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Bertrand Lentsch



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Slippery harmonies abound **The voyage out in John Ashbery's** *Flow Chart* (1992)

Bertrand LENTSCH
Lycée Clémenceau, Nantes

In 1509, Pope Julius II asked a 26-year-old Raphael to decorate his flat in the Vatican. On the walls of the *Stanza della Segnatura*, four large frescoes were therefore painted in 1511. They illustrated Theology, Philosophy, Justice and Poetry. On the ceiling above *Parnassus*, there then appeared a winged lady in between an inscription on the right, NVMINE, symbolizing the divine, and another, on the left, AFFLATVR, meaning inspiration. John Ashbery's 1992-*Flow Chart* is in the same intermediary position. Here is a paradoxical quandary as the poem is a desperate attempt to grasp the elusive meaning of existence, all fleeting glimpses, inchoative impressions, disquieting sensations, and eschatological anxieties. Though the poet is a pilgrim of inwardness, there is a hurdle which he does not overcome. These 215 pages therefore exude a sense of effort, and the text does not smack of the expected *tour de force*. When reading this self-styled conundrum, the bemused reader should not feel at a loss though. The composer's aim is clearly stated in the very title of this delivery: poetic experience amounts to hazardous waylaying wherein slippery harmonies abound. The poet's task is therefore to grasp the essence at the heart of the real thing. Since he relies on Wordsworth's "growth of a poet's mind" (2008, 435), his method is an unmediated transcription of the rambling vagaries of imagination so as to encapsulate the unravelling of life. This emotional and logical compound therefore requires commitment and exclusive concentration on wear and tear, evanescence, and ephemera, such dribs and drabs as delineate the left-over of language. My aim is to deal with this poet's spasmodic utterance, not

only as the token of a convoluted cast of mind but as an insubordinate questioning of the efficiency of language.

The instruction manual

One would hence feel surprised to hear from the outset that Ashbery's claim is moral. His wary postmodern outlook is that an unremittingly eventful reality can in no way be transcendental. What's what is neither exhilarating nor distressing; it is just to be experienced progressively. This is the end of metaphysics. One must therefore scrupulously if not apathetically jot down sense and sensation. Such sluggishness is meant to bear the hallmark of simplicity. The reading experience can then only be one of amazement. Wonder is not enough though. The poet wants to tie that awe into an emotional world which should be as admirable as it is complex. This opus thus shapes a twentieth-century American epic, after Whitman's *Song of Myself*. It is to be appraised alongside Ginsberg's *Howl*, or Williams's *Paterson*.

Despite its singularity, *Flow Chart* belongs to the tradition of the epic poem whose subject-matter is bewilderingly idiosyncratic as it is, heart and soul, removed from stateliness: this poem is avowedly an examination of one's thought processes, a stream of consciousness with all foibles and quirks on the forefront, not to mention the relieving fart (1992, 201), the opportune swear-word "fucking" (1992, 18), and the tell-tale coarse word "cock" (1992, 103). Such is too that strange catachresis as is the outcome of an incongruous characterization, "and when it came time to ask him / for the antidote, the dolmens appeared robed in white, and backlit, / and they thought it was an optical illusion" (1992, 120). Here is an enigmatic Magrittean *Betrayal of Images: Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. One is also struck by the faulty well-to-do borrowing from Latin *fons et origo, ne(r)mine dissentiente* (1992, 77), the learned mention to Bentham's *Panopticon* (1992, 84), the witty name-dropping for trite realities (dieffenbachia), (1992, 98). They are all a hotchpotch of seemingly disjunctive and irrelevant remarks which signal that *non sequitur* is no hindrance in this poem and in life, since such inferences as do not follow from the premises are part and parcel of the poet's perception of that real world, which he perennially disregards as "it". One should also bear in mind that a flowchart represents an algorithm showing the succeeding

steps of a demonstration. They are figured out as orderly boxes, and they are connected with arrows. Splitting the nameplate of his poetic endeavour in two is not innocuous then. This chronicle of his existential intuitions, come what may, is meant to be at once authentic and exemplary. Such a cautionary tale is therefore to be understood as an ode to the disunion of immediacy. Milton's aim in *Paradise Lost* was none other (I, 254-5), (1991, 362):

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

Critics have variously described this sheer flight of fancy as mind-boggling, unknowable, contemplative, ethereal, uncanny, whimsical, and implacable. Much has been proclaimed about Ashbery's musicality (Cazé, 2008, 164-176). Such fits and starts have also been described by Henri Quéré as intermittencies of meaning (1992, 84):

Le modèle de la «syncope» qui conjugue hiatus et intermittences, qui alterne lucidité et moments d'absence, en foi de quoi les programmes afférents de supplémentation apportent du liant ou, comme le disait Virginia Woolf, un quelconque «solvant». C'est ici la question de la dystaxie, du chaînon manquant, du point aveugle, du trou noir, ou c'est encore – les exemples ne manquent pas – la trame de récit tissée par Alain Robbe-Grillet entre nombre de toiles de Magritte sous le nom enjôleur et enrôleur de *La belle captive*.

Since my purpose is to deal with this poet's unconformable eloquence, one may consider it as the token of a difficult visibility. This style yet bears out a meaning, though of the most idiosyncratic ilk. It posits that concatenation is prevalent on congruence and coherence, and that parataxis is the imprint of discrimination rather than hypotaxis which is deemed a snare for dupes. In this restless delivery, vision and sound supersede sense. They are the abstraction of the poet's belief in the diffuseness of meaninglessness in speech and life. Williams's *Paterson* opens up with the same seminal assertion (I, 17-22), (1981, 232-233):

— Say it, no ideas but in things —
nothing but the blank faces of the houses
and cylindrical trees
bent, forked by preconception and accident —
split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained —
secret — into the body of the light!

Ashbery is looking for the same secret; he similarly deals with the big questions: time and space, being and not being, experiencing and enduring. He nonetheless claims that there is no understanding to be gained thereof. When he looks at the fronts of houses, he sees no faces, even though blank, for he does not credit Williams's "preconception". His inspiration is purely accidental; it is merely to keep searching the body of the light. He then gradually comes to concur that he is just gazing at a flash. When he watches façades, he maintains that his retina is barely stamped with the image of a blaze. Such as it is, that is the essence of poetic licence. Commitment to immediacy then implies combing through, rummaging around and roving within one's mindscape, as a theorist who is on the look-out for the abstracted, and puzzled state of Ginsberg, who in the inaugural lines of *Howl* summarized the plight of the gays in the doped hallucination of a hotel front (1-6), (2007, 134):

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an
angry fix,
angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to
the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,

None of the hipster's ilk, the New York school poet does not call for a fix, though. In *Flow Chart*, he nevertheless inaugurates the same "ancient heavenly connection" as made Ginsberg see a "starry dynamo in the machinery of night". Ashbery just describes someone rowing on a sad river, past the writer-reader. Both are said to be uncanny characters who do not reason. He glides past the sights which he mentally registers. His fear is to overlook these intense, stochastic odds and ends. He therefore beckons to the reader to focus on the page and only so. He actually credits Keats's negative capability, that poetic ability to ignore one's mental identity by spontaneously and sympathetically immersing it within the subject under examination (Rollins, 1958, I, 193):

to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature and which
Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean negative capability, that is
when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without
any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

Ashbery thereby deems that it is daily life which he is simultaneously encountering and charting, at the behest of numerous halts, logjams and deadlocks. Despite the risk of a pathetic fallacy, the

result is eventually meant to be pithy (Ruskin, 2009, 71). This is the windfall of the unrelenting unfurling of a poem whose articulation erases appropriateness to matter. Loss thereby acquires a symbolic, mythical portent (1992, 16-19):

And those who sense something
squeamish, in his arrival know enough not to look up
from the page they are reading, the plaited lines that extend
like a bronze chain into eternity.

Beyond the reminder of such a Golden Chain as Zeus struck in heaven to bind the gods to man (VIII, 18-27), which Homer depicted in the *Iliad* (2003, 129), *Flow Chart* is not only an experience in squeamishness but one of queasiness. There is no scorn or irony in this ingenious posture, as here, reluctance is to be taken literally. Ashbery's creed is that knowledge is nothing but the heave of nausea, an encounter with the unwaveringly disappointing, and an inkling of the grotesque. Word for word, the poem is about a man of letters, a rower, someone who only exists once the page has been scribbled or perused. The collision with the unpalatable remainder of experience only matters. The modicum of ignorance between the thing and the word withstands understanding. Everything is devised to fit in with the absolute truth for which this dishevelled text stands. Hence, only emotion matters. Rhetoric prevails on dialectics. More than a conjuring trick, discourse therefore plays with illusion and reality. A mixture of spatial and temporal perceptions, it makes one profoundly uncomfortable, astounded and musing. Meditation is here a stretching of time and a losing of one's self (1992, 5):

Let the book end there, some few
said, but that was of course impossible; the growth must persist
into areas darkened and dangerous, undermined
by the curse of that death breeze, until one is handed a skull
as a birthday present, and each closing paragraph of the novella is
underlined: *To be continued*, that there should be no peace
in the present, no sleep save in glimpses of the future
on the crystal ball's thick, bubble-like surface.

The structure of inspiration is here stated: there is nothing worth examining beyond the text. The book should therefore end where it begins, for lack of any conventional, topical reference. One is nonetheless summoned to comply with the requirement that the poem will develop on its own. The reader must then accept to be locked up within that self-

contained unit. Any external occurrence, be it pleasant or unpleasant, is thereby declared irrelevant. Reading thereby becomes tiresome since one is time and again hampered in a desire to understand what is being studied. It is nevertheless spiritually lifting. The poet's vision of life is no less than an endless succession of aborted impressions, transient memories, and short-lived images, just as the mention of the unexpected skull, proffered as a birthday present summons up the ephemeral reference to Hamlet's pondering on his forlorn self. In *Flow Chart*, the outside world is only a figment of the imagination; its perception is unsatisfactory. The famed *non sequitur*, which is a hindrance to cognizance, derails the course of examination towards a more seminal intuition, upon which the author believes he has unwittingly hit, only to let go, and start anew. As such, linguistic vagrancy, which is often based on semantic inconsistency, is a charting of contentment then disappointment, an itch of knowledge which one keeps hoping for, in a justifiably meaningless existence, were it not for the significant exploration of the author's cast of mind. Here is what Whitman asserted in *Song of myself*, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (1973, 28). This also implies the reader's alienation, namely a transitory pliability to frustration. Such is the result of a constant hovering between two courses, the thing itself, and its foil, inspiration.

Meliora probant, deteriora sequuntur

This wrong quotation (1992, 34), which is inspired by Ovid's *Video meliora proboque, / Deteriora sequor*, (VII, 20), in *Metamorphoses* (2008, 156) means that he sees goodness, and approves of it, but does evil. It is one of the contrivances which testify to this alienation experienced by the reader who is thereby summoned to a trite joke about wedlock, "Marrying little with less". Much in little, *multum in parvo*: the poet's grand aim is thus allusively stated (1992, 34). No matter how disorderly, fitful, vulnerable, unreliable and distracting that poem appears to be, it is nonetheless a meticulous attempt to devise a system of speculation grounding knowledge of nature upon that of the divine one. That theosophy is deemed profounder than empirical science. It ran against the grain of the neo-platonic metaphysics, which started from the perfection of the one and only: "every particular thing has a One of its own to which it

may be traced; the All has its One, its Prior but not yet the Absolute One; through this we reach that Absolute One, where all such reference comes to an end.” (Plotinus 1991, 245). This mystical disquisition was a bid to show the genesis of the perfect being by contrariwise rooting it in imperfect beings (Drabble, 115). Its aim was to examine the transition from non-being into being (Goodrick-Clarke, 90). According to Jacob Boehme, the unfathomable (*Ungrund*) is an unconscious, dark vacuum which gradually becomes aware of its own legitimacy through its ability to create. There is then no such reality as an absolute void; it is ingrained with a desire of being. The duty of the theosopher is to make it happen (Boehme, 2006):

Thou must learn to distinguish well betwixt the *Thing*, and that which only is an *Image* thereof; betwixt that Sovereignty which is *substantial*, and the inward Growth or Nature, and that which is *imaginary*, and in an *outward* Form, or Semblance, betwixt that which is properly *Angelical*, and that which is no more than *bestial*. If thou rulest now over the Creatures externally only, and not from the right *internal* Ground of thy renewed Nature; then thy Will and Ruling is verily in a *bestial* Kind or Manner, and thine at best is but a sort of *imaginary* or transitory Governement, being void of that which is substantial and permanent, the which only thou art to desire and press after. Thus by thy outwardly lording it over the Creatures, it is most easy for thee to lose the Substance and the Reality, while thou hast nought remaining but the Image or Shadow only of the first and original Lordship; wherein thou art made capable to be again invested, if thou beest but wise, and takest thy Investiture from the supreme Lord in the right Course and Manner.

Beyond the religious mention of a superior entity as is an angel, this dissenting contention states that the deity of being is to be surmised within the thing itself and not as a remote reference, far above man’s grasp. That flowchart runs counter positive deduction. Ashbery’s primordial intuition is similar to the mystics’ negative induction. He therefore roots his perceptual groping around, his quest for meaning, into the irking disconnectedness of reality. It baffles imagination on account of its demotic triviality and flimsiness. Needless to say, the poet’s pursuit may seem quixotic, if not hubristic, yet it is his way of grasping the deeply embedded permanence of the real thing, beyond its superficial disorientation. *Non sequitur* must be accepted, since it contradicts dialectics. This is not a superadded, if not superfluous adornment to the author’s rhetoric, but it is the prime constituent, and the vocal music of his mystical rendering of the imperfection of wholeness. It goes without saying that it actually bears the hallmark of a deconstructive inspiration. The

divine itself, *numine*, is discontinuous, so the poet's inspiration, his *afflatur*, is disintegrating. Weird then though they may seem his mental images prove a conventional scriptural mimicry: *ut pictura poesis*. Wordsworth's *Prelude* commences likewise (15-19, 375):

The earth is all above: with a heart
Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about, and should the guide I chuse
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way.

Ashbery's guide too is nothing better than a wandering cloud. Yet, a writer, who is openly bent on probing the innermost recesses of his coincident psyche may at times verge on psittacism, that mechanical repetition of received words and images as reflects neither true reasoning nor feeling. Without the sobering assistance of reason, this speech may be reduced to soliloquy, if not delirium tremens. Man seems to be incurably detained within himself. Yet, instead of the ranting ejaculations of a psychotic bellowing on top of a bridge above the speeding highway, as in Kevin Spacey's film, *Interstate 84*, *Flow Chart* is striking for the author's avoidance of orating, his reticence. For being in no position to account for the crime he had unwittingly witnessed, the misfit in the film would later silently jump out of another bridge, above the Hudson. A man, apparently at a loss in the maze of the uses of this world, his last fit of verbose anger is but a dress rehearsal which foreshadows his self-defining suicide in the river. Similarly, beyond his otherwise fanciful garrulousness, his famed ellipsis, asyndeton, brachylogy, aposiopesis, and the syllepsis which is called a zeugma, the poet's purpose is to highlight that, for all its eccentricity, language is nothing but the structure of perception which shields from the anonymity of silence. He openly asserts it in the first part (1992, 14):

Our privacy ends where the clouds' begins, just here, just at
this bit of anonymity on the seashore. And we have the right
to be confirmed, just as animals or even plants do, provided we go away
and leave
every essential piece of the architecture of us behind. Surely then, what we
work
for must be met
with approval sometime even though we haven't the right to issue any such
thing.

The poet's suspension of disbelief is osmosis with the anonymous; his orthodoxy is a belief in Baudelaire's correspondences. This connection is to be surmised deep within the wrinkle that fuses the reassuring bulk of a cloud with the auspicious or ominous latency of infinity. He does not content himself with agreeing that seeing *is* believing, he writes that seeing is, first and foremost, asseverating one's very existence, just like an animal which discards any claim at intellection. He would imagination were the mere impression of what existed before man was given an opportunity to register it. Like Emerson, his motto is that "language is fossil poetry" (2000, 296). Beauty is, to the letter, in the eye of the beholder. It is an intrusion on his psyche, a breach of his laid-back soundness of mind, which is based on a customary trust in the reliability of matter. One therefore has to invoke some presence, and it is that evocation which attracts him. Quéré described that stylistic reticence as the stonemason's construction (1992, 145):

C'est pourquoi, reprenant les distinctions désormais classiques entre l'« énonciation énoncée » et l'« énoncé énoncé », elle se livre parallèlement à une sorte d'anamnèse qui ramène dans le champ de la réflexion et l'acte d'énonciation», qui définit l'écriture en son surgissement ou son imminence, et l'«énonciation en acte», dont les contours prégnants fondent le discours en son immanence.

Ashbery's practise of poetry is therefore to yoke a deceiving past and a hostile present. It is also to wedge in the threat of the future. His wish is to abstract them all into inspired eloquence. Conventional though this chronicler's creed may be, the reader is yet at a loss, without the bearings which the referential illusion signals. All twists and turns made apparent, his style is nothing but the unexpurgated transcription of immediacy. It runs counter the arbitrary connection of signifier and signified. Even when he feels out of sorts or shrouded in confusion, here is a man who is shorn of delusion, fanaticism or arrogance. Confusion is the seedbed of creation. It is the inevitable upshot of his wilful mixture of anamnesis and prolepsis. That is no window dressing but the yardstick which one uses to gauge the instability of any sense of self; in a story, his own hence the reader's, as comes out fragmented. The poem is a proof of its own begetting, a register of the passing of time, the waywardness of ideas, and the hopelessness of a coherent narrative, all pangs of remorse and flashes of inspiration unashamedly flaunted. They must be transcribed at once. Such an endeavour is exhausting for the poet and it is not the least mind-boggling for the reader, hence, his "squeamishness" and one's queasiness. Ashbery's

alleged difficult visibility stems from the sheer impossibility of grasping the real world. His lyricism is his assumed thrust forward, by trial and error. *Flow Chart* is thereby paradoxical as it is as accurate a rendering of indeterminacy as possible. Strange though it may seem, the poet's posture credits Bentham's stricture against poetry: "it can apply itself to no subject but at the expense of utility and truth" (2011, 512).

Ashbery's refusal to comply with traditional, chronological forms of linear narratives is imbued with his deep sense of musicality: "for me, poetry is very much the time it takes to unroll, the way music does... it's not a static, contemplable thing like a painting or a piece of sculpture" (1992, 167). That stance is redolent of Plotinus's *charis* (emanation) (1991, 47), rather than Plato's *summetria* (symmetrical perfection) (2008, 137): "Indeed, one can almost see the answers spelled out / in quires of the sky" (1992, 81). This ambivalent hint is no stroke of luck. The poet thereby enhances the double meaning of "quire" as being simultaneously the choir, which makes one fantasize about the music of the spheres, and the reams of sheets which are to be turned into a poem. Such is his definition of the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo at Delphi, who delivered the oracles. The poet later on declares that "just as the forms / begin to float away like mesmerized smoke, the resolution, or some resolution occurs." (1992, 81) The mathematical utilitarianism of geometrical shapes is thus relinquished. It is replaced by another unaccountable intimation, a trace or a trail which he keeps triangulating. In *Flow Chart* (1992, 3), he mentions "A Wave". This poem is another of his meandering pursuits of the same "diagram". There, he berates conventional poetical posturing as it is exhausted, jejune and dull, the Keatsian or Wordsworthian "patchwork landscape of childhood," or "The still life of crushed, red fruit in the sky" (Ashbery 1985, 330). For him (Ashbery 1985, 336),

It's all attitudinizing, maybe, images reflected off
Some mirrored surface we cannot see, and they seem both solid
As a suburban home and graceful phantasms, at ease
In any testing climate you may contrive.

How can one feel safe groping for "some mirrored surface we cannot see"? This anguish is a perennial characteristic of his style. Normally, when writing is disconnected from any referential value, it is worryingly ineffectual. His attitude is then to consider that writing can be genuinely exacting as it galvanizes that "testing climate" (Ashbery 1985,

336) which is as singularly unreliable as a glimpse which one descries in a mirror. Both writer and reader must therefore accept to be left in the lurch, looking for the fleeting reflection of an invisible entity. His chase is that of a ghost, a shimmer or a mark on the wall. It consequently becomes mesmerizing. Such an experience actually epitomizes the heartfelt turmoil and discontent caused by things that lack substance: abstractions, indications, glimmers of hope, visual fallacies and flashes in the pan. Just as in 1390, William Langland developed the proselyte dream vision—the Visio of a narcoleptic Will alongside the observant Vita of Dowel in *Piers Plowman* (2009)—Ashbery’s pledge is to draft an egocentric guidance book, a poetics travelogue. Here is not only a writer’s commitment but it is also a reading protocol. There is no gainsaying that such a coin of vantage is supposed to be laid back, and impregnated with the studied carelessness in writing, the Renaissance detachment called *sprezzatura*, which defines the courtier (Castiglione 1967, 56). Both writer and reader yet feel restless. In “The Instruction Manual” (1955), he enthused upon that paradox, when he elated about his desultory flight of fancy from “the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal,” (1985, 5) to “dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers! / City I wanted most to see, and most did not see, in Mexico!” (1985, 5) In *Flow Chart*, he now bemoans, “Back to the instruction manual which has made me dream of / Guadalajara” (1992, 12) Lyrical moments are thus the sequel of those moments of surprise, which Plato depicted in *The Republic* (VII, 514a-520) (2008, 167) as the myth of the cave. Ashbery’s query is similar to a dream that stems from the real world, out of a cave which some men left when they were attracted by the light outside, down to knowledge maybe, or for that matter, Guadalajara. Reminiscence, which Plato described in *Phaedo*, (1996, 72) must then be steeped in the waters of oblivion, so as to regain efficient awareness of quiddity. When put in Ashbery’s very words, in “A Wave” (1985, 337), one becomes aware that:

But there is something else—call it a consistent eventfulness
 A common appreciation of the way things have of enfolding
 When your attention is distracted for a moment, and then
 It’s all bumps and history, as though this crusted surface
 Had always been around, didn’t just happen to come into being
 A short time ago.

That “consistent eventfulness” of things “enfolding” is the stigma of the leftover of language. It is ultimately characterized by such “bumps and history” as he expatiates on. They actually insert a pause within any

unveiling of the truth. That is followed by acceleration. It is all typical of a remembrance of things past as periodically glides into a reality in the offing. The reader then cannot but experience it. He is therefore stunned by that unknown which *non sequitur* summons up in his perception. One realizes that it is a deepening and a thickening of what has always been known, namely that language is the undisputed source of thought, *fons et origo, nemine dissentiente* (1992, 77). In between these Latin quotations the inductive comma and its consequence, a pause, are the deductive scope which defines poetry, just as the allegory of poetry sits in between NUMINE and AFFLATUR.

Reading *Flow Chart* is accepting that difficult reversal of situations. It is accepting that perennial squeamishness which is to make one repeatedly queasy, and irked. Since language prevails on ideas, man's vaunted arrogance in his all-encompassing intelligence is, from now on, to be reviled. That faculty is only subservient to linguistic rules. This may sound as a gladiatorial academic tussle. Wittgenstein once tossed a poker at Popper, at a meeting of the *Cambridge Moral Science Club*, as they argued about whether philosophical issues were real or just linguistic puzzles. The poet is there at it, fathoming out the meaning of contingency, and begging to differ that anything may be reliable. It is a leap of faith, since it is his will to be all at sea, wont on finding that "something else" ("A Wave"), the nebula of unformed ideas, a-not-yet-in-words feeling, a *doppelganger* of the classical imagination, the remnant of language. In order to read and relish *Flow Chart*, one must disregard one's internal sense of harmony and balance; one must bring the process of self-measurement to a standstill. Any re-internalization of the poem is ineffectual. The text is puzzling because it is essentially other. It is estrangement and alienation. That is best summarized in the author's recourse to silence, that intellectual pause, whose rhetorical equivalent is *non sequitur*. Anacoluthon and ellipsis therefore become seminal because they generate a process of acceleration, a quickening of the mind as is felt at having hit upon the truth, but only temporarily so. There is then no other solution but to let go, to meditate another metaphor.

Being and time

Since *Flow Chart* disencumbers space for any quest for existence, Ashbery concurs with Heidegger that mankind has lost the “nearness and shelter” of Being. Both philosopher and poet buttress the same demanding albeit scornful creed that man is no longer at home in the world as primitive man was. Thought is disunited from entity so that only a few can delude themselves in the hope of regaining oneness with self. Metaphysics is skulduggery and there is no revealing of the truth (Heidegger 2008, 261),

To say that an assertion “*is true*” signifies that it uncovers the entity as it is in itself. Such an assertion asserts, points out, ‘lets’ the entity ‘be seen’ (*alêtheia*) in its uncoveredness. The *Being-true* (truth) of the assertion must be understood as *Being-uncovering*. Thus truth has by no means the structure of an agreement between knowing and the object in the sense of a likening of one entity (the subject) to another (the Object).

Such is Ashbery’s commitment against any anguish for disclosure, any epiphanic temptation. The fleeting nature of reality is constantly to be borne in mind. Alethic modalities (from the Greek *alêtheia* meaning truth) are such approximations as what is possible, necessary, impossible, contingent rather than the epistemic modalities which are what is known, believed or the deontic modalities which are what is compulsory, permissible, optional. To furthermore think that Ashbery is at loggerheads with Wordsworth who, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, asserted that perception “takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity,” (2008, 611), immediacy is then the paradoxical letterhead of both actuality and discrimination. The bard is undeniably keen on calling things to mind. He is nevertheless steeped in the clod-hopping abrasiveness of instantaneity. He cannot but be simultaneously hence paradoxically passionate and reasonable. He would then rather exhibit the “supposed irritability of men of genius”, *Genus irritabile vatum* (2, 2,102), (Horace 1970, 137). Coleridge accounted for that so-called irritability as being “a debility and dimness of the imaginative power, and a consequent necessity of reliance on the immediate impressions of the senses, do, we well know, render the mind liable to superstition and fanaticism” (Coleridge, 2008, 171). Ashbery is therefore ensnared between the devil and the deep sea. He might be blamed for self-complacently yielding to mawkishness if not sloppiness. He is yet not blurring the line between the high and the low. There is no mixture between the idiosyncratic and the pathological. His

relying on the supposedly berated immediate impressions of the senses is but a component of a psychoanalytic cure, which Lacan described as a return to the slime, the use of the unadulterated language of the tribe (1966, 90):

L'assomption jubilatoire de son image spéculaire par l'être encore plongé dans l'impuissance motrice et la dépendance du nourrissage qu'est le petit homme à ce stade *infans*, nous paraîtra dès lors manifester en une situation exemplaire la matrice symbolique où le *je* se précipite en une forme primordiale, avant qu'il ne s'objective dans la dialectique de l'identification à l'autre et que le langage ne lui restitue dans l'universel sa fonction de sujet.

This universal speech is akin to poetry. The poet should hence be considered as a wanderer of waywardness. He would henceforth be turned into a "*pouâte*", Lacan's very word to describe those who try to breach the obstacle which syntax and grammar erect in front of man's barbarity. Such a haughtiness, not to say churlishness, is his means to accede a symbolic formulation. This demeanour has been called a "mirror-stage" (1966, 128-129):

Ainsi c'est une ponctuation heureuse qui donne son sens au discours du sujet. (...) C'est ainsi que la régression peut s'opérer, qui n'est que l'actualisation dans le discours des relations fantasmatiques restituées par un *ego* à chaque étape de la décomposition de sa structure. Car enfin cette régression n'est pas réelle; elle ne se manifeste même dans le langage que par des inflexions, des tournures, des «trébuchements si légers» qu'ils ne sauraient à l'extrême dépasser l'artifice du parler «babyish» chez l'adulte. Lui imputer la réalité d'une relation actuelle à l'objet revient à projeter le sujet dans une illusion aliénante qui ne fait que répercuter un alibi du psychanalyste.

These moments of hesitation between the eloquence of speech and the fantastic regression of one's decomposition are encapsulated in the slip of the tongue, the slip of the pen, and the lapse of memory. According to Freud, a parapraxis is no innocent gesture but a result of the operation of conscious wishes or conflicts which could be used to reveal the working of the unconscious in the normal, healthy individual (Freud, 213). Since it also transcribes those moments of uncertainty, which Lacan labelled "babyish", the language of poetry is therefore a more refined, ergo, more pristine way of handling reality than dialectics which is woven into pragmatism. Ashbery's *Flow Chart*'s helter-skelter diction, his constant equivocation and loose-ended delivery are thus but an attempt to chase

the unsoiled purport of actuality, without the realistic sifting of a well-bred, matter-of-fact, coherent appropriateness. This poet is quintessentially a fool and a thief of fire, someone who believes in his inner self to be true to life, in the teeth of outer reality, which he distrusts. If the sensation is valid for him, it can therefore be exemplary. The endless transcription of what intermittently comes and goes is then the meaning of life.

This sample of confessional poetry is yet no warts and all biography. How can his style be at once so “babyish” and so sophisticated? In the second part of the poem, he describes himself as “engaged in tearing down the gnarled structure, exposing the pores of the evidence for all to see” (1992, 74). This article of faith is once again a theft of fire. There is yet no blaming him for being affected with an Adonis complex. That paradox stems from his wish to strike a balance between the above-mentioned incompatible characteristics. A babyish confessional tone is supposedly full of the airs and graces, the titter, the wailing and whining, and the expostulation of someone who walks by, natural and defenceless. It testifies to that “necessity of reliance on the immediate impressions of the senses” which Coleridge singled out (2008, 171). There is more to it than meets the eye. Ashbery’s sophisticated technique of gradual mental unveiling is a way of shielding his deep-rooted anguish. His world-view is actually ingrained with Schopenhauer’s radical pessimism. In *The World as Will and Idea*, he observed that if the universe were, in all likelihood, “the aimless and hence incomprehensible game of an eternal necessity”, it nevertheless was, as such, the embodiment of “an absolutely free will” (2014, 164). All natural phenomena were therefore but the successive degrees of an objectification: “Therefore all ends in disappointment” (1992, 100). For Ashbery as well as for Schopenhauer, like idleness, existential willpower is the root of all evil, since it diverts one from desire and pain to “boredom”, in a never-ending cycle (1992, 14-15):

There is not postage for
 this boredom either really so that it keeps
 returning, might be said never to have gone away at all,
 except for the media with which it keeps getting compared. I say, the other
 reaches really tickle you, when you have a chance.

The paradox which singles out the endless return of tediousness in a discontinuous symbol of evanescence is wittily highlighted in a reminiscence of the media, the be-all and end-all of mundane narrow-

mindedness; the wish to know all in as clipped a form as possible. Even so, intelligence can free itself from that human bondage by art, which is the unselfish, disinterested contemplation of Plato's Ideas (1996, 89). The genuine food of the soul is to be found in some knowledge of such ideas as corporeal nature shuns. When empathy makes one aware of the nature of willpower as in music, it rids one of egocentrism. Asceticism too is the negation of all desires. If *discordia concors* stems from the sheer unreality of realness, the poet's ethics is to adopt the humble stance of someone who is aware that his work is meant to be outrageous. Intelligence is here declared to be pure mimicry of experience. One's aim is hence to bridge the gap between the thing and the word. This enhances the ontological unreliability of reality, (1992, 16-17):

It doesn't matter whether or not
you like the striations, because, in the time it takes to consider them,
they will have merged, the rich man's house become a kettle, the wreath
in the sink turned to something else, and still the potion holds,
prominent.

This authorial posture which tries to snatch the blighted hope of a by-now improbable *carpe diem* betokens deep-seated pessimism. It highlights the impossibility of seizing the day (1992, 53):

here we stand, the breeze is pleasant so let's take
our time and sing one more song, eyes rolling,
and roam at will, timeless:

Since the poet resorts to italics, the bland inconclusiveness of these lines is no stroke of luck: how can one "*roam at will, timeless*"? This commitment to a sense of loss is enhanced by italics. They beckon to the reader to mind the step. The contrast between timelessness and the calendar are here to annul any intuition of a meaningful immediacy, as if the onlooker were unremittingly sent on a wild-goose chase (1992, 27):

O
paradise, to lie in the hammock with one's book and drink,
not hearing the murmur of consternation as it moves progressively
up the decibel scale.

Stating that his elation is inevitably marred by the overpowering hubbub of disappointment, his purpose is to fathom the innermost recesses of language. His realm is yet not to examine the elusive adequacy

of signifier and signified. His is “this chasm of repeated words,” “so as to fit the notch of infinity as defined by a long arc of distant crows returning to the distant / coppice” (1992, 9). Such a labyrinthine, kaleidoscopic meandering does not prove autistic though. His meditation is about the elongation of time and the ensuing ruin of the self. What if the rift between *Flow* and *Chart* were to highlight that *non sequitur* is the wellspring of metaphorical construing? His reference to the *Panopticon* is hence no learned ostentation. It is the requirement which he affixes to his trade as a poet who knows that a jail is *sui generis* a place to watch and check inmates. So is poetry with words. The most efficient architecture was hence to place them under permanent scrutiny, (Bentham 2011, 284):

It is obvious that, in all these instances, the more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose of the establishment have been attained. Ideal perfection, if that were the object, would require that each person should actually be in that predicament, during every instant of time. This being impossible, the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should *conceive* himself to be so.

The predictable consequence was that of an additional madness due to a humiliating loss of identity. No matter how outwardly finicky, that permanent gaze could only be a jump out of the frying pan into the fire. Be that as it may, the plight of the poet is to supersede reassuring intelligibility as is based on the unconquerable stability of an external reality by another (1992, 174):

Thus, all things would happen simultaneously and on the same plane, and
existence, freed
from the chain of causality, could work on important projects unconnected
to
itself and so
conceive a new architecture that would be nowhere, a hunger for nothing,
desire
desiring itself,
play organized according to theology with a cut-off date, before large
façades.
And these
urges, if that's what they are, would exist already without propriety, without
the need
or possibility of fulfilment, what the bass clarinet is to the orchestra,

This desire desiring itself is no sample of psittacism; it is the ever looming threat of disorientation. Ashbery is to be deemed a champion of abstraction, not a hireling of estrangement. *Flow Chart* is a utopia by an enquirer who is looking high and low on the frontiers of knowledge. And as language is the poet's sweet tooth, the poem is full of its simultaneously contradictory languor and vehemence, for being under the poet's persevering watchfulness. Reality should therefore not be blamed for its obvious lack of identity, but the author can. Ashbery's tell-tale reticence throughout, is thus nothing but his awareness that he is violating the language which he is resorting to, when he deprives it of any stable reference. In "Paradoxes and Oxymorons", he did not mince matters about it (2008, 698, 1-4):

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level
Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.
You miss it. It misses you. You miss each other.

Hide-and-seek is thus the predicament wherein he is immersed. It is the cause of his restlessness, too.

Conclusion

The reader should not be taken aback that, in this voyage out, this fathoming of the unknown, slippery harmonies abound. When Hopkins blamed Yeats for lacking of the why and wherefore of inspiration in "Mosada", which he declared to be a "strained and unworkable allegory" (Yeats 1977, 64-65), he was likewise indicting a lack of verisimilitude. That creed was rooted in the sanity of adequacy between word and thing. Try as one might, the reader must accept that in *Flow Chart*, the supposedly irking semantic disruptions, the alleged lapses in cognizance are moments of interrogative silence. This poem is Pandora's Box for unwittingly freeing evil at the expense of hope. The stochastic rhythm is but the rhetorical instance that the author is trying to lessen the strain of an imagination that is bent on reaching to the sky, by being inspired by nothing else but itself; *exit* NUMINE, *enter* AFFLATUR. Ashbery is actually no less than dreaming dreams. They are insubstantial, inconsequential, a pie in the sky. They are therefore tiring. His *non sequitur* is the quantum of solace which he sometimes allots himself. *Flow*

Chart is of a piece with Virginia Woolf's interior monologue in *The Voyage Out* wherein she tried to get to grips with the chaotic ebb and flow of awareness before its structuring in language, the tunnelling process of *moments of being*. If ever it is mistaken, Robert Browning did not say it otherwise when in a sententious illumination, he enquired in "The Faultless Painter" about Andrea Del Sarto (1994, 433),

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

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