

Once Upon a Time in Real Time: Auden and Novalis in the Poetry of John Ashbery

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 2005

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the search for core meaning and authentic experience in the poetry of John Ashbery. Building from a close reading of *A Worldly Country*, it examines the way Ashbery's use of narrative fragments and shifting points of view establish poetry as an encounter with otherness that is dependent on accidents of meaning for its sense of authenticity. Comparisons with the poetry of Ashbery's most important precursor, W. H. Auden, reveal how the influence of German Romanticism emerges with different points of emphasis; Auden's richly ambiguous dualities eventually gave way to a more didactic poetry as he shifted his faith from art to religion, while Ashbery's poetry embodies the fragmented and inconclusive approach of the German poet Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), who developed, through his philosophical writings and the tales embedded in his novels, a double orientation toward the real and the ideal. Novalis confirmed the *Märchen*, or fairy tale, as a genre of primary importance whose capacity for imaginative excess invites accidental encounters with otherness. Analyses of fairy tales and fairy tale fragments in the work of these poets reveal how mysticism and play can inject into everyday moments feelings of self-transcendence that enable poetry to summon an authentic sense of being in the world.

Table of Contents

<u>Supervisory Committee.....</u>	<u>ii</u>
<u>Abstract.....</u>	<u>iii</u>
<u>Table of Contents.....</u>	<u>iv</u>
<u>Acknowledgments.....</u>	<u>v</u>
<u>Introduction.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Chapter 1.....</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>Chapter 2.....</u>	<u>41</u>
<u>Chapter 3.....</u>	<u>73</u>
<u>Conclusion.....</u>	<u>104</u>
<u>Works Cited.....</u>	<u>106</u>

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Introduction

The tale is multicolored, and jerks

back and forth like the tail of a kite. (Ashbery, *Chinese Whispers* 5)

Like the elusive tale/tail in these lines, John Ashbery's poetry contains an element that always dances just out of reach. This thesis describes how his poetry works to capture something essential about modern life and our contemporary experience of the world, while still preserving the secret that continually beats, however erratically and intermittently, at that world's invisible heart. In addition, it resituates Ashbery within the Romantic tradition through his relationship to W. H. Auden, Novalis and folk tales. I turn to Auden because Ashbery's debt to him is considerable; Auden, whom Ashbery has described as “chronologically the first and therefore the most important influence” on his work (Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 4), provides an immediate model for negotiating the narratives of the past and the aesthetic and ethical framework that situates modern poetry today. Ashbery returns to one of Auden's most pressing concerns: the relationship between poetic obligation and the limitations of poetry, a question that was central to Novalis and the Early German Romantics associated with Jena University at the turn of the nineteenth century, and explored extensively in their tales and philosophical fragments. Their conception of *poesie* as an open-ended process reflects a hybrid way of thinking informed equally by religious feeling and Enlightenment rationalism; poetry for them was a never-ending experiment in combining elements of old and new knowledge in their pursuit of transcendence. Aidan Wasley notes the dialectical play in Auden's 1939 poem, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” where “poetry makes nothing happen,” yet is still, he writes a few lines later, “a way of happening” (*Age of Auden* 6). Poised as Auden is here between Britain and America, nearing the

half-way mark of the twentieth century, he points the way toward Ashbery's restless post-war rhythms and the affirmations that arise out of the ebb and flow of quotidian movement in times of crisis and uncertainty. Like the German Romantics, Ashbery and Auden find delight and inspiration in folk and fairy tales, a genre that brings an element of the fantastical to the spiritual and social remedies it offers. My consideration of the function of tales in both poets' work is based on a reading of those tales, along with the lives and work of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, from a perspective that allows for complexity and open-endedness. While German Romanticism is the thread that ties all of these writers together, I focus specifically on Novalis because it is he who most carefully and painstakingly elucidates the development of *poesie* into a practice that works in tandem with philosophy to invite moments of accidental authenticity into the artistic process. For Ashbery, such moments—imperfect, often unsettling, always profound—comprise poetry's chief pleasure and most valuable function: “it forces you back into life” (Wasley, *Age of Auden* 115).

John Ashbery's poetry is a product of lack. Both center and frame are generally missing from his poems or only hinted at, compelling the reader not to abandon them as unnecessary, as some critics of postmodern poetry would contend, but to seek them all the more assiduously. Like a play without its set or a novel whose main character has been erased, events occur within some unspoken context or revolve around an invisible agent that refuses to put the pieces together for us. By omitting what seems most necessary, Ashbery draws out our most human desires: to make sense of the world and to feel at one with it. His is a poetry of the periphery, but it is a Romantic periphery, where the center is everywhere and nowhere at once.

Thus when reading Ashbery's poetry it is best to start with the details, and let the larger picture take time to develop gradually. I begin this thesis with a close reading of his 2007 book,

A Worldly Country, as a means of bringing to light some of his main preoccupations through the peripheral approaches he takes. Though Ashbery's voice is distinctly American, the book is less about his country than about poetry itself, its ancient depths and today's vast shallows whose farthest shore still beckons. As anyone familiar with his work knows, reading his poems to understand his thoughts on a particular subject is like entering a madman's library; after perusing a number of titles, one might start to get a sense that larger themes like time and aging, leaving home, belonging and rebellion, love, longing and death are being addressed, but without any attempt at logical organization. Instead, meaningful connections are accidents that occur across fragments of syntax, discourse and genre, and between the poet and other writers. Like all poets, Ashbery takes pleasure in language, but it is a relaxed sort of pleasure, receptive and sociable, as attentive to others' constructions as to his own manipulations of their arrangement. This quality has nothing to do with feelings of indifference about asserting a lyric voice, but is a result of his deliberate ambivalence toward making a conclusive artistic statement. His comment on Language Poetry could apply to any school or trend: "it will become more fascinating as it disintegrates . . . it's like there's a certain hard kernel that can stand the pressure only for so long, and then it starts to decay, giving off beneficial fumes" (Ashbery and Ford 65). Disintegration is a force that drives the momentum of his poems by turning into to its opposite, a coalescence of meaning into some new insight or image that will in turn be reinterpreted, "like a wave / you look back at, knowing / you saw it, already invested in / some otherness" (*Worldly* 73).

The syntactical performance of disintegration and decay carries with it unsettling implications for narratives designed to explain the communal and individual human journey, and to smooth over the gaps with imaginative solutions, whether religious, psychological or poetic. By referencing W. H. Auden in his autobiographical poem "The Handshake, the Cough, the

Kiss,” Ashbery pays homage to his earliest influence while drawing attention to his own conflicted relationship with the legacy he inherited. Of Auden's preface to *Some Trees*, for which he awarded Ashbery the Yale Younger Poets Prize, Ashbery says, “It seemed evasive. He didn't seem to like the poetry itself” (Ashbery and Ford 39). Ashbery and Auden seek different poetic solutions to the problem of historical uncertainty, but both attempt to rejuvenate the poetic project during a period when the primacy of liberal humanist beliefs, and poetry as their expression, has given way to a more variegated ideological and textual landscape. For both poets, Romanticism offers ways to begin formulating a response that could once again make the world into a place in which we might live freely and ethically, but German Romanticism in particular reflects the conflicts and contradictions that produced the contemporary subject to which Auden and Ashbery attempt to give voice. Its influence can be discerned in Auden's imagery of mines and caverns, in Ashbery's ironic allusions to fairy tales and fables, and in both poets' concern with the human desire to find, in the communal past or the core of the self, some code that will secure a golden future. Out of the German Romantics' fertile blend of religious and scientific models, Novalis, Schlegel, and their contemporaries developed an approach to poetry and philosophy that Michel Chaouli describes as a “process of experimentation in which some forms emerge and others decay, in which some outcomes are predictable and others are not” (4). Accordingly, Ashbery's poetic response is a solution only in the metaphorical sense of a substance that has been dissolved or broken into parts that might be brought together in unexpected new combinations, whereas for Auden, the uncertainty of such a process gradually began to resolve into a clear answer, which resides outside the material world, in the realm of spirit.

Auden's 1966 poem “River Profile,” for example, begins with an epigraph from Novalis:

“Our body is a moulded river” (Auden, *Selected Poems* 295). Novalis's archetypal river symbolizes not only the eternal flux of the physical world, but also the notion of an ongoing confluence founded in a vision of passionate love so profound he devoted much of his life's work trying to reconcile it with his notion of the divine, so that his understanding of the material realm is coloured by his affections for it. Auden captures the manifold beauty of the river's moods almost despite himself, linking it to society's moral decline (and, one discerns, his own), and ending with an image of the river's final “effacement” in “a huge amorphous aggregate” where, he states somewhat doubtfully, even “[u]nlovely / monsters, our tales believe, can be translated / too” (296-297). Absent is anything like his heartfelt entreaty in an untitled poem from 1937 that the lover he addresses might “[f]ind the mortal world enough” (54). Instead, he emphasizes that poetry, because it is irrevocably yoked to the world, must fail at the task of translation so that everything it captures is to some degree “unlovely,” if not downright brutish. Ashbery, by contrast, gives us “Into the Dusk-Charged Air,” a long compilation of rivers whose brief descriptions emphasize their various characteristics and fates. As abstractions rivers may be eternal, but in their material individuality they are merely different, and fascinatingly so. By immersing himself in things as they are, Ashbery follows a strain of German Romantic thinking that goes beyond Auden's threshold of comfort to remain open to the world.

He does this by incorporating what is most compelling in Auden's poetry: the brooding intelligence and dry comic wit; the lonely moments of reckoning in the midst of a larger theme; and the persistent yearning to transcend the pain of loving an imperfect world. For Auden, the latter is cause to resent the limitations of poetry, but the point where he gives up is, for Ashbery, where things start to get interesting. In “Caliban to the Audience,” the concluding speech of *The Sea and the Mirror*, Auden's parody of *The Tempest* and a book which Ashbery has

acknowledged as an unconscious influence on *Three Poems* (Ashbery and Ford 56), Auden presents us with his own version of Shakespeare's Caliban, speaking in the voice of Henry James. This Caliban could, initially at least, be the speaker of any number of Ashbery's poems, as one who, "forever confiding, cajoling, comforting and castigating, forces a recognition of the unbridgeable gulf between what people wish to be like and what they really are" (Fuller 363). In his clownish wisdom, he confirms regretfully that any time we desire to have an author explain a work, "it is I . . . who will always loom thus wretchedly into your confused picture" (Auden, *Selected Poems* 156). His exposition on the role and limits of art, without which "we should never know who we were or what we wanted" (161), is convincing precisely because it shows that not only are our imperfections worthy of an artistic platform, but our desire to know who we are and what we want is that platform's very foundation and the reason it must be both kept and transformed by future voices.

Auden, however, is not convinced by this character of his own invention. Instead, he has Caliban's recognition of poetry's constraints take him to the cliff-edge of a despairing vision in which "at this very moment when we do at last see ourselves as we are," we must face a terrible realization: "There is nothing to say. There never has been. . . . There is no way out" (177-178). Confronted with such a stark declaration, the reader is hardly surprised when Auden takes a turn of direction that John Fuller sees as recourse to "the *deus ex machina*" (367); "here, among the ruins and the bones," Caliban suddenly assures us, "we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours" (178). As a conclusion this sounds forced and unconvincing, as extreme in its sudden and effortless attainment as the previous revelation was in its absence of all possibility. It reflects Auden's profound disappointment in the limits of the human world, and his willingness to conjure an instant paradise that he bears no responsibility for creating. Worse, it defies the spirit

of Caliban himself, who up until now has had more to tell us about ourselves than any “perfected Work which is not ours.”

In *Three Poems*, playing a role similar to Caliban's, Ashbery refuses to sacrifice his artistic autonomy to an unknowable Maker and instead remains focused on his unknowable reader, to whom he has the greater obligation:

Well, this is what I get for all my plotting and precautions. But you, living free beyond me, are still to be reckoned into your own account of how it happens with you. I am afraid that you will never see your way clear through the velleities of the excursion to that other shore, eternal despite its finite nature, of acquisitions, suggestions and hints, useful, irregular: the exposed living that is going on, and of which you are a part, so that it could be said to exist only for you. (*Collected Poems* 254)

His concern is not that there is no way out of the work, but that the other whom he addresses might not learn how to live within it, or even recognize that though it is imperfect, it is ours if we choose to claim it. If, for Auden, seeing ourselves as we are leaves us with nothing to say, for Ashbery it leaves us with so much to say that following a linear narrative path is too restricting. The world with all its ordinary “acquisitions, suggestions and hints” is “useful” but “irregular,” requiring an uneven and sometimes unsatisfying approach that is all part of “the exposed living that is going on.” His revelation, far from being invisible and removed from the business of life, is exactly that busyness that Auden overlooks in his quest for something greater.

In sketching out the development of German Romantic ideas in Auden and Ashbery, I mean to draw attention to a divergence of interpretive approaches that lead, in one direction, to an emphasis on the closure that potentially exists outside the bounds of art, and in another, to the

paradoxically contained boundlessness of art itself, both of which were extensively examined in the writings of Novalis (the pen name of Friedrich von Hardenberg). Novalis's influence on Ashbery is indirect,¹ but the lineage that connects them can be traced down through the American Transcendentalists via Emerson's essay, *Nature*, which was essentially “a restatement of ideas” discussed by Carlyle in his own essay on Novalis's *The Novices of Sais* and the *Fragmente* (Pfefferkorn 14). Like Novalis and Emerson, who share a “basic similarity of intellectual temperament” (246), Novalis and Ashbery share a capacity for speculation, paradox, and a plenitude of perspectives that verge into excess. Emerson may have drawn from Novalis an unwarranted confidence in his own ideals, but Ashbery's work responds to the more flexible aspects of Novalis's thinking, where the writing self and the receptive other seek a common ground despite the absence of any assurance of such a ground. Much is achieved, Novalis argues, “when the striving to understand nature completely, is ennobled to yearning, a tender, diffident yearning that gladly accepts the strange, cold creature, in the hope that she will some day become more familiar” (*Novices* 29). Moments of familiarity, when they do happen, occur by chance in the unfolding of the poem, or in the case of Novalis, in the *poesie* of the tale. And for Ashbery, poems, fables and tales are as much a part of the world as anything else.

My inclusion of readings of some of the fairy tales whose characters and themes are alluded to in the work of Ashbery and Auden places the genre at the fulcrum between their respective approaches to narrative and the metaphysics of desire. Auden's appreciation for the tales of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm—he wrote the introduction for a 1952 collection of their stories (Auden, *Prose* 550)—is rooted both in pleasure and in sympathy for a

¹ Acknowledging Novalis, Auden, and folklore among his influences, Ashbery admits, “I don't see influence the way literary critics see it. . . . I don't sit down to write a poem and think, well, since I've been influenced by Wallace Stevens, I will now write a poem that's influenced by Wallace Stevens.” In David Lehman's “The Pleasures of Poetry: John Ashbery.” *New York Times*, 16 Dec 1984.

teleological model in which poetry embodies a golden past that occurred before humankind was alienated from nature. After the Napoleonic Wars, the term *history* underwent a shift in meaning: it no longer designated an abstraction or some distant drama separate from everyday life. Instead, it came to signify the concrete experience of crisis and change, an “irregular movement” that could obliterate long-held traditions, and therefore “a synonym for insecurity and contingency” (Lampart 173-174). A new philosophy of history was needed to resolve what was felt to be an untenable situation, and it began to cohere in the writings of Herder and Kant, who expressed views of history as a teleological process in which crises are naturally resolved in the progress toward an ideal state of enlightenment. In this triadic structure, the insecure present moves forward into an ideal future only by returning to a golden past that occurred before humankind was alienated from nature. The value of *poesie*, according to such a view, lies in its embodiment of that golden past; in this capacity the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm should be able to heal the wounds of modernity by making the fragmented whole again (176).

In their very sincerity of effort, however, the Grimms set rules for themselves they would be forced to break. In preparing *Children's and Household Tales*, they sought material in its original state, preferably as it was orally transmitted, to ensure that it was uncorrupted by the schisms of modern life (Lampart 172-173). They firmly believed that only *Naturpoesie*, the collective stories of the folk, could unite the German people and shore up their common identity against the threat of revolutionary forces, an ideology that sprung quite naturally from the Grimms' interest in collecting and philology, and their emphasis on precision and accuracy rather than pure creativity (178). Jacob Grimm in particular insisted on strict adherence to empirical methods of collection and observation out of deep respect for the knowledge of the past, and out of reverence for the poetry he discovered “in everything: in old legal customs, in formulas of

law, and in the humblest documents of daily life” (Peppard xi). The source material he compiled in his vast *German Grammar* of 1819 and 1822, in 1835's equally remarkable *Teutonic Mythology*, and in the *German Dictionary* he did not live to finish, was charged with a mystery that he believed needed no enhancement.

Nonetheless, creativity crept into the *Tales*, not only in their careful arrangement but also in their narrative style, which in many cases reflected the bourgeois manners of the educated women who contributed them more than the rustic manners of country folk. On top of that, Wilhelm Grimm edited the tales, removing sexual allusions and adding metaphorical language to create a tone that was less common-sounding and more archaic; it is he who invented the archetypal opening, “*Es war einmal*” (“Once upon a time”), and its matching standard conclusion, “*und sie lebten vergnügt bis an ihr Ende*” (“and they lived happily ever after”) (Lampart 184-185). His contributions to the overall style of the collection doubtless improved its chances of success, but they also reveal its purity to be a necessary fiction, necessary at least insofar as the collection was required to connect with a popular audience who delighted in such a vital link to their common heritage. While the turn back to a golden past embodied in the genuine voices of the *Volk* was meant to provide a solution to “the problem of history,” the result, as Fabian Lampart sees it, is a series of tales that are themselves embedded in history, and yet in that capacity they serve as a genuine literary response to the difficult realities of a modern, changing world (186).

The success of their quest to secure the genre's philosophical significance may have been contingent on a particular historical moment, but it is important to note that for Jacob Grimm it was the quest that mattered. In a letter to his teacher and friend Friedrich Karl von Savigny, he avers that although the connection between history and myth evades us individually, it is

worthwhile to seek it collectively, and in that way uphold a shared faith that a link exists between shifting reality and the mysterious light of story: “This relationship may be something unfathomable, but it is enough that we believe in the existence of this miracle and strive to approach it . . . I see in mythology and popular beliefs a necessity and a truth which are far beyond the ability of individual people” (Peppard 48). Through belief and collective striving this truth could be encountered, if not possessed in its entirety, in part because its nature as the Grimms understood it was as varied as the stories they gathered. While they believed that their tales, in approaching the origins of humankind, drew closer to a religious core, that core was collective and included the pagan past as well as the beliefs encoded in all cultures from which the stories are derived. As Murray B. Peppard observes, “wherever they thought they had found a faith men once lived by, they adopted an attitude of reverence” (49).

Just as the core of truth in the Grimms' tales remains numinous, psychological resolution in Andersen's self-authored tales is often obscured by a layer of irony that throws the integrity of teleological narratives into question. Johan de Mylius observes that Andersen's work contains qualities that ally him with modernist sensibilities: “There is sorrow, misery, and even tragedy in his tales, and even the more comforting endings often have a sinister background” (170). The happy ending he gives *The Snow Queen*, Auden's favourite story, feels as forced as Auden's conclusion to Caliban's speech. The value of the tale, one would like to remind both of them, lies not in its comforting conclusion but in the parabola of its arc, and its strange divagations into an enchanted garden full of narcissistic flowers, the castle of a cheerfully sadistic robber-girl, and the palace of the Snow Queen herself, a place so exquisitely perplexing we would prefer to dwell in uncertainty there than return to Grandmother and her Bible. Ashbery's poetry, by continually leaving the security of any one place or perspective, keeps returning to the curiosities his words

uncover, each time finding something new left behind in the ebb and flow. Near the end of *Flow Chart*, he playfully revisits one of the Grimms' most popular stories:

The evergreen

canopy became an anagram of itself, telling us much
 about how gold was hidden in the old places, and spirits that came forth, irritated,
 from their resting place and pulled the magic latch-string, and the door flew open
 and there were the wolf and Red Riding Hood in bed together, except that the wolf
 was really Grandma. Whew! What a relief! They don't write them that way
 anymore,
 because the past is overlay. (216)

The rumour of “gold” materializes into a comically disappointing scene in which even the bawdiness of “the wolf and Red Riding Hood in bed together” is quickly replaced with a blander version. As the old stories retreat and take something of us with them, each revision in turn tells us something about who we are right now, and this too has a value poetry might recover if we are willing to give it our attention. The “overlay” of the past conceals no discernible origin, only an endless series of layers Ashbery is happy to rearrange for us, in the process inviting us to discover some new and intriguing secret in the old fragments. This thesis takes up the invitation.

Chapter 1

The title poem of John Ashbery's *A Worldly Country* is encased in an ABAB rhyme scheme that initially comes off as a whimsical way to make light of poetic structure, recalling nursery rhymes and the playfully serious light verse of W. H. Auden (1). As the poem progresses, the persistence of these sometimes childish awkward rhymes (“chickens” / “dickens”; “rebelliousness” / “hellishness”) reinforces a sense of the inevitability of a repeated return to social forms that both comfort and confine. Like the soothing rhythms of a rocking chair or a swing, the rhyme mimics the poem's larger thematic oscillation between a repudiation of conventional social patterns that impede change, and a need to hold on to the material emblems that promise security in a temporal world. Ashbery's familiar preoccupation with the way time manipulates our perceptions to create doubt in a knowable reality is played out here in a dramatic shift which speaks to the generational unrest with which he engaged in earlier poems such as “Soonest Mended” and “Pyrography.” In this case, gestures of negation and then disruption of the social order are transformed, abruptly and inexplicably, into acceptance of a social mood that has been tamed and brought to order once again, while this renewed sense of decorum is always threatened by the next spasm of change.

The pace of the poem is key to its emotional impact. Its subject is initially elusive, as the reader is plunged directly into a series of negative phrases that can be summed up as a general disavowal of middle-class values:

Not the smoothness, not the insane clocks on the square,
 the scent of manure in the municipal parterre,
 not the fabrics, the sullen mockery of Tweety Bird,
 not the fresh troops that needed freshening up. . . .

From the uniform “smoothness” of the cultural landscape, the speaker moves to reject the “insane clocks” that measure out the demanding hours of public and social life, an image that resonates with the figure of Tweety Bird to conjure the cuckoo-clock's mad reminder of our forced conformity to arbitrary divisions of time. This particular Looney Tunes character also serves as an apt symbol of middle-class disdain for the scruffy poor as, smug and safe in his cage, the cloyingly blameless bird looks down from his high-rise perch to the alley cat below who longs for a full belly. More damning is the rank scent emanating from “the municipal parterre,” a phrase that suggests not so much a garden as the theatre of municipal affairs and the accompanying corruption of those who play the parts of public officials. The synthetic texture of life in post-war America is further emphasized by the word “fabrics,” which alliterates with “fresh troops that needed freshening up” to create an ironically reassuring reminder of the ease with which the military's image may be laundered to produce the appearance of motives more wholesome than protecting and enriching the country's wealth. Judging from these first few lines the poem appears to be dealing with a political topic, but as the negative phrases accumulate the subject of the poem retreats, and one gets a sense that there is no positive value to the need being implied, only a hollowed-out reverse image of the rejected conventions.

At this point the poem shifts gears and an indistinct subject is introduced: “If it occurred / in real time, it was OK, and if it was time in a novel / that was OK too.” Just as these subjective experiences of time are acknowledged, the pace picks up and seems to run ahead of the subject under discussion, now defined as “the great parade,” a swelling movement of shared social change that emerges “[f]rom palace and hovel” to flood “avenue and byway.” It is never clear where on the political spectrum this “great parade” might be placed, whether the nation has been summoned to war or taken to the streets to protest injustice; that both are occurring at once could

be inferred. Ashbery's seeming carelessness in generating different voices and points of view sometimes obscures the great care he takes to include everyone in the drama he relates, opening up individual trauma to make it more bearable as a shared experience. Carried along on the singsong momentum, the reader comes to a moment of crisis; suddenly, there is “no peace in the bathroom, none in the china closet / or the banks, where no one came to make a deposit. / In short all hell broke loose that wide afternoon.” The disruption has reached into the citizen's most private places, those where one's precious possessions are stored, and “the banks,” where the wealth of the individual and of the country is kept and fostered. Hints of “the crack in the teacup” from Auden's “As I Walked Out One Evening” mark this poem as a revision of Auden's dark prophecy in which a “glacier knocks in the cupboard” to remind us that Time will ultimately invade even our safest public, social, and domestic spaces (*Selected Poems* 66-68).

But Ashbery is not content to leave the reader there, choosing instead to persist with one of his characteristic common-sense turns. In a worldly country things matter, and the stability of relationships built on their exchange provides peace and security. At this moment of cresting turmoil, “the great parade” has reached such hellish proportions that any relief is welcome. Like the metaphorical wave in the final stanza, the wave of change seems to crash and recede to a moment of stillness as the speaker pauses, finally breaking from the rhyme, to wonder, “What had happened, and why?” In the final poem of the book, “Singalong” (76), Ashbery develops this question and provides at least a partial answer:

. . . Why not
 accept the easy way, the one
 that's offered? The kind one?
 Because it isn't easy or kind enough.

It has to be hard
to have brought us this far.

These lines suggest that a distance must be traversed to serve the imperatives of growth and change, but rather than a teleological progression toward some ultimate redeeming knowledge, Ashbery offers a backwards glance at an unfolding history that is firmly anchored in the fluctuations of the temporal world; redemption will come as surely as the next “ungluing,” just as wave after wave breaks on the shore. Once again he takes a long view of “social progress,” and in *A Worldly Country* the shadows cast by the things we feel we need have grown ever longer. The ease they bring, while feeling like release, is a kind of dream that does not promise liberating knowledge but leaves us to “sleep, nod / like reeds at the edge of a pond.” Measured against the horrors of change, “the shallows” offer something more valuable: the safety of not knowing. The quatrain that ends “A Worldly Country” returns to the lulling rhyme scheme in a meditation that suggests a geographic model of time:

So often it happens that the time we turn around in
soon becomes the shoal our pathetic skiff will run aground in.
And just as waves are anchored to the bottom of the sea
we must reach the shallows before God cuts us free.

In this model, time is not a line but a landscape over which we wander without any definite direction, except that we end by being cut free from the various patterns we encounter. Meaning is not possessed but passed through, belonging as much to the circumstances as to the people who are subject to them. Numinous moments are contingent on a certain arrangement of elements that can just as easily become hazardous, like the glimpse of a truth too difficult to face, and these moments can be experienced with eyes open or closed. But the will to remember or to

forget leaves its emotional traces on the landscape, and as Ashbery gives verbal shape to them he continually returns to the question of how such sensitivities are to be retraced, and to what purpose.

Throughout *A Worldly Country* Ashbery revisits the subject of holding and letting go, moving through a variety of moods that are sometimes restless, sometimes forgiving. The fence on which he now sits separates a sometimes frustratingly ambivalent mental space from one that is vaster, deeper, and more frighteningly mysterious than before. A sense of the world crumbling beneath one's feet is conveyed in the cliff imagery of "Filigrane" (21), where "[n]o one knows how / long their toehold can hold out" in "this ugly, cliff-dwelling universe," while in "Cliffhanger" (18), "wintry thickets" are "forcing their edge on you." To take solace in ignorance seems forgivable when "the dream . . . of lamb's lettuce and moss" grows protectively in a place "where Acheron used to flow" ("Feverfew," 5). Milton's river of sorrow flows quietly beneath Ashbery's landscape of moss and cheap goods, its echoes discernible in the need to keep repeating what seems most important while never quite grasping its meaning. His empathy finds its depth in the levels of grief he glimpses but does not fully sink into, directing his reader's gaze in another, more useful direction: back to the poem itself and the comfort of a momentarily shared consciousness. "[W]e'll / recognize us from the way we look at each other, / not from any urgent movement forward / or anything like that," he writes in "Ukase" (22), confirming the sincerity of his desire to be *with*, rather than simply to be. Being with others requires different responsibilities, a need to figure out "the rights and the right ways" ("Opposition to a Memorial," 6), yet the moral imperative of social life also provides a safety net for the individual, drawing him or her away from the dark intoxications of private suffering and toward a shared illusion of wholeness. Even more than the average citizen, the public poet is obligated to be good, to care

for the well-being of others and assume the existence of a communal soul that is capable of being healed. To be good, however, is also to be obedient, to accept half-truths as truths, to make oneself useful and live comfortably in the shallows of thought. Ashbery takes on this role with varying degrees of affability and reluctance, at times remaining entirely noncommittal, as when he notes that “[w]e could ignore the warning signs, / but should we? Should we all? Perhaps we should” (“Image Problem,” 9). His ambivalence here indicates that along with the comforts of social belonging come subtler dangers that undermine the security of group consensus. The idea that there is safety in numbers may be a necessary illusion, but it is an illusion all the same.

This proliferation of voices and attitudes captures the noise of a country that knows what it has, but does not quite know itself. In another poem (“Feast or Famine,” 40) and another mood, the speaker acknowledges how the compulsion to do what is right flickers as the situation changes:

I said, in times of war
 we make good warriors.
 In peace we are as nothing:
 good dads or bankers.
 But see where the tide is rising
 for the umpteenth time, and try
 to put a saddle on that. . . .

To complicate the notion of peace by aligning it with both “good dads” and “bankers” indicates the conflicted morality of a country that not only is driven by ideals, but also relies on a certain degree of complacency in its citizens towards both the violence of war and the profits of peace; they must be willing to accept a status quo in which both dads and warriors are “good.” Noting

that the social mood is changing again, the speaker urges his listener to embrace the energy of this latest wave of opportunity, to “try / to put a saddle on that,” and to leave off kindness for a chance to leap ahead into unknown possibilities. Yet he urges this advance knowing there is always a risk of suddenly realizing that the “whole scene / or reef has retreated,” rendering the enterprise meaningless and difficult to defend.

While Ashbery is willing to gently critique various conclusions about “rights” and “right ways,” he complicates his negotiation with moral conflict by refusing to confine it to any specific politics, instead bringing it back to the realm of personal experience and the roles of both poet and reader. In “A Perfect Hat” he returns to the cliff metaphor, but this time his speaker is eager to be there, “in the thick / of what I would rather be doing, jumping off a cliff, rousing subordinates” (34). Ignoring the instinct to protect his readers from unanticipated meanings, he gives in to his urge to startle them awake before the pregnant moment has passed. In “Opposition to a Memorial” (6-7) the economic stability under threat in “A Worldly Country” is represented as a general obsession with the cheap dazzle of surfaces that blinds the reader to what the poet feels is most important:

There were prisms and lanterns at the outer edge

and toward the center a vacancy one knew.

This is what it means then,

to be in a dream and suck sleep from a jar

as though only the polished exterior mattered.

Inside all was crabbed notes and lines,

the reason of the doing. The reader frowns

and shuts the book. Another time, perhaps,

there will be effusions, random exclamations.

Today it's clear the rent has come due again.

A “polished exterior” of “prisms and lanterns” matters more than the content which is “the reason of the doing”; impatient, the reader gives up trying to translate the “crabbed notes and lines” and turns his or her thoughts to the more practical problem of paying the rent. By having the experience of a poem interrupted by the reminder of an impending financial exchange, Ashbery places the work of the poet in the uncomfortable context of the production and consumption of goods and services. To pay the rent is to exchange money for the continued security of a home, which on the surface seems more serious than scouring obscure passages of poetry hoping for “effusions” and “random exclamations,” words which suggest that the reader expects the poem to be a prettily packaged container of meaning that requires little thought be paid to it. Implicit in this line is a challenge to the reader to consider paying attention to the poem the way one might pay rent, and in this way find a home in it for a time. Those who prefer to “suck sleep from a jar” like nursing infants miss an opportunity to commune with the poet in a transaction that amounts to an exchange, not of goods, but of thoughts and feelings. His frustration stems from more than a lost chance at meaningful communication; also squandered is an alternative means of repairing a society recovering from the trauma of social change such as that described in “A Worldly Country,” where economic values drive the very spiritual values meant to offer solace. To repair is to mend something so that it can be useful again, but its Latin root, *repatriare*, means to repatriate, to send one back to one's home country. When the sense of home and belonging becomes lost in the drowsy acceptance of a society obsessed with

“things”—a worldly country—the poet's task is to provide a genuine sense of home and the security of shared experience, however fleeting that may be. Ashbery's poems often feel that way, as though they are a means of rearranging the furniture of everyday life so that on passing through one might be stopped by a moment that is at once strange and startlingly familiar, like going back to visit a place that has deep personal significance, yet not without company.

One strategy Ashbery uses to create these shared spaces of communion is to deliberately challenge the notion that a poem consists of a polished surface covering a dark interior, which the privileged reader then illuminates. Formally, his poems are never sufficiently coherent to satisfy easy definition, their content regularly flooding their surfaces while its source remains perplexing and unlocatable. A proliferation of meanings, like water, overlaps the shore where intended ideas find form as statements, and while Ashbery seems happy to stand back and observe the swell, he also demonstrates a sense of propriety regarding his reader, of whom he is always aware. Conscious of being courteous, he acknowledges the poetic encounter as an encounter with otherness. In “Well-Scrubbed Interior” (17), the speaker converses with a strangely abstract partner, asking it innocently “Can you walk?” before beginning a chat reminiscent of the Walrus and the Carpenter lamenting the sandy state of the beach. Here, the characters are kept company by an ocean that “keeps pace with us” and remains in place out of “respect” for them; “it just wants to be here and loyal,” the speaker insists, concluding, “[t]hat's what keeps it from splashing across the planet.” Keeping pace with his readers is an ongoing challenge for Ashbery, who acknowledges how easily subjective experiences of time can stretch and contract, falling out of alignment with the external world. Like the ocean, Ashbery's poetic language strives “to be here,” to be that sudden clear place amid the clutter where a moment of presence can be shared. “I can see you now,” says the mysterious walking partner, grateful that

for a brief time “you are in focus, / you in and out of dreams . . .” The conscious mind that it courts has a tendency to slip in and out of awareness, abandoning the poem to skate away on its own thoughts before circling back again. Ashbery anticipates this with his fractured syntax and shifting moods, which accept the fickle dreaminess of everyday thinking and give the reader space to move around in. The risk, of course, is that “one will waken in a well-scrubbed interior / and find it looks dirty, or disappointing / in some other way. Just unplanned.” These inconsistent poetic landscapes do not hide the keys to a universal source of perfection; those seeking the symmetries inherent in conventional ideas of beauty and truth will not find a master of ceremonies waiting to guide them. Instead, there will be brief, unexpected encounters amid the flotsam and jetsam of everyday experience, and occasionally, as in this poem, an indistinct figure offering the warmth of an embrace: “Here, I'll take you. You can repose in my arms / for the rest of the night.” If the poem seems elusive to the reader, the reader's attention is equally difficult to grasp. In this place, and for this brief duration, the poetic embrace provides not so much certainty as a refuge where giving and taking find a still point of balance.

These delicate embodiments are offered as consolation, a moment of release from the unending psychological pressure of the human need to feel complete. Ashbery recognizes that his poems fill a dual role: up close, they provide the individual with opportunities for communion with another, in part by de-familiarizing the sense of home; from further back, they can be seen as products sold to the masses to fulfill a promise of fullness—a promise that will always be broken. In “Mottled Tuesday” (15), he writes with a tone of ironic resignation, “I'll add one more scoop / to the pile of retail,” knowing that his poetic offerings may or may not be recognized as he would wish. Between the artist's intention for a work and its realization as a product in the marketplace is a vast gap where singular objects are transformed into a mass of stuff, where both

the rare and the common—“my white pomegranate, my swizzle stick”—exist side by side in the same bins, indistinguishable to the briskly perusing eye. The modern marketplace depends on and must continually feed its consumers of culture, who thrive on surface images as reflections of some future synthesis of their own identities which can never be attained. Those seeking reassuring images of themselves or their country in this poetry may find that the scene they come upon does indeed look “dirty,” “disappointing” or “[j]ust unplanned.” Ashbery makes no promises, and his mood at times seems to hinge on his response to the dreams and inevitable disillusionments of his readers, as his poetic voice swings from impatience to forgiveness and back again. “Mottled Tuesday” begins with his speaker's awareness that “[s]omething was about to go laughably wrong,” before he announces, with a hint of weariness, the old familiar plan: “We're leaving again . . .” In “Pyrography,” the destination turns out to be “the nothing of the coast” (*Collected Poems* 495); this time, it will be “bogus patterned plains” that once again offer no real escape. Wandering across a landscape that is more smooth and predictable than ever, but still able to produce an everyday sort of inspiration, he knows that whatever answers he finds will never provide enough of a feeling that is longed for in limitless quantities. He cautions other poets:

Amorous ghosts will pursue us
 for a time, but sometimes they get, you know, confused and
 forget to stop when we do, as they continue to populate this
 fertile land with their own bizarre self-imaginings.

Like children let loose at the fair, these “ghosts” are dazzled by a proliferation of possibilities; what else can a poet do in such a climate but “[c]hime authoritatively with the pop-ups and extras”? A pretense of literary authority may sell just as well as anything, this line suggests, but

either way it is all part of the general clamour of worldly goods that promise healing and reparation, and Ashbery is willing to be honest about his discomfort with the situation.

Addressing other poets who share the same predicament is one way of coping, a reminder that there is someone out there who gets the joke. In “For Now” (8), the poet-speaker lays out his complicated feelings about a public that cannot comprehend the notion of a poem as a shared social experience, one which depends for its value on a process of collaboration, rather than on the delivery of a product whose content matches the picture on the package. Forgiving those “on whom nothing has dawned,” he admits that he is uncertain himself where the center of the work lies—“does our polemic have an axis?” he wonders—but quickly comes back to the question of who holds responsibility for “illuminating” the poem. To perceive a work of literature as a product with predictable features and content on demand, and with social currency as an added value, is to accept a kind of passive “victimhood” when the reader is faced with a difficult poem. From the poet's point of view, a different picture emerges. After rummaging through ordinary places like “pantry and hayloft,” he or she brings out objects for the reader's consideration: “reeds, old motor-boat / sections, skeins of herring.” In keeping with his metaphor of water as an ungraspable substance, like time or knowledge, Ashbery has chosen items that easily lend themselves to the imagination: reeds are for hiding or getting lost in; boats must be built to propel us through the murk; herring sustains us. As if that isn't enough:

. . . We brought something else—
 some enlightenment we thought the months
 might enjoy in their gradual progress through the years:
 “sudden realizations,” the meaning of dreams
 and travel, and how hotel rooms

can become the meaningful space one has always lived in.

It's only a shred, really, a fragment of life

no one else seemed interested in. . . .

This loose gathering of images at first evokes the poignancy of everyday cherished things, like the odds and ends a grandfather might save in his garage, but their resonance grows when one realizes just how little monetary value they have. Yet how can we evaluate the moments of drifting thought that fill the empty stretches of our days? While Ashbery seems satisfied with the task of bringing them out for our perusal, the mood of this poem is tinged with the knowledge that their value is compromised by their incomplete, elusive nature. Not only is it impossible to fully take into account such things as “the meaning of dreams / and travel,” these phrases have an offhand vagueness that resists definition, a point implicit in the ironic quotation marks around “sudden realizations.” Their value cannot be reckoned until they are fully imbued with individual meaning, and even then, the quantity being measured resides in the individual, not in the poem. Rather than filling one up, they wait to be filled in the instance of their passing; like a hotel room, they will be moved through but never fully possessed. The poem itself acts as a shell in which to house the very idea of its impermanence, and yet its content lies directly on the surface, leaving its own brief moment of presence vulnerable to evaporation. The value of this moment is not inherent in the poem or its reader, but arises through a confluence of conditions that make significance possible on the occasion of its reading. Ashbery could not be more explicit here, and yet his plain language is powerfully charged, each phrase contributing to a growing brightness until a revelation is reached: the worth of the poem could not be owned or “carried away” even if the poet willed it; “It belongs to the decor, the dance, forever.”

Such moments of revelation come about as secular disclosures rather than prophetic acts

of divine inspiration. The role of poet-as-prophet is addressed in “Autumn Tea Leaves” (72), which defies the promise implied in its title to look forward, and instead preoccupies itself with questions about the present and past. Even there, nothing is clear. “All across Europe a partial eclipse / is checking in,” suggests a strange guest visiting for an unknown duration as a metaphorical entry into a period of epistemological uncertainty. Instead of attempting to explain this new swell of events, the speaker resorts to describing its effects, which oscillate between “[u]nsudden surprise” and “weary impatience.” One might choose for oneself which response fits best, but either way, “it just goes,” regardless of how it is defined or where its “impromptu horizon” is temporarily affixed. The speaker takes on the role of fortune-teller only to tear away any pretense of illusion by attempting to procure detailed answers from the reader-client:

I ask what is special about this helix, if
indeed anything is. Can you see it,
its difference, distinguish among halftones,
fugitive tints, measure the rising level
even as it suffocates us?

The speaker's insistence on asking these questions instead of answering them indicates his unwillingness to provide definition, perhaps because of a suspicion that it would be fruitless to try, but perhaps also because the definition will feel more genuine if it is the reader's own, based on a personal, thoughtful, subjective response. Implicit is the message that individual emotional effects “mark the flow” of the *Zeitgeist* as accurately as anyone else's interpretation of it, and come closer to attaining presence than any externally imposed measurement. Though it is barely adequate, subjective response occupies the middle ground between absolute knowledge and that which is understood to be constructed as such. “Dreams” in the past “were positive heaven,” the

speaker recalls with nostalgia, “not just / framed pictures for the sleeper's instruction / and, yes, delight.” It seems that his hesitance to impose too much interpretation will be in vain, no matter how sincere the motive; “positive heaven” is forever lost, and “framed pictures” are the only possible result of a poetry whose function is so strongly yoked to the use-value made explicit in Horace's platitude. Yet the speaker resists the imperative to create such a frame, turning again to the reader to ask yet another question: “what shred / of blanket will you deem sufficient for the occasion, / dread or ecstasy, or just wanting to be covered?” The confusing syntax of this line presents each “shred” of what could be a “blanket” interpretation as both a reaffirming assertion of meaning and a reason for the need of it. Of the three, “just wanting to be covered” is by far the least opaque, and seems to be the one the poet would prefer: it is the most truthful, and the most tender.

By the end of the poem, Ashbery has offered no revelations other than demonstrating the ambiguity of the poet's position as fortune-teller. No predictions of divine judgement are made, and the subtle biblical allusions to “the rising level” give way to a surfeit of possible meanings rather than a purifying flood. Instead of an occasion for prophecy, the poem becomes not much more than a shared cup of tea, the practice of reading leaves and telling fortunes turning into a literal accounting of things that are common, mundane and transient:

The cakes that were served—
 is there a record of those? Or leaves collected
 in the hollow of a stump, something one
 would wish to have included in the reckoning
 even if it was never going to be reckoned,
 or small sail breasting the apparent tide,

on and out of the forever harbor, just this once?

Next to the teacakes and the fallen leaves, rendered equal to them through syntax and a noncommittal “or,” is the “small sail” that catches the swell and is gone. The shift in imagery to this moment of silent movement engenders for Ashbery the best a poet can give, and it is enough. Without detail or frame, it appears too briefly to look into the future or capture anything specific from the past, and is in itself hardly more than a wish to transcend time, being both “on and out of the forever harbor.” Yet it offers a moment of presence that encompasses both a return to a familiar feeling and its instant loss. This brief movement, not quite real but entirely palpable, gives a sense of spirit passing through matter, as though nothing else need be foretold in the poem but that.

There is something both highly refined and uncultivated about this movement of the poet's mind back through its remembered images, the feeling of a finely-tuned sensibility expressing itself in a completely natural way. Yet it would be inaccurate to claim that Ashbery privileges the natural over the synthetic, or that he could do so without a deep sense of irony. His work allows beauty to manifest itself in strange and unexpected ways, and he is particularly attentive to whatever oddities propel or interrupt the thought process, throwing the “naturalness” of its movement into question. His poems delight in making the unnatural feel natural, in mixing manufactured voices together into something resembling the noise inside one's own head. As a result, fiction and lived experience interrupt each other as they vie for authority, and his poetry presents a true picture of this process even as it fails to distinguish any one true voice. “One of His Nature Poems” (56) is deceptive at the outset since it involves the natural world only peripherally, rendering the title an ironic take on poetic genres rather than an indicator of an homage to all that is wild and free. The first stanza ignores nature completely to ponder possible

solutions to an unnamed problem, presumably to do with preserving or reigniting poetry's relevance in the current cultural climate. The second stanza begins with a metaphor—"Dragging the Pacific for starfish, like we do"—in which natural objects are merely resources that poets exploit. The observation that follows, "Painted truths can't always be lively / nor unvarnished arabesques straightforward and cool," indicates the difficulty of choosing not only a poetic subject, but also the attitude necessary to frame it and make it appealing. Absent are any examples of the wonder, bliss, or terror inspired by the natural world; instead, the speaker is preoccupied with the problem of turning it all into something stylish and original, something that is imbued with a type of "purity" that "isn't flummoxed by brandy and cigars." As a result, the nature poet is portrayed as a pragmatic opportunist for whom the idea of nature is a tool used to brighten things up, like adding bleach to laundry, and the task of writing only a matter of "scrubbing some sense" into the poem to produce the "silver lining" readers expect. Ashbery mutes what might sound like criticism by implicating himself as part of the "we" who are deliberating, in the opening lines, about the next step to take, or the next attitude or resolution to adopt. While he has not written anything that could be accurately summed up as a "nature poem," he does attempt to produce something like a genuine experience that is not separate from the natural processes of birth, maturation, and death. And while irony may have replaced sentimentality, the latter is always forgiven. When nature appears in the last lines, it is because "the last few spectators," have abandoned the poetic performance "to straggle home through a rude wind, mud, and chaos." The basic elements of a "nature poem" lie exposed and unglamorous, as "unvarnished" as the image of the poet that is exposed along with them. But more important is the point that both need to be shaped into a fiction if they are to have any cultural relevance.

As the title suggests, then, “One of His Nature Poems” is as much about the creation of poets as the creation of poems, and it reflects on their plight in a way that is representative of the more general struggle to make sense of one's identity. Throughout these pages, the speaking voice steps back to comment on the process, history, and purpose of his vocation before rejoining the poem to erratically fulfill its obligations in the present, his mood resigned but not unwilling. That present is explored as the point where the membrane between thought and reality is thinnest, where a pinprick might startle us into a moment of clarity. After all, our proximity in time and space to an object of thought would seem to have an impact on our ability to judge its truth-value, potentially rendering the here-and-now more real than memories of the past or prophecies of the future. Certain things are, of course, concrete and graspable; in “The Inchcape Rock,” the speaker can pronounce defiantly that despite all that is suspect, “[t]he feet are here” (32). But when knowledge is reduced to such literal proclamations, and so much of our reasoning is seen to be anchored in shifting sands, a full understanding of the present is as elusive as a complete grasp of the past. In “To Be Affronted” (2-3), a fleeting sense is gained of the fullness of past ways of knowing when the current moment aligns with a former current of movement: “For a while we caught the spirit of things / as they had drifted in the past. And we got / to know them really well.” But the knowledge that has been gotten is simultaneously transformed into matter: the drifting spirit becomes “[c]obwebs” which, although they “sailed / above the shore” are only the physical traces of some past movement that presumably had a meaning that is now lost. Upon further contemplation things get even more strange, “all being” changing into something “mysterious / and rubbery.” As comprehension begins to cohere, “being,” now a thing without spirit, disappears from the picture behind a “shroud,” leaving not a vital and breathing world but “the cement dream of taxis and life.” Life devoid of spirit has recourse only to things,

yet as in poetry, the trace of that spirit remains as the unseen force that propels all movement through those things. To demonstrate this, Ashbery once again develops his subject at a different pace than the flow of his words, so that when the content aligns with the reading experience for a moment – “What we couldn't see was / delightful” – the reader is likely to agree, joining the speaker in a mood of acquiescence that might otherwise be difficult to fathom. The pause compelled by that line is barely perceptible until the next line sweeps in with “July passed very quickly,” confirming a sense that something lovely has happened, but that its loveliness cannot be recognized until after it is gone. Approximately halfway through the poem, the process is repeated, more powerfully this time:

. . . Imagine a movie that is the same
as someone's life, same length, same ratings.
Now imagine you are in it, playing the second lead,
a part actually more important than the principals'.
How do you judge when it's more than
half over?

An opportunity occurs during this brief intermission for the membrane to be pierced before the reader is carried away on the current again. But the suggestive word here is “playing”—the apprehension of reality cannot be distinguished from a creative act. Like the “very little girl” for whom “being” is not much more than a malleable toy, the person who is addressed must try to fill in past and future blanks for him or herself, even as a “pastel tundra / crowds in from all sides,” confining that person to a moving present in which understanding must always begin anew, and be abandoned before it is complete. Delighted or not, the adult knows that there really is nowhere else to go. The most we can say about this reality is that it takes place in real time;

aside from that, the process of understanding is not so remarkably different from a child's practice of fiction-making, including the illusion of control. Shoved from the central role, and unable to discern between a “wizard” and a “charlatan,” the speaker demonstrates that “to be” is inevitably “to be affronted” in this way.

The blurred line between fiction and reality is explored again in “Pavane pour Helen Twelvetrees” (68-69), a poetic comment on the nostalgia of old films and a subtle reiteration of Ravel's “Pavane for a Dead Princess.” Like the opening melody of the musical piece, it begins with an introduction to a melancholy theme, in the form of brief verbal snapshots of the tragic life of the movie star of the title. The longer, more verbally textured stanzas of the second part attempt to explain that life by putting it into a larger context, while at the same time using a layered metaphor to draw attention to the limitations of form: the world as Edenic garden becomes a “park setting,” and finally a movie set with God in charge of the production. God's work, which once took shape in “the pages of a vast / octavo volume,” will be continued in a movie sequel, the new medium providing a newer and snazzier way to present the grand narrative of human sin and redemption. But beyond the special effects there is no shining revelation, only hints of Twelvetrees' singular, pitiful story, summed up as “[a]brasive chores . . . / Then, suicide at fifty”—a life which God admits “might have turned out / differently, if I'd been paying attention.” The long-dead movie star with the sad eyes has not been completely overlooked, but the redemptive power of God's love, confined to incomplete modes of expression, has fallen short for her. Whatever partial redemption occurs is made possible by her brief artistic career, which leaves a compensatory fragment to remain a part of the world after she is gone. Rather than transcending the world, she has been woven into it—“It was for this you spun your little web, / dear, and have somehow been rewarded”—and the result is an ironic sense

of connectedness between the fading image of the performer and an audience that does not seem to mind not knowing her as anything more than a trivial footnote: “Tonight we have tension and oneness, / arcane, arousing. Forgotten starlets / and minor nobility are apt to turn up in it.” Yet even this flimsy glamour generates a moment rich with pathos when she is recognized by an indistinct figure who performs his own imperfect gesture of redemptive love: “And so he said not to go, / is standing stuttering there / fluffier than a dream . . .” This exhortation to stay resonates with poignant irony. The present tense of “standing” suggests the eternal longing of someone who knew her intimately, but the figure might simply be another character in one of her movies, or a fan sad to see the movie end. Either way the object of that longing has been reduced to a flickering image, even if the feeling it evokes is genuine. The allusion to Ravel is apt; moving as it is, there was no real princess behind the original pavane, which was conceived merely as a pretty song for a dance.

While Ashbery is not, strictly speaking, a transcendentalist poet, his poetry does suggest that our fictional reality can be transcended in moments of intense contemplation, although the result is not the deliverance we might expect. During these moments, before thought intrudes to make sense of things by distancing the mind that thinks from the subject being pondered, we move through the present as though moving through a dream. In this pre-narrative state, before reflection, then judgement, then something that begins to resemble knowledge occurs, life passes as pure sensation, and Ashbery heightens this sensation with his use of simple, unexpected images. One example already noted is the “small sail” in “Autumn Tea Leaves,” which is sketched out so sparsely that for a moment it resists the metonymic implications of an actual sailboat and enters the senses as pure essence or abstraction. To encounter such an image is to encounter a half-formed thought, or something that lies between sensation and thought, an effect

comparable to what happens when gazing at abstract art, whose influence is always apparent in Ashbery's work. Jackson Pollock's busy repetition is there, but like the colour field paintings of Mark Rothko, Ashbery's poems also leave spaces that are wide open and free from definable forms; within them the process of sense-making is paused as the mind wanders, slows, and becomes still. He presents another occasion for this stillness in the first quatrain of "A Litmus Tale":

The scribes sank in wonderment.
 This was not the hierarchical file to which
 access had been deeded. It was something
 far more wonderful: an opaque pebble in the grass. (47)

The appearance of the incongruous pebble not only interrupts the scribes, calling into question the authority of the hierarchies they serve, but also the flow of coherent meaning. The pebble, in its unfathomable opacity, is both an obstacle and a blank receptacle that is impossible to make sense of within the context of the preceding lines. The work of the scribes, belonging to a world of officialdom and order, encompasses a kind of sense-making that allows no room for the contemplation of a pebble. Yet the pebble's "far more wonderful" mystery, the intrigue of its permanence and its compelling impermeability, quickly takes over. Next to this mystery, the establishment of shared meanings by official scribes comes across as trivial, and the solitary, almost voluptuous visual sensation provoked by the image of the pebble lying in the grass beckons like a soothing drug.

Yet this point of suspension, where poet and reader hesitate before plunging back in to the shared meanings of the social world, is also tinged with melancholy. Such fullness of perception requires a certain sacrifice of the social self that leads to a feeling of isolation from human

contact. As a continuation of, and contrast to, the pursuits of the scribes, the speaker describes his own work: “I am almost always looking / for themes to break down to further my research / into backward climes of noon alienation and majesty.” By breaking down the common themes and narratives that unite us, the speaker gains his own access—clandestine rather than “deeded”—to a looking-glass version of majesty that appeals to the senses and emotions instead of the logical mind. The result is an unofficial document of aesthetic experience, but the price is alienation, first from people but then, inevitably, from the very thing observed. The speaker's abrupt shift to the singular “I,” and from a tone of wonder to one that is more detached and explanatory, indicates the distance made necessary by this obligation to differentiate and describe. The poet-scribe must choose between meditating on the beauty of a strange, indifferent world—the pebble here could be almost anything, but it exists merely as an object of contemplation that cannot communicate or reciprocate—and joining that world, becoming involved in it and, to a certain extent, blind to the fullness of its beauty. The speaker offers no answer to the question of which is the better way of knowing. Instead, he takes a further step back from that beauty to comment on the poetic process, or what he calls “my own take on the disheveled / frankness we all inhabit / at one time or another.” His encounter with the perfection of the pebble is once again regarded as an interruption, a moment of messy honesty and even indulgence; it has sunk back down into the world of people and words. The desire to reject common experience has been reduced to a guilty pleasure, which is only achieved by “[b]acking away from tribal sunshine / so as to inhabit a no doubt intact compunction of one's own.” Somehow this process strikes a balance between the individual's experience of separation from the tribe and a place or attitude “we all inhabit”; however, that shared place of frankness is also, paradoxically, a place of regret that is all “one's own.” This unstable position is unresolvable; the process of determining which

is the truer state of being remains as insufficient as the “litmus tale” of the title. And yet the title does indicate an unavoidable ironic truth about the fleeting nature of poetic transcendence, and it, too, is tinged with regret.

If Ashbery refuses to choose one primary pattern with which to explore questions of truth, meaning, and knowledge, it is perhaps not only because he can find no pattern that inspires complete confidence, but also because there are times when exploring the ironies of *not* knowing is simply more fun. The flip side of melancholy, after all, is comedy, and relying on coincidences, strange contrasts, and sudden, unexpected moments of clarity can lead just as often to amusement as to something that feels like epiphany. Considering how densely his output is packed with such encounters, Ashbery's famous prolificity may be propelled in part by a drive to increase the chances of their occurring, so that in place of a panacea he can at least offer the kind of regular cheer that comes with a long and easy friendship. His affable humility enables him to accept the everyday realizations that are part of living a human-sized life, such as the one that occurs in the opening lines of “The Inchcape Rock”:

Prop up the “meaning,”
 take the trash out, the dog for a walk,
 give the old balls a scratch, apologize for three things
 by Friday—oh quiet noumenon
 of my soul, this is it, right? (32)

The occasional critic who accuses Ashbery of arrogance may have to ignore the outstretched hand of intimacy here, and his speaker seems to anticipate readerly reluctance with his take-it-or-leave-it tone. But this comically deadpan take on the “dishevelled / frankness” described in “A Litmus Tale” is far from indulgent; Ashbery's self-deprecating humour is one of his most

generous gestures, and is made possible by speaking in a variety of voices that allow for natural candor. Some express the naïve curiosity of children, or the deliberate contemplations of the very drunk, such as the first line of “Thrill of a Romance”: “It’s different when you have hiccups” (46). Others, as in the line quoted above, convey the disgruntled weariness of an elderly man who is becoming resigned to his disillusionment, and who on a certain level just wants to have his supper and go to bed. “Sleeper Wedding” is full of punchlines of this sort that provide comic relief as well as a jumping-off point for more complex insights. “Why am I with this sandwich / in open country?” the speaker wonders, and then collects himself to relate the following anecdote, including his cantankerous response:

The king told me I was a master
 who needed to study, but
 a master all the same.

My answer was who needs kings. (67)

Ashbery might well be talking to those critics who insist on determining his place in a hierarchy that his poetic style routinely undermines, as it does so nimbly here. He sets up the joke by starting off seriously, allowing his reader to buy in to the value of the words “king” and “master.” Then he saps their authority, first presenting a scenario in which “master” can be turned on its head to mean student (and juxtaposing it with the phrase “all the same” to subtly suggest a crowd of similar others), and then by rejecting not just this king, but the pluralized “kings.” Rather than emphasizing the historical importance of a line of kings, this pluralization instead evokes the mass production of images and a gradual emptying out of once-powerful signifiers. His quip “who needs kings,” is posed not as a question but as a common-sense response, as though something unnecessary has been shaken off. After summarily dismissing both kings and masters,

he adds the kicker: “And on that note / maybe we could have it a little warmer in here.” The speaker's curmudgeonly tone is suffused with an ironic awareness that he is exercising the last of the weakened authority of “a master” in whose diminishment he has colluded. The joke, as always, is on him along with everyone else.

The phrase “who needs kings” also encapsulates, in the most condensed and plain-spoken terms possible, the American project, but its forthright confidence is tempered by an unavoidable irony. In a worldly country, where the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, the tyranny of kings is replaced by the everyday tyrannies of desire, and the most lofty ideals take a back seat to the appetite for something new. This appetite is reduced to cartoonish absurdity in “They Are Still Rather Lovely” (44-45), which, like its most obvious precursor, “Soonest Mended” (*Selected Poems* 87-89), takes the pulse of a nation and finds it to be racing along at an alarming rate. The first line presents an image of Ovid “in the infomercial,” where he “starts to monitor his pain, / then gives up trying.” In place of a sustaining myth he seems to be offering a headache remedy; regardless, before any measure can be taken of current cultural metamorphoses, “the image is lost / through a nearly opaque glass transom.” Abruptly, a new image appears, decorated, sexualized, and saleable: “an ankle, / sheathed in ribbons.” Society's drumbeat has accelerated to a whirl, and perceptions are more and more frequently modified by the television screens and computer monitors that deliver them, so that all communication is reduced to the same shape and confined “under the dome” or “beneath glass in a cold room.” The familiar Ashberian trope of a flattened or smoothed-out culture combined with the swift exchange of images suggests that a compulsive habit of buying and selling has become the only comprehensible means of moving forward. But the desultory images that give shape to this new medium of communication have no unifying characteristic on which to hang a cultural myth, and

so “apostrophe, the very stuff of narrative, / shivers and turns spasmodic.” The speaker's tone of weary endurance signals that we are long past shock at the dysfunction of the new system.

The speaker's response to this dysfunction also marks an attitude that has been updated to suit the contemporary moment. The “good citizens” who, in “Soonest Mended,” are described in the present tense as “brushing the teeth . . . and learning to accept / The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out” (*Selected Poems* 89), are now regarded as part of the past: “You . . . did what / was expected of you.” Yet they seem to have gotten even less than expected as a reward. Whereas “action” in the 1970 poem is described as an uneven but still hopeful gesture —“this not being sure, this careless / Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow (89)” — in 2007, the speaker must admit that “the good stuff was poised to return, but the screen crashed.” Something important has been forgotten; as noted in both “Singalong” (76) and “A November” (66), there have been “places left unplanted,” and the now-dominant economic paradigm ironically leaves poets with fewer resources with which to monitor and improve the nation's spiritual health, leaving the speaker to complain, “I'd like to buy a definite article, but it's not that easy.” The explicit authority of an absolute ruler who reduces citizens to subjects has been replaced by the more subtle authority of a freedom-distribution system that shrinks them to fit the shape of expectant children. The poem concludes with a surreal scene in which the demands of the ego are equated with childish desires: “The fat lady / is working up a full head of steam. The conductor is smiling, / the sylvan backdrop is unscrolling. Can we have our presents now?” The dramatic irony of this naïvely hopeful wish—that whatever power is responsible for creating the “backdrop” upon which reality rests might grant a request for “presents,” or presence—is made more acute by the awareness that there is no escape from this scene, that even a proposal to return to the past would only mean dodging sideways under the glass. The poet is

left with one thing to offer, the present, but the speaker's playful tone betrays the ambiguous nature of the gift.

Ashbery treats notions of national identity and human desire with affectionate skepticism because he knows that as a poet he is complicit in their misrepresentation. The task of defining a communal present—the “presents” his chorus demands—proves to be an endless series of failed efforts, and necessarily so, since to impose finitude on his subject would be the end of poetry. Instead, Ashbery allows genuine insights to mingle with his partial successes and mistakes, all of it becoming part of the clutter that accumulates in a country where material and spiritual wealth sometimes overlap in their abundance. His attempts to provide a fresh sense of home in a worldly country lead him in two directions: anticipating a future when “[t]hose places left unplanted will be cultivated / by another, by others” (*Worldly* 76), and looking nostalgically back to “the early lessons,” as he calls them in “Soonest Mended” (*Collected Poems* 185). By drawing on past influences and looking ahead to future perspectives, he provides ironic commentary on the work of his precursors and on his own work that will, in time, be extended and supplanted by someone else. For Ashbery, anxiety about mortality generates both disappointment and hope, and a need for inventories that might, finally, establish something graspable of the individual behind the poem. The difficulties he encounters only add to the complexity of poems that insist, despite their author's wishes, on being themselves. In *Other Traditions*, he quotes David Schubert: “A poet who observes his own poetry ends up, in spite of it, by finding nothing to observe, just as a man who pays too much attention to the way he walks, finds his legs walking off from under him” (146). Paradoxically, his attempts at self-definition are where the pulse of his influences is most strongly felt.

Chapter 2

The longest poem in *A Worldly Country* is “The Handshake, the Cough, the Kiss” (25-30). Functioning as an ironic centerpiece, it is an autobiographical poem of failed redemption, presented as a series of episodes from the life of a poet as he attempts to explain himself and justify his work. Yet even from this central position the speaking voice struggles in the telling, unable to sustain the inward gaze by which a singular self might be located. Instead, it circles around its subject, regularly slipping into first-person plural or regarding its subject from the third-person point of view. This explosion of perspectives, almost cubist in its execution, does not quite obliterate the individual into abstraction, but it does call into question the idea that a stable relationship exists between speaker and reader. Instead, we come to know this individual by seeing him from varying distances and different angles, so that he becomes a collection of puzzle-like pieces that do not fit together to make a whole. With barely enough agency to determine the perspectives from which he is regarded—his thoughts are less a series of choices than a series of interruptions—the speaker seeks to uncover an authorial presence that remains stubbornly intangible. His meandering navigation through the fragmented narratives that deny him wholeness produces occasional strains of frustration and even bitterness, as though he expected something more reassuring from these attempts at nostalgic recollection than “a harmonic convergence viewed through a flawed window.” And yet his casual tone is surprisingly intimate, the abrupt changes of scene and mood revealing a life almost by accident.

His story begins *in medias res*, with a scene in which an urban sophisticate directs a taxicab driver to take a group of people to the cinema. The group is well-known enough that “[w]hen they passed through a city, it was others knew it first,” and the speaker assumes the shape of Ashbery in his younger years, a talented expat who can communicate “confidently, in

French,” and is welcomed by the European literati. Still, uncertainty plagues the scene. The man who “claimed no lift in his shoe” seems not to be telling the truth, a hint that the subject of the poem may be misrepresenting himself as well. Also uneasy in his role is the cab driver, who ought to know this landscape but instead “seemed lost.” The speaker is capable enough to inspire confidence, but once again the destination is a cinema, recalling the imagined “movie that is the same / as someone's life” and the question, “How do you judge when it's more than / half over?” (2). Implicit in this line is another question: how do you tell others about your life in a way that sustains them, without disappointing them or promising more than is possible? Before moving on to an account of the speaker's childhood and education, an older voice interrupts:

Every year at this time of day I get a feeling
of a pain, like thyme or dried figs.
Nobody needs to know what is ailing me,
which is sad, but telling them would be worse.

This break in the narrative emphasizes language play as a key element of the account, and a necessary impediment to its interpretation; its themes will be indirect, its primary substance the obstructions themselves. Yet these obstructions have rich possibilities for conveying surprising meanings and complex emotional states. The speaker's mixing up of “day” and “year” reworks a clichéd phrase to evoke the anxious feeling that time has accelerated to the point that its descriptive categories are no longer adequate; it has become a meaningless blur. His pain feels “like thyme,” a pun which on the surface suggests the ills that come with time and age, but when pressed generates multiple associations: traditionally used for embalming, thyme connotes both death and preservation, and is a reminder that the urge to hold on to things is related to the desire for immortality. Dried figs, like poems, keep their sweetness long after the fruit has been picked,

evidence of a life temporarily extended. The human desire to believe in the impossible—immortality, eternal love—is also addressed in the traditional lyrics of the old folk song, “Scarborough Fair,” where the refrain, “parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme,” is juxtaposed with a series of “impossible tasks” demanded by love. Though it is inevitable that the lovers will fail, they are asked to try anyway, a sentiment Ashbery echoes in *Flow Chart*: “But remember, one isn't obliged to love everything / and everybody, though one ought to try” (82). And so to thyme's association with delayed death can also be linked the idea of perseverance in spite of all odds, and especially the perseverance of love. Yet as metaphors for the speaker's unnamed “pain,” thyme and dried figs bring palpable form to a secret that best retains its usefulness when kept. Like W. H. Auden, who lends this poem both its title and its epigraph, Ashbery has a keen understanding of his responsibilities to the relationships on which a fragile sense of ethical belonging depends.

Aidan Wasley sees potential in reading Ashbery “as a self-conscious inheritor of Auden's civic tradition” (“The 'Gay Apprentice'” 668), which views the speaker-reader relationship as a means of fulfilling an obligation to the public. But Wasley argues that such relationships, for both Auden and Ashbery, take a “romantic, even erotic” form in which “poems reach out hopefully to the reader, like a lover yearning for an ideal partner”; if the reader is persistent in the face of the poet's “defensive misdirections,” they may reach “true contact and communion” (671). This metaphor of erotic seduction goes a certain distance toward capturing the intimacy of tone both poets achieve, but it requires two caveats. First, by defining the “true lover/reader” as one who will “work to understand” the poet, it comes close to positing a “true” poetic speaker who is a free and unified agent, and whose “misdirections” are merely a “defensive” tease. Second, it disregards the variety and complexity of the intimacies conveyed. Part of what makes

Ashbery's poems so appealing is the way they allow the casual intimacies of everyday encounters to unfold as satisfying affirmations of friendly or familial love, such as the "dinner of sandwiches / with the neighbor" offered in "Like a Photograph" (11). These intimacies are frequently rooted in place, often as it bears on a particular stage of life. Whether evoked through the geography of a familiar landscape or the arrangement of rooms in a house, they affirm the relationship of the speaker to others within the context of a place and a prospect it longs to inhabit fully, a place that encompasses the inner circle of the family and the wider social world beyond romantic love.

When erotic intimacy is raised as a subject, it is often viewed as a distant preoccupation of youth, like the springtime ritual of "sex on the river" that the adult speaker of "The Handshake" is restricted to observing because "only minors are allowed" (29). If, as Charles Altieri avers, love poetry must contend with a tradition in which erotic love leads to "transcendental possibilities" arrived at only through "metaphoric extensions of self" that subsume the beloved into the ego of the speaker (30), then relegating such intense intimacy to an arms-length vision of youth is one way for Ashbery to acknowledge the temptation of this unattainable transcendence while still maintaining "the hope there is something that the isolated consciousness can share" (32). Barred from inhabiting an erotic paradise, the speaker can still recognize a common yearning, which Altieri finds summed up by Ashbery as the "permanent tug of a home" (32).

This is not to argue that eroticism is not perceptible in the transfer of feeling between speaker and reader, or in the variety of conflicting emotions associated with the idea of home. In his discussion of this subject, John Vincent recalls Bonnie Costello's argument that Ashbery's use of the second person "offers the reader a feeling of being addressed or accompanied even in the most forbidding terrain," thereby creating "a feeling of connection" to the poem and poet (145), a connection Vincent interprets as erotic. Describing Ashbery as "a gay poet deeply cognizant of

the operations of the closet,” he sees in the use of an indeterminate “you” a means of addressing a “beloved” of the same gender without “throwing the closet door open” (145-146). At times, this function is perfectly fitting: “Lie in that grass. It's what we came for,” says the speaker of “The Recipe” to an aforementioned “you” before inserting a brief dialogue in which a person denies being “Mary,” a slang term for a gay man or lesbian (52). Without excluding such possibilities, Luke Carson takes a wider view, describing Ashbery's typical poetic conversation as one in which “the lyric speaker discloses his proximity to an other self, to an intimate presence who is not necessarily a lover, who may not even be addressed, but in whom the speaker finds attachment in a shared wound or loss” (449). Ashbery acknowledges that “a feeling of loneliness” may be behind his practice of rummaging through indefinite pronouns, perhaps rooted in his isolated childhood and the death of his younger brother (Ashbery, Interview). The presence of another, whether it is suggestive of a past self, a loved one, or a general audience, enables a connection with a shared identity, “a consciousness giving rise to the poem,” but its importance lies in the way the sense of another is incorporated into the poems to produce subtle emotional effects (Perloff 258). By not directly identifying the others to whom he speaks, Ashbery focuses attention on the act or movement that summons their presence into the reader's awareness.

In “The Handshake, the Cough, the Kiss,” the most obvious presence not directly addressed is Auden, whose 1936 poem, “At Last the Secret is Out,” serves as an emblem for the anxieties Ashbery encounters in his exploration of identity and the role of the poet. Certainly Auden's homosexuality adds a deeper shade of meaning to the “secret” that is never named, which finds its correlation in Ashbery's unspoken ailment. But if a trace of homosexuality can be detected in these poems, that trace is also an index of a greater omission and its associated sense

of shame, a “shared wound” based on an obligation poetry is unable to fulfill. Wasley captures this inherited obligation in his description of an “Audenesque” young Ashbery “whose attentions are directed outward at the world and not in toward the self, and who sees poetry as exerting a moral influence on that world” (“The ‘Gay Apprentice’” 670). While this is not exactly true—Auden does look inward, to the extent that Helen Vendler can claim that “he has always been at his most acute in self-definition,” even if it is only “a very partial self-definition” (92)—it accurately conveys both poets' preoccupation with the question of poetry's usefulness.² Auden famously expressed his belief in the limitations of his medium in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” with the phrase “poetry makes nothing happen” (*Collected Poetry* 50), but his protégé is less willing to give up so easily or to redirect his faith, as Auden did, from poetry to religion. For Ashbery, exerting a moral influence requires accepting the different and imperfect intimacies that make themselves available to the moment, articulating both their adequacies and inadequacies before they inevitably dissolve. It demands that he be true to the tricks and machinations produced by the thinking mind.

Auden's approach tends to align itself more closely with foundational narratives, especially those of Christian or Freudian thought, with their promise of salvation or a cure. In the poem from which Ashbery borrows, the keeping and telling of secrets takes place in a middle-class milieu where such activity has an air of sinful indulgence:

At last the secret is out, as it always must come in the end,
 The delicious story is ripe to tell to the intimate friend;
 Over the tea-cups and in the square the tongue has its desire;
 Still waters run deep, my dear, there's never smoke without fire. (*Collected Poetry*)

² In *The Age of Auden*, where this essay has been republished, Wasley adjusts the line to read “and not exclusively in toward the self” (112).

199)

Describing the secret as “delicious” and “ripe,” and including the voluptuous metonymic image of an insatiably desiring tongue, this stanza depicts telling as an erotically charged act analogous to indulging in forbidden fruit. But eroticism, here, is the opposite of love. By sharing forbidden knowledge, the teller and listener repeat the crime of the original sin which plunged humans into a fractured state and denied them true communion. The temptation cannot be resisted; unable to contain what they know, they allow it to spill out into the public realm, undisciplined and promiscuous, leaving its indelible stain on all humankind. And yet, despite all the talking, a final, unknowable secret remains, a source of both wonder and grief. Ashbery, for his part, revisits this theme of secrecy only to continuously circle around it, tuning in to whatever echoes it generates in the narratives devised to explain it. Where Auden presses for an answer, Ashbery's empirical aesthetic keeps him wandering the peripheries of the master-narratives, observing and recording the experience like a tourist: “We took a walk toward the cathedral. / It missed us twice. I think” (*Worldly* 26). His mistrust of language, when it is expressed, is checked with polite restraint, and he acknowledges his confusion with patience and humility.

For all its intricacy and nuance, Auden's poetry is more forthright about confronting the ills of the world. For both poets, feelings of frustration or disappointment are best dealt with by subsuming them into a tone of wry amusement: one that hints at bitterness without evolving into outright pessimism. But Ashbery's poetry is too conscious of its own capriciousness to invest unironically in a command such as Auden's “We must love one another or die” (*Selected Poems* 97). The misbehaviour of language has personal as well as political resonance for Auden, who saw enough of the ravages of the twentieth century to understand that the persuasive power of words is matched by their inability to be loyal to the truth. As an instrument of moral instruction

it had shown itself to be deeply flawed, capable of becoming an ominous force when wielded by “Hitler and Mussolini in their wooing poses” (*Collected Poetry* 37). As a tool that can pry open a gay man's closet and expose him to judgement and condemnation, the casual speech of others threatens even the most comfortable domestic spaces. Obtaining pleasure, let alone moral instruction, from poetic language in such a climate requires an appreciation for the ironies it conveys, and Auden captures these in the subtle undertones of the stanza quoted above, which suggest that the speaker plays a double role. The fourth line, “Still waters run deep, my dear, there's never smoke without fire,” both mimics the innuendo of the implied character who is having tea with a friend, and deliberately uses clichéd phrases to demonstrate to the reader a cultural discourse plagued by lassitude and decadence. As a comment on poetry these lines verge on cynicism, equating the role of the poet with that of a weary sophisticate who enjoys engaging in gossip and spreading half-truths. They revel in both pleasure and shame.

Philosophically, Auden's poetry frequently positions itself at the fulcrum point in a struggle between aesthetic pleasure and civic duty, and his difficulty in reconciling his calling as a poet with the urge to ethical action left its mark on his later poetic career. His view that life should take primacy over art was affirmed by his reading of Kierkegaard, whose philosophy of Christian existentialism places a strict separation between aesthetics, ethics and religion; poetry in this schema is simply not that important (Hecht 443). As these views developed, Auden's Freudian explorations of societal neurosis, coloured by his readings of Marx, gave way to a poetry that was less formally complex and more philosophically decided. David Bromwich finds in the later work an air of defeat which leads to a sense of desperation to tell what the poetry can't show. In Auden's claim that “poetry makes nothing happen,” he reads further implications: “Nothing, that is, in particular, nothing right away, nothing to bet on” (133). Bromwich contends

that hidden beneath Auden's modesty, which is based on his “desire to ingratiate,” is “something bullying, and he is out to bully himself as well as others” (133-134). This bullying works against the inherent possibilities of his own writing:

Auden's poetry knows what its author sometimes forgot: that what it seeks to join—life and death, isolate heroism and the sense of community—must remain forever parted. There is nothing to be done. And this knowledge brings to Auden's early poetry its unique dignity and its air of self-sufficient and unappeased loneliness (136).

Ashbery, on the other hand, consistently allows his poetry to convey the ironies of his good intentions, even if that means surrendering a claim to heroism. “Nobody needs to know what is ailing me, / which is sad” is an observation that freely admits the difficulty of being stoic in the face of regret, and it echoes precisely the “self-sufficient and unappeased loneliness” so evident in Auden's “At Last the Secret is Out.”

The gap between what Auden's poetry knows and what its author wants is apparent when one considers this poem in light of the play in which it originally appeared, *The Ascent of F6*. As a free-standing work, the poem accepts its ambiguities with grace and forbearance, but as part of the play, its mood of lonely resignation undermines Auden's attempt to find a psychological resolution to his protagonist's conflict. Co-written with Christopher Isherwood, the play is an allegory for Auden's struggle with competing urges toward duty and fame, and it exhibits the authorial control characteristic of his later poetry. It casts its hero, Michael Ransom, into an oedipal triangle in which he embarks on a mountain-climbing expedition to win his cold mother's love away from his more-favoured brother. Against his better judgement, and his growing realization that all the reasons given for climbing the mountain—politics, honour, money—are

morally empty, Ransom ascends the mountain, only to kill his brother and see his mother unveiled as a demon he himself has created. This unveiling is the “secret” of the poem, but there is little consolation to be found in it. Ransom dies in his mother's arms at the summit of the mountain, thus achieving his goal, yet attaining what John Fuller calls “an illusory triumph” (200).

The figure of Ransom's mother is significant when its function is considered as part of a story symbolizing the poet's drive to create (Fuller 194). In this case, the mother/demon is the veiled secret that demands the poet go on writing and yet threatens him with the contaminated truth she represents—contaminated because Ransom, who initially blames the demon for his brother's death (Auden and Isherwood 351), must struggle with the question of who is responsible for his misguided quest, his mother or himself. Auden revised the play many times over the following years, shifting the emphasis at the end “constantly . . . from psychology to politics” (Mendelson xxvii), but the question of whether the hero was himself responsible or was beholden to social, familial, and political forces remained unresolved. A revision made in 1939, just after Auden and Isherwood moved to America, ends in triumph; according to Mendelson, “Ransom sheds his pride, overcomes his fear of love, and acknowledges at last his common humanity,” with the result that “The division in himself between the public and the private worlds dissolves in his final lines” (xxix). But those final lines are less than decisive. They proceed from “Now storm and distance hide me from those valleys / Where history is manufactured every day,” to “Valleys and men forgive me. Oh, we all / Stand much in need of our forgiveness,” prompting Rainer Emig to observe, “Rather than resolving the conflict between individual and society, the play once more emphasises it” (45). Auden later wrote that what the play lacked was “a Christian ending” (Mendelson xxvii), which may have resulted in at least a

provisional sense of redemption.

As it is, the play's method of resolving its hero's crisis owes a heavy debt to Freudian psychoanalysis, and particularly, as Fuller suggests, to Georg Groddeck's interpretation of Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt*, which Auden “must have been familiar with”:

Here then once again we have the mother and child situation. Peer ranges the whole world about, and at home there waits one who is at the same time mother, wife, and woman. That is the essence of life, except that man is not always fortunate in finding a Solveig to be both wife and mother to him. As a rule he finds the second mother, the eternal mother, only in that dark kingdom whither we all descend, our common home. (201)

Auden's poetic forays into Freudian ideas led him to explore the symbolic mother as an originary, consoling source that promises final wholeness to the errant child. But this image of the loving mother as a “dark kingdom” suggests an eternal mother who is both generative and dangerous, and by incorporating her into the play Auden dooms his hero to dissolve into her depths rather than attain self-recognition and agency. In psychoanalytic terms, he is forced to return to the pre-oedipal state in which the mother subsumes the child's identity into her own, a threat to individuality that is normally broken when the child enters the public world of the father. The Freudian mother can be a source of knowledge, but only insofar as she is able to parrot the discourse created and sanctioned by the father; in this sense, the love of Ransom's mother for her son is toxic precisely because it is conditioned by her desire to see him prove himself within a masculine world that is ideologically corrupt. His compensation is to veer wildly back from the pole of masculine expectations to a smothering maternal love. As an analogy of the plight of the poet who strives to have a public voice, this overt use of the oedipal

drama reveals that for Auden, the poet's spiritual and social challenge exists within a system of give and take, except that here, there is no balancing point. The mother is an entity that gives to the point of death, the father one that takes to the point of death, and the creative act is fraught with anxiety.

“At Last the Secret is Out” also contains a glancing reference to a mother-figure, but it is one which aligns better with Ashbery's method of incorporating partial narratives without wholly buying in to their conclusions. In the stanza he chooses for an epigraph to his own poem, the narrative fragments become progressively shorter, choppier, and more enigmatic:

For the clear voice suddenly singing, high up in the convent wall,
 The scent of the elder bushes, the sporting prints in the hall,
 The croquet matches in summer, the handshake, the cough, the kiss,
 There is always a wicked secret, a private reason for this. (*Collected Poetry* 199)

Each image collected in this list contains its own secret reservoir of meanings that evoke partial or potential stories about the ease and dullness of bourgeois life, the complexities of intimate relationships, or the artist's sense of isolation. As with Ashbery's disjunctive observations, which so often resemble a jumble of estate-sale goods, there is an unspoken ailment drifting through them all, a suggestion of perpetual underlying restlessness or sin. Yet unlike Ashbery's seemingly careless scattering of fragments, Auden's list of images is held in check by his meter, which sets his words to an Anglo-Saxon rhythm modified into three points of emphasis on each side of a line, and his rhyme, which pulls the lines together into a tidy quatrain; the result is a feeling of measured control and dignity, of tenacity maintained in the face of the unknown. It is the sense of veiled mystery that finds its way into Ashbery's poems, the charge of meaning in an otherwise innocuous-looking phrase, and the easy conversational tone that surprises with its casual

enigmas. An example of this is Auden's image of "elder bushes," which invokes two immediate allusions: the tree on which Judas Iscariot is purported to have hanged himself after betraying Jesus, and the Elder Mother of European folklore who guards the elder tree. A revered wood spirit, the Elder Mother belongs to a tradition of goddesses and wise women who often function as "revealers" in German mythology (Grimm 397), although in some stories they are referred to as witches. Both allusions suggest an underlying guilt or anxiety, and the accompanying shame of exposure; appropriately, the poem is recited by the Chorus just before Ransom's mother is unveiled as the demon who manipulates his actions.

The scent that conveys these reminders of sin and betrayal finds analogy in Ashbery's poem, where both pleasure and ominous illness intertwine:

. . . Out from
 lattices a pleasant breeze was wafting,
 and in that breeze, mingled tones
 of melody like adjusted spices. Then it was all over.
 He felt well, who never said so. I don't know,
 it traveled under him, until he was going to be sick
 in the pit of his stomach, where ailments dwell. (*Worldly* 27).

Ashbery's telling phrase, "I don't know," functions like Auden's "private reason," deflecting the reader's anticipation of an answer to draw attention to the words and the sensations they produce. In both poems, images are compressed until the emotions they evoke blend into an overall impression that is unsettling in its intensity and yet difficult to pin down. Auden's is suggestive of the tremendous depths to which urges and motivations might be traced as they make their way from unspoken or even unconscious experience to a surface where manner and social position

define, however inaccurately, a person; Ashbery's lyric overlaps and amplifies sensory impressions to capture the common experience of the mind inexplicably shifting its mood based on memories or thoughts unspoken and only partially recognized. Both have something to say about the way poetry is made, and how the evocative "scent" or "breeze" which translates itself into bodily sensation finds its mysterious origins in both joy and anguish.

Also evoked by the presence of this breeze is Romantic inspiration, which is given complex treatment by these poets. An influence which clarifies the connections shared by Auden and Ashbery, as well as their differences, is the tendency of German Romantic philosophy to orient itself toward a unifying center or ideal, a tendency that makes itself felt in part through their allusions to fairy tales. For Auden, such narratives are a means of getting at the truth of human experience, and he made his reverence for them clear in a 1944 review of a new edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, which he described as "among the few indispensable, common-property books upon which Western culture can be founded" and ranked "next to the Bible in importance" (Auden, *Prose* 239-240). Auden's favourite story as a child was Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen" (Osborne 12), one of several stories Andersen wrote that derived from myths of wise women or witches. It not only encapsulates some of the psychological conflicts that emerge in Auden's work, but also the philosophical and ethical issues that preoccupy both he and Ashbery as writers. Among the ways it can be read are as a Christian tale of good versus evil; a psychological story of adolescent crisis; or a philosophical comment on the limitations of representation. For these two poets, "The Snow Queen" and other tales are a means of revisiting questions that find their roots in the foundational narratives of childhood and the Romantic impulses that govern them.

On a very basic level, the story deals with the difficult question of how to make socially

responsible art. It begins with the devil, who has created a magic mirror that makes anything reflected in it look ugly and grotesque, and which causes even a good thought passing through someone's mind to be transformed into “a carnal grin” (Andersen 196). When the devil's hobgoblins attempt to carry it up to heaven to mock God, it shatters, and its splintered fragments are dispersed throughout the world, piercing people's hearts and distorting their vision. Kay is a young boy who plays every summer in the rose garden with his friend Gerda. When a piece of the magic mirror becomes lodged in his eye, he sees only flaws in the roses, and begins to misbehave by performing mocking parodies of those around him. One winter day the Snow Queen arrives on a sleigh and spirits Kay away to her ice palace, where she numbs him to the cold with her kisses, and sits on a throne in the middle of a frozen lake that is “cracked into a thousand pieces,” which she calls the Mirror of Reason (224). When Gerda, who has been searching relentlessly, finally finds him, his heart is “a lump of ice,” and he is engaged in an impossible game to win his freedom: “He was shifting some sharp, flat pieces of ice to and fro, trying to fit them into every possible pattern . . . He arranged his pieces to spell out many words; but he could never find the way to make the one word he was so eager to form. The word was 'Eternity'” (225).

Auden's later Kierkegaardian beliefs about art find their nascent form in these details. As a metaphor for secular knowledge, the shattered mirror warns of the compromised ethics involved in its production. Splintering, in opposition to wholeness, is an apt symbol for opposition to God, representing both the devil and various manifestations of sin. As theologian Paul Evdokimov notes, when Christ asks the devil his name, the devil answers, “My name is legion, for we are many,” and Evdokimov comments, “The transition from singular to plural reveals the action of Evil in the world, the innocent being created by God breaks up, atomizes

into isolated fragments, and this constitutes Hell” (qtd. in Lederer 7). The mirror shatters as an inevitable result of the hubris of trying to discover truth by a means other than God, just as the people who aspire to build the Tower of Babel as high as heaven are punished by having their single, unifying language multiplied into many (8). The Snow Queen who enchants Kay begins as a glass-like fragment, first appearing to him as a snowflake that emerges from the swirling snow and grows “until at last it turned into a woman, who was dressed in the finest white gauze which looked as if it had been made from millions of star-shaped flakes” (Andersen 199).

Wolfgang Lederer observes the similarities between the Snow Queen and the mythological Frau Holle, a goddess who makes the snow fall by shaking out her feather-bed. While she is generally regarded as a beneficent housewifely figure who keeps domestic order, her name is etymologically related to the German word *Hölle*, or hell (Lederer 29). Jacob Grimm, in *Teutonic Mythology*, describes her as a goddess who “can ride on the winds, clothed in terror,” and who eventually came to be seen as an ugly old witch (267-268). But in Andersen's version she is beautiful, a detail that emphasizes her capacity for betrayal: she has been rewritten as a symbol of the devil's false wisdom.

The impossible task that Kay is given is a quest for immortality, and it is impossible, Lederer argues, because it relies on the false means of the intellect, rather than redemption by Christ or rebirth through the eternal return of the seasons (66-67). While the former would please God, the latter would satisfy Mother Holle, who was also associated with fertility (Grimm 268). But Kay has been isolated from God—he has forgotten his prayers, and can remember only his multiplication tables (Andersen 202)—and is at the mercy of a witch who represents death, not life. Her word games are a distraction from the true source of redemption, which is bound up in the figure of Gerda. Lederer reads Kay's seduction by the Snow Queen as an analogy for the

adolescent years, when intellectual pursuits serve as a defense mechanism against the threat of sexual and emotional entanglements for which the adolescent boy is not yet ready (30).

According to this interpretation, Gerda's adventures in her search for Kay represent an equally necessary "flower stage" of "narcissistic isolation," when she in turn becomes enchanted by an old woman who combs her hair, feeds her cherries, and keeps a garden full of flowers that tell stories only of themselves (43). A. S. Byatt points out that Gerda ultimately fulfills her role as Kay's rescuer through the structural opposition of her attributes to those of the Snow Queen; whereas the witch is made of ice and numbs Kay with her kisses, Gerda "is in touch with warmth, flowering roses, cherries, and the human heart" (155). When she finds Kay, she melts his heart with her tears, reclaiming him for the temporal world of changing seasons and human relationships; fittingly, they discover that over the course of their adventures they have matured into adults. But Gerda also rescues him by reciting a hymn that links her earthly qualities to Christ—"Where roses bloom so sweetly in the vale, / There shall you find the Christ Child, without fail"—causing Kay's own tears to wash away the splinter from his eye (Andersen 225-226). With Gerda's love, and the pure vision of childhood restored, he has been made whole both psychologically and spiritually. Like Auden, Andersen is intent on conveying the self-consciously humble message that art is only redemptive insofar as it can point to a solution outside itself.

Andersen's opposition of Gerda and the Snow Queen supports this message by reinforcing the Romantic separation between childhood purity and the contaminating aspects of knowledge. They may have grown up, but Gerda and Kay have forgotten their ordeal "as if it were some bad dream" (228), and so they are left unhindered by self-knowledge in the same way that Adam and Eve are ignorant of their nakedness in Eden. United by the purity of their hearts,

they have reverted back to a state of innocence comparable to that theorized by Rousseau and especially Herder, who as a seminal figure in German Romantic philosophy incorporated the idea into his concept of *Volk*, or the people viewed as a “collective individual” (Lampart 176). *Volk* captures the spirit of the people in a pure state that is retained as the nation develops organically into a perfected condition; envisioning it this way was a means of providing a stable model for social progress in response to the violence of the French Revolution. The importance of *Volk* to the development of folk literature lies in the structure of its evolution: its earliest incarnation, or childhood stage, is an ideal state of “natural harmony” which is not yet marred by the contaminating effects of history or civilization. Fairy tales, as a record of the collective memory of a culture, were a means of accessing that prehistoric stage by pushing beyond standard representations of reality to capture a spiritual mood of perfect harmony. Such tales were a means of furthering Romantic literature towards its ultimate goal of synthesizing opposing ideas to create what Friedrich Schlegel called a *Universalpoesie*, which would result in a fusion of poetry and life (176).

Andersen, hailing from Denmark, was thoroughly steeped in the Romanticism of his day, and yet the mood his story captures is not as harmonious as that. Instead, the characters end up in a curiously arrested state that seems less a solution to the contaminating effects of worldly knowledge than an indicator of the psychological conflicts of their author. Andersen was an awkward and deeply sensitive man who developed passionate obsessions with both men and women over the course of his lifetime, none of whom returned his feelings with the same level of devotion: he was rejected by the two women he most admired, Riborg Voigt and Jenny Lind (Lederer 86), and his one-sided love for Edvard Collin left him feeling degraded (145). In addition, though his feelings for Edvard may or may not have been homosexual, in letters he

confessed to a secret torment which was never further elucidated (130). However much ambiguity one chooses to read into his sexuality, his feelings of alienation can be attributed to more than just romantic frustration. As a pauper who made his way to Copenhagen to seek the patronage of wealthy acquaintances, he was a perpetual outsider, belonging neither to the slums of Odense where he grew up, nor to the royal courts he visited during his travels across Europe. In his life he never found the neat conclusions that he sought, and “The Snow Queen” similarly evades a clear resolution.

The outcome ought to be predictable. Gerda is associated with symbols of fertility and rebirth: melting ice, flowering gardens, and the cycling of the seasons from winter to summer. It seems appropriate, then, that when Gerda finally frees Kay and brings him home, they have become adults. And yet the story lacks a proper fairy-tale ending—as Lederer notes, there is no indication that Kay and Gerda marry and live “happily ever after” by having children of their own (69). Instead, they return home: “They walked straight to Grandmother's house, and up the stairs, and into the room, where everything was just as it was when they left it. And the clock said *tick-tock*, and its hands were telling the time” (Andersen 228) Noticing they have grown up, they nonetheless resume their seats on the little stools they used as children, chastely holding hands and listening like siblings as Grandmother reads from the Bible, “Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven” (228). After all the adventures these characters have been through, the moment is not just cloying but also deeply ironic. Denied procreative roles, they have gained entry into a kingdom that seems no less false than the Snow Queen's ice palace. Not only have they failed to pay the Goddess her due, but there is something unsatisfying about the apparent sanctity of the dream-like scene. The mood tries to be holy, but it is tinged with the same contrived nostalgia conveyed in Ashbery's “Syringa,” where

. . . the “tableau”

Is wrong. For although memories, of a season, for example,

Melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure

That stalled moment. It too is flowing, fleeting;

It is a picture of flowing, scenery, though living, mortal,

Over which an abstract action is laid out in blunt,

Harsh strokes. . . . (*Collected Poems* 535)

Andersen did not intend for his stories to be read only by children, whom he believed “understand only the trappings,” but Lederer’s assumption that his work reveals “great truths” to his adult readers is not exactly accurate (4). The conclusion that necessarily follows—and the conclusion that Lederer draws in his subtitle, *Hans Christian Andersen and Man’s Redemption by Woman*—is that this tale is flawed by Andersen’s inability to stay true to a narrative in which the hero achieves psychological and spiritual synthesis through union with a character who symbolizes essential womanhood. An alternate interpretation to consider is that Andersen, for whatever reason, refused to allow such closure, and the result is a story that is more true to his own melancholy and inconclusive feelings about the nature of human relationships and the passage of time. “The Snow Queen” not only lays out “in blunt, / Harsh strokes” the “abstract action” of Christian and pre-Christian archetypal narratives, but also allows the ambiguities of Andersen’s flawed human experience to show through.

The conclusion of “The Snow Queen” reveals that a modernist sensibility wends its way through Andersen’s fairy tales, finding its source in the same Romantic formulations and uncertainties that Auden and Ashbery rely on and struggle with in their own work. Both poets desire a clear conscience, but Auden’s persistence in attempting to define a core identity indicates

his conviction that the power to absolve himself ought to lie in the inconsistent and untrustworthy significations of his poetry. His painstaking excavations of the sediments of the self are an attempt to turn poetry into honest work, a method justified by Goethe, in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, when he describes self-definition paradoxically as a renunciation of the self for the purpose of serving others: "Man," he writes, "should make himself the center from which the common good can proceed, he must . . . hold together so that he can give" (qtd. in Brown 39). Auden's attempt to articulate a central self emerges in his imagery of mines, caverns, and the industrial landscapes which preoccupied him from a young age. Alongside "The Snow Queen" on his nursery shelf sat not only popular fiction like *King Solomon's Mines* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, but also such non-fiction titles as *Machinery for Metalliferous Mines* and *Underground Life*; not surprisingly, he fantasized about being a mining engineer, and imagined in detail a world situated in a limestone landscape (Osborne 12-13). His interest in mining, both as an occupation and as a symbol of the workings of the soul, follows a way of thinking more peculiar to Germany than England. Many German writers, including Goethe and Novalis, had training and experience working in mines, and regarded them with an appreciation that contrasts sharply with the infernal pits envisioned by Blake and Keats (Ziolkowski 19, 24). Mining in England, primarily for coal and iron, was viewed as a utilitarian pursuit that spoiled the landscape and darkened the skies with soot, whereas Germany's mines produced precious metals like silver and gold that were more likely to be crafted into beautiful objects than processed in factories (25). Drawing from this view of the industry, Auden's underground world is a place where the raw materials of the self and its imaginings find their truest essence.

And yet many of his poems, including those Ashbery liked best, demonstrate the paradoxical idea that the truest poetry finds the essence of truth impossible to locate. Auden's

daydreams about mines eventually coalesced into “In Praise of Limestone,” which describes the shifting physical characteristics of a place that seems to exist just on the periphery of memory:

If it form the one landscape that we the inconstant ones
 Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly
 Because it dissolves in water. Mark these rounded slopes
 With their surface fragrance of thyme and beneath
 A secret system of caves and conduits (*Selected Poems* 189)

Once again the origins of knowledge are hidden within a maternal shape whose outer form of “rounded slopes” can be grasped by the senses—briefly, before they dissolve—and whose “secret system” promises the existence of an as yet unwritten map of unconscious experience, a route to an archetypal home. But already its purity has been contaminated by translation into matter, and the speaker's doubt is evident in the ironic sureness of his rhetorical question: “What could be more like Mother or a fitter background / For her son . . . ?” (189). After all, his knowledge that “he is loved” only turns him into a self-centered egotist, traversing the stone landscape with a “band of rivals” who transform raw material into “[c]onspicuous fountains,” “a formal vineyard,” and a “hill-top temple” (189). On top of that, the passage from raw material to crafted artifact is unsatisfying and brief, “short steps” based on nothing more honourable than “a child's wish / To receive more attention than his brothers,” and the result is disappointing: a god created in the very image of these young wits, “pacified by a clever line / Or a good lay” (189-190). Their plight is once again the plight of Kay trapped in the Snow Queen's palace, trying to please her with clever combinations of words. Kay slowly turns to ice in the frozen palace; Auden's variation is a rocky setting, echoed in a passage from “The Quest,” where “The over-logical fell for the witch / Whose argument converted him to stone” (*Selected Poems* 115).

Limestone, whose metamorphosis into marble once provided the raw material for sculptures of gods and mythological heroes (Parkin 295), is just another deceptive medium that represents eternity but does not realize it, and in its materiality threatens to infect the very souls of the men who shape it. Their failure is not one of creativity, but one of faith, or more precisely, their faith has been misplaced onto creativity. This apparent mistake only strengthens Auden's own faith in an ideal that must exist, like a hidden blueprint, beyond the earthly world.

A similarly worldly group of rag-tag figures traipse through Ashbery's "The Handshake, the Cough, the Kiss," where nothing exists beyond the endless cycle of interrupting stops and starts, and "gamboling on rocks is the new theme" that suddenly "nobody is interested in":

O songbird! You asked us to believe
 in you but the way was short. Our quondam companions persist,
 a small, muddy group, adhere to the rival shore, ravenous,
 and expire. (*Worldly* 29-30)

In this landscape of exhausted belief the stature of the artist has not just been diminished but utterly obscured, lost in a semantic flow that grants no special privileges. In Ashbery's pun on "rival" can be detected an allusion to the "dirty in-fighting among rival agencies" that occurs in Auden's "River Profile" (*Selected Poems* 295), and this allusion sets Ashbery's lines up as an ironic take on Auden's use of the well-worn metaphor of the river as a collective human journey. This metaphor allows Auden to depict the mutability of life on a grand and tragic scale, subsuming individual experience into the narrative of a nation that emerges from the scoured purity of "a bellicose fore-time" only to fall into an inevitable, gradual decline (295). In flux, but "à la mode always," his river changes with the countryside around it to reflect various stages of industrialization and moral degeneration, before finally disappearing into the merciful oblivion

of the sea (295-296). Each line pounds out its four-beat rhythm like an Anglo-Saxon heartbeat, save for the shortened last line of each of the twelve quatrains, which is frequently enjambed to contribute to the sense of a pulsing flow of uninterrupted movement. Like limestone, this river contains all things even as it remains consistently itself, a paradox that Ashbery recalls in his experimentation with form as continuous experience. Yet the rhythm Auden imposes on it drives it to its final conclusion—“surrender, effacement, atonement”—which is coloured by his anxious insistence on an “image of death as // a spherical dew-drop of life” (296-297). Perfection, he assures us, awaits at the end of the journey. Ashbery's flow of words often resembles a Heraclitan river of perpetual change, but the loose collection of biographical episodes in “The Handshake” shows poetry imitating a life that finds no meaningful closure, other than to “expire” like any other creature living and feeding in the mud of the riverbank.

Auden would not likely appreciate being left sprawled in the mud this way. Ashbery acknowledges poetry's failure as a medium of redemption, but it is a shared, social failure that does not preclude poetry's ability to help us learn to live in this world of our own making. Auden's response is more personal, revealing his sensitivity to the implications of being unable to transcend a fallen world. He wrote “In Praise of Limestone” in Italy, where he saw the limestone landscape as a way of connecting the “northern protestant guilt culture” of his homeland with “the shame culture of the Mediterranean countries” (qtd. in Fuller 406). He captures this shame in anxious descriptions of earthly things, “the fungi / And insects of the jungle, the monstrous forms and lives / With which we have nothing, we like to hope, in common” (*Selected Poems* 190). His initial formal wanderings across this landscape are true to the general experience of life that Ashbery tries to convey, but whereas Ashbery grudgingly accepts the worldly nature of poetry as part of the dirty work of living, Auden's poems, both

formally and figuratively, resolve themselves onto a straighter path. As Rebecca Price Parkin observes, despite the changing physical characteristics and shifting symbolism of his rocks and rivers, which suggest the flux of real experience rather than any externally-imposed pattern of order, Auden is nonetheless “guiding us all the time toward a carefully planned exit” (296). “River Profile” finds resolution in the cycles of nature, but describes them with a sense of gravity that goes beyond material concerns. Life is too big for art, it seems, even though “Unlovely / monsters, our tales believe, can be translated / too” (*Selected Poems* 297), a passage which suggests that the apparent naïveté of fairy tales is repeated in all of literature's blunt and childlike attempts to depict the deeper mythological forces at work in our lives. Auden implicates himself here as well, as one of the “especials” of “the selfless mother” who will eventually subsume him into the cycle of birth and death, granting him redemption only insofar as his poetry can connect her, however tenuously, to a greater philosophical truth. The dissolving landscape of “In Praise of Limestone” likewise guides the reader out of the confusions of a mutable world. The “greatest comfort” of our prayers, we are told in the last stanza, “is music / Which can be made anywhere, is invisible, / And does not smell” (191). The shame of the flesh is absolved by an escape into spirit, Auden reminds us (Parkin 301), and our humility will be repaid beyond the world of words.

Ashbery works within a similar philosophical framework, but the stance he takes toward it is radically different. He, too, is fascinated by the invisible world, stating in a 1977 interview, “I wrote about what I didn't see. The experience that eluded me somehow intrigued me more than the one I was having” (Perloff 248). But the elusive experiences he chooses to notice come under fire from Auden in the letter of rejection he wrote to Frank O'Hara for the Yale Younger Poets Award in 1955, which he reluctantly awarded to Ashbery's *Some Trees* (Ashbery and Ford

38). In the letter, he cautions both O'Hara and Ashbery against “the great danger . . . of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue” (Perloff 249-250). By contrasting “authentic” with “accidental,” he reveals that for him, the most genuine and therefore authoritative non-logical relations are the kind made deliberately to achieve a specific effect. But Ashbery, if anything, shows more humility by permitting “accidental” relations to predominate in his work. As Perloff notes, “his are not dreams 'about' such and such characters or events; the dream structure is itself the event that haunts the poet's imagination” (252). Less bothered by shame, he does away with the façade of control and instead ventures backstage to marvel at the disorder as he finds it. In that sense, his willingness to articulate the tangential nature of his thinking shows less confusion than daring. He faces his mind's evasions by restraining the humanistic urge to control those words whose “monstrous forms and lives” are impossible to disentangle from our own.

The fables and fairy tales Ashbery incorporates into his work therefore have little to offer in the way of moral or psychological guidance. In “The Handshake,” the appearance of the Snow Queen is merely incidental to the ongoing action, as though the speaker feels it would be disingenuous to grant her a central position around which a complete narrative, and with it the promise of a fully integrated identity, might develop:

And if a child came over to play
 it would be asked its name, then given a dose of brandy
 so as not to play anymore. We risked it anyway,
 out on the ice where it darkens
 and seems to whisper
 from down below. Watch out, it's the Snow Queen,

one said. She likes playing

as long as she's not involved. (*Worldly* 25-26)

Despite being “asked its name” this child will not consolidate into anything so mundane as an individual, but will remain at play, in both senses of the word. Ashbery provides an explanation in “The Skaters,” where his speaker admits that it is not self-consolidation or spiritual oneness but “novelty / that guides these swift blades o'er the ice,” and also novelty that “Projects into a finer expression (but at the expense / Of energy) the profile I cannot remember” (*Collected Poems* 147). As compensation, the speaker of “The Handshake” derives accompaniment from the democratic “we,” which suggests not only other children and other poets, but also other aspects of himself; even the reader, one gathers, is generously included. The effect is an impression that multiple interpretations are inevitable and therefore expected. After all, his recollections are filtered through contrasting genres, different understandings of the way stories and authorship transform over time, and, of course, the unreliable faculty of memory. As a result, the Snow Queen emerges as an element of a child's personal mythology, derived from the memory of a story but distorted and simplified, shaping the terrors that “whisper / from down below” into a figure that might momentarily be managed before it re-emerges later as witch, wife, prostitute, the significance of each inevitably succumbing, once again, to the vagaries of definition. On another level, she even suggests Auden himself, and his chilly disengagement from poetry's more threatening mysteries and surprises.

Ashbery inherited Auden's Romantically-inspired desire to create art that can be useful in a time of crisis, and yet his break with Auden seems inevitable. Gradually, over the course of the decades following Auden's conversion to Anglicanism in 1940, his poetry began to veer away from the intellectual intensity and ironic distance that marked him as a modernist to the younger

poets who admired him. At times straining to provide moral guidance, his least compelling works are limited by a sermonizing tone that privileges message over form. Randall Jarrell makes a valid point when he attacks Auden's poetry as being "too conscious, too thin, too merely rational, we should distrust it just as we distrust any Rational (or Rationalized) Method of Becoming a Saint" (Burt 4). 1941's "The Hidden Law," for example, has a childlike rhythm reminiscent of Ashbery's witty "A Worldly Country," but its lack of ironic awareness has it jolting along with the preachiness of the reformed libertine: "When we escape It in a car, / When we forget It in a bar, / These are the ways we're punished by / The Hidden Law" (Hecht xii). His use of "we" is disingenuous, as likely to suggest the dissolute years he spent roaming around with Christopher Isherwood as to connect with the audience he addresses. "The Common Life," written for Chester Kallman in 1963, is similarly reflective of his personal life, so that its concluding lines are most effective when read from a New Critical perspective that looks beyond the author's intentions to extract a more general moral message: "and always, though truth and love / can never really differ, when they seem to, / the subaltern should be truth" (*Collected Poems* 278). While these lines have an aphoristic quality that easily conveys a sense of hard-earned wisdom, it is the wisdom of a man who is tired of questions and ready for answers.

Ashbery is not much bothered by Auden's hedging compliments of *Some Trees*, admitting that "by that time I didn't like the poetry he was writing either" (Ashbery and Ford 39). Instead, he draws his influence from those poems that evade easy resolution, and a primary example is the one in which "the cough" and "the kiss" of Ashbery's title first appear. "As I Walked Out One Evening" was written a year before "At Last the Secret is Out," and like that poem captures a complexity of perspective that pushes Auden to the limits of the ambiguity he will tolerate (*Selected Poems* 66-68). While on the one hand it led to the kind of encapsulated wisdom found

in “The Common Life,” on the other hand its link to Ashbery via the later poem marks a handing-off point where a transfer of creative energies takes place. Auden's desire to find a way to transcend the uncertainties of modern life may have led him to conclude that poetry is inadequate to the task, but this conclusion overlooks its sometimes surprising affective possibilities. Further explorations of those possibilities would be left to Ashbery and a younger generation of poets.

The poem is immediately notable for its influence not only on “The Handshake, the Cough, the Kiss,” but also on “A Worldly Country,” which borrows its images of squawking geese and whirring clocks, as well as its nursery-rhyme rhythm. However, in Auden's case that rhythm provides an eerie contrast of innocence with the spectre of death, first evoked by the image of reaping that transforms “crowds upon the pavement” into “fields of harvest wheat” (66). What follows after this initial reminder of death are two comments on love, one lyrical, the other a pious exhortation. The speaker, who in his wandering observations calls to mind the figure of an artist or flaneur, hears “a lover sing” a declaration of love in terms so flagrantly hyperbolic they are more parody than love lyric: “I'll love you till . . . the seven stars go squawking / Like geese about the sky” (66). To further refute the sincerity of the lover's song, the voice of the clocks summons the looming figures of Time and Justice to remind the lovers and the speaker that the consolations of romantic love—and by extension, we can presume, of love poetry—are false:

In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss. (67)

Auden resolves the conflict between the passionate affirmation of the kiss and the interrupting reminder of the cough, at least temporarily, with the biblical command in the penultimate stanza: “You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart” (67). Redemptive love, in other words, does not find its source in poetry but in the humble melting of reserve that comes with the recognition of one's sins, and in particular the sin of relying on representations of love rather than love in its flawed and human form.

And yet Auden lays the groundwork for the effectiveness of that command by employing language that is just as figuratively extravagant as that employed by the lover. His personification of Time as the subtle but insistent parental figure who checks the passions of youth is not the least of the rhetorical tricks he employs to frighten the speaker into accepting his solution. The threat of the eventual frigidity and impotence of old age is vividly symbolized —“The glacier knocks in the cupboard, / The desert sighs in the bed”—and childhood innocence is turned upside-down with a series of ominously distorted visions from children's stories:

Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
 And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
 And the Lily-white boy is a Roarer,
 And Jill goes down on her back. (67)

This extravagant re-ordering of popular tales raises compelling questions: what might come of this new relationship between the Giant and Jack? Is Jill more or less satisfied with her new position? No answers are forthcoming, because Auden has no intention of entertaining such questions; he is making a statement. Sin, in its economic, political, social, and sexual forms, is both the result of and punishment for the distressed flaneur's insistence on looking at his neighbours instead of loving them. However compelling these images may be, to choose art over

life, the clocks remind us, will lead to alienation and despair. With punishing repetition, Time mocks the artist-figure for observing rather than joining in: “O look, look in the mirror, / O look in your distress”; “Stare, stare in the basin / And wonder what you've missed”; “O stand, stand at the window / As the tears scald and start” (67). The clocks' insistence that “you cannot bless” further emphasizes the limitations of the poet as an agent of change (67). Redemption comes not through the atomizing effects of art or poetry but through dissolution of the poet's solitary self into a greater stream, “the deep river,” which endures somewhere beyond worldly concerns. The poem's final lines—“The clocks had ceased their chiming, / And the deep river ran on” (68)—suggests that if immortality is available at all, it waits somewhere beyond art, which is subsumed into the river's eternal flow. And yet the figure left standing alone by the river conveys these observations in a tone that is utterly inscrutable. We are given no final confirmation that he has achieved the epiphany of love advocated by the clocks, or even whether this moment of quiet contemplation has come as a result of their message, or in spite of it. All we are left with is the poem itself, and the empathy it engenders.

Auden's insistence on the separation between art and the ethical life denies the affective power of poetry demonstrated in this ambiguous ending. By granting the last word to the poetic observer he unwittingly leaves room for the reader to experience the ache of time and love, unhampered by shame or obligation. The voices of the lover and the clocks become part of the background noise of life with all of its urges and regrets, the same noise that Ashbery, in “A Worldly Country,” renders through his shift from the clanging of “insane clocks” to the sudden, cheerful promise of “See you in church!” (*Worldly* 1). What happens downriver is, for the moment, less important than the river's eternal metamorphosis in the present, linking continuity to perpetual change. Poetry, for all of its alienating strangeness and surprising familiarities, is a

part of that; poetry, for Ashbery, is “life itself” (Wasley, “The 'Gay Apprentice'” 673). The endurance of Auden's river is in an immediate sense the endurance of poetry, and this is the project Ashbery takes up.

Chapter 3

With the close readings of *A Worldly Country* in the first chapter of this study, and the comparison with W. H. Auden in the second, I have attempted to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of some of the philosophical influences that shape Ashbery's work. On the question of the origins of his poetics, the general critical consensus can be summed up in a statement Ashbery made himself in a 1974 interview: "All my stuff is romantic poetry" (Vendler 231). But while his kinship with the English Romantics has been well documented, the romantic wells from which he draws range beyond them to a source that helps to clarify not only the potential of "accidental" non-logical relations in his work, but also the way children's stories engage his contemporary poetics as narratives meant to lend guidance. Musing about language and influence, Ashbery provides a more specific answer: "it's too bad that I can't read German or Russian because my sensibility seems to lie in that direction. In fact I had a German grandmother who spoke German, so maybe I have some distant link to German Romanticism" (Ashbery, Interview).

Ashbery's affinity with German Romantic thought reveals itself through recurring lyrical patterns: frequent digressions, inconclusive speculations, and fragments of fable and fairy tale that incorporate childhood imaginings into complex adult perspectives. These formal innovations bear the mark of strategies used by the most popular German writers of the late eighteenth century, which has been characterized as "the period of the great collections of fragments, of major unfinished novels . . . of wildly eccentric literary experiments" (Brown 169-170). Drawn together by an intellectually adventurous spirit, the early Romantics associated with the university of Jena—"the first avant-garde group in history" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 8)—produced a body of work notable for its hybrid nature and its formal and philosophical open-

endedness. The Jena Romantics, whose core members included the Schlegel brothers and Novalis, initially published their writing in the journal *Athenaeum* with the goal of establishing a *symphilosophie*, or a synthesis of ideas from manifold sources. Their emphasis was on the drive toward unity more than its final achievement, a notion also evident in their concept of *sympoesie*, which indicates not a particular poetic form as end point but progression toward an aesthetic perfection that can never be met (Johnson 1). The fairy tale represented in miniature such a perfection; for German poets writing in the wake of the French Revolution, it was an ideal model for a worldview based on a temporal pattern that looks forward, from an unstable present, to a redemptive future by means of accessing an idealized past. But as a genre rooted in oral traditions whose stories continue to be adapted for modern readers, its contents are in fact malleable and never complete, a contradiction that makes it all the more relevant to the Jena Romantics' philosophical pursuits. What they sought as a universal aesthetic was a blend of literature and philosophy that is collectively created and always in process. What they make available to Ashbery is a shared archive of patterns, images, impulses, and associations, in particular the fairy tale as analogue for the ongoing journey toward a unified self and a renewed collective identity.

From Ashbery's contemporary perspective that redemptive future is veiled, and the numinous charge of the past has been dimmed by historical realities. But the early Romantics, who philosophized a pragmatic idealism not devoid of genuine hope, still inform his work in ways that are both logical and intuitive. Two German Romantic concepts provide context for my exploration of the relevance of their thinking to his poetics: *Tendenz*, defined by Friedrich Schlegel as eternal striving for “a deep, infinite meaning” that can never be reached (Brown 47), and *Witz*, a term that evinces what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call the logic of the accident, a

witty “sudden idea” whose effect Schlegel likened to “the sudden meeting of two friendly thoughts after a long separation” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 52).³ Against these contrasting notions, Ashbery's breaks in tone or direction stand out as a result of competing narrative urges, alternately resisting or acquiescing to the residuum of Romantic malaise that lends solemn ballast to his postmodern approach. His is a poetry of gathering as well as dispersal, where chaos and stasis tender their own threats and attractions, and in between is a reassuringly familiar ground with which we are never allowed to get quite comfortable. In this perpetual flight both toward and away from stable meanings, his work is both a continuation and a renovation of the early Romantic project. “Romantic art,” Brown points out, “begins by turning away from its ideal,” creating distance which arouses a longing to bridge the gap; to correct the faults and complete the fragments “would mean eliminating the desire and with it the pleasure” of the work (46). By allowing accidents of thought to interrupt the prevailing mood, Ashbery prevents his poetry from either achieving a false sense of closure or descending into torpor; instead, he swings from anticipation to doubt and back again without ever abandoning his desire to communicate something genuine, however unexpected.

Fables and folk tales provide fertile ground for meditations on desire and the promise or threat of the chance revelation. Insofar as the intersubjective elements of poetic communication assume some degree of subjective presence, the fairy tale, a genre associated with the individual's moral, spiritual and psychological development, has special subjective power. For

³ Noting its connection to the French *esprit*, the English *wit*, and the German *Wissen* (knowledge), Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy provide additional definitions: *Witz* is “the preferred genre of conversation, of sociality” and at the same time “an immediate, absolute knowing-seeing” (53). In Novalis's words, “*Witz* is creative, it produces resemblances” (53), while for Schlegel its ironic element constitutes “transcendental buffoonery” (56). Elsewhere the authors describe it as a motif, system, or network with a “dangerous” aspect: “Its absolute combinative quality is always threatened from below by its inferior, fleeting, almost formless character. Thus, *Witz* itself needs to be *poeticized*”; however, even when containing its chaotic or frightening elements, “one must abandon oneself to its fundamentally involuntary character” (54).

the Jena Romantics, tales were attempts to systematize this development so that a universal philosophy could be built to provide guidance through the ambiguities of psychic experience. As an aesthetic answer to a philosophical question, they pointed the way toward completion of the individual in relationship with another or a community of others without resolving the paradox that is the foundation of such completion, and without prohibiting the excess of imagination that is the basis of their appeal. In that sense they are a natural model for Ashbery to incorporate into his unsettled observations on youth, maturity, and the guiding role of the poet. Subjective experience in the moving present of his poems is always vulnerable to the shadows that threaten to overwhelm it. But like the firefly's flickering light, its drive is to create relationship, and where a stable assertion of selfhood fails, a fine and subtle empathy takes its place. Tales compel both a yearning for some grand scheme to come and a nostalgic look back at old plans, and as a result they retain their promise to console the spirit with order and inspire the imagination with a sense of freedom and adventure—or conversely, to imbue innocent moments with a sense of doom or fate.

Of those Romantics who explored the philosophical implications of using poetic writing to overcome the limits of the empirical world, none examined them with more personal conviction than Novalis. His continuing relevance to modern poetry, especially to Ashbery as one of its prominent exemplars and interrogators, is tied to his mode of exploration and his conclusions (if one may call them that); thus a brief overview of his philosophical-poetical orientation may be helpful at this point. The turn of the nineteenth century was a time when the German *Märchen*, or fairy tale, was considered to be so expansive as to encompass the highest aspirations for which literature can reach, to the extent that Novalis could proclaim, “The fairy tale is entirely the canon of poetry” (Birrell 117). The promise it held for him was the great

desire of all the Romantics: to once again invest an overly-rational world with profound meaning so that humanity might find in it a new spiritual home. Novalis's own *Märchen*, embedded in his two unfinished novels, *Heinrich of Ofterdingen* and *The Novices of Sais*, are aestheticized accounts of his philosophical struggle to overcome the dualities that stand in the way of social, psychological, and spiritual wholeness. This struggle became personal after the death of his brother and, in the same month, his young fiancée, Sophie, with whom he desperately desired to be reunited. These losses propelled him in what appears to be two different directions: on the one hand, the plots of his *Märchen* typically take the form of a narrative journey that leads, in a roughly circular pattern, away from home and then back to individual and social equilibrium, generally symbolized by a sacred marriage (the merchants' tale in Chapter II of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is the sole exception). On the other hand, he embarked on a rigorous analysis and reformulation of Fichte's theory of subjectivity as foundational truth, which resulted in a much less stable conclusion than the redemptive unions that resolve his tales. In his *Fichte Studies* he reaches the limits of philosophy's ability to ethically establish such a foundation, but his conclusions retain enough power for art that it must play a vital role in the attempt. Philosophy's failure accordingly becomes the means not only to its own continuation as a knowledge-seeking discipline, but to the necessity for art to continue, not in the service of philosophy, but in conjunction with it.

Part of Novalis's legacy, then, is a challenge to poetry that it might produce the effect of unity without assuming the need to prove it through rational means. But it would be a mistake to conclude that he gave himself over entirely to mystical thinking. On the contrary, he maintained a pragmatic outlook on his professional life (he studied law and became administrator of a salt mine, like his father), and sought to balance his knowledge of law and science with philosophy

and poetry, with the aim of integrating all of it into his religious beliefs (Neubauer 12-15). He did not fail to recognize the challenge of this task. “Everything we come to know is a *communication*,” he states in the *Logologische Fragmente*, which he clarifies to mean “a revelation of the spirit,” but he follows this statement with a contradiction: “The meaning of the world has been lost. We stopped at the letter. We lost that which appears for the sake of the appearance” (Pfefferkorn 244). Recovering what was lost became the goal of his philosophy and his poetics. Kristin Pfefferkorn questions whether Novalis's belief in the transcendental possibilities of art was genuine, or a poetic conceit indicative of a fundamental experience of lack, and concludes that while “his stronger inclination is toward the service of art to the truth,” he is ultimately “ambivalent on this point” (189). I would agree, and point out that while his experience of rapture at Sophie's graveside, described in *Hymns to the Night*, was most likely a genuine religious experience, he never gave up on his central imperative, which was to communicate such an experience—that is, to genuinely *share* such an experience—through poetry. His inability to establish a philosophical ground for a permanent state of being in which the self is complete, but all boundaries have dissolved (even the boundaries of death), left him no recourse but to accept in its place a synthesis of subject and object in which the subject is always in process, hovering between self and other in the unending movement of becoming. In that sense, Novalis exemplifies the Early Romantic writer who, in Ziolkowski's words, “stood *between* reality and the ideal, oriented not only toward the infinite and the miraculous but also toward the social actuality of his times” (17). Laurie Ruth Johnson points out that Novalis was, for this reason, “one of the most important predecessors of literary modernity,” while at the same time “the German author viewed as most representative of the nostalgia and sentimentality that characterize that modernity” (103). His tendency to orient himself in two different directions—

toward past and present, myth and reality, the child's delight in imagination and the adult's acceptance of hard truths—culminates in his idea of a reciprocal relationship with an other who, with sufficient love, will “respond to him and confirm him in his sympathies for the world,” resulting in what Brown describes as a “fusion of two in one, but in which the two maintain their distinctness,” like “the back-and-forth vibration of a string that produces one tone” (155). In her discussion of Novalis, Johnson notes the influence of his friend and collaborator Friedrich Schlegel, who conceived of the remembrance of loved ones as just such an action, in this case “a back-and-forth movement of recollection and anticipation,” without denying “that there can be no remembering without loss” (3).

Ashbery's concordance with Novalis's poetics emerges in his performance of this hovering or undecided action, which suggests that poetry is a medium by which a more profound sort of communication can occur only if the autonomy of art and its proclivity for misdirection is respected. This requires a degree of linguistic permissiveness that can be confounding to readers, even as it expands the depth and breadth of poetic possibility. Géza von Molnár points out that freedom, for Novalis, is contingent on “a corresponding degree of passivity, of openness to receive that toward which the self strives in the ever repeated struggle to assert its freedom” (84). Ashbery brings his own brand of self-consciousness to this struggle, accepting that passivity can lead to what he acknowledges as the inadequacy of his poems to please the reader even as they invite independent interpretations. Critics, including W. H. Auden, may bemoan what they see as his aimlessness or lack of control, but he holds fast to the humble ethic that guides this strategy, which is to cast his net widely enough that some detail, however obscure or mundane, might find an audience by accident: the “occasional dream” or “vision” described in “Soonest Mended” (*Collected Poems* 185). According to von Molnár, Novalis ties passivity to the phenomenon of

the chance revelation which occurs “when we catch sight of certain human figures and faces . . . when we hear certain words, when we read certain passages—when we are struck by certain aspects of life, world, and fate” (85). For Ashbery as well as Novalis, fables and tales are a means to negotiate the relationship between private emotions and the larger social or cultural forces that attempt to contain and explain them, with the expectation that neither is adequate on its own to convey truths about human experience.

In 1991's *Flow Chart*, Ashbery reflects on how tales shape our expectations with their particular blend of prophecy and pure invention, in the process revealing the shadow of excitement or threat that is incorporated into the forms that structure our psychological, cultural, and linguistic experiences: “Early on,” he writes,

was a time of seeming: golden eggs that hatched
 into regrets, a snowflake whose kiss burned like an enchanter's
 poison; yet it all seemed good in the growing dawn. (5)

Bound up in these images are lessons of maturity that serve as an analogue for the changing historical view of writing as a medium of redemption. Tales, once passed along with speech, are now gathered into storybook form, “a cube of grace that was to be / a permanent shelter,” but their goodness conceals an uncontrollable force that ties the “growing dawn” to “regrets” and “poison”; the stories, like the children meant to be coerced by them into good behaviour, inevitably take on a life of their own:

Let the book end there, some few
 said, but that was of course impossible; the growth must persist
 into areas darkened and dangerous, undermined
 by the curse of the death breeze, until one is handed a skull

as a birthday present . . . (5-6)

In these lines the force of poetic creativity always threatens to turn a corner and lead us toward dissolution and death. Instead of a pilgrimage, we find ourselves on an unplanned journey with many paths going off in all directions; the choices we make are a gamble, and fate will play a hand. Italo Calvino describes this threat as an essential element of storytelling, taking it beyond the security of the known world: “the fable unwinds from sentence to sentence, and where is it leading? To the point at which something not yet said, something as yet only darkly felt by presentiment, suddenly appears and seizes us and tears us to pieces, like the fangs of a man-eating witch” (18). Literature's “task of consecration,” its public and ethical role, gives way to a private purpose, to give words to personal experience that may be in direct conflict with public obligation. The result is combinations of words “that at a certain moment become charged with preconscious subject matter,” exposing the gap between the consecrated world and the real one (24). Working within this gap, Ashbery produces writing that is both public and private, alternately offering up familiar phrases for communal sharing and then getting lost in a realm that is not yet clear to speaker or reader. This refusal to settle on a single perspective leaves him in a morally ambiguous position that compels him to compensate for the guilt and uneasiness his words evoke by continually speaking without ever revealing too much, leading to a perennially unresolved contradiction in which “each closing paragraph of the novella is / underlined: *To be continued . . .*” (*Flow Chart* 6). On the edge of this excess one can detect an element of hysteria as bewildering as it is liberating, but ultimately his is an honest position that relies on the *Tendenz* of his good intentions to establish the possibility of some sense of redemption, although without guarantees.

In his recent work the extremes are more pronounced; philosophical questions are less

likely to be directly addressed and ideas dissolve more frequently into language play. Like his Snow Queen, who “likes playing / as long as she's not involved” (*Worldly* 26) Ashbery reveals his motives only obliquely, ever cautious about what his poetry might disclose and seemingly hesitant to take responsibility for the shattered mirror he offers in place of a clear poetic vision. In “Programmer” (81), from 2011's *Planisphere*, he revisits the Brothers Grimm:

What kind of a nuthouse is this
 Hansel wondered. Early, evidently,
 yet what crumbs had led us to this door,
 and where, or why, are nothing to me now.

While the image of the unfortunate Hansel being fattened up for stew in his candy prison is a clever metaphor for the contemporary programmer trapped in his cubicle, it also functions as one more piece of data the poet-programmer feeds into the poem, a word machine whose only escape route to a higher truth is the sort of literary hallucination that causes the speaker to wonder, in the last line, if it was all merely a dream. Hansel's story, it turns out, is both fantasy and prophecy, but words like “nuthouse” dance above their serious implications like balloons on strings, compelling him to ask with baffled regret, “What makes everything today / so sexy, so friendly? It was a disaster in history.” Contemporary discourse, while affirming his intention to communicate the texture of life as it is, tosses up phrases that are inadequate to lived emotional experience, for the most part. On initial glance, their inability to measure accurately the gravity of experience is one theme of the poem. But gradually, words and phrases emerge like sharp rocks to mark the danger and struggle of everyday psychic life. “Make yourselves at home the witch said, / I'll only be a minute,” contains a villain whose threat we can all agree on in the context of the story. But another threat, whose private meaning cannot be shared, lurks beneath

the metaphor, so that when the speaker tries to communicate his resistance with the message “I live, / I fought,” the words “form like marbles in the mouth.” His noble claim is not destined for the permanence of a monument carved in stone. Instead, the “witch” serves a dual function, calcifying meaning to garble the intended message, and then smashing it to pieces. The “marbles” play a game of their own, and the subject has been absorbed into it:

An existence like a sea urchin's
is what I inherited. Avast. And in the twinkling
some of it belongs to others, and we love them
as herring love the sea. . . . (81)

With no Gretel to help defeat the witch, or otherwise set up the structural oppositions that could point the way to a resolution, the poet-programmer's lyric voice is subsumed into an “inherited” tradition that drowns him in a flotsam of allusions via implied metaphors: poets as creatures inhabiting the floors of silent seas (in this case not scuttling as Eliot would have it, but simply absorbing as a sea urchin does); a sea-change into the rich strangeness of a shared environment that “belongs to others, and we love them.” A love shared so freely from so unfocused a location also dispenses with a singular identity; he could just as easily have written, “and we *are* them.” Even the New York School with which critics would have him swim predictably blurs his poetic identity as much as defines it. So much about the speaker's doubts regarding others' attempts to establish the poet as a figure of reverence is implied in his dry observation: “It's all a bit orthodox.”

Yet behind the apparent resignation in “Programmer” is a sense that something of common experience is getting through. After all, if the “crumbs” that brought us here have lost their meaning and become “nothing,” then why mention them? Yet there they are, beckoning us

to consider their connotations, and confirming the possibility that there is still a recognizable path that once led to something both dangerous and fantastical, and moreover that there is a “me” to whom these crumbs might have meant something. This presence is hesitant to disclose itself without the defensive armaments of words that in the end betray something of it anyway. “It is as if Ashbery intended to deconstruct his poems in the act of writing them,” observes Karen Mills-Courts, adding, however, that that cannot be precisely the case, because his poetry does not “disintegrate the “I” in that undoing; it confirms the “I” as the generator and seeker of meaning” (268-269). By gathering meaning together, however falteringly, Ashbery invites the numinous charge once granted to the past and the grand narratives that described it into a present that may or may not be willing or prepared to accept it. In this way his poetry is a continual flawed offering to a flawed other, and the continuation of a conversation that takes its own inconclusive nature as its central subject.

A basic premise of this conversation is that the perfection of poetry, identity, or history implies a totality that annihilates all difference. Although oriented toward a full and final disclosure of presence, Novalis recognizes that for art to remain relevant the task must fail; “the story must always remain incomplete” (qtd. in Johnson 30; my translation). The poet's only ethical option, one that respects the integrity of the other as a subject in its own right, is to accept the self's incompleteness, however unsatisfying that may be. For the reader, that means accepting a poetry that denies the ego what it wants in favour of a more egalitarian alliance that is continually in the process of dissolving and rebuilding itself. In *Grains of Pollen*, Novalis notes that “*Witz*, as a principle of affinity, is at the same time *menstruum universale*” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 56). A poetic principle that accommodates the gathering and dispersal of meaning is one that resists the temptation to choose a clearer, more muscular path, whether that is nihilism

or the “cosmic modesty” of an idealism that sacrifices the self for God; instead, “we find a confused intermediate state, beset by nagging feelings of inadequacy and defeat” (Brown 52). The result is a poetry regularly undermining itself as poetry, and a poetic presence that seems bent toward its own obliteration. “Yet all this destruction leaves a residue” of some “knowledge or insight,” argues Brown; “For though the romantic, like Orpheus, proceeds through ignorance, in darkness, and with eyes averted, his goal is positive” (52). Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy concur in their discussion of Novalis's undeveloped fragment on the poet's eventual and necessary “dissolution in song”: “if Novalis never wrote his text on the 'dissolution of the poet,' it is not only because he died, but because this work, like all of his larger projects, was continually getting lost in the multiplication of its own productive germs” (56-57). This continually renewed urge to keep exploring, observing, and reporting back represents a modest triumph of poetry over the dissolving force of the language that conveys it.

The creative excesses of *Märchen* and the novels or poems that contain them are therefore necessary to permit a wider range of interpretive possibilities than their structures would ideally allow. Within this range, self and other or multiple selves may meet and interact, and the distance between them, that which measures the strange against the familiar, must stretch and contract to permit creative acts to occur. In *The Novices of Sais*, a novel more properly described as a long prose poem, Novalis's speaker describes how faith in an ultimate synthesis of knowledge drives him to collect and order the objects of the senses, leading to moments of clarity when “everything becomes so familiar, so dear to me; and what before seemed strange and foreign, becomes all at once like a household utensil” (15). But despite this revelation of the familiar, some trace of otherness remains, a “strangeness that is strange to me,” which he admits is the reason “why this collection has always both repelled and attracted me” (17). Synthesis

extends to the psycho-spiritual: “A truly *synthetic* person is one who resembles many persons at once” he claims, each individual “the germinal point of an infinite genius” capable of expansion into this realm of resemblances as complementary as they are strange (Donehower 15). This scheme permits the true self to disclose itself only in processes of multiplication and pluralization, which he also describes, paradoxically, as processes of “dissolution and dispersion. A person is a *harmony*,” Novalis insists, with “no substance such as '*soul*' ” (15).

Characteristically, Ashbery approaches this legacy of mixed identities with mixed feelings, declaring himself “violently opposed to the little pieces / of the puzzle getting in on the act,” presumably because he cannot see them helping him get a clear view of things, and thus helping him write his way out of this mess, “any more than I can see Little Red Riding Hood climbing Mt. McKinley” (*Flow Chart* 22). He voices these objections even as he leaves the door open to welcome whatever muse may pass by, accepting “the horror of it” and arguing in his own defense, “we are, look, all of us, undisciplined” (22). The results are a mixture of nonsense and something more profound:

No matter that it didn't make me look ridiculous—the point is I could easily
 have managed
 that without assists from bunnies and wood-sprites if something not of my own
 construing,
 something I rejected, hadn't interposed a feline quickness and fur just before the fatal
 gradient, and I stepped back and stared, and in that moment saw myself on a
 visit to myself,
 with quite a few me's on a road receding sharply into a distance spiked with blue
 fantastic crags that had castles perched on them and were honeycombed with

grottoes. I could as easily
 have missed it and arrived blind at my destination, this room
 where I entertain a stranger as dusk deepens and silence settles in,
 and never known my own two shoes, what to make of them,
 as they scoured hills as well as dales in search of the person they
 belonged to instead of staying parked under this plain wooden table. (144-145)

His wandering words have brought him back to a justification of “the little pieces”—in this case, “bunnies and wood-sprites”—that are an inextricable part of an imaginary landscape that has the capacity to open up onto altogether unexpected vistas. While the scene recalls the art of American Romanticism, or perhaps John Martin's “The Bard,” it is overlaid with a psychologizing vision of multiple selves that is surreal in its imagery but postmodern in style; rather than relinquishing creative control to his unconscious, the speaker instead attempts to explain why he fails to assert it. Where the German Romantic spirit is felt most strongly is in his tendency to intellectualize his understanding of this expansiveness and its boundaries. Room is made for a tone that is both serious and playful, for the child's call to adventure and the adult's call to return safely home, and for a vision of ever-widening breadth within the shallows of textual experience. Thus updated, the Romantic landscape brings Novalis's theory of poetic identity into a realm of contemporary understanding that does not deny the distance imposed by the past. Ashbery accomplishes this by shifting the emphasis from the consolidating energies of an infinite genius to the strangeness that unites him with the sympathetic reader in a shared encounter with otherness. Neither God nor the ordering forces that structure language and culture can be counted on to provide a genuine experience of art, only the chance encounter with “something not of my own construing, / something I rejected,” that possesses a feline attraction

both sensuous and violent.

Part of the attraction is the sense that death, that “fatal gradient,” has been delayed for one more moment, and therefore to live is to accept the dark forces words unleash and can never quite recapture. Shoes symbolize this unleashed freedom and particularly the youthful desire for adventure. Ashbery returns to them in “The Handshake, the Cough, the Kiss”:

Nobody had to remind the boy
to hang up his shoes that day, he was already in them,
hobbling off to the cobbler's to buy some new laces
of the kind worn in the port city of his birth . . . (*Worldly* 27)

Behind these images we can once again detect the figure of Hans Christian Andersen, the son of a shoemaker who left his home in Odense to wander Europe entertaining kings and queens. His presence brings ethical, textual, and psychological questions into relief. Like Karen, the protagonist of Andersen's “The Red Shoes,” or the characters who don enchanted boots in “The Galoshes of Fortune,” Ashbery's speaker discovers within himself an insatiable urge to rove more widely than convention would dictate. A product of both selfishness and self-preservation, this urge is generated by the very words that depend on it for expression; the observing (reading or writing) self and the wandering selves are disclosed by the writing simultaneously, creating one another “in that moment.” This allows the speaker to occupy several positions at once: out adventuring amongst the crags and grottoes, and home at “this plain wooden table.” Does he regret the alienation imposed by writing? Perhaps, but one gets the sense that it was worth it to have seen, for a moment, the wider view rather than having “missed it and arrived blind at my destination.”

By contrast, the characters in Andersen's stories do not fare so well, and their fates also

have a bearing on the situation unfolding in Ashbery's lines. The student who puts on magical galoshes that grant his every wish finds travelling the world brings uncertainty, discomfort, and the desire for "something better than the present," and so he dreams of travelling with no body, unwittingly willing his own death (Andersen 109). Ashbery heeds this warning by making the most of the "feline quickness" that springs out of the poem and the dynamic processes of the corporeal world so that he can welcome the stranger he subsequently entertains in his room. The risks implied in such a scenario become clear when one considers it in light of "The Red Shoes." In that story, Karen becomes obsessed with a pair of beautiful shoes that force her to dance, against her will, "over fields and valleys, in the rain and in the sun, by day and night," and more dangerously, away from church and community and "into the dark woods"; desperate, she has her feet chopped off and the shoes dance away, only to return to prevent her from entering the church by dancing on the doorstep (238-240). Though Karen must repent to God, her sin is clearly against society. Staring disapprovingly from the walls of the church are "portraits of bygone ministers and their wives," and Heaven, which her soul eventually reaches after much penitence, is a place "where no one questioned her about the red shoes" (237, 241). And so, in addition to independence and the freedom to explore unknown places, shoes carry the whiff of sin and especially sexual sin, signalled by their red colour and their control over Karen's body. Ashbery, by defending the unmasked-for urge to wander and entertain strangers, recognizes this trace of corporeal shame as part of the fine print of a social contract he must accept, even as he struggles to come to terms with the guilt it implies. Where his poems are most evocative strict morality is left compromised, but he is a poet who knows that art and ethics both demand more than he can give.

Andersen's presence behind these lines exemplifies Ashbery's knack for summoning past

voices as a means of listening for future ways of imagining a more open approach to ethics and art. Like Novalis, he values continuity with approaches from the past that found only partial success, reassuring us that today's mistakes fit within a larger tradition. *The Novices of Sais* includes, as components of a vast dialogue, a variety of historical approaches to the question of the world's genesis: beginning with “myths and poems,” the curious minds of humanity shift to “scientific explanations” (23), only to reach “the horrid abyss” of reason in its most strict and static form (41). The argument comes full circle with the tale of Hyacinth and Roseblossom, told as a plea for the importance of union in love, the formulation of which depends on recognition of “a new bond between Thou and I” (93). But this can only take place the moment the mystical goddess Hyacinth seeks is unveiled to be his familiar beloved, Roseblossom. This theme, whereby the divine is unveiled in the familiar and vice versa, extends to the novel's conclusion, in which the conversation about origins enacts that which it seeks with the revelation that “the life of the universe can rightly be said to have been an eternal dialogue of a thousand voices” (114). In the context of this emphasis on communal, creative production, disagreements about whether Novalis's writing demonstrates nonclosure or is ultimately oriented toward the transcendent seem to miss the point.⁴ His work is better aligned with an understanding of the creative act as both a cyclical return and a leap forward into a new realm that accommodates all that has come before, including originary myths and the abyss of faithless reason, as well as something not yet named. In other words, his is an orientation toward an aesthetic action that admits the hope for truth without denying the troubling ideological implications of embracing one all-encompassing perspective. Richard Kearney notes the essentially hermeneutic nature of such an action: “Emancipating the audience from the ideologies and mythologies of first belief,

⁴ For an example of this, see Nicholas Saul's review of Alice A. Kuzniar's *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin*. *Modern Language Review* 87.2 (1992): 519-521.

the aesthetic space liberates each spectator into possibilities of non-belief or second belief. No longer a given, faith becomes a choice, a matter of interpretation” (11). This grants the reader more leeway than Auden or Andersen permit, room enough even for mistakes, and leaves the writer in a state of perpetual instability as he or she attempts to facilitate conflicting views. Not coincidentally, Ashbery tends to revisit settings involving teachers and students, a dynamic upon which *The Novices of Sais* is premised and ultimately concludes.

“Hotel Lautréamont” (*Notes* 70-72), one of Ashbery's more explicit treatments of oral tradition and the pressures and opportunities it presents, begins in just such a way.

“Lautréamont” is the pen name of the French author Isidore Ducasse, a master of surrealist juxtapositions who coined the simile “as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table,” and contributed the words on the masthead of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, “Poetry must be made by all not one” (Rothenberg and Joris 41). “Hotel Lautréamont” demonstrates how the latter statement relies on the sentiment conveyed by the former; that is, a poetry “made by all” must include thoughts and images that jostle together awkwardly but beautifully, and the poem's form enhances this imperfect fit. The speaker starts off in a didactic tone suggestive of a lecture:

Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society

working as a team. They didn't just happen. There was no guesswork.

The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it.

We see the results in works as diverse as “Windsor Forest” and “The Wife of

Usher's Well.” (70)

His tone begins to falter as the repetitions imposed by its form, a pantoum, results in questions, problems, and troubling observations involving an impending social “dementia” and a final,

“ghastly error.” Coming to terms with error, and accounting for it publicly, is a means to invite that public to consider the triumphs and failures of faith and hope as a shared ground we all inhabit.

In a number of ways, the pantoum epitomizes Ashbery's work as a whole. Its chief pleasure lies in its cyclical process, which employs repetitions of alternating sets of lines to effect startling contrasts and combinations that are to a certain extent out of the poet's control. Continuously circling back on itself to move ahead, it finally returns to an altered beginning that calls into question the certainties of its own premises and conclusions, and in Ashbery's hands, the reliability of the formal structures that are meant to take us from one to the next. “Hotel Lautréamont” enacts these complications in content as well as form. From “Windsor Forest” to “The Wife of Usher's Well,” to “the finale of the Sibelius concerto,” the speaker summons works at various stages in their development from folk stories to assist him as he tries to grasp the origins, processes, and ultimately the destiny of their authors, “the people,” who “knew what they wanted and how to get it.” Communal wisdom dictates a pragmatic approach to what it desires, and its effectiveness is captured in the adage “many hands are making work light again,” but the poet's plight is indicated by his observation that “no one thinks to question the source of so much collective euphoria.” His attempt to put the larger social meaning of these works into words is confounded by obscure histories and musical reinterpretations that seem to confirm Novalis's prophecy of the poet's final “dissolution in song”: “Windsor Forest” alludes to a cantata by Ralph Vaughan Williams, who found inspiration in his collection of folk songs, while the music of Sibelius has its roots in Finland's epic poem, the *Kalevala*. These examples suggest that music has taken precedence over writing, “proving narrative passé.” “The horns of elfland” in the second and third stanza will, for many, bring to mind Benjamin Britten's song cycle before it

leads to bookish contemplation of the *Elfhome* of old Scottish ballads, yet the Tennyson poem from which the phrase is borrowed reassures us that the horns have a voice that grows “thinner” but also “clearer” as they advance through history:

O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,

And thinner, clearer, farther going!

O sweet and far from cliff and scar

The horns of elfland faintly blowing! (Tennyson 1939-1940)

As themes, patterns and images are repeated through generations, their reinterpretation becomes a form of regeneration that confirms the decay of narrative as essential to creativity, and change as necessary to keeping something of what we have; despite the “dying, dying, dying” of the horns' echoes, they “roll from soul to soul, / And grow for ever and for ever” (1940). Even so, the transformation is disturbing. When “[t]he horns of elfland swing past” in Ashbery's second stanza, “we see the results” in the form of the above-mentioned works, but upon repetition of the phrase in the third stanza “the world, as we know it, sinks into dementia,” implying that we have lost familiarity with, and even interest in, the original narratives that inspired them. For the speaker, who is trying to reconstruct something of value with the words available to him, this is a problem. His challenge is to retain the force of literature without accepting any one version of it too literally and thereby alienating his reader, and this requires that he strike a middle ground that leaves room for interpretation.

The elf is a case in point. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, at its Teutonic root is an incubus that causes diseases and nightmares and is rumoured to steal children. This ominous figure has been tamed by the bowdlerizing effects of a contemporary culture bent on protecting children's innocence and disseminating cultural products, confirming that modern iterations only

stay relevant by responding to cultural desires. Though sometimes at odds with these desires, Ashbery's speaker recognizes the result as a situation of our own making that is based on good intentions, and therefore best dealt with ironically. A healthy and well-rested incubus appears near the end of *Flow Chart*, where the possibility of a more honest revision is reserved for some point in the future:

The incubus awoke from a long, refreshing sleep.

A lot of people think they have only to imagine a siren for it to exist,
 that the truth in fairy tales is somehow going to say them. I tend to agree
 with dumb people who intervene, and are lost; actors of a different weakness
 who explain the tracteries of fallen leaves as models for our burgeoning etiquette,
 a system that doesn't let us off the hook as long as we are truth and know it,
 the great swing of things. And of course it may yet turn up. (215)

Whatever dangerous force might lurk within these lines need not be amplified by superstitions that it can be imagined into terrifying existence, nor silenced out of concern for the innocent. Rather, the speaker attempts to convince us that it can be made useful as a catalyst for a “burgeoning etiquette” that might spring forth from the “fallen leaves” of old stories. If it seems as though Ashbery is insisting on a tamer or more toned-down role for poetry, one that adheres in its maturity too closely to such things as “etiquette,” we can be reassured that his “tend[ency] to agree” is somewhat promiscuous, poised as the phrase is between the beliefs of the many and those who intervene to disagree. Such is “the great swing of things” that it reassures us of the status quo while at the same time promising that everything might change tomorrow. The system is us, after all, and so it is up to us to determine what shape our collective “truth” takes.

Thus the poet's task in “Hotel Lautréamont” becomes clear when all that remains is “for

us to come to terms with *our* commonality.” A difficult task, to be sure, from the point of view of a speaker at home in an urban, secular setting where “[t]he saxophone wails, the martini glass is drained, / and night like black swansdown settles on the city.” He considers the obstacles to his goal: “In troubled times one looked to the shaman or priest for comfort and counsel. / Now, only the willing are fated to receive death as a reward.” The distance between those who find communal sources of comfort in religion and those who do not spans the gap from the indefinite pronoun “one” (also implying “as one”) to “only the willing.” An option is introduced after “night like black swansdown settles on the city” once again: “If we tried to leave, would being naked help us?” A number of possibilities arise from this recombination of lines. The evocation of a black swan implies that something special is needed, a rare kind of genius that may or may not materialize. Will being naked, that is to say open and vulnerable, compel it to appear? Or is nakedness linked to the “perversity” in the poem's final section? In the following stanza, children appear to “twist hula-hoops, imagining a door to the outside,” situating nakedness next to a kind of animal innocence that comes across as both hopeful and hopelessly cynical with its implication that we might dream of achieving transcendence through worldly pleasures. Freighted with contradictory meanings, Ashbery's words are products of a world in which “all we think of is how much we can carry with us,” and so the speaker returns to literature's most reliable linear model to ask “what of older, lighter concerns? What of the river?” Still, the answer is not clear. “All the behemoths have filed through the maze of time,” perhaps not burdened with such a confusion of discourses, but still destined to reach a final, inexplicable end. Only by coming to terms with death can the poet possibly formulate a means to immortality; however, if such a formulation is to be communicated, it must come about through immersion in relationship rather than through escape via the alienation of subjective experience. The poet, as an individual

speaking on behalf of the tribe, finds himself in a bind: “It was their choice, after all, that spurred us to feats of the imagination.” Thus chosen, he makes a heroic effort at such a feat, and suddenly “we emerge into the open / and in so doing deprive time of further hostages, / to end the standoff that history long ago began.” But the moment proves too fleeting to grasp, and in the next instant “it is shrouded, veiled: We must have made some ghastly error.” Dismayed, he asks a final question: “must we thrust ever onward, into perversity?”

We must. Human desire, however much we would like it to be strong enough to break into the walled garden of paradise, cannot reach beyond the human world without manifesting as an equal but opposite perversity, the desire for death. The perverse path is the path that turns away from obligation and reason, and so desire always leads in two directions: toward a tyrannical subjectivity that obliterates all difference by projecting itself onto the external world, and toward an ideal unity in relationship that can never be realized fully, because no ideal mirror image of the self exists. In between is the imperfect and barely sufficient sociality reflected in the final stanza:

You mop your forehead with a rose, recommending its thorns.

Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society;

only night knows for sure. The secret is safe with her:

The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it. (72)

With this return to the poem's beginning, Ashbery strikes a delicate balance between the heroic approach and the more modest action of turning away and taking the *via negativa*, a German Romantic tactic that Brown describes as “a calculated method of continual evasion and withdrawal” driven by the desire to “begin with the world” (52-53). But turning to “the tracteries of fallen leaves as models” is neither a sure bet nor an easy path. Ashbery's poetic diversions are

more likely to begin with a word, in this case the well-worn symbol of the rose, which shows us how easily a gesture toward beauty can veer into the absurd. Yet the scene also invites us to consider the rose, whose symbolic significance slips from love, beauty and perfection to blood, secrecy, and even the impossibility of the blue rose and the ache of *Sehnsucht* represented by Novalis's blue flower in *Henry von Ofterdingen*. For Henry, the secret of the blue flower is kept safe in a dream where the absurd is both a “commonplace” and a remarkable gift, “a defense against the regularity and routine of life, a playground where the hobbled imagination is freed and revived and where it jumbles together all the pictures of life” (19). Such freedom comes closest to conscious expression with the telling of Klingsohr's tale, an elaborate tangle of coded symbols that elicits more questions than it answers. Attempts at translation tend only to deepen its enigma, yet this sense of a near-divine imaginative power that speaks through fiction but ultimately keeps its secrets is surely one of the pleasures implicit in Ashbery's claim that “[t]he people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it.”

If we take seriously Ashbery's interest in what research has shown, we must therefore briefly consider his most assiduous precursors, the Brothers Grimm, whose relative success in establishing a common voice for the people has a bearing on the pressures he faces. The Grimms' goal in popularizing fairy tale as a literary genre was enlightened by their understanding that to seek with others what cannot be grasped alone is to be united in movement toward a common mystery. What they meant to offer was nothing less than communion, in both senses of the word: the tales were intended not only to be shared among all, but also to undergo a transformation by which profound truth is experienced through the senses, just as bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ during the celebration of the Eucharist. Though infinite joy cannot be realized completely, through the tales it can be meted out in bits and pieces which,

though disguised as worldly pleasures, need only be recognized as fragments of something more profound. In Wilhelm Grimm's description, fairy tales are

the remnants of a faith . . . like little pieces of a splintered jewel that lie on the ground covered over by grass and flowers and only to be discovered by very sharp eyes. The meaning of the mystical element is long since lost, but it is still felt and gives the fairy tales their content while at the same time satisfying the natural pleasure in the miraculous; they are never just the ornamental play of idle imagination (qtd. in Peppard 50).

This vision of tales as earthly fragments of a lost mystical realm is restated by the folklorist Vladimir Propp, who theorizes that “religious form is primary and the fairy tale form is secondary” (qtd. in Pfefferkorn 150). Pfefferkorn elaborates this idea by distinguishing myth as a genre concerned with “the realm above man,” and *Märchen* as “a secularized myth, which not infrequently serves the myth as graveyard,” where religious beliefs that are no longer viable “leave an echo or shadow of themselves” (149-150). In this view, tales become a supplement to religious myth in the Derridean sense, confirming its inadequacy while paradoxically extending its power, rendering it “thinner” but also “clearer” by making it comprehensible to a secular world.

Just as tales can be read as shattered and profane interpretations of religious myth, Ashbery's poems can be read as dismantled and deconstructed interpretations of the narratives from which he draws. As he traverses these quaint paths he faces the reality of an audience that feels alienated by outdated gestures toward religion or the mending of the soul, one that longs for core truths but requires that such a need be expressed in their own terms. He responds by resituating his poetry repeatedly in the present and treating its basic elements as the fictions they

are, as though, through some ironic gesture or act of reverse psychology, their magic will be revived. It is a gamble and he knows it, but the very amiability of his tone both lulls and propels the reader into new considerations of old narrative fragments. A poem from *Planisphere*, “Circa,” reframes Wilhelm Grimm's scenario:

They were hunting debris in the grass.
It seemed that stencils of various types,
cut from many kinds of materials,
had existed in the not too remote past.

The problem was less what to do about it
than to escape responsibility for it. (11)

Whether he wishes to escape responsibility for a poem that succeeds too well or one that fails is difficult to determine, but either way he cannot help but try to layer these stencils into a palimpsest, seeking resemblances in an individual or collective past that might point the way to a side road down which unexpected poetic revelations might be found. If *Witz* taps a mystery that resides in sociality, then Ashbery resembles the German Romantics in that for him, sociality extends back in time and also forward to anticipate a synthesis not yet available. Such opportunities, if they are to be fresh, must be sought in peripheral spaces where, like hinges, they connect disparate entities without denying a more profound separation. There, in the “joints within our model,” the speaker detects “traces / of historical excitation. Days / with startling similarities in them,” but even so, he feels compelled to give voice to doubts, deriding his method of discovery as “false reasoning based on expectation” (11). This argument between cynical rationality and naïve hope may not be resolved—indeed, it should not be resolved—but

by presenting it in such familiar terms, as a conversation in which differences are maintained, Ashbery insinuates that the ongoing argument is the important thing. Insisting “I don't care” in the final line (12), he admits room for all strategies that might satisfy the deeper structures of desire that drive history forward.

Likewise, Novalis uses Romantic irony as a way of reconciling rationality with mystical thinking. The same poet who envisioned the dream world of the blue flower as an antidote to everyday life also wrote, “I am convinced that true revelations come by cold, technical understanding, and peaceful, moral sense rather than by imagination, which seems only to lead us into the realm of ghosts, this antipode of the true heaven” (Neubauer 3, my translation). Romantic irony, in Gary Handwerk's words, “is the other side of Romanticism, attuned to rationality rather than feeling” (203), and is evidenced by “abruptly disjunctive transitions from one mode of reality and one narrative thread to another,” in which case “the disruption signals the fictional status of literary artifacts and the provisional nature of aesthetic experience” (207). The impossibility of following one thread to a totalizing statement is remedied by instead exploring the rambling process of this never-ending quest, a strategy that uses reason in the service of affect and vice versa in an elliptical pattern of constant movement and play. For the German Romantics, irony was a means of turning reason back on itself; like the sharpened pick of a miner, this refined tool could break apart calcified preconceptions and explore a deeper realm of ideas.

For Ashbery, Romantic irony is not just a means of showing his cards but also an invitation to the reader to observe and respond to the constant reshuffling of the genres, moods, and attitudes available to him. Like Novalis, he is just as conscious of the limits of this play as of its creative potential. In “Märchenbilder” (*Collected Poems* 467-468) his speaker appeals to fairy

tales, chamber music, and film dialogue in an attempt to articulate a mood that promises to bind him to his listener through a sense of shared yearning, if nothing else. As so often happens, he returns to the seductions of childhood imagination only to find that his efforts to capture his listener's attention are inconclusive. The poem begins with the words of Wilhelm Grimm, spoken in the language of Ashbery's grandmother—"Es war einmal . . ." ("Once upon a time . . .")—but abruptly breaks off: "No, it's too heavy / To be said. Besides, you aren't paying attention any more." The significance of these opening lines strains under the weight of their oral and literary history, which reaches back through almost two centuries of retellings and, more proximately, into the ancient terrain of childhood experience. In recognizing the weight of what cannot be said, Ashbery finds himself in the Grimms' complicated position of trying to reconstruct a *Naturpoesie* that must in the end be fictional, suspended in its lightness above the mood he is trying to convey. His project is doomed from the first line; the inexpressible heaviness will not find its way into any single narrative, whether shared or deeply personal.

From this general fairy tale opening he moves to the particular, by attempting a retelling of "The Steadfast Tin Soldier." But Andersen's tale of unrequited love loses its shape under the strain of the speaker's effort to eliminate the gap between story and subjective experience:

How shall I put it?

"The rain thundered on the uneven red flagstones.

The steadfast tin soldier gazed beyond the drops

Remembering the hat-shaped paper boat, that soon . . ."

That's not it either. (467)

The uneven flagstones and the paper boat, which emerges as both memory and object of

anticipation, suggest that the spatial and the temporal terrain of the original tale have become elastic in this retelling. The reviser of the tale, on remembering the boat and perhaps expecting it to return, seems to have confused himself with the soldier, and one wonders what they might have in common. Andersen's soldier is not real but manufactured from tin, and flawed at that; he is missing part of one leg, and so came into the world incomplete. Nonetheless, he is admirably, tragically steadfast, enduring death and rebirth in a Jonah-and-the-Whale-like encounter with a fish, only to return to his beloved and indifferent paper dancer and be cast into a fire. Such faith hardly seems worthwhile when the consummation of a feeling, in this case the soldier's love, is so far beyond the reach of possibility. Only in death, when he is consumed by the heat of the fire and reduced to a heart-shaped puddle of tin, does his passion find an adequate expression of fulfillment. The poetic speaker, by abandoning this narrative so abruptly, seems much less reliable, and the reader might understandably presume that he is not nearly so steadfast in his faith or direction. He has lost faith in the stories, one surmises, because they do not fulfill their promise without exacting a terrible price. Steadfastness is, however, evident in his repeated changes of direction, which indicate his persistently practical goal of finding some sort of workable compromise. His faith is redefined in this poem as an empirical faith, borne out by the senses rather than the spirit.

Ashbery's nod to William Carlos Williams' "Queen Anne's Lace" in the second stanza confirms that this poem is structured by a desire which continually renews that faith. After we are told that a "musical phrase" can capture a mood—a reference to Schumann, whose "Märchenbilder" surely inspired the title of the poem—appropriately, in the next line, a "lovelorn sonata" rides by on "a solemn white horse." With this mysterious "new arrival" a fantasy begins to take shape, a "[p]omp of flowers, decorations" that suggests a wedding, or perhaps a hero's

welcome. Suddenly it is over, “[j]unked,” because this is “[t]he wrong kind of day / For business or games, or betting on a sure thing.” This abrupt transition into the realm of the everyday social world conflates business, games, and marriage into a communal exchange that is viewed as little more than a gamble on an unlucky day. For the poet, though, the gamble pays off; his wordplay and genre-play allow this bleak mood to dissolve into the script of an old black-and-white movie: “She looks into his eyes. 'It would not be good / To be left alone.' He: 'I'll stay / As long as the night allows.’” In this ironic scene, the speaker seems to be addressing the audience even as he joins it, sharing in a common yearning to meld together and at last disappear into the art.

This yearning must go unfulfilled. The scene is “one of those night rainbows / In negative color,” whose beauty can only be a product of the imagination. “As we advance, it retreats” until we find ourselves “far into a cave,” which suggests, in addition to Plato's cave, the cave of Novalis's Romantic landscape that symbolizes a return to our beginnings, a womb-like space of creative rebirth to which the conscious mind is denied access. Forced to take the *via negativa*, we are left with only our desires, disappointments, and depths of feeling, translated into a romantic wood where a cathedral of trees may, if we pay attention, inspire us with a wind that “lifts their leaves, slightly.” Fairy tales, those “bad stories,” may be nothing more than toys, “empty as cupboards,” perfect and predictable miniatures comprising only “another almond tree, or a ring-swallowing frog,” yet Ashbery does not dwell on their failures or any false promise of deliverance outside them. Instead, he returns to the experience of shared pursuit, and admits what compels him—what compels us—to keep revisiting these tales and the poems that resurrect them: “they are beautiful as we people them with ourselves.”

Conclusion

For Novalis, tales are the apotheosis of *poesie*, a pathway forever approaching a magical kingdom where perfect freedom and beauty, the heart of our being, awaits. This exalted role for art is tempered by his understanding that, because our essence is not static but an infinite unfolding, “we can never reach this goal in time”; therefore we must place ourselves at odds with time, and “reach it there in every moment . . . because an endless striving after what hovers ever out of reach before us seems unbearable” (Novalis, *Fichte Studies* 186). Only through the free play of our own efficacy, he argues, can we then capture “the special *everydayness* of the present” in “an endless interchange” (193).

The extent to which Ashbery's poetry is a response to these ideas is evident in his explanation of what a poem is—“not a stationary object but a kinetic act, in which something is transferred from somebody to somebody else” (“Poetical Space” 211)—and in the way he accommodates Novalis's vision of unity by finding terms in which it can be transformed into the most commonplace encounters of contemporary life. Accordingly, he pays what some might consider excessive attention to surface elements, inviting his odd combinations of mood, genre and syntax to make the most of their awkward encounters, and allowing familiar scenarios to harbour a sometimes confounding strangeness. The resulting mish-mash, like a closet full of second-hand clothes that are worn, frayed, and not particularly well-matched, may be confusing but is still somehow comfortable. As Siobhan Phillips notes, “his focused attention on everyday experience helps even his most incomprehensible content to seem weirdly common” (202).

The fairy tales that crop up in his poetry share this ability to marry the strange with the familiar in innocuous ways. Pfefferkorn observes that unlike more serious genres such as myth or saga, which emphasize “the distance between divine and profane realms,” the *Märchen* “freely

and playfully skips from station to station of the tale it tells” (152). Realistic scenarios give way to enchanted landscapes or encounters with talking animals without anyone questioning their plausibility or even taking particular notice, and this affords them the creative capacity Ashbery's poems persistently seek:

For it is in its matter-of-fact lightheartedness that the Märchen asserts the possibility for man, any man, to join the liminal characters of its plot in that threshold region, that borderland, where the ordinary and the extraordinary, the divine and the profane meet. It invites the audience to become part of that moment and place in which man can interact with and grasp the reality that lies hidden behind the world of everyday experiences. (152)

If bits and pieces of tales appear to fit seamlessly into Ashbery's poems, it is because he treats them with a disarming familiarity that admits this same spirit of casual revelation. By filling his poems with such odd pleasures, Ashbery welcomes his readers, if they are so willing, to take part in finding new ways of listening for “the sounded note” that for Auden “is the restored relation” (*Selected Poems* 178), and without which no poetry is possible.

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