

AN OPEN POSSIBILITY: JOHN ASHBERY
AND THE POSTMODERN
PROSE POEM

By

ROBERT RING

Bachelor of Arts

Oklahoma State University

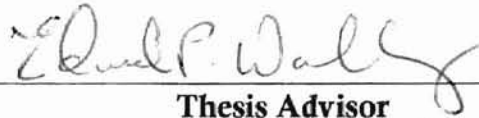
Stillwater, Oklahoma

1991

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 1998

**AN OPEN POSSIBILITY: JOHN ASHBERY
AND THE POSTMODERN
PROSE POEM**

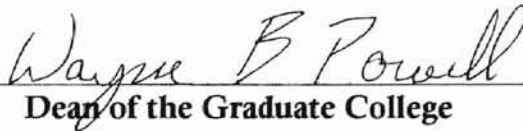
Thesis Approved:



Thesis Advisor






Dean of the Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Edward Walkiewicz, for his patience and guidance throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. My sincere appreciation also extends to my other committee members, Dr. Linda Leavell and Dr. Rollins for their assistance. I would particularly like to thank Dr. Leavell for introducing me to John Ashbery's work and creating a spark of interest for Modernist and Postmodern poetry.

I would also like to give special appreciation to my wife, Genifer, for her patience, understanding, encouragement, and love throughout my graduate work and the thesis process.

An Open Possibility: John Ashbery and the Postmodern Prose Poem

“people either blindly adore or hate my poetry.” Ashbery (qtd in J.Murphy 24)

In “The New Spirit,” the first poem in the triad Three Poems, John Ashbery writes, “But life holds us, and is unknowable”(11). This one statement exemplifies the subject and meaning of Ashbery’s poetry. Something in Ashbery’s poetry, like life, is also difficult to pin down, yet there is also that unnameable, always changing something that holds everything together. To be confronted by the double columns of “Litany,” the popular culture of “Daffy Duck goes to Hollywood,” or the poems listed alphabetically in his most recent book, Can You Hear, Bird, is to discover that Ashbery’s unsettling poetry denies paraphrase. The constant deferment and shifting of meaning is clearly illustrated in the meandering prose of Three Poems, where the poems “hold us,” but in the end remain “unknowable.” The long lines are captivating and resemble fragments of philosophical arguments, but one also has a strange feeling that something is going on and that that something remains undetermined. Three Poems, one of Ashbery’s favorite collections, especially confronts readers with an unresolvable ambiguity. By using the basic tenets of Abstract Expressionism and the deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida, I would like to establish a framework to examine the almost impenetrable “free play” of Ashbery’s prose poetry in Three Poems. Throughout the prose of Three Poems, Ashbery takes his experimental method to the extreme edge of comprehensibility, beyond anything that occurs in his previous experiments. To construct an explicit interpretation of these poems (if that is possible?) would be to miss the point. They

are abstractions in a similar way that a non-representational painting by Jackson Pollock is abstract, and to look for a clear meaning or reference is not the point in either case. Instead, the odd hybrid of poetry and prose suggests a multiplicity of meanings. It is not that Ashbery's poems are meaningless, but rather that those meanings are constantly shifting and slipping. It is because of this inherent difficulty and "indeterminacy" that the work of one of America's most decorated poets has only received minimal critical attention.

By using some of the basic tenets of Abstract Expressionism and the deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida, my aim is to examine some of the intricacies of Three Poems through a different lens. In an effort to not repeat himself and to separate himself from his modernist predecessors such as Eliot and Stevens, Ashbery turns to the visual arts and takes the spirit and themes of Abstract Expressionism and applies them to his extended prose poems, creating a poetic equivalent to what Pollock and de Kooning were doing on their canvases and creating a similar condition of "open possibility." Three Poems is a text that could be described as a set of shifting points around an unknown center, a text deconstructing itself. Ashbery not only questions the boundaries between poetry and prose and the traditional privileged position of poetry over prose, but he also questions the adequacy of language itself.

As the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror, John Ashbery has been described as America's most outstanding living poet. In addition to having produced fifteen volumes of poetry, Ashbery also shares strong ties with the visual arts. He worked as an art critic for the Paris Herald Tribune from

1958-66, was Executive Editor for Art News from 1966-72, and continues to contribute articles on art to New York and many other publications.¹ Yet to his admirers, as to his critics, Ashbery's postmodern antics present something of an enigma. For some, Ashbery's random "play" presents too many problems, and his poems are often criticized for being opaque. Because of the esoteric nature of Ashbery's poetry, the prose poems of Three Poems present a particular dilemma for critics. Nevertheless, critics such as Harold Bloom champion Ashbery, placing him in the American poetic tradition of Emerson, Whitman, and Stevens. Although Bloom praises Ashbery's work in general and describes "Fragment" as one of the best longer poems by an American poet of his generation, he also expresses his "outrage and disbelief" (106) at the "Tennis Court Oath," stating that the poem "will never yield to any reading or sustained re-reading." He explains, "Poems may be like pictures, or like music, or like what you will, but if they are paintings or musical works, they will not be poems" (107). Bloom has no tolerance for what he calls Ashbery's "calculated incoherence," an obvious word play on Auden's admiration of Ashbery's "calculated oddities" in Some Trees, to which Auden awarded the Yale Younger Poets Award. Like Bloom, Lynn Keller acknowledges the continuity between Ashbery and Wallace Stevens in Re-making it New. Keller points out that "Ashbery's early published works employ many of Stevens' tricks of language and syntax while they explore Stevens' attitudes toward the imagination and toward the nature and function of poetic creation" (15). More importantly, Keller, beginning with The Tennis Court Oath, examines Ashbery's divergence from the Moderns. Keller states, "Where the spirit of modernism is expressed with Pound's 'Make it New,' Ashbery's place in history leads him to 're-make it new'" (42). To accomplish

this goal of not repeating tradition, Keller points out that Ashbery turns to surrealist writers, avant-garde painters, and experimental musicians such as John Cage to create new avenues in his poetry. Despite Bloom's criticism of Ashbery's use of music and painting in his poems, most critics, like Keller, do acknowledge the significance of Ashbery infusing the aesthetics of many other art forms into his poetry. While the inherent difficulty of Ashbery's poetry presents problems for many readers, the poems are not completely inaccessible, yet the majority of critics focus on the progression of Ashbery's work and tend to emphasize the success of his later volume Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror. Curiously then, despite Ashbery's honors and awards, there has been little critical attention to his work. David Leham addresses the many difficulties when trying to find a method that would do justice to Ashbery's poetry and questions if it is possible to extract the "sense and flavor" of an Ashbery poem. In his introduction to Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery (1980), he states that "what criticism of Ashbery we have is likely to tell us much about the taste and ingenuity of the critic, but precious little about Ashbery" (16). Furthermore, John Shoptow's On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry (1994) is the first full-length study of Ashbery's work since David Shapiro's idiosyncratic introduction in 1979. Shoptow describes the distortions, evasions, omissions, obscurities, and discontinuities of Ashbery's poems as "homotextual" and claims that his poetry is not so much representative as "misrepresentative."

American prose poetry has also received limited critical attention. In one of the more lucid studies of prose poetry, Stephen Fredman coins the term "poet's prose" to escape the oxymoron "prose poem." Fredman emphasizes that Three Poems follows in the American tradition of Emersonian meditative prose, unlike the

oratorical tradition in which he places the prose poems of William Carlos Williams. In a similar genre study, Marguerite Murphy also dedicates a chapter to Ashbery, placing him in what she calls "a tradition of subversion." Beginning with the French symbolists and tracing the progression of the genre to Ashbery, Murphy relies on Mikhail Bakhtin's studies of the novel and stresses the "heteroglossia" found in the prose poem.

Understanding some of the basic aims of Abstract Expressionism and Ashbery's relationship with the visual arts, as well as his postmodern tendencies, may open new avenues into Ashbery's problematic poetry which appears to defy explication. In addition to having worked as an art critic, Ashbery often uses the paintings of artists such as Giorgio de Chirico, Ingres, and most notably Parmigianino's "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror" for his book titles and as a springboard for his poetic contemplation. Originally, he wanted to become a painter, yet through a strange twist of events found himself reading and writing poetry. As Ashbery notes, "I was more interested in painting and wanted to be a painter; in fact I did up until I was about eighteen. It overlapped with poetry and I found that I was able to say better what I wanted to say in poetry than in painting" (Bloom and Losada 111). Many critics allude to the affinities between Ashbery's work and painting, yet only a few explore the relationships in detail. Fred Moramarco examines Ashbery's and Frank O'Hara's relationship within the New York arts community and compares the "painterly" aspects of their work to that of the artists from whom they draw inspiration. Moramarco is "struck by Ashbery's unique ability to explore the verbal implications of painterly space" (436) and his ability to present in words what painters such as Parmigianino captured on the

canvas. Leslie Wolf, on the other hand, contends that using a "painting as a 'subject' is no guarantee that the poem is painterly" (224). Comparing the developments in the visual arts with changes in literature, Wolf describes Wallace Stevens as a "poetic 'cubist' out of whom has sprung Ashbery's de Kooning" (241). Although the term "painterly" may be the wrong choice to describe Ashbery's work, the extensive role of the visual arts in his poetry cannot be denied. More important than Ashbery's contemplation of and allusions to paintings is his own affinity to artists such as the Abstract Expressionists who embody a spirit of experimentation and the urge to carve out new territory in the arts.

When asked about action painters in a 1981 interview with A. Poulin Jr., Ashbery described Abstract Expressionism as art:

which makes itself up as it goes along, which is the subject of any one of my poems- - the poem creating itself. The process of writing poetry becomes the poem. This was radically demonstrated by action painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, who set out not knowing where they were going, in a sensible trance, as it were, and created works of art which are themselves the histories of their own coming into being . (251)

He goes on to state that, "there was no poetry like this when I began writing. Poetry seemed to be a formal, rational, sensitive way of saying something about some particular thing rather than being an open form" (252). It would be wrong to suggest that Ashbery simply flings words randomly onto the page or to make the same assumption about one of Pollock's paintings. Their spirit of experimentation and quest to be part of the avant-garde, however, cannot be denied. Aware of his

predecessors in poetry and the visual arts, Ashbery shows a strong desire to find new avenues to explore and poetic forms to contemplate. Instead of worrying about subject matter or the resulting work of art, Ashbery is concerned with the processes of art and how the work comes into being, as well as with pushing the boundaries of his art in ways analogous to the visual experiments of such Abstract Expressionists as Jackson Pollock. Although they use different media, both are confronted with a similar mimetic dilemma in trying to express nature instead of making a copy.

Ashbery once commented that “I suppose the urge to paint is still there, and it gets channeled into another medium, where it’s more active” (Gangel 11). A fixation with painting and the meditative mind is clearly evident in his earlier poems such as The Painter and The Instruction Manual, but it is in the prose poetry of Three Poems, a precursor to his highly praised Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror, that Ashbery explores and experiments with traditional poetic boundaries. Ashbery does not try to copy what the Abstract Expressionists were doing on the canvas or to use a particular painting as a starting point for his poetic contemplation in Three Poems, as he does in “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” which often reads like art criticism because of the direct references to art critics. Instead, Ashbery takes the “spirit” and themes of Abstract Expressionism and applies them to his extended postmodern prose poem, creating a poetic equivalent to what Pollock and de Kooning were doing on their canvases. The influence could be described as one of process and not of product. In Three Poems, Ashbery is able to channel his urge to paint in the extremely “active” medium of the prose poem, which liberates him from the “formal” and “rational” lines of poetry and allows for a “condition of open possibility,” to quote Harold Rosenberg on Action Painting. Ashbery consciously or

unconsciously echoes Rosenberg's statement in his prose when he writes, "One is not aware of it as an open field of narrative possibilities" (TP 41).

The experimentation and innovation that went on in painting was very meaningful to me, because it showed that it could be done in one branch of the arts and, therefore, why not in another." John Ashbery (qtd in Osti 91)

The group of artists who burst onto the visual arts scene in New York during the early 1940s and flourished in the 1950s also presents many problems for critics. Although the artists share the ambiguous title "Abstract Expressionist," they do not share one common style or aesthetic. Nevertheless, a general description of Abstract Expressionism's origins, experimental nature, and some of the innovative features of the artists can be provided to establish the framework for a discussion of the parallels between the movement and John Ashbery's Three Poems.

In 1944, Robert Coats, the critic usually credited with creating the label "Abstract Expressionism," wrote in the New Yorker about the form of art emerging out of the traditions of Abstraction and Surrealism. According to Coats, this emerging style, "which is neither Abstract nor Surrealist, though it has suggestions of both, while the way the paint is applied- -usually in a pretty free-swinging spattery fashion, with only vague hints at subject matter- -is suggestive of Expressionism" (78). The "vague hints at subject" are illustrated by de Kooning's work, where the title may suggest that the painting is a woman, yet the details of work become blurred by the erratic movement of the overlapping paint in the foreground. Pollock's later works, however, move into complete abstraction, and instead of using a suggestive title to hint at a subject, he began to number many of his paintings. One of the complexities of speaking about the Abstract Expressionists, as about Ashbery, is the difficulty in working with an art that denies having a

subject, resists meaning by causing deliberate confusion, or retreats into total abstraction. Much of the debate that surrounds Pollock is whether his drip-paintings should be interpreted at all. The focus of most criticism on Pollock shifts to his biography and the myths that surround his art and life. The question that surrounds Pollock's art is if his technique of pouring paint on a canvas was completely illogical and irrational or if the technique was a complicated, controlled system that required skill, practice, and experience to perfect². Just as some critics question whether Pollock's paintings are works of art or simply chaos, Ashbery's gesture of writing a prose poem suggests the same breakdown of order and confusion about the rules of poetry: "The System was breaking down" (TP 53). For instance, when Pollock was introduced to the American public in Life magazine in 1949, he gained notoriety, but his artistic achievement was brought into question: "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" At the time, a painter who flung and dripped paint on a canvas seemed somewhat absurd. In a lecture entitled "The Invisible Avant-Garde," Ashbery described Pollock as an artist "who was gambling everything on the fact that he was the greatest painter in America, for if he wasn't he was nothing, and the drips would turn out to be random splashes from the brush of a careless housepainter" (Shpotaw 45). However, Pollock's position in the art world did not rely on a public who tagged him "Jack the Dripper" but on the praise of critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg³. Ashbery's poetic status is also like that of a high stakes gambler whose success could be attributed to the critical recognition of critics such as Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom.

Acknowledging the inherent difficulty that the Abstract Expressionists were presenting, Harold Rosenberg called for a new type of criticism as he attempted to

explain the movement in his often cited article "The American Action Painters," which appeared in Art News in 1952. He explains that "at a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act- - rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (22). Therefore, the paintings of Abstract Expressionists are the unrepeatable result of the interaction between the painter and his medium, where the "act" of painting itself becomes the subject. Rosenberg notes that "The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter" (22). The painting, according to Rosenberg, becomes "action" without any preconceived or premeditated notions by the artist. This style of painting is a liberating gesture that attempts to break the distinction between art and life. The canvas becomes a "four sided" arena, a place where the artist is part of the art, or a "condition of open possibility" (48). Rosenberg claims that, "in this mood there is no point in an act if you already know what it contains." (22) Instead, "what counts is its special motive for extinguishing the object... what matters always is the revelation contained in the act." (23) Rosenberg expresses the difficulty in providing a theoretical framework to connect the works of such various artists as Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, Hans Hoffmann, William Basliotes, Jackson Pollock, and other painters who were striving towards diversity in their work. Rosenberg explains that "What they have in common is represented only by what they do separately" (22), much like the New York poets.

Instead of following a manifesto of what art should be, Abstract Expressionists share an "attitude" toward art. It is this spirit that carries over into Ashbery's work when he attempts to expand traditional poetic boundaries by infusing prose into his poetry.

Rosenberg's description of the canvas as a "four sided area" was best exemplified in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, when Pollock developed his unorthodox technique of pouring, swirling, and dripping paint onto a large canvas that was placed on the floor, which allowed the artist's movements, as well as gravity and chance, to direct the application of paint. This move away from the easel and traditional painting tools exemplifies Rosenberg's existential artist acting in an "arena." In the often cited article reproduced for Rosenberg and Robert Motherwell's avant-garde periodical Possibilities, Pollock explains his innovative pouring techniques in detail:

My painting does not come from the easel. I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or the floor. I need the resistance of a hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting. (79)

Pollock notes how he continues "to get further away from the usual painter's tools such as easel, palette, brushes, etc." Instead he prefers, "sticks, trowels, knives and dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass and other foreign matter added." "When I am in my painting," Pollock contends, "I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'getting acquainted' period that I see what I have been about." He also maintains that he has "no fear of making changes,

destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well" (79).

Similarly, Ashbery asserts that the act of writing is "to find out something that I don't know" and that when he writes he has "no idea" or "a very sketchy idea," of what the poem will be about. Ashbery makes statements very similar to Pollock's when describing his own creative process. For Ashbery, poetry also has a life of its own: "I have a few phrases or words in mind, or it's some simple idea; and in connecting these things the poetry happens." He goes on to say that "You have a few points that you connect up, and the poem seems very much to deal with getting from one place to another, from one moment to another. Life is very difficult, and it seems very often that we're in a situation that is impossible to deal with, but somehow it does go on, so it's very difficult and easy at the same time. It happens by itself and we're a part of its happening" (Sommer 313). Both artists seem to share the idea that the genesis of a work of art is in the process and in the "happening" or "action" rather than in some artificial and preconceived notion of what the art should represent. Pollock's removal of the painting from the easel, which allowed him to stand over and inside his work, was seen by him as very liberating. In doing away with the poetic line Ashbery finds a similar "freedom" in the prose poem.

For the Abstract Expressionist, art is to spring forth naturally. In addition, Stephen Polcari asserts that "Abstract Expressionism is greatly indebted to surrealism ... for more specific subjects and themes. The duality and unity of opposites, of consciousness and unconsciousness; the Heraclitean flux; the cycles of

birth, death, and renewal; the symbolic uses of the sea, the night, and the eye; and the emphasis on origins and evolution" (27). The surrealist's dreamlike biomorphic techniques and psychic automatism, or making "free association" visual, along with the concepts of change and transformation in inner and outer life, lead up to Pollock's famous declaration that "I am nature" (Polcari 27). Abstract Expressionists also draw from the ideas and concerns of modern thinkers such as Freud, Jung, Nietzsche, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce, among others. Many of the themes of Abstract Expressionism include concerns about transformation and rebirth, returning to origins, the continuum and cycles of motion, the human condition, and the idea of art revealing a quest for security, continuity, and harmony in a struggling world full of conflict and chaos (Polcari 34). During the 1950s, the Abstract Expressionists' various themes dominated the New York visual art scene and influenced other art forms. As Ashbery notes, "the experimentation and innovation that went on in painting was very meaningful to me, because it showed that it could be done in one branch of the arts and, therefore, why not in another" (Osti 91). Like the painters, many New York poets such as Frank O'Hara (who wrote a book on Jackson Pollock), James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch and, of course, the art critic, Ashbery, were characterized by what they were doing separately but also lumped together under the title "New York School" because of their associations with the painters⁴. Ashbery, although not as closely tied to the abstract painters as Frank O'Hara, often visited the Cedar Street Tavern and attended events where he came into contact with the New York painters, most notably de Kooning, Motherwell and Pollock. Ashbery notes that "the artist liked us and bought us drinks" and that the painters were:

free to be free in their painting in a way that most people felt was impossible for poetry. So I think we learned a lot from them...but the lessons were merely an abstract truth--something like Be yourself--rather than a practical one--in other words nobody ever thought he would scatter words over a page the way Pollock scattered his drips, but the reason for doing so might have been the same in both cases.

(qtd. in Shoptaw 45)

Interestingly enough, Ashbery would attempt the same gesture and try to completely fill his pages with prose in Three Poems. Despite Ashbery's views on being lumped into a group like the Actions Painters, he continues to be a New York poet because of this maverick, avant-garde spirit and because of the problematics that arise when one is confronted with his poems.

Ashbery's early affinity for the visual arts, the conflict of presence and absence, and breaking down the barriers between art and life in his work, is evident in a sestina entitled The Painter that he wrote almost thirty years before Three Poems and that recalls the Abstract Expressionist's passion for self expression. At the end of the poem, the painter's canvas is washed blank, and interestingly enough, the only color mentioned in a poem about painting is "white," or the absence of color: "Finally all indications of a subject/Began to fade, leaving the canvas/Perfectly white." Unlike the unrestricted prose poem, the sestina is a complex and restrained form that consists of six six-line stanzas and a three-line envoy. The lines do not rhyme, yet they follow a fixed pattern of end words. Ashbery chooses "buildings (1)," "portrait (2)," "prayer (3)," "subject (4)," "brush(5)," and "canvas (6)" as end words in "The Painter". This artificial, fixed

form provides a contrast to the completely open form of Ashbery's later prose poetry. Although the sestina has strict rules governing it, Ashbery, nevertheless, claims to find a freedom in the restriction and states that writing a sestina "is like riding downhill on a bicycle and having the pedals push your feet" (Bloom and Losada 124). In this early narrative poem, Ashbery tells the story of an artist's dilemma over the limitations of his art and the struggle to express some internal truth or "spirit" through painting, much like the maker in Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West" walking between the land and the sea. Ashbery places his painter in a similar marginal situation between "the sea and the buildings" (ST 55). At first, the painter expects the sea to rush upon him and cover his canvass, so that he can capture the essence of the sea in his art. However, these Romantic expectations never materialize. The sea represents constant movement, chaotic ebbs and flows, and the forces of nature that cannot be truly captured or framed in a work of art. The painter is convinced by the people in the buildings to choose a subject "Less angry and large," yet the painter wonders whether "nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?" which echoes Pollock's own sentiments when he states "I am nature." After painting a portrait of his wife, the painter "dipped his brush/In the sea," but, like Christ, is "crucified" by his subject. The dilemma over the limitations of his art arises for a painter who has chosen the ever-changing sea as a subject for his painting, like the ever-changing movements of consciousness that Ashbery tries to express in his prose. The subject proves to be "too wild," and in a final attempt to transcend all imposed boundaries, the painter, his canvas, and brush are thrown into the always-changing sea. Later, in Three Poems, Ashbery in similar fashion will attempt to break down his own artistic boundaries and like his painter plunge

into his attraction to the directionless and natural messiness of the world, but he is still confronted with the dilemma of how to express reality or to become “nature” like Pollock : “of continually doing something that you cannot name, of producing automatically as an apple tree produces apples this thing there is no name for” (TP 110).

“I wonder what people can mean by poetry not making sense. What exactly is meaning and sense in that context? Probably the lines of poetry that mean the most to us are ones that don’t make sense in the way we’re accustomed to think of sense.” John Ashbery (qtd in Murphy 20)

In addition to the elusive meanings of the Abstract Expressionists, the post-structuralist theories of Jacques Derrida provide a helpful backdrop when trying to understand Ashbery’s systems of meaning in his elaborate prose. For Ashbery, consciousness is in constant flux, constantly infused by incoming perceptions and cognitions from external manifestations; when he converts the “debris of living” or “the fabric of life” into writing many problematics arise, ones similar to those explored by deconstructionists. Where structuralism finds meaning and order, deconstruction finds disorder and a tendency for language to refute its apparent sense. Instead of providing a stable meaning, the text “deconstructs” itself and denies any final explication of meaning. The text is then open to a never-ending free play, a state of change, and transitional meanings that point to other meanings. It is not that deconstruction is the dismantling of a text, but rather that the text is dismantling itself. From the beginning Ashbery’s poems reveal the limitations of language: “It is so much the debris of living, and as such cannot be transmitted” (TP 7). According to deconstruction, every system of communication, therefore, has an element of undecidability or instability. Writing, as Christopher Norris points out, “is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it for ever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge” (29). Focusing on language as a network or relays and systems of differences, Derrida argues that

throughout the tradition of western metaphysics a number of false assumptions have been made about texts. To decenter this metaphysics of presence, he exposes the play of “differance” that occurs in language. In the past, philosophers such as Aristotle assumed a privileged position for speech over the written word as a supposedly clear means of communication, assuming that when words were spoken aloud, the language would be more capable of expressing the ideas within the mind without corrupting or changing anything in the process. Derrida’s deconstructive approach, however, presents a challenge to the “logocentric” bias or the idea that language contains a unified meaning in general. For Derrida, the text is open to a greater multiplicity of meanings than can ever truly be pinned to a transcendental signified. Derrida also points out the discrepancy that exists within the “play” between the signifier and the signified. According to traditional Western metaphysics, the sign requires an absent, transcendental signified. Derrida does not accept the “tight fit” relationship between words and the supposed contained meanings. The repressed or “absent” element can undermine the meaning the text is trying to establish. The words raise doubts, creating a state of indeterminacy. Thus the sign becomes arbitrary in its difference from other signifiers. To describe this opposition between “presence’ and “absence,” Derrida coined the term “differance” to express how meaning is at once “differential” and “deferred,” the product of an endless play of language that cannot be entirely grasped. For Derrida, meaning is only relative in language because of the constant process of deferral present in any systematic network of contrasts and differences which make up language. Meaning constantly shifts and is ultimately lost in a process that only “differs,” “defers,” and “deflects” the truth. In addition, Derrida reveals that the systematic play of traces of

differences within each element also contributes to signification. Because of the strange “being” of the sign, half of it always “not there” and the other half always “not that,” the structure of the sign is also determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent. Meaning is not present, as an essence, within any linguistic unit. Differance also includes the play of spacing by which the elements relate to each other. It is “the becoming-space” (Norris 32) of spoken or written discourse that generates the temporal play of difference, defers arrival at the meaning of the word or the thing itself, and then allows for different interpretations, or readings.

Many aspects of the deconstructive theories of Jacques Derrida elucidate the “possibilities” in Ashbery’s prose poetry. For instance, Derrida writes “no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation” (Norris 81). In other words, it is inherent in any word, signifier, or text that it can be repeated. However, what determines “meaning” is the context in which the signifier occurs. Since this context is boundless, the meanings are also limitless, so new meanings and new interpretations are the result when readers relate one text to others. For Derrida, meaning is always different and deferred. There is no fixed or final meaning. Ashbery’s playful poetry, like the decentering art of the Abstract Expressionists, almost intentionally goes astray and celebrates confusion. Ashbery sounds as if he is a deconstructionist when he asserts that he aims to “dissolve” a poetic form “in solution” in the way “one’s consciousness is surrounded by one’s thoughts” while “using very prosy elements, conversation or journalese...to extract what’s frequently poetic and moving in these forms of communication which are very often apparent to us and which haven’t been investigated very much in poetry”

(Craft 126). The dominant theme, if Ashbery's poetry in fact has themes, is that ambiguity arises when a poet, or any artist, tries to transpose the artistic vision into words, or any other medium, thus undermining logocentrism, or the idea that texts contain a self-evident, unchanging meaning. Prose poetry specifically defies classification according to the boundaries imposed in an effort to define prose and poetry as specific genres.

When Ashbery writes, "Should I put it all down," the statement reveals the deconstructive nature of language. To put it down in words would be to corrupt the truth in some way. Would it be better, he asks, or closer to the truth and reality of life to leave out words altogether because of the unreliability of language? Ashbery, from the start, is highly aware of the play between presence and absence. In an interview with Piotr Sommer, Ashbery notes that he "was actually deconstructing ...poetry in the sense of taking it apart, and the pieces were lying around with out any coherent connection at all" (302). The verbal, textual, and linguistic uncertainties of Ashbery's prose illustrate a never-ending free play of language in a state of dynamic change generating only provisional meanings. On a verbal level, Ashbery's prose contains many paradoxes and contradictions that reveal the unreliability and slipperiness of language. Instead of reflecting the world, Three Poems conveys a decentered world of its own. On the textual level, the many shifts reveal instabilities of attitude and the lack of a unified position. These shifts are predominantly the grammatical shifts of pronouns without antecedents, time shifts, and discontinuities between the blocks of texts, as well as fragments, ellipses, and omissions. On the linguistic level, the poems directly question the adequacy of language itself as a medium of communication, suggesting that, as Eliot writes in

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "It is impossible to say just what I mean!"(15).

“I don’t know what the content of my poems is or what their form is either. It seems to be a question which doesn’t exist for me. I begin writing without knowing what I’m thinking, and stop once I feel I’ve finished. The form seems to be the content and vice versa for me.” Ashbery (qtd. in Labrie 30)

Ashbery’s verbal play in Three Poems begins with the book’s title and the reader’s expectations about poetry in general. The reader sees the word “poetry,” but is then confronted with extensive prose passages and “poems” that continue for over fifty pages. Ashbery misleads readers in a similar way when he titled a long poem “Fragment.” The postmodern urge to break down boundaries and blur genres also contributes to the difficulty of his poetry because the place of “prose poetry” as a specific genre is open to debate. Just as American Abstract Expressionism evolved out of European surrealism and abstraction, prose poetry also evolved out of European forms. Prose poetry, traditionally an experimental form used by poets such as Baudelaire, Mallarme, and Rimbaud in nineteenth century France, seems to pride itself on creating confusion in the arts.⁵ Except for the occasional prose poems produced by Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and Gertrude Stein, the prose poem remained a marginal form until the contemporary American works of Ashbery. John Shoptaw points out that after the publication of Three Poems a number of experimentalist poets such as Robert Creeley, Ron Silliman, Rosamarie Waldrop, Michael Davidson, Lyn Hejinian, Paul Hoover, Bob Perelman and others began covering their pages with prose and that, “while Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror may have attracted more prizes and readers, Three Poems has exerted more influence on poets” (125). Ashbery, nevertheless, rejects the associations between his extended prose poem and the traditional French version of the genre. In an interview for the New York Quarterly, he contends that “there’s something very self-consciously poetic about French prose poetry which I

wanted to avoid... it's very difficult to avoid a posture, a certain rhetorical tone"(126). Even though Ashbery denies using the prose poem to subvert traditions, or working in the decadent spirit of the French, he does exploit the postmodern notion of a genre subverting itself. Postmodernism in general, as Linda Hutcheon asserts, "is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (3). Therefore, Ashbery's choice of calling Three Poems poetry yet writing in prose is a typical postmodern challenge to conventions. Prose poetry inherently is a genre that works against itself and is bent on the elimination of the boundaries between genres, if not the whole concept of genre. Ashbery also shows a self-consciousness towards the tradition of the genre in his struggle to make something new emerge.

Prose poetry typically creates a dilemma for readers and critics alike. What is to be understood when a poet's aim is to deconstruct poetry or in Ashbery's own terms, "dissolve" a poem and put it "in a solution throughout the whole page, so that there are some pages in that book where there are no paragraphs or breaks of any kind" (Poulin 254)? When asked about his gesture of choosing prose in Three Poems, Ashbery simply stated the obvious; "I was trying to write three long prose poems" (Osti 90). Since there are no rules, it is almost impossible to classify what exactly constitutes prose poetry. Some critics contend that the concept of "prose poetry" is a contradiction in terms. For S.H. Miller, prose poetry belongs to the genre of prose because "the prose poem does not 'sing' as traditional lyric always has. Whatever stress, alliteration, and internal rhyme may be found in a given prose poem are the result of prose techniques, rhythms, and devices" (24). On the other hand, Stephen Fredman argues that American prose poems are to be taken on different grounds than the traditional French prose poem. Despite the fact that many prose poets adhere to standard capitalization and punctuation as well as sentence and paragraph structures, Fredman does not dismiss the form as being

unpoetic. Instead, Fredman offers the term "poet's prose," which he claims "escapes the oxymoron and is proposed as a more encompassing term to cover all (not only lyric) poetry written in sentences rather than in verse" (49). Despite the lack of agreement on the genre, the undefined boundaries and contradictory nature of the prose poem appeal to many postmodern poets. Margueritte S. Murphy contends that there is a subversive element working in the tradition of the prose poem as a genre, "an aesthetic that valued shock and innovation over tradition and convention" (3). In keeping with that spirit, John Ashbery in a 1985 interview explains why he chose such a marginal form for Three Poems (1972): "I'm always trying to think of new things to do... But I wrote Three Poems originally because it occurred to me one day, what about prose poetry? It seems like a rather odd hybrid thing and it always sounds too poetic. What if someone were to write prose poetry that was deliberately unpoetic and which would celebrate the utilitarian prose we use when we talk to each other?" (PR 24). What could be more subversive than a poem that is "deliberately unpoetic?" In Three Poems: "The New Spirit," "The System," and "The Recital," which could be described as 118 pages of prose divided into three sections, John Ashbery attempts the impossible.⁶ Unlike those of his French predecessors, Ashbery's prose poems are expansive in a way similar to the grand scale of Pollock's mural-like canvases that create no center of attention for the viewer. And in the tradition of Stein's "Tender Buttons" and Williams's revolutionary improvisations in "Kora in Hell," Ashbery uses prose to present every artist's challenge by attempting to express subjects that are difficult, if not impossible, to articulate. Not bound by any fixed rules, the experimental prose poem allows Ashbery to explore uncharted territory, such as the intricacies of mental processes, which, like prose poetry or the overlapping designs of Pollock may appear directionless and messy, but are not necessarily meaningless.

Ashbery's prose poetry is also in a constant state of becoming, a process of constant transformation, continuous change, interfused, and intermingled like the perpetual activity of consciousness, what S.H. Miller terms an "elaborate psychic geometry" (25). Ashbery's prose adheres to Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as that which "puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself... that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (81). Furthermore, the Abstract Expressionists and Ashbery both fit neatly with Lyotard's description of the postmodern artist as one who is "in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work" (81). Rosenberg makes a similar statement when he calls for a new type of criticism in order to understand the aims of the Abstract Expressionists. Simply stated, Ashbery and Pollock are artists working without rules "in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done" (Lyotard 81). Action painting and prose poetry create similar conditions of randomness, unpredictability, and flux. The end result is an activity rather than a product. Ashbery's surrendering to language allows the prose poem to order itself like the continuous painting of an action painter. In the process, the poem spontaneously creates and molds itself, like the constant flux of consciousness. By maintaining a tension between poetry and prose, the poet attempts to break down imposed order, perhaps allowing the poem to express things as they really are, or else to become Ashbery's own postmodern portrait of the movements of the mind as we think, forget, discover, and try to order the processes of reality. Marguerite Murphy even suggests that the prose poem is a paradigm for a postmodern genre because its form cannot be known in advance (100). Pollock makes a similar gesture when he

actually separates himself from coming into contact with the canvas, allowing motion and gravity to randomly order the paint.

Although the pages of Three Poems appear confusing, the randomness of the text, like Pollock's webs of paint, create their own, new order. For Ashbery, not making sense as in traditional poetry constitutes reality. Ashbery does not try to order experience or impose a clear meaning. As Ashbery explains, "I wonder what people can mean by poetry not making sense. What exactly is meaning and sense in that context? Probably the lines of poetry that mean the most to us are ones that don't make sense in the way we're accustomed to think of sense" (J.Murphy 20). For Ashbery, one of the main features of prose poetry is that it is a genre that plays an elaborate game with meaning, one that defamiliarizes the familiar, and does not always make sense in the process. Similar to the painting of Jackson Pollock, the poems appear to be random words scattered over the page, but it is the spontaneity and uncontrolled whirl and "action" of the process that must be examined. The end product, the poem or the painting, is only a result of the process forming itself, much like the random inner workings of consciousness. Although limited by language and confronted with an infinite subject, Ashbery tries to present this movement and express things as they are in the mind's reality. Poetry, although it may be "deliberately unpoetic," and painting are attempts to impose some sort of structure on reality. Pollock and Ashbery, however, let the randomness of life take over their work. Instead of imposing arbitrary order, they claim to let the work form itself: Ashbery breaks free from the traditional poetic line and meter, and Pollock removes the boundaries and slings the paint over the canvas. What appears to be chaotic and formless allows a new "freedom" of expression. In an interview with Piotr Summer, Ashbery claims that Three Poems "was my attempt at mimesis of the way experience and knowledge come to me, and I think to everybody. I think we're constantly in the middle of a conversation where we never finish our thoughts, or

our sentences and that's the way we communicate" (305). What does Ashbery mean by such a grand gesture? Is it possible for an artist to order experience as it really is? The prose poem may come close, or at least open up new possibilities, despite its muddled meanings. Ashbery explores experience as it filters through the mind within the tensions of prose poetry, which rests between the artifice of poetry and the realism of prose, and at the same time reflects how the phenomena entering the mind and the world outside the mind impose themselves. Many of the difficult features of his work, such as the torturous syntax, slippery vocabulary, notorious pronouns, and half-realized images, present the way consciousness is continually being distracted by the ever-changing present of the world. For Ashbery the poem is more of a private reenactment of the inner workings of the mind, a freedom, a new means to show the mind and to rethink poetry. To quote Hutcheon, "postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe" (23). Ashbery allows fluid and incomprehensible movement to express what is really going on in the meditative mind as it perceives the world. Instead of prescribing what the poem's meaning should be, Ashbery, through the freedom of prose, allows the poem to unravel, much like reality.

Ashbery challenges the reader to follow his 118 page journey through the mind. Broken into over seventy-four fragments and covering fifty pages, the first prose text titled "The New Spirit" is said by Richard Howard to "record a spiritual awakening to earthly things" (48). The second poem, "The System," another lengthy poem, is said by Ashbery to be "a love story with cosmological overtones" (Howard 48). The book ends with "The Recital," the shortest of the poems, which reads like a summary to the "spiritual awakening" and "cosmic love" of the first

two poems. The long, twisting sentences often read like a monotonous daydream, or some sort of meandering philosophical dialogue.

“The New Spirit”⁷ opens with an undefined first-person speaker giving what sounds like an answer to a question asked by an unknown interviewer. In this section, Ashbery introduces the theme of “inclusion” and “exclusion” that resonates throughout Three Poems. The speaker grapples with the mimetic question of which would be a better way to represent reality: to include everything, or to leave out portions. Either choice creates limitations on art and poses a dilemma for the speaker since “truth” is lost. From the beginning, Ashbery’s prose poems initiate a long mediation on representation and meaning:

I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be
one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave
all out would be another, and truer, way.

clean-washed sea

The flowers were.

These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will,
something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the
truth, perhaps, but--yourself. It is you who made this,
therefore you are true. But the truth has passed on

to divide all. (3)

The speaker contemplates the idea of whether to “put it all down,” or “to leave it all out,” yet the reader is not informed what the antecedent of “it” is. In the next fragments, the speaker, providing a good example of incomplete thoughts, chooses to put some words down and to leave some words out. Ashbery allows the reader

many possibilities to construct the poem by filling in the gaps and reordering the syntax: (The flowers were washed clean by the sea?). "These are examples of leaving out" is a self-reflexive gesture which explains the deletions of the previous lines and also refers to the leaving out process and omissions of the mind, where something leaves and another something moves in instantly. The spacing of the poem and the line breaks disrupt the typical conventions of sequential reading, and the reader is left to fill in the gaps, continue the thought, or speculate what was left out. The "leaving out business" (RM 38) is a theme that Ashbery explored earlier in "The Skaters," where the "Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving/Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know involves presence" (RM 39). Throughout Three Poems, Ashbery skates between the dichotomies of presence/absence, present/past, reality/fantasy, and prose/poetry, just to name a few. According to Derrida's concept of "logocentrism" or the metaphysics of presence, we tend to think and express our thoughts in terms of opposites, such as presence/absence, speech/writing, and countless others, yet not only are these simple oppositions, but they are also hierarchies in which one term is privileged, such as the logocentric bias in favor of speech over writing. Like Derrida, Ashbery does not want to reverse these oppositions but rather erase the dividing line or boundary between oppositions and to do it in a way that calls the order of the boundaries into question. Ashbery never makes a choice. Instead, he explores the intertwined relationship of prose/poetry and presence/absence and provides challenges to the logocentric notion that one term holds a privileged position. The dichotomies both install prose/poetry and presence/absence yet subvert and undermine what is illuminated. Three Poems ironically promises to reveal something and then shows that that something is what cannot be seen or shown, except as an absence. Therefore, the result is an unusual text that is indeterminate or undecidable in meaning. Furthermore, by allowing the reader or

“yourself” to take part in the construction of meaning, these textual omissions, as well as inclusions, reveal Derrida’s concepts of the continual shifts and slippage of meaning within any structured system of communication, resulting in a proliferating play of meanings. These self-reflexive gestures continue throughout the three poems:

You know that emptiness that was the only way you could express a thing (12).

I could still put everything in and have it come out even.(13)

since it included everything... was the same as emptiness. (46)

Thus everything and everybody were included. (49)

These erasures are reminiscent of the whited-out canvasses of de Kooning and Rivers, as well as Ashbery’s “Painter.” Interestingly enough, one of the best insights into Ashbery’s “leaving out” can be found in the visual experiments of the Abstract Expressionists. In a discussion with Fred Moramarco, Ashbery admits that:

it's probably something that came from painting too. A lot of de Kooning's drawings are partly erased. Larry Rivers used to do drawings in which there are more erasures than there are lines.

Rauschenberg once asked de Kooning to give him a drawing so that he could erase it. I got to wondering; suppose he did erase it?

Wouldn't there be enough left so that it would be some thing? Or if not, how much could be erased and still have the “sense” of the original left? I always tend to think that none of the developments in

painting rubbed off on me very much, but then, when it comes down to it, I see that, as in this case, a lot of it did. (454)

Ashbery must “include” and “exclude” because leaving “it” all out with total erasure would make reading impossible. Ashbery’s theme of inclusion, like exclusion, continues throughout Three Poems and is often revealed by the cataloging of physical objects: “it would be as objects placed along the top of a wall: a battery jar, a rusted pulley, shapeless wooden boxes, an open can of axle grease, two lengths of pipe...”(TP 5) or else, in typical Ashberian style, the theme resurfaces after long, interrupted passages: “But meanwhile I am to include everything: the furniture of this room, everyday expressions, as well as my rarest thoughts and dreams, so that you may never become aware of the scattered nature of it, and meanwhile you are it all” (TP 14). Since Ashbery’s poems are concerned with the “experience of experience,” they often appear like random meditations. The mental experience is similar to that of a person who is listening to a lecture and his mind begins to wander in other directions but then returns from that private train of thought back to the lecture: “as you listen without taking in what is being said to you, or only in part, so that you cannot piece the argument together” (79). It is the process of how experience filters thought the mind, the inclusion of everything, the “rarest thought,” which “like a river...is never really there because of moving on someplace”(15).

The opening section also echoes Wallace Stevens’ “ Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” which also grapples with mimetic questions and the limitations of art and the imagination. Stevens’ “He” is faced with a similar dilemma of what to include or leave as “nothingness,” but unlike Ashbery, Stevens makes a choice:

The nothingness was a nakedness, a point

Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.

He had to choose. But it was not a choice

Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things

That in each other are included, the whole,

The complicate, the amassing harmony. (229)

For Stevens, there “was not a choice.” The artist must privilege one term and impose order on the chaos of reality, so “He chose to include,” but Ashbery, like Pollock on his canvas, excludes as much as he includes, throwing meaning into question.

Many passages of Three Poems echo the indecisiveness of the first page of the “New Spirit,” as the meditation unravels and ponders whether to exclude or include:

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

One of the aims of deconstruction is not to deconstruct a text, but rather to reveal how the text dismantles itself. Ashbery’s text cites its own conflict with meaning: “if you see what I mean.” Ashbery gives the reader many possibilities for interpretation. This passage appears to contradict itself: “be selective, but not

selective” or “choose your own or rather not choose them.” One of Ashbery’s playful tactics is to assert something and then deny it, or name things by unaming them: “The problem is that there is no new problem...Then this new problem is the same one, and this is the problem” (TP 107-10). He also draws attention to the writing itself with self-reflexive gestures: “This is the point of the narrowing down process.” Ashbery exemplifies the deconstructive notion of the impossibility of an unmediated original truth that relies on “presence” because whatever is present is not self-sufficient and shows traces of its repressed other. Ideal logocentrism is never really achieved because of the undermining of the privileged term from within: the privileged term such as “speech,” “presence,” or “nature” is already contaminated by “writing,” “absence,” or “culture.” The result is a proliferating play of meanings. Ashbery can only create a condition for the possibility of meaning.

For Ashbery, representing reality is a balancing act between leaving the page blank and the continuous urge to put things back together in a “book where every page, or almost every page, would be totally covered with words” (Sommer 302). Both cause problems for the reader who is seeking a particular meaning, or simply looking for a specific subject. Ashbery, like William Carlos Williams before him, shows a concern for the visual field of his poetry; stating that, “ I have to see the poem, the way it looks on the page, the way the letters are shaped, the way the lines are. That’s all very important: it triggers the mental, invisible image of the poem” (Poulin 248). Like Pollock’s all over compositions, Ashbery’s prose poem is a large-scale production that expresses itself through the constant opposition of presence and absence in the visual field. The all over composition, like the double columns of his long poem “Litany,” does not allow for spectators to focus on a center of attention, and by covering a page completely with words, Ashbery similarly decenters his prose poetry, which causes difficulty for the reader and results in a state of “indeterminacy.” The “presence” versus “absence” conflict throughout

Three Poems illustrates Derrida's concerns with the logocentric bias in which writing draws language away from its presumed authentic origins in speech. As Christopher Norris asserts, "To commit one's thoughts to writing is to yield them up to the public domain, to risk being misconstrued by all the promiscuous wiles of interpretation" (63).

Ashbery's shifting pronouns and absent antecedents also contribute to the confusion of the poems and underscore Derrida's claims about the nature of free play in language. It is almost impossible to identify the "I," "you," and "we" throughout the poems. "I" can be a persona speaking to "You" the reader, or an unknown other. The interchange between "I" and "you" could be the interior, meditative dialogue of a split self. "I" and "you" can also apply directly to the reader of the poem, or almost anyone or anything. The pronouns move in many directions and layer themselves like the lines in Pollock's painting. "This is our going now. I as I seem to you, you as you are to me" (12) becomes a confusing word play.

Explaining his use of free-floating pronouns, Ashbery states: "But it seems to me a condition of poetry almost. Every poet uses the 'I' frequently, but who is 'I'?...It's not specific individuals or people that I'm interested in but the relations among them, the going out towards someone having something projected at one. That's what I'm trying to illustrate" (21). Ashbery's pronouns show the randomness of relations in the thought process. This puzzling element of his work is best explained in the often cited Craft Interview:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we"; sometimes one has to deduce from the rest of the sentence what is being meant and my point is also that it doesn't really matter very much...I guess I don't have a very strong sense of

my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry. (123-24).

Through the use of shifting pronouns, Ashbery, unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Plath and Lowell, is able to use the first person “I,” yet does not write confessional poems. With a postmodern twist, Ashbery adheres to Eliot’s injunction and does not reveal the poet’s personality in his poems. “The New Spirit” begins with “I thought” (3), but soon shifts to “as we will”(3), then “It is you”(3), and later to an unidentified “They made a sign”(4). Ashbery continues to shift pronouns in an “endless game” where the speaker, if there is one speaker, sounds as if he is addressing the reader directly. Ashbery returns to the question of inclusion: “You know that emptiness that was the only way you could express a thing?” (12). However, it is never clear whether the “you” is the reader, or the speaker engaged in some sort of internal dialogue, or any of the infinite other possibilities. With a barrage of pronouns Ashbery writes:

I as I seem to you, you as you are to me, an endless game in which the abraded memories are replaced progressively by the new empty-headed forms of greeting. Even as I say this I seem to hear you and see you wishing me well, your eyes taking in some rapid lateral development

reading without comprehension

and always taken up on the reel of what is happening in the wings. Which becomes a medium through which we address one another, the independent life we were hoping to create. This is your eyes nothing the passing of

telephone poles and the tops of trees. A permanent medium in which we are lost, since becoming robs it of its potential. Nothing is to be learned, only avoided, nor can the truth of this be avoided, but it lingers on like microorganisms in the crevices. In you I fall apart, and outwardly am a single fragment, a puzzle to itself. But we must learn to live in others, no matter how abortive or unfriendly their cold, piecemeal renderings of us: they create us.

To you: (13)

Ashbery writes, “some lateral development” and then leaves a gap for the reader to fill in. Just as Pollock’s paint extends past the edge of his canvas, Ashbery suggests that we are “reading without comprehension” and are taken up with what is going on in the “wings,” or what is not included in the text, but in the surrounding world. “We are lost,” and “nothing is to be learned,” in the decentered world of this passage. As in the opening passage, the repressed “absence,” or what is left unsaid also undermines the meaning of the poem. The slippery pronouns only add to the confusion and “to sort them out would be almost impossible” (TP 13). The white spaces suggest silence, and at one point the text breaks and the address “To you:” stands alone. It also sounds like the poem is still speaking to the reader, or is in the form of a personal letter, admitting that all the play is a “puzzle to itself.” Bonnie Costello suggests that a bond is created between the reader and writer in Ashbery’s poetry through a desire for meaning. For Costello, Ashbery uses the pronoun “you” to connect the reader directly to the text in a way similar to Whitman’s gesture in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”(495). Nevertheless, throughout Three Poems all of the pronouns, including “you,” remain unidentified and ambiguous. The

interpretations of “You” remain limitless, whether it refers to a split self, a reader, a lover, or any indefinable “other.”

Not only does Ashbery straddle the boundaries between literary genres, but as Bloom points out, he also infuses the aesthetics of music and the visual arts into his poetry. To “include all” also creates a situation where no one single voice is sustained throughout the poem, and many difficulties arise in Three Poems because many voices creep into the text to create a polyphony or a confusion of multiple voices. Ashbery claims that he wants to “Democratize” poetry, and as he told John Murphy, he wanted to “celebrate the utilitarian prose we use when we talk to each other” (24). To write this “utilitarian prose,” Ashbery infuses changing voices and shifting diction into Three Poems to achieve what he terms an:

attempt at mimesis of the way experience and knowledge come to me, and I think to everybody. I think we’re constantly in the middle of a conversation where we never finish our thoughts, or our sentences and that’s the way we communicate, and it’s probably the best way for us, because it’s the one that we have arrived at. (Sommer 305)

To express the way experience filters through the mind and the sense of meaning constantly “slipping away,” Ashbery often turns to musical composition as an analogy for his poetry⁸. In “The System,” Ashbery contemplates the fluctuating meaning of words in musical terms, “these words occur again to you now, though in a different register, transported from a major into a minor key. Yet they are the same words as before. Their meaning is the same, only you have changed” (TP 93). As Ashbery has noted, polyphony and polytonality are “privileges which I envy composers for having” and “what I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of this argument remain unknown quantities”(Lehman 82). In this attempt to create a musical language in which pronouns shift and voices overlap and intrude,

Ashbery produces a blend of discourses that does not allow for a single voice or meaning to unify the poems. For Ashbery:

forms of music are deeper forms than forms of most poetry. They have evolved... Why exactly did the sonata form turn out the way it did? It's really the result of an instinctual feeling that that's what music should sound like-rather than a lucid elaboration on an idea such as one might find in a Milton sonnet. And it satisfies us. A sonata or symphony starts with a hypothesis, which is developed and tested by argument, and then brought round to a resolution, although nobody can say exactly how this is done. That's what I'd like to do in poetry.
(Osti 96)

Ashbery's comments on his own aspirations towards instilling a musical quality in poetry suggest that he is thinking along parallel lines with Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists, who frequently referred to the musical quality of abstract art. In the words of Pollock, abstract art "should be enjoyed as music is enjoyed--after a while you may like it or you may not" (Frank 111), and Mark Rothko believed himself "to be an artist who would raise painting to the level of music" (qtd. in Cernuschi 131). The critic Clement Greenberg claimed that one of the aims of modern painting was to "purify" itself from foreign references. Music proved ideal because of its inherently abstract quality, unlike literary and visual arts that had to illustrate observable phenomena. Greenberg wrote in "Towards a Newer Laocoon" that, "only when the avant-garde's interest in music led it to consider music as a method of art rather than as a kind of effect did the avant-garde find what it was looking for. It was then that it discovered that the advantage of music lay chiefly in the fact that it was an 'abstract art'" (31). Music was not only abstract, but also important in its ability to express a wide range of emotions while being abstract.

Nietzsche also praised music above the other forms of art because it could express essences rather than copies or appearances.

Ashbery's polyphonic or musical quality is revealed in the "inclusion" of a myriad conflicting voices and odd combinations of diction: "a wave of music which we were, unable to grasp it as it unfolded but living it" (TP 37). One of Ashbery's aims "was to allow all kinds of prose 'voices' to have their say in what I hoped would be poetry-so that at times it sounds like journalism or letter writing or philosophy, both Cracker-barrel and Platonic, and so on. I guess I was trying to 'democratize' language" (Labrie 31). These constant shifts in voice also create a decentering and instability for most readers. For example, many of the passages take on a formal diction and sound like lectures on metaphysics, or an abstruse philosophical textbook:

bouncing off the vortexes to be joined, the cyclical force succeeds in defining its negative outline. For the moment uncertainty is banished at the same time that growing is introduced almost surreptitiously, under the guise of an invitation to learn all about these multiple phenomena. (TP 31)

everything had been canceled out, before the great Common Denominator had probed beyond the shadow of a doubt that $ax^2=ay^2$. (TP 47)

Most people would not consider it in its details, because (a) they would argue that details, no matter how complete, can give no adequate idea of the whole, and (b) because the details can too easily become fetishes, i.e., become prized for themselves. (TP 67)

In “The System,” Ashbery’s philosophical meditation describes what appears to be distinct oppositions of “two kinds of happiness...the frontal and the latent.” Ashbery chooses the latent, yet realizes that it is only “a fleshed-, realized version of that ideal first” (TP 71-86). Stephen Fredman points out that statements like these make it almost impossible to quote from Ashbery’s work. He notes that, in a typical reversal, “‘ideal’ refers to ‘the frontal’ and while ‘realized’ refers to ‘the latent’” (118). Many difficulties arise from these types of statements because Ashbery will affirm one statement but then deny it later, or else deny something, only to affirm it later. For instance, in one passage reminiscent of Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” Ashbery writes, “You discovered that there was a fork in the road, so first you followed what seemed to be the less promising, or at any rate the more obvious, of the two branches.” Where Frost’s traveler expresses regret for not being able to take both paths, Ashbery’s unidentified “you” returns to investigate “the more tangled way... And in so doing you began to realize that the two branches were joined together again, farther ahead” (TP 90). Just when a choice has been made, Ashbery’s speaker returns to explore a road that “comes full circle” (TP 90) where no real choice is ever made. Or, to put it another way, Ashbery provides many choices, but like Derrida, does not necessarily place one in a privileged position. Instead he lets the oppositions combine as part of the process.

At many points, the technical essays turn into meditation, and the poems take something of a personal turn as the speaker ponders growing older and the meaning of life:

When one is in one’s late thirties, ordinary things--like a pebble or a glass of water--take on an expressive sheen. One wants to know more about them, and one is in turn lived by them. Young people might not envy this kind of situation, yet there is now interleaving the pages of suffering and indifference to suffering a prismatic space that cannot

be seen, merely felt as the result of an angularity that must have existed from earliest times and is only now succeeding in making its presence felt through the mists of helpless acceptance of everything else projected on our miserable, dank span of days. One is aware of it as an open field of narrative possibilities. (TP 41)

to be another day in our limited span of days, the reminder that time is moving on and we are getting older, not older enough to make any difference on this particular occasion, but older all the same. Even now the sun is dropping below the horizon; a few moments ago it was till light enough to read but now it is no more, the printed characters swarm over the page to create an impressionistic blur. Soon the page itself will be invisible. Yet one has no urge to get up and put on a light; it is enough to be sitting here, grateful for the reminder that yet another day has come and gone, and you have done nothing about it. (TP 66)

The meditations circle around, pondering the same thoughts and arriving at similar points. Ashbery chooses the indefinite pronoun “one,” which could refer to himself, the reader, or mankind in general. In both examples the flux of time continues to pass, as the immediate present continually becomes the past. As the days go by, “one” is almost helpless. Not only does Ashbery contrast “getting older” with its typical opposite, “younger people,” but both examples also express odd combinations of growing older and the progress of life as some sort of written narrative. Using phrases like “pages of suffering,” “narrative possibilities,” and the “printed characters swarm over the page,” Ashbery’s text supports Derrida’s campaign to undermine the logocentric bias about the immediacy of speech, which is an illusion. Many works of literature, including Three Poems, revert to images of

writing and seem to stage a version of the encounter between the concept of spoken immediacy with writing and difference. As Norris points out, “Derrida argues... that writing is in fact the precondition of language and must be conceived as prior to speech” (28). In other words, Ashbery ends up talking about writing, about how the speaker cannot write his way into an immediacy that eliminates writing.

At other points in the poems, the voice sounds like a Zen Buddhist, or a guide book on meditation: “To formulate oneself around this hollow empty sphere... To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out” (TP 5). It is also possible to see a reflection of America in the 1960s and 1970s, including student protests and the debacle in Vietnam. Ashbery’s “The System” could be a government, as well as a language system, since the article “the” does not specify any particular system. He begins one section with a short question from an unknown voice. It sounds somewhat like a news report, or a magazine article on the counterculture:

Who has seen the wind? Yet it was precisely this that these enterprising but deluded young people were asking themselves...those who chose to remain on the dung-heap, rending their hair and clothing and speaking of sackcloth and ashes: these by far the noisiest group, made the least impression as usual, yet the very fact that they existed pointed to what seemed to be a tragic flaw in the system’s structure; for among penance or perpetual feasting or the draconian requirements of a conscience eternally mobilized against itself, feeding on itself in order to re-create itself in a shape that the next instant would destroy, how was one to choose? ... a motley group but with many level heads among them, whose voices chanting the wise maxims of regular power gradually approached the point of

submerging the other cacophony of tinkling cymbals and wailing and individual voices raised in solemn but unreal debate. (61-62)

The “young people” are never identified, but words such as “mobilized” suggest military images, such as troop movements in Vietnam. The “motley group” who are “tinkling cymbals” could suggest the hippies or any of the diverse groups of American youth during the 60s. The reference to the “many level heads” could refer to activists such as Timothy Leary, Abbey Hoffman, Norman Mailer, or perhaps Robert Lowell.

Other sections also reflect the historical time period of the 1960s and 70s: “To every thing there is a season:” (18) could be a biblical allusion, or a reference to a popular song of the 1960’s by the Byrds. Ashbery also suggests the concept of “cosmic” unity often associated with the nostalgia of the 1960s and the “Age of Aquarius” : “All this happened in April as the sun was entering the house of Aries, the ram, that agent of Mars and fire and the first of the twelve signs of the Zodiac, bringing a spirit of reconciliation and amnesty amid the wars and horror that choked the earth” (43). Ashbery provides many choices but like Derrida, does not necessarily place one in a privileged position. Instead he lets the oppositions combine as part of the process.

Many of Ashbery’s allusions in Three Poems point to some type of breakdown in language or some aspects of the problematics of language, the most pronounced being “that horrible vision of the completed Tower of Babel” (50), an emblem of the breakdown of all language. The Tower symbolizes man’s vanity in attempting complete representation, his punishment being the confusion of “pure” words into a vast number of “corrupted” languages. Ashbery also alludes to many works of literature that reveal some of the problematics of signification because of their wordplay . For example, he refers to the language games of Lewis Carroll,

“One must move very fast to stay in the same place, as the Red Queen said,”(90); the problematical word guessing games of the fable “Rumpelstilskin,” who is “furious that you guessed his name” (36); Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland,” who “wore such a look as he drew near to the Dark Tower” (92); and Cervantes’ playful parody of romance, “better Don Quixote and his windmills than all the Sancho Panzas in the world” (68).

Interesting but odd combinations of words throughout Three Poems exemplify Derrida’s concept of “free play.” The nature of writing allows Ashbery to create various mixtures of abstractions with physical entities or with physical actions. These “Ashberian slips” mix up words in an attempt to name unnameable things. Many examples of these odd combinations occur throughout Three Poems: “the mind’s suburbs” (TP 28), “the caves of your soul” (TP 19), “We must drink the confusion” (TP 4), or “words broken open” (TP 96), “the fuzzy first thought” (TP 7), “a jagged kind of mood” (TP 54), “This is our going now” (TP 12), “Life became a pregnant silence” (TP 63), “jumbled scrap basket of your recent days” (TP 83), “the days get whittled down” (TP 22), “It could have happened differently in no other world” (TP 19), “warpless and woofless subtleties” (TP 29), or the “whole warp and woof of the design” (TP 77). Because of his use of these opaque phrases and odd combinations, his trying to name unnamable things, and his play with the meanings of words, Ashbery could easily be labeled a deconstructive writer. The “possibility” of meaning he creates strikes readers as being exemplary or frustrating, usually both.

Ashbery’s conception of time as flux and his use of time shifts throughout Three Poems further contribute to the textual confusion. For instance, the opening passage of “The New Spirit” presents ideas of reality that resemble those of the complex, not to say contradictory, thoughts of Frederick Nietzsche. Nietzsche, opposed to all forms of systematization, conceived of reality as having neither end nor purpose, as a directionless play of opposed forces, a flux of events-- the product

“One must move very fast to stay in the same place, as the Red Queen said,”(90); the problematical word guessing games of the fable “Rumpelstilskin,” who is “furious that you guessed his name” (36); Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland,” who “wore such a look as he drew near to the Dark Tower” (92); and Cervantes’ playful parody of romance, “better Don Quixote and his windmills than all the Sancho Panzas in the world” (68).

Interesting but odd combinations of words throughout Three Poems exemplify Derrida’s concept of “free play.” The nature of writing allows Ashbery to create various mixtures of abstractions with physical entities or with physical actions. These “Ashberian slips” mix up words in an attempt to name unnameable things. Many examples of these odd combinations occur throughout Three Poems: “the mind’s suburbs” (TP 28), “the caves of your soul” (TP 19), “We must drink the confusion” (TP 4), or “words broken open” (TP 96), “the fuzzy first thought” (TP 7), “a jagged kind of mood” (TP 54), “This is our going now” (TP 12), “Life became a pregnant silence” (TP 63), “jumbled scrap basket of your recent days” (TP 83), “the days get whittled down” (TP 22), “It could have happened differently in no other world” (TP 19), “warpless and woofless subtleties” (TP 29), or the “whole warp and woof of the design” (TP 77). Because of his use of these opaque phrases and odd combinations, his trying to name unnamable things, and his play with the meanings of words, Ashbery could easily be labeled a deconstructive writer. The “possibility” of meaning he creates strikes readers as being exemplary or frustrating, usually both.

Ashbery’s conception of time as flux and his use of time shifts throughout Three Poems further contribute to the textual confusion. For instance, the opening passage of “The New Spirit” presents ideas of reality that resemble those of the complex, not to say contradictory, thoughts of Frederick Nietzsche. Nietzsche, opposed to all forms of systematization, conceived of reality as having neither end nor purpose, as a directionless play of opposed forces, a flux of events-- the product

of what he termed "the will to power." According to Nietzsche, the world is in a constant state of change, of becoming; there can be no truths, but only perspectives: each individual, constituted by the multiplicity of forces, interprets reality from the standpoint of his or her own needs or interests. In a similar way, Pollock's poured paintings reflect flux, metamorphosis, and the present moment. Another driving force behind Ashbery's poetry of flux, as Majorie Perloff suggests, is Gertrude Stein. From Stein, Ashbery gathers the idea of a prolonged or continual present and applies it to his own meditative prose. In an early article on Stein entitled "The Impossible," Ashbery, in a perfect description of his own Three Poems, contends that Stanzas in Meditation "gives one the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a 'plot,' though it would be difficult to say precisely what is going on." He continues to say that it is not "events" that interest Stein, but their "way of happening." And using a statement reminiscent of Rosenberg's description of Action Painting, Ashbery describes Stanzas in Meditation as "a hymn to possibility" (251). Stephen Fredman feels that Stein embodies "a special kind of mimesis" (101) and adds that Ashbery also shares her "invariance of tone," and "monotony" (102). The perfect mimesis of the way things happen that both poets strive for, however, is perhaps unattainable in any form of art.

Much of the textual decentering in Three Poems is a result of the difficult and torturous syntax through which Ashbery attempts to express and not reflect the way the world is always intruding, interrupting and forcing itself upon the mind. As a result, the prose becomes opaque and difficult, if not impossible, to paraphrase. Many of the passages appear incoherent, with sentences continuing for over a page. For example, in the "The System," Ashbery is overtly obscure. Because of the "polyphony," or many voices that creep into the poems, there is no one narrative persona to guide the reader, which results in sentences that often run on with no direction, the language breaking down, or as Ashbery puts it, the poem "gets

dissolved in solution.” It is particularly difficult to take any passage out of Ashbery’s poems because following statements may change or subvert what was previously stated:

Yet so blind are we to the true nature of reality at any given moment that this chaos--bathed, it is true, in the iridescent hues of the rainbow and clothed in an endless confusion of fair and variegated forms which did their best to stifle any burgeoning notions of the formlessness of the whole, the muddle really as ugly as sin, which at every moment shone through the colored masses, bringing a telltale finger squarely down on the addition line, beneath which these self-important and self-convoluted shapes added disconcertingly up to zero--this chaos began to seem like the normal way of being, so that some time later even very sensitive and perceptive souls had been taken in: it was for them life's rolling river, with its calm eddies and shallows as well as its more swiftly moving parts and ahead of these the rapids, with an awful roar somewhere in the distance; and yet, or so it seemed to these more sensible than average folk, a certain amount of hardship has to be accepted if we want the river-journey to continue; life cannot be a series of totally pleasant events, and we must accept the bad if we also wish the good; indeed a certain amount of evil is necessary to set it in proper relief: how could we know the good without some experience of its opposite? (59)

The prophetic voice of this one sentence explores in many directions and meditates on many ideas. Long sentences add to the difficulty of Ashbery’s style. The mesmerizing prose continues on like the river it describes as it moves through the calm eddies and into the roar. The continual flux decenters the poem and sweeps past any reference point. In the passage "reality" is analogous to "chaos," "endless

confusion," and "variegated forms." Ashbery reveals the "formlessness" and continuum of the mind at work. Often, Ashbery begins a section with a short sentence, such as "The system was breaking down" (53). Then he varies the length and structure of the next sentence. While forcing pauses and speeding up the syntactic flow, he asks questions, follows trains of thought, goes into long speeches, plays with the language itself, and gives odd references. Each thought forms and builds upon itself, becoming like the confusing process of consciousness.

The sentences of Three Poems are filled with images of motion. Ashbery describes how he listened to classical music when he wrote Three Poems: "The thing about music is that it's always going on and reaching a conclusion and it helps me to be surrounded by this moving climate that it produces- - moving I mean in the sense of going on" (Bloom and Losada 114). His prose poetry reflects a similar sense of "going on" and reveals Ashbery's concepts of time and reality, that each moment is constantly coming into and going out of being. Similarly, for him the mind is also in a constant state of "becoming." Ashbery uses many concrete examples to illustrate time's "continual present." Some examples of flux include:

already moving into something else--cannot be postponed, therefore
there is no need to anticipate it, and it would be impossible to do this.
(TP 24)

A segment more of reality... And so it slips away, like the face on a
deflated balloon, shifted into wrinkles (TP 6).

that singular isolated moment that has now already slipped so far into
the past that it seems a mere spark. You cannot do without it and you
cannot have it (TP 84)

the razor's edge present which is really a no-time, continually straying over the border into the positive past and the negative future whose movements alone define it (TP 103).

Ashbery's continuum of consciousness and living resembles the philosophy of Heroclitus, which states that "you can never step into the same river twice." The river constantly changes as it moves, and a person's mind is constantly changing, "like a river which is never really there because of moving on someplace" (TP 15). Ashbery's sentences are like Pollock's network of lines poured, blotted, and sprinkled onto a canvas, where they overlap each other, divide into each other, and create their own rhythm. Ashbery's lines of prose poetry work on the same principle of intensity, improvisation, and perhaps a romantic spontaneity, while creating their own elaborate networks of thought. For Ashbery, even the simple outward things that appear inconsequential add to the "fabric of life." Ashbery seems to transcend the mundane world, yet he is always in the very depths of daily life. Every aspect of life adds to the continuum of movement, growth, and development of consciousness.

Despite Ashbery's denial of French influences, his convoluted sentences are not without precursors. Citing Raymond Roussel, a French writer whom Ashbery studied for an uncompleted dissertation and whose *Impressions of Africa* Ashbery translated, Stephen Freedman uses Ashbery's own comments on Roussel to explain the Chinese box effect, or the twisting avenues of Ashbery's own syntax, "Each canto starts off innocently to describe the scene in question, but the narrative is constantly interrupted by a parenthetical thought. New words suggest new parentheses; sometimes as many as five pairs of parentheses ((((())) isolate one idea buried in the surrounding verbiage... In order to finish the first sentence one must turn ahead to the last line of the canto, and by working backward and forward one can at last piece

the poem together" (Fredman, Poet's Prose 114). Ashbery came into contact with Roussel's work when Kenneth Koch supplied him with a copy of the long poem La Vue (1903) after a visit to France. (Shoptaw 8). Other works mentioned by Ashbery as inspiration for Three Poems include Ashbery's translations of the surrealist novel Hebdomeros (1929) by the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, Auden's colloquial speech in "The Sea and the Mirror (1944)," and Centuries of Mediation by Thomas Traherne, whose discourses on love were an important model for the "The System" (Sommer 303). The long sentences in Three Poems are similar in their hypnotic quality to the lengthy run-on sentences of de Chirico which Ashbery translated for Art and Literature in 1965:

The glory of the past, the vanity of human heroism, and those pyramids which the fear of oblivion incites the administrators of the common weal to command of indifferent hirelings who are the thinking of something else as they build, of the fiancee or the wife who awaits them back there, far from the smoke and din, in the peaceful home, close to the window open on the coolness of the garden where thousands of glow-worms streak the shadows with phosphorescent lines. (13)

Interestingly enough, this represents one of the shorter sentences of the novel. In a similar manner, Ashbery's prose expands, and meaning gets lost within all the drawn-out comparisons and details.

Auden's prose in "Caliban to the Audience" prefigures Ashbery's odd mixtures of discourses in Three Poems. Ashbery notes how he discovered Auden's poetry in high school and "what immediately struck me was this use of colloquial speech--I didn't think you could do that in poetry" (Stitt 38). Ashbery employs a conversational tone in Three Poems, complete with Auden-like mixtures of poeticisms and clichés that reveal Ashbery's own playfulness. For instance: "For we

judge not, lest we be judged" (TP 7), "we must accept the bad if we also wish the good" (59), "To have your cake and eat it too" (TP 84), "easy as pie" (TP 88), "once burned, twice shy" (TP 114), and "nothing new under the sun" (TP 11). These clichés illustrate Ashbery's desire to include as many levels of diction as possible, including formal and informal, as well as colloquial and slang: "All right" (TP 107).

In addition to the sources that Ashbery cites as inspiration for his lengthy prose poems, he does not escape the direct or indirect influence of T.S. Eliot. "Wasteland" allusions abound throughout Three Poems: "Yet it was almost enough to be growing up in that city/ The taste of it, rationed through a medicine dropper/ Filled up the day" (TP 33) echoes the spiritual dryness of Eliot's "Unreal City" (W 55). Fertility myths and the Fisher King are also evoked: "Surely this was, also, a time of doing, not harvesting, for nothing was ripe, nothing had been planted" (TP 6) and "the winter wears on and death follows death" (TP 8). Most notable, however, is Ashbery's use of Tarot card images reminiscent of Madame Sosostris. Although she does "not find The Hanged Man" in her "wicked pack of cards" (W 52), Ashbery includes The Hanged Man, who hangs upside down and "points his toe at the stars, at ease at last in comfortably assuming that age-old attitude of sacrifice; the gold coins slither out of his pockets and fall to the earth" (TP 42).

Three Poems presents itself as a comment on other texts. The direct allusions to other works "outside" of the text such as "The Wasteland" and the echoes of other texts exploit an intertextual exchange. Ashbery's intertextuality dissolves the boundaries that mark one text from another in a way similar to Pollock's gesture of allowing paint to leave the confines of the canvas, and move into uncharted territory. Since there are no distinct boundaries, meaning gets caught in a random process of uncertainty.

“It is simply that the Ashbery context is so wide open that it takes a great deal of reading before you can visit its boundaries” Douglass Crase

Finally, Three Poems exposes the linguistic problems inherent in any mode of communication. The poet's prose, like a Pollock painting, also allows the form of the poem to discover itself. The prose adds a certain spontaneity, randomness, and freedom to the poetry and opens avenues of unlimited possibility like the slinging of a bucket of paint over a canvas. Anything could happen when the paint takes its own shape, rather than being contrived or having order forced upon it. The mind in meditation, similar to the way the paint orders itself on the canvas, moves freely and randomly creates itself. However, Ashbery may be working within a system that is not capable of rendering what he is trying to do: “It is so much debris of living, and as such cannot be transmitted” (TP 7). Ashbery's disregard for traditional order allows him to explore something new, yet the last of the three sections, “The Recital,” meditates on the limitations of art to express reality:

Any reckoning of the sum total of the things we are is of course doomed to failure from the start, that is if it intends to present a true, wholly objective picture from which both artifice and artfulness are banished: no art can exist without at least traces of these, and there was never any question but that this rendering was to be made in strict conformity with the rules of art...Perhaps no art, however gifted and well-intentioned, can supply what we were demanding of it: not only the figured representation of our days but the justification for them, the reckoning and its application, so close to the reality being lived that it vanishes suddenly in a thunderclap, with a loud cry. (113)

The experiment questions the limitations of poetry and language to order experience and continuous mental processes. The passage admits the impossibility of the

project. All art conforms to rules. Despite Ashbery's attempts to experiment with the rules in order to present mental processes, it is an impossible task. Although he examines flux, movement, and change, Ashbery, like his painter, cannot capture the "becoming." As the passage states, the project is "doomed to failure" and "It becomes plain that we cannot interpret everything, we must be selective, and so the tale we are telling begins little by little to leave reality behind" (TP 109). Reality vanishes too suddenly, and even the prose poem can not capture it completely. Derrida would attribute this instability to the nature of the signifier. The constant deferral of meaning and the impossibility of communication are evident when Ashbery writes "what we said to the person who was both the bearer and fellow recipient of that message and what that person replied, words that were not words but sounds out of time, taken out of any eternal context in which their content would be recognizable" (TP 76).

Reading Ashbery's prose poetry is somewhat like sifting through the wreckage of a bomb blast to uncover hidden facts or meanings. The vague allusions and twisting fragments of arguments are almost impossible to piece together because of the missing clues and pieces: "In you I fall apart, and outwardly am a single fragment, a puzzle to itself" (13). Despite the difficulty, Ashbery, like any bomber, leaves signature characteristics in his poems, so the poems are not completely inaccessible.

The prose poems follow a long tradition of subversion, and Ashbery continues to undermine the systems of poetry that he uses. The poems evoke questions about what poetry is, or how we define poetry, and the possibilities of arriving at meaning much in the same way that Pollock's canvas stretched on the floor undermines the boundaries of the traditional easel painting. The Abstract Expressionist painter and critic Robert Motherwell once commented that the New York School of painting :

tries to find out what art is precisely through the process of making art. That is to say, one discovers, so to speak, rather than imposes a picture. What constitutes the discovery is that the discovery of one's own feeling, which none of us would dare to propose before that act of painting itself. From this you can see the reckless enterprise in which I am now engaged in speaking of our art rather than in making it. . .

The content of my art is just the world as felt. (79)

Any attempt to discuss Three Poems proves to be a similar "reckless enterprise." Always striving to be avant-garde and endeavoring not to repeat his previous works, Ashbery's prose in Three Poems may give the appearance of disorder. Perhaps Ashbery sums it up best when he simply states, "I was trying to write three long prose poems." This blurring of genre creates an odd mixture of realism, surrealism, symbolism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Culture, Romanticism, Modernism; or simply a postmodern blend. One connection that comes to the forefront is to the Action Painters. Just as Williams and Stevens took cues from painters, Ashbery turns to the visual arts in his own effort to keep things new.

Ashbery's large experiment with prose poetry can be seen as a transitional period in his career before his critically acclaimed Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror. Although Three Poems contains Ashbery's most extensive prose poems, many of his poems contain passages that are on the "borderline of prose," to use Eliot's phrase. Ashbery's shorter prose poems include: "The Young Son," in Some Trees (1956), and "A Dream," which appears as part of Charles Henri Ford's "A Little Anthology of Prose Poem," prose-like passages in "The Ascetic Sensualist" and "Idaho" in The Tennis Court Oath (1962); "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox" and "For John Clare" in The Double Dream of Spring (1970); "Valentine" and "Fantasia on 'The Nut-Brown Maid'" in Houseboat Days (1977). "Description of a Masque," "Haibun 1-6," "The Lonedale Operator," and "Whatever

"It Is, Wherever You Are" in A Wave (1982) as well as the 209 page poem Flow Chart (1992) also demonstrate Ashbery's continued interest in experimental forms. In an endeavor to make things new, Three Poems could be Ashbery's attempt at a supreme fiction, where he does not strive to reproduce, but to reveal "things exactly as they are." Ashbery attempts to close the gap between representation and meaning, but perhaps there is no one method of extracting meaning from Ashbery's poetry. The prose poetry covers the uncharted territories of the way reality presents itself to our consciousness. Perhaps the continuous present is impossible to articulate. Instead of ordering the experience, Ashbery attempts to present the experience itself. The poems deconstruct in an endless "displacement" of meaning, one that constantly frustrates the hope for unity because of the randomness of the poems in general. Ashbery's turns, self-reflexive pronoun shifts, fragments, blank spaces, and rambling prose distract the reader from any unified meaning. Despite his grand effort to be more true to concrete experience and to the subtleties and overlapping complexities of the mind, Ashbery encounters the limitation of his own art. He certainly does not give a guided tour of the experience.

Notes

¹ Many of Ashbery's articles dealing with the visual arts have been compiled in his Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987.

² For more inclusive accounts of Pollock's biography and particular paintings see Landau and Cernuschi.

³ One of the more humorous articles dealing with the meaning and value of Pollock and de Kooning's art comes from the January 23, 1992 edition of the St. Louis Dispatch, where a furious debate in the art world arose when a toilet seat that was painted by Pollock and de Kooning at a party was discovered. Is it a joke, memorabilia, artifact, or art?

⁴ John Shoptaw points out that "Ashbery's associations with abstract painters date from his first years in New York. Though he was never the fixture Frank O'Hara was, he frequented the Cedar Street Tavern for various symposia and events of The Club, organized by some of the leading painters of the New York school" (45).

⁵ For a more inclusive account of the French Prose Poem see such Marxist studies as Richard Terdiman's Discourse/ Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth Century France and Jonathan Monroe's A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre, which use Bakhtin's studies to explore the prose poem as a "dialogical" genre.

⁶ Bloom's dates: "The New Spirit," first of the Three Poems, was begun in November 1969, most of it was written January to April, 1970. "The System" was composed from January to March 1971, with the much shorter "The Recital" added as a coda in April (125).

⁷ As Shoptaw points out, "The New Spirit" comes from Andre Antoine's use of the term *l'esprit nouveau* to describe a group of surrealists. The 1913 Armory Show also used "The New Spirit" as its slogan (137).

⁸ Ashbery often alludes to the direct role of music and the literal use of music when he is composing poetry. He says when writing the prose for Three Poems "I got to listening to Brahms' first sextet and it seemed to be the only piece of music that would work for this particular poem . . . I have eclectic tastes in music as in most other things: Couperin is often very good. I played Elliott Carter's Concerto for Orchestra a lot while I was writing the 'The New Spirit'" (Bloom and Losada 114).

Works Cited

- Ashbery, John. "The Impossible" Rev. of "Stanzas in Meditation," by Gertrude Stein. Poetry 90 (1957): 250-54.
- . Some Trees. New York: Ecco P, 1978.
- . Rivers and Mountains. New York: Ecco P, 1962.
- . The Tennis Court Oath. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1962.
- . Three Poems. New York: Ecco P, 1972.
- Bloom, Harold. "John Ashbery: The Charity of Hard Moments." American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives. Ed. Robert Shaw. Cheadle Hulme, Chesire: Carcanet, 1973. 83-108.
- Bloom, Janet and Robert Losada. "Craft Interview with John Ashbery." The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly. Ed. William Packard. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974. 111-32.
- Cernuschi, Claude. Jackson Pollock: Meaning and Significance. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Coats, Robert. New Yorker Dec. 1944: 78.
- Costello, Bonnie. "John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader." Contemporary Literature 23 (1982): 493-514.
- de Chirco, Giorgio. "Hebdomeros." Trans. John Ashbery. Art and Literature 4 (1965): 13.
- Eliot, T.S. The Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot. New York: Harcourt, 1964.
- Frank, Elizabeth. Jackson Pollock. New York: Aberville P, 1983.

- Fredman, Stephen. "American Poet's Prose and the Crisis of Verse." American Poetry 1 (1983): 49-63.
- . Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Gangel, Sue. "John Ashbery" American Poetry Observed. Ed. Joe Bellamy. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1984.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Towards a Newer Laocoon." Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Ed. John O'Brian. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.
- Howard, Richard. Alone With America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950. New York: Antheneum, 1980.
- Hutcheon, Linda. A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Keller, Lynn. Re-making it new: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- Labrie, Ross. "John Ashbery: An Interview with Ross Labrie." American Poetry Review. 13.3 (1984): 34.
- Landau, Ellen. Jackson Pollock. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989.
- Lehman, David, ed. Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980.
- . "John Ashbery: The Pleasures of Poetry." New York Times Magazine. 16 Dec. 1984: 64-65, 82-92.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Trans. Regis Durand. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984. 71-82.

- Miller, S.H. "Psychic Geometry: John Ashbery's Prose Poems." American Poetry 3.1 (1985): 25-42.
- Monroe, Jonathan. A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1987.
- Moramarco, Fred. "John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara: The Painterly Poets." Journal of Modern Literature 5 (1976): 436-62.
- Motherwell, Robert. The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell. Ed. Stephanie Terenzio. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Murphy, John. "An Interview with John Ashbery." Poetry Review 75.2 (1985): 20-25.
- Murphy, Margueritte S. A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.
- Norris, Christopher. Deconstruction: Theory and Practice. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Osti, Louis A. "The Craft of John Ashbery" Confrontations 9 (1974): 84-96.
- Perloff, Marjorie. The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1981.
- Polcari, Stephen. Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Pollock, Jackson. "My Painting." Possibilities 1 (1947-48): 78-83.
- Poulin, A. Jr. "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery." Michigan Quarterly Review 20.3 (1981): 242-55.
- Rosenberg, Harold. "The American Action Painters" Art News 51 (1952): 22-23, 48-50.

- Seitz, William C. Abstract Expressionist Painting in America. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Shapiro, David. John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry. New York: Columbia UP, 1979.
- Shoptaw, John. On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.
- Sommer, Piotr. "An Interview in Warsaw." Code of Signals; Recent Writings in Poetics. Ed. Michael Palmer. Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic, 1983. 301-13.
- Stein, Gertrude. Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein. Ed. Carl Van Vechten. New York: Vintage, 1972.
- Stevens, Wallace. The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Vintage, 1972.
- Still, Peter. "The Art of Poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery." The Paris Review 90 (1983): 33.
- Terdiman, Richard. Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Wolf, Leslie. "The Brushstroke's Integrity: The Poetry of John Ashbery and the Art of Painting." Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery. Ed. David Lehman. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980. 224-54.

2

VITA

Robert Ring

Candidate for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

Thesis: AN OPEN POSSIBILITY: JOHN ASHBERRY AND THE POSTMODERN PROSE POEM

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on January 13, 1969, the son of Floyd and Joyce Ring.

Education: Graduated from John Marshall High School, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in May of 1987; received Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English and a minor in Philosophy from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May 1991. Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts degree with a major in English at Oklahoma State University in December of 1997.

Experience: Employed by Oklahoma State University as a Graduate Teaching Assistant from 1991 to 1994; employed by Heritage Hall School, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma as an English instructor from 1994 to present.