

INFORMATION TO USERS

This material was produced from a microfilm copy of the original document. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or patterns which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or "target" for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is "Missing Page(s)". If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting thru an image and duplicating adjacent pages to insure you complete continuity.
2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a large round black mark, it is an indication that the photographer suspected that the copy may have moved during exposure and thus cause a blurred image. You will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.
3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., was part of the material being photographed the photographer followed a definite method in "sectioning" the material. It is customary to begin photoing at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue photoing from left to right in equal sections with a small overlap. If necessary, sectioning is continued again — beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.
4. The majority of users indicate that the textual content is of greatest value, however, a somewhat higher quality reproduction could be made from "photographs" if essential to the understanding of the dissertation. Silver prints of "photographs" may be ordered at additional charge by writing the Order Department, giving the catalog number, title, author and specific pages you wish reproduced.
5. PLEASE NOTE: Some pages may have indistinct print. Filmed as received.

University Microfilms International

300 North Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
St. John's Road, Tyler's Green
High Wycombe, Bucks, England HP10 8HR

77-21,384

LYONS, Neva Gibson, 1948-
THE POETRY OF JOHN ASHBERRY.

The University of Oklahoma, Ph.D., 1977
Literature, modern

Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106

© 1977

NEVA GIBSON LYONS

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE POETRY OF JOHN ASHBERRY

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
NEVA GIBSON LYONS
Norman, Oklahoma
1977

THE POETRY OF JOHN ASHBERY

APPROVED BY

J. Madison Morgan
Ray K. Malt
Joan E. Roff
H. A. Elmer
Robert M. Davis

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Among the many friends who have supported me in this effort there are these few who deserve a special measure of recognition. Dr. J. Madison Morrison not only introduced me to the poetry of John Ashbery but has also given me invaluable guidance and encouragement during my graduate work at the University of Oklahoma and during the course of this study. My friend and neighbor, Ashley Mack, graciously shared the burden of typing the manuscript. I especially thank my husband Bill and my daughter Laura for accepting the demands of this project with exceptional patience and good spirits.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. "THE INDIFFERENCE OF A TRUE ESTHETE"	14
III. THE TURNING POINT	52
IV. THE ESTHETIC OF SPRING	103
V. THE EFFICACY OF THE REFLECTIVE ART	156
NOTES	191
BIBLIOGRAPHY	199

THE POETRY OF JOHN ASHBERY

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Even if three major literary awards and enthusiastic critical acclaim for Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1975) had not brought John Ashbery to the peak of prominence in recent American poetry, this intriguing poet would nevertheless demand and deserve closer scrutiny and a more informed appreciation. These latest affirmations of acceptance and excellence have ironically celebrated the very quality of his poetry which has often unfortunately stigmatized it: its "difficult pleasure."¹

Throughout the twenty-four years since Ashbery published his first volume,² his poetry has been increasingly recognized for its haunting and occasionally odd beauty, extraordinary sensitivity to the nuances of voice and language, remarkable degree of originality and inventiveness in style, and compulsion to talk to and about itself. Yet many readers and critics were disturbed by Ashbery's seeming desire not only to be ultimately inscrutable but, worse, to flaunt his closed poetic system. Some, understandably, felt either that the poet had little respect for his audience or that he had simply not yet mastered his craft. One faithful follower

of Ashbery's career accurately diagnosed the problem as he saw it in 1969:

Valéry remarks somewhere that we call beautiful a work which makes us aware, first, that it might not have existed (since its nonexistence would have meant no vital loss), and secondly, that it could not have been other than it is. In these middle poems of Ashbery's /The Tennis Court Oath/, I miss the tug between the first proposition and the second, for there is too much evidence in favor . . . of nonexistence, not enough credence given to inevitability.³

Midway through these first twenty years or so, the balance of necessity tips in favor of inevitability, and Ashbery's poems take on a vitality and a validity that finally make the cost exacted from the reader insignificant by comparison.

Ashbery's work carries within it the weight and authority and utter honesty of one searching indefatigably for the truth among "the multitude of big and little phenomena which combine to make that almost unknowable substance which is our experience."⁴ The intense desire to be faithful to "the experience of experience"⁵ generates, paradoxically, two diametrically opposed principles in Ashbery's poetry: the allusive and the nonreferential, representing respectively the claims of an external, a priori universe and the creation of a self-sufficient, independent universe. Herein are rooted the demands and rewards of the poetry and the very terms of its being.

The universal given in Ashbery's work is the fragmentary nature of existence. The poet's task, accordingly, is to achieve correspondence between self and world, dream and reality, conception and realization. In this respect, Ashbery is a thoroughly modern, post-Enlightenment man who mourns the loss of coherence and value which he has inherited from the Romantics and their descendents. Hence, the allusive mode offers a way of establishing coherence between the inner and outer realities via

the external referents found among works of art, music, and literature. As a consequence, Ashbery makes sizeable demands upon his readers' cultural knowledge, although Pound and Eliot had asked considerably more. At the other extreme, Ashbery seems to have rejected all external claims to the poem's attention; he either denies, in despair, the existence of such connectors or has taken allusiveness and inclusiveness to the limit. In his effort to be all-encompassing and wholly truthful, the poetry often becomes so general and abstract that all the particulars are unrooted and and subsumed by the whole and the reader is left suspended in an unfamiliar, placeless, timeless space. Here, reality cannot be defined by any external authority but is completely dependent on Ashbery's manipulation of the words themselves--a verbal universe, the word as world.

It is this very question of rootedness and rootlessness that whets the innate curiosity of readers and incites their retrospective impulses. Tracking down Ashbery's esthetic ancestry is an enticing but difficult enterprise and its necessity unquestionable. Ironically, what the genealogical search reveals is that embedded in the three sister arts (art, music, and literature) from which Ashbery has drawn most of his poetic material is a distinct nonreferential tradition in which the medium of each form contains the antipodes of its own universe.

In the minds of many readers, Ashbery's closest and most influential non-literary association has been with the world of art. Undeniably, the evidence to support this speculation is plentiful and accessible. Not only does Ashbery allude to specific artists, works, techniques, and historical movements in his poetry, but he has named three of his major volumes after the subject matter or the title of significant art works.

Moreover, it is commonly known that Ashbery was for years a professional art critic for several prestigious newspapers and art journals while he was concurrently writing poetry. Even his own interest in painting precedes his involvement with poetry:

As a child I was more interested in painting and wanted to be a painter; in fact I did until I was about 18. It overlapped with poetry and I found I was able to say better what I wanted to say in poetry than in painting which I subsequently lost interest in.⁶

Although Ashbery "gave up" painting, he appears to recreate in many of his poems, especially in The Tennis Court Oath, effects analogous to those of action painting, collage, and abstract expressionism. Much more significant for his poetry, however, is a larger visual orientation as it is reflected in and reflective of his pervasive theme of seeing and knowing, perceiving and understanding. Ashbery is particularly attracted to the imagery of landscape painting for both its visual appeal and its rich metaphorical possibilities. Indeed, the intimate association of art and nature is the very heart of Ashbery's imagination and the very source of the allusive-nonreferential paradox. Ashbery never uses nature for purely imagistic purposes: he does recognize and utilize its peculiar significance. But whether this significance or value is inherent or is imposed from without by the perceiver is a more difficult matter. Although external nature does not hold for Ashbery a reflection of a higher divine order, it does belong to the larger realm of physical and organic laws and, as such, provides the poet with the inspiration and the major metaphors for his poems. Clearly, Ashbery also subjectively appropriates the forms and rhythms of objective nature to create his own interior landscape. Even his most nonreferential and abstract poems are grounded in nature and are impelled by an organic energy; significantly, Ashbery is

fond of noting in his art commentaries how the best abstract painters take nature for their guide. This entire issue of nature in Ashbery's poetry eventually reduces to a question of realism--what Ashbery defines as the ultimate artistic reality, whether it can be discussed in the traditional subject-object terminology, and how it relates to his practice of poetry. His 1975 review of Jane Freilicher's landscapes, still-lives, and "city-scapes" offers marvelous insight into his attitude toward nature and the artist. While we should stop short of claiming that what he says about Freilicher's painting provides an absolute paradigm for his own poetry, let it suffice to suggest that Ashbery shows exceptional sensitivity to the way she unites the allusive and the nonreferential, perception and reflection, the particular and the whole. "She is a painter," says Ashbery, borrowing Kenneth Koch's words, "of 'what there is there.'"⁷ "There," however, is not the mere objective. What matters more to Freilicher than a landscape's "picturesque" qualities is its "exemplariness":

Somehow everything she touches is revealed as a prototype, a sample of what there is there, though she would be the first to disclaim any transcendental intent and is probably unaware of this quality in her work. . . . The viewer imagines that he is looking at an "objective" account of trees or a table top without realizing that they have been dismantled and put back together again almost seamlessly. . . . Her purpose in ruffling the surface, of injecting not her own note but that of things, in showing up each element's poignant desire to make its own point, to put itself across, to be accepted in its own terms, is to restore the primitive calm that the world presumably had before anyone had looked at it, to reinstate that higher naturalness which can only become visible with the help of a little artifice. She succeeds both in recreating the innocent look things presumably once had and reconciling it with the knowledge of them we have now.⁸

The painterly qualities of Ashbery's verse and their esthetic implications are undeniable and highly visible. But Ashbery has insisted

that he is much "more audio-directed" than visually oriented.⁹ Both his interview responses and his poetry bear out the supreme importance of music to his sensibilities and his imagination. And, once again, Ashbery finds in this cognate art form a model and justification for both the allusive and the nonreferential modes. To be sure, the names of composers, and the titles and features of their works appear in the poems, but not nearly so frequently as their counterparts in painting. Occasionally, Ashbery writes poems whose structures and compositional methods are analogous to certain musical forms. Furthermore, particular composers, compositions, and musical events have given Ashbery invaluable encouragement and inspiration. Ashbery credits the music of experimental composer John Cage and a 1952 performance of his Music of Changes with demonstrating the virtually limitless possibilities of sound and technique. While Ashbery did not set out to reproduce in poetry Cage's specific methods and effects, he did attempt in the 1950's "to be as singular" in his art as Cage was in his.¹⁰ Since that first encounter with Cage's music, Ashbery says that he has written poetry to the accompaniment of music because "I find that I suddenly get into, as they say, a certain composer's work which seems to me a very good background for what I'm thinking about while I'm writing a particular poem."¹¹ But the significance of music for Ashbery transcends period, style, and poem at hand. In the most fundamental way, poetry like music is sound in motion; it

is something that takes time and which actually creates time as it goes along, or at any rate organizes it in a way that we can see or hear and it's something that's growing which is another aspect of my poetry, I think; it's moving, growing, developing, I hope; that's what I want it to do anyway and these things take place in the framework of time.¹²

This idea literally informs Ashbery's poetry and especially illuminates

its nonreferential aspects. When Ashbery gives us difficult or inscrutable semantic content, what remains is that quality of music which he hopes to recreate in his poetry: its pure architectonics, its nonverbal "ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of this argument remain unknown quantities."¹³ Music so naturally adapts itself as a metaphor for the sound, shape, and movement of "our almost unknowable existence" and for our need to work "prolongations of and improvisations on time."¹⁴

Ashbery's debt to art and music should not lead us to underestimate his sound knowledge of continental and Anglo-American literature and his mastery of their conventions. Moreover, Ashbery is acutely aware that readers now show more determination than ever to seek out his literary genealogy. If the allusiveness of his poetry makes this search necessary, its simultaneous elusiveness adds a certain frantic energy to the effort. To one critic who has been especially persistent in developing a psychological theory of Ashbery's literary paternity, the poet replies in a recent poem, "Dangling Modifiers":

I shall put up my shingle and receiving
No earnest from the grey sky shall endeavor
To pin my credit card on the lapel of the looming foster-
father-figure
For whom no vow, no weather is satisfaction,
No brain a refuge from the iron lung.¹⁵

This somewhat humorous but deadly serious picture emphasizes the difficult necessity of the poet's struggle to establish and maintain his own literary credentials and at the same time acknowledge his inheritance.

Ashbery's association with modern, avant-garde French literature has sparked considerable interest and spawned some troublesome speculations on the delicate subject of influence. It is tempting to assume

that Ashbery's ten years in France, plus his ability to both speak and write the language and translate French authors, deeply affected his verse. Ashbery, however, denies any such measurable influence; even his experiment of writing poetry in French and then translating it into English yielded, in his judgment, no spectacular results. However, the ideas and creations of dada and surrealism, available to Ashbery through French literature as well as music and art, without a doubt dramatically altered his consciousness, esthetic premises, and the poetry itself. Ashbery has openly acknowledged his debt to surrealism, but has in the same breath emphasized that it represents only one component of his art. Regarding his kinship to individual French authors, dozens of names come to mind, most of whom Ashbery has mentioned in his art and literary criticism or has translated. W. H. Auden, for example, who selected Some Trees for the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize in 1956, says in his introduction to the book that Ashbery belongs to the tradition of Rimbaud,¹⁶ the French protosurrealist and advocate of dreams and free association. Others suggest the name of Raymond Roussel, the subject of articles and an abandoned dissertation by Ashbery. Again, Ashbery denies any significant influence. Were the list of French authors read and/or translated by Ashbery to continue, it would eventually reach a most unlikely entry, the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico. Chirico deserves a place because his novel Hebdomeros (1929), which he wrote in French, attracted Ashbery's rapt attention and admiration for its prose style, the texture of its composition, and its sole character, a strange philosophical wanderer.¹⁷ Unlikely as it may sound, Chirico's prose, perhaps more than his painting, was a strong factor in the development of Ashbery's long, loose po-

tic line and, in conjunction with the récit of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Ashbery's desire to write an extended prose-poem. This by no means exhausts the list of possible and plausible influences; in fact, it underscores the need for a separate study in order to assess properly the nature and the degree of the French impact on his poetry.

Though wholly warranted, this area of inquiry should not detract from the significance of Ashbery's place in the Anglo-American poetic tradition. Ashbery has often been categorized as a member of "the New York school" of poets, a catch-all designation he has dismissed as "not helpful."¹⁸ The term connotes such anti-establishment traits as tendencies toward the "arty," the avant-garde, and the a- if not anti-literary. Most critics have found it more illuminating to link Ashbery with well-recognized movements and figures. Frank O'Hara saw in Some Trees the presence of respected poets like Housman, Whitman, and of course Auden, the subject Ashbery's undergraduate honors thesis at Harvard. But his highest compliment to the poet of Some Trees was that he had "written the most beautiful first book to appear in America since Harmonium"¹⁹ by Stevens in 1923. In the 1976 Kostelanetz interview, Ashbery confirmed that Auden and Stevens were indeed among the major influences on this important early work:

W. H. Auden ("for making abstract things concrete"), Wallace Stevens ("my favorite poet"), Marianne Moore ("her inventions"), William Carlos Williams ("open form and mundane speech"), Elizabeth Bishop ("seamless language"). "I don't think of my poetry as coming from nowhere. It extends certain traditions."²⁰

As the poetry gained its own strong identity, the voices and the imaginations of Auden and Stevens in particular have remained viable and discernible, and those of Whitman and Emerson have also merited critical comment. However, one additional source of inspiration has been virtually over-

looked: that of Gertrude Stein, whose Stanzas in Meditation Ashbery reviewed enthusiastically for Poetry in 1957 and whose imprint is clear on his later poetry.

The most provocative and promising description of his sensibility and his poetic ancestry comes from Ashbery himself. His poetry is, he insists, "romantic . . . rather than metaphysical or surrealist."²¹ This statement takes us straight to the heart of the allusive-nonreferential continuum and the art-nature dilemma. One perceptive writer on Ashbery sees all the poetry through Three Poems (1972) as a romantic quest to solve the problem of existence and to attain a comprehensive vision of reality.²² The imagery of the journey or quest does indeed dominate the poetry; furthermore, Ashbery shows spiritual kinship to Wordsworth both in the meditative urge to ruminate upon memory and the past and in the motif of sudden revelation on the mountaintop; finally, Ashbery, like Keats, accepts and even celebrates the necessity of being-in-uncertainty. Even the structure of many of his poems closely resembles what M. H. Abrams has described as "the greater romantic lyric."²³

But the crux of the issue is, once again, the place of nature in Ashbery's poetic universe. His concept of poesis is wholly and fundamentally organic; even the principle of organicism, however, raises disturbing questions. Are nature and the self part of the classic external-internal, objective-subjective dichotomy? Or are both subsumed into a higher organic reality? These questions are unavoidable for, when Ashbery takes the organic metaphor to illuminate the poetic process, does he imply the primary reality of objective nature with, as Charles Altieri phrases it, its "immanent presence"? The dilemma brings us full circle

back to Freilicher's landscapes. One highly intriguing perspective is proposed by Altieri in his discussion of Robert Duncan's "poetic of presence."²⁴ Altieri contends that Duncan pursues "the Romantics' dream of erasing art so nature will stand clear." Ashbery, however, chooses the opposite course, dreaming instead "of erasing nature so the book might stand free as a dynamic interchange of self-referring elements."²⁵ We are indebted to Altieri for articulating so finely the literary context of the long-recognized phenomenon of self-reflection in Ashbery's poetry. One interesting problem yet persists: if Ashbery ignores "the book of nature," how do we account for his fascination with and horror of time? If nothing else, time is the ultimate sign and condition of nature. Inasmuch as Ashbery's poems treat the subject of time and are themselves "time organized," Ashbery very much acknowledges his place in nature as well as the inescapable paradox of art: time both impels us to create and thwarts the fullness of our creation.

Nonetheless, the nonreferential principle requires further consideration because it explains so clearly Ashbery's stated attitudes toward his audience and his role as poet. Ironically, the demands Ashbery places on his readers result from both the nonreferential and the allusive. Ashbery is especially frustrating to those who assume that every poem can and will yield up its secrets to persistent, systematic explication. On the one hand, the reader must track down all the obvious references to the arts, historical events, and popular culture. On the other hand, the "abstract" poems or portions of poems give the reader no external referents to pursue in the "real" or the historical world. At this point, a seeming contradiction arises. Ashbery told the Craft interview-

ers in 1972 that he wants "the reader to be able to experience the poem without having to refer to outside sources to get the complete experience as one has to in Eliot sometimes or Pound."²⁶ (Does this release us from our compulsion to bring all allusive material into our sphere of understanding?) This ideal of self-containment is not original with Ashbery; Altieri on another occasion argues that the novelist Flaubert introduced to modern literature the dream of achieving a perfectly independent linguistic universe. Among Flaubert's remarks on Madame Bovary, there is a passage quoted by Altieri which literally anticipates Ashbery's own words:

"What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support. . . . The finest works are those that contain the least matter; the closer expression comes to thought, the closer language comes to coinciding and merging with it, the finer the result."²⁷

Flaubert's motivation sounds purely esthetic; Ashbery, by contrast, insists that his concern as a poet is "for communication which . . . many people don't believe I have."²⁸ How, then, does Ashbery reconcile the indisputable difficulty of his work with the express desire to communicate? He tells Kostelanetz in 1976: "I feel that saying something the reader has already known is not communicating anything. It's a veiled insult to the reader."²⁹ The qualifications of the ideal reader are quite another matter. Nevertheless, herein lies the complexity, the challenge, and the very honesty of Ashbery's poetry: the faith that we can learn something even from the largely mysterious and recalcitrant texture of our existence. "The difficulty of my poetry," says Ashbery,

isn't there for its own sake; it is meant to reflect the difficulty of living, the everchanging, minute adjustments that go on around us and which we respond to from moment to moment--the dif-

ficulty of living in passing time, which is both difficult and automatic, since we all somehow manage it.³⁰

Language itself belongs to this tough, stubborn order of experience; hence getting at the whole of experience requires the poet to wrestle with the irregularities, anomalies, and imperfections of speech.

Something nevertheless remains beyond our reach--that is the mysterious. Ashbery never flinches at the necessity and the beauty of mystery; repeatedly, for, example, in both his art and literary criticism, he has singled out the quality of mystery as a most desirable and essential of esthetic attributes. It is this final inscrutability and yet mystical allure of existence which sustains the ongoing process of Ashbery's meditative poetry. In his introduction to The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara, Ashbery pays tribute to his friend and fellow poet's idea of art by comparing it to Gertrude Stein's definition of creativity: "conceptions aiming again and again always getting fuller. . . ." ³¹ This must surely be the creative energy behind Ashbery's own unique and distinguished contribution to modern poetry: his enormous, undiminishing power to envision heretofore unimaginable worlds and the possibility of their realization. Even if the enterprise proves ultimately impossible, Ashbery's poetry stands on "the conviction that it is the only thing worth trying to do." ³²

CHAPTER II

"THE INDIFFERENCE OF A TRUE ESTHETE"

The title of Ashbery's seventh major volume, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, possesses a hypnotic appeal that invites reflection on the poet's earliest works. As the convex mirror reflects Parmigianino and his surroundings, so the Self-Portrait reveals the contents of the imaginative space which constitutes, as it were, the poet's studio.¹ As with a convex mirror, however, such a reappraisal carries with it the danger of distortion and teleological fallacy, the temptation to see all Ashbery's efforts proceeding inevitably toward the Self-Portrait. Yet the distorted retrospective image does bring into an enlarged foreground undeniable evidence of the self-reflexive impulse, the germinal idea which, in its numerous guises and transformations, remains constant in Ashbery's imagination and poetry. The self-reflexive mode and his three central concerns--time, knowledge, and art--permeate the first volumes, Turandot and Other Poems (1953) and Some Trees (1956), yet are articulated in three poems and a play written before the publication of Turandot. "The Painter" (1948), "Some Trees" (1949), and "The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers" (1951),² together with The Heroes (1952),³ form literally a prophetic core of Ashbery's style and ideas.

In "The Painter,"⁴ Ashbery ponders the nature of art and the cre-

ative process. From the outset of the poem, the painter-artist is in a precarious position, caught between the classic polarities--nature (the sea) and society (the building, civilization). Both sea and society, however, are outside the painter and thus constitute an external world. It is this relationship between painter and world which the poem explores. Clashing ideas and expectations about the resemblance between the painter's "subject" and the "finished product" complicate the problem. Both the painter and "the people who lived in the buildings" (65) expected the sea to "sit" for its portrait like a person, that is, to be humanized, civilized, and still. Moreover, the painter apparently holds the child-like belief that little or no effort is required of him by the painting. The portrait will be purely objective, a mere representation of the painter's subject, and completely natural, i.e., without artifice. But the sea refuses to be reduced and confined to the area of the canvas; exerting its autonomy, the sea simply will not sit, for it will not be personified. Seeing the artist's difficulty, the "artists leaning from the buildings" protest that they no longer have "a prayer . . . of putting ourselves on canvas" (66). Their complaint raises the question of self-expression as the proper end of art.

Thus far in the poem, the debate has centered around two kinds of portraits and their "subjects," the external world and the self. But now the poem forces an issue that is to be crucial in understanding Ashbery's poetry: our preconceptions about subject matter or suitable contents in a poem or any work of art. The painter's advisers have suggested that he take "something less angry and large" (65), as if to say that the sea (nature) is beyond the artist's skills. But he eventually re-

turns to the sea for his subject, implores his soul to "wreck the canvas" (65), and produces a work viewed by some as a self-portrait, though the onlookers apparently are not sure. Then, however, "all indications of a subject / Began to fade, leaving the canvas / Perfectly white . . ." (66). Although this particular poem has a definite subject, many of Ashbery's poems resist our efforts to recognize and articulate a "subject" in the usual sense. Ashbery is, in fact, fond of the "subjectless" poem for which the title is an "aperture," a door which merely opens onto an area to be explored.⁵ Simply put, the poem is not a pre-fabricated structure precisely because of the idea of autonomy: that which is outside the poet literally has a voice in the making of a poem. Yet "The Painter" suggests that if the world, natural or otherwise, has too much to say, it will devour the artist.

Ashbery's concern with these esthetic problems in this early work turns out to be an indicator of what is to come. Moreover, the fact that he casts these questions in terms of painting is too significant to ignore, for the presence of the visual arts in Ashbery's writing is always undeniable. An artistic sensibility and a solid understanding of techniques and art history have informed the poet's whole esthetic and thus his works. Much of the imagery in Ashbery's poetry, much of his feel for and reliance upon space, form, color, and movement as the materials of his imagination, seems to come directly from art. Even the questions of phenomenology and epistemology, the bases of all arts and language, are paralleled and reinforced by the controversies and developments in art. These concerns about the nature of reality, our knowledge of it, and the art made out of it begin to crystallize as Ashbery's dominant poetic

themes in these early poems and in the first two published volumes of verse.

"The Painter" also focuses our attention on other important matters implied by the observers' directive on artistic method: "'try using the brush / As a means to an end'" (65). First, the relationship between idea and form. Although most of Ashbery's poetry relies on neither rhyme, regular meter, nor tight stanzaic patterns, the use of the sestina here deserves mention. One reason is that "The Painter" is probably the most comprehensible of any of Ashbery's sestinas or other excursions into severely ordered schemes. Here, the end-words bear a clear and necessary relationship to the narrative; they are, in fact, the pivotal concepts in the poem. The other reason is that Ashbery demonstrates in this poem the capability of handling difficult forms without strain. A second prominent formal feature of "The Painter" is the narrative impulse, which remains with Ashbery throughout his poetry as an essential of both idea and form. The narrative pattern is often the controlling force in the poem and is particularly important in conjunction with the motifs of time, change, memory, and reflection. On the other hand, our sense of orderly sequence is frequently warped or jolted by a series of dislocated images and fragmented action and speech. This was the overwhelming consensus of critics, who were startled, bedeviled, or insulted by The Tennis Court Oath (1962), although Turandot and Some Trees adequately illustrate the dissociative impulse. Finally, it is this element of dissociation which challenges the assumption that only the end of art, the finished product, has value and that the means of effecting the end are clearly subordinate. To the contrary, Ashbery may very well be anticipating or testing the surrealist

idea that the therapeutic value of the artistic activity itself is supreme.

In retrospect, then, "The Painter" contains the embryo of much of Ashbery's poetry, and a work which appeared the next year (1949) further prepares us for what is to come. "Some Trees"⁶ displays an astonishing number of Ashbery's central ideas and techniques. Again, the interaction between the self and the other and the idea that this relationship changes through time form the core of the poem. The trees may in fact be real or actual trees, yet they are also poems, the "still performance" (62) of speech. In both cases, the trees are external to the speaker, but more importantly they profoundly affect him: they possess a recognizable autonomy with the power to tell us what we are, even to bring the "you" and "I" together into "we." This reconciliation of subject and object, self and other, always in the flux of time, is indicated by the pronouns in a philosophical and grammatical phenomenon which Ashbery constantly exploits throughout his poetry. Thus, two of the poet's dominant concerns are compacted into the lines

you and I
Are suddenly what the trees try
To tell us we are. . . . (62)

The implication is that knowledge results from an interaction between self and world, the "what we are"--being--comes from the recognition of the other's "merely being there" (62), "mere" in Stevens' sense of "pure." The new knowledge, however, is not without qualification, that is, not complete or completed. One must accept, or learn to accept, in Ashbery's poetry a sizeable dose of uncertainty. Indeed, the existence of uncertainty, ambiguity, and multiple possibilities is part of knowledge and is

implicit in his language. The title itself teases with various possible readings: a casual "some (a certain number of) trees"; a surprises, exclamatory "some trees!"; and "some trees!" with emphasis on their special or extraordinary attributes. In any case, the title turns on the indefinite pronoun "some," and, likewise, the poem proper begins with the ambiguous, outward-opening "these." Granted, "these" are not so mysterious, since the probable antecedent, the title, immediately precedes. Nevertheless, here is an early instance of the poem which like Whitman's spider throws out support lines beyond itself. Often, however, the Ashbery poem will not make it clear just where the other end of the line is anchored. But this very indefiniteness is the point, as is the possibility that the antecedent of "these" could be many things--it does not matter which. There is yet another possibility in this particular poem: though from the outset the reader is relatively sure of what "these" are, he still glides through the poem in a state of expectancy as the discovery slowly unfolds and thus experiences them process of coming to know along with the speaker. Again, however, the knowing may be qualified by the indefinite pronoun "something," and once again more than one reading is plausible. If "their merely being there / Means something" (62; italics mine), the emphasis lies more on the uncertainty of exactly what this significance is. If the stress falls rather on "means," then the sheer fact of significance, even if the precise meaning defies articulation, is sufficient. There is a third alternative: the parallel clauses which follow the "what the trees try / To tell us we are" may indicate ambivalence yet may also signify equivalency. Thus, meaning "something" is identified as the permission or ability to "touch, love, explain" (62). This under-

current of tentative, multiple possibilities does not necessarily indicate a young poet's inability to decide what he wants to say. Instead, the difficulty of achieving and maintaining absolute certainty in knowing-- a kind of dangerous stasis--is a major motif in Ashbery's work and forms part of the theme of existence in the face of mystery.

The search for knowledge and being also demands recognition that contradictions and entities from normally separate realms may and do exist together. This idea brings to mind Surrealism's founding father, André Breton, and American literature's master of the grotesque, Edgar Allan Poe, both of whom demonstrated that reality is not necessarily synonymous with the coherent, rational orderly universe; it is rather an interpenetration of the dream and the waking states. For Breton, the desired goal of existence was awareness of the marvelous, which Louis Aragon in Le Paysan de Paris had defined as "the eruption of contradiction within the real."⁷ Such contradiction, such paradox "erupts" within "Some Trees": the likening of speech to "a still performance"; the "you" and "I" in the poem "arranging by chance" to meet; and, in the 1956 version, the emerging on a canvas of "a chorus of smiles," a synesthetic image which blurs together the visual and the musical. But what is even more "marvelous" in "Some Trees" is the readiness for and acceptance of a significant, if not extraordinary, insight in the midst of ordinary experience.

Expanding the theme of knowledge and the range of his technique, Ashbery explores another dominant idea in "The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers."⁸ He has touched upon the idea of change in "Some Trees," for the trees work a transformation upon the "you" and "I" of the

poem. Now, he places change in the fuller context of time and the awareness of time, especially memory. The title focuses attention on a moment frozen in time by a camera, a moment on which the poet-speaker reflects and from which he draws a lesson. To a great degree, therefore, this poem may be considered Ashbery's first experiment with the self-portrait genre in particular and another instance of the self-reflexive mode in general.

The relationship between the poem's central idea and its formal rendering is especially revealing of Ashbery's poetic. As in "The Painter" and "Some Trees," the poet employs a regular form in "The Picture of Little J. A."; here, each of the poem's three sections consists of two unrhymed five-line stanzas followed by a slant-rhyme couplet. In sequence, they form one of Ashbery's favorite structures, a scene, image, or incident completed by commentary, analysis, or reflection. Moreover, they also create a progression or movement that represents the flux of the self always searching to re-establish balance between too much subjectivity and excessive objectivity.

In section I, there is little if any discernible presence of J. A., "little" or otherwise. Instead, two characters speak Shakespearean English in a brief dramatic scene with strong Freudian and sexual overtones; the mood and the scene then change in the couplet to monks "in a far recess" (39). Typical of Ashbery, the pun on "recess" makes two readings possible and both acceptable: the slightly amusing and discrepant image of monks (1) playing (at recess) far away or long ago, and (2) playing in a place far from the secular world. The overall effect is that of dream imagery juxtaposing the erotic and the ascetic, perhaps as the po-

larities of a basic human conflict and the source of guilt and frustration. If the moral dimension suggested by the monks is missing or dormant in I, it is immediately invoked when a noticeably different speaker or tone begins II. Here a somewhat fatherly voice assures his auditors, first "children," then "you," that since "goodness is a mere memory" each may "invent his virtue," in essence escape from past acts and still manage to "be blessed" (40). Taking on the tone of a seer, the speaker makes a mysterious prophecy in which the motif of love (I) is recast in dream imagery and which concludes with the promise that "time shall force a gift on each" (40). However, II closes with a couplet that not only continues the love motif but also picks up the hint of guilt associated with a past action. In this case, a sin of omission, declining to give to a beggar, haunts the dreaming mind: the beggar "striped the night with his strange descant" (40).

The passing into III marks another significant shift in perspective: the poet has moved from the detached, dramatic stance of I, to the warmer, almost pastoral voice of II, and finally into the personal, reminiscent mood of III. It is here that Ashbery fully addresses the question of the individual's relationship to his personal past. The picture he "cannot escape" is more substantial than the "mere memory" of II (40). Having ascertained and evaluated the attitude of his past self toward the future and having compared it with his present perspective, the speaker seems to say that the stubborn things which persist after the experience has passed, i.e., after the "horrors" of change have occurred, offer a light or guide for future decisions and actions. It is worth noting here, too, how the poet expands from the personal "I" to the more inclu-

sive and general "we" in the closing couplet, as if to generalize the "moral" or revelation reached in the course of the poem. And like many of Ashbery's conclusions, this one is at once accessible and mysterious, as calmly and surely understated as the perfect, maddening sense of a Zen illumination:

For as change is horror,
Virtue is really stubbornness
And only in the light of lost words
Can we imagine our rewards.

(41)

Again, like "Some Trees," this Ashbery poem insists on establishing points of reference outside itself, this time, however, by alluding to the title of Andrew Marvell's "The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers." Ashbery has denied any substantive connection between the two poems,⁹ although readers will note that Marvell does exploit the idea of time, particularly the carpe diem motif. Nevertheless, the literary allusion reminds us that Ashbery's poetry is always aware of itself in a tradition and that, indeed, all previous poetry emits the "light of lost words."

Oddly enough, the nature of the word itself and the properties of the literary construct receive their fullest and most integrated exposition not in these early poems but in a play, The Heroes (1952). A major concern of this play, and surely of all Ashbery's poetry, is "seeing things as they truly are" and the esthetic requirements and implications thereof. The heroic Theseus, one of the displaced and deflated mythical characters gathered for a houseparty at the residence of Achilles, treats his fellow guests to a revisionist account of his adventures

with the minotaur in Daedalus' maze. In Ashbery's version, Theseus becomes a sort of Stevensian hero, a man of imagination, who explains how to solve problems, like being trapped in a maze, by exercising the imagination. Such a feat requires what Theseus calls "the indifference of a true aesthete," the ability to grant each entity "its own peculiar nature" (52, 47). This is simply a way of saying that subjectifying the world makes it impossible for one to have an identity, a sense of one's autonomous being, an accurate "picture of yourself" (47; *italics mine*). Theseus claims he has seen himself

as I could only be--not as I might be seen by a person in the street: full of unfamiliarity and the resulting poetry. Before, I might have seemed beautiful to the passerby. I now seemed ten times more so to myself, for I saw that I meant nothing beyond the equivocal statement of my limbs and the space and time they happened to occupy. (52)

Likewise, this esthetic indifference enables him to grant the minotaur "its own peculiar nature," to see it not as the sacrifice-devouring monster but as "the greatest fake of all" (49). Once the principle of autonomy is established, however, one must be willing to recognize and accept change in the changed self and in the changed world. As Theseus learned, "truly seeing" means that "you," the maze, and "your whole idea of the maze" keep changing (51). In essence, the imagination makes possible, even demands, an ongoing dialectic, a continuing realignment and redefinition of the self and the world vis-à-vis each other. This constant changing, says Theseus, "is the wickedest thing Daedalus ever did" (51), for change and the disorientation it creates are "horror," as the poet says in "The Picture of Little J. A." This horror is the loss of identity, a picture of the self, which is a type of death but which may be averted and redirected into growth by the imagination, the agent of trans-

formation. Theseus' story of his train experience best symbolizes the efficacy of the imagination in the self's effort to maintain its moorings in an ever-shifting world:

My train had stopped in the station directly opposite another. Through the glass I was able to watch a couple in the next train, a man and a woman who were having some sort of conversation. For fifteen minutes I watched them. I had no idea what their relation was. I could form no idea of their conversation. They might have been speaking words of love, or planning a murder, or quarreling about their in-laws. Yet just from watching them talk, even though I could hear nothing, I feel I know those people better than anyone in the world. (56)

A related effect of the Theseus fable is to alter the common esthetic axiom that imagination creates a fabulous world, an illusion of reality. On the contrary, here imagination breaks through illusion, a life-threatening minotaur, to reality. Even the play itself and the characters in it are aware of the facade; Chorus once shatters the illusion to warn the audience of the play's subsequent difficulty, "the way life is sometimes" (59). Chorus then assumes the role of the visitor in the maze, who, as Theseus described, climbs out on top to "survey the ground plan of the whole edifice. In short, he is in the dubious position of a person who believes that dada is still alive" (51). Furthermore, imagination brings about the apprehension of beauty, which depends on the recognition of each entity's own identity; thus, Theseus can say to Circe that the larger-than-life figures in front of the Parthenon and ordinary human beings are "beautiful in the same way" (55). Art and ordinary life thus exist on the same plane. Consequently, the phenomenon of reading or seeing The Heroes is not unlike the sensation of double consciousness felt by one who realizes he is participating in and watching his dream at the same time.

It is helpful to be aware of Ashbery's tendency to think in esthetic terms which generate poetry whose premises may be unfamiliar to many readers. Indeed, the four works we have just surveyed demonstrate how Ashbery at this stage writes poetry conscious of itself as art. This is not surprising, given his interest in both music and fine arts, particularly given that he was witness to the experiments proliferating in the late 1940's and the early 1950's. In music, this esthetic ferment is probably best dramatized in a work like John Cage's Music of Changes. According to Kostelanetz in his 1976 interview, Ashbery heard this composition in a concert on January 1, 1952, and was jolted out of a deep depression that had stifled his writing. "It was," Ashbery recalls,

"a series of dissonant chords, mostly loud, with irregular rhythm. It went on for over an hour and seemed infinitely extendable. I felt profoundly refreshed after listening to that. I felt that I could be as singular in my art as Cage was in his."¹⁰

But it was modern painting that seemed to Ashbery "'the most exciting art around."¹¹ Considering the extraordinary ascendancy in New York of what became known as abstract expressionism, this remark comes close to understatement. Even before Ashbery moved to New York City in 1949 to enter graduate school at Columbia, the New York art world had felt the powerful presence of such European giants as Duchamp, Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, Chagall, Ernst, Tanguy, Dali, and even French poet André Breton. During the years from 1942 to 1946, younger American painters were absorbing new ideas from the Europeans and creating a distinctive though diversified new style. By 1950, painters like Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, the latter two often mentioned in Ashbery's art criticism, had established themselves as leaders of American abstract expressionism.

What specific art works Ashbery experienced first-hand and the precise influence they exerted on his poetic sensibility are difficult to verify and assess accurately. Nevertheless, his first volume of verse in 1953 suggests that he had committed himself to finding a voice and a form for a redefined poetic, analogous in a general way to the energetic exploration of new forms in art and music. It is also interesting to note that Turandot and Other Poems was published by a New York gallery, Tibor de Nagy, and was accompanied by four illustrations by the young artist Jane Freilicher.

Because Some Trees (1956) contains all the Turandot poems except the title poem and "White," plus a substantial number of important newer poems, it may be more legitimately considered Ashbery's true first volume. But it is precisely the way in which Ashbery enlarged upon the 1953 collection that gives us insight into his poetic development. The selections in Turandot range in comprehensibility from the relatively accessible "Some Trees" to far more disconcerting, enigmatic, and elliptical poems. The presence of this latter group of course raises the question of esthetic standards and judgment, which depend in large part upon accessibility of meaning and appreciation of palpable form. In these poems, the "normal" dynamics of idea, word, syntax, and meaning either are not operative or not discernible; thus, the normal methods of critical reading may not serve.

Despite the challenges of the poetry in Turandot, we can nevertheless observe the same ideas embodied in the four works discussed initially: the necessity and the possibility of seeing things as they actually are, the self vis-à-vis the world, the demands of existence in a uni-

verse of change, the awareness of time, the nature of the imaginative process, the relationship of the artist and the world. The clearest rendering of these concerns occurs in four "esthetic proposition" poems: "Some Trees," "The Mythological Poet," "Le Livre Est Sur la Table," and "Illustration." Among these and the more difficult group of poems run additional distinctive threads: a high incidence of "positing," both in the manner of a philosophical argument and in the sense of placing things or calling scenes into being; ceremonial and ritualistic elements, often associated with theatrical and mythological events; and the persistent motif of questions and questioning.

"Illustration" is a very full and intriguing treatment of these themes. The title itself first suggests a visual representation as in a drawing or painting, and certainly Ashbery does create a vivid "scene" in which a novice provides onlookers with a highly visible drama. In its root or Latinate sense, "Illustration" reinforces the poem's religious terms--"novice," "offering," "vestment," "miracle"--and pinpoints exactly what the novice and the poem do: to "purify (clarify) ceremonially" a certain truth of which she was "the somber vestment" (60). Despite the liturgical trappings, "Illustration" is a poem not about religious truth but about the nature of truth and knowledge itself.

The form and the language in which Ashbery approaches the epistemological problem is typical of several other poems in both Turandot and Some Trees. The two-part structure, a narrative or "fable" followed by "the stuff of explanation" (Ashbery's own phrase from "The Skaters," Rivers and Mountains, 39), adds to other evidence in the poem that "truth" or "reality" may exist in several layers or variants. As the novice was

"the somber vestment" of "the truth we know" (60) and "an effigy of indifference" (61), so the "stuff of explanation" (part II) is one step removed from the novice's actual performance (part I). "The truth we know" may be read as "all that we know" or "whatever it is that we know." As Theseus claimed in The Heroes, this truth could also be the necessary indifference with which

Much that is beautiful must be discarded
 So we may resemble a taller
 Impression of ourselves.

(60)

The central problem here is how to recognize the presence of truth: "how could we tell?" the poet asks (60). Confusion and misinterpretation result because there are "so many attitudes toward that flame" (60). But after a brief lilting rise in tone, which accompanies the inappropriate feasting and celebrating after the novice's suicide, the poet's voice begins to drop as he realizes the import of the "illustration" she provided. As is often the case in Ashbery, the epiphany is stated simply, clearly--it always sounds so right--yet within a haunting, enigmatic analogy:

But she, of course, was only an effigy
 Of indifference or a miracle

Not meant for us, as the leaves are not
 Winter's because it is the end.

(61)

The implication is that "we" are not always prepared to recognize the extraordinary moment when it does come.

The problem of defining the relationship between knowledge and beauty continues to intrigue Ashbery in "The Mythological Poet" and in "Le Livre Est Sur la Table." Like "Illustration," "The Mythological

Poet" follows a pattern of incident and commentary: part I dramatizes the destruction of a rarified, ethereal beauty ("music") by "a new / Music, innocent and monstrous / As the ocean's bright display of teeth" (47). It is no longer possible for a mythological poet, in the old sense, to exist; he must now create his mythology out of "lewd," earthy reality--the zoo, the "panting forest," "dust, candy, and perverts" (47). But it is not so clear what the new mythology is, for Ashbery closes the poem with two questions and no answers, as if to have the mythological poet ask, "Could there not be? Is this not possible?" Ashbery thus creates the impression of standing on the threshold of a new esthetic, tentative and thus far inarticulate. Yet the imagery of the final stanza picks up the "innocent and monstrous" motif of part I and hints that in the new poetry "the child and the pervert" might "join hands, in the instant / Of their interest" (48). Ashbery is merely extending and testing the redefinition of beauty set forth in The Heroes: the acknowledgement of each thing's unique being through the agency of the imagination. We are confronting here the same important question raised in "The Painter": what may be included in the poem, and how does one choose? Or, to ask in more conventional terms, what is the proper study of poetry? "The Mythological Poet" would seem to answer, "Anything that is beautiful, anything from the innocent to the monstrous." Consider how Stephen Dædalus had appealed to Aquinas for the essential requirements of beauty: integritas, consonantia, claritas!

Oddly enough, the speaker of "Le Livre" sounds like Stephen delivering his dissertation on the principles of art. The poet's initial assertion is a fascinating and revealing one:

All beauty, resonance, integrity
Exist by deprivation or logic
Of strange position. This being so,

We can only imagine a world in which a woman
Walks and wears her hair and knows
All that she does not know.

(84)

It is this kind of statement that Ashbery characteristically allows to stand as an inseparable part of the poem's texture and simultaneously to comment upon the poem and its making. This opening proposition has the look and the feel of a logical construct, but any semblance of formal logical consistency rapidly dissolves into a series of statements that are syntactically complete but semantically strange.

"Deprivation" is synonymous with the loss caused by the passing of time and is also suggestive of the blankness of the page or canvas--deprived of color, line, form. The "logic / Of strange position" may be restated as "unexpected relationships," such as those produced by dream logic. As Theseus would say, these juxtapositions are unfamiliar "and full of the resulting poetry" (*Heroes*, 52), inscrutable yet beautiful. The poet appears to "argue" or propose that both "deprivation" and the strange logic stimulate the imagination, for what follows the initial assertion is a series of images and paradoxes which "thus . . . give fullness / To the dream" (84). Suddenly, the imagined scene takes on an energy of its own and changes before the imaginer's eyes: the lovely picture of the woman passes into a "dismal scene." Not anticipating this metamorphosis, the speaker wonders, "what . . . is this?" (84).

Now the scene shifts again. Just as I opened with argumentative positing, so II depicts a "young man" who "places a bird-house / Against the blue sea" (85; italics mine). Immediately, this scene undergoes sev-

eral transformations, but the connection between the first and the subsequent episodes is imagistic, never explained. Their unity is based on a very simple principle: they are placed there together in an order which, like that of a twelve-tone row, may seem alien and dissonant but which is nonetheless ordered. Again, as in I, the scene is followed by questions; the two terms in each pair are joined by an ambivalent "or" which gives the impression of linking a "closed set" of logical alternatives, and yet the terms are not logically expressed. Read a second way, the "or" simply juxtaposes four possibilities, none of which perhaps excludes the others and all of which stand as various intuitive interpretations of the same scene. In other instances, the "logic / Of strange position" generates inversions or unexpected reversals. Instead of being the objects of worship, the gods themselves "worship a line-drawing / Of a woman" (85). And the sea's ability to write, though odd, does make sense figuratively, for the "waves' minutes" can be seen by the marks they make, the debris they deposit on the shore when "the land advances" (85), i.e., when the tide recedes. Seeing the strange logic in this passage is essentially a matter of imaginatively altering the angle of vision to facilitate a new perspective. It is significant too that "these imaginings" take place on the shore, the point of juncture between two different entities, sea and land. Though Ashbery is perhaps less masterful and somewhat more tentative--"Are there / Collisions, communications on the shore?" (85)--"Le Livre" clearly invokes Stevens' hymn to the imagination, "The Idea of Order at Key West." Within its own formal boundaries, Ashbery's poem offers itself as the fleshing out of its own esthetic principles: that beauty exists in the mysterious, and that knowledge is ultimately an act

of the imagination, not of the reason.

Puzzling and open-ended as "Le Livre" may be, it remains, with "Some Trees," "The Mythological Poet," and "Illustration," among the clearest poems in Turandot. But the differences between these poems and the others are differences of degree, not of kind. At the root of the discomfort these poems may cause is an absence of a one-to-one correspondence between whatever we expect and what we get; either the relationship does not exist or it is not apparent. The most common instance of this "slipperiness" in Ashbery is the resistance of images to submit to scrutiny and interpretation even with the aid of a poem's own internal evidence. But this very stubbornness indicates the origin and nature of these images, the dream impulse or the surrealistic flow of the imagination, and advises readers to question their esthetic assumptions. More often than not, however, such images possess a definite narrative energy, although the sequence is elliptical and the normal transition signs are missing. Frequently, this vagueness of location in time is accompanied by an equally vague sense of place. Persons coexist in the poems by without a clear relation to each other; similarly, voices are often difficult to ascribe to any particular speaker. (Ashbery's "floating pronouns" are usually responsible for this.) To intensify the sense of dislocation, the normal syntax of sentences becomes disjointed and slippery. On an even smaller scale, Ashbery will alter or reverse the usual grammatical function of individual words; e.g., he may use a transitive verb intransitively, or he may make the human agent of an action its recipient via a nonhuman agent, as in "The Mythological Poet": "the heavenly / Moment in the heaviness of arrival / Deplores him" (47). The total impression

is one of multiple possibilities and ambiguity, if not sheer disorientation, both generating and generated by all the devices of dislocation.

Logically enough, this elusiveness is especially prominent in "Answering a Question in the Mountains" and "Turandot," two poems whose central motif is the question. As we might expect, the question the poet is "answering . . . in the mountains" is never revealed. The indefinite article "a" suggests that what question in particular does not matter so much as the process of seeking answers in general, a process which appears to take some time and which may or may not yet be completed at the end of the poem. Nevertheless, the poem impresses us as being rounded, unified, for, as often in Ashbery's poetry, there is a progression and resolution not in the logical sense, but in an intuitive, psychological, or emotional sense. From the arrival in the mountains in part I., through the visionary tone of illumination in II., to the reflection on his departure (III.) from "the hosts of my young days" (81), the speaker has apparently journeyed through time and experience. And while the question and the answer are not identified, the speaker seems always on the verge of articulating them. If there is tension in this and others among these early poems, it results from the anticipation and frustration of a connection never quite made. What Richard Howard said of Some Trees applies here as well: Ashbery aims, "as one firing buckshot may be said to aim, at a single target: the elusive order of existence which the poet knows to be there, just beyond his reach."¹²

In "Turandot,"¹³ the poet offers us more to ponder and withdraws more from our grasp. The fable of Turandot and its operatic settings all turn on the convention of the cruel and beautiful princess who promises

to marry any suitor who can successfully answer her three riddles and who orders the unsuccessful executed. Whether Ashbery took his cue from Puccini's or Busoni's opera--the questions in each differ somewhat--he radically modifies the story:

Prince: Well, what is your first question?

Turandot: There are no questions.
There are many answers.
Then there must be a few flutters.
Shoved by the breath's obstinacy
The antique shutters fall back.
Their caves are full of threads.

Prince: I shall. You will. He gave.

Turandot: He shall. He gave. We shall part.
(Scene I)

Turandot's maddening reply thwarts expectation of a point-by-point correlation between question and answer and of a closer, more recognizable parallel between the traditional story line and Ashbery's version. In the best surrealist manner, the poem abounds with the unexpected, the surprising at every turn; it is in essence a riddle. The passage quoted above provides a case in point. Despite Turandot's reply to his question, the Prince proceeds to offer what sound like answers to three unasked riddles. Turandot responds in kind with a skewed conjugation that teases the reader into wondering if she is "correcting" the Prince's "answers." Later, the riddle motif surfaces again:

Turandot: What has a satin slipper?
What will happen tomorrow?

Prince: Lovely Stradivarius
It it follows
In. In no way
Lord it in known way follows.
(Scene III)

This time Turandot poses only two questions, and the Prince returns an

Needless to say, the whole poem-play is as slippery as this, yet certain clear motifs characteristic of Ashbery's early work help re-establish balance momentarily. More precisely, these motifs are essentially corollaries of the time-change-knowledge complex: memory of the past; growing, dying, forgetfulness; knowing and the cost of learning. Most significantly, the poem challenges the rational definition of reality. The primacy of dreams as the source of creative activity, indeed the identification of the world with dreaming, are asserted by the Chorus. "All," they state, "is in the scroll he keeps for a pillow" (Scene II). Exploiting the same kind of inversion-reversal central to "Le Livre," Ashbery has his Prince observe, "how very odd / To waken like a child to one's delirium" (Sestina). Just as the Prince blurs the boundary line between waking and dreaming, so the characters dissolve the theatrical illusion of reality by acknowledging openly the artifice within which they exist. In the ultimate reversal, it is not the audience which is subsumed by the illusion of art, but, as the King describes, the audience which devours the theater. But Ashbery has given us fair warning in the very first words of the poem:

Although the reader may flinch as the logical bonds between word
ning, syntax and idea bend and snap, he may also pause to consider
lications of what appears to be a game of linguistic chaos, a rid-
you will. If Ashbery's "logic / Of strange position" manages to
a sense of things as they truly are, then the poetry succeeds ac-

ording to the precepts of Theseus. What has been evolving in this early poetry is an idea of what precisely constitutes "reality" or "the way things are." It is neither the external world nor the inner subjective world but a new amalgam created by the interaction between two distinct worlds, as "Some Trees," "The Painter," and The Heroes have demonstrated. On several occasions, Ashbery has invoked the image of the shore, the nexus between two autonomous entities (e.g., in "The Painter," "Le Livre," "Eclogue"), where "collisions, communications" may transpire, where there is transfer and change. The same principle also accounts for the many instances when the waking world of sequence, logic, and coherence and the dream world interpenetrate each other. The strange "he" of the poem "He" intrudes into the secure and comfortable rational life and acknowledges that he is perceived as "'dangerous even though asleep and unarmed'" (72). Normally separate categories have begun to come under the power of an inclusive, unifying impulse, one which does not require things to lose their autonomy but which can hold them all in equilibrium. It demands great energy and honesty to admit that contradictions and paradoxes exist unresolved and unreconciled and to allow them to continue thus. Not to do so would violate the identity of each entity and the demands of reality and the imagination. Perhaps this desire to hold in equilibrium what might else fly apart accounts for the frequent framing of discontinuous or illogical material within traditional generic forms like the sestina. Moreover, Ashbery accomplishes with this framing technique a personal, even lyrical mode in a roundabout way; he permits words to leave the reader in an aura of feeling and revelation without talking about or analyzing it. He renders experience, even personal experience, dramatically

and objectively, arranging the words in whatever way creates or conveys feeling.

When Ashbery compiled a volume of poems for the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition, he chose all the poems from Turandot except "White" and the title poem. He added to these a substantial group of both newer and earlier works, not the least of which were "The Painter" and "The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers," and took "Some Trees" for the volume's title poem. Ashbery submitted Some Trees to the preliminary readers, only to have it rejected. W. H. Auden, sole judge of the contest, intervened, reconsidered Ashbery's entry, and awarded it first prize.¹⁴ Why Auden chose Some Trees is partly revealed in his curious introduction to the book, but his discourse on poetry and the imagination may tell more about himself than about Ashbery's poetry. Subsequent reviews of Some Trees, with a few exceptions, were generally unappreciative, sometimes condescending. Horace Gregory, for example, dismissed Ashbery curtly:

when he /Auden/ speaks of Ashbery's promise as one that places him in the tradition of Rimbaud, his generosity overburdens the young poet who receives /the praise/--where does Ashbery go from there? Ashbery's lines are good prose; they are by no means dull and the most amusing of them--in which a scene between a naked "novice" and an angel is described--were probably written to shock clubwomen in the suburbs. Ashbery should be naughtier than that--and then turn to Rimbaud, if he wishes, for his master.¹⁵

But in a piece called "Rare Modern" for Poetry magazine, Frank O'Hara chided Gregory for his "nearsightedness" and praised Ashbery for his "attempts to look deeply into the actual matter of natural events, rather, it seems, than risk an interpretation which might only be a comfortable means of looking away."¹⁶

O'Hara's assessment is keen and accurate. Closer acquaintance with the poems in Some Trees makes it apparent that the honesty O'Hara credits Ashbery with is the natural concomitant of three persistent issues the poet addresses: time, including change and memory; the knowledge of reality through consciousness of self and world; and poesis, the creative process, and the efficacy of poetry. These concerns are obviously not new to Ashbery, but they take on increasing importance in his poetic development as he begins to further test, clarify, define, and redefine the ideas and techniques he employed in Turandot. As these foci become more sharply delineated, the reciprocity of form and idea in Ashbery's work grows more accessible and more revealing.

In a most basic way, Ashbery's poetry exists and evolves in a physical and organic universe whose essential properties are space (dimension) and time. Far from being a gratuitous description applicable to almost any poet, this statement is intended to emphasize the radical nature of his poetic impulse. Clearly, O'Hara recognized this fact when he commended in Some Trees the poet's "difficult attention to calling things and events by their true qualities."¹⁷ Everywhere in Some Trees, and throughout the subsequent poetry, Ashbery discerns the shape, dimension, and juxtaposition of things, whose interactions continuously alter their positions in time and space. This space, however, is not merely physical; it is rather a surreal space in the sense that within its boundaries exist both the physical and the metaphysical (although Ashbery might object to that term). Ashbery wants to identify the forms of energy that create the sensible layer of appearances, or, more metaphorically, wants to see how the changing light of days and seasons reveals or conceals the

shape of objects and events. The search for knowledge of things as they exist in the amalgam of time is made more complicated, more rewarding, more nearly complete, though it is always by definition uncompleted. Characteristically, Ashbery is aware of time as a simultaneous past-present-future complex. This simultaneity is necessary, for all three components of the complex change with each moment of existence. The failure to recognize the continuous fact of change or, conversely, the willingness to embrace the future determines how accurately we can perceive, as O'Hara put it, "the actual matter of natural events,"¹⁸ the apprehension of which is possible only through an act of the imagination.

Not surprisingly, many of the poems in Some Trees dramatize different perspectives on childhood and the often traumatic experience of leaving the "age of innocence." Throughout these poems one feels and hears an expression of loss, the emptiness left by mistaking transformation for obliteration. Anxiety about the destruction of identity or of the familiar world, or the horror of new, unknown, and seemingly grotesque forms becomes imaged as "a half-eaten child" under "the day's crust" ("The Pied Piper," 79). "Change is horror" (41), declares the poet-adviser in "The Picture of Little J. A." Similarly, a "ghastly change" occurs in "Grand Abacus" (41) as a series of transformations on "the head of long ago days" is wrought simultaneously by the monstrous abacus of time and the abacus of poetic wit. When the computations have been performed, birds return in search of the children, but "it is too late" (45)--the children have vanished. Any sense of horror at the sudden disappearance without further comment by the poet is both mitigated and yet made more frightening by the ingenuous, childlike tone which con-

cludes the poem. Ashbery simply allows the poem to end without satisfying our curiosity concerning the children's whereabouts. A partial answer is offered in "And You Know" when the growing children, realizing the teacher "want[s] us to come back," answer that "it is too late to come back, isn't it?" (69). And then they break "out of the humid classroom, into the forever" (69). So they have left the teacher (with a "vase of tears" on his desk) and "us" in a stuffy, muggy interior, a school-house whose "atmosphere is breathless" (67). Though the implication is partly ambiguous, one strong possibility stands clear: to stay in the past is to cease breathing, to remain trapped like the dying court in "Pantoum." Even if the bonds are beautiful, like the gold wire protecting the schoolgirls or the "silver storm" (43) surrounding the court, the process of growth, as the poet declares in "Illustration," requires for "much that is beautiful [to] be discarded . . ." (60).

The typical experience in these poems, that of childhood, is symbolic of the past in general, as any passing into the future is analogous to the traumatic transition from innocence to experience. The crucial question for the poet becomes how to deal constructively with the past, how to integrate the function of memory into the whole being without paralysis. As Ashbery admits in "The Picture of Little J. A.," "I cannot escape the picture / Of my small self in that bank of flowers" (40); in other words, he is attempting to reconcile his childhood prediction of the future with the reality that future has become as the present. Foresight proved erroneous; hindsight provides a truer "picture." As the words which preserve experience become "displaced" by new experiences and new words, they become "lost words" in whose "light" is the only way "to

imagine our rewards" (41). But the key perhaps is the child's attitude --"accepting / Everything, taking nothing" (40)--a receptivity and yet indifference which is "the true" version of himself, true not because the child accurately predicted the future but because he approached it with the proper attitude.

Ashbery also realizes that, like one's personal past, consciousness of the historical past profoundly affects one's idea of himself and what he can do. In "Album Leaf," the poet questions the optimistic premises and the efficacy of our humanistic heritage:

What can we achieve, aspiring?
And what, aspiring, can we achieve?
(38)

The reason for the poet's skepticism is the apparent impact of biological determinism, symbolized by Mendel's genetic experiments with "green peas in dark gardens" (38). But rather than resolve the issue, Ashbery leaves the question open: what kinds of basic laws limit us? And given these limitations, what is it possible for us to accomplish? Previously, Ashbery has emphasized the difficulty of discerning what was and what is, the knowledge of reality in the light of an everchanging past and present. However, by raising these questions, he begins to shift attention to the future, to the idea of possibility, of what can be.

As the time-change theme further develops in Some Trees, one of the most notable of the major controlling ideas in Ashbery's poetry emerges: the journey metaphor. The maturing students represented by the plural persona in "And You Know" are imaginatively revisiting their former "fond" schoolmaster and his school, but they are always traveling on, tracing "the erratic path of time" (68) and dreaming of the places they

will journey to. However, the epitome of the journey motif is realized in "The Instruction Manual," as the bored and restless technical writer embarks on a marvelous journey during which he daydreams his way through the streets and the minds of the people of Guadalajara. The daydreamer is ever mindful, to be sure, of the relation between his departure point, the present experience he is savoring, and the inevitable return to the place of origin. Given the inescapable fact that time always flows onward, the journey is important to Ashbery because it implies the traveler's acceptance of time and change and symbolizes his willingness to participate in it actively. The journey takes on even greater significance when we observe how Ashbery has embedded it in two poems about teaching and learning. Thus, in a single motif, he unites two ideas fundamental to his poetry: the search for knowledge in the flux of time.

Consciousness of the flow of time is impossible without reference points, which are of two essential kinds: a being's recognition of itself as an autonomous unit and his recognition of entities outside the self. Much if not all of Ashbery's poetry attempts to apprehend reality through consciousness of self and world. Implicit in such a statement is the idea that reality is neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective, that it is rather something created out of and greater than the sum of its parts. But the fundamental problem in the search for the real is the concern of epistemology: what is real and how do we know it? what is it possible to know? These are tough questions that Ashbery attacks from many different vantage points, thus the variety, the difficulty, the richness, and the honesty of his work. What may appear to be inconsistency in the resolution of these questions is in actuality a consistent effort

to answer and prove that change is indeed the supreme law of existence. The second law is the attitude of "accepting / Everything, taking nothing."

The opening poem of Some Trees clearly establishes these two major concerns, knowledge and reality. "We see us as we truly behave" (21), announces the unidentified speaker of "Two Scenes." Already, there is present the reflection motif, the idea (cf. The Heroes) of seeing oneself as an entity outside the self, as in a mirror. In this case the mirror is external reality, made vividly clear by two lines of Stevensian imagery:

We see you in your hair,
Air resting around the tips of mountains.
(21)

The emphasis in Part I is on how things behave and thus how the behavior of external phenomena enables one to see himself more clearly. Part II shifts the emphasis from acting and behaving to what is; the overall effect is more nearly static, like a still life. The predominantly linking verbs draw attention to the function of the statements in II, that is, to either establish identities or equivalencies and to attribute true qualities to objects and events, for "This is perhaps a day of general honesty" (21). Note, however, the tentativeness of the qualifier "perhaps." There is also present in the tone and contents of II a distinct sense of something more than is apparent. In line one, a common natural substance, rain, "anoints the canal machinery" (21). The image teases us to consider whether or how a mere mechanical contrivance can be or be made to appear "consecrated"; the other possibility is that the rain simply makes the machinery appear to glisten as if with holy oil.

Nevertheless, the line suggests that even the most mundane of everyday objects may be seen as extraordinary in a moment of altered or enhanced perspective. Again, as the poem closes, the poet leaves us with a tantalizing statement:

In the evening
Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is.
(21)

This taunt of the "laughing cadets" inaugurates what seems to be a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek, with the poet, as many readers have charged, making the ground rules. More charitably, and more accurately, Ashbery sets out to discover the elusive rules in an attempt to "find out what it is," to "see us as we truly behave."

Even if we remain convinced that the poet's recalcitrance is deliberate, we can still accept in the concluding lines of "Two Scenes" some clues about what to expect in Some Trees. The word "everything" is especially important, for it suggests that the subjects or contents of the poems will include just that--everything--which in turn makes an enormous range of poetic techniques and language not only possible but necessary. Furthermore, Ashbery's embracing of "everything" may be identified as the drive toward inclusiveness, the constant effort to acknowledge, if not account for, all phenomena within and beyond the self. The "self" in his poetry includes not only the rational faculty which orders experience, but also and equally all personal consciousness of feelings, thoughts, dreams, free flow of mental images and sensations, memories, and desires for the future. The external world is thus all phenomena and all entities outside the self. Neither realm exists without impinging upon the other, as Ashbery has already amply demonstrated, in "Some

Trees" and The Heroes, for example, so that experience, knowledge--indeed being--evolve dialectically. In the language of the journey metaphor, the traveller may never truly return to the point of departure.

The clearest, fullest, most artful rendering of Ashbery's chief concerns in Some Trees is one of his few longer poems at this stage, "The Instruction Manual." For a poet who writes in a post-romantic world of gods who worship line drawings of mortal women and heroes who act like ordinary men, the question persists: does there now exist the possibility of transcendence, a feeling of illumination that comes when we "see into the life of things"? For as "The Instruction Manual" illustrates, existence is an ordinary phenomenon in which the moments of insight are always imminent and possible but not always achieved. That "the readiness is all" is as true for Ashbery as for Hamlet; it requires an attitude of receptivity, the willingness to accept contradiction and mystery, and the desire to honestly recognize and encounter the other.

Already in his poetic career Ashbery has shown that the poem is an autonomous being capable of transforming both its maker and its audience, even of acting as intermediary between the two and agent of their merging ("Some Trees"). The exchange between two beings is symbolized by what Ashbery is in the process of shaping into the fundamental linguistic and philosophical principle of his poetry. This is the use of the personal pronoun, especially "you," to signify the relationship of the poet and his audience, the self and the other. "The Instruction Manual" begins with "I," as the poet drifts from the boring task at hand to the excitement of the daydream. After intensely observing the people of Guadalajara, the poet brings the audience into his dream ("Lét us

experience, the imaginative journey. In a very basic way, it is a journey whose footprints are the words themselves, the "lost words" which make it possible for us to "imagine our rewards" ("The Picture of Little J. A.," 41). Here, the reward has been the heightened consciousness, the exhilaration of imaginatively entering the lives of others. It is also the realization that the transcendent moment cannot exist without the mundane, for it is the instruction manual "which has made me dream of Guadalajara." Even though return to the task at hand is inevitable, that seemingly uneventful enterprise contains within itself the seeds of other transcendent moments. Surely, the writer's instruction manual represents the imaginative need or "deprivation" essential to "All beauty, resonance, integrity" ("Le Livre," 84).

In "The Instruction Manual," therefore, the poet in a state of readiness and receptivity, accepting time and change as universal givens, embarks on an imaginative journey from which he returns with a greater knowledge of himself and others and with the awareness of his transformation. The poem too has a certain self-awareness in the same way that The Heroes, for example, is conscious of its own being and making. The persons or consciousnesses that inhabit The Heroes, or even "Turandot," make little effort to keep up the pretense of "suspended disbelief": they remind the audience of the work's artificiality, climb out onto the roof of the structure, and survey the "whole edifice" (The Heroes, 51). Similarly, the visitors in "The Instruction Manual" ascend the church tower to look out over the town and the life of Guadalajara. But Ashbery accomplishes in the poem an even more satisfying esthetic self-awareness through the device of the "tiny . . . convex mirror"²⁰ placed near the

beginning of the poem, just after the poet has arrived in Guadalajara. To his delight and our edification, he finds the band playing Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade, the story of stories whose self-reflexive nature is analogous to that of "The Instruction Manual." Just as this paragon of stories is a story about stories, a story literally made up of many stories, so the poem, as we have seen, is the epitome of instruction manuals. The Ashbery poem usually furnishes its readers with clues to its own dynamics; in later poems we will find the poet making decisions and asking questions normally attended to prior to the poem's "final" state. The result of this self-reflexiveness is the enlargement of the contents of poetry to admit more of the world, to reflect or simply be made out of the flux of consciousness and experience, and that includes the process of writing poetry. What Ashbery has begun to do in these early poems is to narrow the space that has traditionally separated art and "reality." The poem for Ashbery is, therefore, both allusive and inclusive; it alludes to itself, to the external world, to other art works; it includes every voice, every kind of diction (thus Ashbery's effort to "salvage" the cliché), every "subject," every morsel of consciousness.

Carried to the extreme, this inclusiveness eventually becomes no less than the seemingly unqualified, unrestricted permission which the leaders of dada and surrealism proclaimed and endeavored to practice. The question of surrealism as a legitimate influence on Ashbery's work has frequently been raised as readers have turned to the principles of André Breton and the French surrealists²¹ to shed light on the often unorthodox and puzzling poetics in Ashbery's early volumes. In the first two books, Turandot and Some Trees, the presence of dream elements, the

blurring of realms, the coexistence of contradictory states or propositions, paradox, and dissociation clearly indicate esthetic premises and/or effects akin to those of surrealism. In fact, when Some Trees is read in the context of Breton's Manifestoes of Surrealism (1924), much that troubles readers of even the keenest perceptions suddenly is rendered less impenetrable and more "manageable." Manageability eventually becomes, however, a willingness to grant to certain poems their mystery, inscrutability, their refusal to yield wholly to analysis. Whether Ashbery had read the Manifestoes or knew of Breton's ideas during the early 1950's is difficult to say and, in the final analysis, is of debatable consequence. As Ashbery wrote in his 1968 statement, "Dada and Surrealism," the effects on surrealism on twentieth-century art and literature are so pervasive and so profound that no one can escape them. In the sense "of being able to do as we please," Ashbery says, "we are all indebted to Surrealism; the significant art of our time could not have been produced without it."²²

Although Ashbery acknowledges his debt to surrealism, and although much of Turandot, Some Trees, and The Tennis Court Oath seems purely surreal according to Breton's definition of psychic automatism,²³ Ashbery has consistently declined to be categorized as a surrealist. He has also assessed, with incisive critical "indifference," the exact degree to which surrealism was truly a revolutionary and liberating phenomenon. "Like all revolutions," ironically, surrealism "substituted some new restrictions for old ones, limiting its direct effectiveness and eventually bringing about its own decay as a movement, though its effectiveness as a catalyst continues."²⁴ In literature, the freedom which the surrealists

envisioned and prescribed meant automatic writing, but, Ashbery asks,

what is so free about that? Real freedom would be to use this method where it could be of service and to correct it with the conscious mind where indicated. And in fact the finest writing of the Surrealists is the product of the conscious and the unconscious working hand in hand, as they have been wont to do in all ages.²⁵

It is precisely Ashbery's own search for his "real" poetic freedom which begins in Turandot and Some Trees and manifests itself in the simultaneous existence of the inclusive impulse and the elliptical. In the next volume, The Tennis Court Oath, this principle of exclusion will dominate. These two impulses may well be a source of tension for a poet engaged in finding his voice; at the same time, the fact of their coexistence may prove that Ashbery's sensibility is truly surreal. But there is also the strong likelihood that these opposing, or complementary, tendencies are ultimately sources of creative energy and the components of a poetic language yet to evolve.

CHAPTER III

THE TURNING POINT

Several months before Some Trees was published (March 28, 1956), Ashbery won a Fulbright and departed for France, where he would live and write for most of the next ten years. He was first assigned to the University of Montpellier, but found himself lonely and disoriented in a place whose language he could not yet speak and whose people he could not understand.¹ This dissatisfaction led Ashbery to move to Paris in 1956; there he stayed until 1966.

Although the critical reception of Some Trees was not especially encouraging, Ashbery continued to write poetry and to prepare his next major volume of verse, The Tennis Court Oath (1962). But poetry did not make up the bulk of the writing that Ashbery produced in the first six years of his "French period"; he was much more prolific as a critic and a translator. He contributed literary reviews to Poetry and French Review; he began in 1957 what was to become a long association with Art News; and in the summer of 1960 he assumed a five-year post as art critic for the Paris edition of the New York Herald Tribune. Despite the demands of touring enough galleries and assimilating enough information for the weekly Tribune column, Ashbery also wrote for Aujourd'hui and Art International and in 1960 assumed editorship of a short-lived journal named, in honor of Raymond Roussel, Locus Solus. By this time, Ashbery was familiar

enough with the French language to translate Jean-Jacques Mayoux's Melville and the poetry of Reverdy, Breton, Eluard, Char, Roche, Pleynet, and to write some of his critical articles in French.

This sustained and intense intimacy with French and with inter-continental "vanguard"² art, music, and literature has prompted many admirers and critics of Ashbery to speculate on, and often fabricate, the affinities between his poetry and these forces. The search for such tangible connections took on an almost frantic energy when Ashbery's third volume, The Tennis Court Oath, confronted readers in March of 1962. Even if the poet had made at least a modest, respectable start with Some Trees, no one was quite prepared for The Tennis Court Oath. Some readers were fascinated, a few genuinely excited and impressed; but most were dumbfounded, exasperated, or even insulted. A few critics saw talent beneath the chaos, but the majority found only "a stunt," "a joke," or "a bog." Those who tried to explain or defend the poetry turned, partly as a last resort, to analogies with music and painting or to the esthetics of avant-garde French writers. Underlying this entire range of responses to the new book was the consensus that Ashbery's work could not be read as ordinary poetry, or even as poetry at all.

The "trouble" with The Tennis Court Oath is that it continued and carried to its logical end one of the two strong tendencies that informed Turandot and Some Trees: the impulse toward the disjunctive, the fragmentary, the elliptical--the esthetic of exclusion. What gets excluded are the normal connectives that make the discrete units of language cohere into "meaning" as we ordinarily understand it. What Ashbery substitutes are unusual methods of composition, notation, and typography.

To augment our discomfort, the themes and the dominant tone of the poetry are distinctively anxiety-ridden, marked by a pervasive sense of urgency, disorder, and absence and deprivation. Still, the familiar triad of concerns in the previous poetry forms the backbone of The Tennis Court Oath: the search for knowledge in the flux of time through the agency of the imagination. An accurate assessment of the volume requires us, therefore, first to acknowledge those qualities which establish its kinship with the earlier and the later poetry. The newer and more troubling elements may then stand in clearer perspective, as will the attempts of critics and the poet himself to explain this seemingly unsatisfactory but very important phase of his career.

The journey metaphor, the dominant feature of Some Trees, remains central to the constant quest for knowledge of reality (self and world) as it changes with each passing moment of existence. And since time continually separates or destroys the bonds that have been made and the relationships that have been understood, loss results and with it the sorrow of change and the need for replacement, re-forming the connections. The journey, the travelers, and their purpose may be vague and unidentified, as in the surreal slow-motion of "The Unknown Travelers." In "The Ticket," the journey and the ticket play double roles: they have effected the speaker's separation from "you," and now the ticket represents "those love letters" (43), which presumably symbolize a journey of return to the loved one. Absence, sorrow, and "people far away" are also part of "The Suspended Life," in which we find a woman "under heavy sedation" (36) is embarked on a round-the-world cruise aboard the Zephyr. Though her trip stays suspended between "hope and death," the world and learning go on: "The weath-

er continues, the children are on their way to school" (38). However, the alienated wanderer of "The Idiot" ("Two Sonnets," 2.) eventually finds friendly mariners (and even friendly waves) whom he joins in the struggle to save their ship from sinking. In the same positive vein, those "Leaving the Atocha Station" on a kaleidoscopic train trip discover that "suddenly . . . we are close," "you are freed," and there will be a "next time around" (33, 34, 34).

In essence, the journey or voyage in The Tennis Court Oath becomes both a condition of separation and an attempt at reconciliation. The very means of holding people and society together--language--is often fragmented in these poems, and thus the very efficacy of the word, indeed of poetry, is called into doubt. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the poems full of certain persistent motifs: absence, entrapment, and disorder, on the one hand, and, on the other, expectancy, liberation, and (re)union. These major concerns, as the volume title clearly suggests, are not merely personal; the scope of The Tennis Court Oath is global ("a trip around the world") and historical. Through his choice of title and in the individual poems, Ashbery implies clearly that the distances of space and time which separate us are enormous, that the revolutionary turmoil of nations parallels the growing pains of individuals, and that the memory of one's past necessarily includes the history of one's civilization.

Appropriately enough, Ashbery explores in the title poem the personal relationship in a public and historical context and prepares the reader for the task that awaits him throughout the book:

What had you been thinking about
the face studiously bloodied
heaven blotted region
I go on loving you like water but

there is a terrible breath in the way of all this
 You were not elected president, yet won the race
 All the way through fog and drizzle
 When you read it was sincere the coasts
 stammered with unintentional villages the
 horse strains fatigued I guess . . . the calls . . .
 I worry

(11)

In form, the poem is free and irregular; the syntax is broken; unfinished thoughts flow into other incomplete phrases; ambiguity arises from the syntax, punctuation, and ellipsis; location in time and space is vague; comparisons are often odd; various voices float in and out of the poem. As in the earlier poetry, the narrative urge is strong, and the simultaneous awareness of past, present, and future is evident in a line that carries both an allusion to the historical Tennis Court Oath and a bearing on the situation at hand: "there was no turning back but the end was in sight" (12). The circumstances, however stingily outlined, appear to turn on the act of choosing, apparently the public decision by "you" to run for president and the private decision "to ask her about her family and the others" (12). Furthermore, throughout the narrative runs an undercurrent of violence and injury (blood), illness (the doctor, the patient), and fear--all forms of disorder in the human body and in the body politic. Nor can we discount the possibility dangled before us that the whole poem could have been spoken by a delirious patient or an inmate in the asylum of Marat-Sade:

the patient finished
 They could all go home now the hole was dark
 lilacs blowing across his face glad he brought you
 (12)

Nevertheless, the concluding image, despite the mad scrambled syntax of the last line, resolves the preceding tension into a pleasant, restorative

image.

As the poem indicates, Ashbery's interest in the historical, social, and political is more pronounced in The Tennis Court Oath than anywhere else in his poetry, earlier or later. A preoccupation with nationality and geography is present in such poems as "America," "'They Dream Only of America,'" "Idaho," and "Europe." Skepticism and tentativeness, especially as regards the possibility of knowledge, has not been an unusual motif in Ashbery's previous poetry, but now the skepticism or disillusionment is directed to the established order and takes on a bitterness not often found in his tone. "A White Paper" (Ashbery's own government report) speaks of "political contaminations" (32): and in "the stars and stripes forever" the speaker of "White Roses" finds that

No stars are there,
No stripes,
But a blind man's cane poking, however clumsily, into the inmost
corners of the house.

(35)

In all, a basic principle persists: the threat to, the absence of, the desire for coherence, whether in the sense of one's being connected to a person, a place, a government, a culture, a language, or in the sense of words' being connected to their meanings. Twelve years after The Tennis Court Oath was published, Ashbery remarked in a public reading that the poems of this volume (in particular, "Thoughts of a Young Girl," "'They Dream Only of America,'" and "'How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher . . .") "reflect my being cut off from my native tongue and thinking a lot about America."³

No poem more succinctly expresses this condition of separation and more fully embodies the major motifs of The Tennis Court Oath than "'They

Dream Only of America.'" But Ashbery does not write an overtly autobiographical poem, although the techniques he employs to distance himself from the poem's speakers do call attention to themselves. Nevertheless, the thirty-year-old unidentified "he" and his companions ("we") drive through a dream landscape, toward what is uncertain, presumably to return "him" to his home, where he "went slowly into the bedroom" (13). With customary ambivalence, the bedroom represents both the place of dreams (wishes) and love, and a place of enclosure, which together suggest his deprivation or alienation. There he speaks of his loss:

"There is nothing to do
For our liberation, except wait in the horror of it.

And I am lost without you."

(13)

As usual, Ashbery leaves the "you" unspecified. The multiple possibilities of the pronoun's reference--to another person (a loved one), to a fragmented part of himself, to a generalized world outside the self, or to America--are all viable. They also exemplify a predominant feature of The Tennis Court Oath: the inescapable awareness of one's self as inextricably tied to the larger social and political forces in the world. The implication of the final lines is that a state of loss, caused by separation from "you," is a form of imprisonment, from which "he" awaits liberation. The speaker is well aware, however, that liberation means change and that "change is horror" ("The Picture of Little J. A.," Some Trees).

Although "'They Dream'" demonstrates in The Tennis Court Oath the presence of the dream impulse and the tendency of many poems to resist rational understanding, "America" more fully expresses the two complementary principles--those that dissociate and those that associate--in the

language of fragmentation, the very cause of woe for Ashbery and his readers. Throughout the five vers libre sections, Ashbery scatters key words and images which, by virtue of repetition, give unity, tone, and theme to the poem. The technique here is simply a variant of the compositional principle of such strict forms (sestina, canzone, pantoum) as he employed in earlier works--randomly chosen words in an arbitrary order. Predictably, political and military images associated with the theme of disorder, or the absence of order and freedom, predominate: accident, anarchy, horror, arsenal, sentry, petals armed with a chain. At the same time, the poem is remarkably full of imagery of the natural order: stars, sunlight, fire, rain, snow, the sea, storms, flowers, apples, trees, of which two take on a special significance vis-à-vis the poem's major themes. In particular, stars in cluster or composite form link the natural night sky and "the flag of film / waving over the sky" (i.e., stars and stripes), toward both of which the speaker of the poem has ambivalent feelings: "And I am proud / of these stars in our flag we don't want" (18). The second image, that of snow, assumes importance in stanza three, when it appears in conjunction with "messenger"; together they signal the emergence of expectancy, the anticipation of a momentous event. These two natural images symbolize two contradictory forces at work in the poems, one urging negation and separation--"love / parting the separate lives" (16), "his misanthropy" (19)--the other urging freedom and communication.

The noticeable tone of anxiety in The Tennis Court Oath also appears concurrently with, indeed because of, other manifestations of absence. One form of absence Ashbery has already explored in Some Trees: the loss that results from the continual departure of the present into the

past and the realm of memory, more specifically imaged by the passage out of childhood. The theme continues in The Tennis Court Oath but has darkened considerably with the realization that death belongs to the growth-change-separation-loss complex. Consequently, all the poems that treat the subject of childhood or youth now also consider the fact of death, the ultimate absence. At the same time the curious young voices of "Our Youth" are discovering coffee, they are also seeing dead puppies, dead horses, even a dead hand; yet they still casually assume that what is dead "perhaps . . . will never rot" (41). The idea of decay, the process of obliteration, is simply beyond them. In "Night" the memory of youth in a dreamlike sequence is inseparable from the "idea of death," "the easy aspirin" for the pain of living (22); yet there is a greater acceptance of the fact, almost a welcoming of it. In a similar vein, the sleep of children in "The Lozenges" stands in the background of the speaker's meditation, especially his conclusion that "we all have graves to travel from" (49). Ashbery most noticeably addresses the question of death in a strange poem called "The Ascetic Sensualists," a mixture of irregular introductory stanzas, a prose paragraph, eleven "funerals," and a final prose passage explaining "why the funeral décors" (54). To be sure, the poem is full of images and implements of death--knives, decapitation, a "pearl-handled revolver raped gun" (52)--but the writer of the final paragraph attributes "the funeral décors" rather generally to "the farewell [that] was taking place" (54). Again, the mention of a trip recalls the sense of isolation the traveler of "The Suspended Life" feels and emphasizes this important variant on the death-absence theme.

Separation, or alienation, is literally a kind of living death,

and it is through the pervasive imagery of enclosure, entrapment, and entombment that Ashbery explores this anguished condition with great frequency throughout The Tennis Court Oath. The situation exists, as we observed, in "'They Dream,'" though here two kinds of enclosure exist side by side. The children in stanza two are "hiding from darkness in barns" (13), self-imposing their imprisonment out of fear. But they can be grownups now, says the speaker, and thus come out of hiding. Yet the grownup figure in the poem finds himself in similar circumstances, from which he is awaiting release. Elsewhere, Ashbery is more explicit: there are rooms, storerooms, and prisons in "Night"; a shadow raves inside a trunk ("An Additional Poem"); the "bars had been removed from all the windows" (62) in "The New Realism." Sometimes, however, mere release is not the answer. After acknowledging that "our youth is dead" (41), the young adults of "Our Youth" admit that although they have escaped "down the cloud ladder" their problem "has not been solved" (42).

The example par excellence of the entombment motif in all its implications is the haunting "'How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher . . .'" The speaker of the poem finds himself in a peculiar paradox. He indicates willingness, even desire, to "inhabit the divine sepulcher of life" (25), to continue living despite the fact that he images life as restrictive or emblematic of death. But the uniqueness of the paradox is that its apparent contradiction is only apparent, for life is fatal eventually, and our lives, as the Elizabethans said, are our true tombs and monuments.

The real subject of the poet's meditation, then, is life, existence, and a consideration of what promotes it. (Significantly, the poem begins

and ends with questions which are not answered.) We encounter first several inversion images, forces pulling downward or holding things under, away from light. "Do dolphins" (those messengers between two worlds) "plunge bottomward / To find the light?" (25). The underground images then become linked with the idea of time and growth, that of children and that of Western man. Invoking both personal memories of childhood and the history of civilization, the poet recalls trading suckers, dating, and being "one of the few / To have held my breath under the house" (25). On the larger historical scale, the speaker wonders how man managed to grow up from "under the tulip roots" (26) and become a civilized being, a creature both of reason and of faith. The question is so applicable to both the child and the man:

But where in unsuitable heaven
Can he get the heat that will make him grow?
(26)

The poet appears to leave the question hanging in mid-air, but what follows may offer a clue. The meditation on growth glides into scenes involving hands engaged in acts of parting ("We say goodbye / Shaking hands"), providing sustenance (tending plants, eating), and reaching out--"Hands that are always writing things / On mirrors for people to see later" (26). The bonds between human beings are the source of energy, the condition of growth, the hope for coherence.

In the most fundamental way, the language of The Tennis Court Oath is the metaphor of its spiritual and emotional contents, for the centrifugal force which breaks up syntax and meaning also has dissociated the poet from the world. Consequently, the anxiety of alienation generates an equally strong tone of expectancy and hope and a new vocabulary to convey

it: the verbal and nonverbal modes of communication. In hopes of effecting union or reunion, the personae of these poems either reach out for the other actively, through writing or delivering letters, or maintain a state of anxious receptivity to signs and signals "from the great outside" ("America," 19). In any case, the attempts to re-establish contact represent release from the spiritual and emotional prisons so ubiquitous in this volume. Appropriately enough, the letters are almost always love letters, as in "Thoughts of a Young Girl," "The Ticket," and "Rain." The black-and-white tile imagery of "Rain" not only provides a stark backdrop for the theme of separation ("Taxis took us far apart" 287), but also symbolize the colors of writing--the dark ink and the blank white page. Though a letter does arrive (in II.), by section III. "the crumb of confidence" (30) is missing and the remainder of the poem depicts images of loss, an impending storm, falling behind in a race, and being deserted, even by nature:

The third of runners who are upon you are past you
 The opal snows the moppet
 You behind me in the van
 The flat sea rushing away

(31)

Another significant feature of this poem, "Rain," and of "How Much Longer . . ." and "America" as well, is the association of glass, mirrors, and windows with the effort to overcome separation. The "reflection of the face" and "the deep prune of the mirror" (30) in "Rain" may well represent a turning in on oneself as a result of rejection or thwarted efforts to make contact. The windows are somewhat ambivalent, for they may be open, allowing things to be "blown in the window" (28), or closed, permitting a view of the outside but nevertheless serving as a transparent

barrier. The prospects are more hopeful in the other two poems. Contact between inside and outside, self and world, however tentative and mysterious it may be, is accomplished in "America" when

A feather not snow blew against the window.
A signal from the great outside.

(19)

"How Much Longer . . ." offers even more promising possibilities in the marvelous image of "hands that are always writing things / On mirrors for people to see later" (26). The medium of the word is endowed with the power to enable the viewer (reader) to see both himself and the other (writer) simultaneously.

This simultaneity, this double consciousness of The Heroes continues in Ashbery's work a major strain: the self-reflexive awareness of the poetic process. In the context of the anxiety that pervades this volume, the insistence of his poetry to comment on its own being and making takes on an even greater poignancy and significance. Doubting the efficacy and coherence of the word, and the world as well, yet still believing that writing is his only hope of achieving communion, the poet continues to address "you to whom I write" ("The Ascetic Sensualists," 54). The pronoun "you" is admittedly slippery: it may indicate the way we talk about or to ourselves without using the uncomfortable first-person, or it can represent the fictional addressee who exists within the formal world of the poem. But Ashbery speaks to "you" with sufficient urgency and frequency that he may well be directly approaching "you" the reader, for throughout The Tennis Court Oath one feels that the poet is always on the verge of breaking through formal poetic barriers. He does, on occasion, lament the fact that "you do not trust me anymore," for he has given "you" a "torn

page with a passionate oasis" which is now "in flames" ("The New Realism," 60, 59, 61). In short, the poet seems to acknowledge his limited control over a sometimes recalcitrant language; here we recall the teaching of Theseus in The Heroes: all entities are autonomous and therefore may not submit themselves to our control or reveal their meaning. As Ashbery explains in "Dido,"

The body's products become
Fatal to it. Our spit
Would kill us, but we
Die of our heat.
Though I say the things I wish to say
They are needless, their own flame conceives it.
So I am cheated of perfection.

(20)

Thus, even one's words, once released, are not one's own; they take on their own life and power. The autonomy of the reader creates a more difficult situation in "Measles," where speaker and audience have an adversary relationship:

I oppose with all the forces of my will
Your declaration. You are right
To do so. The street catches auburn
Reflections, the start is here.
You may have been well.
You limit me to what I say.
The sense of the words is
With a backward motion, pinning me
To the daylight mode of my declaration.

But ah, night may not tell
The source!

(46)

Even if these lines do not go far to decipher the often impenetrable poems in this volume, they do succeed in offering a precise though partial explanation of their elusiveness. To understand only the "daylight" (rational or conscious) meaning of Ashbery's disjunctive, surreal poems is difficult if not impossible, simply because they have their origin in "night,"

the place of dreams, which perform marvelous permutations on their raw materials. The poet may also be admitting here that these poems will never yield to the scrutiny of others and would thus appear to negate or severely qualify the otherwise strong need in The Tennis Court Oath to reach out and to be understood.

The pervading tone of the volume is, in fact, one of qualification. Throughout, the opening lines of "The New Realism" echo again and again:

I have lost the beautiful dreams
That enlisted on waking,
Cold and waiting. That world is a war now. . . .
(59)

It is this condition of loss and chaos which finds, ironically, serene and remarkably coherent expression in "A Last World." In the global, historical spirit of The Tennis Court Oath, Ashbery presents a historical overview that is at once personal and universal, a sweeping meditation on time, change, truth, memory, salvation, and love (or the absence thereof):

These wonderful things
Were planted on the surface of a round mind that was to become our
present time.
The mark of things belongs to someone
But if that somebody was wise
Then the whole of things might be different
From what it was thought to be in the beginning, before an angel
bandaged the field glasses.
Then one could say nothing hear nothing
Of what the great time spoke to its divisors.
All borders between men were closed.
Now all is different without having changed
As though one were to pass through the same street at different
times
And nothing that is old can prefer the new.
(56)

The poet continues in this vein, considering how cold is the truth that the universe is inconstant, that "once a happy old man / One can never change the core of things," how the "six frock coats today" become "six

black fungi tomorrow" (57). Even the vital forces associated with the primitive ritual have become "a rite of torpor, dust" (58). As if the world is being reduced to the elemental in a final holocaust,

Everything is being blown away;
A little horse trots up with a letter in its mouth, which is read
with eagerness
As we gallop into the flame.

(58)

Yet, in the face of this apocalyptic negation, the poet offers us a kind of indomitable quest-figure who attends "eagerly" to a last-minute message of hope.

"A Last World" is exemplary in The Tennis Court Oath because it employs the mode of coherence to express the forces of dissociation, in spite of those forces. By contrast, the major poem of this volume is truly what Kostelanetz calls "a classic of coherent diffuseness."⁴ With few exceptions, however, most readers would omit the word "coherent," for "Europe" impresses many as an accident passed off as a poem. Nevertheless, "Europe" deserves more than cursory attention for several reasons. It does, first of all, embody all the major themes and images present in The Tennis Court Oath. Second, it is rich in a variety of inventive and unusual poetic techniques. But its most significant single feature is its length: "Europe" is the first of Ashbery's long poems. When questioned in the 1972 Craft Interview about his general fondness for the long poem, Ashbery replied that it "gets much closer to a whole reality than the shorter ones do."⁵ Though he does not write long poems to the exclusion of briefer ones, this remark serves to remind us that in The Tennis Court Oath and subsequent volumes Ashbery never abandons the idea that the creative process makes possible the search for reality and being. And, as

in Turandot and Some Trees, "a whole reality" necessarily includes the flux of the poet's consciousness through time. In many respects, however, "Europe" is much closer to psychic automatism than to a harmonious union of conscious and unconscious. And here the question of esthetic standards confronts us once again. In general, automatic writing is not necessarily synonymous with, does not necessarily produce art, as Ashbery himself stated in his 1966 review of Chirico's novel Hebdomeros.⁶ Later, concerning "Europe" in particular, Ashbery admitted that he no longer felt much affection for or interest in it. He wrote the poem during the early years of his tenure in France (it was published in Big Table in 1960) in "a state of confusion about what I wanted to do."⁷ Feeling dissatisfied with his work, Ashbery "felt it was time just to clear my head by writing whatever came into it and that's very much the case with that poem; and I think it helped me along but I don't value it as much as ones I've written since."⁸

The responses of two critics to the poem "Europe" go to the heart of the esthetic problem: the relationship between art (poetic language) and life itself. When Breton had proposed that "language is the double of reality," he did not quite say that language is reality. Yet it is interesting to note what Kenneth Koch, Ashbery's friend and fellow poet, wrote after the appearance of the poem in 1960: "Europe" has "the illumination of language turned into life"⁹ (*italics mine*). Koch stops one step short of saying that Ashbery has transliterated life into language. But Ashbery has come so close to merging or identifying them that most readers begged for the orderliness associated with art and not to be expected in the apparent randomness of raw life. Reconsidering The Tennis

Court Oath in a 1966 review of Rivers and Mountains, critic Stephen Koch simply solved the problem by according it the scope already implicit in the title of the volume:

"Europe" is not a poem, but a "poetic notebook" of a man living in Europe, cut off from the nourishment of spoken English, and trying to keep the tonalities of the language fresh in his ear despite this "impoverishment." As such, the poem shows a certain strength of purpose: that of a poet who will use only a language that's alive for him and who is--like the disfranchised deputies who vowed not to give up until they had a constitution--standing firm in the midst of confusion, scavenging the rubbish of language in search of a voice.¹⁰

Though perhaps a harsh term, "scavenging" is indeed part of the method of composition that produced "Europe." For example, Ashbery would use a random phrase from an American magazine like Esquire to spark a flow of words. Or he would simply "appropriate" snippets from "Beryl of the Biplane," the British children's story of a World War I aviatrix.¹¹ The "literary" sources are, of course, much more numerous and probably impossible to track down, partly because the impression of fragmentation is so overwhelming and the rearrangement of the pieces is so startling. This manner of arranging the bits of language inspired Kenneth Koch to praise "Europe" for its "new method of poetic notation."¹² The entire poem consists of 111 numbered sections, each of which differs from the others in form. Streams or patches of surreal imagery pervade the usually irregular and unrhymed lines; in addition, there are sections of narrative prose (#8) and lines of dialogue (#77). Sometimes the effects are a matter of typography--spacing the words in an unusual way, lining up parallel columns of verse, or setting words in the spaces of a grid (#104). Kenneth Koch argues that this "amazing technical inventiveness" allows Ashbery to "arrange details so as to create emotion."¹³ But the reader must be en-

dowed with sufficient imagination, flexibility, stamina, and patience to approach this verbal collage.

Although "Europe" appears to be a grab-bag devoid of much order or coherence except the illusion of sequence and continuity provided by the consecutively numbered sections, it does display a high degree of thematic unity. The backdrop and the dominant tone of this poem and the whole volume is upheaval, war, and revolution. Thus, in addition to Beryl and her biplane, there is a complex of war imagery: engines, machines, airplanes, zeppelins, guns, bombs, secrets, spying, physical suffering, death, corpses, "rotten stone flesh" (#14), funerals, darkness. There is the unnamed and ubiquitous enemy -- the "absolute, unthinking / menace to our way of life" (#7)--and the "formal tragedy of it all" (#39). Time is no longer the only force of destruction and dissociation, but it remains a central theme as past, present, and future are contemplated, as children still must be "dragged into next year" (#31), as a "ghost of stone" becomes the "recent past symbolized" (#85).

Even if the past leaves us only "bare" and "timeless" stones (#86, 87), "Europe" is not totally bleak. As in the volume as a whole, the impulse to coherence, reintegration, and meaningfulness exists simultaneously beside the threat of disintegration. Granted, however, the more positive urge does seem rather weak by comparison. The poet is concerned with distinguishing "the real thing" (#89) from illusion but apparently feels that "until the truth can be explained / Nothing can exist" (#13). Yet, the means of explanation and communication are everywhere--in books, newspapers, signs, notices, messages, telegraphs, letters. Still the poet seems to doubt the efficacy of the word, the "powerless creating images"

(#95), and realizes that everywhere there are secret codes to be cracked.

All these motifs appear in "Europe" much like the dots of color in a Seurat painting; seen from the proper distance, they produce recognizable colors and masses. Because of the fragmented language, the sudden appearance of something recognizable and tangible amid the placeless, timeless area, a sudden sense of narrative movement after floating in the same place, the reader does not sense a careful structure or progression for all these motifs. Nevertheless, curiously enough, sections 8 and 111 (the final one) create a frame for the poem. Section 8 is a prose account of Ronald Pryor and Collins, who are resting briefly "after the long run from Suffolk." The nature of their travel is not disclosed, but the tone of the paragraph and the fact they had started "long before daybreak" and "had been moving swiftly" do suggest a clandestine urgency. Without further ado, the passage ends abruptly: "All was now ready for the continuance of the journey." Ronald and Collins do not appear again until the final section of the poem, but the idea of the journey is picked up in scattered references to travelers, trains, ships, cars, and especially the Beryl story. It is also possible for the "journey" to signal the mental journey the poet is about to undertake. When "Ronald" resurfaces clearly in #111, ("Ronnie" has already appeared in #107), the poem closes as he and Collins witness a spectacular coded message being flashed upon the clouds by "A miniature searchlight of great brilliance, / --piercing the darkness, skyward" (#84). Ashbery once again leaves us on the edge of anticipation, about to break the code and receive the mysterious message.

Although it is possible to discern a general thematic unity among

"Europe" and the other poems of The Tennis Court Oath, finding a coherent structural principle is not a rewarding exercise. Thus critical response to the volume was largely negative, even though the reviewers tried to be charitable. R. W. Flint (1962) complained that The Tennis Court Oath was extremely disjointed, inconclusive, and "needlessly ponderous," yet he found in it a kind of "tonal" unity, a "cadence of feeling-sight."¹⁴ Mona Van Duyn, writing for Poetry the same year, said that "the strength and integrity of the poet's imagination" were evident in certain "isolated lines" and "exciting juxtapositions," but concluded that she "must leave to others" any "affection for his definition of poetry."¹⁵ In 1965, Jonathan Cott called Ashbery "America's most radically original poet,"¹⁶ but Friedman (1967), trying diligently to be fair, said Ashbery "was so original as to be unintelligible."¹⁷ Some explained that the poet was recreating the method and effects of action painting and collage techniques, but Harold Bloom (1973) countered that one cannot "translate" from one medium to another without destroying the original, i.e., poetry.¹⁸

Happily, Ashbery's reputation began to brighten considerably after Rivers and Mountains was published in 1966. Readers who feared that The Tennis Court Oath might represent a trend in the poetry must have been relieved when they found Rivers and Mountains to read more like the best of Some Trees. But the new volume did not so much return to the earlier poetry as embrace the principle of inclusion and continuity which was for the most part suppressed by its opposite in The Tennis Court Oath. Rivers and Mountains is unmistakably and characteristically Ashbery in its still intense concern for the ideas of time, the journey toward knowledge, and

the efficacy of art. More importantly, the volume marks in Ashbery the presence of a stronger, surer voice in the poetry as a whole and, in particular, his mastery of the long poem.

Judging from the tenor of the reviews, "The Skaters" would appear to be the book's raison d'être or at least the poem on which the whole volume would stand or fall. Writing for the New York Review of Books, Denis Donoghue focused exclusively on the long poem, "The Skaters," which, in spite of a few redeeming virtues, adds credence to his claim that the long poem is by definition "a freak of nature."¹⁹ Stephen Koch is more appreciative, calling "The Skaters" "the most successful long poem written by an American since Beryman and Lowell wrote theirs. . . ." But Koch's appreciation extends to the whole volume, which he says not only lifts Ashbery's work out of its earlier "gamey-ness" into "the realm of true seriousness" but also, and more importantly, "vindicates the search for voice in The Tennis Court Oath."²⁰

"The Skaters" takes on even more interest and significance when viewed in relation to the other poems in Rivers and Mountains and the developments they represent in Ashbery's poetic. The most dramatic change is the way Ashbery has expanded, clarified, and strengthened his major themes by couching them in a largely new vocabulary. The journey has clearly become a quest for knowledge and understanding through a terrain at once mental and physical. The simultaneous existence of known and unknown is acknowledged by the familiar but more frequent references to discovery, understanding, and reality, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the hidden, especially in the guises of secrets and puzzles. As in Some Trees, Ashbery ponders the possibility that the extraordinary moment of

insight may exist and perhaps be briefly attained even within the realm of ordinary experience. But what is new in Rivers and Mountains is the somewhat startling appearance of quasi-religious words like "magic," "mystery" (with overtones of "religious mystery"), and "miracles" and intriguing titles like "The Ecclesiast" and "Blessing in Disguise." And the sense of being on the verge of an imminent revelation is often evoked by the language of the threshold. What the poet may be on the threshold of has also been expanded beyond mere knowledge to include being. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the journey/quest proceeds toward a reward expressed in peculiarly philosophical, if not clearly religious, terms of value, promise, peace, blessing, exaltation, and renewal.

This optimistic language, however, does not signal an attitude of naïve hope or an absence of psychological or artistic struggles in Rivers and Mountains, although the tension and general uneasiness of The Tennis Court Oath are virtually gone. Instead, an attitude of watchfulness and preparedness prevails, expectation tempered by acceptance of limitation and accommodation. The poet acknowledges the possibility that the aids to facilitate the journey--blueprints, maps, menus, letters, messages--the agents which establish contact between the self and the other or which contain important information, may be misleading or impossible to decipher. In fact, it may be impossible to discern whether events are taking place on real natural landscape or an enormous map with

dry, papery leaves
Gray-brown quills like thoughts
In the melodious mass of today's
Writing. . . .

(10)

There may be other hindrances and dead-ends: the vague but ubiquitous

"enemy" of "Rivers and Mountains," the "danger" (16) of "If the Birds Knew," the solipsism of "Clepsydra." Words themselves may finally prove "useless," and so might love ("These Lacustrine Cities").

This coexistence of opposite principles, absence and plenitude, within the same time-space is essentially another form of the inclusion/exclusion motif of Some Trees and The Tennis Court Oath, and it generates the same kind of implications. Time relentlessly destroys, yet it also grants the opportunity of the future. The self may be plagued by "poverty," the pain of loss or the ineffectuality of the imagination, but it is also capable of asserting its powers. From "These Lacustrine Cities," the volume's opening poem, to "The Skaters" the polar principles of absence and plenitude are operative. The idea of absence pervades the frequent references to death ("assassination" in "Rivers and Mountains"), reduction, departure, being eaten or consumed, and, in "These Lacustrine Cities," "the feeling of ascending emptiness," and the idea of barrenness, exile, silence suggested by "the middle of the desert" (9). But the claim to plenitude is equally strong, perhaps stronger. Ashbery increasingly turns his attention to the positive act of creative assertion in its various aspects: forming, creating, performing. Sometimes, in his characteristic way, Ashbery qualifies this positive principle, as if to avoid an unbalancing tendency toward excess. In "Clepsydra," the opposite of absence is, logically enough, "non-absence" (27). Even when Ashbery does acknowledge an act of creation, it is both typically paradoxical and qualified. Hence the last two stanzas of "Cities" set the tone for Rivers and Mountains:

The worst is not over, yet I know
You will be happy here. Because of the logic
Of your situation, which is something no climate can outsmart,
Tender and insouciant by turns, you see.

You have built a mountain of something,
Thoughtfully pouring all your energy into this single monument,
Whose wind is desire starching a petal,
Whose disappointment broke into a rainbow of tears.

(9)

The old nature-art debate in "The Painter" still thrives despite an apparent, if temporary, resolution here. The poet has accepted the fact that the life-breath of art (the "wind" of "this single monument") originates in feeling, not reason, and takes life (stiffens the petal) as it preserves the image of life. Though a certain loss is the price exacted by art, the poignant image of "a rainbow of tears" assures that joy and hope as well as sorrow are the conditions of both living and creating.

The awareness of oneself as a creature of time, as a child of both a personal past and a larger historical past, continues to be an essential part of Ashbery's meditation on existence and creativity. In earlier works, e.g., "Album Leaf" (Some Trees) and The Tennis Court Oath, Ashbery considered how individual lives and a collective historical identity affect each other and often run parallel courses; likewise in Rivers and Mountains, as the allusion to Freud in "Civilization and Its Discontents" and the quasi-psychological rendering of recent Western history in "Cities" suggest. The opening lines of "Cities" explain the relationship of history and the present, of the past and the poetic imagination:

These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing
Into something forgetful, although angry with history.
They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible,
for instance,
Though this is only one example.

They emerged until a tower
Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back
Into the past for swans and tapering branches,
Burning, until all that hate was transformed into useless love.

Then you are left with an idea of yourself. . . .

(9)

The poet is describing the situation which occurs for societies and for individuals--a kind of creative impasse where people, especially imaginative people, can do no more than play "creative games." But the poet suggests too that a positive turn of events is imminent. Art/poetry has other sources of energy and inspiration than "dipping" back into the past for used-up language and forms. What is on the verge of becoming is the idea of creativity as an "all-inclusive" enterprise:

We had thought, for instance, of sending you to the middle
of the desert,

To a violent sea, or of having the closeness of others be air
To you, pressing you back into a startled dream
As sea-breezes greet a child's face.
But the past is already here. . . .

(9)

It is significant that these alternatives involve natural places, substances, and forms, as opposed to the "tower" and "artifice"; they have more vitality too than the faded romantic "swans and tapering branches" and a healthier aspect than the cities that "grew out of loathing." Ashbery also associates mountains, wind, petals, and the "rainbow of tears" with the creative act in the last stanza. The quiet but insistent and always visible presence of natural rhythms, formations, and processes in this poem is indicative of their importance in all of Rivers and Mountains. They are fundamental to Ashbery's poetic vocabulary in this volume, for they provide the perfect organic metaphor for the workings of time and the continuing flow of the meditating mind through the landscape of existence.

Unlike some landscape poetry, Ashbery's poems do not assume the primary validity of the exterior world or that there is inherent value within the scenery that upon proper reflection will reveal a higher source of value (God). Nor are the rhythms of nature merely and conveniently analogous or conducive to those of the meditating mind. The union between idea and image, between tenor and vehicle, is complete, so that Ashbery's is a "seamless"²¹ metaphorical language. And the pervasiveness of this natural metaphorical vocabulary through Rivers and Mountains is indisputable. Six of the twelve poems carry titles that either name one of the three states of water or imply its necessary presence. And not by coincidence, these poems explore the relationship between the external world and the creative process.

One of the most remarkable poems in Rivers and Mountains is one which completely embraces the major metaphors of time, nature, and imaginative activity. "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" embodies the supreme natural principle of change in the age-old symbol of the flowing river. But it is not merely to acknowledge the continual natural process of flowing, freezing, and thawing that Ashbery catalogues the qualities of dozens of rivers. Nor is it simply to imitate these rhythms in free verse, though the tempo and the aural resonances of the poems do this admirably. As in the early catalogue poems, most notably "The Instruction Manual," the poet has embarked on an imaginative journey by which he attempts to see as much of the world as possible. "Air" represents Ashbery's inclusive impulse at its strongest. Moreover, the power of the poet's mind is so strong that it, rather than the natural geographical arrangement, orders the rivers; in fact, the imagination increasingly assumes greater control of the rivers'

flow as the poem draws to a close. It is as if the poet has for a while created and participated in the illusion that he can overpower or at least decelerate the inexorable flow of time--that he can, in essence, exert his authority over external reality.

As the poem begins, however, the poet seems content simply to sound the names and acknowledge the manner of their movement, i.e., to describe what he imagines. Toward the midpoint of the poem, his speech changes from declarative to conditional as he ponders momentarily the other possibilities of being:

If the Rio Negro
Could abandon its song, and the Magdalena
The jungle flowers, the Tagus
Would still flow serenely, and the Ohio
Abrade its slate banks. The tan Euphrates would
Sidle silently across the world.

(18)

Then, as if the change has already been effected, the poet slips into the narrative past tense until "The Parnahyba / Is flowing" (19) marks a gliding back into an enlarged and suspended present. This is briefly interrupted by a prophetic glance toward the future: "Someday time will confound the Indre . . ." (19). Having included these possibilities of time and condition, the poet now opens the imaginative space to bring in "you," at once addressing himself, his auditors, the world in general. In a passage that sounds as if Ashbery is asserting the autonomy of the external world, he apparently denies "your" ability to alter the course of time: "You cannot stop / The Yenisei" (19).

But there is a seeming discrepancy in this view if we have tentatively understood Ashbery to be positing the power of the mind over nature. The problem lies in the ambiguous pronoun "you," for the poet may in fact

be announcing that no other consciousness may alter what his own mind has created. The closing section of the poem offers further support to the idealist position, for the poet suddenly bursts out with imperatives to in fact stop the rivers' flow:

Let the Brazos
Freeze solid! And the Wabash turn to a leaden
Cinder of ice! The Marañon is too tepid, we must
Find a way to freeze it hard.

(19)

Now follows the catalogue of frozen rivers. Yet the poem concludes not with images of stasis but with images of process (just as the poem's title suggests continuing motion): "The Ardeche glistens feebly through the freezing rain" (20). With a characteristic grammar that in Rivers and Mountains becomes established as integral to Ashbery's poetic language, "Air" drifts indefinitely into the ongoing present by virtue of the rich present participle "freezing." The final phrase is also characteristically double (at least) in implication; the "freezing rain" is both rain in the process of freezing and rain that causes things to freeze.

The idea of multiplicity inherent in this closing phrase reflects the larger principles of inclusion and plenitude which inform this poem, the entire volume, and Ashbery's subsequent poetry. Although "Air" appears to accept and celebrate the fact of time through change, it also ironically implies that change is an illusion and indeed casts doubt on our ability to ever know whether it is or not. Rivers are, of course, formed of one compound whose solid or liquid state does not alter its fundamental properties. (Hence, the ancient questions of ontology--unity, duality, plurality--which Ashbery takes up at length in Three Poems.) The idea is stated more directly in "If the Birds Knew":

There is no possibility of change
Because all of the true fragments are here.
(16)

The implications for the self, especially the creative self, are enormous and serious, and Ashbery treats them with due respect. If the idea is valid, then there can be nothing old ("The past is . . . here," he says in "These Lacustrine Cities," 9) or nothing new, despite the vocabulary of "novelty" in Rivers and Mountains. Ashbery eventually realizes in "The Recital" what the problem is: "there is no new problem" (Three Poems, 107). This in turn poses difficult questions: How do we regard past, present, future--why three separate and troubling concepts? If all are the same, what then can we create? Or can we create? The most threatening question is the one which finally demands, what is the value of art?²²

The most important lead to the answers lies ironically in a re-statement or corollary of the problem ("no possibility of change") in one of the most significant poems in this volume, "Clepsydra." The title itself illuminates the question. "Clepsydra," or water clock, literally means "to steal water," i.e., to steal time (flowing water). Just as each moment of passing time registered or made visible by the clock is the true one, "Each moment / Of utterance is the true one; likewise none are true" (27). In essence, all are equal in value, and all are equally valid or invalid. In the same way, the name of each river in "Air" claims equal reality by virtue of the poet's continual uttering of each name. Whatever is true (real) is so by virtue of its coming into existence. But the corollary would necessarily deny authenticity or "reality" to anything past or future and would thus leave us stranded in a very narrow space

of the present, "the miserable totality / Mustered at any given moment" (28). By this logic, any words already uttered have by definition lost their trueness. Again, Ashbery confronts the fact of loss, which has been a major theme of his poetry since "The Picture of Little J. A." Then, the solution to the pain of loss and the nostalgic attachment to the past, a feeble attempt to prolong the life of so many dead moments, was to seek our rewards "in the light of lost words." The task is a tricky and a delicate one, requiring Ashbery to avoid a solipsism of the past as well as of the self. But in "Clepsydra," he discovers, or re-discovers, how the fleeting moment of existence "gives not only itself, but / Also the means of keeping it" (30). This realization leads to further blessings of understanding, to "a feeling of well-being" and

a kind of sweet acknowledgment of how
The past is yours, to keep invisible if you wish
But also to make absurd elaborations with
And in this way prolong your dance of non-discovery
In brittle, useless architecture that is nevertheless
The map of your desires, irreproachable, beyond
Madness and the toe of approaching night.

(31)

As if the past circles around to become again "the white din up ahead . . . unformed yells, rocketings" (27) which are again brought into being, it becomes the source of saving acts, "sentinels against this quiet / Invasion" of "Madness and . . . approaching night" (31). Despite the fact that the whole enterprise may ultimately be useless, a closed circuit, the poet nevertheless deems this method beyond reproach. But, he comes to see,

There should be an invariable balance of
Contentment to hold everything in place, ministering
To stunted memories, helping them stand alone
And return into the world, without ever looking back at
What they might have become. . . .

(32)

Our words, "our slightest steps and the notes taken on them" (32), embody another significant part of Ashbery's meditation on self and time in "Clepsydra." The question is whether reflection is a form of action, or whether the two are forever separate and irreconcilable. If they are, poetry like Ashbery's, primarily meditations on time, is truly a "dance of non-discovery," the construction of a "brittle, useless architecture" with no value for anyone except possibly its maker. Between the problem of time and the relationship of the self and all that is external to the self, the meditating mind flows until the two concerns come into an at least temporary resolution at the close of the poem.

More specifically, Ashbery considers the possibility of discovering the self in and through other people, the world at large, and whatever the self has created and released to its own autonomous existence. This intense fascination with the identity of self has led one reader of "Clepsydra" to call the poem so perfect in its solipsism "that it gives the uncanny effect of being a poem that neither wants nor needs readers."²³ The poet is searching for

The sum total of all the private aspects that can ever
 Become legible in what is outside, as much in the rocks
 And foliage as in the invisible look of the distant
 Ether and in the iron fist that suddenly closes over your own.
 I see myself in this totality, and meanwhile
 I am only a transparent diagram, of manners and
 Private words with the certainty of being about to fall.

(31)

It is worth noting that here, as elsewhere in Rivers and Mountains, Ashbery begins to use the forms and processes of writing (the idea of legibility) as metaphors for existence, as if this particular form of creative activity were the known quantity in whose terms the unknown--life--may be illuminated. But here, even though the self becomes "legible" in the world,

the search for self has led

first to you, and through you to
Myself that is beyond you and which is the same thing as space,
That is the stammering vehicles that remain unknown. . . . (32)

The poet also expresses uncertainty concerning the recognizable resemblance or reflection of the self's original intention in what the self has created:

There was only a breathless waste,
A dumb cry shaping everything in projected
After-effects orphaned by playing the part intended for them,
Though one must not forget that the nature of this
Emptiness, these provisions
Was that it could only happen here, on this page held
Too close to be legible, sprouting erasures, except that they
Ended everything in the transparent sphere of what was
Intended only a moment ago, spiraling further out, its
Gesture finally dissolving in the weather. (29)

In all these passages, one recurring fear stands out: the threat of non-existence, absence, dissolution--even his words do not exist long enough to acknowledge their maker. The images of transparency suggest nonexistence, or at least invisibility; but, the poet realizes, words are also windows which "no longer speak / Of time but are themselves," ironically "transparent guardians you / Invented for what there was to hide" (33). Finally, the poem itself becomes a transparent medium for a revelation that, momentarily at least, coherently identifies the concerns of time and of self, "what you meant" with "ex-possibilities," "representation" with "present fact," in a tone of serene acceptance:

Must wear them like clothing, moving in the shadow of ^{you}
Your single and twin existence, waking in intact
Appreciation of it. . . . (33)

A perfect closed world in which there exists no barrier between intention

and realization, possibility and fact, that is, a full and true reflection.

After the sometimes impenetrable density of "Clepsydra," Ashbery gives us a sense of lucidity and expansiveness in "The Skaters." The long poem has been finally achieved with an authority that was foreshadowed by "The Instruction Manual" and even by the fragmented "Europe." Like "The Instruction Manual," "The Skaters" embodies the poet's strong impulse to coherence and continuity, his desire to capture and maintain an extraordinary moment snatched out of the mundane. And like "Europe," despite its method and effect of discontinuity, "The Skaters" attempts to link past and present, the collective and the individual, in short, to be all-inclusive. But unlike both these earlier poems, "The Skaters" avoids the extremes, one an almost too symmetrical coherence, the other a frantic grabbing for all the pieces. Here Ashbery writes an extended four-part meditation on the twin efforts of giving permanence both to the memories of the past (childhood in particular) and to the words that register the intuitions available to a "human mind" that "cannot retain anything except perhaps the dismal two-note theme / Of some sodden 'dump' or lament" (34). In perspective, to use the dominant visual metaphor in the poem, these parallel efforts finally seem to merge at the "vanishing point" so that they are indeed one and the same enterprise.

Although "The Skaters" may give the initial impression of being a somewhat happily untidy mass of memories, dreams, and imaginary voyages, and although its area and "contents" may be as large as the poet's consciousness, the poem is nonetheless well-unified by such traditional means as repetition of key images, metaphors, and ideas. The idea of dis-

covery links two of the poem's major motifs--that of the letter (both epistle and alphabetical character) and that of the quest or voyage, both offering hope of finding the known within the unknown. As in the earlier poetry, the letter is often an inscrutable puzzle, the means of withholding information, yet the hoped for vehicle of meaning. The poet is also eager to launch into the unknown of the past (much of it lost by the feeble memory) as well as into the unknown of the future.

The poem is further unified by the poet's distinctive, generally casual, easy-flowing voice engaged in dialogue with the reader. Critic Denis Donoghue objected, however, to so "slight" an ordering principle and warned that it is a dangerous esthetic practice. He argues that the flow of a writer's thought is simply too subjective and hence too "murky," an "inescapable temptation to bad work." This critic further objects that Ashbery wishes to "moralize his landscape by a 'series of repeated jumps, from abstract into positive and back to slightly less diluted abstract,'" but fails because he is more interested in the moralizing than in the landscape.²⁴ The point of raising this kind of criticism is not to put Ashbery on the defensive but to illuminate the structure or progression and the poetic idea informing this poem and the whole of Rivers and Mountains. In a passage remarkable for its open, direct, and curiously unself-conscious candor, Ashbery explains:

This, thus is a portion of the subject of this poem
Which is in the form of falling snow:
That is, the individual flakes are not essential to the
importance of the whole's becoming so much of a truism
That their importance is again called into question, to be
denied further out, and again and again like this.
Hence, neither the importance of the individual flake,
Nor the importance of the whole impression of the storm,
if it has any, is what it is,

But the rhythm of the series of repeated jumps, from abstract into positive and back to a slightly less diluted abstract.

(39)

It is not so much the "contents," or the substance, the landscape, or the moralizing that is the life of the poem as it is the feel of the process of moving among these. Nor is Ashbery's method to record that process merely but rather to show how moment-to-moment awareness of the rhythms, the nuances, the changes, becomes incorporated into the business of living and into the process of reflection.

Generated, as Ashbery has confirmed, by the memories of a solitary and often boring childhood,²⁵ part I weaves a meditation on the simultaneous processes of re-collecting the past and moving forward into the future. The major metaphor of this enterprise--the stamp-collecting album--remarkably illustrates the rich multiplicity captured by Ashbery's language. Although this metaphor is not as visible or dramatic as those of music, painting, skating, and writing itself, it is the controlling force in part I precisely because it is always at least implicit and always all-inclusive. The progress of the imaginary voyage prompted by the sounds of a skating party is marked by several peaks of intensity, or moments of greater than usual clarity of perception, each cast in terms of one of the secondary or "creative" metaphors. Each one represents the clear articulation of a problem crucial to Ashbery's survival as a creative being, or the acutely perceived and finely expressed reflexive awareness of the processes occurring simultaneously with the awareness. Without necessarily having found any iron-clad answers, the meditation in part I narrows perfectly to the poet's honest assessment of his situation in lines which eloquently embody the tone, attitude, intention, and dynam-

ics of the poem as a whole:

But it is here that he is best,
Face to face with the unsmiling alternatives of his nerve-wracking
existence.
Placed squarely in front of his dilemma, on all fours before the
lamentable spectacle of the unknown.
Yet knowing where men are coming from. It is this, to hold the
candle up to the album.

(40-41)

Skeptical of the self's power to cope heroically (in the old sense), the poet nevertheless persists, even if the light his meditations generate is only that of a candle (of the imagination, perhaps). The album to be thereby illuminated is ostensibly the childhood stamp book, but it is also the traditional metaphorical anthology of life, consisting of souvenirs already collected--photographs ("The Picture of Little J. A."), pictures, songs--and the remaining blank pages.

So the bittersweet process of re-collecting begins. "These decibels," the sounds of the skaters, "are a kind of flagellation" (34). The effort to recall the past as the inertia of motion into the future pushes us forward results in a kind of secular "perdition," a state of hell in which novelty

guides these swift blades o'er the ice
Projects into a finer expression (but at the expense
Of energy) the profile I cannot remember.
Colors slip away from and chide us.

(34)

The problem is a fundamental one: "How much any one of us survives" (34) despite our efforts to "collect" the parts of our identity. So urgent is this problem, so tenuous this survival that the poet, after describing the cacophany of existence in a marvelous, extended musical metaphor, feels only "a dim intuition that I am that other 'I' with which we began" (35).

Consciousness of this fact gives rise to the next cluster of perceptions, which are unified now by the visual metaphor of "perspective," for "afterthought" is the attempt to determine the true position with respect to other objects, especially things distant, like the house in the unnamed picture. The poet is aware too that "the human brain"

Seems a sorcerer's magic lantern, projecting black and orange
cellophane shadows
On the distance of my hand. . . .

(36)

How is one, therefore, to be sure of what he sees in the distance? Whatever it is, a sudden "great wind" (like the rippling water and changing light that alters the poem's initial flow of thought) makes "the perspective with horse / Disappear in a bigarrure of squiggly lines" (36). Yet, as Ashbery realizes, this "great wind cleanses," albeit by the "sickening, festering process" (37) of afterthought.

As if so cleansed, the poet turns his attention to the present, not a narrow, razor's edge present, but a broad, ongoing now. Incorporating the musical idea of sound through time and the painterly vocabulary of line, mass, and color, Ashbery now picks up the poem's title for his grand metaphor of poesis, casting the mirror of reflection on the process of creating the poem:

Lengthening arches. The intensity of minor acts.
As skaters elaborate their distances,
Taking a separate line to its end. Returning to the mass,
they join each other
Blotted in an incredible mess of dark colors, and again
reappearing to take the theme
Some little distance, like fishing boats developing from the
land different parabolas,
Taking the exquisite theme far, into farness, to Land's End,
to the ends of the earth!

(37)

The marvelous passage signals the poet's discovery of his most urgent

concern--the making of art and of life--which occupies his mind for the remainder of part I. "It is," he announces, "time now for a general understanding of / The meaning of all this," including "all kinds of objects which ought to be described. / But can one ever be sure which ones?" (38). The epistemological doubt still plagues Ashbery, only now it is clearly part of the artistic problem of selectivity. Once again, Ashbery must acknowledge the inseparable forces of inclusion and exclusion, but his declining to confront fully "this leaving-out business" (39) may leave readers wondering if he feels the need to somehow justify the extreme elipsis of The Tennis Court Oath and what he apparently considers an unavoidable measure of the same here:

calling attention

Isn't the same thing as explaining, and as I said I am not ready
 To line phrases with the costly stuff of explanation, and shall not,
 Will not do so for the moment. Except to say that the carnivorous
 Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving
 Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know
 involves presence, but still.
 Nevertheless, these are fundamental absences, struggling to
 get up and be off themselves.

(39)

It is not difficult to conclude that Ashbery is grappling with the most basic and threatening kind of absence: the transitory existence of the word in the grip of time. Hence the idea of the individual and the mass already embodied in the metaphor of the skaters' "elaborat~~ing~~ their distances" takes on even greater significance. Since the individual flakes ("each moment of utterance," "Clepsydra") so quickly become an indistinguishable part of the mass, one is left only with the rhythm of their falling.

In spite of his disclaimer to the contrary, Ashbery is still afflicted with "this madness to explain" (39), and at the same time ac-

knowledges that no one is "going to be fooled one instant by . . . phony explanations" (40). Hence, the poet almost takes leave of the poem, "the whole mismanaged mess" (40). He returns forthwith, carrying an elaborate analogy on the relationship of the poet to the vastness and variety of experience. But the poet of Ashbery's analogy returns from his flight across "unknown horizons" only to incur "the disgust of honest folk" (40), who, with the "No Skating" sign, seem to represent those forces working against the imagination. Nevertheless, "it is here that he is best," still vowing "to hold the candle up to the album" (40, 41).

In this state of partial knowing--"on all fours before the lamentable spectacle of the unknown / Yet knowing where men are coming from"--Ashbery in part II finds himself on a voyage into the unknown. Again, it is a matter of perspective, of seeing "how this tossing looks . . . from a distance" or how the rotted rock "in these islands" has turned into a "tiny speck in the distance" (41). Discovery, the chief concern of II, is the act of making visible what was heretofore invisible, of seeing what is truly there when the distance has been, if possible, erased. Ashbery also implies the concept of discovery in the motif of the letter, or the idea of legibility, and it is this motif which provides the unifying frame for II. In the section's opening phrase, "under the window marked 'General Delivery'" (41), Ashbery introduces not only the image of the letter (epistle) but also the concurrent suggestion of being born (a secular rebirth of the imagination) and of being liberated from an unholy bondage to the past. The implication of "delivery" is, logically, that rebirth and/or liberation are the promise and the reward of discovering. There is yet more richness in Ashbery's letter. When the poet

states that "all this must go into a letter" (41), he continues to acknowledge his desire to establish dialogue with others (to send a message), his impulse to include everything, and ironically, the temptation to reductiveness, to which he succumbs in part IV.

Having set up these resonances, Ashbery drifts into a reverie on the past, imaged here as an "old fort" which "even the most patient scholar, now / Could hardly reconstruct" (40). Still he cannot resist the invitation to examine the artifacts inside the fort's museum. Suddenly regarding himself from a distance, he wryly asks, "But how is it that you are always indoors, peering at too heavily canceled stamps through a greasy magnifying glass?" (42). This question marks a turning point in II from the apparently useless attempt to make out the now faded and illegible signs on the "cancelled" past to a recognition of the self's static, imprisoned condition--"I am condemned to drum my fingers / On the closed lid of this piano, this tedious planet" (42-43)--and finally to the awareness of being on a journey in progress. Ironically, it could very well be that the "old map" inside the museum imperceptibly triggered this imaginary voyage, which is taking place in a landscape at once internal and external, so flawlessly has Ashbery fused the two worlds.

The poet finds himself wondering if "the future will be kinder to me than the past," setting out alone, "going where no one is" (43). But he asserts, "Still, I am prepared for this voyage" (43). His intentions are strengthened when the symbol of past authority and value, the "old heavens" (43), do not answer his taunting call. So he then vows to "never return to the past, that attic," even though its "sailboats," because of the nearsighted memory's tendency to idealize, "are perhaps more

beautiful than these, these I am leaning against" (44). In a final rejection of "you bewhiskered old caverns of blue," the poet comes to an exuberant acceptance and understanding of his position:

Here I am then, continuing but ever beginning
My perennial voyage, into new memories, new hopes and flowers
The way coasts glide past you. I shall never forget this moment

Because it consists of purest ecstasy. I am happier now than I
ever dared believe
Anyone could be. And we finger down the dog-eared coasts
It is all passing! It is past! No I am here. . . .

(44-45)

Without warning, however, the beautiful sailboat of moments ago becomes a "rowboat . . . moored in the alligator-infested swamps" (45), and the whole voyage is cancelled. The traveler becomes absorbed in the life around him, on the island where he is stranded, until the voyage is suddenly on again. Then follows a passage striking in its gorgeous, sparkling imagery of "the glistening white ship," its carnival gaiety and colors, and its "motley and happy crowd / Chanting and pouring down hymns" (46). Not certain whether to leave the comfort of the dock--"That majestic ship will pull up anchor who knows where?" (46)--the poet flows with the crowd onto the boat,

And, as into a tunnel, the voyage starts
Only, as I said to be continued. The eyes of those left
standing on the dock are wet
But ours are dry. Into the secretive, vaporous night with all of us!
Into the unknown, the unknown that loves us, the great unknown!

(46)

This unreserved embrace of the mysterious future, with eager abandon worthy of Whitman and the pure sense of wonder reminiscent of "The Instruction Manual," quickly comes under sober scrutiny, which culminates in one of the poem's major moments of insight: the possibility of freedom within the constraints demanded by our existence:

Firstly, it is a preparing to go outward
Of no planet limiting the enjoyment
Of motion--hips free of embarrassment etc.

The figure 8 is a perfect symbol
Of the freedom to be gained in this kind of activity
The perspective lines of the barn are another and different
kind of example
(Viz. "Rigg's Farm, near Aysgarth, Wensleydale," or the
"Sketch at Norton")
In which we escape ourselves--putrefying mass of prevari-
cations etc.--
In remaining close to the limitations imposed.

(47)

Again, as in part I, Ashbery brings together his major metaphors to augment the intensity of his occasional and invariably paradoxical discoveries. The figure 8 is a masterful choice in this respect, for it perfectly embodies the concept that a return to the center is simultaneously "a preparing to go outward" again. Furthermore, by yoking the skating and perspective motifs, we can look at the figure 8 from another angle, as Ashbery no doubt did, and find that this self-contained sign to be the universal symbol of infinity.

Pursuing the idea of perspective (angle), Ashbery applies it to another pressing concern of this meditation: "the problem of death and survival" (48). As if beyond comprehension, the thought of death and the idea of the vanishing point lead Ashbery to consider poverty, vividly imaged as a "clean, but cold and damp room" with chipped, tattered reminders of "former finery" (48). Once more, the principle of absence had asserted itself ("the carnivorous way of these lines") and forces its reality on the poet at every turn. The poverty that he must overcome is the sense of loss at having repudiated "the past, that attic" (43) and the "fear of this separate dying" (47), the final vanishing point. He is left wondering how the imagination will thrive, what materials it will

fashion into art if it has only the bare essentials of existence to work upon. Yet the poet's earlier discovery that absence nonetheless implies presence ("Clepsydra") returns after temporarily fading from sight, so that Ashbery can acknowledge that the scene of poverty, "all this," is truly "my own invention," that one can make even "practical telephone" (48) out of tomato cans, rubbish spared by the goats.

The thought of a device to send and receive messages prepares Ashbery for the final and spectacular "invention" of part II. In the "flame fountain" passage, the poet describes rather prosaically how to make a witchly brew of simple chemicals which shortly becomes a luminous, effervescing liquid with "fireballs" and "jets of fire" darting "from the bottom . . . with great rapidity and a hissing noise" (49). As if suddenly reliving childish delight at this wonderful concoction, Ashbery ecstatically exclaims, "how luminous the fountain! Its sparks seem to aspire to reach the sky!" (49). Subsiding to a more restrained reflection, he remembers too how "in my day we used to make 'fire designs'" (50). The delight of such "solution writing" was the satisfaction of burning into visibility the invisible message or design outlined by the dry solution. Yet the poet wonders if, half hopes that some message might also be hidden in the flame fountain, "in the gaps of the smoke / Without going to the bother of solution-writing. / A word here and there 'promise' or 'beware'" (50). Sure enough, a design is there, or rather is generated in the poet's imagination. This "puzzle scene" is bursting with images of renewal, possibility, lovers conjugating, and a postman bearing a letter. "It is a scene," remarks Ashbery, "worthy of the poet's pen, yet it is the fire demon / Who has created it . . ." (51). But the

vivid scene, "the heaving, sucking fountain" begins "paling away," though the "fire-lines of the lovers remain fixed, as if permanently" (51). Soon, however, they too collapse, to be replaced by a craggy landscape and a flat sea. "Then this vision, too, fades slowly away" (51). And we never know the message the postman's letter contains--or if it contains one at all.

Until this point, Ashbery has only occasionally broken the rather smooth, melodious modulations of his language in "The Skaters." With an iconoclastic glee, he has sometimes interjected a few harsh words ("I'd like to bugger you all up. / Deliberately falsify all your old suck-ass notions," 41), stiffened the flow with some rather turgid didactic instructions (the flame fountain directions), and thrown in a few clichés (the happily self-mocking "great balls of fire!" 50). But part III stands out for a noticeable hardening of tone that naturally accompanies the motif of exile and a general uneasiness about the prospects of "seeing" oneself.

Ashbery prepared for the theme of exile earlier in the poem, hinting at the poet's alienation in the "balloon" analogy of part I and indicating that the voyager of part II is "going /where/ no one is." The sense of an always impending absence or departure was further reinforced in II by the continual reflection on death, poverty, and impermanence. The fading away of the spectacular "fire vision" and its "puzzle scene" leaves the poet alone with himself and with the thought that

you are a secret and you must NEVER tell it--the vapor
Of the stars would quickly freeze you to death, like a tear-
stiffened handkerchief
Held in liquid air. No, but the secret is in some way the fuel
Of your living apart.

(51-52)

Thrown back on his own resources, Ashbery undertakes the task of accommodation by considering what little he has ("my puny little shoal," 54), what is real, what he wants (dreams, desires, hopes, "Freiheit"), and what he finally can expect to have. The voyage has brought him to an island where the ongoing process of discovery continues.

The opening lines of part III lead into a section marked by its indented verse paragraphs, by a noticeable increase in half-completed thoughts, but most of all by an intense interest in the universal psychological complex: sleep, dream, death, desire, memory, and what we can know about and from these. What the poet does know about the presence of dreams is somewhat qualified:

One average day you may never know
How much is pushed back into the night, nor what may return
To sulk contentedly. . . .

(52)

He is certain, however, that "only one thing exists: the fear of death" (52), but wants "no dramatic arguments for survival, and please no magic justification of the results" and "no hope . . . to be authorized except in exceptional cases . . ." (53). So, "in the meantime, back to dreaming, / Your most important activity" (53). But there is another voice, which seems to represent another part of the poet in debate with himself. which counters that "desire" will "permit you to forget you dreams a little while. / In reality you place too much importance on them" (54).

Ashbery then modulates back into an interior twilight world in which the question is not Keats' "Do I wake or sleep?" but rather "What matter now whether I wake or sleep?" (54). The tone of this passage alters noticeably, for a process of refreshment has begun as the "west wind" inspires an appreciation of natural principles, forces, and desires.

It also reveals "in the meadow's parched and trampled grasses" a "vast . . . mystical design full of a certain significance, / Burning its way into my consciousness" (54). Left "immersed in dreams of sexual imagery," the poet is able to hear "a pure scream of things" and to find himself "happy once again" with the earthy memories of childhood on a farm (54).

The scene shifts abruptly to the stark surroundings of Ashbery's simple island existence in which "one's only form of distraction is really / To climb to the top of one tall cliff to scan the distances . . . in hopes of an unusual sight" (55). Ashbery continues the visual perspective metaphor to emphasize the attempt to see clearly what's out there and perhaps to recognize the "unusual sight" if and when it does present itself. His ability to see clearly into the past has even diminished--"I am beginning to forget everything on this island" (55)--so that the poet is left with "a weathered child's alphabet" for his "only reading material" (55). He is, simply, back to basics, at a stage of development where he must reconstruct the varied language of his existence from a finite number of letters. Turning his attention to the oncoming storm forming over the sea, at once beautiful and terrible, the poet-child revels in the rain with the delight of being free from parental and social authority ("no nurses or infirmaries here / To make an ass of one"), though he good-naturedly accepts ("Ker-choo!") the laws of cause and effect (56).

But Ashbery quickly admits the discrepancy between the secret, solitary world of childhood and his middle-class apartment he inhabits "in reality." There is so much plenitude in "news . . . so new you can't realize it yet," "the crowded cafe," and "the motley spectacle" (57) that

his acute sense of solitude is heightened. And though he realizes that "everybody in the place" is a professional exile "like me," he still feels apart from the masses who "continue to tread water," unaware of the change--"so complete as to be invisible" (57)--that has taken place in his perception of the world. Ashbery the exile has retreated into his interior, subjective world, a cavern where "magic lantern slides are projected on the wall" (58). So strong is his sense of separation that he begins to doubt the efficacy of his imagination and words and to criticize "the usual anagrams of moonlight," the mere reshuffling of outworn "customary images of . . . death" (58). He goes on to predict that the disgusted reader will throw the "whole business into the flames" because

the only thing that interests him is day
And its problems. Freiheit! Freiheit! To be out of these
dusty cells for once and for all
Has been the dream of mankind since the beginning of the universe.
(58-59)

Having done this penance of exile, the poet can now participate in an "exchange of ideas," "a far more beautiful handshake" (59). He has arrived at a clear assessment of and perspective on his situation and a realistic attitude toward it. The letter-message motif surfaces again, this time with Ashbery's acceptance that "the true meaning . . . is slight" (59). And the idea that one is a secret even to oneself is again affirmed, but at last he "could deal with the way / I keep returning on myself . . ." (59). Though still qualified, the revelation is one not of warning but of promise:

It all ends in a smile somewhere,
Notes to be taken on all this,
And you can see in the dark, of which the night
Is the continuation of your ecstasy and apprehension.
(60)

The blessing is a mixed one, yet there is serenity in these final lines of part III. This serenity foreshadows the reflective calm of part IV, spoken from the vantage point of an old man in his "fourteenth year as governor of C province" (60), a man who sounds seasoned and wise although he claims he is none the wiser for his age. The line lengths and verse paragraph divisions have become generally shorter and more irregular, and the rhythm of the leaps between them somewhat more abrupt, though not jerky. It is as if the very form of IV reflects the old man's regret that he is too poor to repair his "house" (Ashbery continues the architecture metaphor) since, like Yeats' "aged man," "I have all I can do to keep body and soul together / And soon that relatively simple task may prove to be beyond my powers" (61). We can sense the same elliptical impulse so dominant in The Tennis Court Oath, but here the frantic energy is mitigated by the tone of acceptance without acquiescence. It is even with "a feeling of delight" that the speaker realizes that he is "all alone with the skittish darkness" (61). The prominent absence-exclusion principle in IV further manifests itself in one of the poem's major motifs, that of the letter, one of the possible means of discovery. The old man of part IV has the curious reductive habit of naming things by a single alphabetical letter, e.g., "C province," "Z high road," "wife of P," "X month." These abbreviations raise several alternative interpretations: that the old man simply cannot remember full, specific names and thereby proves the poet's initial skepticism of the mind's retaining powers (I); that they are unknown quantities; or that knowledge of their specific identities is not important. The latter possibility is attractive because the abbreviation in effect renders things both more abstract and

more general, allows the old man to universalize his experience, and puts a reflective distance between him and the personal particulars of his life. He can thus retreat from himself and note "how the tiresome old man is telling us his life story" (63).

The idea of seeing oneself from a distance, the epitome of reflection, is also inseparable from the larger, more inclusive theme of Ashbery's poetry, the power of time. The old man knows that most of his life is behind him, that

The sands are frantic
In the hourglass. But there is time
To change, to utterly destroy
That too-familiar image
Lurking in the glass
Each morning, at the edge of the mirror.
(61)

Thus he still embraces the discovery made in part II, that the voyage is "continuing but ever beginning." It is significant too that he refers several times to the season of the year, especially spring, the "beginning of March," the time of renewal. Simultaneously, he detects hints of autumn in the wind. This apparent ambivalence or contradiction (which might be attributed to senility) is, however, thematically justified in Ashbery's work by the phenomenon of simultaneity. In earlier references to seasons, the poet has expressed sensitivity to the way the "early springtime evening" in part II contained both "memory of winter, hint of autumn to come" (51). And once more, the double vision of The Heroes, the simultaneity of awareness, the power of the mind to look backward and forward at the same time and to hold in balance the conflicting forces of existence. Hence, the closing lines of the poem do not speak of the fear of death or the certainty of extinction, but of growing into the fullness

of harvest, as the present progressive verb forms dissolve into the indefinite future and toward no discernible vanishing point:

The apples are all getting tinted
In the cool light of autumn.

The constellations are rising
In perfect order: Taurus, Leo, Gemini.
(63)

With his indomitable ambivalence, Ashbery both affirms the natural principle of fruition and denies the established order of the heavens, rearranging, as it were, the constellations in the sky. In the same breath, he confirms the fragility of human perception and memory and celebrates the quiet triumph of the mind over the world.

The remarkable achievement of "The Skaters" is not only its proof of the poet's power to sustain a long poem, to control a wide variety of voices and stances with deceptive casualness, and to masterfully incorporate the concepts and vocabulary of analogous art forms into a distinct verbal fabric with ease, grace, and wit. A triumph of at least comparable stature is that Ashbery has attained in Rivers and Mountains a new clarity and candor in understanding the necessary relationship between the principles of negation and creative assertion. The discovery which Ashbery makes once again involves his fundamental triad of poetic themes. The self-reflexiveness of the meditative art and the opportunity of time make possible the continual coming into being and the renewal of the spirit. Even in the depths of imaginative or spiritual poverty, Ashbery asserts the truth he found in "The Thousand Islands":

Quickens the scrap which falls to us. ^{continuance}
(24)

This, indeed, is the turning point.

CHAPTER IV

THE ESTHETIC OF SPRING

As "The Skaters" so masterfully reiterated, both art and music have been integral and essential components of Ashbery's poetic language and the generally referential nature of his work from the outset. The early volume Turandot and its title poem took their inspiration and in part their themes from the opera of the same name; the title poem of Some Trees, while not yet traced to a specific painting, strongly suggests the visual and synesthetic experience of seeing trees emerge on a bare canvas; The Poems, an expensive and virtually inaccessible limited edition published in 1960, was a collaboration between Ashbery and artist Joan Mitchell; The Tennis Court Oath could very well allude to the painting by David; and, as Ashbery's New York Herald Tribune review of Hiroshage and Hokusai¹ and the Oriental governor section (IV) of "The Skaters" suggest, Rivers and Mountains reflects Ashbery's knowledge of and interest in Oriental landscape painting.

Hence, when Ashbery took the name of Giorgio de Chirico's painting for The Double Dream of Spring (1970), he confirmed and intensified what he and his readers had always acknowledged: the ekphrastic quality of his verse. Yet, Ashbery has always played down the importance of the visual and plastic arts for his own art, probably because many readers have been too eager to "explain" his intentions, methods, and results primarily

in terms of painterly techniques. (For example, the premises and effects of action painting and collage are presumably evident in The Tennis Court Oath.) In spite of his disclaimer, the visual is indisputably present, although to assess and appreciate fully the impact of all esthetic encounters Ashbery documents in his art criticism is an entire study in itself.

While the implications of the particular Chirico painting are enormous and fundamental to the idea of poetry in the Double Dream, the choice of Chirico in general is too significant to ignore. To be sure, there is a general affinity between Chirico's surrealistic "dreamscapes" and Ashbery's poetic landscapes, but Ashbery also knew and admired Chirico's novel Hebdomeros (1929), which the Italian painter wrote in French. Until 1966, there was no English translation of the novel; Ashbery himself had translated the long central episode into English for the Spring 1965 issue of his magazine, Art and Literature.² A year later, in his review of the complete English translation, Ashbery reveals in the major features of Hebdomeros qualities which are clearly discernible in his own style. Whether Chirico exerted a direct influence on the poet or whether the poet found in the painter a compatible spirit that encouraged his own inherent tendencies, the similarities are startling and illuminating. For example, like Ashbery's often disconcerting narratives, "The novel has no story, though it reads as if it did"; still, it shows "a semblance of plot and structure." Moreover, the texture of Ashbery's language, from "The Skaters" through the Double Dream and Three Poems, is remarkably like what Ashbery calls Chirico's "incredible prose style":

His long run-on sentences, stitched together with semicolons, al-

low a cinematic freedom of narration: the setting and the cast of characters frequently change in mid-clause. In this fluid medium, trivial images or details can suddenly congeal and take on a greater specific gravity, much as a banal object in a Chirico painting--a rubber glove or an artichoke--can rivet our attention merely through being present. His language, like his painting, is invisible: a transparent but dense medium containing objects that are more real than reality.³

One also observes in Chirico's prose the same abstract forms, deserted, sharply-lighted and shadowed structures, and vast, eerie landscapes that distinguish his paintings and that dominate much of Ashbery's own imagery. Chirico's work derives much of its haunting power from the discrepancy between the human and the unearthly or inhuman, the vital and the mechanistic or abstract. Ashbery's universe, by comparison, is more organic, full of nature's forms and forces. In the Double Dream, the reader is always aware of air or wind as the medium of existence, the breath of life; the seasonal cycles of growth, harvest, decay; the diurnal rhythm of night and day; the natural symbols of plenitude--trees, branches, forests, stars. Still, Ashbery shares Chirico's affection for architectural structures and the abstract shapes, planes, and angles of geometry, astronomy, and physics, and is particularly sensitive to mass and density and to space and lightness. Just as the voyage in "The Skaters" was an interior one, so in the Double Dream the spaces which enclose Ashbery's abstract imagery often remind us of Chirico's provocative "metaphysical interiors." This predilection on Ashbery's part for abstract and essential contours creates, not surprisingly, a difficult figurative language, suggesting sometimes that Ashbery is reducing the palpable, natural world to its skeletal components, other times that he is perceiving the reality beneath surface appearance. Most often the effect is one of dislocation in time and space, much unlike the relatively solid sense of geographical

place in Rivers and Mountains. Indeed, even the rivers and mountains have to a great extent given way to the vast plains and the mysteriously vacant landscapes so intrinsic to Chirico.

In Hebdomeros, these landscapes provide the physical and mental setting through which the novel's sole character, "a kind of metaphysician," Ashbery says, "evolves."⁴ "Evolves" is an accurate word, though it does not perhaps connote in Chirico's novel the presence of Ashbery's central metaphors, that of the journey. Hebdomeros is, in fact, embarked on an extended and seemingly goal-less journey, the significance of which is heightened by a reproduction of Chirico's "The Anxious Journey" that accompanies the review. This journey eventually leads Hebdomeros to an unexpected meeting with destiny--immortality incarnated by Chirico as a mysterious woman, "a female noun with the eyes of the father."⁵ In the earlier works, Ashbery's journey symbolized a search for knowledge; in Rivers and Mountains, the voyage of discovery began to take on religious overtones and to confront, as in section IV of "The Skaters," the fact of mortality; finally, in the Double Dream, the search for origin and destiny becomes even more urgent as revealed by the astonishingly high frequency of not only the traditional philosophical concerns but also a distinctly theological vocabulary, especially pronounced in the "French Poems" and "Some Words" (from the French of Arthur Cravan). Throughout the volume, the poems are abundantly full of such terms and concepts as faith, grace, benediction, sin, hell, purification, hope, rescue, redemption, holiness, visions, "stations . . . of being," kyrie eleison, worship, chants, hymns, free will, God, souls, immortality. At the same time, the presence of this theological language is ironic, because for Ashbery the old systems

of accommodation to the laws of the universe are no longer satisfactory. "No God," says Ashbery in his rendition of Cravan, "emerges to dream our destinies" (64). Ashbery does not, however, see cause for despair. "Out of this cold collapse" of "the past with its religious / Messages and burials," he hopes a "warm and near unpolished entity could begin" ("Fragment," 80).

Nevertheless, the religious themes not only persist but also become united with the journey motif to form a metaphor as old and as profound as the medieval mystery play: Everyman's pilgrimage. In the opening poem of the Double Dream, Ashbery sends his Everyman on an "anxious journey" into a Chirico landscape and announces the serious concerns of the volume:

They are preparing to begin again:
Problems, new pennant up the flagpole
In a predicated romance.

About the time the sun begins to cut laterally across
The western hemisphere with its shadows, its carnival echoes,
The fugitive lands crowd under separate names.
It is the blankness that succeeds gaiety, and Everyman must depart
Out there into stranded night, for his destiny
Is to return unfruitful out of the lightness
That passing time evokes. It was only
Cloud-castles, adept to seize the past
And possess it, through hurting. And the way is clear
Now for linear acting into that time
In whose corrosive mass he first discovered how to breathe.

(13)

"The Task" makes clear that man's destiny is not necessarily an other-worldly immortality. Either that is not possible or the poet has simply denied its value and existence. What is desirable is what remains possible within the world of the senses, love, dreams, memories, and the imagination:

I plan to stay here a little while
For these are moments only, moments of insight,
And there are reaches to be attained,
A last level of anxiety that melts
In becoming, like miles under the pilgrim's feet.
(13)

Passing time renders his efforts "unfruitful," so that he must always be "preparing to begin again," renewing his strength and imagination in order to recognize the "moments of insight" when they do appear and to participate in the continual process of becoming.

The anxiety which "melts in becoming" may well be generated by the demands of an intense state of readiness and the desire to attain a completed state of being, which, like Chirico's immortality, "exists beyond the 'declining verbs' of living, dying, and being born again."⁶ This heightened sense of "being on the verge" in the Double Dream is described as standing on a precipice--the "narrow ledge over the water" ("Summer," 20), the moment standing "poised for a fall" ("It Was Raining in the Capital," 23), standing "cautious yet free / On the edge" ("Evening in the Country," 34); as a shore, as in the title poem; and in the image of suspension--"water lifted out of the sea" ("Rural Objects," 45). The pilgrim finding himself caught between potentiality and realization, his questions echo throughout Ashbery's work: are being and becoming mutually exclusive states? Is "being" the continuous process of becoming, the cumulative awareness of each instant of insight before time erases it? Does "being" imply a condition of stasis, an ideal state of harmony between action (experience) and reflection?

The difficulty is again rooted in the passing of time, which constantly disintegrates and reassembles the pieces of existence, so that what is known or fulfilled on moment is gone the next. Hence, in the

Double Dream the absence and the detritus motifs of The Tennis Court Oath still persist. As Ashbery explains in "Soonest Mended," the "promise of learning is a delusion" for "tomorrow . . . alter[s] the sense of what had already been learned" and "the learning process is extended . . . so that from this standpoint / None of us ever graduates from college . . ." (18-19). Thus, like Hebdomeros, one sees his "'theories of life varied according to the sum of his experiences.'"⁷ For this reason, Ashbery calls Hebdomeros "uncommitted," at least until he meets the destiny-figure, but emphasizes in "Soonest Mended" that "this not being sure" is action,

this careless
 Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
 Making ready to forget, and always coming back
 To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago.
 (19)

It is this Keatsian being-in-uncertainty that Chirico addresses in Hebdomeros and Ashbery, once again, though more intensely, confronts and even embraces in the Double Dream. The distinctively Ashberian willingness and ability "to accept / The charity of the hard moments" (19), the refusal to allow paradox and mystery to immobilize the imagination, and to live in multiple and often contradictory propositions simultaneously. Ashbery does not abdicate the necessity of choice altogether, for he does choose an attitude, a way of proceeding, but neither does he make a false choice to simplify a situation in which the resolution of opposites is not possible and therefore not among his alternatives.

The ideas of simultaneity and multiplicity provide the essential conceptual bridge between Hebdomeros and the Chirico painting for which Ashbery names this volume, "The Double Dream of Spring." All the semantic

possibilities of the title alone richly illuminate the poetry, and the intriguing kinship between the painting and the title poem generates even more profound implications for Ashbery's reflective and referential art. In his painting, "The Double Dream of Spring," Chirico has depicted two dream images of spring, not side by side as one might expect, but one within the other. When we compare the styles of the two dreams, our observations suddenly yield fascinating insights into Ashbery's poetry, though it would be useless to expect either Chirico or Ashbery to submit all to explication and interpretation. The beauty of Chirico's art, and Ashbery's as well, is the quality of mystery which neither man will demean or pretend does not exist.

The outer image contains the famous hallmarks of Chirico's earlier paintings--the quickly receding horizon, the contrast between the huge, swallowing open spaces of sky and horizon and the dark shadowed cavities of the arched arcades, the long shadows, the eerie, unnatural light, and the featureless mannikins (these facing away from the viewer). By contrast, the inner canvas is more abstract, in the manner of a blue-print, in that objects at various depths in the picture are merely transparent overlapping planes and outlines. However, just as a dream incorporates images from the "outer environment," the inner dream picture echoes the arch motif from the right portion of the larger scene, the two small figures casting shadows in the distance, and, from the left side of the larger scene, the departing mannikin figure, who wears the slightest hint of human features. The inner picture also alludes to other Chirico paintings, particularly in the motifs of the smokestack and of the tower structure topped by pennants on flagpoles, as in the poem "The Task."

The relationship of the two dream images is crucial, for the possible interpretations arising out of them are numerous and deliberately ambiguous. Do both images claim equal validity? Or does the Chinese-box arrangement imply the priority of one over the other? Does Chirico invite us to make a choice, or, as DiPiero argues, offer both?⁸ Is the dream-within-the-dream truer or is it further removed from reality; is it a source of truth and not removed from reality at all? Is the work of art simply a dream transcription, or does the imagination perform further transformations on the dream elements?

Ashbery's general orientation, as the Hebdomeros review and the poetry of the Double Dream indicate, is toward ambivalence or, more positively expressed, multiple possibilities. He intimates in "Soonest Mended" that he has raised "fence-sitting" to "the level of an aesthetic ideal" (18). In "Some Words," he translates Arthur Cravan's advice to "accept yourself as numerous" (63), and in his own "French Poems" he speaks of being "lost at the heart of a multitude of things" (39). In terms of a major metaphor from "The Skaters," Chirico and Ashbery both offer us multiple and simultaneous perspectives or modes of vision. Indeed, one of the most intriguing characteristics of Chirico's paintings is his disorienting use of perspective. Now, Ashbery, with the aid of Chirico, makes the perspective motif more complex and more suggestive. The question he raises is whether the human mind can hold two or more points of view at the same time. For not only do the two canvases, one within the other, present us with two different vanishing points: even the two halves of the outer scene do not share the same vanishing point. On the right side, mountains are visible on the horizon at the far end of

the plain, but there is neither plain nor horizon on the left side.

The idea of simultaneous multiplicity also applies to the word "dream," which in itself can mean the cinematic flow of images during sleep but also daydream, willed dream, vision, ideal, and wish--all of which are both made out of the materials of reality yet confirm the absence of something in everyday reality. The possible meanings of the word "spring" are already implicit in its metaphoric significance as a time of renewal and already abundantly present throughout the Double Dream in such motifs as "starting out" ("Soonest Mended," 19), "beginning again" ("The Task," 13), "coming to life" ("For John Clare," 36), and "sowing the seeds" ("Soonest Mended," 19). What the title suggests, the poetry reveals: Ashbery's continued journey in search of all possible sources and forms of knowledge and experience, including the dream, and the intimate association, if not fusion, of natural forces and the mind's creative activity. What is new to this volume of poetry is not the inclusion of dream material for the first time; Ashbery has drawn on dreams throughout his poetry, from the liquid "Chaos" in Some Trees, with its classic, archetypal images of land, water, dark, light, male, and female, and the fragmentary and kaleidoscopic "logic" of automatic transcription in The Tennis Court Oath. Ashbery has now more fully assimilated the dream into his poetic modes and has discovered how it augments and enriches the resonances of a meditative art aware of itself.

Ashbery makes it impossible for us to ignore the relationship of the dream and the referential nature of his poetry not only by naming this volume for Chirico's painting but also by including a poem of the same title. Like the painting, "The Double Dream of Spring" displays the

hallmarks of its maker's style, exhibits sureness of voice and technique, yet retains the mysterious allure of dream logic. It is a peculiar blend of dream revelation and a seemingly logical, controlled structure--whether that structure is imposed or inherent is another question. The first six lines form a point of departure, literally a stepping-off place from which the poem drifts down into the depths of the dream:

Mixed days, the mindless years, perceived
With half-parted lips
The way the breath of spring creeps up on you and floors you.
I had thought of all this years before
But now it was making no sense. And the song had finished:
This was the story.

(41)

With "mixed days," the poet suggests that his experience is composed of or swings between the conscious and the unconscious, action and reflection, and "mindless years" connotes the relationship of passing time, the unconscious, and memory. The incomplete sentence grammar in the first three lines contributes to the feeling of suspension between states and the general sense of wonder and anticipation expressed in the image of "half-parted lips." But there are even more intriguing possibilities raised by the synesthetic act of perceiving with "half-parted lips." If the perceiver is the poet, Ashbery implies that perception--sight and understanding--is as natural as drawing a breath; furthermore, and more exciting, perception is simultaneous with the opening of the poet's mouth in speech, Tzara's idea that thought is made in the mouth, in short, that perception and creation are one and the same process. Seen another way, the "days" and "years" may be personified, perceived by the poet as having ("with") a mouth which speaks to the reflecting present of dreams, memories, and experiences out of the past. The fourth and fifth lines

confirm the difference between the past and the present and the need for reassembling, as Ashbery states in "Rural Objects," "the bits of information . . . all that ancient stuff" in "the backyard of your dream" (43). Change has rendered previous understanding useless, absurd. But although the melody has vanished, the kernel of the story remains.

The longer middle section of "The Double Dream of Spring" relates this dream story:

Just as you find men with yellow hair and blue eyes
Among certain islands
The design is complete
And one keeps walking down to the shore
Footsteps searching it
.
And we keep stepping . . . down . . .
The rowboat rocked as you stepped into it. How flat its bottom
The little poles pushed away from the small waves in the water
And so outward. Yet we turn
To examine each other in the dream. Was it sap
Coursing in the tree
That made the buds stand out, each with a peculiar coherency?
For certainly the sidewalk led
To a point somewhere beyond itself
Caught, lost in millions of tree-analogies
Being the furthest step one might find.

(41)

Ashbery still believes that "all of the true fragments are here" (Rivers and Mountains, 16) and asserts that the vast mystical design in the meadow ("The Skaters") "is complete," not wholly knowable perhaps, but whole in and of itself. Yet the voyager pursues it, and in doing so approaches the shore, symbolic of the place between land and water, the edge of the unconscious, and "stepping . . . down . . ." into the rowboat, enters the dream, simultaneously turning inward to the self and "outward" toward the "other." Out of this intense mutual awareness--between Ashbery and Chirico perhaps--arises what I regard as the climax of the poem, the "moment of insight," which is, in true Ashberian style, inextricably bound to an

acute consciousness of the organic world, signified by the long-central image of the tree. Even the moment of clarity remains shadowed in mystery, for the question as to the cause of the buds' standing out is unanswered or answered with an analogy which requires intuitive grasp rather than causal analysis.

The last seven lines distance the poet from the dream revelation by signalling a return to "now" and "the land":

And now amid the churring of locomotives
Moving on the land the grass lies over passive
Beetling its "end of the journey" mentality into your forehead
Like so much blond hair awash
Sick starlight on the night
That is readying its defenses again
As day comes up

(41-42)

In contrast to the outward and open-ended direction of the rowboat in the dream, the "churring locomotives" threaten the sense of expansiveness and endlessness with an "'end of the journey' mentality," perhaps the danger or regarding this particular insight as the goal and the end--or the possibility that the ascent into the waking world will in effect negate or weaken the momentary illumination of the dream.

This reading clearly reveals that the relationship between the poem and the Chirico painting is not mimetic. We can discern a semblance of the framing structure, i.e., the presence of a deeper level of awareness within a more conscious level. The Chirico painting also raises the possibility, assuming that one dream image interprets or reflects the other, that Ashbery's poem may very well be the poetic analog to that experience. Still, these are similarities which argue for analog, which the identical titles suggest. Nor does Ashbery's poem belong to the same category of ekphrastic verse as Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts"; here "The

"Fall of Icarus" by Breughel provides an occasion for what is essentially an explication of the picture. Similarly, Ashbery's own "Soonest Mended" establishes a tone very much like Auden's as the poet's response to an Ingres painting and Orlando Furioso evolves into further meditation. It is more likely, however, that "The Double Dream of Spring" is an imaginative response not to the painting itself but to the recollected experience of seeing and reflecting on it. It may be even more accurate to argue that, in keeping with the metaphoric implications of the title, the springtime vision of renewal generates a cycle of dreams and further creative energy. In any case, this extraordinary poem further confirms the presence of the peculiar double vision Ashbery has carried with him since The Heroes: that ability to reflect upon art while simultaneously making art--to perceive "with half-parted lips."

Ashbery's poetry also reflects upon its own coming into being, and the theme is no less prominent in the Double Dream. Several poems in the volume continue the nature-creativity motif by exploring simultaneous awareness. Like "Clepsydra" in Rivers and Mountains, "Summer" addresses the fundamental dilemma of all art: whether art is true to the rhythms of life--of which change is the primary reality--when it "captures" life; whether it is possible to unite experience with reflection upon experience; whether, as he wondered in "Clepsydra," reflection is a form of experience. In "Summer," the processes are clearly separate and as natural as the progression of the seasons of a year and of a lifetime. Occasionally, the reflexive urge and sly and humorous; in "Rural Objects" the poet refers to himself, rather unexpectedly, as "mountain ash mindlessly dropping berries" (44). Once again, Ashbery closely connects the

the resources of the natural world and the unconscious with the artistic process. Significantly, this description of the creative self follows a reference to touching bottom as "in a dream."

These two examples further demonstrate that Ashbery's achievement in the Double Dream is the incorporation of the dream motif into his three central concerns--time, knowledge, and the reflective art--and merging of certain features of classic dream imagery with his own figurative language. What remains to be seen is the variety of ways the dream element governs the movement and shape of the poems. Ashbery finally articulates how the dream becomes an important form of memory and how in turn art explores the dream as a way of preserving it and discovering the modes of knowing and being that it makes possible. He brings into the "contents" of his poetry the idea that the dream is both an object of and a form of reflection in the age-old concept of the "dreamscape," the union of dreams, nature, and the generation of creative energy. Now it becomes necessary to reconcile the philosophical orientation of the Double Dream and the dream mode. To be sure, Ashbery's poetic concerns have always been and continue to be philosophic, but he has never presumed to approach his subjects in any systematic philosophical manner; he certainly offers no rigorous proofs, as he points out in the 1972 Craft Interview:

Philosophy hasn't directly influenced my poetry but the process of philosophic inquiry certainly has; again, sitting down to somehow elucidate a lot of almost invisible currents and knocking them into some sort of shape is very much my way of doing but as for specific philosophical concepts I don't think they play any role in my work.⁹

Ashbery moves through and among philosophic ideas intuitively by means of highly imaginative metaphors and analogies or through the agency of a dream revelation. Consequently, his poems do not come to a resolution

in any logical sense but approach a feeling, a state of mind, or a sensed knowledge, very often embedded in a scene or striking image. His modes and structures, however, are even more various and inventive than the union of philosophic and dream poetry might indicate. The concept of multiplicity generated by the double dream of spring, the simultaneity of reflection and self-reflection, and the neoplatonic idea of the many and the one are fundamentally pervasive and informing forces in the poetry of the Double Dream. The poems are in essence the embodiment of Ashbery's compulsion to explore his major concerns in a variety of voices and structures. Existence in diversity is both a theme and a formal principle.

In some instances, Ashbery prefers a pseudo-philosophical manner, which gives the momentary appearance of a logical construct. "For John Clare" is much concerned with the philosophical phenomena of perception, memory, "mutual cohesion and attraction" (35) between subject and object, but neither its tone, diction, nor method is systematically philosophical. Or a title itself may prepare us for a philosophical treatment, which of course does not follow; "Plainness in Diversity" is such a poem, as is "Definition of Blue," despite its rather metaphorical title. By far the best poem in this genre is "Decoy." The first line, one of Jefferson's eloquent major premises from the "Declaration of Independence," is immediately turned into the object of a satiric, cynical overview of twentieth-century social and economic chaos. Yet there is, by the end of the first section, a subtle but certain shift in diction and tone from the predominantly heavy language to a more figurative mode:

We hold these truths to be self-evident:
That ostracism, both political and moral, has
Its place in the twentieth-century scheme of things;
That urban chaos is the problem we have been seeing into and
seeing into,

The men . . . sit down to their vast desks on Monday . . . begin
planning the week's notations, jotting memoranda that take
Invisible form in the air, like flocks of sparrows
Above city pavements, turning and wheeling aimlessly
But on the average directed by discernible motives.

(31)

Ashbery then brings the "argument" to a recapitulation or, as Shapiro calls it, a "false summation."¹⁰ There is, however, some thematic unity between the initial idea of mass decline and the application of the business analogy to a generalizes "us" in the summary, a strange but definite unity between the first and second sections:

To sum up: We are fond of plotting itineraries
And our pyramiding memories, alert as dandelion fuzz, dart from one
pretext to the next
Seeking in occasions new sources of memories, for memory is profit
Until the day spreads out all its accumulation, delta-like, on the
plain
For that day no good can come or remembering, and the anomalies
cancel each other out.
But until then foreshortened memories will keep us going, alive, one
to the other.

(31-32)

Finally, the poem dissolves into an image of surreal dissociation:

There was never any excuse for this and perhaps there need be none,
For kicking out into the morning, on the wide bed,
Waking far apart on the bed, the two of them:
Husband and wife
Man and wife

(32)

It is not difficult to discern the evolution of the poem in terms of its movement in sentence rhythm, diction, and tone from formal, turgid, and distanced to relaxed, meditative, and purely imagistic. The thematic unity is a more intriguing matter, but a clear parallel exists between

between the large-scale disintegration suggested in part one to the ambivalent separation of the man and woman at the close.

Yet Ashbery does not always in the Double Dream set up a decoy to draw his readers, often imperceptibly, down to the shore of the unconscious or further down into the dream. "Spring Day" begins suspended somewhere between the dream and waking states, then quietly slips into a dream-like sequence that bears a remarkable resemblance to the medieval dream vision, The Pearl. The "giant body" awakens in the dream "as though beside a stream . . . and has to recognize / The secret sweetness before it turns into life" (14), then narrates a story of breaking forth into identity and "the gulf of recreation" (15). Once again, Ashbery unites the dream with the energy of natural growth and the creative force. In a similar manner, the poet in "Parergon" describes an experience much like Keats' "Sleep and Poetry." Those who maintain a readiness to hear the voice in the dream "are happy in our way of life" though "It doesn't make sense to others" (55). They "sit about . . . restless" waiting for the intuitive signal:

Occasionally it becomes time
To lower the dark shade over it all.
Our entity pivots on a self-induced trance
Like sleep. Noiseless our living stops
And one strays as in a dream. . . .

(55)

The one who "strays" is a nameless prophet figure who teaches a "lesson" that "edded far into the night" (56). In a passage full of religious terminology, the dream-prophet advises those trapped in mortality, "the present of flesh," that "the true way is sleeping," the source of regeneration, and that our basic human need is "the tether / Of entering each other's eyes" (55).

Ashbery accomplishes an interesting variation on this dream mode in "It Was Raining in the Capital," the pun on "capital" hinting that this is a poem of the interior city. Characteristically, Ashbery has not rhymed his poems or employed strict formal schemes since the early experiments with form in Some Trees. Most of the poems, especially the dream poems, in the Double Dream are written in vers libre, and the relatively few stanzaic forms, usually four-line stanzas as in "Spring Day," are loose and unrhymed. In "Raining," Ashbery creates a curious counterpoint between form and content, casting a puzzling dream narrative in a ballad form which makes little effort to disguise its Audenesque sound. First, the ballad form's constant reminder of "one who came before," particularly of one as important to Ashbery as Auden, has the same alluring but unnerving effect on the memory as the quotation from the Declaration in "Decoy." Indeed, one of the striking motifs of "Raining" belongs to Ashbery's increasing concern with memory, especially déjà vu. Keenly aware of spring's entrance into the capital, the female figure, the Aquarian, "thought she had seen all this before (21); likewise, the unearthly ("fed by ink and paper," "never born of woman") man evokes Wordsworth's intimation ode at the point where he hears "that music he had once known / But now forgotten" (22). Significantly, the loss of contact with a past "music" or the vague sensation of recognition creates a vacuum of anticipation, filled here by the Aquarian's teaching: "'To absorb life through the pores / For the life around you is dead'" (23). This in turn is augmented and, paradoxically, "illustrated" (in the sense of Ashbery's early poem "Illustration") in a typically Ashberian image and conclusion:

The sun came out in the capital
Just before it set.
The lovely death's head shone in the sky
As though these two had never met.

(23)

The closing lines are mysterious, fusing the curious logic of dream revelation with the internal landscape.

The relationship of a rhymed ballad form and a dream narrative revives the question always implicit in dream art: how the artistic process alters the dream material. As Ashbery made clear in the review of Hebdomeros, automatic transcription of dream experience does not automatically guarantee a product worthy of the name art.¹¹ Furthermore, Ashbery is well aware that the masterful rendering of the dream work usually precludes swift execution. In his important statement on dada and surrealism in the New Republic, Ashbery points out that

Dali's meticulous handling of infinitesimal brushes excludes any kind of automatism as far as the execution of his painting goes, and perhaps even their conception was influenced by a desire to show off his dazzling technique. Breton called Miro the most surreal of the Surrealists, yet the deliberate wit and technical mastery of his work scarcely seem like tools to plumb the unconscious.¹²

The primacy of the dream in the Double Dream is indisputable, and Ashbery rivets our attention on the subject by means of his title and the presence of the dream as a mode and as a subject. It would be misleading to assume that Ashbery's esthetic in this volume resurrects the overpowering automatic and dissociative impulse of The Tennis Court Oath, especially as it appeared in "Europe." But even "Europe" revealed a remarkable degree of coherence despite its method of composition and its surface appearance. And the likelihood is that one so sensitive as Ashbery to the technical and formal skills of his craft would naturally

incorporate them into his mind just as any conscious thought or experience becomes part of the raw material for the dream process. Thus, while it is both possible and reasonable to believe that Ashbery "imposes" form upon the poetic idea, it is also equally plausible to argue that he discovers or heightens the form already inherent in the dream.

One of the most delightfully absurd poems in The Double Dream is one that carries to the extreme the incongruity between the freedom of dream wit and the strict artificiality of the sestina, and between the title and the story of the poem itself. The sheer urgency of movement and the wackiness of "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" provide respite from the generally reserved tone of the volume. But it accomplishes two more important things: it reaffirms Ashbery's ability, perhaps even compulsion, to speak in a diversity of voices and to still remain within the thematic area of a given book of verse. From another perspective, "Farm Implements" is a witty blend of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the expected and the unexpected. The title invites us to expect a poem in Ashbery's referential or ekphrastic mode either in the manner of "Soonest Mended," in which particulars of a painting are mentioned as part of the poet's reflection, or in the manner of "The Double Dream of Spring," which "refers" to the primary work in a more subliminal and less obvious way. Of course, the title here is probably a total fabrication on Ashbery's part, related to the poem itself only by "farm," "landscape," and one of the six end words, "country." It too is another decoy; the primary referent is the comic strip "Popeye," the childhood anticipation of which, says Kermani, is the "subject" of the poem.¹³

Indeed, the motif of memory and perception is central to the poem. The

Popeye characters engage in remembering: Sea Hag remembers spinach, they all recall "how it was cheaper in the country," and the note pinned to Swee'pea's bib declares, "Henceforth shall Popeye's apartment / Be but remembered space. . ." (47). Again, however, what is remembered is not so important as how it is remembered or the peculiar quality of the memory. What "Farm Implements" captures and expresses is the release of the child's imagination:

The first of the undecoded messages read: "Popeye sits in thunder,
Unthought of. From that shoebox of an apartment,
From the livid curtain's hue, a tangram emerges: a country." (47)

The tangram suggests the fragments of memory that can be rearranged to form different shapes, as the sestina relocates the end-words and channels the elements of the cartoon-like narrative into different and unusual patterns. The most important statement of "Farm Implements" may well be the idea that poetic form does not necessarily impede the exploration of dreams, memories, and the unconscious, that, in fact, as Ashbery suggests in the New Republic piece, the right tool can enhance the search and free creative energy.

Beneath the high spirits of "Farm Implements," however, is the poet's ever-present wariness of something that remains just out of reach, an "undecoded message." The "madness" of the poem very likely has multiple causes and implications, one of them being a defense mechanism against the ultimate absurdity of existence and our efforts to make a coherent whole out of thoughts, feelings, dreams, wishes, experiences, and memories. One of the major themes of The Double Dream is that the dream does belong to a certain order of reality and does contain a reality within it. Yet Ashbery knows that the dream can also be illusion and

unfulfilled wish, extreme subjectivism and imperfect memory. The difficulty of distinguishing illusion from "reality" is the task of the poet in "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," and the effort leads him to revisit his childhood to determine "if I dreamed it all" (25). This poem is important in the Double Dream because it addresses not only the efficacy of the dream, but also the larger philosophical and theological questions of plurality and unity, knowledge of appearance and reality, time, and the degree of choice possible for humans to exercise. It is singular among this volume's poems because it embodies in its title the concept of multiple perspective, sources of knowledge, and modes of experience, perhaps a proliferation of activity to counteract the threat of loss and absence.

The tree, which in Ashbery's poetry has often symbolized not only creative and natural growth but also plenitude and multiplicity growing out of the one, is the central image in the first section of "Variations":

For the pleasures of the many
May oftentimes traced to one
As the hand that plants an acorn
Shelters armies from the sun.
(24)

In its jingly sound, the opening analogy carries the tone of a truism, which while valid sounds a bit too pat, too easy. This is borne out in the succeeding lines as the youthful speaker rhapsodizes on the pleasures and security of youth under the tree's protection:

The feeling is of never wanting to leave the tree,
Of predominantly peace and relaxation.
Do you step out from under the shade a moment,
It is only to return with renewed expectation, of expectation
fulfilled.
Insecurity be damned! There is something to all this,
that will not elude us:

(24)

what if I dreamed it all,
The branches, the late afternoon sun,
The trusting camaraderie, the love that watered all,
Disappearing promptly down into the roots as it should?
(25)

Suddenly, the verse form shifts from free and unrhymed to jaunty, jerky couplet in the most juvenile rocking-horse gait, "relieved" twice by triplets that would appall Dryden and Pope. This is the signal that the poet has entered the "calypso" portion of the poem. Now, instead of sympathizing with his disillusioned self, Ashbery makes his youthful sentiments the object of parody, full of clichés, pompous diction, and archaic usages, wrenched syntax, awkward (slant) rhymes (yours-flowers),

and forced rhythm. Here the narrator recounts how his "youth" was "spent underneath the trees" (25) and how he journeyed around the world, visiting the landmarks of history and civilization, moralizing on each sight, and finding gems of wisdom which he dutifully passes on to his readers. The irony of each "age-old truth I to thee impart" (26) lies in the discrepancy between the speaker's superficial understanding so earnestly presented and the fact that each "truth" is a highly serious matter to Ashbery. There is also a paradoxical, ironic validity in the youth's final piece of advice:

And trust in the dream that will never come true
'Cause that is the scheme that is best for you
And the gleam that is most suitable too.

(27)

The next major change in tone and prosody is introduced by an immediate rejection of this admonition in the youth's plea: "'MAKE MY DREAM COME TRUE.'" In this final prose passage, interrupted three times by couplets (representing variations on the fugue subject), the matured speaker wonders if it is possible to realize the dream by determining if his perception and memory of the past were truly illusory. "In the morning you forget," he says; you can speculate on what probably happened, but "Still, you can't tell" (26). Eventually, the "incident" comes "to be not only as though it never happened, but as though it never could have happened" (27-8). This leads the poet to ponder whether he has any choice among the versions of the past, whether the mind by definition retains a verifiably true memory or clings to its own subjective impression. "Can it ever be resolved?" he asks. "Or are the forms of a person's thoughts controlled by inexorable laws, as in Dürer's Adam and Eve?" (28). Hearing no answer, he decides to "Forget it" (28), yet the

search for some answer about the past continues and takes him into his childhood haunts, where he finds the now decrepit "old grade school he'd attended as a kid" (29). Encountering old Professor Hertz, whom he had apparently known when both were younger, he politely requests the professor to answer his questions. But he is completely shattered by the old man's reaction: "I will tell you nothing!" (29). So, Ashbery ends "Variations" with the harsh truth that no answer is forthcoming even from one whose business is knowledge. Nor is there any way, apparently, to know if he really did dream it all. And certainly, any hopes of making the dream come true in the present are destroyed by the old man's ungracious behavior.

"Variations" is perhaps the most obvious and radical departure from the norm in the Double Dream in respect both to form and to method. And even though it addresses one aspect of the dominant dream motif, it departs from most other "dream" poems in this volume because it revives the passing-out-of-childhood theme of Some Trees and The Tennis Court Oath. Rivers and Mountains is the turning point here, for although the memory of childhood is central to "The Skaters," Ashbery clearly shows an increasingly intense interest in the stages of adulthood. Although he is ever more acutely aware of time's passing, as he remarked in the Craft interview,¹⁴ his poems very often exist in a medium in which time is suspended and essentially imperceptible. In such poems, Ashbery creates the sense that the poem is not anchored to any tangible referents, that it slips back and forth between the specific and the general, that its perspective and scale pass from minute to panoramic in a rather elusive and often disorienting manner. Such poems are, in fact, not without

referent or metaphor, yet they are in a fundamental way "abstract narratives" or meditations just as art or music, by definition sensuous forms, can be "abstract." Their conception is abstract and philosophical and they characteristically consider the phenomenon of being, both the somewhat mystical experience of feeling one has ascertained and understood the true nature of an entity and the more generalized meditation on existence itself. Moreover, poems of this nature are also profoundly self-reflexive in that the act of speech, the processes of composition, or linguistic terminology are the metaphors. Hence, living, reflecting, and creating become analogous if not identical. Consider this passage from "Sunrise in Suburbia":

Others will bend these as it is possible
 And a new mode will be sunning into the past:
 Refreshment and ease to the statement
 And back to the safe beginning, because it starts out
 Once more, drawn to and fro in a warm current of breathing
 As fires start in hope and cold and
 Color those nearest and only warm the most distant.
 The inflection is suspended,
 Not to be thoroughly initiated, under a spell to continue;
 Its articulate flatness, goal, barrier and climate.

(49)

At other times, as in "Sortes Vergilianae," the narrative sounds like a history of the creative self "discerned from afar":

There was a time when the words dug in, and you laughed and
 joked, accomplice
 Of all the possibilities of their journey through the night
 and the starts, creature
 Who looked to the abandonment of such archaic forms as these,
 and meanwhile
 Supported them as the tools that made you. The rut became
 apparent only later
 And by then it was too late to check such expansive aspects as
 what to do while waiting
 For the others to show unfortunately, no pile of tattered
 magazines was in evidence,
 Such dramas sleeping below the surface of the everyday machinery;
 besides

Quality is not given to everybody, and who are you to have been
supposing you had it?
So the journey grew ever slower. . . .

(76)

Nevertheless, in all these poems and, indeed, throughout the volume, whether in philosophical meditation or in dream poem, whether exploring the concerns of existence or creativity or both, the poet asserts one all-encompassing principle: the principle of spring, the ever preparing to begin the journey. The poem which most fully embodies this principle and most fully integrates all Ashbery's concerns in their various and many forms is, once again, the customary long poem of the collection, "Fragment." And, as with the title of this volume, we can discover how the idea of always beginning again shapes the poem as we consider the title's philosophical and esthetic implications and take into account how Ashbery himself has illuminated the poem.

Since Some Trees, the long poem has been the epitome of each collection of Ashbery's poetry, documenting with extraordinary clarity the developments in the poet's evolution and casting a revealing light on each volume as a whole. "Fragment" does this with uncommon excellence. Lacking an internal unity or the coherence imposed from without by the mind, the phenomena of reality and the discrete moments of passing time are indeed fragmentary. It is the unending task of the poet, indeed the human being, to find either coherence or a mode of being within the chaos and the uncertain connection between appearance and reality, dream and art, part and whole. "Fragment" attests to this fact, not without a measure of Ashbery's usual irony and gentle irreverence. The title, Ashbery told the Craft interviewers, "was a kind of joke because the poem is very long and yet like any poem it's a fragment of something

bigger than itself," i.e., "the consciousness that produced it at that moment,"¹⁵ the collection to which it belongs, and the cumulative body of Ashbery's works.

This sense of "fragment" as part of a larger entity already extant is augmented by the idea that one's work, rather, one's effort to live creatively, implies a sense of going forward. Like the figures in Chirico's "The Double Dream of Spring," and the pilgrim in "The Task," the poet is always stepping outward into the vast plain of possibilities. Completion is not the ideal, for it is deadening if not impossible; Ashbery even appears to reject the time-honored esthetic notion that a work of art is a complete entity unto itself, a formal, conceptual whole. The value of artistic making lies, therefore, not in the completed whole --"freedom turned into a painting" (91)--but in the ever-renewing process of making. Likewise, one's perceptions and knowledge of the world are never completed and always fragmentary. But, as Chirico's double dream suggests, the multiple images of dream or of reality are equally valid. Yet the very existence of more than one version of the way things are raises the important possibility that pure, immediate, first-hand knowledge of the world is beyond our means and that what we do know is always a "version of what is" (79). Hence, as time perpetually alters reality, it is necessary to perpetually revise these versions. This is the theme and the very form of "Fragment."

In the Craft Interview, Ashbery offers readers insight into the way in which the poem came to take its shape, fifty ten-line stanzas:

That . . . was the way I decided the poem was going to look before I wrote it; its wasn't that I felt it had any particular significance. . . . Also I had been reading Maurice Scève, the 16th century poet who wrote in dizains and I was impressed by

the fruitful monotony of his form, as over and over again he says very much the same thing in hundreds and hundreds of ten-line stanzas, constantly repeating the form and yet adding something a little new each time, and the ultimate cumulative effect of these additions is something I was aiming at although I didn't use the ten-line stanza with any very definite aim in mind or desire to imitate Scève. . . . It also seemed a very good in-between length; lacking the in-the-round effect of an sonnet and longer than a quatrain; a purposely stunted form which is ideal for these repetitions with minimal variations.¹⁶

To readers who might be put off by the likely tediousness and unredeemed monotony in such a style, especially in conjunction with the poet's penchant for an abstract, difficult imagery and odd, startling word combinations, Ashbery could reply with the same argument he advanced in 1957 to support Gertrude Stein's "Stanzas in Meditation." In this portion of his review for Poetry, Ashbery not only defends Stein but offers an uncannily accurate preview of his own style:

There is certainly plenty of monotony in the 150-page title poem . . . but it is the fertile kind, which generates excitement as water flowing monotonously over a dam generates electrical power. These austere "stanzas" are made up almost entirely of colorless connecting words, such as "where," "which," "these," "of," "not," "have," "about," and so on, though now and then Miss Stein throws in an orange, a lilac, or an Albert to remind us that it really is the world, our world, that she has been talking about. The result is like certain monochrome de Kooning paintings in which isolated strokes of color take on a deliciousness that they never would have had out of context, or a piece of music by Webern in which a single note on the celesta suddenly irrigates a whole desert of dry, scratchy sounds in the strings.¹⁷

To be sure, much in "Fragment" may not be pleasing by normal standards of harmony and wholeness. Yet the poem is harmonious and whole by virtue of the thoroughness with which its idea informs it. Not only is the stanza a "purposely stunted form"; even many of the sentences are fragments; others read like so many fragments jammed together between periods. Still others are fragmentary because of ellipsis, which imparts a quaintly Chinese flavor. Ellipsis on a larger scale creates passages

of dislocation typical of "Turandot" and "Europe"; Ashbery shifts so abruptly from abstract to concrete that the rounded edges of transition are completely lost. This phenomenon too is described so accurately by Ashbery in the 1957 review of Stein's Stanzas. The work, he says,

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. Sometimes the story has the logic of a dream . . . while at other times it becomes startlingly clear for a moment, as though a change in the wind had suddenly enabled us to hear a conversation that was taking place some distance away. . . . But it is usually not the events which interest Miss Stein, rather it is their "way of happening," and the story of Stanzas in Meditation is a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars.¹⁸

This is not to say that "Fragment" is so generalized that Ashbery's presence cannot be felt in the poem. To the contrary, its "contents" are indisputably Ashbery: appearance-reality, knowledge of self and world, the flux of time, possibility, choice, and the mystery of art--in short, the life-art journey. The impetus, however, behind the poem is the unifying power of love, not simply the erotic variety and not only a specific love affair, but a general principle of the urge toward union, a universal force like the one Spenser celebrates in the Fowre Hymns. Ashbery further explains in the Craft Interview:

it's like maybe all of my poems, it's a love poem; Scève's Delie was a long cerebral love poem; and the actual situation isn't apparent in the poem, but it's what is behind it and is generating these repeated examinations and rejections and then further examinations.¹⁹

The idea of love is not new with the Double Dream. An imaginative act brought the "you" and the "I" together into "we" in "Some Trees"; the pain of separation and lost love was a principal theme of The Tennis Court Oath; the mystical, almost religious experience of being on the verge of union is dramatized by "Blessing in Disguise" in Rivers and

Mountains. Now in "Fragment," the idea of love generates the continuous motion of the poem and also binds together two of its major preoccupations: the perceptual relationship between the mind and the world and the dynamic relationship between an author and his audience. Since this poem, somewhat like "Europe," does not lend itself to stepwise explanation, it profits more from a close consideration of these two central concerns.

Ashbery discloses the link between these themes in a distinctively self-reflexive portion of the second dizain:

These last weeks teasing into providential
Reality: that your face, the only real beginning,
Beyond the gray of overcoat, that this first
Salutation plummet also to the end of friendship
With self alone. And in doing so open out
New passages of being among the correctness
Of familiar patterns.

(78)

The poet announces the end of imprisonment in self--solipsism--and asserts that recognizing the autonomy of the other, human or nonhuman, makes possible new modes of being within the fragments of existence. Even within the "monotonous" repetition of the ten-line stanzas, new "passages," moments of poetic insight, can emerge; even the voyage over the same route again and again, beginning and ending in the same harbor, can bring new discoveries. It is not by accident that both "insight" and "discovery" are rooted in the concept of perceiving or that the phenomena of visual apprehension and of intuitive and intellectual understanding are both called "seeing." Moreover, there is an intrinsic semantic bias in the idea of perception which makes it all the more suitable for Ashbery's purposes: the element of subjectivity. Throughout "Fragment" the appearance-reality theme manifests itself in the vocabulary and imagery of

"versions," "ways of seeing" things, "interpretations," "impressions," and "forms." But the more pressing issue is the relationship between the inside and the outside worlds, specifically the way the perceiver interprets reality and how much power he has in determining or altering reality. Hence, the imagery of the center and the sphere dominates; it is particularly pronounced as Ashbery tries to assess our "sphere of influence," as it were. This question of personal efficacy takes the form of the relationship between wish, dream, intention and realization, fulfillment, fact, as in stanza four:

Not forgetting either the chance that you
 Might want to revise this version of what is
 The only real one, it might be that
 No real relation exists between my wish for you
 To return and the movements of your arms and legs.
 But my inability to accept this fact
 Annihilates it. Thus
 My power over you is absolute.
 You exist only in me and on account of me
 And my features reflect this proved compactness.

(79)

Although rejecting solipsism in stanza two, the poet does assert the principle of subjectivity and even the power of creation. Whoever this unidentified "you" may be is relatively unimportant; indeed, Ashbery's continual affirmation of multiplicity denies the necessity of choosing among the possible "you's." More significant is Ashbery's proposal that the love bond, with all its grief and ecstasy, is the paradigm for the author-audience relationship. Equally as significant, Ashbery places more trust in the power of the word to function as the bond linking self and other, poet and audience. This is not to say that Ashbery considers the word all-powerful: he does know its limitations. In some instances, the word takes on metaphoric power to reveal or establish the common ground

among us, even if it depends only on feelings and sensations, for, in the last analysis, they can be known if nothing else can. Continuing the image of the sphere, Ashbery says that we are like the blood orange, having "a single/Vocabulary all heart and all skin" (82). Still, the poet must believe in his own medium and his own enterprise, writing; it is for him the only certain means of knowing the other, even the only certain sign of reciprocity:

I want it all from you
In writing, so as to study your facial expressions
Simultaneously: hesitations, reverse darts, the sky
Of your plans run through with many sutured points.
Only in this way can a true basis for understanding be
Set up.

(85)

Finally, the larger and lifelong enterprise of "persist/ing" in the revision of very old / Studies" is once again perceived as a continuous act of writing: "cancelling with one stroke of a pen all / The provisions, revisions, and so on made until now" (87).

By merging the efforts of knowing, loving, writing, and living, Ashbery has prepared for a major statement on poesis, which emerges out of the most well-defined and self-contained sequence in the poem, stanzas 38 through 46 (90-93). This portion of the poem signals a major figurative shift from the circle-sphere of the first half to the poet's long-favored metaphor of the journey. It becomes visible near the mid-point of the poem, after the poet perceives a "change . . . more complete than ever" (86) and with the image of a sail "disappearing into / An ocean of newsprint" (87) begins to associate the boat-journey with the printed word. When this all-important association surfaces again in stanza 40 (91), Ashbery is telling the story of poetic possibilities and of poetic

visions foretold and coming to pass. Two stanzas earlier, a progenitor figure, "the ancestor," has just explained how poetry comes into being:

Masses are traced with parental concern.
After silent, colored storms the reply quickly
Wakens, has already begun its life, its past, just whole and sunny.
(90)

"Everything," Ashbery reports, "happened as he had foretold, but in a funny kind of way" (90). The idea of the possible, "the front page / Of today" (90-91),

had grown up without anybody's
Thinking or doing anything about it, so that now
It was the point of where you wanted it to go.
The fathers asked that it be made permanent,
A vessel cleaving the dungeon of the waves.
(91)

Thus, "the fathers"--poetic predecessors in Ashbery's tradition--had conceived of poetry as the release of the unconscious from bondage in the "dungeon." However, "it was not easy to tell in what direction" this permanent imaginative freedom "tended . . . in any case / Not the peaceful cawing of which so much had been / Made" (91). Once again acknowledging the irony, perhaps even the inherent contradiction, of art, pure surrealist art in particular, the poet announces: "I can tell you all / About freedom that has turned into a painting" (91). This is a transparent yet tantalizing disclosure, for Ashbery has told us all about it, somewhat obliquely in his poem "The Double Dream of Spring" and quite precisely in his appraisal of the modern imagination's debt to dada and surrealism. Ashbery then recounts the demise of that "permanence," the "elder version," and the pursuit of what "seemed the only honorable way, and futile": "to see the painting as pitch black" (91) rather than the white front page of today's possibilities. "But the way" of that darker

"song was to be consumed, corrosive" (92). Still, however, the dialectical evolution proceeded until it reached "a narrow strip of land . . . where / Illusion mattered no more than the rest" and where "ideas kept the same / Distance" (92). Thus, after reaching a point of critical objectivity and detachment, "it was time to compare all past sets of impressions" (92). Even if this new area of creativity made no distinction between illusion and reality, or the versions thereof, even if "truth" were no longer the raison d'être of poetry, there would be "pleasure / In the telling" (92) and "indifference" (93). But the story reveals that to the true esthete, as described by Theseus in The Heroes, it makes no difference whether the imagination changes or can reality--"it was what it had always been" (93)--for the highest esthetic value is to ascertain, as well as humanly possible, the true nature of each autonomous entity. True fullness of being, reality in its ultimate sense, is the ongoing creation of the mind, "pleasure / In the telling," the boat making its way across the "unread page of water" (93). As for the expectation that works of art should bear a perfect correspondence to the whole of objective reality, Ashbery simply sees them for what they too had always been:

incomplete, good-natured pictures
 Flatter us even when forgotten with dwarf speculations
 About the insane, invigorating whole they don't represent.
 (93)

It would be contrary to the fundamental principle of this volume, the principle of spring, for Ashbery to presume that the evolution of poetry has ended with his account. "The dance continues," he knows,

And as one figure
 Supplants another, and dies, so the postulate of each
 Tires the shuffling floor with slogans. . . .
 (94)

Finally, as he ponders the "secret of what goes on," clarity dims and the poetic insight begins to recede beyond reach. His questioning response, "But what could I make of all this?" (94)--both confirms this darkening of the vision and at the same time acknowledges the welling up of creative energy. And in the remaining lines, Ashbery once more associates creativity with love, affirming in the exchange of words the metaphorical union of poet and audience with lover and lover. The principle of spring prevails even as this fragment of the poet's imagination nears its close and the poet asserts a double perspective, projecting how this moment will be remembered by "her" in the future and moving steadily forward into that future.

On first meeting, Ashbery's next volume, Three Poems (1972), may appear to depart radically from the poetry's direction of growth. The titles of all his previous major works draw attention to their fundamentally referential and often ekphrastic nature and invite us to reflect on their metaphorical relation to other forms of art, history, and the organic world. Breaking this tradition, the title Three Poems is simplicity itself, apparently declining to announce the intention or "contents" even in Ashbery's usual witty, ironic, or enigmatic way. But as the works themselves reveal, the title is completely straightforward. As if the fact of being poems is of greater relevance than what they are "about," the title asks us to consider seriously the nature of poetry.

Although this question is not new to Ashbery or his readers, the form in which he addresses it is relatively unusual in English poetry: the extended prose meditation, or what is known in French literature as the récit. To call a prose piece a "poem" immediately raises numerous

esthetic questions. Ashbery has occasionally used prose for short poems and for portions of longer ones, but has never really forced the issue until now. Any poet who writes in vers libre, however, has by definition begun to confront the issue. Although vers libre virtually does away with the demands and distractions of scansion, fixed meter, rhyme, and even stanzaic regularity, it nevertheless remains conscious of itself as "poetry" and not "prose." Ashbery envisions and explores in Three Poems that quality of poetry which transcends the usual formal definitions and all the accoutrements of what John Hollander has called "the metrical contract."²⁰ In the Kostelanetz review, Ashbery hints at this when he explains why he wrote Three Poems in prose:

I'm constantly trying to think of things I haven't done yet, and prose poetry, until that point, as in Baudelaire and Rimbaud, always seemed slightly askew and not quite right. It sort of sounds self-conscious and "poetic," which is a quality I dislike in prose. I was wondering: What about writing prose poetry in which the ugliness of prose would be exploited and put to the uses of poetry? And that was hard to do, of course. . . .²¹

Ashbery admits that he does not wholly succeed in ridding his prose-poetry of the "pompous, awkward, self-consciously poetic, like the prose-poetry I was trying to get away from."²² Nonetheless, he approaches in his own language that achievement he so admired in Chirico's writing and painting: "a transparent but dense medium containing objects more real than reality."²³

Ashbery has discovered that the ongoingness of prose is perfect for connecting "the moments of awareness," which must "be continuous if they are to exist at all" ("The New Spirit," 14). Still fighting the same threat of discontinuity that plagued him in and since The Tennis Court Oath, Ashbery strives with his seemingly self-generative prose "to keep myself attached to" the brief moments of clarity "as they roll from view"

("The New Spirit," 14). This produces neither sameness nor monotony nor absence of growth; a general evolution takes place in the poems as "leit-motifs are introduced, dropped, and reintroduced where one least expects them," just as in Hebdomeros. "But," Ashbery goes on to point out in the Chirico review, "they unfold in such a way that one is seldom conscious of repetition, only of a shifting, orchestrated texture."²⁴ For Ashbery this is the texture of existence, the terms and the possibilities of which he seeks on a never-ending journey.

So, once more, the narrative energy implicit in the journey and in the récit assumes primary importance in the poetry. The actual imagery of the journey or voyage is not so much visible in Three Poems as it is totally absorbed into the life-love-art complex. Much like "Fragment," Three Poems progresses dialectically through multiple considerations and reconsiderations of various possible alternatives for regarding the past, the present, and the future; dealing with the pain of loss and regret; achieving an attitude of acceptance in the midst of diversity, mystery, and uncertainty; creating life and art out of what remains possible in the absence of magic; seeing oneself in the larger historical and cosmological scheme of things; and, finally, ascertaining a principle of unity and coherence among the diverse modes of knowing and being. And despite the way Ashbery has allowed the title Three Poems to divert our expectations, the volume is profoundly concerned with art. Though certainly not a novel addition to his poetry, the creative process becomes more tightly intertwined, more nearly merged with the process of living: the style is the man. Furthermore, what unites and nourishes both is the power of love. Love signifies the self's knowledge of the other, and in its ideal

state is the epitome and symbol of perfect reciprocity between self and other. This reciprocity is embodied in the very language of the poems, which are not simply conversations of the poet with himself but serious dialogues with "you," lover or reader or both. It is a total consciousness, a combined effort of poet and other, which results in the poem's making. Hence, no matter how painful the experience, how far from optimistic the outlook, Ashbery can assert that "the most pessimistic moments in my big poems are optimistic" because "somebody is being born."²⁵ Coming into existence, the "question of your being here"--these constitute the theme of Three Poems.

Renewal is the very idea, form, and source of energy in the volume's first poem, "The New Spirit." This title simultaneously states the major problem to be addressed and the promise of solving it, as the first few lines demonstrate:

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, truer, way.

clean-washed sea

The flowers were.

These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something 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.

Have I awakened? Or is this sleep again? Another form of sleep?
(3-4)

Except for the slower, interrupted pace, this passage is a remarkable microcosm of "The New Spirit" and Three Poems as well. In a casual, calm manner, in an intimate conversation with himself and with "you," the poet announces the problem: the difficulty of knowing which is the "truer" way

among all the possible ways and how to choose among them. Ashbery has polarized the choices here as the two great principles of all his poetry: in way of inclusion ("the costly stuff of explanation") and the way of exclusion ("the carnivorous way of these lines").²⁶ Rather than opt for one or the other, he essentially denies that the truth is in any one way; it is, rather, in the making and in the maker. The moment of clarity quickly passes, leaving Ashbery uncertain of the state of consciousness he inhabits and unable to discern so much as a "profile in the massed days ahead" (4). In short, he finds himself in the "middle of the journey," "a place of ideal quiet" (4). Having completed the meditative "composition of place," he can now consider his options, a method of choosing among them, and a way of pursuing without regret the selected path.

Attempting to trace the course of these subsequent reflections is not only difficult but in some respects contrary to the principle of the poem. The reason for both lies in the tightly woven texture and the insistent continuity of the prose poem, which moves with "quicksilver" fluctuations too minute and numerous to recount.²⁷ Ashbery is perhaps having his joke on the critics, daring them to paraphrase this one. Such fluctuations of consciousness and gradations of existence are the very body and life of the poem; they represent Ashbery's desire to do justice to "the experience of experience" and simultaneously to grasp its larger shape and contours. Ashbery does acknowledge the cost of this enterprise: to "have the whole outline in mind yet . . . not notice the individual changes as they occur, and then one day /have/ it dawn on you that you are the change" (25). These moments of "dawning" are the palpable

rises which reveal a manageable form in the poem's landscape. Ashbery brings us to numerous places at which he suddenly alters perspective: leaping out an intense, ongoing present, distancing himself from the entire process of reflection, summarizing or categorizing the events in phases in the first half of the journey--e.g., "that stage" or "the incandescent period" (38)--and flowing almost imperceptibly into another stream of meditation. The rhythm is that of what Ashbery calls an "exploratory dialogue" (25), which, as it evolves, demonstrates how the need for renewal, a "new spirit," emerges out of and is clarified by the poet's assessment of his progress. When he reaches the close of this meditation, he is prepared to fully assume a "new kind of arbitrariness" (9), the idea of choosing.

The very concept of choice is not simply a matter of esthetic practice; it is fundamentally a theological question of free will. Ashbery's journey in "The New Spirit" is like the pilgrimage of the soul toward its destiny in The Double Dream of Spring. In traditional religious meditation, the problem and the goal are to align the errant human will with the divine will; the choice is clear: there is only one path to salvation. As Stephen Donadio suggests, "The New Spirit" alludes to Dante's Vita Nuova and follows in general the pattern of Dante's allegory of salvation.²⁸ Moreover, the poem abounds with Biblical expressions, theological concepts, and liturgical phrases which Ashbery appropriates as naturally into his vocabulary as clichés and words from numerous other sources. As in the Double Dream, however, a profound irony pervades the entire theological framework. Dante and Ashbery may both suffer from spiritual poverty, but for Ashbery there is no vision of eternal bliss

at the end of the pilgrimage, no "beatific scrap" (16) that might fall like manna, no divine will to accept. There is only

so much debris of living, and as such cannot be
transmitted
Into another, usable substance, but is irreducible
But it is your landscape, the proof that you are there. . . (7)

In place of a divine order, Ashbery rediscovers the immutable law of time and change, which offers only two alternatives: "to deal with or be lost in" (7) the wasteland. So the choice, therefore, is not between inclusion or exclusion but is whether or not to embrace "a strange kind of happiness within limitations," to live in a "limited but infinitely free space" (27). This happiness, this essence of "well-being," is similar to that portrayed by the figure 8 skaters in Rivers and Mountains; it consists in "a way of moving forward" (19). Unlike the inevitable rightness of divine salvation, the true and false ways of Ashbery's "disenchanted" world "are confounded." Only hindsight discloses that "the way we took was the right one" (17), for the true way, the "new spirit," is simply to choose. To refuse choice is to be lost, stranded. The rewards, on the other hand,

in some cases . . . will take the form of clumsy removal of the barriers by force . . . in others, getting used to inhabiting the ruins and artfully adapting them to present needs; in still others, standing up in the space certain that it is the right one, and feeling the sense of its proportions leave your mind like rays, striking out to the antipodes and polishing them, perfecting them through use. One can then go about one's business unencumbered by nostalgia but still feeling the habit of this place where one has accomplished things before. . . . (28)

The renewal of the spirit certainly does not affect the working out of the laws of chance and causation in the physical universe: "The

phenomena have not changed" although "a new way of being seen convinces them they have" (39). Ashbery still assumes a "conservation of mass and energy" principle which argues against renewal in the absolute sense but implies rather a personal and subjective transformation. Furthermore, Ashbery discovers that this idea of renewal "poses terrible problems" (45), the chief of which results from a sense of wholeness he begins to feel toward the end of the poem: "Everything had stopped for him. There were no new stories. No one invented things for him anymore" (46-47). Suddenly realizing that his stories are among the unchanged phenomena of the universe forces the poet to critically assess his own efficacy as an artist: even his stories have been continued revisions of the older ones, as he said in "Fragment." If "all of the true fragments are here," is creativity an illusion? In Ashbery's secularized universe, the book of the world does not easily yield up its answers to such questions. One thing is certain:

the major question that revolves around you, your being here . . . is . . . affirmed in the stars: just their presence, mild and unquestioning, is proof that you have got to begin in the way of choosing some one of the forms of answering that question, since if they were not there the question could not exist to be answered, but only as a rhetorical question in the impassive grammar of cosmic unravelings of all kinds, to be proposed but never formulated.
(51)

If Dante's heaven is mute, the poet's only hope lies in the idea of "striking out": the enterprise of setting out on the journey is synonymous with the continual writing down and revising of one's life work. So he takes up the pen in further meditation.

Like "The New Spirit," the title of the second poem, "The System," connotes the principle of unity; in the poem, however, Ashbery explores the diverse definitions of reality and happiness. Toward this end, he

writes a poetic history of ideas in order to place his own situation "in relief." What he proposes to explore are "the sequences that can now exist in memory" (54), another historical tradition, "the oral kind that goes on in you without your having anything to do about it" (56). These

other, unrelated happenings that form a kind of sequence of fantastic reflections . . . have hardly ever been looked at from a vantage point other than a historian's and an arcane historian's at that. The living aspect of these obscure phenomena has never to my knowledge been examined from a point of view like a painter's: in the round, bathed in a sufficient flow of overhead light, with "all its imperfections on its head" and yet without prejudice of the exaggerations either of the anathematist or the eulogist: quietly, in short, and I hope succinctly.

(56)

Though more rigorous than that of "The New Spirit," the method here is not as systematic as one might expect. Ashbery's way is to live in each idea for a moment. While taking up and casting aside these systems, the poet is concurrently delineating a larger, more inclusive system of being in which the parts exist in a unity of the whole. As in The Tennis Court Oath, the quasi-historical narrative often becomes indistinguishable from the retelling of the self's growth, and the problems that have perplexed the history of ideas suddenly but naturally emerge in the relationship of lover and beloved and in the mysteries of the imagination.

Ashbery offers another hint of his method when he announces early in "The System" that this day of exploration is also "the day of temptation" (53). He retains the theological orientation of "The New Spirit" as he assesses the prospect of "our salvation" and describes the process of death and resurrection. Without denying the mystery of existence, Ashbery can still celebrate the sensual, which "can save us in extremis" (76), and the profane world. But the truer and more subtle temptation comes as part of Ashbery's desire to draw us into the consciousness of the

poem, to make us live the difficulty of distinguishing between appearance and reality. The reader is swept along by the flood-tide of long, cumulative sentences, convinced by the authority of present-tense verbs, and seduced by both the imagery and the abstract beauty of the ideas. For example, after taking up the idea of variety, "this cosmic welter of attractions" (58), Ashbery then shines the indifferent studio light on "the whole vast, waving mass" and makes us see:

Thus it was that a kind of blight fell on these early forms of going forth and being together, an anarchy of the affections sprung from too much universal cohesion. Yet so blind are we to the true nature of reality at any given moment . . . 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 ugly as sin. . . .

(58-59)

Indeed, the metaphorical modes of seeing--from painterly perspective to understanding to the dreamer's and the prophet's visions--are inseparable from the ideas of unity and multiplicity in "The System." Together they give rise to the major metaphors in the poem. When Ashbery has completed his study of the alternative ways of "seeing" reality, he finds that nothing but himself has changed, that "'Whatever was, is, and must be,'" and that he is "viewing it all from a different angle, perhaps not more nor less accurate than the previous one, but . . . necessary . . . for the in-the-round effect to be achieved" (93). Here the painterly idea of the multiple perspectives needed for a whole view merges with the theatrical metaphor, which throughout Ashbery's poetry has been evident in the idea of "gesture" but which now comes to dominate the remainder of Three Poems. What we see in-the-round now is "the thing that our actions have accomplished . . . a chronicle play of our lives, with

the last act still in the dim future" (93). The concept of life as theater, related to the poet's persistent vision of the world as book, bursts with implications which go as far back as The Heroes and "The Painter."

The problem and possibility of knowing reality was a major concern of The Heroes and supplies now the impetus for Ashbery's search for a fail-safe system of knowledge. In a substantial section of the poem, Ashbery rejects not only "right reason" (idealism) and "sensory data" (empiricism) but also an amalgam of the two, for this "is not completeness either" (68). But he finds in the ongoing, ever-completing but never-completed drama the perfect symbol for the simultaneous processes of acting and reflecting, the living and the telling of the story. "In relief," self and world assume the clarity of their autonomous identities; hence one is aware of the vast multiplicity of the world and the ideas about it. When his "wanderings have come full circle" (100), the poet has discovered that

all these ideas had arisen in the same head and were merely
aspects of a single organism: yourself, or perhaps you desire
to be different. So that now in order to avoid extinction
again it now becomes necessary to invoke the idea of oneness,
only this time if possible on a higher plane . . . so that
each difference might be taken as a type of all the others and
yet remain intrinsically itself, unlike anything in the world.
(101)

This peculiar version of unity-in-diversity enables Ashbery once again to assert the possibility of holding opposites in balance. Yet he is not content with anything less than the vision of wholeness, Breton's "future resolution" of opposite realms. He envisions the merging of self and selflessness, the poetic achievement of "turning you both in on yourself and outward" (97), the "intolerable" mixing of reality and fantasy, even the spectators "swarming up onto the stage to be absorbed into the

play" (94). Still, this vision--"the reality you dreamed and which is therefore real" (86)--may in the end

become possible; that is the time when audience and actor and writer and director all mingle joyously together as one, as the curtain descends a last time to separate them from the half-empty theater.

(94)

Ashbery returns at last to the ultimate and universal esthetic question of "The Painter" and Auden's "The Sea and the Mirror": the relationship between reality and the work of the imagination. Here, the crucial concept of verisimilitude takes the question directly back to the dilemma of "The New Spirit": whether to include everything and what to include. In the final stages of his meditation, Ashbery once again sees the writer's selectivity as the metaphor for living. We do shape "our continuing story," but we can do so only by learning of ourselves from movies of the past. "These windows on the past," says Ashbery,

enable us to see enough to stay on an even keel in the razor's-edge present which is really a no-time . . . [a] dimensionless area . . . the blurred edge where life is hinged to the future and to the past. But only focus on the past through the clear movie-theater dark and you are a changed person, and can begin to live again.

(103)

As a result, "our story takes on the clear, compact shape of the plot of a novel" (103). But the shape is transformed as each frame of the present becomes the recent past, so a new question confronts us: "What place is there in the continuing story" for everything, all "the medium size experiences that somehow don't fit in but which loom larger and more interesting as they begin to retreat into the past?" (103). It seems that despite our efforts, the choice of what to include and exclude is out of our hands; life asserts its authority, assumes a certain momentum, a

vitality of its own, and "the rejected chapters take over" (104).

The poet leaves the film and returns to daylight, squinting and as surprised as the dead soul resurrected from his solipsism to see that nothing has changed. He resists the momentary temptation to "plung[e] into the middle of some other old movie," turns his back on the past-- "dust and ashes"--and prepares for "the pragmatic and kinetic future" (106). The performance, the recital, begins.

"The Recital" is a rich and perfectly conceived title, Ashbery at his most provocative and his most luminous. In only eleven pages, the poet literally recites, re-tells, gives further depth and definition to the themes he has developed in "The New Spirit" and "The System." The apprehension of reality has been his perennial concern, and the urgency of that task governs "The Recital" from the outset. The first step is to recognize and accept what is apparently "new" as properly "part of some other, old problem" (107). Yet the refusal or inability to accept this, Ashbery reveals, is a form of childishness, which he proceeds to analyze. The emergence from our unhappy childhood into adulthood is likened to "the abrupt change from darkness to daylight (108), be it from Plato's cave or the dark movie theater. As a result of intoxication with our liberation from "utopian joy as well as the torments of that older fantasy world," we were deluded into "dull living," content with the mere "naming of all the new things we now possessed" and "the task of trying to revive . . . memories, make them real" (108). The overwhelming variety of new experiences and old memories eventually forces this admission: "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" (109). Face to face with the inevitable paradox of art, we have only one way of coping with time and variety of phenomena, the conditions which impel us to make art: to sing, to "register our appraisal of the moving world that is around us" (109). But in doing what we must, "our song is leading us on now, farther and farther into that wilderness and away from the shrouded but familiar forms that were its first inspiration. On and on into this gathering darkness --is there no remedy for this?" (109-110). Though doomed, the analytic act of naming at least provided the illusion of knowing, of rendering the recalcitrant world of phenomena somewhat less alien and more manageable, more systematic, as it were. But the unmanageable plethora of names which has driven us to song has brought unanticipated grief, "the sorrow of continually doing something that you cannot name, of producing automatically as an apple tree produces this thing there is no name for" (110).

Thus every effort comes to bear unintended fruit; our sense of efficacy is nil. It is not simply that we feel no control over our destiny; rather we can neither detect nor conceive of any "spiritual model for our aspirations" (111). The systems of both the hedonist and the ascetic are unworkable. We may, however, believe we have in sight "some seemingly superior vision," or that "the masterpiece we were on the point of achieving was classic in the sense of the Greeks and simultaneously informed by a Romantic ardor minus the eccentricity . . ." (112).

But Ashbery knows that this envisioned masterpiece cannot exist:

Any reckoning of the sum total of the things that 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 . . . 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 of them, the reckoning and its application, so close to the reality being live that it vanishes suddenly in a thunderclap, with a loud cry.

(113)

Such art encroaches upon the natural world--the daylight goes out of the day and the pine trees are struck with "a mysterious blight." It makes no sense; the book of nature and each new situation we confront exist in an unknown language and "cannot be decoded with reference to an existing corpus of moral principles" (114). And if "the landscape" and our representation of it assume the primary validity of the external world, then our very existence comes into doubt. Hence we may be blind to "an event of cosmic beatitude" because, assuming it is taking place outside, we fail to accept the fact that "it took place inside us" (114).

To pursue the elusive vision of wholeness and the fullness of being has been Ashbery's task, to maintain a state of preparedness for the extraordinary moments of revelation as they flash brilliantly and briefly in the realm of ordinary experience. Perhaps the ultimate hope of those who practice the art of meditation is to approach or achieve a perfect state of continuous revelation. Ashbery knows, however, that we cannot transcend the laws of time, to have halted the journey or to have reached its end: this is nothing less than death. To accept the vision as a mixed blessing is a condition of our paradoxical existence. The promise of revelation is our joy; its ephemeral presence, our anguish.

In the depths of this anguish, the poet wonders if there is nothing new to signify his acceptance of the "insistent now," the future always presenting "itself as the turning point" (115). Slowly, glimmers begin to invade the dusk of his room, and "something real did seem to be

left over" from his playing over and over again with "these tattered enigmas" (117, 116). The "real" is imaged as "a solid remnant of light" (117) which becomes substantial as understanding gradually prevails and the unexpected synthesis comes into being. "This fusion," of which "the partnership . . . was the only element now" (118), symbolizes the poet's acceptance of the past without anxiety and anticipation of the future without fear of the unknown. What matters now is the "transparent but dense medium" that holds the present fullness: it is the transformation that is of the essence, not the opposites. Even as the fusion is coming into existence, time is pushing it back over the "Bridge of Sighs" into memory, from whose weak grasp it is rapidly escaping. The aftermath, however, is free from regret, for

a vast wetness as of sea and air combined, a single smooth, anonymous matrix without surface or depth was the product of these new changes. It no longer mattered very much whether prayers were answered with concrete events or the oracle gave a convincing reply, for there was no longer anyone to care in the old sense of caring. There were new people watching and waiting, conjugating in this way the distance and emptiness, transforming the scarcely noticeable bleakness into something both intimate and noble. The performance had ended, the audience streamed out; the applause still echoed in the empty hall. But the idea of the spectacle as something to be acted out and absorbed still hung in the air long after the last spectator had gone home to sleep.

(118)

So concludes Ashbery's recital--meditation, story, re-telling, performance--and so it circles back to its point of origin. The "voyage . . . ends in a new key, although at the appointed place" (116). In echoing the poet's initial quest for "the new spirit," the closing paragraph reasserts and reconfirms the "dignity of the mind" and the imagination. For Ashbery's récit shows us nothing if not the vision and the promise of living in the idea, that of wholly assuming "the idea of

choosing." This is why "concrete events" are no longer the expected answers to prayers and why, even after "the performance has ended," there still remained an idea so firm and solid, so reified, that we do not question the necessity or possibility of its being "acted out and absorbed." In this way, "The Recital" fulfills "The New Spirit" and generates the sense of ongoingness and renewal which extends beyond the last word.

CHAPTER V

THE EFFICACY OF THE REFLECTIVE ART

With Rivers and Mountains and The Double Dream of Spring, Ashbery firmly established his place as a major figure in modern American poetry. Since those two volumes, Ashbery's work has grown in excellence and has acquired an audience which, if not always certain of their ability to read it, recognizes its merit. This recognition reached its highest point when Ashbery's seventh major book, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1975), received three distinguished awards: the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. This most critically applauded book makes it difficult to avoid the temptation of arguing for a teleological progression in Ashbery's poetry. It is nearly "unimaginable" in retrospect to have anticipated after Three Poems any less than the fruition of the ekphrastic and self-reflective modes in the Self-Portrait. Ashbery is indisputably right in Three Poems when he describes how viewing the movie of our lives suddenly reveals a shape and contour as dense and compact as that of any novel. And, truly, when the frames of Ashbery's most important works are seen together, a portrait of self-reflection emerges with astounding clarity:

you and I
Are suddenly what the trees try
To tell us we are. . . .

"Some Trees," 1949

I was so happy. . . . For at last I was seeing myself as I could
only be . . . full of unfamiliarity and the resulting poetry.
The Heroes, 1952

Hands that are always writing things
On mirrors for people to see later. . . .
"How Much Longer Will I Be Able to
Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher . . ."
The Tennis Court Oath, 1962

Scratching in dust a name on the mirror. . . .
(I)

But there is time
To change, to utterly destroy
That too-familiar image
Lurking in the glass
Each morning, at the edge of the mirror.
(IV)
"The Skaters"
Rivers and Mountains, 1966

And the face
Resembles yours, the one reflected in the water.
"Summer"
The Double Dream of Spring, 1970

And it is here that I am quite ready to admit that I am alone,
that the film I have been watching all this time may be only a
mirror, with all the characters including that of the old aunt
played by me in different disguises.

"The System"
Three Poems, 1972

Finally, in Self-Portrait, the profound implications of "writing on mirrors" are fully acknowledged, fully explored, and fully accepted for all their limitations and their rewards.

Even if the philosophical and esthetic aspects of self-reflection have constituted the core of Ashbery's poetry since Some Trees, there is still the question of what has changed and what has remained, what, in essence, is Ashbery's "style." From one perspective, the general history of his style from Turandot to Three Poems seems to reveal a "developmental" impulse from the more formally controlled to the more liberated, the

"culmination" of this freeing process symbolized in the virtually de-poeticized Three Poems. Just on the point of asking what does the prose-poet do for an encore, the dangerous tacit assumptions underlying that question become apparent and Ashbery publishes poetry whose surface appearance resembles that of Rivers and Mountains and The Double Dream of Spring. Indeed, the poems in Self-Portrait represent a variety of structures, yet they all have roots in the earlier poetry and for the most part share Ashbery's characteristic handling of figurative language and rhetoric. In some instances, the reader finds a strangely more stylized poetic than might be expected but nonetheless free. With the exception of certain metaphors and modes that have taken on greater prominence and luminousness, the "newest" feature of the poetry in Self-Portrait is an indisputable richness, resonance, and authority.

Ashbery's poems still position themselves along a continuum between the polar principles of dissociation and coherence, of openendedness and resolution, and continue to exhibit a narrative momentum. In "Worsening Situation," the poet assumes a distinct persona to narrate or dramatize the feeling of being disconnected from life and unable to effect any desired results. A variation of this is the epistle, like "Tenth Symphony," which is in the form of a narrative reminiscence addressed to an unnamed auditor; however, an anxiety typical of The Tennis Court Oath suffuses the epistle "Lithuanian Dance Band," spoken by a seeming madman in a breathless series of run-on sentences. Ashbery also combines narrative with commentary, illustration, or meditation, as in "No Way of Knowing" and "Poem 1." As "No Way" illustrates, Ashbery begins in medias res, one of his favorite techniques, to create a sense of hav-

ing sudden access to another person's self-contained life-story. A third general type among the narrative poems is the semi-abstract narrative, like "Voyage in the Blue," "Absolute Clearance," and "Scheherazade." Ashbery has also appropriated and "refurbished" other structures from previous volumes. The scene and meditation/commentary which was prominent in Turandot and Some Trees resurfaces again in two more openly ekphrastic poems, "Forties Flick" and "City Afternoon." Still other poems which "resolve" into a scene at the end represent a figurative mode of thought characteristic of Ashbery especially in his pseudo-logical poems. "Voyage in the Blue" is a curious mixture of abstract narrative and the premise/proposition which flows into an illustration, figurative conclusion, or meditation.

These categories are clearly not mutually exclusive, nor are they intended to be. Instead they simply remind us of Ashbery's range and of his continuing desire to incorporate the "old" into the "new." Take, for example, the poems that represent in Ashbery the extremes of accessibility. "Sand Pail" and "Tarpaulin" are notable among the poems in Self-Portrait not only for their striking brevity but also for their kinship with the short hermetic poems, best typified by "To Redouté" in The Tennis Court Oath. The earlier poem evokes in its finally impenetrable appeal the painting of Redouté and, at the same time, casts doubt upon the efficacy of perception and memory by playing on the French verbs douter and redouter. "Sand Pail" is similarly tantalizing, visually vivid, yet reserved:

Process
 of a red stripe through much whiplash
 of environmental sweepstakes misinterprets
 slabs as they come forward. A

footprint
 directs traffic in the center
 of flat crocus plaza as the storm
 incurses on this new situation. Why
 are there developments?
 A transparent shovel paves, "they" say,
 residual plastic fetters
 pictures of moments
 brought under the sand.

(54)

The difference between the two poems thirteen years apart is one that characterizes Ashbery's voice in all of Self-Portrait: the language is dense, solid, vibrant.

Likewise, readers who believed that Ashbery left the exploded, dissociative mode behind at the Atocha Station or in "Europe" will be surprised to find "Farm II" in Self-Portrait. Like many of Ashbery's fragmented poems, "Farm II" begins to take on a certain sense of rightness and "sense" as it becomes more familiar. Still, it gives the impression of being pieced together in such a way that teases the reader to find a way of reassembling it. Whether Ashbery deliberately undertook to emulate Raymond Roussel's techniques is impossible to tell. But we should bear in mind that Ashbery is extremely knowledgeable about Roussel's life and works. Ashbery's tribute to Roussel for Art News Annual contains this revealing description of the French writer's odd and inventive style in Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique (1932):

Each canto starts off innocently to describe the scene in question, but the narrative is constantly interrupted by a parenthetical thought. New works suggest new parentheses; sometimes as many as five pairs of parentheses ((((())) isolate one idea buried in the surrounding verbiage like the central sphere in a Chinese puzzle. 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.¹

At the other end of the spectrum, however, lie a few poems of

extraordinary openness and clarity. Poems like "Mixed Feelings" and "Fear of Death" have absorbed the personal, autobiographical voice of "The Instruction Manual" and "The Skaters" and purged it of any awkward self-consciousness. As a result, Ashbery appears to have dropped even a personal though poetic persona in order to speak as one person to another. Consider "Fear of Death":

What is it now with me
And is it as I have become?
Is there no state free from the boundary lines
Of before and after? The window is open today

And the air pours in with piano notes
In its skirts, as though to say, "Look, John,
I've brought these and these"--that is,
A few Beethovens, some Brahmses,

A few choice Poulenc notes. . . . Yes,
It is being free again, the air, it has to keep coming back
Because that's all it's good for.
I want to stay with it out of fear

That keeps me from walking up certain steps,
Knocking at certain doors, fear of growing old
Alone, and of finding no one at the evening end
Of the path except another myself

Nodding a curt greeting: "Well, you've been awhile
But now we're back together, which is what counts."
Air in my path, you could shorten this,
But the breeze has dropped, and silence is the last word.

(49)

The poem is obviously not without artifice, yet it possesses the same nonartificial quality of self-assessment as Yeats' "The Circus Animals' Desertion." Unlike Ashbery, the Yeats of this poem was, of course, nearing the end of both his life and his poetic career and is, as Edward Said says of the later Hopkins, lamenting "the verbal dead remnants" of his creative potency.² Ashbery has not reached this phase yet, although he concedes in the Craft interview that "the passing of time is becoming

more and more the subject of my poetry as I get older."³ What is remarkable about "Fear of Death" is the honesty. But its freedom from morbidity or self-pity also represents an achievement in the continuing maturity of Ashbery's style.

In other aspects of style, particularly prosody and rhetoric, Self-Portrait both partakes of the familiar and exhibits some new tendencies. Line length is irregular, the rhythm variable, and the stanzas, when they do appear, are often variable and always unrhymed. As usual, Ashbery is as fond as ever of surprise through provocative paradox ("this severed hand," in "Worsening Situation," the poet says, "stands for life"), through deflation ("As you came from the holy land / Of western New York state"), and through "detour." The poetry also retains Ashbery's insatiable impulse toward the metaphorical, in the largest sense of the word; his comparisons are abundant, are full of the unusual but uncannily illuminating, and often have a peculiar archaic or epic ring reminiscent of Stevens:

As on a festal day in early spring
The tidelands maneuver and the air is quick with imitations:
Ships, hats appear. And those,
The mind-readers, who are never far off. But
To get to know them we must avoid them.

And so, into our darkness life seeps. . . .

(25)

Perhaps the most surprising stylistic phenomenon occurs in "As You Came from the Holy Land." It may startle some readers to come upon a so highly rhetorical poem after the relative looseness--but not absence, by any means--of rhetoric in Three Poems:

you reading there so accurately
sitting not wanting to be disturbed
as you came from that holy land

what other signs of earth's dependency were upon you
what fixed sign at the crossroads
what lethargy in the avenues
where all is said in a whisper
what tone of voice among the hedges
what tone under the apple trees. . . .

(6)

But, again, it is the mark of Ashbery's stylistic maturity that the rhetoric is never rigid or superfluous.

The most convincing demonstration of richness and mastery and vitality in Ashbery's poetic is provided by a quick overview of the diction in Self-Portrait. Once again, the very nature of his language embodies and reinforces the central concerns of the poetry. The single most distinguishing quality of Ashbery's verse is its insistent and inexorable refusal to stand still--it is always changing perspective and always, in spite of its sometimes disembodied placelessness, reaching out and bringing in external referents. Though his tone is often and increasingly visionary, Ashbery interrupts or spoofs it with sudden odd shifts in the level of diction. Midstream in a serious meditation, Ashbery throws in a cliché or two:

These were meant to be read as any
Salutation before getting down to business,
But they stuck to their guns. . . .
("Scheherazade," 6-7)

At the same time, Ashbery is soberly questioning all possible sources of truth, including that offered by homely, conventional wisdom:

You forget how there could be a gasp of new air
Hidden in that jumble. And of course your forgetting
Is a sign of just how much it matters to you:
"It must have been important."
The lies fall like flaxen threads from the skies
All over America, and the fact that some of them are true of
course
Doesn't not so much matter as serve to justify
The whole mad organizing force under the billows of correct
delight.

("Grand Gallop," 20)

There are also literary echoes, including the voices of such poets as Eliot ("'really not the same thing at all,'" in "Farm," and "There will be time / For other decisions" in "Lithuanian Dance Band") and, of course, Auden. Sometimes the poet speaks in intentionally archaic forms and distinctly Biblical tones. The epigraph to "Absolute Clearance" quotes from Bossuet: "'Voilà, Messieurs, les spectacles que Dieu donne à l'univers. . .'" Attempting to determine the truth from samples, i.e., pictures or "spectacles" on the walls, the nameless "he" of "Absolute Clearance" considers how a thing can apparently change its value or seem both "irrelevant and the truth" (12). It is a matter of perspective, which the poet gladly changes for us: "Suffer again the light to be displaced . . ." (12). The meditation, reminiscence, and reassessment triggered by the pictures eventually lead to this uncomfortable but so perfectly fitting juxtaposition of Biblical quotation and flat-toned recapitulation:

I put away childish things,
It was for this I came to Riverside
And lived here for three years
Now coming to a not uncertain
Ending or flowering as some would call it.
(13)

At best Ashbery is presenting us with a painful incongruity; at the most cynical, indulging in parody. No less serious but brighter in tone, Ashbery's most delightful piece of parody in Self-Portrait is "On Autumn Lake," which provides the same kind of comic relief to the volume as "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" brought to The Double Dream of Spring. Like "Farm Implements," "On Autumn Lake" deals with subject matter of great importance to Ashbery and to the book as a whole and yet distances him from the absurdity lurking behind almost every human

enterprise including art and especially that of "doing" art. Ashbery begins as a "Chinese philosopher" who is "leading liot act to foriage . . . here on Autumn Lake thoughtfully inserted in / Plovince of Quebec . . ." (48). The parodic opening quickly subsides into an intense apprehension of the lake's edge in the distance and a critique of art and the preparation for art. Meanwhile the poet is apparently engaged in a fill-in-the-blank writing exercise which leads him to conclude that

It's like the "machines" of the 19th-century Academy.
Turns out you didn't need all that training
To do art--that it was even better not to have it. Look at
The Impressionists--some of 'em had it, too, but preferred to
forget it. . . .

(48)

But the parodic strain returns and neatly frames the poem as it concludes:

I do not think that this
Will be my last trip to Autumn Lake
Have some friends among many severe heads
We all scholars siting under tree
Waiting for nut to fall. Some of us studying
Persian and Aramaic, others the art of distilling
Weird fragrances out of nothing, from the ground up.
In each the potential is realized, the two wires
Are crossing.

(48)

As the autumn lake reminds us, Ashbery's chief sources of figurative language remain in the arts and in the natural/organic world--both inseparably bound up with the idea of creativity. Ashbery's obvious first-hand knowledge of and ease with Impressionist painting in "On Autumn Lake" seems to merely corroborate the overwhelming evidence that Self-Portrait brings to the painting-music controversy vis-à-vis Ashbery's poetry and imagination. It is certain that the visual imagery and painterly techniques provide much of the volume's striking imagery--the con-

tinuing presence of planes, perspective, horizons; the imagery of cross-hatching ("The One Thing That Can Save America"); the "flesh tones" of "De Imagine Mundi"; in general, the poet's indisputably keen sense of the visual world in terms of mass, line, and color. On the other hand, Kostelanetz argues that Ashbery's imagination is is aural⁴ and I concur. Although painting has "movement" and Ashbery will be the first to agree, as his art criticism demonstrates, his poems move musically. To resolve this controversy is in some respects to attempt a solution to a nonexistent problem; both the visual and the aural are integral to Ashbery's poetry, and both must be accorded their true value in it. The difficulty of recognizing the musical is that in terms of movement it is simultaneously so subtle and so completely internalized that our attention is drawn elsewhere by other more noticeable stylistic features. Perhaps the most balanced blend of the visual and the musical came to be in "The Skaters"; here both were obvious because the vocabulary of each was part of the poem's form and idea. In Self-Portrait, we find rather scattered references to composers and their works, what Alban Berg said of Mahler's ninth symphony ("Self-Portrait," 76), or the famous canon of Pachelbel and the final canonical movement of Franck's sonata for piano and violin ("The Tomb of Stuart Merrill," 38). It is likely that these works are part of the extraordinarily large repertoire of esthetic experiences Ashbery has accumulated over the years and bear the same relationship to his poems here that Chirico's painting bore to "The Double Dream of Spring." To recall a particular musical work in a poem may be to clarify the memory of a significant occasion, thought, or feeling; again, as with the dream and the painting in The Double Dream of Spring, the music becomes an agent and a form of the memory. There is an even greater appeal in

music which Ashbery has mentioned before: the mystery of its subliminal message and the argumentative power of its momentum.

Ashbery has also long associated music with the rhythms of living. The pervasive presence of air and wind imagery in his poetry, the puns on air (tune, melody), and the idea of a wind instrument are curiously similar to Milton's transformation of the highly rhetorical "music of the spheres" motif into the simple and profound breath of life. While Ashbery in no way approaches the Miltonic theological stance, "Fear of Death" poignantly unites air with music, music with life, and silence--the absence of music--with death:

The window is open today
And the air pours in with piano notes
But the breeze has dropped, and silence is the last word.
(49)

There is also in the last line the suggestion that the sounding of sounds --whether words or musical notes--is the telling of the story, which for Ashbery is his life's work. The making-of-fictions has been a strong theme in the poetry, especially in The Double Dream of Spring and Three Poems, and now becomes more nearly united with music, as indicated by the reference to Surrey's lute in "Grand Galop." It is the idea of musical momentum, continuity, and self-generation that finally links music and the story.

Ashbery's story in Self-Portrait is essentially a re-telling of the story and an asking again of the old questions: is it possible for us to know anything, to recognize or achieve the fullness of being? How can we continue in the face of our limitations? So, once again, Ashbery

embarks on a journey into the vicissitudes of existence, where the claims, the trials, and the minor victories of life and art are virtually synonymous.

Like Milton, ironically, Ashbery does acknowledge our state as a fallen and fragmented one, badly in need of coherence. The poet is therefore continually seeking a sense of restoration, of course not theological, like Milton's, and continuity between self and world, self and past, knowledge and reality, intention and act, word and idea. "There is," he insists hopefully in "Tenth Symphony," "some connexion . . . among this" (46-47). Once the need is known, the task is to assume a state of receptivity to knowledge as it emerges from various sources and directions, to distinguish between illusion and reality, the artificial and the authentic, the surface and the core. The primary difficulty is that of recognizing and accepting as valid the numerous sources of knowledge--perception, reflection, the creation of art, memory, dream, experience. Although to refuse this course of action is to negate life, the cost is enormous. Existence comes to mean enduring the wait for epiphany and reunion. The letter motif still symbolizes the anticipation of a message, as in "Farm," "Farm III," and "The One Thing That Can Save America," or the frenzied urgency to communicate, as in "Lithuanian Dance Band." There is also to be endured the frustration of loss through time, the dissociation of established bonds, the certainty of incomplete or unattained knowledge and of partial realization. In "All and Some," the poet concedes that "to sense /a thing/ clearly is not to know it, alas" (65) and that "all good intentions remain puny" (64). The only hope here is that "the work gets completed in a dream" (65). Perhaps the most pain-

ful reality is the necessity of accepting limitation and the illusion of freedom and choice.

The fundamental question--how wide is our field of possibilities? --is not new to Ashbery's poetry but takes on ever greater proportions. Ashbery announces and reconfirms the seriousness of the problem in the volume's opening poem, "As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat," and returns to it again and again, most noticeably in "Worsening Situation," "Forties Flick," "As You Came from the Holy Land," and "Farm II." The packet-boat metaphor not only assimilates Ashbery's long-central letter and voyage motifs but at last incorporates the idea the the journey's route is pre-arranged and the destination and home-port always the same. If this is true, what can be new and different, what can be created? Ashbery addresses the problem in an organic allegory of poetic creativity:

So this was all, but obscurely
I felt the stirrings of new breath in the pages
Which all winter long had smelled like an old catalogue.
New sentences were starting up. But the summer
Was well along, not yet past the mid-point
But full and dark with the promise of that fullness,
That time when one can no longer wander away
And even the least attentive fall silent
To watch the thing that is prepared to happen.

A look of glass stops you
And you walk on shaken: was I the perceived?

(1)

Just as it is about to become, the poet's reflection suddenly fills him with doubt, apprehension, and awareness of limitation. Yet he glimpses a synesthetic vision of the possible, the dreamed about, the beginning of

The great formal affair . . . orchestrated,
Its colors concentrated in a glance, a ballade
That takes in the whole world, now, but lightly,
Still lightly, but with wide authority and tact.

(1)

The poet is "sunstruck," as it were, giddy from the midsummer sun and giddy with the vision, "drunk" in the packet-boat. Though it holds "the promise of that fullness," summer yet "demands and takes too much away" (2). So the poet returns to the kinder world of dreams, preferring imaginative intoxication than sobriety, for "the night, the reserved, the reticent, gives more than it takes" (2).

This does not mean that Ashbery has repudiated his search for the truth; having confronted limitation, he finds it necessary to adopt a special attitude toward the search. We recall that Theseus of The Heroes taught that reality is apprehended only through the imagination. Still, the poet's doubt about his creative powers persists, particularly vis-à-vis the horrible prospect of writing one more diary like all the others, of merely repeating "the story worn out from telling" ("A Man of Words," 8). To complicate matters further, Ashbery discovers in "Grand Galop" certain problems inherent in the manner of telling:

But I was trying to tell you about a strange thing
That happened to me, but this is no way to tell about it,
By making it truly happen. It drifts away in fragments.
And one is left sitting in the yard
To try to write poetry
Using what Wyatt and Surrey left around,
Took up and put down again
Like so much gorgeous raw material. . . .

(19)

However, in his story of stories, "Scheherazade," the poet affirms the "newness" of "each new occurrence" and the "new avenues" (9) opening for him. The constant struggle to transform repetition, the doing again, into absolute creativity thoroughly suffuses Self-Portrait; this is borne out by the unusually high frequency of words beginning with the prefix "re-." Nevertheless, this is very likely the ultimate artistic illusion

fostered and clung to by the drunken passenger on the packet-boat: poetry comes to be through the making of fictions from the little we do have.

It "does sometimes occur," says Ashbery,

If only in creases in forgotten letters
Packed away in trunks in the attic--things you forgot you had
And what would it matter anyway,
That recompense so precisely dosed
As to seem the falling true of a perverse judgment.

(19)

If art is purely mimetic, purely objective, there can truly be nothing new in the absolute sense, only a rearrangement of all the old elements. But the very self-reflective esthetic of Ashbery's poetry wholly shifts the grounds of the argument. One critic especially interested in the poetry-painting relationship describes how that relationship in Ashbery's work is rooted not in static representation but in process:

. . . the esthetic of action painting, as has often been noted, is an esthetic of self-reflection, of painting as process, of a work of art revealing and expressing the circumstances of its own composition. This is "self-portraiture" in its most basic and literal sense, for its aim is to capture the "self" at its most intensely creative peak, and to record that intense involvement on the canvas.⁶

A fully realized work of art not only manifests the presence of both the internal and external realities but also celebrates the artist making art. This crucial idea of the ongoing creative act informs two of the fundamental motifs of Self-Portrait: art as performance (theater, pageant) and words as organic life-forms, e.g., flowers. Not only does Ashbery borrow the medieval conception of life as a pageant and the Renaissance conceit of life as a stage play; he also continues from Three Poems his image of art as a collective enterprise between author (or actor) and audience. The audience is not necessarily contemporaneous, for Ashbery is ever acutely conscious of self as part of the larger historical community.

Ironically, those very things which foster art and make it possible are its sources of limitation. In The Tennis Court Oath, Ashbery had objected to being pinned by some other person "to the daylight mode of my declaration"; now in "Voyage in the Blue" he better comprehends the illusion of infinity and power within boundaries:

We have them all, those people, and now they have us.
Their decision was limited, waiting for us to make the first move.
But now that we have done so the results are unfathomable, as
though
A single implication could sway the whole universe on its stem.
We are fashionably troubled by this new edge of what had seemed
finite

Before and now seems infinite though encircled by gradual
doubts
Of whatever came over us.

(26)

This peculiar sense of freedom and limitation is central to Ashbery's complex meditation on Parmigianino's self-portrait.

The possibility of moving "the whole universe on its stem" brings us to the power of the word, the idea which informs the second major figurative motif of Self-Portrait. The tree has been with Ashbery throughout his career; in retrospect, therefore, the early poem "Some Trees" appears amazingly prophetic. Although sometimes ambiguous, sometimes full of multiple connotations, the tree has consistently symbolized organic force, life, creativity, and the union of opposite realms. The tree stands in two worlds, as it were, rooted in the earth and growing upward into the sky. Moreover, the tree literally embodies the idea of the many (branches) and the one (trunk, tap root), which constitutes another important theme in Self-Portrait. In "The One Thing That Can Save America," the tree image dominates as the poet searches for a sense of national identity, "these roots," among the confusing, sprawling multiplicity of

"orchards flung out in the land, / Urban forests . . ." (44). However, the tree is a less powerful presence in Self-Portrait than the analogy between the word and the blooming flower, which not only grows but propagates itself.

The self-aware and self-generative quality of Ashbery's poetry evident in these metaphors is manifested in three distinct though not mutually exclusive modes which all turn on the idea of perceiving (seeing and understanding), reflecting, and the making of fictions. All the poems in Self-Portrait are fundamentally meditative and reflective, yet there is one group of poems very purely so. The second category is, to be precise, a subgroup of the first type and reflects exclusively on the processes of making and telling. The third group includes the essentially ekphrastic poems, in which specific pictures or paintings serve as the reflecting surfaces for the poet's thoughts.

The general meditative mode embraces some of the volume's strongest, finest poems: the introductory "As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat," "As You Came from the Holy Land," "Grand Galop," "Voyage in the Blue," "The One Thing That Can Save America," "No Way of Knowing," and the remarkably candid "Fear of Death." Although each develops its own "subject," all these poems share the same intense need to assess the self in its present situation, to possess a sense of the self's personal and collective roots, and to envision a destiny. In essence, Ashbery seeks a heightened consciousness of himself and the world in an enlarged time frame of past, present, and future simultaneously. "Grand Galop" is exemplary among these poems for its scope of idea and for its form. The other works in this group are generally stanzaic; "Grand Galop" is

considerably longer, looser, more self-propelled. As the title indicates, the poem not only runs as "full gallop," but also moves with a musical melodiousness and the momentum of a galop (dance). If Ashbery allows us to admit the slang sense of "gallop" to our reading of the poem, we find that he indeed does "reprimand" himself or feel mutely reprimanded by time for his "charming and ineffectual" (17) self. He perceives the world as speaking to him:

All things seem mention of themselves
And the names which stem from them branch out to other
referents.
Hugely, spring exists again.

(14)

The whole poem is such a "branching out" on the theme of time, waiting, choosing, achieving, and being fulfilled. The poet comes to understand that since "nothing takes up its fair share of time" a "wait is built into things just coming into their own"--that the most excruciating delay of all is "waiting for the wait to be ended" (14). This leads Ashbery to reflect on another attribute of time: it may chide him for "the unfinished works of the studio," yet it offers the opportunity for "the work to be yet redeemed at the end" (15). Oddly enough, the poem echoes barely audibly the tone and the sentiment of Eliot's Prufrock, who laments his paralysis and fragmentation. Ashbery, by comparison, seems to be caught between desire and failure, wondering "are we never to make a statement?" (16). For a moment, he expresses the problem of time and its general implications:

As long as one has some sense that each thing knows its place
All is well, but with the arrival and departure
Of each new one overlapping so intensely in the semi-darkness
It's a bit mad. Too bad, I mean, that getting to know each
just for a fleeting second
Must be replaced by imperfect knowledge of the featureless whole,

(16)

I not only have my own history to worry about
But am forced to fret over insufficient details related to large
Unfinished concepts that can never bring themselves to the point
Of being, with or without my help, if any were forthcoming.

(16)

this consolation:

If it turns out to be not worth doing, I haven't done it;
 And so from a day replete with rumors
 Of things being done on the other side of the mountains
 A nucleus remains, a still-perfect possibility
 That can be kept indefinitely.

(18)

Time plays other bad jokes, such as causing the poet to "forget

how there could be a gasp of new air / Hidden in that jumble" (20) of forgotten letters and mementos in the attic. So one is left "limping carefully / From one day to the next," still on the quest. Like Browning's Childe Roland, Ashbery does not find a grand castle, but comes upon

a worn, round stone tower
Crouching low in the hollow of a gully
With no door or window but a lot of old license plates
And a sign: "Van Camp's Pork and Beans."
(20)

Then, "the whole business starts to frighten even you, / Its originator and promoter" (20). The external world again speaks, not scolding, but merely returning as "a smile of recognition this time polite, unquestioning" (20), in short, somewhat ambivalent. At last, Ashbery realizes he is trapped between two grim and totally unacceptable alternatives: "now we are at Cape Fear and the overland trail / Is impassable, and a dense curtain of mist hangs over the sea" (21).

The duration and intensity of self-scrutiny in "Grand Galop" admittedly creates a bleaker tone than that in the other reflective poems. Nevertheless, the concerns are the same; "Grand Galop" simply makes a stronger statement about the uncertain prospect of knowing as much as we want or need to know, of exercising much freedom of choice, and of fulfilling all our dreams and intentions. Though no less cognizant of the restrictions built into existence and into art, the poet of "Scheherazade" appears more comfortable with his freedom within limitations. And although the two poems seem to me basically different in conception and method, they do share this: Ashbery's vision of the world as a book and of living as "making a statement." In "Grand Galop," he rather darkly depicted this idea of the organic word as adding "to the already all-but-

illegible scrub forest of grafitti on the shithouse wall" (18). But the precise difference between the two poems is that the poet of "Grand Galop" reflects on the closely allied but clearly distinct enterprises of living and making art, whereas in "Scheherazade" he is literally telling "the story of stories." Furthermore, "Scheherazade" has an unmistakably allegorical quality which is absent from "Grand Galop" and operative in varying degrees in the other "making of fictions" poems: "A Man of Words," "Märchenbilder," "Robin Hood's Barn," "Oleum Misericordiae," and "Hop-o'-my Thumb."

The vocabulary of theater and the grammar of existence are wholly absorbed in Ashbery's tale:

An inexhaustible wardrobe has been placed at the disposal
 Of each new occurrence. It can be itself now.
 Day is almost reluctant to decline . . .

 Other dreams came and left while the bank
 Of colored verbs and adjectives was shrinking from the light
 To nurse in the shade their want of a method
 But most of all she loved the particles
 That transform objects of the same category
 Into particular ones, each distinct
 Within and apart from its own class.

(9)

It is this transforming power of the word that makes possible a "springing up" in which "all things seemed present, whether / Just past or soon to come. It was all invitation" (9). Thus invited into the making of stories, "each found himself caught" in the book of nature and of history, a grand volume of our omnipresent collective experiences, all of which

Existed there to be told, shot through
 From border to border. Here were stones
 That read as patches of sunlight, there was the story
 Of the grandparents, of the vigorous young champion

(The lines once given to another, now
 Restored to the new speaker), dinners and assemblies
 . . . but all
 Was wariness of time watching itself
 For nothing in the complex story grew outside:
 The greatness in the moment of telling stayed unresolved
 Until its wealth of incident, pain mixed with pleasure,
 Faded in the precise moment of bursting
 Into bloom, its growth a static lament.

(10)

The lament is in order not only for the elusive moment of being between
 "becoming" and "been" but also for the inevitably doomed enterprise:

Some stories survived the dynasty of the builders
 But their echo was itself locked in, became
 Anticipation that was only memory after all,
 For the possibilities are limited.

(10)

Taking the idea that the field of reflection exists strictly between the
 perceiver and the perceived (or the mirroring surface), Ashbery conceives
 of our stories as mere sound reflections "locked in" the echo chamber of
 the collective unconscious. ("This locking into place," Ashbery tells us
 in "Self-Portrait," 76, is death.) The outcome never varies: "the kind
 and good are rewarded . . . the unjust one is doomed to burn forever" (10).
 But there is a place "between these extremes" for us "minor characters"
 to "muddle through." And in this small clearing, Ashbery discovers a new
 creation story, new Adams and Eves ("the grandparents") beginning the
 story anew--"The lines once given to another, now / Restored to the new
 speaker"--limited (but by the audience) yet liberated (from damnation):

It is we who make this
 Jungle and call it space, naming each root,
 Each serpent, for the sound of the name
 As it clinks dully against our pleasure,
 Indifference that is pleasure. And what would they be
 Without an audience to restrict the innumerable
 Passes and swipes, restored to good humor as it issues
 Into the impervious evening air? So in some way

Although the arithmetic is incorrect
The balance is restored because it
Balances, knowing it prevails,
An the man who made the same mistake twice is exonerated.
(10-11)

There is one further possibility in "Märchenbilder." As in the closing lines of "The Skaters," Ashbery asserts the triumph of the mind over all the bad stories: "they are beautiful as we people them / With ourselves" (60).

The same questioning of esthetic predestination is one of the issues reflected upon in the third group of poems, which, by virtue of the volume's ekphrastic title and title poem, are especially significant. The shorter of these ekphrastic works are not, however, based on paintings, but on the reminiscences or depictions of an unusually painterly scene. During a reading in 1974, Ashbery noted that "On Autumn Lake" was inspired by "a Chinese-looking lake in Quebec,"⁷ which triggered the wacky-but-serious consideration on "doing" art. Whether the pictures that inspired the other short ekphrastic poems were real or imaginary is uncertain and probably inconsequential. The poems nevertheless confirm the tremendous impact of a highly visual scene on Ashbery's imagination. Ashbery is especially sensitive to the way the mind and memory respond to the pictorial experience of old photographs, as in "City Afternoon" and "Mixed Feelings." A brief and open poem, "City Afternoon" speaks for itself:

A veil of haze protects this
Long-ago afternoon forgotten by everybody
In this photograph, most of them now
Sucked screaming through old age and death.

If one could seize America
Or at least a fine forgetfulness
That seeps into our outline
Defining our volumes with a stain
That is fleeting too

But commemorates
 Because it does define, after all;
 Gray garlands, that threesome
 Waiting for the light to change,
 Air lifting the hair of one
 Upside down in the reflecting pool.
 (61)

"Mixed Feelings" is a bit more inclusive thematically, carrying on "A complicated / Flirtation routine" with "what seems to be girls lounging around / An old fighter bomber, circa 1942 vintage" in "an old, mostly invisible / Photograph" (42). The whole poem is truly a "mixed" experience, the "smell of frying sausages" being sensed simultaneously with the picture, the everyday world continuing to exist side-by-side with the poet's imaginary dialogue with "these Ruths, Lindas, Pats and Sheilas," the poet's entering their world--"What are you hobbies, girls?"--and listening to theirs--"Aw nerts . . . this guy's too much for me" (42). Temporarily banishing them from his mind, the poet well knows how they will re-surface and reincarnate themselves "someday in the not too distant future . . . in the lounge of a modern airport" (43). No matter what direction Ashbery's poems take in Self-Portrait, they all reiterate the basic principle that "all of the true fragments are here," that things have an instinctive way of knowing how to unfold. "Forties Flick" reemphasizes this in a beautifully rendered version of Ashbery's early scene and meditation format, particularly notable for its exquisite visual sensibility.

The shadow of the Venetian blind on the painted wall,
 Shadows of the snake-plant and cacti, the plaster animals,
 Focus the tragic melancholy of the bright stare
 Into nowhere, a hole like the black holes in space.
 In bra and panties she sidles to the window:
 Zip! Up with the blind. A fragile street scene offers itself,
 With wafer-thin pedestrians who know where they are going.
 The blind comes down slowly, the slats are slowly tilted up.
 (5)

The poet's immediate response is "Why must it always end this way?" Because, he has known all along, "the plot of a story" doesn't have to be reinvented.

By comparison, the ekphrastic masterwork of this volume, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," virtually transcends the mode altogether. Yet it is perhaps the most purely ekphrastic among Ashbery poems. The primacy of the painterly in Self-Portrait was confirmed, so it appears, when the poem was a special feature in the January-February 1975 Art in America issue on the self-portrait.⁸ What may have surprised some readers is that a poet so commonly associated with modern, especially avant-garde, art would center his reflection on a second-order Italian painter of the sixteenth century. But we should not underestimate the optical fascination that Parmigianino's self-portrait held for Ashbery, who has an eye and an appreciation for trompe l'œil effects and for the handling of space, mass, and perspective. But the optical features of Parmigianino's painting do not exist in an esthetic and philosophical vacuum; consequently, the self-portrait is a perfect reflective medium for Ashbery's fullest and most extended meditation on the multiple dimensions of the ekphrastic and self-reflexive modes. Indeed, Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" subsumes the ekphrastic into a higher form of meditation on his most urgent of concerns: the possibilities and limitations of time.

Ironically, "Self-Portrait" is among the most deceptive of Ashbery's poems in both substance and style. The opening lines of the poem certainly perpetuate this deception, for Ashbery posing as art critic swiftly and deftly describes the painting and very properly quotes Vasari, the great Italian historian of contemporary art. Though not pedantic, the

poem begins with a focus on the painting and with, as Ashbery says, "an essayistic thrust":⁹

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises. A few leaded panes, old beams,
Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together
In a movement supporting the face, which swims
Toward and away like the hand
Except that it is in repose. It is what is
Sequestered. Vasari says, "Francesco one day set himself
To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose
In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers . . .
He accordingly caused a ball of wood to be made
By a turner, and having divided it in half and
Brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself
With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass,"
Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait
Is the reflection once removed.

(68)

Throughout the poem, Ashbery returns again and again to the painting, its unifying and inspiring power, as he sallies out from and back to it. The texture of the poem is much more various and interesting than the initial description and quotation suggest: Ashbery flows among numerous meditative modes and voices, including interpretation, direct address to Parmigianino, very personal reminiscences. Yet the diversity and the seeming chaos are organized, as it were, by the "polestar" (71) of the painter's eyes. The poem truly does revolve around the painting, and the distance from the center to the circumference, though finite, is ample. Moreover, Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" takes for one of its major metaphors the sphere (and circle), the very condition of the painting's existence and significance. But Ashbery insists that the poem is only loosely related to the painting, which is merely "a pretext for a lot of reflections and asides that are as tenuously connected to the core as they are in many of my poems, which, as you know, tend to spread out from a core idea."¹⁰ Nor is the poem

particularly systematic in organization or accessible in "message." "If one sat down and analyzed it closely," Ashbery cautions, "it would seem as disjunct and fragmented as 'Europe.'" ¹¹ To be sure, the sentences are not exploded into pieces, nor do they suffer from the extremes of length or a certain opacity, as in "Clepsydra" or "Fragment." No matter how sophisticated the idea, staggering the implications, or complex the movement of meditation, any sense of the disjunctive is mitigated or even lost in the low-key, relaxed-but-taught tone of Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts." The overwhelming impression is that Ashbery approaches and perhaps even achieves the "transparent but dense medium" for which he so admired Chirico.

Ashbery's initial description of and reflection on the self-portrait establish the pattern of the poem's development. Although a well-woven whole, the poem falls into six "verse paragraphs," the first five relatively short (averaging two pages each) and the sixth accounting for nearly the last half of the poem. Each new section signals an intensified continuation, a sudden evaporation, or a welcome return to the central train of thought. In the first of these, Ashbery ponders the unique and complex ramifications of Parmigianino's self-portrait for the paradoxical nature of art. The poet's interpretation, which follows Vasari's account, goes immediately beyond the optical to the philosophical. "The glass," observes Ashbery, "chose to reflect only what he saw" (68)--a radically idealist proposition that perception precedes and determines existence. The power of perception apparently makes the soul "captive . . . unable to advance much farther than your eye as it intercepts the picture" (68). Despite having interpreted the picture as a statement on the lim-

itation of the soul, the poet, with seeming indifference, admits that his

words are only speculation
(From the latin speculum, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
(69)

Thought the portrait seems to say everything, the message remains subliminal. This leads directly to the fundamental ambivalence of art, so perfectly embodied in the Parmigianino self-portrait. "It is life englobed" (69), says Ashbery, life in all its three-dimensional authenticity, yet distorted and illusory, having no surface, only "visible core" (70), nonetheless a true rendering of what Parmigianino saw. Most of all, it is not life, for the globe will not allow on "to stick one's hand / Out" (69). The expression of the portrayed artist is equally ambivalent, even indifferent; the "wraith" of smile, the gesture of the enlarged hand "swimming out" toward the surface of the globe is "neither embrace nor warning" but "holds something of both in pure / Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything" (70).

The "balloon" of speculation pops, and Ashbery's concentration breaks. As Ashbery's fused interior and exterior imagery indicates, the "clouds / In the puddle" (70), a reflecting surface, simultaneously represent external distractions and the mind's inherent weakness to sustain focus. The image of the clouds being "stirr^{ed} up into sawtoothed fragments" (70) confirms the everpresent threat of dissociation by its chief perpetrator, time. In this second verse paragraph, the theme of time as it encroaches on the poet emerges as Ashbery's main preoccupation. Although the reflection on time seems to grow out of his reflection on and in the Parmigianino self-portrait, it becomes increasingly and abundantly clear that time, not the painting, is the primary impetus of the poem:

A peculiar slant
Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model
In the silence of the studio as he considers
Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.

(71)

The poet's effort at self-portraiture results not so much in the organization of chaos around himself, as in Parmigianino's round mirror; rather he feels "the carousel starting slowly / And going faster and faster" until everything merges in "one neutral band that surrounds / Me on all sides" (71). The speeding up of time thus reduces his memories to "a magma of interiors," and the poet is left knowing "only the straight way out, / The distance between us" (71). So, Parmigianino's self-portrait saves the poet, teaching him how to "perfect and rule out the extraneous / Forever," to enjoy "the enchantment of self with self" (72) in a widened present.

But, in the next section, Ashbery laments the difficulty of this present:

Tomorrow is easy, but today is uncharted,
Desolate, reluctant as any landscape
To yield what are laws of perspective. . . .

(72)

Drawing on the voyage and perspective motifs of "The Skaters," Ashbery reflects on the idea of possibility--what is possible to conceive of and to accomplish, whether time brings the realization or the distortion of promise, intention, and the dream of ideal forms. The crucial concept here is the distance between two points: there must be a point of reference, a vanishing point. The laws of perspective are the means of establishing coherence and proper focus between perceiver and perceived, self and reflected image, today and yesterday, today and tomorrow. But today has no fixed point of reference, hence the dilemma. Occasionally, one specially

nourished dream of the possible will "wax, flourish" (73) but, fading, leave us "awake" in the slum of daily existence. The discrepancy is enormous, but Ashbery invokes the aid of Parmigianino authority Sydney Freedberg to assure us that the apparent distortion, like that produced by Parmigianino's meticulous realism in the "Self-Portrait," yet retains a "'strong measure of ideal beauty'" (73). Time both makes these forms possible, extant, and yet snatches them away all too soon, before we can "actually see them" (73). Paradoxically, it is the infinitesimal point of their passing out of grasp and into absence that makes us believe them:

And we realize this only at a point where they lapse
Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up
Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape.
(73)

What may have appeared to be loss ironically becomes the sustenance of living; the ideal forms "nourish a dream which includes them all," and the "dreams prolong us as they are absorbed" (73).

Once again, the impetus for this meditation, Parmigianino's face, begins to fade from memory. Just as soon, however, "its stereotype" returns but now "unfamiliar" (73), and Ashbery concentrates his meditation on time as it affects the self's knowledge of the other. In particular, time renders all things once known but now forgotten unfamiliar "when / We meet them again" (74). To relearn the lost knowledge represented by Parmigianino's "stereotype" is "the point / Of invading the privacy of this man" in the self-portrait. So fully has Parmigianino drawn us into his world, his space and time, so well has he rendered "the velleities of the rounded reflecting surface" (74) that momentarily "you could be fooled . . . Before you realize the reflection / Isn't yours" (74). But we quickly regain proper distance and perspective, disengaging from so

complete an identification--or narcissism--and granting to the perceived image, Parmigianino, "the strict / Otherness of the painter in his / Other room" (74). It is not the self we see mirrored in the painting: it is the autonomous other being.

At the same time, Ashbery is becoming conscious of the world beyond the window of the artist's studio; its presence is finally too powerful to ignore, and "the shadow of the city injects its own / Urgency . . ." (75). Not only is the poet's interest expanding beyond the immediate concerns of the painting but also expanding to include the spatial and temporal distance between Parmigianino's painting and himself. His own city, "New York / Where I am now" (75) reflecting, is juxtaposed to Rome, where Parmigianino worked, and to Vienna, the nexus between Ashbery and the painter, the city where Ashbery saw the painting, he tells us, in the summer of 1959. The city must be acknowledged, for it is always threatening "to siphon off the life of the studio," yet it is impossible for the artist to do without, for it is the very "backing of the looking glass of the . . . sketched studio" (75).

Until this point, Ashbery has considered in various combinations his fundamental concerns of time, knowledge, and the efficacy of the reflective art vis-à-vis the Parmigianino self-portrait. Now, in the long final section of the poem, all these principal themes coalesce into a sustained and unified vision as the image of "your face," brought by "a breeze like the turning of a page" (76), returns to Ashbery's mind. This seemingly restorative act has, however, become perceived as a deadly "locking into place." The poet has begun to feel trapped by the "englobed" studio and Parmigianino's self-portrait and disappointed that "no

answer / Or answers were forthcoming" (76) from Francesco himself. But what Francesco the "stereotype" represents, a "sample . . . not to be taken as / Merely that but . . . as all" (77), is a collective past life without which beauty cannot exist. Hence comes into focus a preliminary definition of art and beauty which takes into account the relationship of self and other, present and past:

What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific
Life, experienced or not, channeled into some form
Steeped in the nostalgia of a collective past.

(77)

Yet the invaluable necessity of life, love, the ultimate reciprocal knowledge, cannot, we know, "be sandwiched / Between two adjacent moments" (77) of this "nondescript, never-to-be-defined daytime" (78). It cannot, however, exist anywhere else, nor can the painting to which the "'poetic,' straw-colored space / Of the long corridor . . . leads back" (78). "Hasn't it too," asks Ashbery, "its lair / In the present we are always escaping from / And falling back into . . ." (78). Ashbery's major effort as a poet has been to pin down and find room in the precise moment of existence as its potential passes into the irrevocable past. Now Ashbery crystallizes the relationship of past and present, art and life, in a metaphor he has used only once before ("The Skaters"): the museum. The Parmigianino painting

is trying to say it is today
And we must be out of it even as the public
Is pushing through the museum now so as to
Be out by closing time. You can't live there.
The gray glaze of the past attacks all know-how:
Secrets of wash and finish that took a lifetime
To learn and are reduced to the status of
Black-and-white illustrations in a book where colorplates
Are rare. That is, all time
Reduces to no special time.

.

Our time gets to be veiled, compromised
By the portrait's will to endure. It hints at
Our own, which we were hoping to keep hidden.
(79)

One of the finer ironies of Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" is that his apparently novel object of meditation would yield a truth that he already knows. Despite the seemingly perfect realization of intention in the Parmigianino painting, there prevails the universal principle of creation which "makes works of art so unlike / What the artist intended" (80). The illusion of power and freedom is just that--an illusion. However, the greatest irony of all is that this "stringent law" (80) of otherness, which wrecks the best of intentions, necessarily makes self-portraiture an impossibility. It is not ourselves we see in the mirror, but this "not-being-us" (80). Any self-portrait is by definition a distortion, and Parmigianino's convex mirror quietly, wryly, firmly proclaims this truth. But, in order to know oneself--Theseus still speaks clearly in Ashbery's poetry--one must see oneself as unfamiliar, as other. So, it would seem, the self-reflective art is rescued from complete inefficacy and, in the end, redeemed.

The rounded portrait has served Ashbery not only as mirror but also as crystal ball, whose focus he is now allowing to become broken: "A ship / Flying unknown colors has entered the harbor" (81). The scene "drifts away," the "fertile thought associations . . . appear not more or rarely." Like the vivid scene which bubbled out of the flame fountain in "The Skaters," the vision fades, its "colorings . . . washed out" (81). From here until the close of the poem, Ashbery's tone drops as he assesses what remains now that the magnificent optical illusion has been revealed for what it is. "Once it seemed so perfect" (82)--but the poet,

now almost brooding, realizes that it was never truly within power or possibility to remain in the suspended present of Parmigianino's "paradise: exotic refuge within an exhausted world" (82). Therefore, Ashbery must deny the validity of the distorted, rounded, convex image:

I beseech you, withdraw that hand,
Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,
The shield of a greeting, Francesco:
There is room for one bullet in the chamber:
Our looking through the wrong end
Of the telescope as you fall back at a speed
Faster than that of light to flatten ultimately
Among the features of the room. . . .

(82)

Just as the convex image is sucked swiftly back into the past, the poet's world begins to fragment,

each part of the whole falls off
And cannot know it knew, except
Here and there, in cold pockets
Of remembrance, whispers out of time.

(83)

Time is truly the convex mirror which distorts the image yet holds in its "pockets / Of remembrance" the only source of knowledge and the only promise of possibility. The sustained revelation must give way to ordinary daylight, the pageant of living must resume, though not without receiving sustenance from the flickering radiance of the ideal. Ashbery mourns the ultimate and undeniable impossibility of an absolute art, perfectly conceived and executed. But this finest and most ambitious of his self-reflexive meditations embodies the same inarticulate yet sensuous authority which he so cherishes in music. Even if its fullness of realization is by definition an illusion, Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" is without reservation a magnificent one.

NOTES

CHAPTER I

¹ John Ashbery, Introduction to The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Knopf, 1971), p. ix. This phrase was used by Ashbery to describe O'Hara's poem "Second Avenue," but it applies so well to Ashbery's poetry in general.

² John Ashbery, Turandot and Other Poems (New York: Tibor de Nagy, 1953); Some Trees, ed. W. H. Auden, Yale Series of Younger Poets, Vol. 52 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956); The Tennis Court Oath (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962); Rivers and Mountains (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); The Double Dream of Spring (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970); Three Poems (New York: Viking, 1972); Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (New York: Viking, 1975).

³ Richard Howard, "John Ashbery," Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in America since 1950 (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 32.

⁴ Ashbery, O'Hara, p. xi.

⁵ A. Poulin, Jr., ed., "Notes on the Poets," Contemporary American Poetry, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975), p. 418.

⁶ "Craft Interview with John Ashbery," New York Quarterly, No. 9 (Winter 1972), p. 11.

⁷ John Ashbery, "Jane Freilicher at Fischbach," Art in America, 63, No. 3 (May/June 1975), p. 92.

⁸ Ashbery, "Freilicher," pp. 92-93.

⁹ "Craft," p. 31.

¹⁰ Richard Kostelanetz, "How to Be a Difficult Poet," New York Times Magazine, 23 May 1976, p. 20.

¹¹ "Craft," p. 14.

¹² "Craft," pp. 20-21.

- 13 Paris Leary and Robert Kelly, eds., A Controversy of Poets (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 532.
- 14 "Craft," p. 26.
- 15 John Ashbery, "Dangling Modifiers," ZZZ (1974), p. 12. This is surely a reference to Wallace Stevens the poet and Harold Bloom the critic.
- 16 W. H. Auden, ed., Foreword to Some Trees, by John Ashbery, Yale Series of Younger Poets, Vol. 52 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 13.
- 17 John Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," rev. of Hebdomeros, by Giorgio de Chirico, ed. James A. Hodkinson, Book Week, 4, No. 15 (18 December 1966), p. 5. Ashbery notes that "the excellent translation is anonymous."
- 18 Ashbery, O'Hara, p. x.
- 19 Frank O'Hara, "Rare Modern," Poetry, 89 (February 1957), 313.
- 20 Kostelanetz, p. 20.
- 21 "Craft," p. 30.
- 22 W. S. Di Piero, "John Ashbery: The Romantic as Problem Solver," American Poetry Review, 2, No. 4 (July-August 1973), 39-41.
- 23 M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 201.
- 24 Charles Altieri, "The Book of the World: Robert Duncan's Poetics of Presence," Sun and Moon, No. 1 (Winter 1976), p. 66.
- 25 Altieri, p. 89.
- 26 "Craft," p. 23.
- 27 Charles Altieri, "Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry," PMLA, 91 (January 1976), p. 108.
- 28 "Craft," p. 24.
- 29 Kostelanetz, p. 26.
- 30 Kostelanetz, p. 33.
- 31 Ashbery, O'Hara, p. viii.

³² John Ashbery, "The Impossible," rev. of Stanzas in Meditation, by Gertrude Stein, Poetry, 90 (July 1957), 254. Ashbery uses these words to compliment Stein's achievement in Stanzas.

CHAPTER II

¹ Howard, p. 19.

² David Kermani, John Ashbery: A Comprehensive Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1976), pp. 73, 71, 72. According to Kermani (p. 73), Ashbery says he wrote "The Painter" in 1948. For "Some Trees" and "The Picture of Little J. A.," Kermani records the date of first public appearance, not the date of composition. With only two clearly noted exceptions, the page numbers for these and all other poems discussed in this chapter will refer to Some Trees. Any significant differences in the Turandot, Some Trees, or early published versions will be noted.

³ John Ashbery, The Heroes, in Artists' Theater, ed. Herbert Machiz (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 44-78. The play was first performed at the Living Theater, New York City, in 1952, then in May of 1953 at the Artists' Theater, New York City.

⁴ This poem first appeared in Poetry, 87, No. 3 (December 1955), pp. 154-55. It is identical to the version in Some Trees.

⁵ "Craft," p. 12.

⁶ In Harvard Advocate, 132, No. 5 (31 March 1949), p. 10. Ashbery changes "a gathering of smiles" in Turandot to "a chorus of smiles" in Some Trees.

⁷ Quoted by Anna Balakian, Literary Origins of Surrealism: A New Mysticism in French Poetry (New York: New York University Press, 1966), p. 19.

⁸ In Partisan Review, 18, No. 4 (July/August 1951), 420-217.

⁹ Kermani, p. 72.

¹⁰ Kostelantetz, p. 20.

¹¹ Kostelantetz, p. 20.

¹² Howard, p. 24.

¹³ Since the pages in Turandot are not numbered, locations of the quoted lines will be indicated by the poem's section names: Scene I, Scene II, Scene III, and Sestina.

- 14 Kostelanetz, p. 20.
- 15 Horace Gregory, "Poetry Chronicle: The Poetry of Suburbia," Partisan Review, 23, No. 4 (Fall 1956), 550.
- 16 O'Hara, "Rare Modern," p. 311.
- 17 O'Hara, pp. 307-08, 311.
- 18 O'Hara, p. 311.
- 19 Abrams, p. 201.
- 20 Howard, p. 21.
- 21 Although Breton is considered the leader and chief spokesman of the French surrealists, there was a great deal of diversity in that rather loosely-knit group.
- 22 John Ashbery, "Dada and Surrealism," New Republic, 158, No. 22 (1 June 1968), 36.
- 23 André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, tr. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969). Breton envisioned "the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality . . ." (p. 14). He formally defined surrealism as "n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express--verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner --the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by the reason, exempt from any esthetic or moral concern" (p. 26).
- 24 Ashbery, "Dada and Surrealism," p. 35.
- 25 Ashbery, "Dada and Surrealism," p. 35.

CHAPTER III

- 1 Kostelanetz, pp. 20, 22.
- 2 Howard, pp. 18-19.
- 3 John Ashbery, Reading, 12 March 1974, Contemporary Authors Series, University of Oklahoma.
- 4 Kostelanetz, p. 22.
- 5 "Craft," p. 29.

- 6 Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," p. 5.
- 7 Kostelanetz, p. 22.
- 8 "Craft," p. 16.
- 9 Kenneth Koch, "Poetry Chronicles," Partisan Review, 28, No. 1 (January-February 1961), 136.
- 10 Stephen Koch, "Games of the Poet," Nation, 203 (12 December 1966), p. 650.
- 11 Kostelanetz, p. 22.
- 12 Kenneth Koch, p. 136.
- 13 Kenneth Koch, p. 136.
- 14 R. W. Flint, "Poetry Chronicle," Partisan Review, 29, No. 2 (Spring 1962), 290-91.
- 15 Mona Van Duyn, "Ways to Meaning," Poetry, 100, No. 6 (September 1962), 394-95.
- 16 Jonathan Cott, "The New American Poetry," in The New American Arts, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Horizon Press, 1965), p. 146.
- 17 Norman Friedman, "The Wesleyan Poets--III. The Experimental Poets," Chicago Review, 19, No. 2 (1967), 53.
- 18 Harold Bloom, "John Ashbery: The Charity of the Hard Moments," Salmagundi, Nos. 22-23 (Spring-Summer 1973), p. 107.
- 19 Denis Donoghue, "The Long Poem," New York Review of Books, 6, No. 6 (14 April 1966), 18.
- 20 Stephen Koch, p. 650.
- 21 Kostelanetz, p. 20. Ashbery uses the term "seamless" to describe Elizabeth Bishop's poetic language.
- 22 DiPiero, "The Romantic as Problem Solver." Reflecting on the double dream image in Chirico's "The Double Dream of Spring," DiPiero explains the focus of his study: "If . . . distance exists between our immediate awareness of the real and our knowledge of it in art, then art in some way estranges us from our immediate surroundings; if the distance becomes too great, art separates itself from its sources, its roots in the world of things. Unless there exists a least some remote possibility for achieving what Yeats called 'Unity of Being,' there can be no real hope" (p. 39).

23 Bloom, p. 110.

24 Donoghue, p. 19.

25 "Craft," p. 20.

CHAPTER IV

¹ John Ashbery, "Landscapes of East, West' at Louvre," New York Herald Tribune, Paris edition, 26-27 November 1960, p. 5.

² John Ashbery, tr., "From Hebdomeros," Art and Literature, 4 (Spring 1965), pp. 9-36.

³ Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," p. 5.

⁴ Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," p. 5.

⁵ Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," p. 5.

⁶ Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," p. 5.

⁷ Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," p. 5.

⁸ DiPiero, p. 39.

⁹ "Craft," p. 22.

¹⁰ David Shapiro, "Urgent Masks: An Introduction to John Ashbery's Poetry," Field, No. 5 (Fall 1971), p. 34.

¹¹ Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," p. 5.

¹² Ashbery, "Dada and Surrealism," p. 35.

¹³ Kermani, p. 85.

¹⁴ "Craft," pp. 22-23.

¹⁵ "Craft," p. 28.

¹⁶ "Craft," pp. 26-27.

¹⁷ Ashbery, "The Impossible," p. 250.

¹⁸ Ashbery, "The Impossible," p. 251.

¹⁹ "Craft," p. 28.

²⁰ John Hollander, "Romantic Verse Form and the Metrical Contract," in Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 188.

²¹ Kostelanetz, p. 26.

²² Kostelanetz, p. 26.

²³ Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," p. 5.

²⁴ Ashbery, "The Decline of the Verbs," p. 5.

²⁵ "Craft," p. 33.

²⁶ Ashbery, "The Skaters," Rivers and Mountains, p. 39.

²⁷ This term is borrowed from "Quicksilver Distortions," the title of David Kalstone's commentary on Ashbery's Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1975), The Times Literary Supplement, 3828 (25 July 1975), pp. 834-35.

²⁸ Stephen Donadio, "Poetry and Public Experience," Commentary, 55 (February 1973), p. 71.

CHAPTER V

¹ John Ashbery, "Re-establishing Raymond Roussel," Portfolio and Art News Annual, 6 (Autumn 1962), p. 104. It is interesting to note that the Winter 1962 issue of Locus Solus contains Ashbery's translation of Pierre Martory's poem, Les Soirées de Rochefort, which must be pieced together much like Roussel's Chinese-box (pp. 122-31).

² Edward Said, "The Characterization of a Literary Text," Modern Language Notes, 85, No. 6 (December 1970), 790.

³ "Craft," p. 23.

⁴ Kostelanetz, p. 33.

⁵ Kostelanetz, p. 30.

⁶ Fred Moramarco, "Ashbery's Self-Portrait," American Poetry Review, 4, No. 6 (November-December 1975), 43.

⁷ Ashbery, Reading, 12 March 1974, University of Oklahoma.

⁸ John Ashbery, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Art in America, 63, No. 1 (January-February 1975), 74-78.

⁹ Kostelanetz, p. 33.

¹⁰ Kostelanetz, p. 33.

¹¹ Kostelanetz, p. 33.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrams, M. H. "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric." Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: W. W. Norton, 1970. pp. 201-229.
- Altieri, Charles. "The Book of the World: Robert Duncan's Poetics of Presence." Sun and Moon, No. 1 (Winter 1976), pp. 66-94.
- "Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry." PMLA, 91 (January 1976), 101-114.
- Ashbery, John. "Dada and Surrealism." New Republic, 158, No. 22 (1 June 1968), 35-36.
- "Dangling Modifiers." ZZZ, 3 (1974), 12-13.
- "The Decline of the Verbs." Book Week, 4, No. 15 (18 December 1966), 5.
- The Double Dream of Spring. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970.
- , trans. "from 'Hebdomeros.'" Art and Literature, 4 (Spring 1965), pp. 9-36.
- The Heroes. In Artists' Theater. Ed. Herbert Machiz. New York: Grove Press, 1960. pp. 44-78.
- "The Impossible." Poetry, 90 (July 1957), 250-54.
- Introduction to The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara. Ed. Donald Allen. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1971.
- "Jane Freilicher at Fischbach," Art in America, 63, No. 3 (May-June 1975), 92-93.
- "'Landscapes of East, West' at Louvre." New York Herald Tribune, Paris edition, 26-27 November 1960, p. 5.
- Reading. Contemporary Authors Series, University of Oklahoma. 12 March 1974.
- "Re-establishing Raymond Roussel." Portfolio and Art News Annual, No. 6 (Autumn 1962), pp. 88-92.

- . Rivers and Mountains. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.
- . "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." Art in America, 63, No. 1, (January-February 1975), 74-78.
- . Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror. New York: Viking, 1975.
- . Some Trees. Ed. W. H. Auden. Yale Series of Younger Poets, Vol. 52. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956.
- . The Tennis Court Oath. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962.
- . Three Poems. New York: Viking, 1972.
- . Turandot and Other Poems. New York: Tibor de Nagy, 1953.
- Auden, W. H., ed. Foreward to Some Trees, by John Ashbery. Yale Series of Younger Poets, Vol. 52. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956.
- Balakian, Anna. Literary Origins of Surrealism: A New Mysticism in French Poetry. New York: New York University Press, 1966.
- Bloom, Harold. "John Ashbery: The Charity of the Hard Moments." Salmagundi, Nos. 22-23 (Spring-Summer 1973), pp. 103-31.
- Breton, André. Manifestoes of Surrealism. Tr. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969.
- Cott, Jonathan. "The New American Poetry." The New American Arts. Ed. Richard Kostelanetz. New York: Horizon Press, 1965. pp. 117-61.
- "Craft Interview." New York Quarterly, No. 9 (Winter 1972), pp. 11-33.
- DiPiero, W. S. "John Ashbery: The Romantic as Problem Solver." American Poetry Review, 2, No. 4 (July-August 1973), 39-41.
- Donadio, Stephen. "Poetry and Public Experience." Commentary, 55 (February 1973), 63-72.
- Donoghue, Denis. "The Long Poem." New York Review of Books, 6, No. 6 (14 April 1966), 18-20.
- Flint, R. W. "Poetry Chronicle." Partisan Review, 29, No. 2 (Spring 1962), 290-94.
- Friedman, Norman. "The Wesleyan Poets--III. The Experimental Poets." Chicago Review, 19, No. 2 (1967), 52-73.

- Gregory, Horace. "Poetry Chronicle: The Poetry of Suburbia." Partisan Review, 23, No. 4 (Fall 1956), 545-53.
- Hollander, John. "Romantic Verse Form and the Metrical Contract." Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: W. W. Norton, 1970.
- Howard, Richard. "John Ashbery." Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in America since 1950. New York: Atheneum, 1969. pp. 18-37.
- Kalstone, David. "Quicksilver Distortions." Times Literary Supplement, 3828 (25 July 1975), pp. 834-35.
- Kermani, David. John Ashbery: A Comprehensive Bibliography. New York: Garland, 1976.
- Koch, Kenneth. "Poetry Chronicles." Partisan Review, 28, No. 1 (January-February 1961), 130-36.
- Koch, Stephen. "Games of the Poet." Nation, 203 (12 December 1966), pp. 649-50.
- Kostelanetz, Richard. "How to Be a Difficult Poet." New York Times Magazine, 23 May 1976, pp. 18-20.
- Leary, Paris, and Kelly, Robert, eds. A Controversy of Poets. New York: Doubleday, 1965.
- Moramarcio, Fred. "Ashbery's Self-Portrait." American Poetry Review, 4, No. 6 (November-December 1975), 43-44.
- O'Hara, Frank. "Rare Modern." Poetry, 89 (February 1957), 307-16.
- Poulin, A., Jr., ed. "Notes on the Poets." Contemporary American Poetry. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975.
- Said, Edward. "The Characterization of a Literary Text." Modern Language Notes, 85, No. 6 (December 1970), 765-90.
- Shapiro, David. "Urgent Masks: An Introduction to John Ashbery's Poetry." Field, No. 5 (Fall 1971), pp. 32-45.
- Van Duyn, Mona. "Ways to Meaning." Poetry, 100, No. 6 (September 1962), 390-95.