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Abstract Expressionism and Raymond Roussel
in the Poetry of John Ashbery

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prague, January 2011

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Chapter I: Introduction

Without any exaggeration, John Ashbery, born 1927, may be said to be one of the most important Anglo-American poets of the twentieth century. He had been labeled as the Eliot of the second half of the century¹ because of his defining influence and the parallel of his career to the “onset, rise, and (perhaps) climax of the postmodernist mode in North America.”² Whether this is because Ashbery has been always so closely connected to the spirit of the times or whether his influence in many points actually triggered the trends later to define the writing of more than one generation could be the subject of endless discussion. Yet, as David Herd once dubbed Ashbery’s poetry as “poetry of occasion”³ in the best sense of the word, we may reasonably suspect that there is something true about both ideas. Ashbery as a poet, at once highly self-conscious, self-reflexive and perceptive of his surroundings, stands at the very center of the action where it is difficult to trace the exact direction of inspirational flows.

This may be said to be one of the hallmarks of Ashbery’s career. The other, paradoxically but symptomatically, is in direct conflict with the first, that is: the very status of Ashbery’s as a poet entitled to claim a central position in the canon has been during his career subject to wild vicissitudes. His postmodernity too has been in fact challenged by some critics tending to place him rather in one line with such writers as “Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Stevens, Eliot;”⁴ while for others he is the epitome of the avant-garde artist. Ashbery himself has rather tried to protect his own original position without all clear-cut movements, simultaneously standing at their intersection; yet, he used to be the notorious prey of literary critics, being “served with every kind of sauce”⁵ and yet always escaping his eager critics,

¹ Nick Lolordo, “Charting the Flow: Positioning John Ashbery,” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Winter, 2001: 755.

² Brian McHale, “How (Not) to Read Postmodernist Long Poems: The Case of Ashbery’s ‘The Skaters,’” *Poetics Today*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2000: 562.

³ David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2000). This book is an excellent critical biography.

⁴ Like for example Helen Vendler. This generally depends on which texts the critics select as central and which will they marginalize. See Lolordo 752.

⁵ As he once noted about Roussel’s similar fate in the 1960s. See: John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 49.

possibly even carrying on mocking and sophisticated defiant conversations with them in his poetry.⁶

Moreover, Ashbery has over the years developed a remarkably eclectic range of inspirational sources. This is on the one hand accounted for by his intense immersion in (both higher and lower) culture, in the literary, visual, and cinematic arts. Second, it goes hand in hand with his fundamental belief in plurality, democracy and the decentralization of literature and his fascination with all kinds of marginal “other traditions.”⁷ Third, it has its roots in the literary milieu of the 1950s when Ashbery and his friends were starting their careers among the informal circles of the New York School of poetry, a fact worthy of more detailed attention.

When Ashbery entered the literary scene in the late forties and early fifties⁸ the pervading style, as David Herd writes, was that of the “Lowell-dominated middle generation:”⁹ intricate and patterned, highly formalistic verse toward which the New York School poets “felt deep distaste” and which “prompt[ed] them to read widely and more actively.”¹⁰ To stand in opposition to this strictly thematic, new-critical kind of writing meant, “clearly, to be eclectic, improvisational, occasional, and accepting.”¹¹ Even later, when the scene was invaded by the Beat generation and when Robert Lowell published his groundbreaking *Life Studies* in 1959, the matter-of-course, unquestioned confidence of the Beats and the Confessionals in the absolute authority of the speaking ego and its control over the expressive elements of the text

⁶ See: Martin Kevorkian, “John Ashbery’s Flow Chart: John Ashbery and the Theorists on John Ashbery Against the Critics Against John Ashbery,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Writers on Writers, Spring, 1994: 459-476.

⁷ This is actually a title under which his Charles Eliot Norton lectures were published, introducing six minor poets that Ashbery sees as worthwhile reading.

⁸ Ashbery’s first poems were published without his knowing in 1945. In 1947 he published in *The Harvard Advocate*. In 1953 Ashbery became an author of a chapbook published by Tibor de Nagy Library. In 1956 his first collection *Some Trees* came out that won Yale Younger Poets Prize judged by W. H. Auden. See John Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, Ed. Mark Ford (New York: Library of America, 2008) 994-7.

⁹ Herd 28.

¹⁰ Herd 28.

¹¹ Herd 34.

motivated Ashbery to search for more ambivalent, skeptical modes revealing the falsity and dangers of such a self-centered, intolerant position.¹²

The list of names in Ashbery's private tradition thus included for example Boris Pasternak, Osip Mandelstam, John Clare, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Laura Riding, W. H. Auden, Wallace Stevens, Hölderlin, Raymond Roussel, Stéphane Mallarmé, Giorgio de Chirico and many others.¹³ Another important influence was the informal members of the New York School themselves: the poets lived in close contact with the galleries and painters of the emerging second generation of Abstract Expressionists¹⁴ who were then, in the early fifties, "trying to clear professional space for their own careers in the shadow of the immediately preceding generation,"¹⁵ i.e. painters like Pollock and De Kooning. The Abstract Expressionist movement was already established, a symptom of the greater progressiveness of the visual arts scene, possibly by virtue of being built on the European avant-garde examples, and in its time more ahead than the literary scene. The fifties were a period when, in the words of Helen McNeil, "American poetry was constrained and formal while American abstract-expressionist art was vigorously taking over the heroic responsibilities of the European avant-garde."¹⁶ Ashbery, as the author of much art criticism knew the issues under discussion very well. Moreover, the New York School poets enjoyed a lively cooperation among themselves and Ashbery, for instance, has written some texts together with his friend Kenneth Koch¹⁷ and also an entire novel with James Schuyler composed from sentences of their alternate authorship.¹⁸

The time from September 1955 to September 1957, and later from June 1958 to 1963, Ashbery spent, except for a few short trips, in France, writing poetry, art criticism, attempting

¹² "Ashbery is antipathetic to confessional poetry because it fetishises the individual, and in so doing denies poetry its broader social function." Herd 20.

¹³ Herd 207.

¹⁴ Robert Von Hallberg quotes Kenneth Koch saying: "We shared that whole painting scene." Robert Von Hallberg, "Avant-Gardes," *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Volume 8: Poetry and Criticism 1940-1995*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 104.

¹⁵ Von Hallberg 104.

¹⁶ "John Ashbery," *The Poetry Foundation: Find Poems and Poets. Discover Poetry*, biographical entry, 2010, 18. Apr 2010 <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=233>>.

¹⁷ Herd 56.

¹⁸ Herd 57.

at composing a dissertation on Raymond Roussel, giving occasional readings and lecturing.¹⁹ During this period he took a vigorous interest in French painting, especially that of the Surrealists, and in relative isolation from his original literary scene created verses based on experimental techniques. These are collected in his 1962 book *The Tennis Court Oath*. Last but not least, Ashbery has in the course of his prolific career also translated works by André Breton, Pierre Reverdy, Arthur Cravan, Max Jacob, Alfred Jarry, Antonin Artaud, Noel Vexin and other French authors: his attention to the French avant-garde has been addictive and thorough.²⁰

Ashbery spent the period after his return to America in relative obscurity, lecturing and, most notably, writing his two collections of poems, *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970) and *Three Poems* (1972); the latter is an extended piece of reflexive poetry in prose. As he had rebelled against the academic mainstream before, he again expressed his dislike for any institutionalized literature when, at the end of the sixties in his article of the same name, he proposed a concept of the so-called “invisible avant-garde.”²¹ The article argues that the avant-garde had already established its own tradition and with its growing popularity had become a near mirror image of the official writing: the only authentic avant-garde was now represented by “a handful of decrepit stragglers behind the big booming avant-garde juggernaut.”²²

The most decisive milestone came in 1975 when Ashbery published his most acclaimed book, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* that earned him a rare combination of all the three major American poetry prizes and hurled him almost overnight from complete obscurity to unreserved popularity. From that point on, Ashbery has been often interviewed about his poetry and started to be a favorite topic with literary critics who in his diverse and volatile verse found supportive material to a range of often contradictory theories. It is of some interest that he is

¹⁹ John Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, Ed. Mark Ford. (New York: Library of America, 2008) 996-8. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

²⁰ “John Ashbery,” *The Poetry Foundation: Find Poems and Poets. Discover Poetry*, biographical entry, 2010, 18. Apr 2010 <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=233>>.

²¹ Quoted from: David Sweet, “‘And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name’: John Ashbery, the Plastic Arts, and the Avant-Garde,” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Autumn, 1998: 320.

²² Quoted from: Sweet 320.

also said to be the poet on whom famous Harold Bloom in a way built his career. “John Ashbery has been the foremost beneficiary of Bloom’s marketing strategy,” says Susan Schultz, as “Bloom, like the prophet he sometimes proclaims himself to be, needed a contemporary hero, and Ashbery [...] just happened to fill those shoes.”²³

Ashbery had now to come to terms with the devouring and possessive force of public acclaim and with the host of his followers and epigones. He has got into a situation to have defined a “generic poem”²⁴ of his time, although now he was able to use his influence to draw attention to works of his various inspirational sources and marginal writers. To an extent he chose to do so when he in 1999 published his work *Girls on the Run*, inspired by the emblematic outsider artist Henry Darger. His earlier book *A Wave* (1984) also earned much critical acclaim and won the Bollingen Prize. Among his other works two other books stand out: his 1991 two-hundred-page discursive poem *Flow Chart* that is nevertheless one of his finest pieces of writing and repays the reader’s attention and *Hotel Lautreamont* (1992) which is a partial return to his earlier experimenting and to the Surrealist heritage.²⁵ On the whole Ashbery has however ceased to raise storms in the literary world recently and now seems to have become a stable and unshakable part of the panorama; in 2008 Marjorie Perloff noted in an interview that nowadays “Ashbery must be the only poet who makes it into all of the anthologies, whether mainstream or not.”²⁶

This overview should serve to show that Ashbery’s poetry has always evolved under a variety of influences²⁷ and has always clearly, though melancholically, poked fun at human reflexes for clutching at easy, absolute statements, perhaps including literary labels as well. These influences helped to shape his writing as highly original and to an extent hardly

²³ Susan M. Schultz, “‘Returning to Bloom’: John Ashbery’s Critique of Harold Bloom,” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Spring, 1996: 25.

²⁴ As John Koethe wrote in his “The Absence of a Noble Presence;” quoted from Herd 180.

²⁵ Ernesto Suarez-Toste, “‘The Tension Is in the Concept’: John Ashbery’s Surrealism,” *Style*, Volume 38, No. 1, Spring 2004: 3.

²⁶ Hélène Aji and Antoine Cazé, “A Conversation with Marjorie Perloff,” *Sources*, Vol. 20, Autumn 2008: 41.

²⁷ As David Herd says, „no individual influence had priority over Ashbery. All are equal in the poetry because poetry is equal in all of them. Where is the poet to be found, after all, if not in the range of tastes [...]” Herd 46.

classifiable. Two of the influences that I believe to be pertinent and illuminating have been singled out for examination in this study: Abstract Expressionists and Raymond Roussel. Both dialogues have been powerful and long-lasting: Roussel was to be the topic of Ashbery's dissertation and Ashbery also often presents him as an excuse for his leaving for France; visual arts are a matter of Ashbery's lifelong interest (from the early childhood he has always been interested in visual arts and there was even a time when he wanted to become a surrealist painter and took painting classes²⁸) and an element of his important personal relationships.

Both had formative impact on Ashbery's writing and the traces of their formal techniques in fact very comprehensively describe Ashbery's writing both in terms of style and the motivations behind it. In a brief sketch, the adopted elements and effects include: fragmentation and collaging that significantly transform possibilities of subjectivity and the lyric self; use of the cliché that paradoxically refines lyrical expression; the inclusion of different tones and registers including the absurd or tasteless; the effects of the mundane and the everyday; postmodern practice of quoting, allusion and accidental resemblance; and the analogy of our interpreting mechanisms acted out in the poem.

I will try to illustrate these points with relevant examples from the whole of Ashbery's career. Because of that and also for the sake of brevity, the analyzed passages will be rather selective and no comprehensive genealogy of these influences will be provided, although I will make references to their position in Ashbery's writing when necessary. The thesis is divided into two chapters, each one dealing with single influence. It should be also noted that the analysis in the first chapter is indebted to Charles Altieri's concept of the "aspectual self" as it is presented in his 1988 article "John Ashbery and the Challenge of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts" (see bibliography).

²⁸ Susan McCabe, "Stevens, Bishop, and Ashbery: A Surrealist Lineage," *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 1998: 149.

Chapter II: John Ashbery and Abstract Expressionists

"Modern art was the first and most powerful influence on Ashbery," said Helen McNeil in the *Times Literary Supplement*.²⁹ Critics often associate Ashbery's writing mostly with Abstract Expressionists because of the correspondence of his style to "nonrepresentational methods of picturing reality"³⁰; in Ashbery's treatment, they argue, the poem becomes the equivalent of "an arena in which to act," a performance evolving in the time of writing or an "event,"³¹ as a notorious quote by Harold Rosenberg has it. Rather than a reproduction of an object from reality, the poem becomes a trace and meta-description of its own coming-into-being. In its display of fragments of found texts and frequent juxtaposition of poetry and prose it is sympathetic to the Abstract Expressionist's notion of a canvas as a battlefield of forces in a dynamic relationship. In this and in the quest for movements of mind Ashbery's poems echo the cavalier, self-expressive gesture of Abstract Expressionists.

On the other hand, there is also a pertinent objection to this. Rather than echoing the expression of the self with its Romantic connotations, Ashbery's poems often seem to be devoid of subject and thus depersonalized, as the pronouns in the first, second and third person seem to be in a way fluid, pertaining more to the various modes of our relating to the world than substitutes for specific personae. As Robert Von Hallberg observed, Ashbery's writing has much closer relation to the work of the so-called second generation of Abstract Expressionists, with their "[e]mbarrassment with seriousness" and love for "accident, innocence, and of course fun and the various reliefs experienced in the presence of absurdity," as well as with their shared attraction to the demotic, even to the vulgar.³² That is, Ashbery's poetry points rather in the Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, than Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, line.

²⁹ "John Ashbery," The Poetry Foundation: Find Poems and Poets. Discover Poetry, biographical entry, 2010, 18. Apr 2010 <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=233>>.

³⁰ "John Ashbery," The Poetry Foundation: Find Poems and Poets. Discover Poetry, biographical entry, 2010, 18. Apr 2010 <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=233>>.

³¹ Von Hallberg 105.

³² Von Hallberg 105.

Whatever the individual nuances, when speaking about Ashbery, painterly metaphors are useful. The strangely abstract, visual and collage-like qualities of Ashbery's poetry (for instance his pasting in of overheard conversations or lines from a wartime comic book) or the idea of a picture as an event, occasion and performance: these bring to mind parallels to visual arts. Yet first a short history of the movement is needed before the specific techniques will be commented on in more detail.

1. Origins and Brief History of Abstract Expressionism

American Abstract Expressionism appeared in New York after the end of World War II. Influential in its birth was the artistic climate created during the second half of the 1930s, marked by warfare, sources of inspiration coming from avant-gardes across the Atlantic and the spur of the Government's financial support for artists.³³ It gave the artists a relative sense of recognition and of justification of their activities and also created meeting places where they could devote themselves to full-time painting and exchange their ideas.

The art practiced in these havens fell roughly into three categories: first, there were Social Realists who embraced leftist ideology and emphasized subordination of art to social uses and its universal intelligibility. They strictly forbade formal experiments, favored representational styles, and most often focused on public murals.³⁴ The second group, the Regionalists, escaped into the idyllic past of the American Golden Age: their works, again strictly representational, praised the harmonic coexistence of farmers and early townsmen with nature, often in a naïve, illustrational fashion.³⁵ The third and for us now most interesting direction led away from representation towards the developing of European cubism, DeStijl in particular. These painters in 1936 organized into American Abstract Artists group, immediately shaken by theoretical disputes about the degree of abstraction required and by disagreements

³³ In the form of 1935 Federal Art Project. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) 5-7.

³⁴ Sandler 7-8.

³⁵ Sandler 8-10.

about membership. This group authoritatively promoted a sterile geometrical school inspired by Mondrian, Picasso and Kandinsky.³⁶

On the other hand, the painters who were later to form the loose Abstract Expressionist movement in disillusionment with the present dogmatism and propaganda demanded a more liberated approach. The intention was to speak for a person as an individual and capture his or her innermost emotional states. These artists, including Gorky, Pollock, Gottlieb, Rothko and Baziotes, were inspired by surrealist techniques, notably by automatism loudly promoted by the 1939 immigrants to New York, including André Breton.³⁷ They began turning away from figuration and relied instead, in the words of Irving Sandler, “on their particular experiences and visions, which they painted as directly as they could.”³⁸ The canvas became a record of the artist’s expressive presence, an arena of unpremeditated action and almost heroic struggle with the medium. The paintings’ visual ferocity expressed the irrationalities, anxieties and ambiguities of individual’s psyche, but hoped to reach the intrasubjective in this way too.³⁹

The individualistic, Romantic, nature of Abstract Expressionists’ pursuit however disfavored an origination of any monolithic movement. The ideas were in quick circulation and there existed a number of internal divisions. Some of the artists, notably Pollock, Rothko and De Kooning, received immediate recognition and media attention, while the others, especially those who had recently returned from army service and wanted to join projects already well under way, were left in comparative shadow until in fact very recently.⁴⁰ The movement split into “hot” and “cool” modes of painting⁴¹, the “hot” ones producing testimonies of their “lonely existential vigilance in coming to grips with passions that lay deeper than could be manifest in

³⁶ Sandler 11-9.

³⁷ Sandler 31.

³⁸ Sandler 30.

³⁹ Sandler 30.

⁴⁰ Marika Herskovic, ed., *American Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s: An Illustrated Survey* (New York: New York School Press, 2003) 10-11.

⁴¹ Charles Altieri, “John Ashbery and the Challenge of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Summer, 1988: 809-810.

representational dramas,”⁴² as Charles Altieri puts it, while in the “cool” mode, abstract expression meant “simply a function of the actual relations of color, line, and movement which the painting could sustain,”⁴³ as though the painting was independent of its maker’s will.

In contrast to this first generation of Abstract Expressionists there appeared a second generation consisting of more conceptually oriented painters like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan and others who re-evaluated the use of figuration, play and humor in their works.⁴⁴ They often mix playfulness and satire with a lyrical, elegiac mood. The modern environment invades the pictorial plane in the form of found objects, collages, quotations from both high tradition and popular culture; flags, signs, letters, numbers are appropriated and in a way abstracted by ripping them from their original context and juxtaposing them in new relations, giving them almost existentialist overtones in a fashion similar to Duchamp’s treatment of found objects or De Chirico’s placement of torsos into bare metaphysical landscapes. Abstract Expressionist pictures often reflect on the medium itself and thus verge on conceptualism: by toying with the border between representation versus actual presence they introduce a complex interaction of interpretive indeterminacies, paradoxes and ironies. They play with the viewer and address the ambivalence of his position as well as of the status of the paintings themselves, introducing complex play of intentionality: as Jasper Johns said, the painting aims not to be a deliberate expression of the individual psyche but rather a “helpless statement.”⁴⁵ Kirk Varnedoe, when reflecting upon the dialectic in Johns’ art between creating and concealing, forming and burying wrote: “Johns is in love with conditions of irresolution.”⁴⁶ To this kind of art Ashbery comes closest in his poetry.

⁴² Altieri 809.

⁴³ Altieri 809.

⁴⁴ Von Hallberg 104-5.

⁴⁵ David Sylvester, “Jasper Johns,” *Artchive* 31 Oct. 2010 < <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/J/johnsbio.html>>.

⁴⁶ David Sylvester, “Jasper Johns,” *Artchive* 31 Oct. 2010 < <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/J/johnsbio.html>>.

2. Background: Twin Issues of Abstraction and Intentionality

The issue of the influence of Abstract Expressionism upon Ashbery's writing revolves most persistently around the axis of abstraction and intentionality. When considering this we should start by mapping the extent that the medium of literature allows for abstraction (and what would it look like), which results in the question what would be the equivalent of the breach between the figurative and non-figurative art on the one hand and, in narrower focus, between cool and hot modes of expression on the other hand.

The second, related, point of contention is the problem of the "self" in poetry. Much of Ashbery's uniqueness perhaps rests in his treatment of subjectivity and intentionality and there seem to be two poles on a scale upon which the uses of intentionality in Ashbery's writing can be marked down. One extreme is, according to Robert von Hallberg, the aspect that "ambitiously refuses to present a 'self' in language"⁴⁷ as in *The Tennis Court Oath*, where "the idea of a central consciousness seems almost irrelevant."⁴⁸ On the other end of the scale stand more popular poems written in a kind of "discursive verse"⁴⁹ that Stephen Koch brilliantly and aptly described as "a hushed, simultaneously incomprehensible and intelligent whisper with a weird pulsating rhythm that fluctuates like a wave between peaks of sharp clarity and watery droughts of obscurity and languor."⁵⁰ This "voice" brings to mind an older, experienced, yet rather inconsequential narrator sunk deeply in his or her thoughts or perhaps an echo of some universal consciousness dreaming our life: and thus a pole allowing at least for some hypothesis of a lyrical persona.

Charles Altieri in his interesting essay sees the actual effect of Ashbery's techniques as offering new dimensions for the self, comparable to the Abstract Expressionists' treatment of the transparency of surface. By demasking the flatness of the medium, the poem accepts the

⁴⁷ Hallberg 107.

⁴⁸ Hallberg 107.

⁴⁹ Hallberg 108.

⁵⁰ "John Ashbery," The Poetry Foundation: Find Poems and Poets. Discover Poetry, biographical entry, 2010, 18. Apr 2010 <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=233>>.

imperfections of language and these in turn enhance its expressive repertoire. Moreover, the work sets the perceiver in uncertainty that forces him to reflect on his role and “aspects” of the self in new ways, as the poem in a way mirrors the perceiver’s own efforts at deciphering its possible meaning. The technique thus abolishes the uniting confessionalist self out of the text to in a way manipulate the reader into reflecting on his or her desires and vulnerabilities, as he or she would be required face to face with a painting based on similar sort of “meta-level” approach. Eventually the artwork should posit a kind of new, reformed ego, tamed into a humbler adoption of the inevitable human inadequacies, so successfully acted out in the admitted inadequacies of the medium itself.⁵¹ This approach seems to be very relevant and in turn echoes in a certain sense the goal of surrealist objects that were intended to materialize the forces of human imagination by presenting a concretely irrational assemblage, the symbolical function of which was to reveal the hidden desires suppressed according to the psychoanalysis deep into our subconscious,⁵² desires that were meant to spring up from the semantic seams offered by the object.

3. Abstraction, Catalogues, and Collaging in Ashbery’s Writing

Before we start treating the possibilities produced by juxtaposition of those hypothetical collage-elements in Ashbery’s writing, we have to define and outline them in his poetry. This means we must start at the beginning and consider the likelihood of achieving abstract effects in literature. The issue there is going to be mainly the differences and parallels between the devices of both of the mediums: visual and textual. Let us first examine few levels of language from speech sounds to its higher units to trace abstract possibilities of Ashbery’s writing and poetry in general; even if this approach may seem a little bit forced, it will provide us with a clear and systematic methodology.

⁵¹ Altieri 819-30.

⁵² Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a Poezie: K Vývojové Dialektice Moderního Umění* (Praha: Mladá Fronta, 1969) 103.

Given the automatic denotation entailed in the Saussurean *signifié-signifiant* pair, it is as unrewarding to try to achieve pure abstraction in poetry, as it is in painting to represent a narrative (unless in a series of frozen images as in a comic book). As Nelson Goodman says in the *Dictionary of Art*: “Since an abstract work is one without representation, or more generally denotation, the question naturally arises, what an abstract verbal or linguistic work may be.”⁵³ Thus, probably the Zaum poetry of Russian futurist poets like Velimir Khlebnikov (or Osip Mandelstam) came the closest to abstraction in literature where the abstract qualities are already on the level of speech sounds.

In Zaum poetry ad-hoc words are independent on any denotative content, engaging the reader in enjoying the poems on the grounds of their sound qualities; although the words may echo outlines of existing words and may sound like a foreign language, we have to participate in the poem only through impressions brought about by the melodic qualities of the verse. Although Ashbery sometimes plays with sound qualities, for instance when substituting the orthography of words that sound the same to refresh, defamiliarize and inscribe humor and poetry into the layers of stale phrases, his poems include scarcely any nonsensical words and his playfulness serves other reasons, not enjoyment of the sound *per se*.

Another partly abstract approach was chosen by Gertrude Stein who in her prose poems *Tender Buttons* tried to achieve abstract effects by exploiting the possibilities of English. She attempted to sculpt semi-abstract, cubist-like portraits of everyday objects out of the words, to render the feel of the objects. Let us briefly quote a beginning of one of them, called “A Piece of Coffee”:

More of double.
A place in no new table.
A single image is not splendor. Dirty is yellow. A sign of more in not mentioned. A piece of coffee is not a detainer. The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter. The clean mixture is whiter and not coal color, never more coal color than altogether.
The sight of a reason, the same sight slighter, the sight of a simpler negative answer, the same sore sounder, the intention to wishing, the same splendor, the same furniture.⁵⁴

⁵³ Nelson Goodman, “Abstraction,” *The Dictionary of Art, Vol. 1*, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove, 1996) 89.

⁵⁴ Gertrude Stein, “A Piece of Coffee,” *Tender Buttons*, (New York: Haskell, 1970) 12-3.

The language is refracted already on the level of the individual words, with semi-grammatical expressions like “more of double” or “more [...] than altogether;” the words clash and create witty absurdities. The sentences’ ability to embark suddenly on a different theme is the same Ashbery fondly uses in his own poetry and, generally, the lesson of poetry in prose, and the charm of its inconsequentiality, were both successfully transplanted into Ashbery’s writing; at the same time, there is a difference. Stein isolates words and uses them as primary material out of which she creates sensual images; if the language is out of joint, it is to disjoint also our cemented ways of perception. Stein’s words seem to wish to be primevally pure; they are to induce us to, in the words of Judy Grahn, “*insterstand*” the meaning, to “[f]igure it in” instead of “figur[ing] it out.”⁵⁵ They aim to be colorful (and some of them are indeed names of colors or specification of their hues). The “description” is almost tactile, fresh, wants to decrease the reader’s distance to objects by peeling off the layers of our experience, setting us in the midst of a world that feels very much like physically looking through a cubist kaleidoscope or appearing within a Cézanne, Picasso or Braque painting. The words are moreover almost hedonistically chosen with regard to their lush sound: the entire fourth paragraph has perhaps sprung from the alliterative repetition of s’s, perhaps to mimic the sensuous “sssipping” of hot coffee.

Let us then go back to Ashbery and see how he employs short sequences of words in comparison to Stein. The following passage from early Ashbery presents us also with a coffee scene and therefore is pertinent to the experiment. The quoted passage is the beginning of the section II of the poem called “Rain” from Ashbery’s most experimental book *The Tennis Court Oath*, coming from his French period:

The first coffee of the morning
Soon the stars.

⁵⁵ Grahn, Judy, ed. *Really Reading Gertrude Stein: A Selected Anthology with Essays by Judy Grahn* (Crossing Press, 1989) 21.

and broken feldspar black
squares against the light
message – a handwriting
Dip pen in solution

They would be playing now
The sky
Flowers sucked in – stone ranunculus
amaryllis – red
Freesia and existence

The letter arrives – seeing the stamp
The van
New York under the umbrella

A photograph of what⁵⁶

First we see that Ashbery does not content himself with a single object; by means of his collage of textual scraps he tries to piece together a whole situation, however broken and incomplete. The words are relatively isolated too (as though each of the fragments had its own grammatical construction; although the bits may overlap and follow up as in “black/squares against the light/message”); yet their vividness is clouded compared to Stein and their independence somewhat mutilated. They are not a primary material, but they carry their history with them and suggest they have been rather recycled; in this period Ashbery experimented with Dada techniques, cut-up and collages.⁵⁷ The punctuation in particular makes the fragments appear to be found, coming from unrelated texts, much like a swarm of graffiti texts and bits of posters scattered on a wall. We encounter words like “ranunculus” or “amaryllis” that give the impression of labels, phrases that would seem cold, artificial and empty for one who is not sure of their looks; these are followed by the abstract (and perhaps slightly ironical) term “existence.” In contrast to Stein’s absorption in the sensual “now,” Ashbery’s poem expresses more complex relation to time: even in the minimal space of the first two lines, we can already see enacted the rapid transience of the time. At the end of the passage there appears a

⁵⁶ Ashbery: *Collected Poems* 60-1.

⁵⁷ Ashbery: *Collected Poems* 997-8.

nonsensical grammatical construction similar to Stein's, yet this hints, rather than at disjunction of stale perceptual relations, at interrupted, missing information.

It is necessary to note that the melancholia of the scene is undermined by other passages in the text that cast rather ironical light on the whole and contribute to the relative distance of the perceiver from the text. Let us here mention a quote from the end of section I: "Cupped under the small lead surface of that cloud you see/you are/going to die/Burned by the power of that view/The day of the week will/not save you" (60). Still, the blunt pathetic assertions seem to live on their own and even in contrast to the potential ironies maintain their relative value; they offer us a justified outlet of emotions. This careful mixture is typical of Ashbery and will undergo further refinement during the course of his later writing.

In its simplest form, juxtaposition in Ashbery echoes Surrealist automatic writing, as the snatches of sentences sometimes boil down to strings of unrelated words, like the one at the end of the following passage from "Leaving the Atocha Station" from the same period:

The arctic honey blabbed over the report causing darkness
And pulling us out of there experiencing it
he meanwhile . . . And the fried bats they sell there
dropping from sticks so that the menace of your prayer
folds . . .
Other people . . . flash
the garden are you boning
and defunct covering . . . Blind dog expressed
royalties . . .
comfort of your perfect tar grams nuclear world bank tulip (60)

This poem appears to be aimed to capture, enact live the impressions one may have when pulling off in a train from an unknown city, images dissected and distorted in quickly disappearing window views. In relation to the next chapter on Raymond Roussel, it is also useful to point out the unrealistic, purposely papier-mâché *realia*, which parallel Ashbery's earlier poem "The Instruction Manual" from *Some Trees* (1956)⁵⁸ describing a pastiche travelogue where he, inspired by Raymond Roussel, "purports to describe mechanically

⁵⁸ For relevant interpretation of this poem see: Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) 230.

produced, mass circulation images.”⁵⁹ The plaster, unrealistic quality is reminiscent of Raymond Roussel’s description of a beach on a vignette of a mineral-water bottle and many the like. Yet here, in contrast to Roussel, the “fried bats” are not meant seriously but humorously; they are poking fun at tourists with their ad-fuelled expectations, contributing to the “paper” impression of the text.

As has been already mentioned, the last line evokes automatic writing, a surrealist technique of “unexpected juxtapositions, of which the most fertile were not the result of conscious deliberation”⁶⁰ that Ashbery uses sometimes in *The Tennis Court Oath* and profusely in *The Vermont Notebook*, but becomes scarcely a governing principle in other collections and poems. However, the term automatic writing should be generally used with caution; if we, as in passages from *The Vermont Notebook*, deal with lists of nouns, it is from a purely logical point of view not unconscious or uncontrolled outpour, but rather a process already limited by its input settings.

Even in Ashberian “automatic writing” we encounter the peculiar second-hand quality of language. In her article, Tamar Yacobi treats Ashbery’s prose poem “Description of a Masque” from his 1984 *A Wave* as an example of modern ekphrasis. She quotes Brian McHale who writes about catalogues and claims that in postmodernism, catalogues naturally “gravitate toward the word-list pole, even if they begin as assemblages of objects.”⁶¹ She rightly claims that the role of items in such lists is to “subsume.”⁶² Ashbery plays with this effect very humorously in already mentioned *The Vermont Notebook*, a 1975 collaboration with artist Joe Brainard, written while taking a bus trip through New England.⁶³ It begins with two simple pages stating: “October, November, December” (329) and “The climate, the cities, the houses, the streets, the stores, lights, people” (331). Then it unfurls into whole pages of lists of places,

⁵⁹ Ford 230.

⁶⁰ Dawn Ades and Matthew Gale, “Surrealism,” *Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 30, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove, 1996) 18.

⁶¹ Tamar Yacobi, “Ashbery’s ‘Description of a Masque’: Radical Interart Transfer across History,” *Poetics Today*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Winter, 1999: 697.

⁶² Yacobi 700.

⁶³ Ashbery: *Collected Poems* 1000.

enumeration of window signs, board games, cities, people, clothes etc. and even lyrical passages approximately in this vein:

Darkness, eventide, shadows, roost, perch, leaf, light, evasion, sentinel, plug, dream, mope, urchin, distress, ways, many, few, found, dreaming, unclad, season, solstice, many, before, few, undid, seam, artery, motor, before, sleep, come, mouth, asshole, behaving, foundered, sleep, reef, perfect, almost. (531)

These finally blend into successions of more or less disjointed, laconic sentences, a bit in the style of the already mentioned poems from *The Tennis Court Oath*. As we see in this excerpt, in between the words, piled up with almost childish delight, small anecdotal stories evolve and terse judgments are passed; crying out from their austere ranks, they are perhaps the liveliest from the whole of Ashbery's oeuvre. Still, they do not conceal their fragmentariness and imply the mundane travel routines; the customs and clichés linked to them in our imagination are an important part of the message. In this, the book seems to me to be reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's "Combines," quasi-surrealist collages of newspaper clippings, photos, clothing, cardboard, metal, wood, strings and three-dimensional objects like stuffed animals, overlaid with paint, that are somewhere on the border between paintings and sculpture and have that half-documentary, half-nostalgic feel of collections of souvenirs, mementos of lives, holidays, history.

Let us now quote a passage from, albeit late, Ashbery and see how Ashbery collages larger units. For a better insight, let us again compare it to the passage quoted earlier in this chapter from Gertrude Stein. The first difference is already at hand: it would be difficult to find in Ashbery a lengthier still-life description of a single object. The passage is not concerned with a single object (indeed, the objects rather tend to be parts of a scene, mentioned in passing and seldom still), but nevertheless it deals with later Ashbery's equivalent of sensual description and entails human interchange, too:

It's the lunatic frequency this time. One man, taking his kids to the ball game, reverted and was found playing cards at a friend's house. In spring the tips of the apple branches graze the trailer and it's time for a new round robin of progressive delicacies and returned thank-you letters. Out in the open

by the gym it was never a question of keep your pants on we're all getting
someplace, getting
to be someone. Those were perspectives too limned to shoot along and the
people thanked
the baseball player who invented them. Inactivity is as a syrup to these people,
some of them,
they bank on mistrust and in the end are amazed to find their land has been
overgrazed
by herd of yak, each of the quadrupeds spaced almost equidistant from its
nearest neighbor, as far as the eye can see, to Labrador and beyond
into the topaz twilight of the Urals.⁶⁴

We see that the syntax is this time (and as a rule in later Ashbery) very, almost deceptively, fluid; the fragments out of which the subtle ridicule is formed are larger than the individual words; sound does not play here much important role. Ashbery's words do not aim to be new; they have already gone through the postmodern mill. They are inherently borrowed: we encounter a baseball field, certain friend's house, trailer and gym: these swirl around the reader only to suggest small-town stage props, a generic shareable experience, and work precisely *through* their cementedness, through their ability, as Yacobi writes, to "subsume." The sentence about "getting someplace" sounds like a sarcasm quoted out of a mouth of an indignant speaker, itself perhaps a parody of the verbal repertoire of an unimaginative cheerleader, or trainer, i.e. in fact a twice fabricated piece of cliché. The language is secondary material, on every step aware of its history, of being used many times. Even the situations themselves repeat and come in "rounds." And, the whole passage leaves the impression of being a part of a speech of some speaker with whom we by no means have to identify; we are rather encouraged to step back and listen perhaps with sympathy before forming our own judgment.

In this speech we encounter moreover two overgrown tropes.⁶⁵ One of inactivity being "a syrup" that so much glues its possessors to "mistrust" that they literally "bank" on it, as if they were overlooking some land that, in the second absurdly sprawling simile, overhangs from

⁶⁴ John Ashbery, *Flow Chart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) 36.

⁶⁵ Throughout the thesis I will refer to this phenomenon by the term "overhanging metaphor," "overhanging" in the sense of extending, protruding out of its proper place and becoming an autonomous unit rather than in the sense of the uniting frame of the text.

its original purpose and peels off the text, “overgrazed by herd of yak.” The image extends through actual geography to the Labradors and Urals characterized for whatever reason by their improbable “topaz twilight,” another phrase as if cut out of a travel agency brochure. The right side of the simile’s equation asserts its artificiality by its rampancy and even offers room for further, so to say parasitical, metaphorical development. This distances the reader, engages his critical faculties, entraps him in a texture of run-on similes that resist proper placement, swirl in the text and in so doing flesh out our experience with transience and our interpretive effort when coming to grips with reality.

Thus we have seen that, on the level of clauses, lines and sometimes whole sentences, the use of collaging, a highly employed technique in Ashbery, raises an interesting possibility: a poem composed of scraps of texts may very easily become a kind of abstraction, although the components themselves remain referential. The scraps of texts may be chosen either arbitrarily, as in the case of poems that were, according to Ashbery, started by an eavesdropped bit of conversation⁶⁶ and as testimonies to a current ongoing moment may incorporate other overheard sentences any time later. Or we may wonder what was the key of deliberation in choosing the lines from the William LeQueux’s 1917 adolescent novel *Beryl of the Biplane* used in the poem “Europe” in *The Tennis Court Oath*.⁶⁷ We should note here that Ashbery frequently and with delight introduces into his writing obscure references to other poets that blur the borders between quotation, paraphrase and accidental resemblance; this fact may also have melancholy overtones as a commentary on the texts’ ability to preserve, entomb or to revive a part of literary tradition: as Lolordo notes after having accidentally discovered a reference to William Gifford’s 1817 translation of Juvenal’s first *Satire* in *Flow Chart* with the help of the English Poetry CD-ROM.⁶⁸ While the clipped-off texts lose their context and lock one into another, the overall effect is that of mutilating and merging of the individual meanings,

⁶⁶ Herd 72-3.

⁶⁷ Majorie Perloff, “Just Their Pot Luck,” *Stand*, December 1999: 13-16.

⁶⁸ Nick Lolordo, “Charting the Flow: Positioning John Ashbery,” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Winter, 2001: 763.

which consequently blurs the poem into a kind of panorama that accomplishes to stand somewhere between the lyric and the epic, as in the passage from *Flow Chart* quoted above.⁶⁹

All this brings forcefully to mind the parallels to the art of the second wave of Abstract Expressionists, especially collaging and incorporation of *trompe-l'oeil* objects, pictures, nails, wood etc. in the art of Jasper Johns. One thing that Johns also does in his paintings is quote another classical painting (as Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* or Picasso in *Perilous Night* [1982]),⁷⁰ in the form of a cutout and in altered colors. He may also include an American flag, a monochromatic silkscreen of Mona Lisa, etc. as in *Summer* (1986). Or, he may, as in his 1962 *Diver* divide his painting into five vertical panels of quasi color samplers. From left to right, *Diver* entails: a panel with target in red, blue and yellow (that is, in the three primary colors) on black and white background; a vertical sampler of shades of gray going from black to white and again to light gray; and then, in the three right-hand panels, a chaos of mostly red, blue and green patches out of which surface the words "BLUE" in blue letters, "RED" in greenish, and "YELLOW" in red. Together with its title and the shape of two hands at the center of the painting, the painting could be perhaps read as an ironic comment on the efforts of Pollock and his likes to "dive" into the painting but also as a quite desperate commentary on the possibilities of contemporary painting and perhaps also an account of personal crisis. What interests me is however the way in which these color samplers are placed one against another without even the slightest commentary or hint from the author: as if the painting was yet to be executed or was in progress. This reminds me of Ashbery's frequent *tours de force* in placing together pieces of apparently unrelated texts both in poetry and prose in one poem, as in

⁶⁹ There used to be a genre called "cento," a piece of poetry composed solely of quotations from usually Homer or Virgil. However, in centones the goal was to create as smooth transitions as possible, so that the apparently inconspicuous (though often very vague) poems acquired their meaning through the contrast of the immediate with the original context of the lines. This in turn undermined the original sources. Ashbery's treatment of textual fragments is in this regard different: heterogeneity of the quasi constituent units is an important part of his poetics, relativizing of the cited passages is subtler and he does not use quotations only. For more on centones see: Marie Okáčová, "Centones: Recycled Art or the Embodiment of Absolute Intertextuality?" *Kakanien Revisited*, Spring 2009

<http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/graeca_latina/MOkacova1.pdf>.

⁷⁰ "Perilous Night by Jasper Johns: Visual Archeology," *National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC*, 2010, 31 Oct 2010 <http://www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/johns/archaeology_1.shtm>.

“Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox” (189-194). In both cases the effect forces the painting (or a poem) to reflect on itself as a work of art and poses question about its intentionality as it will be dealt with later.

When drawing some painterly parallels, we should not miss another good example which shows the treatment of the public sphere and its incorporation into the private and offers an interesting comparison with Johns. It is Ashbery’s poem entitled “America” from *The Tennis Court Oath*, reminiscent of Johns’s famous 1961 picture called *Map*. The poem begins:

Piling upward
the fact the stars
In America the office hid
archives in his stall . . .
Enormous stars on them
The cold anarchist standing
in his hat.
Arm along the rail
We were parked
Millions of us
The accident was terrible
The way the door swept out
The stones piled up –
The Ribbon-books. miracle. with moon and the stars (45)

In Johns’s painting a concrete, notorious ground plan of the USA map emerges from expressionist patches of red, blue and yellow; it is of interest that John Cage used analogy to literature when commenting on the underlying pattern of *Flag* (1954). He says that “beginning with the flag, a painting was made,” a painting “which both obscures and clarifies the underlying structure.” Cage further argues that “a precedent” of this task “is in poetry, the sonnet: by means of language, caesurae, iambic pentameter, license and rhymes to obscure and clarify the grand division of the fourteen lines into eight and six.”⁷¹

Conversely, in Ashbery’s poem we have to piece together the abstract portrait of the country from concrete scenes, each line an imaginary cell in a crossword, the meaning “piling upward” in a succession of twists. The phrase “piling upward” itself suggests American striving for ideals, commercialism and the multitude of American people; stars inevitably evoke the

⁷¹ David Sylvester, “Jasper Johns,” *Artchive* 31 Oct. 2010 < <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/J/johnsbio.html>>.

flag; then there is the clown-like, mocked, yet peculiarly “cold” anarchist, standing on a hat (which may at once suggest a somehow calculating dadaist poet, an illusionist with his rabbits or the famous “I-want-you” image, all quite ironical commentaries on anarchy). The scene with parked cars evokes the now defunct American drive-ins and is at once an image of a standstill of civilization, a decisive moment and of a “terrible” accident, “terrible” however in a rather exaggerated language implying shallowness. At the end of the excerpt, the public and personal histories combine and lead us to an image of faith, a miracle that may be cheap as well as profound. The excerpt shuffles with capital and lower-case letters (the same way as in Johns’ canvases where numbers and letters emerge like faint remembrances of public signs, advertisements and clocks) and with faulty syntax and punctuation to remind us of its fragmentariness, the fact we are reading an equivalent of remainders of posters on a wall.

This principle holds for the poem as a whole: each of the following five sections introduces a new theme, so that gradually we obtain a kind of body of evidence on, or a summary of, America, a country of individuals “proud/of these stars in our flag we don’t want”: “citizens of some future state” (50). Through scraps of private memories and collective history (in the course of the poem we may find a suggestion of lost love, summer festival, military theme, patriotism, liberty) a portrait of the country is pieced together in all its ironies and contradictions. Yet the poem finishes in an introvert tone, with an image where “A feather not snow blew against the window./A signal from the great outside” (51). Similarly, Johns’ painting seems to deconstruct the objective form of the map into a subjective disarray of colors and the whole image seems to pose a question: “What does this country mean to me?” Both Johns and Ashbery connect the individual with the public: the outside invades private sphere through the appropriation of found objects, while the private enters the public because of being to an extent depersonalized in a series of fragments. Moreover, both artists seem to be very conscious of the role modern media and technology play in our life.

Thus collaging allows Ashbery to narrate a generic modern story much in the fashion of a comic book, popular stories or TV programs. This method may be probably found in “Idaho,” a poem from the same collection, mostly in the way it uses pieces of seemingly found texts. In defiance of all classifications, it begins with a piece of prose somewhere on the border between a cheap love story and a merciless satire on it presented in a third-person narrative with all the flaws of a badly written psychological drama.⁷² This objective account suddenly collapses into a graphically unbridled and only loosely connected series of fragments when the hero dares to reach for the heroine’s hand. The dissolving narrative takes us immediately into the subjective feeling, inner confusion, the “excitement,/ apprehension,” and the “tingling” of the “uttermost [...] nerve” (118) of the heroine’s doubts. After several unusual lines consisting only of question marks or crosses, the first part of the story ends in a way that may suggest the heroine’s death or an insurmountable aversion towards marriage.⁷³ The second part presents differently named protagonists in a partnership crisis and, after a second passage of objective prose where the heroine steps in a car and starts it, it ends in another suggestion of death and in the final elegiac, disjointed lament on

The “never mind” rubbish
All, all fixed
running water
And the proper names
blood out of courage. (118)

The objective passages serve to anchor the text in reality, whereas the fragments introduce a much more complex overlaying of attitudes and succeed in depicting the characters’ inner turmoil and the ambivalence of human conflicts. An important characteristic is that the poems are often sequences of apparently unrelated, random and alien pieces of texts of various

⁷² “Their whole conduct had been, up to now, not impersonal exactly, but utterly devoid of any recognition of sex-consciousness.” And few sentences further: “Carol, her eyes wet with tears at the picture of his isolation in the crowded rectory, had uttered a deep sigh at her recital of being left for the first eight years of her life to the sole care of Patches.” Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956-1987*: 118.

⁷³ “The mouth of weeds // marriage. She shivered. ‘It’s – it’s a death!’” Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956-1987*: 119. This undermining effect, when one passage allows for two radically different interpretations is typical of Ashbery’s style.

literary qualities. This inclusiveness allows for a typically Ashberian broad range of tones from pathetically mundane to lyrical and deeply tragic that perfectly balance one another in a picture that does not oversimplify and remains tolerant and human; while the formal qualities of the “source texts” (as for example the self-assured cheesiness of the love story at the beginning of “Idaho” or the fragmentariness of its subjective passages) provide meta-comments on what is taking place in the poem.

This peculiar juxtaposition of frank openness, overblown emotional assertions, and real-life pathos on the one hand, and the alibi of distancing through means of quoting on the other hand, has also its equivalent in Johns’s painting. In the already mentioned *Summer*, a plain shape (perhaps a shadow) of a man standing in front of a wall in a defenseless posture and located on the left-hand panel is contrasted with other objects on the right-hand panel (a picture of Mona Lisa, a large metal bowl etc.). The vulnerable contour of the man is thus at once a seat of subjectivity and, being a shadow, simultaneously represents an index, an impersonal document, standing on par with the other quotes in the right-hand panel. This allows for the play of vulnerabilities Altieri writes about: human vulnerabilities shining through and found in the vulnerabilities of the medium (with its tools “laid bare”⁷⁴) intrigue us by blunt, yet somehow disinterested sentimentality. It is no accident that when Johns speaks about his art, he says that the resulting painting should be ultimately “not a deliberate statement but a helpless statement,”⁷⁵ not strictly limited by the author’s intentions but always saying in a way more than he or she meant to.

The principle of collaging is in a broader sense responsible not only for the peculiar effects in these cases, but, I would like to argue, is the chief tool of Ashbery’s composition. All his poems are informed by the principle of multiple juxtaposition of tones, registers and themes so that they may be in a way reduced to more or less stable or volatile constructions made of second-hand material, where the fragments relativize one another and allow the reader to step

⁷⁴ Altieri 816.

⁷⁵ David Sylvester, “Jasper Johns,” *Artchive* 31 Oct. 2010 <<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/J/johnsbio.html>>.

back and observe the assemblage from distance. The contents will be at the same time surprisingly discovered as a depiction of the reader's inner states, as the next section shall show in more detail.

Ashbery reinforces his collage effect by frequent use of overhanging metaphors and similes and at the same time blurs the contours of the fragments by ingenious use of deceptive grammar constructions (as with frequent participles, vague pronouns etc.⁷⁶). This is connected to the use of intentionally misleading explanations as one of Ashbery's typical devices.⁷⁷ Thus it is a part of Ashbery's poetics that it makes us postpone our judgment and prepare to re-interpret what has already been said in accordance to the current context; this process of the deferral of sense is never interrupted and thus it steadily leads us away from any possibility of a definitive summary. Through this interlacing the "sculpture of moments, thoughts added on"⁷⁸ becomes more intricate, refined and richly textured. Unvarying variability of course causes tedium: but even this is a part of our everyday experience that Ashbery wants to present to us.

An additional consequence is the enhancement of the abstract effects of language: the individual units, if we imagine them in this way, pull a host of other meanings into the poem, as we invite intertextuality to come to aid us. Thus, the fragmentary pieces acquire also a degree of independence which on the whole emancipates and foregrounds the medium of the language and its structures and laws much more than is usual in traditional poetry (a strategy quite similar to abstract-expressionist technique). Depending on the nature of the components, the overall effect of the poem may range from lyrical panoramas of feelings to wild juxtapositions of concrete objects that give a sort of dense, palimpsestic impression: they are postmodern artifacts that use the effects of subsuming and ekphrasis to point out the second-hand qualities of language and connect the introspective with the outside world.

⁷⁶ See: Mary Kinzie, "'Irreference': The Poetic Diction of John Ashbery, Part I: Styles of Avoidance," *Modern Philology*, Vol. 84, No. 3, Feb., 1987: 267-281. Mary Kinzie, "'Irreference': The Poetic Diction of John Ashbery, Part II: Prose, Prosody, and Dissembled Time," *Modern Philology*, Vol. 84, No. 4, May, 1987: 382-400.

⁷⁷ Suarez-Toste 6.

⁷⁸ Ashbery: *Collected Poems* 791.

4. Intentionality, Pronouns, and the Problem of Self

As it has been said before, Abstract Expressionism divides into two groups according to the role it ascribes to the picture in relation to the self: one group, the so-called “hot” school, most conspicuously exemplified by Jackson Pollock, believes in the assumption, as Charles Altieri writes, “that the intending agent of the art work can so control its medium that it produces an expressive equivalent for its own most intense psychic states.”⁷⁹ The picture represents the “artist’s heroic negotiation with forces that threaten to overwhelm the desired singleness of spirit.”⁸⁰ During this negotiation it is desirable, however, to switch off conscious control and allow for the unconscious to enter and produce a more faithful image of the author’s emotional states. In the words of Paul Jenkins: “Sometimes it is like keeping a storm door shut with one hand and painting with the other. Keeping the known out so that the unknown may enter.”⁸¹ The artist produces an account of his mind: “I am lifted out of myself and suddenly realize that I am looking out finally at myself looking in,”⁸² says Edward Dugmore. Simultaneously, the resulting picture should be as definitive as possible: “I want each painting to be my whole life,”⁸³ writes Mary Abbot.

However, Ashbery realizes what traps are laid down by the unreserved faith in the unified ego, once and for all sealed in its visual representation. He realizes, in Lacanian terms, the split in the ego, the “bar” representing the “impossibility of the ideal of a fully present self-consciousness; the subject will never know himself completely, but will always be cut off from his own knowledge.”⁸⁴ Thus, what we call the “self” is always a temporary construction springing up from the situation, a complex blend of desires and identifications where greater number of attitudes combine in subtle overlaying. When heading in the direction of the

⁷⁹ Altieri 822.

⁸⁰ Altieri 822.

⁸¹ Herskovic 110.

⁸² Herskovic 174.

⁸³ Herskovic 22.

⁸⁴ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996) 195.

unconscious, there is always “[a] point that the subject can approach only by dividing himself into a certain number of agencies.”⁸⁵ The ego in its totality is never liberating, but means rather a totalizing simplification that cannot hold for a longer stretch of time, and is always escaping the articulation of its unconscious side.

The checks to the “hot” position were almost immediately provided by the so-called “cool” mode of Abstract Expressionism. It argues the primacy of the painting itself: the indicia how to continue the work come from the picture, from the inherent laws of form: “I was not exploring ‘nature’ in my work, but was exploring rather the surface of a canvas and the ways paint works upon that surface,”⁸⁶ says Kyle Morriss. The tractive force of Ashbery’s later surreal revelries may be said to come from the tractive force of language: the individual fragments are tied to each other by infallible rules of grammar: valences of the sentence elements demand continuation of the speech that introduces new elements and the text spreads further until it reaches the point where clauses and sentences tie to each other across full stops through cataphoric and anaphoric references; the machine goes on. This may be at the same time said to be the tractive force of the mind: “The unconscious is structured like a language;”⁸⁷ while verbalization is a means of bringing things to consciousness. The realization of an impersonal force lurking in the structures of the language is one of the most important postmodern moments; yet the major shift in the art of Ashbery and the second generation of Abstract Expressionists is perhaps exactly its ability to locate “principal semantic energies” into “the uses it makes of expressive forces distinctive to the medium.”⁸⁸

As Shapiro says about Ashbery’s method in *The Tennis Court Oath*, the result of the collaging here

is the curtailing of the “I” as having much lyric or dramatic nuance. The “I” may now merely be the “I” *not of a persona* but of a piece of *newspaperese* or

⁸⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998) 51.

⁸⁶ Herskovic 230.

⁸⁷ Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 3.

⁸⁸ Altieri 814.

newspaper, or part of a story pasted, as it were, upon the poem. There is no more of Ashbery to this “I” than the “I” of an alien bit of prose from another source shockingly “fallen into” the poem.”⁸⁹

If there is any subjectivity then it is subjectivity heavily pressed upon by other, contradictory passages that rob it of any claims to definitiveness. The ego is doubted in its ability to stand for itself and produce a faithful statement about the world. The pronouns and especially the “I,” exclusively preferred to proper names, thus, according to Altieri, present us with “relational states”⁹⁰ instead, with “particular styles and directions through which persons act out their investments.”⁹¹ The personal pronouns acquire rather metaphorical properties and, consequently, we “deal continually in aspects.”⁹²

To illustrate this effect in more detail, let me now quote a fairly extensive passage that will nevertheless prove very useful. It comes from the first chapter of *Flow Chart*, that is, from the very beginning of the more than two hundred pages long poem:

What we are to each other is both less urgent and more
perturbing, having no discernible root, no *raison d'être*, or else flowing
backward into an origin like the primordial soup it's so easy to pin
anything on, like a carnation to one's lapel. So it seems we must
stay in an uneasy relationship, not quite fitting
together, nor precisely friends or lovers though certainly not enemies, if
the buoyancy of the spongy terrain on which we exist is to be experienced
as an ichor, not a commentary on all that is missing from the reflection
in the mirror. *Did I say that? Can this be me?* Otherwise, the treaty will
seem premature, the peace unearned, and one might as well slink back
into the solitude of the kennel, for the blunder to be read as anything
but willful, self-indulgent. And meanwhile everything around us is already
prepared for this resolution; the temperature, the season are exactly right
for it all not to be awash with sentiments expelled from some impossibly
distant situation; some episode from your childhood nobody knows about and
even you can't remember accurately. It is time for the long beds
then, and the extra hours to be spent in them, but surely somebody can
find something spontaneous to say before it all fizzles, before the incandescent
tongs are slaked in mud and the tender yellow shoots of the willow
dry up instead of maturing having concluded that the moment
is inappropriate, the heroes gone to their rest, and all the plain
folk of history foundered in the subjective reading of their lives
as expendable, the stuff of ordinary heresy, shards of common crockery⁹³

⁸⁹ David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) 55-56.

⁹⁰ Altieri 826.

⁹¹ Altieri 827.

⁹² Altieri 827.

⁹³ John Ashbery: *Flow Chart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) 10-11.

The whole passage seems to be the speech of a persona: yet it is not particularly clear whether it is a monologue or a soliloquy. The speech may be addressed to the reader and the first lines, speaking about the “uneasy relationship” may apply to the relationship between the writer and the reader; yet, at least based on the evidence from the preceding sections, it may as well be the speaker’s address to his lover⁹⁴ either actual or, more likely, taking place in his thoughts only.

Upon closer inspection the pronouns will reveal the fluidity of their referents. The text includes the already mentioned ambiguous “we” of the relationship; moreover, the same pronoun later occurs in general statements where it seems to act in the role of a rhetorical device, an inclusive “we” pulling the reader into the text. A similar ambivalence arises about the “you.” It may address the lover, or the anticipated audience, pulling them into the text, implying that the described experience is collective, shared. Thus, the text at the same time virtually invites the reader to identify with the voice and to actually step into the place of its central consciousness, which complicates the doubling even further. Additionally in the sort of meta-comment in italics (“*Did I say that? Can this be me?*”⁹⁵) the “I” dramatizes Lacan’s premise that the self is always constituted through alienation with itself, or, as Altieri says, it expresses the “inescapable dilemma of all agents who are distinct from their expressions yet vulnerable through them,”⁹⁶ and thus the internal split into different personae. The central consciousness of the text has a consequently multiple nature.

The idea that we are partly encouraged to identify with the central consciousness of this passage leads us to further reflections on what the passage says. Namely, that the text itself on the level of its contents admits that the subject in general is inescapably caught in his subjectivity: there, experience is treated as interpretation. Things “seem” rather than “are,” and

⁹⁴ “oh my/friend that knew me before I knew you, and when you came to me/knew it was forever, *here* there would be no break [...]. It seemed our separate/lives could continue separately for themselves and shine like a single star./I never knew such happiness.” Ashbery: *Flow Chart* 7-8.

⁹⁵ Italicization is Ashbery’s: Ashbery: *Flow Chart* 10.

⁹⁶ Altieri 812.

this both in relation to the outside and to our mind; the blunder is “read” as willful and self-indulgent, the “plain folk of history” is “foundered” “in the subjective reading of their lives as expendable.”⁹⁷

The text’s treatment of time also contributes to the realization of limiting subjectivity: Ashbery uses the already mentioned trick and lets his metaphors overgrow and possibly even become the seed of another metaphor so that we gradually lose track of the individual vehicles and tenors and the text becomes a dazzling chain of metaphors that doesn’t seem to lead anywhere; yet, this is intentional. As we try to puzzle out the meaning, we see that what takes place in our head is the exact analogy of what the speaker seems to be undergoing in the poem: coming to grips with the environment and with the self in relation to that environment. We observe the speaker observing himself observing his thoughts; and the experience of that constant, yet never absolutely successful, interpretative effort is an exact analogy of what takes place in our mind when reading the poem, which is the exact analogy of what takes place in our actual lives. The poem evolves in time as our consciousness does, and with it, and the true meaning is engendered in the interaction between the poem and the reader.

The shifts in the tone of the whole poem give to each individual passage an ambiguous value: as Altieri writes, Ashbery moreover makes use of all the clichéd, unintended connotations of the phrases he employs in an effort to let “the noise of the world” in.⁹⁸ Thus, “we find ourselves continually experiencing speech as if the texture of implicit or virtual relations which it projects embodied its unconscious side, a set of implicit connections perhaps more attuned than our standard names to the complexity of our feelings.”⁹⁹ The words’ meanings balance on an unsteady level of contexts and referents and this may even induce the reader to misread or speculate on possible replacements of words (that moreover do appear in

⁹⁷ Ashbery: *Flow Chart* 10-11.

⁹⁸ Altieri 816.

⁹⁹ Altieri 817.

the text¹⁰⁰). This introduces a quasi Freudian slip effect into the text: here for example in “the buoyancy of the spongy terrain” which is “to be experienced as an ichor”: the word “ichor” in my opinion may suggest “anchor” here.

The self is not said to be trapped in the work forever and in an exhaustive fashion. It is rather born in the analogy of how we perceive the text and the world. Ashbery exploits the twofold nature of the self even more explicitly in the poem “A Blessing in Disguise” from *Rivers and Mountains*, where he describes the multiple mirroring of identifications in the following way:

And I sing amid despair and isolation
Of the chance to know you, to sing of me
Which are you. You see,
You hold me up to the light in a way

I should never have expected, or suspected, perhaps
Because you always tell me I am you,
And right. The great spruces loom.
I am yours to die with, to desire. (139)

Sometimes, in the earlier, more radical poems from *The Tennis Court Oath*, the intentionality of the text prevails over the intentionality of any subject, as the poems seem to lack any central selective force. In the disjunctive, collage-like poem “Europe,” any of the 111 sections may look like this:

91.
flanked by his lieutenants – lemon –
his chief outside
“If I am wrong
a fine sieve
telephones I do not
strong nature who wrote of him while starving himself (109)

We have an impression of absolute randomness: we are more likely to rejoice at any unexpected suggestion of a coherent meaning appearing on the jagged edges of the supposed units than to search for an overall selective consciousness in the passage. Yet it is again a

¹⁰⁰ See Alan Clinton, “The Code that Dare Not Speak Its Name: Ashbery – Turing – Roussel,” *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Issue 19: 218.

comment on how we deal with intentionality in our lives: on the human tendency to project consciousness into inanimate things, to attribute meaning to random accidents. The poem may be a mirror of our own frustrations. The lack of the self makes the absence of the projected, desired self cry the more loudly from the gaps of the text: the reader oscillates between hope and despair and the poem staggers along with him or her to an unsatisfactory end.

Before we start another chapter on Roussel, let us briefly note that this practice is indeed quite similar to the absence of the self in Raymond Roussel's last poem *New Impressions of Africa*. Generally his treatment of the subject in his descriptive poems limits itself to the character of observer as an excuse for observations. The subject is usually mentioned only at the beginning and the end of the works and within this frame "metaphors piled on metaphors, far from distancing one from actuality, lead to the heart of the real."¹⁰¹ The lyrical self is, as Mark Ford writes, "wholly diffused amid the poem's multiple, parallel lines of discourse, and the self-sufficient metaphors of which they are mainly composed."¹⁰² Thus, Raymond Roussel's and the Abstract Expressionists' techniques support each other in Ashbery's poetry.

To sum up, fragments of found or seemingly found texts function in Ashbery like autonomous parts of a collage: the effects they provide enable Ashbery to stand somewhere in between the lyrical and the narrative, allow for abstract effects and introduce a public dimension into the verse. The incongruity of the elements, whether clearly distinguished on the page or following one another in an unbroken flow of metaphors, pose interpretative difficulties for the reader: by ostentatious disregard for traditional requirements of form the form itself becomes a channel of meanings, like Abstract Expressionists' paintings. The traditional lyrical subject is abolished in favor of a multilayered texture of attitudes that the reader is invited to share during the process of interpretation, as he gradually understands that this process is strangely mirrored in the conflicts within the poem itself. Ashbery thus escapes the simplifying

¹⁰¹ Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) 201.

¹⁰² Ford 199.

traps of the assertive self and makes his poems at once more democratic, skeptical and faithful to real workings of mind.

Chapter III: John Ashbery and Raymond Roussel

Ashbery became acquainted with the work of the French proto-surrealist Raymond Roussel in 1951 thanks to his friend Kenneth Koch and later went to Paris and collected material about Roussel in an attempt to write a dissertation about him.¹⁰³ What attracted him to Roussel was the peculiar qualities of his writing, especially the weird parenthetical structure of his poem *New Impressions of Africa* (1932). Ashbery decided to learn French and later found many characteristics of Roussel's idiosyncratic writing relevant to his work.

Among these, it is first the wild imaginative span of Roussel's ostensibly automatic writing, a part of which is however based on phonetically deconstructed phrases that become a hidden scaffolding behind the work. This strict mechanism requires strong exercises of imagination and produces most disjunctive transitions. This is germane to Ashbery who likes to describe everyday life in all its inevitable tedium and unpredictable contrasts of mundane and significant moments. In his series of Norton Lectures, Ashbery praises the poetry of John Clare, another author from Ashbery's own other tradition, as a successful "distillation of the natural world with all its beauty and pointlessness, its salient and boring features preserved intact."¹⁰⁴ As his poetical voice of charming inconsequential narrator loses itself in thoughts, the endless chain of interruptions and asides also mimics the working of the reader's and human mind generally: the incongruity and self-sufficiency of the text is indebted both to Roussel and Abstract Expressionists.

Secondly, this method produces stiff, unstylistic and naïve results, which was partly given by Roussel's stylistic limitations too. The stories and poems, both composed predominantly of unexpected and in their own way improbable descriptions, are ornaments of strangely persisting presence and artificiality that raises the reader's expectations but fails to satisfy them. This creates a suspension that paradoxically gives to Roussel's stories autonomy; and the sense of hollowness behind the work corresponds to the postmodern enchantment with

¹⁰³ Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 45.

¹⁰⁴ Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 11.

the surface and is a poignant commentary on our own similarly inconclusive and, as it seems, empty existences. All this Ashbery tries to evoke in his own poetry.

1. Raymond Roussel's Biography

Raymond Roussel is a unique phenomenon in literature, a complex human fate prompting readers either to overlook him completely or to come to terms with him elaborately. An overwhelming sense of fixation, changelessness and definitiveness emanates both from his life and his oeuvre. For a scholar attempting to deal with the seeming 'mystery' of his writings, the threshold of understanding does not provide a point where new light is thrown on the work. Instead, the clicking of the opening mechanism signifies the end of the game. Thus, Michel Foucault puts into the center of Roussel's obsessive repetitions and doublings hollowness and death: the point behind which it is impossible to go, an eternal fixity and emanating darkness.¹⁰⁵ This indeed corresponds very well to postmodern skepticism and study of the surface. It is perhaps the reason for Roussel's sudden rise to popularity in the 1960s.

Roussel described his *procédé*, the most characteristic feature of his writing, in his posthumously published essay "How I Wrote Certain of My Books" (1935). It is a method of phonetically deconstructing certain phrases to create new sequences of words that became a skeleton upon which a story was based: a self-assigned verbal rebus that enabled and obliged him to create works of disconcerting qualities. Yet, the *procédé* as the ultimate answer to the mystery of Roussel's compositions seems to be worthy neither of the effort of looking for it, nor of the reader's expectations. By its very finality it seems to leave the mystery intact, exactly because there is no mystery, as Michel Foucault persuasively shows in his 1963 book *Raymond Roussel*.¹⁰⁶ As Mark Ford notes, while "Roussel's writings make perfect, irrefutable sense on

¹⁰⁵ Michel Foucault, *Raymond Roussel* (Praha: Herrman & synové, 2006) 13-8, 104.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Ford cites in his book from an interview with Michel Foucault where Foucault speaks about the exceptional position of the book in his work. Foucault says: "No one has paid much attention to this book, and I'm glad; it's my secret affair. You know, he was my love for several summers..." Ford 226.

their own distinctive terms, viewed as a whole they end up posing questions one hardly knows how to formulate.”¹⁰⁷

Ashbery says that Roussel’s writing is “like the perfectly preserved temple of a cult which has disappeared without a trace, or a complicated set of tools whose use cannot be discovered.”¹⁰⁸ Roussel’s books thus expose the reader to effects similar to that of abstract expressionist painting as Altieri describes it: they present a fact that somehow demands recognition as an intending agent and raises interpretative difficulties. Moreover, this autistic insularity was actually a source of pride for Roussel: he boasted about the independence of his work from reality.¹⁰⁹

Consequently, to search for further meanings is to parallel Roussel’s gesture of breaking into hitherto impossible regions, into a land where there are no rules and all theories are superstructures based on a somewhat precarious starting point. The various strikingly creative approaches of Julia Kristeva, Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault then for Ford prove that “one can make [...] virtually whatever one likes of [Roussel’s] works.”¹¹⁰ The only safe answers of Roussel’s writing thus lie in his singular biography and the many compulsions of his character.

Raymond Roussel was born in 1877 into a family belonging to the wealthy Parisian bourgeoisie¹¹¹ and died in 1933 in Palermo of a deliberate drug overdose.¹¹² After pursuing musical studies at a conservatory, composing music and writing the lyrics himself, he decided in his seventeenth year to devote his life to writing and, as he claims, thus his “vocation was settled.”¹¹³ Roussel says: “From that moment on I was seized by a fever of work. I laboured, so

¹⁰⁷ Ford xxii.

¹⁰⁸ Ford xxii.

¹⁰⁹ “Now, from all these travels I never took a single thing for my books. It seems to me that this is worth pointing out, since it illustrates so clearly how everything in my works derives from the imagination.” Ford 19.

¹¹⁰ Ford xxii.

¹¹¹ Ford 27.

¹¹² Ford 214.

¹¹³ Ford 35.

to speak, night and day for months on end.”¹¹⁴ This impressive engagement with literature reached its peak during the work on his first major poem, *La Doublure* (1897),¹¹⁵ composed over the period of six months in 1896¹¹⁶ and described in the work of the psychologist Pierre Janet. Roussel is quoted to remember having been “gradually overwhelmed by a strange rupture”¹¹⁷ and he describes this sensation in related terms:

One understands by some peculiar means one is creating a masterpiece, that one is a prodigy. [...] Whatever I wrote was surrounded by rays of light; I used to close curtains, for I was afraid that the shining emanating from my pen might escape into the outside world through even the smallest chink.¹¹⁸

When *La Doublure* appeared on 10 June 1897 and no literary earthquake took place, Roussel was shattered. He developed a kind of skin disease and also neurasthenia from which he suffered during the rest of his life. The continuation of his literary career became a chronicle of a series of attempts to re-attain the state of *la gloire*, of resurrection of the “sensations of art,”¹¹⁹ which became his obsession.¹²⁰ This obsession is not only, along with his financial independence, responsible for the quantity of his writings, but projects into them at every turn, most notably into Martial Canterel’s (Roussel’s alter ego from *Locus Solus* [1914]), invention called *resurrectine*: a substance that allows the dead to repeat mechanically and endlessly the crucial moments of their life.¹²¹

Roussel used to work relentlessly and squandered huge amounts of money on the promotion and staging of his plays in an effort to become as famous and popular among the public as his two idols Pierre Loti and Jules Verne.¹²² He took extreme pleasure in repetitive life; acquired eccentric eating and clothing habits; had a paid female companion who covered

¹¹⁴ Ford 35.

¹¹⁵ Having the double meaning of “understudy” and “lining.” John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 57.

¹¹⁶ Ford 45-6.

¹¹⁷ Ford 12.

¹¹⁸ Ford 12-3.

¹¹⁹ Ford 4.

¹²⁰ Ashbery writes in *Other Traditions*: „Although *La Doublure* was far from a masterpiece and Roussel’s most important work lay in the future, it was as if the game had ended there; any praise or blame his future work might occasion would be beside the point.” And elsewhere he continues: “Of his life not much remains to be said, since for him at least it had ended at the age of nineteen.” Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 53,55.

¹²¹ See: Raymond Roussel, *Locus Solus* (Praha: Dauphin, 2002) 98.

¹²² Ford 16.

his homosexuality; traveled widely but absurdly spent most of his travels locked in a cabin or a car, writing; toward the end of his life patented the use of vacuum tubes in building construction and invented a chess move; and, when the money began trickling away, he took to alcohol and drugs to revive his sensations of glory.

His desire for universal recognition as a genius however remained unfulfilled; if Raymond Roussel was mentioned at all, it was in derision because of his scandalous and fabulously expensive dramas, *Locus Solus* (adapted 1922), *The Star on the Forehead* (1925) and *The Dust of Suns* (1927). In this, it strangely mirrors Ashbery's obscurity before becoming popular overnight. The only appreciative readers Roussel found, except of few solitary critics such as Édouard Dujardin,¹²³ were mostly among the Surrealists who admired his writing, with verve took part in fights prompted by the performances and later based their own concept of a theatre as explosive force in shaking social prejudices on these scandals.¹²⁴ Among them were Robert Desnos, Philippe Soupault, Jean Cocteau and André Breton. Despite this fact, Roussel never understood the Surrealists' writing; once he dryly noted it was "a bit obscure."¹²⁵ Only at the end of his life, when he realized that the only hope left was that he might achieve "a little posthumous fame,"¹²⁶ he addressed all the leading figures of the Surrealist movement with a plea for help with the publication of his last book.¹²⁷ After this, Rousselian poetics seemed to address mostly limited circles of artists and critics: except for Oulipians and the school of *nouveau roman* (Alain Robbe-Grillet and others) it was Foucault, John Ashbery, Georges Perec, and Harry Matthews.¹²⁸

¹²³ Ford 155

¹²⁴ Ford 24.

¹²⁵ Ford 48.

¹²⁶ Ford 26.

¹²⁷ Ford 210.

¹²⁸ Ford xv, xxiii.

2. Raymond Roussel's Writing and its Impact on Ashbery

The writings of Raymond Roussel may be tentatively divided into two groups: one is best exemplified by his early poetry and the second by his novels. Both differ dramatically concerning their compositional method, although the resulting effects are complementary parts of a shared poetics. Works from the first group are written in prose and include the most unimaginable scientific, artistic and natural phenomena dictated by the merciless workings of the literary *procédé poétique*, which supplies to an extent the supportive skeleton of rhymed verse. These novels are paradoxically more poetical, picturesque and fantastical than Roussel's poems.

The second group consists mainly of poetry that uses alexandrines instead of the *procédé*. These verses, as Ashbery writes, "are nevertheless far from being poetry," but instead are "exquisitely ordered rhymed prose,"¹²⁹ the poetic being limited there to the corset of rhymes. As Ford writes, in the hundreds of pages of discarded versions of published and unpublished poems accidentally discovered in 1989 in the storage house of a furniture company¹³⁰, one may discover pages consisting solely of long lists of rhymes in the left-hand margin, with a few words filled into the empty lines now and then for future completion. This suggests that even in realistic writing, Roussel may have used the help of arbitrary connections to stimulate and justify his endless descriptions.

Raymond Roussel spent ten years "arduously sifting and panning through vast tracts of language in search of 'le gros lot' (the great prize),"¹³¹ until he finally reached his *procédé*, although, as it has been mentioned, he did not employ it in all of his writings. During Roussel's lifetime, some critics and authors speculated on a possible mystery motivating the outlandish forms and contents of his writing,¹³² but not until the posthumous essay was published were

¹²⁹ Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 58.

¹³⁰ Ford 7.

¹³¹ Ford 56.

¹³² Cocteau once asked him if there was some private meaning or a code behind it; Roussel's answer was: "I will explain myself after my death." Ford 216.

their suspicions confirmed. Even without waiting for a similar posthumous disclosure as regards Ashbery's poetry, I think we may safely exclude the possibility of a similar method being an equally powerful force in Ashbery's, although in some cases he may use similar techniques to embellish and spur his writing. As instances of these may serve his use of sestinas, pantoums as in "Hotel Lautréamont," or his collaborations with Kenneth Koch that often included challenging forms and comical requirements.¹³³

It is true, that Alan Clinton mentions Ashbery's occasional "trivial" use of "crypt words" like substituting "boarders" in a sentence for a one that originally read with "borders."¹³⁴ Ernesto Suárez-Toste speaks about Ashbery's use of English cognates of French words (like of French *temps*, a word denoting both time and weather, in the poem "Ice-Cream Wars") or calquing of idiomatic French expressions.¹³⁵ Although this "thinking in another language,"¹³⁶ in Ashbery's phrase, may also create a parallel of what he described as a "stereo effect" of Roussel's pun-based language, a sort of shadowy second discourse hovering above the text,¹³⁷ Ashbery seems to use this device not so often, certainly not as an underlying general mechanism. Rather, it appears spontaneously, according to the needs of a specific poem, as a humorous and playful element.

Roussel writes that the development of the *procédé* had three phases: in the first, employed in the short story "Parmi Les Noirs" ("Among the Blacks") he tried to find two sentences that would differ only in one letter and would, thanks to the polysemy of French language, allow for two different meanings. The task was then to devise a story that would

¹³³ "Koch's note to the uncollected 'Crone Rhapsody' explains that the poem was written 'according to the following requirements: that every line contain the name of a flower, a tree, a fruit, a game, and a famous old lady, as well as the word bathtub; furthermore, the poem is a sestina and all the end-words are pieces of office furniture.'" James Longenbach, "Ashbery and the Individual Talent," *American Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring, 1997: 113-4.

¹³⁴ See: Clinton 218. Another example may be the puns on real/reel and hole/whole in the poem "The Tennis Court Oath" in following passages: "you come through but/are incomparable the lovely tent/mystery you don't want surrounded the real/you dance;" and in "They could all go home now the hole was dark/lilacs blowing across his face glad he brought you". Ashbery, *Collected Poems* 43, 44.

¹³⁵ Ernesto Suárez-Toste, "'The Tension Is in the Concept': John Ashbery's Surrealism," *Style*, Volume 38, No. 1, Spring 2004: 7.

¹³⁶ Quoted from: Suárez-Toste 8.

¹³⁷ Ford 216.

begin with one and end with the other.¹³⁸ The next stage, resulting in *Impressions of Africa*, consisted in using the versatile French preposition *à* and devising a train of phrases with latent double meaning. For example, the double meaning of *mou à raille* (something like “a rallied, bullied wretch” and “a railway line of calf’s lungs”) introduces the image of a statue of a helot with a sword in his breast, standing on a pedestal placed on a railway line of calf’s lungs. The story then tells a tale of a boy killed by his teacher for not remembering the declination of a Greek verb.¹³⁹ The third phase rests in deconstructing random verses from his earlier writing or from a poem by Victor Hugo into a succession of different words implicit in its pronunciation: thus *Locus Solus* came into being.¹⁴⁰ In all instances, writing has a task of squeezing itself into the gap between two almost identical phrases and thus filling the folds of ambiguities inherent to the language.

Roussel was in this manner, and probably much to his delight, impelled to juxtapose most disparate elements that cause almost involuntary admiration for his peculiar genius. The fantastical contrivances and scenes of his quasi-travelogues join what is incompatible: the living and the dead, the animate and the inanimate, virtuosity and mutilation, the microscopic and the large, the accidental and the regular, past and present, and, perhaps most strikingly, the high and the low, the sacred and the profane. This may be seen in Ponukelian *Luen’ Shetuz*, a “religious dance which was held in great respect and was specially reserved for great ceremonial occasions” and which is performed by women emitting “terrifying belches” while dancing in “lithe, sinuous movements.”¹⁴¹ Besides, we may find there the electrocution of a young woman by lightning, sea sponges eating coagulated human blood, and numerous deaths à la second-rate romances, compatible with Ashbery’s own foible for popular literature and (though much subtler) use of absurd details as employed in “Idaho” and elsewhere.

¹³⁸ Like the often-quoted *billard/pillard* sentence: “*Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard*” or “*billard*”. Foucault 20; Ford 64.

¹³⁹ Ford 2-3.

¹⁴⁰ Ford 4.

¹⁴¹ Raymond Roussel, *Impressions of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) 20.

Roussel's passion for copious description rendered in fanatical concision makes these alternations quick and shocking. This is what Ashbery called a "tumultuous impression of reality which keeps swiping at one like the sails of a windmill";¹⁴² although it is a comment on later realistic *New Impressions of Africa*, it captures the gist of that writing very well. For Ashbery, poetry has to be as porous as possible, if not even all-inclusive, because only this way it may capture the fractured reality that bombards a post-modern citizen twenty-four hours a day, letting the "noise of the world" in as Altieri writes.¹⁴³ Moreover, the constant balancing of opposites is in accord with what Altieri described as Ashbery's moving "brilliantly between cliché and assertion;"¹⁴⁴ where the movement between disparate elements precludes the hierarchical primacy of any of them, as has been mentioned earlier.

To illustrate this, the poem *New Impressions of Africa*, will be perhaps most useful. Hailed by Desnos, Dalí and Queneau¹⁴⁵ and where, in the words of Mark Ford, "[m]etaphor begets metaphor begets metaphor, until language seems turned wholly inside out,"¹⁴⁶ meant Ashbery's first encounter with Roussel's eccentric oeuvre. Brought from Paris by Kenneth Koch in 1951, the oddity of the text together with a mute conventionality of its flagrantly unrelated illustrations by Henri A. Zo immediately aroused Ashbery's curiosity.¹⁴⁷ As he says, he "made a mental note to someday learn enough French to be able to read the poem"¹⁴⁸ and in 1958 left for France to collect material for his intended dissertation on Roussel.

The poem consists of three cantos, each beginning with an observation on a certain location in Egypt; these are however quickly interrupted by an utterly irrelevant exemplification or ridiculous comparison, which is in turn interrupted again by a train of other comparisons and this repeats over and over, while the poem descends step by step into itself and it is no longer

¹⁴² Ford 198.

¹⁴³ Altieri 816.

¹⁴⁴ Charles Altieri, "John Ashbery and the Challenge of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Summer, 1988: 817.

¹⁴⁵ Ford 208-9.

¹⁴⁶ Ford 192.

¹⁴⁷ Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 45-6.

¹⁴⁸ Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 46.

possible for the reader to bear in mind not only the initial sentence (divided from its conclusion by 216 more verses¹⁴⁹) but also the following ones. All this is accompanied by equally digressive footnotes in alexandrines. There, in a series of barely justified, improbable and only tangentially connected comparisons, different people wonder about different things:

someone who has just arrived in Nice wonders if it's warm enough to wear linen; an animal-tamer being eaten by one of his wild beasts wonders if, a year on, his widow will still be dressed strictly in black ... Indeed Roussel offers us in total fifty-four examples of quandaries, not all of them focused on human beings: [for example,] a flower on which someone who has dined asparagus has just urinated wonders if its scent will ever return.¹⁵⁰

These absurd and hardly justified similes for their own sake reduce the world into a representation that in a way seems to be more solid, present and autonomous than the real itself and here we may spot another source of Ashbery's "overhanging metaphors." The embarrassing ordinary experience suggested in such a kind of writing appeals to Ashbery too. In addition to the passages already mentioned, every now and then in his poetry we may stumble across a passage like the following one from *Girls on the Run* (1999), merging in Rousselian fashion lyrical language and journalese, suggestions of the nostalgic, absurd, low and comical:

Out in Michigan, or was it Minnesota, though, time had stopped
to see what it could see, which wasn't much. A recent hooligan scare had
 blighted the landscape,
lowering the temperature by several degrees. "Having
to pee ruins my crinoline relentlessly,
because it comes only ecstatically."
But the wounded cow knew otherwise.¹⁵¹

It is of course a frequent strategy in Ashbery to ruin a self-consciously nostalgic passage by a brief instance of scatology, almost with childish delight and in defiance to critics and readers who may feel offended. This appears in Ashbery's book-length poem *Flow Chart*

¹⁴⁹ Ford 188.

¹⁵⁰ Ford 189-90.

¹⁵¹ John Ashbery, *Girls on the Run* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1999) 7.

(1991),¹⁵² and in “Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox” (189).

This poem starts with a quoted quatrain

For the pleasures of the many
May be oftimes traced to one
As the hand that plants an acorn
Shelters armies from the sun... (189)

immediately brought down by an observation what pleasure it is to sit under a tree in a place where “the annual rainfall is .0071 inches,” (189) almost a Rousselian turn reminiscent of the comparisons from *New Impressions of Africa*. Then follows an overstrained passage about the pleasures of growing old, of “divest[ing] oneself of some tested ideals” (190) that suggests a rather hypocritical optimism. After a series of outspokenly ironical idyllic couplets, Ashbery finishes with a remarkably realistic, disillusioned poetry in prose, at the end describing a man who visits the neighborhood where his grade school was:

It was a rambling structure of yellow brick, now gone in seediness and shabbiness which the late-afternoon shadows mercifully softened. The gravel playground in the front was choked with weeds. Large trees and shrubbery would do no harm flanking the main entrance. Time farted. (194)

This is actually the climax of the poem, where revelation takes place and the “he” of the description finally loses his temper and tediously sustained optimism and bursts into shrieks. The last sentence presents epiphany in a scatological garb and provides perhaps the most concise Ashbery’s comment on the transience of life.

Before Roussel got to the *procédé* he wrote much in the fashion of his *New Impressions of Africa*. The early poems “La Vue,”¹⁵³ “Le Concert,” (both 1903) and “La Source”¹⁵⁴ (1904) are detailed, “fanatical, indeed impossible”¹⁵⁵ descriptions of miniatures set into lens of a souvenir pen-holder, the heading of a letter from the hotel’s stationery and a vignette of a bottle of mineral water, respectively. All the poems meticulously describe frozen scenes, fixed

¹⁵² “Excuse me while I fart. There, that’s better. I actually feel relieved” Ashbery, *Flow Chart* 201.

¹⁵³ Meaning “The View/Vision”: Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 59.

¹⁵⁴ Meaning “Spa/The Spring” Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 59.

¹⁵⁵ Ford 82.

representations of reality, in what seems to be an attempt at keeping the presumably sad reality at bay. The endless descriptions of essentially mundane sceneries are carried forth by alexandrines nevertheless lacking much poetry. Similarly, his dramas abandon the *procédé* but also use the poetic form as their scaffolding. They consist either of almost unrelated anecdotic stories spread freely among the numerous host of the drama's characters (in *The Star on the Forehead*) or a catalogue of various dazzling antiques leading to ultimate disclosure of a hidden treasure (in *The Dust of Suns*).

Thus in Roussel the distinction between poetry and prose effectively collapses. Even prose demands a "liberating straightjacket" of *procédé*, an underlying structure of arbitrary, phonetically motivated connections. And poetry, once it is firmly set into the scaffolding of rhymes, may resign on the poetical and figurative entirely and abandon itself to pure description. We can observe in Ashbery a similar permeation of poetry and prose, as if the distinction did not really matter and its use was only a matter of widespread convention. He uses rhymes and regular stanzas only very seldom, more likely as parts of larger textures only. Thus, his free verse, built on intonation and the pattern of indefinite verb-constructions and obscure pronouns out of which vivid images gleam, is not very far from being prose.¹⁵⁶ His prose, as Mary Kinzie has shown on a passage from "For John Clare," achieves similar smoothness and "effects of accuracy on one hand, on the other ease of juncture, without putting the achievement into lines" so that these "depend[] more on the music of the [...] connectives and relational words than on any adjustment of the hard and slack stresses."¹⁵⁷ Thus *Three Poems* (1972) consists of three long poetical essays in prose, while *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) is a poem that reads like an essay, a piece of art criticism merged with personal reflection. Many other single poems, especially from Ashbery's earlier writing, make use of

¹⁵⁶ As Mary Kinzie shows in the course of a detailed analysis from her two-part article on irrelevance in Ashbery. See: Mary Kinzie, "'Irrelevance': The Poetic Diction of John Ashbery, Part I: Styles of Avoidance," *Modern Philology*, Vol. 84, No. 3, Feb., 1987: 267-281. Mary Kinzie, "'Irrelevance': The Poetic Diction of John Ashbery, Part II: Prose, Prosody, and Dissembled Time," *Modern Philology*, Vol. 84, No. 4, May, 1987: 382-400.

¹⁵⁷ Mary Kinzie, "'Irrelevance': The Poetic Diction of John Ashbery, Part II: Prose, Prosody, and Dissembled Time," *Modern Philology*, Vol. 84, No. 4, May, 1987: 383.

alternate prose and verse passages. These are for example the already mentioned “Idaho,” “Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox,” “For John Clare” etc.¹⁵⁸

Yet, what is even more important is what I would call the “material presence of thought.” Alain Robbe-Grillet very fittingly characterized Roussel’s fictitious universe as “a *flat and discontinuous*” one characterized by “clarity [and] transparency.”¹⁵⁹ This effect has some interesting consequences, linked tightly to the practices of both generations of Abstract Expressionists. First, it problematizes the worlds as regards their real or imaginary status. The scenery of the Trophies Square, where the Incomparables’ contest in *Impressions of Africa*¹⁶⁰ takes place, is via the neutral, first-person narrative presented as a tangible and unassailable presence to be trusted. On the other hand, the narrator except for helping Carmichael to memorize the *Jeroukka* song, is only a passive and nameless observer of the events and creates a sort of parenthesis around the succession of artistes’ acts, which is typical of Roussel’s narrators in general.

This on the one hand fleshes out the happenings even more intensely, but on the other hand it makes the reader suspect that the events stand in some special relation to the narrator; especially as they are so weird. Moreover, when we realize that the occurrences are told as memories contained strictly within the mind of the nameless, faceless narrator, matters become blurred: there seems to hover a possibility that the whole peculiar story is only a dream, a twisted projection of mental states that cannot be expressed otherwise. Thus, *Impressions of Africa* create an image suspended between being and non-being, between autonomous presence and representation, between objectivity and autistic self-enclosure, between the reverse and obverse that are conjoined as in a Möbius strip.

Moreover, as soon as Roussel embarks on a description of, let us say, a stake with a Negro trapped in coils of rope, performing exhaustingly minute work, constantly having before

¹⁵⁸ “Idaho” (Ashbery, *Collected Poems* 118), “Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox” (Ashbery, *Collected Poems* 188), “For John Clare” (Ashbery, *Collected Poems* 198) etc.

¹⁵⁹ Ford 48.

¹⁶⁰ Roussel, *Impressions of Africa* 206.

his eyes a bowler hat, suede glove and a piece of caricature,¹⁶¹ Roussel loses any sense of perspective and gives us at once details it is impossible to see from the narrator's standing point. This reinforces the autonomy of the scenes and together with the delayed explanation of their meaning¹⁶² makes them objects similar to Surrealist paintings or Duchamp's ready-mades. They invite speculation and thus appear to hide a cryptic, half-apprehended message.

This links to another phenomenon which is the use of ekphrasis, adopted by Ashbery in "Description of a Masque" from *A Wave*. The bulk of the novel *Impressions of Africa* consists of descriptions of ingenious contrivances and performances staged by the Incomparables in front of the Ponukelian emperor. The performances are basically fantastical variety numbers, theatrical scenes or presentations of various "machines for making art": for instance a river loom that weaves a tapestry with a picture of Biblical flood that "could bear comparison with the finest water-colors,"¹⁶³ or an automatic easel "based on the principle of electro-magnetisation" producing works "of uncommonly intense colouring and [...] strictly true to the original,"¹⁶⁴ such as a scene of dawn in a tropical garden. Roussel delights in production of series of "frozen" pictures having complex stories behind them: the whole book is in a way a collection of such frozen pictures, disjunctive exposés of the individual performances, folded *mise en abyme* one into another.

Thus we may descend further down the ladder: one of the performances shows two native children acting out the last scene of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, appropriated from a miraculously retrieved "original" Shakespeare manuscript, that however turns the real Shakespeare upside down: here, both dying Romeo and Juliet hallucinate a series of images inserted into the play and representing disparate and wild allegorical stories they both were told as children. The hallucinations appear as smoke pictures arising from pastilles designed by the

¹⁶¹ Roussel, *Impressions of Africa* 6.

¹⁶² Both Roussel's novels fall into two halves: one is a rebus-like presentation of a scene, the second an explanative story that usually makes one wonder even more.

¹⁶³ Roussel, *Impressions of Africa* 94.

¹⁶⁴ Roussel, *Impressions of Africa* 147-8.

inventor Fuxier. Both children have their heads decorated by hats made of illustrations of famous battles from a history book: and we could continue in this way *ad libitum*. The whole book thus appears as a description, representation, but this is in fact a deceptive disguise. Rousselian Shakespeare is not Shakespeare; Rousselian Africa is nothing like Africa; the historical and mythical persons never existed in our world; the amazing inventions are physical and logical impossibilities. The world of Raymond Roussel is thus not a representation, it is a presentation: in accord with Abstract Expressionists' art, it is a panorama whose cryptic qualities press on the reader and make him pose the work as an intentional subject. This is one of the ingredients of the mystery of Roussel's work: the insistence with which mere words claim the existence of a world behind them.

Ashbery exploits the omnipotence of language with similar boldness in his "Description of a Masque": as Yacobi argues, the linguistic here triumphs over the visual, as "insight outranks and reverses sight."¹⁶⁵ The theatrical masque quickly becomes similarly impossible when we read that a "little to the right and about eight feet above this scene, another seemed to hover in mid-air" (746). Actually, the masque is rather reminiscent of TV and Ashbery alludes to TV when he mentions images from Jacques Cousteau documentaries. This happens after the speaker, who contrary to Roussel's speakers, uses his interpretive capacities and explains the meanings of the scenes, suddenly realizes "what should have been obvious from the start: that the setting would go on evolving eternally, rolling its waves across our vision like an ocean, each one yet recognizably a part of the same series, which was creation itself" (755). This potentially ironic statement is reinforced by the following list of clichéd scenes and the reader already knows that what the masque in its improbable theatrical disguise refers to is our real-life, media-penetrated experience: moreover, the performance never ends since "the avalanche fell and fell, and continues to fall even today" (758). The prose poem itself thematizes the re/presentation difference for example when a statue of Mercury suddenly comes to life or

¹⁶⁵ Yacobi 674.

when a pistol shot disturbs Alice of Wonderland painted on a mural so that “she hastily clap[s] her hands over her ears (749).

The autonomy of language appears also in the interspersed dialogues from Roussel’s *The Star on the Forehead* and this too may have been an inspiration for Ashbery. When mentioning Ashbery’s and Schuyler’s novel *A Nest of Ninnies* David Herd writes about the similar “instability” of characters.¹⁶⁶ In a way this mimics the aimlessness and pettiness of ordinary human conversation, reminiscent of Ionesco’s plays: somehow, the people become only puppets and the conversation assumes active role over them. On the other hand, Ashbery is aware that human individuality and emotionality, as well as the bulk of one’s existence, resides in everyday exchange of phrases that, irrespective of their literary value, are for Ashbery as a poet very important. Pieces of and attempts at communication, as well as inner monologues, intersperse all Ashbery’s writing and these fragments refract the central consciousness into complex of attitudes, as has been already pointed out.

To sum up, Ashbery treated himself to a large number of effects in Roussel’s writings. Among them are the lesson about irrelevance of the distinction between prose and poetry; merging of different registers and orders; almost material presence of thought; liberation of discourse from dependence on a concrete persona; poetics of the mundane as well as the exuberantly and courageously fantastic that goes hand in hand with the practice of Surrealist poets. Ashbery says about the reading experience of *New Impressions of Africa* that at the end, one has the feeling “the scenery along the way has made its point, amounting to something like daily life as it is actually lived: boring and at the same time exciting in its unavoidability.”¹⁶⁷ It would be difficult to find a quote that summarizes Ashbery’s attraction to Roussel better.

At the same time, it is obvious that Ashbery was inspired more by Roussel’s techniques than by his ideological points of departure; the technique is applied to different purposes and actually supports the devices suggested by Abstract Expressionists. Yet, Raymond Roussel’s

¹⁶⁶ Herd 64.

¹⁶⁷ Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 67.

case may very well have elucidated the potential marginal authors have for any poet, not only for Ashbery, although Ashbery exhibits strong attraction to the work of outsider and minor poets. Since they are not caught in the web of traditionally given codes, they present us with their own alternative poetics, viewing the workings and tasks of the text and the whole concept of what the text is supposed to offer to the reader in different and unusual light which may enrich the way “canonical” authors perceive their own craft and works.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

Many of the features of Ashbery's style may be traced back to similar techniques in the Abstract Expressionists' and Raymond Roussel's work and these two sources moreover reinforce each other in their implications. Roussel seems to have inspired directly rather the formal possibilities and thematic excesses of Ashbery's verse, whereas the broader consequences are Ashbery's own inventions. Abstract Expressionism informs the form of, as well as the motivations behind, Ashbery's writing while responding to the challenges of contemporary art and its confidence in both the expressive possibilities of the assertive poetical self and in impersonal formalism.

Ashbery early in his career attempted to shake off the chains of tradition and his previous achievements and wrote his most challenging and problematic book *The Tennis Court Oath* that often tends to be isolated from his other works because it is so experimental. This separation is, in my opinion, unnecessary, since the method of his later writing remained essentially the same. In *The Tennis Court Oath* he writes poems inspired by the Dadaism, yet more skeptical, detached and also brought down by ridicule that more than at the liberation of mind from constraints of rationality hints at the hollowness and pettiness of ordinary human existence, inspired by Roussel's descriptive poems. Through quotations of found texts Ashbery manages to maintain a polyphony of voices that attempts to capture a variety of emotional states existing side by side, relativizing but not invalidating one another. The effects are fresh and progressive, although quite daunting for the reader, and they prefigure subtler means of enacting the interpretative nature of our thinking and life that Ashbery would employ later to put us back into the here and now of our experience.

In later Ashbery the collaging is less outspoken and the fragments effaced by the smooth flow of Ashbery's elusive grammar. Some of them may be allusions to other authors and to critical discourse, fragments of overheard conversations, or intentionally ill-fitting metaphors and similes; among them, a unified self refracts and disappears like the speaker in

Roussel's chronically descriptive pieces. Instead, the pronouns are rather emotionally charged modes of relating to the world and invite the reader's participation. As the reader gradually becomes involved in the multiple, mirrored presences in the text, he or she recognizes that the experience of the interpretative difficulties are the same as the difficulties taking place in the poem. The elusive treatment of verbs in terms of their time reference and the incessant piling up of the meaning points to the way we construct our selves and to the impossibility to summarize our experience without distorting simplifications. It succeeds in the same project for which Ashbery praised Elizabeth Bishop: it embodies "our coming to know ourselves as the necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life that is always on the point of coming into being."¹⁶⁸

Thus his poetry is extremely inclusive and one would be almost tempted to say honest, because it does not avoid the representation of any facet of our life, however embarrassing or emotionally vulnerable. It manages to be democratic, as especially the American critics often love to emphasize, without having to compromise its quality, as Ashbery's rich background in all sorts of avant-garde movements proves. Ashbery is thus singular for the ease with which he can balance all these influences and roles without being overwhelmed by them. Ashbery's poetry is indeed extremely, rarely clever while being also accepting, humorous, kind and self-reflective. American poetry of the second half of the twentieth century may be only grateful that it could have placed such a poet in its emblem.

¹⁶⁸ Longenbach 109.

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