

we become. We are set in our ways" (49). The sixth theme is the *present* as the site of

either emptiness or everyday, distracting activity, "After all, *I* / can go on living here, and

I don't mind emptiness, but you / must fill your days with satisfying chatter" (195,

original italics), but also the present as the source of one's coming to an understanding of

one's existence, "This is the way to go—here. This the place to be" (102) and "*This* is

the frontier" (134, original italics). Emptiness, if allowed to exist and one faces it, can be

a sign to attend to the present.   And, finally, the seventh theme is the need to understand

his relationship with his *tradition*, or where he has been "posited" or "posted," in order

not to cling to it or be unconsciously governed by it:

<div style="text-align:center">The barn has begun</div>

to tarnish and it would not do to stay any longer, even though you

were posted here:

it is essential that you leave this very evening, that you not look

back

or ever give a thought to the circumstances that transported you to

　　this place

of easy definitions and only so-so resolutions because all

that was going to name you has been shunted aside. (88-89)

These themes interact with each other as the poem moves forward in order to give the

speaker a better understanding of where he stands in the present. They appear only

vaguely in the initiating experience, but assume more weight in his thought as they are

reconsidered by writing them down along with current experience and other memories.

The Act of Autobiographical Writing in *Flow Chart*

The speaker in *Three Poems* noted that a proposed act "needs pronouncing" in

order for one "to formulate oneself" (TP 5). Heidegger had earlier asserted that

"discourse is the articulation of intelligibility," by which he means that to be able to

communicate what one understands is to appropriate it as one's own (*Being and Time*

150); such discourse takes a number of forms including "hearing" and "keeping silent"

(151). It is necessary in being part of this world and in understanding one's self: "The

human being shows himself as a being who speaks. [. . .] This being is in the mode of

discovering world and [. . .] itself" (155).

As the speaker in *Flow Chart* now wends his way through his sometimes

disconnected reflections, he, too, notes the importance of transcribing and recording his

thoughts. As an autobiographical experiment in self-discovery, the poem looks at the

various forms with which information is transmitted, both by the speaker to himself and

by him to others. The speaker often uses the word "matter" either as a material substance

or as that which is important, such as in the phrases "no matter" or "what matters." At times, *Flow Chart* seems to be a compendium of forms; to point to the constant transfer of thought to or by a physical form, almost every page refers to one or more forms such as the following: charts, diagrams, maps, accounts, plays, novels, novellas, histories, stories, poems, sestinas, pages, reports, diaries, books, magazines, papers, letters, texts, manuscripts, notebooks, agendas, records, curricula, television, gramophones, phones, radios, films, Braille, pageants, horoscopes, matrices, spectacles, laws, paintings, embroidered frames, boxes, mirrors, words, sentences, lines, headings, labels, discourses, music, sonatas, pictures on book jackets, dispatches, marginalia, and others. Like Bakhtin's speech genres that include all utterances, not just literary forms, Ashbery recognizes all forms of communication as potentially expressive of one's self and as sources for information about one's self.

The meditative *Three Poems* represents an internal dialogue with one's own voices; the autobiographical *Flow Chart* uses a diary format to point overtly to the physical act of putting one's daily thoughts on paper or expressing them in other external modes. *Flow Chart* is the place where the poem's speaker transcribes, on the one hand, external experience as it appears to his consciousness, and, on the other hand, internal thought as it relates to his actual life. Ashbery is concerned not only with the materiality of the act of writing, but also with the writing of matter as he encounters it in the world, as opposed to writing from an ethereal stance. In this view, he follows in the tradition of Montaigne, who says, "this great world [. . .] is the mirror in which we must look at ourselves to recognize ourselves from the proper angle" (116); of James, who calls for "a philosophy [. . .] that will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite

human lives" (*Pragmatism* 17); and of Heidegger, who defines human existence by its

"being in a world" (*Being and Time* 11). Near the end of *Flow Chart*, the speaker

compares himself to writers who do not write of their world but who write in a self-

consciously poetic manner of what lies beyond their ordinary experience:

>   If one had thought not to count
>
> and tabulate every moment and expose it to the litmus of living in some
>
> > way
>
> I can't understand, then it would be all right for those bald men at the
>
> > beach and some could
>
> redeem the morning pledge and saunter off distractedly into the football
>
> > fields
>
> of dusk, and leave others alone, and welcome death as a diversion and
>
> > they in turn could write
>
> this down. Lakes and raccoons and unspotted moons would be the result.
>
> As it is, everyone now finds himself inferior: repeat, everyone.
>
> There is unrest; the shadow of the ball carries over,
>
> I am left to repeat standards that have no particular relevance for me. I
>
> > write
>
> on the sides of buildings and on the backs of vehicles, and still
>
> no nail divides the splinter from its neighbor, no fish swims close to
>
> > another.
>
> I have seen it all, and I write, and I have seen nothing. (214)

The poem's speaker calls himself, and everyone else, "inferior," which is to be of this lower world, to be terrestrial. Without attempting to understand what lies beyond his experience, he writes on what he sees in or feels about the world in which he lives, even though he does not completely understand that either. He is not like those writers who do not measure their thoughts by their world, but who "saunter off distractedly," that is, they do not pay attention to where they are or to those around them. These writers avoid death as a reality in their lives by considering it a "diversion," something outside their ordinary course; but the speaker, on the other hand, writes of what Heidegger would call an authentic existence that includes the unsettledness felt when facing the finitude of death: "There is unrest." It is a short declarative statement in austere contrast to the rhyming "lakes and raccoons and unspotted moons" of the writers who are writing for poetic effect. Paradoxically, the ethereal poets use specific terms to describe that which is not present in their experience while the speaker who considers death as part of experience writes vaguely using the expletive "there" and the indefinite "unrest"—he cannot name, without distorting, that part of experience that can be felt but not seen.

Essayism as a Method for Finding One's Place

Essayism as a method is implied by Ashbery on the penultimate page of *Flow Chart* as he continues his comparison of people who construct their world and people who look at the world they inhabit; he explains the latter view as a "system" that can be construed as essayism because it does not impose itself but lets phenomena reveal themselves:

A lot of people think they have only to imagine a siren for it to exist,

that the truth in fairy tales is somehow going to say them. I tend to agree

with dumb people who intervene, and are lost; actors of a different

weakness

who explain the traceries of fallen leaves as models for our burgeoning

etiquette,

a system that doesn't let us off the hook as long as we are truth and know

it,

the great swing of things. And of course it may yet turn up. (215)

The "system" is the method of being lost in the world he does not understand; but rather

than attempting to find himself by imagining a security that does not exist, this system

takes the tentative approach of following signs such as those revealed in "the traceries of

fallen leaves." In this phenomenological way, he finds the mutable truth of his own

existence. This pragmatic sense of truth evokes James who asserts that a truth must be

connected with experience; it is not "a stagnant property inherent in" an idea. James

conceives of truth as an idea that "*becomes* true, is *made* true by events" (*Pragmatism* 97,

original italics). These truths must be tested by looking at the consequences that result

from acting on an idea; something will be verified as true if it is "*a leading that is worth*

while (98, original italics), that is, it "will carry us prosperously from any one part of our

experience to any other part" (34). In this "great swing of things" that moves one

through life, the speaker in *Flow Chart*, like James before him, recognizes truths not one

Truth, though he holds out the possibility that "it may yet turn up." James, too, allows

for the possibility of "the 'absolutely' true, meaning what no farther experience will ever

alter, [. . .] that ideal vanishing point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge" (*Pragmatism* 106-07). This system of allowing himself to be lost and measuring his truths by experience as it changes in time is the skeptical, essayistic method of Ashbery's writing.

Ashbery also illustrates the effect of experience on his writing and tests his usual mode of expression by incorporating the vocabularies he encounters in various places, such as academia, science, colloquial conversation, the legal profession, business, politics, and journalism. However, instead of repeating the words as they were used in their actual circumstances, he takes them out of their usual area of concern and uses them to express the poem's speaker's thoughts on his own experience. In this way, he shows the far-reaching effect of language on thought as it moves across the barriers of its particular discipline. For example, he uses legal language when remembering some vaguely described memory in which he replied to friends' accusations that he is playing "mind-games" by saying that "ignorance / of the law, far from being no excuse, is the law" (FC 123). The familiar statement, "ignorance is no excuse," takes on a new significance by being more than an excuse, by being the law. By calling ignorance "the law," Ashbery alludes to the derivation of "law" from the Old Norse, meaning "something laid or fixed"; the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines law in this original sense as "the type of something unalterable." For the skeptical thinker, ignorance, then, is the rare element that cannot be changed in one's thinking; to be ignorant is not to know, it is uncertainty: one cannot be sure of knowing anything with certainty. By considering ignorance a law, Ashbery acknowledges it as a rule of conduct by which he must live; it is essential for his tentative approach. Law also implies an authority by

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which it is imposed and enforced; whether this authority is a universal being or one's self, Ashbery does not say.

Ashbery mixes up the various vocabularies with general allusions to, but not elaborations on, his own thoughts about personal relationships, the death of his mother, writing poetry or autobiography, critical responses to his poetry, political news and current events of the day, childhood memories—whatever makes a difference in his daily life and affects the direction of his thinking or the manner of its expression. With this connection of language and life, he exploits the diversity and multiplicity of one's existence, thus demonstrating the difficulty and rewards of looking for "signs" in the flood of experience, of "sifting a mountain of detritus / indefinitely in search of tiny yellow blades of grass" (FC 83). Ashbery does not neatly proceed in thought from a topic sentence about a particular experience to a concluding insight on its importance to him; instead he adopts a desultory approach that encourages unusual combinations of thought and language.

This expansive, inclusive view of what plays a role in autobiographical writing provides Ashbery a number of different angles with which to view himself, but it also requires, by necessity, that he not attach himself to just one. Ashbery ends Section V with an allusion to Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven" to explain the impetus lying behind his poetry;[14] it cannot rest in what it has achieved but must constantly seek new vantage points and, thus, new language to come closer to what "must be happening beyond the point" it currently sees:

A hound-shaped fragment of cloud rises

abruptly to the impressive center of the heavens only to fold itself

behind itself and face into the distance even as it advances

bearing news of the channel coast. That is the archetypal kind of

development

we're interested in here at the window girls move past continually.

Something

must be happening beyond the point where they turn

and become mere fragments. But to find out what that is,

we should be forced to relinquish this vantage point, so

deeply fought for, hardly won. (194)

Just as *Three Poems* discusses the displacement of the center by the edge as it moves into

consciousness, *Flow Chart* recognizes that "news" arrives from the "channel coast." But

in *Flow Chart*, Ashbery's speaker relates the additional difficulty of leaving one's present

vantage point with its prized gains in order to move on.

The speaker in *Flow Chart* significantly determines that his place is never at any

particular vantage point—either at the center or at the edge; it is in the traffic between

them. Home, as either an origin or a destination, remains an elusive, even impossible

ideal; he will always find himself in the middle:

I, who don't care, always get caught in the middle.

I belong there anyway. I'm going to someplace from someplace, and

think in these terms.

I'm like a corset string that gets laced up but never tied. I've tried to be

kind and helpful,

I know I have, but this is about something else. It's about me. And so I

am never

off the hook; I look at others and reflect their embarrassed, sheepish grin:

all right,

can I go home now? But I know deep in my heart of hearts I never will,

will never want to,

that is, because I've too much respect for the junk we call living

that keeps passing by. (213)

Home is no longer the "quiet and confusing" place that both caused the speaker's anxiety and helped him avoid facing it at the beginning of the poem. He now sees himself as "living" in the passage of the present in which he moves from one place to another; he sees the past that informs the present, and the future that includes his death; and he makes decisions for himself with this knowledge.

Montaigne and Heidegger carry this thought of being in between to its extreme implication: Montaigne saying "every human nature is always midway between birth and death" (455), and Heidegger saying that the human being "*stretches along between* birth and death" (*Being and Time* 342, original italics). Heidegger also asserts that within this time span, the human being "understands itself in terms of what it encounters in the surrounding world and what it circumspectly takes care of, [. . .] not just useful things and works, but at the same time what 'is going on' with them: 'affairs,' undertakings, incidents, mishaps." He even uses water metaphors similar to James's in referring to "the activities in which 'one' 'swims along' with it 'oneself'" and asking, again using James's phrase, "Is the occurrence of history then only the isolated course of 'streams of

experience' in individual subjects?" (354). Ashbery's speaker, too, respects the value of what might be considered useless, "the junk we call living / that keeps passing by." As a *bricoleur*, he watches for seemingly irrelevant, "small signs," for minor experiences that nevertheless attract attention, for lingering memories that will not fade. He often finds among them the triggers that will take his thought in a new direction toward a greater realization of connectedness in his life.

The beginning of the poem suggests the need for a connection with the "larger activity" that "shrouds" one's life but the necessary connecting bridge is represented only by "girders / whanging in the absence of wind" (FC 3). The speaker later questions whether his attempts to make sense of his situation will end; one bridge leads only to the need for another: "How many bridges between here and the end of that journey? / Over wells, along walls, silently one creeps along" (43). He gradually realizes that life's ordinary encounters may contain "a development / but not necessarily a resolution at the end." Moreover, the development occurs almost without notice or fanfare; indeed, ostentatious connections that announce themselves, like Rilke's "Archaic Torso," do not build constructive bridges:

> A bridge erects itself into the sky, all trumpets and twisted steel,
>
> but like the torso of a god, too proud to see itself, or lap up
>
> the saving grace of small talk. And when these immense structures go
>
> > down, no one hears:
>
> a puff of smoke is emitted, a flash, and then it's gone,
>
> leaving behind a feeling that something happened there once,

> like wind tearing at the current, but no memory and no crying either: it's
>
> just
>
> another unit of space reduced to its components. An empty salute. (84-85)

By continuing to question the emptiness he feels despite its ensuing anxiety, instead of denying it or covering it up, the poem's speaker comes to an understanding of himself in his historical existence. In the first lines of the poem, the speaker wonders whether to expect pain or emptiness, and he now finds both; but they lead to a fuller life, not to despair. Ashbery describes the situation of facing the predicament of continually seeking one's place, never reaching a final destination in life:

> As long as we're on this planet
>
> the thrill never ceases. Even a garage can be a propitious place; a
>
> mechanic's
>
> whistle from under a car can add to the spectrum of consternation
>
> suspended, and
>
> making faces in the weeds. As long as we are never who we are ever
>
> going to be
>
> the bind obtains and life on the edge of a knife has its own kind of
>
> remuneration,
>
> so tenuous is the balance that keeps one foot caught in a misunderstanding
>
> of someone's making. (159)

With the autobiographical approach, the speaker charts his own particular experiences, memories, and reflections that imperfectly advance what understanding he can obtain. It

is now sufficient for him to conclude by pointing, not to a bridge that links the past to the

future or takes one to the "celebration," but to a bridge that is open to the present and

shows a way to cope and live in it:

<div align="center">We are merely agents, so</div>

that if something wants to improve on us, that's fine, but we are always

the last

to find out about it, and live up 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. By evening the traffic has begun

again in earnest, color-coded. It's open: the bridge, that way. (216)

Like the diagram sketched on the wind that found its way across miles and centuries to

the poem's speaker at the end of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," the wind that was

absent as the poem's speaker consulted the diagram in at the beginning of *Flow Chart*

remarkably finds its way with its message by the end of the poem. The diagram is

momentarily complete—the speaker finds himself in his present, his changing present:

"This is the place to be" (102).

The diary form that relies on daily entries to capture the present turns out to be the

most appropriate form for *Flow Chart*. Its essayistic process does not build on a steadily

erratic progression of thought as it did in *Three Poems*, but instead it reflects on the

ability of language to redirect thought over a period of time as a result of the various

sources of input and interruptions from daily life. In Ashbery's next book-length poem,

Girls on the Run, Ashbery turns to narrative, in which the essayistic process appears to be

motivated by sequences of activity within a purported plot instead of by the movement of inner thought as expressed in meditative or autobiographical form. It reveals another major turn in Ashbery's experiments with form and the expansion of consciousness.

CHAPTER FIVE

GIRLS ON THE RUN AS NARRATIVE POETRY

Girls on the Run (1999) begins with a mysterious scenario that suggests a plot

with unanswered questions: who are these people and what is happening to them?

> A great plane flew across the sun,
>
> and the girls ran along the ground.
>
> The sun shone on Mr. McPlaster's face, it was green like an elephant's.
>
> Let's get out of here, Judy said.
>
> They're getting closer, I can't stand it. (3)

These unconnected, undeveloped elements are sufficient, however, to suggest a number

of potential story lines and to establish the poem as narrative rather than lyric.[1]

According to Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, narrative must meet only two

requirements: "the presence of a story and a story-teller. [. . .] For writing to be narrative

no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required" (4).[2] Halfway through the

thirteenth line, one of the girls instructs an unnamed character to write: "Write it now,

Tidbit said, / before they get back." In response to this command, the poem suddenly

shifts from third to first person: "And, quivering, I took the pen" (GR 4). Now the

narrative is no longer just "telling" but is, as Roland Barthes says of first-person

narrative, "saying that one is telling and assigning all the referent ('what one says') to this

act of locution" ("Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" 114). The reader

then expects this eyewitness speaker, who is one of the characters in these inexplicable

events, to provide "truthful" answers, at least according to his perspective, to the implied

questions: Who are Tidbit and the speaker, and where are they? Why the sudden

directive? What is to be written, and will it explain what the third-person narrator had

previously described? Who are "they," and are "they" the threat Judy feared? Why have

"they" left, where did "they" go," and when are "they" coming back? Why should the

speaker write before "they" return? And, finally, why does the speaker quiver when

taking the pen?

Ashbery diverts the reader's expectations for a plot that will eventually answer

these questions by posing more questions. As in *Three Poems* and *Flow Chart*, questions

activate Ashbery's essayism; they are meant not to be answered but to throw the poem

into the state of confusion that Ashbery seeks in order to work his way through

unfamiliar terrain to find a form for asking his real question, "the major question that

revolves around you, your being here" (TP 51). Essayism encourages one to test a

subject by looking at it from various viewpoints; since the whole can never be seen, one

must come at it indirectly from different angles to increase one's knowledge of its parts.

In *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery chooses the perspective of narrative space in which to

continue his probing of the connection between consciousness and external phenomena.

He trusts that the tentative, philosophical method of essayism in a narrative poem will

reveal insights that do not simply build on those of his previous meditative and

autobiographical poems but are different in nature, as they come out of the narrative

interplay among character, dialogue, and setting. Ashbery alludes to the role of this

philosophical approach at the end of the first section of *Girls on the Run*. One of the

characters, Dimples echoes an exclamation from the closing lines of "My Philosophy of

Life" where the speaker sees another thought coming that will revise what was just realized: "Look out! There's a big one . . ." (CYHB 75, original ellipses). One's philosophy is not tied to a system of unchanging principles, but is dynamic, providing a phenomenological and pragmatic way to meet the exigencies of life. Dimples expresses a similar thought but more as a warning: "I told you it was coming, cried Dimples, but look out, / Another big one is on the way! / And they all ran, and got out, and that was that for that day" (GR 4-5). However, in *Girls on the Run,* Ashbery does not simply entreat the reader to enjoy life and one's philosophy of life, as he did in the earlier poem; he suggests that one must live and play despite apprehension of the unknown. The "big one" could be another idea or another experience, but the two affect each other. The lines come at the beginning of the poem rather than the end; his characters reside in the zone of confusion where the obvious questions remain paramount and unsettling. The narrative is just beginning; the real question has not yet revealed itself.

The remark that "another big one is on the way" introduces the complication of time. Beginnings and endings; time of day; time in which to act; time as the ostensibly known past, a fleeting present, and the unknown future—all aspects of time enter into narrative. That an idea as pervasive as time remains inconceivable has also long occupied philosophers; Heidegger and James, in particular, contribute to a phenomenological understanding of time: Heidegger presents time as a temporal horizon of past, present, and future, in which being defines itself; and James considers time as a process in which the transitions between its successive moments become "themselves experiences" (*Pragmatism* 231). Ashbery takes advantage of time's role in narrative to show how it

defines one's existence in a Heideggerian ontological sense and how it is actually experienced by human beings in a Jamesian pragmatist sense.

Although *Girls on the Run* meets basic narrative criteria, it does not conform to traditional, narrative notions of point of view, character development, setting, and plot. Instead of transcribing experience in unambiguous narrative that finds causality and consistency, Ashbery turns to an essayistic narrative that explores the ambiguity inherent in real experience to uncover relationships among characters, actions, and environment that might otherwise be buried under an imposed order. The narration in *Girls on the Run* relies on both first- and third-person narrators, who are sometimes indistinguishable from each other; and the dialogue is not always distinctly attributable to a particular character or either one of the narrators. Its characters do not have histories; do not show development through either thought or action; appear in the poem only once or sporadically; and, for the most part, do not have differentiating characteristics, but seem interchangeable. The narrative does not describe the time or place in which the actions occur. The plot and the episodes within it do not have discernible beginnings, middles, and ends nor do they establish a sequential outline for the narrative.

Ashbery provides a guide for reading *Girls on the Run* in his early use of narrative and in his assessment of other writers' narratives that employ similar open, experimental forms of narrative. His more recent encounter with Henry Darger's outsider art—watercolors and writings depicting the struggles of the Vivian Girls—takes Ashbery into a new realm as it supplies the immediate impetus for *Girls on the Run.* The poem initially seems to represent a radical break from his previous poems because of its focus on action and dialogue among various characters rather than on inner reflection, but

Ashbery's continuing project of choosing different forms for addressing the "major

question" of "being here" gradually reveals itself. As he follows an erratic path to the

unpredictable end of the poem, the narrator expresses his wish to expand his viewpoint

further; he wants to hear the other ways to tell the tale:

> Tell me, can you tell it any
>
> different where you come from? I know the highlights are blurred
>
> now, the witnesses less than forthcoming,
>
> but fences are down, and we can travel where it was never supposed
>
> anyone could go, to highlands of the spirit that refresh and punish
>
> the blame we were supposed to ingest, until they leave that off, too.

<div align="right">(GR 48)</div>

The "you" can be the reader or a character in the poem, a stranger to the narrator in either

case; but to "tell it" implies that everyone has a different version of the same story.

Narrative Forerunners

Several of Ashbery's early works—a poem, a novel, and two introductions to

narrative works by other authors—foreshadow the indeterminate narrative style of *Girls

on the Run*. They reveal a long-standing fascination with essayism as a means of

developing thought within an open, inconclusive narrative, which need not cohere in

sequential events or developed characterizations. Narrative in these works is driven by a

vague, foreboding, yet comic, tone; and it is told by ambiguous narrators, who present the

story primarily through animated, discontinuous bits of dialogue. Just as essayism

merges with autobiography in *Flow Chart*, so that neither genre functions discretely but

forms a new mode of autobiography, essayism now merges with narrative in *Girls on the Run* and its forerunners to form a new mode of narration.

The earliest example is Ashbery's collagistic, disjunctive poem "Europe" (1962), which includes passages taken from the novel, *Beryl of the Bi-Planes* by William LeQueux. According to David Shapiro, the novel is "a book for girls written at the time of the First World War" (19); Ashbery was intrigued by "the unworried prose and atmosphere of the girls of the bi-plane" despite their involvement in war (74). In "Europe," Ashbery includes a description of the heroine Beryl's flight in the bombers above a dark earth: "There was no sign of light anywhere below / —all was a bright black void" (TCO 71). Many of the characters in "Europe" cannot see or hear because of the noise and turmoil of war that surrounds them; they cannot position themselves in their current environment and rely on vague, perhaps unreliable, reports in newspapers for clues:

> The formal tragedy of it all
>
> Mystery for man—engines humming
>
> Parachutes opening.
>
> The newspaper being read
>
> Beside the great gas turbine
>
> The judge calls his assistant over
>
> And together they try to piece together the secret message contained in
>
> > today's paper. (71)

The characters in *Girls on the Run* also look to the news for answers to their own situation, and they are even more explicitly thwarted:

                    No one knew how many

tried to escape, or how many were successful. You had to read it

in the evening's news, and by then sea-cows were weary.

They taxed themselves out of existence. Our raft capsized

and they opined the day was bright with promise, though shut off

from what really happened. It was time for golf. (14-15)

News, which is largely transmitted through narrative, can be informative but it can also

be unreliable: events are too intricate to be plainly stated; the writer is too distant from

events to report them accurately; the writer is too close to certain aspects of the events

and misleads by presenting only one viewpoint; or finally, the author is likely to impose

an order on the story that distorts reality. Therefore, in order to learn about a total

situation, even when playing an active part in its happenings, readers must piece together

clues from the news with judicious reading and considered input from their own

experience. A few stanzas later in "Europe," the speaker says, "The newspaper is ruining

your eyes" (TCO 73); derived narrative, in news or other texts, cannot replace what is

learned in one's experience but should instead be considered as part of that experience—

one more tool, a "searchlight," to "pierce the darkness" (84). Victor Turner notes that

"'narrate' is from the Latin *narrare*, ('to tell') which is akin to the Latin *gnārus*

('knowing,' 'acquainted with,' 'expert in') both derivative from the Indo-European root

gnâ ('to know')" (167). Perloff, who cites Turner's etymology of "narrate," asserts that

"to tell a story is to find a way—sometimes the only way—of *knowing* one's world." She

acknowledges the impossibility of narration to be a complete, comprehensive form of

knowledge: "But since, in the view of any of our poets, as in the view of comparable

fiction writers, the world just doesn't—indeed shouldn't—make sense, the *gnosis* which is narration remains fragmentary." Postmodern narrative poetry, in Perloff's view, frustrates "our desire for closure" and thus such "'stories' foreground the narrative codes themselves and call them into question" (*Dance of the Intellect* 161, original italics). In both "Europe" and *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery calls attention to narrative's value and limitations as a form for knowing even as he uses it.

The first two lines of *Girls on the Run* recall the bi-planes and girls of "Europe": "A great plane flew across the sun / and the girls ran along the ground" (GR 3). They run below the plane as though from a vague, undefined threat; no explicit connection is made between the plane and the girls' running, although the next line raises a question with the nonspecific pronouns, "they" and "it": "They're getting closer, I can't stand it" (3). The girls cannot comprehend this threat any more than the characters in "Europe" can understand the world of war in which they participate. Regardless of the perilous times, the characters in both works often seem incongruously cheerful, or at least reconciled: "I'm on my way to Hull / grinned the girl" ("Europe," TCO 73); "and all the nifty year was almost gone. Well isn't that a catastrophe, Aunt Clara gurgled" (GR 15). "Europe" begins Ashbery's experimentation with narrative that does not tell its tale through a logical sequence of events with developing characters.

Nest of Ninnies, the second example of a forerunner for *Girls on the Run*, is a novel begun in 1952, before "Europe," but not completed and published until 1969 (Kermani 23). Ashbery and James Schuyler collaborated on the novel by taking turns writing lines or passages, so it often takes surprising leaps. Sequences do not necessarily connect with each other; and, though the core cast of characters remains relatively stable

throughout, dialogue often moves in strange directions as they speak without really

listening to each other, their speech motivated instead by their separate agendas:

"'There's a lot that goes on around here you won't hear about from Mr. Bush,' Betty

said, and fell silent. 'What are you doing for lunch?' Fabia asked" (61). In *Girls on the*

Run, Ashbery also forgoes connective explanation between sequences and in dialogue. In

an exchange that arises regarding the coming and going of tides, the sense of the passage

increasingly recedes:

> Then they all wanted to know why it goes on
>
> all the time, and the preacher answered it was due to bats. In the silos. Oh,
>
> I thought you wanted to know, Philip said. We do, but other than you
>
> > there are two
>
> pails formally, and no one can figure out what is inside. (15)

The disjunctions in the two works serve different purposes. In *A Nest of Ninnies*, they

help explain the characters and their relationships; in *Girls on the Run*, they provide

metaphorical ambiguity that tells little about the characters but suggests the difficulty in

expressing thoughts that have not reached sufficient clarity for concrete language.

Much of the story in *A Nest of Ninnies* is told through clichéd dialogue, such as is

heard in many social situations; however, Ashbery and Schuyler mix it with unusual,

exotic twists: "'Alice—you shouldn't have,' Nadia cooed. 'One would think oneself a

thousand miles away—in a *cabinet particulier* at La Pérouse'" (NN 165). And it

humorously parodies the pretentious conversation, along with other social conventions, of

people vying for a superior position in their relationship:

"The chateau country is lovely in the summer," Claire said,

"though personally I prefer it in the fall. But why don't you visit one of

the less publicized vacation spots? Picardy, for instance?"

Dr. Bridgewater frowned. "My interest is not so much in the

beauties of nature—we have plenty of that here—but in Francis the First

and places associated with him. It would mean a lot to me actually to set

eyes on the royal salamander." (69)

In *Girls on the Run*, too, clichés abound, although they are usually followed by more

mysterious metaphors; the dialogue is just as often expressed by the narrator as by the

characters. The following dialogue is not specifically attributed to anyone:

Those who want to go back to the base camp can do so. I swear

I've never seen a more ornery bunch, though civic-minded

at heart, I suppose, but there's a great gap between their intentions

and the harvest moon that seems to belie mediocre aspirations

even as it secretly promotes them, waxes as it wanes

into delirium tremens, and other missed opportunities

too numerous to scramble for, in disbelief's fomented ocean. (44)

The first three lines repeat everyday, colloquial conversation; the clichés help the

character express him or herself quickly and succinctly at a superficial level. In the

fourth line, the dialogue suddenly moves to metaphor as though it is attempting to

express what is not understood and cannot be put in ordinary language. Despite

differences, *A Nest of Ninnies* looks forward to *Girls on the Run* in its continued

experiments with fragmented sequence and its use of dialogue as a means of propelling the narrative.

A third example of Ashbery's early interest in narrative is found in the "Introduction" he wrote for his 1986 translation of the French novel *Fantômas* written in 1911 by Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre. Ashbery points to some of the elements of narrative in the novel that he will later incorporate in *Girls on the Run*. Fantômas, as the hero of a series of novels, attracts the reading public's attention, Ashbery says, because he "isn't just a personage, superhuman or not, but a place, an atmosphere, a state of mind." He is an "image: the unforgettable one of the masked man with a dagger brooding over Paris"; however, "with Fantômas, terror almost becomes monotonous" (4-6). His "dire acts" take place on the familiar streets of Paris; "the places themselves are actually actors in the events described," and the Parisian readers "shuddered delightedly" as the "sober facades" represented "a seeming denial of fantastic goings-on behind them" (6-8). Ashbery notes that if the characters "remain hieratically frozen in their relation to one another, [. . .] they are nonetheless constantly on the move, traversing the landscapes of the world by every available means of locomotion" (7). *Girls on the Run* is also haunted by a "brooding" terror, though it is not named and cannot be seen. The characters in the poem do not retreat, but go about their ordinary activities, talking about their common concerns, despite the underlying uncanny feeling that persistently threatens to, and sometimes does, pierce through the everyday façade of normalcy:

> Inside in the twilit nest of evening,
>
> something was coming undone. Dimples could feel it,
>
> surging over her shoulder like a wave of energy. And then—

it was gone. No one had witnessed it but herself.

And so Dimples took off for the city, which was near and wholesome. (4)
Everyone in the poem constantly moves; they "ran," "get out," "get back," "took off,"
"returned," "leave," "keep on"—"such a lot of going around and doing!" The characters
assume importance in the narrative not by their individuality but by their activity and
exchanges with each other; even Trevor the dog leaps, jumps, and comments on the
situation.[3] The action and dialogue of the characters form an atmosphere in the
environment, which, like the places in *Fantômas*, becomes an actor in the events
described. In *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery will exploit this uncanny environment of terror
lurking underneath everydayness, a topic he introduced in *Flow Chart*.

Finally, as a fourth example, in 1992, Ashbery wrote the "Preface" for a new
edition of short stories by Mary Butts, who originally published her stories between 1923
and 1938. He mentions what Paul West called "her disjointed, dislocated style" and
admits that "indeed she can be a difficult writer to 'follow.'" Ashbery could be talking
about himself when he comments on "her occasional carelessness in indicating who is
saying what, to the point where we don't always know who is still in the room" (ix).
Ashbery's description of her characters sounds like his in *Girls on the Run*: "Usually she
brings on her characters without explaining them." And her stories develop like his
poems: "They start just about anywhere. [. . .] They unfold, rather than unroll, with
lacunae and bits of seemingly irrelevant information interrupting the flow, and then,
having brought us somewhere, they leave us" (x). After quoting one of her mysterious
passages, Ashbery describes the dilemma of skepticism that it presents:

Where are we? Where have we come from? But the narrator has already warned us in the story's opening sentences: "There is no head or tail to this story, except that it happened. On the other hand, how does one know that anything happened? How does one know?" (xi)

The first-person narrator in this story immediately further complicates the issue of authorship. She questions what she, as narrator, knows and what Max, the character who tells her a story within the story, knows:

How do I know that Max did not invent it? Only, if I invented it that he invented it, it doesn't mean that what he thought he saw happen, happened as he thought he saw it. (Butts 203)

The narrator's and the character's knowledge and points of view are not stable; the narrator, "I," is also a character in the story, and the character, "Max," is also a narrator. Invention is shared by the author, the narrator, and the character, and none of the information appears to be unequivocally true.

Ashbery, too, brings the dilemma of narration into his poem. In the following instance, for example, an unnamed person, perhaps the narrator, asks a series of what seem to be rhetorical questions. On behalf of the others in the group, an unnamed character responds to the last question:

What if someone called back to you

from a distance? What would that sound like? What would you think?

    Does anyone

care any more about it's being night? "We think

night is fine, it enables one to get over the headaches of day

>   and so survive until day returns,
>
>   a limpet in his arms, one blue eye poking out from the vellum of his
>
>   matted hair." (GR 42)

The lack of quotation marks to enclose the questions and the presence of quotation marks for the response indicate a possible change in levels of dialogue. The questions address ineffable mysteries that might be subjects of the narrator's inner monological rumination without expectation of a response. The narrator may be answering himself; but, more likely, as the quotation marks suggest, someone else responds. The narrator's thoughts seem to have mysteriously broken through into the consciousness of the characters who respond as one. They reply with a practical answer that goes as far as possible until it can go no further and must turn to metaphor. A final possibility is that the dialogue takes place openly between one character, who is perhaps the narrator, and a second character. The narrator's roles as observer, author, and active character merge.

Ashbery compliments the "erratic motion" that Butts' stories follow, a method he valued in *Three Poems* as a way of thinking, and now admires as a way of narrating: "After reading Butts one is left with an impression of dazzle, of magic, but what made it is hard to pin down" ("Preface" xi). He remembers one story, not in its detail, but in its "sense of the whole story as something evil, glittering, funny and, at the end, surreally beautiful." He especially notes certain "features of her writing": "her startling ellipses, especially in conversations; her drastic cutting in the cinematic sense; her technique of collaging bits of poetry and popular song lyrics" (xii). Ashbery writes *Girls on the Run* with similar features; the following incident stands alone in a separate stanza without introduction: "A struggle ensued and the driver fell out of the vehicle. / And what did the

old lady do then? / 'She gave them some broth, without any bread, and . . . and . . .'" The lines are immediately followed by a one-line stanza: "All are like soup" (GR 53, original ellipses). Ashbery appreciates and emulates Butts' ability to create the "sense" of a story without capitulating to a structure that orders existence and imposes closure; he observes her story's "breathless skittering as it evolves before us," so he cannot easily remember the story without rereading it ("Preface" xii).

Ashbery's use of the word "evolves" points to an important element in essayism. Essayistic narrative dispenses with the traditionally stable narrative order that unfolds an already determined tale, in favor of a narrative that moves in a mobile present. Every moment affords an opportunity to move forward, backward, or sideways; the narrative evolves by creating its own order as it develops, an order determined by its changing present. Because essayism moves in the present, essayistic narrative evolves for the reader precisely because it previously evolved for a writer who made choices in the mobile present during the composition process. To tell a completed story in retrospect would thwart the evolving element of essayism.

In these written works, Ashbery develops the narrative structure that interests him, but the immediate catalyst impelling him to write *Girls on the Run* comes from the visual arts: Henry Darger's watercolor illustrations for his novel about a child slave rebellion, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in what is known as The Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. Although Darger creates his art to complement his novel, Ashbery was initially drawn to the art, perhaps, in part, because the art itself is narrative and it had the capacity to draw him even further away from the norms of literary narrative. Acccording to Michael Leddy,

who attended Ashbery's reading from *Girls on the Run* at the American Folk Art

Museum in Manhattan in 2002, Ashbery told of seeing Darger's work exhibited in

Lausanne, in Heidelberg, in Manhattan, and in various books (3). In "responding to an

audience question about why he chose Darger's work as a subject, Ashbery said that he

didn't choose Darger. Rather, he felt that he was chosen by seeing Darger's work" (2).

Ashbery replicates this sense of election in *Girls on the Run* when one of the characters,

Tidbit, chooses another character to write the events, and he obediently picks up his pen.

A dialogue alluding to both Ashbery and Darger immediately follows the command and

agreement to write:

> Drink the beautiful tea
>
> before you slop sewage over the horizon, the Principal directed.
>
> OK, it's calm now, but it wasn't two minutes ago. What do you want me
>
> to do, said Henry,
>
> I am no longer your serf,
>
> and if I was I wouldn't do your bidding. That is enough, sir.
>
> You think you can lord it over every last dish of oatmeal
>
> on this planet, Henry said. But wait till my ambition
>
> comes a cropper, whatever that means, or bursts into feathered bloom
>
> and burns on the shore. (GR 4)

The narrator alludes to Ashbery and Darger in the odd juxtaposition of "beautiful tea"

with "slop sewage." Tea is part of Ashbery's own writing ritual; he tells an interviewer,

"I do drink tea while I write" (Stitt 198). "Sewage" references Darger's employment "in

Chicago hospitals, for most of his life as a bandage roller and lavatory cleaner" (Rhodes

108). Ashbery seems to be wondering how he will use Darger's work, but puts the

question (without a question mark) in Henry's mouth: "What do you want me to do, said

Henry." The question becomes a statement, and as the dialogue becomes Henry's

declaration of independence from the project, it moves faster, omitting clear references to

who says what. In this sequence, Ashbery may be referring to accounts he read of Darger

arguing out loud with himself; later, in 2005, a documentary on Darger's life and art

showed interviews with neighbors from his boarding house who remembered hearing him

vigorously "reliving arguments with nuns" or saying "things that he couldn't say during

the day when he was working." He played all the roles with different dialects and voices

so loudly that many neighbors thought he had visitors—but he was always alone in his

room (*In the Realms of the Unreal*). When Henry—or is it the narrator?—allows that his

ambition may either fail badly or succeed extravagantly, Ashbery may be thinking of

Darger as a true avant-garde artist, one who has no regard for acceptance and is

undeterred by doubt. Ashbery wrote in "The Invisible Avant-Garde" (1968) of Jackson

Pollock's "recklessness," the trait that "makes experimental art beautiful, just as religions

are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing" (RS

391). Perhaps Ashbery saw this same trait in Darger, who devoted his adult life to his

art; but shortly before his death, when his landlord asked if he wanted anything from his

room, Darger said, "No, I don't want anything, they're of no use to me anymore. You

can throw them away" (Lerner 19). Darger's complete disregard for public acceptance,

his doubt of his work's worth to anyone else, his dedication to perfecting the techniques

of his illustrations, his pursuit of a reckless art that expressed, even formed, his reality—

all of these qualities may have inspired Ashbery, not to copy the art, but similarly to

engage himself in his art as he fashions it for himself. He ended "The Invisible Avant-Garde" with a quotation from Busoni that sums up this attitude:

> And finally, in an article addressed to his pupils [Busoni] wrote, "Build up! But do not content yourself any longer with self-complacent experiments and the glory of the success of the season; but turn toward the perfection of the work seriously and joyfully. Only he who looks toward the future looks cheerfully." (RS 395)

This last line will resonate in the closing lines of *Girls on the Run.*

As the book jacket for *Girls on the Run* states, the poem is only "loosely based" on Darger's works. Ashbery indicates that *Girls on the Run* is "after Henry Darger," which could mean "subsequent to in time" or "in the characteristic manner of." It differs from Darger's work in many important ways: Darger's epic novel and illustrations graphically present many extremely violent scenes, including torture inflicted on the girls; some of the illustrations depict, without explanation, girls with male genitalia; the narrative is specific and detailed in its descriptions of battles and weather conditions; and Darger steps didactically into the narrative to set forth his moral purposes of showing the bravery of women and girls and denouncing the cruelty of adults toward children. Ashbery occasionally refers to "slaves," battles, and military figures, and he does have one sequence suggesting torture that could have been torn from Darger's novel:

> For how did you expect us to get out
> once we got it, or was it a secret for those in authority
> to bottle up within us? You did the right thing,

that's for sure. Now it's time to surrender, or be riven asunder, garroted,

eviscerated

by the actual time of the explosion. They had some nerve

telling us to come over at such and such an hour. I'm sure they'll be sorry

once they've been told about it. (GR 32-33)

These lines come at the bottom of the page that also refers to what could be Darger's

paintings: "fountain pens are the color of crayons dipped in the watercolor that was used

in the landscape" (32). The juxtaposition of the opposites likely intrigues Ashbery; but

the violence and desire for revenge against authority in Darger's stories and illustrations

do not assume prominence in *Girls on the Run*.

Darger's artistic dissimilarities to Ashbery's may lead to a major attraction of the

work for Ashbery. Darger's work unsettles viewers because they do not know what to

make of the many disturbing images; at the same time, they are fascinated by the "certain

off-balance enchantment, a refreshing tendency to counteract idyllic artificiality with

awkward earthiness" (Bonesteel 29) and by the "mixture of tracings and collaged

elements from a wide variety of sources that combine to produce a surprisingly uncanny

effect" (Rhodes 110). Michel Thévoz describes a common reaction, probably shared by

many viewers: "We should begin by admitting it: The aesthetic elation we feel when we

discover the drawings of Henry Darger is not innocent" (15); yet despite the "turmoil"

engendered in his viewers, Darger "is the creator of work as communicative and touching

as ever existed" (19). Darger begins the first volume of his novel, anticipating these

mixed reactions, by noting that it contains "things that might be comical, sad, and

horrifying. [. . .] Let the reader follow every event and adventure, and then he can, if he

sets his mind and heart on it, take it on as if he himself was an actual participator" (qtd. in *In the Realms of the Unreal*). The radical horror and beauty present in his work parallel, only in more violent form, the comic sense that survives in Ashbery's work despite an underlying threat of terror. Both artists seek to express the paradox of strange confusions that cannot be completely understood, but if faced might enable one to live life with Busoni's cheer.

  Girls on the Run is characteristic of Darger in certain other ways that are similar to the narrative aspects that have interested Ashbery in the works previously discussed. First, both Darger and Ashbery focus on children, particularly, but not solely, girls. Though they portray the children's "adventures" differently, they both describe the children with a playful lightheartedness, combined with strength, determination, and unflagging resiliance.[3] They also ascribe a certain intelligence to children that adults have lost; Ashbery describes it in *Girls on the Run* as a world some adults can recover:

<div align="center">Moss drips on moss;</div>

  the more interesting-smelling exhibits have been packed away.

  Or was there a terminus, sadly, deep underground? This, only children

   can know,

  and some adults who have turned the steep corner into childhood. (12)

 Second, like Ashbery's characters in *Girls on the Run*, Darger's brave heroines and brutal masters lack characteristics that would individuate or separate them from others in their group; their similarity arises partly because Darger was not a trained artist or skilled in drawing, so he painstakingly traced his images from comic books, advertisements, and other sources from popular culture and then duplicated them, using them repeatedly in his

illustrations. Additionally, and more like Ashbery's purpose in *Girls on the Run*, Darger's interest was not in the individuality of his various characters but in the larger goal of creating a world that would allow him to express himself and work through his concerns, which is the third similarity in their work. Ashbery and Darger create worlds that do not seem like real places that exist in specific time. Though they both use language that appears to place the narrative in a particular context and include images and language from the extant popular culture, the narrative nevertheless remains floating in a timeless atmosphere. However, the worlds differ. Thévoz describes Darger's world:

> A priori, this work is neither edifying nor sacrilegious; it does not at all state a truth, nor does it take on an underlying ethical stance. It comes from a much more primal level. A supernumerary of the human species made it up for his own private use as the framework of his inner feelings and thoughts, as an imaginary space where his most antagonistic impulses and outpourings could find a voice. (19)

Darger lives in one imaginary world populated by his characters through whom he speaks; it is a world replacing the real world with human beings to whom he cannot relate. On the other hand, Ashbery's poem, *Girls on the Run,* is only one type of imaginary space, narrative, among many other forms or configurations of textual space that he inhabits in other poems in order to better understand his place in the real world where he lives. Nevertheless, Darger's world may choose Ashbery because it is a place offering a stimulating mixture of welcome similarity and edgy difference, and because it reflects its creator's total absorption, "seriously and joyfully." Darger's illustrations

provide the motivating force that brings life to the narrative techniques Ashbery has been considering; he now has the angle and form necessary to write *Girls on the Run*.

Narrative Form

Ashbery's previous experiments with narrative show that the form can be used flexibly, not only to tell a story but to create the exploratory space of essayism. In *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery meets the rudimentary requirements of narrative so he can benefit from the new viewpoints afforded by characters and story, but he deviates from traditional narrative so he can investigate and test new ways of using characters and story for his purposes in transcribing experience. In Ashbery's essayistic narrative, the narrator assumes an ambiguous role, characters and dialogue serve mood and atmosphere rather than characterization, and sequence develops in an elliptical rather than fully presented pattern.

In the first twelve lines of *Girls on the Run*, the third-person narrator is absent from the story; the thirteenth line introduces a first-person narrator who both participates in the dialogue and comments on the situation. Mieke Bal considers both third-person and the first-person sentences to be "uttered by a speaking subject, an 'I.' The difference rests in the object of the utterance" (22). The opening of *Girls on the Run* is uttered by, in Bal's terms, an "external narrator" because it "never refers explicitly to itself as a character"; the interrupting speaker would be a "character-bound narrator" because "the 'I' is to be identified with a character" in the poem that it will narrate (22). Such a narrator cannot be a disinterested reporter but must become an interpreter mutually implicated with that which he interprets; in this way, he phenomenologically uncovers

not only other beings within his environment but also his own place, or being, within his

current environment.[4] The narrator in *Girls on the Run* often conflates his roles of

narrator and character:

> But as for leaving you all without a tale to tell, I would be daft
>
> nay derelict, not to insist on where the others have gone. Isn't there a
>
>> place
>
> to stop, that we'll all know about when we come to it?
>
> Yes there is, she said, we'll just all have to back down
>
> into the gloom, and bait our hooks with peanut butter.
>
> Which is what they did. (15-16)

This stanza illustrates the merging of roles. The first three lines appear to be the

character-bound narrator addressing "you"; it is not clear whether he is addressing "you"

as the reader, a generic "you" as himself in an inner dialogue, or "you" as a character in

the poem. He expresses his perceived duty as author to write the expected story that can

be retold, a traditional one that requires him to find out where "they" have gone. He

could be referring to the opening lines, "write it [. . .] / before they get back," although

characters are constantly coming and going in subsequent stanzas so the reference cannot

be certain. Finally, he asks whether the story could end with an explicit, recognizable

conclusion. An unnamed character answers "yes" and proposes a metaphorical plan with

peanut butter as bait to make conditions favorable for the end to reveal itself. Is the

answer part of the external dialogue between two characters, or is it simply the narrator's

internal creation of an answer to his own question? Both the question and the response

are not in quotation marks, although the narrator's speech has the sound of a rhetorical

question in an inner dialogue, while the response sounds like direct speech. Even though the responder's plan is unclear, the external narrator closes the stanza in a matter-of-fact manner reporting in third person that the plan was carried out, though no specifics are provided to tell how it was done, and "they" could include the character-bound narrator as character. This short stanza shows the narrators' overlapping, indistinct roles as both external and character-bound. The reader must interpret it as though identification of the narrator's distinct role is not important or, more likely, is not possible, which may be Ashbery's point. He makes explicit what may be implicitly true even in the traditional narrative: the material author, the narrator as imputed author, the exterior narrator, and character-bound narrator are mutually implicated.

A number of characters, not all of them human, inhabit the world of *Girls on the Run*, but each one plays only a small role in the narrative; they are significant as individually named members of a group rather than as individuals in their own right. Tidbit, who encourages the narrator to write at the beginning of the poem, has a name suggesting that she (that is, if wearing a housecoat means Tidbit is female) is small; but it also implies that she, like all of the other characters, contributes only tidbits or choice bits of unrelated information. She prompts the narrator to write and then appears once again to play a small role in a short incident:

> Hungeringly, Tidbit approached the crone who held the bowl,
>
> . . . drank the honey. It had good things about it.
>
> Now, pretty as a moment,
>
> Tidbit's housecoat sniffed the undecipherable,
>
> the knowable past. (5, original ellipses)

As usual, the scene leaves unanswered questions. "Pretty as a moment" (in what way is a moment pretty?) would seem to describe Tidbit but actually describes her housecoat that has the unimaginable ability to sniff. All things in the environment, including inanimate objects and animals, have the potential to become characters and play a part in creating the story, just as they play a part in forming one's "being-in-the-world" by the attention paid to them or the importance attached to them. How can the past be both undecipherable and knowable? The *Oxford English Dictionary* includes a definition for "decipher," which is to "convert into ordinary writing" and "to represent verbally or pictorially." So, the housecoat, in this case, is part of a past that cannot be converted "into ordinary writing" or represented "verbally or pictorially." But the past can be known in other, extraordinary ways. The task for the narrator as author is to find a way to write about, or narrate, that which cannot be otherwise known; his representation of the characters is one of those ways.

Because the characters appear only once or twice and speak with similar intonations, keeping track of who says what is not important. Their unusual storybook names (e.g., Tootles) or designations (e.g., Uncle Margaret and the truant officer) give the story an imaginative, childlike air and create the semblance of a crowd, even though they all merge into the narrator's voice. *Girls on the Run* recalls primitive forms of narrative where animals, objects, and human beings act but not as individualized entities.[5] The characters' activity and chatter create an atmosphere that becomes one of the main characters of the poem: from the first lines, they sense a brooding threat from which they must run: "Let's get out of here, Judy said. / They're getting closer, I can't stand it" (3). The "kiddies" (18) do not feel at home in their surroundings:

I'm no expert but I see a problem here.

The fisheries have come undone, as the headlong race to the pole

has made alarmingly evident. As I say, I can speak only for myself,

but as soon as I got here the rules became different.

They didn't apply to me any more, or to anyone else except a distant runt,

almost invisible in its litter. (20)

At the same time, "our stalwart little band of angels" maintains a spirit of optimism at some basic level. Someone, perhaps the narrator, asks, "And if they don't want to play / according to our rules, what then?" Someone, perhaps Raggs the mutt, answers pragmatically: "'Why, then / we'll come up with something, like the sink-drain." And he alludes to their hope for finding significance in what seems to be meaningless activity: "'but as the spirit of going is to go, I can't / control you, advise you much longer. Just keep on / persevering, and then we'll know what we have done matters most to us'" (6). What one does, says, or pays attention to defines what matters, thus the focus on action and dialogue, not character traits.

The characters maintain a humorous approach to daily events, primarily through word play: "The obelisk hobbled over. 'Do you know which way / to the basilica?' he marveled" (23). The dread, the pragmatic industry, the optimism, and the humor—all create an environment that dominates the poem and subordinates the individual characters at the same time as it paradoxically appears through them in their dialogue and their actions.

The environment, which is seen through characters and dialogue, not description of scenery or landscape, establishes an inconsistent but predominant tone; it is part of

Ashbery's extraordinary manner of telling what is "undecipherable." The second component is the elliptical rather than sequential reporting of incidents; traditional narrative depends on recognizable sequence in time, even if it is not narrated in chronological order. Scholes and Kellogg define plot "as the dynamic, sequential element in narrative literature" (207); according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a sequence is "the following of one thing after another in succession" and "the fact of following as a logical inference or as a necessary result." *Girls on the Run* employs a number of markers that suggest the presence of sequence: "Drink the beautiful tea / before you slop sewage over the horizon, the Principal directed"; "But wait till"; "Then"; "And so," "And now"; "On the fifth day" (GR 4); "And that was that for that day"; "Sometime later they returned"; "This time" (5). But these temporal phrases are not sufficient to establish clear continuity; the sequences lack detail necessary to link the activities within the sequence or to link the sequence with what comes before and after. The exterior narrator addresses the poem's narrative dilemma at the same time as he describes the effect on the characters of continuous action without connectivity:

> The tides were still active, one coming in
>
> as another was going out, and one's thinking got caught
>
> in these shifts, too positive some days, too blank the next,
>
> and it all did matter somehow, though it didn't seem to
>
> compute at any given moment. (43)

The characters cannot decipher the connectedness, if there is any, in the sequences if they are distracted by the "shifts"; how does one know how "it" matters when no "given moment" computes?

Narrative structure attempts to provide a logical sequence to these "shifts." But Gary Saul Morson points out that, in imposing this order, "narrative structure [. . .] falsifies" life as it is experienced "in several distinct but closely related ways":

> It violates the continuity of experience by imposing a beginning and an ending; it reduces the plurality of wills and purposes to a single pattern; it makes everything fit, whereas in life there are always loose ends; and it closes down time by conferring a spurious sense of inevitability on the sequence actually realized. (38-39)

The problem, then, for Ashbery is how to create a narrative that does not distort experience with an imposed order, but provides a place where experience can be tested. Morson poses the question: "If an author wants to represent freedom, can he escape the determinations of his own design and ending?" (41).[6] Ashbery begins his escape from deterministic thinking in the story by acknowledging the utopian desire for coherence, both in narrative and in life: The characters "need to have a story line" (GR 46); they are "waiting for something coherent to happen" (47). The narrator temporarily, or for the sake of argument, accepts the popular view that each moment can offer its own meaning if looked at as an individual, frozen moment: "I'll go along with what you say. We must isolate the moment / from its comperes, look behind it, / and if possible draw the appropriate conclusions from its appearance of unease" (48-49). But one of the characters, perhaps Dennis, presents Ashbery's oft-stated view that being in a place of utter confusion where everything merges, a place that is noisy and disorderly, contains more possibilities for truth than a place with isolated, coherent moments: "but if saints won't let us in, blast us / into nether pandemonium, for that will be where their

compacted truths hibernate" (46). Pandemonium describes the environment where *Girls on the Run* takes place; it is the extreme description for the nonlinear, creative, place of essayism where unconnected, incomplete sequences eventually reveal their own order.

Freedom from sequence seems to be an impossibility if narrative plot is defined by sequence. Paul Ricoeur resolves the apparent contradiction in his distinction between "episodic" and "configurational" dimensions of narrative that appear "in varying proportions" in all narratives: "The activity of narrating does not consist simply in adding episodes to one another; it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events. [. . .] The art of narrating, as well as the corresponding art of following a story, therefore require that we are able *to extract a configuration from a succession*" ("The Narrative Function" 278, original italics). In *Girls on the Run*, both dimensions compete, although the episodic remains relatively undeveloped and the configurational dimension assumes more importance for the plot, such as it is. Despite, or more likely because of, being brief and disconnected but numerous, the sequences establish space for the essayistic process in which the configurations are gradually though erratically realized.

Narrative Essayism

Paradoxically, even though sequentiality remains secondary in *Girls on the Run*, time plays a major role in determining the extent to which the narrative forms a meaningful totality. The characters are concerned with time, as they measure their actions within the span of each day, and with the end of time, as they dread their individual deaths or time's end in the eschatological sense. The plot shows how the characters, as a group but not individually, establish ways to live toward the future

despite the anxiety triggered by the implications of time. Heidegger, James, and Ricoeur

illuminate the role time plays in *Girls on the Run*; all three of them discuss "duration" of

time as spanning past, present, and future, though each with a different focus: Heidegger

looking at the authentic versus the inauthentic way of being within this span; James

looking at the perception of time's duration as an experience of change; Ricoeur, who

follows in Heidegger's phenomenological tradition, looking at the role of narrative in

expressing this duration.

In *Girls on the Run*, more explicitly than in any of his previous poems, Ashbery

offers his tentative essayism as a pragmatic, phenomenological way to live in a present

that continuously moves toward an uncertain future. His approach encourages one to

consider the vagaries of time as means to freedom for action rather than as crippling

angst. Vagary, which comes from the Latin *vagari*, to wander, is a wandering or devious

journey; it describes the erratic, unpredictable path of Ashbery's essayism, which accords

with Montaigne's skeptical view of time:

> For time is a mobile thing, which appears as in a shadow, together with
>
> matter, which is ever running and flowing, without ever remaining stable
>
> or permanent. To which belong the words *before* and *after*, and *has been*
>
> or *will be*, which at the very first sight show very evidently that time is not
>
> a thing that *is*. (456, original italics)

For Ashbery, as for Montaigne, one should live with time's implications, not fear or try to

stem them. The narrative form gives Ashbery the opportunity to investigate the role of

time in experience. The narrator in *Girls on the Run* constantly measures the characters'

actions by time: "in the twilit nest of evening" (GR 4), "that was that for that day" (5), "sometime later" (5), and so on, on every page.

Ricoeur asserts that although narrative contributes to the philosophical discussion on the concept of time, its role has usually been overlooked by philosophers. Not only does he hypothesize that "narrativity and temporality are closely related," he takes "temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal" ("Narrative Time" 169-70). Narrative captures time as it operates in experience, thus rescuing it from abstraction; Ricoeur cites Heidegger's discussion of now, saying "it is important to attend to the way in which we 'say now' (*Jetz-sagen*) in everyday acting and suffering." Thus the sense of time, as determined by preoccupation and concern, connects with one's world and experience; it is no longer merely a "reduction to an abstraction" (173). Ashbery's characters in *Girls on the Run* constantly discuss their concerns, their fears, and their reactions to the anxieties induced by time.

The poem starts in a logical place—the characters reveal their generalized and common conception of time before the process of testing it in experience begins. The passage deserves in-depth consideration because it introduces, in one page, the most important issues that the poem will essay. After the scene is set, Judy begins a conversation with two of the girls; she is panicked, but oddly and suddenly changes tone when she lapses into a calm, repetitive, confusing, and relatively lengthy lecture:

> Let's get out of here, Judy said.
>
> They're getting closer, I can't stand it.

But you know, our fashions are in fashion

only briefly, then they go out

and stay that way for a long time. Then they come back in

for a while. Then, in maybe a million years, they go out of fashion

and stay there.

Laure and Tidbit agreed,

with the proviso that after that everyone would become fashion

again for a few hours. (GR 3)

The first two lines explicitly express Judy's fear of an unknown "they" and her understandable wish to flee. She continues with an inexplicable transition, "but you know," to introduce what at first seems to be a seven-and-a-half-line non sequitur. She traces her "fashions" (i.e., apparel) that go out of "fashion" (i.e. style or vogue), although she may be talking about more than apparel by also hinting at additional definitions of fashion such as "make or form," "manner or way," and/or "prevailing custom." Repeated verbs, prepositions, and adverbs in the passage indicate place ("in," "out," "stay," "back in," "out," "stay there") as it occurs in a loosely-reckoned time ("briefly," "long time," "a while," "then," "a million years," "after that," "again for a few hours"). Judy seems to be diverted from her fear by a preoccupation with success in the world as measured by conformity to ever-changing trends over which she has no control.

The passage brings to mind Roland Barthes' structural analysis of "the written system of fashion" as it appears in particular fashion magazines of the day (*The Fashion System* x). The language mediates between the clothing and the users: "calculating industrial society is obliged to form consumers who don't calculate; if clothing's

producers and consumers had the same consciousness, clothing would be bought (and produced) only at the very slow rate of its dilapidation" (xi). Further, through its rhetoric, fashion informs the consumer of clothing's significance for certain activities, "*if you want to signify what you are doing here, dress like this*" and for presenting a certain identity, *if you want to be this, you must dress like this*" (249, original italics). But the consumer is subject to fashion's annual rejection of "its own past"; fashion "lives in a world it wants to be, and sees as, ideally stable" (273). Fashion strips time of its significance: it "postulates an achrony, a time which does not exist; here the past is shameful and the present constantly 'eaten up' by the Fashion being heralded" (289). Judy purportedly references fashion to recount what happens to her fashions, not to fashion as an institution, in the cyclical process of enforced change. But she unwittingly uses the arbitrary sign of fashion to express her view of time as she has accepted it in its conventional sense. It happens to her, she is not a responsible agent in her use of time; her rhetoric that measures time's movement by its effect on her turns it into an empty sign that not only does not acknowledge the past or the future but also subjects the present to an arbitrary cycle.

Because this passage on fashion immediately follows Judy's articulation of fright, Heidegger's connection of fear and time seems pertinent. Applying Heidegger's conclusions would suggest that Judy and her friends have "a fear *of* something"; they "await" the manifestation of something that will be "detrimental" to their "potentiality-of-being" (*Being and Time* 313, original italics). This fear, which is "futural," negatively affects the present: "Taking care of things which fears for itself leaps from one thing to the other, because it forgets itself and thus cannot *grasp* any *definite* possibility." The

girls become confused, in the sense not of a creative confusion with the potential to reveal possibilities, but of a crippling confusion in which they forget themselves due to fear and cannot find their way in their "surrounding world" (314, original italics). Judy and her friends exemplify Heidegger's description of inauthentic being. Instead of being able to take care of their future in a "mode of anticipating," they relinquish responsibility and adopt the character of "awaiting"; they search for their place in the world through what is "urgent or indispensable in the business of everyday activity," in their case, through what the world considers to be in vogue (310-311). In allowing their fashions to be dictated by the empty rhetoric of an autonomous segment of society, such as that described by Barthes, they measure their time and themselves by the current actions of their society. The digression on fashion can be understood as a purposeful turn away from the unnamed fear that threatens the girls' being and toward their understanding of time; it is a futile attempt to locate themselves in their world: "This *confused making present* of the nearest best thing belongs to forgetting oneself in fear" (314, original italics). Their worth is measured by the world and is out of their control; but they turn to, and lose themselves in, the world in response to their fear.

Tidbit first agrees with Judy, but immediately moves in another direction. In a critique of Barthes' analysis of the semiological method through the example of fashion, Jonathan Culler criticizes Barthes' strategy of omitting his subject's opposite, "the rules which distinguish the fashionable from the unfashionable" (35). Through Tidbit, Ashbery also shows the opposite of inauthenticity; she exemplifies an inauthentic being becoming an authentic being. The discussion with Judy prompts her, without delay, to ask one of the characters to "write it now"; saying "now," for Heidegger, "is the

discoursing articulation of *making present* that temporalizes itself in unity with an awaiting" for a future "that retains" the past (*Being and Time* 382, original italics).   By saying "now," she consciously decides that someone must pay attention to the present; she reverses the attitude toward time that the previous discussion with Judy epitomized. When Tidbit returns, wearing a housecoat "pretty as a moment" that sniffs "the undecipherable, / the knowable past" (GR 5), her personified housecoat, which combines the moment with the past, represents what Heidegger terms "authentic temporality": "We call the *present* that is held in authentic temporality, and is thus *authentic*, the Moment." It is a present that has a "resoluteness" obtained by no longer "falling prey to the 'world'" but by living in the world with knowledge of the past and anticipation of the future (*Being and Time* 311, original italics). Presumably, through her participation in the discussion, Tidbit realizes the girls' current conception of time as a detriment to their possibilities for "authentic being," and she resolutely retrieves her present. Her first act is to choose one of the characters to narrate the events, to establish a record, and to bring an authentic present to the group through language. Heidegger describes the role of discourse through language: "Since discourse is for the most part spoken in language and initially speaks by addressing the 'surrounding world' in taking care of it and talking about it, *making present* has, of course, a *privileged* constitutive function" (320, original italics). The character-bound narrator will enter into dialogue with the other characters and will write the poem to enact the process that Tidbit has put into motion.

The question arises, why does Tidbit not "write it now" herself? The answer is not given. However, the poem allows the possibility that all of the characters, including the narrators, are one: the indeterminate nature and unchanging tone of the dialogue, the

undifferentiated characters who differ only in name, and the imprecise markers indicating who is speaking give the poem the sound of a single voice. The speaker could be any one or no one in particular. Heidegger notes that every human being is rooted in a culture and lives "for the most part" in the world of "they," but can retrieve an authentic presence for periods of time as did Tidbit. It is a back-and-forth, unending process in which time affects place to constitute being. By creating characters who speak and act on his behalf, the narrator could be attempting to extend his viewpoint beyond his usual perspective; he could be talking about himself when he writes, "A man stands by a cactus, counting / the flecks of rage as they pass by, and you are in another suit, / abashed, a dapper salesman today" (GR 10) or "'All aboard! If there's one thing I hate it's a loner,' / Uncle Philip said, or someone who's beside himself" (16).

The story does, "for the most part," take place in the world of busy activity, but certain threads indicate the plot's zig-zag progress toward particular configurations. Paradoxically, although the poem's references to threads indicate configurations that the poem develops, they also suggest the inability of the narrative to maintain a steady thread that connects the sequences of the plot, the thread that sustains the comforting illusion of order.[7] Section VI ends by pointing to two threads, the day and the end:

> OK, so it's
>
> all until another day, and we can see quite clearly into the needle whose
>
> > thread is
>
> waving slowly back and forth like a caterpillar, accomplishing its *end*.
>
> So may it be until the end that is eternity. (13, italics added)

And Section VII begins by deflating the metaphysical notion of "end" as "eternity" and

rejects the thread's ability to last from one chapter to the next:

> The thread ended up on the floor,
>
> where threads go. (13)

A little more than halfway through the poem, Trevor, Fred the truant officer's dog,

speaks up to offer the final reference to threads, along with those of pain, the sun, and

Ashbery's familiar image of the bridge:

> "The chime irritates me, I'll lose the thread
>
> if I follow it much further," Trevor whispered. And where
>
> should we go for relief, we who have never had any, have never felt
>
> what it means to go without pangs, unless momentarily forgotten,
>
> by the bridge, in sunlight's vale? (37)

The chime may be interrupting Trevor's concentration on following the thread, or Trevor

may be tiring; however, though the thread is occasionally lost, its sporadic presence is

necessary in holding the narrative together. Peter Brooks equates the thread with plot,

which he considers to be prior to other elements of narrative: "It is the very organizing

line, the thread of design, that makes narrative possible because finite and

comprehensible" (4). The few threads in *Girls on the Run,* even though broken and

disorderly, direct attention to the configurations that make up the plot.

The first configuration is the day, the unit by which time is reckoned in *Girls on*

the Run. Ashbery has emphasized the day in all of his long poems, but in this poem, he

gives it even more attention as the measure of time in which one acts before facing the

end. Ricoeur distinguishes between time as reckoned by a day and the abstract nature of

time: "A day is not an abstract measure; it is a magnitude which corresponds to our

concern and to the world into which we are thrown. The time it measures is that in which

it is *time* to do something" ("Narrative Time" 173, original italics). In *Girls on the Run*,

the characters are in constant motion, and their activities are tallied each day: "And they

all ran, and got out, and that was that for that day" (5); "This was that day's learning"

(15); "And so they left home that day" (16);

> Such a lot of going around and doing!
>
> Sometimes they were in sordid sexual situations;
>
> at others, a smidgen of fun would intrude on our day
>
> which exists to be intruded on, anyway.
>
> Its value, to us, is incommensurate
>
> with, let's say, the concept of duration, which kills,
>
> surely as a serpent hiding behind a stump. (13-14)

The day as the reckoning of time does not imply constancy; each new day offers its

"now" in which beings continue their interpretations of themselves. This opportunity for

new, unexpected experience gives the day its value, which the narrator of *Girls on the

Run*, in an odd turn of phrase, believes cannot be compared with "the concept of duration,

which kills." This phrase evokes both James and Bergson in their discussions of time and

duration.[8]

In "The Perception of Time" in *Principles of Psychology*, James refers to an

earlier use of the term "duration" by S. H. Hodgson and also notes that "Locke, in his dim

way, derived the sense of duration from reflection on the succession of our ideas." James

defines duration as "the unit of composition of our perception of time with a bow and a

stern, as it were—a rearward- and a forward-looking end" (1: 609), and he primarily

discusses the perception of duration. In 1889, Henri Bergson introduced the term of

"duration" in *Time and Free Will*; it would become central to his notion of time. Bergson

defines "pure duration" as "the form which the succession of our conscious states

assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state

from its former states" (100, original italics) and later adds that "'real duration' signifies

both undivided continuity and creation" (*Creative Evolution* xiv). He stresses that "it is

not a quantity, and as soon as we try to measure it, we unwittingly replace it by space"

(106).

　　According to biographer Robert D. Richardson, James was most excited with

Bergson's thought; he corresponded with Bergson, read a number of his books, and wrote

"'*Durer = changer, croitre, devenir*' (To endure means to change, to grow, to become)"

on the endpaper of his copy of *Time and Free Will* (426). Then why does the narrator of

Girls on the Run say the concept of duration kills? The answer may lie in Ashbery's

distrust of the term "concept" and in an equivocal use of the term "duration"; Ashbery

evokes Bergson with the term "concept" and both James and Bergson with "duration."

Bergson attacks the use of "ready-made concepts" as unable "to grasp the true nature of

vital activity" (*Creative Evolution* 48-49), a point consistent with Ashbery's approach.

But instead of using "duration" with James's and Bergson's definitions based on

"continuance in time," Ashbery uses "duration" in its senses of "durableness" and

"hardening" from the Latin root "dūrus" meaning "hard" which, of course, he would

consider a destructive view of time. The deviation from the expected definition in his

allusion to "duration" causes one to dwell on that point for understanding—a sure sign of its value.

James writes that "the durations we have practically most to deal with—minutes, hours, and days—have to be symbolically conceived" (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 611). Ashbery begins *Girls on the Run* with an allusion to day in the line "a great plane flew across the sun"; because light creates day, sun is an important ancillary to the configuration of day in the poem. The narrator addresses the sun in a reflection on the group's plight and their reliance on the sun:

> We aren't easily intimidated.
>
> And yet we are always frightened,
>
> frightened that this will come to pass
>
> and we all unable to do anything about it, in case it ever does.
>
> So we appeal to you, sun, on this broad day.
>
> You were ever a helpmate in times of great churning, and fatigue.
>
> You make us forget how serious we are
>
> and we dance in the lightning of your rhythm like demented souls
>
> on a hospital spree. (9)

Heidegger acknowledges the sun's importance for helping human beings define themselves in a day: "Everyday," the human being needs "the *possibility of sight*, that is, brightness, if it is to take care of things" and understand "itself in terms of its daily work. [. . .] Taking care makes use of the 'handiness' of the sun giving forth light and warmth." From the sun "arises the 'most natural' measure of time, the day," which it then divides:

"Like sunrise, sunset and noon are distinctive 'places' that this heavenly body occupies."

The sun is available daily for everyone to discover the "actual world of useful things,

[. . .] nature in the surrounding world and the public surrounding world," too. The human

being, "thrown into the world, temporalizing, and giving itself time, takes account of its

regular recurring passage" (*Being and Time* 379, original italics). All that the sun

provides—the regular rhythm of the day and its divisions, warmth, sight, the revelation of

the communal world, and most especially, time to realize one's potential—sustains "the

stubborn little band of marauders" (GR 39). The plane in the first line manifests itself as

a threat because it flies "across the sun," thus eclipsing it momentarily from the girls who

are running below.

Despite the sun's sustenance, the "kiddies" (18) are "always frightened /

frightened that this will come to pass" (9). What will come to pass may be the end of

every day, sundown and nightfall. Heidegger observes that the human being, thrown into

its situation, "is subject to the changes of day and night. Day with its brightness gives it

the possibility of sight, night takes it away" (*Being and Time* 379). Or, it may be an

attack by the unnamed "they" who have been holding the group hostage, threatening

future violence. Most likely, though, it is death, even the end of the world.[9] The girls are

obsessed with "the end" from the beginning of the poem; Heidegger describes the span

of life between two ends: "Death is, after all, only the 'end' of Dasein, and formally

speaking, it is just *one* of the ends that embraces the totality of Dasein. But the other

'end' is the 'beginning,' 'birth'" (342, original italics). Once one is born, one is on the

way to the other end, and one forms one's being around that certainty; one "exists as

born, and, born, it is already dying in the sense of being-toward-death" (343). Although

death is certain, its time "remains constantly indefinite"; so, the human being "opens

itself to a constant *threat* arising from its own there" (245, original italics).

Girls on the Run, too, addresses its end from its beginning although it is indefinite

about when and how it will end and about how the characters will face it; the narrative

remains ambiguous and does not even say whether the end pertains to the people, the

world, or the story: "He sat, eating a cheese sandwich, wondering if it would be his last, /

fiddled and sank away" (8); " As we perch / on this twig that must be the end of the world

for us" (19); "All were pursued by what happened this time / so as not to be puzzled by

what happened next on the long pier / of time reaching to the vanishing point" (24); "It is

all just about over" (25); "Just as the sun is going down / and down and down for the last

time"; "In the utopian schemes there was nothing left"; "But time was up"; "O say is

there any more, / truly? Can we have something? No" (45); "Then it was all over" (47);

"When it was all over, a sheep emerged from inside the house. / A cheer went up"; "It

was only inevitable, after all" (49).

The references to the end increase as the narrative approaches the end of the

poem; but the reader remains wary—Ashbery is known for his oxymoronic inconclusive

conclusions. However, unlike the meditation of *Three Poems* and the autobiographical

diary entries of *Flow Chart* in which readers do not expect finality, a narrative is

generally expected to provide some kind of closure, even if it be ambiguous. Peter

Brooks notes that readers are "frustrated by narrative interminable, even if we know that

any termination is artificial, and that the imposition of ending may lead to [a] resistance

to the end" (23). In a narrative such as *Girls on the Run*, in which the narrative is driven

by a pending, cataclysmic end, that end must be expressed in some way. Brooks suggests

a proposal that could describe Ashbery's strategy for closing the poem: "Perhaps we would do best to speak of the *anticipation of retrospection* as our chief tool in making sense of narrative. [. . .] We read in a spirit of confidence, and also a state of dependence, that what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of the already read" (23, original italics). This suggestion evokes, whether or not he meant it to, Heidegger's definition of an authentic understanding that acts in the present with an awareness of the past and anticipation of the future. The characters do not realize this tripartite view of time at the beginning of the poem, but they do want to make sense of their struggle: "And what does this have to do with me?" They dread not only the end but not knowing its consequence: "No one will ever know the outcome any more, / No, I mean no one will ever know the outcome" (30).

The characters fear and resist the pending end, they want to feel their lives have some meaning, and they want to enjoy themselves and each other in the time they have. Early in the poem, one of the characters, perhaps the narrator, says that distractions, such as trying to figure out an unknowable order or a meaning, remove one from one's real work: it is "toying with anagrams, while the real message / is being written in the stars." He advises a phenomenological relinquishment of control in order to let the answer reveal itself through what one pays attention to and does: "'But as the spirit of going is to go, I can't / control you, advise you much longer. Just keep on / persevering, and then we'll know what we have done matters most to us'" (GR 6). In prizing experience over abstract thought, the poem exemplifies James's "radical empiricism [. . .] with its pragmatic method and its principle of pure experience" (*Essays in Radical Empiricism* 83). James believes that whether attention comes "by grace of genius or by dint of will,"

one forms one's world through what one attends to: "Suffice it meanwhile that each of us literally *chooses*, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit" (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 424, original italics). Pragmatism begins with experience; however, it does not object to "the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere." It is "interested in no conclusions but those which our minds and our experiences work out together" (*Pragmatism* 40).

    Girls on the Run also stresses community and communication. The characters are constantly talking to each other and are repeatedly described with images of dancing. As a symbol, dance is "the corporeal image of a given process, or of becoming, or of the passage of time. [. . .] There is a universal belief that, in so far as it is a rhythmic art-form, it is a symbol of the act of creation" (Cirlot 76). Ashbery's images of dance show the characters' progress in coming to terms with their circumstances. "The kiddies dancing sidewise" (GR 4) describes them as they begin their narrative journey. As they become more frantic, one of the characters appeals to the sun, describing the group's dancing as a mindless reaction to their terror: "You make us forget how serious we are / and we dance in the lightning of your rhythm like demented souls / on a hospital spree" (9). As the poem gets closer to the end, the characters reflect their growing adjustment in their more natural movement: "they sway to and fro, / in time with the maker's rhythm" (33). Trevor the dog, the poem's most frequently quoted speaker other than the narrator, connects dancing with the ordinary motions of life using a mixture of concrete colloquial and abstract metaphorical language:[10]

Whoa, Trevor responded, these dances of life—

always pissing, and shitting, and waking up in the great grapefruit

as in a trundle bed, breathless following how it goes, leads

to the great here and there. (35)

The next-to-the-last mention of dance addresses the question of meaning; it is a response

to the earlier "then we'll know what we have done matters most to us": "This is only

what they did do. / They danced, and became meaningful to each other. It was cosmic

time" (49). They are meaningful to each other in their community, though life is no more

connected than it ever was: "All was as it had been before, / with no two dancers in step"

(52). Life returns to its prior way in that the characters still do not move in synchronous

motion; however the uncertainty looming over their lives is no longer feared. James

believes that "taken as it does appear, our universe is to a large extent chaotic. No one

single type of connection runs through all the experiences that compose it" (*Essays in

Radical Empiricism* 24). Regardless, one can feel a sense of continuity within one's own

experience at the same time as one feels a sense of discontinuity between one's

experience and another's (26). At the end of *Girls on the Run*, the narrator refers one

more time to dance, "There is no end to the dance" (52). James does not go so far as to

say "that the actual world, instead of being complete 'eternally,' as the monists assure us,

may be eternally incomplete, and at all times subject to addition or liable to loss."

However, he does say "it *is* at any rate incomplete in one respect, and flagrantly so. The

very fact that we debate this question shows that *our knowledge* is incomplete at present

and subject to addition. In respect of the knowledge it contains the world does genuinely

change and grow" (*Pragmatism* 82, original italics). The dance, or the interpretation of one's existence within one's world, is an ongoing process.

James sees "real creative activities in being" in the concrete experiences of "sustaining, persevering, striving, paying with effort as we go, hanging on, and finally achieving our intention—this is action, this is effectuation"; in these acts, he says, is where philosophers should look rather than "grubbing underground for what effects effectuation, or what makes action act" (*Essays in Radical Empiricism* 95-97). In *Girls on the Run*, the configurations of the plot reveal their significance through the characters' indefatigable actions and dialogue, not through abstract explanation. They are ongoing without any clearly defined turning point: an unnamed character says "But you must, otherwise the story would have no turning," but it does not; it has only a gradual, growing realization, not an epiphany. The characters do not have final answers but they have adapted to their circumstances, finding a productive way to cope. James writes that in the "pragmatist view [. . .] all our theories are instrumental, are mental modes of *adaptation* to reality, rather than revelations or Gnostic answers to some divinely instituted world-enigma" (*Pragmatism* 94, original italics).

In the last pages, the characters resume their playful storytelling: "Does anyone still want to play?" (49); "Talkative was / starting to tell one of his stories again, and smiling, / Hopeful silently abetted it" (51); "Paul picked up the legend / where it had been broken off" (52); "At first Talkative was reluctant to speak, then the words fell / like spring rain from his lips" (52). The narrator allows that even uncertainty is now understood as part of their experience and is not to be feared: "So we faced the new day, /

like a pilgrim who sees the end of his journey deferred forever. / Who could predict

where we would be led, to what / extremes of aloneness. Yet the horizon is civil" (53).

Ashbery manages to retain a limited freedom within a narrative structure by

approaching the narrative with a tentative essayism that does not impose an unrealistic

coherence but constructs an environment in which contradiction, the incomprehensible,

and possibility—all inherent in the confusion of events—are allowed to exist. When

defending "the many" over "the one," James argues that "the world is full of partial

stories that run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times. They

mutually interlace and interfere at points, but we cannot unify them completely in our

minds" (*Pragmatism* 70-71). Bakhtin, whose analyses of prose and genre aptly

illuminate Ashbery's *Three Poems*, also sheds light on Ashbery's narrative

inconclusiveness. Bakhtin notes that Dostoevsky's novels "contain no final, finalizing

discourse that defines anything once and for ever." Dostoevsky, he says, would not allow

"authorial discourse," to form a hero's "finalized image": "'Secondhand' discourse

providing a final summary of personality does not enter into his design. Whatever is

firm, dead, finished, unable to respond, whatever has already spoken its final word, does

not exist in Dostoevsky's world" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 251).

Narrative affords performative space for Ashbery to activate his Heideggerian

"major question that revolves around you, your being here"; in so doing, Ashbery moves

even closer than before to James's desire to connect philosophy with concrete example

and experience:

>Our acts, our turning-places, where we seem to ourselves to make
>
>ourselves and grow, are the parts of the world to which we are closest, the

> parts of which our knowledge is the most intimate and complete. Why
>
> should we not take them at their face-value? Why may they not be the
>
> actual turning-places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the
>
> world—why not the workshop of being, where we catch fact in the
>
> making, so that nowhere may the world grow in any other way than this?
>
> (*Pragmatism* 138)

The narrative form also allows more opportunity than the other forms for Ashbery to demonstrate his American pragmatic optimism that survives despite its realistic look at the period of "time" in which one can either "repair" by going somewhere or "repair" by restoring one's self, and at "the times" as the historical period in which one lives:

> The fat clock ticks. It's time to repair
>
> To the orchard, or just to repair.
>
> When it was all over a sheep emerged from inside the house.
>
> A cheer went up, for it was recognized that these are lousy times
>
> to be living in, yet we do live in them:
>
> We are the case.
>
> And seven times seven ages later it would still be the truth in appearances,
>
> festive, eternal, misconstrued. Does anyone still want to play? (49)

The poem seems to respond to this question in its final lines. They return to one of Ashbery's favorite tropes: moving from here to there or, at least, finding out where one is, since no one stays in place. The poem offers itself as friendly encouragement to the reader to "venture out" and follow its example of essayism: a willingness to test, question, and remain open to what will be found in the new experiences of the future.

We were cautioned once, told not to venture out—

yet I'd offer this much, this leaf, to thee.

Somewhere, darkness churns and answers are riveting,

taking on a fresh look, a twist. A carousel is burning.

The wide avenue smiles. (55)[11]

EPILOGUE:

ASHBERY'S ESSAYISM—A WANDERING PILGRIMAGE

Essayism not only provides a way of thinking that tests ideas, it also promotes a pragmatic, provisional attitude that accepts, rather than suppresses, the instability, contingency, and contradiction inherent in everyday existence. Ashbery takes advantage of both aspects of essayism in his attempts to comprehend what it means "to be" within this constantly changing situation. He began his investigations as early as "Some Trees": "The trees try / To tell us we are: That their merely being there / means something" (ST 51) and has continued them throughout the course of his work, including his most recent poems: "I / know and do not know what it is I am" (WC 73). As a philosophical *bricoleur*, Ashbery draws on the thought of like-minded philosophers, such as Montaigne, James, and Heidegger, to help him determine where he stands in his world at a given time. Three foundational beliefs, which they share in varying degrees, motivate Ashbery's essayism: life flows in unceasing, unpredictable motion; knowledge is provisional; and changing experiences require reevaluations of truths.

First, to portray the incessant motion in life, Ashbery employs images such as wandering, traveling, perpetually beginning, and taking a voyage, journey, or pilgrimage: for example, "Here I am then, continuing but ever beginning / my perennial voyage" (RM 44); "The beginning, where / we must stay, in motion" (HD 39); "For though we wander like lilies, there are none that can placate us, or / not at this time" (WSIW 80); and "For the continual pilgrimage has not stopped" (TP 5). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines

"wander" as "to move hither and thither without fixed course or certain aim" and

"pilgrimage" in its general sense as "a journey; a period of travelling or wandering from

place to place; (in early use) a period of exile, a foreign sojourn. Now *literary*"; and in its

figurative sense: "originally in religious contexts: the course of life, *esp.* mortal life as a

spiritual journey leading to heaven, a future state of blessedness, etc." Ashbery's view of

life as an unceasing, wandering pilgrimage highlights the correlation between life's

constant motion and one's self-understanding. If human beings are defined by "being-in-

the-world" as revealed through their interactions with its phenomena, as Heidegger says,

and if the course of a life entails an ongoing pilgrimage from place to place, then human

beings, as pilgrims, must continually redefine themselves by determining where they are

presently located in their pilgrimage. Self-understanding is, thus, related to determining

one's place in one's world. Ashbery addresses this task in his poetry: he tells

interviewers that a poem is a way of "getting from one place to another" (Sommer 313)

and that he writes to "realize, more, where I am" (Gangel 13).

To further complicate the issue, the destination of the pilgrimage in Ashbery's

poems is indeterminate. Religious pilgrims seek specific shrines or holy places when

they embark on pilgrimages in the course of their lives; Ashbery's pilgrims, for whom the

course of their lives is the pilgrimage, include both religious and secular human beings

who see their journey extended from day to day, until the end of life. A residual effect of

their wandering without a defined end or goal is that these pilgrims suffer an occasional,

uncanny sense of strangeness, of feeling not at home in the middle of everyday activity;

therefore, they desire to counteract that unsettledness by covering it up with activity, by

denying its existence, or, more productively, by facing it and integrating it into daily life.

The essayistic method assists Ashbery in the latter alternative of confronting and coping with unsettledness; in his poetry, he addresses the situation in which people yearn for what they cannot have—stability in an uncertain, ever-changing existence. Thomas Harrison describes essayism as a response to the unrealistic "search for a perfect accord between thinking, feeling, and acting in which right living can be said to consist." Through essayism, which accepts the impossibility of such an ethical harmony, one can "formulate a solution for living *in the absence* of this accord" (2, original italics). Its creative spirit of philosophical inquiry encourages the acknowledgment and exploration of contradictions, disjunctions, and anxiety. These investigations sometimes lead to areas of thought that have been ignored or suppressed; one might not see or be aware of, for example, the motivations for certain everyday practices because they are either unnoticed or disguised with the support of concepts that are no longer explicitly interpreted. Heidegger asserts that a phenomenon "can be covered up to such a degree that it is forgotten and the question about it and its meaning altogether omitted" (*Being and Time* 31). Essayism's wandering thought, often stimulated by confronting what might be uncomfortable, offers the opportunity to uncover such previously inaccessible phenomena through indirect means.

Ashbery frequently takes advantage of a number of connotations and definitions for specific terms in order to complicate his language; no meanings can be rejected without consideration. Therefore, despite Ashbery's tendency toward a modern secularism, the religious connotation of the term "pilgrimage" also bears on his thought. It indirectly recalls the Puritan Pilgrims, who left the Old World for the New World, who sought freedom *from* religious persecution and *for* self-governance. Richard Ruland and

Malcolm Bradbury describe the Puritans' "essential tale" as "a religious one of travail and *wandering*, with the Lord's guidance, in quest of a high purpose and a millennial history." Their imagination "brought to the New World not only a Judaic sense of *wonder* and millenarian promise, [. . .] but a vision of the task and nature of writing itself. [. . .] America became a testing place of language and narrative [. . .] and created the modern, discovering writing that we now call American literature" (9, italics added). Even though the religious mission of Puritanism long ago became assimilated into the larger secular American culture in which and of which Ashbery writes, the inclination to wander with a sense of wonder remains central in his poetry and does not exclude the religious connotation. He sometimes uses religious terms when depicting secular circumstances; for example, Ashbery's speaker in "Litany" muses on poetry, which he defines as "something like / grace," while he wanders on a "great high street which is like a too-busy / harbor [. . .] / a blatantly cacophonous if stirring / symphony" (AWK 38).

The sacred alongside the secular reenacts America's two beginnings: secular colonists, who came to find gold, settled Jamestown at roughly the same time as the Puritan Pilgrims established Plymouth. The United States derives from both Jamestown and Plymouth, the worldly and the sacred, respectively; and Ashbery incorporates language from both realms. His occasional use of sacred language, though it occurs in a secular context, acknowledges the religious impulse without limiting it to any doctrine. In this regard, he parallels James, who equates individual quests with a broad definition of what is meant by being religious:

> However particular questions connected with our individual destinies may
> be answered, it is only by acknowledging them as genuine questions, and

living in the sphere of thought which they open up, that we become

profound. But to live thus is to be religious. [. . .] The love of life, at any

and every level of development, is the religious impulse.

(*Varieties of Religious Experience* 388, 392)

Ashbery gives his readers the option to identify with the religious implications or ignore

them. Either way, with the image of a pilgrimage, Ashbery embodies the idea of flight

from the confinement of the known toward the promise of freedom in the unknown. He

continues the early tradition of the Pilgrims by depicting America as a place where one

can continually move toward new beginnings and find one's own voice within one's

particular history and culture. Ashbery hears "America calling" (HD 8), but rather than

defining it or drawing conclusions about it as a country, he presents his "version of

America" (SPCM 44) based on what he sees and hears, on Americans' ways of being and

how they affect each other. He told an interviewer that he was more aware of the

American culture after living in France for ten years: "Since I returned, I have gotten

more involved in the American scene, the American landscape, language, the funny way

we live. We're constantly sort of making up our lives and our personalities as we go

along in a way Europeans don't do. Luckily, I think, we improvise" (Gangel 9).

Ashbery's speaker in "The Skaters" relates his changing environment to his self

perception: "We step out into the street, not realizing that the street is different, / And so

it shall be all our lives: only, from this moment on, nothing will ever be the same again"

(RM 57). As the "street" moves on and changes, so does he.

The second point underlying esssayism is its inconclusiveness, which corresponds

to skepticism's doubts about acquiring knowledge with certainty. Montaigne developed

his essays as the proper vessels for his skeptical belief that he cannot develop his subjects completely, "for I do not see the whole of anything" (219). He warns against being "content with what others or we ourselves have found out in this hunt for knowledge." He always sees, as does Ashbery, another road:

> There is always room for a successor, yes, and for ourselves, and a road in another direction. There is no end to our researches; our end is in the other world. It is a sign of contraction of the mind when it is content, or of weariness. A spirited mind never stops within itself; it is always aspiring and going beyond its strength; it has impulses beyond its powers of achievement. If it does not advance and press forward and stand at bay and clash, it is only half alive. Its pursuits are boundless and without form; its food is *wonder*, the case, *ambiguity*. (817-18, italics added)

For Montaigne, as for Ruland and Bradbury in speaking of the Puritans, the word "wonder" easily slips into "wander"; "wonder" as "food" for "a spirited mind" inspires the pilgrim to wander. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun "wonder" as "an astonishing occurrence, event, or fact; a surprising incident; a wonderful thing"; and the verb "to wonder": "to ask oneself in wonderment; to feel some doubt or curiosity (*how*, *whether*, *why*, etc.); to be desirous to know or learn." Montaigne asserts that wonder encourages a mind to "press forward" with further research, despite realizing that full knowledge is never attained. Essayistic thinking requires the nourishment of wonder to propel continual inquiry; it also requires the circumstance of ambiguity to expose all angles of thought, the many options for meaning within one thought. The result might be something previously unknown, even wondrous. Ashbery suggests that a "questioning

stance" for attending to "the small ways" in which things happen has the ability "to coax us out of sleep and start us wondering what the new round / of impressions and salutations is going to leave in its wake / this time" (AG 54). With the phrases, "new round" and "this time," Ashbery implies that each experience offers more information, but with "coax us out of sleep," he recognizes that one must resist the urge to be content with current knowledge.

Finally, essayism's inconclusiveness accommodates pragmatism's conception of truths rather than Truth. Immutable truth, like absolute knowledge, cannot be established in one's experience: "So far as reality means experienceable reality, both it and the truths men gain about it are everlastingly in process of mutation—mutation towards a definite goal, it may be—but still mutation" (*Pragmatism* 107). James remarks favorably on "mind-wanderings" as a means of thinking about one's reality to develop "more results," or, one could say, the truths in particular experience:

> No matter how scatter-brained the type of a man's successive fields of consciousness may be, if he really *care* for a subject, he will return to it incessantly from his incessant wanderings, and first and last do more with it, and get more results from it, than another person whose attention may be more continuous during a given interval, but whose passion for the subject is of a more languid and less permanent sort.
>
> (*Talks to Teachers on Psychology* 778, original italics)

Essayism, like James's mind-wandering, requires the person's desire to stay with a subject in order to continue questioning it. Ashbery demonstrates this "care" by persisting in asking his "major question [. . .] your being here" (TP 51) within the longer

poems, among the various poems in each volume, and among the volumes themselves. Different truths are revealed in different perspectives, conditions, and times.

Essayism, as a process that accommodates continual motion, incomplete knowledge, and changing truths as unavoidable aspects of existence, proves itself to be a useful way of thinking for people who do not wish to settle into a status quo that strives to deny such complications. In this regard, Ashbery takes on a role comparable to that of Emerson, who declares in "Circles" that "I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker" (*Selected Essays* 198). Ashbery describes someone, conceivably a poet, who is "intent on disarraying the public gravitas of things" (WSIW 79):

> So who's to blame us for signing off on our agenda and
>
> sinking into a cozy chair, accepting the proffered sherry and sighing for
>
> a time when things really were easier and more people were alive. That,
>
> and Jack's tattoo. But there was something else slinking up via the
>
> back way and mingling with the invited guests, *mine de rien*. Not a
>
> bailiff or a rejected suitor from prelapsarian school picnics, nor yet a
>
> seemingly indifferent observer, tie-clasp camera getting it all down, nor
>
> a truly open-minded member of the cultivated bourgeoisie our
>
> grandfathers sprang from or knew about, but a cosmic dunce, bent on
>
> mischief and good works with equal zest, somebody fully determined
>
> to *be* and not disturb others with his passive-aggressive version of how
>
> things are and ever shall be—the distinguished visiting lecturer.
>
> (78, original italics)

The "cosmic dunce" is an interesting verbal modulation from Ashbery's description of characters who "danced" in "cosmic time" in *Girls on the Run* (49). The dancers exemplify community in relationship; the dunce exemplifies a way out of torpor. The cosmic dunce, perhaps Ashbery himself, is paradoxically "fully determined" not to be determined by the "passive-aggressive" conventional wisdom of what should be. Alternatively, he attends to who he *is* by simply letting himself be himself. Because he resists disturbing others with definitive proclamations on "how / things are and ever shall be," he puts himself on a temporary status as a "visiting lecturer." However, he does disturb the status quo by demonstrating a vital way of being, thus drawing attention to a surrounding, seductive apathy.

The poet, as one who disturbs, rescues Ashbery's speaker from his nostalgia for an impossible contentment so that he can regain a sense of "authentic being," which is Heidegger's term for a person who resolutely faces, rather than turns away from, a feeling of *angst* due to a lack of control over one's own being and future. Ashbery, thus, sees his role, not only as an unsettling "cosmic dunce," but also as a pragmatist whose poetry demonstrates the practical results of acknowledging one's anxiety so that one can find ways to live with it: "Mine's isn't the option to / show you how to escape or comfort you unduly but with a little time / and a little patience we shall make this thing work" (FC 15). His poems accomplish this task, not by providing "escape or comfort," but by presenting a tentative way of thinking in order to find ways of approaching one's experiences that are, in James's terms, "helpful in life's practical struggles" (*Pragmatism* 42). Instead of looking at life's contingencies with dread or ignoring them, which intensifies the *angst* of uncertainty, Ashbery recognizes them as part of existence;

therefore, he accepts the indefinite and the mysterious, including the ultimate unknown of death: "You might as well linger / On verandas, enjoying life, knowing / The end is essentially unpredictable" (AWK 109). He even welcomes change to the extent that he suggests initiating it: "You must try getting up from the table / And sitting down relaxed in another country" (AG 56).

Essayism implies acquiescence in what cannot be changed, but not acquiescence in the status quo; it promotes a committed dedication to a phenomenological uncovering of whatever lies within each experience: "I put aside the there and now. / Now it was time to stumble anew" (WSIW 12). Ashbery calls for resistance to the "easy way" (WC 76): "Only don't fall back on the old excuses, i.e., / action as an excuse for inaction. We're not children anymore. / Why not give real life a chance?" (54). Essayism's pragmatic method tests ideas for what works, based not on what has been done or what theory suggests, but on the particulars of each encounter: "We are aware that we are doing something / and are thus prepared to follow the event's traces as far as need be" (WSIW 80).

Tracing Ashbery's essayism sheds light on *how* the process of inquiry motivates the poetry, yet one must also take the further step of paying attention to *what* Ashbery communicates, which is what he muses on and discovers as he follows the "erratic" path of his thought. He wishes to make sense of each day's happenings:

> For night, as usual, knew what it was doing,
>
> providing sleep to offset the great ungluing
>
> that tomorrow again would surely bring.
>
> As I gazed at the quiet rubble, one thing

> puzzled me: What had happened, and why?
>
> One minute we were up to our necks in rebelliousness,
>
> and the next, peace had subdued the ranks of hellishness. (WC 1)

Of note is that the question of "what had happened, and why?" is the single line in the poem that does not rhyme; all other lines are rhyming couplets. Its breaking away from the regular rhythm of the poem draws attention to its importance. The question cannot be answered definitively, but is answered provisionally; because of one's unquenchable desire to understand one's encounters with one's world, it must be asked at night after each day's "ungluing" in hopes of incremental, pragmatic answers that help one begin again the next day.

Essayism reflects a philosophical viewpoint in two ways: first, both philosopher and poet can employ the "how" of essayism's form in their works as a way to test ideas freely without need to conclude or systematize; second, essayism in a philosopher's and poet's works effectively expresses the "what" of their philosophical positions by allowing the effects of the flux and confusion inherent in experience to become part of the work itself. An understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Ashbery's poetry illuminates his intertwined form and thought; Ashbery does not differentiate between the two when discussing their place in his poetry: "The form seems to be the content and vice-versa for me" (Labrie 30). However, his poetry will always retain the element of mystery; mystery is a critical part of its subject and motivation, just as it is a part of everyday life. Ashbery continues to write poems that attempt to "see us as we truly behave" (ST 9), that place him, at least for the moment, within this ever-changing,

mysterious world: "So we faced the new day, / like a pilgrim who sees the end of his

journey deferred forever" (GR 53).

NOTES

Introduction

[1]Cleanth Brooks includes as one of New Criticism's defining aspects a "concern with a specifically *literary* criticism as distinguished from a study of sources or of social backgrounds or of the history of ideas or of the political and social effects of literature" ("New Criticism" 568, original italics). However, in the late 1960s and 1970s, psychoanalytical, phenomenological, structural, and post-structural literary criticism, which had been developing on the Continent, began exerting more influence in the United States, eventually lessening the dominance of New Criticism. Also, see Vincent B. Leitch's *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* for the history of New Criticism's influence in American literary criticism.

[2]Stephen Toulmin argues for a similar combination in thought. He defines the twentieth-century challenge to be an amalgamation of skepticism and foundationalism: it should seek to restore the benefits of "the 16th-century commitment to intellectual modesty, uncertainty, and toleration [. . .] without in turn losing the advantages [. . .] won during the three hundred years in which intellectual life was dominated by Cartesian philosophy and the exact sciences" (174).

[3]Adorno's statement continues and revises the anti-science dogma of the New Critics. Cleanth Brooks in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, for example, discusses the insufficiency of a scientific analysis and classification either in writing or reading a poem. "It is not enough for the poet to analyse his experience as the scientist does. [. . .]

The poem [. . .] is an 'imitation'—by *being* an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience" (212-13, original italics). Brooks looks to the poem to unify and *be* an experience rather than to take it apart and simply talk about it; Adorno looks to the essay to examine meaning in changing contexts rather than cling to the controlling concepts of science.

[4]A few notable examples of these studies are Claire de Obaldia's *The Essayistic Spirit*, Thomas Harrison's *Essayism*, John A. McCarthy's *Crossing Boundaries*, and Alexander J. Butrym's collection of essays in *Essays on the Essay*.

[5]By comparing Ashbery's thought to that of certain philosophers, I do not intend to suggest that Ashbery considers his work to be a form of philosophy. I agree with David Lehman who notes that "although Ashbery's corpus is not to be confused with a body of philosophical work, it may profitably be examined within the context of a philosophical inquiry, especially in light of the poet's unique conception of the self" (25).

[6]Charles Molesworth, for example, disparages the tone of the early poems' imagery as "arbitrary, coy, disaffected, 'smart'"; and despite Ashbery's subsequent awards, he asks, "How has this difficult, often abstruse poet found an audience?" (22, 38).

[7]David Lehman, too, focuses on Ashbery's style, particularly on his revision or extension of the usual view of irony. Ashbery, he comments, is content to let contradictions rest in a "state of more-or-less peaceful coexistence" (102); his "ironic gesturing" is his means of "resist[ing] the temptation to fill up vacancies with reassuring convictions" (126). James Longenbach follows Ashbery's stylistic experiments through several phases, determining in "Syringa" that "the subject matter [. . .] is not only

inconsequential but unknowable" (*Modern Poetry* 99). Recently he wrote that in always

writing about the same subjects, which is true of most of lyric poetry, "Ashbery [. . .]

forces us to recognize that we read a poem for its manner rather than its matter"

(*Resistance to Poetry* 32). Richard Kostelanetz concludes that "the real key to Ashbery's

genius lies [. . .] in the 'sound' of his poetry; it is also the quality most likely to elude the

hasty reader of his works" (109).

[8]Vendler's comments on Wallace Stevens' long poems could also apply to

Ashbery's long poems. In *On Extended Wings*, she writes that "in each period of

Stevens' life as a poet, [the long poems] are characteristic, and to read them in sequence

is one way, if not the only way, of tracing both his states of feeling and his enterprises

and inventions. [. . .] Through the long poems Stevens discovered his own strengths" (2).

She further notes that "we keep, in reading Stevens, a double attitude, seeing the major

poems both as things in themselves and as steps in a long progress toward his most

complete incarnations of his sense of the world: 'What is the poet's subject? It is his

sense of the world" (6). "The long poems give us very clearly Stevens' world" (7). One

of the differences between Vendler's study of Stevens and my study of Ashbery stems

from one of Stevens' aphorisms, which Vendler quotes: "a change of style is a change of

subject"; therefore, she looks first to his style (11). On the other hand, I maintain that

Ashbery looks at the same subject but experiments with style to change perspective, so I

will, therefore, look at the relationship between style and subject to see how change of

style alters the perspective on an unchanging subject.

[9]Geoff Ward warns that "we must be wary of the dangers in thinking of

'Ashbery's writing', as if there were an absolute consistency of belief and procedure

stretching from *Turandot*, or even *The Double Dream of Spring* to *April Galleons* and

beyond" (92). I agree with Ward; essayistic writing, by definition, does not follow an

absolutely consistent procedure. I do suggest, however, that Ashbery circles around the

same question, the perception of self within an uncertain world, though the investigation

changes with time and perspective. The essayistic strategy encourages side paths,

detours, and digressions that, while not directly focused on the question, will ultimately

bear on it—even if only to eliminate or discard certain views.

<u>Chapter One</u>

[1]David Herd describes "My Philosophy of Life" as a poem that "advertises itself

to the uncertain reader, and does not prove to be a decoy." He notes that in this poem,

Ashbery is interested in explaining his "origins and fundamentals" to the reader (*John

Ashbery and American Poetry* 215).

[2]Ashbery says that he read Proust in college before he was twenty. He calls the

experience "a major shock":

> It took me almost a year. I read very slowly anyway, but particularly in
>
> the case of a writer whom I wanted to read every word of. I think one
>
> ends up feeling sadder and wiser in equal proportions when one is finished
>
> reading him—I can no longer look at the world in quite the same way. [. . .
>
> The work] seizes the way life sometimes seems to have of droning on in a
>
> sort of dreamlike space. (Stitt 189)

[3]Vendler notes the connection between thought and humor to point out humor's

role in keeping thought agile:

> [Pope's] *Essay* represent[s] thought [. . . a]s something that
>
> can be parodied, jested with, coarsened, inhumanely speeded-up;
>
> something mobile in its flickering, ever tumbling over into nonsense,
>
> smooth at times, rough at times, serious and funny by turns, giddy and
>
> solemn, wittily resourceful in its self-expression in language; something
>
> that can always bring an edge to the mind and a smile to the lips.
>
> (*Poet's Thinking* 35)

Oscar Wilde, too, sees wit as a necessary ingredient for thinking about and coping with life; he wrote in *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it" (390), and in *Vera, or the Nihilists*": "life is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it" (665).

[4]David Herd points out the reference to William James, links the poem to several passages from *Pragmatism*, and discusses the influence of James's pragmatism seeing an Emerson-Whitman-James-Stevens, American strain continued by Ashbery (*John Ashbery and American Poetry* 13). He also briefly points out relevant pages in James's *Pragmatism* that distinguish "refinement" and "pragmatism" though he does not draw detailed distinctions between the terms as used by James and Ashbery nor does he examine the import of James's pragmatism for reading Ashbery's work (215).

[5]James was so heavily criticized for his views in *Pragmatism* that he immediately published *The Meaning of Truth* as a follow-up to and defense of it. Both volumes are published together in the edition of *Pragmatism* that I cite. In the "Preface," he writes: "One of the accusations which I oftenest have had to meet is that of making the truth of

our religious beliefs consist in their 'feeling good' to us, and in nothing else. I regret to have given some excuse for this charge, by the unguarded language in which, in the book *Pragmatism*, I spoke of the truth of the belief of certain philosophers in the absolute" (171). As he repeats his theories of truth and pragmatism in hope of clarifying them, he says, "I make bold to vary my statements, in the faint hope that repeated droppings may wear upon the stone, and that my formulas may seem less obscure if surrounded by something more of a 'mass' whereby to apperceive them" (244). His metaphoric description of essays as "repeated droppings" is interesting as a lively term applicable to Ashbery's repeated attempts to cover the same ground from different perspectives.

[6]Geoff Ward states that Ashbery's phenomenology is "from a perspective more like that of Merleau-Ponty's writing, than Heidegger's essentialism" (112). Although I agree that an interesting comparison could be drawn between Merleau-Ponty's views on the phenomenology of perception and Ashbery's interest in perception of self, I focus on Heidegger because his phenomenology is linked, unlike Merleau-Ponty's, to the ontological questions that I believe are pursued in Ashbery's poetry and motivate his interest in perception. Although Heidegger's phenomenological quest aims ultimately to understand the essence of being, it begins in *Being and Time* by investigating the phenomena of human existence, which aspect is also crucial to Ashbery.

<u>Chapter Two</u>

[1]"Some Trees," with its subject of the speaker's relationship to his environment and its closing insight, initially appears to be in the lyric mode, but its abstract landscape and third-person plural, unspecified speakers belie its appearance. "Two Scenes" moves

even further from lyric with a paratactic structure that prevents its unity and, especially, its inconclusive closing without epiphany in addition to its undefined landscape and mixture of pronouns. "Clepsydra" continues the move away from traditional lyric poetry as it mingles the language of argument and a semi-philosophical stance with images, diction, and other expected poetic patterns.

[2]Shoptaw draws attention to the poem's structure as an argument. He points out that "[a]s a water clock, the clepsydra was used to time lawyers' arguments in court" (84). He refers to the poem's "densely woven argumentation" (88) and describes the "case argued [as] a divorce: that of the past from the present, the poem from the poet, and one lover from another" (84). Herd notes that "'Clepsydra' is an argumentative poem: discoursing on Romantic and modernist aesthetics even as in its practice it is moving dramatically beyond them" (*John Ashbery and American Poetry* 109). I argue that Ashbery's argument pertains to the philosophical issues of time, truth, and self rather than to specific events or aesthetics.

[3]Heidegger's translator to "On the Essence of Truth," John Sallis, notes the term "to err" must be "understood in its root sense derived from the Latin *errare*, 'to wander from the right way,' and only secondarily in the sense 'to fall into error'" (quoted in "On the Essence of Truth" 135).

[4]Ashbery draws attention to the serpentine nature of his sentences in describing "the bounding from air to air, a serpentine / Gesture." Shoptaw also discusses "the serpentine sentence," in "Clepsydra," "descending from Wordsworth [. . .] and Stevens

[. . .] and from Proust and [Henry] James." He notes that "if we read 'Clepsydra' after *Some Trees*, for instance, we would expect line breaks at the end of sonic and syntactical units" (85).

[5] I use "analytic" and "synthetic" in their root meanings of "breaking up or separating" and "putting together," respectively; I do not intend the "contrast originally introduced by Kant between types of proposition" (Blackburn 15).

[6] Ashbery uses Analytical Cubism versus Synthetic Cubism to explain the difference between absorbing new influences by taking them apart and consolidating them "to sort out what one has and to make of it what one can": "The period of Analytical Cubism and its successor Synthetic Cubism is a neat model for this process, and there will always be those who prefer the crude energy of the early phase to the more sedate and reflective realizations of the latter. Although I have a slight preference for the latter, I know that I would hate to be deprived of either" (RS 241-242).

[7] Ashbery states that he was reading *The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley while writing *Three Poems* (Sommer 303). Huxley's anthology includes some excerpts from *The Cloud of Unknowing* but specifically what parts of the book Ashbery read or even whether he read the book as early as writing "Clepsydra" is not known. The allusion to *The Cloud of the Unknowing* seems rather specific, however.

[8] The Italian provenance of a "stanza" is a "room; as a room, or a self-contained group of lines, the single stanza creates a space for Ashbery in which he can move around to investigate all corners or aspects of his subject without leaving his main focus.

[9] Shoptaw sees "Clepsydra" as "one of the most productive poems of Ashbery's career" (87). I agree that it is a decisive poem; as I argue, "Clepsydra" points to many of

the questions and issues that will be further contemplated in the long poems that I am considering. I comment on many points raised by Shoptaw, such as those on "destiny," "prevision," "the serpentine sentence," and "question and answer"; however, unlike Shoptaw, I specifically focus on them as they relate to the pragmatic purposes of skeptical and ontological questioning. Longenbach, too, considers "Clepsydra" "a watershed in [Ashbery's] career" because he is able to "embody a temporal process" while "avoiding his earlier idealization of poetic form" (*Modern Poetry* 95). Harold Bloom, however, does not see "Clepsydra" as a critical turning point in Ashbery's work; in fact, he sees it as "a beautiful failure [. . .] because [of] its solipsism [. . .] that neither wants nor needs readers" (*Figures of Capable Imagination* 178). He considers "[t]he poem's subject [to be] Ashbery's entrapped subjectivity." I, on the other hand, read it as a probing of the self that avoids solipsism due to its attention to one's self in a world of others—concerns that he will continue exploring in much of his later poetry.

Chapter Three

[1]Ashbery has often referred to his poetry in terms of space and personal exploration: "I want to move to some other *space*, I guess, when I write which perhaps was where I had been but without being fully conscious of it. I want to move in and out of it, while I'm writing [. . .], realize, more, where I am" (Gangel 13, original italics). Ashbery makes this point another way by saying that his poetry "sets up a kind of imaginary field and moves around in it" (Osti 87).

[2]Other critics have thought of genre in terms of place. Claudio Guillén described genre as a matching of the poet's "matter" with "form; while the "details of rhetoric and

style" may vary, "only the generic model is likely to be effective at the crucial moment of total configuration, construction, *com-position*" (120, original italics). "Composition," which derives from the Latin *positus*, to place, indicates Guillén's view of genre's function in placing material together in a controlling form. He later called genres "'dwelling places' for the writer" (377), but recognized that although creative writers work within and respond to these places, their resulting aesthetic decisions often contribute to redefinitions of a genre. Even so, Guillen said, the system of genres endures: "The code, if not the message, is a coherent whole" (133). Ernst Robert Curtius says they provide a writer an "ideal space."

[3]Wayne Booth evokes essayism when he refers to "Bakhtin's unsystematic system" (xxi), which echoes Pater's description of the essay as "this essentially informal, this un-methodical, method" (166).

[4]The inclusion of ordinary speech in their poetry puts Ashbery and Williams in a poetic tradition that goes back to early poets such as Chaucer and, more recently, to William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, and Ezra Pound. In 1800, Wordsworth published the "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*" in which he responded to readers and critics who resisted his turn away from the prevalent "poetic diction" of his time. He defended his decision "to choose incidents and situations from common life" and to present them in the "language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination" (358). He further showed "that the language of Prose may yet be well adapted to Poetry" (360) and agreed with Aristotle "that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative" (362). Though Wordsworth's language is not the spoken language of

today, and much of it was not even the spoken language of his own time, he did prepare

the way for an expansion of the definition of the "poetic." Whitman's poetry arose from

his American experience; in a retrospective view of his poetry, "A Backward Glance O'er

Travel'd Roads," he wrote: "Given the Nineteenth Century, with the United States, and

what they furnish as area and points of view, 'Leaves of Grass' is, or seeks to be, simply

a faithful and doubtless self-will'd record. [. . .] I abandon'd the conventional themes" of

poetry (658). Though he reveres and learns from the great poetry of the "Old World," he

foreshadows Williams' and Ashbery's aspirations for a democratic poetry when he

expresses his desire to record the variety of his own time: "the New World needs the

poems of realities and science and of the democratic average and basic equality" (664).

He considers "Leaves of Grass" as an "outcropping" of his "own emotional and other

personal nature"; as such, he expresses himself in a colloquial idiom that directly

addresses his reader, even though it often apostrophizes and catalogues in a poetic way.

Although Bloom considers Ashbery, "like Whitman and Stevens, a descendant of

Emerson," he adds that Ashbery, with his "more modest" hopes "is, in temperament,

more like Whitman than like Emerson or Stevens" (*Figures of Capable Imagination* 170-

71). Pound pays homage to Whitman as his "spiritual father," saying that "like Dante he

wrote in the 'vulgar tongue,' in a new metric. The first great man to write in the language

of his people" ("What I feel about Walt Whitman" 145-46). Unlike Whitman, who draws

material from his own experience, Pound includes prose from a number of outside

sources, and he also writes in a variety of idioms. *The Cantos* includes numerous

literary/historical allusions and languages, such as American, conversational slang: "An'

that man sweat blood / to put through that railway, And what he ever got out of it?"

(101); regional dialects; foreign languages; ideograms; the languages of history and economics; and poetic diction: "If the hoar frost grip thy tent / Thou wilt give thanks when night is spent" (554). Hugh Kenner notes that Pound moves beyond Wordsworth and other predecessors: Pound's "attention, with less ceremony than Mallarmé's, was upon just such a mystery, the rare cooperation of genius with common speech: neither the laconic expertise of a Flaubert [. . .] nor the adoption of the 'real language of men' which is but another persona, but the power to charge simple vocables with all that they can say" (105). Ashbery seems to work toward achieving this power in his use of ordinary language and clichés, but also the frequent unfamiliar word that sends the reader to a dictionary.

[5]In *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, P. N. Medvedev and Bakhtin specifically connect genre, language, and consciousness:

> Every genre has its methods and means of seeing and conceptualizing reality, which are accessible to it alone. [. . .] The old concept that man is conscious of and conceptualizes reality through language is basically correct. It is true that no distinct or clear consciousness of the world is possible outside of the word. Language and its forms play an essential role in the process of the consciousness's refraction of existence. (133)

To change genres is to change one's perspective, possibly to one that might be unfamiliar or even alien. Medvedev and Bakhtin consider both "inner genres for seeing and conceptualizing reality" and genres for representation embodying that reality through the plastic arts or literature (134). The processes at work in the inner and representative genres are intertwined:

> In real fact, seeing and representation merge. New means of representation force us to see new aspects of visible reality, but these new apects cannot clarify or significantly enter our horizon if the new means necessary to consolidate them are lacking. One is inseparable from the other. (134)

This text is one of several disputed texts bearing the name of Bakhtin as co-author and originally published by Marxist associates of Bakhtin. The dispute has not been definitively settled and is beside this work's point; however, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, who believe Bakhtin did not write the texts and did not share Voloshinov's and Medvedev's Marxist, semiotic, formalist or structuralist views, allow that, even so, they "believe that Bakhtin not only influenced Voloshinov and Medvedev, but that their ideas had an important effect on his own development" (11).   Morson and Emerson "believe that the relations among Bakhtin, Voloshinov, and Medvedev were genuinely dialogic," which perhaps influenced Bakhtin's later turn toward "theories of language and literature that were sociological without being Marxist, [. . .] with his sociology without theoretism" (118-119).

[6]Ashbery describes polyphony in terms of voice, which closely aligns with Bakhtin's theory, but, in an interview, he also refers to its musical usage, in which simultaneous but independent melodic lines enter into the total composition in much the same way: "I am constantly using different voices without being aware of it, of different people who seem to be talking in these poems without bothering to indicate to the reader where one stops and another one starts up again because I'm interested in a kind of polyphonic quality that attracts me in music" (Munn 61).

[7]In her Bakhtinian reading of *Three Poems*, Margueritte Murphy concludes that even though Bakhtin asserts that "poetry tends to be monologic and solipsistic," the qualities of dialogism and polyphony "that Bakhtin finds in the discourse of the novel appear in heightened and self-conscious form in *Three Poems*" (178). Murphy's discussion focuses more on how the "polyphonic discourse" in *Three Poems* lives "up to the model of the prose poem as a subversive, contestatory genre" (196-97) than on its role along with his other poems in addressing his philosophic concerns. Nevertheless, Murphy offers an intriguing analysis of Ashbery's "ways of being and thinking" in *Three Poems* (196).

[8]For example, Susan Schultz proposes that in these lines, Ashbery raises "the question of genre," whether to write a prose poem or lyric (137); John Shoptaw similarly believes that Ashbery is choosing between "total prose" and "fragmented lyric" (126).

[9]Bloom notes that *Three Poems* "has an oddly religious tone" (*Figures of Capable Imagination* 179), but he attributes that tone to self-reflexivity. He says that Ashbery, just as Vendler said of Stevens, "tends to *sound* religious when his poems discourse upon themselves" (179, original italics). However, I assert, in this chapter, that the religious tone in *Three Poems* appears to result, instead, from Ashbery's making use of the methods of religious meditation including some of its language, even though the poem's speaker meditates on an increasing understanding of self rather than on overtly religious matters. I will, in the "Epilogue," also address Ashbery's use of religious language as an expression of what James calls "the love of life, [. . .] the religious impulse" (*Varieties of Religious Experience* 392).

[10]Many critics have noted Ashbery's allusions to Stein and Eliot in much of his work, including in *Three Poems*, a point with which I agree. However, in this chapter, I'm looking particularly at Ashbery's decision to use prose rather than poetry for *Three Poems*, so am more interested in the prose works as predecessors.

[11]In his study of Ashbery's prose, Stephen Fredman looks at the "classic meditation questions" in *Three Poems* as they "are set within a mid-life spiritual meditation" (118), but he does not dwell at length on Ashbery's use of the meditative process itself. Fredman makes an interesting observation on Ashbery's meditative prose: "Because the sentence is our most highly developed tool for argument, its employment by Ashbery in the form of prose allows him to investigate argumentative and philosophical realms more intensively than in his extremely elliptical verse" (110). And, of course, Ashbery continues in future poems to use long lines and interspersed prose for such an advantage.

Chapter Four

[1]Shoptaw recounts a conversation in which Ashbery told him that this description on the dust jacket was "drafted by Ashbery and revised anonymously at Knopf." Shoptaw writes that "the jacket copy will not meet literal 'truth-in-packaging' standards. But this 'authorized' (if not exactly 'authored') description of *Flow Chart* is nonetheless an intriguing and valuable document." Shoptaw believes that the "definition and metaphorical elaboration of the title" in this description "invite us to read the poem, in some way, autobiographically" (306-7). I concur and further note that whether or not

Ashbery actually wrote the words, the description accurately portrays *Flow Chart* in terms that recall its predecessors.

[2]Shoptaw discusses the *Flow Chart* as "anybody's autobiography, but nobody's in particular." He links it to his book's premise of misrepresentation by adding, "But the peculiarity of its misrepresentations belongs only to its autobiographical author" (302). He adds that "the definition and metaphorical elaboration of the title [in the book jacket] lead us to read 'flow chart' as a synonym or metaphor for 'autobiography,' and consequently invite us to read the poem, in some way, autobiographically" (307). Vendler notes that in *Flow Chart*, "Ashbery feels free to use private information inaccessible to his reader (if only so that his autobiography in verse can be an intimate one, and the reticence that means so much to him will remain unviolated." And she particularly finds that "this sort of disguised autobiography runs all through Part IV of 'Flow Chart'" ("Steely Glitter Chasing Shadows" 75). Perloff quotes lines from *Flow Chart*: "And if I told you / this was your life, not some short story for a contest, how would you react?" On reading these lines, she says "we realize [. . .] that we have witnessed Mr. Ashbery's own life, one in which it is no longer possible, or even desirable, to separate personal memory from what one has read in the newspaper or seen on television" ("Forest of Agony and Pleasure" 12).

[3]This description applies also to artists such as Rembrandt and Van Gogh, who painted their self-portraits many times, presumably attempting to catch the changes occurring in time and mood. Georges Gusdorf concludes that "the total portrait of Rembrandt is to be found on the horizon of all these different visages of which it would be, in a sense, the common denominator" (35). In this sense, only all of Montaigne's

Essays or all of Ashbery's poems with their on-going records of change, development, and contradiction would come close to authentic literary self-portraits; however, *Flow Chart*, with its daily record of change over a period of six months, might also be considered a microcosm of Ashbery's larger scope.

[4]Though most critics acknowledge increasing attention being paid to autobiography in the twentieth century, Saint Augustine's *Confessions* is generally regarded as the first autobiography with Rousseau, Montaigne, and even Plato often cited as forerunners to the modern form. Saint Augustine, for example, prefigures Ashbery when he says that he wants to write "in such a way that my words would reinforce for each reader whatever truth he was able to grasp about these matters, than express a single idea so unambiguously as to exclude others, provided these did not offend me by their falsehood" (302). James Olney makes a case for W. P. Scargill's *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister* published in 1834 as the first book to call itself an autobiography (5-6) although the Oxford English Dictionary credits the *Monthly Review* with the first usage of the term in 1797.

[5]It is interesting to note that this shift in emphasis from the isolated life to the life in the context of its environment occurs roughly at the same time as literary criticism moves from the narrow view of New Criticism that confined itself to the work itself to criticism that considers the work's and the author's context.

Also, the shift in emphasis, noted by Olney, from "bios" to "autos," from knowledge of a life to awareness of a self, is also recognized by others with slightly different emphases. Brian McHale, who writes on postmodernism, asserts the "dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*" and "the dominant of postmodernist fiction is

ontological." The former foregrounds questions on how to know and the latter

foregrounds questions on the nature of what it is to be (9-10, original italics). Heinz

Kohut, a psychiatrist and neurologist who explores the meaning of the self, believes that

artists anticipate the concerns of their era; the European novelists of the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries, he says, wrote of individuals' struggles with their

environment, whereas the modern artists depict the break up and fragmentation of the

self. The tasks at hand are not only to portray but to heal, "to create new structures that

possess wholeness, perfection, new meaning" (286-288). The philosopher William Earle

attempts to redefine the procedures of philosophy; he suggests "an effort to excavate the

implicit, reflexive consciousness of a singular being by that singular being." The

"autobiographical consciousness" thinks about itself; he writes, "'Know thyself' invites

me to become explicit as to who I am, what it is for me to exist; what my singular

existence has been, where it is now, and what lies before me." He also calls it an

"ontological autobiography" (10).

[6]Roy Pascal concurs, tracking the origins of autobiography primarily to Europe

but not finding it in the Far or Near East (2). Cox links autobiography with the American

and French revolutions, "the convulsive acts which released the individual as a potent

political entity and gave us what we are pleased to call modern man. And each nation

produced in this revolutionary period a classic account of the self: Rousseau's

'Confessions' and Franklin's 'Memoir'" (256). Taylor sees its importance primarily in

American culture, where representative men such as Howells and Clemens felt "a need to

reinvent a narrative bond between personal upheaval within and accelerating change in

America without" (xii). William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist connect

autobiography with the American myth, "a pilgrimage from imperfection to perfection," in which the writer scrutinizes himself or herself to reconcile either religiously with "the infinite one" or politically with "the general group" (503). Mutlu Konuk Blasing draws a similar distinction: "autobiography has proved to be a congenial form for American writers, because it asserts both their spiritual power to create or regenerate themselves and their potentially political power to change hearts and minds" (xii).

[7]Ashbery discusses this use of his experience in an interview:

> I have always been averse to talking about myself, and so I don't write about my life the way the confessional poets do. I don't want to bore people with experiences of mine that are simply versions of what everybody goes through. For me, poetry starts after that point. I write with experiences in mind, but I don't write about them. I write out of them. (Stitt 189-90)

[8]In his communication through poetry, Ashbery veils specific details of his own experience, placing more emphasis on how his thought works in an autobiographical way so the same process can be adopted by readers; he provides "The Skaters" as an example:

> When I was writing [in "The Skaters"] about childhood memories, I didn't want them to be specific ones that applied to me but only ones that anybody would use if they were thinking autobiographically; they were just to be forms of autobiography rather than special elements that applied to my life and in fact many of them are made up things, not things I experienced as a child. ("Craft Interview" 24)

Ashbery's admission that he not only does not specifically describe his own experiences but even makes some up could be considered violations of Lejeune's "autobiographical pact." John Shoptaw considers *Flow Chart* to be misrepresentational autobiography, chiefly because he believes it breaks with the autobiographical pact (331). He reasons that "implicit in Lejenue's equation of the autobiographer with his or her subject is the assumption that one promises to tell the whole truth of one's life and to judge (and 'sentence') it accordingly" (331). However, Lejeune actually argues for the autobiographical pact in truth of authorship not material; Lejeune writes, "In order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general), the *author*, the *narrator,* and the *protagonist* must be identical" (5, original italics). In order to establish this identity of name, either the title of the work or its opening section can state that it is autobiography or the narrator-protagonist can have the same name as the author (14). According to Lejeune, the author does not commit himself or herself to exactitude; instead, biographical and autobiographical texts are "referential": "Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not 'the effect of the real,' but the image of the real" (22). Ashbery does not claim, either in the title of *Flow Chart* or in the name of the narrator-protagonist, to be writing an autobiography, so at Lejeune's most basic level of definition for the autobiographical pact, Ashbery's poem does not qualify as autobiography. While many of the problematic autobiographical issues raised by Lejeune become subject matter in *Flow Chart*, the "autobiographical pact" itself is not relevant for Ashbery's poem; its autobiographical elements serve primarily to provide a form for his investigation of self/consciousness but do not purport to provide autobiography as retrospective narrative regarding his own history.

[9]Weintraub notes that a diary is not autobiography because it usually records the events and thoughts of each particular day; it "has its very value in being the reflection of but a brief moment" and its "premium [. . .] lies in the function of faithful recording and not in the function of assigning long-range meaning" (827).

[10]Shoptaw reads the passage that describes the argument as the speaker yielding "the first person to the father, whose oral history imputes their separation to a misrepresentative cause" (324). With Ashbery's proclivity for slippery pronouns, this exchange is reasonable and would not change the essence of my interpretation. In fact, the father telling the son to change his shirt would be consistent with tradition laying down the rules and expectations.

[11]Freud's analysis of the oedipal struggle would also pertain to this section, though it would be more pertinent in a discussion of Ashbery's views on sexuality than on the uneasy feelings that force one to face one's situation.

[12]In his unfinished essay, "The German as Symptom" (1923), Musil described a similar feeling as common to the individual of his time: "A dull, persistent feeling of his strange cosmic situation seldom leaves him" (*Precision and Soul* 174).

[13]Shoptaw does not refer specifically to this passage but notes in his discussion of the double sestina in *Flow Chart* that "like his gay precursor [Swinburne], Ashbery leaves not children but poems in his name for readers to come; what they reproduce is up to them" (321).

[14]Ashbery chose only Section V of *Flow Chart* for inclusion in his selected later poems *Notes from the Air*.

Chapter Five

[1]Perloff anticipates a shift from lyric in modernism poetry to narrative in postmodernism poetry: "The dominant poetic mode of early modernism remains the lyric [. . .] in which the isolated speaker (whether or not the poet himself), located in a specific landscape, meditates or ruminates on some aspect of his or her relationship to the external world, coming finally to some sort of epiphany, a moment of insight or vision with which the poem closes" (*The Dance of the Intellect* 156-57). However, "all [the] hallmarks of the late modernist lyric will become less prevalent as our conceptions of the relation of self to world become more closely adjusted to the phenomenology of the present. In understanding that present, a narrative that is not primarily autobiographical will once again be with us, but it will be a narrative fragmented, dislocated, and often quite literally non-sensical" (169).

[2]A number of structuralist studies define narrative in a less open, general manner and place more requirements on the narrative events. Roland Barthes asserts that "there can be no doubt that narrative is a hierarchy of instances. To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in 'storeys'" ("Introduction to Structural Analysis of Narrative" 87). Tzvetan Todorov states that "narrative requires the unfolding of an action, change, difference" (28). He, like Barthes, believes that "a hierarchical order has to be introduced" (29), but adds that "it is incorrect to maintain that the elements are related only by *succession*; we can say that they are also related by *transformation*. Here we have the two principles of narrative" (30, original italics). Mieke Bal presents a narratology that "presupposes that an infinite number of narrative texts can be described using the finite number of concepts

contained within the narrative system." Her detailed study sets out these specific concepts that define narrative as part of a system to offer readers "an instrument with which they can describe narrative texts" (3). On the other hand, although Gérard Genette sets out a systematic theory of narrative in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, he accepts a minimum narrative: "*I walk, Pierre has come* are for me minimal forms of narrative" (30, original italics). In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, he adds that in these "minimal forms of narrative, I opted for a broad definition, and I still do. For me as soon as there is an action or an event, even a single one, there is a story because there is a transformation, a transition from an earlier state to a later and resultant state" (18-19). While Genette continues in the latter volume to recognize the value of narratology in its contributions to the analysis and understanding of literary texts, he also acknowledges that it is "distressing" to some people, sometimes to himself: "What irritates them is its 'soulless' and sometimes mindless technicalness" (8). I will not attempt to read Ashbery's poem in the light of narratology's systematics because I do not believe it would be as productive as following the tips Ashbery offers that show how to read his poetry and prose by following his "erratic" path.

[3]Though some critics have noted similarities in the biographies of Ashbery and Darger, they are few and far outweighed by the differences. Leddy points out that both artists suffered early loss that contributed to a shared concern with "matters of loss and grief": In their childhoods, Ashbery lost his brother and Darger lost his mother and newborn sister (9); however, Darger, unlike Ashbery, spent a large part of his childhood in orphanages and institutions rather than with family. In an interview, Ashbery says that he does not "feel very much removed from the childish mind" and attributes his attitude

to "nostalgia for childhood. He describes a "mythical kingdom" that he and a friend, Mary, created: "I think I've always been trying to get back to this mystical kingdom that Mary and I inhabited. Maybe 'Girls on the Run' was a way of accessing that sort of paradise" (Rehak 15). The major difference is that Darger was generally considered by many people to have been insane, incapable of leading a normal life with other people. John M. MacGregor, an art historian and psychotherapist, includes in his detailed work on Darger an extensive diagnosis of Darger's mental problems; he summarizes them as "a puzzling case of arrested development and autistic withdrawal" (31). Leddy relates that in Ashbery's remarks before reading from his poem, he distanced himself from Darger by means of a benign wit, joking that it's

> not clear how to pronounce Darger's name (i.e., hard or soft *g*), because "he didn't know anybody." Ashbery's account of seeing Darger's work at the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne assumed that Darger was insane: unlike the work of the other artists in the museum, who seemd to be "contained in their insanity," Darger's work showed an artist trying to break out. (2)

[4]Gérard Genette makes a similar distinction except that he does not include the third-person narrator as an "I." Because the third-person narrator tells but does not participate in the story, the narrative would be heterodiegetic ("diegetic" being Plato's term for a story that is told, not acted). The first-person narrator who both participates in the dialogue and comments on the situation would introduce a homodiegetic narrative (244-45).

[5]Fredric Jameson would consider "the bewildering fluidity" of such characterizations as "preindividualistic narratives [. . .] in which nothing like narrative 'point of view,' let alone 'identification' or 'empathy' with this or that protagonist, emerges; in which not even the position of an individual storyteller or 'sender' (*destinataire*) can be conceptualized without contradiction" (124). He points to these primitive narratives as support for his objection to the belief "that stories are always about people" as much of recent narrative analysis assumes (123).

[6]Morson answers this question with his concept of "sideshadowing":

> Sideshadowing conveys the sense that actual events might just as well not
> have happened. In an open universe, the illusion is inevitability itself.
> Alternatives always abound, and, more often than not, what exists need
> not have existed. *Something else* was possible, and sideshadowing is used
> to create a sense of that 'something else.' [. . .] Along with an event, we
> see its alternatives; with each present, another possible present" (118)

His answer resonates in Ashbery's poetry; as the narrator asks in *Girls on the Run*, "Tell me, can you tell it any / different where you come from? (48). Ashbery's speaker in *Flow Chart* even wonders about his possible, alternative ways of being: "But what if there were other, / adjacent worlds, at one's very elbow, and one had had the sense to ignore one's / simulacrum and actually wade into the enveloping mirror" (115).

[7]Ulrich, the hero of Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, voices the wish for life as a narrative held together by a thread, an impossible wish:

> When one is overburdened and dreams of simplifying one's life, the basic
> law of this life, the law one longs for, is nothing other than that of

narrative order, the simple order that enables one to say: "First this

happened and then that happened. . . ." [. . .] Most people relate to

themselves as storytellers. [. . .] They love the orderly sequence of facts

because it has the look of necessity, and the impression that their life has a

"course" is somehow their refuge from chaos. It now came to Ulrich that

he had lost this elementary, narrative mode of thought to which private life

still clings, even though everything in public life has already ceased to be

a narrative and no longer follows a thread, but instead spreads out as an

infinitely interwoven surface" (708-09).

Ulrich had earlier lost the narrative mode of thought and chosen, instead, the attitude of

essayism (273), which could more effectively navigate the "infinitely interwoven

surface." In a similar manner, the plot in *Girls on the Run* abandons the *thread* of

sequential events in traditional, orderly narrative to follow, instead, the *threads* that

associate the configurative sequences of essayistic narrative.

[8]James first published his discussion of duration in "The Perception of Time"

in the *Journal of Speculative Philosphy* in October 1886 and in *Principles of Psychology*

in 1891 (1: 605-42). Henri Bergson first published his discussion of duration in *Essai sur*

les donnees immediates de la conscience in 1890; according to his translator F. L.

Pogson, he worked on the book between 1883-1887. It was published as *Time and Free*

Will in 1910. Bergson summarizes the difference between time's real duration and its

subsequent spatial representation: "the transition is made by imperceptible steps from

concrete duration, whose elements permeate one another, to symbolical duration, whose

moments are set side by side, and consequently from free activity to conscious

automatism" (239-40). Bergson later explained that he conducted his initial work on

duration prior to James's published works and that he knew nothing of James prior to his

own publications. He added that he, too, was not an influence for James (Perry 2: 599-

600). Ralph Barton Perry, the author of the most comprehensive biography on James,

notes the following primary similarities and differences between the two men's thoughts

on time:

> Bergson, as he himself pointed out, took as his point of departure the
>
> logico-mathematical way of thinking, which, in neglecting *real time*,
>
> missed, he believed, the very essence of things. James did not, as is
>
> commonly said, begin with experimental psychology, but rather with
>
> British empiricism, which, in neglecting *felt relations*, also missed the
>
> essence of things. In other words, while for Bergson the crucial truth was
>
> temporal passage, for James time was only one of the many cases of that
>
> transitiveness or continuity which was *his crucial* truth. Both thinkers
>
> found the key to metaphysics in a certain aspect of conscious experience,
>
> namely, its continuity. James saw in this continuity a way of coping with
>
> the hereditary difficulties of empiricism—such as dualism, and the
>
> problem of the one and the many. Bergson, on the other hand, used it first
>
> as a means of correcting the abstract timelessness of the intellectualistic
>
> view, whether in physics or in metaphysics. (2: 601-02, original italics)

[9]Frank Kermode discusses the forms of the end as he begins his study, *The Sense*

of an Ending, by saying that "although for us the End has perhaps lost its naïve

imminence, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions; we may speak of it as

immanent (6, original italics). People's lives take place in the middle, "and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths. (So, perhaps, are all ends in fiction)" (7).

[10]Ashbery had previously given a dog a philosophical voice, even implying that the "lost dog" is himself as a poet in *Three Poems.* Shapiro compares that dog, who "apostrophizes his own soul, a poet-dog" to "Kafka's Philosopher-Dog" (163). In *Girls on the Run*, Raggs the mutt and Trevor the dog also recall Kafka's short story, "Investigations of a Dog"; in Kafka's story, the dog is the narrator, who occupies himself with what he calls his "hopeless but, as far as I am concerned, indispensable little investigations" (278). His questions are attempts to know himself and his "own species": For what is there actually except our own species? To whom but it can one appeal in the wide and empty world" (289); he looks at his canine "colleagues" and asks, "what kind of attempts do they make to manage to go on living in spite of everything? (297). He asks his questions despite knowing he will not know: "no one can maintain that he has settled everything for good" (299). Putting some of these questions and reflections in a dog's voice illustrates the truth to be found, for Kafka and Ashbery, in moving outside the normal sphere of knowledge, in this case outside the human species, to find answers.

[11]The last lines with their images of darkness, like so many lines and images in Ashbery's poetry turn one to Eliot. "East Coker" pictures the movement into the future and eventual death as the movement into darkness: "O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark" (126). Other images from "East Coker" appear prominently in *Girls on the*

Run; for example, Eliot equates dancing with time: "Keeping time, / Keeping the rhythm in their dancing / As in their living in the living seasons" (124). Eliot asserts a skepticism regarding final knowledge and the need to re-evaluate one's experience continually:

> There is, it seems to us,
>
> At best, only a limited value
>
> In the knowledge derived from experience.
>
> The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
>
> For the pattern is new in every moment
>
> And every moment is a new and shocking
>
> Valuation of all we have been. (125)

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