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SUBJECTIVITY, LANGUAGE, AND LONELINESS IN THE POETRY OF JOHN ASHBERY:
A SOCIAL READING

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ABSTRACT

For all the countless ways critics have represented John Ashbery, there has unfortunately been a relative shortage of readings that seek to understand him as a socially-minded poet. Ashbery as the charter of his own private consciousness is a more common interpretational trend, but views of Ashbery's poetry that over-stress such "privacy" may neglect and misrepresent important themes and techniques that characterize his work. Rather than going the other way and simply ignoring those aspects of Ashbery's poetry that lead to meditations on privately individual subjectivity (or even draw out labels of solipsism), my thesis interprets them as components of a broader struggle by Ashbery to develop his socially situated poetics. Building on contextual arguments about the social necessity of a reformulated avant-garde amid the homophobia of the McCarthy era, my thesis interprets the concerns initiated in Ashbery's life and poetry during that time as gestating into broader examinations of the social realm and subjectivity (specifically its potential to approach either solipsism or intersubjective connection). In my readings of *The Tennis Court Oath* and *Three Poems*, I argue that Ashbery's treatment of thoroughly communal language and conceptualizations of selfhood as deeply social necessitate a view of the poet as fundamentally engaged in the social world. Equally important to my thesis, however, is the understanding that Ashbery seeks to approach and develop the social realm by simultaneously examining the strictures of subjectivity — particularly the shortcomings of its language — that present solipsism as a constant threat against the emotional and communal possibilities of social interaction. Focusing primarily on *The Tennis Court Oath* and *Three Poems*, two of Ashbery's most stylistically distinct books, my thesis provides a paradigm through which varied elements in Ashbery's collected works can be viewed.

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The Mooring of an Introduction: Ashbery as a Social Poet

It is never too late to mend
 no matter how we clammer to redo everything from the ground up; the chatter
 never subsides
 but like the tide of dust of the oceans, returns and retreats, forever opaque,
 forever itself:
 a longing one does not subdue. (Ashbery, *Flow Chart* 73)

In blackened page after blackened page, from the prose of *Three Poems* to the overflowing lines of *Flow Chart*, or, conversely, in a succession of textual snippets, from the lacunae-ridden “Europe” of *The Tennis Court Oath* to the poetic “one-liners” of *As We Know*, John Ashbery has been and continues to be many . . . *things* in his poetry. The vague yet all-encompassing referentiality of such a descriptor seems only fitting for a poet whose positions in and towards his own poetry are so variable. At times seemingly absent, a hidden vehicle for ceaselessly modulating discourses, and at other times overtly, meta-textually present, Ashbery inhabits ever shifting spaces of relationship towards his “self” (or perhaps simply his subjective consciousness), the perceived world, and the language that attempts to chart and change them both, even as they, all three interweaving, alter each another. Since academic criticism, not long after the acclaimed success of 1975’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, began to seriously play catch-up with Ashbery’s work, there has been an ever increasing number of Ashberys circulating through the halls of academia. As Susan Schultz explains in her introduction to *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, there is “a meditative Ashbery, a formalist Ashbery, a comic Ashbery, a late-Romantic Ashbery, a Language poet Ashbery, and so on” (1). To this list I hope to add a socially-minded Ashbery, a poet who engages the social world while examining the strictures of subjectivity — particularly the shortcomings of its language — that present solipsism as a constant threat against the emotional and communal possibilities of such engagement. Although Ashbery has expanded upon these concerns throughout his career,

altering them (and aspects of his style) in relationship to the time in which he is writing, their roots are set firmly in the post-war avant-garde community of New York and in the estranging cultural and political atmosphere of the McCarthy era.

Whatever poetic heritage critics have claimed for Ashbery, whether formed from French surrealism or American Transcendentalism, each categorization has seemed far too limited and single-minded. Rather than attempt to wholly avoid this perennial risk, though, this essay will focus on one primary aspect of Ashbery's poetry in the belief that it constitutes a mutable, rather than exclusionary, paradigm for reading into the many other distinguishing qualities of his art. Framed modestly, this aspect of Ashbery's poetry might be thought of as its ability to develop and furnish the desire to connect subjectivities; a desire that arises not necessarily from Ashbery himself, as owner of a privileged psyche in search of readers, but rather, more abstractly, from what seems at least partly a quality of language itself. For Ashbery, the use of language both nourishes and contributes to the desire to emotionally and intellectually link subjectivities. As he puts it in *Flow Chart*, our language of constant vocal and nonvocal "chatter," ever-present and unstable, comprises a constant "longing one does not subdue." Despite the insufficiencies of our "forever opaque" language, Ashbery suggests that we may use it in tandem with the desire it both creates and reveals to "mend" the strictures of, and the ruptures between, subjectivities, for "other people are interested" and "there is no use in giving them the slip" (73). Though the capability for linking subjectivities is an ever-present component of language, it exists for Ashbery as an underdeveloped ability. One of his major accomplishments then, has been his continual effort to revivify and draw attention to the social potential of language through his often uncanny linguistic play.

To frame this another way, there exists a “lonesomeness of words” that both influences subjectivities’ dissatisfactions with the ability to communicate and initiates greater desire for intersubjective connection. The phrase, “lonesomeness of words,” comes from Fred Moramarco’s reformulation of a line in “How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher . . .” and is used to various effect in his essay on *The Tennis Court Oath*, but to illustrate how the phrase informs this paper, it is best to go to the source in Ashbery’s poem:

The dirt
 Is mounting like a sea. And we say goodbye

 Shaking hands in front of the crashing waves
 That give our words lonesomeness, and make these flabby hands seem ours —
 Hands that are always writing things
 On mirrors for people to see later — (79)

These few lines appear in the middle of a short allegory about a plant, a fable that begins childishly and falls into easy, unpatterned rhymes (“tree”; “bee”; “sea”) that nostalgically gesture toward a no-longer viable form of expressing, or transferring, emotional and intellectual meaning. By the section quoted above the illusion of allegory gives way, and an ambiguous “we,” evoked as if at a funeral or a farewell by the sea, becomes the point of focus. In either case the crisis of impending isolation reveals both language’s seeming detachment from the expression of subjectivity and shared experience and its function as a desperate bid to overcome the “lonesomeness” caused, in part, by its very inadequacy. The same paradox also informs Ashbery’s subsequent depiction of writing as a lonesome activity that is both a root cause of, and a potential cure for, anxiety about the threat of solipsism. With the speaker anxious about the possibility of escaping such a threat, the ephemeral words appear first as a reflection of the solitary, bounded self, yet by potentially lingering they hold the promise that others might come

to read them. Does this entail an emotionally fulfilling communication of meaning across consciousnesses, though, or is the lasting trace (to use a word resonant of Derrida) merely a figurative representation of language revealing its own lack, the ever deflecting word that suggests a supposed original locus of meaning but fails to point to it? When the recipient finds the words and feels the absence of the primarily imagined sender, does their ability to see themselves in these written “things” illustrate a connection or does the image of a mirror reinforce the anxiety of being unable to escape the lonely limits of what has become a reified self, an encapsulated subjectivity?

Circling amid questions such as these without accepting the possibility of an ultimate resolution (and retaining a comic lightness that fluctuates between irony and poignancy as a means of coping with the angst such questioning can generate) comprises a major aspect of Ashbery’s poetic career. It may therefore be said (after “How To Continue” from 1992’s *Hotel Lautréamont*) that, for Ashbery, such a focused attention on the emotional impact of language on the experience of subjectivity, and the concomitant process of teasing out partial or momentary answers (so long as they are progressive stepping stones), forms a way of continuing through the forces that threaten to break apart any sense of commonality and community. In his poetry, however, Ashbery is less concerned with documenting or expressing his own felt experience than he is with registering and critiquing the ways in which our common language facilitates *anyone’s* expressions — particularly expressions that are meant in some way to help create social bonds or lessen the specter of solipsism in our experience of subjectivity.¹ By creating unfamiliar

¹ This formulation comes in part from Marjorie Perloff’s theory of poetry as she defines it in *Wittgenstein’s Ladder*: “poetry is not . . . the *expression* or externalization of inner feelings; it is, more accurately, the critique of that expression” (184).

juxtapositions out of seemingly ordinary language and holding the fragments up to our attention, Ashbery attempts to set up for his readership the means for crafting their own way of continuing. It may be useful then to think of Ashbery's poetry as an extended project book that is also a how-to guide, significantly made, like *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do*, "By many hands . . ." ² Always aware of the impediments bred by language, Ashbery's poetry hinges on the assumption that a shift in the relationship to language allows for the possibility of altering interactions of all kinds — actualized or not, this possibility, along with a re-conceptualization of selfhood and a more nuanced understanding of subjectivity, then becomes a point around which to imagine and organize forms of "lonesomeness" assuaging bonds.

To merely present fables of communal experience is insufficient for Ashbery, though, as they are forms unable to either account for the unique experiences of subjectivity or strengthen the experience of intersubjectivity. In "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher . . .," therefore, the tale of the timidly growing plant appears only as a momentarily satisfactory allegory before it finally gives way to an authorial interruption: "But no doubt you have understood // It all now and I am a fool. It remains / For me to get better and to understand you so / Like a chair-sized man" (79). In this remark there is both a dissatisfaction with the possibility of organizing discourse so as to be able to speak genuinely about a common condition of longing and dissatisfaction, and an underlying, counterbalanced faith in the a priori existence of commonality. To be able to speak about unique and communal experiences of subjectivity, not necessarily in language that hasn't been corrupted or rendered unsatisfactory by associational ties to preexisting discourses, but at least with an awareness of language's effects on us, is

² In his critically lauded long poem, "The Skaters," from 1966's *Rivers and Mountains*, Ashbery uses excerpts from the children's activity book, *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do*, which is subtitled "By many hands . . ."

nevertheless held as important to preserving both the capability and desire for intersubjective connection and reciprocity.³

Though its implications may be extended, this reciprocity exists, first and foremost, as an interaction between writer and reader. The poem therefore continually references itself as a medium difficult to read: “If you knew why then professor) reads”; “He is not a man / Who can read these signs . . .”; “As if reading had any interest for me, you . . .” (78-80). With the looming threat that the “reader is carried away / By a great shadow under the sea” (79), the poem’s bid to create meaning depends on its own resistance to interpretation and on the reader’s desire to overcome the challenges of reading. The ellipses therefore both mark the text’s refusal to signify with even the supposed certainty of words, and function as symbolic entryways into the text for the meaning-producing reader. Through the collaborative process then, the indeterminate, but generously suggestive, field of discourse can become more than a merely “difficult” text. It can become (in large part thanks to its semantically unsatisfactory language) an overt facilitator of

³ The associational ties that lead to Ashbery’s use of “chair-sized” as an adjective provide fitting examples of the duplicities present in mediating, pre-existent discourses. The “chair-sized man,” while evoking a reader, also harkens back the mention of a “dwarf” in the tenth stanza. As if a receiver and transmitter of language signals, Ashbery uses discourses already present in order to reveal how an individual is assailed by existing language patterns. The “dwarf,” therefore, is discussed with scientific/anthropological (“possessing a normal-sized brain”), mythological (“released by giants from things”), and allegorical language (the plant, which “realizes it will never be a tree,” becomes an allegory for the dwarf, who is himself used as an allegory for the universalized “ancient man”) (79). By juxtaposing these discursive trends and clichés, Ashbery reveals language’s impediments to understanding, and with the authorial interruption, marks the desire to move beyond these discourses to a more adequate means of understanding another individual. (The use of “chair-sized man,” though, by possibly evoking the language of side-show advertising, gestures towards the persistent difficulty of finding a discourse that isn’t laden with disruptive connotations.)

the mutual creation of intersubjective meaning — an important symbolic point for understanding Ashbery as a poet concerned with the social realm.

Articulation: Voicing and Joining

Representing Ashbery as a socially-oriented poet is not a particularly new venture, but it nevertheless comprises a manner of reading him that has been insufficiently adopted by critics. The broadest claim for Ashbery's importance as a vehicle for social expression is also one of the first, dating back to a 1985 review-essay by S. P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe. In "John Ashbery and the Articulation of the Social" Mohanty and Monroe simultaneously review Ashbery's *A Wave* and *John Ashbery*, a collection of essays edited (and heavily contributed to) by Harold Bloom. While their reading of *A Wave* illustrates some important ways of responding to Ashbery's so-called "difficult" passages and goes a few steps towards implementing a thesis adequately attuned to the social dynamic in his work, Mohanty and Monroe's theory about Ashbery's poetry (and even more broadly about an "American" cultural condition in 1985) is best understood in contrast to Bloom's influential, canonically centered interpretation.

According to Mohanty and Monroe, Bloom's assimilation of Ashbery into a lineage of Romantic descent is based on a "hastiness" of reading and a desire to "support his general conclusions" (39).⁴ Since 1985, Bloom's "general conclusions" about canonically worthy poetry have been further fleshed out, but the gist of Bloom's agenda for Ashbery is visible in his essays from, and introduction to, *John Ashbery*. Mohanty and Monroe go further though, tracing Bloom's "generic and ideological parameters" back to a 1968 essay in which he defines

⁴ For insights into the "agonistic" aspects of Bloom and Ashbery's long literary relationship see "'Returning to Bloom': John Ashbery's Critique of Harold Bloom" by Susan Schultz.

Romanticism by its insistence on “imagination’s freedom,” a freedom that is “redemptive in direction but destructive of the social self” (qtd. in Mohanty 39). Having supposedly inherited this tradition from an American strain (which primarily includes Transcendentalism, particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens), Ashbery is cast by Bloom as a Romantic self overcoming spiritual crisis by imaginatively constructing his world (Mohanty 38).⁵ As Mohanty and Monroe point out, this interpretation entails certain ideologies — about selfhood and the function of poetry, in particular — that run counter to prevalent impulses in Ashbery’s work. Rather than view Ashbery’s poetry as the display of an isolated, “ontological self” self-consciously creating its own privileged world as Bloom does (qtd. in Mohanty 39), Mohanty and Monroe argue that “the central concern of Ashbery’s poetic career can only be defined as the self-world relationship, with an investment in exploring the features of a social voice and identity as they can be genuinely available today” (37). Insightful as this is, Ashbery is less concerned with crafting a supposedly sanctified “genuine” social voice or identity than he is with understanding how a renewed awareness of our already existent discourses can be used to

⁵ According to Bloom this differs from solipsism which “tends to narrow consciousness to an acute preoccupation with self,” and traps subjectivity in a “phantasmagoria” rather than allowing it to “invent” its world (qtd. in Mohanty 39). Given the logical paradox of representing or understanding solipsism (see Altieri, *Self and Sensibility* 26), it is useful to explain here how I am using the term “solipsism.” Rather than think of it as a sound philosophical position or a specific state of being, it is more useful to understand the specter of solipsism as an inevitable by-product of subjective consciousness. Since subjectivity can seemingly limit the applicability of what is “known,” felt, or believed to the singular self, solipsism (as I use the term) functions rhetorically as this condition rendered extreme in the felt experience of consciousness. It is the specter, therefore, of the hindered ability of individual subjects to communicate and connect with one another on a meaningful level. “Intersubjectivity” is therefore the move away from a solipsistic state of mind towards improved capabilities for interpersonal communication and dependency.

alter our conception and experience of subjectivity, making them and the fluctuating identity they create more socially oriented.

Whereas Bloom finds an “American Transcendental Self” in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” Mohanty and Monroe more accurately characterize the self in Ashbery’s most famous poem — and his oeuvre as a whole — as “ineluctably social” (44); it is an ever altering concept (rather than a definable, ontological entity) that changes according to its interactions within a social realm. Most importantly, this idealized vacillation is facilitated by the act of listening:

Ashbery’s poetry is perhaps above all, as he has himself suggested, a poetry that draws primarily from *listening*. . . . Recognizing the social not as something outside, but rather as an internal force that manifests itself above all through the multiple presence of conflicting discourses, Ashbery allows his very notion of the self to be fundamentally changed by what he hears. (44-45)

By being attentive and responsive to the innumerable voices, discourses, rhetorical styles, and clichés that constitute both the social dialogue and, from a certain perspective, the individual “monologue” of consciousness, Ashbery is able not only to alter his own experience of subjectivity but may be able, Mohanty and Monroe suggest, to illustrate a means of re-imagining the intersection of the self and the social that would assuage a particular kind of common lonesomeness. Unlike the “imagination’s freedom” that Bloom idolizes, Ashbery’s imaginative project remains thoroughly invested in the social world, and in the subjective experiences of others. In a particularly Wittgensteinian moment, Mohanty and Monroe declare that while a romanticized transcendence is impossible, “a keen awareness of the kind Ashbery displays of the multiple discourses or mobile verbal systems that come to define us through our use of them may

offer the greatest possibility we have for liberation” (46). Not unlike Bloom, Mohanty and Monroe see the experience of loneliness as a key trope in Ashbery’s poetry, but their perception of it diverges markedly. As Susan Schultz explains in *The Tribe of John*, for Bloom, Ashbery “is alone in his time, and his work mythologizes that loneliness” (5). Though Mohanty and Monroe see Ashbery’s work as “touching on individual loneliness,” the primary concern is loneliness as a common cultural condition — what they call, in language meant to be decidedly un-romantic, “the individual’s monadic isolation in current society” (59-60). Broad and vague as this is (and still partially tapping into the mythos of loneliness), as a formulation of how Ashbery perceives the dilemma of isolated subjectivity amid the desire to create, maintain, and fully experience the richness of social bonds, it remains useful. Rather than hold up Ashbery as a singular poet who supposedly offers the possibility for a dreamy “liberation,” though, it is best to approach his work as a unique form in contemporary culture that may help strengthen the experience and understanding of intersubjectivity and lessen the concern that solipsism will stem from atomized subjectivity. Mohanty and Monroe go some ways toward recognizing this capability by examining a passage from “Self-Portrait” and framing the “otherness” that Ashbery sees as characterizing all of an individual’s psychic experiences as a product of subjectivity “reading” and responding to the exterior realm: “The asubjective,” Mohanty and Monroe write, “is precise and fine; it challenges us as does a text. The self does not master it; it reads and is read by it. It is this reading, and the articulation traced and defined in the process, which Ashbery seeks to understand as the dimension of the ‘social’ ” (41). Ashbery’s poetry does more than simply draw attention to the interaction between the subjectivity and the social, though. Through its indeterminacies and manipulation of recycled language, it encourages and facilitates the

improvement of such important “reading” methods which, when used on texts that are both literal and symbolic (reality and consciousness as texts), allow subjectivities to have a more fluid and less isolating interaction with the social realm.

Since Mohanty and Monroe’s review-essay, the conception of Ashbery as a poet overtly concerned with the social realm has increased somewhat, but as recently as 2006 Andrew Epstein, in his book *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*, could still rightly claim that “critics have been reluctant to see Ashbery . . . as a poet who actually contemplates the nature of human relationships” (127). Whereas Epstein examines the impact of Ashbery’s friendships on his poetry (particularly his friendship with Frank O’Hara) as a means of theorizing the tensions and bonds that existed within the neo-avant-garde context of the New York School, the focus of this paper is first on Ashbery’s treatment of human relationships in the abstract. As Epstein notes, Ashbery’s poetry is marked by its “frequent insistence that human selves, however atomized, independent, and isolated, are inextricably bound to one another, wound within one another” (128). Since he uses the avant-garde’s conflicting ideologies of “individual novelty and group solidarity” as a starting point for examining Ashbery’s relationship to the social (129), Epstein dwells on Ashbery’s concern for the fate of the constantly regenerative individual artist within an avant-garde community that risks initiating its own undoing by developing group homogeneity and stability. Though this is certainly a prevalent topic in Ashbery’s work, there is something to be gained by approaching his poems from the converse position. Rather than focus on the dilemma of the individual trying to retain independence and eccentricity while continually negotiating involvement with a social group, this approach would regard the specter of individual “atomization,” “isolation,” and, to a lesser

extent, “independence” as the primary dilemmas that need to be dealt with; issues that arise in large part because of language and therefore require response that is initiated first and foremost through attention to language. On the one hand, this approach accounts for the unfortunately prevalent trend of critics reading Ashbery as a poet thoroughly ensconced in private subjectivity, for it acknowledges the threat of solipsism — of subjectivity that desires, yet feels almost unable, to get outside of itself and form interpersonal bonds — as one of Ashbery’s concerns and motivations for writing. On the other hand, this approach provides a paradigm for reading Ashbery’s poetry as an attempt to alter the conception and experience of subjectivity so that feelings of personal atomization are reduced, and possibilities for establishing interpersonal dialogues and relationships are increased. Though Ashbery’s concerns often appear as abstract meditations with a vague relationship to events exterior to the text, they, and the aesthetics they entail, were partly initiated and profoundly influenced by the cultural and political atmosphere of 1950’s America.

An Avant-Garde on the Edge of Isolation

The postwar avant-garde community of the so-called New York School poets is the one of most important contexts to an understanding of the social dynamic in Ashbery’s poetry. As a complex and variously manifested artistic position, the “belated” or neo-avant-garde mind-set and social scene led to a number of ideological and aesthetic concerns in Ashbery’s poetry, but became, more importantly, a means of responding to the era’s alienating political climate. As practitioners of neo-avant-garde aesthetics during the fifties, the often collaborative New York School poets (James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, Frank O’Hara, and John Ashbery),

however distinct, resemble each other and the “original” avant-garde in their desire to work against the established forms and styles of the time. As belated inheritors of an avant-garde tradition that had already become accepted as a norm by many both inside and outside the so-called art-world, though, the New York School poets had to also critique the assumptions of the historical avant-garde. In his essay, “Ashbery, O’Hara, and the Neo-Avant-Garde Manifesto,” Mark Silverberg argues that from the mid fifties onward, with the spread of his image and persona, the “avant-garde outsider was fast becoming an insider and trendsetter, as the mass media reduced cultural radicalism to lifestyle, celebrity, and fashion” (137).⁶ An avant-garde rooted in antagonistic opposition was thus less viable because it risked “reinscribing the dominant culture it sought to defeat” (139). A revitalized and more intellectually nuanced vanguardism was nevertheless important to the New York School poets not only as a means of navigating the flexible commodification propensities of the culture industry, but also, more significantly, as a strategy of response to the cultural and political atmosphere of the McCarthy era.

Silverberg identifies a strategy of “indifference” (heavily influenced by Marcel Duchamp) as the primary means by which Ashbery and O’Hara resisted the “problem of appropriation by the culture industry” (139), but the aesthetic that their “indifference” entails is also, more importantly, linked to their philosophical responses to the era’s homophobia. Turning away from a vanguardism meant to militantly engage and transgress the dominant culture, the indifference of Ashbery and O’Hara was more fundamentally a means of turning the focus

⁶ Silverberg provides a few revealing examples: “Jackson Pollock was conscripted to promote Country Homes real estate and couturier fashion, and the once outcast beat writers were used to sell everything from pulp fiction paperbacks and Hollywood films to ‘beachnik’ swimsuits” (139).

inward, toward themselves as members of a community desirous of establishing interpersonal bonds independent from dominant social codes and accepted practices. According to Epstein, an important aspect of post-war avant-garde poetry was “the fostering of chosen fraternal ties — the elected brotherhood of fellow marginalized and ‘deviant’ souls — in lieu of the biological imposed bonds of nuclear family, which are so redolent of Cold War culture’s deification of the heterosexual, domestic idyll” (234). Poetry was thus treated as a forum in which relationships between persons — with all the concomitant concerns about selfhood, community and dialogue — could be thought through in an effort to avoid the isolation that the homophobia of the McCarthy era threatened to make a condition of being for gay individuals.

More than simply an unsympathetic or bigoted cultural climate, the homophobia of the McCarthy era was characterized by rampant structural discrimination that attempted to tie homosexuality to issues of national security. As John Shoptaw explains in his book, *On the Outside Looking Out*,

Ashbery’s poetics evolved during the late 1940’s and early 1950’s, a particularly repressive and paranoid period of American history marked by the investigation and harassment of homosexuals and Communists by Senator McCarthy, the House Un-American Activities Committee, the FBI, the Selective Service System, and the police. In 1950, for example, a senate report declared “sexual perverts” a security risk, alleging their greater susceptibility to persuasion and blackmail by foreign agents. (4)

The atmosphere of persecution, which fueled “anti-homosexual campaigns” as Ashbery put it, made a definite mark on the poet’s psyche and expressive capabilities, no doubt exacerbated by

his decision to avoid being drafted for the Korean War by registering on government record as a homosexual: “I was afraid that we’d all be sent to concentration camps if McCarthy had his own way. It was a very dangerous and scary period” (qtd. in Shoptaw 5). In an interview four years after the publication of *Three Poems*, Ashbery reflected on some of the personal consequences of the political climate:

[I]n the early 50’s, I went through a period of intense depression and doubt. I couldn’t write for a couple of years. I don’t know why. It did coincide with the beginnings of the Korean War, the Rosenberg case and McCarthyism. Though I was not an intensely political person, it was impossible to be happy in that kind of climate. It was a nadir. (qtd. in Shoptaw 5)

The inability to write amid a repressive environment, and the link between stifled expression and anxiety may not be immediately visible themes in Ashbery’s poetry, but the historical context which rendered them real for Ashbery played a formative role in his aesthetic ideologies, making the turn towards an interactive and generative avant-garde community that he could dialogically engage important for both personal sustainment and expression.

The New York School coterie of poets was not the only vanguardist community of poets and writers to coalesce during the McCarthy era. Situating Ashbery’s aesthetically loose-knit group within a larger trend in poetry allows for a greater understanding of its social importance. In his study of Ashbery, O’Hara, and Baraka, Epstein argues convincingly that “the kind of small coterie of initiates that Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan were creating in the Bay Area, that O’Hara would soon galvanize in New York, and that Ginsberg, Kerouac, and the Beats were fostering in both cities as well as on the road in between,” were all aspects of a common

response to the larger, estranging cultural context (29-30). A 1951 essay by Paul Goodman entitled “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950” gives, according to Epstein, a “theoretical and historical basis” for the development of such avant-garde communities during the 1950’s, particularly those that formed for and amid a gay subculture. Building upon a critique of the avant-garde’s historical development, Goodman’s essay becomes a forceful “manifesto of sorts” (Epstein 29), expounding upon the need for vanguard artists to initiate “the physical reestablishment of community.” For Goodman, the alienating culture of the 1950’s, in which “persons are estranged from themselves, from one another, and from their artist,” necessitated the development of “intimate community” through avant-garde collaboration. Numerous “small communit[ies] of acquaintances, where everybody knows and understands what is at stake,” were required, Goodman believed, to combat “our estranged society” (qtd. in Epstein 29). Though a collective of friends served as the starting point for Goodman’s avant-garde vision, the community would eventually, as Herd explains in *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, “come to look beyond itself” (53).

Frank O’Hara read Goodman’s essay in 1951 while at the University of Michigan, and enthusiastically embraced elements of its vision, soon writing about the essay in a letter to his friend Jane Freilicher: “if you haven’t devoured its delicious message, rush to your nearest newstand! It is really lucid about what’s bothering us both besides sex, and it is so heartening to know that someone understands these things” (qtd. in Epstein 30). As Epstein speculates, O’Hara may have been so emotionally taken in by the essay, in part because “an important subtext in the bisexual Goodman’s” writing “is its Whitmanic vision of an ‘adhesive,’ fraternal, subcultural gay community in an age of violent homophobia” (30). Avant-garde community

could thus serve as a means of coping with the psychologically atomizing and isolating effects of McCarthy era homophobia. Collaboration (on the little magazine *Locus Solus*, for instance) was therefore important, not simply for the type of art it created or the ideologies about artistic production it implied, “but for the act itself” (Herd 53) — an act that symbolically and literally helped allay the potential loneliness that the dominant culture of the McCarthy era, in addition to its structurally implemented discrimination, threatened to impress upon the subjectivities of gay individuals.

Though Ashbery has never written about his homosexuality as overtly as O’Hara, recent criticism has begun to recognize how much meditations on homosexuality have influenced his poetic style.⁷ The neo-avant-garde “indifference” of Ashbery (an indifference to accustomed, commodifiable avant-garde theatrics as well as mainstream trends) is exhibited, according to Silverberg, in part through a style of “neutrality, independence, reticence, and secrecy” that privileges indeterminacy and resists the tendency for art to become reified as a static object with singular meaning (146). These same qualities, reticence and secrecy especially, are also Ashbery’s methods of obliquely commenting (amid a performative act of concealment) upon homosexual experience. The elusive “Some Trees,” for instance, which Silverberg takes as a prime example of Ashbery’s reticence, has also often been read as a love poem that “marks the desire it dare not speak aloud under the regime of homophobia and surveillance in which it was

⁷ In addition to Shoptaw and Epstein, see the third chapter in John Vincent’s, *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry*; the second chapter in Maggie Nelson’s, *Women, the New York School and Other True Abstractions*; and Mark Silverberg’s essay, “Laughter and Uncertainty: John Ashbery’s Low-Key Camp” for further discussions of the relationship between Ashbery’s poetry and queerness.

written” (149).⁸ Silverberg, however, is correct in arguing that the display of reticence in many of Ashbery’s poems should be given a wider interpretation. Since Ashbery studiously avoids the trappings of autobiographical poetry, I take the dilemma of attesting to the existence and experience of illicit desire in an environment whose discourse is unsympathetic to such expression as only a starting point for thinking through Ashbery’s stance toward subjectivity and communication in general. Regarding interpersonal dialogue and the development of intersubjectivity as difficult but emotionally vital processes that must take place within a generally unsatisfactory discursive environment, and as means of creating social bonds in order to avoid the threat of isolation that that discursive environment helps create, opens up possibilities for discussing both the references to homosexuality in Ashbery’s work and the broader implications of his textual strategies. The two books by Ashbery that I will be discussing in the rest of this paper, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) and *Three Poems* (1972), may have appeared after the peak of the McCarthy era, but the collections retain the influence of those formative years, extending the beliefs and aesthetics developed as a response to McCarthyism into longer lasting practices that address the dilemmas posed to our social selves

by subjectivity and unsatisfactory discourses. Though it has often been regarded, by both its proponents and detractors, as an oddity in Ashbery's career, *The Tennis Court Oath* is a fitting place to begin in a discussion of the social component common to all of Ashbery's poetry.

Rather than simply being a test case to check the claim that Ashbery is consistently concerned with subjectivity's relationship to the social realm (the collection, after all, is often construed as non-communicative), *The Tennis Court Oath* is, intriguingly, one of Ashbery's most socially-oriented books.

“The facts have hinged on my reply”: Dialogue in *The Tennis Court Oath*

More than anything else in his oeuvre, Ashbery's second book, *The Tennis Court Oath*, demands new reading methods that will be able to account for the collection's relationship to the avant-garde and the emotional and philosophical impacts of its various forms of indeterminacy. Viewing the collection through a social lens provides the best means for understanding both of these aspects. In a 1988 interview with John Tranter, Ashbery hesitantly framed *The Tennis Court Oath* as a project in which he tried to find a new way of writing: “My intention was to be after . . . kind of . . . taking language apart so I could look at the pieces that made it up. I would eventually get around to putting them back together again, and would then have more of a knowledge of how they worked, together.” Seen in this light, Ashbery's second book appears to be founded partly on a mistrust of language, partly on a belief in the instructional and generative possibilities of experimental writing (à la Raymond Roussel), and partly on a faith in the possibility of eventually restructuring a broken language in order to better understand its functions and effects. What is at stake in this process, though, is more than simply finding a way

to write “new” poems — it is a process that is undertaken in the hope that altering our relationship with language practices will generate more fulfilling modes of interpersonal communication.

By “taking language apart,” the poems in Ashbery’s second volume — especially “Leaving the Atocha Station,” “Europe,” and “Idaho” — resemble art produced during the historical avant-garde more than anything else he has produced during his long career. Ashbery’s poetry, though, as Andrew Ross points out in his essay, “Taking the Tennis Court Oath,” “harbors within itself historical knowledge about the failures of the avant-garde, not only on the level of cognitive/aesthetic strategies of shock, but also in the context of the politically utopian project of constructing a new social reality” (207). Instead of subscribing to the destructive intent of Dada “anti-art,” Ashbery shifts the aims of the avant-garde to a more personal level, using techniques from the historical movement (such as assemblage and collage) in the hope that they may make sympathetic subjects aware of the duplicitous influences of dominant discourses — “‘heroic’ British popular fictions” and “American newspaper culture with its own scaled-down discursive forms,” according to Ross (208).

Throughout *The Tennis Court Oath* the bounded nature of language in general is displayed through a textual praxis that calls the purely representational capacity of words into question. However much language is its own circumscribed system, though, Ashbery reportedly continues to believe that “language finally depends on references to meaning generated outside language,” a belief that he sees as separating him from the so-called Language poets who have taken inspiration from his disjunctive poetics (Linda Reinfeld qtd. in *The Tribe of John* 2). The difficulty of understanding the relationship of language to subjective states of mind, as well as its

influence on personal and communal meaning, has consistently been one of Ashbery's dilemmas. Though he may not necessarily believe they exist only through language, the converse position, regarding language as a mere means of grasping at and codifying such independent meaning, is equally unsatisfactory. For Ashbery the most pressing concern is not finding an answer, but rather continually reworking his understanding of how the lack of a sustainable solution both complicates and opens up possibilities for the experience of intersubjectivity.

In an otherwise perceptive essay that illuminates important aspects of Ashbery's relationship to actual and imagined readers, Bonnie Costello makes the unfortunate decision to follow Bloom in viewing *The Tennis Court Oath* as "a swerve toward a primitive solipsism and disregard of the reader." For Costello the poems exclude the reader because they "imply a theory of language in which communication is not a primary goal" (495). Rather than displaying solipsistic self-absorption, though, the poems of Ashbery's second collection can be read as emotional bids to escape the looming shadow of solipsism cast by subjectivity and the language that remains incapable of satisfactorily mapping the processes of consciousness. In many ways this can be seen as one of Ashbery's primary projects, a continuing endeavor that he has attended to in various manners throughout his career. As Ashbery's supposedly most "radical" and "avant-garde" book, *The Tennis Court Oath* responds to this dilemma with a style all its own, but with a variety of strategies and theoretical assumptions that are also developed and refined in later works. By making emotional appeals for readers' engagement, by re-conceptualizing the self through avant-garde techniques, and by stressing the dialogic nature of language instead of

succumbing to a belief in purified expression, the Ashbery of *The Tennis Court Oath* looks through the solipsistic mirror in order to more fully imagine a social poetics.

Far from excluding the reader, *The Tennis Court Oath* aggressively initiates a meaningful readerly engagement in an effort to negotiate paths through the ensnarements of subjective consciousness. In contrast to Costello, Bruce Andrews, a poet and academic who is closely linked to the origin of Language poetry, highlights *The Tennis Court Oath* as a text that, though deeply immersed and invested in inevitable subjectivity, ultimately works towards the communal and social construction of meaning. In “Misrepresentation: (A text for *The Tennis Court Oath* of John Ashbery),” Andrews links this force of social constitution to Ashbery’s extreme inclusion of the reader as a partner in the process of accruing and moving through meaning: “you find a relativism grounded in practices, in the round of language, which demands *responsiveness* from us and not simply *decipherment*. Dialogues in place of a fugitive ‘monologic,’ as a means by which reality can be *constituted*. *Paroles*” (497). Here the Saussurean *parole* denotes the specific language acts of individuals occasioned by certain contexts, but Andrews may also be punning on the origin of the word: parole as an oath, a word of honor. Language is thus most fundamentally a binding force between persons that can determine responsive actions, but the deployment of language as such must struggle against the counter-force of language as a medium that fails to adequately transmit what is desired.

Since *The Tennis Court Oath* stresses the hinderances and mediating aspects of language, some critics have failed to heed the message of renewed expressive possibilities it also contains. In his book, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, David Herd misconstrues the implications of Andrews’ argument in favor of Ashbery’s indeterminacy by assuming that the Language poet

propounds a “language detached from reality” in all cases (85), but Andrews’ valorization of *The Tennis Court Oath* does not seek to separate mind and reality (as Herd believes). Rather, it means to allow for possibilities of renewed expression and action once we realize that, on at least some level, there is an inevitable schism between mind (or language) and reality. For Andrews, the realization that language, as Andrew Ross points out, “has nothing at all to do with unmediated expression” (209), allows for an improved and more nuanced relationship to “reality” — especially as it is linguistically constructed and construed in a social setting. Ashbery, Andrews rightly claims, is “suspicious” of the “instrumental use” given to signs, and the free play of signifiers becomes one means to undercut that implied value (499). Unlike paint used abstractly (often seen as an aesthetic corollary to Ashbery’s second book), words cannot be wholly rid of their suggestive meaning. Herd is therefore correct to argue that the accident in which the speaker breaks his leg in “‘They Dream Only of America’” is the result and symptom “of a linguistic condition to which the poet means to offer a cure,” but is only partially appreciative of the dynamics of that condition. The linguistic disease does not necessarily stem from the fact that “key” as a signifier is detached from the literal object and made interesting as an abstract sign, as Herd believes, but rather from the misplaced belief that “key,” as a possible sign, could correspond directly to a concretized solution that circumvents the language game. Herd, however, correctly recognizes that the literary depictions of America to which Ashbery’s poem alludes, particularly Whitman (“pillars of grass”), Twain (“hiding from darkness in barns”), and the Beats’ (“We could drive hundreds of miles / At night through dandelions”), are part of the linguistic condition if they are allowed to unquestionably dominate perceptions. Thus each allusion entails a darker side with negative consequences, and poem’s travelers fail to find

their dreamed of America (84-85). Herd also rightly notes that Ashbery's avant-garde subversions of representation are meant to be an element of the cure (86), but they are only part of *The Tennis Court Oath's* treatment plan. It is equally important to note that the collection also frequently casts interpersonal dependency as a possible remedy or way of continuing. The closing line, for instance, of “‘They Dream Only of America’” — in which the baffled speaker admits: “I am lost without you” (63) — poignantly suggests that the struggle to navigate literal and psychic landscapes with unsatisfactory discourses is made possible only by another's presence.

In contrast to “‘They Dream Only of America,’” the title poem of the *The Tennis Court Oath* aesthetically links the signifying failures of language to interpersonal ruptures establishing the fraught nature of communication. Despite the theme of linguistic misunderstanding, Ashbery's “Oath” is not an entirely pessimistic take on the hinderances of language.⁹ Nor is it simply a disjunctive testimony to the ascendancy of the signifier after the signified's reign is overthrown. Its linguistic fragments, set one next to the other, may disrupt the possibility of narrative progress, but taken as a whole the poem sets its fragments bouncing back and forth, tennis balls across a tennis court. The net may be down, as Robert Frost once said of free verse, but play continues, and the resonances of certain lines are continually ricocheting off one another, leading various “voices” to meld (in both the current and antiquated sense) in mutual

⁹ This theme develops out of Ashbery's continual use of words and phrases associated with misunderstood communication (e.g., “stammered”; “jabbered”; “reading it carelessly”) and his haphazard quotation (as if voices were only partially overheard) in the last stanza: “The person. pleaded — ‘have more of these / not stripes on the tunic — or the porch chairs / will teach you about men — what it means’” (61-62).

clamoring.¹⁰ With these voices the poem acts as a dialogic pastiche commenting not just on the forms that have reckoned its creation, but on itself as a bid to convey meaning within (and to approximate an experience of) cacophony.

The first stanza, for example, opens with a seemingly personal address, but then modulates suddenly into a poetic voice that suggests ekphrasis: “the face studiously bloodied / heaven blotted region” (61). Both Shoptaw and Andrew DuBois have written about “The Tennis Court Oath” in relation to the ekphrastic genre, noting that the title refers not just to the political and fraternal oath sworn during the French revolution, but also to Jacques-Louis David’s well-known representations (a preliminary sketch and an unfinished painting) of the historical event (Shoptaw 44; DuBois 43).¹¹ The art-image that seems to be described by Ashbery’s second and third lines, though, is not recognizable in David’s artwork (though perhaps a reader may scan associational ties to the Reign of Terror). Since the ekphrastic voice in Ashbery’s poem doesn’t refer to an actual painting, the possibility arises that the words depict a real event (real, that is, in

¹⁰ “Meld,” in the now largely obsolete sense of the word, means to “make known (by speech), reveal, declare.” The current meaning of “meld,” to “merge, blend; to combine or incorporate,” originated in the U.S., likely as a portmanteau of “melt” and “weld” (OED). I take the word to be a useful illustration of, and comment on, the dialogic nature of language. Anything uttered or declared through speech is also, necessarily, involved in a process of language merging and recombining as it accrues meaning.

¹¹ To these three referents I would like to add a somewhat more oblique fourth. In an interview with Mark Ford, Ashbery recalls the poem’s origin: “It was a beautiful day and I saw these young people in their tennis whites playing — a lovely sight — and then I thought, ‘Gee and then there was the tennis court oath, which was such a serious violent event’ ” (46). As this tale suggests, the poem was born out of the figurative intrusion of violent disharmony into a serene, pastoral, almost aristocratic scene — an intrusion that my reading sees as central to the semblance of a narrative that the poem enacts.

being part of the narrative(s) suggested by the poem).¹² As a result the mediation of language is stressed; rather than directly represent an event, the language immediately turns the event into an aesthetically formulated sight of imposed meaning (as painting can do, and as ekphrastic poetry itself has often done to paintings [see DuBois 39-40]). This is perhaps a tenuous assumption, certainly closer to playing with the possibilities of the text than delineating any single interpretation. Nevertheless, the possibility exists — due mostly to the fact that otherwise disjunctive lines occasionally reverberate along similar frequencies. The violence suggested by a “face studiously bloodied” thus finds counterpoints in other lines, particularly those that are assimilable to narratives about a journeying doctor and an illicit love-affair.

Commenting on a section of “Europe,” Peter Straub declares, in “The Oath Unbroken,” that the “ghosts of many possible narratives . . . move through these lines.” The same may easily be said of “The Tennis Court Oath,” but more so than in the profoundly adumbrated “Europe” each possible narrative here seems to bear a closer relation to the others. (The irony, though, is that “Europe” is formed from the “cut-up” and erasure of a single narrative text, William Le Queux’s xenophobic 1917 novel, *Beryl of the Biplane*.) Picking up perhaps on Ashbery’s use of the outdated (and now offensive) term, “mulatress” (seemingly referring to a maid in the poem), DuBois quite fairly characterizes this overall semblance of a narrative as an “apparent tale of miscegenation” that ultimately “speaks to . . . an ethics of multiculturalism, an awareness of

¹² DuBois suggests that certain elements of the poem may, perhaps coincidentally, allude to elements of David’s sketch. Though “merely suppositions” the links that DuBois posits are intriguing because they all connect Ashbery’s poem to seemingly minor details in the artwork, elements that are independent of the central fury: a man turning away from the speeches, “children peeking around the pillar,” and the weather, reduced from a symbolic, yet historically accurate, storm to mere fog and drizzle (37-38).

otherness that can trace its genealogy in part to the Enlightenment ethics of the expansion of political representation advocated by the Third Estate,” members of whom gathered for the historical oath (42).¹³

Attempting to elucidate the “narrative” of the poem further is perhaps tantamount to an act of artistic license. This is partly one of the poem’s pleasures, opening itself as it does to each reader’s participation, but such reconstruction in the guise of critical analysis may also do a disservice to the text itself since it studiously avoids the false trappings of narrative cohesion. The poem’s “ghost” of a narrative, though, develops out of the gathering together of stylistically different voices, and in order to understand part of Ashbery’s method it is useful at least to comment upon these voices. In addition to the ekphrastic voice and the multiple personal addresses (essentially a lyric mode, but one that replaces the singular subject with Ashbery’s famously ambiguous pronouns), the poem also slips into antiquated speech (“to one in yon house”), dons the guise of an objective narrative (“The doctor and Philip had come over the road”), embodies communal discourse with cliché (“there was no turning back but the end was in sight”), and seems to pick up blended snippets of dialogue (only sometimes presented in quotes).

Certainly not all the lines of “The Tennis Court Oath” can be thought of as belonging to a particular stylistic voice; the scraps of language are continually unsettling. Situated amid the matrix of voices, though, otherwise bare-boned syntactic scraps or semantically convoluted lines

¹³ As in *Some Trees*, Ashbery makes oblique references throughout *The Tennis Court Oath* to homosexuality, an apparent “otherness” in the homophobic political and cultural climate of Ashbery’s youth. In “Europe,” for instance, the abandonment of a singular authorial voice paradoxically allows Ashbery to attest to homosexual desire: “He held me in his arms — it was marvelous” (137). With an undefinable voice, Ashbery can also write in “Rain” of “His love boiling up to me” (85).

gain evocative associations. Take, for instance, these lines in which what may be two distinct semblances of narratives collide:

All the way through fog and drizzle
 When you read it was sincere the coasts
 stammered with unintentional villages the
 horse strains fatigued I guess . . . the calls . . .
 I worry (ll. 7-11, 61)

The seventh line of the poem resonates with the journey of the doctor and Philip, and the eighth begins by connecting up most readily with an alternative narrative fragment, one that seemingly involves a letter (perhaps connected to a forbidden relationship?, that led to violence when uncovered?, and then the need for the doctor? [the trouble is determining how much speculation is acceptable]). What is most interesting, though, is the style, for even the supposed sanctity of a distinct “voice” within Ashbery’s multi-vocal poem is broken down as lines eight through ten collapse the two seemingly separate narratives and voices in on each other by using either inappropriate verbs (stammered) and adjectives (unintentional), or nouns (coast, villages) depending on which perspective serves as the starting point.

Attention to such melding provides a paradigm through which to read other lines and indeed the poem as a whole. A particularly interesting blending of styles occurs over the break in lines between the third and fourth stanzas: “for the carnation laughed here are a couple of ‘other’ // to one in yon house” (61). Keeping in mind the presence of an ekphrastic “voice” in the poem, the appearance of the laughing carnation (on first read seemingly a surreal detail in a group of lines otherwise in the style of a traditional, albeit fragmented, narration) gains additional connotations. Once we realize that “carnation” is being used as a color to metonymically represent a person, the line heightens the racially charged drama DuBois

recognizes. The line also seems to pick up something of the ekphrastic genre, for according to the OED, “carnation” refers not only to the “colour of human ‘flesh’ or skin; flesh-colour (*obs.*),” but also, more specifically, to “[f]lesh tints’ in a painting; those parts of a painting which represent the naked skin.” For a poem and collection so overtly concerned with the nature of aesthetic representation (DuBois links this theme to the crisis of political representation wrought by the historical Tennis Court Oath [39]), “the carnation” becomes a testament to all that has been left out in seemingly natural representations; the “flesh tint” of carnation negating the presence of persons who are deemed racially “‘other,’” as the poem puts it.

Written within quotation marks, Ashbery’s “‘other’” stands out in the poem, alerting us to its own insufficiencies. The quotation marks also suggest that the word is being appropriated, and it is hard, over fifty years later (the poem was written in 1957), not to read the influence of Lacanian psycholinguistics in Ashbery’s use of the word. In the late 1950’s Ashbery (who lived primarily in Paris from 1955 to 1965) may have been aware of the increasingly influential French philosophical milieu, or his use of “other” could also reach back to the sources that influenced Lacan’s conceptual development of “the Other” (Freud, Hegel, etc.). The Lacanian link, however, is the most generative, casting its light over other lines, such as the following which might suggest “the Real” as it is occluded by language: “. . . the lovely tent / mystery you don’t want surrounded the real / you dance” (61). Amid the breakdown of grammatical and syntactic rules, the relationship of words to one another becomes much more fluid and suggestive; whether or not lines run on though enjambment is a matter of indeterminacy, one that the reader must not resolve, so much as experience. Regardless, the “lovely tent mystery” of language persists surrounding any sense of “the real” whether it be an abstract concept, a

suppressed event or object, or the “you” of the following line who responds to the indeterminacy by embracing artistic motion as the reader also must if the obfuscations of language are to be converted from hinderances to communication into more fulfilling vehicles for meaning conveyance.

By affirming the dialogic nature of language, and by subverting the myth of language as a means of transmitting a singular meaning, Ashbery relinquishes the assumption that language can function as the circumscribed expression of a singular self. Though this raises occasional concerns in Ashbery’s work, the re-conceptualization of self and “personal” expression in broader social terms is, by and large, a positive aspect in his poetry — a way of philosophically responding to the menaces of stasis, singularity, and isolation that the experience of subjectivity may occasionally pose. Though Ashbery makes his theory of a fluid self that is inextricably intertwined with others a more explicit theme in later works, the roots of this belief can be found in the avant-garde practices of *The Tennis Court Oath*.

In his essay, “‘And Time Shall Force a Gift on Each’: Ashbery, Pasternak and the Expression of the Avant-Garde,” David Herd argues that Ashbery’s second book is heavily influenced by Pasternak, particularly his conception of the self as a mutable and dispersed identity, an idea that Herd sums up with Doctor Zhivago’s words: “However far back you go in your memory, it is always in some external, active manifestation of yourself that you come across your identity — in the work of your hands, in your family, in other people” (qtd. 52-53). Herd views “America” as a poem especially linked to Pasternak, both by its form (which evokes the short lines and associational linking of *The Year 1905*) and content (the barrage of workers, factories, and politicized figures) (61). As in Pasternak, Herd argues, the “foregrounding of

background” in “America” illustrates the “unsteadiness of character” (50) — the self “is not lost in the background; it is found there” (53). What this connection implies about Ashbery’s interests goes far beyond aesthetic influence, though. It suggests that Ashbery, like Pasternak, sought a method of accounting for “his relation to the situation as a whole” (Herd 51) — a way of understanding the individual’s position within a complexly social and deeply historical entirety. Herd is therefore correct in claiming that Ashbery exhibits an interest in “Americanness” and that the language of *The Tennis Court Oath* is “meant not to be inward and self-generating, but alert (and alerting) to contemporary circumstance” (62). By suggesting that Ashbery recognizes the self as deeply embedded in and created by expansive social situations, Herd opens up possibilities for interpreting “America,” but does not go far enough in examining the sense of America that is created by the tone and tropes of Ashbery’s poem.

“America” may formally reveal the self as a confluence of background happenings, but given the overall tone of the poem that is hardly a reassuring message in and of itself. What “America” achieves, though, through its bare-boned lines and recurring motifs, is a sense of secret solidarity beneath upheaval, and moments of joy amid sorrow — perhaps a representation of what it is to be “Barely tolerated, living on the margins / In our technological society” (“Soonest Mended” [231]), or an oblique corollary to the experience of being gay during the homophobic paranoia of the McCarthy era. With the vertiginous “piling up” of words in “America,” Ashbery reveals a landscape populated by lonely individuals caught up in the “Inch pageant / of history” (68). As Shoptaw notes, Ashbery pays tribute in the disjunctive poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* to various schools of contemporary painting, such as abstract expressionism, collage and gestural realism (44). “America” deploys theoretical and aesthetic

elements of all three, but like the gestural realism of his friend Larry Rivers, in particular, its form uses and undercuts foundational American myths (hence the presence of “bars” and “stars” that variously resonate with positive or oppressive connotations). The “abstractness” of words, especially as Ashbery uses them, defies the possibility of their having an exclusive meaning and thus hinders whatever desire for myth-making lingers in the reader. However, as symbols laden with possibilities of meaning (not least of which is an emotive resonance), the words that Ashbery repeats and re-contextualizes suggest an accord that is occluded by the poem’s disjunctive grammar — a formal rendering of the eclipsed accord that can also be gleaned in the poem’s content. As William Watkin notes in his book, *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde*, “America” (like its counterpart “Europe”) has “political undertones” and the two figures in the first section, “the encrypted ‘office[r]’ and the cold anarchist, seem symbolic of two forces of threat in the collection, bureaucracy (American) and pure violence — the European influence of Artaud’s sense of horror which Ashbery concedes did influence this collection” (197-98). Out of the “intertextual *bricolage*” (Watkin’s phrase) that creates an Artaudian nightmare though, the voices of individuals emerge, bearing witness to, and thereby resisting, the horror. “I was almost killed / now by reading / on trial” (66), for instance, begs to be read with the McCarthy hearings in mind. Other lines suggest a disenfranchised immigrant’s tale:

Though I had never come here
 This county, it laws of glass

 Lured far away
 Wave helplessly
 The country
 lined with snow
 only mush was served (69)

With numerous, similarly fragmented voices, its five sections and desolate aura, “America” bears the influence of Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” Ashbery’s poem, though, ends not by taking refuge in the solitary (artistic) individual’s ability to order the chaos, but by turning outward (with resonances of a political underground) toward a “signal from the great outside” (70) — that which might, as the rapid juxtapositions of “America” do formally, link together the disparate individuals. In his typical fashion, Ashbery does not allow the signal to be any recognizable answer (even “Europe” ends with an ambiguous morse signal flashed in the sky), for its persistence as a hopeful, communicative presence relies, fundamentally, on its unknowability. As Watkin writes, “America,” by using language non-rationally, opens “up the articulating gaps of poetic language not necessarily to push language into collapse, which would be a more traditionally nihilist avant-garde stance, but to allow for sublime undecidability to come about” (199). More than an aesthetic principle, such undecidability is, in fact, one of Ashbery’s major philosophical groundings, underpinning what Epstein has characterized as the pragmatist, anti-foundationalist strain in Ashbery’s poetry.¹⁴ Throughout *Three Poems*, in particular,

¹⁴ Epstein argues that much of the pragmatist character of Ashbery’s poetry resulted from the young poet’s study of American literature under F. O. Matthiessen (then a premier “authority on Emerson and the Jameses”), from his appreciation of modernist writers with strong ties to pragmatism (e.g., Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams), and from his immersion, during the early 50’s, in the Abstract Expressionist art scene of New York, which counted among its many influences “the American pragmatism of James and Dewey” (62). For Epstein, numerous tropes and motifs in post-war avant-garde poetry (particularly those that emphasize mobility, flux, and non-closure) — along with the philosophical/poetic positions that they help to reveal — bear the mark of pragmatism and Emersonian thought. (Against some current trends, Epstein interprets Emerson as deeply connected to Jamesian pragmatism and literary modernism). Numerous qualities of pragmatism are important to Ashbery’s poetry, but of particular importance to this paper are its “fallibilism,” its insistence on “the social character of the self,” and its “theme of plurality” (Richard J. Berstein qtd. in Epstein 55).

Ashbery modulates a pragmatist mind-set into a versatile and constantly revised belief in the personal and communal benefits of intertwined doubt and inquiry.

From “You private person” to You Plural: Selfhood in *Three Poems*

More than any of his other collections, Ashbery’s 1972 book, *Three Poems*, exemplifies the difficulties of recognizing unknowability as the primary condition of being, and the possibilities that the embrace of unknowability as such offers to the experience of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Written predominantly in prose, *Three Poems* relies on its ability to mimic the supposedly functional clarity of prose while simultaneously undercutting such lucidity with ambiguous referents, partial narratives and ambagious arguments that continually renew yet have “no special goal” (326). The cloud of unknowing that such prose creates is established first through language that plays with the notion of “truth” by convoluting itself.¹⁵ It has become a critical commonplace to read the beginning of “The New Spirit” — Ashbery’s question of whether to “put it all down” or “leave all out” (309) — as a self-commentary on the markedly distinct styles of *Three Poems* and *The Tennis Court Oath*. As Shoptaw points out though, “The New Spirit” complicates the matter by creating an “inverted history” (126), whereby the desire for an all inclusive writing gives way to a realization that more fragmentary writing provides a “truer” way (309). Ashbery recognizes, however, that “something soon comes to stand in” the place of textual absences, not “the truth, perhaps, but — yourself” (though, of course, “you are

¹⁵ See DuBois for a discussion of how *Three Poems* bears the influence of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a late fourteenth century text by an anonymous monk which asks those in search of God to “put down” (in the sense of relinquish) their “clear pictures” of things beneath God in favor of entering a “thick cloud of forgetting” (qtd. in DuBois 74-77).

true”) (309). The attempt to put it all down is just as much a catch-22. As Marjorie Perloff notes, the poem’s attempt to “put it all down” is marked fundamentally by its absences, particularly the lack of the “confessional or revelatory ‘it’ we might have expected” (qtd. in Shoptaw). Though “leaving [it] out” is, in one sense, unavoidable, the form of “truth” that it creates is insufficient for *Three Poems* since “the truth has passed on // to divide all” (309).

Recalling a motif from *The Tennis Court Oath* (“There was no longer any need for the world to be divided” [“Measles” 102]; “The Division was unsuitable” [“The Lozenges” 106]; “All borders between men were closed” [“A Last Word” 114]) such dissatisfaction with an abstract division stems, in *Three Poems*, from a concern that the “truth” that arises out of writing is only the product and possession of a solitary “you”; a separation between subjectivities rather than a link as *The Tennis Court Oath* would have it. Rather than being simply opposite poles within Ashbery’s career then, *Three Poems* and *The Tennis Court Oath* are intertwined works that, with differing strategies, address a similar dilemma of writing — the desire to improve and express (all the while using an unsatisfactory language) not simply subjectivity’s response to phenomena but the *phenomenon* of intersubjectivity itself as it contests with the strictures of subjective experience.

Three Poems most readily finds intersubjectivity in the indeterminacies of existence that undo the notion of a singular, isolated self, and in the continual recirculation of language through subjective consciousness and the social realm. Robert Creeley, one of many contemporary poets heavily influenced by *Three Poems* (see Shoptaw, *On The Outside* 125), has claimed that Ashbery’s most famous prose-poems exhibit “as near a communal self as I’ve witnessed” (qtd. Fredman 117). Most importantly, the poems’ ability to voice the social is also a means of

altering the experience of subjectivity so that the literal creation of communal entities is better facilitated. As Stephen Fredman summarizes it, Creeley, in a 1979 lecture, “recommended [*Three Poems*] as a possible way out of the postmodern dilemma of the self, in which writing no longer speaks for the self as a social entity” (117). Against the backdrop of a postmodernism that might be seen as unable to understand the critically constructed “death of the subject” as anything but a dramatization of each subjectivity’s further atomization, Creeley rightly recognizes Ashbery’s embrace of a transparent selfhood (after any notion of an ontological self has been dismantled) as an attempt to understand social interconnectivity and develop possibilities for creating social relationships amid the persistence of a seemingly isolated or encapsulated subjectivity.

Stylistically, Ashbery’s use of “you” as an ambiguous addressee is one of the aspects of *Three Poems* most immediately relevant to a discussion of the self’s relation to the social realm. As Fredman notes, the “use of ‘you’ is particularly effective in dissolving the ego and projecting the sense of self outward” (116). Like other pronouns in Ashbery’s work, “you” possesses a vagueness that underscores important philosophical dispositions about the self. In a much remarked upon quote, Ashbery speaks revealingly about the ambiguity of his pronouns:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. “You” can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I’m addressing, and so can “he” and “she” for that matter and “we”; [. . .] my point is that it doesn’t really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what’s the important thing at that

particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism. (qtd. in Shoptaw 139)

Here, Ashbery specifically represents the un-reified self as generative of a social dynamic — in this case the singular voice dissolves itself in order to embrace polyphony (a clear analog to *The Tennis Court Oath*). Ashbery's refusal to project a "self" onto his poetry also opens it out to readers. Contrasting with the dominant (academically sanctioned) poetic mode of the fifties, Confessionalism, Ashbery's poetry recognizes that the "self" purportedly revealed in any language act is only a rhetorical construct. On the one hand such a "self" cannot account for the complex experience of subjectivity, and on the other hand it allows the author to monopolize the poetic act. In a move that philosophically (though not stylistically) resembles the tenets expressed in "Personism," O'Hara's flippant yet critically astute "manifesto," Ashbery chooses instead to use a "weak" (read continually shifting) sense of self in his poetry — an aesthetic decision that accounts for the continual vacillations of subjectivity and includes readers (as "aspects of a consciousness" formed by our common language) in the poem's development.

Throughout "The New Spirit" and "The System," *Three Poems* continually discusses ideas of selfhood in a bid to improve the literal and imaginatively real bonds between individual subjects and their social environments. At times the poems acknowledge an ineluctable separation between subjectivities and at other points they discuss the inclusion of each individual in the all encompassing "tree of humanity" ("The System" 344). Subjectivity, depending on the

circumstances, may swing reluctantly or desirously, at any time, towards either end of the spectrum, searching after a sense of uniqueness or a sense of connectedness. *Three Poems*, however, despite its constant digressions, becomes primarily concerned with moving from the former toward the latter as the separation of subjectivities takes on the appearance of approaching solipsism. Echoing (sometimes simultaneously) friendly advice, self-help lingo, psychiatric and philosophical discourses, *Three Poems* counsels, in general, a re-conceptualization of the self as the most immediate method for understanding (and perhaps emotionally experiencing) social interconnectivity. Recalling his method of approach to language in *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery, in “The New Spirit,” writes of the self: “to release it from its condition of hardness you will have to take apart the notion of you so as to reconstruct it from an intimate knowledge of its inner workings” (319). In her essay, “‘Whispers out of Time’: The Syntax of Being in the Poetry of John Ashbery,” Judy Norton argues that Ashbery’s ensuing representation of the self as a dissembled “Juggernaut” implies that the “self which is ‘together’ is dangerous and destructive in its very wholeness” (287). The reified self, Ashbery suggests, threatens the well-being of the world-reading subjectivity by hindering its ability to cope with the inevitable flux of existence. Most importantly, such rigidity would also prevent the individual from enacting the pragmatist ethos at the heart of *Three Poems*, which holds that a mobility of perception combined with continuous self-revision is essential to the development of our capabilities for creating and sustaining interpersonal relationships. Ashbery therefore decides that it is better the self remain *deconstructed* so that it can be “harmless and even helpful” (319). In being so taken apart, “you,” as an embodiment of subjectivity, is open to shifting relationships with its exteriority (the always subject “I” can now also stand as object).

Numerous critics have discussed the self or subject in Ashbery's poetry, and though their descriptions of it vary, one trend (outside of the Bloom-influenced arena) is to see it as fundamentally unstable and relational. Linking the representational failures of language (in a positive way) to a re-conceptualized selfhood, Norton points out that the "lack of a self-sameness of subject and self-representation" denies the possibility of "full self-knowledge." Therefore, the subject "cannot directly know 'himself,' as subject, but only as object, or, speaking more precisely in grammatical terms, as complement" (282). As with Pasternak, the self can only be found or understood in the relationship to an exteriority. Norton herself frames the subject in Ashbery's poetry in terms of syntax, a move that allows her to highlight the mobile, relational aspects of the self (among them subjectivity's relation to the passing of time). Charles Altieri's suggestion in his book, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, however, will serve as my primary framework for discussing the self or subject as it is figured in *Three Poems*. Analyzing Ashbery's "Litany" (from *As We Know*), Altieri writes: "Perhaps the self is primarily a function, not an entity — a function that is manifest in our assertions of desire or our investment in things" (162). Recalling Foucault's response to Barthes' famous essay on the death of the author, Altieri's representation of the self as a function acknowledges the influence that the persistence of subjectivity (which creates a sense of atomized individuality) has, even after we realize the self does not exist as an ontological entity. Altieri's most important realization, though, is his understanding of the self as only brought into being when it relates via desire to the world, for the desire implied by such a formulation is less the "want" of pre-existing self than a means of attempting to comprehend subjectivity by establishing connections with the asubjective world.

As “The New Spirit” describes it, the un-reified self becomes a more efficient vehicle for continual communication and interaction with the world, which consequently appears as “an open field of narrative possibilities” (333):

[O]ne realizes one’s self has dwindled and now at last vanished in the diamond light of pure speculation. Collar up, you are lighter than air. The only slightly damaged bundle of receptive nerves is humming again, receiving the colorless emanations from outer space and dispatching dense, precisely worded messages. There is room to move around in it, which is all that matters. (333-34)

Liberated from the stasis threatened by the deadweight of singular selfhood, the essence of subjectivity, as Ashbery ideally imagines it, is communication: receptive nerves that respond to stimuli with “precisely worded messages.” Though this image of levity is alluring, *Three Poems* is much more reserved in its overall estimate of how the self might be re-situated within the social realm (the dream of linguistic precision is also reexamined). “The New Spirit,” in particular, portrays the mania for a concretized sense of self as a destructive bid to possess definitive knowledge: “you lacerate yourself so as to say, These wounds are me.” As treatment, *Three Poems* counsels a form of Nietzschean “forgetting” as the only “way in which new lives — not ours — can ever begin again.” Turning on itself as usual, though, the prose acknowledges that “escape in either direction is impossible.” The more realistic option is to embrace the unknowability of life *as* life-sustaining and as a catalyst for interpersonal relationships. The mutual desire to uncover an answer that does not exist is, in fact, according to Ashbery, “the major enchantment that gave us life to begin with, life for each other. Therefore I hold you. But life holds us, and is unknowable” (314). Such an emphasis on the necessity of emotional, interpersonal binds to the navigation of life recalls the poignant ending of ““They Dream Only of

America.’” Like the earlier poem also, though, *Three Poems* remains suspicious of the discourses we rely on for such navigation.

“It almost seems — ’”: Mending with Failing Words in *Three Poems*

For Creeley the representation of “a communal self” in *Three Poems* (which is able to emerge as a more recognizable and imaginatively real entity after the individual “self” is re-conceptualized) stems in large part from Ashbery’s “flexible cliché brilliance” (qtd. Fredman 117) — his deployment of demotic language not just for a multiplicity of purposes, but his understanding of how cliché itself serves dual purposes simultaneously. As they do elsewhere in Ashbery’s poetry, clichés in *Three Poems* illustrate, in part, the extent to which subjectivity is shaped by communal discursive patterns. According to Stephen Fredman, “Ashbery would like to show language’s relationship to experience, how our ways of speaking structure how we think about what happens, rather than describe specific experiences” (107). The use of cliché is therefore an investigation into both the positive and negative aspects of having to rely on the expressive capabilities of an already highly mediated language. As Charles Altieri explains:

Most of us have little but sincerity and intimacy to believe in as ultimate values, yet all our means to such goals seem contaminated by the overdetermined qualities of our public language. There are virtually no terms we might apply to the self or to intimate experience that do not also carry elaborate fantasies shaped by advertising or the repetitive banter of journalism and television drama. (*Self and Sensibility* 21)

Whether or not one agrees with sincerity and intimacy as ultimate values, Altieri's suspicion of our language's ability to express these satisfactorily is particularly valid in a discussion of Ashbery (one of the poets whose work Altieri regards as addressing this problem), since the poet often manages to achieve unique emotional poignancy with recycled and ironic language.

As a poet who understands, at least in theory if not in practice, the appeal of "precisely worded messages," Ashbery recognizes that clichés and standardized modes of discourse are, inevitably, partly complicit in language's failure to provide the emotional sustenance needed to maintain interpersonal relationships. This failure, though, is itself emotionally resonant, for Ashbery remarked:

What moves me is the irregular form — the flawed words and stubborn sounds, as Stevens said, that affect us whenever we try to say something that is important to us — more than the meaning of what we are saying at a particular moment . . . The inaccuracies and anomalies of common speech are particularly poignant to me. This essence of communication is what interests me in poetry. (qtd. in Fredman 107)

The static words of cliché, by coming to represent only themselves as etiolated language and a general, unexamined idea instead of that which they are meant to speak for, threaten to abstract the signification process from subjectivity's internal desire to express. Ashbery is not interested, however, in truly believing that the "meaning" of what we do say could ever correspond directly to the expressive intent; especially for the experiences most important to humans, language seeks to name the unnameable. The "essence of communication" for Ashbery is an ineluctable inaccuracy that reveals the extent to which subjectivity is constituted and manipulated by

mediated and mediating language. It may also reveal a reason why consciousness continually imagines itself as an entity dissociated from the language it uses, for as Altieri speculates in “John Ashbery and the Challenge of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts,” perhaps “the more that we become self-conscious about how much of our psychic lives are fundamentally public, the more we cannot escape sensing what might be called deep Wittgensteinian privacy” (824).

Clichés, of course, extend beyond simple wordings into whole areas of conceptualization. Thus, after Ashbery sets up the first of his “Twin notions of growth” (atomized lives progressing along independent trajectories like careers), he realizes that “this way of speaking has trapped each one of us” (352). Recalling perhaps Wittgenstein’s formulation of his philosophical project as an attempt to show the trapped fly a way out of the fly-bottle (to show us how our language practices contribute to the angst of philosophical dilemmas), Ashbery’s recognition that unexamined language use has emotional and intellectual consequences is as integral to *Three Poems* as it was to the aesthetic choice of “taking language apart” in *The Tennis Court Oath*. Since Ashbery desires to overcome the limits imposed on subjective life by an unsatisfactory language, *Three Poems* occasionally exhibits the dream of what Fredman refers to as “pure language” (pre-Babel, as opposed to language marked fundamentally by the need to translate and thus proliferate inaccuracy) (105). The possibility of finding a transcendence in which you are “no longer prevented by the grid of everyday language” therefore persists despite Ashbery’s counter-awareness that language presents an epistemological impasse (328); “the limits of the

language (*the language which I understand*) mean the limits of *my world*” as Wittgenstein wrote in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (qtd. in Perloff, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* 20).¹⁶

Out of the persistent desire for “pure language” and the unflagging realization of its impossibility Ashbery sees a way of continuing in an attentiveness to (and the embrace of) our imperfect language practices. As Fredman argues, Ashbery “accepts the counterfeit nature of his language and endeavors to translate this nearly exhausted diction into a provisionally adequate discourse” (113). In *The Tennis Court Oath* an understanding of the dialogic nature of language emerged as an important element for re-conceptualizing the self and thus altering social practices and relationships. Similarly, *Three Poems* turns to imperfect language to find a basis for initiating action and establishing interpersonal relationships: “the act is still proposed, before us // it needs pronouncing. To formulate oneself around this hollow empty sphere . . . To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out” (310). With the self recognized as a construct continually re-formed around its very absence as an ontological entity, the poetic (yet thoroughly quotidian) breath becomes the desired means by which the self can come into being as an agent. Most importantly, “any breathing is to be breathing into each other, and imperfect, like all apprehended things” (312). The breath of language, rather than giving voice to an a priori self, allows a mutable self-function to be crafted and drawn into life giving and life sustaining relationships with others. Throughout *Three Poems*, in fact, the self (despite subjectivity’s tendency to imagine itself as an independent, atomized entity) is revealed to be constructed through others:

¹⁶ In order to further exhibit the Wittgensteinian corollary to Ashbery’s concerns about solipsism and communal experience, it is important to note Perloff’s remark that although Wittgenstein never refuted this proposition later in his career, “the solipsism of ‘my’ gradually gave way to ‘our,’ to the continuous struggle everyone encounters in the ‘bumping of one’s head’ against the walls of one’s language cave in the drive to understand one’s world” (20).

“In you I fall apart, and outwardly am a single fragment, a puzzle to itself. But we must learn to live in others, no matter how abortive or unfriendly their cold, piecemeal renderings of us: they create us” (315). The language structure may emphasize a solitary “I” as subjectivity’s controlling agent, but *Three Poems* posits that the mind’s inability to know phenomenon or even itself with certainty — let alone other people — destabilizes the notion of a reified, singular selfhood. Thus, in the ambiguous “you” the illusory “I,” once atomized and central, falls apart, its singular appearance retained but understood as a fragment from a social whole. Such a re-conceptualization of selfhood does not necessarily end the melancholia that initiates *Three Poems* and extends throughout its digressions, but it is a gesture that Ashbery makes in order to imagine subjectivity as a fluid and interconnecting agent of interpersonal relationships rather than as an isolating and encapsulating entity.¹⁷

Like “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” *Three Poems* uses the imperfect reading of apprehended things to situate the always equivocating self-function within the world. Edward Hoepfner has written of “Self-Portrait,” that the “great point of Ashbery’s poem is that ‘I’ is not

¹⁷ At the risk of appearing too biographical, it is interesting to note Ashbery’s account of how the “content” of *Three Poems* was generated. In his interview with Mark Ford, Ashbery explains: “I thought of them [the three poems] as three oblong empty boxes to be filled with anything. I remember discussing it with my analyst, Carlos (a Chilean); I said, ‘I’m writing these three long prose poems, but I can’t think of anything to put in them,’ and he said, ‘Why don’t you think about all the people who’ve meant most to you in your life, and then don’t write about them, but write about what you think when you think about them?’ I thought this was a good idea, though I’m not sure I ever actually did it” (56). Recounting the same story in an earlier interview with Koethe, Ashbery’s equivocal ending is a more certain, “So I did” (qtd. in Shoptaw 140). Regardless, Ashbery’s anecdote suggests a vision of *Three Poems* as a therapeutic exercise, one in which the subjective self is formed and known primarily by its attempts to understand its relationships with others. Thinking of *Three Poems*, conceptually, as a type of “cure” that analyzes our relationship to language also establishes further ties to elements of Wittgenstein’s philosophical projects.

something that may be regarded in the fashion one regards an object; the self is rather the act of reading the world, and that act designates identity insofar as it may bear designation” (173).

Three Poems anticipates the later poem’s emphasis on the self as an act of reading, but the emotional stakes are much higher, since its world is more clearly populated by other, elusive people (often a “beloved” and “you”) toward whom an individual, yet flexibly communal, subjectivity directs its reading glance. In an important, self-referential section of “The New Spirit” (which leads to the realization that “we must learn to live in others”) Ashbery uses the act of reading as a metaphor for consciousness and the desire to connect:

Even as I say this I seem to hear you and see you wishing me well,
your eyes taking in some rapid lateral development

reading without comprehension

and always taken up on the reel of what is happening in the wings. Which becomes a medium through which we address one another, the independent life we were hoping to create. This is your eyes noting the passing of telephone poles and the tops of trees. A permanent medium in which we are lost, since becoming robs it of its potential. (315)

With the last sentence Ashbery refers simultaneously to the experience of living in a continually misinterpreted present moment, the experience of reading the modulating discourses of *Three Poems*, and the experience of using language itself. With a twist on Aristotelian entelechial development (elsewhere a theme in *Three Poems*), Ashbery privileges the possible (“what is happening in the wings”) that does not actualize as the fundamental influence on individuals in their desire to address one another and create together an “independent life” outside of encapsulated subjectivity. Language, never quite able to sufficiently name what, in its potential, it was expected to name, is cast as a communal labyrinth of sorts. As a “permanent medium,” —

the intermediary stage extended into perpetuity — language “becoming” does not involve any definite fulfillment of expression or mutual address. In this it can be seen as a medium that separates subjective consciousness from the present, other people, and itself. Ashbery, however, only uses the melancholic overtones of such a viewpoint to investigate further how language can be used more aptly as a means of intersubjective connection.

According to Daniel Cottom’s argument in “‘Getting It’: Ashbery and the Avant-Garde of Everyday Language,” the colloquial expressions (clichés and tautological statements), vague demonstratives, and free-floating pronouns (especially “it”) that Ashbery often uses all “suggest a popular recognition that our linguistic orientation cannot come close to being pinned down in terms of formed parameters of time, space, perspective, or native competence” (10). Despite the “necessary failure in naming” that these insufficiencies reveal (7), much of the “everyday” language that Ashbery employs, though “made up of linguistic usages that do not add up,” still “prove[s] uncannily more than sufficient to get our attention.” The ability to “get our attention” is particularly important to Cottom’s argument about Ashbery’s style, and provides vital insights into the techniques of *Three Poems*. For Cottom the “characteristic unit of Ashbery’s poetry is the striking utterance.” In striking the reader despite (or even because of) its semantic failing, the utterance reveals a poetry “more concerned with capturing captivating effects than with establishing meanings for itself” (13). Cottom’s account of the striking utterance is one of the most useful conceptualizations of Ashbery’s style, but Ashbery’s written “utterances” do more than simply captivate momentarily; they suggest (and simultaneously dissemble the notion of) a shared meaning outside of the language act toward which readers can grasp. By employing its linguistic insufficiencies as such, the utterance teases out the idea and experience of communal

meaning or intersubjectivity; we know, or at least seem to for a moment, the meaning even if the language itself, on second inspection, fails in its bid to preserve such meaning with semantic accuracy (a particularly important point for appreciating the false causalities and unclear arguments of *Three Poems*). The definitive communal meaning, of course, does not exist in Ashbery's poetry, and nowhere is it expected to. What Cottom's observation reveals about *Three Poems*, in particular, is Ashbery's insistence on meaning as a continual process of relating to the world rather than a fixed entity, and his belief in language as a fluctuating, time-bound strategy of mobilizing the reader's movement toward and away from the suggestion of shared meaning — a way of continuing that holds more promise for avoiding the strictures of subjectivity and creating possibilities for interpersonal connection than the search for an ultimate, personal answer.

The reader's emotional and intellectual journey through the circuitous prose of *Three Poems* has been figured in a variety of ways by critics, but the frame that John Shoptaw creates in his essay, "The Music of Construction: Measure and Polyphony in Ashbery and Bernstein," perhaps best represents the relationship of the reading process to some of the poems' prominent themes. Picking up on the distinction Ashbery makes in "The System" between "frontal" and "latent" happiness, Shoptaw writes: "Readers of *Three Poems* are absorbed by the wait for their own frontal moment of understanding, which, miragelike, seems always a little ahead or behind" (219). Ashbery's meditation on happiness is much more convoluted than Shoptaw acknowledges, but the correlation still follows. The fulfillment of frontal happiness, as Shoptaw explains, entails achieving "ecstatic absorption" at the "expense of mundane, ongoing life" (219). Ashbery, however, imagines this state of being as only an incredibly rare occurrence

in which the otherwise fleeting, frontally happy moment is sustained permanently. Latent happiness, which “is harder to understand” (Ashbery 353), operates in relation to frontal happiness, and its potential impact on individuals varies. In this secondary form of happiness the “beneficent frontal moment is absorbed into one’s memory or an era’s expectations” and seems always emergent on the horizon (Shoptaw 219). Trying to live with such “happiness,” though, risks creating an existential panic that the “sign of fulfillment” has been missed or will never arrive; conversely (out of such panic) it may also lead to a deluded belief that “plane of final realization” has been attained. The consequences of such a delusion are clear in their detriment to the possibility of social interdependency: while the “ship is sinking under them” individuals in such a state have their ears “closed to the cries of their fellow passengers” (354). Ashbery’s solution to this dilemma entails in part an embrace of radical unknowability; a general agnosticism raised as “a kind of fence-sitting,” to use Ashbery’s words from “Soonest Mended,” “to the level of an esthetic ideal” (232). He therefore questions even the possibility of being truly aware of one’s limited knowledge: “we in fact cannot aver with any degree of certainty that we *are* ignorant” (354).

Although the resultant “open-mindedness” (which preserves the desired “mobility” of life) prevents certain pit-falls of latent happiness, there is still the danger that “further inquiry” will cease. For this, Ashbery takes comfort in the promise of ineluctable, if imperfect, communication, asserting in “The System” that the “sensuality [that] can save us” includes “what we said to the person who was both the bearer and fellow recipient of that message and what that person replied, words that were not words but sounds out of time, taken out of any eternal context in which their content would be recognizable” (355). Though it hints at the desire for

“pure” language, the “sounds out of time” remain our quotidian words; the content recognizable not because “that message” has a clearly defined meaning (it even lacks a referent), but because it entails interpersonal communication. Building on Shoptaw’s observation, we might say that the reader of *Three Poems* is not simply induced to wait for the “frontal moment of understanding” and thus interpolated into an experience of “latent” happiness; rather, the reader passes through fleeting moments of frontal understanding (which come in the form of striking utterances and pretenses of resolution) in shifting relationships to latent happiness, wherein the quest for comprehension is less about achieving a “final realization” and more about itself as an endless mobilizing force that, when dwelled upon, holds the potential to alter the experience of subjectivity. The dense prose and circuitous, self-revising arguments of *Three Poems*, as the reader’s corollary to the external phenomena and flux of consciousness that Ashbery concerns himself with, are significantly indeterminate, impossible to hold in the mind with certainty for an extended period of time. Nevertheless, Ashbery maintains a faith in the ability of such indeterminacy, when it is embraced as such, to serve the valuable purpose of generating essential yet fluctuating meaning. There exists a sense of ineluctable communication even through our imperfect language: “as the discourse continues and you think you are not getting anything out of it [. . .] this knowledge is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress itself upon you, the forms of your inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand” (358).

The reader’s experience moving through the prose of *Three Poems*, which we have been extrapolating here, relies predominantly on Ashbery’s unique form of indeterminacy. More than any other critic, Marjorie Perloff (primarily in her book, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*) has

examined Ashbery's ability (through the careful suggestion of meaning, the occlusion of otherwise revelatory information, and the manipulation of syntax and grammar) to develop indeterminacy as a foundational aesthetic. Most importantly, Perloff has argued that the embrace of such indeterminacy signals a break from a particular strand of High Modernist poetics (in which symbolism, even for all its indeterminate characteristics, still suggests a controlled order of meaning, e.g., Eliot's "The Waste Land") (see *Indeterminacy* 8-28). Though Perloff recognizes some of the significant effects of Ashbery's indeterminacy (particularly its impact on conceptions of the self and its correlation to contemporary mediums of discourse), not enough has been done to examine the relationship of Ashbery's indeterminacy to socially situated poetics. As Charles Altieri notes, it is important to understand "the problems of indeterminacy" as a means rather than an end (*Self and Sensibility* 141). Altieri, himself, has gone some ways to formulating a theoretical framework for understanding the social role of indeterminacy in poetry. Discussing Jasper Johns' painting, *Target With Four Faces*, as a means of theorizing a particular brand of postmodern indeterminacy (of which Ashbery is an acknowledged poetic exemplar), Altieri writes: "[W]e find the experience of indeterminacy becoming a quite determinate image of our inescapable entrapment in the traces, transformations, and equivocations which constitute the anxious process of coming to terms with intentional activity, with proposing meanings and being the target of meanings proposed by others" (*Challenge* 813). Rather than resulting in a non-communicative impasse (a complaint Bloom and Costello have made against *The Tennis Court Oath*), Ashbery's effectively irresolvable indeterminacy draws out and highlights the "intentional" aspect of the reader's relationship to meaning. With the text generating a constantly equivocating sense of meaning, the process of creating and synthesizing meaning

becomes important not for the meaning itself, but for the impact of that process on individual subjectivities as well as, vitally, on social interactions and relationships. Though Altieri mentions the anxiousness of this process, an “inescapable entrapment,” he also rightly understands the indeterminacy of Ashbery’s poetry as both a means of improving the ability of subjectivities to create relationships and a vehicle for emboldening the emotional potency of such interaction. The imperfections of language (indeterminacy at its most basic level), which we have seen Ashbery embrace, can play an important role, after all, in crafting social dialogue. As Altieri notes, the hubris of trying to create a purified discourse equates to a “desire for purified states of feeling that involve the author in concealing and denying the noise of the world.” Ashbery, Altieri rightly claims, “sees that such a purification eventually refines away the imperfections which keep the self open to change and able to communicate, however imperfectly, with other persons” (*Challenge* 821). In his decision to use demotic and indeterminate language, therefore, Ashbery allows the reader to participate in a discourse that imagines the self’s “entrapment” in equivocating subjectivity as, more fundamentally, an exercise in creating wider potentials for interpersonal connection and communication.

Although he accepts the philosophical premises that underlie his use of indeterminate language, Ashbery remains ever aware, especially in *Three Poems*, of the potential for personal estrangement and anxiety that stems from the failure of language to adequately chart the processes of subjectivity. Nearing the end of “The Recital,” therefore, Ashbery muses: “‘It almost seems — ’ How often this locution has been forced on us when we were merely trying to find words for a more human expression of our difficulty, something closer to home.” By qualifying itself as twice removed from any semblance of direct expression, Ashbery’s locution

acknowledges the failure inherent in its effort to express the subjective “uneasiness that is undermining our health, causing us to think crazy thoughts and behave erratically” (378). The cliché (“closer to home”) embedded in Ashbery’s hope for a “more human expression” gestures simultaneously to the supposed failure of language and to one of its greatest traits, for the “uneasiness” that Ashbery imagines is hardly a mythologized loneliness in the vein of Confessionalism or Bloom’s criticism; rather, like the “otherness” from “Self-Portrait,” “it almost seems” an inherent aspect of subjectivity as it relates to itself and the world it inhabits. As the unique subjective experience of a loosely similar condition of being, Ashbery’s inexplicable “uneasiness” and the desire for further naming that it breeds might not be quenched or explained by the use of cliché, but the commonness of the phrase stands, at least in part, as a comforting testament to the shared experience of such uneasiness.

Ashbery’s Gathering of “tattered enigmas”

For all his dissatisfaction with the effects of unexamined language, for all his dismay at the inability of language to fulfill the promises of expression its mythos holds, and for all his desire and effort to take language apart and renew our use and awareness of it, Ashbery retains a genuine appreciation for the stumbling gestures of our failing language. In “The Recital” of *Three Poems*, therefore, Ashbery redeems the failures of language (and accepts the “uneasiness” that cannot be entirely dispelled even by the most emotionally poignant and innovative language) by suggesting that the process of moving through reality with a failing, uncontrollable and unknowable language is equivalent to, and an instruction for, life itself. Perhaps, Ashbery even suggests, “tattered enigmas” of language — unable to pin-down that which they are meant to

speak toward and incapable of being wholly grasped themselves even by a conscientious and practiced poet — may still lead, through our attention to their very strangeness and mystery, to the type of harmonious synthesis between a subjectivity and its environs which we desire:

As I thought about these things dusk began to invade my room. Soon the outlines of things began to grow blurred and I continued to think along well-rehearsed lines like something out of the past. Was there really nothing new under the sun? Or was this novelty—the ability to take up these tattered enigma again and play with them until something like a solution emerged from them, only to grow dim at once and fade like an ignis fatuus, a specter mocking the very reality it had so convincingly assumed? No, but this time something real did seem to be left over—some more solid remnant of the light as the shadows continued to pile up. (382)

Even if the vague “solution” appears only momentarily, Ashbery endeavors to imagine such a synthesis as initializing the gestation of a renewed sense of community and intersubjective connectedness: “There were new people watching and waiting, conjugating the distance and emptiness, transforming the scarcely noticeable bleakness into something both intimate and noble” (383).

The effort to use language and our cognizance of its effects to facilitate the literal formation of such “intimate” communities and to improve the ability of individual subjectivities — as much “tattered enigmas” as the language coursing through them — to imagine and feel themselves as interconnected has been an ongoing and vitally important component of Ashbery’s poetry. The institutionalized practices and cultural prejudices of McCarthy era homophobia, and the individually and socially beneficial avant-garde responses that formed small, gay empowering communities, provide a formative context for Ashbery’s concerns about subjectivity and the social realm. The impact of such a historical moment on Ashbery’s poetry cannot be overlooked, but throughout his entire poetic career Ashbery has treated those concerns with

abstracted meditations on what it means to live with the consequences of subjectivity itself. The failures of language, whether they be the stifled expressions of gay desire or the general signifying complexities of any word, have served, as much as the promising possibilities of language, as Ashbery's tools and themes in his explorations of the relationship of language to subjectivity. As the title of this paper suggests, language, for Ashbery, always stands between subjectivity and loneliness, holding the potential, all at once, to dissociate or join them. More important than simply allaying loneliness or avoiding the specter of a dreaded solipsism, though, Ashbery's poetry has been engaged in a bid to understand, appreciate and develop social realms. Reading Ashbery's poems — his own gathering together of "tattered enigmas" left open for play — as thoroughly invested in the relationship between subjectivities and social environments not only offers the most fruitful possibilities for understanding his unique usages of language, but also offers the best opportunities for developing upon and extending outward the small, community-minded coteries that Goodman described and Ashbery, alongside (in body or spirit) his New York School companions, helped to develop.

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