THE SCHEME OF COMMON LANGUAGE

A Comparison of John Ashbery and Amy Gerstler

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August 1993

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

There are two traditions in English poetry: elevated and down-to-earth. The former is characterized by formal style, use of verbal associations, and philosophical subject matter. The latter is informal, uses worldly images and makes specific points. When elevated style uses common language, i.e. words drawn from specialized contexts, those words bring with them the down-to-earth spirit. They convey an effect of honesty, indicting the abstraction of elevatedness as an evasion. John Ashbery calls up that effect to discredit it, to show that down-to-earth poetry's implied access to the world is delusive and his personalized internal view is honest. Amy Gerstler accepts the indictment, letting it bring her poems to an epiphanic connection with reality. This distinction reflects their generational difference, between Ashbery's postmodernists who see no possibility of understanding reality, and Gerstler's post-postmodernists who instinctively hope for that understanding while accepting postmodernist epistemological pessimism.

ABRÉGÉ

Il y a deux traditions en poesie anglaise: littéraire et populaire. Le premier est marqué par son style formel, son utilisation des associations verbales, et sujets philosophiques. Le second est informel, emploie des images mondaines et marques des points spécifiques. Quand le style littéraire emploie le langage commun, c'est à dire des mots tirés des contextes specialisés, ces mots amenent avec eux leur l'esprit populaire. Ils transmettent l'effet d'honneté et condamnent l'abstraction du "littéraire" comme une évasion. John Ashbery fait appel à cet effet aux fins de le discrediter, et de demontrer que l'accès tacite au monde est illusoire et et que sa vue à lui personalisée et internalisée est honnète. Amy Gerstler accepte la condemnation, permettant que celle là amene ses poemes à un lien epiphanique avec la réalité. Cette distinction reflète la différence de leur générations, entre les post-modernes d'Ashbery qui ne voient aucune possibilité de comprendre la réalité, et ceux de Gerstler qui instinctivement espèrent atteindre cette comprehension, tout en acceptant le pessimisme epistemologique post-moderne.

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INTRODUCTION

It may seem that I have selected two very disparate talents for comparison. John Ashbery's poetry is relentlessly personal and difficult; Amy Gerstler's, socially relevant and relatively readable. He is sixty-six, the author of fifteen collections and perhaps the most acclaimed living American poet; she, while well known in Southern California, is in her mid-thirties and only received mild wider recognition when Bitter Angel won the 1991 National Book Critics Circle Award. That both are longtime professional art critics and write fine, wry poetry is a weak bond.

In fact, both the generational and perspectival gaps serve to make the comparison revealing. I shall argue that Ashbery and Gerstler do have in common that they write what I call "elevated" or "formal" poetry. This provides a basis for comparing the way they incorporate diction that is in the spirit of the other major class of poetry, the class I name "down-to-earth." That diction is what I term "common language," defined as words and phrases drawn from specialized contexts. When, as in the works of these poets, common language is mixed into elevated style, it carries the effect of plain truth, of a direct transmission of experience, of the world as it really is. These two poets employ that effect in opposite ways.

Gerstler takes it at face value. Her common language constitutes a momentary influx of trustworthiness, an

epiphanic self-confrontation in an atmosphere of evasion. It follows through on its initial threat to undercut the elevated language and ideas around it. Ashbery evokes the effect to mock it. He shows that blunt language has no more truth in it than elevated language does. That reinforces the major epistemological thrust of his work -- that the world is unknowable, that there is no truth beyond our own distressingly fragmented perceptions.

Taking Ashbery first, I will show how these antithetical uses of common language illuminate the respective viewpoints and some of the complex delights of these two bodies of work. I will then discuss some further implications of the sources whence the poets derive their common language. Finally, I will show how the generation gap between the poets, from Postmodernism to a new era, can be seen in this same methodological difference. In sum, I compare Ashbery and Gerstler in a single area in the hope of placing their differences in an instructive context.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Mark Robin of Beyond Baroque Literary/Art Center, Ruth Wisse, and Jacob Wisse, in supplying bibliographical materials, and of Leonard Wisse, in translation and encouragement.

THE HISTORY AND EFFECTS OF COMMON LANGUAGE

The customary association of the term "common language" is different from the one I use throughout this paper. That customary use is exemplified in the title phrase of Adrienne Rich's 1978 collection of poems The Dream of a Common Language. Rich introduces the dream in the poem "Origins and History of Consciousness":

> ...No one lives in this room
> without confronting the whiteness of the wall
> behind the poems, planks of books,
> photographs of dead heroines.
> Without contemplating last and late
> the true nature of poetry. The drive
> to connect. The dream of a common language.[1]

This "common language" is an encompassing system of communication, a way and form of expression that is accesssible to all, a poetic form that allows the poet to freely and fully transmit the sense of her experience to any hearer. By contrast, the common language I refer to in this paper, while it shares some of that purpose of wide disseminability, is a far lesser, non-utopian thing.

I begin by defining my terms. "Language" in this critical area is defined by the Random House Dictionary as "diction or style of writing. The language of poetry; the stilted language of official documents." Diction, in turn, is "style of speaking or writing as dependent upon choice of words."[2] This definition of "language" can create confusion for someone analyzing a poem's tone and tonal level, because it gives the impression that the "language of poetry," the

distinctive and opaque effect that has been described as "a mysterious, perhaps magical emphasis,"[3] depends in large part on diction, that is, on word choice.

But in fact poetry's particular effect, the "language of poetry," can be formed by elements other than word choice. Specifically, most of the effect that differentiates contemporary poetry from other uses of language actually comes from syntax and meter, in a poem that may use a vocabulary indistinguishable from that of prose or speech. A good example of "the language of poetry" that uses ordinary prosaic diction is the first stanza of "In Bertram's Garden" by Donald Justice. The poem is quoted in full in Paul Fussell's Poetic Meter and Poetic Form as exemplifying the "relation between the conventions of poetry and the individual talent."

> Jane looks down at her organdy skirt
> As if it somehow were the thing disgraced
> For being there, on the floor, in the dirt,
> And she catches it up about her waist,
> Smooths it out along one hip,
> And pulls it over the crumpled slip.[4]

No esoteric words are used here, though I had to look up "organdy," which in fact is the only three-syllable word in the stanza. The phrase "about her waist" is the only noncontemporary note. (The poem dates from the 1950s.) "The thing disgraced" is the only markedly unusual word order.

Yet by virtue of meter, rhyme, the present tense, the line breaks and other formal features, this is obviously poetry, and, as Fussell's analysis shows, poetry that fully

explores the traditional pathways of the genre of poetry. It is, in fact, written in a classic example of what I shall refer to as elevated poetic style. By that I mean a style which fully utilizes the traditional defining formal qualities of English poetry: line breaks with metric regularity, syntactic variety, especially frequent reversal of customary word order, and as I shall show later, use of the associations, connotations and sounds of words to convey meaning. "In Bertram's Garden" is the language of poetry in full flower, yet it has the diction of prose.

We can, then, break down the Random House definition to its constituent parts. The "diction" and the "style of writing" of a particular piece don't always go together. In the phrase "common language" I am referring almost entirely to diction. I am analyzing the skill of altering vocabulary, not the more subtle one of bending poetic rhythms and forms. However, when I refer to "language" unmodified, I accept the wider definition which includes both "diction" and "style of writing."

Justice's stanza also gives us insight into a particular meaning of the word "common." He exemplifies the tendency, in the middle and late twentieth century, for even the elevated poetic style to use everyday diction; that is, words taken from everyday contemporary North American life rather than from some storehouse of jewel-encrusted archaisms. It is not out of the ordinary, Justice demonstrates, for poetry to use the same vocabulary that people of the poet's time and place

use ordinarily. Therefore, when I discuss the use of common language in poetry, I do not mean "language that people use ordinarily." I reject "common"'s primary, Richian meaning when modifying "language": "pertaining or belonging equally to an entire community, nation, or culture; public: a common language or history."[5] My "common language" is not common in this sense of "universal," nor in the sense of "frequent." If it were, there would be no sense in discussing its use within poetry, its contrast with poetic language, because on analysis the diction of present-day poetry is almost all drawn from the everyday.

What, then, is my referent of "common"? It is one of its less positive ones: "having no rank, station, distinction, etc; ordinary." In more precise terms, common language as I use the term is diction associated with and usually derived from specific, functional contexts. Because of its functionality, its customary confinement to the speech of a particular group or trade, these words have a jarring effect within everyday conversation -- which, as we have seen, shares a vocabulary with even poets' poetry like "In Bertram's Garden."

This specialized diction, these words, includes street slang, the constantly changing verbal fashions of adolescents, profanity, the terminology of all sorts of technical areas, and the oily argot of advertising. All are called "common" because they are, in another sense, uncommon; i.e. unusual. They have no "distinction" in the sense of

social grace precisely because they are distinctive.

One such jargon worth mentioning is highly elevated diction composed of enough archaisms and hifalutin terms to make language sound outmoded. Ashbery is particularly fond of introducing such words, as at the end of "Drame Bourgeois":

> Only let your voice not become this clarion,
> Alarum in the wilderness, calling me back to piety, to sense,
> Else I am undone, for late haze drapes the golf links
> And the gilded spines of these tomes blaze too bright.[6]

Common language is diction imported from any specialized area. The wide range covered by that definition should prepare us for its shifting, variegated manifestations, as well as for the sometimes shadowy demarcations between normalcy and deviation in the work of these poets.

Historically, the language of written poetry has been elevated well above the everyday. The historical background of this truism may shed some light on the practices of the twentieth-century poets we are considering. As Denys Thompson traces it in The Uses of Poetry, poetry began as indistinguishable from song. It was an accompaniment to dance, which is both the oldest form of human collective artistry and the oldest form of human collective worship. Later, when ritual worship became codified, poetry first became fixed in its oral forms; and later still songs and poems became part of the collective endeavor known as work.[7] Christopher Caudwell writes that poetry "becomes the great switchboard of the instinctive energy of the tribe,

directing it into trains of collective actions...."[8]

Thus poetry was a cohesive element in group unity, part of the group's vision of itself, as well as an integral part of social life. In its development as epic and myth, when it was acknowledged as the basis of group identity, poetry reaches a high point of social importance. In fact Shelley, as quoted by Thompson, went so far as to say, "In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry."[9]Had he been talking about pre-literate society, Shelley's more famous line might have called poets "the acknowledged legislators of the world."[10] The arrival of writing, however, had two notable, seismic effects on poetry.

The first effect is basically anthropological: poetry is removed from its lofty position in society. It "[passes] from being the possession of a whole people to the care of specialist and eventually professional poets."[11]The second effect writing has on poetry is more technical. Thompson notes that the comparison between literate and older poetry "stops at the point at which we note how English poetry relies on the association of words, built up by previous use...The pre-literate has none of this capital to draw on; instead he relies on the experience he shares with his audience of the basic facts and events of human life."[12]

These changes alter the face of poetry, at least as we know it in English. Poetry had once been a method for transmitting knowledge or understanding of the outside world.

While it could still have that function, its necessity as a conduit of information was lost when poets started to record their work. With poetry's mnemonic qualities no longer essential, other techniques of group memory came to the fore.[13] The technical shift, the reliance on the associations of words, of the system of language, was analogous. In both these ways, poetry turned inward. It lost the relationship to the outside world that had been its raison d'etre. Words themselves begin to take a strong role in the effect of poems. That is, of course, words used as words, for their own internal associations and reverberations, not just as signifiers. Words began to hold the magic that had previously been reserved for things. This autonomy of the system of written words has remained intact, as witnessed by the wide acceptance and influence of the Structuralist claim that the primary factor in shaping literary works throughout the history of Western literature has been the structure of language itself, even in the case of writers mainly concerned with affecting or portraying the outside world.[14]

This change, however, was far from final; all it did was introduce a dynamic. The tension between the two emphases of poetry has endured. Repeatedly throughout literary history, conflicts have arisen, between sets of authors and between sets of critics, over the issue: What is the right way to get effects from language? (In the case of critics: What is the right way to describe the way language gets its effects?) Is it through the self-contained, unaccompanied instrument of

language itself, the system made up of the language and the previous works it has generated? Or is it through language's function as a map, a set of pictures, a mechanism for calling up the outside world?

One such clash occurred in the first quarter of this century, with the rise of Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky and the rest of the Russian Formalist literary critics. As Victor Erlich carefully points out in his standard study, Russian Formalism was always a heterogeneous and often a fractious movement. But its broad beliefs are what concern us here.[15] Shklovsky and company were reacting against the domination of contemporary Russian literary criticism by the ideas of the Symbolists. "The basis of the Symbolist technique was a belief in correspondence...The poem...stands between the outer world and the subject in a world of forms."[16] Symbolism was used to convey a variety of messages, many of them of a mystical or phenomenological nature. But the philosophical underpinning was, and is in all Symbolist poetry, a concentration on and conveyance of the relationship between the word and the world. In other words, Symbolism in theory and practice is directed toward relaying knowledge about the world. This aim was summed up in the Symbolists' glorification of images, poetic tropes, as the central literary communicative device.

The Formalists reacted violently against this aim, if a turn toward refined estheticism can be called violent. They were impelled by an increasing stress on and understanding of

the technology of expression. Their initial interest was in new discoveries in linguistics. They hoped to analyze poetry, from the standpoint of linguistics, by its generative rules. This led them to the position for which they are known, a belief in literary works as self-contained entities, or at least entities which exist in the non-corresponsive, contained system of language. In the words of the standard-bearing Shklovsky, "a work of literature is the sum-total of all stylistic devices employed in it."[17] Jakobson wrote, "The function of poetry is to point out that the sign is not identical with its referent."[18]

With the image, the connection between work and world, removed from its central role in the effect of a literary work, the Formalists concentrated on words as autonomous entities. Words themselves, through their associations and their sounds as much as through their dictionary meanings, are the writer's total material.

In both Formalist criticism and works written under Formalist influence, this focus on linguistic resources is meant to produce at least a momentary revision in the reader's total viewpoint. Symbolism, with its reference to the outside world, intends to produce an image or realization about a part of that world. But since Formalism works within the system of language, through which the reader sees the world, the intended result is to change the way the reader looks at the world. Where the Symbolists had wanted new ideas made familiar to the reader, defamiliarization was the

Formalist grail. Poetic diction was to make the reader see her everyday surroundings all afresh, to make "strange what is habitually assumed."[19] This alteration of consciousness was the justification for the reordering of language in the works of the Formalist canon.

The emphasis of the Formalist view on what might loosely be called lexical rather than semantic communication allies it with the English tradition of poetic diction. Not that English poetry from Chaucer until Romanticism was disconnected from the outside world. It accepted the role of providing specific worldly information. But I would argue that the acceptance of a limited stylistic range made English poetry inherently formalistic for the first four hundred years of its history. The tyranny of accepted forms deeply familiar to the readership forced poets to take manipulation of those forms as their way of creating meaning. Thus a particular poem's meaning to its readership was more apparent through its verbal and literary associations than through what the poem as a piece of rhetoric said about the world.

This benevolent tyranny was manifested in the area of diction. "For most of the history of English poetry the diction of poetry was elevated, sharply distinct from everyday speech."[20] Poetry, it was felt increasingly from Spenser's era on, and especially after 1660,[21] should be written in poetic diction: "`A system of words,' said Dr. Johnson, `refined from the grossness of domestic use.'"[22] This demarcation reached a climax in the long reign of poetic

decorum, which decreed that diction be precisely suited to the level of its genre and subject.[23] The formalist aspects of this way of thinking are obvious -- poetry is seen as a controlled system of expression, its links with the outside world not necessarily germane on a poem-by-poem basis. The link between Russian Formalism and the ideology of poetic diction is clearer when Owen Barfield, in Poetic Diction, actually defines that phrase as work producing the defamiliarization we have seen promoted by the Russian Formalists:

> When words are selected and arranged in such a way that their meaning either arouses, or is obviously intended to arouse, aesthetic imagination, the result may be described as poetic diction... When I try to describe in more detail than by the phrase "aesthetic imagination" what experience it is to which at some time or other I have been led...I find myself obliged to define it as a "felt change of consciousness", where "consciousness" embraces all my awareness of my surroundings....[24]

The sway of poetic diction endured with little challenge until around 1800. That is the point when Wordsworth, as "every schoolboy knows",[25] used the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads to "affirm" that "there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of Prose and metrical composition."[26] He sets the stage for future adherence to elemental language:

> Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart...are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated...

What Wordsworth is talking about -- which may explain some of the confusion he created -- is poetry as communication. He is explicitly separating the message from the form. The poet starts with his feelings, which he attempts to accurately contemplate and then forcefully communicate. That view of poetry as the processing of materials is what's really new in the Preface, lying behind the discussion of rustic versus sophisticated diction. This can also explain Coleridge's famous attack on the Preface as being not only wrongheaded but completely irrelevant to Wordsworth's actual poetic practice.[27] Coleridge was really reacting to Wordsworth's attempt to separate meaning and form. His response to the Preface emphasizes the integratedness of the poem, thus implying the uselessnesss of dividing the work and what it represents. As a "general form" of his argument, Coleridge writes,

> ...I adduce the high spiritual instinct of the human being impelling us to seek unity by harmonious adjustment, and thus establishing the principle, that all the parts of an organized whole must be assimilated to the more important and essential parts.[28] [Emphasis in original.]

Barfield condenses this argument when he writes that Wordsworth "sometimes failed" to remember that "the order in which words are placed has become in English an integral part of their meaning."[29] (Emphasis in original.) What Wordsworth spawned, the real revolution he fostered, was the new split between poetry that is essentially an offshoot of song, poetry that uses words as bearers of psychological and aural

music, and a newer poetry that uses words as the bearers of thoughts. These are, or are analogous to, the two types I have roughly delineated as "elevated" and "down-to-earth," which could also be respectively termed defamiliarizing and familiarizing.

In historical context, Wordsworth was attempting to return poetry to its origins. The attack on "poetic diction" as a fey intrusion on the poet's role as communicator, "a man speaking to men,"[30] bespeaks a desire to return to the first stage of poetry described by Thompson, when the poet spoke as part of a collective, when he was expressing ideas (at that stage, ideas representative of the group's sentiments) rather than creating experiences by linking words.

Though it has grown far from Wordsworth's purposes, the poetry of men and women speaking to men and women, the poetry of using words to conduct ideas, has spread rampantly. Today in North America it is everywhere, its sheer quantity far eclipsing any formalist efforts. The content of culturally unifying myths has given way to a different content, however: personal definition. Every coffeehouse is now crammed with wordsmiths expressing their personalities in all their subjective detail, using words only as a medium for the all-important work of communicating the poet's own essence to the audience. Informal tone and fluid (often nonexistent) structure, assertive and aggressive titles like "My Cunt is the Center of the Universe," subjects like deciding between beef and chicken at the supermarket, are the standard fare.

And even in serious poetry journals, my informal assessment is that the vast majority of poems are written with ideas and images more than with words.

It is possible to trace this content-centered, anti-formalist tendency in American poetry directly back to Wordsworth. Hyatt H. Waggoner refers to it as "the Emerson-Whitman-Williams tradition that has been dominant in the recent past."[31] Whitman, "the supreme American inheritor of Romanticism,"[32] certainly shared much of the poetic purpose of "the quintessentially English Romantic, Wordsworth: `the Poet binds together by passion and language the whole vase [sic] empire of human society.'"[33] Young America, a group of nationalist poets of the 1830s and '40s who influenced Whitman, took Wordsworth seriously;[34] it was perhaps inevitable that the Wordsworthian clarion would be heard primarily by American poets, struggling to express native populism and break free from the intimidating conventions of British tradition. Emerson, Whitman's mentor, expressed the new spirit plainly, as Jerome Loving points out:

> In discussing British poetry, [Emerson] complained: "The English have lost sight of the fact that poetry exists to speak the spiritual law, and that no wealth of description or of fancy is yet essentially new or out of the limits of prose, until this condition is reached." The exception, he felt, was Wordsworth. Quoting Walter Savage Landor, he said Wordsworth "wrote a poem without the aid of war." This was indeed Whitman's intention, as Emerson doubtless realized in reading the preface [of Leaves of Grass]: "The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to

> hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains."[35]

In their turn, Whitman's use of slang and colloquialism, his insistence that revealing his self was the poet's calling, shaped an entire tradition of American poetry. Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay took up his mantle as populist poets;[36] Hart Crane, though his poetry is formalistic, carried on his attempt to create a clear-eyed mythology of America; and in the post-Second World War period, the Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso -- whose free-form, abandoned style has been imitated to the point where it has become identified with serious poetry in popular culture[37]-- wrote copiously as Whitmanesque individualists.[38]

It is a measure of the consistency of familiarizing poetry that it encompassed poets who strove to be social leaders and poets who strove to be untrammeled egos. What they have in common is that the message trumps the lexical medium.

At the same time, the tradition of elevated poetry continued to evolve. Although this type of poetry respects certain conventions, it also must follow the changing course of language in order to maintain its vitality. David Ferry, apologizing for the obviousness of the point, refers to "a continuing and probably permanent impulse in literary history: the reaction against a style...which is felt to have become literary in the sense of `unreal', no longer responsive to the data of experience...."[39]As the quotidian diction and the looser forms of even the elevated poems of

recent decades shows, the high style too has been strongly influenced by Wordsworth and his successors' demolition of the poetic regulations of the eighteenth century.

Let us now summarize how the two types of poetry we have identified manifest themselves in the field under discussion, contemporary American poetry. One type -- which I shall argue is the type John Ashbery and Amy Gerstler write in -- can be called elevated or formal poetry. It follows the ante-Wordsworthian tradition of English poetry in adhering, albeit loosely, to poetic diction and form, using words primarily for their inherent associations and music. In other words it uses the poem's status as a poem to communicate meanings that are more specifically poetic than the prosaically summarizable meanings of poetry in the post-Wordsworth, Whitman-Ginsberg tradition.

That latter tradition I name the down-to-earth tradition, a term I hope will encompass most of the attributes of the style. Poets working in this tradition attempt to make some statement about the noumenal world, or at least to connect the poem to that world. To that end, they eschew poetic forms, structures and syntax. Words in the down-to-earth tradition are basically denotative, are linked more to their referents in the world than to their connotations and past use in language.

Transferring this analytical distinction to poem-by-poem terms, the phenomenalist tendency in elevated poetry is most

clearly visible, in twentieth-century works, in lofty and complex subject matter. Engaging the world directly, making points about love, morality or blackbirds, is the function of down-to-earth poetry; both by its philosophical underpinnings and by its technical freedom, down-to-earth poetry states more readily than elevated poetry. The poet of elevated style engages metaphysical or philosophically abstruse concepts or even moods and approaches to life rather than concrete events or items or specific arguments. This concentration suits such poets' tendency to exploit the resources of language. Poetry that works with the inherent qualities of words is not suitable for drawing the reader pictures.

A second and simpler mark of elevated poetry is just that: its elevated, formal style. Though this cannot be a watershed distinction given that there are many formalist poets, including my two, who work in nonstandard forms and work in nonstandard language, a poem or passage can usually be accurately classified as either an elevated or a down-to-earth piece of work on a quick gauging of the formalistic quality of its language and structure. An elementary tonal evaluation, based on the poem's distance from prose, will often suffice.

Having separated down-to-earth from elevated poetry, we can now consider the mixing of the two -- the subject of this paper. How do elevated poems incorporate the techniques of down-to-earth poetry? (The reverse, using elevated style in down-to-earth poems, needn't concern us. It is almost always

done for simple reasons of satire and mockery.)

In the case of Ashbery and Gerstler, that incorporation is through the vehicle of diction. This introduces something of a paradox: to say that elevated poetry utilizes the tone or emphasis of down-to-earth poetry through diction is not to say that it adopts the diction of down-to-earth poetry. While the diction of elevated and down-to-earth poetry is generally different, it does not differ enough -- as Justice's poem shows -- to form two separate universes. Rather, the elevated poetry of these two poets momentarily incorporates the worldly emphasis of down-to-earth poetry by mixing in what I have already defined as common language: language from specialized fields.

This admixing is a relatively recent phenomenon. Even after Wordsworth had made the case against poetic diction, many poets were loath to risk too great a tonal descent. (Perhaps those poets who maintained the elevated style felt that much more determined to maintain its elevated standards.) Bernard Groom argues in his history of poetic diction that until late in the nineteenth century English poetry was unsure of its stature. Figures who appear magisterial in retrospect, like Milton and Tennyson, still considered themselves to be looking up to the great classical writers. A large part of English poetry involves this struggle to find a legitimate voice in what is, after all, a few-hundred-year-old vernacular.[40] American writers felt that juvenile inferiority as well, with the added spike, mentioned

earlier, of feeling inferior to the British luminaries. Writers working to establish the authority of elevated poetry in English were not going to turn around and undermine that authority by using words not normally associated with poetry.

Second, varying one's tone from high to low within a poem through diction historically was a limited technique, more gimmicky than reliable, simply because of the paucity of vocabularies available for the writer to choose from. Leaving aside dialect, a poet could dip into the colloquial language of his own class, the words of the low class, a limited scientific lexicon, and that was about the extent of it.

In the last fifty years, however, the English language has become multifarious enough to make varying levels of diction a technique of subtlety and grace. Amy Gerstler, reviewing a biography of Frank O'Hara, placed the beginning of this pluralism precisely with the postwar innovation of O'Hara and Ashbery's "almost impossibly inclusive aesthetic...at the time such a dynamically eclectic approach to art...was unheard of."[41]The review provoked a reader to cite Gerstler for "cultural amnesia" in ignoring T.S. Eliot's primacy in innovation.[42]Yet while "The Waste Land" is a tour de force, especially the working-class argot of Part II, it is just that flamboyance that places its author in the tonal past. The poem calls attention to itself as a pastiche of the styles of speech of a fragmented world. Eliot sustains it, but had no interest in repeating it, just as it is difficult to imagine a further development of the blatant collage of

Finnegans Wake. What happens instead in a growing number of poetries throughout this century is a subtler technique of varying of levels, one which becomes part of the fabric of expression rather than a microcosmic imitation of the world.

Eliot was born too early to have an instinctive access to the twentieth century's proliferation of dictions. The 1969 volume Language in America presents a small part of the array of "the many `languages' currently being used in America to codify reality." Examples of these, including the "languages" of politics, bureaucracy, advertising and computers, show how English has become a smorgasbord.[43] No longer is every person's language a personal matter of nativity, upbringing and education. We each have internalized entire styles of speaking, from regional lingos to technical vocabularies. And this has presented new opportunities to the poet. Utilizing common language in a text of elevated style became a versatile tool -- with some constant implications.

Down-to-earth poetry's engagement with the world gives it the appearance of a direct look at experience. That appearance is used by practitioners from Wordsworth to Liz Belile (the author of "My Cunt is the Center of the Universe") to support and communicate their insights. Common language, being the product of specific environments, shares this cachet of honesty. It seems to eliminate the masking of direct perceptions and cold truths practiced by language that is literally artificial.

When common language interrupts a flow of elevated

language, the effect is of a sudden access of truthfulness. Finery no longer distracts the reader from an unmediated view of the world through the writer's eyes. In such a context, common language functions as an empirical test of the loftier, more metaphysical view being presented in the elevated-style poem. There is satisfaction in seeing abstractions held up to the light coming in through the window on the street. Very often they turn out to be flimsy.

That's what happens in James Wright's well-known poem "In Response to a Rumor that the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia, Has Been Condemned":

> ...I saw, down river,
> At Twenty-third and Water Streets
> By the vinegar works,
> The doors open in early evening.
> Swinging their purses, the women
> Poured down the long street to the river
> And into the river.
>
> I do not know how it was
> They could drown every evening.
> What time near dawn did they climb up the other
> shore,
> Drying their wings?
>
> For the river at Wheeling, West Virginia
> Has only two shores:
> The one in hell, the other
> In Bridgeport, Ohio.
>
> And nobody would commit suicide, only
> To find beyond death
> Bridgeport, Ohio.[44]

The poem slides into common language in its last five lines. There's the barroom-joke tone of "The other in Bridgeport, Ohio," the repeated notation of the town's full name, like a posted envelope, and especially the term "commit suicide." That's the precise, scientifically accurate way to name that

act; there's no attempt to link it verbally with the "death" in the next line. The tone here undercuts the fantastic imagery of the whores' nightly journey as drowning, and the filled-out conceit that they must subsequently arise. It's a shift that removes the depiction of the women from the abstract to the concrete. Finally, their sadness is revealed as their inescapable situation, not a religious-tinged construction of that situation.

Another, blunter example of this phenomenon can be found in stanza 21 of Derek Walcott's title poem "The Arkansas Testament":

> The original sin is our seed,
> and that acorn fans into an oak;
> the umbrella of Africa's shade,
> despite this democracy's mandates,
> still sprouts from a Southern street
> that holds grey black men in a stoop,
> their flintlock red eyes. We have shared
> our passbook's open secret
> in the hooded eyes of a cop,
> the passerby's unuttered aside,
> the gesture involuntary, signs,
> the excessively polite remark
> that turns an idea to acid
> in the gut, and here I felt its
> poison infecting the hill pines,
> all the way to the top.[45]

Walcott begins this stanza with an elegant metaphor. The original sin, the evil of slavery, at least provides a sheltering history to its continuing victims. But as the stanza goes on, that philosophical comfort is negated by the circumstances of life as it is actually lived. At first those themselves are described in the same literate circumlocutions used for the metaphor: the inversion and heraldic sound of

"the gesture involuntary" describe the misery of feeling racist abuse.

The contradictoriness of that rhetoric is then taken to task in the rest of the stanza. "The excessively polite remark", a phrase itself excessively polite, is shown for what it is in the flat commonality of "acid / In the gut." In its plain and aggressive description, that phrase counteracts the relative floweriness of what went before. It's also a mild example of a type of technical common language, which we will encounter frequently in Ashbery. "Acid" and "gut," like Wright's "commit suicide," are the scientifically exact, not the verbally interesting names for things. Although "in the gut" retains some poetical flavor, the rest of the stanza, especially its perfectly uninflected last line, continues to provide a direct, common-language devastation of the palliation the poet was offering at the beginning of the stanza.

These two poems and many like them buy into the idea that common language is more truthful than the standard vocabulary of surrounding elevated style. Abstraction is tried and found wanting. But that's not the only trial that can take place. The assumption behind it can be in the dock as well. When common language interrupts the elevated flow, the effect is of honesty -- but that effect can itself be undercut immediately. If the ostensibly direct language doesn't in fact reveal anything, its Ross Perot-like stance of honesty can be revealed as fraudulent. That verdict in

turn is an epistemological statement. It says that we cannot know anything directly. It says, therefore, that aspiring to a direct, unmediated view of the world is delusive, and claiming to have such a view is mendacious. The vindication of elevated style over common diction indicates the only way to see the world clearly: to acknowledge that one's own perceptions, as revealed in the phenomenal patterns of elevated language, are the only genuine information available to a person.

That process of indication by vindication takes place frequently in the poetry of John Ashbery. He mixes common language into his elevated style to show that understanding of the real world is a chimera. He has no hope for it; the only possible source of enlightenment is his abstracted and admittedly baroque musings.

JOHN ASHBERY: THE INDICTMENT OF TRUTHFULNESS

To begin, let us establish that Ashbery can accurately be called a writer of elevated style. This is initially evident from the famous difficulty of understanding him. His entry in Contemporary Authors is largely an analysis of his reputation for opaqueness. The poems written early in his career, like the indecipherable "Leaving the Atocha Station," sparked a heated debate over whether they meant anything at all.[46] That work is self-evidently elevated or formalistic, in my terms (unless it's just gibberish). It can hardly be getting its effects through concrete meaning if nobody knows what it means, nor through denotation if nobody knows what it denotes.

In the last two decades, however, Ashbery's poetry has become more accessible, partly because readers have grown used to him but more because of a modification of his style. This is the period that my analysis deals with. Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, published in 1975, was a watershed. It emerged from a discomfort with poetic forms that led to Three Poems, a 1972 book of prose that has not aged well despite Ashbery's inalienable gracefulness; it reads like a thrashing out of ideas that have yet to find forms. Self-Portrait has, in David Kalstone's words, "a new fluidity, a way to re-admit the self to his poetry."[47] Ashbery's poetry since, while often opaque, has a more focused voice. The earlier style, culminating in The Double Dream of Spring (1970), springs

from topic to topic with a diffuseness that makes it difficult to discuss tone intelligibly.

Given that Ashbery's poetry cannot be called literally meaningless, it is necessary to establish its place in the formalist camp. It fits there by virtue of both the qualities mentioned earlier as characteristic of that camp. Ashbery's work in his last seven volumes of poetry evinces both a consistently elevated style and a preoccupation with abstract, philosophical inquiry.

A good example of both is the opening lines of "Blue Sonata":

> Long ago was the then beginning to seem like now
> As now is but the setting out on a new but still
> Unidentified way. That now, the one once
> Seen from far away, is our destiny...[48]

As in Donald Justice's poem, the diction (except for "unidentified") is plain Anglo-Saxon, but the style is unmistakably formalistic, notably in the use of "but" in place of "merely" or "just" in line 3, and in the passive "once seen." Metrically, the poem sets up an irregular but clear pattern of long pentameter lines that begin with vague, feminine-sounding feet and glide into firmer alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. While one could not assign these lines a meter, it would certainly be at least somewhat fruitful to analyze them in prosodic terms. Most typical of contemporary elevated style, and of Ashbery, is the way the thought cannot be pinned down to a meaning, the way the language subtly but openly avoids precision and subverts

direct communication. "Long ago was the then..." -- does that mean that "the then" happened long ago, or is he saying "the then" is identical with "long ago"? Is the phrase "as now is" linked with what goes before it or what comes after? This unparaphrasable meaning is clearly connotative in intention, despite its syllogistic sound.

Just as typical, though unusually barefaced, is the generalizing, abstracted level of the thought. The way we experience time is the subject -- not the subtext, but the matter under discussion. This is the sort of topic with which elevated poetry is much more likely than common-language poetry to concern itself. English poetry as a genre lacks the rational resources to engage the psychological nature of time-experience except with the metaphors and suggestions of its elevated style. A down-to-earth, prosaic philosophical poem about the nature of temporal experience might as well be prose.

Ashbery's poems routinely and unashamedly engage similarly metaphysical issues. "They Like" is one of many that begin with a specific picture and move with dizzying speed to an over-arching analysis of experience:

> They like to drink beer and wave their hands and whistle
> Much as human beings everywhere do. Dark objects loom
> Out of the night, attracted by the light of conversations,
> And they take note of that, thinking how funny everything is.
>
> It was a long time ago that you began. The dawn was brittle
> And open, and things stayed in it for a long time

as images
After the projecting urge had left...[49]

The rapidity with which actors and scenes are changed reveals clearly that they are vehicles for the communication of wider insights into how our surroundings shape our consciousness and our actions. "They," who are introduced with such wit and vigor, vanish at the end of the first stanza. "Dark objects" are such a fleeting presence that they are immediately removed as the subject of the sentence they began. Ashbery's well-noted propensity for pronouns of uncertain antecedent -- Kenneth Koch is said to have invented as the typical Ashbery line "It wants to go to bed with us" -- is a powerful esthetic device for "articulat[ing]...the ambiguous zones of our consciousness."[50] But, formally, it also allows him to inform the reader that the true subject of a given poem will emphatically not be the subject of a given sentence within it, that the true subject is a concept, a mood. The content, as far as it is summarizable, of "They Like" is not as straightforwardly philosophical as that of "Blue Sonata." But despite that secrecy -- or, in another sense, because of it -- "They Like" is unmistakably abstract and conceptual rather than particular and expository.

Though I have defined Ashbery's subject matter as conceptual exploration, in contrast with the information or instruction of down-to-earth poets, he is not a poet of pure play, either verbal or intellectual. To categorize him so would diminish him. As Herschel Baker writes, "the test of relevance...can never be evaded in a literary production...

and no honest writer, however much concerned with form and substance, neglects his only proper subject, which is the human condition."[51] However difficult to extract and expose, there is meaning (far more often than multiple meanings) in Ashbery's work. That meaning relates to the uses and limits of human knowledge, and it is frequently conveyed with the vehicle of contrastive common language.

In examining the epistemological implications of Ashbery's use of common language, I am following Alan Williamson, although he focuses on an earlier period of Ashbery's career than I am treating. Williamson observes about The Tennis Court Oath, the poet's second book, that interruptions in the "narrative" of poems with erotic or violent undertones constitute a psychic censorship and that "the break almost invariably occurs just as the crisis of revelation approaches."[52] Ashbery's canon makes it clearer today than it was in 1962 that there could never actually be any such crisis; that revelation, of any scope worthy of that name, is something barred by Ashbery's view of human cognition. As a footnote to that statement can stand the often-quoted "Two Scenes," the first poem in Ashbery's first collection. The poem begins with the anticipation of great advances in knowledge:

> We see us as we truly behave.
> From every corner comes a distinctive offering.[53]

Yet on second thought, this would be no revelation at all. To be seen as we truly behave is almost a tautology. Any

observant student of human nature already sees us as we truly behave. To be seen as we truly are would be a gift, but it has only been offered in our imaginations, from the associations with the word "truly." The second line also promises a cornucopia and instantly melts it away. "A distinctive offering" from every corner promises confusion. As the first line of a poem it would be heartening, with the inspiring momentum of the first line of another great and shifty book-opening Ashbery poem:

> Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you,
> At incredible speed, traveling day and night,
> Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents,
> through narrow passes...[54]

But since the first line has seemed to hold out the image of profound knowledge, the multiplicity of distinct offerings from different corners can only confuse us. Actually Ashbery's word is "distinctive," a meaningless word used almost exclusively to tone up advertisements.[55] We can see that from the first, Ashbery's project was to deny the possibility that the stimuli of the world give any unified picture of it. We also see his early skill, to be manifested with much more regularity from the early seventies on, in bending one word, especially in a cliche direction, to give a powerful line a subtle twist; as Williamson says, "Seen from this angle, Ashbery's fondness for statistical jargon and empty everyday expressions seems a good deal more purposeful than before."[56] He proceeds to gloss that fondness as a critique of such language. To me the idea that social language is empty is not Ashbery's full point; social

criticism is just an adjunct to communicating his view of life as both sensual and uninstructive. "Two Scenes" concludes with an idiosyncratic succinctness that he was not to achieve consistently until well down the road:

> 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."

The poems in Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, Houseboat Days, As We Know and the ensuing collections mix common language into their elevated language in a highly deliberate way. The effect of such dualistic passages, as I shall show, is to establish the unknowability of the exterior world, and thus to validate both the elevated poetic level of the work, and the work's message: what Williamson calls "the pluralism that resists any pull toward singleness of vision."[57]

Self-Portrait is the collection that exhibits this contrast the most deliberately. A clear example is "Foreboding." It is also short enough to quote in full, which is useful with Ashbery because his language is rich enough that a few lines out of context can be interpreted in innumerable ways.

> A breeze off the lake--petal-shaped
> Luna-park effects avoid the teasing outline
> Of where we would be if we were here.
> Bombed out of our minds, I think
> The way here is too close, too packed
> With surges of feeling. It can't be.
> The wipeout occurs first at the center,
> Now around the edges. A big ugly one
> With braces kicking the shit out of a smaller one
> Who reaches for a platinum axe stamped excalibur:
> Just jungles really. The daytime bars are

> Packed but night has more meaning
> In the pockets and side vents. I feel as though
> Somebody had just brought me an equation.
> I say, "I can't answer this--I know
> That it's true, please believe me,
> I can see the proof, lofty, invisible,
> In the sky far above the striped awnings. I just see
> That I want it to go on, without
> Anybody's getting hurt, and for the shuffling
> To resume between me and my side of night."[58]

This poem is in an unusually personal voice for Ashbery; it stands out even in his most personal collection, along with the near-autobiographical "Fear of Death." Unusually for him too, it takes on directly the issue of what our intellects make of the violence of reality. Usually, describing the setting of an Ashbery poem is like describing the air, but this poem depicts a real-world and basically consistent situation, or at least atmosphere. In this case, then, we could expect the common, supposedly direct language to have a genuinely referential quality.

That element, however, fails to inform us. The first three lines, with their pair of compound adjectives and the ontological loftiness of the third line, have set the scene in elevated and even arch tones. Yet line 4, though it shifts to a slangy tone, provided by a barroom idiom, does not even constitute solid ground itself, let alone provide a contrast that would make the previous refinement seem evasive. It presents reality as a place not of revelation but of drunken confusion. That is evident from the actual content of the line (followed by the still more lavishly detailed confusion of the next line) and also from the way even the crude statement is presented with Ashbery's characteristic

inexactitude. Does the "I think" refer to the phrase that precedes it or the one that follows it? The gaze at reality drifts off into unclear evasion; try as we may, we can see nothing.

The same thing happens a few lines down. "A big ugly one with braces kicking the shit...," complete with profanity, seems like a scene that will force us to face what life really is. But it fades into myth, not because the poet is afraid to tell us exactly what happened but because we instinctively make a story out of whatever we see; we cannot see the world clearly, and the language that claims to record our discovery just records our failure. Similarly, the plea at the end of the poem drifts into delicate opaqueness: "For the shuffling / To resume between me and my side of night" abandons the singleness of the desire for no one to be "hurt." Of course, as I observed apropos "They Like," all Ashbery's subjects mutate into something else; as Marjorie Perloff observes, it is perennial in his work that the reader knows what is being said but not what is being talked about.[59] But while the reader may be easily seduced into following the twists and turns of an explicitly argumentative passage, a stretch of common language that suddenly changes subject comes as a slap in the face.

The total effect of "Foreboding," then, is ominous indeed. All danger is a surprise, all understanding is doomed. The common language, providing images of violence from which a clear world-view at least could be expected,

only reinforces the statement made plainly in the dialogue at the end. Everything that affects us at all comes from unexpected quarters, "the pockets and side vents" -- an unexpected source of imagery, as well -- tailoring. Foreboding -- an uncomprehending but definite sense of impending danger -- is all we have, the same sense the speaker has when presented with the equation. Something, something unpleasant, is apparent to us, but we don't know exactly what, nor remotely why.

This summary demonstrates how appropriate and useful it is for Ashbery to use the technique of undercutting the supposed truthfulness of common language. In general, when common language's claim of access to reality is shown to be false, it buttresses the argument or picture being presented in the surrounding elevated language. In Ashbery's case this support is doubled, because that bigger picture, of the unknowability of the world, extends directly from the demolition of the credibility of common language.

That point and the way it is doubly made are apparent in a longer poem, also from Self-Portrait. This is the 84-line "No Way of Knowing" (also a personal poem for Ashbery). In his longer poems, to give the reader some relief from the barrage of indeterminate language, Ashbery tends to insert more coherent précis of his beliefs. Here he states, in elevated but definite terms, that the stimuli of our daily life, indeed all the processing our mind does, cannot be reduced to any concrete message:

> ...This stubble-field
> Of witnesses and silent lowering of the lids
> On angry screen-door moment rushing back
> To the edge of woods was always alive with its own
> Rigid binary system of inducing truths
> From starved knowledge of them. It has worked
> And will go on working. All attempts to influence
> The working are parallelism, undulating, writhing
> Sometimes but kept to the domain of metaphor.
> There is no way of knowing whether these are
> Our neighbors or friendly savages trapped in the
> distance
> By the red tape of a mirage....[60]

With considerable margin for error, this passage can be paraphrased into something like "By its fragmentary nature, our knowledge of the world induces us to order the world in categories. Yet all these orders we set up are images; they can never be tested." Ashbery actually states his beliefs, in a characteristic mixture of lyricism and wind.

The relative directness of this passage, its move -- within an elevated, abstract context, loosely adhering to iambic meter and free of common language -- in the direction of the down-to-earth, is one of the elements protecting it from a rhetorical threat that comes a few lines later. The graceful epistemological despair we have just witnessed is challenged by common language's promise of truth. The real world makes its appearance, this time in the form of emotional desperation:

> I like the spirit of the songs, though,
> The cameraderie that is the last thing to peel off,
> Visible even now on the woven pattern of the
> branches
> And twilight. Why must you go? Why can't you
> Spend the night, here in my bed, with my arms
> wrapped tightly around you?
> Surely that would solve everything by supplying

> A theory of knowledge on a scale with the gigantic
> Bits and pieces of knowledge we have retained...

It is in the appeal to "spend the night" that common language makes a telling appearance. As a pat, cliche phrase,[61] "Spend the night" leaps out of a passage that carries the sense of having been carefully crafted to express a personal idea. In addition, it immediately follows a line, "Visible even now on the woven pattern of the branches / And twilight") that in its formality of phrasing evokes flowery, nineteenth-century descriptive style. To "spend the night" carries associations of romance, of profligacy, and of darkness. This tripartite suggestion of vivid, down-to-earth reality is absent from the elevated, near-sophistic language of the rest of the passage.

But it is just that suggestion that Ashbery says, and now shows, is delusive, as the poem moves gently into the mockery of "Surely that would solve everything." In fact, as he states throughout, living "naturally" and seeing "clearly" would solve nothing, because they are impossible. No sexual abandon, no temporal oblivion, no sensory deprivation will give us any access to reality. As Ashbery writes in the conclusion of the poem, that access can only be an unverifiable, internal "sense":

> ...it made the chimes ring.
> If you listen you can hear them ringing still:
> A mood, a Stimmung, adding up to a sense of what
> they really were,
> All along, through the chain of lengthening days.

The view that the flow of consciousness is Ashbery's true subject is echoed by many writers. "The recording of

successive truths is what is on Ashbery's mind," writes Helen Vendler.[62] "Ashbery's poetry is humorously and melancholically self-reflexive and sees itself as a provisional, halting critique of naive and degraded referential poetries," is the fourth sentence of David Shapiro's book-length study.[63] Williamson begins his discussion of Ashbery by accurately, if somewhat simplistically, summing him up as

> ...a poet of the mind very far off inside itself, dependent on the quality and intensity of its own responses for its final sense of reality, and therefore -- a conclusion from which Ashbery does not shrink -- ultimately isolated.[64]

We have seen how Ashbery justifies this quasi-solipsistic stance by undercutting the implications of the use of common language. I would like now to expand that finding somewhat and show how he carries his attitude to the edge of the domain of morality, how he conveys, in addition to the impossibility of overall knowledge of the world and the consequent necessity of accepting the limitations of one's consciousness, the message that the best life is that which doesn't seek that universal knowledge. This will be seen in an analysis of an important work, "The Ice-Cream Wars":

> Although I mean it, and project the meaning
> As hard as I can into its brushed-metal surface,
> It cannot, in this deteriorating climate, pick up
> Where I leave off. It sees the Japanese text
> (About two men making love on a foam-rubber bed)
> As among the most massive secretions of the human
> spirit.
> Its part is in the shade, beyond the iron spikes of
> the fence,
> Mixing red with blue. As the day wears on
> Those who come to seem reasonable are shouted down
> (Why you old goat! Look who's talkin'. Let's see
> you

Climb off that tower--the waterworks architecture,
  both stupid and
Grandly humorous at the same time, is a kind of
  mask for him,
Like a seal's face. Time and the weather
Don't always go hand in hand as here: sometimes
One is slanted sideways, disappears for awhile.
Then later it's forget-me-not time, and rapturous
Clouds appear above the lawn, and the rose tells
The old old story, the pearl of the orient,
  occluded
And still apt to rise at times.)
                                A few black smudges
On the outer boulevards, like squashed midges
And the truth becomes a hole, something one has
  always known,
A heaviness in the trees, and no one can say
Where it comes from, or how long it will stay--

A randomness, a darkness of one's own.[65]

As Perloff states, reference in Ashbery is a fleeting thing. One way not to analyze him, then, is by starting at the beginning of a poem and going through to the end. To proceed in such a linear manner presumes a narrative which is not present, and that mistaken presumption leads to confusion and disgruntlement. A superior analytical method is to seize upon a passage in which some meaning can be discerned and trace its connections through the rest of the poem to, it is hoped, discover a pattern. Armed with this interpretive possibility, one can read from soup to nuts and make out the poem's structure.

The technique of grasping what one can meshes with analysis through use of common language, because common language is inherently graspable on a fundamental semantic level. In the present poem, lines 8-11, centering on the slangy abuse of line 10, are attractively clear. The crude (though hardly savage) verbal abuse of thoughtful people

seems to present a theme susceptible to further exploration.

However, matters are not that simple. First of all, "those" merely "come to seem reasonable." As always in Ashbery, innocuous description has deeper connotations. Perhaps the shouters are bold debunkers. The tower could be ivory, could be a symbol of isolation that "those who come to seem reasonable" would do well to descend from. Second, the shouting appears to slide into a more kindly description of the tower as "a kind of mask." Lines 8-11 may still be a way in, but only upon more thought and closer reading. They will lead us into the poem if we consider them purely as a shift in tone, without using them to generate a nonexistent story.

"As the day wears on / Those who come to seem reasonable are shouted down", open parenthesis. The tone of this line and a half descends slightly from that of lines 6 and 7, whose circumlocuitous phrasing and still-unidentifiable pronominal subject give them a lofty, inscrutable air. Now look at lines 8 and 9 in isolation again. They tell a narrative, but the present tense gives them the sound of a TV news or travelogue voice-over. The present tense ("come to seem reasonable") is not a semantic device, to plant doubt about whether "they" really make any sense. It imparts a touch of character to the voice. With the BBC sound of "As the day wears on" we are already in a public world, no longer the private mind of the first seven lines.

The introduction of that context of reportage tells us how to read the common language, the street insults of line

10. It becomes explicit and condemnable, whereas if it had been juxtaposed directly with the elevated, personal tone of the poem's first seven lines it might have been amusingly iconoclastic. The slight tonal shift into realism has prepared us to hear these phrases as we would in the street -- as rude, disrespectful, an intrusion; language like this is not an aid to understanding. The tone of the poem has been managed so that the common language will be read in a negative light. The reader senses line 10 as unpleasant anti-rationality, rather than as insult comedy.

On this reading, "The Ice-Cream Wars" states a case for rationality through the rejection of common language. But rationality is merely one reason for upholding the relative viability of elevated language over common language's claim to superior reality access, a claim made explicit in the line "Let's see you / Climb off that tower--," both in its incitement to visible evidence and in its taunting invitation to join the real world. Keeping one's own personal, though limited, perspective, rejecting the claims of worldly knowledge, is the wise way to live.

This interpretation is sustained as the rest of the parenthesis moves back into somewhat evasive elevated language. The meter becomes more regular, and as part of the same smoothing process the writing grows roundabout (note the qualifying phrase "a kind of" and the redundancy of "both...at the same time"). Again, the course of events here is unclear. The connection between the shouting down and the

"him" of line 12 is indecipherable, and making it impossible to decipher who is wearing the "mask" or why. But indulgence and understanding are apparent in lines 11-13, in the phrase "Grandly humorous" and the wry comparison to "a seal's face." The mask, which makes it difficult to see the wearer and for him to see the world, is accepted as a part of our perceptual apparatus; and it can be completely misleading if taken too literally, exactly the way a seal's face suggests a human expression that bears absolutely no relation to what is in the seal's mind.

As the poem slid gradually into raw language, it is sliding gradually out. I will forgo close reading of the remainder of this rich poem, but move into the defiant formalism of rhyme at the end is noteworthy. The last four lines and especially the isolated final one have a mnemonic urgency. This is something you must remember: that the truth is "a hole, something one has always known...A randomness, a darkness of one's own."

But remember what? That we all die? That actions should be based on the categorical imperative? There is no explicit lesson, only the poem's demonstration of the uselessness of looking for truth outside one's consciousness. If I may contradict myself by adducing content, this emphasis allows us to make greater sense of the despairing note of the beginning of the poem, "Although I mean it...it cannot...pick up where I leave off"; of the "Japanese text," suggesting a world that is determined to take clarity where it can, even

in luridness; and of the slightly contemptuous "Its place is...mixing red with blue." The world cannot be painted, cannot be worked with. Red and blue are the primaries, as in Wallace Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor":

> Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
> The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
> The weight of primary noon,
> The A B C of being,
>
> The ruddy temper, the hammer
> Of red and blue, the hard sound--
> Steel against intimation--the sharp flash,
> The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.[66]

If we look back to the main passage of inefficacious common language itself, the "old goat" lines, "The Ice-Cream Wars" actually provides at least a short moral pointer. There is a harmful, aggressive aspect, as well as foolishness, to attempting trying to grasp the world in (to mix senses) common, communal terms, rather than through an individual's eyes, your own.

Presumably, this disapproval would extend to the practice of imposing one's own viewpoint on others. That would certainly account for the rhetorical diffidence with which Ashbery presents his epistemology of limited consciousness. That epistemology, which is in large part his theme, would also encompass a new angle on a basic moral lesson: in common language, "be yourself." As Paul Auster writes, Ashbery's "greatest talent...is his utter faithfulness to his own subjectivity."[67]

AMY GERSTLER: THE ACCEPTANCE OF EPIPHANY

In analyzing the poetry of Amy Gerstler, we can again begin by establishing that she is a poet of basically elevated, formal language. This will be more difficult than with Ashbery because, as will be seen in Part IV, she incorporates common language more realistically and spontaneously than he does. But more up-to-date low language does not lower the overall formality and tone of the poems.

Here is the full text of "Housebound," a poem that certainly starts off raw:

> When we fuck, stars don't peer down: they can't.
> We fornicate indoors, under roofs, under wraps;
> far from nature's prying eyes--from the trees'
> slight green choreography, wrung from rigid trunks,
> that leaves us unmoved. In full view of the shower
> head and bookcases, we lick and tickle each other.
> Every stick of furniture's a witness. We'd like
> to believe our love's a private sentiment, yet
> how many couches, cots, and benches have soaked up
> some? Lust adheres to objects, becomes a prejudice
> instilled in utensils by human use. How can I blind
> these Peeping Toms--silence the libidinous whining
> of these sipped-from paper cups and unused
> toothbrushes?
> I can't. I wait for the outspoken adolescent spoons
> to rust and hold their tongues so we can be alone.[68]

In terms of the distinction between down-to-earth description and elevated exploitation of a scene, this poem, despite its frankness, works toward the latter. It puts a personal problem in terms of a general vision ("Lust adheres to objects..."). The idea of housewares as voyeurs is presented as an intellectual conceit, as a purely abstract or philosophical issue. There is no trace of the pathology that

would be demonstrated by someone seriously worried that the furnishings were watching her lovemaking.

The poem's elevated status is also apparent in the way it creates meaning by its form more than by its content. More specifically, it uses form that is rhetorically disproportionate to the complexity of the literal meaning to generate a tone of existential querulousness. The argumentative structure is a complex one. First the situation is stated -- we don't have sex in the out of doors, we're hidden. But that means we're in sight of the furniture. Then the structure is restated as a problem -- the furnishings of the house are taking in our passion. Then that problem is restated as a general pattern -- objects become lustful and envious when exposed to this view. Finally there is an attempt to solve the problem, and a despairing realization that solution is beyond the writer. What is formal about this structure is not just the rhetorical edifice but its application to an odd, conceptual problem. The poem is what was once called a conceit -- "an elaborate, fanciful metaphor,"[69] a metaphor strained to the breaking point.

Lastly, "Housebound" displays a certain verbal formality. The lines are not in a strict meter, but do display a pattern of short, strong two-syllable feet followed by more flowing three-syllable feet later in the line. The fifth- and fourth-to-last lines are good examples: "How can I blind / these Peeping Toms, silence the libidinous whining...." And the language, while once again not high-

flown, is characteristically coy in even the blunt lines, such as the clinical "lick and tickle" and the enumerative "couches, cots, and benches." (Gerstler is fond of lists, frequently preferring them to positioning one punchy image or word to make the reader empathize with the speaker's sensation.) It's a typical Gerstler poem in its detached ruefulness; the poet often sounds like the intellectual, almost solemn twelve-year-old first-person heroine of her prose piece "Primitive Man":

> At public school, I'm trying to work my way out of being an untouchable nut. Sort of like dead Catholics I read about in Western Religions--lightweight sinners in life, who got stuck in purgatory when they died, until their relatives could pray them out. I've got a lot to atone for before I'll be considered normal enough to ignore.[70]

Even when Gerstler is riotous, she remains distant, elevated, somewhat aloof, and in visible control of her form.

"Housebound" is less of a linguistic adventure than a typical Ashbery poem, but equally formalistic. Gerstler's strong emotional current remains beneath the smooth surface of what might be called twentieth-century poetic diction. Another example of the distance Gerstler keeps from her subject, the way she uses surface emotions as a tool to extract other meanings, is "I Fall to Pieces":

> What does a kiss mean in our kind of relationship?
> A truce of lips? That though we're both animals,
> you won't bite? After necking in the cemetery,
> I felt as scattered as that married couple's ashes.
> You read their plaque aloud: TOO BAD, WE HAD FUN.
> Hope my crumbs and dust wind up feeding a cactus
> whose fruit becomes your tequila. You'd drink me,
> and I'd enter your temple: an ever-faithful
> headache.
> But I wouldn't be able to see your Adam's apple jump

> when you swallowed. Glug glug. So let's walk upright awhile, keep paradise at bay, OK? Kiss me again, breathe your little ills and weird fear into me. Erase my name, leave me speechless.[71]

This is a coherent emotional autobiographical vignette. That differentiates it from Ashbery's poems, from which a personal, speaking subject is so determinedly absent. But despite the greater immanence of the subject, the author is as remote from this situation as the author of "The Ice-Cream Wars," because the emotional self-analysis of "I Fall to Pieces" is unmistakably, deliberately artificial. The artifice is displayed in the way the emotions expressed by the speaker are ironized and manipulated without being allowed to arouse any empathy in the reader. The first 4 1/2 lines can be taken as a casual but plausible speech to a lover. Then the incredibly unlikely cemetery inscription TOO BAD, WE HAD FUN places us in the realm of fantasy. We realize that this is not a true account, that we have been set up, and stop trying to decipher the reality of their relationship. Neatly, the poem goes on for precisely 4 1/2 more lines, luring us into almost the same belief. The tequila image is more fanciful than the first four lines. But a fanciful lover might resort to it. Until it becomes self-parody with "Glug glug." There has probably never been a sentiment felt strongly enough that it could be communicated in proximity to the word "glug," let alone its iteration.

The last two lines of the poem again present a believable romantically troubled speaker. But by now the reader knows better than to credit this as a real monologue

from a real heart. For one thing, there are only three more lines after "Glug glug." So we know there is no space for the dehumanizing, distancing surprise effects we have encountered so far to be counteracted by a serious resolution of this section of the monologue. It would take a repeated or an extended reversal of that process to effect a transition to mimesis. Second, the last line is specifically about dehumanization. The woman (presuming her sex) is asking her lover to take her over to a degree that doesn't even sound romantic anymore. Although she has just stated she'd like to continue living, she seems to be asking for either literal or emotional death in him, the way the married couple are dead in the wind.

This is not to deny that there are real emotions expressed in this poem. The emotions are present; they are just not being denoted by the words. The analogy with Ashbery is clear. Both use language that is non-referential, or, more precisely, language whose true subject is not the same as its literal referent. Its true subject, then, is undefinable, more an abstraction than a definable or summarizable notion. It could even be argued that Gerstler's poetry is more deceptive and difficult than Ashbery's, despite seeming relatively lucid, because of seeming relatively lucid. The works leave tracks leading in one direction while they have stolen off the other way. Gerstler's poetry -- again, assuming we do not take it as being utterly meaningless or inept -- connotes its meaning rather than denoting it. Along with its formal

structure and syntax, that places it in the elevated, as opposed to the down-to-earth, camp.

The issue of emotional evasiveness, prevalent in Gerstler's poetry, brings us to the crux of the argument: the way Gerstler's poetry, in contrast to Ashbery's, accepts the claim implicit in common language to be revealing literal truth. This is "Kindergarten":

> Why do children burrow in dirt?
> To play gardener? Or to escape
> their bright clothes and dishes,
> decorated with gently-intended
> images--squirrels and birds,
> meant to keep them safe and
> uplifted? Surrounded by carnival
> colors that tire their eyes,
> sleep at least distances them
> from the stink of things breaking
> down; the slither and groan of
> accidents on long afternoons
> when mother lets the cake plate
> fall. Raised on Wonder Bread,
> children nevertheless aren't fooled
> by our bald planet's toupee of
> redolent hedges. Regret pinches
> them right at bedtime, when they
> realize dinners and card games
> will go on without them now,
> and they taste their as-yet
> unexcavated fate, waiting beneath
> waving weeds, where animals,
> vegetables and minerals trade shapes.[72]

There are two striking common-language elements in this poem: "Wonder Bread" and "toupee." Both are definitively contemporary terms, at odds with the elevated, rhetorical tone of phrases like "their as-yet unexcavated fate." It is easy to see that on a semantic level, they convey a kind of sarcastic realism in contrast to the unreality with which the children are surrounded. The miracles of capitalism are

undercut in the image of sparkling but unnourishing Wonder Bread. The miracles of nature are undercut in the image of earth's greenery as a cosmetic wig, one which could easily slip off.

But both important common-language elements undercut not only the images with which the writer has surrounded them, but the writer's voice itself as well. The formal voice here is distant and satirical. Beginning with the first line, its language is slightly too grandiose for its form. A simple, short question does not require the distracting word "burrow"; the language is too elaborate for the meter. The "slither and groan" of the cake plate falling is likewise delicately oversold. The action is not massive enough for those apocalyptic words, which sound like the prelude to the crack of doom. In this poem Gerstler subtly sets up not only an evasive society which lies in an attempt to protect its children, but an evasive voice to tell us about it. The lines "Raised on Wonder Bread, / children nevertheless aren't fooled / by our bald planet's toupee of / redolent hedges" then bring the realization of dusty mortality to parents and children, and to the writer as well. The prior images of harsh reality have been stated in elevated terms, and thus really haven't gotten through. These lines tell us what the real world is like in the language of the real world.

On both the levels of semantics and tone, Gerstler accepts the claim of common language to truth, the claim Ashbery likewise rejects in both those areas. That is why

the role of common language in Gerstler's poetry, even when the poem is written in language almost as opaque as Ashbery's, is to cut through that elevated, dense language to bring a traditional epiphany, a clear moment of realization or recognition. The five lines of "A Love Poem" show this pattern of hers to be inherent:

> Me Jerusalem, you Kansas City.
> You fifth, me jigger.
> Me fork, you can opener.
> You sweetmeat, me bean-cake.
> Me zilch, you nada.[73]

Here each line, each comparison, of the first four, is witty and puzzling. Some seem to present a hierarchy (Jerusalem vs. Kansas City); others seem to simply express the lovers' different personalities. Both the images and their progression are expertly designed to lull us into a pleasant state of befuddlement: the lines draw the reader into the situation while denying him or her the information needed to comprehend it. There is no way to interpret the first eighty percent of "A Love Poem" on any literal level. But the last line is starkly, almost painfully clear. It has some of the deftness of the last line of Stevens's "Anything Is Beautiful If You Say It Is,"[74] in which "The dirt along the sill" is transformed by the context into a "symbol of high polish,"[75] except that the transformation in this poem has almost the opposite effect. "Zilch" and "nada" are an obvious common-language presence: they are not only slang but forced, obvious, dated slang.[76] Common language is again being used unironically as a vehicle for clearer perception than formal

language can provide. The playfulness of the comparisons is being demolished: there is no need for comparison, the lovers are the same, and what is more, they are nothing. This can be taken somewhat positively. It may be a sign that they are united, that differences have been eliminated. Or it may mean that both the individuals and their relationship mean nothing, that they represent the coupling of worms. But this last line certainly presents a starkness absent from the preceding lines. The speaker is coming to a harsh or at least a sudden awareness. This is provided by the introduction of common language. The diction of the first four lines, while it includes proper names and household objects, comes from what might be called the general store of language. It does not belong to a particular linguistic department, as "zilch" and "nada" do.

"A Love Poem" presents us with common language that successfully sells itself as truthful. But truthfulness in that short poem remains an impression. It will have to extend and concentrate itself into a single truthful image for the poems to derive any moral force from their use of common language. As we did for Ashbery, let us now examine the way Gerstler's common language conveys a morality, a view of the world that goes beyond a belief that it is possible to have a view of the world. The consequence of that belief, one would expect, would be more of an activist philosophy than Ashbery's. After all, if you know what the world is like, you can change it a lot more effectively than if you have no

certainty beyond the contents of your own head.

If not activism, Gerstler's poems at least reveal a compulsion to honesty. This resides both in her use of truthful-seeming common language and in the explicit evasiveness of the context that surrounds it. This poem is titled "Often":

> You frighten me. Your moods
> unnerve me. Your hours get in
> my way. At times, when you're
> here, and your jacket's tossed
> on the floor and there's a half
> drunk mug of cold tea in nearly
> every room, I decide I just want
> to be alone, so I can collect my
> thoughts, get up early and work,
> without your wants and rhythms
> tripping up mine. This morning
> I woke to a neighbor's new rooster
> crowing. I turned my head and there
> was your strange gaunt face at close
> range. Icy joy invaded me: you'd
> lived through the night. I had to
> shove my pillows on the floor
> to get a better look at you.[77]

The voice speaking at the outset of this poem is, if not actually lying, is at least self-deceptive. The opening is delicately pitched to imitate a plain, heartfelt revelation, but in language elevated enough that the reader is left with some uncertainty over whether this is a confession or a construction, an attempt by the speaker to convince herself. She repeats what is basically the same complaint, using words like "frighten" and "unnerve" that carry just enough of a high-flown, psychoanalytical note to imply that some contrivance went into them. As well, the poetic structure, the metrically satisfying iambics of the first three lines, makes their literal truth suspect. The careful shaping of the

sounds, especially in the repetitive rhythms of "You frighten me. Your moods unnerve me," give a hollow ring to the supposed directness of the exposition. As in "Housebound," the poet's presence is made obtrusive to limit our involvement with the character. Sincere, believable confession wouldn't seem to require such craft. And the repetition gives the voice a whiny tone that also serves to distance the reader from her troubles.

Moving onward, the next few lines lay out a particular situation when the speaker feels oppressed by her lover and tell us what she does in response. These lines are written more prosaically than the first few; they lack the prefabricated style of the earlier lines, and are thus more convincing as personal narrative. The image of the stale tea mug eyeing the speaker in every room she walks into gives some depth to her stated sense of suffocation. But a flavor of evasiveness still pervades the litany of complaint, the repeated "I"s of lines 7-8 and the renewed vagueness of "your wants and rhythms." The speaker is telling us her problem in a manner that seems to be attempting to be relatable, but is so distinctively self-conscious and defensive way that we know she simply is not leveling.

The break comes in the middle of line 11, with the words "This morning." It situates us in a specific moment, gives us the feeling that we are about to be shown what we have been uneasily told. "This morning" is a direct rebuke to the title "Often", which could easily be a sullen response to any

number of sensible direct questions -- "How often?" "When?" "Always?" The words "This morning" begin the process of cutting through the fog. The next few images are a parade of blissful specifics. The neighbor has a "new rooster." This is doubly specific, since both the irrelevantly precise adjective and the fact that the neighbor in what sounds like a very urban poem keeps poultry surprise us with particularity. The "strange gaunt face" lets us see the lover where his tossed jacket and irresponsible teacups did not.

Nonetheless, there is still evasion going on in the speaker's narration of her emotions. The phrase "icy joy invaded me" is semantically clear enough, and represents a change from the relationship angst of the first half of the poem. While ambiguity lingers -- "icy joy" is not an image of outright amorous bliss -- ambiguity can be part of truth in a poem, especially a love poem. It just has to be earned; the speaker has to make us feel that she has wrestled with this question to the limits of her ability. The tone of those four words does not quite accomplish that; with its passivity and the obvious attempt at a flashy oxymoron, it still carries too much of the style of conventional romance writing. Though it is quirky enough not to be purple, "icy joy invaded me" is in this voice not yet convincingly sincere. We feel that this speaker can be more precise than that.

The proof comes in the next-to-last line, with the word "shove." It seems like a lot of weight for one word to carry, but shove fills the bill as truthful common language in two

respects. "Shove", though included in Webster's Dictionary, is a slangy word. It has a blunt sound light years away from where the poem began, with "frighten" and "unnerve." It has the precision of slang, of words that arise spontaneously because no orthodox term will fit the thought. Those words are often frowned on by users of proper English. The speaker's slip into common language here brings home the truth of her feelings about the object of her desires. The modus vivendi of dodging and irritation was a disguise for her feelings of passion and wonder. And the brusque precision that puts "shove" in the province of common language also works in a more conventional way. Like "commit suicide" in James Wright's poem, it feels accurate the way the earlier language did not.

In "Often," common language is used not just to set out a world-view. It dramatizes that view, which is inherent in the psychological process going on in the language. We see a person reaching discovery, admission -- not a major epiphany, perhaps, but a new stage of honesty about her own feelings.

This may sound like reading more into the tone than is there, but I believe the poignant detachment so striking in Gerstler's poetry comes from another use of the same stratagem of admitting the naked truth of common language. Gerstler is expert at subtly manipulating the typical confessional voice of lyric poetry. In poem after poem, the speaker tantalizingly fails to provide enough information to arouse our sympathy with her situation. The details we do get

seem mundane and unsatisfying. Yet at the same time the poet manages to induce that sympathy by creating the impression of self-revelation. This effect is achieved through a tonal shift, an important part of which is the careful interweaving of common language into the diction of the poem. Common language lends the character's mild epiphanies, the reader's brief insights into her, both an aura of truthfulness and a slightly more intense, rawer voice than the story that leads up to them. Rather than being saved for a climax, common language operates almost subliminally throughout the poem on the reader's consciousness. The elevation that hides the speaker's emotions from us is intermittently dropped, allowing us to sense openness that is absent from the content of the speaker's words. We feel that a troubled but hidden person is making a genuine effort at communication.

In "Overcome," this interweaving is complex enough to make the poem almost as opaque as one of Ashbery's:

> Few realize this glittering
> hour exists. But you do.
> The sky molten, the clouds so aroused
> they remind you of your mission:
> to huff and puff and blow down
> the old forms, then erect new altars
> from mud, breadcrumbs, and pollen.
> Your course, shooting star,
> becomes clear for a minute.
> The day begins to warm up. What's distant
> from us is perfected, I guess. A wind
> from the abyss ruffles your hair.
> The air thickens into your body
> as you move through it.
> You never believed a word I said.
> Nor were my hands of much use.
> My love for you so akin
> to homesickness, that tonight,

instead of clouds, the sky looks full
of crumpled bandages and blindfolds.[78]

Here the instants of awareness, rather than being concentrated in the last lines of the poem, are spread throughout it. The first instance of such awareness is in the second line. The poem's first line and a half partakes of the elevated tone found in most of "Often"; the rhetorical loftiness of "Few realize..." is on roughly the same tonal level as "Icy joy invaded me." That loftiness is here undercut by the simple counter-statement "But you do." Those three words are almost comical in their refusal to accept the roundaboutness of the compliment offered by the poem's opening, in the way they make explicit the different and challenging nature of the "you" in this poem. His quality, his insight into the "glittering" nature of the "hour", is to be directly depicted, not suggested by comparison.

But "But you do" is not yet common language. That element is introduced in the next line, where the technical terms "molten" (from metallurgy) and "aroused" (from sexology[79]) continue to subvert the elevated style with which the poem opened. "The sky molten" is a strikingly fresh image of the ferment and rebirth which take place both in the mind of the "you" and in the poem's language. The image of the molten sky is skillfully juxtaposed with a separate image of clouds. Molten clouds approach a standard poetic image: we are used to clouds roiling, boiling, rolling and so on. By transferring the image of liquid metal to the sky itself, Gerstler emphasizes the word "molten"'s precise, scientific

nature; then the "aroused" clouds further the impression of a sudden, surprising series of events that are nonetheless only visible to the serious.

Common language continues to subtly define the newness of the situation in the ensuing two lines. These employ popular culture to consolidate the revision just described. Line 4, though returning both metrically and in diction to a smoother surface, includes the phrase "Your mission," with its lightly mocking echo of the tacky 1960s television series Mission: Impossible, in which Peter Graves's instructions were always ominously prefaced with "Your mission, should you choose to accept it...." The line executes the return it describes. In it, the surprising freshness of the technical words used to describe clouds and sky is downgraded to a quirky cultural reference, just as the sudden vision of the person being addressed is blended into what he was trying to do all along. The next line completes this return to old, elevated ways of seeing from the down-to-earth spirit of lines 2 and 3. The phrase "huff and puff and blow down" does derive from the specific context of nursery rhymes. But although it is language foreign to the traditional poetic store, it has roots in folk poetry, and a meter far more traditional than that of the elevated poetry written today. This common language that is recognizably a grandfather of elevated style leads us back to the metrically regular, connotative, and somewhat tentative narration of line 6.

It would consume too much space to detail all the

continued shifts in "Overcome" between common language that reveals the true wildness of life, the "abyss," and elevated passages that demonstrate the speaker's rueful inability to hold onto that revelation, which comes to her in the person of her love object. Let us move instead to the end, where, in contrast to the climactic insight of "Often," the speaker finally acknowledges the insufficiency of her knowledge. David Shapiro writes about these last lines,

> The homesickness...seems to be for a time when objects spoke more clearly, when a connection between men and women might be clearer, and when home itself in linguistic terms was less uncanny. The poem is one of Romantic crisis, and all the ominous monotonies of Gerstler seem to conclude in its troubling, Proustian wound.[80]

That wound is expressed in a new image of clouds -- an indifferent one, one which in its routine diction and regularized style shows us that the speaker is finally without the knowledge, borne by common language, that has been slipping in and out of her grasp for the length of the poem. Gerstler's epistemology is more positive than Ashbery's, in that she believes it possible to see the world as it is and strives to do so. But her striving reveals how difficult a feat is such sight, and how complicated and ephemeral is the down-to-earth picture of knowledge held out by common language.

SOURCES AND RAMIFICATIONS

Now that we have established roughly antithetical uses of common language in these two poets, it behooves us to compare their respective sources for that type of diction. Where do Ashbery and Gerstler get their common language, and how do those origins affect common language's role in their poems as witness to reality?

John Ashbery's poetry employs two basic types of common language. One is what might be called the most blatant type: street language, diction that is slangy to the point of profanity. The specialized origin of these words and phrases is found in new social or linguistic environments that breed new terms. These additions may be scorned at first as nonstandard and unworthy of inclusion in dictionaries. The second type comes from a different world and has a very different tonal impact from slang's crude charge. It is the jargon of bureaucratic institutions and official documents.

We have seen in "Foreboding" and "The Ice-Cream Wars" how Ashbery brings slang and profanity into his poems, even though the slang in the latter poem ("Why, you old goat!") may be deliberately dated. But the first stanza of "Poem in Three Parts" begins as a definite excursion into the sexual-graphics aspect of current street language:

1. Love

"Once I let a guy blow me.
I kind of backed away from the experience.
Now, years later, I think of it

> Without emotion...
> Who goes to bed with what
> Is unimportant. Feelings are important.
> Mostly I think of feelings, they fill up my life
> Like the wind, like tumbling clouds
> In a sky full of clouds, clouds upon clouds....[81]

Replicating the processes we have seen thus far, the common language and concomitant attempt at worldly clearsightedness that begin the poem are soon firmly supplanted by Ashbery's customary isolated detachment. Once again the poet is telling us that the brute facts of experience are not the truth of it. Ten lines after the passage I have quoted comes one of Ashbery's most succinct statements of his epistemology:

> One must bear in mind one thing.
> It isn't necessary to know what that thing is.
> All things are palpable, none are known.

The down-to-earth beginning is also cushioned even before we read it by the title and structure of the poem; we know that if the graphic section went on for pages, it would still eventually give way to another "part."

From this passage and the profane moments of "Foreboding," we can see that Ashbery's slangy common language comes out of moments of stress, human emotional revelation. Although the pretensions to truth that graphic language takes on in an elevated poetic context are eventually thoroughly discredited, the language does have an emotional genuineness to it. One more example will suffice -- a poem from Houseboat Days called "Spring Light." This is roughly the second half:

> There is a great deal on the ground today,
> Not just mud, but things of some importance,
> Too. Like, silver paint. How do you feel

About it. And, is this a silver age?
Yeah. I suppose so. But I keep looking at the
cigarette
Burns on the edge of the sink, left over
From last winter. Your argument's
Neatly beyond any paths I'm likely to take
Here, or when I eventually leave here.[82]

Again, we see the characteristic intrusion of common language ("Yeah. I suppose so.") to provide a claim of truth, though here truthfulness does not go much beyond skepticism. And again, that claim gives way in the last two and a half lines to an admission of incomprehension and a projection into a vague and unchartable future. But what is truly noteworthy is the way the interjection is grounded in a situation that's vaguely recognizable, even vaguely dramatic. Ashbery has taken the trouble, with the two questions that precede the intrusion, to set up an atmosphere of dialogue. This prepares us to see the speaker of the "Yeah" as an actual person, though by this point in the poem (let alone the book) we already know that there is no reliable speaker, no solid vantage point. Ashbery's moments of slang and profanity are rhetorically phantasmal, like all of his common language, but psychologically they are solid.

This is less true of the second major category of Ashberyan common language, which can collectively be given the name of the poem "Unctuous Platitudes." It begins,

There is no reason for the surcharge to bother you.
Living in a city one is nonplussed by some

Of the inhabitants. The weather has grown gray with
age.
Poltergeists go about their business, sometimes

> Demanding a sweeping revision. The breath of the
> air
> Is invisible. People stay
>
> Next to the edges of the fields, hoping that out
> of nothing
> Something will come, and then it does, but what?
> Embers
>
> Of the rain tamp down the shitty darkness that
> issues
> From nowhere. A man in her room, you say.[83]

Here the common language, aside from one excursion into scatology, is quasi-bureaucratese. Even the last sentence quoted, which sounds more like a line from a novel, is novelistic filler, not novelistic drama like the "Spend the night" passage in "No Way of Knowing." The prime example is the first line, which gives the rest of the poem the flavor summed up by the title. Obviously, this unctuous platitude is a slap at corporate or civil-service English.

But the tone, rather than being dramatic, is light. This type of common language is not taken seriously; it is slightly exaggerated, or exaggerated by repetition, and allowed to indict itself. Thus there is a difference between the method used to demolish Ashbery's two major types of common language and their claims to truthfulness. Slang and profanity are established, allowed to make their claims, because slang has a prima facie claim to being connected with the world and accurate about its nature. Slang emerges from the world, from daily circumstances. This gives it a plausible accuracy that must be clearly and finally disproved. Phrases like "demanding a sweeping revision," on the contrary, while they take themselves seriously,

suggesting important real-world tasks at hand, are self-evidently remote from reality. They smack of their origins as second-generation ways to order reality, or, more harshly, to distort reality. Bureaucratic and business terminology's falseness to experience is obvious, and they can be juxtaposed with personal language and allowed to show its falseness to experience without further effort from the poet.

In this poem, as in many others, the undercutting we have witnessed of common language's epistemological claims literally takes place with no overt authorial effort. The unctuous platitudes of "Unctuous Platitudes" are not confronted and swept away, like the slangy confidence of the speaker in "Spring Light." They are allowed to melt into the customary ignorance that occupies most of the poem. The literary word "nonplussed" eases the transition from the unctuous flavor of the first line to the calm, sad description of an ungraspable situation that we find in the second, third and fourth stanzas. This mood culminates in the classic Ashberyan setup of "hoping that...Something will come, and then it does, but what?" It is at this point that slangy common language reappears, to restate the case for knowledge more forcefully. The picture of the world it presented in the adjective "shitty" is negative, in contrast to the optimism of line 1, and forceful, in contrast to the opening's placidity. This is a suggestion of *real knowledge* that to be dealt with more quickly, and it is, with the triumphantly indefinite "From nowhere" and the non sequitur

that ends the passage.

Thus "Unctuous Platitudes" includes both the principal types of Ashberyan common language. A purer example of the way the poet brings in jargon so it can deflate itself is in one of Ashbery's many sweet jargon-laden poems, "Another Chain Letter":

> He had had it told to him on the sward
> Where the fat men bowl, and told so that no one--
> He least of all--might be sure in the days to come
> Of the <u>exact</u> terms. Then, each turned back
>
> To his business, as is customary on such occasions.
> Months and months went by....[84]

The readymade phrases of this poem, the "exact terms" and "as is customary"s, are never really challenged. They operate by simple irony, creating disbelief in the possibility of understanding the world with the idiotic faith they display in the notion.

Amy Gerstler's common language tends to be more subtle than Ashbery's in both its contexts and its use. This is partly because her language is simply less lavish than his; of the two connotative poets, her language is closer to the verbal simplicity of denotation. When she employs conversational common language, even when it is as profane as Ashbery's, it is less demonstrative of its street status than his. To phrase it so as to do Gerstler justice, her slang and street language are less striking than Ashbery's because they are more realistic, more integrated with the characters who are at least shadows in Gerstler but not even that in

Ashbery. The opening of "Housebound" notwithstanding, Gerstler generally uses relatively unobtrusive examples of everyday-type common language as she accomplishes her own purpose of coercing her speakers toward epiphany. The word "shove" as used in "Often" exemplifies this subtler method. The confrontation between common language and elevated style is a quiet victory for the former, rather than a clash.

But there is a flashy dimension to Gerstler's common language: the extended use she makes of some particular sources. Frequently, especially in her prose, she ventures into a particular sort of parody. A prime example is this piece from Bitter Angel:

> SLOWLY I OPEN MY EYES
> (gangster soliloquy)
>
> While the city sleeps there's this blast of silence that follows the whine of daylight: a defeat that wraps itself around buildings like a python, or one of those blue sheets they bundle corpses up in. Wanna go for an ambulance ride? Fragments of the sordid and the quote unquote normal vie for my attention. Hacking coughs and seductive yoo-hoos dangle in the 3 a.m. air. Up on this roof, I smoke cigarettes and wait. I feel like god up here. No kidding. Jerusalem Slim on his final night in the garden. Mr. X, Dr. No, The Invisible Man. All the same guy, different movies. It's a city of delinquents: my disciples. Maybe some bum down below finds one of my stubbed out butts and is delighted. Everybody's looking for something to inhale and something else to empty into. The whole city reels and twinkles at my feet, but the stars aren't impressed. They see it every night. The eighty-year-old elevator operator downstairs snores like he's trying to suck up the Hudson. Humans act as if they're going to stick around forever, but nobody ever does. That's what cracks me up.[85]

This piece is a curious and delicate hybrid of down-to-earth and elevated language, although here the elevated

language is that of literary prose, not poetry. Common language gets an extended opportunity to make its claim, in the form of a character of its own and a stage on which to perform. The special context of popular culture is far more than an allusion, it is the background of the speaker. Laurence Goldstein writes, "[Gerstler's] gangster is aware of himself as imaginary, an inventor of identity for himself. His possibilities are chosen from the movies."[86] This expansion gives common language a credibility that it lacks in Gerstler's more personal lyrics, or in Ashbery's rapid segues. But the credibility is not entirely a matter of space. Handing common language more lines could just as easily allow it to demonstrate its limitations through circularity or repetition, like a droning prole in a David Mamet play.

Instead, the gangster is given much of the revelation in this piece. He has the perspective that common-language voices in Ashbery entirely lack, and that conversational common language passages in Gerstler are simply too truncated to provide. The gangster has a point of view, and the one you would expect from someone whose daily routine probably includes a rubout and a couple of car chases. He finds human life fragile. This is perhaps the primal common-language message: that all the lofty efforts of elevated language, even its bothering to think about the nature of existence at all, are farcical frippery when the reality of human life is a competition for survival.

Yet the gangster presents this real-world message in a highly stylized way. As Goldstein notes, he is aware of himself as a character, and his speech is an exaggeration of dialogue from 1930s Warner Brothers movies with Edward G. Robinson. While he is ostensibly bringing us a bulletin from the front lines, he is at the same time trapped in his own context so completely as to become a caricature. The gangster is in the same situation as the speakers in Gerstler's relationship poems: struggling toward knowledge, but imprisoned in their own perspective. The difference here, that his perspective is one that seems realistic rather than idiosyncratic, only serves to make his fetters more unbreakable.

This presents us with a new view of common language: that because of its origin in a specialized context, it can present a limiting point of view rather than a liberating view of reality. What at first seemed to be a new entitlement of common language turns out still to be restricted. Yet, as in her more conventional poems, Gerstler does continue to support the striving for epiphany represented by common language, and in the final analysis the gangster seems to have the right idea. His thuggish view of reality exhibits more awareness than his attempts at elevated literateness, such as the python image at the beginning of the piece. "Slowly I Open My Eyes," like "Overcome," shows us a character who does not attain the vision he is reaching for; and though "Slowly" has a more tragic aspect in that the

gangster, more than the speaker in "Overcome," seems doomed never to attain such vision, common language still provides more opportunity for it than purple prose.

That interpretation is aided by "This Winter," which is laid out like a poem, not like prose. The speaker here sounds like the gangster, or has as particular and a common-language voice. But Mike (named in a part I don't quote) is more in the know, as he might say, despite his tonal limitations:

> New gloom. Frozen smoke. Rain every day, with a hint
> of snow in it. For once that chump of a weatherman
> was right. But I don't care anymore. I flip another
> spent Lucky butt to the pavement and watch it sizzle
> out. I want it to finish getting dark, quick...
> She was something, like the sky, I never saw enough
> of.
> Icy static making her satin robe cling and snap as
> she
> slipped back into it. Her head in my lap, lips
> glistening,
> right up to the minute she became instant history.
> Colder now, she's got that head thrown back
> somewhere,
> laughing at me. And the rain's giving birth to a
> snowflake
> here and there. Ah, my doll. Whatta landscape.[87]

The voice is again the hard-bitten narrator drawn from popular culture, though the exact source is harder to identify. The narrator of a Mickey Spillane novel, perhaps, again endowed with an out-of-place sensitivity. This common-language voice, however, is a more clearly truthful one than the anonymous gangster's, making this poem, despite its parodic style, a blood relative of the love poems discussed in Part II. While the voice in this poem has some of the integratedness of Ashbery's, supplied by "the quick oscillation of levels," noted by Sven Birkerts in another

Gerstler pop-culture excursion called "Dear Boy George,"[88] we can see that Mike's wistful romantic nostalgia for his woman, written in the literary near-absurdity of "She was something, like the sky, I never saw enough of," is bloated and remote compared to the descriptions of the cold, lonely weather that's now upon him. When Mike speaks in propria persona, the comparative vividness of his speech convinces us that the elevated style is nostalgic evasion and the Spillane-ish, down-to-earth style is giving us the truer picture.

Complicating that analysis once more is the fact that, like the gangster in "Slowly I Open My Eyes," Mike's imprisonment within a popular-culture identity undermines his authority as much as it reinforces it. We recognize Mike's status as a spokesman for realism, because of his earthy lumpenness, but the cliched nature of that lumpenness gives us doubt. Someone who uses the word "chump" and (at another point) refers to his "ugly mug" is a spokesman for clear perception within the context of this poem, but hardly a prophet of truth.

Mike is such a creation, such an archetype, that we grasp and believe his words easily. In fact we may laugh at ourselves for being so attuned to an artifact, and that recognition diminishes his status, compromises the truth-telling elements of common language. In this poem and in "Slowly," through their speakers' tragic imprisonment in his cartoonish identity, Gerstler is able to dramatically demonstrate another aspect of the difficulty of accepting

claims to truthfulness. The popular-culture type of common language is highly attractive, and it can supply us with truthful messages; but only with personal honesty, a close look and a careful struggle.

EPILOGUE: A GENERATIONAL SHIFT

Gerstler's free use of the common language of popular culture brings me to a consequence of the different uses of common language in these two writers. Put briefly, Ashbery is of a generation that declared language utterly insufficient for understanding the world, indeed declared impossible the attainment of any unified understanding of it.[89] His thoroughly skeptical use of common language reflects that belief. Gerstler's generation makes no such declaration. It is possible that they take the absence of overarching understanding as a basic truth, but I believe that on the contrary, they do believe in understanding, from a perspective similar to that which predated Ashbery's cohort. This faith is reflected in the way Gerstler and others have constructed an ordered world, a world essentially comprehensible even through the cultural fog that surrounds us.

A historical analysis of Postmodernism is in order here (much of it based on Linda Hutcheon's A Poetics of Postmodernism). Literary Modernism arose early in this century as a response to the great turn-of-the-century crisis of old structures of faith. It began with the despairing assumption that the old religious and intellectual structures of belief were dead. That despair is exemplified in early twentieth-century poets as different as Eliot and Stevens. But despair was followed by a search for new structures to

replace the old ones, or a retreat to the old ones.[90] Eliot constructed a new, grim, knowledgeable Anglican Christianity. Joyce attempted to synthesize a new overhanging roof out of the centuries of Western culture available to him. Stevens looked to the basic materials of the intellectual life, imagination and reality, as creating a new belief sytem through their competitive symbiosis.

The generation that succeeded the Modernists faced what it saw as further blows to the nineteenth-century belief in progress toward order, in the form of economic depression, human brutality during two world wars, and science's simultaneous theoretical presentation of the universe as even more cosmically indifferent than had been thought, and practical application to terrifying weapons of destruction. This generation found even Modernist alienation naive. The Modernist attempt to create new systems to replace the old came to seem goofily misled, a romanticism as foolish as the grandparental dogma it had replaced.[91]

A new literary thought pattern -- "system" would be a horrid oxymoron -- arose soon after World War II. The basis of Postmodernism has been defined and redefined. One repeatedly quoted attempt is Jean-Francois Lyotard's that postmodernism is the denial of all absolutes.[92] In a more moderate framing, Postmodernism is the belief that no idea has authority, since all are products of discourse. No structure can apply everywhere, because all are limited by the circumstances of their production. In this view,

Postmodernism does not assert that the world is meaningless, as is often simplistically attributed to it, but that all meanings are created.[93]

Considered philosophically, this formulation of Postmodernism seems unrevolutionary. Only a thoroughgoing Platonist or a devout follower of a major monotheistic religion would deny that all meanings are ultimately created, or that belief systems are products of discourse. And those two types are rarely found among latter-twentieth-century artists and writers. The essential Postmodernist nihilism was established by Nietzsche sixty years earlier.[94]

Since it failed to introduce a new artistic attitude, Postmodernism remained as much a bind as a principle. Postmodern writers were as sure as modernists that the old system of belief was dead. But they felt there was no intellectual integrity in trying to replace those systems with new ones. Since all systems were limited in the ways mentioned above, to portray an inchoate, random and incomprehensible world was the only honest course. The Postmodernists seem to have been motivated by a sense of intellectual rigor, in contrast to the Modernists, who wrote out of instinctive mourning for the old systems. Postmodernists felt obligated to carry the epistemological realizations of the modernists to their logical conclusions. They operated on the bizarre assumption that consistency is required between the artist's beliefs and the world he or she portrays.

This intellectualized artistic principle accounts for much of the preciousness of Postmodernist writing. Without the internal motivations that animated the modernists, Postmodernist literature often became incomprehensibly solipsistic.[95] This has even been said of some of the early work of John Ashbery, like "Europe" and the aforementioned "Leaving the Atocha Station." But, in contrast to the run of Postmodernists, Ashbery's lack of hope of understanding of the world does seem to emerge from a deeply personal impulse, and the personalism is one of the qualities that allows his work to escape the Postmodernist box.[96]

Nonetheless, Ashbery, born in 1927, is a member in good standing of the first generation of Postmodernist writers. His fragmented style and the insistence we have seen on demolishing the possibility of a unified understanding of the world or human experience are excellent credentials for such a categorization. In this light it is valuable to look at his relation with an immediate poetic predecessor, Wallace Stevens. Stevens published his first book in 1923[97] and is thus a neat generational as well as artistic match with Ashbery, who debuted with Some Trees almost exactly thirty years later.

Stevens, of course, was a Modernist par excellence, one who attempted to substitute imagination as a substitute for the old gods in redeeming reality.[98] Harold Bloom cites Ashbery's relationship with Stevens as an example of a mature poet grappling triumphantly with a strong predecessor:

"...The achievement of John Ashbery in his powerful poem "`Fragment,´" writes Bloom, "is to return us to Stevens, somewhat uneasily to discover that at moments Stevens sounds rather too much like Ashbery, an achievement I might not have thought possible."[99] He quotes stanzas from Ashbery´s "Fragment" and Stevens´s "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle":

> Like a dull scholar, I behold, in love,
> An ancient aspect touching a new mind.
> It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies.
> This trivial trope reveals a way of truth.
> Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
> Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
> Into the autumn weather...

The Ashbery reads:

> Like the blood orange we have all a single
> Vocabulary all heart and all skin and can see
> Through the dust of incisions the central perimeter
> Our imaginations orbit. Other words,
> Old ways are but the trappings and appurtenances
> Meant to install change around us like a grotto.

We can see how Ashbery has appropriated Stevens´s tone, his manner and even his way with an unexpected metaphor to extend his unifying Modernist message to the scatteredness of Postmodernism. Stevens saw decay and rebirth, and was willing to install a single metaphor as his revised image of the human spirit. Ashbery sees humans as isolated, imaginations circling a "central perimeter" (a non sequitur, a null set) and abandons every metaphor a few lines after he picks it up.

This obviously fits in with the use to which Ashbery puts common language. Its inefficacy communicates his message that intelligible truth about the world cannot be constructed and is unlikely to be revealed. Amy Gerstler, we have seen,

uses common language antithetically, accepting its chastening truthfulness. Her first book, Early Heaven, was published in 1984, another thirty years after Ashbery's. Where does that place her in the pageant of isms?

The most useful classification of Gerstler, though it needs a snappier name, is as a post-Postmodernist, or perhaps a Postmodern premodernist. Writers like Ashbery see all discourse as controlled, all systems as flawed, and thus ostentatiously deny the validity of any claim to deep knowledge. Writers of Gerstler's generation have absorbed that critique, grown up with it, and thus, depending on one's perspective, have either taken it to its next step or retreated to a stage that came before it. In either case, she and her contemporaries exhibit no direct awareness of Postmodernist skepticism. They take it as a rather uninteresting given.

The post-Postmodernist lack of interest in the systems controversy is clear from the epistemological basicness of Gerstler's poems. Viewed from one angle, they are almost untroubled by even the original earthquake that unsettled the Modernists. They follow the time-honored format of the poet-speaker reaching an epiphany through manipulation of language. But that untroubledness can also include an awareness of the damage that the concept of epiphany has sustained. She and other writers of her generation -- David Foster Wallace, Madison Smartt Bell, Barry Yourgrau -- are aware of the Postmodernist revelation, but aware of it as

part of their intellectual makeup, as an assumption, not as a position they are staking out and have to trumpet in their work.

This is evident in the way Gerstler uses the received language of popular culture. Postmodernists frequently take the proliferation and prevalence of new forms of popular culture as further evidence of the irretrievable destruction of the old humanist world-view.[100] Even Ashbery, open-minded as he is, cannot resist using it as evidence of cultural decay, as in "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape," where he uses Popeye as a character to comically accentuate the surreal hopelessness of understanding our input:

> The first of the undecoded messages read: "Popeye
> sits in thunder,
> Unthought of. From that shoebox of an apartment,
> From livid curtain's hue, a tangram emerges: a
> country."
> Meanwhile the Sea Hag was relaxing on a green
> couch: "How pleasant
> To spend one's vacation en la casa de Popeye,"....[101]

Whereas Gerstler, as we have seen, takes popular culture to be a possible provider of knowledge. She and the other writers I mentioned create works whose whole world is previously used language, language from an unmmistakable cultural context. Wallace, Bell and Yourgrau are all prose writers. Gerstler is the only writer I am aware of who consistently and confidently integrates popular culture into poetry. This poem is called "Russian Dusk":

> When you drink this wine,
> which smells of fresh-cut hay,
> the moon rises, chaperoned
> by the aroma of coal smoke.
> The stars flash like the silver

filled molars of my delightful
Lithuanian milkmaid.
Here, take another swig.
Blue evening light, cold darkness.
Shaggy horses exhale steam.
Partial gloom inside the unlit church.
A rooster crowed, a calf bawled
for milk, a dog barked and then
she loosened her babushka
and fell into my arms, knocking
over a chair in her haste
to embrace me.[102]

This poem is clearly aware of its cultural material. The derivateveness of the language can be seen to be deliberate in the campy lines about the milkmaid's molars. Those lines skillfully mock both overripe Romantic cliche and the strained industrial metaphors of socialist realism. Yet there is genuine vision to the image; stars and a gleam of fillings are an imaginable comparison. The fourth-to-last line performs the same balancing act by introducing "babushka," a piece of common language in the form of unabashed local color. The word exhibits its Russianness in a tacky way, yet at the same time introduces a strong image, of the woman untying her kerchief as she stumbles to her beloved. And bringing in this woman reuses and thus redeems the earlier image of the "Lithuanian milkmaid."

"Russian Dusk" is aware of its language as a product. It consciously taps into the reader's store of half-remembered associations with Russia drawn from bad movies, cheap novels and mindless children's books. Yet at the same time it allows those associations to provide a genuine experience, an emotion that was previously lacking in both the reader and the person to whom the poem is addressed and that the former

certainly never expected to derive from his or her readymade memories of a foreign place. And although the climax of "Russian Dusk" is an emotional moment, the poem as a whole presents a definite realization. Everything becomes clear when one drinks "this wine"; it unifies the world in a single Muscovite vision. The poem again presents an epiphany, and this one more friskily liberating than the grimmer realizations in "Slowly I Open My Eyes," "This Winter," and the other poems quoted thus far.

On the evidence of "Russian Dusk," Gerstler is something quite different from the Postmodernist she has been called. The belief in the possibility of revealed knowledge of the world, and the fact that she unself-consciously (though, as we have seen, often guardedly) uses the common language of popular culture to express it, instate her as part of a newer generation. What's been said is to Gerstler both a natural and a legitimate source of understanding. Her use of secondhand language qualifies her work as ironic, but only in a rhetorical, not a tonal sense. Gerstler has none of the tone of irony, the bitterness of older poems of secondhand language like this one by E.E. Cummings:

> Picture it gents: our hero, Dan
> who as you've guessed already is
> the poorbuthonest workingman[103]

Her irony is reflexive: living in a post-Nietzschean, post-Postmodernist world, she may be genetically aware that unified knowledge is a sham, but neither she nor her characters takes that awareness seriously enough to stop

striving after that unity.

This post-Postmodernist style can be found in many media. Mark Tansey in painting, Robyn Hitchcock in popular music, and the Coen brothers in film are a few artists whose work is grounded in the art of the past to such a degree that they seem to be parodists, yet whose tone is far from parodistic. Their work, like Gerstler's, expresses the late-twentieth-century awareness of limited knowledge, and sadness at it, but also the naive instinct to strive after unified awareness anyway.

This quixotic mixture of attitudes is similar to one we have also encountered in Ashbery. As we saw in Part IV, despite his rigorous adherence to epistemological pessimism, he allows common language, the voice of the truthful, down-to-earth spirit, to have its say. Clearly, he is not immune to epiphany's charms. And he may be less so with age, as witness the poignant end of the 1990s "Poem at the New Year":

> ...There was pipe smoke
> in cafes and outside the great ashen bird
> streamed from lettered display-windows, and waited
> A little way off. Another chance. It never became
> a gesture.[104]

Both John Ashbery and Amy Gerstler, to end on a note of commonality, import the down-to-earth spirit in contrast with their own elevated style. Yet both, Ashbery in resisting and Gerstler in succumbing, seem to subscribe to the dream of common language, to acknowledge the power of its promise of ultimate knowledge, expressed in another Adrienne Rich poem:

> The lioness pauses
> in her back-and-forth pacing of three yards square
> and looks at me. Her eyes
> are truthful. They mirror rivers,
> seacoasts, volcanoes, the warmth
> of moon-bathed promontories.[105]

The gentle, sophisticated tone of these two poets conveys their difficult skepticism about that dream. However much they may wish to believe in the truthfulness of a lioness, they remain faithful to the truth of their own painfully human points of view.

FOOTNOTES

1. Adrienne Rich, The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977 (New York: W.W. Norton 1978), 7.
2. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (New York 1966), 806, 400. "Diction" is similarly defined by William Packard in The Poet's Dictionary as "word choice; the consistent feature of the type and style of words that are used..." (New York: Harper and Row 1989, 40).
3. Christopher Caudwell, Illusion and Reality (New York: International Publishers 1947), 13.
4. Paul Fussell, Poetic Meter and Poetic Form (New York: Random House 1979), 177.
5. The Random House Dictionary 297.
6. John Ashbery, Houseboat Days (Penguin Books 1978), 44.
7. Denys Thompson, The uses of poetry (Cambridge University Press 1978), 19-24, 28-36.
8. Caudwell, op. cit., 27.
9. Thompson, op. cit., 84; The Poetical Works of Shelley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1975), 604.
10. Shelley, ibid., 612; The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (London: Oxford University Press 1974), 499.
11. Thompson, op. cit., 85.
12. Ibid. 27.
13. Ibid. 89-94.
14. See M. H. Abrams, "What's the Use of Talking About the Arts?", in Morton W. Bloomfield, editor, In Search of Literary Theory (Cornell University Press 1972), 3-13, 54; Raman Selden, A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (The University Press of Kentucky 1985), 52, 66-68.
15. Victor Erlich, Russian Formalism: History--Doctrine (The Hague: Mouton 1955), chs. III-IV and X passim.
16. Barrett Watten, Total Syntax (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1985), 4.
17. Erlich, op. cit., 181.
18. Ibid. 90.
19. Watten, op. cit., 8.
20. Frank N. Magill, editor, Magill's Critical Survey of Poetry (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Salem Press 1982), 3539.
21. Bernard Groom, The Diction of Poetry from Spenser to Bridges (University of Toronto Press 1955), 3.
22. X.J. Kennedy, An Introduction to Poetry (Boston: Little, Brown 1971), 43. Babette Deutsch defines poetic diction similarly in Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms (New York: Funk and Wagnalls 1974), 123.
23. Jack Myers and Michael Simms, Longman Dictionary and Handbook of Poetry (New York 1985), 76; Groom, op. cit., 103 ff.
24. Owen Barfield, Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1973), 41, 48.
25. Donald Davie, Purity of Diction in English Verse (New York: Schocken 1967), 12.

26. Lyrical Ballads, edited by Michael Mason (New York: Longman 1992), 68-69. The following quotation is from p. 60.
27. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (Oxford: The Clarendon Press 1907), 2:55, 31
28. Ibid. 56.
29. Barfield, op. cit., 162.
30. Lyrical Ballads 71.
31. Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets from the Puritans to the Present (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1984), 624.
32. Justin Kaplan, Walt Whitman: A Life (New York: Simon and Schuster 1980), 189.
33. M. Wynn Thomas, The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1987), 53.
34. Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman (New York: Macmillan 1955), 129.
35. Jerome Loving, Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1982), 88.
36. Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton University Press 1961), 269-271.
37. In a television commercial for The Gap that aired frequently in 1992 and 1993, a fey, tortured-looking poet reads in a coffeehouse his formless, Beat-like lines about the blue jeans of an old love.
38. Helen Vendler, Voices and Visions: The Poet in America (New York: Random House 1987), 42-44 and Donald Barlow Stauffer, A Short History of American Poetry (New York: E.P. Dutton 1974), 149 describe Whitman's vast influence.
39. David Ferry, "The Diction of American Poetry," in Irvin Ehrenpreis, editor, American Poetry (New York: St. Martin's Press 1965), 137.
40. Groom, op. cit., 74, 211 and passim.
41. Amy Gerstler, review of City Poet by Brad Gooch, Los Angeles Times Book Review June 27, 1993, 3.
42. Eloise Knapp Hay, letter to the editor, Los Angeles Times Book Review August 22, 1993, 11. Ms. Hay teaches English literature at the University of California at Santa Barbara.
43. Neil Postman, Charles Weingartner, and Terence P. Moran, editors, Language in America (New York: Pegasus 1969), ix and table of contents. See also Raymond Gozzi, Jr., New Words and a Changing American Culture (University of South Carolina Press 1990), 2-3; Albert H. Marckwardt, American English (New York: Oxford University Press 1980), 179-180, and Arn Tibbetts and Charlene Tibbetts, What's Happening to American English? (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1978), 16-17.
44. James Wright, Above the River: The Complete Poems (The Noonday Press 1992), 173.
45. Derek Walcott, The Arkansas Testament (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1987), 115-116.

46. Paul Carroll, The Poem in its Skin (Follett Publishing Co. 1968), 9-12.
47. David Kalstone, "`Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,'" in Harold Bloom, editor, John Ashbery (New York: Chelsea House 1985), 104.
48. Ashbery, Houseboat Days, 66.
49. John Ashbery, A Wave (Penguin Books 1985), 53.
50. Paul Auster, The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press 1992), 95.
51. Herschel Baker, editor, Twelfth Night (New York: Signet Classics 1965), xxv.
52. Alan Williamson, Introspection and Contemporary Poetry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1984), 120.
53. John Ashbery, Some Trees (New York: The Ecco Press 1978), back cover and 9.
54. Ashbery, A Wave, 1. The poem is "At North Farm."
55. "Distinctive" has been for decades one of the favorite words of prize-copy writers on The Price is Right
56. Williamson, op. cit., 140.
57. Ibid. 146.
58. John Ashbery, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (Penguin Books 1986), 36.
59. Marjorie Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1981), 269-270.
60. Ashbery, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, 55. The next two quotations are on p. 57.
61. At a barbecue I recently attended, a young woman told of the difficulties of attending college in one's hometown: "The first time I spent the night with someone, I walked out the next morning and ran right into my old Latin teacher."
62. Helen Vendler, "Understanding Ashbery," in Bloom, editor, John Ashbery, 181.
63. David Shapiro, John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press 1979), 1.
64. Williamson, op. cit., 117.
65. Ashbery, Houseboat Days, 60-1.
66. The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1978), 288.
67. Auster, op. cit., 96.
68. Amy Gerstler, Bitter Angel (San Francisco: North Point Press 1990), 57.
69. The Random House Dictionary 303.
70. Amy Gerstler, Primitive Man (Madras: Hanuman Books 1987), 26.
71. Amy Gerstler, The True Bride (Santa Monica, CA: The Lapis Press 1986), 17.
72. Ibid. 28.
73. Gerstler, Bitter Angel, 75.
74. The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens 211.
75. Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th edition (1974), article on Wallace Stevens
76. "Zilch" dates from the 1920s, "nada" in English from

1914. In my observation neither is used often today. See Robert Hendrickson, The Facts on File Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins (1987), 580; Stuart Berg Flexner, Listening to America (New York: Touchstone 1984), 330; Merriam-Webster's New College Dictionary, 10th edition (1991), 771.

77. Gerstler, Bitter Angel, 74.
78. Ibid. 78.
79. Some years ago on the television show Late Night with David Letterman, the actor John Lithgow exploited the clinical nature of this word in recounting having a young woman shave his body hair so he could play a transsexual in the movie The World According to Garp. "After a while," he intoned, "it became clear that I was becoming" -- long pause -- "aroused." He got a huge laugh.
80. David Shapiro, "A Salon of 1990: Maximalist Manifesto," American Poetry Review 20:1 (1991), 43.
81. Ashbery, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, 22.
82. Ashbery, Houseboat Days, 68.
83. Ibid. 12.
84. John Ashbery, Shadow Train (New York: Viking 1981), 4.
85. Gerstler, Bitter Angel, 40.
86. Laurence Goldstein, "Looking for Authenticity in Los Angeles," Michigan Quarterly Review 30:4 (1991), 727.
87. Gerstler, The True Bride, 21.
88. Sven Birkerts, "Prose," Parnassus: Poetry in Review 15:1 (1989), 177.
89. Jeremy Hawthorn, A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory (London: Edward Arnold 1992), 153, 156.
90. Ibid.; Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: history, theory, fiction (London: Routledge 1988), 139-140; J.A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1991), 551.
91. Hutcheon, ibid., 7-11; Gary Shapiro, editor, After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places (Albany: State University of New York Press 1990), 4.
92. For example, G. Shapiro, ibid., xii.
93. Hutcheon, op. cit., 41 ff.
94. Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1985), 1-8.
95. David Lehman, "The Shield of a Greeting: The Function of Irony in John Ashbery's Poetry," in David Lehman, editor, Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1980), 104-105.
96. The somewhat sweeping evaluation of the Postmodernist achievement is my own.
97. Encyclopedia Britannica, op. cit.
98. Ibid. and see Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1980), 202-16.
99. Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press 1973), 143-144.
100. Hutcheon, op. cit., 6. This is a broad summary of her involved discussion of Postmodernism's attitude toward popular culture.

101. John Ashbery, The Double Dream of Spring (New York: The Ecco Press 1976), 47.
102. Gerstler, Bitter Angel, 70.
103. Hayden Carruth, editor, The Voice That Is Great Within Us: American Poetry of the Twentieth Century (Bantam Books 1970), 178.
104. John Ashbery, Hotel Lautréamont (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1992), 83.
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