

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Mysteries of Construction": The Dream Songs of John Ashbery

—I wrote about what I didn't see. The experience that eluded me somehow intrigued me more than the one I was having, and this has happened to me down through the years.

—John Ashbery¹

I

IN 1955 both Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery entered the annual competition for the Yale Younger Poets Award. The outcome of this contest is one of the nice ironies of literary history. The judge that year was W. H. Auden, and he originally declared that none of the manuscripts submitted deserved to win the prize. But then, by Ashbery's account, the following happened:

... someone, a mutual friend, possibly Chester Kallman, told Auden—by that time he'd gone to Ischia for the summer—that Frank and I both submitted. And he asked us through his friend to send our manuscripts, which we did, and then he chose mine, although I never had felt that he particularly liked my poetry, and his introduction to the book is rather curious, since it doesn't really talk about the poetry. He mentions me as being a kind of successor to Rimbaud, which is very flattering, but at the same time I've always had the feeling that Auden probably never read Rimbaud. He was very outspokenly anti-French.²

¹ Sue Gangel, "An Interview with John Ashbery," *San Francisco Review of Books*, 3 (November 1977), 12.

² See David Kermani, excerpts from unpublished interview with John

Auden's Foreword to *Some Trees*, published by Yale in 1956, is a curious document. The comparison between Ashbery and Rimbaud leads Auden to the following rather back-handed compliment:

Where Wordsworth had asked the question, "What is the language really used by men?" Rimbaud substituted the question, "What is the language really used by the imagining mind?"

In "Les Illuminations" he attempted to discover this new rhetoric, and every poet who, like Mr. Ashbery, has similar interests has the same problem. . . . the danger for a poet working with the subjective life is . . . realizing that, if he is to be true to nature in this world, he must accept strange juxtapositions of imagery, singular associations of ideas, he is tempted to manufacture calculated oddities as if the subjectively sacred were necessarily and on all accounts odd.³

This emphasis on Ashbery's "calculated oddities," his "strange juxtapositions of imagery" is put even more bluntly in Auden's letter of rejection to O'Hara:

I'm sorry to have to tell you that, after much heart searching I chose John's poems. It's really very awkward when the only two possible candidates are both friends.

This doesn't mean that I don't like your work; lots of the poems I like very much, in particular *Jane Awake*.

I think you (and John too, for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with any "surrealistic" style, namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations

Ashbery, New York City, 2 June 1974, in *John Ashbery: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), p. 6.

³ Foreword to *Some Trees*, Yale Series of Younger Poets, 52 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 16. This foreword was not reprinted in the second edition (New York: Corinth Books, 1970), nor is it included in the reprint of that edition by the Ecco Press, New York, 1978.

some other-worldly realm. Ashbery has little in common with Yeats's "Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland." On the contrary, the poet casts a cold eye on the seemingly endless round of epiphanies his contemporaries say they are experiencing. Thus, in reviewing Philip Booth's *Weathers and Edges* in 1966, Ashbery remarks: "Rare is the grain of sand in which [Booth] can't spot the world; seagulls, dories, and schools of herring are likewise windows on eternity, until we begin to suspect that he is in direct, hot-line communication with it."⁷

Not *what* one dreams but *how*—this is Ashbery's subject. His stories "tell only of themselves," presenting the reader with the challenge of what he calls "an open field of narrative possibilities" (TP, 41). For, like Rimbaud's, his are not dreams "about" such and such characters or events; the dream structure is itself the event that haunts the poet's imagination. As he put it in an essay on Gertrude Stein, written shortly after the publication of *Some Trees*:

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. Sometimes the story has the logic of a dream . . . while at other times it becomes startlingly clear for a moment, as though a change in the wind had suddenly enabled us to hear a conversation that was taking place some distance away. . . . But it is usually not 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. . . .⁸

What Ashbery means by a "hymn to possibility" can be understood by comparing his "Rivers and Mountains" (1966) to a poem that may well have been its source, Auden's "Mountains" (1952), which begins:

⁷ *New York Herald Tribune: Book World*, 3, no. 42 (4 September 1966), 2.

⁸ "The Impossible," *Poetry*, 90, no. 4 (July 1957), 251.

I know a retired dentist who only paints mountains,
But the Masters rarely care
That much, who sketch them in beyond a holy face
Or a highly dangerous chair;
While a normal eye perceives them as a wall
Between worse and better, like a child, scolded in France,
Who wishes he were crying on the Italian side of the Alps:
Caesar does not rejoice when high ground
Makes a darker map,
Nor does Madam. Why should they? A serious being
Cries out for a gap.

And it is curious how often in steep places
You meet someone short who frowns,
A type you catch beheading daisies with a stick. . . .⁹

Here Auden is exploring the ideas human beings have invented about physical nature, specifically the stale Romantic notion that mountains connote strength and grandeur. For what are mountains really but objects that retired dentists like to paint? (The Old Masters knew better!) And whom do we see scaling their heights but vulgar little types who behead daisies with their walking sticks? The Julius Caesars, for whom those "dark" places on the map were a special nuisance, have been replaced by "unsmiling parties, / Clumping off at dawn in the gear of their mystery / For points up." And so it goes from stanza to stanza. Auden's tone is sophisticated, wry, bemused, gently satiric—as if to say that he himself is also a bit foolish for getting annoyed about such trivia. For isn't the idea of nature (as distinct from its particular manifestations) benign and lovable?

"Mountains" is a witty dissection of human pretensions and rationalizations. But what are we to make of Ashbery's "Rivers and Mountains"?

On the secret map the assassins
Cloistered, the Moon River was marked

⁹ *Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 428-429.

Near the eighteen peaks and the city
 Of humiliation and defeat—wan ending
 Of the trail among dry, papery leaves
 Gray-brown quills like thoughts
 In the melodious but vast mass of today's
 Writing through fields and swamps
 Marked, on the map, with little bunches of weeds.

.
 Your plan was to separate the enemy into two groups
 With the razor-edged mountains between.
 It worked well on paper
 But their camp had grown
 To be the mountains and the map
 Carefully peeled away and not torn
 Was the light. . . .

(RM, 10-11)

We know from Auden's context how to regard "retired dentists who only paint mountains," and it is amusing to think of the child, scolded in France, wishing himself on the other side of the Alps. But what are we to make of this "secret map" where unidentifiable assassins are cloistered? Are the mountains real or do they only exist as marks on a map? Further, is the map real or are the Moon River and eighteen peaks to be found on some sort of board game in which toy soldiers battle? Is the poet alluding to a comic strip? An adventure film? A travelogue? Or is the strange landscape that emerges a fantasy on a postage-stamp scene ("a stamp could reproduce all this / In detail")? The reader can invent any number of plots and locations that fit this "all-purpose model," but there is finally no way of knowing what these war games signify. Auden playfully reminds us that "perfect monsters—remember Dracula—/Are bred on crags in castles," but Ashbery's "secret map" allows for no such connections to be made, for we can identify neither the monsters nor the crags. The land, after all, "Was made of paper."

It would be easy to conclude that Ashbery's poetry is

merely incoherent, that anything goes. Robert Boyers' strictures in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1978) are typical: "If we take meaning to refer to the possibility of shared discourse in which speaker and auditor may participate more or less equally," then "Ashbery is an instance of a poet who, through much of his career, eliminates meaning without achieving any special intensity. . . . Meaning is often left out of an Ashbery poem . . . to ensure the continuity of a quest for which ends are necessarily threatening."¹⁰

This is to regard *meaning* as some sort of fixed quantity (like two pounds of sugar or a dozen eggs) that the poet as speaker can either "leave out" or proffer to the expectant auditor with whom he is engaged in "shared discourse." But, as Ashbery suggests in his remarks on Gertrude Stein, there are other ways of generating meaning, of creating the "transparency" he admires in the poetry of Reverdy, for whom "a canal and a factory" are not symbolic counters but "living phenomena"¹¹ Consider the following poem from *Houseboat Days* (1977):

The Other Tradition

They all came, some wore sentiments
 Emblazoned on T-shirts, proclaiming the lateness
 Of the hour, and indeed the sun slanted its rays
 Through branches of Norfolk Island pine as though
 Politely clearing its throat, and all ideas settled
 In a fuzz of dust under trees when it's drizzling:
 The endless games of Scrabble, the boosters,
 The celebrated omelette au Cantal, and through it

¹⁰ "A Quest without an Object" (review of *Houseboat Days*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 September 1978, p. 962; cf. Roger Shattuck, review of *Houseboat Days*, *New York Review of Books*, 25, no. 4 (23 March 1978), 38. "Fantasia of a Nut-Brown Maid," writes Shattuck, conveys "the sense of a container without contents."

¹¹ See "Reverdy en Amérique," *Mercure de France* (Special Issue: Pierre Reverdy), 344 (January/April 1962), 110-111. I am translating from Ashbery's French.

which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue.⁴

It is hardly surprising that Auden would have misgivings about a poetic style so seemingly unlike his own, and so startling a departure from the carefully controlled neo-Symbolist poetry that dominated the early fifties.⁵ What I find especially interesting, however, is that, despite Auden's evident reservations about Ashbery's poetry, he did make precisely the right connections:

From Rimbaud down to Mr. Ashbery, an important school of modern poets has been concerned with the discovery that, in childhood largely, in dreams and day-dreams entirely, the imaginative life of the human individual stubbornly continues to live by the old magical notions. Its world is one of sacred images and ritual acts . . . a numinous landscape inhabited by demons and strange beasts.

(p. 13)

Or, as Ashbery was to put it in *Three Poems* (1972), "the magic world really does exist" (TP, 16).⁶ When, for ex-

⁴ Unpublished letter to Frank O'Hara, 3 June 1955. Quoted by permission of Edward Mendelson, Literary Executor of the Estate of W. H. Auden. Copyright © 1977 by the Estate of W. H. Auden.

⁵ See my *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters* (New York: George Braziller, 1977; rpt. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), Chapter One, passim; and my essay "'Transparent Selves': The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara," *The Yearbook of English Studies: American Literature Special Number*, 8 (Modern Humanities Research Association, 1978), pp. 171-196.

⁶ The following abbreviations of Ashbery's books are used throughout this chapter:

- | | |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ST | <i>Some Trees</i> (1956; rpt. New York: Ecco Press, 1978). |
| TCO | <i>The Tennis Court Oath</i> (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1962). |
| RM | <i>Rivers and Mountains</i> (1966; rpt. New York: Ecco Press, 1977). |
| DDS | <i>The Double Dream of Spring</i> (1970; rpt. New York: Ecco Press, 1976). |
| TP | <i>Three Poems</i> (New York: Viking Press, 1972). |
| SP | <i>Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror</i> (New York: Viking Press, 1975). |

ample, Robert Frost's "I" came upon "two roads" that "diverged in a yellow wood," he felt he had to choose one or the other. In the dream landscape of "The System," it works out differently:

That's the way it goes. For many weeks you have been exploring what seemed to be a profitable way of doing. You discovered that there was a fork in the road, so first you followed what seemed to be the less promising, or at any rate the more obvious, of the two branches until you felt you had a good idea of where it led. Then you returned to investigate the more tangled way, and for a time its intricacies seemed to promise a more complex and therefore a more practical goal for you, one that could be picked up in any number of ways so that all its faces or applications could be thoroughly scrutinized. And in so doing you began to realize that the two branches were joined together again, farther ahead; that this *place of joining* was indeed the end, and that it was the very place you set out from, whose *intolerable mixture of reality and fantasy* had started you on the road which has now come full circle. It has been an *absorbing puzzle*.

...

(TP, 90, my italics)

Ashbery's narrator does not look forward to a time when he will be telling one and all that he "took the [road] less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference." For in the place where reality meets dream, choice becomes an irrelevancy; what matters is that two paths that are separate can mysteriously join together. Or maybe there never were two.

This "absorbing puzzle," the ongoing process of "waking up / In the middle of a dream with one's mouth full / Of unknown words" (SP, 55), is not to be confused with the Romantic yearning for transcendence, the longing to enter

HD *Houseboat Days* (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

AWK *As We Know* (New York: Viking Press, 1979).

The roar of time plunging unchecked through the
 sluices
 Of the days, dragging every sexual moment of it
 Past the lenses: the end of something.
 Only then did you glance up from your book,
 Unable to comprehend what had been taking place, or
 Say what you had been reading. More chairs
 Were brought, and lamps were lit, but it tells
 Nothing of how all this proceeded to materialize
 Before you and the people waiting outside and in the
 next
 Street, repeating its name over and over, until silence
 Moved halfway up the darkened trunks,
 And the meeting was called to order.

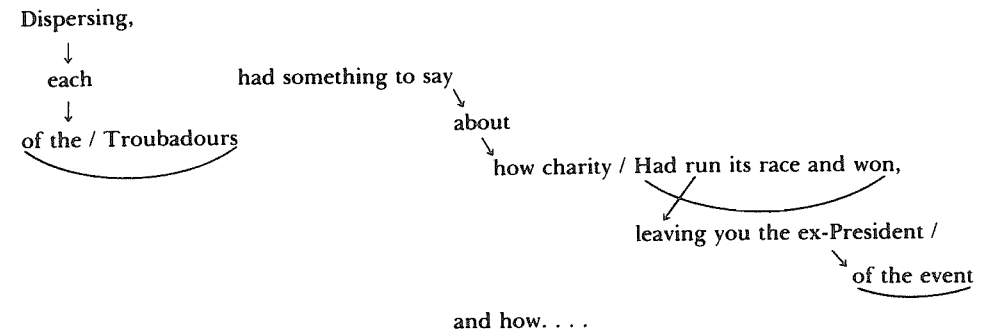
I still remember

How they found you, after a dream, in your thimble hat,
 Studious as a butterfly in a parking lot.
 The road home was nicer then. Dispersing, each of the
 Troubadours had something to say about how charity
 Had run its race and won, leaving you the ex-president
 Of the event, and how, though many of those present
 Had wished something to come of it, if only a distant
 Wisp of smoke, yet none was so deceived as to hanker
 After that cool non-being of just a few minutes before,
 Now that the idea of a forest had clamped itself
 Over the minutiae of the scene. You found this
 Charming, but turned your face fully toward night,
 Speaking into it like a megaphone, not hearing
 Or caring, although these still live and are generous
 And all ways contained, allowed to come and go
 Indefinitely in and out of the stockade
 They have so much trouble remembering, when your
 forgetting
 Rescues them at last as a star absorbs the night.

(HD, 2-3)

This elusive narrative is what Ashbery calls in an earlier poem "a puzzle scene." The very verse form is equivocal,

for Ashbery's loose blank verse (the lines range from four to six stresses and from nine to fifteen syllables) is overwhelmed by the prose rhythm of his purposely clumsy long sentences—sentences that spill over successive lines with their complicated subordinate clauses and qualifiers:



Such verse, Northrop Frye has suggested, represents a kind of inverse euphuism: "the prose element in the diction and syntax is so strong that the features of verse still remaining give it the effect of continuous parody. This is the area of intentional doggerel. . . . Here again, as with euphuism, we are moving in an atmosphere of paradox, and also discontinuity."¹²

Parody and discontinuity are, of course, also operative on the semantic level of Ashbery's poem. "The Other Tradition" presents a series of arresting visual images, akin to Reverdy's "living phenomena," that don't seem to add up. Who, to begin with, are these people who "came" late in the day to this setting of "Norfolk Island pine" and what are they doing? The "endless games of Scrabble" and "celebrated omelette au Cantal" suggest that the "event" of line 27 is some sort of house party, but a house party is of limited duration whereas this happening is characterized by "The roar of time plunging unchecked through the

¹² *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 69-70.

sluices / Of the days, dragging every sexual moment of it / Past the lenses." Perhaps the "event" is an Encounter Group session? A religious retreat? A stay in a sanatorium or mental hospital? The "stockade" which "They have so much trouble remembering" suggests a prison. The forest setting—"branches of Norfolk Island pine," "fuzz of dust under trees," "darkened trunks"—implies that some kind of ancient rite is taking place. At the same time, the forest borders on "the next / Street," and "More chairs / Were brought, and lamps were lit," as "the meeting was called to order." Perhaps this is a political rally; on the way home, the "you" speaks into the night "like a megaphone." But in that case, why are the participants of the "event" called "Troubadours"? Dozens of provocative and possible stories suggest themselves.

The pronouns, as always in Ashbery, create confusion for readers who look for logic and continuity. Here the poet's own explanation, which I cited in Chapter Two, is helpful:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we" . . . my point is also that it doesn't really matter very much, 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 thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward a greater naturalism.¹³

¹³ See Janet Bloom and Robert Losada, "Craft Interview with John Ashbery," *New York Quarterly*, 9 (Winter 1972), 24-25.

Once it is understood that for Ashbery, "we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem," that identity is fluid and fragmented, the shifting pronouns ("They—"you"—"I") become less vexing. The point is that the poet is at once a participant ("ex-president / Of the event") and an observer; he views the incidents recorded both from outside and inside, from the vantage point of the past as well as the present and projected future. This is the "polyphony" Ashbery speaks of.¹⁴ Or, to use the analogy of film, we have shifting perspectives on certain phenomena that are themselves on the brink of dissolving. Thus, when the narrator says, "I still remember / How they found you after a dream, in your thimble hat, / Studious as a butterfly in a parking lot," he seems to be addressing himself, but the "I-you" dichotomy creates distance, the present self remembering its former incarnation as solitary reader. Or again, the studious "you" who wears a "thimble hat" may be a close friend or lover. In either case, the import of the little scene remains unclear for the analogy to the "butterfly in the parking lot" is purely fanciful, evoking what Ashbery has called "Märchenbilder" (SP, 59), in this case perhaps "Thumbelina." All we can safely say is that the "I" and "you" are at once part of the "they" and yet detached from "them," just as the setting is both outdoors in the pine forest and indoors in a lamp-lit meeting room, and just as the characters are simultaneously up-to-date (with "sentiments / Emblazoned on T-shirts") and medieval: "Troubadours" dreaming under their "thimble hat[s]."

The logic of "The Other Tradition" is thus that of a dream; there is no way we can say "precisely what is going on." But the "way of happening" is carefully worked out. However open the meaning of individual lines or passages may be, images do coalesce to create, not a coherent nar-

¹⁴ For a musical analysis of Ashbery's "polyphony," see Lawrence Kramer, "'Syringa': John Ashbery and Elliot Carter," in *John Ashbery: Essays on the Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 255-271.

rative with a specific theme, but a precise tonality of feeling.

Consider the title of the poem. Some readers have remarked that Ashbery titles are annoying because they seem to have nothing to do with the words that follow. But in most instances, the title resonates, not just with images from the poem which it names, but from earlier ones. "The Other Tradition," for example, was introduced in *Three Poems*:

There was, however, a residue, a kind of fiction that developed parallel to the classic truths of daily life (as it was in that heroic but commonplace age) as they unfolded with the foreseeable majesty of a holocaust. . . . It is this "other tradition" which we propose to explore. The facts of history have been too well rehearsed . . . to require further elucidation here. But the other, unrelated happenings that form a kind of sequence of fantastic reflections as they succeed each other at a pace and according to an inner necessity of their own—these, I say, have hardly ever been looked at from a vantage point other than the historian's and an arcane historian's at that. The living aspect of these obscure phenomena has never to my knowledge been examined from a point of view like the painter's: in the round. . . .

(TP, 55-56)

This passage provides us with interesting clues. Not the "facts of history" but the "other, unrelated happenings that form a kind of sequence of fantastic reflections"—this is the subject of the poem. Not, in Aristotle's terms, "what actually happened," but "what could and would happen either probably or inevitably." Ashbery wants to examine the "living aspect of these obscure phenomena . . . from a point of view like the painter's: in the round." So, when we return to the poem, we see that Ashbery has created a "Märchenbild" that is rather like a Max Ernst *frottage*. In fairy tales, form is fixed (the plot begins with "Once upon a time" and moves, through a series of turns and counterturns—spells, enchantments, mistaken identities, acci-

dents—to its dénouement: "they lived happily ever after"), but content is peculiarly fluid; events that are highly concrete and particular are open to any number of interpretations. So, in "The Other Tradition," Ashbery has created a dream plot that "each reader can adapt . . . to fit his own set of particulars."

Does this imply that the poem can mean anything one likes? Not at all. However one interprets the "event" Ashbery relates—rite, orgy, meeting, rally, party, retreat, Encounter Session, or a combination of these—clearly "The Other Tradition" is a kind of Proustian memory poem in which the narrator relives an especially haunting incident, a turning-point, whether real or imaginary, from his past. As Ashbery says of Raymond Roussel's poem "La Vue," "the poet, like a prisoner fascinated by the appearance of the wall of his cell, remains transfixed by the spectacle before his eyes."¹⁵ One thinks immediately of Plato's cave, whose inhabitants, having had a fleeting glimpse of the light outside, now contemplate the flickering shadows of passing objects, "the fragments of a buried life you once knew," as Ashbery puts it in *Three Poems* (TP, 86). The event is "over," and the poet can only look at the cave wall, trying to find some pattern in the perpetually shifting shapes before him. So objects are outlined: "More chairs / Were brought, and lamps were lit." "For a moment," as Ashbery says of Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, "the story becomes startlingly clear as though a change in wind had suddenly enabled us to hear a conversation that was taking place some distance away." Then the images grow faint until "forgetting / Rescues them at last, as a star absorbs the night." And so they fade into the light of common day.

It has been suggested, notably by Alfred Corn, that poems like "The Other Tradition" are to be understood as "imitations of consciousness." "Their ambition," says Corn, "is to render as much psychic life as will go onto the

¹⁵ "On Raymond Roussel," *Portfolio and Art News Annual*, 6 (Autumn 1962); rpt. in *Raymond Roussel, How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, ed. and trans. Trevor Winkfield (New York: Sun, 1977), p. 51.

page—perceptions, emotions, and concepts, memory and daydream, thought in all its random and contradictory character, patterned according to the ‘wave interference’ produced by all the constituting elements of mind.”¹⁶ But how “random” is the “psychic life” put down on the page here? It seems to me that, on the contrary, Ashbery’s dream structure is highly formalized. For the chronology of the “event” provides Ashbery with a particular procedure, a way of incorporating the contradictions between “I” and “they,” between indoors and outdoors, parking-lot and forest, sunlight and drizzle, omelettes and booster shots, noise and silence, union and separation, the “sexual moment” and the solitary absorption in “your book.” Ashbery’s is, we might say, a world where “A” can always be “B,” where “silence / Moved halfway up the darkened trunks, / And the meeting was called to order.”

Here Ashbery’s remarks on Raymond Roussel, whom Cocteau called “the Proust of dreams,” are apposite:

What [Roussel] leaves us with is a work that is like the perfectly preserved temple of a cult which has disappeared without a trace, or a complicated set of tools whose use cannot be discovered. . . .

[His] language . . . 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.¹⁷

Language always on the point of revealing its secret—this pattern of opening and closing, of revelation and re-veiling, of simultaneous disclosure and concealment is the structural principle of the Ashbery poem. Like Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, such an enigma text endlessly generates the impulse that makes the reader yearn for completion and understanding. In Roger Cardinal’s words, “the receiver knows that a signal is being emitted, but his connection with the

¹⁶ “A Magma of Interiors,” *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 4 (Fall/Winter 1975), 224.

¹⁷ “On Raymond Roussel,” p. 55.

transmitter seems to be on a faulty line.” It is in this sense that Roussel’s work is like “a complicated set of tools whose use cannot be discovered.” To read such a text, says Cardinal, “is like being given a key only to learn that the locks have been changed.”¹⁸

II

To invent persuasive “mysteries of construction” is by no means easy, as anyone who has read the countless imitations of Ashbery currently breaking into print knows. Too much disclosure produces contrivance; too much concealment, unintelligibility and boredom. In Ashbery’s early poems, these twin dangers are not always avoided. Consider “The Instruction Manual,” which appeared in *Some Trees*. Ashbery recalls that he wrote this poem when he was working for McGraw-Hill in New York as a writer and editor, not quite of instruction manuals but of college textbooks: “The poem really ends with me returning to the boring task I have to do, where the poem began. It leads back into me, and is probably about the dissatisfaction with the work I was doing at the time. And my lack of success in seeing the city I wanted most to see, when I was in Mexico. Mostly because the name held so much promise: Guadalajara.”¹⁹

“The Instruction Manual” begins:

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

¹⁸ “Enigma,” *20th Century Studies*, 12 (December 1974), 45, 56.

¹⁹ See “Interview with John Ashbery,” *San Francisco Review of Books*, 12.

elbows on the desk and leaning out of the window a
little,
Of dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers!
(ST, 14)

Bored with the dreary instruction manual he has to prepare, the poet conjures up vivid and exotic images of Guadalajara, with its "flower girls, handing out rose- and lemon-colored flowers," its bandstand musicians "in their creamy white uniforms," its "houses of pink and white, and its crumbling leafy terraces." The poem's structure is that of a travelogue: here is the poorer quarter, there is the market, here is an old woman sitting in a patio, and so on. Finally the narrator exclaims:

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

The reality-dream-reality structure of "The Instruction Manual" is a version of the Greater Romantic Lyric as Meyer Abrams and others have defined it. A determinate speaker in a particular setting (looking out of the window of the building) is moved by a certain stimulus—in this case, the pages of the instruction manual—to reverie or daydream. "Such a poem," writes Abrams, "usually rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepening understanding which

is the result of the intervening meditation."²⁰ Although Ashbery's speaker does not achieve the epiphany toward which the Greater Romantic Lyric usually builds (his dream of Guadalajara is a pleasant escape fantasy rather than a transforming psychic event), "The Instruction Manual" does have the out-in-out form characteristic of Romantic poems like "Tintern Abbey" or "Frost at Midnight." Indeed, its three-act division—Before the Dream, the Dream, and After the Dream—is so neat that one might suspect Ashbery of parodying an established genre, especially since the long Whitmanesque lines that frame the daydream itself here express the very opposite of Romantic ecstasy. The speaker seems to be yawning.²¹

"The Instruction Manual" is not, in any case, a representative Ashbery poem, which is probably why it has been so frequently anthologized. Even in his earliest work, Ashbery rarely makes things so easy for himself or for his reader. In the opening poem of *Some Trees*, "Two Scenes," the interplay of fact and fantasy is much more complex:

I

We see us as we truly behave:
From every corner comes a distinctive offering.
The train comes bearing joy;
The sparks it strikes illuminate the table.
Destiny guides the water-pilot, and it is destiny.
For long we hadn't heard so much news, such noise.
The day was warm and pleasant.
"We see you in your hair,
Air resting around the tips of mountains."

²⁰ "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford, 1965), p. 528. See also Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (New York: Norton, 1957), Chapter One, *passim*.

²¹ On this point, see David Shapiro, *John Ashbery*, Columbia Introductions to Twentieth-Century American Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 37.

II

A fine rain anoints the canal machinery.
 This is perhaps a day of general honesty
 Without example in the world's history
 Though the fumes are not of a singular authority
 And indeed as dry as poverty.
 Terrific units are on an old man
 In the blue shadow of some paint cans
 As laughing cadets say, "In the evening
 Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it
 is."

(ST, 9)

The opening line, "We see us as we truly behave," immediately recalls the Wallace Stevens of "What we see is what we think," or "We make, although inside an egg / variations on the words spread sail" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"). The phrase "dry as poverty" in line 14 echoes Stevens' "The Ordinary Women": "Then from their poverty they rose, / From dry catarrhs. . . ." Like Stevens, Ashbery is fond of using abstract nouns in prepositional constructions: "A day of general honesty," "Without example in the world's history," "the fumes are not of a singular authority," and so on. Like Stevens, he has a predilection for qualifiers ("This is perhaps a day"; "Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is"), and he prefers intransitive and copulative verbs to transitive ones.

Yet even in this early "Stevensian" poem,²² Ashbery turns the Stevens mode on its head by cutting off the referential dimension. "Two Scenes" is not like, say, "Credences of Summer," the reverie of a particular speaker who "meditates / With the gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night," the time being midsummer when "the mind lays by its

²² The "abiding influence of Stevens" on Ashbery is a theme running through all of Harold Bloom's commentaries on Ashbery: see especially, "John Ashbery: The Charity of the Hard Moments," *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 169-208.

trouble and considers," it being "a long way / To the first autumnal inhalations."²³

Ashbery's poem rejects any such continuities. "Two Scenes" presents us with "clear visual images," to use Eliot's phrase about Dante, but Ashbery's are "clear visual images" that have no discernible referents. The "laughing cadets," the "water-pilot," the "tips of mountains"—these are arresting images of some mysterious truth half-glimpsed, but their signification is purposely left blurred and open. In the first dream scene, there are references to light, sparks, warmth, hair, water, and mountains; in the second, to rain, fumes, a canal, drought, poverty, and paint cans. How the second evolves out of the first is an "absorbing puzzle." One can invent a story about a "train bringing joy," possibly carrying a group of "laughing cadets" into the mountains, possibly passing a canal where a "water-pilot" waves to them. I am reminded of the train emerging from the flowering Russian steppes, so gorgeously filmed in *Dr. Zhivago*. But many other films or fictions come to mind. "Everything has a schedule if you can find out what it is," but the trouble is that you can never find out. We cannot even identify the "you" of line eight: "We see you in your hair." The only certainty is that, as in "The Other Tradition," everything shifts ground before our eyes: the "sparks" that "illuminate the table" go out; the "Air resting around the tips of mountains" gives way to a "fine rain anoint[ing] the canal machinery," and when the rain dries up, strong fumes appear, perhaps from the "blue shadow" of the old man's "paint cans." The "distinctive offering" promised at the outset never seems to come. And yet the cadets are "laughing." Maybe the "preparatory dream" (TP, 7) will return. In its fidelity to "a way of happening" rather than to "what happens," "Two Scenes" anticipates Ashbery's later work.

But before that later work came into being, Ashbery wrote the poems collected in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). Here the balance sometimes tips the other way: disclosure

²³ *The Palm at the End of the Mind, Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), pp. 287-292.

is so totally blocked that the reader is all but excluded from the world of the text; one's connection with the transmitter seems to be, not on a faulty line which allows for expectation and suspense, but on no line at all. The collage poem "Europe" is a case in point. Its 111 sections are chiefly cut-ups from a childrens' book called *Beryl of the Bi-Planes*, which Ashbery found on a Paris quai. Here are the first five sections:

1.

To employ her
construction ball
Morning fed on the
light blue wood
of the mouth
cannot understand
(feels deeply)

2.

A wave of nausea—
numerals

3.

a few berries

4.

the unseen claw
Babe asked today
The background of poles roped over
into star jolted them

5.

filthy or into backward drenched flung heaviness
lemons asleep pattern crying

(TCO, 64)

As we make our way through successive sections, the story of Beryl's zeppelin ride and parachute jumps, her

narrow escape from a bomb threat, and the mysterious detective story about "Ronald Pryor" and a man named Collins, appear in bits and pieces. We can, if we care to, reconstitute the plot of the pulp novel which is Ashbery's source. Thus, if we begin with items like the "construction ball" of #1 and the "poles roped over" of #4, we find a connection to the shining "instruments" of #37, the "steel bolts" of #107, and the grand Morse Code finale of #111. But there is no further range of suggestiveness, no "language on the point of revealing its secret." Once we have put all the pieces on the table and have reassembled the jigsaw puzzle, the game is over. And this is precisely what "Europe" is—an amusing game, a kind of Surrealist *cadavre exquis*.

Ironically, the opacity of "Europe," its resolute refusal to relate meanings, is not attributable to its excessive disjunctiveness, as Harold Bloom, who calls the poem a "fearful disaster,"²⁴ seems to think. I would argue that it is, on the contrary, too one-dimensional, which is to say that it is not "disjunctive" enough. For here we don't have disparate images or voices coming together so as to form startling new conjunctions; rather, all the references are drawn from the same circle of discourse and so the seeming discontinuities are all on the surface. I shall have more to say of this later when I take up Ashbery's extraordinary new collage poem, the fifty-page "Litany."

"Europe" aside, *The Tennis Court Oath* contains many fine poems, especially the hallucinatory "'They Dream Only Of America'" (TCO, 13), which I have discussed elsewhere.²⁵ Reading this "detective poem" is, as in the case of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, like overhearing a conversation in

²⁴ *Figures of Capable Imagination*, p. 172. Bloom further says: "The Ashbery of *The Tennis Court Oath* may have been moved by De Kooning and Kline, Webber and Cage, but he was not moved to the writing of poems. Nor can I accept the notion that this was a necessary phase in the poet's development, for who can hope to find any necessity in this calculated incoherence?" (p. 175).

²⁵ "'Transparent Selves,'" *Yearbook of English Studies*, pp. 186-187.

which one can make out individual words or phrases but has no clear idea what the speakers are talking about. Thus we have no trouble understanding a sentence like "This honey is delicious / *Though it burns the throat*," but we cannot tell who is saying these words to whom or why he or she should feel this way about honey. Or again, it makes no sense, rationally speaking, to compare a lake to a "lilac cube," but within the context of "'They Dream,'" where we also find "thirteen million pillars of grass" and where those who hide "from darkness in barns . . . can be grown-ups now," such comparisons come to seem perfectly natural.

In the great series of Dream Songs that begins with "These Lacustrine Cities" (1966), landscape becomes increasingly fragile, the movement in and out of dream more fluid. Consider the following prose passage from "The New Spirit," which is the first section of *Three Poems*. The subject, in a very general way, is the rebirth of the self that comes when one falls in love.

At this point an event of such glamor and such radiance occurred that you forgot the name all over again. It could be compared to arriving in an unknown city at night, intoxicated by the strange lighting and the ambiguities of the streets. The person sitting next to you turned to you, her voice broke and a kind of golden exuberance flooded over you just as you were lifting your arm to the luggage rack. At once the weight of the other years and above all the weight of distinguishing among them slipped away. You found yourself not wanting to care. Everything was guaranteed, it always had been, there would be no future, no end, no development except this steady wavering like a breeze that gently lifted the tired curtains day had let fall. And all the possibilities of civilization, such as travel, study, gastronomy, sexual fulfillment—these no longer lay around on the cankered earth like reproaches, hideous in their reminder of what never could be, but were possibilities that had always

existed, had been created just for both of us to bring us to the summit of the dark way we had been traveling without ever expecting to find it ending. Indeed, without them nothing could have happened. Which is why the intervening space now came to advance toward us separately, a wave of music which we were, unable to grasp it as it unfolded but living it. That space was transfigured as though by hundreds and hundreds of tiny points of light like flares seen from a distance, gradually merging into one wall of even radiance like the sum of all their possible positions, plotted by coordinates, yet open to the movements and suggestions of this new life of action without development, a fixed flame.

(TP, 37)

Ashbery's prose sounds deceptively reasonable and straightforward. One sentence follows another imperturbably: "At this point . . .," "At once . . .," "And all the possibilities . . .," "Indeed. . . ." The tone is quiet, the language chaste, subdued, and given to abstraction: "glamor," "radiance," "the ambiguities of the streets," "the possibilities of civilization," "reproaches hideous in their reminder of what never could be," "the summit of the dark way." Adverbs of time abound: "all over again," "at night," "no longer," "gradually," "yet"; and similes, rarely used in the early work, are prominent: "these no longer lay around on the cankered earth like reproaches," "Hundreds of tiny points of light like flares seen from a distance," "one wall of even radiance like the sum of all their possible positions."

But the seeming continuity of Ashbery's paragraph is deceptive. What looks like a retrospective account of a specific event in the poet's life is decomposed at every turn so as to ensure fidelity to dream process, for to escape "the familiar interior which has always been there. . . . is impossible outside the frost of a dream, and it is just this major enchantment that gave us life to begin with, life for each other" (TP, 11). When asked why he used prose in *Three Poems*, Ashbery explained:

The prose is something quite new. . . . suddenly the idea of it occurred to me as something new in which the arbitrary divisions of poetry into lines would get abolished. One wouldn't have to have these interfering and scanning the processes of one's thought as one was writing; the poetic form would be dissolved, in solution, and therefore create . . . more of a surrounding thing like the way one's consciousness is surrounded by one's thoughts. And I was also very attracted by the possibility of using very prosaic elements, conversation or journalese, what libraries classify as "non-fiction"; to extract what's frequently poetic and moving in these forms of communication which are very often apparent to us and which haven't been investigated very much in poetry.²⁶

To "dissolve" the "poetic form," all the while "extracting what's frequently poetic" from the so-called "prosaic"—this is not, as reviewers of *Three Poems* have often maintained, simply to put down everything that happens to come into one's mind. Rather, the feat is, in Auden's words, "to arouse authentic non-logical relations that cause wonder." The syntax of Ashbery's first sentence, for example, looks straightforward: a simple subject-predicate unit followed by a subordinate result clause. But the "result" is a mystery, for we know neither what the "name" is that "you forgot . . . all over again," nor when "At this point" might have been. In the preceding section, Ashbery has alluded to the sudden disappearance of Rumpelstiltskin, "furious that you guessed the name," but in the new context—"At this point"—there is no certainty that the reference is still to the Grimm fairy tale.

Perhaps, then, the next sentences will shed light on "the event of such glamor and such radiance." We read on, expecting to find out what it was that happened. In the dream sequence that follows, the poet, distanced as "you," finds himself arriving in an unknown city at night, intoxicated by the "strange lighting." Something happens as if

²⁶ *New York Quarterly* Interview, p. 27.

in slow motion: "The person sitting next to you turned to you, her voice broke and a kind of golden exuberance flooded over you just as you were lifting your arm to the luggage rack." In this privileged moment, "At once the weight of the other years and above all the weight of distinguishing among them slipped away." The effect is Proustian but with a difference: in Ashbery's poem, the connection between stimulus and response is never established. The gesture of lifting one's arm to the luggage rack is not comparable to the tasting of the *petite madeleine* or the tying of the shoestring, particular actions that bring back to life a buried past in which these same actions occurred. In "The New Spirit," we have, as in " 'They Dream Only of America,' " or "These Lacustrine Cities," parts that belong to no whole—an absent totality. For we never come to know the larger story in which the arm, raised to the luggage rack, and the breaking voice of "The person sitting next to you" play a role.

Here it is illuminating to compare Ashbery to Beckett. The dream sequences in *How It Is* usually involve a specific narrative or a series of concrete images. The difficulty in reading them is that there is no way of knowing what such a narrative or image sequence means. When, for example, we come upon the lines:

it does and I see a crocus in a pot in an area in a
basement a saffron the sun creeps up the wall a hand
keeps it in the sun this yellow flower with a string I see
the hand long image hours long. . . .

(H, 21)

we cannot explain why this particular "yellow flower with a string," held by an unknown hand arrests the poet's attention. Ashbery's procedure is rather different. He gives the reader fewer particulars, but then makes large conceptual statements that seem to depend on those particulars, scanty as they are. Thus the "golden exuberance" experienced during the incident with the luggage rack leads to the abstract formulation: "You found yourself not want-

ing to care." But immediately we ask, "care about *what* and *why*?"

In this context of absent causality, even familiar things become unfamiliar. The breeze that gently lifts "the tired curtains day had let fall," for instance, is, of course, the Romantic symbol of rebirth, an influx of inspiration, a renewal of creativity. Yet here it is hard to say who has been reborn or what changes result on account of the "correspondent breeze." The "possibilities of civilization" now lie open to the poet and his beloved; "without them," he declares, "nothing could have happened." But then nothing does happen. The "Which is why" clause that follows promises a connection where none exists. One can only say that at certain moments, unpredictable and unaccountable, the self is deflected from the "summit of the dark way we have been traveling" and experiences "the intervening space" coming toward it as a "wave of music." And when this happens, the "space [is] transfigured as though by hundreds and hundreds of tiny points of light like flares seen from a distance."

This last passage recalls Stevens: for example, the "fragrant portal, dimly starred" of "The Idea of Order at Key West." But Stevens' impassioned address to his friend ("Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon"), in which these words are embedded is a response to a particular landscape seen in a particular context and therefore transfigured, whereas Ashbery's "wave of music," like Beckett's "llama emergency dream" in *How It Is*,²⁷ has an erotic cast. The death of the "incandescent period" (TP, 38) is the death of love, a dissolution that seems to puzzle the poet as much as it does the reader, "For we never knew, never knew, what joined us together" (TP, 10). To describe "loving" is impossible, but as the speaker of "The Recital" observes, what matters is "our private song, sung in the wilderness, nor can we leave off singing" (TP, 108).

²⁷ (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 14.

III

In his later poems, Ashbery's landscapes of desire are increasingly presented in the guise of what Frank O'Hara calls "charming artifice."²⁸ Medieval romance, Elizabethan pageant, comic books, Arthur Rackham fairy-tale, Disney World T-shirts, flowered wallpaper, frosted wedding cakes, "stage machinery," "grisaille shepherdesses," "terrorist chorales"—all these coalesce in the dream theater of *Houseboat Days* (1977), on whose dust jacket, designed by R. J. Kitaj, we find a portrait of a graceful lady in a long-sleeved dress, immobile at the oar of a stylized boat, silhouetted against the shadowy two-dimensional forms of mountains, lake, and cloudy sky.

In keeping with this new emphasis on art as artifice, one of the loveliest poems in the book is called "Pyrography"; the process of burning designs on wood and leather with a heated tool here becomes the process of imprinting burning traces of memory and vision on a consciousness so fluid and amorphous that the "heated tool" is likely to slip on its surface. The poem begins:

Out here on Cottage Grove it matters. The galloping
Wind balks at its shadow. The carriages
Are drawn forward under a sky of fumed oak.
This is America calling:
The mirroring of state to state,
Of voice to voice on the wires,
The force of colloquial greetings like golden
Pollen sinking on the afternoon breeze.
In service stairs the sweet corruption thrives;
The page of dusk turns like a creaking revolving stage
in Warren, Ohio.

(HD, 8)

The scene is present-day Chicago, the heart of the nation

²⁸ See "Apollinaire's Pornographic Novels," *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Bollinas: Grey Fox Press, 1975), p. 157.

("This is America calling"), but curiously it is also a fairy-tale world in which "The carriages are drawn forward under a sky of fumed oak." This contrast of old and new is nicely reflected in the stanza's meter which oscillates between the formality of "In service stairs the sweet corruption thrives," a perfect iambic pentameter line with inverted word order and heavy alliteration, and the prosaic inflection of "The page of dusk turns like a creaking revolving stage in / Warren, Ohio."

In the second stanza, the "we" who are also "they" set out on a journey across the great American continent, first by boxcar through the "gyrating fans of suburbs" and "the darkness of cities," and then the scene suddenly dissolves and the travelers are moving up the Pacific coast to Bolinas, where "The houses doze and seem to wonder why." Along the way, they meet, in an echo of Baudelaire's "Le Voyage," the "disappointed, returning ones," but "the headlong night" beckons and it is too late to take warning and turn back. Indeed, as the journey continues, we proceed, not westward or north to Canada, but into an imaginary world. A city has evidently been erected, "built . . . / Partly over with fake ruins in the image of ourselves: / An arch that terminates in mid-keystone a crumbling stone pier / For laundresses, an open-air theater, never completed / And only partially designed" (HD, 9). Where are we? Like Rimbaud's "Villes," or Ashbery's own "lacustrine cities," these cities cannot be specified; they emerge as part of a theater decor upon which the curtain may fall any minute. So the poet asks:

How are we to inhabit
This space from which the fourth wall is invariably
missing,
As in a stage-set or dollhouse, except by staying as we
are,
In lost profile, facing the stars. . . .

(HD, 9)

This question has haunted Ashbery from the beginning. He has known, all along, that "Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is," the difficulty being that you can never find out. Just so, the question posed in "Pyrography" is rhetorical, for the poet knows that the only way to inhabit a "space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing" is to accept it as the "stage-set or dollhouse" it really is, to realize that, in Yeats's words, "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it."

And yet one longs to counter the "strict sense / Of time running out, of evening presenting / The tactfully folded-over bill." And so one continues the journey, despite all warnings from "the disappointed, returning ones," this time into the haunted landscape of the past:

A long period of adjustment followed.
In the cities at the turn of the century they knew
about it
But were careful not to let on as the iceman and the
milkman
Disappeared down the block and the postman shouted
His daily rounds. The children under the trees knew
it
But all the fathers returning home
On streetcars after a satisfying day at the office undid
it:
The climate was still floral and all the wallpaper
In a million homes all over the land conspired to hide
it.
One day we thought of painted furniture, of how
It just slightly changes everything in the room
And in the yard outside, and how, if we were going
To be able to write the history of our time, starting
with today,
It would be necessary to model all these unimportant
details
So as to be able to include them; otherwise the
narrative

Would have that flat, sandpapered look the sky gets
Out in the middle west toward the end of summer. . .

(HD, 9-10)

Here memories of Ashbery's Rochester childhood blend with "Märchenbilder" and present-day images to create a hallucinatory picture of absence. Everyone seems to know "it"—whatever "it" is—but "it" must be kept from the ice-man, milkman, and postman. Fathers, "returning home / On streetcars after a satisfying day at the office undid it"; "the wallpaper / In a million homes conspired to hide it." This mysterious "it," the poem implies, must be included in all accounts of "the history of our time." Without "these unimportant details," the narrative "Would have that flat, sandpapered look the sky gets / Out in the middle west toward the end of summer." And of course we already know *that* look from the opening lines of the poem.

The journey, it turns out, is not only a journey across the American continent or back into "cities at the turn of the century," but the eternally present "journey" one lives through each day of one's life. Change is the keynote: thus the "still floral" climate instantly dissolves into the floral wallpaper found "In a million homes all over the land"; the "painted furniture" "just slightly changes everything in the room," and one cannot "save appearances / So that tomorrow will be pure" (HD, 10). Such rationalistic schemes invariably fail for "The parade is turning into our street." As in Rimbaud's "Parade," these dreams are haunted by a procession of unidentifiable and hence frightening figures in "burnished uniforms." And now the scenic dissolves come faster and faster: the "street" gives way to the image of "The land / pulling away from the magic, glittering coastal towns." Cottage Grove and Bolinas, boxcars and trams, boats and circling kites—all coalesce and their fragments are etched, as if with a heated tool, into the contours of the poet's psyche. And the poem concludes:

The hunch is it will always be this way,

The look, the way things first scared you
In the night light, and later turned out to be,
Yet still capable, all the same, of a narrow fidelity
To what you and they wanted to become:
No sights like Russian music, only a vast unravelling
Out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond
To these bare fields, built at today's expense.

(HD, 10)

"Pyrography," which is to say *poetry*, thus involves a continuous attempt at "unravelling / Out toward the junctions," an attempt just as continuously blocked as the stage-set disappears from sight. Just when the language "seems . . . on the point of revealing its secret," the mirror clouds over. For the designs burnt into the surface by the pyrographer's tool lose their sharp outlines after a time. Yet the artist continues to erect his crumbling stone piers and open-air theaters, to invent "forgotten showtunes" for his "Street Musicians," in an effort to redeem the "bare fields, built at today's expense." For

The phenomena have not changed
But a new way of being seen convinces them they
have.

(TP, 39)

This "new way of being seen" is nowhere more startling than in Ashbery's ambitious new sixty-eight-page poem called "Litany" (1979). Here the poet returns to the collage technique of "Europe," but the text he now "cuts up" is not someone else's novel but, so to speak, his own poem even as he is in the process of composing it. In "Litany," we meet familiar Ashbery paradigms: the "journey *en bateau*" of "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" and "Pyrography," the house party or cell-group meeting of "The Other Tradition," the disquisitions on art objects of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." The landscapes too are the familiar ones: the sleepy nondescript small town, somewhere in the Middle West, the Pacific coast, the fake Palladian buildings one

sees in stage sets, fields of flowers, fairytale castles with balustrades and towers, comic-book animal farms, battle scenes from old war movies, "forest prisms." Ashbery's "strange juxtapositions" (Auden's term) recall Rimbaud's famous catalogue of "decadent" art works in the *Saison en enfer*:

J'aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de portes, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires; la littérature démodée, latin d'église, livres érotiques sans orthographe, romans de nos aïeules, contes de fées, petits livres de l'enfance, opéras vieux, refrains niais, rythmes naïfs.

(I loved absurd paintings, door panels, stage sets, backdrops for acrobats, sign-boards, popular engravings; literature that is out of fashion, Church Latin, erotic books with bad spelling, novels of our grandmothers, fairy tales, little books of childhood, old operas, silly refrains, artless rhythms.)²⁹

If Ashbery's poem incorporates such irreverent and non-poetic material, in what sense is it a litany? According to the OED, a *litany* is "an appointed form of public prayer, usually of a penitential character, consisting of a series of supplications, deprecations, or intercessions in which the clergy lead and the people respond, the same formula of response being repeated for several successive clauses." Ashbery's litany maintains the prayer-response form: the poem is written for two voices, presented on the page in double columns using different typefaces. But here the two voices do not stand for the prayer of the clergy and the response of the faithful. On the contrary, although there is a certain "response" element in "Litany," which I shall talk about later, on the whole voices A and B are generally interchangeable, both usually dealing with the same material, although from different points of view. Indeed, the Author's Note tells us that "The two columns of

²⁹ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, ed. Suzanne Bernard (Paris: Garnier, 1960), p. 228.

'Litany' are meant to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues."³⁰

"Simultaneous but independent" is nicely noncommittal: it suggests that we can read "Litany" in almost any sequence we like. Instead of following column A from page to page and then turning to column B, we can often move from A to B or B to A on the same page, generating different narratives and image clusters as we go along. In creating a text that can be read both across and down, and sometimes even diagonally, Ashbery has fulfilled his own earlier aim of producing "an open field of narrative possibilities" (TP, 41).

Consider the following passage, taken from the center of Part II (L, 49). The context is a parodic disquisition on the relation of art to reality. In column A, the narrator is arguing that no portrait can ever capture the inner reality of its subject anyway, and so, paradoxically, landscape, into which we can project ourselves, is the truer representation. In column B, the plot of a film that the narrator and his lover have seen "a dozen or more times" is considered to be more "real" than the actual "plot" of their own lives, which remains a mystery. Monologue A is chatty and discursive:

Right. That's why landscapes are more
Familiar, more what it's all about—we can see
Into them and come out on the other side. With
People we just see another boring side of ourselves. . . .

Monologue B is closer to the landscape of dream:

*In the sea of the farm
The dream of hay whirls us toward
Horizons like those only
Imagined, with no space, no groove
Between the sky and the earth. . . .*

³⁰ See *As We Know*, p. 2. Since "Litany" occupies more than half of this volume and it is the only poem in the collection I refer to, in subsequent references I use the abbreviation L.

The two monologues can, of course, be read independently. But when we read them horizontally as well as vertically, we discover a number of new narrative possibilities. Suppose, for instance, that when I come to line 15, I move from A to B:

Portraits, on the other
Hand, are a different matter—they have no
Bearing on the human shape, their humanitarian
Concerns are foreign to us, who dream
And know not we are humane, though, as seen
In the sea of the farm
The dream of hay whirls us toward
Horizons like those only
Imagined, with no space, no groove
Between the sky and the earth, metallic,
Unfleshed, as though, as children,
Each of us might say how good
He or she is, and afterwards it is forgotten,
The thought, the very words.

Here the connecting link between the two columns is the word “dream” in the first. The “reality” of portraiture is rejected in favor of a dream vision, in which earth and water blend, the hay whirling “*us toward / Horizons*” where there is “*no space, no groove / Between the sky and the earth.*” For a fleeting moment, the harmony of childhood is restored.

Or again, we may begin with the “lost horizon” image in column B and move from there to the parallel sequence in A:

In the sea of the farm
The dream of hay whirls us toward
Horizons like those only
Imagined, with no space, no groove
Between the sky and the earth, metallic,
Right. That’s why landscapes are more
Familiar, more what it’s all about—we can see
Into them and come out on the other side.

Here the moment of vision quite naturally leads to the explanation, “That’s why. . . .” Of course “landscapes” are “what it’s all about,” for when the line “*Between the sky and the earth*” disappears, we are able to see into the life of things, to “come out on the other side.”

In reading “Litany,” we thus become collaborators, choosing those plots and meditational sequences that most appeal to us. But this is not to say that we can read the poem any way we like. For, whether we read the two monologues on page 49 vertically or horizontally, we never get very far away from the same underlying “plot.” Ashbery, in other words, creates a form that allows for a good measure of free play, but the larger “puzzle scene” nonetheless has its own particular contours.

However we splice the parts, “Litany” is, first and foremost, a penitential poem, playing on the conventions of intercession, supplication, and deprecation. Thus religious vocabulary—“prayer,” “psalm,” “angel,” “chant,” “church,” “cathedral spire,” “rite,” “scrolls,” “temple,” “holy,” “pre-ordained,” “liturgical,” “eternity,” “petitioner,” “God’s road”—floats to the surface of the text repeatedly only to disappear once more as if the presence of these words were accidental, having no connection to the context in which they appear. For of course there is no one to intercede for this poet, no one to whom he may pray and who will listen to his words of self-depreciation. The response to the “prayers” of the A voice can come only from within; the B voice, as we have seen, is not even the poet’s alter ego since the two are largely indistinguishable. Moreover, the one feature of litany this poem almost never manifests is the very central one of *repetition*. On the rare occasions when the formula is invoked, as on page 22 where we read:

For all those with erysipelas
And all the wrinkles on the forehead
And the cheeks that come from within, like reverse scars

For all those wearing old clothes
With the dormant look of expectation about them

*For the women ironing
And who cut into lengths of white cloth. . . .*

we are taken aback, as if a sudden intrusion had spoiled the moment, inhibiting the free play of the text.

Indeed, one way to read "Litany" is as a serious parody of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, whose phrasing is heard again and again:

there was
Never anything but this,
No footfalls on the mat-polished marble floor,
No bird-dropping, no fates, no sanctuary.
(L, 15)

The moment
Not made of itself or any other
Substance we know of, reflecting
Only itself. Then there are two moments. . . .
(L, 18)

*When the winter is over, and the sodden spring
That goes on even longer, a pitcher of water
Drawn deep from the well is to be
The reward and the end of just about everything. . . .
(L, 62)*

*. . . . and gradually leads us, each of us,
Back to the fragment of sense which is the place
We started out from. Isn't it strange
That this was home all along, and none of us
Knew it?
(L, 63)*

In Ashbery's 1980 version of the *Quartets*, the fire and the rose can never become one, nor can the poet ever come in contact with "the still point of the turning world." He only knows that "time flows round again / With things I did in it, / I wish to keep my differences / And to retain my kinship / To the rest" (L, 2-3). Accordingly, the "suppliant" of Part I expresses his longing for simplification:

For someone like me
The simple things
Like having toast or
Going to church
Are kept in one place.

(L, 1)

But at the same time, the poet knows that he cannot keep these "simple things" "in one place," that he cannot make it cohere. Indeed, while the A voice expresses this wish, the B "response" is:

*So this must be a hole
Of cloud
Mandate or trap
But haze that casts
The milk of enchantment
Over the whole town. . . .*

And so the "simple things" like "having wine and cheese" are seen as through a haze filter and become Other; the "having toast" and "Going to church" give way to the "milk of enchantment." The setting of both monologues is the same small town, but while in the first, "The parents of the town / Pissing elegantly escape knowledge / Once and for all," in the second, the narrator starts to imagine "whatever / Could be happening / Behind tall hedges / Of dark, lissome knowledge."

This movement in and out of dream characterizes the whole poem. In Part I, whose subject is, in very general terms, the childhood world, there is consistent rapid-fire modulation from "wooden fences" to "towers of lightning high over / The Sahara desert," from an "old apple tree" to "wisteria . . . in league / With the Spanish minstrels," from dust blowing through open windows to a "caravan / In slow motion" of "Elephants and wolves / Painted bright colors." If the poet dwells in an ordinary town on a lake shore, he also seems to be at home in "A colossal desert full of valleys and melting canyons" or in "Greek coves barely under the water."

The repeated prayer for deliverance from the past and the stated longing for "the flutes and premises of the future" must, accordingly, be construed as false leads. For in the course of "Litany," both poet and reader come to see that there is no way of distinguishing the past from the present or future, or the "real" from the fictive. In a related poem entitled "No Way of Knowing," we read:

The body is what this is all about and it disperses
In sheeted fragments, all somewhere around
But difficult to read correctly since there is
No common vantage point, no point of view
Like the "I" in a novel. And in truth
No one never saw the point of any. . . .

(SP, 56)

Accordingly, one must be open to possibilities. So, in Part II of "Litany," while voice A "photographs all things," B reads "*some poem*" that reminds him of the "*dark, wet street . . . Gleaming, ecstatic, with the thin spear / Of faerie trumpet-calls*" (L, 17). On the same page, A talks of the "enormous summer nights opening / Out farther and farther, like the billowing / Of a parachute," while B remarks that "*It's getting dark at seven now*" and evokes a rainy autumnal world. Yet, just as we can read across as well as down, so we discover that Ashbery also reverses roles: it is the voice of the A column that remembers "the hours in the rain-drenched schoolroom," while B speaks of "*the summer job in the department store.*"

Such cross-cutting is not just arbitrary. To be alive in the late twentieth century is, for Ashbery, to recognize that "*So many points of view, so many details . . . are probably significant*" (L, 35). One can make a good case for a New England vacation (L, 22), where "the ocean that came crashing almost / Into the back yard did not seem ill-disposed," and where even though "No one offered you a drink and there were no / Clean glasses and the supper / Never appeared on the table, it was / Strangely rewarding anyway." But one can just as well argue (the B column on

the same page), that, what with "*an increasingly mobile populace*" filling up the trailer parks, it's better to stay home:

*and the mountains are
Now so breathtakingly close to the city
That it's like taking a vacation
Just to stay home and look at them
That's all one can do.*

(L, 22)

The ultimate absurdity! For if present-day technology has brought the mountains within easy travel distance of the city, it has also created a world in which one is not likely to see further from one's window than the building across the street or the smog floating above it. But then, one can always dream of mountains. . . .

The form of "Litany," Edmund White has observed, "is the ideal transcription of Ashbery's sense of things: a mental space humming with signal and noise, focus and blur. Anthropologists have suggested that the human cortex may be so large not because of an evolutionary pressure toward intelligence but rather because of the need in an animal so sociable, for a 'computer' that might select meaning out of constant and random chatter."³¹ In this sense, Ashbery's "hymn to possibility" is indeed a litany for the computer age. If it renounces the phrasal repetition indigenous to the form, it is because things no longer happen in precisely the same way twice. As Ashbery puts it in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror":

Today has no margins, the event arrives
Flush with its edges.

(SP, 79)

³¹ "Two-Part Inventions" (review of *As We Know*), *The Washington Post Book World*, 25 November 1979, p. 4.