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Chutes and Ladders: John Ashbery's Poetics as Experience

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Chutes and Ladders: John Ashbery's Poetics as Experience

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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For Paris Adorno

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

clean-washed sea

The flowers were.

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

to divide all.¹

1. John Ashbery, *Three Poems*, New York: Penguin Books, 1986, 3.

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“BUT THIS IS an important aspect of the question / Which I am not ready to discuss, am not at all ready to, / This leaving-out business”², writes John Ashbery, as he settles into the motion of his poem “The Skaters.” It arrives during a moment in my reading where I anticipate an interjection that explains the poem’s subject and consequently, what it is about. But an aside isn’t offered and “This leaving-out business” as absence is just another form of presence where my interpretive possibilities are kept in play. The subject—if there is any to discern at all—is an experience of not only a poem’s elaboration, but how in the process of reading I become conscious of constructing meaning through time.

On a rainy day a few years ago, I sat in a laundromat combing through an anthology of Ashbery’s poetry ranging from 1956 to 1984 that I had picked up a few hours earlier. I read a few poems selected from his first collection *Some Trees* and as I waited, I found myself lost between his words and the sound of the laundromat. I don’t know why I chose to purchase Ashbery’s poetry that day but I think he appeared on my radar soon after I read Ann Lauterbach’s *The Night Sky*, whose cover is a collage by Joe Brainard where an angelic figure looms beneath a starry night. Next to the title, Lauterbach includes: *Writings on the Poetics of Experience*.

By the time I came to Ashbery, the phrase “poetics of experience” was at the forefront of my concern, though I wasn’t sure what the idea meant. As I understand it now, a *poetics of experience* emphasizes a process of writing that self-reflexively traces consciousness as it becomes expressed through words. But what would it mean to shift *of* to *as*, making a *poetics as*

2. John Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, New York, NY: Ecco Press, 1988, 39.

experience? Would it make any difference at all, since *of* implies motion of part to whole, a metonymic transition, while *as* an equivalence? I feel that Ashbery's poetry performs as a divided consciousness that includes my own familiarity with certain phrases, while estranging me from others. Instead of being reflective of experience, I describe his poems *as* experience from my position as a reader. I can't explain why I made this modification from *of* to *as*, except that I went off a hunch.

To describe Ashbery's poetry as experience is vague—the trouble is specificity; finding a way to become more engaged through the reading to then respond to through writing. Ashbery has often been criticized for being too abstract, a term that I struggle with often but I am not too interested in defining or defending what it means to be abstract. I think that a more precise way to describe Ashbery is that his writing rests in a space outside of the literal, between the allegorical and the model, which requests certain imaginative work from the reader. I believe that this project has been an attempt to explore what pleasure I have found in the possibilities that language creates for myself as a reader. And yet, the best description that I have found of the experience of reading Ashbery comes in the guise of a review he had written on Gertrude Stein and Henry James:

[*Stanzas in Meditation* and *The Golden Bowl*] are highly complex and, for some, unreadable, it is not only because of their complicatedness of life, the subject, but also because they actually imitate its rhythm, its way of happening, in an attempt to draw our attention to another aspect of its true nature. Just as life is constantly being altered by each breath one draws, just as each second of life seems to alter the whole of what has gone before, so the endless process of elaboration which gives the work of these two writers a texture of bewildering luxuriance. . . .[and] seems to obey some rhythmic impulse at the heart of all happening.³

3. John Ashbery, "The Impossible," *poetry*, (Chicago) vol.90, no.4 (July 1957) (Review of Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*), 250.

As I return to this passage now, Ashbery draws my attention to how Stein and James express time. If a *poetics of experience* deals with becoming conscious of consciousness, then a *poetics as experience* deals with becoming conscious of all that becomes through time. At least I can say that as a reader, Ashbery makes me aware of how time feels when I reconfigure my attention to generate meaning. Meaning is the counterpoint to pleasure, but in this sense I use the word meaning as it becomes *meaningful* to me—not in the sense of a hermeneutics but as an erotics.⁴ A part of this emphasis towards meaning in the experiential sense is that his poetry has a distinct musicality, at times theatrical, both of which take place through space but are propelled forward in time, never heard or seen the same way twice. But time in Ashbery’s poetics does not occur linearly despite the forward-moving direction of language. Instead, time is palimpsestic, offering a “‘simultaneous’ perception of events”⁵ which allows the poem to collect a mass of spatial and temporal information:

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 in question, to be
 denied further out, and again and again like this.
 Hence, neither 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.

Mild effects are the result.⁶

4. I am thinking of Susan Sontag’s 1966 essay “Against Interpretation” where she calls for an “erotics of art” which I’ve always understood as relating to the experiential and sensuous—emphasizing the sensorium over the critical. See Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London: Penguin Classics, 2009.

5. Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 141.

6. Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 39.

The way time functions for Ashbery is a cycle of becoming, and as a reader this is evident in the way that certain phrases jump out as familiar while others go unrecognized before “their importance is again called in question, to be /denied further out, and again and again like this.” It is difficult to say what is going on, thus “the whole impression of the storm” is not emphasized but the “rhythm” that calls attention to the way things happen in time which holds the poem together and drives it forward. Ashbery said in a 1982 interview that “you should try to make your poem as representative as possible,”⁷ hoping to get at an “general, all-purpose experience,”⁸ which seems to harken back to the way he described both Stein and James. I began reading Ashbery searching for an answer to what he meant by “experience,” but now more than ever, I think that what he makes allegorical is the feeling of time that gathers anything and everything, and that the work that I bring to the poem to make it meaningful is an “all-purpose experience.” I no longer demanded from his expressions an explanation: I enjoy the created possibilities.

THE OTHER DAY I fell asleep for two hours and dreamt that I was in a house with other people, but my perception depended on time which ricocheted through my memory and imagination. After I woke up, I began reading sections from *Time Travel* by James Gleick, an intellectual history that centered around H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*. Gleick writes that:

everyone knows what time is. It was true then and it’s true now. Also no one knows what time is. Augustine stated this pseudo-paradox in the fourth century and people have been quoting him, wittingly and unwittingly, ever since:

7. John Koethe “An Interview with John Ashbery,” *SubStance* 37-38 (1983), 183.

8. A. Poulin, Jr., “John Ashbery,” *The Michigan Quarterly Review* 20.3 (1981), 250-51.

What then is time? If no one asks me, I know. If I wish to explain it to one that asks, I know not.⁹

Time gets all screwy in dreams: clocks don't read right (that is if I am even able to look at them), hours become days and weeks become minutes, and I can time travel—time is bent into a self-contained and paradoxical logic. My dream emphasized the feeling of time without explaining it—there were no indicators of time but I knew that something was happening through my experiences of remembering while finding myself compressed between memories.

Ashbery once said that “As I have gotten older, it seems to me that time is what I have been writing about all these years during which I thought I wasn't writing about anything.”¹⁰ Time in the course of dreams is felt but never defined, it is about “how it feels, not what it means.”¹¹ But of course it is important to take anything Ashbery says with a grain of salt since what he says is never exactly what he means. His poems aren't about *time* per se, but revolve around the personal experience of becoming with it where time is form and the content is the transitions of attention. With Ashbery I have feeling of being in motion where I am unable stop and understand his poems; each poem revises its internal logic, playing by its own rules, and hoping to discover the master-key to unlock what a poem means, to locate its central subject, leads in circles. The poem becomes an event that merges his experience with life sans ego or as Jody Norton puts it: “poetic thinking, for Ashbery, is reflection: the subject, as thinking being, reflects on his own subjectivity, and in doing so reflects that subjectivity—which is no more fixed or consistent than thought itself.”¹²

9. James Gleick, *Time Travel: A History*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2016, 9.

10. David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, New York: Anchor Books, 1998, 95.

11. Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 96.

12. Jody Norton, “‘Whispers out of Time’: The Syntax of Being in the Poetry of John Ashbery,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 41, no. 3 (1995): 281, <https://doi.org/10.2307/441853>, 282.

I've found Ashbery's poetics as an experience in that I find myself becoming conscious of my own consciousness in relationship to how he handles the feeling of time passing. My reading is fueled by curiosity, guided by my experience as being true, rather than attaining knowledge. "What moves perpetually in its stillness is a poem"¹³ and I know what I feel when I read Ashbery but when asked to explain it, I know not how.

Some say that the measuring of time
Is a recognition of what it is, but
I think the things that are in it
Are more like it, though not quite it.¹⁴

MY READING OF Ashbery begins in 1962 with *The Tennis Court Oath* and works through his poetry up until 1979 with *As We Know*. To contextualize my readings, I turn towards his contemporaries' reviews along with the literary criticism that came in the following years—including Ashbery's own interviews and biographical materials. I suggest that Ashbery's poetics bear no secrets but offer an experience that happens *as we know*. Experiences occur simultaneously in Ashbery's poetry through his transitions of attention as they reverberate through time. Ashbery has taught me how to listen, not only to the interplay of language, but also to myself as I read through his forking paths. Because I am interested in how it feels like I am undergoing something within Ashbery's language, I have reflected on my own subjective experience that includes collages which I made during pivotal points of my reading.

13. In James Gleick's book *Time Travel: A History* he references T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* where Eliot writes in the part V of Quartet No. 1: Burnt Norton:

"Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness."

See James Gleick, *Time Travel: A History*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2016, 132.

14. John Ashbery, *As We Know: Poems*, New York: Viking Press, 1979, 58.

This project of reading Ashbery is in many ways is an account of the process that I have found for myself in coming to terms with my own desire to understand. Part of this process arrives in situating certain cornerstone poems in relationship to Ashbery's life because it seems to me that part of what he's doing and what he is *doing* are in fact the same thing. That is not to say that his poems reflect his life, but that life has found its way into his writing just as my own life has found its way into my encounter with his language. If his poems are thought of as events, a culmination of expressions pulling from lived experience and lived imagination, then what he has given is generous enough. One review notes that *The Tennis Court Oath* "had given his reader stones instead of bread,"¹⁵ but it is only with the expectation of knowledge that the reader stays famished. Ashbery's poetry offers what we know to be experience which all too often goes unrecognized until after-the-fact but here, there is no after-the-fact, no retrospectively named subject.

IN MY FIRST chapter, I trace readings of experience through figures that Ashbery either read, or was aware of. These writers have informed my own reading of Ashbery, providing guidance rather than explanation. By writing around the work of William James who had either a direct or peripheral impact on writers who practice variations of American pragmatism, I move through Emerson's understanding of pragmatism before turning to Stein and Stevens. Emerson constructs his own linguistic reality through a "poetics of transition" that "is stimulated by a core dissatisfaction with all definite, definitive formulations, be they concepts, metaphors, or larger

15. John Ashbery, "Jacket 2 — John Ashbery Interviewed by John Tranter, 1988," accessed December 6, 2018, <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html>.

formal structures.”¹⁶ Emerson, along with Stein and Stevens’ work lays the groundwork for reading as a process driven experience of realities. I am also guided by Raymond Roussel, a French writer whom Ashbery studied intently. Roussel worked playfully with language, offering continuous elaboration that leads the reader in circles, “drawn by a dark centre, never identified, always elusive—a perspective extended to infinity in the hollow of words.”¹⁷ Roussel has taught me to read towards a curiosity sustained by the pleasure of mystery.

In chapter two I follow my reading of Ashbery’s *The Tennis Court Oath*. I view this collection as a radical divergence from not only his previous poems but also a way of thinking about how words work when they become decontextualized and defamiliarized. The poems provokes interpretation, appearing to be full of signs and symbols which as a reader I have tried to make sense of, but meaning arises in the moment of reading through their mystery; there is no secret behind their mystery of construction. It seems that many of these poems solidify a technique that Ashbery brings back later on, one that highlights the transitory quality of attention:

Now he cared only about signs.
Was the cigar a sign?
And what about the key?
He went slowly into the bedroom.¹⁸

Chapter three focuses on an experiential reading of “Litany” and “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” as monologues that ground themselves in the meeting point between the poetic-self and world, meaning and word, focusing on language as an activity of life. The purpose of this chapter

16. Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, & American Literary Modernism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999, 7.

17. Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001, 228.

18. John Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1977, Print, 13.

is to express the moment in which meaning is found during my reading of Ashbery. I hope to articulate this construction of meaning through anecdotes, subjective reflections, and in the overlaps of experience as it occurs in reading and within my world. Ashbery's speakers, who so often became an amalgamation of multiple voices, divide his poetry into multiple focal points. However, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" and "Litany" present monologues that seemed so unlike the Ashbery I thought I knew because both poems strive to explain a poetic-self's experience by way of collecting expressions. And this is what makes Ashbery's poetry so evasive: experience becomes known through its proximity with other expressions. Ashbery's poems are world-things: it is poem is a poem is a poem is a poem. Feelings can not be removed from their context in Ashbery—they are always in motion and contain no secret:

The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
 Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
 Has no secret, is small, and it fits
 Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.
 That is the tune but there are no words.
 The words are only speculation
 (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
 They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
 We see only postures of the dream,
 Riders of the motion that swings the face
 Into view under evening skies, with no
 False disarray as proof of authenticity.
 But it is life englobed.¹⁹

"Our moment of attention"—but who is this "our"? Perhaps it is both Ashbery and speaker, the painter Parmigianino who Ashbery both is and isn't, myself and the poem. In certain ways, "our moment of attention" is anyone aware of their attention and yet still "cannot find the meaning of the music." The whole passage folds back on itself as it moves along, presenting an absence that "fits / Its hollow perfectly" and becomes a presence—this is the sound of music; the pleasure of a

19. John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems*, New York: Penguin Books, 1986, 69.

“life englobed.” That is to say, my reading of what becomes meaningful is more often than not found in the interplay between life and words which I believe invokes the multiplicity of connections, links, and paradoxes found in language:

It is, I think, Ashbery's great gift, to have taught us to listen for the multiplicity, the plurality, of experience: *as we know*. As William James put it, "for every part, tho it may not be in actual or immediate connexion, is nevertheless in some possible or mediated connexion, with every other part, however remote, through the fact that each part hangs together with its very next neighbors in inextricable interfusion."²⁰ Reading "Litany" with John Ashbery is just that: an *inextricable interfusion*. Like singing along with life.²¹

SINCE MY FIRST reading of Ashbery, I have found myself curious about his process of writing and why it felt so difficult to express what I thought was happening in his poetry. Instead of understanding his poetry as imitating the dream-space, reflective of autobiographical, or planted within the tradition of American poetics, I want to believe that Ashbery's poetry encompasses a greater scale of lived experience. I do not intend to draw a causal relationship between certain writers and Ashbery's poetics, but instead to draw attention to their resonating affinities. Perhaps, by working through the language of these other figures, Ashbery's own poetry might avoid explanation and instead, continue the curious affect that drew me towards him in the first place:

You shall never have seen it just this way
And that is to be your one reward.²²

I can say for certain that after reading Ashbery nothing has changed, except for the way I imagine myself in relation to the world.

20. Lauterbach cites William James' Lecture VIII from *A Pluralistic Universe*. See William James, "A Pluralistic Universe Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy," <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11984/11984-8.txt>, accessed February 8, 2019, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11984/pg11984.html>.

21. Ann Lauterbach, "What We Know as We Know It: Reading 'Litany' with J.A.," accessed February 8, 2019, <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/text/Lauterbach-Ashbery.html>.

22. John Ashbery, *The Double Dream of Spring*, New York: Dutton, 1970, 22.

Chapter One: Readings of Experience

Alexander Zondervan, *Something Went Wrong*, Collage, A4, 2019.

*All life
 Is a tale told to one in a dream
 In tones never totally audible
 Or understandable, and one wakes
 Wishing to hear more, asking
 For more, but one wakes to death, alas²³*

AS I BEGAN looking for ways to talk about Ashbery I found myself at an impasse. I felt that any attempt to interpret his poetry would be somehow sacrilegious, fearing that I would no longer feel the magic of a mystery that I wanted to keep for myself. It wasn't until I stumbled across an illuminating review that Ashbery had written about Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* and Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* that I began to get over my cold feet. There he draws attention to the relationship between poetics and experience where language becomes reflective of representative possibility. This review was the spark that offered a way into reading Ashbery, since it is strangely self-reflexive of his own practice:

Stanzas in Meditation gives one the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a 'plot', though it would be difficult to say precisely what is going on. . . .But it is usually not 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. The poem is a hymn to possibility; a celebration of the fact that the world exists, that things can happen. . . .If these works [*Stanzas in Meditation* and *The Golden Bowl*] are highly complex and, for some, unreadable, it is not only because of their complicatedness of life, the subject, but also because they actually imitate its rhythm, its way of happening, in an attempt to draw our attention to another aspect of its true nature. Just as life is constantly being altered by each breath one draws, just as each second of life seems to alter the whole of what has gone before, so the endless process of elaboration which gives the work of these two writers a texture of bewildering luxuriance. . . .[and] seems to obey some rhythmic impulse at the heart of all happening.²⁴

23. Ashbery, *As We Know*, 37.

24. Ashbery, "The Impossible," 250.

Here, Ashbery lucidly articulates the role of “transitive”²⁵ language within Stein and James’ texts, having the sense that something is happening, that time passes, without explaining what it means for either. By working through language that focuses on action as opposed to nouns, their writing is an “attempt to draw our attention to another aspect of its true nature” but what is this “true nature?” I think that for Ashbery this “true nature” is to be found in fictive possibilities precisely because it is an “all-purpose model” that readers can engage. Both Stein and James’s work speak towards the way life occurs as it happens, interested in the motion and “rhythm” that it reflects where “each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars” and nouns, pronouns, and a subject are suspended in interpretation. .

Ashbery had read or at least been aware of the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens. I read these figures through the tradition of American pragmatism which follows consciousness as it manifests through language. They have offered me a way to think about experience within reading and writing. What Stein effectively does in *Stanzas in Meditation* is build her own reality, and the question becomes how I, the reader, can access it. Stein’s reality occurs in the interplay between her consciousness and language; for Emerson, reality emerges in his poetic-self as it moves through language; and for Stevens, an independent reality is found in the interdependency of a factual reality and the imagination. These writers carry the position of the true into a fictive space as opposed to equating the true with the real.²⁶ Reading these writers has not only given me a basis from which

25. Richard Poirier defines transitives as “verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and the like—to all the words which are usually assigned the lowly task of moving us toward the substantives.” See Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993, 136.

26. I owe this idea to Lauterbach who once drew a diagram with two columns. In one column lie the true and the false while in the other, the real and the fictive. Here, she explains that the true and false belong to a moral universe while the real and the fictive belong to reality. The overlap between the real

to better understand the ideas within a *poetics of experience*, but they also inform my reading of how Ashbery constructs realities through his own poetry.

William James writes in his essay “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” that “the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its *varity is* in fact an event, a process, the process, namely, of its verifying itself, its *veri-fication*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*.”²⁷ Truth, for James, was arrived at through the very process of pragmatism which he viewed as a transitory experience suspicious of definitions, limits, and absolutes. Pragmatism relies on experience for its continuity, its stream that occurs through time: “when a moment in our experience of any kind whatever inspires us with a thought that is true, that means that sooner or later we dip by that thought’s guidance into the particulars of experience again and make advantageous connection with them.”²⁸ In other words, experience offers a continuity of possibilities because it is kept in motion, and truth is the guiding factor in its velocity. What matters is that truth is not a “stagnant property” but arrived at through a state of motion which complicates the idea of a poetic-self and process of a stream-of-conscious. In short, truth can be carried into the fictive as a process that connects one experience with another.

WHILE JAMES DEVELOPED theory, its practice can be found with Emerson who recognized the dissonance between words and things, anxious that whatever part of himself he

and the fictive both take up space in reality, but to equate the real with the true is to limit the possibilities present in the fictive.

27. William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 4 (6): 141, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2012189>, 1907, 142.

28. James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” 144.

sought to express through language would always be a fragment of his whole. For Emerson, pragmatism became a process of reconciling the poetic-self's experience with words through transitions to keep possibilities available. He saw anything absolute or definitive to sever the poetic-self from words causing writing to lose its potential to be an action.²⁹ The pragmatic practice at its core is a way of recognizing and overcoming limitations of language as well as life through the act of writing.

I have not always understood Emerson's writing as reflective of the poetic-self's uncertainty. I feel now more than ever that to read his essays as a gesture of individual affirmation is to ignore the contradictions present throughout Emerson. While Emerson carries himself with conviction he also finds that everything is subject to change—including the poetic-self. The keystone of this anxiety is articulated in "Self-Reliance," where he writes "power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*."³⁰ Transitive language is present throughout Emerson as he remains in a state of action—"darting to an aim"—while his poetic-self is threatened by disintegration. And this is the danger of repose: the severance of words and actions where possible experiences are lost. Through motion, language and the poetic-self mirror the becoming of life which makes it difficult to locate a definite subject in his essays.³¹

29. Lauterbach writes that Emerson sought "practical possibility" where "words and actions were not severed from each other. . . [that] both had the desire to arouse in others a sense of the joy of being through the agency of doing, and writing itself as a prime example of this activity" See Ann Lauterbach, *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 130.

30. Ralph W. Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, New York, NY: Library of America, 2008, 271.

31. For Poirier, "elusiveness is the defining feature of Emersonian self-hood: 'Through his concept of 'genius' he manages to hold onto an idea of the self, even though it is a self far more shadowy than his rhetoric of individualism has led people to suppose. The self in Emerson is not an entity, not even

The unstable duality present within the poetic-self is articulated in Emerson's essay "Experience" which was written in the wake of his son's death. Here he embarks on journey in an attempt to overcome an impasse however, this impasse does not arise out of the mourning for the loss of his son but rather from a sense of arrest, a threat of indifference.³² He begins the essay writing "where do we find ourselves? In a series which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none"³³ revealing an anxiety about how the poetic-self comes to know itself through its place in language. Emerson's pronoun "we" implicitly refers to himself but simultaneously disrupts the subjectivity of the essay—a split in the poetic-self—where the tension between "extremes" and believing "it has none" reflect the inability to know oneself. As Emerson writes "I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me,"³⁴ he acknowledges the rupture language causes in conceptualizing a stable poetic-self. The difficulty language presents when expressing the self is elaborated by Richard Poirier, who writes in *Poetry and Pragmatism*, that "when you put yourself into words on any given occasion you are in fact not expressing yourself"³⁵ because thoughts and feelings—that is an experience—have no way of translating directly to words. With this instability, Emerson takes up a certain evasiveness that seeks to avoid constructing an absolute poetic-self at the cost of attempting to say just what he means at one point or another; the poetic-self is to view language as an action, a state of being in

a function; it is an intimation of presence, and it comes upon us out of the very act by which the self tries to elude definition." See Levin, *The Poetics of Transition*, 27.

32. Emerson compares the loss of his son to losing a "beautiful estate" saying that "if tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me,—neither better nor worse. . . . I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature." See Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, 473.

33. Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, 471.

34. *Ibid.*, 491.

35. Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 67.

transition. Perhaps this is why I've always found it difficult to say exactly what this essay is about as it weaves through a series of meditations, and upon return, I discover things I hadn't noticed before. My attention shifts; I feel something happen.

Emerson appears to write towards an epistemological question of the self and its relation to the world through words where pragmatism offers a way to use language that invokes experience without explanation—the groundwork for a poetics as experience. In his essay “Circles” he writes that “the eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end,”³⁶ using circles as a metaphor for the limits encountered but overcome through the course of experience. “There is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable,”³⁷ and with this absence of the “unknown” comes the presence of a continuous possibility for things to happen. This motion found in writing ultimately leads to an individual reality as a guide for what can be known but in this way—though Emerson appears interested in what can be known—his writing is structured around an ontological basis in constructions of becoming, though kept in a perpetual state of *becoming*. Emerson's “circles” provide constant motion for revision, a distaste for defining limitations and boundaries, and this applies to the way the self navigates its own reflection,—which is always just a reflection that distorts, imagines, and works within the ambiguity of language.

For Emerson limitations arrive in definitions and perhaps even more crucially in words where language has the potential to consume itself. As Jonathan Levin writes in *The Poetics of Transition* “each new horizon [of the circle] represents a newly emerging unity made available to experience and at the same time subject to reformation on the basis of further experience. The

36. Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, 403.

37. *Ibid.*, 406.

pragmatists adopt a similar transitional dynamic whereby coherence of available rational forms runs up against the recognition of the limits of those forms and the impulse to reimagine them and so establish new intellectual and moral paradigms.”³⁸ American pragmatism offers a “poetics of transition” that is “stimulated by a core dissatisfaction with all definite, definitive formulations, be they concepts, metaphors, or larger formal structures,”³⁹ so that Emerson may conceive of writing as an action, as an imperative of life itself where to experience is to begin again from each day. The task is to “reimagine” these limitations through transition, beginning from a point where things can still happen and where interpretations are kept in play.

THE INTEREST IN writing as a form of becoming extends to the relationship between consciousness and words as they unfurl through time. Lyn Hejinian writes in *The Language of Inquiry* that the transitions between things for William James, “are the materials of cognition and hence consciousness. ‘Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.’”⁴⁰ Stein studied psychology under James during college, study that had an impact later in the way she imagined her consciousness as it happened through language. She writes in “Poetry and grammar” that “one of the things that is a very interesting thing to know is how you are feeling inside you to the words that are coming out to be outside you” and as Hejinian points out: “coming into consciousness of consciousness or perceiving perception is, for Stein as for [William] James, the proper function of introspection.”⁴¹ Reading Stein is not an easy task because her attention to

38. Levin, *The Poetics of Transition*, 7.

39. *Ibid.*, x.

40. Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, Berkeley, Calif: Univ. of California Press, 2010, 136.

41. Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 144.

consciousness occurs in real-time through language, and as a reader I am offered the choice to either become aware of my own consciousness of her own perceiving perception, or view her writing as a sterile deconstruction of language. But her prose and poetry are pervaded by a musicality known as her own: the domestic objects of *Tender Buttons*, the repetition of her syntax, and the portraits she made of other people are all so distinctly Stein. So, I think it is more enjoyable to go along with the ride because she finds pleasure in her presence which can be just as pleasurable to read.

Part of this pleasure is in the way that Stein handles names. But the act of naming for Stein is one way of arresting the motion she finds in tracing consciousness through language and time. As “Stein proposes the act of writing as the organization and location of consciousness in legible units, and not just of consciousness but of the consciousness of consciousness, the perception of perception,”⁴² she realized that through emphatic repetition, nouns become signifiers for the very transition of time and consciousness. She writes:

I have said that a noun is a name of anything by definition that is what it is and a name of anything is not interesting because once you know its name the enjoyment of naming it is over and therefor in writing prose names that is nouns are completely uninteresting. But and that is a thing to be remembered you can love a name and if you love a name then saying that name any number of times only makes you love it more, more violently more persistently more tormentedly. Anybody knows how anybody calls out the name of anybody one loves. And so poetry is really loving the name of anything and that is not prose.⁴³

Naming imposes a limit and “the enjoyment of naming it is over” becoming “completely uninteresting.” Her writing repeats itself—words occur more than once and sentences begin after a full stop with a conjunction indicating the continuation of an idea—which is a way of keeping motion through repetition. Levin writes that “by loving a name, the name is infused with the

42. *Ibid.*, 143.

43. Levin, *The Poetics of Transition*, 12

entire range of emotional experience that characterizes an intimate relation to what is named. The name is no longer abstract, but belongs to the affective contexts in which it is invoked. Naming restores our sense of relation to and among things,⁴⁴ grounding the name in time as it happens. The repetition of names defines the name in its relationship to language, releasing the anxiety of subjectivity present in naming, that defines itself in relation to a poetic-self, for the very fact that it need not carry an abstract weight. For as abstract as Stein appears to become, her focus driven by the way words function in increments—there is always a localized point in the syntax that performs her abstractions, giving them a precise weight. Her poetic-self is present through the way words work in relation to one another.

In her essay *Portraits and Repetition*, Stein writes that “the strange thing about the realization of existence is that like a train moving there is no real realization of it moving if it does not move against something and so that is what a generation does it shows that moving is existing. . . .if the movement, that is any movement, is lively enough, perhaps it is possible to know that it is moving even if it is not moving against anything.”⁴⁵ Speaking about her processes of language portraits, Stein aims towards a language that carries an intrinsic velocity where repetition is not about beginning again, but where expressions modulate through time, giving the feeling of their own movement, “even if it is not moving against anything”:

BERNARD FAY
 Patience is amiable and amiably.
 What is amiable and amiably.
 Patience is amiable and amiably.
 What is impatience.
 Impatience is amiable and amiably.⁴⁶

44. *Ibid.*, 12.

45. Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1957, 165.

46. Stein, *Lectures in America*, 203.

Each time a word repeats for Stein, it does so in new light shone by the language that it is used within that consequently defines it. She writes that "the important thing was that for the first time in writing, I felt something outside me while I was writing, hitherto, I had always had nothing but what was inside me while I was writing."⁴⁷ It is as though Stein found a way to write without the pressure of expressing the self, because any expression through insistence would be experienced for the first time, as opposed to repeating which suggests that time has not in fact moved or is merely remembrance. This mode of writing presents a form of transitive thinking where the poetic-self does not experience the pressure of realization or reification. I take Stein's comment that if it "is lively enough, perhaps it is possible to know that it is moving even if it is not moving against anything" to be about the work of expressions in relation to the poetic-self, that through emphasizing transitive language, even the poetic-self as a substantive is able to both crystalize and disseminate any sense of certainty. By moving away from writing through the psychological, the poetic-self loses the anxiety of maintaining its relationship towards expression because the signifier and signified are not embedded within a self, but instead, mediated through whatever presence a poetic-self may have. Ultimately, a world is constructed between the distinct language and words arriving in syntax.⁴⁸

AS WILLIAM JAMES says that "truth *happens* to an idea. . . .Its validity is the process of its valid-*ation*,"⁴⁹ Wallace Stevens seeks to carry truth into the fictive universe. This he sees as

47. *Ibid.*, 203.

48. For Stein "there is no longer any effort to reinforce the illusion of psychological realism. Stein uses words to represent character, emotion, even objects (as in *A Long Gay Book* and *Tender Buttons*) without the false and falsifying distortion imposed by the techniques of naturalistic illusion." See Levin, *The Poetics of Transition*, 11.

49. James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," 142.

an individual reality which acts as “an extended inquiry into new possibilities of transition, attempting to think beyond the received imperatives of thinking.”⁵⁰ That is, he seeks to articulate the experience held between imagination and reality, where language is continuously in motion between these two realms.

Ashbery had been an avid reader of Stevens. Karin Roffman writes in *The Songs We Know Best* “John especially liked Wallace Stevens’s essay on the ‘potency’ of her [Moore’s] poetry. Stevens praised Moore for her imagination, which had enabled her to create ‘a reality adequate to the profound necessities of life today’ without ‘speak[ing] directly of the subject of the poem by name.’For Ashbery, these comments provided him very nearly with a blueprint for how to read a Moore poem more astutely. They also explained to him how he might shift the weight between subject and emotion in his own poems.”⁵¹ The essay that Roffman refers to is “One of Marianne Moore’s Poems” where Stevens writes that “an isolated fact, cut loose from the universe, has no significance for the poet. It derives its significance from the reality to which it belongs. To see things in their true perspective, we require to draw very extensively upon experiences that are past.”⁵² Stevens interest in experiences, what he views as a culmination of factual reality and subjectivity, follows in the Emersonian sense of pragmatism in that it is through transition and motion that new possibilities, and in this case realities, are made available.

Like Emerson’s circle, Stevens builds circles not only in a singular present reality where imagination reacts towards present limitations in forms, but extends into multiple realities that

50. Levin, *The Poetics of Transition*, 182.

51. Karin Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best: John Ashbery's Early Life*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 168.

52. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, New York: Library of America, 1997, 699.

exist in both a common “universe” and the individual poet. Stevens demonstrates how in reflection of subjectivity, a poetic subject reflects subjectivity through transition:

Somehow, there is a difference between Miss Moore’s bird and the bird of the Encyclopedia. This difference grows when she describes her bird as

The friend
of hippotigers and wild
asses, it is as
though schooled by them he was

the best of the unfolding
pegasi.

The difference signalizes a transition from one reality to another. It is the reality of Miss Moore the is the individual reality. That of the *Encyclopedia* is the reality of isolated fact. Miss Moore’s reality is significant. An aesthetic integration is a reality.⁵³

Stevens makes the distinction between the encyclopedia’s entry for the bird and Moore’s poetic language, drawing a distinction that through her language, a new reality takes shape. This motion is “an aesthetic integration” which, in turn, becomes a separate but equally possible reality.

Stevens elaborates when he writes “considering the great purposes that poetry must serve, the interest of the poem is not in its meaning but in this, that it illustrates the achieving of an individual reality.”⁵⁴ In many ways, Stevens addresses this continuous processes of constructing

realities in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”:

He had to choose. But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate, the amassing harmony.⁵⁵

53. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 700.

54. *Ibid.*, 703.

55. *Ibid.*, 348.

The question of what constitutes realities, essentially a question of judgment when faced with the task of what to write, becomes a practice of inclusivity which for Stevens is “the complicate, the amassing harmony.” I view this practice of inclusion to be another way of insisting on life, for both reality and imagination, the fictitious and the true, where each with the other combine to form a world where the poet and language may culminate and present alternative possibilities in motion. Pragmatism arrives for Stevens through the value of the imagination’s dependence on reality: “to copy a reality is, indeed, one very important way of agreeing with it, but it is far from being essential. The essential thing is the process of being guided.”⁵⁶ As reality remains distinct from the imagination, the two are interdependent on one another in constructing an experience by conceiving of the poem as event.⁵⁷

A crucial component of what it means to build one’s own reality, to open up the web of multifaceted possibilities and acknowledge the divergence between poetic-self and language arrives in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” when Stevens writes:

What about nobility, of which the fortunes were to be a kind of test of the value of the poet? I do not know of anything that will appear to have suffered more from the passage of time than the music of poetry and that has suffered less. The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an

56. James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” 146.

57. George Santayana, Stevens teacher at Harvard, envisioned poetry at its best not when “it depicts a further possible experience, but when it initiates us, by feigning something which is impossible, into the meaning of the experience which we have actually had,” (See George Santayana, and William G. Holzberger, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, Cambridge, Mass. [etc.: MIT Press, 1990, 168) prompting the “objective correlative” which was developed later by T.S. Eliot. The “objective correlative” is a poetic device aimed at translating emotion through the objects used within the poem—not only dependent on the content but applying to the poem as a whole: a poem as an “objective correlative” could be considered an event. The purpose was to have the poem be a locus point of experience (and why Eliot pushed back against the poet’s personality arising in the poem) so that expressions were used as a catalyst to generate unexpected feelings in both reader and poet alike. Stevens’ interest in sound prompts the poem to become an event. See Herman Saatkamp and Martin Coleman, “George Santayana,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/santayana/>.

unalterable vibration, which it is only within the poem of the acutest poet to give them. This of us who may have been thinking of the path of poetry, those who understand that words are thoughts are not only our own thoughts but the thoughts of men and women ignorant of what it is that they are thinking, must be conscious of this: that, above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds.⁵⁸

Stevens' interest in the sound of words as the core of poetry resonates with his interest in harmony and tone. For Stevens, the sounds of words get at a different means of expression. Instead of placing the burden on the poet to use words to express directly an experience (which is not possible), the poem becomes reflexive of its own sound to inspire experience through the very reading itself, though not mimetically but receptively. When we understand that words are not our own, that "words and thoughts are not only our thoughts but the thoughts of men and women"—that is that language is shared—the emphasis towards sound as a transitive substance seems the only way of expressing the complicate meeting point of fact and subjectivity. For Stevens, the poem as event might be analogous to music as it behaves experientially and expressions both alter and reconfigure the poetic-self along with whatever nouns arise. In other words, expressions as sound are in motion without having to move against anything.

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* *

SOME TIME AGO my professor, who wished to remain anonymous, told me an anecdote. She said that once, while coming out of an anesthetic haze in a hospital, she heard some people talking near by but found it difficult to make out what was said—even though she could hear them just fine. When she finally came to, she decided that she now understood Ashbery. I think that this anecdote gets at a crucial aspect of Ashbery's poetry: that as a reader I am left on the outside of a conversation that is happening already from the outside. As my

58. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 663.

professor was able to hear the words just fine, the familiar was made strange through her inability to make sense of what was said.

My professor's anecdote resonates with the work of the early twentieth century writer Raymond Roussel, whom Ashbery had researched in France from 1955 to 1965.⁵⁹ Roussel, during his lifetime, gained little positive recognition as many critics brushed him off as eccentric, characterizing his work as a joke gone awry. His primary support came from the surrealists with his theatre work: Jean Cocteau calling Roussel "the Proust of dreams,"⁶⁰ and Louis Aragon naming him the "president of the republic of dreams."⁶¹ However, Roussel felt little to no affinity with the surrealist movement. After his death in 1933, Roussel became a cult-hit, presenting what seemed to be an enigmatic puzzle within his body of writing.

At first glance, Roussel's posthumous essay *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* seems to be an explanation for his writing process but instead offers a misleading series of linguistic paths. Roussel states that his writing "involved a very special method. And it seems to me that it is my duty to reveal this method, since I have the feeling that future writers may perhaps be able to exploit it fruitfully."⁶² On one hand, the essay seeks to speak to an audience but on the other is written in such a way that it becomes a self-reflexive catalogue, containing some three or so pages of examples that become increasingly idiosyncratic. His usage of details, references, and lists increasingly avoid any explanation of his writing, becoming a continuation of his own

59. Ashbery writes that "it seemed impossible that I would ever be able to read it [*Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, Roussel's long poem] with any understanding, but for a long time that was the thing I most wanted to do. So I learned French with the primary aim of reading Roussel." See Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001, xii.

60. Raymond Roussel, Trevor Winkfield, and John Ashbery, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, New York: SUN, 1977, 46.

61. Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, 49.

62. *Ibid.*, 3.

practice—and Roussel seems aware of this, often citing missed details as faults in his own memory. Towards the end, Roussel provides a series of autobiographical fragments that seem to create a caricature of himself, as though a split has occurred not only between the various meanings of words but in Roussel’s poetic-self, as well.⁶³ This split, the recurring and continuous elaboration of meanings, is expressed by Roussel as he writes “I chose two almost identical words (reminiscent of metagrams). For example, *billard* [billiard table] and *pillard* [plunderer]. To these I added similar words capable of two different meanings, this obtaining two almost identical phrases:”

1. *Les lettres du blanc sur les bands du vieux billard* . . .
[The white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table . . .]
2. *Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard* . . .
[The white man’s letters on the hordes of the old plunderer⁶⁴ . . .]

By unraveling two “almost identical phrases” that harbor different meanings with a similar sound, Roussel makes us aware that familiar words are still sounds that evade definitive meanings.⁶⁵ Not only does Roussel use this method to develop a “plot,” but these two phrases also perform as brackets: the first is a narrative beginning and the second is an end. Roussel’s

63. Roussel’s first novel that he completed when he was nineteen was titled *La Doublure*, translating to “The Lining”, or “A Double.” After completing his novel, he says he “was filled with an extraordinary intense sensation of universal glory.” However, shortly after, he fell into a personal crisis finding that his novel received little to no attention. Before he fell into his crisis, he had a photo taken of him on a balcony posing contently—he later requested that he would like to be remembered by this photo, his double.

64. Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, 3.

65. The process that Roussel uses to generate meanings is elaborated by Ford who writes “like an all-powerful catalyst, the procédé destabilizes language at the level of the word, while simultaneously requiring it to mobilize all available forces to accommodate the new combinations thrown up by the double entendres it exploits.” This procédé or method is a velocity by which words are simultaneously forced to generate new meanings, while at the same time revealing their original association. Ford continues, “while on the level the procédé reveals all words—or fragments of words—to have potential double meanings, on another it imposes on them the strictest possible laws of connection. In the texts themselves, the different levels never acknowledge each other, though they can be seen as engaged in a mutually beneficial, if eccentric, bargain.” Procédé offers a way to generate the possibility for multiple exhausted pathways to follow in both interpretation and writing. See Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*, 5.

“almost identical phrases” is a measure of time, one that comes around nearly full circle.⁶⁶

Ashbery called this “Roussel’s ‘*rimes de faits*’ (‘rhymes for events’)” which “helped him utilize his unconscious mind” which might lead him “back to a common source of mythology or collective unconscious.”⁶⁷ Like Stein, Roussel’s language is in perpetual idiosyncratic motion but he is less introspective and his conscious is always one step behind language’s generative possibilities. Moore described Roussel’s *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* (1932) as reflective of the “mysteries of construction,”⁶⁸ and Roussel’s language seems to form a phantom labyrinth.

Michel Foucault notably wrote his only literary analysis on Roussel titled *Death and the Labyrinth* in 1963:

All of Roussel’s language, in its reversal of style, surreptitiously tries to say two things with the same words. The twisting, slight turn of words which ordinarily allows them to make a topological ‘move’ that brings into play their fundamental freedom is used by Roussel to form an inexorable circle which returns words to their point of origin by force of his constraining rules [. . .] Language has become circular and all-encompassing; it hastily crosses distant perimeters, but it is always drawn by a dark centre, never identified, always elusive—a perspective extended to infinity in the hollow of words.⁶⁹ . . .

Describing Roussel’s writing as a “topological ‘move’” brings to mind a palimpsest, where there is *the word* and the layering of interpretations drawn forth, whereby a web of multiple meanings become teased from the unchanged, but ever changing, original language. This, as Foucault writes, is “an inexorable circle which returns words to their point of origin,” drawing a similar cadence as Emerson’s “Circles,” but the distinction, so it seems, comes with Roussel’s playfulness with language. Instead of being skeptical towards language’s “dark centre,” its

66. The cyclical movement of time that Roussel practices is explicit in his long poem, *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, where parenthesis and footnotes are inserted into one another, like a garden of forking paths—“(((The role of snobbism plays (((to tell the truth, what was Jacob?” See Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, 68.

67. Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, 53.

68. *Ibid.*, 54.

69. Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*, 228.

evasiveness which severs expressions from the poetic-self's identification, Roussel plays within the "infinity in the hollow of words." That is, the endless cataloguing he brings to his books, the elaboration of how he engages different words, and finally, his obsessive attention towards description which follows, so it appears, from the word's generative capabilities on their own. Language, for Roussel, comes from outside, already pre-fabricated and ready to be disfigured and re-appropriated into new narrative possibilities; the labyrinth is already there and Roussel is ready to wander through its multiple pathways.

In his essay "In Darkest Language," Ashbery writes "with the possible exception of Butor and of Michel Leiris, none of the writers who have dealt intelligently and sympathetically with Roussel have succeeded in making clear just what is so extraordinary about him: it would seem to be something that can be felt but not communicated"⁷⁰—a comment just as applicable to Ashbery's own poetry. Part of the difficulty in communicating the presence of feeling seems located with Roussel's way of description and cataloguing. As Ashbery writes "the result in each case of each of his books is a gigantic dose of minutiae: to describe one is like trying to summarize the Manhattan telephone book." And minutiae in this case is not to be conflated with realism's interest in detail as to build a phantom world, but instead focused on the way language begins to replicate and generate in its own way. The details, while they matter, are swept away into a vast expanse where "the whole is more than the sum of its parts. It is an experience unique in literature."⁷¹ Never-mind symbolism, let alone parsing tactics, for Roussel what matters is the experience offered in minutiae, the process of both creating and in turn, reading through the complicate mass.

70. Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, 60.

71. *Ibid.*, 61.

Despite Roussel's "rules" for writing, the relationship between phrases and words are not necessarily connected—this is what I think is meant by his unconscious process. On one hand there is the practice of splitting these realms in language, but on the other, the reason for their direction, is kept in the dark: "It is the disjunction between these realms which creates what Ashbery has called 'the "stereo" effect' of Roussel's prose: 'we are following him on one level and almost but not entirely missing him on another, a place where secrets remain secret.'"⁷² Roussel gives only so much to his reader before cutting him off. There are points within his texts that may be entered, but entered for only so long before the train of language makes another tangential move—always in motion, metamorphosing what has come before. But the point that Ashbery makes, along with Ford, is not that Roussel should be cracked—the enigma is there not to serve as a challenge to reveal but rather dwell within—and I think that this point of finding a comfort within the uncertainty is what makes Roussel, and I would argue that Ashbery falls here as well, most engaging.

Roussel asks the reader to read with a curiosity equal to that of his own prose:

It is ultimately of no importance whether one can discover, running through these paltry fragments, the thread of a project on which Roussel might have labored all his writing life with a view to making it his crowning work, the 'masterwork' that would have won him general recognition. There is no Roussel mystery; his work is not a riddle that we must solve. It is only our reading of it, our thirst for explanation, our love of complexity that creates the impression that there is a secret to be cracked. If secret there is, it will not be found where we look for it.⁷³

The goal of reading Roussel is not to uncover the secret, the riddle, or even the technique of his work but rather, reconfigure what it means to read. Roussel exemplifies an interest through his writing that feeds a different part of reading's expectations, of what we seek to gain out of reading, where instead of attaining knowledge, the process itself arrives to prove its own point.

72. Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*, 216.

73. *Ibid.*, 234.

As Ashbery writes “but even though we may never be able to ‘use’ his work in the way he hoped, we can still admire its inhuman beauty, and be stirred by a language that seems always on the point of revealing its secret, of pointing the way back to the ‘republic of dreams’ whose insignia blazed on his forehead.”⁷⁴ And from here, I think Ashbery asks a similar question of its reader: to be curious, and to read in spite of its endless metamorphosis and join in the joy of endless motion that begins again.

Both Roussel and Ashbery share a dream. Marjorie Perloff, in “*Fragments of a Buried Life*”: *John Ashbery’s Dream Songs*, writes “bits of everyday reality. . . weave in and out of the poet’s [Ashbery’s] consciousness, serving as reminders that to dream is to be on the verge of waking up.”⁷⁵ This affinity for ascribing the dream to both Roussel and Ashbery represents a form of paradoxical logic, a way of continuous departure where beginnings arrive in the sense of having new possible experiences. The dream for Ashbery in particular is one that occurs in an in-between space as a day-dream might, where reality meets with consciousness and experiences fluctuates between external and internal stimulus:

For some day these projects will return.
The funereal voyage over ice-strewn seas is ended.
You wake up forgetting. Already
Daylight shakes you in the yard.
The hands remain empty. They are constructing on osier basket
Just now, and across the sunlight darkness is taking root anew
In intense activity. You shall never have seen it just this way
And that is to be your one reward.⁷⁶

The work of the dream is then one that arrives in the form of a path, presenting alternate realities that merge with a plurality of worlds. Just as Stevens was interested in the individual reality

74. Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, 55.

75. Marjorie Perloff, “‘Fragments of a Buried Life’: John Ashbery’s Dream Songs,” in *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, ed. David Lehman, (Ithaca, 1980), 73.

76. Ashbery, *The Double Dream of Spring*, 22.

composed by the poet, the dream space for Ashbery performs as a further step in this process; one where multiple realities can exist simultaneously. The experience of waking follows and the distinction between the two worlds collapses in on itself resulting in a cycle which then recurs. Dreaming allows for the possibility to begin again, where experiences are not constrained by forms of logic that are used to rationalize how something is felt. The dream serves as a suitable allegory for the evasiveness of expressing experiences through language—Ashbery writes “You wake up forgetting” and this negative space in memory is not an absence but rather an open field since “You shall have never seen it just this way / And that is to be your one reward.”

What matters for Ashbery’s dream is the cycle of renewal, where fragments are carried through time and resurface at later points. About “Soonest Mended” Lehman writes “this is the autobiography raised to the abstract level of allegory,”⁷⁷ that the poem “suggest[s] a dream narrative loaded with plot twists and complications, and the dreamer is anyone.” Resonant with Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*, the dream is the invitation to the reader where they may undergo the experience of time passing without substantive waypoints. As Ashbery said that “it seems to me that time is what I have been writing about all these years during which I thought I wasn’t writing about anything,” time in the course of dreams is felt but never articulated, and Ashbery’s concern is found in “how it feels, not what it means.”⁷⁸ What is important about the dream in both Ashbery and Roussel is the way that dreams have the flexibility to appropriate and reconfigure reality, not only spatially but also temporally. Roffman recounts the effect that *Much Ado About Nothing* had on a young Ashbery, concluding that “almost every character in the play discovers that to dream and to forget are equally crucial ways to learn, an idea that would

77. Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 95.

78. *Ibid.*, 96.

become a hallmark in many of Ashbery's mature poems."⁷⁹ The language of "dream" reappears, and in this context is a way of continually revising and reorganizing the way in which the characters from *Much Ado About Nothing* see the world, even while their experiences had an effect on them. Taken in this vein, the dream offers possible ways of organization—though not in the sense of rearranging reality but of being altered by one's experience with the world—where stimuli is transcribed through the course of the poem.

Ashbery listens and lets what he hears alter his own relationship to the world. This is a feedback loop, a continuous exchange between the relation of self and world where the poetic-speaker undergoes endless revision.

79. Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best*, 31.

Chapter Two: Writing with *The Tennis Court Oath*



La Salle Garnier in Paris, typical of the many opera houses where American

Alexander Zondervan, *dance (for Luke Burton)*, Collage, A4, 2019.

Hence, neither 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.

Mild effects are the result.⁸⁰

IN 1962 WHILE living in France, Ashbery published his second and most discursive collection of poetry titled *The Tennis Court Oath*. While it has become one of my favorites, it did not begin this way. The collection challenges my preconceptions of how I engage language and from the very get-go, precluded me from any cohesive conversation—all I could do was listen. Ashbery reflects how his “intention was to be after... kind of... taking language apart so I could look at the pieces that made it up. I would eventually get around to putting them back together again, and would then have more of a knowledge of how they worked, together.”⁸¹ This attention to language and how it functions begins to appear as a collage that in many ways reconfigures his mother tongue. We are with him as he wrote while we read, trying to figure out how language works when placed together. In an interview with John Tranter from Jacket Magazine in 1988

Ashbery reflected on how *The Tennis Court Oath* “antagonised a lot of readers:”

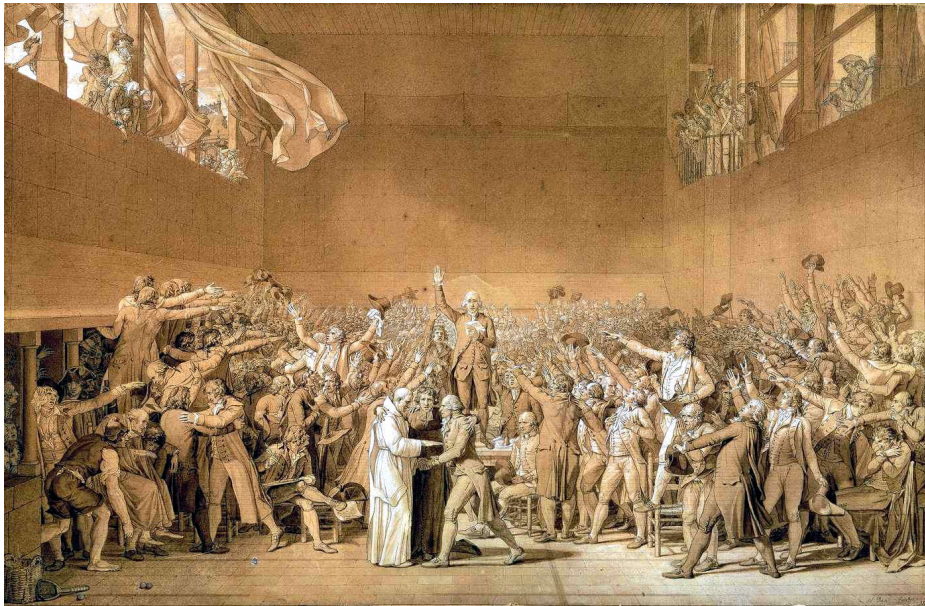
The reception was even... more minimal and more hostile than that of the first book. I remember a couple of reviews. One was by the poet Samuel French Morse, who actually edited Stevens’ posthumous books, who said that I had given the reader stones instead of bread. And John Simon, the dreaded theatre critic of New York magazine, reviewed it for the Hudson Review, and quoted a line from [the poem] ‘Europe’ which was ‘he had mistaken his book for garbage’, and he said ‘If the poet says this, what more can the reviewer add?’⁸²

80. Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 39.

81. Fletcher, *A New Theory*, 141.

82. Ashbery, “Jacket 2 — John Ashbery Interviewed by John Tranter, 1988,” accessed December 6, 2018, <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html>.

The initial response to *The Tennis Court Oath* was generally resistant. As Morse said, Ashbery gave “the readers stones instead of bread,” positioning the collection as having a different reading experience than that expected, one which resists digestion, analysis, or interpretation on the part of its readers. *The Tennis Court Oath* references the 1789 “act of defiance by representatives of the nonprivileged classes of the French nation. . . .at the beginning of the French Revolution” where they were forced to move “to a nearby indoor tennis court. . . .[and] took an oath never to separate until a written constitution had been established for France.”⁸³ But *The Tennis Court Oath* also calls to Jacques-Louis David’s 1791 painting that dramatizes the historical event.



Jacques-Louis David, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1791), Musée National du Château, Versailles. Image source: CGFA.

What these implicit references recognize is the interpretive possibilities that language holds: phrases pass through time, unfolding into webs of meaning. And while *The Tennis Court Oath* takes pre-existing information and reconfigures it, the title just happened to come about after an experience that Ashbery had:

83. “Tennis Court Oath | Summary & Facts,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tennis-Court-Oath>.

I was on a bus in Paris one day, going past the Jardins du Luxembourg, where there are tennis courts. It was a beautiful day and I saw these young people in their tennis whites playing—a lovely sight—and then I thought ‘Gee, and then there was a tennis court oath, which was such a serious violent event.’ And this gave me the idea for writing the poem, and its title. Of course it wasn’t actually a tennis court as we know it, but more like a handball court, the original *jeu de paume*. Then I found some wonderful David drawings for that painting before he did paintings of clothed people he drew them naked, and then after he’d do them with clothes—so there are drawings of naked men waving their hats in the air, one of which I tried to get Wesleyan to use on the jacket, but they wouldn’t.⁸⁴

The title itself prompts a series of different interpretations but this method of using pre-existing titles act by “disguising or neutralizing the demands of the self is to use other people’s words. . . .most strikingly in his choice of titles already used by other people.”⁸⁵ Ashbery’s account reflects an inner-dynamic between appearances and information—noticing the process of David’s painting as being equally interesting as that of the final result where the tension between naked and clothed figures reveals a process where elaboration is still at play.



Philippe Bordes, *Le Serment du Jeu de paume de Jacques-Louis David. Le peintre, son milieu et son temps de 1789 à 1792*, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1983, p. 50.

An exchange happens in the experience as it occurs while information and organization come after the fact. With that being said, *The Tennis Court Oath* has been viewed as either a brief and inchoate excursion or a crucial leap within Ashbery’s poetic life. I think that *The Tennis*

84. Ashbery, *John Ashbery in conversation with Mark Ford*, 46.

85. Mark Ford, *Polarities: A Study of John Ashbery's "The Tennis Court Oath,"* 64.

Court Oath rests in a position of unease and for this reason marks a radical shift in Ashbery's poetic practice.

I read *The Tennis Court Oath* as a collection of poems that carry a certain energy of curiosity aimed towards how language can generate meaning unexpectedly. The poems hold many signs and symbols which as a reader I have tried to make sense of but I've found meaning by dwelling within their mystery. I think this is half of the point. The other: that there is no secret behind their mystery. I found that once I got over the initial hump of *trying to make sense of* and *searching for a subject*, the collection gives way to an animated life that is non-linear, exploring the relationship between language and *abstraction*. By abstraction I simply mean language that can not be made to signify a literal thing. This makes categories, interpretation, and meaning harder to discern but also emphasizes the role of imagination and participation for the reader, which in this case is myself.

ONLY SIX YEARS earlier in 1956, Ashbery published his first collection of poems *Some Trees*.⁸⁶ Frank O'Hara said that in these poems "there is the difficult attention to calling things and events by their true qualities,"⁸⁷ and I think his comment resonates with William James' truth that "*becomes* true, is *made* true by events."⁸⁸ I find that these initial poems reflect the movement from a poetic-self's relationship to reality and imagination; reflexive of how one sees oneself through time. A truth is guided by an attention towards the way experience reconfigures the

86. While I do not spend too much time focusing on *Some Trees*, my purpose of including it here is to animate the radical shift present in *The Tennis Court Oath*. *Some Trees* is necessary to include because it helps situate and contextualize my way of reading Ashbery's later poems.

87. Marjorie G. Perloff, "'Transparent Selves': The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 8 (1978): 171, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3506772>, 175.

88. James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," 142.

world around the speaker. Ashbery writes in his poem “The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers”:

Yet I cannot escape the picture
Of my small self in that bank of flowers:
My head among the blazing phlox
Seemed a pale and gigantic fungus.
I had a hard stare, accepting

Everything, taking nothing,
As though the rolled-up future might stink
As loud as stood the sick moment
The shutter clicked. Though I was wrong,
Still, as the loveliest feelings

Must soon find words, and these, yes,
Displace them, so I am not wrong
In calling this comic version of myself
The true one. For as change is horror,
Virtue is really stubbornness

And only in the light of lost words
Can we imagine our rewards.⁸⁹

“The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers” draws attention to many of the ideas Ashbery became concerned with later in his career: what to do with the image of himself, the question of what to do with time, the problem of what to do with feeling and words—however, the poem rests heavily on visual description mediated by a stable poetic-self. The focal point is built in a fairly straightforward way: the speaker describes what is there, and moves into the moment of thought and reflection, before coming to a conclusion. The poem reflects a conscious attention to the way things happen and how events occur in time. Even though the previous two parts are not focused on the speaker’s “small self” directly, the lines maintain a linear syntax. As the speaker talks about how “feelings / Must soon find words”, a dichotomy opens up between a reality and an imagined, or phantasmic world but the two seem to remain separate and I wonder if this distinction plays into what M.H. Abrams calls “the greater Romantic Lyric” where:

89. John Ashbery, *Selected Poems*. Penguin Books, 1985, 13.

a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech. . . .The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect of change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. . . .Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.⁹⁰

“The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers” seems to take on what Abrams describes as the greater Romantic lyric in that the speaker articulates a localized setting that moves into a form of meditation where the image of the external prompts an inner process of “memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling.” There is a cyclical process that happens to the poem (“Yet I cannot escape”)⁹¹ which “rounds upon itself to end where it began,” though this beginning is met by the a new experience for the speaker. However, an emphasis is given to description as an ordering force that makes sense of what is happening. There is a stark contrast in the speaker’s imagination to that of reality; take for example “The Instruction Manual”:

As I sit looking out of a window of the building
I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses
of new metal.
I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an
inner peace,
And envy them—they are so far away from me!
Not one of them has to worry about getting out this manual on
schedule.
And, as my way is, I begin to dream, resting my elbows on the desk
and leaning out of the window a little,
Of dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers!
City I wanted most to see, and most did not see, in Mexico!⁹²

I’ve always felt Stevens someplace within the undercurrent of this poem—the speaker in a reality met by the imagination, both dependent on one another to create the speaker’s own individual reality based off of snippets of experience, isolated facts, and subjective meaning. But there is a sense of realism where the movement from reality to the imagination is mediated through the

90. M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism*, New York: Norton, 1984, 77.

91. Ashbery, *Selected Poems*, 13.

92. *Ibid.*, 5.

phrase “I begin to dream” which paints the city of Guadalajara as a fantasy world since the speaker “did not see” it in Mexico; there is an articulated separation between the two realms of reality and imagination, imposing a limitation since this in-between space cannot be fully merged. In articulating that the dream is entirely made up—that is an individual reality of the speaker—the language appears to work in retrospect as the speaker attempts to capture the experience of a dream, or of the imagination as it occurs, instead of embodying the transitive language that holds a stronger affinity to the feeling of day-dreaming. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to say that the impulse to enter a daydream from reality is *untrue* but what arises is a particular mood where a tone is reached; a timbre specified.

THE TRANSITION FROM *Some Trees* to *The Tennis Court Oath* is radical, not only in the process and presentation of writing but also from my position as a reader. Mark Ford writes in *Polarities: A Study of John Ashbery's "The Tennis Court Oath"* that “the oppositional nature of so much of the poetry in *The Tennis Court Oath*, its foregrounding of the dual and the discontinuous, might be seen as an attempt to escape the influence of Wallace Stevens, who is so pervasive a presence in *Some Trees*”⁹³ and I am inclined to agree. While certain poems from Ashbery’s first collection *Some Trees* aims at organizing a central argument as a way of arranging the relationship between imagination and reality, *The Tennis Court Oath* does not provide this construction but rather unfolds through generative fragmentation. In the original dust-jacket to *The Tennis Court Oath*, which Ashbery did not intend to publish, he said that “his goal was to reach ‘a greater, more complete kind of realism;’ and subsequently, that the

93. Ford, *Polarities: A Study of John Ashbery's "The Tennis Court Oath,"* 52.

‘polyphony’ of his poetry is ‘a means toward greater naturalism’⁹⁴—that the poets work ‘is like that Penelope ripping up her web into a vari-colored head that tells the story more accurately than the picture did.’⁹⁵ An emphasis is given to Penelope’s process where instead of completing her shroud, she weaves and un-weaves it to prolong, or suspend, the passing of time. Though Penelope’s unweaving is not a form of destruction because “once you’ve destroyed art you’ve actually created it. It just has to be changed and chopped up a bit to take on a new beauty.”⁹⁶ I think that *The Tennis Court Oath* reveals a mode of fragmentation that constructs a reality where things order themselves as they happen, both consciously and internally, unconsciously and externally.

I keep returning to the title poem from *The Tennis Court Oath* searching for a way to enter its language and each time it resists my reading—I would rather sweep it aside but it has become personal after my many attempts. “The Tennis Court Oath” subverts my expectations for the rest of the collection and emphasizes a divided poetic-self. Lauterbach writes that she “once heard John Ashbery remark: ‘I am John. Ashbery writes the poems,’”⁹⁷ and while this remark appears whimsical it brings out an important issue: the “I” becomes signified in its relationship to the language contextualizing it. The same interplay of language can be applied to his use of expressions whose signified meaning shifts along a paradigm of continuous revision. I’ve included the entirety of “The Tennis Court Oath”:

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

94. James Longenbach references a quote from “Craft Interview,” 124.

95. James Longenbach, “Ashbery and the Individual Talent,” 113. & Longenbach references second quote from “In the American Grain,” 4.

96. Ashbery, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford*, 44.

97. Ann Lauterbach, *The Given and the Chosen*, (Richmond, Calif: Omnidawn Pub, 2011), 22.

there is a terrible breath in the way all of this
 You were not elected president, yet won the race
 All the way through the 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

the water beetle head
 why of course reflecting all
 then you redid you were breathing
 I thought going down to mail this
 of the kettle you jabbered as easily in the yard
 you come through but
 are incomparable the lovely tent
 mystery you don't want surrounded the real
 you dance
 in the spring there was clouds

The mulatress approached in the hall—the
 lettering easily visible along the edge of the *Times*
 in a moment the bell would ring but there was time
 for the carnation laughed here are a couple of “other”

to one in yon house

The doctor and Philip had come over the road
 Turning in toward the corner of the wall his hat on
 reading it carelessly as if to tell you your fears were justified
 the blood shifting you know those walls
 wind off the earth had made him shrink
 undeniably an oboe now the young
 were there there was candy
 to decide the sharp edge of the garment
 like a particular cry not intervening called the dog “he’s coming! he’s
 coming” with an emotion felt it sink into peace

there was no turning back but the end was in sight
 he chose this moment to ask her in detail about her family and the others
 The person. pleaded—“have more of these
 not stripes on the tunic—or the porch chairs
 will teach you about men—what it means”
 to be one in a million pink stripe
 and now could go away the three approached the doghouse
 the reef. Your daughter’s
 dream of my son understand prejudice
 darkness in the hole
 the patient finished
 They could all go home now the hole was dark
 lilacs blowing across his face glad he brought you⁹⁸

98. Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath*. Middletown, 11.

“The Tennis Court Oath” is a poem in motion, continuously renewing itself by breaking off into a series of fragmented possibilities. Not only does the language shift through what seems like different moments in time (“to one in yon house”) but the poem constantly revises its position towards inclusivity; how language might be included and to what scale. However, one component that holds the verse together beyond a series of associations (its internal glue) is the different pronouns as they relate to time. At first, due to the poem’s fragmented lines and initial dichotomy between “you” and “I,” the speaker appears to be addressing the poetic-self to an other figure. This “I” to “you” form resembles the lyric that is grounded in the speaker’s relation to descriptive imagery, as following the external observation of “the face studiously bloodied / heaven blotted region” transitions to the internalized response of “I worry.” However, as the pronouns appear, they are modified by the syntactic tense. The first line begins from the speaker referencing a past event with “What had you been thinking about”, positioning the language in retrospect before moving to “I go on loving you like water” and shifts to the present. The first verse syntactically places “you” in the past tense while “I” in the present. While the pronouns at first remain in their own specific tenses, the verse fluctuates between temporal spaces with each line—adding to the disorienting collage-like continuity of the speaker’s voice.

In shifting between temporal spaces within the syntax that modify the pronouns, the speaker works with given information that undergoes renewal and transfigurations without mediating the transfiguration of information into meaning. “The Tennis Court Oath” shifts between the past, present, and future, compressing the sequence of events into a space where things can occur simultaneously. I believe that experiences are very often not a singular thing but a plurality of events that surge towards a center as it moves through time. While experiences

occur in a temporal continuum, they only fulfilled when they are received through a subjective consciousness. Time in experience is no longer linear. Angus Fletcher describes this phenomenon in Ashbery as “reflex delay”:

The reason for the reflex delay is that he is in fact representing the real character of a so-called ‘simultaneous’ perception of events that in material truth appear one after another. If you represent such a sequence, you can only do it by introducing a slight sequential delay, which may be disconcerting, but is in fact accurate. It is as if each event in an Ashbery poem, like the cathedral organ tone, exists *simultaneously* at two different moments on the temporal continuum.⁹⁹

“Reflex delay,” or the simultaneous layering of events that occur in the “temporal continuum” as the line of the poem, collects parts of “The Tennis Court Oath” into a fluid yet paradoxical whole. This paradox is that even though the poem happens sequentially, the way expressions are used by the different pronouns find themselves echoing throughout the poem-space. This can be seen with the two phrases: “horse strains fatigued I guess . . . the calls . . .” and “like a particular cry not intervening called the dog ‘he’s coming! he’s / coming’”. While the two phrases occur in different contexts, there is a strange delay between what happens and while the two phrases might not be related, there is a way in which the latter recalls the first. Even though the speaker changes, the two phrases appear to occur simultaneously in time even when one occurs before the other. As a result, the amassed pieces of each line begin to morph into one another based on time signifiers (or signatures) and as events palimpsest the external and internal descriptions lose their distinctions.

As the pronouns are modified by temporal shifts in the syntax, “reflex delay”¹⁰⁰ effects pronouns as well. Due to the reverberation of time, distinctions between pronouns begin to form a palimpsest of simultaneous signifiers referring to the same signified body. In other words,

99. Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, 141.

100. *Ibid.*, 141.

“you” and “I” in “The Tennis Court Oath” simultaneously signify the self and the other, reflecting and refracting off of one another through the course of temporal perspectives. In this case, the speaker does not hold a singular voice, but is dispersed through the poem’s various pronouns who take part in an inter-textual conversation, both speaking and listening.

MANY OF THE POEMS collected in *Tennis Court Oath* were “experiments” that Ashbery “thought would perhaps lead to something” though he “didn’t really intend them to be finished poems.”¹⁰¹ But Ashbery emphasizes the way in which these poems happen, and while they embody a looser central argument or concept that might be present in later poems, the collection reconsiders, and to that extent, reconciles his own personal relationship with language. This relationship exhibits the way in which the poetic-self handles language, showing an interest in how and where expressions take place. I think that the pronouns in “The Tennis Court Oath,” along with Ashbery’s later work, perform as expressions do, following a “rhythm, its way of happening”¹⁰² as expressions occur in the liminal-space between self and other, speaker and listener, “you” and “I.” Pronouns are stripped from the signified to elevate the importance of ephemera in the course of an event. Pronouns become signs for the speaker to express through and around, opening up a multifaceted field of possibilities. Taken in this way, I view *The Tennis Court Oath* as a transitory poetic exercise that helped crystalize Ashbery’s technique of working through time, space, and the exchange between pronouns and expressions in his later work.

That is, Ashbery’s poetry reflects a curiosity about the relationship between language and subjectivity to the extent that language is able to become a part of the subjective self. Mark Ford

101. Ashbery, *Jacket # 2* interview.

102. Ashbery, “The Impossible,” 250.

writes in *Polarities: A Study of John Ashbery's "The Tennis Court Oath"* that the collection “exhibit a far less stable relationship between the poetic self and the world outside to which it is trying to relate. Many of these [poems] seem to fluctuate dramatically between an unaccommodating solipsism and a sense of helpless dispersal, unable to discover a middle ground between these two absolute opposites.”¹⁰³ This polarity between the “poetic self and the world outside” is representative of a readership while at the same time, centered around a vast subjectivity from the speakers. However, the “poetic self” of *The Tennis Court Oath* dwells precisely in this “middle-ground” where things do not have to be “absolute opposites,” simply because there is not a conversation concerning a stable poetic-self. The speaker’s musicality remains but the anxiety of maintaining a stable center is removed so that the poems focus on the exchange of expressions between pronouns. Ashbery’s “How Much Longer Will I Be Able To Inhabit The Divine Sepulcher . . .” is a poem that exemplifies the “poetic-self” not as a singular voice, but a field of expressions in motion:

How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher
Of life, my great love? Do dolphins plunge bottom ward
To find the light? Or is it rock
That is searched? Unrelentingly? Huh. And if some day.¹⁰⁴

The speaker begins with the pronoun “I”¹⁰⁵, working through a monologue that seems to express an anxiety of the “poetic-self”¹⁰⁶ in relation to the outside world. The possessive “my” first appears to relate to an other but instead applies to “life”, the “divine sepulcher”, as a space that both presents a limitation and a possibility where what is said is constrained by what it refers to. The poem begins from a topsy-turvy focal point where time and space are disoriented by logical

103. Ford, *Polarities: A Study of John Ashbery's "The Tennis Court Oath,"* 44.

104. Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath*, 25.

105. *Ibid.*, 25.

106. Ford, *Polarities: A Study of John Ashbery's "The Tennis Court Oath,"* 44.

contradictions but this is the fun of it, the messiness of language that is still affective and self-reflexive. In this first verse, the speaker maintains a distinct voice through the series of questions

but soon moves into a position between the “poetic-self and the world outside”:

Shaking hands in front of the crashing of the waves
That gives our words lonesomeness, and make these flabby hands seem
ours—
Hands that are always writing things
On mirrors for people to see later—¹⁰⁷

There are always “mirrors” and a sense that what is happening in the poem is refracted upon the actors within it. The exchange of “Shaking hands” opens up a space where communication travels from one point to another, highlighting the action rather than the statement. The exchange “gives our words lonesomeness” as if to say that language functions independently from its source when in transit, while at the same time making “these flabby hands seem ours”, signifying language’s mirage of reflecting the self. That is to say, exchanges of expressions are “always writing things”, happening between person and pronoun, and it is in reflection or “On mirrors” that the pronouns becomes defined, though independent from language. The result of this transitive interaction is that the poetic-self is left out of the conversation, yet includes whatever might be floating through the air.

There is an explicit distinction between words and actions, where words take up a life of their own regardless of their origin:

Meanwhile what am I doing to do?
I am growing up again, in school, the crisis will be very soon.
And you twist the darkness in your fingers, you
Who are slightly older . . .

Who are you, anyway?
And it is the color of sand,
The darkness, as it sifts through your hand
Because what does anything mean,

107. *Ibid.*, 26.

The ivy and the sand? The boat
 Pulled up on the shore? Am I wonder,
 Strategically, and in the light
 Of the long sepulcher that hid death and hides me?¹⁰⁸

Information becomes expressions in transition between pronouns. Instead of focusing on the poetic-self, the speaker is interested in the space between pronouns where the self and the other do not matter as much as the exchange that takes place. The speaker says “The darkness, as it sifts through your hand / Because what does anything mean,” and I am reminded of Emerson: “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them step through our fingers then when we clutch hardest.”¹⁰⁹ The speaker asks “Am I wonder,” placing the phenomenon of the “I” within language as a driving force of both curiosity and itself a linguistic oddity that collects around its frame—“I” is a vessel that manifests through “wonder.” In this way, pronouns modify language just as words are defined by the proximity of other words. Just as I move through my day without a defined idea of what meaning it may have for me, Ashbery’s poetry performs similarly.

THE “I” DOES not arrange, it collects as a center of curiosity in time. As an orientation sign, “I” is the receiving end of experience that makes possible the simultaneity of events—it becomes known through fragmentation. The most fragmented poem included in *The Tennis Court Oath* is “Europe”: a series of 111 marked sections, each pulling fragments of language from magazines and from a novel titled *Beryl of the Biplane* by William Le Queux. Ashbery recounts: “I remember writing it in a state of confusion about what I wanted to do. I would sit down and over pages without really knowing what I had written. . . .I’d get American magazines

108. *Ibid.*, 27.

109. Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, 473.

incoherence is *not* arbitrary or contingent; it is essential to the poem's embodiment of the inherently disorganized nature of experience: this is the potential danger with an aesthetic of embodiment rather than description."¹¹³ While the poem resists substantive language, "Europe" functions in a way where the relationship between poetic-self to expression is subverted through the speaker's engagement with pre-fabricated language. By pairing expressions from multiple sources with generated writing, the speaker dissolves into expression. And yet what is so extraordinary about "Europe" is the way it embodies a plurality of voices, an exercise in listening, which migrates through each section and alters what has come before. While "Europe" is an arranged poem, its language seems to just occur without striving to web together a sense of linearity or unity. However, by placing them into one body of work, the language renews itself, perhaps even finding a motion in itself without having to move against anything. I think that in many ways, Ashbery's own "all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars"¹¹⁴ is representative, but not for the individual reader or poetic-self, but for the way language works as it moves between bodies.

ASHBERY SAID THAT he "was trying to develop a different kind of writing than I'd done in *Some Trees*."¹¹⁵ This shift is most evident in the poem "They Dream Only of America" which engages a kind of language that converges the distinct realms of reality and imagination, acting as though it belonged to a murder mystery. I am reminded of Stein who writes:

Anybody can be interested in a story of a crime because no matter how often the witnesses tell the same story the insistence is different. That is what makes life that the

113. James Longenbach, "Ashbery and the Individual Talent," *American Literary History* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 103–27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/9.1.103>, 113.

114. Ashbery, "The Impossible," 250-251.

115. Ashbery, *John Ashbery in conversation with Mark Ford*, 44.

insistence is different, no matter how often you tell the same story if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different. It has to be, anybody can know that.¹¹⁶

No matter how many times I read the poem, the insistence is different and it seems to be fueled further only through the repetition of re-reading. The poem evades a solid subject matter, calling into question the very signs it uses while emphatically shifting between what seems to be multiple perspectives revolving around an unidentified protagonist:

They dream only of America
To be lost among the thirteen million pillars of grass:
“This honey is delicious
Though it burns the throat.”

And hiding from darkness in barns
They can be grownups now
And the murderer’s ash tray is more easily—
The lake a lilac cube.

He holds a key in his right hand.
“Please,” he asked willingly.
He is thirty years old.
That was before

We could drive hundreds of miles
At night through dandelions.
When his headache grew worse we
Stopped at a wire filling station.

Now he cared only about signs.
Was the cigar a sign?
And what about the key?
He went slowly into the bedroom.

“I would not have broken my leg if I had not fallen
Against the living room table. What is it to be back
Beside the bed? There is nothing to do
For our liberation, except wait in the horror of it.

And I am lost without you.”¹¹⁷

While Ashbery moved into an indeterminate signified space, “Now he cared only about signs. / Was the cigar a sign? / And what about the key?”, he does not dwell in this uncertainty between

116. Stein, *Lectures in America*, 167.

117. Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath*, 13.

signified and signifier too long before moving back to a tangible description of transition—“He went slowly into the bedroom.” This poem, along with the whole of *The Tennis Court Oath*, plays into the crime story where I begin searching for clues only to find that more signs are called into question. But suspense in this regard works as *to suspend*, for *The Tennis Court Oath* denies the reader from solving the mystery and continuously insists in itself as it folds and unfolds. “They Dream Only of America” seems aware of this: “There is nothing to do / For `our liberation, except wait in the horror of it” and it always seems that the key to the collection’s mystery is right around the corner. Through elaboration in time, the tissues of reality are met by an imagination “And the murderer’s ash tray is more easily— / The lake a lilac cube” and experience becomes simultaneous: senses are combined with colors, associations, occupying a dream logic.

Like Roussel, the poems from *The Tennis Court Oath* seem to ask of me to join in on the continuous journey of curiosity towards all things, where secrets that seem imminent vanish before my eyes, and where knowledge is undermined by a truth found in the fictive. *The Tennis Court Oath* only seems to ask that I listen because through each reading its words renew, never stating the same thing twice.

Chapter Three: A Poetics as Experience



Alexander Zondervan, *A Ruddy Belt*, Collage, A4, 2019.

The difficulty with that is
 I no longer have any metaphysical reasons
 For doing the things I do.
 Night formulates, the rest is up to the scribes and the
 eunuchs.¹¹⁸

IF THERE IS a subject for this project, it might be the reconfiguration of how I read. I chose to write about Ashbery because I felt his poems resisted interpretation at the outset and yet I still found pleasure in them. Instead of trying to locate this pleasure through a hermeneutics, a metaphysics, a philosophy, or a framework did not matter so much as I wanted to write in conversation with Ashbery's poetry. That is not to say that I am no longer interested in the analytical but I am not attempting to argue towards anything, nor defend anyone from anything—aside from invoking that Ashbery and the scope of his world should be read. The *poetics as experience* that I have for so long attempted to make sense of is the process with which I become conscious of transitioning attention while reading and writing. It is through these transitions of attention, which occur through time, that I recognize that something has happened: that I have undergone an experience. The emphasis is positioned upon the poem's reading rather than the poem's meaning—words can be mined or listened to. I am now more interested in the latter.

I began reading Ashbery's collection *As We Know*, published in 1979, on a warm day in February—already an unexpected event for the time of year. The collection is published in an elongated book, a form that invites reproductions of art and descriptions. The first part of the book is given to Ashbery's long poem, "Litany," which runs along the horizontal pages in two columns. Each column is a voice and as mentioned in the author's note, both voices "are meant to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues."¹¹⁹ As I began reading each column,

118. Ashbery, *As We Know*, 91.

119. *Ibid.*, 2.

cycling between the ways in which the language caught my attention, the poem's duration extended and each monologue took upon itself its own characteristics, a way in which the poetic-self became through the course of becoming.

The dust blows in.
The disturbance is
Nonverbal communication:
Meaningless syllables that
Have a music of their own,
The music of sex, or any
Nameless event, something
That can only be taken as
Itself.

*The fences are barrel staves
Surrounding, encroaching on
The pattern of the city,
The formula that once made sense to
A few of us until it became
The end.*

*The magic has left the
Drawing finally.
They blow around the rest—tumbleweed
In a small western ghost town
That sometimes hits and sometimes misses.*¹²⁰

Unlike *The Tennis Court Oath*, “Litany” presents a poetic-self that is visually split and whose monologues become a similar model for the kind of musicality present elsewhere in Ashbery’s poetry. However, in this case, they are split apart and the conversation happening between the two is only in the course of being heard (or in my case, through the course of reading). And two modes of expressing a similar concern arise from the two voices where the left carries a greater constative voice, one that prods around an attempt to express those “Nameless events” while the voice on the right is less direct with a performative mode of expression working with the visual though denoting the effect as though through allegory as when “The magic has left the / Drawing finally.” Next to one another, the two voices are in constant motion, but what I think is striking is the way that each voice works in an echo-chamber of isolation, a study, and yet begin to overlap when they are read aloud—the reading itself becomes an audible event where words blend in and out from one another as though a hybrid between music and

120. *Ibid.*, 4.

spoken language. A funny thing was happening as I read where the voices began to speak into one another—where the syntax from one would merge into the other as though invoking a third and absent monologue. This third monologue is an overtone from the sounds of words as they overlap one another.

There is a recording of “Litany” from 1980 where Ashbery and Lauterbach read the two monologues simultaneously. Listening to this recording, the words become an ocean of rhythm and textures, a droning hum where certain transient words appear as quickly as they vanish. This is the third monologue, not the words themselves as they are understood, but the ensemble of words as they are heard. Lauterbach recounts this time she had read “Litany” in her essay “What We Know as We Know It: Reading ‘Litany’ with J.A.,” an essay which I read shortly after beginning my own journey into Ashbery’s poetry. She expresses the oddity of the book, the difficulty of synchronizing her own reading with Ashbery’s mellow and steady recitation. She writes that the only way she could read her monologue was by listening to Ashbery’s recording through headphones in isolation: “somehow, *hearing* the First Voice made it possible for me to play, or be, the Second.”¹²¹

There is something overwhelming about hearing the poem’s two voices simultaneously; but its duration and the very nature of the monologues do not necessarily make the poem stuffy as I had first imagined, but rather unexpectedly starts out into a world of its own, one where so much happens. Through all this happening, each voice both moves in syncopation (“a watch / That is always too slow or too fast”)¹²² that animates both a world and a poetic-self that dynamically reverberates between one another, at times one becoming more present while the

121. Lauterbach, “What We Know as We Know It: Reading ‘Litany’ with J.A.”

122. Ashbery, *As We Know*, 67.

other drifts away; vice-versa. And through this poem I came to realize that what I had been looking for was beneath my nose the entire time: Ashbery's difficulty, the displacement between what is said and how it happens, is carried through the very vein of negotiating inclusion through absence. That is, it is not about imagining possibilities or of building a whole new imagined world, but of constructing experience through the various particulars that are known as they happen—entwined with the already numerous.

*You
Pick up certain things here, where
You need them, and
Do without the others for the moment,
Essential though they may be.
Every collection is as notable for its gaps
As for what's there. The wisest among us
Collect gaps, knowing it's the only way
To realize a complete collection
Than one's neighbors.¹²³*

“Litany” is filled with gaps, silence, absence, and darkness—it is a poem that recognizes itself through the very thing that it cannot express, those unnamable and magic events which might escape once it has been explained. And this is what gets at the heart of Ashbery: his poems are known through their experience where instead of making meaning after I read, meaning is constructed during its moments. “Litany” as a poem is dependent on the passing of time: reading its dual columns make it seem as though it is already in dialogue and is dependent on time, but this is time in the musical sense—to *stay in time*. It can be described tacitly by its measures, the physical sense of moving through sound and with sound. It calls upon us to become attentive towards the wandering consciousness that is present when we read, to notice the transitive quality of listening.

123. *Ibid.*, 19.

If Ashbery's poetry is known as it happens while its central life is driven by an already present life, the poem moves around my own self-reflexivity. The fleeting quality in Ashbery's work, especially in "Litany," which draws so close to a religious universe and whose title references a form of prayer in church, avoids articulating experience as it becomes known after-the-fact. That is, Ashbery's language is not as ephemeral as it might seem because it does not attempt to build any scaffolding to sustain itself once it has ended—remaining in-between impulse and over-tone where language moves in its stillness. And now I hear Lauterbach's comment which I had initially glossed over in a brand new light:

It has long been my contention, or suspicion, or just unverified hunch, that John Ashbery (like Gertrude Stein) has had some relation to William James and American pragmatism. Ashbery's reluctance to make any statement or declaration that does not appear to arrive and disappear on the heels of his miraculous syntax seems to me evidence of the kind of conceptual relativity that James first enunciated in the early years of the twentieth century. Ashbery's joyous investment in a present reality as being inimical to what James called "copying" is further evidence: Ashberian poetics insists on the multi-dimensionality of time-space duration, as opposed to either pictorial mimesis or the cause-and-effect order of conventional, developmental, narration: reality, for Ashbery, has neither linearity nor *replica*. Connections among thinking and feeling, knowing and doing are always in flux.¹²⁴

That Ashbery "has had some relation" to the tradition of American pragmatism seems undoubtable. As opposed to belonging to or continuing with this tradition, Lauterbach's remark acknowledges the space that Ashbery has made for himself while calling attention to his proximity to pragmatism. For Ashbery, reality is not made in expressing a poetic-self, nor does it occur in the interplay between consciousness and language, imagination and reality. I get the sense that reality for Ashbery is a practice in listening to the world. And to read Ashbery is to then be positioned in a space someplace outside of himself or a poetic-self, while a subject moves around a speaker's focal point. Maybe it is a paradox, but if it is it's at least a positive and

124. Lauterbach, "What We Know as We Know It: Reading 'Litany' with J.A."

pleasant one—like sitting with someone and listening to a concert, together we undergo an offset but singular encounter of the same phenomena, though the experience divides into two distinct moments of meaning. Ashbery’s poetry is like sitting there with someone, asking “How can I explain?”¹²⁵:

No matter how raffish
 The new clients moving slowly along,
 Taking in the sights, placing bets,
 There comes a time when the moment
 Is full of, knows only itself.
 Like a moment when a tree
 Is seen to tower above everything else,
 To know itself and to know everything else
 As well, but only in terms of itself
 Without knowing or having a clear concept
 Of itself. This is a moment
 Of fast growing, of compounding myths
 As fast as they can be thrown off,
 Trampled under, forgotten. The moment
 Not made of itself or any other
 Substance we know of, reflecting
 Only itself. Then there are two moments,
 How can I explain?¹²⁶

“Litany” unfurls through the course of similes, repeating words, and exchanges between the internal and external exchange of knowing and becomes not an explanation but further elaboration which, paradoxically, comes closer to the what the speaker attempts to convey: “Tell me / What is on your mind, and do not explain it away.”¹²⁷ *Do not explain it away.*

I DROVE UP to Hudson, located along the west border of Columbia County in New York State, with Luke this past weekend. We had planned spend the day at thrift stores along the main street, getting some work done (he needed to write three poems by Thursday and I hoped to

125. Ashbery, *As We Know*, 18.

126. *Ibid.*, 18.

127. *Ibid.*, 42.

revise some of this writing), and also visiting Ashbery's house that he purchased in 1978. We spent an hour trying to find Ashbery's Hudson home, walking to the water-front before searching nearby the churches that were rumored to accompany his house. After nearly two hours we found his home in a square just a block or two parallel from the main street. The house is boxy and three stories high, has a stone staircase that leads to a circular stone veranda with two columns on either side. It has large wooden doors and a stone facade. I wondered if anyone still lives there. Across the square from his house is a church and down the street, another. Luke and I went to the one furthest from his house—a grey stone Roman Catholic church which I doubt Ashbery frequented. I imagined that he would have preferred the other reddish one with a bell tower.

It was Sunday, service had ended and most people seemed to be either inside or headed someplace inside but it was a beautiful day—the warmest day of April yet. Inside the church it smelled of oak and honey, containing us among the many small red candles. I wondered why the statues were covered in royal-purple cloaks as we walked to the front of the hall. We sat down and for some reason I decided to play back a section of “Litany,” though it seemed silly to do then as it does now, but nevertheless we listened. I heard Ashbery's voice alongside Lauterbach's, but I *really* couldn't hear what they said or how loud they were speaking. Their voices were pulled up into the high arches, dissipating through the space at a rate that seemed faster than sound—how could that be? The feeling that their voices gave, perhaps intensified by the church's acoustics, was beautiful. *How can I explain?*

It all seemed perfectly lucid: being in that church, the feelings distinct and intimate as it happened. But my attention reverberated between the audio, the smell, the shadows and warmth, Luke who flipped through a book of hymns, the sound of wood breathing, light through

windows, purple, “*tones never totally audible.*” This was the rhythm of life as it happened; my attention in transition between transients—the embarrassment of the ritual, uneasy by the trespass, excitement in the moment of life. Though I wasn’t sure whether the spaces we moved through were in any way related to Ashbery, its proximity felt somehow enough to become a reality of my own, a dream whose tale was “*so magnificent in the telling*” just as it happened.

We left the church and walked to the other whose architecture reminded me of a church I lived by briefly in Berlin. However, its doors were locked, so going around back we ran into one of its members who directed us to a small garden around the corner. Through a heavy steel gate and beneath a wooden cross was a little stone tile with Ashbery’s name on it. I remember another with the name “Gertrude” adjacent to his among a handful of others tiles in the same small alcove. Luke asked me if I thought Ashbery would like it if he knew that his world would be visited by young admirers. I’d like to hope so.

My visit to Ashbery’s home in Hudson occurred in a moment of disorientation—being in a fog from hunger, tired of writing, feeling burnt out—, I had not written a poem that I felt glad about for weeks. That is to say, the temporal signposts vanished and it was a pilgrimage somewhere between the past and the future, though not necessarily in the present.

The final two voices of “Litany” conclude the poem:

Why keep on seeding the chairs
 When the future is night and no one knows what
 He wants? It would probably be best though
 To hang on to these words if only
 For the rhyme. Little enough,
 But later on, at the summit, it won't
 Matter so much that they fled like arrows

*I've written them several times but
 Can't straighten it out—would you
 Try?*¹²⁸

128. *Ibid.*, 68.

From the taut string of a restrained
 Consciousness, only that they mattered.
 For the present, our not-knowing
 Delights them. Probably they wont be devoured
 By the lions, like the others, but be released
 After a certain time. Meanwhile, keep
 Careful count of the rows of windows overlooking
 The deep blue sky behind the factory: we'll need them.

Not only do the two monologues occur simultaneously, they also highlight the temporal flux that Ashbery had grasped ever since *The Tennis Court Oath*. Time is the form through which experience is received, though not necessarily linear as he had already shown:

In these final fifteen lines, there are five temporal signs: *the future is night, but later on, for the present, after a certain time, meanwhile*. These unsteady, disorienting pointers or skips, so typical of Ashbery, rupture narrative as a condition of chronological cause and effect, as we learn to listen to a vibratory consciousness that forfeits one form of knowing for another. It is, I think, Ashbery's great gift, to have taught us to listen for the multiplicity, the plurality, of experience: *as we know*. As William James put it, "for every part, tho it may not be in actual or immediate connexion, is nevertheless in some possible or mediated connexion, with every other part, however remote, through the fact that each part hangs together with its very next neighbors in inextricable interfusion."¹²⁹ Reading "Litany" with John Ashbery is just that: an *inextricable interfusion*. Like singing along with life.¹³⁰

The ideas of time and sound are dependent on the receiver, as Lauterbach writes that reading "Litany" is "like singing along with life," there is an aspect of participation in the encounter. To listen, or to sing along, is to direct the reading process into an active position—to listen actively and respond not through dialogue, but through song: as an ensemble. There is musicality present, an ear that writes as an ear would listen and this is what I think is so beautiful about Ashbery. Through his poetry he is both speaking and listening, and we as readers are invited to do the same thing during its reading.

129. Lauterbach cites William James' Lecture VIII from *A Pluralistic Universe*; William James, "A Pluralistic Universe Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy," <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11984/11984-8.txt>, accessed February 8, 2019, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11984/pg11984.html>.

130. Lauterbach, "What We Know as We Know It: Reading 'Litany' with J.A."

IT OCCURS TO me that a sort of foreshadowing for “Litany” might have arrived when Ashbery entered the limelight at the age of 48 with his 1975 poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” This is not to say that one caused the other, but the attention that Ashbery brings to navigating two simultaneous monologues seems to be present in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” The poem’s germ began with a cheap book he found in Vienna containing reproductions of the Italian masters and whose cover was Parmigianino’s *Self-Portrait*. Ashbery says that “I corrected it [“Self-Portrait. . . .”] much more than I normally do, though they were all minor corrections. I’m still not sure I like the genre it seems to occupy—that of a poem about a work of art. I can’t think of any examples of this genre I really like. Maybe Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’.”¹³¹ I took some notes during my first reading of the poem from nearly a year ago:

-Porter said that “the truest order is what you already find there, or that will be given if you don’t try for it. When you arrange, you fail.” That this copying was “enough for his purpose.”¹³²

-Like a constellation, the different components find an order of their own in the composition and instead of arranging how it should be seen, it is a choice of including what is already present.

-A moment of forgetting that the reflection in the painting is not one’s own, then remembering.

I am glad that I mention Fairfield Porter in my notes, his paintings are exciting and alive and I feel they are in affinity with Ashbery’s poetry (if the visual could be related to language). Porter painted a portrait of Ashbery in 1952 where Ashbery sits slouching on a couch, his face slumped into his hand. He is young, surrounded by shades of beige, and full of life though the image begins to escape its inviting lull where the ordinary appears strange, to then return familiar again.

131. Ashbery, *John Ashbery in conversation with Mark Ford*, 57.

132. I believe that this quote is from “Respect For Things As They Are” by John Ashbery.



Fairfield Porter, *John Ashbery (Argyle Socks)*, 1952, Oil on canvas, Collection The Flow Chart Foundation, Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

The thing about Porter’s paintings is that they are recognizable until they are not: they appear familiar until objects begin to hover in their depth and shadows, as though time warps through the paint and we are brought into a visual dream reality. This is not a mimetic copy of reality, but I think that Porter presents his own reality through his paintings:

Why be unhappy with this arrangement, since
 Dreams prolong us as they are absorbed?
 Something like living occurs, a movement
 Out of the dream into its codification.¹³³

The portrait of Ashbery is an arrangement already present—the pale blue garment tossed besides him prodding out from the sea of beige. The dream for Ashbery is a part of life, it is the name for a common reality, and its “codification,” the process with which it becomes turned into an

133. Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 73.

individual one. I would like to think that Porter had done a similar thing with his “codification” of what is already there, present in the dream, then codified into the portrait.

Looking at “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” now, the mirror becomes a point of inclusivity, a frame where the whole of what could be is received without being arranged retrospectively. The poem rests in a place of uncertainty, reflecting not only the image of Parmigianino in the mirror, but also containing a more prominent and central poetic-self whose voice begins to intone a duality between the self and how one appears, all at once finds boarder encompassing within the perimeter of the mirror.

I see in this only the chaos
Of your round mirror which organizes everything
Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,
Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing.¹³⁴

The image of Parmigianino at the reflections center is a receptacle to everything around him, much like Steven’s “Anecdote of the Jar” which reconfigures the way the landscape is seen by simply becoming the reference point, or “polestar” from which everything around leans in and remains the same, though how it is seen becomes different. But what is striking is the way that the speaker does not read into the eyes within the mirror as they remain on the surface, which in this instance is enough as they “dream” but do not hide anything further beneath the surface of what is already there: “But your eyes proclaim / That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there / And nothing can exist except what’s there.”¹³⁵

To copy a reality is, indeed, one very important way of agreeing with it, but it is far from being essential. The essential thing is the process of being guided.¹³⁶

“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” begins:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer

134. *Ibid.*, 71.

135. *Ibid.*, 70.

136. James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” 146.

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 from 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.¹³⁷

Since my first reading of Ashbery, I've admired his ability to bring so much that occurs in life into the space of the poem. I think that this is a difficult thing to do without losing a certain musicality that orients the poem and yet, even with the mass of information and knowledge that Ashbery carries from the world into the poem-space, a relatively consistent and recognizable affect is reached. And while Ashbery's poetry might not have a stable poetic-self as it reverberates between the "convex mirror" and "the reflection once removed," his speaker is able to make space for quotes that remain ambiguously between pre-fabricated and generated language.

It becomes easy to want to decipher the lines, even when the language appears most clearly, but Ashbery writes:

The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
 Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
 Has no secret, is small, and it fits
 Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.
 That is the tune but there are no words.
 The words are only speculation
 (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
 They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
 We see only postures of the dream,
 Riders of the motion that swings the face
 Into view under evening skies, with no

137. Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 68.

False disarray as proof of authenticity.
But it is life englobed.¹³⁸

There is nothing hidden in the poem, its secret “is too plain” as it attempts “no / False disarray as proof of authenticity.” Like Porter who painted what he found already arranged, the amalgamation of “Self-Portrait” is not presented in its discursive and wandering pathway to prove anything of authenticity, its one-of-a-kind-ness, which implies the question then of *how did you do it?* The poem “is life englobed” in that it constructs through itself its own reality dependent on the dream—which might be an inverted idea of Stevens construction of reality dependent on imagination. Here, reality is the poem, the dream is a world, its boundaries interwoven to open up a space of life—because life is the experience of both universes, both reality and dream, where the fictive is alive and true. “Life englobed” is an ear that listens and responds with a musicality that has brought together the multi-faceted things we might call experience:

One feels too confined,
Sifting the April sunlight for clues,
In the mere stillness of the ease of its
Parameter. The hand holds no chalk
And 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.¹³⁹

The paradigm moves and the temporal orientation is addressed head on: “whispers out of time.” Ashbery offers so many wonderful phrases that lend a hand into the entry of his poetry, and I think this one is particularly extraordinary for it presents both the inclination to listen and to listen in a non-linear experience of time.

138. *Ibid.*, 69.

139. *Ibid.*, 83.

THERE IS ONE poem that I think foreshadowed the poet's trajectory through and in life: it belongs to the earlier collection *Rivers and Mountains* from 1966. As I see it, the poem is the epitome of the work that Ashbery had completed between 1962 to 1979. I would like to include the full poem here, but it is much too long to quote in its entirety. "The Skaters" begins:

These decibels
 Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound
 Into which being enters, and is apart.
 Their colors on a warm February day
 Make for masses of inertia, and hips
 Prod out of the violet-seeming into a new kind
 Of demand that stumps the absolute because not new
 In the sense of the next one in an infinite series
 But, as it were, pre-existing or pre-seeming in
 Such a way as to contrast funnily with the unexpectedness
 And somehow push us all into perdition.¹⁴⁰

The poem begins with what is not seen—working through sound—which make “for masses of inertia.” The poem is in motion, resting heavily on transitive language that “stumps the absolute” in evading definition. Nearly every reference in the first stanza is working with ephemera, building upon previous lines like a snow-ball effect, and showing interest in the dynamic between the already present, pre-fabricated, “pre-existing or “pre-seeming” and the way those things which are already there surface unexpectedly. The speaker is interested in a very specific kind of *new*, one which does not necessarily alter the pre-existing modes of reality but rather rise through the waves of habit and “infinite series” as suddenly noticed. Perhaps this is the charity of attention where in every instance there is something meaningful, even in the smallest impermanent parts. But that these arrivals, which are unexpected and apart of an already present swarm of minutiae, “push us all into perdition” to say that even the poetic-self and the body are

140. Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 34.

under constant revision and destruction, in continuous renewal. A more accurate word than destruction is the fluxes of transition:

But this is an important aspect of the question
 Which I am not ready to discuss, am not at all ready to,
 This leaving-out business. On it hinges the very importance
 of what's novel
 Or autocratic, or dense or silly. It is as well to call attention
 To it by exaggeration, perhaps. But 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.

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 in question, to be
 denied further out, and again and again like this.
 Hence, neither 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.

Mild effects are the result.¹⁴¹

The “bitter impression of absence” still “involves presence” the speaker says, to which this expression might be taken as the central motif binding the poem together. For not only does the speaker evade definition while at the same time addressing this fact but furthermore, cycles through an amassing source of minutiae with such a velocity that the poem feels to bend back on itself while simultaneously moving forward from a fresh perspective. And this is what the speaker says about attention which, to paraphrase, is not the same as explaining. To call attention to ephemera is to highlight the specific form of *new* which Ashbery is getting at: where calling

141. *Ibid.*, 39.

attention to things already present ascribes meaning through new light. However, explanation would limit what possibilities may come, just as Emerson shown towards definitions, Stein towards the noun, and Roussel towards elaboration. That is, the *new* sets itself up for Ashbery against the final, the absolute, the definition, and similarly, against material newness that replaces what has come before. Lehman writes that “Ashbery’s capacity for egolessness endows him with a sort of negative capability—the ability to empty himself so thoroughly that he can lose himself amid the objects of his attention.”¹⁴² Maybe a better word for this *new* is an outstanding receptivity that welcomes in the world around him.

“The Skaters” likens itself to the “form of falling snow”, calling that a “portion of the subject” as though to intone the description of Roussel’s writing that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. While falling, snowflakes are a series of ever-changing ephemera, until fully crystallized and landing, then melting and beginning again. “The Skaters” seems to mimic this cycle, beginning from sound, moving into a more constative yet reserved voice, and back into the “slightly less / diluted abstract.” As with Emerson’s circles, the poem imagines ways around its own limitations, and like Roussel’s *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, when the speaker appears to explain his process, the writing itself grows more complex. The skaters are not skating at random but form a specific figure on the surface:

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.¹⁴³

142. Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 98.

143. Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 47.

Rules and freedom make up the poem and the figure 8 is at its core, adding a second circle to Emerson's first and, as a result, mirroring its own cyclical motion. The speaker says "Here I am then, continuing / but ever beginning / My perennial voyage, into new memories, new hope and flowers. The way the coasts glide past you."¹⁴⁴ The figure 8, as it rests on the surface, is constantly continuing while at the same time "ever beginning" from paths already followed to the first end. However, the figure envisions the labyrinth without imposing the need for a final end, or for the addition of new and elaborating paths. Ashbery said that "The Skaters" "has very long lines and a general looseness—that's when I began writing my poems on a typewriter. I was writing such long lines I'd forget the end before I got to it. But I can type fast and I found if I composed on the typewriter I could remember the end of the line."¹⁴⁵ I get the sense that there is a certain amount of faith in Ashbery's writing; that wherever the line might go, the speaker has a sense that things might come around full circle. The figure 8 for Ashbery opens up the possibility for paradoxes, contradictions, and imagination. The final line concludes: "The constellations are rising / In perfect order: Taurus, Leo, Gemini."¹⁴⁶ And of course, the other "perfect order" is Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo.

IF THERE IS anything to say about these three poem, the gift that I think Ashbery has given us, it is not located in any line or any term. It is not located in the words, titles, or interplay of time either; it is not found in how a poem comes about to be meaningful to me in my singularity. I think it is something that rests between the words, an excitement found in their

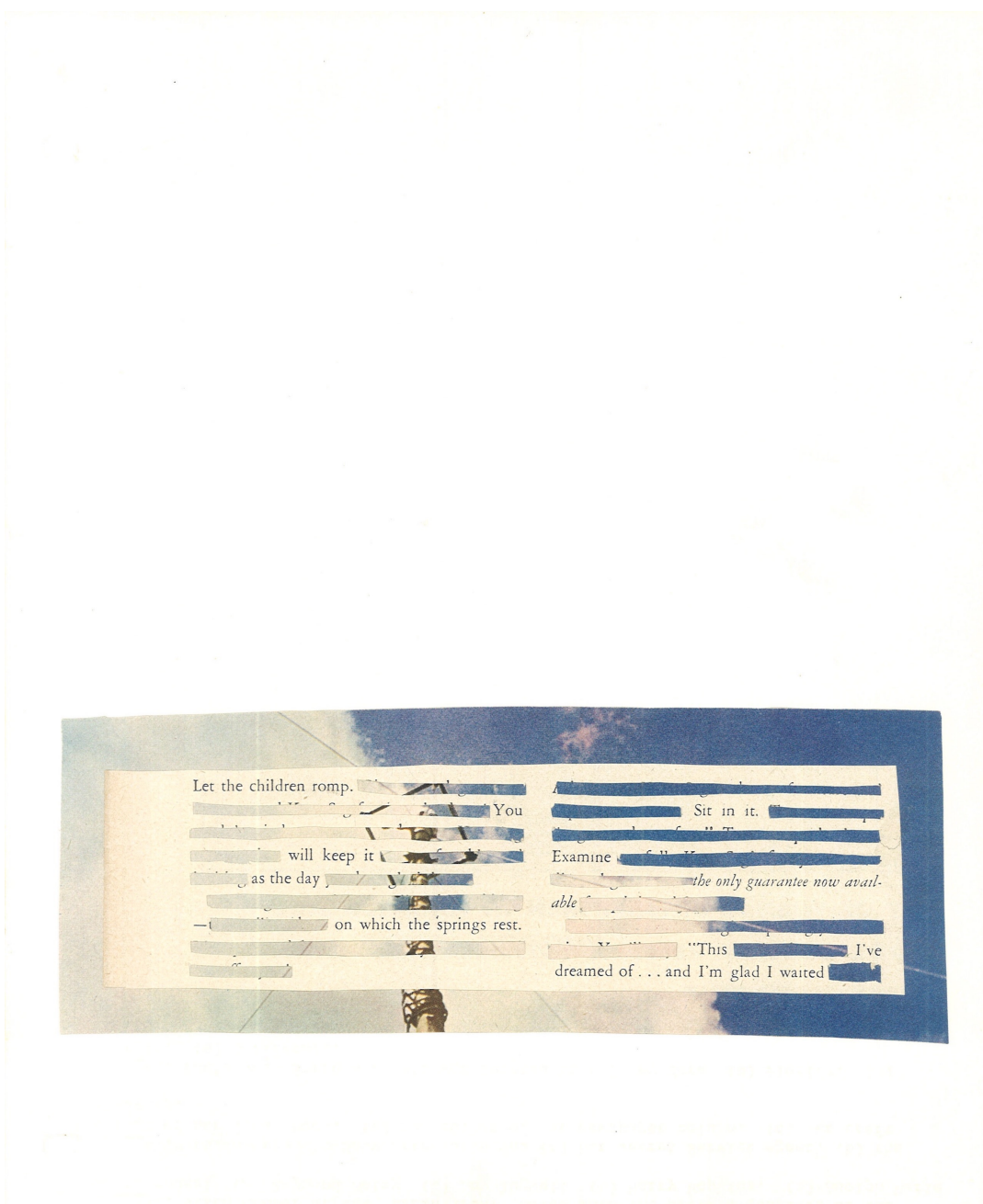
144. *Ibid.*, 44.

145. Ashbery, *John Ashbery in conversation with Mark Ford*, 47.

146. Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 63.

interplay, where a certain musicality and an ensemble of attention becomes the poem. But I do think that Ashbery asks of the reader to listen to the reverberations between the poem and their drifting consciousness, dwelling in the middle-ground. This middle ground is neither completely Ashbery's words or my own consciousness, but a third voice with an invitation.

Conclusion



Alexander Zondervan, *Let the children romp*, Collage, A4, 2019.

experience, v.

2. a. To have experience of; to meet with; to feel, suffer, *undergo*.¹⁴⁷ [my emphasis]

IT IS WEDNESDAY and I am on a train headed to New York City for the evening. I believe that despite the amount of work I have to do before the weekend, it is important to gather any experiences that are presently possible. This past weekend I visited the Bard College senior thesis studio arts show, along with a short senior theatre performance dealing with wrestling, the internet, video games, and time. I have found myself having a difficult time writing lately but after this past weekend, I wrote a poem:

Superchute 3

Scratched blue walls, your peeling face
 bugs
 in the wallpaper,
 flowers in the
 bugs. What an amazing garden
 stuck in a rhythmic
 algorithm
 going nowhere
 from nowhere.
 You would like to outrun
 your source code and knock-out
 and the plastic bodybag is as I imagined.

I would like to think that switching my attention to mediums outside of writing is an essential part in the process of writing. This is a curiosity of language's ability to relate to the world, offered continuously as possible experiences. I think that Ashbery has shown throughout his work that writing and listening are intertwined and that listening is a certain kind of receptivity that welcomes the complex and often staggered points of meaning found through the course of each day. Listening and writing are simultaneously an absence and presence—it is a part of the

147. "experience, v.". OED Online. December 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/66521?rskey=jGHZs6&result=2> (accessed December 06, 2018).

“leaving-out business.”¹⁴⁸ A choice arrives in what becomes included through writing, and with Ashbery, what is included through absence. Too much is baffling, too little is baffling; what is the happy-medium? A middle space, a voice that both speaks and listens: this is what I love most about Ashbery.

Listening is predicated on curiosity. By listening I mean to practice a certain receptivity, an attention directed to sound, music, or voice, as it dissipates through space and interacts with each object. Ashbery strikes me as directing his poetic attention to these motions of sound as they move through time and fold back on itself: I am not given an image, I am given a musicality that brushes against everything as it blossoms both outwards and inwards. Maybe what I mean is that “the subject of Ashbery’s poetry is his consciousness, and what makes it exemplary—to use a word the poet is fond of—is that it is so inclusive of the world beyond his room”¹⁴⁹—this is a vast curiosity that navigates the middle space between the his room and beyond. Roffman writes that “as John listened to Tudor play Cage’s piece for more than forty-five minutes with no apparent break between any of the four movements, he heard sounds change slowly, strangely, deeply: ‘there were banging chords, followed by long periods of silence.’ He was hearing a musical equivalent to the world of his childhood. . . .He had hated that dull world and wished to flee its many pains and constraints, but he also knew best its slow rhythms and wandering moods.”¹⁵⁰ The role of music in Ashbery’s life was central, and he heard Cage’s piece the music moved beyond the room, brushing through time as “wandering moods” move through memory and accumulate at a convex point.

148. John Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 39.

149. Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 107.

150. Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best*, 203.

IN MANY WAYS, I think I entered reading Ashbery with an interest already in American Pragmatism—there are many links between the work that Emerson, James, Stein, and Stevens completed and those found in the Language Poets whose writing had a great impact on me. However, the Language Poets were also driven by a turn to theory and academia. But Ashbery did not express much interest in theorizing his poetry, saying that “the whole question bores me” but nevertheless and enjoyed that it “create[ed] a lot of interest”¹⁵¹ in his work.

I had also been reading work from George Oppen, William Bronk, Lyn Hejinian and Michael Palmer before Ashbery. I was attracted to their writing for their attention to how language functions in its proximity to other words—a suspicion towards the stillness of words then turned into a generative process of discovery. I am reminded of Palmer’s poem “Still (A Cantata—or Nada—for Sister Satan),” where he writes of language’s relationship to a poetic-self and its exteriority in sound:

The child first learning the words
wonders what comes between the words.
And learning the words she tries to recall
what came before,
a ringing or whistling or roaring, a
kind of chorus perhaps, as of wind over water,
like water here, near enough to see
that’s mysteriously called the Sound.
Are there sounds between the words
where all feels asleep and still?
Maybe she laughs at the thought
that the words breathe too
and that the breathing turns
right there, in the air between the words.¹⁵²

151. Ashbery, *John Ashbery in conversation with Mark Ford*, 60.

152. Michael Palmer, *The Laughter of the Sphinx*, New York : New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2016, 76.

There is a distinct fissure between the child and the words, as though take on a life of their own around sounds. This picture draws a dichotomy between the substantive word (if taken visually) and the transitive quality of sound. That in the case of words, they are codependent while at the same time still evasive in their own agency—“that the words breathe too / and that the breathings turns / right there, in the air between the words.” The lines begin as though something will be learned, concretely defined, but instead unravels into a transitive performance where subject becomes a practice of absence, which, as I think we already know, is just another form of presence. These words form circles that repeat themselves and are also present in language where words renew and revise their sounds, and breath between one another. There is a resonating concern, articulated through a different musicality in Palmer’s poem that I think Ashbery has expressed in his own way. I feel as though Palmer articulates a theoretical component that rests within *The Tennis Court Oath*, though Ashbery navigates the question of meaning from a different vantage point.

Perhaps the way Ashbery addresses the questions of language’s possibility to create in-groups and out-groups can be found in his poem “A Blessing in Disguise” which acts as a feedback loop between the self and the world beyond. I think that this poem presents the middle space that the speaker inhabits clearly where words reverberate between a localized and encompassing signified. The poem does, however, end in a voice that seems distinctly Ashbery’s —it’s musicality resting between curious innocence and graceful sanctity:

Remembering to forgive. Remember to pass beyond you into
the day
On the wings of the secret you will never know.
Taking me from myself, in the path
Which the pastel girth of the day has assigned to me.

I prefer “you” in the plural, I want “you,”
You must come to me, all golden and pale

Like the dew and the air.
And then I start getting this feeling of exaltation.¹⁵³

I wonder if “you” in the poem calls to life, the multiplicity of life as all that belongs to it: the experiences of encountering a world as it happens and “Remember to pass beyond you into the day / On the wings of the secret you will never know.” I think that “A Blessing in Disguise” articulates the pleasure in which Ashbery has found his relation to life and in life, writing. There is a wonderful sense of life in the poem, a pleasure whose source is not articulated, is a secret, but which is in the continuous process of exchange between a self or poetic-self and the “pastel girth of the day” which has “taken me from myself.” This, as the speaker says, is the beginning to “this feeling of exaltation.”

Grace suddenly seems an adequate description. There have been so many words going through my mind to describe what Ashbery’s poetry evokes: life, subjectivity, consciousness, unconsciousness, time, experience, etc. but it seems to me now that what these descriptive words all come to a head at a point of grace. For to be in grace is both an activity in motion and a *state* of being, an agility that appears at ease with little self-consciousness, if any at all. And Ashbery’s poetry radiates with a pleasure that I think can only be found with a lack of self-critical scrutiny, as well as criticism for what his subjectivity is met with. He had said that “. . .we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what’s the important indiscriminate thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved”¹⁵⁴ and most of his poetry seems to be a hymn to life and its spontaneity; the interdependence of language on what is happening both in the poem and outside of it.

153. Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 26.

154. John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University, 1994, Print, 139.

Ashbery invites the pleasure found within the order of life to surface through his writing;
his listening grace is a *blessing in disguise*.

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