Poetic Attention: The Impressionist Sensibility and the Poetry of John Ashbery

by

John Lennox
Department of English
McGill University, Montreal

August, 2003

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

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-612-98459-1
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-612-98459-1

ABSTRACT

"Poetic Attention" reveals how John Ashebry's ties with past literary traditions elucidate his own personal aesthetic. Starting with a review of Ashbery's critical reception, the thesis shows how Ashbery's poetry and its reception are polarized in two major post-Romantic approaches to poetry: the Romantic, and the "objectivist" tradition of modernism. Beginning with a look at how Ashbery's early poetry reflects both paradigms, I focus on moments where both are simultaneously active. I demonstrate how impressionism, as a sensibility with certain methodological, epistemological, and technical concerns and devices having to do with the conjunction of consciousness and the world in perception, best describes the interaction between Ashbery's Romantic and modernist strains. Impressionism helps us understand how Ashbery negotiates the Romantic desire for resolutions to spiritual crises and the modernist focus on objects in and of themselves by treating a searching attentiveness to those objects as a value in itself.

RESUMÉ

"Poetic Attention" nous releve comment les relations du John Ashbery aux traditions du passé litteraire dénoncent son style personel. En debutant avec une revue de la reception critique d'Ashbery, ce thèse montre comment sa poesie et sa réception sont divisés entre deux maitrises majeures: celle de romanticisme et celle de la tradition "objective" du modernisme. Après avoir observant comment les premier poemes d'Ashbery reflectent ces deux paradigms, je cherche à identifier les moments ou les deux sont simultanement actives. Je montre comment l'impressionisme, comme sensibilité avec certains attribués techniques, methodologiques, et epistemologiques concernant la conjunction de la conscience et le monde dans la perception, aide la lecteur à mieux comprendre l'interaction des espèces romantique et moderniste dans l'oeuvre d'Ashbery. L'impressionisme nous aide à comprendre comment Ashbery negocie le désir romantique de trouver des resolutions aux crises spirituelles et la cherche moderniste à affirmer aux objets le charactère des objets simples en donnant une valeure à la préoccupation inquisitive aux objets.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Miranda Hickman for providing such helpful supervision in the course of this project, for instinctively knowing good from bad directions, and for being able to push and refine my thinking beyond what I thought possible. This thesis is in fact an odd mixture of knowledge and abilities I have stolen (or let us say safely derived) from a number of people who have taught me over the past few years: Brian Trehearne, Peter Ohlin, Kerry McSweeney, and Peter Gibian should know of my debt to them and receive whatever blessing a student can give for their future success and happiness. Also, behind my interest in impressionism there must be looming Philip Buckley, whose seminars and discussion groups on phenomenology have been perhaps the most challenging part of my time at McGill. Friends worthy of my praise are too numerous to name; those close to this project, and to my own path as I undertook it, know who they are. I shall single out, for other reasons, Andreae Prozesky. And, though I doubt they will read this, I hope this brings some joy to my parents.

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INTRODUCTION

The effort in criticism to define the essence of John Ashbery's poetry in terms of its characteristic style, influences, and effects has resulted in two more or less distinct Ashberys, the delineation and comparison of which I take as one of my main tasks here. It is a fruitful task because the two dominant Ashberys are at odds with each other. On one hand, Marjorie Perloff reads Ashbery as belonging to a poetics of indeterminacy wherein words on the page do not attain any symbolic coherence but instead, Perloff argues, combine as objects with little referential value beyond their literal surface meanings, gesturing meanwhile to such symbolic coherence only mysteriously. Ashbery's poetry, in Perloff's view, is most often purposely enigmatic, generating the desire for coherence by leaving final meanings indeterminate. On the other hand, Harold Bloom finds in Ashbery evidence of a personal struggle for identity, autonomy, and artistic strength. For Bloom the words on the page do have symbolic value and they do attain final meaning, that final meaning being the story of the Ashbery's own growth as a poet.

My intention, while delineating and comparing the two dominant Ashberys, is to reveal a deeper sensibility, prior to both, that throws their differences and similarities into relief. As a disclaimer, the ambition here is not to finally decide what kind of poet Ashbery is, but merely to compare different views of Ashbery, as well as the different tendencies within the poetry on which those views are based, using a model that will generate new insights (both local and general) about both the poetry and the criticism.

Bloom's and Perloff's readings of Ashbery in my view rely too heavily on one or the other extreme of the traditional subject/object dualism. Where Bloom reads in Ashbery's poetry the struggle for the sovereign, unified subject, Perloff reads objective

correlatives that do not correlate. While being very useful in their own right, both approaches are equally reductive, as their appeals to pure subjectivity or objectivity tend to be mutually exclusive. Ashbery's poetry is actually the meeting of these two realms: its main theme—which it also performs—is the drama of the subject engaged, in a mixture of philosophical and colloquial language, in the process of finding resolutions to classical problems of identity, interacting with phenomena—images, objects, situations, events—which refuse to yield the kind of symbolic meanings that would help provide any adequate answers to those problems. Unlike the poets and writers in Bloom's Romantic tradition, Ashbery's lyric voices are not authentically subjective but are objectified and put on the same plane with objects. Yet unlike the artists in Perloff's tradition of indeterminacy, Ashbery still makes the development of a lyric voice—capable of insights and emotions—a central concern in the poetry.

The model I invoke here to describe the interaction of Romantic and indeterminate strains in Ashbery is that of literary impressionism. Impressionism, as it is practiced by Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, and Joseph Conrad, and as it is theorized by Walter Pater and Ford Madox Ford, is defined by its epistemological and methological concerns with the mediation of the subjective and the objective. Beginning with the principle that one cannot accurately perceive, much less represent, objective reality without the encroachment of a subjective point of view, impressionism concerns itself with teasing out the ways in which impressions are the simultaneous determination of objective reality by the subject and shaping of the subject by its impressions of objective reality. Impressionism is primarily a method of evoking reality while acknowledging this principle.

Various stylistic devices common to impressionist writers—the appropriation by a narrator of a character's point of view; the betrayal of the presence of a viewer in the

seemingly objective description of an object or image; in general a marked increase of attention to how things are viewed and experienced; the use of associational logic to extend the presentation of and meditation on impressions; attention to and detailed description of objects for their own sake; great agility in spatial and temporal perspective, to the point where that agility in moving between perspectives is itself a main subject—these devices have analogous procedures in Ashbery, such that an impressionist sensibility may be said to dominate his poetry while not aligning it wholly either with Bloom's Romantic quest for selfhood or with Perloff's indeterminate objectivism.

I provide in chapter 1 a survey of Ashbery criticism, focussing on ways in which critics fall in with either Perloff's or Bloom's paradigms. Chapters 2 and 3 look first to some of Ashbery's early work, where the two Ashberys may be seen working distinctly though at times simultaneously, and then to how the interaction between the two Ashberys is in fact a productive antagonism best understood under the rubric of impressionism. I argue that while much of Ashbery's poetry appropriates the structure of thought associated with the Romantic lyric, it is impressionistic in substance. That is, unlike in the typical Romantic lyric (as defined by M. H. Abrams), where an initial observation of the natural outer world incites a controlled meditation on the speaker's alienation from that world resulting in an integration of both worlds in a final resolution, Ashbery's "crisis" poetry takes impressions as the impetus and subject of the poem, to the extent that the complex and potentially endless negotiation with impressions is both the means of resolving the crisis (which is usually one of meaning: linguistic, perceptual or cognitive, and narrative), and, paradoxically, is the crisis itself. At various different points, however, the telos of the crisis is abandoned, and the structure of thought is loosened to allow a freer flow of

impressions and associations. The prolongation of this flow of impressions and associations then becomes the ultimate telos of the poetry.

I use the following abbreviations for Ashbery's volumes, listed here in the order of their publication:

ST *Some Trees*

TCO *The Tennis Court Oath*

RM *Rivers and Mountains*

DDS *The Double Dream of Spring*

TP *Three Poems*

SP *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

HD *Houseboat Days*

Plays *Three Plays*

W *A Wave*

FC *Flow Chart*

CYHB *Can You Hear, Bird*

CHAPTER ONE: TYPICAL ASHBERYS

I begin with a telling gesture of Ashbery's in a poem from his first inarguably successful volume, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, the volume that won the National Book Critics Circle Award, the National Book Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1975. In "The Tomb of Stuart Merrill" Ashbery inserts what looks like a fragment from a reader's letter:

> "I have become attracted to your style. You seem to possess within your work an air of total freedom of expression and imagery, somewhat interesting and puzzling. After I read one of your poems, I'm always tempted to read and reread it. It seems that my inexperience holds me back from understanding your meanings.
>
> "I really would like to know what it is you do to 'magnetize' your poetry, where the curious reader, always a bit puzzled, comes back for a clearer insight." SP 38

This is a cheeky thing to do, to include someone's response to your poetry in the poetry itself. But while the passage seemingly comes out of nowhere, and while Ashbery gives no commentary, no indication of what it is there to do or what his attitude is toward it, it is not ineffective. The passage performs in the poem what its unnamed author describes: it is an exercise of Ashbery's "total freedom of expression," but that freedom, here as elsewhere in Ashbery's oeuvre, can often result in baffling poetry which the reader feels he or she does not "understand." Reading the quoted letter in "The Tomb of Stuart Merrill," we are interested, "a bit puzzled," and desirous of a "clearer insight."

Quoting this particular letter (real or not) without providing a context is a telling gesture for Ashbery because it points to two aspects of his poetry every critic has had to deal with in one way or another: his difficulty, and, connected with his difficulty, his allure.

Difficulty, a poem's refusal to give clear meaning, is often enticing, seductive, since it encourages a greater flexing of the interpretive faculty on the reader's part. Ashbery's difficulty is often the first note struck by his critics. In the first book-length study of Ashbery, David Shapiro's *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1979), John Unterecker begins the foreword:

> The poetry of John Ashbery seems "difficult," I think, only because we normally ask of literature vast simplifications. "Don't," we are always saying to literature, "don't, whatever you are, be as complex as life, as liberty, or as the pursuit of happiness!" xi

Most critics agree that the difficulty and complexity of Ashbery's poetry is largely a result of its scope. Helen Vendler writes, in 1981, when it "seems time to write about John Ashbery's subject matter," that Ashbery's subject matter is no different in kind from any other poet's, in that it concerns "Oh, love, death, loneliness, childhood damage, broken friendships, fate, time, death, ecstasy, sex, decay, landscape, war, poverty" (Understanding 181-2). Fred Moramarco is able to whittle it down to the "dual focus of Ashbery's writing life: to express contemporary consciousness and to find metaphors that truly invoke a sense of what life is" (39-40). A poetry of such scope, whether one considers it expansive (covering *everything*) or reductive (covering nothing in particular), will no doubt seem difficult, impenetrable, such that one may say of any of Ashbery's volumes what Vendler says of *Flow Chart*: "The whole is too big to be subordinated to criticism; no critical essay could hope to control, except in very general terms, the sheer volume of linguistic and psychological data presented" (Steely Glitter 138).

If Ashbery is difficult and intriguing because of his scope, that scope must also include the increasingly large number of poetic traditions, styles, and periods of which

Ashbery is claimed to be the inheritor. Ashbery is for Harold Bloom and others a belated Romantic, the most recent of "strong" poets in the line of Wordsworth, Emerson, Whitman, and Stevens. Marjorie Perloff, in contrast, puts Ashbery in the line of "indeterminacy" whose roster includes Rimbaud, Gertrude Stein, Pound, William Carlos Williams, and John Cage. There are also significant influences coming from the French, from Proust, Raymond Roussell, Pierre Reverdy, and other French Surrealists.[1] Not to mention the number of non-literary traditions, mostly in the visual arts, which frequently pop up in the criticism (and explicitly in the poetry as well), of which Mannerism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art are the most common. The list could go on. Suffice it to say the poetry is accommodating, if nothing else, to many critical perspectives. The problem is that for the most part all of these comparisons are helpful; they all shed light on the poetry, but at some point either the specific analogy is too slight, or all analogies taken together become vacuous. It does not help, for example, to say that Ashbery's poetry is fragmented like much modernist poetry.

In such a critical climate, where Ashbery means many things to many critics, the main drive is to decide, even generally, what kind of poet Ashbery is. This is a nice way of asking: who is right? The relatively simple question from which this paper proceeds—how may we best account for Ashbery's characteristic style?—is of this sort. The question of Ashbery's difficulty is only partly related to this more basic question. There are, after all, moments of extreme clarity which balance Ashbery's moments of obliqueness. What is needed now is both an adequate account of how such clarity and obliqueness interact in a single style, and an explanation of how the different strands of influence combine to create this style. Ashbery's scope may be considered the sum total of this equation: it is his

[1] For a good account of the French influence on Ashbery, see Mark Ford, *Mont D'Espoir*, and, more generally, Shoptaw.

repertoire of images, themes, and devices. His scope, then, as I see it, is a by-product of a larger sensibility—by which I mean, for the moment rather vaguely, a set of concerns and practices—that is the main subject of debate in the criticism. If only because Ashbery is a living poet who still publishes a volume roughly every other year,[2] his style is always changing, hard to pin down, and criticism tends to meet this challenge by attempting complete and sufficient explanations of the essence of his poetry, rather than, say, local investigations of specific images or themes. This is not to say that the local devices are not discussed, but that they are usually discussed only within the context of the question of what Ashbery's essence is. And there is, of course, nothing wrong with invoking this all-encompassing context, but it is important to remember that for most of Ashbery's critics it is never merely a part of Ashbery at stake, but Ashbery *qua* Ashbery. This is so mainly because, again, as a living poet, Ashbery is in the process of being canonized; and canonization, we might say, is complete only when a poet's essence, what he or she "stands for" in the literary spectrum, has been more or less decided and commonly acknowledged. Ashbery's difficulty may also come, then, from the odd feeling many get while reading him that he *should* be canonical, though one does not know exactly why. His scope, his seemingly "total freedom of expression," compounds this strangeness and increases the stakes.

The drive to define the essence of Ashbery (in other words his characteristic style, its influences and effects) has resulted in two more or less distinct "Ashbery"s, with two leading critics heading the camps. Marjorie Perloff's view of Ashbery as a poet of "indeterminacy" picks up on traits in Ashbery that reflect (or, judging by Ashbery's

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[2] Ashbery's volumes, since *Flow Chart*, have been published with remarkable regularity: *Flow Chart* (1991); *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992); *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994); *Can You Hear, Bird* (1995); *Wakefulness* (1998); *Girls on the Run* (1999); *Your Name Here* (2000); *As Umbrellas Follow Rain* (2001); *Chinese Whispers* (2002).

popularity and influence,[3] dictate) trends in postmodern aesthetics (though Perloff locates the origins of these trends in certain modernist poets): indeterminacy of meaning as both subject and *modus operandi* of the poetry, achieved through free play and through the use of shifting perspectives with no ultimate ground, i.e., which have no narrative or symbolic coherence. Ashbery, in this view, takes up the modernist interest in fragmentation, disjunction, and the play of surfaces, though in a more extreme way. By contrast, Harold Bloom argues for a view of Ashbery in which Ashbery is the latest in a line of High Romantic poets, and in which the sole subject of the poetry is Ashbery's own growth as a poet toward poetic freedom, autonomy, and strength. For Bloom the essential Ashbery is Ashbery struggling with his predecessors, mainly Stevens, but through Stevens Whitman, Emerson, and Wordsworth. These two dominant views of Ashbery are in conflict with each other, both in terms of what tradition they believe Ashbery to be a part of, and in terms of what that tradition says about what kind of poet Ashbery is. As we shall see, most other critical perspectives on Ashbery proceed more or less from those of Perloff and Bloom.

The most succinct articulation of Perloff's perspective on Ashbery occurs in her book *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: From Rimbaud to Cage* (1981). Her chapter on Ashbery, "'Mysteries of Construction': The Dream Songs of John Ashbery," appeared in a slightly different form as an essay entitled "'Fragments of a Buried Life': John Ashbery's Dream Songs" in the first major collection of essays on Ashbery, *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, edited by David Lehman and published a year before *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. As the titles suggest, in both pieces Perloff focuses on the dream-like quality

[3] For interesting discussions of Ashbery's influence on younger poets, see Ward's last chapter in *Statutes of Liberty*, "Lyric Poets in the Era of Late Capitalism," Koethe's "The Absence of a Noble Presence," and Andrew Ross' "Taking the Tennis Court Oath." See Bibliography.

of Ashbery's poetry, its tendency to treat "meaning" not as "some sort of fixed quantity (like two pounds of sugar or a dozen eggs) that the poet as speaker can either 'leave out' or proffer to the expectant auditor with whom he is engaged in a 'shared discourse'" ("Fragments" 67) but as a mysterious process in which "calculated oddities" and "strange juxtapositions of imagery"[4] form an "absorbing puzzle" (PI 251).

A telling claim, repeated in both pieces almost verbatim, argues that "Not *what* one dreams but *how*—this is the domain of Ashbery, whose stories 'tell only of themselves,' presenting the reader with the challenge of 'an open field of narrative possibilities'" ("Fragments" 67, PI 252). This last phrase, "an open field of narrative possibilities," is culled from Ashbery's *Three Poems*, a volume from which Perloff derives much of her vocabulary for dealing with Ashbery, and is an apt description of what she usually finds in her readings of the poetry: an Ashbery poem in Perloff's view typically becomes an "enigma text" which "endlessly generates the impulse that makes the reader yearn for completion and understanding" while at the same time frustrating that impulse by not supplying the *what* of content (PI 262). The strange images which neither refer specifically to the outside world nor cohere logically amongst themselves within a poem, and which thus leave *only* possibilities for the reader—and almost never determinate meanings—are also in Perloff's readings usually "underscored by the indeterminacy of conjunctions and pronouns" ("Fragments" 79). Focussing on numerous levels of ambiguity—imagistic, narrative, thematic, and grammatical—Perloff claims Ashbery's dominant aesthetic is one of "indeterminacy," meaning that it both thematizes and performs a dream logic whose chief characteristic is the preference of open-ended process over grounded symbolic coherence.

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[4] Perloff is quoting from Auden's Foreword to Ashbery's first volume, *Some Trees* (PI 249).

Perloff's critical move, away from both the notion of poetic meaning as content and from the view of the dream model as a means of symbolically presenting that content, and toward a notion of meaning as a process that can take a "dream structure," is part of a larger critical project she undertakes in *Poetics of Indeterminacy* to redefine "what we loosely call 'Modernism' in Anglo-American poetry" as "two separate though often interwoven strands" (vii). Instead of a more or less unified aesthetic shared by most or all Anglo-American 'modernist' poets, Perloff would like us to see modernism as made up of, on one hand, "the Symbolist mode that Lowell inherited from Eliot and Baudelaire and, beyond them, from the great Romantic poets," and, on the other, the "'anti-Symbolist' mode of indeterminacy or 'undecidability,' of literalness and free play, whose first real exemplar was the Rimbaud of the *Illuminations*" (vii). Perloff's alternative genealogy of modern poetry, what she calls the "other tradition," borrowing the phrase from the title of an Ashbery poem (HD 2), is a necessary context for understanding how she reads Ashbery, for her work on Ashbery's poetry aims not so much to offer readings of the poems in and of themselves as to show in each poem Ashbery's adherence to this "other tradition."

Particularly influential in this other tradition is what Perloff calls "the French Connection": "the line that goes from Rimbaud to Stein, Pound, and Williams by way of Cubist, Dada, and early Surrealist art" (vii). What unites the writers and artists in the tradition of indeterminacy is a concern with "play" as an end in itself, with "endlessly frustrating our longing for certainty" (34). This Perloff opposes to the aesthetic ideals of what she alternately calls the Romantic, High-Modernist, and Symbolist tradition: "organic unity, coherence, indirection, multiplicity of meanings" (27). I discuss in chapter 2 what larger implications Perloff's conception of nineteenth and twentieth-century literary history have for her assessment of Ashbery. Here I shall merely outline how Perloff reads

indeterminacy in Ashbery, as well as how she differentiates his aesthetic from that of the Symbolist tradition. For the moment I use "Symbolist" tradition here to refer to what Perloff alternately calls Romantic, Symbolist, and High-Modernist, because the symbol is ultimately at stake, both in terms of its use in the poetry and in terms of its prevalence in the theory and thought surrounding the poetry. Perloff most often defines indeterminacy in counter-distinction to the way the symbol governs the logic of Romantic/Symbolist/High-Modernist poetry. The symbol governs that tradition by giving the poetry referential coherence; the words on the page, the images, objects, and allusions that make up a poem always have "specific connotations" (23) which coalesce in determinate meanings. The Symbolist mode, in Perloff's view, finds exemplary expression in Eliot's objective correlative:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding "an objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion. PI 22

A poetic governed by this logic will give its objects, situations, and events referential value in that they mean by an indirect but in the end clear process of signification. This does not imply that things always have clear meanings, but that there is in poems written in this mode at bottom a discernible formula whereby objects, situations, and events refer to interior states, feelings, and attitudes and in so referring take on symbolic value.

Perloff uses *The Waste Land* and a canto from Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn" as her primary examples of this mode, commenting on a "climactic line" like Eliot's "I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plains behind me" that

> we have a complex sense of what it means to "fish" in such circumstances, and the "arid plain" brings up memories of all the places we have traveled through in order

> to get where we are: the "stony rubbish" and "dead tree that gives no shelter" of Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones (Part I), the "brown land" of "The Fire Sermon" which "The wind / Crosses...unheard," and the "endless plains" of "cracked earth / Ringed by the flat horizon only" of "What the Thunder Said." However difficult it may be to decode this complex poem, the relationship of the word to its referents, of signifier to signified, remains essentially intact. 17

In other words, the objects, situations, and events throughout *The Waste Land*, though they may do so in a complex, fragmented, and indirect way, do form a network of coherent symbolic meaning. By contrast, Perloff reads Ashbery's "These Lacustrine Cities,"

> These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing
> Into something forgetful, although angry with history.
> They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for instance,
> Though this is only one example.
>
> They emerged until a tower
> Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back
> Into the past for swans and tapering branches....
>
> Much of your time has been occupied by creative games
> Until now, but we have all-inclusive plans for you.
> We had thought, for instance, of sending you to the middle of the desert,
>
> To a violent sea, or of having the closeness of the others be air
> To you, pressing you back into a startled dream

As sea-breezes greet a child's face. RM 9

as a poem in which "narrative becomes enigmatic" (PI 9) and "there seems to be no world, no whole to which these parts may be said to belong" (10). Perloff concludes that "In Ashbery's verbal landscape, fragmented images appear one by one—cities, sky, swans, tapering branches, violent sea, desert, mountain—without coalescing into a symbolic network" (10).

The major difference between Perloff's and Bloom's readings of Ashbery is that for Bloom the poetry (what he chooses to read, anyway) *does* coalesce into a symbolic network; and that network is the story of Ashbery's development as a "strong" poet in relation to his influences. Proceeding from a theory of poetry as "intra-poetic relationships" wherein a new poet struggles for priority with influential precursors, and wherein this struggle produces an "anxiety of influence" which governs nearly all characteristics of the new poet's style, Bloom finds Ashbery to be among the few and the rare of recent American poets who have the courage and talent to take up this struggle. Ashbery is actually a key figure in much of the work in which Bloom lays out his theory of the anxiety of influence.[5] Bloom's main claims about Ashbery may be summed up as the following: that Ashbery's major precursor is Stevens; that Ashbery's strongest poetry is that in which he sounds most like Stevens (Bloom names "Fragment"); and that Ashbery's poetry is, *qua* Ashbery's, the struggle for creative autonomy waged with a line of Romantic poets that includes Wordsworth, Emerson, Whitman, and Stevens. The symbolic network behind Ashbery's verbal landscape is the growth of Ashbery himself as a poet in counter-distinction to Stevens, and, behind him, the Romantic line of poetry. Bloom most often reads Ashbery by charting different steps of Ashbery's growth, what Bloom calls "revisionary ratios" or

[5] Major chapters on Ashbery appear in Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* and *Figures of Capable Imagination*. See Bibliography.

"mechanisms of defence"—moments in a poem where Ashbery betrays but also overcomes influential elements from the Romantic tradition (AI 13).

I am concerned not so much with Bloom's larger theory of influence, but with the ways in which some of its basic tenets conflict with Perloff's position on Ashbery. For to read Ashbery in terms of his own personal development in relation to his influences is to take a much more subject-centred view of the poetry than Perloff will allow. Because such a reading is psychoanalytical in its approach—reading in the poetry Ashbery's own defence mechanisms aimed at his precursors—its object of inquiry is not solely the poetry, but a larger entity, the poetry conceived as being Ashbery's own psyche. Thus Bloom will place Ashbery in a tradition in which personal, psychological drama is the main, if covert, theme: "Like his master, Stevens, Ashbery is essentially a ruminative poet, turning over a few subjects over and over, knowing always that what counts is the mythology of self, blotched out beyond unblotching" (Introduction 7). The "mythology of self" Bloom has in mind here is the drama of transcendental consciousness typically associated with English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. Though Bloom deals with this drama in a variety of ways, it is possible to isolate its central theme as what Bloom calls "the High Romantic insistence that the power of the poet's mind could triumph over the universe of death, or the estranged object-world" (AI 145), provided we read "universe of death" as including the power a poet's precursors have to stifle his own originality. I explore Bloom's reading of transcendence in Ashbery further in chapter 3.

The essential Ashbery is for Bloom the Ashbery in which this struggle is most apparent. In other words, Bloom is far from finding an "open field of narrative possibilities" in Ashbery, because, for him, there is only one narrative. And since this narrative is the drama of Ashbery's own psychological battle for priority, Bloom tends to

analyze those pieces which best conform to what he calls the High-Romantic crisis-poem model (Measuring the Canon 219-20): "Soonest Mended" (DDS 17), "Wet Casements" (HD 38), and "Tapestry"(AWK 90) mainly. The crisis-poem is a form of meditation, close to what M. H. Abrams calls the "greater Romantic lyric." In Abrams' greater Romantic lyric a speaker struggles to resolve a pressing question or issue in a dialectic reflection of interior (subjective) and exterior (objective) spheres, achieving resolution by reaching an insight, whereupon the crisis is more or less resolved, and both spheres reflect this change ("Tintern Abbey" and "Frost at Midnight" are excellent examples of this) (Abrams 76-7). Bloom's move is to treat the crises in these Ashbery poems as coded crises of influence (usually by reading all rhetoric of death and all dealings with the "estranged object-world" as metaphorical equivalents to influence and the question of priority and creative vitality), but for my purposes here either form of crisis amounts to the same thing: the presence and control of a unified consciousness, most often taking the form of a lyric speaker, that joins disparate parts of the poem (images, voices, events, etc.) in the logic of the crisis, which is always subjective. Thus Bloom is quick to play down any difficulty resulting from Ashbery's enigmatic style of discontinuities, arguing that "Though the disjunctiveness of so much of Ashbery suggests his usual critical placement with the boisterousness of Koch or the random poignancies of O'Hara, he seems most himself when most ruefully and intensely Transcendental" (Intro 8)—Transcendental here meaning subjective, lyrical, meditative, and thoroughly Romantic. The difficulty in Ashbery's poetry, for Bloom, results from the difficulty of the struggle it enacts (and *is*), not from its indeterminacy of meaning.

The major point of contention, then, between Perloff's and Bloom's perspectives, is the question of whether Ashbery constructs this unified consciousness behind the discordant imagery and events which dominate the surface of the poetry. This

consciousness would create, in other words, the kind of symbolic network Perloff does not admit in Ashbery. Another way of putting it would be to say that Perloff and Bloom resort to opposite ends of the classical Cartesian subject/object dualism, insofar as this dualism can translate in poetry into the dualisms of interior/exterior spheres, lyric speaker/objects and images. Where Bloom sees little but the inner drama of a lyrical subject, Perloff finds only exterior objects presented without the context of an interior drama that would incorporate them into a meaningful system (a crisis of influence, for example). On the other hand, one characteristic that Perloff's and Bloom's approaches share is the prioritization of poetic tradition and influence. But in Perloff's case tradition and influence are much less menacing and crucial: her placement of Ashbery in the line of Rimbaud, Stein, Pound, Williams et al. does not involve a theory of *how* Ashbery came to be part of this line, but serves only to facilitate analogies for the purpose of comparing and contrasting different works.

The rift between Perloff's and Bloom's perspectives becomes most apparent in Ashbery criticism that deals with tone. In particular, partisans of Perloff's view focus on irony as a governing element that destabilizes the integrity of the lyric voice. Irony, however, is only one mode of this destabilizing; others include Ashbery's self-reflexivity (which has the same structure of irony), his use of indefinite pronouns to give a poem the effect of having many speakers, and the aesthetic of collage or montage that appears in more or less concentration throughout his oeuvre. To return to the quoted letter in "The Tomb of Stuart Merrill," that gesture perfectly, if a bit too overtly, exemplifies all of these devices: it is as self-reflexive as you can get, it resorts to another, unidentified speaker, and is pasted into the poem with no transitions into or out of it. But irony seems to be the most pervasive of these devices, as it is at bottom an attitude that can be considered prior

to them all. Each of these modes of destabilizing the integrity of the lyric voice stem from irony in the sense that their effects are achieved primarily by detachment. The lyric voice is held at a distance, for example when Ashbery uses clichés and other banalities, or is shunned altogether, dispersed among many unidentifiable speakers.

Irony calls into question the sincerity or authenticity of the unified consciousness Bloom and others posit as the source of Ashbery's poetry. Andrew Ross, for example, writes of moments in Ashbery where "The hard currency of experience and reflection is almost always revealed as counterfeit, secondhand, and therefore presented in such a way as to advertise its own consciousness of mediation" (196). This brand of irony, while certainly having roots in Romantic irony, may be distinguished from it in that Ashbery's, applied more often to lyric utterances than to dramatic situations, calls both the postulated speaker and the assumed authorial presence into question (as opposed to, say, Byron's irony, which allows the author-as-creator's role to remain intact). Ashbery's irony, therefore, is unstable, as he often *only* presents the ironic statement, and does not provide a firmer vantage point in terms of which we can gauge a more truthful position. ("The Instruction Manual," which I discuss in chapter 2, is a good instance of this type of irony.) David Lehman, in an essay on Ashbery's irony, writes that "Ashbery does not reconcile contradictions; rather, he presents them in a state of more-or-less peaceful coexistence, as though they were parallel lines that cannot be expected to meet in the finite realms we inhabit" (Shield of a Greeting 102). This may apply either to contradictions resulting from the self-conscious utterance or to discrepancies that emerge in a disjunctive, collaged text: in either case the intention remains ambiguous.

But Lehman pulls back from Perloff's conclusions about such ambiguity, claiming that any difficulty or indeterminacy resulting from parallel lines that never meet is actually

part of an "attractive aesthetic strategy" which attempts to be, not indeterminate, but mimetic: for "even the most elaborate ironic gesture is scarcely an end in itself; it is directed at the aim of a redemptive enchantment, an ultimately affirming apprehension of 'the real reality, / Beyond truer imaginings,' in all its puzzling variousness and delightful disorder" (Shield 103). In other words, Lehman saves the irreconcilable contradictions that result from Ashbery's irony by making reality itself full of them, so that the poetry actually deals realistically with reality—more realistically than poetry that organizes reality into coherent thematic or symbolic structures.

Lehman, editor of the first major collection of critical essays on Ashbery, and, later, chronicler of Ashbery's formative years with James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch in *The Last Avant-Garde: The Makings of the New York School of Poets*, has been a constant defender of Ashbery's more radical instabilities and general difficulty. But he reveals here the power of the Bloomian approach. For while Lehman wishes to trumpet irreconcilable contradictions in Ashbery as contributing to a kind of aesthetic of indeterminacy, he nevertheless invokes a context in which that aesthetic is a "strategy" to be employed in the service of the Romantic model of symbolic coherence. Seemingly meaningless parts of a poem are not actually meaningless, Lehman's logic suggests, but are meaningful ways of dealing with the actual meaninglessness of the outside world. Geoff Ward puts forth something close to this when he argues that the difficulty of the poetry reflects the difficulty of knowing and adequately representing reality (Statutes of Liberty 99). Ashbery's poetry begins, for Ward, with the recognition that "Trustworthy reality is a chimera that beckons and mocks, forever out of reach, forever alluring" (SL 100). This is, in effect, another version of Unterecker's comment that Ashbery's difficulty stems from its scope, which is life itself. It is not hard to see how these views, in reinstating the

representational model of poetry, albeit in such a way that that representation is always troubled, can return us to the Romantic model of poetry wherein subjectivity tries to give an adequate account of itself through meditating on its relation both to itself and to the outside world. In other words, these views can return us quickly to Bloom.

Ashbery's recourse to collage or montage also calls into question the integrity of both the unified lyric speaker and the authorial presence supposedly in control of this speaker. Critics wishing to stress this side of Ashbery frequently refer to his radically experimental *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), a volume that remains a major point of contention between the positions of Perloff and Bloom. As an example of a popular argument of how Ashbery's disjunctiveness contradicts Bloom's reading, Andrew Ross is worth quoting again, at length:

> *The Tennis Court Oath* is most often regarded by critics either as an early and therefore "immature phase" or else by those, like Harold Bloom...as a "fearful disaster." The epistemological model for both of these kinds of critical pronouncement is, of course, that of the unified, coherent field of the "author," replete with a recognizable career trajectory....Bloom, more than anyone, has successfully written Ashbery into that kind of heroic story which explains all of the contradictions and discontinuities of a writer's work in terms of *idiosyncrasy*...[But] the collagist techniques developed in *The Tennis Court Oath* would preclude any possibility of presenting such a unified author....For collage and montage...depend upon the intrusion or intervention of found materials to break up the purified realm of the poem or artwork. They do not constitute a medium through which authors can transfigure their traditional role of alienated commentator...authors lose the power to elevate themselves as source and origin of all the transformative

> impulses that inhabit the text....[T]his loss of power strikes hard at the bourgeois Romantic ideology of creative autonomy. 201-2

While this seems a very convincing account of Ashbery's disjunctiveness, especially when applied to *The Tennis Court Oath,* it is also a good example of how the same phenomenon in Ashbery can serve both subjective and objective-oriented perspectives. For we may choose to see Ashbery's collage or montage techniques as versions of a Romantic or transcendental aesthetic of the egotistical sublime. Ward, for example, treats Ashbery's "total freedom of expression"—"the structureless structure of the endless list, the pseudo-narrative, the neo-Surrealist collage"—as a logical extension of "Whitman's severance of American from English poetic tradition [which] inaugurated an aesthetics of monstrous absorbency, total inclusion" (SL 9). This is to say, the most disparate objects, images, and events may be considered extensions of the self, even if these are presented so as to seem completely random.

The critical question posed implicitly in the work of Lehman and Ward, then, is to what extent the most radically meaningless or indeterminate aspects of Ashbery can be considered part of a strategy that works within the traditional framework of the Romantic lyric. Both opacity of voice and attitude and a reliance on the aleatory can, in other words, be seen as devices used by the more or less unified consciousness or lyrical subject at the helm. At the same time, to invoke the egotistical sublime or consciousness itself as explanatory concepts for traits which do seem to deny the existence of these concepts may be a little easy. Nevertheless, the simultaneous accuracy of both perspectives remains an intriguing possibility.

Though without anything as elaborate as a theory of influence, Helen Vendler's take on Ashbery resembles Bloom's in its insistence on a more or less unified lyrical subject

behind the variegated surface of the poetry. Vendler is fond of describing Ashbery's stylistic agility in catalogues of what look like genre metaphors reminiscent of Perloff's lists of uncertainties, writing of *Flow Chart* (1991) that it is "a diary; a monitor screen registering a moving EEG; a thousand and one nights; Penelope's web unraveling; views from Argus' hundred eyes; a book of riddles; a ham-radio station; an old trunk full of memories; a rubbish dump; a Bartlett's 'Familiar Quotations'; a Last Folio; a vaudeville act" (SG 130). But these descriptions are for Vendler only suggestive analogies, not analytical points. Vendler's actual claim is that Ashbery is essentially a lyric poet. For just as *Flow Chart* is "really a lyric," so Ashbery's experimental poems throughout his career have "continued and revised American lyric" (SG 135, 130). And Vendler is quick to defend Ashbery against charges that it is "impossible to say what an Ashbery poem is 'about'" (U 179), as an Ashbery poem is about what any poem is about: "love, death, loneliness, childhood damage, broken friendships, fate, time, death, ecstasy, sex, decay, landscape, war, poverty" (181-2).[6] More telling, perhaps, is Vendler's list of what critics actually mean when they claim Ashbery's poetry to be about poetry itself:

> "poetry" is often used to mean: how people construct an intelligibility out of the randomness of experience; how people choose what they love; how people integrate loss and gain; how they distort experience by wish and dream; how they perceive and consolidate flashes of harmony; how they (to end a list otherwise endless) achieve what Keats called a "Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity." U 179

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[6] Compare Perloff, who also likes to provide catalogues of Ashbery's variegated style: "Medieval romance, Elizabethan pageant, comic books, Arthur Rackham fairy-tale, Disney World T-shirts, flowered wallpaper, frosted wedding cakes, 'stage machinery,' 'grisaille shepherdesses,' 'terrorist chorales'—all these coalesce in the dream theater of *Houseboat Days*" (PI 275).

In other words, there are common, basic concerns governing Ashbery's most complex representations and manoeuvres. Even his dream-like qualities are distortions of original experiences, or are allegorically about how dreams distort experience.

Most telling, however, is the last item in this list, the reference to Keats' "description of this world not as a vale of tears but as a vale of what he called 'soul-making.' We are born, according to his parable, with an intelligence not yet made human; we are destined to the chastening of life, which, together with painful labor on our part, tutors our chilly intelligence into a feeling and thinking soul" (179-80). For Vendler Ashbery is at his best when he "gives his own version of the Keatsian soul-making" (180). Like Bloom, Vendler finds the quest for identity at the core of Ashbery, and though she does not posit a theory of influence of Bloom's sort (other than the history of the lyric), she nonetheless appeals to the same Romantic model of subjectivity. Thus, while acknowledging an authentic difficulty in the poetry that results from something like an aesthetic of indeterminacy, Vendler is able to pierce through that difficulty to an intuitive understanding by locating a symbolism common to, but not necessarily explicit in, all lyric poetry, and indeed the minds of all people:

> [Ashbery] is probably right in assuming that what Stevens called "the hum of thoughts evaded in the mind" must be, in a given time and place, rather alike from mind to mind. In my own case, by entering into some bizarrely tuned pitch inside myself I can find myself on Ashbery's wavelength, where everything on the symbolic level makes sense. SG 130

While Vendler's approach is more impressionistic, she argues nevertheless for an Ashbery very similar to Bloom's in a few ways. Both critics see Ashbery as a Romantic: both, that is, posit a symbolic level of meaning in the poetry behind a variegated surface of "eva[sions]

in the mind" (Perloff's indeterminacies), both place this symbolic level of meaning within a Romantic framework of the quest for identity, and, more fundamentally, both maintain that there is a unified and unifying lyrical consciousness at work throughout the poetry that can, if nothing else will yield it, serve as an object of hermeneutic inquiry.

Other critics follow this line of reasoning by treating the poetry as an emanation of a unified and unifying consciousness, sometimes called Ashbery the man and poet, sometimes a lyrical subject or speaker. Thus Charles Berger, who follows Bloom in taking Ashbery as a "poet of high imagination, the visionary" (146), will argue that while "Ashbery has never been what we would call a dramatic poet...the voices he draws into his poems, no matter how far-fetched, are always versions of an elusive but central speaker" (149). More overtly taking up the Romantic element in Ashbery, in an essay on Ashbery's influence on other poets John Koethe echoes Bloom and Vendler in arguing that "the traditional resources [Ashbery] seeks to conserve are the fundamental impulses of romanticism," which Koethe characterizes as "subjectivity's contestation of its objective setting in a world which has no place for it, and which threatens to reduce it to nonexistence" (Absence 87). Koethe grants that Ashbery has "genuine" "deflationary" or "deconstructive" aspects of the sort seized upon by Perloff, but thinks of them "as merely part of the form the diffuse, decentered version of romantic contestation takes in his poetry, almost as though this whole glittering postmodern contraption were powered by an old-fashioned wood-burning stove" (88). Koethe is quick to differentiate Ashbery from the "traditional manifestations" of the Romantic contestation, pointing out how Ashbery "does not attempt to valorize the individual self but rather to assert the claims of [a] diffuse, impersonal subjectivity" (87) and how the poetry "is informed throughout by an acknowledgement of its own failure" (87), but these are stances Bloom attacks as defences

common to the Emersonian spirit, ways of pretending the anxiety of influence, the strict adherence to the traditional manifestations of the romantic contestation, does not exist (Bloom, Intro 8-9).

In what remains the most extensive book on Ashbery by a single author, John Shoptaw's *On The Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*, Shoptaw builds on Perloff's model of indeterminacy by arguing that in a characteristic "indeterminate" poem such as "At North Farm" (W 1), "although we cannot determine any single plot or subject for the poem, we can identify the representational, relational system which produced it, and through which its particulars circulate" (10). While taking pains to remember that Ashbery is not a systematic poet, Shoptaw argues that for most of the poems we are able to "locate their meaning in their mode of production" (10). Where Perloff argues that there is only surface-level activity, Shoptaw claims that that surface is in fact the product of a "cryptographic process" (7) whereby Ashbery revises familiar words and phrases into deliberate misrepresentations. Shoptaw's procedure, then, is to go back and reveal the process by which a "crypt word" or a "crypt phrase," became "displaced by, but still discoverable in, the final poetic text" (6). He does this by identifying different kinds of "markers" in the poetry, which are, Shoptaw says, "the products of sonic, visual, or associational misrepresentation" (7). Shoptaw gives some examples:

> "it all came / gushing down on me" (FC 170; "crashing"); "the pen's screech" (FC 108; "scratch"); "emotions / The crushed paper heaps" (TCO 32; "crushed hopes"); "your blurred version" (TP 36; "vision"). 7

Shoptaw also points to "added, dropped, or substituted letters" for signs of encryption: "signs of metal fatigue" (FC 199) being a misrepresentation of "mental" (7).

As a method of reading, however, the process of locating crypt words and phrases in the poetry can be exasperating, especially for a reader who does not, as Shoptaw does, have full access to Ashbery's manuscripts and source materials. Shoptaw's exegesis, in other words, performs much the same function as Eliot's *Notes on The Waste Land*: it is an excellent companion to the poetry, telling us, for example, how Ashbery's reading of *The Kalevala*, a "collection of Finnish oral epic poems," influenced his writing of "At North Farm" (12), but as a theory for Ashbery's aesthetic cryptographic misrepresentation tends to lean heavily on the causes which produce Ashbery's style, while downplaying its effects. There is no harm in this approach, of course, but it is important to recognize how it differs from Perloff's in that it has, in fact, a completely different object of enquiry: where Perloff aims to describe Ashbery in terms of the reading experience his poetry offers, Shoptaw draws his insights from what he can glean of the authorial process. And while Shoptaw is careful not to use his research behind the scenes to claim definite and ultimate meanings for the poetry, he relies heavily upon biographical factors that motivate most of Ashbery's misrepresentations, mainly Ashbery's homosexuality.

For all the referential instability a theory of a cryptographic method of writing would seem to produce, Shoptaw's procedure moves, in fact, in the opposite direction, resolving instability by supplying its source. By positing a cryptographic method behind the poetry, Shoptaw is able to simultaneously accept the apparent contingency and general difficulty of Ashbery's poetry and explain how such an overall effect came to exist. This reduces contingency and referential instability, however, to effects which are intentional and therefore explicable in light of authorial intent. Thus, even while Shoptaw will admit that in an Ashbery poem the "particulars (details of time and place, objects, selected words) are often vague, unexpected, abstracted, conflicting, misplaced, or missing," and while

> its argument or narrative is insufficiently supported, inconsistent, incomplete, and fragmented; its discourses, genres, and forms are strangely mixed or misapplied; its grammar and syntax are twisted, disconnected, or elongated; and its autobiographical subject is withheld or covertly generalized, resulting in an abstract expressionism which unsettles and contorts all other subject matters by removing their frame of reference, (2)

he can still claim that these "misrepresentations do not as a consequence rule out meaning, expression, and representation; they renovate them" (3). For Shoptaw Ashbery's randomness, and his general refusal to mean, then, is, as it is for Lehman and Ward, part of a larger program to which we can appeal for understanding even while that program seems to preclude the appeal.

The reinstatement of traditional subject-centred concepts such as "intention," "representation," and "expression" by various critics reveals the pervasiveness, the allure, and perhaps the truthfulness of that approach which sees a unified and unifying lyrical consciousness behind the discordant parts of Ashbery's poetry. Bloom's view of Ashbery, then, would seem to have found more success in Ashbery scholarship. But it is important to keep in mind the potential of Perloff's position, since it is the only one that lets difficulty stand *as difficulty*. It remains a radical position, for as insightful as a theory of indeterminacy is, its own logic precludes the level of understanding sought by other critics who recognize Ashbery's difficulty but who find some way of explaining how it works or why it is there. In a way, to understand indeterminacy is to render it ineffective, since indeterminacy is almost by definition the resistance of understanding. Ultimate indeterminacy actually shuts down the hermeneutic process of reading, saying there is another way of reading which does not fall back on traditional models of lyric poetry. It asks: do we lose something

valuable in Ashbery by assigning meaning where meaning seems purposely avoided? Might his difficulty be an integral part of the poetry? If so, we need to be able to say why in a way that lets the difficulty that results from indeterminacy remain difficult.

CHAPTER 2: ROMANTIC AND MODERNIST OPPOSITIONS

Despite the readiness with which many critics who acknowledge the indeterminate strain in Ashbery subordinate it to some notion of the lyrical subject which explains all indeterminacies, there are more than enough moments of indeterminacy in Ashbery's oeuvre to yield two different canons: one showcasing Perloff's Ashbery, the other Bloom's. Ashbery's second volume, *The Tennis Court Oath*, for example, is dismissed by most critics who follow Bloom in seeing Ashbery as a traditional, if difficult, lyric poet, whereas its frequent use of collage and montage techniques, as well as its extreme disjunctiveness—"To employ her / construction ball / Morning fed on the / light blue wood / of the mouth" ("Europe" 64)—make it paradigmatic of Ashbery's indeterminacy. His fourth volume, *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), on the other hand, offers much more stability and continuity in the poetic utterance—"Birds and trees, houses, / These are but the stations for the new sign of being / In me that is to close late, long / After the sun has set and darkness come / To the surrounding fields and hills" ("Evening in the Country" 33)—and is a favourite of Bloom and Berger. But there are moments and even whole poems, however, in Ashbery's early work in which both his indeterminate and Romantic strains appear alongside each other, and even simultaneously. In this chapter I isolate these strains, discuss their origins, and ultimately show how they interact for Ashbery as a productive antagonism: "The Instruction Manual" and "Soonest Mended" are two early poems in which the indeterminate and Romantic Ashbery struggle but in the end cooperate to produce a hybrid style that foreshadows Ashbery's later, more overtly impressionist work.

"The Instruction Manual" (ST 14-18), taking as its theme the transformative powers of the imagination, has received critical attention for its adherence to the Romantic

model of the crisis-poem. The poem makes use of the "traditional resources" Koethe finds throughout Ashbery's oeuvre, "the fundamental impulses of romanticism ... subjectivity's contestation of its objective setting in a world which has no place for it, and which threatens to reduce it to nonexistence," in its treatment of the daydream as a conscious mechanism of escape. At the same time, "The Instruction Manual" betrays an ambivalent attitude to these impulses, treating them with irony and detachment. A speaker, finding his office work tedious, begins his complaint:

> As I sit looking out of a window of the building
> I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.
> I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace,
> And envy them – they are so far away from me!
> Not one of them has to worry about getting out this manual on schedule. ST 14

The long, easy lines and the conversational tone are disarming and uninspired; one wonders exactly what the tone is of a line like "they are so far away from me!" But the reader hardly has time to judge the sincerity of the speaker before the initial situation swiftly changes into a reverie of something else entirely:

> And, as my way is, I begin to dream, resting my elbows on the desk and leaning out
> of the window a little,
> Of dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers!
> City I wanted most to see, and most did not see, in Mexico! ST 14

There follow 65 long lines describing in detail an imagined holiday in Guadalajara, beginning with "Your public square, city, with its elaborate little bandstand!" and moving through to the "flower girls," "women in green" serving fruit, "a dapper fellow / Clothed in deep blue" with a moustache "trimmed for the occasion," "his wife" who "carries a fan,

for she is modest, and does not want the crowd to see her face too often," and a boy "with a toothpick in his teeth" who converses and falls in love with a "young girl / Of fourteen or fifteen" (ST 14-16).

This is the parade scene. A stanza break returns the reader momentarily to a consciousness of the speaker's control in the travelogue, but this widening of perspective is swiftly broken off as the reader too enters the daydream:

> Let us take this opportunity to tiptoe into one of the side streets.
> Here you may see one of those white houses with green trim
> That are so popular here. Look—I told you!
> It is cool and dim inside, but the patio is sunny. ST 16

At this point we are no longer merely seeing the scenes of Guadalajara along with the speaker, but are physically present, and moving quickly even, from the cool and dim interior of a house to the sunny patio. Again the daydream becomes unbelievably detailed and layered:

> An old woman in gray sits there, fanning herself with a palm leaf fan.
> She welcomes us to her patio, and offers us a cooling drink.
> "My son is in Mexico city," she says. "He would welcome you too
> If he were here. But his job is with a bank there.
> Look, here is a photograph of him."
> And a dark-skinned lad with pearly teeth grins out at us from the worn leather
> frame. ST 17

The photograph functions as a mise-en-abyme for the poem itself; it is an imaginary ekphrasis of an artificial reality complete with invented details. But of course the description of the photograph is no stranger than the fact that the old woman has just

spoken, not only to the speaker in his daydream but to us as well, as we sip the cooling drink she has just given us. From here we depart for a last look at Guadalajara from (as if the prop were needed) "That church tower ... the faded pink one, there against the fierce blue of the sky" (ST 17). There follows a panoramic view of the "whole network of the city," complete with a review of all we have seen so far, as well as some other things, at which point the poem concludes with its own summary and a return to its initial situation:

> How limited, but how complete withal, has been our experience of Guadalajara!
> We have seen young love, married love, and the love of an aged mother for her
> son.
> We have heard the music, tasted the drinks, and looked at colored houses.
> What more is there to do, except stay? And that we cannot do.
> And as a last breeze freshens the top of the weathered old tower, I turn my gaze
> Back to the instruction manual which has made me dream of Guadalajara. ST 18

While it would sound odd to call the "The Instruction Manual" an essay in realism, the imagined travelogue has a straightforwardness of conceit—no extraordinary images, events, or personages appear—that gives it a natural feel. The poem is unique in *Some Trees* because it noticeably lacks what Shapiro calls the "forced passion of French surrealism" (37) which characterizes most of the volume ("Then there is a storm of receipts: night, / Sand the bowl did not let fall"—"Album Leaf" (ST 26)). It is, in other words, one of the more accessible of Ashbery's early poems. The quotidian diction, elementary description, and playful tone make the narrative easy if nothing else.

Perloff does not consider "The Instruction Manual" an indeterminate poem like "These Lacustrine Cities." Its straightforwardness, it would seem, precludes indeterminacy. But while subtly dismissing "The Instruction Manual" as not "representative" of Ashbery's

poetry, Perloff makes a significant observation. She identifies the structure of "The Instruction Manual" as that of what Abrams calls the "greater Romantic lyric" in that, in the tradition of poems like "Tintern Abbey" and "Frost at Midnight," "The Instruction Manual" has an out-in-out structure whereby a "determinate speaker in a particular setting (looking out the window of the building) is moved by a certain stimulus–in this case, the pages of the instruction manual–to reverie or daydream" (PI 264). But insofar as the speaker does not reach the usual "epiphany toward which the greater Romantic lyric usually builds (his dream of Guadalajara is a pleasant escape fantasy rather than a transforming psychic event)," Perloff suspects the poem of being a parody of the genre, "especially since," she says, "the long Whitmanesque lines that frame the daydream itself here express the very opposite of Romantic ecstasy. The speaker seems to be yawning" (PI 265).

Shapiro apparently agrees with this last point, that the reverie in "The Instruction Manual" is in fact a faint parody of the Romantic imagination: "The poet is presented as a drab worker, fantasizing a world of music and color and holiday. But the fantasy itself suffers from the banality of the worker and his *tedium vitae* has obviously affected the overtly tourist-like attractions discovered in Guadalajara" (37). Similarly, the poem to Shoptaw is "pseudo-romantic" (37). Shoptaw too finds the imagined trip through Guadalajara unremarkable when set against the opening and closing situation of the poem: "There is no shift in style or added richness of detail, for instance, between the framing reality and the dream, only the two-dimensional vividness of 'local color'" (37). While I would agree that there is no shift in style, to say that there is no "added richness of detail" is to confuse the comparison, because there is *no detail at all* in the "framing reality" of the poem. Neither the window, the building, the desk, the instruction manual, the people in the

street, nor the speaker himself is described at all in the opening and closing sections of the poem, whereas the inhabitants of Guadalajara come complete with miniature inner psychological histories: the man who has trimmed his moustache for the holiday; his wife, who "does not want the crowd to see her face too often"; the young couple who are "obviously" in love.

At the same time, Shapiro is right in noting how the fantasy world of Guadalajara is affected, or at any rate similar to, the banality of the worker's drab real world. Both worlds are composed of surfaces, and the focus on detail in the fantasy world is almost entirely superficial: the detail never really signifies anything meaningful beyond easy tokens of basic emotions (i.e., it does not have any symbolic value, or its symbolic value is so consciously banal as to be pointless), but only reinforces the shallowness of the whole poem. We know why, then, there is no "transforming psychic event," or at least why there cannot be: because, instead of acting as meaningful reflections of the speaker's inner states, the scenes in Guadalajara lack symbolic depth. Perloff need not, then, completely dismiss "The Instruction Manual" as not representative of Ashbery's indeterminacy, as, while it does not exactly give an "open field of narrative possibilities," it raises questions of tone and significance which give credence to different attitudes toward the powers of the imagination. For how are we to configure the relation between the real and the imagined world in "The Instruction Manual"?

It is worth looking at Abrams' definition of the greater Romantic lyric for some keys to exactly what may be the target of the parody in "The Instruction Manual." Abrams describes the greater Romantic lyric as a poem featuring a

> determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a

> more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely intervolved with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation. 76-7

Described thus, the greater Romantic lyric is a structured narrative of thought, a formula for enlightenment attained through a dialectic of interior and exterior states. In Abrams' definition, the formula for the greater Romantic lyric is also the seed for Symbolism and for Eliot's notion of the objective correlative, since all three work by establishing correspondences between interior and exterior spheres, whereby objects in the exterior sphere have figurative depths which reflect various aspects of the subject's interior life. We can see, then, what mode Perloff has in mind when she claims that for Ashbery "Nature no longer wears the colors of the spirit" (PI 36); at stake is the principle of the correspondence between subjective and objective, interior and exterior, which is the premise of Symbolism as it grows out of the greater Romantic lyric. (Baudelaire, however, based his Symbolism on different types of correspondences—between the different senses, between the mind and the exterior world, and between the natural and the spiritual (Abrams 114-15). But the latter two of these are very close, since in the context of the poem—in its composition and reception—the mind of an individual subject is needed to grasp the spiritual significance of

the natural world. Spiritual correspondences are still thought correspondences.) The greater Romantic lyric establishes, in other words, a structure or movement of thought in which objects and images can take on symbolic value for a subject who is in the throes of some insight which takes place as a narrative involving those objects and images.

"The movement of quest-romance," Bloom writes, "before its internalization by the High Romantics, was from nature to redeemed nature, the sanction of redemption being the gift of some external spiritual authority, sometimes magical. The Romantic movement is from nature to the imagination's freedom (sometimes a reluctant freedom), and the imagination's freedom is frequently purgatorial, redemptive in direction but destructive of the social self" (The Internalization of Quest-Romance 5-6). Bloom is discussing here what he elsewhere calls the "inward turning" that takes place in Wordsworth and comes to define poetry since the Romantics (Canon 231), namely the "internalization" of the redemption narrative typical of the romance genre. Romanticism, for Bloom, is the broad movement encompassing the last two hundred (or two hundred and fifty) years in which poetry comes to have "no true subject except the poet's own selfhood" (231). Poetry becomes the poet's own quest for redemption in the form of imaginative poetic power. Or, equally, poetry is the quest for imaginative poetic power masquerading as a quest for redemption. English Romanticism, Bloom writes, is

> More than a revival [of romance], it is an internalization of romance, particularly of the quest variety, an internalization made for more therapeutic purposes, because made in the name of a humanizing hope that approaches apocalyptic intensity. The poet takes the patterns of quest-romance and transposes them into his own imaginative life, so that the entire rhythm of the quest is heard again in the movement of the poet himself from poem to poem. QR 5

The greater Romantic lyric, as Abrams defines it, is the perfect formula for the "rhythm" of that quest: ending either in the poet's mind, now a habitable space apart from death and the object-world, or in the altered landscape, now made significant and comforting to the poet through his own creative powers, the movement of each poem repeats the pattern of the resolution of the poet's quest for imaginative autonomy. It also offers a model for how and why objects and images acquire symbolic depth; their depth of meaning is acquired through their use as meaningful reflections of inner states in the course of the poet's quest for imaginative freedom and autonomy.

"The Instruction Manual," while it seems to conform to this movement, departs from it in a few crucial ways. First, the second part of the greater Romantic lyric, the movement inward into meditation, is here simply another outer world. Second, there is no movement toward giving outer objects and images any symbolic value; while both inner and outer parts of the poem are really "outer," things seen and described, all remains surface banality, though detailed. Third, and as a result of these two departures, there is no final insight or integration of interior and exterior worlds, only the comic punch line.

That said, the poem is a great example of how even in very early Ashbery the indeterminate and Romantic impulses actually coincide. For only by setting up the expectation of symbolic meaning and insight, by appropriating the structure of thought mapped out by the greater Romantic lyric and implicit in later Symbolist and High Modernist traditions, can the poem achieve its deflationary effect. This may seem a simple thing to do, an elementary satire, but here both modes are held up simultaneously, and their relation is more complex. If the final punch line is to work at all, the reader has to have *forgotten* about the artificiality and banality of Guadalajara as well as about any potential ironies activated in the opening office section, since remembering these elements would

detract from the surprise return to them. This is why the excess of detail in Guadalajara, which comes across now as description for its own sake, is effective—because it is absorbing. Its ability to hold self-consciousness at bay affirms the value of both the imagination and more generally of the subjective quest-romance the reverie enacts. The imagination, specifically the poetic imagination, is its own value: its ability to merely distract from, and not to transform, reality is what "The Instruction Manual" affirms. The reader, meanwhile, is caught in an indeterminate zone, neither able to forget entirely about the framing reality, nor stand firmly within it, gazing out knowingly at Guadalajara. The strange power of "The Instruction Manual" is its ability to keep an ironic distance from the banality of the imagined scene it describes, even while affirming the value of that scene as an example of, in Ward's words, "the mind's own hospitality to creative play" (SL 102).

While "The Instruction Manual" does not deal directly with the lyrical quest for identity (although it does, despite its deflationary aspect, affirm some of that quest's values: integrity, wholeness, circularity), there are numerous occasions in the early poetry where Ashbery does engage in struggles resembling those found in Abrams' and Bloom's notions of the Romantic lyric and the quest-romance it performs, most notably when the language tends toward metaphors of growth, development, maturity, learning, and judgement. *Three Poems* (1972), for example, is replete with quest language, the three long prose poems mostly meditations on different stages of the "ways toward a more fruitful and harmonious manner of living" (TP 60). While the goal often remains vague, the knowledge that there is a goal, and that we are in now better now worse positions in its attainment, permeates the volume:

> All that was necessary were patience and humbleness in recognizing one's errors, so as to be sure of starting out from the right place the next time, and so a sense of

> steady advancement came to reward one's efforts each time it seemed that one had been travelling too long without a view of the sun. And even in darkest night this sense of advancement came to whisper at one's side like a fellow traveler pointing the way. TP 60

The imagery here, of the movement from darkness to light, literally and spiritually, has its origin in *Three Poems* at the beginning of "The New Spirit" (whose title similarly signals the quest motif), where the speaker asks:

> Have I awakened? Or is this sleep again? Another form of sleep? There is no profile in the massed days ahead. They are impersonal as mountains whose tops are hidden in cloud. The middle of the journey, before the sands are reversed: a place of ideal quiet. TP 4

The hiddenness of the mountain tops corresponding to the speaker's general uncertainty, the simile almost works by the logic of the objective correlative. The mountain image is a good example, though, of how in the early poetry Ashbery develops an elementary symbolism, using the landscape, most often a natural one, to illustrate basic desires, struggles, and crises. Here, as in "The Instruction Manual," the elementary symbolism is so elementary as to suggest irony, or, as the case may be, parody (of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale"). But the evenness of the tone and the lack of embellished sentiment allow the position to stand authentically, despite its simplicity.

Thus the mode of the quest-romance appears in Ashbery in, oddly enough, the most straightforward ways: metaphors of paths, journeys, enlightened perception, understanding and knowledge (both of self and others), pilgrimages, narrative itself, and anything that suggests an impending gratification of desire or completion of a process of learning and understanding—these recurring tropes are indicative of the lyric struggle, not

explicitly toward autonomy in Bloom's sense, but toward self-knowledge, happiness, and identity (which may amount to the same thing). A love lyric like "Some Trees" uses trees to reflect a human relationship:

> These are amazing: each
> Joining a neighbour, as though speech
> Were a still performance.
> Arranging by chance
>
> To meet as far this morning
> From the world as agreeing
> With it, you and I
> Are suddenly what the trees try
>
> To tell us we are:
> That their merely being there
> Means something; that soon
> We may touch, love, explain. ST 51

The trees which mingle their branches ("each / Joining a neighbour") are an objectification of the desired human communion (touching, loving, explaining) and even, so goes the conceit, directly "communicate" this relationship to the speaker and his partner. *The Double Dream of Spring*, however, is the volume which most plainly attaches the lyrical quest to the landscape, as the opening poem, "The Task," declares:

> I plan to stay here a little while
> For these are moments only, moments of insight,

And there are reaches to be attained,

A last level of anxiety that melts

In becoming, like miles under the pilgrim's feet. DDS 13

Aligned with "miles under the pilgrim's feet," "moments of insight" become the units of a journey illustrable in both physical, objective and abstract, subjective terms. And later, in "Evening in the Country," after the basic transcendence is announced,

...Birds and trees, houses,

These are but the stations for the new sign of being

In me that is to close late, long

After the sun has set and darkness come

To the surrounding fields and hills....

Now as my questioning but admiring gaze expands

To magnificent outposts, I am not so much at home

With these memorabilia of vision as on a tour

Of my remotest properties... DDS 33

the end of the poem unites subject and landscape in the notion of the journey:

There is growing in that knowledge

We may perhaps remain here, cautious yet free

On the edge, as it rolls its unblinking chariot

Into the vast open, the incredible violence and yielding

Turmoil that is to be our route. DDS 34

Often the quest-romance is aligned with the project of writing itself, such that the poet's compositional decisions and characteristics themselves enter a crisis narrative. "The New Spirit" opens: "I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And

next the thought came to me that to leave it all out would be another, and truer, way" (TP 3)—"way," like "route," a term in which both concrete and abstract senses are active, as well as the more ethical/spiritual sense echoing the pilgrimage in "The Task" (each case conveys the notion that there are right and wrong, true and false, ways and routes). The correspondence of the lyrical subject and the landscape, and the incorporation of this into the poetic project, allows Ashbery to unite "Task and vision," or "vision in the form of a task" (DDS 46), and all of these passages are examples of the "High Romantic insistence that the power of the poet's mind could triumph over the universe of death, or the estranged object-world." They are markers, in other words, of the Romantic mode in Ashbery, signs of the inward turning which betray the presence of a unified consciousness seeking resolution to a crisis through a dialectic meditation with the outside world. The major Romantic impulse of the early Ashbery is the habit of denying the estrangement of the object-world and using its symbolic potential to enlighten the lyrical subject in its quest for knowledge, identity, and fulfillment.

Against the "vision in the form of a task," however, there is the indeterminate strain, showcased mainly in *The Tennis Court Oath* and *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), which obstructs the narratives of the quest-romance with more impenetrable imagery that does not carry symbolic meaning and therefore cannot be incorporated into an interior/exterior dialectic. At times indeterminacy results from an overextension of the principle of transcendence: since any part of the object-world *can* carry symbolic meaning, there is no reason why the most disparate objects should not. But mostly indeterminacy results from the way precise images and scenes coalesce to form only fragmentary narrative moments, as in "The Tennis Court Oath":

The mulatress approached in the hall—the

lettering easily visible along the edge of the *Times*

in a moment the bell would ring but there was time

for the carnation laughed here are a couple of "other" TCO 11

"'They Dream Only of America'" parodies the sensibility that relies too heavily on symbolic understanding. Here, as Ward suggests, the brunt of the joke is Freudian symbolism (SL 107):

Now he cared only about signs.

Was the cigar a sign?

And what about the key?

He went slowly into the bedroom.

"I would not have broken my leg if I had not fallen

Against the living room table. What is it to be back

Beside the bed?..." TCO 13

More than a fun stab at symbolism, Ward adds, the passage reveals a "profound distrust of rationalization" (SL 107), and we may take rationalization to include the causative logic which governs symbolic meaning. Ward writes that "Ashbery's ironies pre-empt the methods of psychoanalytic criticism...by building an awareness of them into the poetry's effects" (SL 107). An ironic treatment of the logic of symbolic meaning, then, is one way in which Ashbery disrupts the Romantic mode.

Turning away from symbolism, Ashbery's indeterminate works move toward a logic different than that dependent on a causality that makes or discloses meaning. "Two Scenes," the first poem of *Some Trees*, anticipates later Ashbery work, according to Perloff, in using "clear visual images" which have "no discernable referents" (PI 267):

I

We see us as we truly behave:

From every corner comes a distinctive offering.

The train comes bearing joy;

The sparks it strikes illuminate the table.

Destiny guides the water pilot, and it is destiny.

For long we hadn't heard so much news, such noise.

The day was warm and pleasant.

"We see you in your hair,

Air resting around the tips of mountains." ST 9

Here, clearly, there is no continuity as in "The Instruction Manual." The causal connectives are illogical (the train strikes sparks that illuminate a table?), or at least seem to work on a purely linguistic level: "comes" is repeated with its subjects held between; "destiny" is repeated; "noise" seems to come from "news" via the half-rhyme, as does "Air" from "hair." And if the "scene" depicted in this half of the poem is somewhat vague, the second "scene" has little connection to the first, and is itself enigmatic, as the final lines thematize:

II

A fine rain anoints the canal machinery.

This is perhaps a day of general honesty

Without example in the world's history

Though the fumes are not of a singular authority

And indeed are dry as poverty.

Terrific units are on an old man

In the blue shadow of some paint cans

As laughing cadets say, "In the evening

Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is." ST 9

Aside from there being no real, identifiable scene here, there is much to suggest a thematic preoccupation with disclosure and secrecy. Shoptaw, for example, argues that "Two Scenes" concerns the quest for self-knowledge, playing out "an implicit analogy between the clouded mirrors of life and art which justifies such obscurities" (20). The "obscurities" in "Two Scenes" are for Shoptaw exemplary of the difficulty of self-knowledge, as the first line "We see us as we truly behave" "submerges the idiomatic wish to 'see ourselves as others see us'" (20). "Two Scenes," then, may be an obscured quest for identity of Bloom's sort, provided one treats the use of the plural "we" as figuratively reducible to the singular.

While I agree with the general direction of Shoptaw's remarks, I will, following Perloff, draw a distinction between what the poem says and how it actually works (PI 166). For whatever content may be submerged in "Two Scenes," the poem is governed more by a textual logic which allows rhymes and alliteration to generate the poem (Shoptaw reduces the "narrative in the second scene" to "the story of a vowel": "canal machinery," "an old man," "paint cans," "laughing cadets" (20)), and repetition and symmetry to structure it (two nine line stanzas each ending with two quoted lines of discourse). And it is difficult to call this a "cryptographic" method, since such textual logic does not really point to any underlying message. Rather, one can isolate it as a purely surface-level phenomenon: the words on the page are called into being not for their evocative or symbolic potential, but for their visible and aural relation to other words.

Some Trees is especially rich in its use of language itself as the generating, as well as unifying, principle of the poetry (as opposed to a stated theme, subject, or occasion), in the form of a traditional formal device, by repetition of words, or by playful paronomasia. The

paradigm here seems to be the sestina, of which there are three, whose form dictates, once the first stanza's end words are chosen, the end words for the rest of the poem. The form of the sestina itself enforces closure in the final stanza which condenses all six end words in three lines (two to a line), giving the effect of a summary even when none is given. Ashbery's most famous sestina, "The Painter," is the perfect example of a poem whose narrative is dictated by the end words but whose actual content remains circled but never pierced by them. Rather, the actual content is the way the end words connect in various ways on the page, each time producing a different sense, until by the end buildings, portrait, prayer, subject, brush, and canvas are figuratively synonymous (ST 54). "Into the Dusk-Charged Air," from *Rivers and Mountains*, is another good example of Ashbery's textual logic, the governing principle there that each line contain the name of a river:

> Far from the Rappahannock, the silent
> Danube moves along toward the sea.
> The brown and green Nile rolls slowly
> Like the Niagara's welling descent. RM 17

This is an extreme example of a strain in Ashbery that works primarily on the surface of the poetry, either through puns and wordplay, or through more elaborate systems of repetition. Ashbery replaces the system of meanings normally produced in the meditation of a Romantic lyric with a purely textual system. Here his roots are with Raymond Roussel, the early Surrealist writer who devised a purely linguistic method of writing stories and scenes dictated by the method itself.[7] This strain in Ashbery uses a formal or purely linguistic device or innovation to produce a new process of experience as the device is

[7] For an excellent account of Roussel and his "procédé," see Mark Ford, *Roussel* 1-26.

played out in the poem, both for the writer and the reader, rather than a polished structure articulating a symbolic system of the letter and the spirit, subject and object.

The method of writing according to a formal device or experiment differs from Shoptaw's notion of the cryptographic method in that the former need not have any source or intended meaning that existed prior to the finished product. The "content" of such a method is precisely the way the language generates itself as the poem is written and then read. And beyond Roussel, Perloff locates the origins of this strain in Ashbery in a larger tradition. Central to Perloff's theory of the two strands of modernism is an historical scheme, put forth by Roger Cardinal, of poetry's recent (in the last 150 years) "three-stage cycle" (PI 28). Perloff quotes Cardinal:

> Firstly, art finds itself becoming mysterious because it begins to treat of mysteries. Secondly, it deliberately chooses to be mysterious, because the mysteries of which it treats need to be kept from the profane. Lastly, art is mysterious because its capacity to attract attention depends precisely upon its sustaining an air of mystery. Now the first stage of such a cycle must be dated from the period of early Romanticism.... The mysteriousness of a work like [Novalis'] *Hymnen an die Nacht* is then a function of the mysteriousness of its subject matter. At the second stage in our imagined cycle, the mystery invoked in the work of art is deepened by artistic procedures designed to make access into the work difficult. The difficulty of Mallarmé's sonnets is then not a question of their subject-matter...but of their being clothed in 'une ombre exprès' that veils any clear meaning that might otherwise peep through. PI 29

In the final stage of the cycle, Cardinal writes, "a sensibility may be said to emerge that is prepared to occupy itself with the gestures of mystery and defer clarification of the content

of that mystery" (PI 29). From this imaginary cycle Perloff draws some interesting conclusions. The first stage of the cycle should be fairly clear, evident in, say, Wordsworth's invocation of the "presence" that "disturbs" him

> with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things. 134

A passage like this corresponds well with the first stage of Cardinal's three-stage cycle because the subject matter—the "motion" and "spirit" that "rolls through all things"—is the mystery. The second stage is by and large the Symbolist mode (Mallarmé), differing from the first in making the physical aspect of language reflect the opacity of the subject matter, which remains more or less the same as in the first stage (holy correspondences).

The third stage, however, that which informs Perloff's other tradition, follows from the previous two in relying more and more on the physical qualities of the language as the loci of the subject matter, but now to the extent that what those qualities are supposed to treat has disappeared. Or, basically, words have lost their referential value, and are themselves the subject matter. Thus, as Perloff argues, in Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, as in Williams' *Spring and All* and Pound's *Cantos*, words themselves are the object of concern (they are objectified, as opposed to simply referring to other "real" objects), and their

interaction on the poem's surface, rather than its symbolic depth, is the poet's subject (PI 33). The shift, Perloff writes, is sometimes more visible in artistic media other than poetry:

> For in painting and sculpture, Cardinal's third stage, the stage in which surface is preferred to "depth," *process* to *structure*, is much more readily identifiable than it is in poetry. From the early days of Cubism in 1910 through Vorticism and Futurism, Dada and Surrealism, down to the Abstract Expressionism of the fifties, and the Conceptual Art, Super-Realism, assemblages, and performance art of the present [1981], visual artists have consistently resisted the Symbolist model in favor of the creation of a world in which forms can exist "littéralement et dans tous les sens," an oscillation between representational reference and compositional game. PI 33-4

While this history in painting and sculpture is helpful, it is not difficult to see an aesthetic based on the "oscillation between representational reference and compositional game" in the work of Williams and Pound, the former coming to regard poems as machines made out of words, and the latter approaching a similar concept in the notion of the vortex.[8] In both poets also there is a shift away from the determinate lyric speaker toward objectified words and utterances woven into a text which does not always (rarely) attribute speakers, sources, and contexts, but allows them to grow out of compositional relationships. Thus the two quotes at the ends of each section of "Two Scenes" have no real source (who are the laughing cadets?), but exist, the first as if pasted in, the second introduced by the ambiguous "As," on a plane even with whatever is responsible for the machinery/honesty/history/authority/poverty rhyme. The reader cannot know the source of these relationships because they are not presented in such a way as to make sense once an authoring speaker has been identified. A lyric situation remains only hypothetical,

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[8] See, respectively, Kenner, 397-406, and Perloff, 155-99, for discussions of Williams' and Pound's "objective" approach to poetic language.

created, if at all, by the words themselves and held at a distance from their source, as if they have attached the caveat that "this could be spoken by someone, somewhere."

Ashbery's indeterminacy results, then, in large part from a fidelity to the object-world in its objectness, its refusal to be anything but object. Since language is part of this object-world, and no longer the property and medium of a ruling subjectivity, it too is presented with the same fidelity to its objectness. At the same time, because Ashbery constantly invokes the quest-romance narrative, the variety of contexts in which objects, images, voices, and other bits of poetic meaning *should* have meaning, the objectness of his images and utterances is constantly called into question. Between quest-romance and indeterminacy is the "oscillation between representational reference and compositional game." It is as if Ashbery has already undergone the quest, and is now able to see it in its entirety, able to seize upon any aspect of it, early or late in the quest, and inspect its significance, not always successfully, in light of the larger movement. It is for this that so much of Ashbery seems to be a fragment of a larger, undisclosed narrative, and why his jumps in verb tenses, temporal and spatial planes, and voices can seem to be natural—because he has always already evoked in the reader an awareness of their imminent connections and purposes, even while he himself admits to not having total knowledge of what those connection purposes are, since he too, in writing toward them, is not there yet. This is perhaps the best explanation for why some critics point to Ashbery's scope as a defining element of the poetry, saying that the poetry is about nothing less than life itself. On one hand this is reductive and uninformative, but at the same time, a poet proceeding according to the premise that anything *may* have significance in a quest for identity and knowledge whose parameters have yet to be defined (because the quest is unfinished) proceeds from a principle of transcendence. The poetry thus unites precision, the particular

moment or image objectified, presented, and questioned, with elaboration, the sequential treatment of such moments and images in an ongoing discourse about that questioning. Thus Perloff's summary, that

> *Language always on the point of revealing its secret*—this pattern of opening and closing, of revelation and re-veiling, of simultaneous disclosure and concealment is the structural principle of the Ashbery poem PI 262

is apt because Ashbery's objectification and investigation of language within the structure of the quest-romance narrative will open, reveal, and disclose meanings and correspondences among things only some of the time, while other times, when the language of those meanings and correspondences is held up to scrutiny, there will be no represented meaning, merely a composed presentation of objects.

If we may judge by the amount of critical attention it has received, "Soonest Mended" (DDS 17-19) is the masterpiece of Ashbery's early period (early here meaning the five volumes published before *Self-Portrait* and now collected in *The Mooring of Starting Out*—which title is taken from "Soonest Mended"). "Soonest Mended" offers firstly a host of memorable lines and phrases which lend themselves as titles and key tropes for a variety of critics' work on earlier Ashbery. Bloom titles one of his major essays on Ashbery "The Charity of the Hard Moments"; David Herd thematizes Ashbery's declaration of "action," made in "Soonest Mended," to describe the period of *Rivers and Mountains* and *The Double Dream of Spring*; Shoptaw titles his chapter on *The Double Dream of Spring* "Soonest Mended"—it is clearly considered a poem representative of its period.

One of the reasons the poem is so successful is that it incorporates most of Ashbery's characteristic techniques while questioning them–making those techniques thematic in the poem itself. Herd reads it as "generally a bringing together of competing

impulses" (120) which might include: active vs. passive; public vs. private; "intimacy" vs. "distance" (120); "vision" vs. "irony" (McClatchy 120). In other words, "Soonest Mended" is recognizably a crisis poem, where the viability of the poet's vocation–and Ashbery's particular take on this vocation–are called into question. The competing impulses, listed here, combine in the poem into the critical question for Ashbery: how can one claim to be active in the public sphere, to intimately engage with "matters of general concern" (Herd 119) when one's poetry is private, ironically distant from that sphere, and seemingly passive? On a more general level, this question may also ask what the value is of an aesthetic of indeterminacy which does not aim to communicate meanings and messages, seemingly denying its public usefulness.

The beginning of the poem tries to pose the question straightforwardly, but the seriousness of the concern is undercut three times by Ashbery's "pop melodramatics" (Shoptaw 105). The poet and his ilk are "Barely tolerated, living on the margin / In our technological society" and "always having to be rescued / On the brink of destruction" (DDS 17). This genuine distress is somewhat destabilized, however, when the poet's community is compared to "heroines in *Orlando Furioso*," and is almost totally deflated when the rescue is said to occur only "Before it was time to start all over again." Whatever it was they needed to be rescued from is then playfully dismissed (and most importantly not named) as the "whole thing" which "Angelica, in the Ingres painting" considers "forgetting." It is unsure to what extent the distress, implicitly embodied in the "small but colorful monster" near Angelica's toe, is made humourous, made light of. Next, the distress is transposed into a comic strip scenario, as

> there always came a time when
>
> Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile

Came plowing down the course, just to make sure everything was O.K. 17

Shoptaw calls the opening section of "Soonest Mended" a "dramatization of the impoverished life" (106). I am not so sure. Is it impoverished because the poet is "Barely tolerated, living on the margin"? If so, the impoverishment is not so simple, or at least is not presented so directly that we can unproblematically assume it is genuine. For the "melodramatics" here are conscious, and the potential for irony in these lines asks us to reserve judgment. The playfulness of the language ("small but colorful" is an odd mix–does being small normally preclude its being colourful?; who says "automobile" in 1970?; "plowing down the course") makes it difficult to decide whether Ashbery's allusions are meant to genuinely illustrate the situation of being "On the brink of destruction" or whether this destruction is inconsequential, since it is handled with what seem like throw-away gestures. The same goes for the line, further down: "Alas, the summer's energy wanes quickly, / A moment and it is gone" (17), which, as Herd points out, parodies (knowingly or not–it *is* a rather common poetic sentiment) Shakespeare's Sonnet 18: "And summer's lease hath all too short a date" (Herd 120). But is this allusion in favour of or mocking the sentiment? It is difficult to tell. As in "The Instruction Manual" ("Yet soon all this will cease, with the deepening of their years, / And love bring each to the parade grounds for another reason") we have a sampled poetic utterance placed in a context in which it is difficult to judge its tone. We must suspend judgement and read on.

The problems alluded to but not named in the opening section reveal themselves to be a variety of concerns more or less bound up in the question of responsibility and maturity, both civic and poetic, in various guises. First, the poem names the "little problems (so they began to seem), / Our daily quandary about food and the rent and bills to be paid." It is not these problems, however, that matter, but the fact that they do matter.

The wish is to "reduce" them to "a small variant," or to move beyond them, and perhaps the self-centred attitude they inspire, to larger concerns. (Later the speaker realizes that his group was one of "spectators" and not of "players.") Yet this is difficult to do, as responsibility and maturity are a

> holding on to the hard earth so as not to get thrown off,
> With an occasional dream, a vision: a robin flies across
> The upper corner of the window, you brush your hair away
> And cannot quite see, or a wound will flash
> Against the sweet faces of the others, something like:
> This is what you wanted to hear, so why
> Did you think of listening to something else? We are all talkers
> It is true, but underneath the talk lies
> The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose
> Meaning, untidy and simple like a threshing floor. 17-18

That is to say, responsibility and maturity (being a "good citizen") seem to preclude indulging in the reveries of poetry. Herd reads this passage as follows:

> Intimacy and distance are beautifully handled here: that which is intimate (the poet's hair) brushed away; that which is distant (the wounded faces of the others) brought close by the felt word 'sweet'. The poet himself thinks this is 'something like', and he is surely right. 120

Shoptaw reads the "wound ... flash[ing] / Against the sweet faces of others" as an image of arguments, in that Ashbery is here "conserving semantic resources" in "a world where he hardly counts" by "refraining from arguments, from making 'a wound ... flash / Against the sweet faces of others'" (106). I confess I do not understand either of these readings.

First, there is no reason to assume that the "you" who brushes his or her hair away is the poet. Nor need we read the "wound" which "will flash / Against the sweet faces of the others" as implying either that the others have "wounded faces" or that someone (the poet, speaker) can "make" wounds flash against the others' faces by arguing with them.

It is clear that these images are the occasional dreams and visions, as the colon tells us. They are also conventional poetic images: the bird noticed in the corner of the window, somebody brushing his or her hair back. The ambiguous "wound" jests at the ambiguity of metaphor, at the way poetic thinking can rest too easily on merely being suggestive and evocative. The sense conveyed is that these are guilty pleasures: "what you wanted to hear," though you claimed to want something else. The passage acknowledges the pressure of matters more important than poetry and personal pleasure, but also suggests, via the pun on the enjambed line, that "talk" of this "something else" "lies." Away from the public sphere people are a "moving and not wanting to be moved" and meaning is "loose," "untidy," and "simple" (most likely in the diminutive sense). The private self enjoys the occasional dream and vision, the robin etc., but these are guilty pleasures compared to the "action" demanded by the public sphere.

The rest of the poem deals with how this struggle plays itself out over time, and what can be expected to come from it. The speaker recalls the typical high school/university sports game as emblematic of the desire for attention and success (there is also, perhaps, the traditional opposition of jock/sensitive artist at work here), realizing that "we ... Were merely spectators," and not the stars of the game. But here there is a crucial turn in the poem, as the speaker recognizes that spectatorship, or marginality in this situation, is a necessary part of the event, since the spectators are "subject to [the game's] vicissitudes / And moving with it out of the tearful stadium, borne on shoulders, at last"

(18). The careful phrasing of "tearful stadium" figuratively unites the players and spectators in the drama, foreshadowing the erasure of the poem's thematic oppositions of the active/passive and the public/private in the final passage. The "moments, years, / Solid with reality, faces, nameable events, kisses, heroic acts" which define a life do not reveal their meaning so cleanly in active/passive and public/private dichotomies (18). What is left is a continual process of learning within the contradictory unity of these dichotomies. If "How to receive information, or make meaning" is the question posed by "Soonest Mended" (McClatchy 52), the poem's conclusion is that doing so necessarily involves "narrative hazards" (Shoptaw 105), false meanings, false interpretations of the moments and years of a life. The course itself *is* hazards. Action, then, is to accept falsehood right off, but then to return repeatedly to the moments where meaning came to mean and rethink those moments.

The near-comic gestures opening the poem are actually disarming ways of introducing what will become the poem's major thematic concerns: the necessity of new beginnings at what seem like endings, the necessity of forgetting (therefore allowing the new beginning to take place), and the necessary though complicated playing and associating with various fictional roles which are essentially "rules." The ambiguities at the beginning of "Soonest Mended" are ways of "sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow" (DDS 19). But, as Berger points out, the crookedness is a kind of direction: "'Soonest Mended' remains striking within the Ashbery oeuvre not so much for its return at the end to a sense of origination—other poems certainly enact this course—as for its planned, haphazard course *to* that end" (159). Planned and haphazard–what does this mean? I would point to the way Ashbery repeats words and phrases, sometimes in the same form, sometimes in a

crooked form, throughout "Soonest Mended," such that the final sentence is a concentrated statement of most of what has gone before:

> And you see, both of us were right, though nothing
> Has somehow come to nothing; the avatars
> Of our conforming to the rules and living
> Around the home have made–well, in a sense, "good citizens" of us,
> Brushing the teeth and all that, and learning to accept
> The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out,
> For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
> Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
> Making ready to forget, and always coming back
> To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago. DDS 19

Bloom's gloss argues that "Here Ashbery has achieved one of the mysteries of poetic style, but only through the individuation of misprision" (AI 146). It is uncanny how Ashbery's language at the end of "Soonest Mended" articulates Bloom's theory of misprision: the mature poet can be said to thrive on the "charity of the hard moments" of struggle in which the precursor finally yields his style to the ephebe-cum-mature poet, who now purposely sows "the seeds" of his own poetry (the precursor's style) "crooked in the furrow" while "Making ready to forget" the precursor. The mature poet is, however, "always coming back" to the initial inspiration in the precursor, but with a built-in defense mechanism of willed ignorance to the process, "thinking not to grow up / Is the brightest kind of maturity" (DDS 19).

But the notion of individual development is precisely what the ending of "Soonest Mended" denies, not simply outright, but in the way the poem works as a whole. The

conclusion in the final passage is a beautifully cadenced anti-conclusion, each unit affirming only stasis and/or indirection. Further, each part of the final passage is a rephrasing of a previous part of the poem, the whole finish being a restatement and not a resolution of the poem's competing impulses. I will sketch briefly how the poem arrives at this conclusion in both a planned and haphazard way. We first need to consider the technique of "sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow" a metaphor for writing, where the furrows in a field correspond to the lines of a poem. "Sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow" would then mean something like "writing in an unorthodox way." In "Soonest Mended" this would describe the way the direction of the poem is governed by a strange textual logic, where synonyms and puns, both visual and aural, seem, in retrospect, to have directed the flow of thought. The final passage betrays the presence of such logic: "acting this out" (acting out roles) becomes both "rules" and "action" (roles/rules; acting/action); the "promise of learning" and the "learning process" becomes "learning to accept / The charity of the hard moments"; "the clarity of the rules" also becomes "charity of the hard moments" (clarity/charity; rules, restrictions, conformity/hard moments); "loose / Meaning" becomes "this not being sure"; "necessary arrangements" becomes "careless preparing"; Happy Hooligan's automobile "plowing down the course" becomes "sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow" (plowing/sowing); Angelica's "forgetting" becomes "Making ready to forget"; being rescued "Before it was time to start all over again" becomes "always coming back"; "moving and not wanting to be moved" becomes "The mooring of starting out."

The textual logic of "Soonest Mended," then, like that of "Two Scenes," dictates its content. Here, just as the poem never progresses in terms of synthesizing concepts and ideas, but merely restates the same ones in different ways, so the crisis of living on the margin is not actually resolved, but only discussed. In leaving its themes only "discussed,"

however, the poem raises the question of what material is necessary for forward movement and eventual resolution. The poem remains, as the repeated kernels state, in the middle of the journey, returning at the "end" to the moments that led up to it, not really with any new insight, but with a noticeable lack of conclusion that can only encourage a revision of those other moments. As a Romantic crisis-poem, "Soonest Mended" modifies the motion toward resolution by making the "varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely intervolved with the outer scene" the locale or "outer scene" of the poem itself. There is no deepened understanding, only shifting planes of images and objects which are called upon as examples and illustrations in a meditation which will ultimately call their exemplary and illustrative character into question. The values of the Romanic mode which gives images and objects exemplary and illustrative character, then, are also called into question, as well as the major assumption readers bring to the lyric poem: that it will be an allegory of insight.

CHAPTER 3: THE IMPRESSIONIST SENSIBILITY

"Soonest Mended" announces an aesthetic of being constantly stuck in the middle of the quest for knowledge, identity, and more generally resolutions to the crises that result from that quest, returning repeatedly to objects and images, and to the particular moments and scenes they create, but finding those objects and images strangely inadequate to the quest. Such an aesthetic dramatizes the meeting of Romantic and indeterminate modes, as it invokes the narrative of the Romantic quest while using objects which do not yield the symbolic depth necessary for their meaningful integration into a symbolic network that could aid the lyrical subject in fulfilling the quest. And while this calls into question the adequacy of fulfilling the quest, as well as the values of the goals attendant on its fulfillment, it does not dismiss the quest itself, but modifies and expands it. The quest, instead of serving as *telos*, now serves as a means of directing attention more randomly to discrete objects which need not appear in any meaningful order, since the ordering mechanism is the haphazard way in which they meet the questing subject.

Ashbery's aesthetic also pits against each other two kinds of subject: one, the thinking, meditative subject, who undertakes the quest, and two, that same subject as the object of its own reflection in the course of the quest. Irony and quotation, then, are ways of objectifying potential subject positions or attitudes so that different modes of subjectivity may be called into question. In this way the quest itself becomes the more everyday phenomenon of self-questioning. The deepened understanding Abrams finds in the greater Romantic lyric Ashbery displaces throughout the poem and delivers only tentatively, so that the process of deepening understanding is highlighted while insight itself remains perpetually imminent. Since the quest has the power to grant meaning and insight,

its prolongation or suspension makes the poem a kind of balancing act: on one hand an Ashbery poem has forward momentum, as it moves toward final meaning, while on the other hand it privileges stasis, the suspended encounter with the object in a moment of poetic attention. In conversation with Richard Jackson, Ashbery has pointed out this tension, beginning with Borges:

> Borges gives an almost Paterian definition of creativity: 'Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces molded by time, certain twilights in certain places—all these are trying to tell us something, or have told us something we should not have missed or are about to tell us something. The imminence of the revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality.' The imminence of a revelation not yet produced is very important and hard to define in poetry and probably is the source of some of the difficulty with my own poems. But I don't think it would serve any useful purpose to spare myself or the reader the difficulty of that imminence, of always being on the edge of things. 70

The question remains of exactly what this aesthetic of always being on the edge of things is. The two major modes that meet in Ashbery are the Romantic, the mode which posits the lyrical quest and the possibility of its symbolic fulfillment, and the branch of "objectivist" modernism Perloff describes as the "other tradition."[9] Is there an appropriate way to describe this interaction of opposing modes?

The closest mode or style to Ashbery as I have described him here is impressionism. Impressionism—literary impressionism—does not normally receive the

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[9] I follow Kenner's use of the term "objectivist," which *loosely* describes the aesthetic common to Williams, Pound, Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, and Basil Bunting: "language as if indifferent to hearers…preference for denotation over etymology, for the cut term over association and the channelled path" (404). These qualities are analogous to those described by Perloff as forming the poetics of indeterminacy: the lack of the lyric speaker communicating some matter to an auditor, the preference of surface literalness over symbolic depth.

sort of treatment Romanticism and modernism do as a movement or period, and perhaps justifiably so. For one, it lacks the polemical foundations Romanticism and modernism have in Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Pound's Imagist and Vorticist articles of the 1910s. Though it is not as radical a manifesto as those of Wordsworth or Pound, Ford Madox Ford's 1913 article "On Impressionism" nicely articulates some of the main tenets of impressionism as Ford conceived it. "Any piece of Impressionism" he writes, "is the record of the impression of a moment" (41). For Ford the impression of a moment involves both the thing perceived and the "frank expression of [the] personality" of the perceiving subject. As demonstration, Ford singles out a passage from Tennyson:

> And bats went round in fragrant skies,
>
> And wheeled or lit the filmy shapes
>
> That haunt the dusk, with ermine capes
>
> And woolly breasts and beady eyes. Ford 40

Ford does not consider this impressionist because "no one watching a bat at dusk could see the ermine, the wool, or the beadiness of the eyes" (40). Ford distinguishes "moments" of observation when one would learn of the ermine, wool, or the beady eyes (reading about them in books) from the actual moment of seeing the bats here, arguing that impressionism cannot include these bits of information because they are not authentically "momentary" (40). But Ford does allow "superimposed emotions" (41) to enter the depiction of something, as when there are "two [or] three [or] as many as you will, places, persons, emotions, all going on simultaneously in the emotions of the writer" (40). He also grants the impressionist writer a good amount of flexibility in the "moment": "it is not a sort of rounded, annotated record of a set of circumstances—it is the record of the

recollection in your mind of a set of circumstances that happened ten years ago—or ten minutes" (41).

As Jesse Matz points out, however, Ford's theory of impressionism—the inclusion of the viewer's perspective and personality in the depiction of something viewed—is fraught with paradox. Ford "alternates," Matz argues, between stressing the force of the subjective and the objective: "between defining Impressionism as 'exaggeration' and precise 'presentation'" and "between believing art can produce its own coherent reality and believing that that power requires deference to some real-life source" (161, 162).[10] For Matz, contradictions like these prevent both critics and impressionists themselves from clearly defining impressionism. At the same time, Matz maintains that the lack of consistent criteria for defining impressionism is itself one of its definitive elements: impressionism, in Matz's view, stems from its own "tendency toward definitional vagueness" (15). Further, the range of meanings impressionism has in literary and critical discourse is the result of the corresponding "*range* of the *impression itself*" (15).

Recent theorists of impressionism will remind us, first of all, that literary impressionism should be dissociated from its painterly counterpart. As Matz, Maria Kronegger, and H. Peter Stowell stress, impressionism for literature is not mainly concerned with pictorial effect, although pictorial effect is often an important component of it. The type of impression behind literary impressionism, Matz argues, is philosophical in origin, and recalls the debate between the Stoics and the sceptics over whether "nature has provided us with a firm basis for knowledge by providing us with clear and distinct impressions" (Frede 66). In Matz's words, the debate stems from the difficulty we have in

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[10] See also Levenson on a similar contradiction in Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,"* where Conrad matches a "rousing rhetorical call for the sensory apprehension of life's surfaces" with a demand for psychological "inwardness and depth" (1).

attaining knowledge through sensual impressions of the exterior world which are both "*striking* and *passing*" (19). Matz continues:

> to the Stoic, impressions constituted knowledge, because they had a seizing (cataleptic) force that guaranteed validity; to the Skeptic, impressions did not seize so much as print and pass, and therefore could not wait for confirmation. The disagreement in this instance followed upon disagreement between aspects of the "impress"—between the push and remove which together make up the act of impression. 19

Taking this origin of the impression into account, Matz places the impression at the centre of a number of dichotomies, the main one being that of the sensuous and the rational. The impression is a sensation first of all, but it is also the basis, however questionable, for thought and knowledge. It is also the meeting point, so to speak, of the physical object world and the rational, subjective world of the mind. Further, the impression marks the meeting of the particular and the general, since impressions are always particular, but many similar impressions repeated form general classes. Matz claims the impression plays a "crucial *mediatory* role" in "undoing" these oppositions. It undoes these oppositions in being composed of both of them, neither one exclusively. Kronegger touches on something similar when because of their common "conviction that we cannot know reality independently of consciousness, and that we cannot know consciousness independently of reality" she unites impressionism with slightly later developments in phenomenology (14).

Just as it is important to dissociate literary impressionism from the pictorialism of its painterly counterpart, it is also necessary to retain the basic sense of the impression, not as the "mere" impression of feelings and fancy (though this kind of impression is at the heart of the debate about the impression's validity as a source of knowledge), but as the

striking and passing, the push and remove of something on a receptive, registering surface. Striking and passing, push and remove—these aspects of the impression, and the way they describe how perception, uniting consciousness and reality, subject and object, leads mysteriously to knowledge, reveal the incredible scope of the impression as a metaphor. Not surprisingly, Matz is reluctant to put impressionism as a style into a "single interpretive scheme" (17), but prefers to treat it as writing concerned with the impressions as a "mercurial *metaphor for perception*, one that inspires and endangers aesthetic effort" (18). Impressionism, in Matz's view, is an attentiveness to the questionability of the impression itself, in various guises:

> Does Impressionist experience flow or flicker, or does it strike sharply? Is the Impressionist's world one in which truth is available to perception, or one in which its depths are dark? Is Impressionist experience a matter of receptivity or discretion? Impressionists perpetually give different tentative answers to these questions and then dramatize the controversy that results. 7

Formulated thus, the questions which guide an impressionist aesthetic align the impressionist writer with Pater's critic, who, as Pater claims in *The Renaissance*, must aim "To see the object as in itself it really is." "And in aesthetic criticism," Pater adds, "the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly." (xix).

To know one's own impression as it really is—this is an apt expression for the way in which impressionism bridges the subjective and the objective, for while each impression remains subjective, entirely one's own, the attentive impressionist is equally concerned with "the object as in itself it really is." Just as the impression mediates rational, generalizing subjectivity and sensuous, particular objectivity in the notion of experience, which is itself

an abstract name for perception, impressionism as a literary mode proceeds from the premise that the matter it treats will be equally subjective and objective. It proceeds, in other words, from the "conviction that we cannot know reality independently of consciousness, and that we cannot know consciousness independently of reality" (Kronegger 14).

Impressionism's ties are thus equally back in time, to the Romantic drama of the "mythology of the self" and forward, to the indeterminate mode of modernism, in which objects themselves are the only subjects (people and voices being put on an objectified plane). Provided we recognize an origin to Perloff's tradition of indeterminacy prior to Rimbaud, say, in nineteenth-century realism (both being concerned with a literal, as opposed to symbolic, understanding of the object-world), Stowell's claim that impressionists like Chekhov and James "broke from the transcendent subjectivity of romanticism and the omniscient objectivity of realism to forge the subjective objectivism of literary impressionism" (4) not only describes the way in which impressionism bridges the Romantic and indeterminate modes, but also tells us how the impressionist model helps describe the interaction between the subjective and the objective in Ashbery, such that Ashbery too may be called a subjective objectivist. The subjective here refers to the various structures of thought (argument, enquiry, questioning, crisis, meditation, etc.) which the poems enact, derived from the model of the greater Romantic lyric and the movement within it of the quest-romance, while the objective points to the objects and images which act as variables in those structures of thought. While this may be in fact be said of any number of poets writing after modernism, what makes Ashbery usefully read as impressionist is, as I have shown, the lengths to which he goes to extend and thematize the investigation of how the subjective and objective interact in this schema. By constantly

calling into question the meaningfulness of the objects and images that populate the poetry, and making this investigation itself thematic, Ashbery aligns himself with the attentiveness to the questionability of the impression Matz defines as impressionism. In this chapter I will look at some of Ashbery's later work, showing how its procedures and concerns work within an impressionist model.

To read a poet in or out of broad poetic movements and eras like Romanticism, modernism, and especially, given its conceptual vagueness, impressionism, is a difficult and dangerous task, requiring a level of generality at which differences and exceptions must be downplayed or overlooked entirely. My aim in reading impressionism in Ashbery is to point to nothing so broad as what Bloom calls Wordsworth's "inward turning,"[11] but rather to more local devices and concerns which are typical or characteristic of an impressionist sensibility. I am concerned here with impressionism as a sensibility which stems from the questioning of the impression itself, then, and not as a literary movement with a schematic set of rules or beliefs, and to this extent I follow Matz. That said, most critics would have no problem including Flaubert, Proust, Pater, James, Conrad, Ford, and later, Woolf, in a non-exhaustive canon of impressionists. For the sake of brevity, I will deal here with only a small handful of examples of impressionist work, though it is my hope that these examples will define a sensibility.

The most basic tenet of impressionism is that the perceiver affects and alters what is perceived. Thus to represent an object one must take account of how, from what perspective, it is perceived: "The form of the world is inseperable from the emotional, attitudinal, and sensory patterns superimposed on that world by a perceiver" (Stowell 9). At

[11] Though one could, following Stowell, see impressionism as "the incipient moment of modernism"—"It rendered a furiously changing world precariously perched for the flight of modernism into the twentieth century" (8-9), and argue that it and Romanticism are of more or less equal stature.

the same time, neither can the perceiving subject be represented on its own, since as a subject it is made up of the impressions it receives from objects perceived. Again, "we cannot know reality independently of consciousness," and "we cannot know consciousness independently of reality." There follow from this many implications for the artist working with this principle in mind.

Though I would ultimately refer the reader to Kronegger's study on impressionist stylistic devices, I have made a short sketch of these here as they pertain to Ashbery, after which I turn to more concrete examples. Kronegger argues that impressionist work aims primarily to "render... the interplay of the individual's consciousness and the surrounding world" (13). This entails both a greater fidelity to the actual processes of an individual's thought and more attention to the way in which objects perceived by that individual affect those processes. Thus, in Flaubert, the "founder of literary impressionism" (15), character and plot take on secondary importance, while the way in which objects impress themselves on a receptive consciousness takes centre stage. Kronegger writes of how "quality of images of light, of steam, of heat, of sound, of movement, of fog, of mist, and of the river" are "evocatory and atmospheric," isolating "the observer and creat[ing] the impression of vagueness and distance. These images reflect states of emotion within the main character whose vision is impaired" (15-16). In other words, action and plot are replaced by succeeding moments of perception which are quickly created and destroyed (often those moments will involve the perception of something ephemeral—light, steam, heat, sound, movement, fog, mist), but these moments do not point to any transcendental truth beyond themselves (in fact, often it is their inability to do so that is dramatized, as in *Madame Bovary* and *The Ambassadors*).

The seemingly objective description of images and objects which nonetheless betrays the perspective of a character (as in *style indirect libre*) prevents those images and object from taking on any real symbolic function. Such symbolism is tied to the perceiving subject and is often (in Flaubert, as perhaps in Joyce) satirized as fetishes. The lack of transcendental truth beyond material impressions is an important component of impressionism; it is the major difference between impressionism and the Romantic/Symbolist tradition which does use the correspondence between interior and exterior realms to reveal timeless truth. While impressionism seems to work in the same way as the objective correlative, its distinct way of presenting the correlation of interior and exterior refuses any clear knowledge of what that correlation means. Objects and images may reflect mental states in impressionism, but they do so not because they are thus meaninfully designed, but because that is simply the way reality is experienced (and not always understood).

Impressionists also reject the "traditional emphasis upon order, thought, and clearness" (35) and focus instead on "blurring contours" as a way of noting "the transitoriness of all things" (46). The blurring of contours applies to objects perceived, but also to the order in which they are perceived. In impressionist work, since a memory may also be an impression, "the act of perceiving and the act of remembering are homologous" (41). For this reason the use of the diary or journal form is a popular impressionist device (20). In line with the logic of the diary, impressionist work is often formally fragmented into discrete but flexible spatialized moments of time which can be easily navigated. There is a good deal of agility in both spatial—"events are seen from different centers of consciousness" (15)—and temporal—memories and wishes or dreams within "different centers of consciousness" are also spatial impressions—perspective.

In this light we should understand Flaubert's desire "to present the protagonists and their world from many viewpoints and in successive instants as fragmentary and progressive portraits, created by the pointillist perception of their reader" (54), which is fulfilled partly by the use of language "no longer understood as thought and concept, but as sensation and sound image" (17). That is, language evokes a perceived object as the object is perceived by an individual consciousness, such that the reader, in experiencing the same evocation, may inhabit that consciousness and "create" its portrait.

From a potentially endless sketch of impressionist practices, I turn now to some of Ashbery's later work, and to two categories I have isolated from Kronegger's study: perspectivism (the appropriation of different points of view), and associational logic (the logic or form that governs the movement between points of view and moments of perception).

PERSPECTIVISM

The category is agility in perspective, or perspectivism. Because reality is always reality as experienced by someone, Flaubert, say, will, in a fictional world, make use of different characters as lenses through which the reader may experience the "world" represented. Or, "events are seen from different centers of consciousness" (Kronegger 15). The opening of Madame Bovary, for example, appropriates the perspective of a schoolboy who witnesses the young Charles Bovary first come to school, but this schoolboy, who actually narrates the opening scene in the first person, gradually fades away into an omniscient narrator. The rest of the novel is mainly an oscillation between Charles' and

Emma's perspectives. This is by now a characteristically modernist device, but Joyce too is an impressionist in this regard.

There are generally two devices which allow for such a perspectivism in impressionist works. Formally, impressionists achieve agility in perspective by giving their work the "form and structure of the diary" (Kronegger 20). In the diary, journal, or notebook, normal compositional rules no longer apply, and unexplained shifts in style and content are natural and expected. The diary form is also well suited to the Paterian axiom to know one's own impression as it really is, since it is usually nothing more than the recording of and rumination on personal impressions. The key to this device is how it allows slightly different forms to render unique perspectives on a given subject. Ashbery's formal experiments—the sestinas, pantoums, mixed prose and poetry pieces, and invented stanzas—work within this logic, that different forms will produce different experiences, and are valued in their own right for the unique perspectives they produce. As Vendler points out, later Ashbery relies more on the familiar letter and the familiar essay than on strict formal experiments, and in their laxness, which naturalizes radical shifts in tone and style, these are extensions of the impressionist diary form (U 185). The travelogue form of "The Instruction Manual" is an early example of this mode.

The diary form, an informal, roaming rumination, is close in structure to the greater Romantic lyric, the crucial difference being that it does not generally end. So there is usually not the "deepened understanding" of a subject of inquiry, but a potentially endless extension of the inquiry. Its loose structure facilitates what Perloff calls Ashbery's hallmark, the revelation and re-veiling of meaning, and allows the oscillation between moments of quest-romance and indeterminacy, as objects meditated upon momentarily reveal significance for the questing speaker. In Ashbery's 1970s work this oscillation is intensified,

and one notices a deepened contrast between directly presented everyday phenomena and the vague, expansive contexts in which those phenomena are supposed to carry currency:

> Only in the tooting of a horn
>
> Down there, for a moment, I thought
>
> The great formal affair was beginning...SP 1

Or, as in the final passage of "Houseboat Days," an adventure novel noticed, presumably in a display window, joins that quotidian moment of awareness with an image of the quintessential adventurous Romantic quest-hero Childe Harold:

> A sail out some afternoon, like the clear dark blue
>
> Eyes of Harold in Italy, beyond amazement, astonished,
>
> Apparently not tampered with. As the rain gathers and protects
>
> Its own darkness, the place in the slipcover is noticed
>
> For the first and last time, fading like the spine
>
> Of an adventure novel behind glass, behind the teacups. HD 40

As Shoptaw notes, the Harold image is an appropriation of perspective, what Shoptaw will point out in his discussion of "Wet Casements" as an instance of "focalization," as "Ashbery gazes here not at Italian skies or seas but through Byron's first-person eyes" (195). The passage also works by a rapid shift in perspective between that view and the second, of the book and teacups, the shift encompassing two models of "experience": the one worldly and expansive (Harold's, of the sea, and of the continent) and the other parochial and minute (of an antique shop, most likely, and of the precise arrangements of objects in its window). By closing on the more humble of the two, however, Ashbery betrays a scepticism at the ambitious perspective and its assumption of knowledge, a scepticism which has been at work throughout the poem, as earlier the speaker states:

The mind

Is so hospitable, taking in everything

Like boarders, and you don't see until

It's all over how little there was to learn

Once the stench of knowledge has dissipated, and the trouvailles

Of every one of the senses fallen back. HD 38

Shoptaw gives an extended and convincing reading of "Houseboat Days," identifying the roots of its scepticism in Pater, "two of whose sentences are collaged directly into the poem": ll 13-18; 31-6 (Shoptaw 194-9). Each appropriated sentence argues against "the possibility of knowing" (196), but, in my view, asserts nevertheless an impressionist ideal of suspended observation:

To praise this, blame that,

Leads one subtly away from the beginning, where

We must stay, in motion. To flash light

Into the house within, its many chambers,

Its memories and associations, upon its inscribed

And pictured walls, argues enough that life is various.

Life is beautiful. He who reads that

As in the window of some distant, speeding train

Knows what he wants, and what will befall. HD 39

The simile here foreshadows the half-simile in the closing passage ("As rain gathers..."), and similarly allows a rapid shift in perspective, and a focalization, this time of an impersonal "He" with whose near-impossible view of the message on a "distant, speeding train" we are implicitly aligned. The poem as a whole argues for the slow motion this image

reinforces for its perceiving subject: a slow motion filled with attentive observation that yields intricate moments of perception, though not necessarily an integral end, as the image of the one who will notice the slipcover suggests: "This profile at the window that moves, and moves on, / Knowing that it moves, and knows nothing else" (HD 39).

While it is difficult to give most of the images in "Houseboat Days" any symbolic value (everything can be taken literally—the connections between parts are not integral), the dominant metaphors, of stasis, observation, and variegatedness, stem from impressionist concerns with perception and its dubious relation to knowledge. The poem's bizarre achievement is to bring its near-sublime contrasts in perspective actually "beyond amazement," beyond here meaning back into the realm of the domestic, and the poem ends, Shoptaw nicely points out, as does "The Instruction Manual," when "dailiness resumes" (199). The visionary moment that would be the climax of a quest-romance narrative is toyed with, considered—and to that extent experienced—but ultimately rejected in favour of the local, everyday realm of literal objects, which realm now has much the same potential to amaze, since its literalness encourages more and more innovative ways of presenting it. The dominant note of the volume, as well as of *Self-Portrait*, is the hesitant testing of objects and their value for insight and fulfillment, as the speaker states in "As One Put Drunk into the Packet Boat": "I tried each thing, only some were immortal and free" (SP 1).

Flaubert also provides the paradigm for the appropriation of different perspectives in his use of *style indirect libre*. For Flaubert *style indirect libre* is the inclusion in the narrator's voice of language properly belonging to a character in the fiction. The language may be an actual expostulation, but more frequently simply reflects the character's consciousness. For example, near the beginning of chapter VII, shortly after Emma's mother has died and

Charles has started visiting her home, the narrator in Madame Bovary describes Emma's state of desperation:

> Peut-être aurait-elle souhaité faire à quelqu'un la confidence de toutes ces choses. Mais comment dire un insaisissable malaise, qui change d'aspect comme les nuées, qui tourbillonne comme le vent? Les mots lui manquaient donc, l'occasion, la hardiesse. 74

The melodrama in the narrator's language here is actually Emma's presence. Ineffable malaise, whose aspect changes like blobs or clouds, that twirls like the wind? Obviously this is Emma's language, and she is asking the question. She has, in other words, a say in how she is presented. We have already encountered this strategy of *style indirect libre* in Ashbery, in "Soonest Mended," where, with no more indication than a colon, the speaker launches into delicate dream/vision language, curiously close to Emma's, which is no longer authentically his: "a robin flies across / The upper corner of the window, you brush your hair away / And cannot quite see, or a wound will flash / Against the sweet faces of the others...." Ashbery's tendency, however, is to make such speech—undifferentiated from yet uncharacteristic of the speaker's normal language, almost presented with the caveat of being hypothetical—the entire fabric of the poem, to the extent that there is no remaining authentic speaker.

Style indirect libre is one way in which the unifying lyrical consciousness Bloom frequently finds in Ashbery may disintegrate into many different centres of consciousness. Bloom's reading of "Wet Casements" as a dialogue between Ashbery's self and soul, then, where "you" is Ashbery's soul or re-imagined character, in the process of becoming, and 'I' is Ashbery's writing self or reduced personality" (Canon 226), may be a little reductive. The opening passage,

> The conception is interesting: to see, as though reflected
> In streaming windowpanes, the look of others through
> Their own eyes. A digest of their correct impressions of
> Their self-analytical attitude overlaid by your
> Ghostly transparent face HD 28

Bloom reads as a drama of self-perception, of "I," looking out as if through wet casements, which should but do not open up to clear vision, or "information"—"a more reliable knowledge communicated by and from otherness"—of or about "you," who is a number of things: the "soul of Ashbery, lost erotic partner, the other or muse component in lyric poetry" (Canon 226). Bloom does not, however, give any account of what this passage actually describes, and the ambiguity of "look" in the phrase "the look of others through / Their own eyes" makes the situation anything but clear. My reading pictures someone sitting inside by a window, while outside it rains and people pass by. These others look at the window, but see themselves reflected by the water on the glass. They cannot see inside, though the person sitting inside can see out, and is looking, as it were, through people's reflections (through their own eyes) at them looking at themselves. The inside person's "Ghostly transparent face," meanwhile, is overlaid on both the outside person's face and its reflection on the wet glass, though he (the inside person) cannot "see" the other person's reflection.

While the language is perhaps too different to suggest a direct influence, the image in the opening passage of "Wet Casements" is in fact a rewriting of one Ford uses to describe the purpose of impressionism. In "On Impressionism," Ford attempts to explain the impressionist's "superimposed emotions:"

> I suppose that Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass—through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you. 41

Ford's gloss on this image, that "the whole of life is really like that; we are almost always in one place with our minds somewhere quite other" (41), describes the impressionist mode as a general displacement of the mind. But there are more specific similarities between Ashbery's and Ford's images: in both the viewer's awareness of looking is superimposed on what is seen. Crucial to note, however, is that in both cases this superimposition keeps the viewer's "presence" contained by the glass (though Ford does not mention the viewer seeing him or herself in the glass): the object perceived does not actually embody and reflect any of the subject's thoughts or feelings (as it might in a Romantic lyric situation), but is recognized, because of the presence of the glass which creates the illusion that the viewer is "part" of what is seen, as its own distinct thing. It is a figuration of transcendence which acknowledges its own non-existence: it is hypothetical yet real because experienced. The focus, instead, is on the mediation that occurs in the moment of perception.

Secondly, both images feature the conspicuous presence of another subject reflecting on the glass, the difference being that Ashbery's is outside, with the viewer looking directly "at" him or her, whereas Ford's is inside, with the viewer looking at a reflection of the other person. In either case, however, the conception is of a shared point of view.

Ashbery completes what is only hinted at by Ford. The passage in "Wet Casements" describes a loss of subjectivity and the inhabitation of other subjectivities, not a consolidation of solitude. It is a moment of focalization, taking its cue from the poem's

epigraph, the opening of Kafka's "Wedding Preparations in the Country," as Shoptaw keenly observes (199): "When Eduard Raban, coming along the passage, walked into the open doorway, he saw that it was raining. It was not raining much" (HD 28). Kafka, interestingly enough, offers an excellent analogue for a couple of Ashbery's impressionist characteristics. Not far into "Wedding Preparations" the narrator describes Raban watching the action in the street:

> People were going past with slightly bent heads, above which they carried their dark umbrellas in a loose grip. A dray also went by; on the driver's seat, which was stuffed with straw, sat a man whose legs were stretched out so negligently that one foot was almost touching the ground, while the other rested safely on straw and rags. It as though he were sitting in a field in fine weather. Yet he was holding the reins attentively so that the dray, on which iron bars were clanging against one another, made its way safely through the dense traffic. 54

One notices first of all the fact that nothing is presented that could not conceivably be a record of Raban's own perceptions and thoughts. A phrase like "legs stretched out so *negligently*" recalls the way Emma's language and sensibility intrudes on the narrator's in *Madame Bovary*. Yet, more than that, in its bizarre attention to random, insignificant though precise detail, the passage recalls "The Instruction Manual" as well as Ashbery's general propensity toward artful description for its own sake.

Artful description for its own sake would not appear to follow from *style indirect libre*, but if we remember that in the impressionist mode anything described at all implies, and to a certain extent constructs a viewer, we will see that the description and presentation of objects has its own function. In Ashbery, because there are no characters to construct by describing things, the only subject that could possibly authorize the various impressions

rendered in the poetry is a unifying lyrical consciousness. *Style indirect libre*, used in the service of accomodating multiple points of view, to the point where even bits of language with unlocatable sources (clichés, colloquial diction, overheard speech) enter what is now, since it can incorporate everything, a transcendental subjectivity. The difference, however, between Ashbery's transcendental subjectivity and that of Whitman, for example, is that Whitman does not allow the expansiveness to let go of the originating subjectivity, whereas Ashbery does. Ashbery's detachment from the originating subject tells us that his concerns with subjectivity and identity work outside the logic of the Romantic "inward turning." Earlier in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* there is a passage in "As One Put Drunk into a Packet Boat":

> A look of glass stops you
>
> And you walk on shaken: was I the perceived?
>
> Did they notice me, this time, as I am
>
> Or is it postponed again?

Here the drama of self-reflection is by no means particular to the speaker, implied writer, or Ashbery as poet, but is made general by the shift in pronoun from "A look of glass stops you" to "was I the perceived?" The shift is natural and would not be noteworthy did it not employ the same kind of focalization used in "Wet Casements," "Wedding Preparations," and in *style indirect libre* generally. Pronominal distinction does not matter anymore here: since anyone can experience this, it does not matter who does.

The modernist difference in Ashbery's case, what differentiates his use of *style indirect libre* from Flaubert's, is that the fragments of others' language, or the pronominal references to others' potential roles, are not immediately understandable once they enter the poem. Whereas Flaubert has two or three characters to look through, and the reader

knows this, Ashbery has an unlimited supply. We are back, then, at Ashbery's incorporation of the reader's letter in "The Tomb of Stuart Merrill," save that now we have a better understanding of the logic which governs the use of the letter, if not a clearer understanding of its purpose. While not a purpose, one effect the letter might have is that in coming across it, the reader may associate its strangeness (which, as it is in the poetry it addresses, it draws our attention to) with the difficulty of making sense of found objects in general.

For while most of the time found objects are not strange, but fit immediately into one or another category, those which are not readily apprehended, but require more observation and questioning, are the points of of departure for impressionist work. The attempt to clearly perceive and understand the meaning of something which, for whatever reason, is obscured, is a paradigmatic impressionist situation. One particular kind of this situation recurs throughout Ashbery's oeuvre, and has its origin in Joseph Conrad's highly impressionist *Heart of Darkness*. Shortly after Marlow arrives in Africa he is lying on the deck of his steamboat, and

> I heard voices approaching—and there was the nephew and the uncle strolling along the bank. I laid my head on my arm again and had nearly lost myself in a doze when somebody said—in my ear as it were...I became aware that the two were standing on the shore alongside the forepart of the steamboat just below my head. I did not move...I was sleepy...[they] made several bizarre remarks: 'Make rain and fine weather—one man—the Council—by the nose'—bits of absurd sentences that got the better of my drowsiness...33

The subject of the passage is equally the content of what the nephew and uncle are talking about, and the way in which Marlow hears them: dimly, vaguely, in a dream-like state. The

passage also tells of how unreliable sensory perception in what is essentially a lyric situation (a perceiver mediating something perceived) produces a fragmentary record or text: "Make rain and fine weather—one man—the Council—by the nose." It is also apt that the object of Marlow's attention is language itself. We have seen a similar moment occur in "The Instruction Manual" where the narrator again catches sight of the boy with the toothpick:

> Wait—there he is—on the other side of the bandstand,
> Secluded from his friends, in earnest talk with a young girl
> Or fourteen or fifteen. I try to hear what they are saying
> But it seems they are just mumbling something—shy words of love, probably.
>
> ST 15-16

The norms established earlier in "The Instruction Manual," and even here, make this passage stand out. A narrator who is in fact imagining the scene should not experience any sensory deprivation (he can locate the boy on the other side of the bandstand but cannot hear what they are saying?). Similarly, in an early Ashbery play "The Heroes," Theseus tells the following anecdote:

> Let me tell you about an experience I had while I was on my way here. My train had stopped in the station directly opposite another. Through the glass I was able to watch a couple in the next train, a man and a woman who were having some sort of conversation. For fifteen minutes I watched them. I had no idea what their relation was. I could form no idea of their conversation. They might have been speaking words of love, or planning a murder, or quarreling about their in-laws. Yet just from watching them talk, even though I could hear nothing, I feel I know those people better than anyone in the world. Plays 10

The difficulty of clearly perceiving and understanding phenomena like these is both perhaps the origin of indeterminate, impenetrable imagery in Ashbery, and a sign of his impressionist heritage. For just as for the impressionist "there is no idealistic mental nature: the sense-impressions we have are nature itself" (Kronegger 14), in a dramatization of the writer/storyteller/speaker's failed attempt to have "clear and distinct" impressions the lack of sensory clarity will produce a lack of conceptual clarity. (Thus Ford will write that "an Impressionist...will never render a long speech of one of his characters verbatim...[but] will only record his impression of a long speech" (41).) It is consistent, however, with the technique of *style indirect libre*, that unclear, undistinct impressions enter the poetry, since the subject who has these impressions is a no less important point of view for the writer and the reader. Realist representation of objective reality, when in the impressionist sensibility it must take into account the subject's point of view, remains realist even though it may not be able to represent anything clearly. Impressionism, then, substitutes clarity for accuracy, since a lack of clarity in perceiving reality may still be accurately represented.

ASSOCIATIONAL LOGIC

Impressions always seems to be superficial, purely surface phenomena. At the same time, the impression's ephemerality involves a trace, a commencement of a train of thought that aims to understand where the impression came from, what it means in the context of other, similar or dissimilar, impressions, and where it went once it had passed. This trace may represent a danger for the impressionist, that of the possibility of being unable to trace the impression. The thought process incited by the impression risks going nowhere.

In Ashbery's case, however, the trace allows him to go everywhere. The example of Proust is foundational in this regard. The first paragraph of *Du Côté de Chez Swann* offers a paradigmatic shift of perspective, scene, and character which will become a favourite device for Ashbery. The narrator begins by telling us about his habit of reading before bed and then waking up in the middle of the night, but then suddenly jumps to an imagined landscape where a traveller makes his weary way home:

> Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire: "Je m'endors." Et, une demi-heure après la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir encore dans les mains et souffler ma lumière; je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce don't parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François 1er et de Charles-Quint. Cette croyance survivait pendent quelques secondes à mon réveil; elle ne choquait pas ma raison mais pesait comme des écailles sur mes yeux et les empêchait de se rendre compte que le bougeoir n'était plus allumé. Puis elle commençait à me devinir inintelligible, comme après la métempsycose les pensées d'une existence antérieure; le sujet du livre se détachait de moi, j'étais libre de m'y appliquer ou non; aussi-tôt je recouvrais la vue et j'étais bien étonné de trouver autour de moi une obscurité, douce et reposante pour mes yeux, mais peut-être plus encore pour mon esprit, à qui elle apparaissait comme une chose sans cause, incompréhensible, comme une chose vraiment obscure. Je me demandais quelle heure il pouvait être; j'entendais le sifflement des trains qui, plus ou moins éloigné, comme le chant d'un oiseau dans une forêt, relevant les

> distances, me décrivait l'étendue de la compagne déserte où le voyageur se hâte vers la station prochaine; et le petit chemin qu'il suit va être gravé dans son souvenir par l'excitation qu'il doit à des lieux nouveaux, à des actes inaccoutumés, à la causerie récente et aux adieux sous la lampe étrangère qui le suivant encore dans le silence de la nuit, à la douceur prochaine du retour. 11-12

The paragraph ends far from where it begins, and, as in "The Instruction Manual," if we were to look for a meaning in the narrator's reverie, we might be tempted to say that it is about the power of the imagination. But in both cases the effect of the shift seems to be more important. The train whistle which begins the narrator's turn to the outside scene is an impression which forces a displacement of the mind, and the point of the passage is more the experience of the shift in perspective than the content of what each perspective offers.

For Ashbery as for Proust, the very ability to trace impressions through associations is a major preoccupation, both thematically and formally. "The Instruction Manual" is his foundational work in this regard, establishing the principle of the roaming encounter with surface details for its own sake as a *modus operandi.* Such an aesthetic inevitably focusses on the protean quality of reality and knowledge, the way moments of attention congeal, merge, and fall away. Ashbery's long poem "A Wave" (W 68-89) picks up on this, taking as its theme both the striking and passing of impressions and their way of dubiously suggesting stability:

> And it could be that it was Tuesday, with dark, restless clouds
> And puffs of white smoke against them, and below, the wet streets
> That seem so permanent, and all of a sudden the scene changes:
> It's another idea, a new conception... W 68

"A Wave," like "Soonest Mended," is largely about revision and the expansion of consciousness revision affords by opening up the object-world to more complex observations:

So my first impulse
Came, stayed awhile, and left, leaving behind
Nothing of itself, no whisper. The days now move
From left to right and back across this stage and no one
Notices anything unusual. Meanwhile I have turned back
Into that dream of rubble that was the city of our starting out. W 74

It takes only a minute revision, and see—the thing
Is there in all its interested variegatedness,
With prospects and walks curling away, never to be followed... W 78

A more recent poem, "My Philosophy of Life," (CYHB 73-5) recalls both "The Instruction Manual" and "Soonest Mended" in its use of the shell of an argument or quest as a container for a seemingly aleatory exploration of associations. The speaker begins in a typical quest situation:

Just when I thought there wasn't room enough
for another thought in my head, I had this great idea—
call it a philosophy of life, if you will. Briefly,
it involved living the way philosophers live,
according to a set of principles. OK, but which ones?

A pause, occasioned by the stanza break, reinforces the joke, but we quickly realize the large number of variables that are going to play a part in this search for an acceptible "set of principles" by which to live:

OK, but which ones?

That was the hardest part, I admit, but I had a
kind of dark foreknowledge of what it would be like.
Everything, from eating watermelon or going to the bathroom
or just standing on a subway platform, lost in thought
for a few minutes, or worrying about rain forests,
would be affected, or more precisely, inflected
by my new attitude.

Ashbery's correction of "affected" to "inflected" is deeply revealing. Inflection, the adding of affixes to words in order to change their syntactic function, while keeping the base words intact, is analoguous to the way in which Ashbery's invocations of quests and arguments syntactically change the the value of the objects and images that appear within them. In these lines, for instance, "eating watermelon" and "going to the bathroom" are inflected with the question of how they might relate to the search for the principles of the good life. They are not given symbolic value in the context of such a search, but the possibility of doing so is raised. The speaker continues, defining his new program:

I wouldn't be preachy,
or worry about children or old people, except
in the general way prescribed by our clockwork universe.

There follows an astonishing series of shifts and associations worth observing at length:

Instead I'd sort of let things be what they are
while injecting them with the serum of the new moral climate
I thought I'd stumbled into, as a stranger
accidentally presses against a panel and a bookcase slides back,
reveal a winding staircase with greenish light
somewhere down below, and he automatically steps inside
and the bookcase slides shut, as is customary on such occasions.
At once a fragrance overwhelms him—not saffron, not lavender,
but something in between. He thinks of cushions, like the one
his uncle's Boston bull-terrier used to lie on watching him
quizzically, pointed ear-tips folded over. And then the great rush
is on. Not a single idea emerges from it. It's enough
to disgust you with thought. But then you remember something William James
wrote in some book of his you never read—it was fine, it had the fineness,
the powder of life dusted over it, by chance, of course, yet still looking
for evidence of fingerprints. Someone had handled it
even before he formulated it, though the thought was his and his alone.

It's fine, in summer, to visit the seashore.
There are lots of little trips to be made.

The simile ("as a stranger…"), as Lehman points out, "all but obliterates the ostensible subject of the sentence, 'the new moral climate' that would ensue from having a 'philosophy of life'" (LAG 103). Lehman points correctly to the "prose styles of Henry James and Marcel Proust" who taught Ashbery "that the subordinate elements in a

sentence may steal the show" (LAG 102) for the origin of such a device, and the passage here illustrates how far Ashbery has taken it. For the simile that introduces the stranger, who appears complete with sensations and memories, is itself eclipsed by a change in pronoun, or what may be a return to the lyric speaker's situation: "It's enough / to disgust you with thought." And by the time the stanza ends, we are in another time, another place, which has no overt connection to what has gone before, and no recognizable speaker or character involved in the flat, abstract declaration: "It's fine, in summer, to visit the seashore."

Geoff Ward points to syntax in more recent Ashbery as the mechanism for such a style of eclipses, arguing that Ashbery, in his later years, is concerned more with syntax than with images. Ward aligns this concern with that of other writers who in old age also developed styles involving highly elaborate syntax, Henry James and Wordsworth, for example. The reason, Ward argues, is that "Perhaps as the brilliance of life fades, the urge to hold on to it, to map it, to seize it and fill all its space, the comfort that ongoing syntax provides against silence, is what is at work here" (PSP 176). More interesting, however, is that Ward sets Ashbery's style of deliberately deferred conclusions against Christopher Dewdney's notion of teleotropism in sentences. Dewdney writes:

> Language is always movement forward, streamlined into the anticipation of an ultimate meaning. Meaning is where we are going, it is our intention. Like a plant growing towards light, a sentence grows towards its final meaning, it is teleotropic. This ultimate meaning is the orientation of a sentence at any given point in time. It is a magnetic field in which syntax is the compass needle pointing to the true north of intention. 150

Ward uses Dewdney's notion of teleotropism to read Ashbery's elongated syntax as a defence against closure, against the death of the utterance. Aside from such a conjecture, however, Ward reads Ashbery's tendency to build large syntactical units on extended subordinate clauses in terms of its stylistic effects, quoting from *Flow Chart*:

> I think it was at that moment he
> knowingly and in my own interests took back from me
> the slow-flowing idea of flight, now
> too firmly channelled, its omnipresent reminders etched
> too deeply into my forehead, its crass grievances and greetings
> a class apart from the wonders every man feels,
> whether alone in bed, or with a lover, or beached
> with the shells on some atoll (and if solitude
> swallow us up betimes, it is only later that
> the idea of its permanence sifts into view, yea
> later and perhaps only occasionally, and only much later
> stands from dawn to dusk, just as the plaintive sound
> of the harp of the waves is always there as a backdrop
> to consternation and conversion, even when
> most forgotten) and cannot make sense of them, be he knows
> the familiar, unmistakable thing, and that gives him courage
> as day expires and evening marshals its hosts, in preparation
> for the long night to come. FC 4

Whether or not we wish to analyse the motive behind the continuation of this sentence as a fear of death (and we may), the effects of a sentence like this, and what implications we can

draw from those effects, are valuable in their own right. Ward glosses Ashbery's penchant for long sentences:

> Such fabulous elongation of syntax to form a labyrinth whose heart turns out to be all thread and no minotaur might seem to offer the questing reader little in the way of ultimate purpose. It is more the case that *Flow Chart* offers pleasures en route, to a centre that is not reached, because that is not what poetic syntax can do. PSP 179

Teleotropism makes the sentence itself a grammatical equivalent to the movement of quest-romance and the greater Romantic lyric—streamlined toward meaning. Ashbery's style of "pleasures en route, to a centre that is not reached," by contrast, is an impressionist deferral of that "deepened understanding" in favour of a total immersion in the matter leading up to it. Elongated syntax, then, is a mechanism for extending the flow of impressions and associations such that individual units, phrases, images, and objects, having lost their connection to the overarching movement of the sentence toward meaningful completion, also lose much of their purpose within that schema, and become objectified as fragmentary units in a flow, discrete moments of attention. Kronegger, who argues that in elaborate impressionist prose "the great number of commas has its equivalents in the impressionist's broken brushstrokes" (83), would see this as an impressionist characteristic. By deliberately severing individual units from the pull of the sentence, Ashbery also severs the poetry from the Romantic value system which treats individual moments of poetic attention as worthwhile only insofar as they further the main *telos* of the poem: the insistence on the autonomy and integrity of the imaginative subject. In Ashbery's impressionist sensibility, these moments are valued in their own right, though the "mythology of the self" which would otherwise authorize them is still required to invoke its own loss.

The impressionist flow of images and impressions works by an associational rather than a causative logic. Kronegger rightly points to Joyce's epiphanies—"plotless sketches, with flashes of mood and place which are created and destroyed almost simultaneously" (52)—as impressionist, and the last chapter of *Ulysses* too certainly qualifies as impressionist, a plotless, unpunctuated monologue of associations (in other words, with the *most* elongated syntax), flashes of mood and place dissolving into each other, stemming from Molly's memory of the proposal at Howth Head ("the sun shines for you he said..."). Ashbery's impressionist flow of associations, however, is not of the stream of consciousness sort, or at least not entirely. For usually in the flow there remains a residue of the narrative of enlightenment, which is causative (as, for example, "Tintern Abbey" is: while most of the movement in the poem is occasioned by association—unwilled memories and hopes—these are recuperated within the purposive structure of the poem's moral lesson). The structure of Ashbery's meditative lyrics retains the form of an argument, but uses an associational logic to defer resolution. The structure, then, is the continual rendering substantial, into precise images and fragments, of a pattern of thought which is defeated by its substantiation. The pattern is that of the greater Romantic lyric and the quest-romance it enacts, but modified and expanded by the impressionist desire to prolong the moment of attention into numerous moments of attention which succeed each other in a necessarily loose flow. Elongated syntax both gives way to and charts the flow. Indeterminacy enters when these discrete moments of attention are called upon, momentarily, both by Ashbery straighfowardly, as near the end of another later meditative lyric, "Yes, Dr. Grenzmer. How May I Be of Assistance to You? What! You Say the Patient Has Escaped?" he interrupts the story (only to be immediately sent off on another train of thought):

And all the girls turned away

to weep, but were changed to ivy

and stuff like that. Why am I telling you this?

To assuage my conscience, perhaps, hoping the bad dreams

will go away, or at least become more liberally mixed

with the good, for none are totally good

or bad, just like the people who keep walking into them,

and the scenery, familiar or obvious though it be CYHB 166

and by the reader as he or she tries to make sense of the poem, i.e., to determine a pattern. The reader "cannot make sense of them, but he knows / the familiar, unmistakable thing."

CONCLUSION

Ashbery's more recent work in the 1990s shows a greater concentration of the impressionist fusion of the subjective and objective: an exemplary line like "Uncertainty polishes the china / to a mirrorlike daze" (CYHB 71) is made of an odd mixture of agencies, freezing a moment of reflection as a mirroring of impressions. If there is any story of Ashbery's development, it is of the increasing precision of this fusion. But this may be saying too much. Ashbery is in any case more concerned in the 1990s volumes with metaphors of the impression as marking, etching, and engraving on mirroring or transparent surfaces, few of which are made out to be durable traces:

> In the time of friendly moose
> droppings I followed them to the Shedd Aquarium.
> No one was selling tickets that day.
> I wandered in and out of the fish tanks,
> stopping occasionally to leave a handprint
> on the plate glass for the benefit of some fish or other. CYHB 83

> for though we came
> to life as to a school, we must leave it without graduating
> even as an ominous wind puffs out the sails
> of proud feluccas who don't know where they're headed,
> only that a motion is etched there, shaking to be free. CYHB 63

The impression serves here as a locus for complex, multi-faceted images which involve a number of subtly suggested relations. The images are implicitly about communication

("handprint" "for the benefit of some fish *or other*") and more generally about desires and attitudes and the way they may relate to action in the object-world. This betrays a deep emotional concern for the subject.

As I have argued, Ashbery's project is to keep this concern for the subject a constant presence in the poetry. It often serves as the impetus for trains of thought and reflections which eventually replace the subject-centered meditation with an open-ended mediation of the subjective with objects and images. This mediation, broken down into discrete moments of poetic attention which are taken as ends in their own right, becomes the guiding principle of the poetry. In this way the Romantic "inward turning" Bloom finds in Ashbery, along with its values of wholeness and symbolic coherence, is constantly subverted by an outward turning to objects (which includes the subject and language itself *as* objects) whose more or less random incorporation into the poetry—without the deepened understanding attendant on their final integration into a symbolic whole—results in indeterminacy. Because the turn to these objects as impressions which necessarily involve a perceiving subject makes the poetry a flight through the intricacies of these impressions, we may say, along with Perloff, that Ashbery offers an "open field of narrative possibilities," but at the same time qualify this by adding that most of those narrative possibilities involve a lyrical subject, however indefinite or difficult to describe it is, or however many there are.

Niether exclusively a Romantic crisis of selfhood nor an objective presentation of objects for their own sake, Ashbery's work is the impressionist suspension in the varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling closely intervolved with outer scenes which allows for a modulation and often the simultaneity of the two. There is, of course, some Ashbery which does not fit so well in this schema, and my selection of

works has necessarily been limited. In particular, there is much more work to be done on what is considered Ashbery's most definitive piece, the long poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." But there may be something gained in skirting this poem in an Ashberyan way so that its achievements may be first approximated by a prolonged wandering through the surrounding provinces. The impressionism of Flaubert, Proust, Pater, James, Conrad, and Ford provides an excellent point of entry into this territory, as well as a number of useful ways to map it. Ford's impressionism, which is to be the record of the impression of a moment, is not far off from the aesthetic described by Ashbery critics who, like Moramarco, see one of Ashbery's main goals as being to "truly invoke a sense of what life is," save that in Ashbery's impressionist take on this goal the invocation cannot and should not end, as "A Wave" finishes its 21 pages of roaming rumination with the perplexing send-off: "We'll stay / In touch. So they have it, all the time. But all was strange" (W 89).

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